

The Sentry Corps' shuttle touches down on the landing pad of the local news building, where Dr. Maxwell assigned as their rendezvous point of extraction. Agent Armor steps out of the shuttle bay doors with smile decorated across her face. She salutes to Dr. Maxwell as the Sentry Drones accompanying her takes his luggage and briefcase.

Dr. Maxwell shrugs his shoulders, "At ease, Miss Links. You know that military bravado isn't necessary around me."

"Forgive me, sir. Old habits die hard after all. You produce more results and even quicker - if I may add - than any branch of the military I have worked for."

Dr. Maxwell smirks confidently, "One cannot fault the ingenuity and determination of mankind, but precise optimization and efficiency is the key."

"Excuse me for speaking out of line, sir, but I cannot believe you allowed your *pet* to eliminate Goldmire out in the field," speaks Agent Armor after transferring the data of her mission report to Dr. Maxwell.

"I didn't *allow* her to do anything. She will *ATTEMPT* to eliminate Goldmire but that will be the same result when she attempted to take my head..." comments Dr. Maxwell.

Agent Armor smirked flexing her arm, "Yeah, until she ran into the brick wall commonly known as my fist."

He took her hand and studied it briefly.

"You need to get maintenance on that. Your joints aren't responding as well as they should and your armor plating is cracked. That unregistered wildcard did more damage than you gave her credit for."

Agent Armor shrugged, "I only had my performance routines at 27%. I was cutting her a break anyway. We had to give them a show after all since we had an audience with the whole world watching." She pauses before continuing, "Do you really trust *her*? The assassin I mean... Anyone else would call you insane for making her your personal secretary after what she tried to do."

Dr. Maxwell smiled, "She knows she can't defeat the power I have created with my technology and the wealth I can provide. I offered to triple the payment on her contract to assassinate me if she take out Goldmire. Until that contract is fulfilled, I made it part of my terms for her to work for me until it's carried out. What she doesn't know that it's a fool's errand. I'm sure she has her own concerns, but to allow us to do extensive research on her powers and reverse engineer them to apply them to the Sentries is doing her own kind in rather than aiding them."

Agent Armor nodded in agreement, “Yes, but who sees *ninjas* anymore? That kind of thing went the way of jukebox machines and the Atari. If they were really in high demand, those Hunters wouldn’t have jobs. From those files that she downloaded from their servers, there’s no records of anyone fitting her description in their databases for that matter either.”

Dr. Maxwell: “Between the demons, monsters, and other creatures that go bump in the night that are affiliated with the Hunters, I’m not surprised at anything anymore. Once their operations became public knowledge, it was hard for any of them to stay secluded from the rest of the world like in previous centuries. We live in an age of technological marvels and then others that cannot be explained by mere science. It’s only a matter of time before humanity is back at the top of the food chain. Wouldn’t matter to me if some array of *freaks* want to compete for second place. Keeps us in business when they get out of line.”

Agent Armor: “Whether it’s demons, monsters, wildcards, or even humans, there’s always going to be those foolish individuals who will need discipline. Some may see it as arrogance, but I like to call that job security, sir.”

Dr. Maxwell nods as he cycles through his messages on his iPhone. “Tundra and Reactor have finished their routine sweeps on their assigned areas and meeting us back at HQ. We can head back as soon as our guinea pig comes back.”

Agent Armor salutes, “Yes, sir. Is it wise to have Tundra and Reactor on their own in the field already? Their augmentations have been working properly without any issues, but given the increased activity as of late of rogues and unregistered wildcards, it would be easy for them to get overwhelmed given their lack of experience.”

Dr. Maxwell: “No worries at all. The Archive monitors all sorties in progress and can relay our nearest personnel and resources to assist if necessary.”

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On the outskirts of town, a pair of ninjas stand together watching from the surrounding forest.

The male speaks up first, “She’s taken too long, Shina. We should consider her tainted by these people and their customs. The job was take out both of the organizations’ heads for the rest would fall like dominos in one fell swoop.”

