



REFLECTION

LA'A KEA

PROLOGUE

PIECES SET IN PLACE

Kathleen Sage knew this day would come.

She paced around her apartment and muttered to herself, calculating how she could escape the mission. But it was pointless. There was no avoiding it. When Kathleen first accepted the mission, she saw it as effortless until she developed a flaw.

And things only got worse when she heard a knock at the door.

Instinctively, she reached her hand to her waist before rays of light pointed to her hand and revealed a rapier—her weapon of choice. But when she peered through the peephole, expecting the enemy, she was shocked to see something beyond that.

"Benjamin!" Kathleen muttered, gritting her teeth. It's been weeks since they last saw each other. She thought she nipped the bud when she broke up with him, apparently not. Shame and guilt were swelling within Kathleen as she saw her ex-boyfriend looking like an abandoned puppy on a porch. His orange eyes were watering as he wrapped his arms around himself and shivered; his clothes were dirty and untidy, like he had just gotten out of bed or was living off the streets. His expression cried, "Pity me!"

Her sword hand trembled as the other reached the doorknob. It was just Benjamin. What's so wrong about him? He wasn't terrible; he was so kind that it irked Kathleen. He'd always beat around the bush, keep to himself, and put other people's problems ahead of his own. He was so selfless that it made Kathleen fall for him.

Kathleen yanked her hand back, ran to the bathroom, and hurled when she reached the sink. After taking a few short breaths, she ran the water and washed her face. Kathleen pulled a few loose strands of platinum-blond hair and looked at her repulsive self. From the freckles on her cheek to the fairness of her skin, she looked like any other person. But she held a divine burden that couldn't be tarnished at a time like this.

She couldn't stand herself acting like a *Grievance*.

Kathleen's directive, above all else, was to rid the world of Grievances. They were hideous monsters ripped straight out of hell itself. If the world were to learn about the existence of Grievances, it could spell chaos. That's why she couldn't falter.

She couldn't let The Director down.

Kathleen wasn't just an ex-girlfriend; she was a *Miracle* who had to neglect Benjamin for the greater good. She considered abandoning him on the doorstep and waiting until he left since he wasn't knocking. But she knew Benjamin.

Looking back at the peephole, she saw that Benjamin was still there, as quiet as always, hesitant to knock any further. He was always the apprehensive type.

Kathleen couldn't resist, but not without using her *Gift*.

Before Kathleen did anything, she twirled her rapier until it gleamed with light, turning bright red like a newly made weapon before transforming into an umbrella. An umbrella with a duck head for a handle. Kathleen placed the umbrella on her coat rack.

Kathleen clasped her hands in prayer with her weapon out of the way until angelic wings blossomed where her shoulder blades were. The wings touched and stroked the

temples of her head like a second pair of hands. Kathleen's eyes flashed from bright blue to dull gray as she sighed heavily and felt her heart rate stabilize.

Without hesitation, Kathleen opened the door.

Benjamin yawned, "I bet you weren't expecting me."

"On the contrary, I did. Why are you here?"

He scratched his head, "I forgot something in the garage."

Without a word, Kathleen rushed to her key hooks, grabbed the garage opener, and walked outside. Benjamin quickly followed, but instead of standing by her side and enjoying her company, he lurked behind her like a shadow.

A few of the neighbors noticed this peculiar activity, waving toward Kathleen and Benjamin with a smile on their faces. But Kathleen and Benjamin nodded in acknowledgment. They didn't have time to socialize for their separate reasons.

If Kathleen were to engage in societal conversations, she wouldn't be wearing the immodest clothes she was wearing. From a short camisole to yoga pants, her mother would crucify her if she saw what she was wearing. Instead, Kathleen rushed to the garage without a moment in between, ignoring Benjamin in the process.

"Remember those days?" Benjamin mumbled, but it didn't matter. The damage was already done. In all of Kathleen's power, she couldn't seal away her memories. She could only seal her emotions and remain as stoic and steadfast as possible.

Despite this, there was a time when Kathleen enjoyed Benjamin without the use of emotional suppression. It was when they both lived in the same cul-de-sac; their fathers were like brothers to each other, and Benjamin became a Godson.

But that was a fleeting moment.

Kathleen couldn't fly like the other Miracles if she kept having her family and Benjamin weighing her down. So, when she detached herself, her powers far surpassed any of the other Miracles. She made Demons quake in fear.

When Kathleen arrived at the garage door, she clicked the opener, which sent the door whirring up and away. Benjamin ducked under and walked inside the small, crowded space before he grabbed a red tackle box. He opened the box to check that everything was there and closed it with a smile, "Thank God you didn't toss it."

Kathleen sighed, "Is that it?"

"You're not trying to kick me out so fast, are you?"

"I'd prefer not to."

Benjamin was like a kid at a candy store regarding memorabilia. He would always get nostalgic over the tiniest details. He was as much of a friendly giant as he was a drama queen, which balanced out Kathleen's stoicism. The moment he opened the box of polaroids, he might as well have opened a can of worms.

"Remember this, back at Discovery Kingdom?" Benjamin admired, his eyes watering after seeing how happy Kathleen was with him and her younger sister. Kathleen only remembered how she faked smiling to make the two of them feel better, which, in the end, made her learn more than she ever would.

Kathleen regretted not spending as much time with Iris as she should have and wished that someday she could reconnect with her and Benjamin, preferably when the mission was over and the world was saved.

Benjamin found many other things in the box, including stuffed animals he won at the carnival and tickets to every rollercoaster. Kathleen couldn't help but tear up after Benjamin talked about their time there, wishing things were as simple.

"I appreciate the help, Kat," Benjamin muttered, fidgeting with his hands and trying to phrase another sentence. Kathleen spent more than enough time with him to understand that he was about to say something foolish like the hopeless romantic he always is.

"We shouldn't see each other again," Kathleen declared before Benjamin scrunched his nose, wiped the tears off his eyes, and left the garage. She didn't mean to hurt him but knew it was the only way to tell him the truth.

She didn't want to deceive him.

Kathleen's eyes returned to blue the second Benjamin left. She gasped in surprise and felt a wave of regret after what she had done. She knew she had to warn him, but not to that extent. Kathleen wanted to run after Benjamin and apologize, but the truth was plain. That would be impossible.

She had to accomplish the mission, but she didn't want to! Every force in her body was repelling her to commit the final act. Kathleen walked back to her apartment to think things through before she heard leaves rustling, followed by a familiar ally.

Startled, she summoned her rapier and thrust it with a spin, only for the ally to grab the sword between the tip of his fingers and shake his head, "Having second thoughts?"

Kathleen retracted her sword and sheaved it, "Not at all."

Her ally shifted his weight back and forth. He always showed up at the worst of times, picking you apart bit by bit until you were nothing but vulnerable.

In short, he was the perfect Miracle.

Apart from Kathleen, Justin Alekseev excelled in hand-to-hand combat and healing. Their unique skills made them the perfect match, which is why they were stationed in California. Justin took his sunglasses off and wiped them with his shirt, "You know what The Director does to second-guessers."

"I know!" Kathleen snapped, causing Justin to smirk.

"For the Miracle of Serenity, you sure are short-tempered."

Kathleen bit her lip. She wasn't going to yell at Justin; it was the worst tactic to use against him. Kathleen was grateful that her partner wouldn't have to see this. Because if Akane was, she'd rip Justin's throat out just because he insulted Kathleen.

But since she wasn't around, Kathleen chose the safest option. She ignored Justin and returned to her apartment to slip on her red Cal State East Bay sweatshirt. Kathleen finished things by freshening herself up and looking at the mirror with a twirl.

When she got back to the garage, Justin was still there.

"What changed your mind?"

Kathleen didn't say a thing, entering her car and turning the ignition. As the car rumbled to life, a little memento of her partner's dangled along the rearview mirror. A necklace she was given from Hawaii. She never thought much of it, only the rambunctious, fiery spirit associated with it. Operative Akane. The friend who looked up to Kathleen.

Kathleen hoped she could fight enough so Akane wouldn't have to, so Benjamin wouldn't be introduced to the world of suffering. The world filled with monsters ripped straight out of hell, the world filled with people rising from the dead, and the world filled with Angels and Demons battling against each other.

She wanted to see both of their smiling faces one last time, but she knew that was impossible. She knew she'd never see Benjamin and Akane ever again.

CHAPTER ONE

THE INVISIBLE MAN

It makes sense that I'd be sitting in a metal death trap on a day like Halloween.

I saw my life flashing through my eyes as Dillion enjoyed driving the damn thing. From the constant rattling to the bumpy experience, I wished I was back home eating Kit-Kats and watching Netflix, but Dillion wouldn't have it any other way. He dragged me out of my house and brought me with him, all while wearing his skeleton onesie.

The nauseous scent of gasoline filled my nostrils, turning my stomach inside out as I ducked my head out the window. Every force in my body repelled me from sitting down and enjoying the ride, but everything was out to get me. Looking outside, I saw dozens of trick-or-treaters walking the streets, enjoying their holiday, while I simply detested it.

"Come on, Benjamin!" Dillion testified, "The pot smell isn't that bad!"

"That's n-not what I was thinking about," I gagged, ducking my head back into the metal death trap. I leaned my head against the passenger seat in relief, breathing in and out.

"You need something to take the edge off," Dillion said, reaching into the glove box and offering a joint, to which I vigorously shook my head. "Suit yourself."

I rested my head against my shoulder, glancing outside as I tried to distract myself. But the sights kept repeating themselves. Goosebumps riddled across my arms and legs as I thought something was stalking me from a distance. I pulled my window up, but when I did, I was reminded of a question that echoed around my head like a song you can't forget.

