

Kioni

A **Breaking Boundaries** story:

PROLOGUE - A MOUTHFUL OF ROCKS

Her face blankly glared at the concrete sky, eyes glazed over with a dull sheen as her mouth hinged open, a last breath escaping before the body froze in time. Still forever.

Alcuin helplessly watched the blood seep from her matted hair, hunched behind a small concrete barrier as its edges chipped from splintershot fire. He grit his teeth, not because of the endless sensation of impending death, but because this was another he could not save. He counted every one, like the fact that tallying every defenceless soul might somehow immortalize their existence within his mind.

Another Splintershot shell struck against his barricade, then again, then again. The Alphoric were relentless; tearing, shooting and destroying anything they could set their slitted eyes upon. Alcuin's gloves tightened against his rifle, tilting to another of the faceless EDAP guards. They nodded. Alcuin, and by extension the others, all peeked their rifles down the bunkers tunnel, and returned a barrage of steel into the growing mass of orange and gold.

It wouldn't be long until the aliens wisened up, almost striking Alcuin in the face. He retreats further behind the barricade, reaching the corner of a pillar, then reloads his weapon with shaky hands and ingrained technique. He could still hear the crying of terrified refugees further behind, despite the useless, amplified gunfire.

He peeks across the corner, lowering his rifle in an attempt to obscure his profile. The Alphoric presence had doubled already. And they were cornered.

“RETREAT!” Alcuin roars, and the other EDAP soldiers obey. Alcuin throws himself over another barricade, weaving around the utilitarian symmetry of its tunnel and hunkers between a more protected nook within the tunnel's corner. He almost trips on a body, his run more akin to a weightless stumble. The other soldiers quickly form a new defensive line. One is struck in the back on his retreat, instantly dead. Another, a Splintershell rod pinning his leg into a crate, still fighting.

The new angle feels much more comfortable for Alcuin, the stench of gunpowder lesser here, not yet enough to burn the eyes. An Alphoric shock troop darts between his rifle's sights, Alcuin's rifle barks twice.

Then another, then another.

Alcuin reloads, then begins again, however the Alphorics presence has tripled. As they fend off the front wave, those behind the Alphoric frontline begin rummaging through the lost ground; tearing those hiding from their spots and killing them with their serrated jaws. Others kick or fire at the already dead. Triple checking them until their bodies are a deflated pile of gore.

“Grasshoppers! To the six!” A soldier shouts. Alcuin pivots instantly.

Alphoric had breached the evacuation tunnels and quickly began flooding into the civilians' last refuge. Alcuin's jaw sets, his chest surges with a fiery pain.

“You, you and you,” He points at three of the troopers. “Fall back and protect the civies!”

The three soldiers disappear without a word, an exchange of gunfire quickly erupting behind him. Alcuin fires again, putting two more Alphoric down, yet the snarling horde of crocodilian monsters was endless.

“ALCUIN!” a soldier shouts, coaxing him for a magazine.

Alcuin throws a spare across, the soldier catches it. Then, a Splintershot rod pins itself into his skull and into the wall. The body dangling exactly how he had been standing a moment prior.

Alcuin mouths a curse, forcing himself to move on and retaliates with another barrage of gunfire. The Alphoric return it tenfold, forcing him backward further; however during his retreat he notices an outlier.

An Alphoric wearing a heavier, more ceremonial suit of armour. Still sharp and elegant and gold and purple, but unmistakably protective. It wore a gilded crown of golden plating, EXNO marble scripture stenciled upon its flatter edges. Contrasting with its lightweight, cheap, brethren.

If these feral creatures had any authority, this was it.

“Target the one with the hat!” Alcuin roared, and the remaining troopers shifted their rifles. The Alphoric packmaster heard it too, and tried to retreat beneath the horde.

It didn’t matter; the troopers all converged fire towards it, striking it first in the back, then neck. It shrieks in a horrifying gurgle, causing the Alphoric horde to stutter.

Alcuin didn’t relent. They took the window.

A dozen aliens are instantly mowed down, and the rest retreat to cover. No longer reliant on the sheer numbers of overwhelming force.

A stillness passes. Just the passing clouds of dust, swaying of the bunker's light and the growing stench of blood and death.

Alcuin’s hands clasp tighter against his rifle's handguard as he waits for another alien's mistake, his eyelid twitching violently in anticipation as loose dust gently settles against his messy brown hair.

The aliens bark something between themselves in a slurred speech. Croaking and trilling in panicked alien language. Then, they collectively dart out from their hides.

Alcuin puts one down, a trooper another.

Then, they're gone. The Grasshoppers retreated. They had fled the tunnel.

Alcuin releases a hot breath, snaps towards his flank and makes way towards the civilians. Half of them had been massacred. Thirty five or so, dead.

One of the troopers sent to defend them comes out from his barricade, weapon still tucked into his shoulder, but lowered.

“We get em?” he asks, voice rattled with terror.

Alcuin doesn’t look at him, his eyes still stuck on the pile of corpses across from the living one. Living, hiding, like vermin.

“Where are the other troopers?” He asks, already knowing the answer, but clinging onto procedure.

“Dead.” The trooper mutters. “You sure they’re really gone? They could be coming back.”

Alcuin reassesses his weapon before moving on. "Get these people moving behind us. We make it for the exit." He ordered. "If we can't, we're dead."

The troopers glared at him in horror, then back to the survivors, quickly acknowledging the severity of his words. None looked at the bodies anymore, that would be the commander's burden.

Alcuin cleared his throat. It didn't help the burning sensation within it.

Meters away from the mass graves, the two troopers. Mangled. Their flesh unrecognizable pulp loosely attached to their uniform and armour. White geometric plating, slathered in blood, digging into the indents on their right breastplate.

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He sighs, crosses the distance, then pilfers their husks for ammo, medicine, anything useful. Four magazines, some batteries...

A Biopatch.

Alcuin's eyes widen, then he quickly pockets it before anyone could notice. The act was prideless and he took no pleasure in it, but Biopatch was a lifeline. Others would kill for it alone. He could feel the judgemental glares from the other EDAP soldiers, watching an unfamiliar commander looting the bodies of their brothers. A few shift, enraged, but silent. The others redirect their attention to the survivors, ensuring that the remaining mass of defenceless refugees were capable of moving.

The soldiers rout the crowd towards the tunnel's mouth, further bodies of human and Alien trailing from within. Alcuin follows closely, weapon locking tightly into ready, itching for the inbound ambush. Yet none would come. The further they went, the more mangled the bodies became. Mostly from railgun fire, but others were intentionally brutalised by claw and fang. Others eaten. The stench of death, of exposed organs and metallic blood, unbearable.

As they continued, Alcuin couldn't help but sneak a glance towards the dead Kinkeeper. Its reptilian body, twisted in a lifeless sprawl with a unique assortment of ornamental armour. A pattern he hadn't seen before. Whatever this thing was, it was clearly important.

It only worsened as they neared the bunkers exit, and the civilians began to react to the carnage. The brutality, the recognition of deceased kin, it was too confronting. The soldiers pulled a stunned few back into the group by force.

The escort reaches the end of the tunnel, through the brutalist lobby, and a few steps away from the entrance doors. Alcuin orders a halt and the soldiers meet up at his side. The sealing

doors had seemingly been pried open by something. A machine, or beast, didn't matter to Alcuin. All that mattered if it was on the other side of the door.

Alcuin sucks in a quivering breath, pulls his rifle tighter into his shoulder, then leads the charge outside into the ruined forest. They instantly fan around, every angle covered as Alcuin halts the advance, then lowers his weapon in relief.

They truly had left. One Alphoric, and they had scattered into the world like rats.

Alcuin gives it another minute, still unsure if he should trust his own judgement. Then, he orders the troopers to call out the civilians. Another flicks out a small red pistol, then fires a blinding yellow flare into the frigid Alpine air.

The civilians, still panicked, still petrified, cling together, even though they no longer need to. Some of the troopers lower to a knee, others try to slack. Alcuin corrects them. Not taking any chances. He wants to reach for his radio, try to find any nearby friendly signals. But that window could be death. Instead, he looks to the countless felled trees, flattened by artillery months ago. Anything could be behind those logs, waiting for the flare, the perfect ambush.

Seconds pass, then minutes, then hours. Alcuin's muscles hadn't tensed any less than within the bunker, his heart hadn't slowed. But everyone else had. Now, the civilian mass had resorted to grieving their losses. Almost all had seemingly lost someone loved, either silently or audibly.

Alcuin was used to the misery.

Shortly before Alcuin could realign himself, movement further down. A twig snapping, a dark shape low to the ground, skulking, fast. Alcuin fired at it before he could even register it as what it truly was; a rabbit. Not an alien. The other troopers were unphased. The civilians flinched or yelped.

A shriek fills the sky as four white drop ships knife through the overcast woodland, their engines heard before seen. They encircle around the flare, spotting those underneath, then descend into the ground with a careful glide. One was marginally smaller than the other three, meant to redeploy soldiers to some other corner of this dead earth.

