



SWORD OF THE NATION

PUBLIC PREVIEW II

CHRISTIAN KALEB CARUZO

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By Christian Kaleb Caruzo

To Sabina,

I always dreamed of the day when I could present you a copy of this dream. Alas, fate had other plans in store.

From the son that never deserved to be blessed with such a marvelous mother, may this get me one step closer to becoming the son you deserved to have.

I will always love you, and when I'm long gone from this world and I'm nothing but ashes and dust, I'll still love you.

To Christopher,

The most precious gift my mom ever gave to me, I haven't given up because of you. Your innocent smiles are the reason that keep me in the fight even though I have no strength of my own nor weapons left to wield.

Here's to a next chapter in our lives, a brighter one, away from all the pain we've suffered in the past.

May this be a pillar towards building that good future I promised her you'll soon have.

Acknowledgements

I don't even know how to begin writing this.

This is a journey that began many years ago. It spawned as more infantile tale and has evolved through time, nurtured by my woes, triumphs, sins, vices, virtues, losses, laughter, tears, and everything else that comprises the flawed and man that I am as I continue to find my place in a world that I never quite fit in and that I still don't fully understand.

This universe, and its tale, remained as a dormant dream from my early teenage years up until mid-2015, when I began to seriously explore the possibility of bringing it to life. I started to do my research and prepare. However, life dealt some terrible blows to my family during that time, once we adjusted to our new reality I slowly began drafting and plotting a skeleton sketch of things, at that point I only had a roadmap, some basic character names, and one or two important cornerstone moments marinating in my mind.

It was not until August of 2016 when I started work on the very first draft, however, I was not content with it, and went back to the drawing board. By December of 2016 I felt like I was finally on the right path, and so I began to walk the road, so to speak.

I wished to have this ready sooner but life dealt me the worst blows, and my world has since then turned upside down.

To all the friends that I've encountered in my adventures across this atypical life of mine, who have given me the invaluable treasure of their friendship, to the ones I've lost. To everyone who's believed in me, to everyone who's supported me, heard me, lended me a hand—friends and strangers alike, you've all given me the strength I needed to stand up once more after my darkest hours.

I owe you all the world, and then some more.

To you, who is reading this, I hope that this story, spawned from the unbound imagination of a pariah—a complete social outcast, inept and flawed in many ways, manages to inspire you and spark your imagination.

I hope this Crimson Dream of mine is given life in your mind as it has lived on mine throughout all these years.

This book is for all of you.

A word before you start

Greetings and welcome to Sword of the Nation's second public preview.

First of all, I would like to avail myself of this opportunity to thank everyone who participated and gave Sword's first public preview a go, and even more immensely thankful to those that provided their invaluable feedback.

I am very honored to present this second preview, which is closer to what I aspire will be the final published version of Sword. Much like with the First Public Preview that I released in January, I hope it gives you a good first look at the life of Bastiel Isthel, the Nation of Vaifen, the Crown of Starsong, and the Gestalt team, as they face the unrelenting wrath of the Ashen Reckoning and their leader, Dogma.

This preview contains the Prologue and the first nine chapters (out of a planned twelve), going all the way up to the events of "Operation Midnight Rhapsody" in Chapter IX: Binaural Symphony.

If you've already gone through the first public preview then you won't find any significant changes beyond grammar and a few tweaks to the story that do not affect the overall plot. This is, however, the first time I release a preview of the ninth chapter in a public manner.

What you're about to read has not been professionally edited yet, and as such, mistakes and grammatical errors will be found. While English isn't my native language and this is my first rodeo of this type, it is polished to the best of my ability and deficient expertise, so please excuse any glaring mistakes you may find, I promise that they won't be present in the final product.

Creating this universe and giving form has been one of the ways I've been able to keep going after all that has transpired in my life over the past five years.

I hope you enjoy a glimpse of this Crimson Dream of mine.

Yours truly,

Christian Kaleb Caruzo.

PROLOGUE

The Sovereign Nation of Vaifen, a proud Nation-State located on the planet Orbis. The daybreak signaled the start of a new day for its shining capital, the crown city of Ternion, one of the largest cities in the world. That nascent sunlight coincided with the start of a new week, and just like in any other weekday, the alarm clock on Marcus Johnson's bedroom went off—punctual as ever.