"S-say," I stuttered, "What do you see in your reflection?"

“The hell you mean,” Dillion chuckled, “You think you see ghosts or something? You'll see just about anything with a few puffs of this.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Then what kind of question are you asking then?”

“I-I don’t know,” I fell back, “A stupid kind.”

My hair stood on end as we drove through the neighborhood, approaching a house that looked like the richest on the block. This had to have been one of the houses that gave out king-sized candy bars. Music was blaring, lights were flashing, smoke was billowing...

And I was taking it all in at once!

“To think the p-police hasn’t shut this place down yet!” I yelled before the metal death trap’s low-riding bumper scratched against the curb, making me shudder.

“What was that?” Dillion asked as the loud music made everything even worse. Trick-or-treaters gathered around the house as if it belonged to a celebrity, creating a large crowd that could’ve easily been a mosh pit.

Dillion leaped outside of his metal death trap, walked around until he got to my door, and opened it as I sat there shivering like a mess. He tapped his fingers against the roof, checking his phone. “You good man? We’re not even inside the freaking house yet.”

I must be a burden if I was making him impatient.

“Yeah, I’m fine, sorry about that,” I scooted out of the passenger seat, swinging my plastic burden out, a prosthetic arm. A reminder of the mistakes I made. A punishment.

I didn’t dress up for the party—since I didn’t want to go in the first place—so I wore a white collared shirt with jeans.

“Don’t be sorry, I’m sorry about what happened to you,” Dillion tried to understand, but he couldn’t. It’s not like he was ever there.

“It’s not your fault it happened,” I mumbled.

“I sure hope it wasn’t; Amber got caught up in that mess.”

My eyes trailed to the ground. I can’t believe I roped Dillion’s girlfriend into this. All this time, I was complaining, only to realize that I was the selfish one. “I’m sorry.”

He patted my back, “Cheer up, dude! You’re at a party, live a little! I’ll tell you what, the moment you don’t feel safe, we can head back home and call it a night.”

“I don’t feel safe!” I blurted.

“Just humor me a little, at least a few minutes in,” Dillion offered as we walked to the front door. Humor him? What about me? I got roped into this mess. Can’t a guy recover in peace instead of being thrown into all this chaos?

And why did it have to be Halloween of all the days?

And as we walked inside, I quickly followed him from behind, blending in as dozens screamed and cheered at the sight of him. My greatest fear swarmed around me as I hoped it would end as soon as possible: interacting with people. I wasn’t scared of ghosts, vampires, or anything like that, but making friends and being rejected by them. I’m lucky enough to have this guy, and we’re not even that close.

“Ayo Dillion, what’s up?” One of his friends asked him.

“Nothing much, nothing much,” He scratched his head as he was stuck talking with all of his different friends. I couldn’t even fathom having that many people you know and

care about; it almost seems like a chore compared to a social gathering. And while it all looks so nerve-wracking, I envied the guy for how easy he's making it look.

I was an introvert yearning to have friends.

As more people arrived at the party, everyone started to move around, causing me to get swept up in all the chaos and far away from him. That's it! I'm through! I tried yelling out for help, but it was impossible because of all the music and commotion.

My death sentence might as well have been carried out because I knew there was no way I'd be able to escape this party. I was taken to the garage, and while it was noticeably quieter, there were still rowdy people who couldn't help but bother me.

A few of the guys dressed up as condiments were playing ping pong with each other while a group of girls were giggling and laughing in the corner. And I couldn't help but recall the shower rod they crudely installed in the center of the room.

More and more people kept walking in and out of the garage, some of them smoking and some swinging around the shower rod, but if I minded my own business, they wouldn't do anything to me. I wanted to keep searching for Dillion, which meant socializing and jumping straight into the crowd. Yeah, no, not going to happen.

After finding myself a quiet enough corner to sit, I dragged a lawn chair over and sat down before pulling out my phone and playing some good ol' solitaire. I hoped the hours would fly by, and before I knew it, I would find Dillion.

Until I felt chills running down my spine, the same sensation I felt back when I thought I was being followed. The sensation grew as a lady with short black hair wearing a dragon costume popped into my personal space bubble.

“How’s it going?” She slapped my shoulder, frightening me with her piercing red eyes. I thought they were contacts, but the way they shone like brake lights kept me in suspended fear. Everything about her was triggering my brain to go into DEFCON 1. She only wore a green top that had wings attached to it, a short green skirt, and horns. I thought she had scales across her arms and legs, but they turned out to be hundreds of tattoos.

I turned away, but she was faster.

She orbited around me, sliding her feet until she squinted her eyes at me. I lifted my shirt’s collar up to cover my face, only for her to simply say, “Wrong person.”

I gave a sigh of relief as she ran away towards a guy dressed up as the Phantom of the Opera, yelling at him like they were a couple breaking up.

Something I’m all too familiar with.

But the Phantom simply dusted her away, causing the Dragoness to walk to a skeleton I very much recognized. Dillion! The two of them chatted things up, laughing along the way before the Dragoness stroked her hand against his arm.

Finally finding Dillion, I ran towards him, but the Phantom stopped me.

“Can I lend your ear for a moment?” he asked, blocking my way. I wasn’t in the mood to meet anybody at the party. Dillion was enough. I ducked my head left and right, but this guy kept bothering me, “I’m sorry about Raven back there.”

“Her?” I raised an eyebrow as I looked at the Dragoness with short black hair and red eyes. She was so vibrant and in-your-face that it scared the piss outta me. The Phantom, on the other hand, seemed pretty chill. Because his mask covered half his face, I couldn’t see him as much, but he had brown eyes and long blonde hair that was in a ponytail.

“Yeah,” He reached his hand out to me, “My name’s Justin, what’s yours?”

I reluctantly shook his hand, “Benjamin.”

He seemed like a nice guy.

I wanted to contribute something to the conversation, but I was afraid that my stuttering would only stop me. So, I just waited for Justin to talk: “If you don’t mind me asking, what happened to your arm? I’d love to know the story behind it.”

I grimaced, shaking my head. I didn’t want to do anything besides grabbing Dillion and getting out of there. Everyone in this party is as mysterious and vibrant as Raven and Justin, a bundle of conversations I didn’t want to involve myself with.

Thankfully, Dillion noticed me in time and walked towards me. Raven was walking beside him and chatting left and right. “What’s up, Benji-Man! Enjoying the party?”

I tilted my head back and forth, “Ehh.”

“I’m sure you already met Raven,” Dillion introduced as I simply nodded. It’s not that I didn’t want to be around her; it’s just that she’s not my type.

“I’ve heard everything about you,” She added as Dillion simply laughed. I’m glad Dillion could enjoy himself, at least, especially since what happened to his girlfriend. Justin slid into the conversation, talking with the scary girl and Dillion. The three of them hit it off perfectly, like a group of friends who’ve known each other for years.

Little by little, I drifted away from the conversation. I wasn’t the star of the show. I never was. Just an invisible man who nobody talked about. Dillion suggested that we’d all hang out upstairs, and when Justin and she complied, they walked off without me. I expected them to call for me, but they never did, ignoring me like I never existed.

“So that’s how it’s going to be,” I kicked the ground. I didn’t need the three of them to tell me that I wasn’t required. And in doing so, I left the party for some fresh air.

Anywhere was better than the party, and that included the outside. I used to love the great outdoors and enjoyed every second of it. From walking through the wetlands to counting every roly-poly I came across, there always was something for me out there. My mother used to love going on walks with me before she was no longer here, so now, every time I breathe the fresh morning air and view the sunrise, I think of her fading smile.

“Another thing ruined,” I muttered as I kicked a rock I saw on the sidewalk. Everyone else was trick-or-treating while I was hoping to find something intriguing. There were many interesting costumes, ranging from your typical clown to zombie, but the details in some of the things they wore were so intricate that it was almost real. I never believed in things like that or the supernatural. It’s all a sham—a cheesy movie setup.

After I kept walking for another few blocks, though, I eventually came across a small bridge that crossed above an intersection and led into another neighborhood. There was barely anyone walking around at this point, so I had the whole place to myself. I could do whatever I wanted, and nobody would see a thing. Nobody’ll care anyway.

It’s not like they can see me or anything.

My feet dragged against the metal beneath in a tired daze, walking me towards the rail, where I could see everything: the speeding cars, the flashing lights, the full moon. The harsh breeze blew my hair back and forth, and everything felt like a fever dream—a nightmare that I just wanted to wake up from.

“Who’s to say that jumping won’t wake me up?” I muttered. I struggled to climb over, only for a few running kids to stop my attempt. What was I thinking? There’s no way I’d jump. I’m seriously not that desperate. My left hand gripped the railing as my plastic arm dragged against me. After being alone for so long, I heard a disembodied voice.

“You’re already invisible; why not make it permanent?”

The voice was neither male nor female. It wasn’t sticking to any person but rather a force of nature, the will of the earth itself. And to the voice’s response, everything around me warped and bent like they were made of pipe cleaners. Lampposts are bent and snapped into spirals. The bridge’s railings twisted like a pretzel, and all the cars beneath me flipped upside down like turtles that couldn’t get back up.

The voice continued, “Do yourself a favor and jump already.”

Then, all the trees that surrounded me uprooted themselves, levitating into the air as the roots beneath them snapped like rubber bands. One by one, the trees flew towards me like heat-seeking missiles. I scrambled to safety, escaping the bridge and ducking for cover. But it was no use. How was I supposed to fight this kind of power?