Their bracers squeal underneath their weight, their turbines whine, as they land in a diamond formation around them. For the first time in two days, Alcuin's shoulders lowered.

The transport ships settle, then with hissing pistons their rear cargo holds split their steel slabs into the mud. Instantly, the troopers escorted the civilians into them, filling one, the other two remaining empty. They had expected less casualties. An unfortunate commonality.

An EDAP official departs from the smaller ship (this one opened from its sides), and made his way directly to Alcuin. He was an older man. No armour, only a service pistol. Santiago. His inscrutable overseer. His face was flushed red, hair white as snow, fixed into a sagging, enraged expression. Alcuin lowers his rifle. Prepared for a different kind of assault. Instead, Santiago doesn't scrutinise Alcuin. Instead, he pushes a small handheld radio into his hands.

"You're relieved from these troopers, Sport." Santiago grumbles, his teeth stained black with chewing tobacco. Alcuin's head twitches. "Take this shuttle. Lucky you, you're off to Kioni."

Alcuin's brow lowers and almost drops his weapon.

"Kioni? What happened?"

Santiago bites his bottom lip with an irritated smirk. "Nuthin yet, but someone inside is requesting for you alone... Take any guess."

"Robenero?" Alcuin asks, eyes wide with surprise.

"Bingo... Little fuck face thinks he'll be able to crawl his way back."

Alcuin feels a heat rise in his eyes. Every moment Santiago spoke, should be rectified with a fist into his mouth. Unfortunately for everyone, he was in charge.

"I'm needed here though... Send someone else."

Alcuin was eager to see the old recruit again, however it was uneconomical. He couldn't allow himself to waste time and responsibilities because of a vague calling.

"Did he say anything specifically?"

Santiago scowls. "You don't get a say. He requested right at our upper channels, the EALC. It's being deemed a priority-one." He said. "And no. You're expected to report back to us with that radio every twenty four hours. If you fail to do so, you are immediately categorized as AWOL, and will be criminally liable to such."

Alcuin sighs, shuts up, and gets inside, almost shoulder-checking Santiago with deliberation.

"And think of this as a vacation!" Santiago shouts, the aircraft's turbines reactivating as they prepare for take-off.

He positions himself into the cabin's thin metal seats, locking the brace across his chest, leaning across the bulkhead bracing. He watches the troopers complete their extraction, the side doors shudder, then close the distance between both parties. He thumbs at the radio's channel selector, unsure exactly what Santiago had meant by giving him this. Instead of

talking into it, he clips it to his belt. Alcuin, alone, within the trooper compartment, watches the Earth begin to shrink underneath his boots. Whatever Razi had the nerve to tear him from saving lives...

Better be worth it.

1 - THE CITY OF WHITE

I

The transport shuttle pierces the barrier of clouds, sunlight suffocating between the gray lifeless mass. The cabin rattles with the pressure shift, jolting Alcuin harshly against his passenger bracer. His knuckles whiten around the bars as he grinds his teeth.

He'd believed he'd seen every atrocity possible, yet somehow flying was his worst affliction.

He pulls himself deeper into his chair, not enough to shield the sunlight from casting a slit across his face. The small rectangular window, just enough to watch the city of Kioni materialise through the mountainous fog like an apparition. A dream. Alcuin squints, at first because of the brightness, but again at the impossibility of it. A functioning city. A live, untouched bastion of human civilization. Still here, on Earth. It was one thing to know about Kioni's apparent survival, entirely another to bear witness. He watches the jungles of white concrete and glass spire catch the remaining light, casting bleak reflections below into the fog rolled metropolis. Small rectangles of light illuminate a mosaic of glass patterns, each one another world. Although up high, the air was recycled, dull. As gray as the city appeared beneath him.

An analogue buzzing crackles from above his shoulder and he notices a dangling headset right within his reach. He grabs it, his other hand tightening further around the bars as though it

might counteract the other, and juggles it across his head. Shortly, after another brief crackle of static, would a feminine voice translate through the noise.

“Your friend...” A woman asks, voice lower in pitch and dry, “you even know what he wants?”

It had been the eighth hour of continuous hull ticks and turbine whirs. Alcuin hadn't even noticed each seat had a hotline to the pilot.

He cups the microphone with his gloved hands, shielding it from non-existent wind through habit. “Negative,” he says.

That summons a small noise from at the end of the crew compartment, almost chuckle like, muffled by steel walls. “Well, if it's who everyone's saying it is. You, and I, are in trouble.”

Alcuin's brow furrows and he pulls against his shallow beard. “And who do you think it is?”

“Word around the town? Dourman.” She says. Alcuin sighs.

It was Razi, for better or for worse.

A sudden shift in pressure pushes against his gut as the dropship dips towards a structure outside of his vision. His free hand quickly shifts back to the bracing bar, fingers locked, teeth clenched. The ship lands with a thunderous slam, jolting him against the support bars, almost enough to bruise. The cabin ignites with a sickly green flash and the turbine whine dies with a low squeal. He reaches for the buckle and unlocks it, then lifts the support frame from his body.

“Before you go, put your gear in one of the bags. The Kioni people don't take too kindly to us EDAP folk,” the pilot says with an almost sarcastic cadence.

John sighs, knees cracking as he reaches a duffle bag from the above storage compartments, and begins to strip his geometric combat armour into the bag. Its sharp edges poke against the canvas, uncomfortable to pack, worse to sort. First chestplate, then pelvic plate, then gauntlets, then thighplates. He barely fits the shinpads in with a shove, almost tearing the bag. The canister of Biopatch falls from the armour, rolling across the bulkhead floor and underneath his seat. He groans as he lurches for it, clasping it with intense irritation.

He palms at the canister for a moment, looking back and forth between bag and canister. He could fit it, but the sensation of nakedness quickly arrived without the presence of armour. He clips it to his belt, tucking it underneath the waistline of his pants.

“Done?” The pilot asks.

“Done.”

“Then get the fuck out of my bird.”

The cabin shudders and the side wall unlocks, air hissing from its seams. Alcuin zips the bag back shut, hangs up the headset, then reaches for the door. He heaves it sideways and the sound of city life fills the interior of his metal box.

At first it was overwhelming. The soundscape of some ghost world left behind half a decade ago. But he was here. Absorbing it. Apart of it. He hops from the edge of the crew bay, his boots meeting helipad green. They were raised above at the tip of a skyscraper landing pad. One of thousands. At first, he steps towards a connecting catwalk, peering down from the railing and into the city. Barely, just barely, could he see moving cars down the streets, little blips moving across the roads that he could convince himself were people.

He continues, following the road to an elevator room as the ship behind him takes off. The room was sterile. Marble floor with black concrete walls. Elegant. Simple.

A lone security guard stood by the elevator, hands cupped over another as he glared through black glasses. The man vaguely sneers at Alcuin's presence. He notices it immediately. There were no other doorways or apparent exits. The elevator was the path.

Alcuin tries to call the elevator, the guard swats his hand away, his other hand between himself and Alcuin's chest.

“You gotta show us the bag first.” The guard demands in a low, authoritative tone.
“Protocol.”

Alcuin notes the service pistol against his hip, then glides the bag towards him, allowing them to awkwardly remove the bag from his shoulder. The weight surprises them and they almost drop it. He sets it onto a small wooden table, gliding the bag open with a clean single stroke. At first, the guard appears to be unsure of what he's seeing, face pulled into a mix of alarmed interest. He tilts some of the objects within, catching a glance of the EDAP title ingrained into the chestpiece with a utilitarian stenciling.

The guard clicks his tongue, now keeping Alcuin well within his view. “Your name?”

“Alcuin.”

They zip the bag back up with a stuttering drag before passing the duffle with a facefull of brood. They press the elevator button for him, waiting at the stainless steel doors before a delightful jingle plays, and the doors open. The guard steps inside to press a button, then back out, holding the doors open for Alcuin to enter.

“He's waiting for you at the bar.”

Alcuin walks in and they release the doors, quickly sealing moments after. Floor sixty five illuminated across a board of numbers ranging to eighty. It was the only thing notable within this cramped glass box of stale air.

The elevator plummets, then eases to a halt.
The doors open... To an apparition.

A calming jazz tune plays in hidden speakers as countless well mannered citizens waltz around the space in unbothered flow. Rows of vintage furniture filled the restaurant interior with the gentle glow of chestnut tinge. Wood fitted panelling across the walls, reflecting light from hanging glasses atop a bar, gray Kioni light invading from large windows within each booth.

More people were within them than in recent wars. Their attention, directed towards socialising and enjoying food.

Real food.

Hot iron fingers clasped across Alcuin's throat as he felt the forgotten sense of jealousy take hold. Had he perhaps died on the ship? Was this his beyond?

Taking the moment to compose himself, he steps forward, quickly needing to weave a path through the tide of patrons, finding himself at the bar. He rolls his fingers against the polished table, however all staff are taken. He sucks in a breath, absorbing the environment at the same time of ignoring it. A sensation of watching eyes burns against his skull.

He tilts, assuming its his old ally, however meets a face he'd never seen before. A younger civilian with silky waxy brown hair. Young, thin, but visually aged.