Under normal circumstances, that alarm would have heralded the start of Marcus' meticulous daily routine, but that morning was a one of a kind exception to his otherwise inflexible groove. Marcus was already wide awake and all set to face the challenges of that day long before the alarm clock on his nightstand screeched. He was already dressed for work by the time the sunlight touched his bedroom's window.

For that young man, a restless night had preceded that beautiful morning. Marcus was not sure if he had even managed to sleep at all—he couldn't recall at what time he fell asleep the night before. His mind, the culprit of his sleeplessness, was cluttered and unable to form clear thoughts. Marcus' hands were shaking; he was nervous, anxious, and scared. He felt a pressure in his chest and an eerie sensation of nausea that he could not shake off. The television in his

bedroom was turned on, and the morning news aired. A female announcer described the weather forecast.

“Clear skies and mild breezes,” she announced to her viewers with a large smile and an overflowing charisma, “a fantastic start of the week for all of us here in Ternion!” the woman added.

Marcus had listened to the weather forecast, yet, the woman’s words had fallen on deaf ears—for his mind was elsewhere. The bedroom was cold and yet, he was sweating as if he was inside a boiler room. Strong feelings of nervousness and anxiety continued to invade Marcus like parasites that fed upon his psyche.

He was never known among his peers to be an anxious person—quite the opposite rather, something was certainly different that morning. Nonetheless, he had diligently dressed for work: white shirt, gray suit, and a blue tie, all tidied up as usual. His black shoes were as pristine as ever.

Marcus kept checking the time, it was still too early to leave home and head to his workplace: Nouveaux Tech, where he performed duties as a senior quality assurance technician. What troubled his mind, however, had nothing to do with his line of work, a post he considered boring, yet well remunerated.

He turned around and fixed his gaze upon a brown briefcase resting on a chair just across the room—that ugly briefcase was the source of Marcus’s distraught. Just staring at it made Marcus’ hands tremble in fear. The anguished man then gazed at the framed picture on his nightstand, right next to his alarm clock.

He firmly grasped the frame with his hand, and the joyful memories that surrounded the picture helped him regain some of his composure; the warmth of the hug that the photo

immortalized, the kiss that they both shared moments after that photograph was taken—Marcus could even feel her lips once more.

“This is for her, Marcus . . . this is for her,” he muttered to himself, “if I do this then she will be fine . . . everything—everyone will be fine . . . I must do this.”

Marcus’s apartment was a small single bedroom abode, what it lacked in space was compensated by the magnificent sights of Ternion that his bedroom windows offered. With a blank stare, he gazed through the window and contemplated upon that peaceful morning. Marcus observed the towering skyscrapers of eastern Ternion through the window, and he felt the warmth of the radiant sun that ascended over the clear blue skies.

A second alarm went off; this time, the sound originated from his wristwatch. That alarm had but one purpose: to inform him that it was time to depart.

Marcus walked towards the brown briefcase—hesitant to grab it, once again, he had negative thoughts regarding the inanimate object. Whatever was the deal with it, was something that brought much anxiety to that young man. Marcus closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and grabbed the source of his mental woes with his right hand.

He left his bedroom and walked past a small round table, his breakfast, a bowl of cereal with milk, laid on the table completely untouched. Marcus loved that particular brand of cereal, and would always eat it every morning before getting ready for work—but he could not find the stomach to eat a single scoop that morning, and it was all because of the damned brown briefcase in his grasp.

Marcus stood in front of the entrance to his apartment, “For Sally . . .” he said to himself. Just thinking of the woman in that picture gave him the determination to go on.

As he left his apartment building he felt compelled to turn back, “For Sally—for everyone!” he repeated to himself as he continued to walk in a vain attempt to subdue his mental anguish. The man ignored the passersby and walked towards Estival Station in order to take the train that would carry him to his workplace.

After strolling across four blocks, Marcus found himself face to face with the grandiose Estival Station, one of the most emblematic and busiest train stations in Ternion, a crucial hub for transportation in the city, and yet another landmark of Vaifen’s regal tradition.

Much like its sister stations spread across the capital, Estival symbiotically linked its intact aesthetic and historical architecture with the ever more prevalent touch of modernity, and its constantly evolving technology.