I can’t; it’s simply a result of my mistakes. Defeated, I fell to my knees, hoping this would rectify the lives I lost. The car crash that I was involved in. The one that killed Dad.

There was nobody else that wanted me anyway, nobody to miss me. But a flash of light proved me wrong. A ribbon of light waded through the air, blinding me before everything turned back to normal. The lampposts were better than new, the cars were driving, the bridge was fine, and the trees weren’t about to kill me.

And right as I thought I was crazy for imagining all that, I saw Justin walking up the bridge, slinging a fanny pack over his shoulder. Was he the cause behind all this, or did he stop the cause? In any case, is this supposed to mean that the supernatural is the natural?

There's no way. Monsters don't exist! I must've been wrapped up in a prank show or something! "You saw that, didn't you?"

"Saw what?" Justin asked as I gave up the notion.

"Never mind," I gave up, "Where's Dillion and Raven?"

Justin winced, "Last I saw them, they were leaving the house all giddy-like."

"My one ride!" I slapped my forehead. Dillion was always my ride. Even before the incident, I'd pay him for the gas, and we'd go wherever we wanted to. Amber would hang out occasionally, and that was fun. But after Raven showed up, I was the odd man out.

But Justin offered hope, "If you want, I can give you a lift'."

I used to think I was the Invisible Man, someone nobody cared about. I turned my head back to the bridge, where everything went sideways, only to shake my head in denial. If Justin acknowledged me, then that's at least enough.

"Yeah, thanks," I said. shaking my head and going along with him.

CHAPTER TWO

HARD KNOCK HAWAIIAN

I wouldn't be stained in blood if it wasn't for that damn tourist! He deserved that knuckle sandwich, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's start from the beginning. I'll set the scene. It was a beautifully sunny day in Maui, the best island in Hawaii and the best place in the world. I started my day off by eating breakfast with my Unko Kai. We sat across each other, biding our time until our food arrived. My mouth salivated at the sight of steak and eggs served with rice and macaroni salad, causing me to devour the plate nearly in half.

"Slow down, sistah," Unko Kai chastised, drinking his black coffee and slicing his pancakes into bite-sized pieces, "There's no need to rush."

Feeling thirsty, I chugged half a glass of fruit punch and gasped, "I know."

I was so excited about eating that I nearly forgot what was happening. I spent so much time with Unko Kai, especially since I won't see him much longer. His balding gray hair, which he kept hidden under his marine veteran's hat, was a dead giveaway on top of his dark, wrinkly skin. But even so, his orange eyes were still bright and fiery, like he wouldn't kick the bucket just yet. And that's what I like about Unko.

But all good things must come to an end, a quote someone made since they were too butthurt about their own life.

Tourist A had arrived, pushing the front doors with such force that it alarmed everyone in the diner. Beyond his disrespect, he wore flashy neon shorts and a neon top that made him look like a walking traffic cone. I wouldn't be caught dead wearing that.

Many locals had their things to say, but Unko Kai's reaction summed it up.

"Damn Haole," He cursed under his breath. Many foreigners in Hawaii want the "authentic Hawaiian vacation experience," which is just as much a mouthful as a capitalistic tornado. Sure, they help our economy, but I'd rather be broke than get money from the white man, the same people who stole our land.

And if you're uncultured enough not to know what happened to our people, allow me to enlighten you. The Native Americans weren't the only group that had their land stolen; Hawaii was also wrongfully taken!

"How's the food?" A friendly waitress interrupted Unko and I's silent judgments, refilling his coffee, "Unko? Akane?"

I turned my head to the waitress and gave two thumbs up with a smile, "It's perfect, sistah! Onolicious in every way!"

The waitress nodded and returned to the kitchen, but right as she did, the host just happened to make Tourist A sit in the booth across from us. What the hell? There were plenty of other seats in the goddamn diner, so why the hell was it here?

I couldn't even look at my food until the fucker showed up.

He pulled out his phone obnoxiously, calling his other dude-bros and talking as loudly as possible. I know Hawaii's pretty loud, but this dude had no sense of respect. He was like an annoying influencer who made everyone else his interviewer. Tourist A didn't

give a shit. He was just as ignorant, stupid, and simple-minded as any foreigner would be. It didn't matter if it was the beach, ocean, or a lava rock; they'd always brought out their social medias and told the whole fucking world about it.

Who gives a damn about your Instagram post of a beach.

This diner wasn't even brand spanking new! It's just the same as it was when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Half the ceiling boards were missing, broken machines were in the corner, and the roaches were so giant that they could serve the plates themselves!

And I loved every broken, charming part of it! This was supposed to be my escape from all the flashy, touristy, capitalist-serving influencers, but apparently, not.

If we were out in the open, I'd summon my spear and smack some sense into him. But I couldn't, especially in front of Unko. I just twirled my fork like it was the spear.

Oh, Kū. How I miss you so.

Some have preferences for guns, I'm looking at you, America, and there are those who have preferences for the best weapon mankind has ever created.

I'm talking about spears, obviously. They're a beloved extension of yourself, can be used for hundreds of things besides fighting, and are cool to look at. I always believed that actions spoke louder than words, and the spear's no different.

"If you ask me," Unko offered, "People like him should fuck off."

"You ain't lying," I agreed without listening fully to what he said. When I turned my head and wondered why he would've said something so violent, I shrugged. Unko's got all the right and more to hate the tourists. We all do. They took away our language, culture, and family less than two hundred years ago. It's time to stand up.

Tourist A finally noticed my intent, raising an eyebrow, “You good?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I said as I got out of the booth, attracting the attention of everyone in the diner with a voice as passively aggressive as possible. “You got a problem?”

“Nah, I’m just here for the vibe, ya know.” He said it in the most Californian accent possible. Don’t get me started on California. “I wanna hit the waves!”

Fuck California! I asked my best friend in the whole wide world if she’d instead pick here or there. She chose the latter.

“Vibe?” I scoffed, wiping my nose. “You think I care if you have a good enough internet connection or Instagram filter? Read the room, asshole, you’re not welcome here.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, I guess,” He muttered, looking away to avoid the conversation. Then I heard him mouth the word bitch.

Non-confrontational piece of shit!

“The fuck you just called me,” I reached for his muscle tee, yanking him upward, some of the locals cheering as the others shook their heads. Unko was all for it, nodding his head before Tourist A slipped out of his top and kicked me in the chest.

The crowd winced as I slid backward, hitting the kitchen counter. And meeting the friendly waitress’s concerned gaze. Her hands quivered as she held the pot of coffee in her hand to which I grabbed it and looked at the tourist, “You got some nerve-”

“So what?” The Tourist interrupted. If there were two things I despised more than anything else, it was being interrupted and foreigners. And this mofo is a double whammy!

He kept antagonizing, “Where’s that aloha spirit you people have-”

I threw the glass pot at his chest, shattering glass and singeing his skin before I punched him in the nose until his back slammed against the table. I kicked him to the side and stood on his back as I yelled at his face, “How’s that, you punk ass bitch!?”

Then all the cheers turned to cursing as they thought I was the bad guy. Everything went south from there. I couldn’t recall what happened afterward because it wasn’t interesting anyway. The tourist cried, yelled a few things, and flipped me off here or there before calling the police about how some “tall, brown, and buff girl beat a poor, defenseless man.” Luckily for him, the officer who arrived at the scene was my man on the inside.

A local who wasn’t related by blood, but I knew a lot from... well, you’ll see.

“This again, Akane?” He massaged his forehead with one hand while reading the witness testimonies with the other. “Every day, it’s another problem.”

Pua’a and I didn’t always get along. That isn’t even his name. I just called him that because there was a time he got his ass kicked by a wild boar. He looked much younger than Unko Kai but still had some experience. I thought all police officers were servants of The Man, but Pua’a’s like a double agent. He should owe me a solid.

“You make it sound like it’s my fault.” I raised my hands. Pua’a and I talked as we were the only ones left in the diner. Tourist A and Unko were outside in the parking lot, and I wondered how this was my problem.

The local rolled his eyes, looked both directions and lowered his voice, “I thought we had a deal. I’d look the other way, and your employer would pay me accordingly.”

It was a simple bargain. I knew I wasn't in trouble the moment I fought Tourist A. I was untouchable. My employer likes to keep these situations under wraps in case one of their finest Operatives isn't where they need them to be. I'm that special.

"But it's been two years and over two hundred problems! That raises a concern," His voice cracked, "As a friend, I'm seriously worried about what you're going through."

"You're no friend," I shook my head. Kathleen was one of the only friends I ever had, but she's been in California for who knows how long.

Pua'a shrugged, "What would Ritsu think if she saw you like this?"

I pouted, "Ritsu doesn't need to know."

The officer shook his head, writing a few final notes and talking about a false alarm in his walkie-talkie. "Okay, it's settled. But this... is the last straw. I'm going to miss the money, but I'd rather teach you a lesson. I'll see you around."

"Yeah, sure," I groaned, exiting the booth and leaving the diner. I felt something stirring within my gut for the first time in two years. Was it regret? Impossible.

That Tourist deserved everything!

I walked out of the diner in a daze, blinded by the Hawaiian sun, as I saw Unko Kai standing next to my motorcycle. It had all the bells and whistles. It was black, fuel-efficient, and had the best thing a girl could ask for leaning against it.

My beautiful, wooden Kū. It may look like your average obsidian-tipped spear but don't underestimate it. Kū's got performance anxiety, and rather than being a spear, it spends its time disguised as a walking stick. But I still love it no matter what.