They glare at him for an extended moment, before looking away with a snarl, downing the rest of their glass of bronze fluid.

He'd seen that look more than enough times. Hate. Intent to prove it without saying a word. They wanted him to know it.

The EDAP were clearly not welcome in this city; that alone was obvious. Only the government understood what was outside the walls.

Then, a soft hand clasps its way across Alcuin's shoulder, gripping it as their weight pulls him to turn.

Razi "Dourman" Robenero. Standing proudly in a police uniform and a shit-eating grin. Twenty two years of age, hotheaded, and a engineering genius with two doll-like women clutched

tightly at his flanks. He was handsome, lean, messy and loud, wearing a baggy navy cop hoodie without embarrassment.

“Ladies, this man owes me a drink,” Razi says, gently pushing both girls somewhere into the mass of people.

Alcuin shifts awkwardly as if he'd seen a side of Razi he'd never fully witnessed, but expected all the same. Then, for a moment, smiles, shaking his hand in a firm, fleeting moment.

Razi coaxes him towards a booth filled with fancy patrons and a wall sized window, flashes his police badge, and clears the upholstery. Razi waves his hand, motioning for him to sit. The motion casually impresses Alcuin.

“Police? You never figured for an authority type.” Alcuin says cordially, Razi chuckles.

“First words I hear from your tired face in six months, and it's a dig.”

Alcuin quietly laughs along, as his friend waves over a hostess, then simply holds up two fingers without words. They write down something unknowable, then disappear as quickly as they came.

“So... Judging by the fact you're not dead, you guys still holding strong? Without giving away too much.” Razi grins, teeth beaming.

Alcuin's face remains flat, but his tone is lighter, almost friendly. “What'd you think?”

Razi huffs a breath through his nose, nodding seemingly in understanding.

“And the others?” He asks, stretching his arms against the top of the backrest, Kioni's light casting upon his upper body.

“Alive. Angry. The norm.” Alcuin answers. “I was just on a S.O.S call to some other squadron. They got chewed up.”

Razi nodded along as Alcuin readjusted the dufflebag from his shoulder to between his legs, barely squeezing it through the gap between chair and table. Alcuin interlocks his fingers afterwards, resting his hands onto the table, leaning slightly into them as he corrects his posture.

“Seriously though. How'd you end up as a badge? Thought you'd wanna put your 'gift' to more use?” Alcuin asks, not quite seriously but hoping for a genuine answer.

“Ah. That is a long story,” Razi says quietly, almost as if the answer wounded his pride. “But I thought a cop mimicked my responsibilities in the Edap. It was more cruisy too.”

“More cruisy? All the paperwork?” Alcuin mutters.

All the joy drains from Razi's face. “It's because I'm Brazilian? Isn't it?”

For a rare moment, Razi had him on the backpedal. “No. Not at all.”

Razi's grin returns, gaining further radiance as he quietly laughs to himself.

“Sim, sim... keep telling yourself that.”

The waitress returns with a platter, two glasses brimmed with golden alcohol and a bottle with the remaining contents between them. She gently plants each cup, then the bottle, then leaves with a smile to Razi. He thanks her with a thumbs up and a tongue click. He takes a sip, almost revering its taste with subtle shifts in his expression.

“For the most part, Kioni police work is peaceful. Not much crime, back within the good ol' city. But, as for why I chose this...”

He takes another sip.

“It gives me eyes everywhere... all across the grid... nowhere my peepers can't see!” Razi explains, flourishing his arms as he reveals his grand plan. He takes a moment to assess Alcuin's reaction, hoping for approval.

Instead, he gets confused.

“Why'd you need eyes on the city? What did you see?” Alcuin asks.

Razi, swats the question with his hand, trying to physically deflect the call to action for just a moment longer. “We'll get to that very soon. For the moment, let's...”

“Razi, I'm serious. Did you see something?” Alcuin interrupts, tone no longer loose; a reflex of his training.

Razi's head swings toward the window, poorly trying to hide the disappointment across his face. He sits in silence for a moment, his leg now bouncing, before downing his glass, then stands.

“Come. Not here,” He says, quickly taking the bottle for himself and turns to the exit.

Alcuin stands, quickly gripping the glass behind Razi's back and sipping at the liquid. Malt liquor, his joy, and Razi knew that. He grabs his duffle, slings his gear across his shoulder, and follows Razi out from the crowded bar and back towards the opening elevator. Razi clicks the

button and the both descend towards the ground floor. They pass the administrative lobby and through the threshold into the city streets.

The city air was immediately dull while a wind chill prickled Alcuin's skin. He takes a moment to gather his bearings, looking down both sides of the street as Razi hurries for his dark muscle car. Each distant beep of traffic almost reflexively caused Alcuin to jolt, while he could see people further down walking without any care in the world. Surreal wasn't the right word, Alcuin was sure such a word didn't exist.

Alien, he supposed.

"I was like that my first time too. Don't worry. It might do you good to remember what we're fighting for." Razi assured, before getting inside the driver's seat. Alcuin, with a pause, followed into the passenger's seat.

Razi puts the keys into the ignition, quickly pulling the vehicle out from the curb and assimilating into the growing traffic. Alcuin watches the world pass through his window like a child. Every passing sight, something he thought he'd never see again.

Teens playing basketball in a court, cart stands selling goods to the corporate rush, passing neon billboards of want and wish. It was instantly intoxicating, the promise of the old world resurrected.

Razi slows the car, finally reaching congestion within the crowd, then rolls his fingers against the steering wheel. "Alright. You gotta know something important, before anything..." Razi mutters, turning to face Alcuin with a sudden seriousness. Alcuin matches his expression.

"This place, its people, they don't know about beyond the walls. They live in complete ignorance of everything that's happening out there."

Alcuin takes a moment to register what Razi has told him. His brain instead registers only an error.

"What? What do you mean 'out there'?"

Razi sighs, rolls his lips and looks to the ceiling for reconsideration. "Kioni knows nothing about EXNO, nothing about the Resistance, nothing about the outside hellscape... they're completely oblivious."

"How the fuck couldn't they know? The whole world around them is dead!" Alcuin barks, voice muffled through his teeth in passing ire. He glares to the windshield, but can only visualise his racing thoughts.

How is this possible? Is this possible? Is Razi wrong? Was the city's survival based on pure chance?

"I'm not really sure myself. It only seems some of the head government guys actually know about it... But the general populace has no idea. It's freaky."

Alcuin shakes his head in disbelief, not really sure if he was believing what he was hearing.

"So the whole city is blind? The entire place?" He asks. Razi nods with a smirk. Alcuin leans into his seat. "Great."

Razi fills the gap between his vehicle and the ahead one, leaning further into Alcuin's space. "You heard of the saying, 'hear no evil, see no evil, say no evil?' My theory is that it's possible the only reason that Kioni isn't a steaming pile of shit, is because no one knows about their existence."

Alcuin looks back to Razi, jaw loosening slightly. "You think that Exno deliberately ignored Kioni? You know that's bullshit."

Razi shrugs. "Maybe. But so far something's working, and I intend to keep the spanner out of the works, y'know?"

Alcuin sighs, sinking further into his seat, looking back at the road in utter defeat. It was increasingly becoming more apparent that this trip might have been a genuine waste of patience.

"So you want me to be what exactly? A peacekeeper?" Alcuin asks, brow lowering.

"More or less, but... Not the way you're thinking." Razi corrects, wagging his finger between the gap. "Two days prior, cameras of mine managed to record something within a nearby park. It was unmistakably Exno. A lone Grasshopper sneaking across a road. It had waited until night to leave."

Alcuin snaps back towards him, waiting for the joke to reveal itself across his face, yet nothing comes. He rubs his mouth, muscles slightly tensing as the word itself, 'Grasshopper', was enough to activate his training. If Razi was mistaken, the implications would all be catastrophic. The last bastion for civilised life, now found, moments from collapse.

As the traffic eases, a pedestrian jogs in the way, causing Razi to hammer the brakes. He rolls down the window, calls them something ugly, then rolls it back up, following the road with a clearer mind.

"My best guess is it's a scout. Maybe looking for weaknesses before he hollers his boyfriends. But I've been trying to track it ever since, that's why I called you..."

Alcuin releases a frustrated breath, then turns to him, hand fortifying himself across his side of the dash.

“Why not bring this to the government then? It’s obvious that their strategy of ignoring the problem has failed.”

Razi freezes momentarily, head tilting.

He breaks free from the congestion, and swerves into a clearer road.

“They figured... If Exno was capable of neutering every global superpower within three weeks, they’d stand no chance.” Razi says, voice sarcastically hopeful. “They literally told me that they’d rather everyone die blissfully ignorant. That it’s less painful that way.”

Alcuin shakes his head. This was it, Humanity had capitulated. Given up.

“However,” Razi clicks his tongue, easing the wheel left, then right. “I’m much more stubborn.”

Alcuin says nothing, attention fully on him.

