

SIDRAN, THE CITY THAT VANISHED

I dreamt again of the city.

It'd been winter when I last stepped foot in Sidran. Red lanterns had hung all throughout the narrow, steep streets, prayers adorning them in gold paint. There'd been plenty of snow and more smoke than usual in the sky. Industry had been consuming Sidran, same as it had already consumed the rest of the nation.

In the dream, I saw myself holding my son's hand. I was leading him up a set of stone steps, trying to ignore screams coming from a temple we were passing. It'd been a blood week. Sora hated blood weeks and we always ended up having the same talk.

"Why do the gods need blood?" He asked, as he always asked.

"Because gods are greedy," I said, like I'd said a hundred times before. "And we have to keep them happy."

The dream decided all of a sudden that my daughter Iris was there, too. She danced up the steps ahead of us, turned, laughed. "That was a funny scream. Did you hear that one?"

I hadn't. I opened my mouth to tell her so.

Then she was gone. I turned. Sora was also gone.

Then the city vanished around me.

Then I was alone. Back to how things really were.

My telephone was ringing. I jolted upright in bed, fumbling blindly in the dark for the damned thing, which sat upon my bedside table. After a moment, I found the handset, picked it up, and pressed it to my ear.

"Akiri," Volduran's voice crackled across the line, "we need you here. Now."

"Alright," I said, not really awake yet. "Alright, I'll be there."

I slammed the handset down. Another fucking dream and another fucking call. It was starting to become a routine.

Just in case, I turned to the other half of my bed. The empty half. The half Haran should've occupied but hadn't for years now. Well. What had I been expecting? Things, and people, could apparently just disappear, but they sure as hell wouldn't come back.

"Gotta go," I said. Odi, my cat, looked up at me from his own little bed in the corner of the room.

"Meow," he said, as though the little bastard cared, and went right back to sleep.

#

Like all breach agents, I was mandated to live close to the Gray House. The proximity didn't do much to save me from the rain, though—it was pouring down heavily enough that, in the three minutes it took to walk from my apartment to the front door of where I worked, I was soaked.

Once I was undercover, I lit a cigarette and waved my ID at the four suited men standing guard. Inside, I dripped water all over the marble as I crossed the foyer. There was a long desk spanning the far side, behind which sat a dozen women, a couple of them noisily using their typewriters. A map of our nation dominated the wall behind them, and as always my eyes automatically found the empty space where the city of Sidran should've been. Where it *had* been.

Volduran was waiting for me by one of the many statues, this one depicting the god Haraxthias, who possessed no legs and thus was forced to drag his bleeding, half-severed self across the sky. Out of all the members of the pantheon, I'd always liked him the least. He was the one parents tended to use in order to frighten their children— something which I'd never done with my own.

"You could've waited next to any statue," I grunted.

Volduran was ten years my senior, though looked even older, with gray in his hair and a face that had withstood extreme amounts of punishment throughout the duration of his life. His nose was crooked, his ears puffy, and today his right eye was swollen. Man couldn't go more than a day without ending up in a fight with someone. It was a real problem. He said, "I reckon he's underappreciated. People don't like him because he's a gory sight but it was Adenthis who cut him in half, and no one ever judges the bastard for it."

"Don't act like you even believe in any of it."

Volduran grinned. "Who says I don't?"

"You're too cynical for all of that."

"Ah, Akiri, that's the thing. With gods like ours, faith is the more cynical path. Anyway." He stepped in closer. "No time to chat, I'm afraid. We're moving out in a moment."

"What's happened?"

"We have a partial breach on our hands. Not a big one, if the Dreamers are to be believed, and in over twenty years, they haven't let me down yet."

I winced. It was the fourth breach we'd been called out to in a span of around two weeks, and I knew most other agents had been similarly stretched thin. It wasn't normal. It wasn't even close to normal. Breaches were supposed to be incredibly rare. We agents weren't really meant to do much, which was why there were so few of us. We were a contingency, kept in the back pocket of the nation, just in case.

"I know," Volduran said, seeing my expression. "Don't worry, I'm pretty fucking concerned, too. First things first, though. We have to shut this one down."

"Where?"

"Downtown. Miyanora Street. Inside an abandoned factory." He grinned. "Been a while since I ventured down into the crime capital. It'll be nostalgic."