“What’s wrong, cuz?” Unko Kai asked as I grabbed Kū, spinning it around and practicing moves as he read my mind, “You got problem or what?”

“What I got,” I talk story with Unko, “Is Pua’a telling me that what I did was wrong. But that damn haole deserved everything and more!”

I gave Tourist A, who sat across the parking lot, the stink eye. He had bandages wrapped around his chest and was facetimeing his bromingos in tears. “I-I was minding my own business, having a nice q-quiet meal. Until she suddenly beats me into a pulp saying that ‘the white man don’t belong here no more’!”

“You lying fuck!” I cursed at the tourist from afar, causing him to shiver before Unko Kai pulled his hat off and scratched his balding head.

“So Pua’a is on the haole’s side,” Unko sighed, slipping his hat back on and walking to the diner's front door, “Wait right here; I gotta go shi shi.”

I shrugged in response, spinning Kū around as Unko was doing his business. Breaking a sweat, I took a break before I heard a gut-wrenching scream. A scream that was so terrifying that Tourist A and I covered our ears and winced.

When the screaming cleared, I instantly ran into the diner out of concern for Unko and Pua’a, and what I saw was something I shouldn’t have. I covered my mouth in disgust as blood splattered everywhere as a human balloon had popped, the smell of death emanated everywhere, and I saw a monster so terrifying I thought I was done for.

A Grievance with a body so covered in tentacles, spines, and fins that I thought it was a man holding a fisher’s net filled with sea creatures.

I think now's about as good of a time I tell you what I do for a living.

It's killing these monsters, or if you prefer to be politically correct, Grievances. My employer assigns me to fight them daily without explaining much about where they came from, their plans, or anything helpful. They all range in different shapes, sizes, and difficulty, with this monster taking the cake regarding fear factor.

Now, back to the action.

The Grievance swept me with its tentacles out of the diner. I bent a lamppost out of shape as I reached my hand out to Kū.

The spear wobbled before zipping straight towards me like a lightning bolt, only to impale a car beside me.

The sea monster leaped outside, grabbing me by the legs and flailing me across the parking lot. I bit my tongue and tried to summon Kū, but it kept missing me by a second.

Running for cover, I went inside the diner. The sea monster followed, clicking like a dolphin as I hid behind the kitchen counter. I guess the other staff had the same idea, quaking in their boots as I placed my finger in front of my mouth with a shhh.

I looked to see if Unko Kai was there, but he was nowhere to be seen. The Grievance must've got to him, as well as Pua'a. That damn thing!

We were all at the whims of the Grievance. I summoned Kū to save the day, only for it to pierce through the window, shattering glass and entering the kitchen. The fire sprinklers rang as the Grievance tilted its head and tracked the spear like a canine.

The coast was clear, and the terrified staff left the diner, as the monster and I were the only ones left. But as I thought the sea monster was busy, string wrapped around my waist and yanked me backward as another Grievance entered the fray.

Both looked just as disgusting. Their bodies were hideously morphed from head to toe, so much so that I couldn't tell which part was which. It's like looking at the ingredients of a hot dog; I nearly puked before I fled into the kitchen.

Cornered, the Grievances grabbed my throat as I felt the same stressful feeling. My heart raced with anxiety as the walls felt like they were closing in, and the puddles that appeared on the ground reflected the one person I loathed.

The Grievance raised its arm, but it was immediately obliterated by Kū falling into my hand. The other attacked, but I swiped my spear through it, slicing it in half. One down, I threw Kū to the side before mercilessly beating the monster to a pulp.

Blood and water mixed with each other as I screamed, yanking the Grievance tentacles as they screamed bloody murder. Both of us cried in desperation as the sprinklers finally gave out, the battle was over, and I was covered from head to toe in blood.

CHAPTER THREE

REALITY CHECK

I hated myself for falling asleep.

I knew it was going to happen eventually. The day before was rough. I got dragged into a party. I didn't want to be a part of my friends, who all ditched me, and I was left wandering the neighborhood alone and forgotten until Justin found me.

Luckily for me, he offered to drive me home. I wasn't the kind of guy to accept offers from strangers I had just met, but I had nowhere else to go. The ride back was fine—the nightmare I had when I got home was not so fine.

The same scene was replayed over and over.

The night after the fishing trip.

I was driving my Chevy Malibu, my hands at ten and two. Dad was resting in the passenger seat. At first, I didn't want to go fishing at all. Kathleen had broken up with me, school was about to start, and I was dealing with what my Godfather called “adulthood.”

But Dad convinced me otherwise. During the ride, I told him everything I felt—and I meant everything. When I picked the tackle box up from Kathleen's house and she didn't want to see me ever again, that stung. She didn't need to make things worse.

So, I talked with him—the only man I trusted.

He was more than just my therapist; he was my interpreter. When I was diagnosed with a speech disability, Dad was the only one who understood me.

As for after the trip, it must've tuckered him out so much that he decided to sleep on the passenger seat. It wasn't a wise choice, considering the road from here to Antioch was bumpy as hell, and that included all the bridges, but he seemed pretty beat.

Things weren't handed to him on a silver platter. He was a first-generation immigrant from the Middle East. And while he didn't remember much of the time he spent living out of the country, I could tell he still missed it.

And America was just another stepping stone for him.

He worked his way up the corporate and societal ladder until he eventually became a police consultant for the Bay Area, where he met my Godfather.

Once I was halfway there to Antioch, I drove through Walnut Grove. A blink-and-you'll-miss-it town divided by the river itself. We usually stopped there for bathroom breaks and the occasional crawdad fishing festival, but there was something else about this place that made me mesmerized. Then, as I stopped at a few intersections and made a few left turns, Dad snapped out of his snoozefest and rocked his seat upright.

"Almost there?" He muttered, smacking his lips.

"Y-Yah," I said as we crossed the fourth bridge on our trip. And while I was only above the water for a moment, the reflection flickered like a broken television.

My eyes must be playing tricks on me.

Then Dad reached into the glove box, grabbed his old green journal, and jotted a few notes down before asking a question that would reverberate around my head.

"What do you see in your reflection?" His last words.

Then, that's when it all shifted.

I saw everything through a hazy red filter. I wanted to close my eyes and avoid what was about to happen so badly, but I couldn't. My eyes were forcibly open, my hands were glued to the wheels, and I was stuck reliving this burdening experience.

I wanted to yell and scream at my dad, warning him to run away. There were so many things I wish I could do, but I couldn't. I was left at the whims of the world.

The nightmare replayed itself.

As soon as I drove off the bridge, onto the road, light pierced my eyesight. My tire locked, the wheels jamming until the car flipped. Everything came so fast that my body never processed how painful it was. Everything faded to black, the only sensation I felt was a disembodied voice that reverberated around my head like a commentator.

The same voice back at the bridge said, "What a shame."

My head rested against the bathroom floor, drool spilling out before I got up, grabbed my glasses off the floor, and looked in the mirror. But when I saw a zombie that was on the other side, I screamed, slamming my back against the towel rod before I winced.

The monster copied all my movements, my reactions, and even the expressions I gave. It looked a lot like me, and its right arm was missing! But we were still vastly different. The monster's eyes were ripped from its sockets, its bones were poking out all over, and it had this empty look on its face that felt like it was devoid of all emotion.

"What do you see in your reflection?" Dad's last words echoed around my head. To me, a fucking zombie. I must've been riding off of the Halloween drug.

Startled, I pinched my cheek, and I saw myself again when I did. Thank God. I have already dealt with worse enough. I wasn't stuck on August 22nd.

Since that very day, I'd experienced the same nightmare every time I fell asleep. And what's worse about it all wasn't the fact that I didn't see the aftermath of the crash, but the fact that I never saw Dad after that point. I was only told that he didn't make it.

I didn't even check myself. When my Godfather postponed Dad's funeral until after my recovery, I still didn't attend. I was so afraid of seeing Dad without his vibrant smile that I simply ignored him. I ignored everybody.

I didn't know what to do anymore. Just thinking about thinking hurts my brain. After washing my face and leaving the bathroom, I breezed past my neglected living room and went straight to bed. After Kathleen kicked me out of her apartment, I spent the last few months living at my Dad's house, which ended up being mine.

My two-bedroom, two-bath tomb.

I never left the house since recovery, besides the party Dillion dragged me into. Work and school were an afterthought because how could I even do that with my fake plastic arm? I know there are thousands of other options to try and make things as "normal" as possible, but there is no normal anymore. Equipping a bionic arm and making light of my disability accepts the fact that I moved on. But I'll never move on.

I could never fit in.

The only thing I did around the house was eat, try not to sleep, and rot in my bed. I used to love cooking, but you can't do that if you're half what you're used to. I'd order from DoorDash, wait for the guy to leave, and then pick it up.

The only person I saw besides Dillion was my Godfather. I'd be another arm into the grave if it weren't for him. He's been helpful with paying groceries and rent. He might throw a curse or two at me for not being able to pay it myself, but he still helps.

He even offered to hang out with me a few days ago. He said his schedule was finally clearing up. I was hesitant at first, but after all my friends ignored me, I went to the only man who saw me. Sliding off my bed, I grabbed my clothes scattered across the floor and threw what smelled the best: a white button-up and jeans.

The jeans were getting so baggy that I had to slip a belt around them, and that was only after I saw how shriveled and bony I was getting from the lack of sleep.

It wasn't long before I called my Godfather, who eagerly answered, "On my way!"

After a few minutes, my Godfather arrived in his black and white police car, standing outside and combing his hand through his moussed-up hair. When I walked outside the door and arrived, he cracked a smile.