The female shook her head as she looked at the busy city. “Masato, have faith in *her*. She’s one of our organization’s best operatives – at least out of the few of us that are left.”

Masato scoffed, “No thanks to both the Hunters and those Sentries coming into the public eye.”

Shina: “That’s why we accepted the contract for their heads. Their operations have made it painfully difficult for us to remain in the shadows, undetected. Her delicacy with this operation has made it a success thus far.”

Masato: “Are you not the least worried that she’s been living with these people that are foreign to our customs that she has considered not returning to our order? She was born a wildcard after all.”

Shina: “How dare you think that lowly of our *sister*? She may not be of our blood, but she is still part of our clan. I firmly believe that when the time is right, she will make the right decision. Besides, her wildcard abilities give her an additional edge that none of us thought possible when coupled with her training and ninjutsu.”

“I agree, but why does she continue to allow that doctor to experiment on her and study her powers? It seems that it would do more harm than good in the grand scheme of things...”

“My dear Masato, that’s all part of a woman’s charm... Gaining that scientist’s trust and being at his side at all times. There’s going to be that one moment of weakness where he has his defenses down. It is then and only then is when she will be able to collect his head.”

Masato nods, “And what of the Hunters’ leader?”

“That I’m unsure of as I’ve never seen him in the field personally. I’ve only heard stories of his frightening powers. For all of our sakes, we’re just going to have hope the stars are aligned in our favor.”

At that moment, Shina and Masato immediately go on guard as they sense the presence of an incoming Sentry Drone patrol. The duo quickly disappear into the trees to avoid detection.

Sentry Drone #616: “Area secure. No sign of hostiles.”

Agent Armor can be heard over their communication devices, “Continue to sweep of the area. Report all findings to The Archive.”

Sentry Drone #616: “Affirmative.”

Shina and Masato merely look to each other before racing through the forest, leaving this city behind them, but not out of their minds. They were stopped in a clearing where another of their own awaited them. Where Shina’s hair was blonde underneath her hood, this woman’s hair was raven-black; her features more of a blend of Asian and Mediterranean lineages.

Shina and Masato greeted her with a formal bow.

The woman looked concerned, “Only two of you? Where is our *sister*? Did she not finish her mission?”

Masato spoke up, “There were complications...”

Shina adds, “We don’t know the exact details of the situation, Mei Long, but we do know that she’s carrying out the contract as we speak.”

Mei Long sighs, “There’s nothing we can do then. We can’t risk being out in the open for this long. Daybreak is in a few hours and we have to reach the Homeland by then. We will have to entrust our sister to find her own way back home. The Masters will not be pleased with this news.”

Masato and Shina nod silently before following Mei Long throughout the forest

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The first thing the kunoichi does after she lands from severing Reno Goldmire’s head was drop her blades. They were scorching red hot and smoking on the ground as the metal immediately melted just like the snow around them.

Croix, Minerva, and Elly’s jaws hang open, “What the actual *fuck*?”

Iori informs them, “You can’t kill the headmaster so easily. I’ve seen him waste an entire militia just by looking at them and walk away without a single scratch on his body.

That wildcard, Dragon, can merely control flames. The best way I can put it with the headmaster is that he IS the fires of Hell incarnate.”

Reno’s “head” explodes into a ball of cinder as the remainder of his body is enveloped in flames. A new head materializes from the flames as he looks at his attacker with his body standing up in front of his foe.

Reno states to his subordinates, “Elandra, get your shield up. Things are about to get really hot around here. I suggest you don’t get involved. I don’t want to inform your parents that any of you fell in battle on my watch.” He looks to the Brothers Silver to his rear and adds, “I suggest you two stay out of this as well. We can settle our quarrel after this matter is dealt with.”

Dragon gets riled up, “What!!?? We were here first and you’re just going to turn your backs on us, just like that?”