“We’re up against a lone Grasshopper scout. Back outside, that’d be as hard as getting shot. If we’re quick and efficient, we’ll kill it and any friends it may have. Then the city will be safer for a little while longer.” Razi says, occasionally turning from the road to meet his eyes. No humor in them at all.

Alcuin remains suspended, eyes open but thoughts layered over. Each moment he was desolated from the fight weakened the EDAP incrementally. It may have only been a sliver, but slivers is all they had left. Then again, if Kioni fell, what would be the point for fighting? Razi’s strategy to beat the Alphoric at their own game was likely too late, yet on the odd chance it would work... Humanity would have another sliver of time.

He turns to the window, visualizing the surrounding towers as mountains of rubble. The citizens dazed across the carnage, others buried beneath debris and crushed between crumpled cars. He hears the roar of a siege ship’s warhorn. Then the tidal rumble of its aftermath.

Alcuin turns back to Razi, face quickly tired with thought. “Okay... Okay. I’ll help you, but remember, once the mission’s done, it’s back to the war for me.”

Razi nods in approval, a grin barely contained across his mouth. “Then first things first...” Razi swerves towards another alley, cutting through a street before ending at a barricade. He wiggles the car across a gap in the footpath, then redirects back to the road until he reaches an overhead train bridge. Two concrete pillars support the bridge across the road, casting the

beneath tunnel in perpetual shadow. Razi pulls in, parking at the edge of its corner footpath, and removes the keys from his car.

Alcuin opens his door, juggling the duffle as he stretches to his legs, glacial Kioni air striking him immediately with an intense fog. The sound of distant traffic and city noise muffled here, despite being only an exposed shelter. At the wall of the supports corner, a flaky artwork presented itself. A spray painted image of a dark man's head, features veiled behind painted darkness with streaks of light illuminating the pinnacles of their coarser features. The head had an expression of immense solemnness, exuding from their eyes that faced an unknowable expanse.

Alcuin glares at it for a second, shuffling the bag again across his shoulder.

“You made this?” Alcuin asks, fog escaping his breath. Razi shrugs as he disembarks the vehicle.

“No. But it is my marker.” Alcuin turned to him. Razi held out a thin plastic keycard with two fingers, twirling it for a moment before approaching the wall.

He presses the card into the it, a moment nothing happening, until a shrill noise emits from some inside device. He then gently pushes a hand across the it, a slab of the concrete separating and hinging open like a door, leaving behind a trail of powder.

Alcuin raises his eyebrows, following him inside into an encapsulating darkness. Razi calls out a staircase, and Alcuin follows him down the metal spiral into another room. It was pitch black, but he could tell by the growing echo that the space was larger than the others.

Razi clicks his fingers, and the room ignites with a flash of white light.

Alcuin reflexively squints, observing the bunker before him: Its concrete walls snaked with oily grunge and a network of rubber cables. He follows their lead across the ceiling, down the bunker and behind a meticulous network of computer monitors, barely held upright by a thin metal desk. Between them, a flimsy setup of plastic tables sprawled with endless papers, folios and photos. Most pages are meaningless documents, dead leads and potential areas of interest, however a single image catches his eye. A printed photo, tucked between a paperclip, of a gray silhouette...

A familiar silhouette...

An Alphoric Grasshopper.

“This? Well this has been my home away from home...” Razi proudly announces, raising a hand towards the security system with pure pride.

Alcuin remains frozen. Awestruck, but also impressed. “How’d you even manage this? I thought the government turned the cheek?”

“They did,” Razi recalls. “I hired some contractors to hollow this place out. Thankfully, their discretion was only worth a little extra cash.”

Alcuin blinked. Cash. He hadn’t heard that word in years. Razi caught it, then cleared his throat.

“Oh, right. I forgot. Here, it’s still the gold standard. No need to trade your bullets. Money is back to being top dog.”

“And that?” Alcuin says, pointing towards the surveillance system. “What is that?”

Razi turns to the setup, then back, eyes squinting.

“She’s my little eyes everywhere, scanning every little crevice within this entire district for proportional data readings.” Razi stops himself from getting carried away, then continues slower, insultingly so. “It’ll tell me if it captures a silhouette that ain’t quite human. It sends it to my smartphone, prints an image, even tells me where the capture was located on text. Nifty eh?”

Alcuin nods, not quite listening, slowly approaching the device to see it better. Each monitor broadcast a network of live surveillance that seemed to span the entire city. Alleys, bustling centres, even private apartments and less-than-legal sightlines, bathes Alcuin in a haze of blue light. Green markers overlay every passing body, recording some obscured math between themselves. A powerful barrier of heat surrounds the setup, their fans whirring unabashedly.

Razi watches Alcuin with growing satisfaction.

“Does it work?” Alcuin quietly asks himself, sceptical.

Razi grins. “Some jank is expected, but you tell me...”

He shimmies towards the tables and removes a printed photograph tucked beneath a pile of folders. He tilts it towards Alcuin with two fingers, allowing him to take it. Alcuin flicks the photo straight, tilting it toward the above lights to illuminate its contents. A blurry image of a middle class boulevard. Nameless to Alcuin, however some details within it were notable. The road was quiet, only a few vehicles parked nearby, and it was shady, protected from the sun by rows of trees.

The alien leered between the gap of an exposed sewage manhole, directly in the road's centre and directed further down the street. Its spindly, clawed, fingers clutched at the the threshold, snout rowed with swollen gums and misaligned fangs that barely crisscrossed

together its malformed piranha head. Its body, sunscorched orange-bronze scale, with softer grays and browns for its weaker flesh.

The Alphoric had many names; dog-legs, baby-eaters, ravagers, and yet Grasshoppers had become the colloquial term across the planet. Its meaning had many alterations, but Alcuin understood none. His use of the term was purely obligatory.

Stranger yet, was the Grasshopper's outfit, or lack thereof. No shell of armour. No Exno imagery, gold or regal accenting. Only an asymmetrical bundle of torn or tied cloths, stolen human rucksack, and loincloth woven from torn tarp sheets. The thing was essentially naked, purely designed for speed and stealth.

Alcuin tilts the photo closer to his face, squinting at another odd detail. Dangling from the alien's ramshackled belt of paracord, was a contrasting device. High tech, familiar, undoubtedly human make. It seemed like a server torn from its rack. Alcuin had never seen anything like it, especially slung on the hip of an Alphoric, but that meant it was important. He needed his eyes inside that device.

Razi shakes his head. "Caught little-miss-pretty two days ago... Can't say I've ever seen one like that before."

"Neither." Alcuin says.

His brain quickly flashes from his time in the bunker. Then another time in District six, then some other nameless location. The more recent occurrences of Exno violence. He blankly stares at the photo, now no longer seeing it, but envisioning.

"We've gotta tell the people. We need curfews, bodies, they won't be ready otherwise," Alcuin warns, voice trembling for a moment. Razi reservedly sighs, wiping his hands across his pants before delicately pinching the photo from his fingers and pocketing it.

"I know. But it's not for us to decide." Razi mutters, not truly believing his own words. "We can't risk interfering with the city, or we may lose that one thing that Kioni is accidentally doing right. Sorry dude, but we gotta play by their rules."

Alcuin clenches his eyes shut, hands pressing against his hips as he tries to squeeze a rebuttal. Everything that comes up is a shot in the dark.

"And you're sure of that?"

Razi nods, quickly removing the photo to point at it. "If the civies see THAT, we both know they'll want answers. When they get answers, then it's revenge. Once that happens, the lids gone. Any chance of Criatura's retaliating is a given."

Alcuin bobs his head, standing in place. He believed him, worse yet, he believed the plan was sound, not reckless. Had Kioni somehow made a man out of this boy he'd mentored?

"Without help, this is a risk," Alcuin warns. Razi flashes a grin.

"Playing with fire, it's what we do best. Ain't it?"

Alcuin smiles, pushing air from his nose. Wasting no time, he begins unloading his bag, unzipping it with a fluid glide. First, the chestplate, heaved onto the table, shaking as it lands. He inspects it for any damages, then begins assembling his rifle from the parts within. Razi watches him with a restrained glee. The same kind of excitable reaction he'd harbour moments from a suicide operation.

"That photo was taken in a place called Calle Agustina. Just some street, nothing special. Wanna check it out before you settle in?"

Alcuin nods, twisting the barrel into the receiver, then fastening the handguard across its length. He leans back, removing the Biopatch from his belt, then plants it gently across the table, giving himself less chance of banging it against it.

Razi glares at it, huffing in surprise. "Damn, you had enough for that? You got some for me, right?"

Alcuin grins. "We're sharing that Razi. Don't get shot, and we'll be alright."

2 - NETWORKING

Alcuin throws the car door shut, its concussive noise causing Razi to flinch with sentimental pain. A thicket of Apiculata trees cast a mosaic of shadow from above, their twisted branches offering glimpses into the gray lifeless sky. He rolls his shoulders, testing his chestplates straps, then kicks his boots against the footwalk. His greaves don't jiggle. Perfect.

He circles towards the vehicle's boot, yet Razi who was now also armoured with his own personalized kit, calls out.