The man looked as tired as I was with his tousled, graying hair, five-o'clock shadow, and baggy eyelids. Although I bet he wasn't neglecting sleep like I was. His uniform looked slightly disheveled, but he was still the same Chief of Police I knew and loved. His blue eyes pierced my soul, reminding me of Kathleen's coldness. But it made perfect sense, considering how they're both related.

That was the only similarity. While Kathleen wasn't a hugger, Peter wrapped his arms around me when I got to the driveway. And while I patted his back repeatedly to stop, his crying changed my mind. The sound of his sobbing muffled against my shoulder,

causing me to tear up in response. He was the only family I had left at this point. We were both hurt because of what happened because while I lost Dad, he lost a brother.

Peter and Kathleen were our next-door neighbors, which was what blossomed the start of a beautiful relationship. I'd always play with Kathleen in the backyard while Peter and Dad had their fun. They raised me until I attended East Bay, which was when I started having feelings for Kathleen. I was so nervous that I was afraid to tell my Godfather, but he saw it coming. And Kathleen and I rented an apartment together.

"I swear you're getting older by the second!" Peter exclaimed as we drove out of my neighborhood towards one of Dad's and I's favorite restaurants, Cocina Medina. It is an authentic Mexican restaurant that beats all the Taco Bell I DoorDashed. It was like a second home to me. The food reminded me of what Mom used to make; the staff was always nice and friendly, and you could tell that there's something here you can't get anywhere else.

We sat and caught up to everything that happened since we got inside. Peter couldn't help but admire me as I looked at the menu and nodded without a word.

"I mean, come on! It's like you turned twenty in the blink of an eye!"

I was so busy with Dillion that I forgot yesterday was my birthday. "Yeah."

I wasn't much of the bragging type; besides, Halloween was such a craze that nobody would listen if I mentioned my birthday. Most of my childhood birthdays consisted of having candy and pumpkins along with them, so I just became desensitized to it.

Along with anything having to do with fantasy and the supernatural.

I guess that's why I never liked anything Dad wrote about...

It wasn't long before our server handed me my order. One shrimp taco bowl, the kind of grub I wanted to dig my fork into! I jabbed at my food and ate delightfully as Peter watched me longingly while preferring to drink instead of eating.

But after a few shots, he sang like a canary.

"I'm sorry for what happened to Kathleen," He blurted, to which I gave a nod while I kept picking apart the taco shell. I can't rewrite the past, and besides, Kathleen decided to split us apart, so it wasn't my fault that our relationship was over. I thought about that for some time, but I just chalked it up as bad luck. "It's like she disappeared without a trace."

I dropped my fork. "Wait, what?"

"You didn't know?" Peter slurred, "Kathleen went missing days after you were in recovery. Her car's still at the apartment, so we're unsure as to whether she skipped the border with some illegal boyfriend or she's kidnapped. Or both. Fact is, she's a goner."

Peter kept jabbering about his daughter disappearing like it was another day at the precinct, another work-related problem he had to clock in for. Did he seriously not care whether she was alive or not? It would've made more sense if I didn't care.

"And you never told me until now?" I asked him.

"You're a shut-in!" He raised his voice, "How else was I supposed to?"

Everyone in the restaurant heard, causing me to slink against my seat. Peter always had to be the center of attention, making everyone hear what he had to say.

Peter realized what he had done, "I'm sorry. It doesn't matter anymore though because if she's gone for long enough who knows where she could be."

I didn't know how to feel up until that moment. One part of me was thinking, "Good riddance, the world would be better without people like her," the other part was being upset about how everything happened. Kathleen's a smart, capable woman. How did she get herself wrapped up in some potential murder mystery?

"Oh, that reminds me," Peter mentioned before reaching into his satchel and pulling out a cardboard box you'd put clothing in, "Here you go."

"What's in it?" I asked.

"Just open the goddamn box," Peter cursed.

I sighed and grabbed the box, expecting to find my fifty-eighth pair of pajamas. I expected the worst and opened it, only to feel the fabric's rugged touch. When I pulled it out, it revealed a long brown jacket that reached to my knees. It was Dad's farwa.

"No fricking way," I admired, smelling the farwa and smelling its earthy scent. It was the only thing Dad brought from his homeland, "I thought this was destroyed!" "You'd be surprised. That was one of the only things that survived in the suitcase. Most of all, the other stuff was either incinerated or torn apart."

When I had the farwa, I imagined Dad standing right beside me. The coat's comforting touch reminded me he'd always be there when I needed him. Tearful, I got out of my chair and wrapped my arms around Peter. I couldn't help but weep after what he did, causing my Godfather to pat my back as I let all my emotions out.

CHAPTER FOUR

'BOUT DAMN TIME

“So let me get this straight,” An Operative who arrived at the scene checked his notes, “Two... demegorgon-cthulu-Grievance-abominations showed up to Tasty Crust after you rightfully defended yourself against a mouth-breathing tourist.”

“Exactly!” I explained my side of the story.

“And as far as casualties go... they killed the officer and your uncle?” He clarified, to which I looked down at the asphalt. Pua’a and Unko had nothing to do with this! But as much as I thought they were both gone, a reassuring hand touched my hand.

“What’s all dis about?” Unko asked with a yawn.

“What the fuck, Unko?” I cursed at him, grabbing him by the hand and wrapping an arm around him, “I thought you were pau the moment the Grievance-”

The Operative cleared his throat, “The gas leak occurred.”

“Y-yeah,” I scratched my head as Unko explained his side.

“I thought I told you cuz I went shi shi. Didn’t see Pua’a, though. It’s a shame he went belly up.” Unko took his hat off as solace, to which I bit my lip, “Anyways, I’m sorry to bother you, cuz; let’s do this again sometime, maybe without the haoles.”

Unko flicked his hand into a shaka before walking off. I wiped my brow immediately afterward as the Operative wrote more notes down. The guy looked familiar but like déjà vu familiar. I would’ve recognized an Operative who had rainbow-colored

eyes by now, especially since they looked like a spinning pinwheel you'd see on MacBooks. But as soon as he finished his notes, he sighed heavily.

“The Director’s not going to like all this publicity.”

“So what? I defeated the Grievance. End of story.”

“It’s not only that. It’s about keeping their existence a secret. You think I rearrange people’s memories for fun? Make them think they saw an explosion instead of a demon?”

I shrugged, remembering exactly why the Operative seemed familiar. He was a Miracle. They’re like the best of the best of Exodus. “Listen, Luka, I’m trying my best.”

Luka sighed, pulling out a tablet and texting someone else, “You’ve been saying that ever since Kathleen left. But when are you going to follow through?”

“When you make me a Miracle, beats me.”

“We’ll see about that,” Luka chuckled. I bet you’re acting hella confused right now, wondering what all these terms Luka and I are throwing around and how ominous-sounding most of it is, but I’ll have you know that it’s okay to be kept in the dark. That’s how Exodus treated me most of the time. I’ve worked with them for the past few years, and it’s all right.

They don’t provide vision or dental, but they make up for it. And that’s pretty much it... aside from the fact that they’re a secret government organization that hides the existence of Grievances. They’re not perfect, but what job is?

But it’s all about to change!

“For now, The Director wants to see you.” The Miracle said.

“Fuck seriously?” I groaned. The Director can lick my Hawaiian ass. I never met the man once, but I could tell that in a corporate world filled with shitty supervisors and even shitter managers, The Director stands atop all of that. He is The Man.

“I arranged a flight from Kahului Airport to Daniel K Inouye in,” The Miracle checked his watch, “Three hours. So be ready.”

Light passed through Luka as he began to fade away like a ghost, but he kept smiling as I flipped him off in defiance. I cursed, “Fucking Luka.”

With Luka gone, I picked up my spear, wiped the blood from the last battle off it, and drove back to my camper to get ready to leave for Oahu. I washed the blood off my skin, packed a few changes of clothes, and reluctantly climbed up the corporate ladder.

I got a lot of weird looks from locals and tourists when I arrived at the airport, and when I realized it was because they were looking at Kū, I was shocked. The world needs to accept ancient weapons more. Anyway! To avoid having a deadly confrontation with one of the world’s greatest threats outside of Grievances—the TSA—I made a tactical retreat to the bathroom. That led me to unveil another of Kū’s most extraordinary feats. I held my breath, spun Kū around, and voila! The spear shrunk into a walking stick half its size.

It’s a handy trick. Most Operatives and Miracles use this Gift, with each of their weapons transforming into a different everyday object. I’m sure Miracles have special techniques and weapons, but I’m a friendly neighborhood Hawaiian.

My friend Kathleen—the strongest Miracles in the whole damn world—has her rapier looking like an umbrella. But if she ever gets into a hairy enough situation, she can

simply throw her weapon into the Backstage. And I'm not talking about the Backstage as in theater performances; I'm talking about another fucking world that's beyond our own.

Got all that? Great.

After strutting through security and arriving in Oahu, I was confused as hell. I left my Yamaha in Maui, thinking an Operative would pick me up, but Luka left me in the dark again. They never gave me the how or why, just the "do it yourself bitch"!

Whatever, it's not like I needed their help. But when I arrived at baggage claim, I felt my hair stand on end. My vision fluctuated like the heat waves of Waikīkī, which revealed someone walking towards me. A woman with a black pixie cut that was wearing a suit and tie. She also held an acoustic guitar, but the Backstage revealed it as a katana. I didn't need any more hints. I turned around and gave them a great big hug.