"And will it just be the two of us—?"

Volduran didn't need to answer because at that moment, just as rain-soaked as I was, a young, sharp-faced man threw open the front door and came crashing in. He looked around, eyes wide, water dripping down his face. He had dark hair, slicked back, and wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. It was wet enough that it'd become translucent.

"Ah, here he is," Volduran said. "Meet Juhiro. Newest recruit, and youngest in the history of the Gray House. Scored incredibly well on all the tests, if you can believe it. He's a little fresh but, I think, promising. Juhiro— get over here. This is Akiri, my partner. You'll defer to her just as you'll defer to me. She's one of the best we have."

Juhiro thrust out a hand. "A pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I've heard about you. You closed that breach in Hinteria all on your own, didn't you?"

I shook his head and offered him a tight smile. "Volduran was there but at the time of closing he was unconscious so, yes, I suppose it *was* all on my own."

"But," Volduran said, scarred face twisting in a smile of his own, "before I became *indisposed*, I provided invaluable assistance, did I not?"

“Sure,” I said.

Volduran clapped his hands. “There it is. Introductions have been made. Now, we have a breach to close.”

THE STARS ARE WATCHING

I knew something was going to go wrong because the stars were out in full force. That meant that the gods were watching, and the gods only ever watched us when they knew blood was soon to follow.

We arrived in the backs of three trucks. Volduran, Juhiro, myself, and eight cops who were supposed to be our muscle. I had nothing against the police, except when it came to breaches, which tended to make them useless. Couldn't blame them for that, though.

By the time we'd left the Gray House, it'd stopped raining. It was a moonless night, bright with the cold glittering of stars and the faint bruising of a distant aurora. Miyanora street, notorious for criminal activity, was empty except for a couple of teens lurking in the shadows, and they cleared quickly when we pulled up.

Juhiro, the youngest agent we had, was the first to jump out of the truck and hit the pavement. His dark hair was slicked back, his pistol already in his hand. He was an unhealthy mixture of far too eager and terrified all at once.

"I'll take point," Volduran said. "Akiri, I want you right behind me."

I nodded, drew my own gun, cold metal pressing into my palm. The abandoned factory loomed up before us, windows smashed in, the bricks grimey and weathered. Two floors. The double-door entrance was already broken down for us so that the opening was a tunnel of exposed darkness. A place like this, a door wasn't needed to keep people out. Smoke stacks protruded out of the building like horns. My mouth was all of a sudden dry.

"Let's go," Voludran said. He gestured to the cop sergeant, an intimidating wall of muscle named Odahan, and the sergeant advanced upon the factory with his men in a line behind him, weapons drawn. He paused just outside of the entrance as though taking a second to compose himself, then set his shoulders and stepped inside. The cops filed in. I waited for gunshots, for screams. Volduran glanced back at us as he too entered the factory, his mouth a grim line.

My turn. I switched on my flashlight, which I held in my left hand. A cone of yellow light carved through the darkness and illuminated the foyer. Disintegrating walls, rubble, and broken glass covered the ground, a few wires hanging down from the ceiling. I breathed in mold and rot. No sign of cultists, although someone had definitely been squatting there recently; not too far away was the remnants of a fire and several empty beer bottles.

Odahan made a sign with one hand, signaling to his men that it was time they split up. The cops divided themselves into two groups and fanned out, the barrels of their guns leading the way. I hoped the Dreamers had been wrong, that this place really was empty, that there was no breach.

From somewhere within the labyrinthine building, a voice.

All of us froze. I gritted my teeth. Fuck. Not abandoned, then. Odahan made another sign, then headed off in the direction of the distant voice.

The air felt oddly thick, hard to breathe in. I wanted to ask Volduran whether or not I was just imagining it. He had good instincts, had been doing this job since I was just a child. There wasn't much he hadn't seen, which was why I really didn't like his expression at that moment. He

was frowning deeply, his eyes darting around madly as though in search of something. Juhiro, right behind us, was breathing heavily, far too audible for my liking.

The factory floor opened up into a wide, empty space. There were marks on the ground where machinery had no doubt sat. A few things had even been left behind, large metal objects that made no sense in the darkness. Glass crunched beneath our boots. A bat, startled by our approach, catapulted itself through the air and made for one of the broken windows.

One of the cops said, "Hey! Don't move!"