"Hold off on the rifles for now. Don't wanna cause unnecessary alarm." He reaches out a semi automatic pistol toward him, its barrel in his hand, grip ready for the taking.

Alcuin hesitates. The rifle was an extension of himself, another limb. He gently takes it, feeling the weightlessness of its body, then glides it into his pistol holster. It was at least of EDAP make; white painted poly-alloy chassis, angular design, high tech. It would at least stop an argument, or correct an Alphoric mistake.

Razi nods. He removes a smartphone from his pocket, then a small rectangular wrapper. He raises the phone up to the street, aligning the image with the road, then grunts with satisfaction.

"This is the place," he mutters, tilting the wrapper to his mouth and sucking in a tab of gum. He tilts it to Alcuin, but is rejected.

Alcuin shifts, looking down further into the street. Fragments of a more chaotic life existed across, yet they had found one of the seemingly still locales Kioni had to offer. Within the distance, the fog had cleared into a beige haze.

"So, we investigate the surface first. Then the manhole?" Alcuin asks.

Razi inhales, taking in the scent of car exhaust and dried chlorophyll, then exhales.

"Firstly, I wanna check out the manhole itself." he said, chewing audibly. "Things'r heavy. Might have used something to pop it open."

Alcuin nods, then turns back to him. Razi's armour was clearly custom; gray steel plating curved into a lightweight chestpiece and bulky knee guards that seemed to limit his flexibility. Tactical equipment protrudes from his armour in odd places, clearly functional, clearly an afterthought. 'Kioni P.D' was etched at the center of the chestplate in the poor hopes to convince the everyman that this was a standardised police kit. The armour was cute, however would do nothing against an Exno rod. Razi catches the glare, predicting the within conversation, then shakes his head as he closes the distance to the manhole.

Alcuin follows him, crouching down at the road's center. An old rusted iron manhole cover, slotted perfectly into its place. Nothing about it was inherently interesting. Razi waves his hand, stretching his stance as he cups his fingers across one indent. Alcuin reciprocates the action, and the two heave off the plate with a struggle. Razi activates his shoulder's flashlight, then peaks down the sewer hole. A cylindrical chasm shows itself, water rusted stairs leading down into an ancient brick-laid tunnel.

“What are we looking for?” Alcuin asks, “signs of entry?”

Razi clicks his tongue, the gum snapping somewhere between his teeth. “Wanna find out what it used, if anything.”

Alcuin inhales, turning back to the flipped manhole cover. On either side, there had been no signs of damage or chipping, nothing had pried it open, so then, pushed?

“Nothing indicating damage around the entryway too,” Razi said, voice clinical. He pulls back out his phone, returns to the screenshot of the previous sighting and stares at it for a moment.

The manhole cover was placed exactly like it had been in the photo. Almost like it had been pulled open from the outside, despite the Alphoric emerging from within. He thins his lips before he notices something else. Wherever the Grasshopper was looking towards, may have been important.

Razi looks down its path of sight, then back to the photo for confirmation.

“Anything?” Alcuin asks. Razi shakes his head.

“Just old homes, nothing that particularly catches my eye.”

Alcuin nods along as he glares down the tunnel, then back around the street for unique sightlines. No other cameras, only the one he guessed was Razi's own. If there had been a sighting, it would have been purely through eyeballs. He removes his own flashlight from his pauldron, peering into the sewer in distrustful evaluation.

“You know... I never figured you'd actually go through with this.” Razi says, voice measured but excited. “Every possibility I considered had you leaving me to the wolves, but I didn't know who else to call. So thanks. For having my back.”

Alcuin presses his lips together, slightly irritated by the remark. “You're gonna owe me big for this.”

Razi, for a flash, expresses terror at the implication. He quickly flushes the expression away with his usual carefree demeanor.

Alcuin steps closer to the manhole, his toes across the threshold. “We should go in.”

Razi, suddenly, darts back to his vehicle leaving Alcuin nonplussed. He remains over the tunnel, watching the boot glide open and a large gray cylinder meet Razi’s hands. He holds it up in the distance, then returns with a brisk, but careful, jog. It was a drone of some sorts; a metal tube with two bulky wheels and an array of expensive looking cameras rowed at its centre.

“Just in case they’ve left any surprises in there…”

Razi flips its switch, pulls out his smartphone, then haphazardly tosses the drone into the hole. It strikes something with a clunk and Razi grins, face illuminating with its feed. The drone’s motors squeal from under them, quickly vanishing behind brick and concrete tunneling.

“Are we expected?” Alcuin asks. Razi shakes his head.

“No, not like that. If any workers, or Grasshoppers, are down here, I’ll be able to find them before we commit to somewhere so narrow.” Razi mutters, crouching onto a knee as he maneuvers the drone further into the chasm.

Alcuin puffs through his nose. “And you can see in the darkness?”

“Nightvision and Thermal cameras on this puppy. Don’t ask how I got them.”

Alcuin ignores the bait and he stands watch over Razi. Surveying the street with consecutive machine-like scanning. Some pedestrian leaves their home from outer one-fifty meters. A flock of crows flies overhead. Otherwise, safe.

Razi’s chewing grows more ferocious, as does his concentration. He squints, something catches his eye, but fails to mention it. He then pockets the phone, trading it for his pistol.

“Alright, she’s good.” He says. Alcuin nods. He aims his flashlight beam back down into the tunnel, the drone patiently waiting at the foot of the rusted steel ladder.

He sighs, tightening the gloves across his hands before twisting, then placing a foot against the thin metal bars of the ladder steps. He carefully descends, the air instantly changing to a rancid stench of waste and mold. Moist ancient bricks suffocate him upon his descent, barely touching the edges of his armour along the way down. He drops to the floor, boots soaking within a small river of stagnant brown water and repossesses the drone.

“Here!” He hears from above.

Alcuin tosses the machine up to Razi, who almost fumbles it. He quickly disappears, reappears, then begins his descent.

Alcuin moves from the passage and into the neighboring tunnel, flashlight cutting cones through the darkness, water trailing under his boots toward a brown river within the centre of the path, aligned within the heart of the tunnel. He pivots to Razi, who is still halfway his descent, noticing a faint smudge of color across the passage's edge.

A moss green glyph, seemingly chalk, hastily scribbled. An eye, its eyeball slitted.

Razi strikes the ground, reacts to the smell, then circles beside Alcuin. "Whats that?"

Alcuin tilts his head, unsure. "A warning, best guess."

Razi photographs the icon, the flash illuminating the tunnel with a fleeting light.

Alcuin turns to him. "I thought you said there was only one."

Razi shrugs. "Could just be for itself. It gets awfully confusing in the city."

"Mmmm," Alcuin grumbles, not convinced. He removes his pistol, checking the safety, then chamber.

Razi turns, tapping Alcuin on the shoulder, and the two follow the tunnel down, reaching an intersection with one option closed with a gate. They take the available option, flashlights dancing in the dark, boots sloshing in the water. They clear multiple identical channels, nothing else notable down the distance. Then, Alcuin's ears perk up. Ahead, the sound of running water like tv static bouncing from the walls.

They follow the noise, prepared for a fight. Their postures tighten, separating down both corners of the culvert, approaching the ahead open space. A large inspection chamber, water flowing through and down a steep drop, the side footpaths rising into concrete platforms shielded with damaged railings. Alcuin follows the right side while Razi takes left, separating both between a sewerage waterfall as they clear the space.

Clear.

Alcuin lowers his pistol, approaching his platform's edge, looking down to the drop where the water fell. That jump would easily break legs. If there was anything down there, they'd need another way.

"Alcuin!" Razi whispers, voice bouncing loudly from the walls. "We got a door here."

Alcuin instantly pivots, finding his way across as they stack up on each corner of the door. It was a rusted metal sheet, the handle snapped off from its socket. Another glyph was marked across its centre; chaotic red lines that formed no coherent geometry, but chaos. Razi attempts to push it open, but it does not budge. He reaches for a small handheld wedge, unsocketing it from a buckle beneath his backplate, then tosses it to Alcuin.

Alcuin catches it cleanly, lining up the flat head of the bar, then ramming it into the doors seam, toward the lock. Razi positions behind him with the pistol as Alcuin twists the prybar, his arms shaking as he grits his teeth in strain.

The door clatters open, barely moving. The two snap back to their corners and Razi gently pushes the door again, this time the steel giving beneath his push. It creeps open, hinges squealing, and the two fly in.

Before Alcuin could even register the room, a thin gentle string pulls against his shin.

He looks to the rooms center, a massive steel water pipe, aimed directly towards them, red markings warning -----

A pressurized geyser of water strikes Alcuin, engulfing both himself and Razi behind. Both are launched from the room, out the door and into the railing. Razi misses it completely, disappearing into the stream and is swept away. Alcuin's spine flashes in pain, as the bar catching him collapses, dropping him into the freezing brown waterfall.

The current, excited by the surge, tears Alcuin from the ground, launching him down the ramp and into the bellow pit. He lands in a thin layer of water, barely cushioning the fall, striking the brick floor against his shoulder. His body flares with pain, unable to move for a moment.