"Long time no—" the lady interrupted me as I hugged her, dropping her water bottle, which clanked on the floor as loud as possible. She wrapped her arms around me with a smile before stroking my curly hair, "See"

There's so much I wanted to say about my mentor that I didn't know what to say. By day, she's my foster parent; by night, she's a Grievance-slaying Miracle. She's just as strong, if not stronger than Kathleen, and she taught me how to fight.

"I thought you were in Ukraine!" I shouted. She was sent there to provide allied support against the Russians and any lingering Grievances. The war's been going on for so long that I realized she's been gone for a whopping two years!

"I was, but you didn't think I'd leave you alone for a second, would I?" She doted, pulling my cheek as the sunlight reflected across her ebony eyes.

“Cut it out, Ritsu!” I snapped back at her. I swear she treats me like a kid whenever I’m around her. She’s a grandma who forgets how old her grandchildren are. And if anyone else would act like that towards me, I’d sock them in the face because that’s how special Ritsu is. Both her and Kathleen are the only ones I ever trusted.

“No can do!” Ritsu denied. She kept messing around with me all the way to her car, and when we got there, I crossed my arms, pouting.

That was until I noticed the scent of fried chicken and freshly cooked rice.

“Is that what I think I’m smelling,” I blurted, looking behind the passenger seat and seeing the most onolicious food a bruddah could ask for. A Foodland bag filled with Spam Musubi, Fried Chicken, and Hawaiian Sun.

“Oh, that? That’s just some local food I bought because they had a deal going on; nothing to do with you showing up.”

“This is bribery,” I mumbled between bites, scarfing all the chicken and musubi as Ritsu left the airport and drove down the highway.

Once we arrived near Waikīkī, she pulled down the window and cranked the radio up as I saw all the locals walking by. I always loved Oahu, but something about it didn’t strike me the same way as Maui. It’s honestly because of how cramped it was because of all the tourism and the lack of farmland. Everything I saw was building after building, reminding me how it’s just as bad on the mainland. But I’m not here to soapbox or anything; I’m just bringing up a little bit of cynicism and letting you decide what’s what.

As we kept driving past all the hotels, I waved at the buddhas and sistahs I saw walking by, which was a small fraction compared to the dozens of tourists. But Ritsu drove

away from all the fame and acclaim, taking a sharp turn until she drove into an underground parking garage. Once she parked the car, she picked something off my cheek.

“Stop it!” I nudged my face back before Ritsu couldn’t help but apologize. Ritsu, Kathleen, and I were practically a family. Whenever we finished a mission, we’d end the day watching the sunset and eating shaved ice. And despite all that... Ritsu never picks on Kathleen! It’s always me! Why can’t the teasing be divided evenly?

I think Ritsu picks on me because she knows I get flustered.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help it.” Ritsu apologized as I wiped the bits of food off my face.

Taking a deep sigh, I left the car, grabbed my belongings, and went to a set of doors at the end of the parking garage. It looked more like a hotel than some top-secret organization, but I figured they were going through some renovations. Again, I’ve never been here before, so I’m just here for the ride. The only time Exodus ever communicates with me is with Luka, and they barely say enough as it is.

And I’ve never seen The Director.

You think a VIP like me would get all the attention and more, but they’ve been giving me all these bullshit side-quests. How come I’m the one who gets left behind on the islands while Kathleen and Ritsu do all kinds of shit. And because I thought I’d only be doing a one-night stay, I brought two changes of clothes, Kū, and that’s about it.

“You know why I’m here Reese?” I asked her, who looked the other way, held her hands behind her back, and whistled like she wasn’t being suspicious enough, “Great.”

When Ritsu and I entered the hallway, I heard stomping and chattering from above before we arrived at an elevator with a keypad instead of a button. Ritsu punched a code

within the keypad, and the doors opened. The doors shut as soon as we entered, revealing my reflection and Ritsu's. Ritsu's reflection revealed her wearing a checkered kimono, long black hair, and spending time with her children. She never talked about having children, but I guess it makes sense for someone like her to settle down. Then the children turned to dust, Ritsu fell to her knees, and I saw better cinematography there than any modern film.

“What you see in the Backstage might be real, but don't let it distract you,” Ritsu explained as I looked at my own reflection. What about my reflection is real? She always says that it has some deeper meaning, but I think it's BS. Ritsu was either wrong or the Backstage was busted because the only thing I saw was my childhood friend from Maui.

I haven't seen her since elementary school, so that must've affected her appearance. She was lightly tanned, with green eyes and long curly hair that reached her waist. The girl also had dorky little glasses that matched her already goofy white dress. Everyone called her Abigail, but I was the only one who called her Abby.

After rubbing my eyes, I returned to see myself, and the elevator doors opened to reveal the central hub. The first thing I saw was a series of screens that displayed Grievances across the Pacific and a map that displayed all of them as red dots. It looked like your typical headquarters, containing monitors that operators operated on and talked with the Agents on site. It was like a call center—a futuristic, technologically sound call center.

The screens then revealed the witnesses at the restaurant, detailing their basic information on another screen as if it were a slideshow. But instead of running to the police and screaming, they acted as if they were on drugs. Even Tourist A was fine.

“What did you see?” An Operative interrogated him.

Tourist A scratched his head, “Some girl beat the shit out of me.”

The footage then revealed my ass getting kicked in 4k. Operatives giggled as I ran to the man in charge, only to find that it wasn't The Director. Just a random Jane Doe- a girl wearing a suit with rainbow-colored eyes. “Again Luka?!”

Luka spoke with the Operative on site, “Situation cleared.”

“Where's The Director?” I called Luka out before she looked at me and squinted her eyes until Ritsu appeared right next to me. She snapped his fingers.

She spoke into a microphone, “Everyone. May I have your attention?”

The room was dead silent, the Operatives glued to Jane Doe.

“Give a round of applause to Ritsu Kekoa, the founder of Exodus!”

The room was filled with outrageous clapping, but I was speechless as ever. Not only was Ritsu a certified badass, but she also created Exodus. What the hell!

“You're The Director?” I exclaimed at Ritsu before she politely waved at all the cheering Operatives, told them to return to their business, and looked at me.

Ritsu shook her head, “It's a long story. I used to be in charge, but I stepped down after I found you. The Director you're about to meet was one of my students.”

“Seriously?” I asked, so The Director's only been around for a few years. That's crazy. I bet things were amazing when Ritsu was running the joint.

“It's good to see you again,” Luka shook Ritsu's hand. She might've been Luka, but she didn't look the same as the one I saw back in Maui. If you compared the two, you could

tell they didn't look the same. But the Backstage would beg to differ. Luka's spiritual echo was constantly transforming like someone picked random off a create-a-character screen.

"How've you been?" Ritsu asked.

"Oh, you know, same as usual," Luka brushed off with a smile. Her mannerisms were the same; it was just like she body-swapped or something. Then I remembered what Ritsu told me about Luka when I first met them in Maui.

"You don't look the same to me," I muttered.

Luka sighed, holding a hand to her chest. "So you recognize me? That's a relief."

One of the perks of becoming a Miracle is developing a Gift, a special power that's based on the user's personality or whatever bullshit voodoo zodiac they're into. Ritsu's gift was time, Kathleen's was being overpowered as fuck, and Luka's was... different.

Luka can project themselves wherever they want, but the form changes every time. They can be a late man in his fifties or a young woman in her teens. The guy can't choose; it's just a random personality generator. At least, I like to think he's not able to, but Luka's a chill person; he wouldn't do anything nefarious. I've never seen him in person, so for all I know, he could be some guy living in his parent's basement. So yeah...

He's the ultimate catfisher.

But that's not all, he's also damage control. He manipulates people's memories into thinking they're seeing something else. So instead of seeing a restaurant get turned to shit by sea monsters, they're seeing Kū commit property damage.

That's what makes his projection skill so nifty. But that's all he's useful for; he doesn't do a lick of fighting, much like The Director.

“Now, what do you say we get this thing over with, shall we?” Luka rallied Ritsu and me, causing Ritsu to enthusiastically cheer as I did the exact opposite.

I followed Luka past the monitors and Operatives before Ritsu stood back there, giving a thumbs up before I realized that I would have to do this all by myself. Once we arrived at the end of the hall, Luka pushed the door open to reveal a sanctuary.

“Good luck out there,” Luka encouraged me as I went inside. The room felt so eerie that it was like The Director was always watching me. Remember, I never met the man myself—I even thought he was Ritsu! Luka gave me all the missions, which I only assumed were from up top. Even so, I wondered why this guy even wanted to see me.

He stood atop the sanctuary’s stage, sitting on a bar stool as I cautiously walked towards him. He didn’t even pay attention to me when I got near him, only flipping the pages of his book with his solemn gaze. He looked a lot older than Ritsu, which was a surprise, seeing as to how he was her student.

The gray hair and eyepatch weren’t helping either.

The more I kept hearing about The Director and the locations where they’d hide their bases, the more he reminded me of a pirate pastor. Not only was he wearing a suit and tie, but when I got closer to the front, I could see he was reading the holy text.

He looked so distracted and stuck reading the book that I wanted to say something to get the conversation started, to get my point across, “Hey listen-”

“There’s nothing you can say to get yourself out of this predicament,” The Director interrupted, shutting his book, which echoed across the sanctuary. He looked at me with his

remaining eye. He leaped off the stage and got to my level, to which I instinctively gripped my spear, only for The Director to laugh and lean against the stage.

“Quick to wrath, I see,” He chuckled as I only kept my guard up.

“I’m just here because Luka asked me to, that’s it.” I addressed.