I heard, rather than saw, what happened next. On the other side of the factory, someone started to run. The cop called out again, then he, the sergeant, and the rest of their group broke into a sprint.

Then, in the corner of my vision, a shadow coalesced. I spun, torchlight scything through the darkness, just in time to see a bearded man in rags swinging a club at my head. I fired off a shot, stupidly and suddenly loud. The club hit me just above my eyes.

The world went white. My ears rung. More gunshots sounded out.

I was on the ground, on my back, staring up at nothing. My gun. Where was it? My hand fumbled at the ground, found the icy metal and grabbed it. I tried to sit up and my vision blurred. My face felt warm so I touched my brow gingerly. There was enough light for me to see black blood coating my fingers.

Volduran's face appeared before my own. "Akiri, are you alright?"

"Ugh," I said. I was trying not to vomit.

"Can you stand?"

I nodded dazedly. Volduran hooked his hands under my arms and hauled me back up to my feet. Juhiro's torch beam was focused on my attacker, who was curled up on the ground in a spreading pool of dark blood. I thought I could see the stars reflected in the inky liquid, peering down at us through a hole in the roof above us. *There's your blood*, I thought, but knew well that the gods were greedy.

The three of us stood there for a moment, alone. Odahan had gone off with one half of his men in one direction, while the other half were...who knew where? Cops tended to be impulsive when it came to breaches. A good chunk of them were desperate to become breach agents and were likely to do something stupid in order to prove their worth.

"You good to keep going?" Volduran said, eyeing me closely.

I glanced down at my attacker. What was the correct thing to feel in that moment? I doubted *nothing* was the right answer. "I'm fine," I said. "Perfectly fine." I dabbed at my brow with my coat sleeve. "Let's keep going."

We followed after Odahan. Shouting up ahead, echoing through empty spaces. Volduran broke into a jog and Juhiro and I stayed right behind him. I would've preferred to walk, with the way my head was spinning.

We crossed the open floor and found ourselves at the mouth of a corridor that stretched out before us. Torchlight was visible at the very end of it.

Gunshots rang out. One, three, then a storm. I felt each *bang* in my head, little needles thrust into my brain.

"Stay close," Volduran said. He sprinted down the corridor.

We followed, my stomach churning with every step, the shots getting louder. There was a brief interlude filled with shouts and my own heavy breathing, then the guns opened up again.

We turned right, found ourselves in a vast, dark space. Torch beams flickered and roamed, guns barked and offered their muzzle flashes, and people, their features lost in the blackness, darted from one piece of cover to another.

It was easy to pick Odahan out, since he was so large. He was crouched behind a piece of old machinery, cradling his shotgun. His eyes met mine, he shook his head, then he stood, fired his weapon, and sunk back down. My ears were ringing.

“Stay here!” Volduran roared. He charged in, bent over low, and joined Odahan.

Juhiro and I made eye-contact, silently communicating. Obviously neither one of us was going to stay put. We saw it in each other’s expressions, and at the same time we advanced into the room.

The two of us ducked behind a separate piece of machinery. I glanced around, taking in the situation. There were metal stairs not too far away, leading to a steel platform upon which men, presumably cultists, were taking cover of their own.

A bullet slapped against our cover, ricocheted off. I jolted, heart missing a beat, and it was only then that I realized that, yes, Volduran had been right, I should have stayed back. I was a containment agent, not a soldier, nor even a cop. I could use a gun, was trained for basic conflict, and had even been in a few exchanges in the past...but nothing like this.

Juhiro opened his mouth and shouted something at me. Gunfire drowned out his words, and I shook my head at him. This fresh wave of shots, though, came from further ahead.

Then sudden, abrupt silence.

I froze. That silence made me feel vulnerable. Smoke drifted across my vision, and I breathed in a sour reek. Fuck, my chest hurt. I hoped my heart wouldn’t explode.

“All clear!” a voice boomed out.

Odahan shouted, “Ty, that you?”

“It’s me, captain. We got ‘em!”

Ty. The name of one of the cops. Odahan rose tentatively from his cover, gun still pointed at shadows. His torch whirled around. Others were standing now, too. Once I saw that Volduran was up, I lurched to my feet, offering Juhiro a hand.