He sputters, coughing the water from his lungs before dragging himself to the drier parts of the pit. Razi quickly emerges from the water afterwards, dragging himself across the brick like a freshly risen zombie.

“Razi! You okay?” Alcuin asks, his side stabbing with pain, stealing his voice.

Razi sputters, coughing. “No! I just got shit water in my fucking mouth!”

Alcuin relaxes, then attempts to stand.
Nothing gives, only some lingering pain. Good.

He looks up at the waterfalls pinnacle from where they had fallen. It was a decent tumble, both were lucky to not have broken anything. His clothes, armour, hair, all soaked and dripping with murky fluid.

Razi emerges to his feet, cradling his hand across his forehead. He wasn't hurt, more enraged.

"The hell was that?" He demands, asking himself and Alcuin simultaneously.

"A trap."

"A trap?"

"A trap."

Alcuin wipes the water from his hands across his soaked pants, then attempts to fish for their weapons using his boot.

"When we entered, i think i triggered a tripwire. Moment I touched it, the water hit us."

Razi sneers, eyes wide. Disbelief.

"What? They couldn't possibly know we were coming."

Alcuin shrugs, lifting up both his and Razi's sidearms. "Guess they did." He tosses Razi his pistol. He catches it.

Razi looks up, then around. The lower half stretched a further way down, however it seemed to end at a wall, a small channel allowing the water to travel below it. No side doors or ladders around.

"How're we gonna get out?" He asks, Alcuin turns to the pit's end.

He crosses the water, taking to the dry sidepath, and approaches the backwall, a humble shift in the perspective existing within its corner. An organised collection of trash, too purposeful to be mistaken. He calls Razi over, crouching at the pile. A single battered sleeping bag, half rolled, with a pile of torn and damaged jackets around them to keep the water from touching it. Scraps of rotted half-eaten food, small mechanical junk, and an empty booze bottle half filled with clear water. It was a homeless person's shelter. Here.

"You reckon our friend got them?" Razi asks, closing the distance as he clutches his ribs with a wince.

Alcuin sniffs. "I don't see the owner."

He shifts his boot across the moat of jackets, breaking the barrier and accidentally allowing the water to sweep through. Razi leans awkwardly, picking up a jacket between two fingers and holds it towards his face. Doing it again, with another jacket, he sighs.

“They all come from Mataeo...”

Alcuin pivots, “Then we’ve got a lead?”

“No,” Razi grumbles, tossing the jacket into the pile. “These could be from anywhere.”

Alcuin nods, then turns back to the falling water. He twists in place, searching for anything to help them back to the above chamber. The walls were featureless, aside from the occasional piping. Yet they were too distant to climb, even worse, slippery with a viscous residue. He turns to the waterfall itself, glaring hard into the rushing water. Surely they’d need a way to ascend if the water was drained, how would the workers clear debris otherwise?

Alcuin fills his lungs, holding his breath. Before he can even hear Razi’s realisation, he pushes through the endless pressure of glacial water, arms outstretched, reaching for the backwall. His legs wobble as his body lurches forwards, allowing the rush to carry across his back instead of pushing him, head downturned. His hands meet brick, then he glides them across, striking his fingers against a hard bulge.

He quickly grabs it, a single cylindrical brace, then finds another above it. Then another, then another. Alcuin puts a boot up against a step, pulling himself upright and through the surge. Each pull flares his body in anguish, worsened by his stilled breath which was now beginning to burn the lungs.

Reaching the pinnacle, his hand pierces through the above water and clasps at the edge of the platform for leverage. He finds a support bar, then pulls himself from the water, gasping for air as he remains suspended, but still dangling from the platform’s corner, water still coaxing him to fall once more.

Razi glares, eyes wide, terrified of another fall. Alcuin ignores him as he catches his breath, then pulls himself to the surface with his remaining strength.

“Anything there that’ll get me up?” Razi asks sheepishly.

Alcuin growls. “Just get up here.”

“Really couldn’t just be normal fuggin water...” Razi mutters, before hesitantly vanishing into the waterstream below.

Alcuin waits by the rushing water, then grabs at the brown hand from the surface of the water. He heaves him to the surface, Razi searching for clean air with desperate drags.

“Thanks.”

Alcuin nods.

The two recover, taking a moment to catch their breath, allowing the water to fall from their clothes once more. Razi straightens, circling around the platforms back to the opposite side and towards the trapped doorway. Alcuin follows him, hand tighter around his pistol than before. He wraps around the waters channel, looks at the broken support railing, then stands behind Razi, at the edge of the door frame.

Razi peaks inside, slowly, carefully stepping within terrified increments. Alcuin watches over his shoulder, then fills in the opposite angle once the hallway widens. The chamber glows with a sickly amber light, a dull faded glow. Like a stormcloud had captured lightning, yet never intended to reveal it.

Alcuin clears his angle, but it was quickly obvious that nothing was there. Each corner of this room is featureless brick, with some replacement paneling to seemingly withstand their damages, but nothing indicating a presence within, or had been.

Expect the trap, of course.

A massive orange pipe, protruding from the wall, purposefully disconnected to whatever system it once worked in. It was overgrown with algae and black mould, chunks of plantlife still falling in congealed scoops from its exposed opening. Alcuin followed the trail from where it had blasted them. He only remembered the water hitting them immediately, a pressurized blast. Something like that required human engineering no-how, worse, it was obviously a trap.

If there was any doubt in his mind. The red graffiti above stomped it in the guts.

‘IGNORE NOW. OR YOU DIE.’

It was direct enough, enough to make Razi laugh at its sincerity. Then at the fact that a Grasshopper was not only literate, but smart enough to spring this trap at all. Each letter was a series of harsh chalk flicks. Red lines torn into language that kept their creators' rage a lingering presence.

“Lookin like our friend’s gonna be a ray of sunshine...” Razi mutters, stepping further back.

Alcuin pauses, rapidly reading the phrasing in repetition. This was a clear warning. From the Alphoric. They didn’t do warnings.

“It knows we’re after it.” Alcuin mutters, awestruck but equally uncomfortable. A pit began to churn within his core, a deep uncertainty that training could not fix. This was against protocol... The enemies, not his.

“Seems so.”

Razi swivels around the pipe, following its sides with an analytical watch. Alcuin is too distracted to notice, or to care, Razi’s attempts to climb it, failing with little effort.

“Bloody Grasshopper probably thinks he’s a smart guy... I’ll fucken show him smart guy...” Razi mutters frustratedly, rummaging through the pipe’s pump controls. A large white steel box that connects to the pipe by the wall.

He looks at the gauges and other meaningless symbols Alcuin couldn’t recognise, then sneers. Whatever Razi understood, he kept it within. Only an expression of ire would surface. An intense one.

Alcuin looks to him, gliding his pistol into his holster. “What’s up?”

Razi shakes it off. “Nothing. Gonna have to get Stallone to check this out.”

Alcuin looks behind himself, toward the pulled tripwire, then back to Razi. “Stallone?”

Razi looks at him blankly, blinks, then raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“Oh, yeah... I forgot to mention him.”

Alcuin lowers his head, looking at Razi through his eyebrows.

“I’ve sorta got someone on landline. A friend. He said he’d help out if we start getting into trouble.”

Alcuin looks back at the warning, swallowing hard. “Does this ‘Stallone’ know about what’s happening?”

“He knows enough,” Razi’s voice wavering in hopes to soften the blow. “I’ve told him about the aliens and the war. He might not know just how bad it **really** is though.”

Alcuin looks at Razi blankly, turning away and back for the observation chamber with a tired walk. Razi turns, looks at the trap, face slowly morphing into disgust, and follows Alcuin back outside.

Alcuin stops, but Razi continues the charge, shepherding themselves back the way they came. Razi climbs the ladder first, returning back to the surface and lying across the road. Alcuin follows him, side jolting with pain, pulling himself up towards the light. The air clears to something remotely breathable, Alcuin’s eyes squint. He heaves himself to the road, lying just beside Razi as both watch the smog filled sky. Liquid trickles from Alcuin’s hair, his clothes, his armour; before long, a puddle forming beneath both soldiers as they caught their breath, enjoying the taste of city air.

A tinny horn blares at their feet, causing both to jolt upright. In their state, they had missed the wide gray sedan waiting patiently for them to clear out.

“GET THE HELL OFF THE ROAD, GODDAMN IDIOTS!”

Razi turns to Alcuin with a grin, then gets up, waving an apology to the driver. Alcuin follows, and the vehicle speeds off, nearly striking the misplaced manhole cover. The two wait a few moments more before returning the cover to its proper place.

Razi sighs, reaching for the gum in his pocket. “Well that was a bust, eh?” He finds the wrapper, yet tosses it to the floor once the water trickles from its base.

“Not exactly. We know something now. The enemy is smart, much smarter than the ones on the field.” Alcuin mutters, reminiscing about horrors, but also method. “It lured us perfectly into a trap. If it wanted us dead, it’d have used something else.”