“Ah yes, Hermaphroditus,” The Director acknowledged, “They told me what happened, how your path of destruction nearly alerted all of the islands.”

“But I killed it though, doesn’t it matter?”

“Even so, your negligence towards keeping the peace is alarming. Hermaphroditus told me you’ve been harassing tourists and bringing Grievances everywhere you go. They say you’re a bad luck charm. And the other Operatives share the same sentiment.”

“Fuck what they say! I get the results, don’t I?”

The Director cleared his throat, which caused me to stiffen.

He paced around me in a circle, slamming his leatherbound book in his hand until he asked, “What is it that makes a Grievance a Grievance?”

You’ve got to be kidding me. Throughout my entire time at Exodus, they’ve always told us one simple truth: that Grievances are evil Demons straight from hell.

I told him what I thought verbatim, but The Director shook his head.

“I see,” He surmised walking circles around me, “Grievances have been intricately linked with humanity ever since Cain murdered Abel-”

“Yeah sure, keep saying whatever makes you feel in charge,” I mumbled.

“-As the world’s population grows, Grievances do the same. And there’s a thin curtain that hides the world’s knowledge from the truth, and what you’re doing right now is

threatening the very thing we stand for. So, I ask you this: what's the purpose of an Operative who threatens to destroy the foundation of Exodus?"

The Director's making some bold accusations here. Just because I had a run-in with a haole once or twice does not make me public-enemy-number one. "Why don't you stop pointing your finger at me and point it at the Grievances, the real monsters?"

He smiled, "That's what I've always been doing. I'm just warning you that if you continue down this path of negligence, you'll end up the same as Iscariot."

"Iscariot?" I muttered confusedly. Who the hell was he talking about? It could've been anyone. Then one face popped into my mind, the one person that was always called on missions by The Director, the one I called Prodigy, "What the hell did Kathleen do?"

"Iscariot," He fixed his tie, "is no longer with us."

I dropped to my knees, my mouth ajar until my gaze rolled to the empty ceiling. I traced my fingertips around the side of my neck, the tattoo Kathleen had chosen herself, the only thing I had to remember her by. My mind immediately sent me back to the last time we met, the day before she was swept away and never seen again.

"So tell me: what's so great about California that you'd prefer it over being here?" I played around with Kathleen, sitting atop my camper's roof while watching the sunrise.

"It's nothing," She brushed aside, "It's just a part of the mission."

"Part of the mission," I scoffed, "More like part of The Director's plan."

Since joining the organization, she's been nothing more than The Director's favorite. It's always Kathleen this and Kathleen that with the man. I almost wish Kathleen wasn't strong enough so she'd be able to stay here with me.

Selfish, I know, but what's so wrong about wanting to be with your friend?

"You're saying that like The Director's a bad person," Kathleen called me out, "But his intentions are far from malicious. He wants to maintain world stability."

"Stability," I mocked, "Does stability mean the displacement of rich, white landowners versus homeless, drug-addicted locals? Does stability mean the police who swore to protect doing the exact opposite? If Exodus wants to protect humanity so much, why isn't it fixing the wrongs that humanity has brought upon itself?"

Kathleen was silent, stunned even. I almost wanted to apologize, but I meant what I said: there are wrongs in this world that the director is batting an eye on. How is he the leader of the organization if they're not even fixing these injustices?

Just what in the hell is Kathleen even doing in California?

"You're right," she agreed. The world is more corrupt than we can ever imagine. Grievances are everywhere, and humanity is powerless to stop them. But that doesn't mean we can't try to fix it. The first step to changing the world is accepting its flaws."

Prodigy smiled, and as she did, the sun peeked through the mountains and shone across the island. That's when I was able to get a better look at her tattoo, one she kept on the back of her shoulder. I picked it myself. She had a yellow hibiscus, while I had a sunflower. But her looks didn't matter. I was into personalities more than anything.

When I first met Kathleen, she had a beautiful personality. She was smart, quirky, and always had a story to tell. We'd banter back and forth about whatever, which often led to arguments that Ritsu had to defuse. However, after Kathleen had continued doing all these missions for The Director, she lost her sense of self and emotions.

She became a fucking robot, a killjoy that did as she was told. Frightened, I tried to make things work between the two of us. It took a while for her to return to normal.

It was still taking a while! Her soldier-like mindset has blended into her daily life, so much so that I had to argue that eating overpriced local food is okay because it's delicious. What happened to her is a mystery I'll never know. Or even want to know.

And while I wanted this bonding session to last forever, Kathleen's cell phone ringing shut it. Prodigy took a call, leaped off the roof, and talked for a while, so much so that I couldn't help but overhear from above. Her voice was much different and relaxed than when she spoke to me; she even laughed a few times.

Kathleen never laughed when I was around.

"Okay, see you tomorrow, bye." She concluded before climbing up the RV and sitting back down, and I couldn't help but feel a bit jealous.

I tried teasing to ease the tension, "Was that your boyfriend?"

I hated how right I was.

"Yeah," Kathleen heaved, stretching her arms and legs, "He thinks I'm working at EMT Training and that I'll be back home tomorrow."

"What's his name?" I asked with a tinge of annoyance.

“Benjamin. We’ve known each other since elementary school, and our dads are like brothers to each other, so the stars were aligned. He can be a bit of a drama queen and an overthinker, but he’s a pretty sweet guy overall. You two should meet up sometime.”

“Totally,” I grinned, wondering what kind of sick love triangle I was being wrapped into, “Was being his girlfriend part of the mission as well?”

Kathleen raised an eyebrow, “Would you be more or less irritated if it was?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I turned away from her, “You should get going. I don’t want your boyfriend to be disappointed if you show up late at the airport.”

Was I being petty? You bet I was! But I deserved to be after the number of times I was dropping hints and Kathleen and hoping for her to understand. But no! She’s playing the childhood friend route, doing what The Director tells her to, and being a lapdog!

“Okay,” Kathleen frowned, and once she vanished into the Backstage, I crossed my arms and looked to the sky as I hated Kathleen for what she did.

And hated myself for acting like that the last time I saw her.

I dropped my spear, clamping my chest as my heart felt like it was about to burst. The Director’s talking shit about Kathleen, there’s no way in hell that she’d die.

“Bullshit she is!” I cursed at The Director, not giving a fuck about formalities or taking a deep breath and counting to ten.

“Be that as it may, Iscariot’s partner-on-site reported that as such. And ever since we lost Iscariot, Antioch has been swarming with Grievances.”

“So what? It’s not like it’s my problem.” I blurted it out, only to realize that what that partner reported may be my golden opportunity. I’ve always been upset with all these missions I’ve been getting, dealing with fucking-idiot-tourists. I wanted to work alongside Kathleen, but now, I could take her place “Unless I go there myself!”

The Director smiled, clasping his hands. “If you think you’re up to it, I’ll let you visit the site and finish what Iscariot started.”

I felt like I was walking into a trap. I might’ve spurred the conversation and asked him to take me there, but The Director deliberately mentioned my partner because he knows how much I care about her. Beyond that, I’ll be going into uncharted waters.

“So, what’ll it be?” The Director offered, “Succeed where Iscariot failed and understand your true potential, or spend your days fighting tourists?”

CHAPTER FIVE

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

“Last stop: Tumbleweed Court.” My Godfather relayed with a toot-toot, driving into my neighborhood and dropping me off as I looked at all the houses we drove past.

The cul-de-sac was smaller than I thought it was. That neighborhood was the center of all entertainment when Kathleen and I were younger. I looked at what used to be my Godfather’s old house with a reflective sigh, staring longingly at the magnolia tree where we struggled to install a tire swing. I also remembered the driveway that Kathleen and I used to bike down and the bush that I crashed into.

“Say bye to the house, bye to the house-house,” Peter rapped as everything in the neighborhood looked gray and dull like all the life and color was sucked away from it. Once Peter and, consequently, Kathleen moved away, everyone else followed, only to be replaced by sheltered, quiet folks who didn’t dare introduce themselves.

Dad and I stayed in that neighborhood while the rest of them moved on, and the sounds of laughter and joy Tumbleweed Court had were all but diminished. That was when Kathleen and I started to grow distant before we reconnected in college.

And as soon as Peter stopped in front of my house, I lugged myself outside with the present he gave me before giving him one final farewell.

“I wish I could do more, but duty calls.”

“Yeah, of course,” I groaned. I wanted to tell him how much I’d love it if he’d stay home, how happy that’d make me feel.

“Something on your mind?” He asked, his fingers tapping the wheel.

But what’s the point? He’ll probably say he has bills to pay, things to do, and he doesn’t have time to spend with me. Yeah. I’m not that special anyway.

I tapped my foot, “You could always drop by again if you’d like.”

“Someday,” He smacked his lips. As I thought, it didn’t matter what I’d say, because he’d be incredibly vague about when it might happen. I wondered if I should ask him about my dreams or the heat-seeking trees at the bridge.

Forget it. “You have any advice to give?”

“I don’t know; who do I look like, a Guardian?” He asked me, “You should get out of your house more- that’s what. All this brooding and staying inside is bound to make you feel terrible. You don’t get anything in life by sitting and doing jack shit.”

I shuddered in fear as he dished out that painful dose of reality.

“You’re right,” I muttered, only for him to roll up his window and drive off. After walking up to the driveway and opening the garage with the clicker, I was greeted by the horrendous sight of a black metal death trap. A waste of space if you ask me.

The last time I remembered driving the gas-guzzling piece of crap was when I grabbed my tackle box at Kathleen’s apartment, a terrible memory in itself. The garage itself felt like a distant memory, from the unsafe door that’d close without a motion sensor to the tire tracks smeared across the floor to the study installed in the back right corner.