Voltage held his hand up to silence his younger brother and whispers to him, "Let's see what he can do. Besides, it would give us a chance to study what he's capable of."

The air all around them becomes dry as a desert-like haze fills the area and their surroundings. A great degree of concentration is required here to refrain Reno from simply reducing everyone around him into ashes, along with the city limits for miles. Even Voltage and Dragon are backing up slowly from this fiery opponent. The city rooftops were typically covered with snow and ice at this time of the year, but this unnatural event put that climate on hold as all of the snow for a five mile radius was quickly evaporating.

Reno smirks, "Before I roast you alive... I would like to have the pleasure of knowing the name of my would-be assassin. I have to have something to post on the Hunter.NET in terms of identifying the corpse. Who knows, if you give up nicely, I could still take you out for dinner and movie after this..."

The kunoichi smiled behind her mask and merely uttered the word, "*Kanashimi...*"

The Brothers Silver immediately look at each other.

Reno's eyes widen at the revelation, "Ah, now I see. Someone put a contract out on me. Cute, really cute. I guess your employer didn't give you any field and combat data on me then. Allow me to give you a proper demonstration for you can truly know what you're up against."

With his body still engulfed in flames, he walks towards the kunoichi and swung at her with a fire-charged punch. She moved out of the way, but right into the line of fire for the incoming kick. She blocked with a palm strike to that limb and backflipped away a few feet. She took the kunai darts from her leggings and threw them at Reno. He merely looked at the incoming projectiles and they exploded before even making contact. He caught another out of the air while another grazes his cheek before exploding thereafter.

Reno dusts himself off, "You've got some interesting talents, but your little blades and knives aren't going to work against me. You made quite the reputation for yourself over the past decade on the laundry list of targets that you've been able to put away over the past decade. I wouldn't be able to talk you into putting those talents to use for my organization, eh?"

Kanashimi's eyes narrow as she drew her katana from her back.

Reno tilts his head to the side as he watches her, "I'm going to take that as a no then. Such a pity to put your talents to waste like this tonight."

She ran her fingertips across the blade, causing it to emit an eerie glow. She charged straight at Reno, who held up a hand to stop her. She cuts that limb off in one swift blow, but Reno's body instantly restores itself from the flames like before. He snaps his fingers and the spot

where she's standing is instantly engulfed in flames. To the surprise of those looking on, Kanashimi is seeing backflipping out of the flames and sliding to a stop after she slammed her katana into the ground. Reno's flames don't stop pursuing her in the least. Kanashimi armed herself with several more kunai darts and threw them all around her as she sat on one knee in front of her glowing katana. The kunai instantly explode around her, cancelling out Reno's flame attack to boot. Kanashimi instantly drew her blade from the ground and charged right through the smoke. She glimpsed at Reno's body and cut him in half with her glowing blade like a hot knife through butter.

"Wrong move, *hot stuff*," casually said Reno as he restored himself. He snapped his fingers again, this time getting her with his explosive flames at point blank range.

"Simple science lesson tonight, folks. You get too close to the fire, you're going to get burnt."

Kanashimi's body falls forward as she's reduced to ashes while Reno Goldmire's body returns to normal. He lights a cigar from his pocket with his index finger and looks over his shoulder after taking an inhale, "A damn shame too. I thought I could cut loose some more with that one. I don't get to come out into the field as much as I would like."

Minerva drops to her knees from the extreme heat, gasping for air slightly from Reno's exploits here tonight.

Croix: "Hang on just a little longer. We're going to get out of here once the Boss takes care of those other two guys..."

Iori states, "They have already left. I didn't see them leave myself but they must've left when the headmaster got a little carried away there."

Reno drags on his cigar a bit more, "Carried away? I showed restraint here actually."

Croix: "Could've fooled me."

Minerva laughs before breaking out into a coughing fit from the lack of air on the rooftop.

Kanashimi's corpse then explodes into smoke. Reno looks back to see a smoking log on the ground replacing where Kanashimi's body was.