Razi huffs, playing with the disposed gum with his boot. “If my memory serves, it just launched us down a six meter pit. I’d say it’s a miracle we didn’t break our necks.”

Alcuin nods. It would have appeared as an accident to the city if they had. He wipes a layer of liquid from his brow.

“So then, what now?”

Razi rolls his head, crushing the wrapper beneath his toes. “Well, I guess we’ll wait.”

“Goddamn it Razi.”

Razi waves his hands, trying to redirect the shift. “I know, I know! But if we wanna weed out this bastard, we need time. It ain’t as simple as pruning a weed, you gotta let it grow before you pull it from the stalk.”

“Razi...”

“A week tops! If nothing happens in a week, you are free to leave. AND I’ll still owe. It’ll be like a vacation too. No point in rejecting that if everyone’s gonna die anyway.”

Alcuin watches Robenero’s expression closely, looking for a tell. A smirk, a grin, some small change where he simply couldn’t help himself. It seems genuine, yet Razi’s terms were beginning to grow increasingly dubious.

“A vacation?” He grumbles.

Razi's face flashes in panic. "Okay, maybe I used the wrong word there. Time to prepare."

Alcuin breathes in deeply, exhaling through his nostrils. This is why the EDAP gave him that radio. 'Every forty-eight hours' they'd said.

"Goddamn it." he mutters, shaking his head. "You know that's not just a small ask."

"I do." Razi says, "But this is about them."

Razi points a hand down the street, where the city's industry incrementally advances and the roads fill with vehicles. Pedestrians crisscross the sidewalks while lights pulse through the faint haze. Alcuin watches the ahead road, keeping his eyes glued in the case the alien might accidentally stumble across.

"A week. Nothing more."

Razi reaches out a hand, Alcuin indulges in the gesture with a firm shake. Razi releases something in his hand before he can pull away. A keychain with two keys connected to a thin metal loop. Alcuin's eyes roll up at him.

"Got you a place in case this happened. Not too far from here." Razi says, a grin barely contained across his mouth. "Relax for a moment, sleep it off. You'll know immediately when something comes up."

Alcuin glares blankly at the keys, twirling them around like an expensive relic. "Relax?"

Razi was already moving towards his muscle car, wiping a layer of fallen leaves across his car's windshield. Alcuin curls his hand across the keys tightly, feeling the jagged teeth of the keys, then follows him into the vehicle. Razi drives them down the road, the streets blurring, Alcuin thumbing at the keychain. He furrows his brow, juggling his thoughts as the roads stretch around him.

The Alphoric were inherently ambush predators. Opportunistic savages. Which meant that wherever it had been holding up, would likely be nearby a source of food. However, in the city, that was everywhere. Aside from base desires and combat tactics, Alcuin knew little about these monsters' weaknesses. Only that they were unpredictable.

The car slows, swerving to the foot of a stretching tower. Alcuin peers over Razi's shoulder, before noticing the vehicle's sunroof and switches. A jet black tower with its lower rows tinted glass. Its entrance was regal, indulgent, while a purple neon billboard pulsed above it. Scantly dressed women surrounded its alleys, smoking, talking, seemingly belonging to this structure.

NIGHTSKY LUXURIES.

Razi glances at the building, then back to Alcuin. He smirks, nodding his head with deliberation.

“Razi... Where are we?”

Razi waves his hand at the keys in Alcuin's hand.

“My favourite titty bar... But most importantly, it's good undercover accommodation. You get a nice view, good bedding, better shower...”

“I'm not fucking sleeping in a strip club.” Alcuin growls. Razi sighs.

“It's not a strip club, not the upper floors at least.” He explains, voice low with a sense of disappointment. “Just walk to the lift, and you skip all the entertainment. That is, if you want to!”

Alcuin, tired, fed-up, swings the door open and leaves. He circles around the car, Razi rolling the window down as he reluctantly makes it towards the Nightsky tower.

“If anything happens I'll call!” He shouts, then rolls the window up and revs his engine before disappearing down the road. Alcuin watches him leave, frustrated, but more annoyingly, confused.

He couldn't help but feel out of the loop. The sudden mention of a guy named Stallone. Being dropped off to rot in a strip club. It all felt turbulent, impulsive. Alcuin stands at the edge of the tower, an unpleasant fluttering sensation within his core. Nothing in that building scared him, but the uncertainty of Razi's message here, did. He creeps towards the main entrance, side flaring in pain climbing its concrete steps, before mustering up the courage to face Razi's stupidity.

He enters, facing a dimly lit lobby. Fluorescent lights flicker across the ceiling, illuminating floating particles within a hazy air. A small fog machine rolls a blanket of fog underneath the reception desk, while an attractive, punkish, red haired woman watches him from behind. She puts out a cigarette against a ceramic platter, then taps at an electronic till before facing him. Her face quickly winces, the armour, the soaking clothes, the smell, however she seems more amused if anything.

“Can I... help you?” She asks, voice low and curious.

Alcuin raises the keys, opening his hand to allow them to dangle around his finger.

“Oh. Then you're all good.” the woman says carefully, a pause for each word.

Alcuin looks further down the hallway, noticing a row of elevators accented with neon strips, then walks to them. The receptionist follows him with her eyes, speechless, more interested that the EDAP had a room, instead of leaving wet footprints against their expensive carpet. Alcuin makes his way to his accommodation's floor, tracks down his room, and unlocks it.

Floor thirty two. A minimalist living room presents itself, sized adequately, with a wall sized window that bathes the living quarters in a white, drab, glow. A small leather couch lies across from the tiny kitchen counter, facing a large flat screen television and flimsy homely table. A large wrapped basket sat atop it, only keeping Alcuin's attention for one reason.

Upon its tag, "From Razi."

Fuck sakes.

Alcuin quickly takes it, unwrapping its plastic shield before removing its contents. A bundle of clean civilian clothes, a stick of deodorant, and a smartphone. Behind the phone, was a silver credit card, 'Unlimited Cash' written on the tape binding the two together. He tosses the basket, keeping the phone and card as he fiddles with its screen. It was unlocked, with direct contacts to Razi, Stallone, and emergency services. He places the device atop the kitchen counter, and begins to strip the soaked armour from his body, removing his plates, gloves, and other combat oriented apparel until he was only dressed with his EDAP fatigues.

A fleece army drab blouse with a EDAP patch across his left shoulder. His baggy white pants patterned with a geometric mess of white and gray shapes. His beige combat boots, abused, yet not structurally damaged. He accidentally catches his radio upon fiddling with the chestpiece.

He stares at it in pause, unsure if he really wanted to hear his voice during this point. He walks to the window, faces the city below, and presses his thumb into the side button.

"This is EDAP designation 'Alcuin', reporting from Kioni to Overseer. How copy?"

He waits, scanning the earth below as if a sniper may be lying in wait. People up here were reduced to shapes, yet positioning was a heavy tell. He instead watched the building tops, window frames.

He repeats himself, tone clinical and engrained. The radio gurgles with static, then a voice clears from its speaker. It wasn't Santiago, he had no clue who it was.

"Roger designation 'Alcuin', Overseer awaiting report." A man responds in procedure. His voice was dry and raw.

Alcuin flattens his thumb across the radio, stretching his lip. "Asset 'Acluin' has made contact with designation 'Dourman'." He pauses, considering his wording. "Dourman has advised that asset Alcuin partakes in an assisted eradication of an undercover Alphoric presence within the city. Please advise."

No response.

Only the muffled noise of the beneath city.

Alcuin shifts anxiously, unsure if they had correctly interpreted his message. His eyes move from the city and to the glowing yellow Radio screen.

"Confirmed. Asset 'Alcuin' is authorised to assist in the eradication of Exno saboteurs." The sound of mechanical typing vaguely comes through the static. "You are compelled to report back to this channel within another twenty four hour interval. We will update you on your objective parameters if they are to change."

Alcuin looks at the radio, unsure if he should say more. The secret bunker, Kioni's deliberation of Alien coverup, the porn-star hotel. At least he had now received the EDAP's consent. It was now an official undercover operation.

Alcuin sighs, planting the radio beside his armour before sitting onto the sofa. The leather creases loudly as his weight shifts, slowly sinking backwards as Alcuin's eyes grow heavy. He rubs them, fighting off the growing tire.

City noise bleeds into the silence as Alcuin's body, for the first time in a long time, relaxes.

He removes the pistol Razi had given to him, rolling the weapon across his hands as he inspects it. It was a civilian handgun. Unremarkable, ineffective. He disassembles it, fighting off the creeping exhaustion, and searches for faults, dirt, and debris. Alcuin wipes some dirt from the pistol's recoil spring, then repeats its hammer. Then he closes it back up. The pistol had likely only been fired a few times in its entire life.

His mind quickly races, probabilities, strategies. If they were to track the Alphoric, how would they do it? He had spent the entire war on the backpedal, fighting for escape, not pursuit. He had never been a hunter, but neither had Razi. He knew some of Razi's pre-war life: Born into a family trapped within Brazil's carter's, smuggling and fixing weaponry while he was a teenager, yet Alcuin didn't see a link. For Razi to deliberately step into this role, out of his comfort zone, he was trying to prove something.