I knew the moment I stepped foot in that study, I'd get all teary-eyed and upset, which is why I rarely visited this place, but I figured that seeing what Dad was recently up to might lift my spirits. If that's the sort of thing a ghost can do.

Kicking off my shoes, I stepped into the carpeted office, a renovated corner of the three-death-trap garage that included dozens of bookshelves, a drafting desk, a couch, and a TV. To be honest with you, it was more of an intellectual man cave than a study.

I stroked my hand against Dad's drawings, which rested atop the drafting desk, thinking back to how much of a thinker he was. From the very moment we picked this house, Dad wanted a drawing room, a place where he could be undistracted and write whatever came to mind, which is what resulted in this.

I read the title of the first book I picked off the shelf:

“The Curtain Chronicles, Issue 1, by Thomas Abrams.”

Dad was always obsessed with fantasy and the supernatural, so much so that I bet my birthday being on Halloween was no coincidence. Now, I wouldn't go as far as to say that he believes in the occult or he's superstitious, except that he believes in fortune cookies and reads his occasional horoscope, but he's a pure-blooded storyteller.

Now, with all these issues and more, you'd think he'd publish them and hope for the world to see what he was capable of, but I think my lack of support, as well as his other priorities, was the reason behind his decision to postpone.

Of course, a ghost can't publish comics at all, so that's that.

It's great that he has a passion for something, but let's be honest here, what's the point in believing in something fictional and never to happen? Fantasy is just an escape

from reality and a poor one at that. There used to be some decent movies and television shows. But once all the big entertainment studios realized that they don't need to be original to make money, they kept recycling the same garbage and ruining what it means to be a good storyteller. It's always a sequel after a reboot with Hollywood! So unless Dad thinks he can topple those multi-million dollar industries, his comic books are useless.

My hands flipped through the pages as I grumbled, looking at all the hard work Dad wasted. Hard work that amounted to nothing more than hand cramps. I kept looking through the first issue, hoping that Dad left a hidden message or something more meaningful than the content I was consuming. It was about a kid named Timothy.

I scoffed, "That's a self-insert."

And as I kept reading, it showed his parents murdered in an alleyway, "What a cliché. If Dad seriously thinks he can make the next bestseller, he's got to do better."

I finished the first issue with a huff. Was that seriously the culmination of Dad's work? I couldn't believe it. I looked between my phone and the dozens of bookshelves, stuck between doomscrolling and reading. I've been watching the same garbage for the past two months, but I'd rather watch reels than deal with the outside world.

But my past self and Dad would disagree. When he and Kathleen were around, all we'd ever do was run and have fun and make our own stories.

I sighed, "Fine. I'll read one more issue."

I walked back to the shelf, grabbing another issue. Each had a superfluous background, but they all had the same motif. Color and black-and-white were opposing elements, like oil and water, that mixed with each other.

The first issue showed Timothy in his typical superhero pose, sporting a white shirt and gray sweatpants. But half of the cover showed him normally in black and white, and the other half showed a trail of blood and bodies in full color.

The second issue showed Timothy facing off against a humanoid monster who looked like a monster in black and white but was secretly a human underneath. Like the big reveal at the end of a Scooby-Doo episode, except the human wasn't playing a monster for laughs.

I opened the second issue, detailing Timothy's vow of vengeance. I read some of the narration aloud, "After encountering the monster that killed his parents, he unlocks the power to see past the curtains of the world and reveal the Backstage..."

The Backstage was drawn as a series of curtains in a theater, shrouding the world in a blanket until Timothy physically drew them apart to reveal the monster's real identity.

"...a parallel world beyond all reflections and truths: it reveals everyone's truest self. Which revealed the monster to be none other than Timothy's relative. A *Grievance*."

I dropped the book in shock. The same question that Dad asked me replayed itself in the issue. "What do you see in your reflection?"

Timothy exclaimed, "How is this even possible?"

I shouted at the book, "That's what I'm saying!"

And when I wanted to read more, the wind from outside picked the book up and threw it outside the garage, out to the driveway in the dark of night. Racing for the book, I leapt off my couch and grabbed it only to reveal a page that startled me the most.

A flashback shows Timothy's relative driving a black metal death trap straight towards the parents. Timothy screamed in agony as he knelt beside his dead parents, screaming at me before the illustration rippled and blended into a dark shade of red.

Another damn car crash!

"There's no way he could've known," I muttered to myself repeatedly, my hands clasp my head as I dropped the book before I stumbled backward outside the garage and bumped into something from behind. No. Not something.

Someone.

I turned around, sighing at the sight of Dillion. He still wore the same costume from the night before, which caused me to feel uneasy. He breathed with his mouth open, heaving his chest up and down as he towered over me.

I hesitated, "The h-hell? You scared me."

He didn't say a thing, only breathing in response as I felt the same chill as I was back on the bridge, facing that shadowy figure who gave me all those thoughts.

"Hey, what's going on? Say something!" I told my friend, only for him to place both his hands on my shoulder and lean his head against mine before whispering a threat.

"You're gonna pay for this."

I jerked my head back, seeing nothing but darkness in response. Everything was black, the voices returned, and I was contemplating ending my life.

My friend was a soulless monster.

"I'm going to kill you after what you did to Amber!"

The hands grappled my arms and legs as I closed my eyes, wanting to blot out the anxiety as much as possible, but that didn't make much of a difference when I kept hearing Dillion whispering into my ear. "You caused the crash—killed my Amber—and thought you'd only lose an arm? Fat chance! I'm dragging you to the pits of hell!"

I never felt more afraid in my entire life—except for the car crash!

Yeah, that's right. Nothing in this world can separate me more than what happened that night—the darkness is nothing more than a pushover at this point.

"Just shut up already!" I screamed at Dillion, begging it to do its worst, and right as something grazed my neck like a claw, a knife pierced right through it.

A bright spark of light that discharged from the knife caused Dillion to shriek, dropping me until I saw the familiar sight of crimson eyes pierced through the darkness.

"The hell are you doing?" Raven yelled, "Get up and fight!"

"Easy for you to say!" I snapped back as I got to my feet and tried to survey the situation, marking her location by where the knives were thrown.

I could've spent all day wondering how Dillion followed me, why she showed up, and how I was involved in all this, but I figured that it's better saved for later.

The lights may have been out, but we were still fighting on the driveway: I had the advantage of knowing where everything was! When she was fighting off Dillion and diverting its attention, I ran back into the garage and rummaged around until I found the perfect weapon: a pocketknife! But Dillion must've known my intention.

Hundreds of arms grappled around my neck.

I looked to the red-eyed girl for help, only to hear she was busy fighting herself. I tried screaming for help, but my voice became raspier and raspier.

“End of the line.” Dillion’s voice echoed around the garage as I felt my life was about to be snuffed away, my hand losing the knife’s grip. As I began to lose my breath, the entire garage fluctuated around me like I was deep underwater. The walls were wobbly, the floor was gone, and it was like I had entered a house of mirrors. The darkness also disappeared, making it look like I had strapped on a pair of night-vision goggles.

I was seeing the Backstage.

Dillion was levitating off the ground as a Succubus, a scantily clad demoness with long horns and a tail, wrapped its arms around him. The Succubus whispered sweet nothings into Dillion’s ear as hundreds of insect appendages sprouted from its back.

“Yes DDDDillion,” The Succubus articulated, “Kill for me!”

Her voice sounded just like Amber’s, fooling Dillion like a siren to a sailor. I thought I was playing a game of checkers, fighting a Dillion-turned-monster. But Raven and the Succubus were playing a chess game, fighting it off through the Backstage.

It’s time to take it up a notch.

With the Succubus in plain sight, I clicked the faulty garage door closed, pinning its right set of arms. The cat-like chick slid into the garage, using the walls and ceiling as part of her turf. She ran around the walls, confusing the Grievance.

Now, it’s time for the final blow. I ran towards the Succubus while its arms jutted straight toward me, causing me to dart left and right in response. And as I climbed up the truck, I leaped and fell onto its shoulders, wrapping my legs around its neck in a chokehold.

It kept clawing at my legs and slamming me against the wall, but I knew that it would've been over if I quit. Dealing with the pain, I slit the Succubus' throat as dust spewed out instead of blood. The demoness yowled, flinging me towards Dad's study.

I crashed against the bookshelves, breaking a few of the shelves and causing books to fall against me as the Succubus screamed in agonizing pain.

The Succubus scratched at Dillion, "It's time to go DDDDDillion!"

Dillion yowled as the Succubus tried escaping. His skin and tissue were ripped off like Velcro as she ran away. I tried to save Dillion, but Raven grabbed my shoulder, shaking her head. Dillion's fate was already decided. His life was over.

"I didn't ask for this!" He screamed before he became nothing but a pile of bones. Once Dillion was out of the picture, the Succubus simply vanished, but I could still hear it stuttering. And once the lights turned back on, I realized the battle was over.

But I was speechless.

What in the hell had just happened? Who was I supposed to trust at this point? The red-eyed girl walked in front of me, and I expected her to say something helpful, but instead, she said, "You're welcome. I saved your life."

"The hell?" I cursed, looking at Raven like she said the most out-of-pocket thing, only to realize that she's always been that way.

Laughing, I said, "I did all the work."

And as I kept chuckling, watching her smile in response, I stumbled towards the couch and collapsed. The last thing I heard was her acknowledging my victory.

"Well, I guess I have to give credit where credit is due..."