"Should've known... A substitution technique. She did it while she was caught up in the explosion countering my previous attack. She made sure I didn't see her hand signs before she performed her silly ninjutsu."

Elly asks, "So that means that she's still out here?"

Reno exhaled again, "I wouldn't worry about her. She knew that she was outmatched here tonight. She's not going to try that again anytime soon, especially after showing herself out in the open like that. That's not her kind's style."

He looks back at the helicopter. "Do a thorough search of the transport and we're heading back to the facility. I don't like being out in the open like this for such an extended period of time, especially after that stunt the Sentries pulled on TV earlier. The tabloids and the media are going to be looking for every reason in the world to paint a bad label on us."

Minerva looks melancholy, "What about Ashley? Should we look for her too?"

Elly sighs and shook her head, "No, she made her choice. It's like you said earlier - she's human after all. She wasn't born into all of this *insanity* like we have. It's a lot to take in."

Reno walked towards the helicopter, "She has our calling card. If she changes her mind, she knows how to reach us. Make that sweep quickly. I think we've been away from the facility far too long for my taste - not that I'm looking forward to hearing Rika chew me out for not bringing her along."

The Hunters collectively say, "Yes sir!"

The Hunters load up into the helicopter as Reno drags on his cigar once more as he looks at this city, thinking to himself.

*"One night and everything that we've worked for has been turned upside down... Yet at the same time, there's things going on beneath the surface that not even the Sentries are aware of. There's far too many pawns on the chessboard and not enough rooks, bishops, kings, and queens for my taste. This isn't good - neither for the Hunters nor the Sentries."*

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Ashley is seen walking down the back alleys, trying to make her way back home. She's stopped by Voltage and Dragon blocking her way. She immediately raises a nearby trash dumpster overhead and motions to use it to defend herself.

Dragon steps forward, "Wait, wait! We're not looking for a fight, *mamacita*. We just wanted to ask you a few questions."

Ashley cautiously lowers the dumpster and eyes Dragon from head to toe, "Okay, but that's only because I think you guys are *kinda* cute. Keyword being KINDA. What were your names again? "

Dragon laughed as he looked back at his brother, "I'm Alejandro and that's my brother Tomias. We're not looking for trouble."

Ashley: "Could've fooled me. Y'know what, I'm just going to call you two, *Sparky* and *Matches*."

He adds, "We're just looking for any leads on how to get our sister back. If that means we have to fight the Sentries and the Hunters, then so be it."

Voltage answered, "The head of the Hunters is the one responsible for our sister being held in captivity by the Sentries. We're not looking for you to fight our war for us. We just want to ask you if you get any leads to give us a call."

Ashley: "I doubt those guys are going to come looking for me. That goes double for the Sentries since they got what they wanted here. It's not like there's anything special about this town anyway. A few more weeks and I'll be graduating myself and out of here on the first thing smokin' - no pun intended, boys..."

Dragon: "We get it. This isn't your fight, but we saw what you did out there today. You didn't have to protect those people and expose yourself. You stepped in and did the right thing. That's why we have a good feeling that we can trust you."

Ashley: "I just don't like seeing people throwing their weight around, y'know? I didn't even think about it to be honest... One second I'm standing there like everyone else, the next thing I know I'm throwin' hands with one of the Sentries' Field Commanders? After all of this, I just want to go home..."

At that moment, Ashley pulls out her phone and notices a text message from her sister that read, "At home. Where R U? Mom's flippin out..."

Ashley stuck her phone back into her pocket and looked at the two men in front of her.

"I would love to chat some more, but I gotta get home. I'm sure you two aren't on Skype or Google Hangouts, so how can I reach you? It's not like you're in the Yellow Pages are anything if that's something you big boys even use anymore..."

Voltage reached into his pocket and hands her a small electronic device. It's the same size and shape of button to the untrained eye.