Marcus would always take the Line Five route, which went all the way to the smaller Addicus Station, where he would be at walking distance of Nouveaux Tech’s main building. The anxious man was a fervent user of the train station’s unlimited monthly pass subscription and thus, had no need to purchase a regular single-use ticket that morning, which allowed him to skip past the purchase line and further walk into the station without interruptions.

As he walked towards the corresponding departure lane, Marcus began to have doubts once more. He looked around and saw a young husband walk by alongside his wife and their two small children; to his left was an old man sitting on a bench, reading the news using a small tablet device.

Marcus turned around and gazed upon a group of students that chatted and laughed among themselves, as well as two happy lovers professing their affection to one another through a passionate kiss, and an angry businessman that talked to someone over his phone using rude

words and an elevated voice tone. Having seen all those different people going on with their lives made his head spin.

“I can’t do this . . .” he whispered, “I can’t.”

Now lightheaded, Marcus felt like he was suffocating, as if something had sucked out the oxygen in the station. Shadows of doubt and fear clouded his thoughts, and then something hit his leg, which only served to startle him further.

His heart had skipped a beat. He turned around and looked down only to find out that the culprit was a glowing blue ball that had bumped into his leg. As he began to calm himself the ball changed colors and began to move on its own towards a young boy who grabbed it, the spherical toy retracted to a smaller size that fit in the infant’s palm.

“Carl!” A woman exclaimed. “How many times must I tell you not to play with that here?” She scolded the boy.

“I’m sorry, mom,” the boy apologized to her mother as he laid his head low in embarrassment.

The boy’s mother looked at Marcus, “I’m so sorry, mister,” she apologized to him.

Marcus, still nervous, replied, “It’s . . . it’s no problem, ma’am, really.”

The mother walked off with her son. She kept scolding the young kid along the way but Marcus heeded no further attention to the woman’s words—instead, he continued to walk towards the Line Five lane.

Despite the fact that he knew there were security cameras that watched every move in the station, he kept feeling as if someone, or something else, was keeping an eye on him—making sure that he would do what he was meant to do with the brown briefcase that he carried.

The sounds of the passersby filled Marcus' ears with a cacophony of pure static noise. The advertisements displayed through the station, as flashy and innovative as they were, did nothing to call his attention; not even the world's most lauded marketing team could have conjured an advertisement capable of swaying the attention of Marcus Johnson in that particular moment.

Marcus arrived at the waiting line. The arrivals screen displayed that the train, ever so punctual, would arrive in three minutes. The man felt as if the passage of time had slowed down, those three minutes were about to become an eternity for him.

He experienced fear once more, his cold hands began to shake again. Marcus did all he could to keep his composure. His tie was strangling him—he wanted to rip it off, he felt every drop of sweat that exuded from his body as he tightened his grip on the brown briefcase's handle.

Marcus was so distraught that he did not realize that his phone had a few missed calls; he took the device out of his pocket, three missed calls from Sally were on the top of the screen's notification list, and a few text messages from her as well. A voice announced everyone present that the Line Five train had arrived just as Marcus was about to read Sally's messages.

As usual, the voice instructed the passengers to board the train in an orderly manner, it was then when Marcus realized that the three minutes had passed. He wished that for once, the stupid train would had not been so punctual.

Marcus stood still as people passed by him to board the train; the distressed man held the brown briefcase with his right hand, and his phone with his left—his mind was at a crossroads. He did not know whether he should board the train first, or call his beloved Sally before doing so.

After all, the man with the glasses that gave him the briefcase explicitly instructed him with that monotone voice of his, that under no circumstances he was to open the briefcase. He had but one simple instruction: bring the briefcase with him and await his usual train.

Marcus decided to call the love of his life. He was about to place the call when he saw another man exiting from the train—immediately noticing that he too had a brown briefcase that was identical to the one he held with his right hand. It could not be a mere coincidence, as no one would have such a bad taste in briefcase design to pick the very same ugly brown model as the one he was entrusted with, let alone to display such an affront to fashion in public and be devoid of shame.

Marcus Johnson got closer to the man with the identical briefcase. He opened his mouth to speak to him—but before he could say a single word he heard a very loud screeching beep. Suddenly, the train station went dark, as if something had cut out the power.

More scared than ever in his life, Marcus found strange that the station's emergency systems, including the lights that should automatically kick in in case of a power outage, failed to do their job. He looked at his phone and noticed that it wasn't working either, his device was dead and wouldn't turn on no matter how many times he pressed the power button.