The second group of cops emerged from the far side. Ty, a grin on his face, said, “Came up right behind them. Stupid bastards. All dead now, though.”

“You did well,” Odahan grunted. He glanced up at the platform, where dead cultists were slumped against the railing. Black blood trickled down from up high, splattering against the concrete floor. “Casualties?”

“None.”

“Any sign of...” Odahan cleared his throat, then more quietly said, “of a breach?”

Ty shook his head. Both men looked at Volduran, who cracked his knuckles and said, “You boys hold down the fort. Keep us safe. We’ll find the breach.”

#

It didn’t take us long to find it.

No two breaches are alike. This one was a narrow slit hanging horizontally in the air, as though a god had picked up a knife and slashed at reality. It was so thin, the edge of a blade, that we could see nothing of what lay beyond. A faint pink light oozed out of the wound.

The three of us stood at a distance. Volduran sniffed at the air, as did I. No noticeable odor from the breach. That, combined with how faint the light was, and how thin the cut seemed to be, indicated that it had only been birthed very recently. That, at least, was good news.

We were in a large office room that'd likely belonged to the factory overseers. There were a few high windows but the only light emanated from the breach and from our torches. Cabinets had been tipped over and lay in a heap. There was an old desk and a single framed photo hanging from the wall, covered in so much dust that the image was entirely hidden.

Juhiro took a step toward the breach, his eyes wide. I remembered that he was new enough to have not seen many of them before. Part of our training involved lengthy psychological conditioning that allowed us to get so close to them. Breaches defied the laws of our world. They were abnormalities that our brains weren't designed to deal with, and even for those of us trained to gaze into their depths and not flinch, safety wasn't guaranteed.

I held out a hand to stop Juhiro. One thing about breaches was the temptation they posed. For one reason or another, a lot of people felt compelled to touch them, or even to enter them.

Volduran reached into his coat and pulled out a small piece of metal. It was a rod, about the length of an index finger. We called it a Closer. Hold it up to a breach, activate it, and after an amount of time that depended on its severity, you could seal it up. They were only really effective for minor tears like this one, and how they actually worked was apparently a secret too well guarded for even us agents to know. May as well have been black magic.

The danger with Closers was that they pissed off anything that might be lurking on the other side of the breach. It usually wasn't any issue, because unless the breach was significant, nothing could squeeze its way through, but I'd heard the horror stories.

Volduran activated the Closer. A high pitch whine emitted from the rod, and he brought it close to the reality tear, standing so close to it that he'd certainly be experiencing distortions. At that proximity, there were both visual and auditory hallucinations, and a sense of overwhelming dread that was impossible to describe unless you've felt it.

"You good?" I said. I watched him closely. Always important to have multiple agents on hand, even for the closing of a minor breach. We were playing by a rulebook, but the very nature of the job was unpredictable and dangerous.

"All good," Volduran croaked. He shook his head as though to clear out the cobwebs. His breathing had become harsh. I wondered what he was seeing at that moment, and what the voices were whispering to him.

Juhiro tried to get closer, but still I held him back. He said, "Did you see that?"

I frowned. "See what?"

He pointed to the breach. "I saw something. Like a shadow—"

Volduran's legs gave out under him. He crashed to the ground, head smacking concrete, the rod falling from his limp hands. I hesitated for only a second, my mind blank, before I dived for the Closer.

It was still activated. I held it up, heart thundering, my vision darkening. The breach flared up. Tendrils of pink light pulsed out like miniature streaks of lighting.

Look, a voice hissed into my head. *They're waiting for you.*

Like I'd said, auditory hallucinations were to be expected.

But this was different. This was a voice pouring right into the meat of my brain. And I could not help but feel that not only did it know me, but that I knew *it*.

Then it whispered three names to me.

Haran. Iris. Sora.

My husband. My daughter. My son.

One of the first things they teach you is to never gaze directly into a breach.

Yet that's exactly what I did.

An eye stared back at me. It was pressed up against the tear in reality, cold, intelligent, and hungry. It was massive, so much so that I could only make out the pupil, which was like a puddle of oil within which constellations had been trapped.

The constellations began to blur, to take new forms. Faces started to coalesce. So, too, did a city. I could not look away. I had to see this. I had to—

I was frozen. The Closer continued to whine in my hand. My eyes were locked onto the single, vast orb gazing back. It didn't blink. And the voice said, *I know you.*

"Close it!" Juhiro shrieked. "What are you doing?"