Voltage: "That device is charged with a small fraction of my powers. When you flip it over and hit the button on the bottom, it emits a frequency that only I can detect and track from any distance. If you want to reach us, that's the best way."



Ashley looks at it quizzically and nods, “Uhhh, thanks? Look, I’ve gotten way more involved into this mess than I would have liked, but if I hear anything, I’ll definitely let you know.”

She sprints down the alley, but stops mid-stride to stop in her tracks.

She looks back to Voltage and Dragon.

“I hope you two find your sister. There’s nothing more important in this world than family. I wouldn’t have been in this mess tonight if I wasn’t out there looking for my own sister. Luckily, she found her way back home and I thank the Lord for that. If I hear anything about your sister from the Sentries or the Hunters, I’ll definitely give you a call. In the meantime, take care of yourselves, boys.”

Dragon gives a hand motion to “call me” until Voltage elbows him in the ribcage, shaking his head while they watch her run off into the cold, winter night.

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A few hours later, Masato, Shina, and Mei Long have returned to the place that they have called home. This country is referred to as the Homeland to their natives. It’s precise location is unknown. The trio are on their knees at the foot of the thrones that seat the rulers of this domain.

“Report...” hisses the reptilian beast of a man, who dressed in a traditional gi that is sitting atop of a throne in this Japanese influenced dojo that Masato, Shina, and Mei Long have retreated to.

“Kanashimi continues to remain undercover as our operative on the outside. It seems that she voluntarily chose to this line of action. Otherwise, she would have merely cancelled the contract and came back with her findings,” reports Masato.

Shina adds, “Given the situation that urged out escape out of the vicinity. She must have attempted to collect Goldmire’s head at that very moment. She will not fail, Master Ryoto.”

Master Ryoto’s eyes narrow before his voice booms throughout the dojo.

“WE DID NOT GIVE HER THE ORDER TO TERMINATE GOLDMIRE!!!! SHE ACTS ON HER OWN!!”

Mei Long retorts, “If the Hunters’ leader falls along with the inventor of the Sentries’ technology, then we will have restored balance, yes? What say you, my lord?”

“NOT BALANCE... ONLY CHAOS...”

The reptilian woman sitting next to Master Ryoto speaks up to interject.

“What my husband means is that disposing both parties isn’t going to restore the balance that we have upheld in this world since the beginning of creation. I hate to say this, but if Kanashimi continues to act under her own discretion then our clan will be forced to terminate her to prevent the humans and *the gifted* from being swept up into a war that would leave all parties on the brink of extinction.”

Mei Long nods as she formally bows to them both once more, “When put that way, I see your point, Master Tatsuo. We will continue to monitor the situation and inform you of where Kanashimi’s loyalties lie.”

Masato, Shina, and Mei Long depart as Ryoto and Tatsuo are left stir on this information.

Ryoto: “I never thought it was a good idea to train one of those Wildcards in our ways. She never was born of our blood.”

Tatsuo: “It was time for our clan to open our doors to others outside of the bloodline. I want to be *absolutely* sure that Kanashimi has gone astray before we give the order to assassinate her.”

Ryoto: “So be it. If she has, I want to deliver the final blow myself to remind our clan of their loyalty to our mission of balance is one not to be trifled with. As long as we draw breath and long after we are gone from this world, the maintaining balance in this world is the only thing that matters.”

Tatsuo: “I’m confident in this generation... They are odd in their ways, but I have faith that they will ultimately do what is needed when the time is right...”

Ryoto: “For all of our sakes, I hope you’re right...”

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12:01 AM at the Peterson household...

Ashley sneaks in through the front door. She tiptoes through the kitchen, making sure to take off her scarf and snow-covered overcoat before making her way into the living room to bolt up the stairs. The lights illuminate on with Ashley’s mother sitting on the couch with her arms folded.

“ASHLEY RENEE-MONTOYA PETERSON, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN??”

The only thought that crossed her mind as she froze in her tracks and slowly turned around to face her mother was, "*Oh shit...*"