What?

Alcuin rubs his eyes again, the Green eye appearing within his mind. The trap. This was also an atypically intelligent alien, which meant it was here for a purpose. But one thing made little sense to Alcuin.

Why didn't it spring a deadlier trap?

Alcuin's mind continues to race as he blankly watches the window, thumb circling the grip of the pistol. His eyelids grow fluttering once more, weights pulling them down. He allows them to close for a moment, then opens them. It wasn't the time for sleep, he needed to figure out their next move.

< - - - - - 10 HOURS LATER - - - - - >

Golden light bleeds through the window casting rays across the wall and onto Alcuin's face. The light seeps through his eyelids, causing him to wake with a jolt. The pistol rests firmly in his hand, ready to fire. He eases himself, but his body has been tense all night. The couch surrounding him was damp, yet his clothes had almost completely dried. He rubs his face, groaning as he forces himself upright, his body begging him to remain still.

He pockets the pistol then searches the remainder of his apartment. He stops at the master bedroom and glares at the mattress. He grunts in irritation. The shower was as luxurious as it came too, black marble tiles, glass walls with a pristine steel head. Much better than a plastic bag with holes.

Alcuin retrieves the smartphone, no messages. He huffs, arms falling to his sides as he tries to allow the spare time to flow. It is pointless.

His leg endlessly bounces. His mind keeps screaming at him to MOVE. He keeps noticing a reflective shimmer within the surrounding skyscraper windows. Any could be a Resistance sniper. The walls are closing around him. He stares at the smartphone, waiting for the call, the message, nothing.

He frantically looks for the door. It was time to leave.

Anywhere but within this kill-box.

He leaves the building, taking the phone and pistol with him, and heads out into the city street. Golden rays scissor across the distant towers and through the blanket of fog, rolling down the filled roads. Despite the otherwise warm appearance, frost still managed to escape his breath. He tucks his exposed hands into his pockets, pulling his arms into his body in the

effort to preserve heat. Both sides of the street lead down into a stretch of endless buildings, pedestrians and vehicles, and he commits to a direction walking with a brisk march.

Each passing citizen pretended to not notice him. Alcuin could feel their eyes move to him the moment they left his periphery. His hairs rise as his skin grows colder. Even outside, the droning terror grew louder.

Outside, each one of these people would likely be behind, or at the end of his rifle. Their lives a calculated arithmetic. Friend or foe. Neutrality did not exist.

An engine roars as a vehicle darts through the beside street, the sudden roar jolting Alcuin's body with a painful shudder. He snaps across, two sets of sirens blaring, their respective vehicles giving pursuit.

This was a mistake.

Following the road further, the path expands into a large city square, its name a sculpture of concrete letters, cemented into the slab footpath. MATEO, with bright blue letters swallowed in the shadow of the behind megastructure. An immense complex of glass, concrete walls, and foot traffic. Its entrance was a four-laned escalator that endlessly dragged hordes of shoppers up a floor, into the bowels of its consumerist labyrinth. Alcuin watches in awe, his pace slowing before finding himself a thin uncomfortable bench to sit upon.

For a moment, the sight cleared the stress.
It served to remind him of what he longed for. Normalcy. A future.
But this city was acrylic. A perfect imagining of unreality.

Dreams vanish when the eyes are opened.

Above ravens gather in flocks, swirling across the awnings as their cries barely matter in the chaos of the city. Alcuin notices them, only for their dancing shadows catching at his feet. Nasally laughter erupts toward the plaza's entrance; a group of delinquent teenagers antagonise a security guard with a skateboard. Behind them three cops watch, waiting for a reason.

Alcuin watches the faceless crowd further, a gentle cold wind blowing across his hair. He shivers, but the cold distracts his self-consuming mind from the horrors of helplessness. Alcuin's head lifts, eyes narrowing as one of the pedestrians breaks the crowd, and makes for his direction.

The man stands beside his bench, hands dug into his leather jacket pockets. They sigh, fog jettisoning from his mouth as he turns to face him. Alcuin tries to hide his stare, but fails miserably. The pedestrian matches his look with a friendly expression, deep blue eyes, thin lips upturned, yet the expression feels inauthentic. Staged.

Alcuin turns from the stranger and they quietly chuckle. He looks back to the person, who was now holding a flask. The stranger swigs it, catches his stare, then offers Alcuin a sip.

“I can’t help myself, but I need to ask... You’re that EDAP guy that landed in Icarus last night, right?” Their voice was young, smooth, and pungent with the stench of booze. Alcuin’s eyes widen, then shakes his head at the drink.

The stranger winks, then sips the flask again. Their face was boyish, curly chestnut hair fluttering in the wind. Their leather bomber jacket was rugged and battered and his jeans had black smudges and tears. They appeared homeless, or at least a vagrant.

“Me? Sorry, I wouldn’t think so,” Alcuin calmly redirects. He holds a fake smile, hoping the stranger would buy it.

The stranger spots the patch across Alcuin’s shoulder, then grimaces. “Yeah, Right.”

Alcuin’s stomach drops. Fuck.

“Well, hero... The name’s Lev. And I got an inkling that this ain’t a common place for you.”

Alcuin rubs his mouth, then shakes his head. He reminds himself of his sidearm. He could grab it easily if needed.

“Is it that obvious?”

Lev grunts, agreeing.

“I’ve been here only a year and the entire time, I’ve never seen anyone sit in that chair. Only people who sit around in this city tend to be tourists. The EDAP are also quite foreign here nowadays. I wonder why.”

Alcuin looks at Lev again, his eyes widening in a sudden realization. This was that man who stink-eyed him at the bar. Moments before meeting Razi. The one with the look. Hate.

Alcuin tries to swallow the fear, but his hand instinctively rests closer to his sidearm. “You said you’ve been here a year... You from the outside?” Alcuin asks.

Lev watches his hand, realising what it meant. He abruptly laughs, before filling his mouth with more alcohol. “You don’t gotta worry pal, I ain’t gonna hurt you. I’m just looking to pass some time.”

The response calms Alcuin a fraction, however his guard remains. If he was from outside, he undoubtedly knew about the big secret.

“So, you were with the EDAP as well?” Alcuin asks, squinting his eyes through suspicion, his back meeting the behind slats. Lev shakes his head.

“No. Wasn’t really affiliated with anyone worthwhile. Left my people for the safety of the white city.” Lev chuckles, drinks again, hiccups, then shakes his head. “Small group, wandered for supplies. I left after a disagreement.”

Alcuin’s eyes twitch. This guy was young for who he claimed himself as. Early twenties at most, and claiming he survived in the battlefield without affiliations to the EDAP or Resistance. It was a lie that was easy enough to catch. But the mention of his ‘disagreement’ intrigues Alcuin. Perhaps he was a deserter. Perhaps Alcuin was mistaken.

“So, if you’re not EDAP or Resistance, who’s side are you on?”

“Yours, so you needn’t worry. That’s actually why I came here.” Lev explains, waving the flask around. “I came to give you the courtesy of a warning.”

Alcuin’s heart plummets. He restrains every desire to jolt, to shoot, to stay in that chair and not escalate to violence. His hand taps the edge of his weapon, he does not reach for it.

“A warning?”

“Yes,” Lev nods. “Alcuin, is it?”

Alcuin doesn’t react, but that gives Lev a tell.

“We share a mutual partner. Robenero.” Lev sips from his flask. “The idiot was supposed to introduce me, but you guys went off on the lead without me. Not sure if that was intentional or not, but I gotta know what happened.”

Alcuin takes a hard look at Lev. He wasn’t so sure if he believed him, but it wasn’t unlike the kid. However, an outlier existed. If this Lev was an ally, why didn’t Razi introduce him at the bar? It would have been convenient. Instead, he didn’t even seem to notice him. He bites his lip, considering his next words carefully. Maybe, if he was lying, he could trip him up. Alcuin meets Lev’s eyes, then dives his hand into his pocket.

“Alright,” Alcuin says. “I’ll get him to tell you.”

Lev’s smile flickers, drooping slightly. “Ah, there’s no need.”

Alcuin insists. Lev drops the act, smile vanishing.

“You’ve made your point. Just put it down and I’ll tell you exactly why I’m here.”

Alcuin stares, smartphone held high as the cogs in his head turn. A fickle sense of control felt within his grasp. Perhaps it would do more good in hearing him out. He deliberately pushes the phone back into his pocket, then crosses his arms. Lev sighs, posture loosening.

“Who you’re hunting... You’re gonna stop chasing them.”

Alcuin freezes in place, arms stuck together, compressing his chest and breathing. His eyes fix onto the threat, but Lev now has a hand resting within his jacket.

“If you don’t, I’ll come back.” Lev warns. “I’ll kill your friends. I’ll kill you. And I’ll burn this place to the floor to do it.”

Lev turns, rejoining the distant crowd as quickly as he came. Then, vanishes. Alcuin stares at the crowd, eyes wide, palms sweating, before registering that he was gone.

3 - HOME INVASION



The