My muscles were locking up. My body compelled me to stay exactly where I was, to look into that eye until it swallowed me whole. One aspect of our psychological conditioning instructed us to visualize the most positive thing in our life. I didn't have a whole lot of options. I envisioned my family, conjuring up an image of my husband, of my children, seeing them smiling.

But they were gone. Vanished. As though they'd never even existed. And I would never see them again.

Akiri, whispered the voice. *Akiri, Akiri, Akiri—*

Juhiro was screaming in my face. He tore the Closer out of my hand, held it right up to the breach, his own eyes averted. The whine grew louder, a needle driving into my ears, working its way into my brain. The breach shuddered, started to grow dimmer. The great eye on the other side of it recoiled.

And then the breach was gone.

Volduran groaned, picking himself up off of the ground. I bit hard into my lip, drawing blood, bringing myself back into my body. I grabbed Volduran and helped him up to his feet, the three of us just standing there and staring into the darkness where the breach had been. There was an unidentifiable, sweet taste to the air, the lingering scent of Hell, or whatever reality existed on the other side of breaches.

Juhiro glanced down at the Closer in his hand. "What happened?"

Volduran, his eyes wary, slapped the young man on the back. "You did well, kid." To me, he said, "What happened?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

Volduran ran a hand along his scalp. "Let's get the fuck out of here. Then we'll talk about what happened. Juhiro, I reckon the two of us owe you a drink. Or ten."

Volduran turned and made for the door, Juhiro trailing behind, the Closer still in his hand, as though he were afraid to let go of it. I remained where I was, my body starting to shake, the adrenaline oozing out of me. I'd fucked up. I'd stared into the opening, despite all of my training, and endangered all three of us. Juhiro, the new kid, the one who was supposed to just be observing and learning, had saved our lives.

Seconds passed, and then I was alone. I started moving, my limbs leaden, my energy evaporated. I held my torch down low, the yellow arc of light splashing across the stained, dusty concrete.

I stopped. Something had caught my eye. Writing on the wall to my far right. I raised the torch and focussed its beam on the graffiti. t.

Two words in messy, black paint: *Remember Sidran*.

I couldn't move. The torch beam wavered in my trembling grip. I was imagining it, surely, a lingering hallucination caused by the breach. It had screwed up my mind and now I was seeing things that weren't there.

But the words remained. *Remember Sidran*.

The city that everyone had forgotten. Except for me.

And whoever had written those words.

"Akiri!" Volduran stood in the doorway, frowning at me. "What's wrong?"

I could hardly speak. There were tears in my eyes. It was the first acknowledgement, outside of my own mind, that the city had ever even existed. I wasn't crazy. Sidran *had* been real. My family had been real. They'd been mine.

"Come here," I choked out.

Volduran approached cautiously. "Akiri, are you alright?"

"What does that say?" I pointed at the writing. "Volduran, please."

Volduran's turned his head and looked where I was pointing, directly at the words. After a moment he said, "Remember Sidran? What is that?"

"The city!" I shouted. I climbed back up to my feet. "Sidran was a city. Remember? Please tell me that you remember?"

Volduran looked wary now. He came a little closer, hands held out in front of him as though he were approaching a wild animal. "Akiri, you have to calm down. I don't know what you're talking about. You were just exposed to a breach. Remember your training. Fixate on a pleasant memory, okay?"

The only pleasant memories I had belonged to Sidran, to the life I had lived there. A thousand thoughts swirled around inside my head. Volduran didn't remember, of course he didn't. But he could at least see the writing, which meant that it was real, that I wasn't hallucinating.

And that meant that there was someone else out there who remembered the city. And maybe they knew what had happened to it.

Despite my confusion and my despair, I felt something like hope blossoming inside of me. I wasn't insane. I now had confirmation.

"Come on," Volduran said. "Akiri, we have to get out of here."

"Okay," I murmured. "Okay."

I didn't want to leave, not with those words painted on the wall. Had the cultists written them? Did they somehow know what had happened to the city? But I couldn't remain standing there, staring at the graffiti like a moron. I was alarming Volduran. If I didn't get a grip, he might think that I'd been overexposed to the breach, that my mind had been fried.

And perhaps it had been.