The screams of the people present were even louder than the piercing beep he had just heard. Mere seconds later, another loud beep was heard amidst the darkness of the station. The sound emanated from the brown briefcase he held. Marcus began to panic, his life began to flash before his life. His parents, his friends, but most importantly, his beloved Sally, smiling at him just like the picture that he had on his nightstand.

The brown briefcase in Marcus' possession exploded. The massive blast decimated the Line Five arrival dock and destroyed a sizable portion of Estival Station along with hundreds of innocent lives.

Fear and panic spread throughout the nearby citizens and to all those that by mere stroke of chance had survived the blast. Chaos thrived in the area and terror overtook their resolve. The forecast of that day was clear skies, and that would've marked a peaceful start of the week—the aftermath of those two ugly brown briefcases had changed Ternion's forecast into a mournful and grim one.

Death had descended upon Estival Station and caressed it with its cold, grim hands.

I: THE MAN IN RED

Halcen's, a family-run restaurant located at the outskirts of the Grand Royale commercial district in central Ternion. The morning service had begun just like any other regular day. Sticking to family tradition gave their cuisine a unique and characteristic homemade flavor that set them apart from other food establishments and franchises in the area. Excellent food, affordable prices, Halcen's truly was a delight to any palate—even the most demanding ones.

The small restaurant was a special gem hidden in plain sight, at a mere walking distance of Ternion's busiest zone. Its décor blended green, brown, and white colors that were accompanied by wooden floors, soft music, and a great use of natural lightening. Without any doubt, anyone could definitely leave their worries behind and have a good time at Halcen's.

A young white skinned man sat alone at the westernmost row of tables. The lonely man's messy hair had an unusual white color that was as uncommon as his gray eyes. He wore dark pants and a crimson red unbuttoned shirt, with a gray t-shirt underneath that featured varied lines that comprised an abstract pattern. A simple look at his face would reveal that he hadn't had a good night of sleep in quite some time. The dark circles around his eyes were an evident sign of sleep deprivation. The solitary man also suffered from a mild headache and a few sore muscles—the medicine he took beforehand partially alleviated his aches.

The peculiar man pulled his phone from one of his pants' pockets and checked the Net as he waited for his order. He browsed through several news feeds until he found what he was searching for: a recently published news article that reported a strange incident that occurred the night before.

Silas Kowalski, the elusive leader of the Blood Serpents, an underground drug syndicate, was finally captured under strange and unclear circumstances. Kowalski, along with some of his closest subordinates, were found beaten to a pulp and were now held in custody by Ternion's police authorities. Kowalski was to be immediately placed under trial for the numerous charges he had been indicted with.

The white haired man felt an immense sense of satisfaction upon reading the news, as made evident by his faint smile. His joy was interrupted when he felt a discomfoting pain around his bruised right shoulder that slightly extended towards his neck; the man massaged the afflicted area with his left hand and moved his head in order to alleviate the pain. The discomfort became more bearable after a couple of seconds.

The aroma that emanated from the warm breakfast dishes and the freshly brewed coffee continued to permeate the restaurant. A waitress wearing the locale's green, black, and white uniform grabbed a dish ready to be served from the kitchen. She navigated through the restaurant with great dexterity and arrived at the white haired man's table. The man covered his mouth with his hand in order to conceal his yawn while the waitress served his dish.

"Here you go, buddy!" the waitress said as she placed the dish on the table.

The man stared at the waitress, "Thank you, Jeanne," he said to her.

The waitress Jeanne noticed the exhaustion that emanated from the unusual customer's eyes, "Had a long night again, eh Bastiel?" she asked.

The customer smiled at her, “Yeah . . . you could say so,” Bastiel responded, “long busy work night, but it was worth it.”

A sense of concern was visible in Jeanne’s face as she spoke with a soft voice tone, “I imagine . . . just . . . be careful, will ya?”

“Don’t worry,” Bastiel said to quell her concern, “besides, when it comes to trouble, you’re one to talk.”

“Hey now!” The waitress exclaimed.

Both of them chuckled at each other.

“No, but seriously,” said the waitress to the customer, “don’t push yourself too much during those ‘long nights.’ I’d hate to see you get in trouble.”

Bastiel closed his eyes and responded with a nod.

“Well . . . this will kick you up for sure,” Jeanne placed a mug of coffee and a glass of juice on the table, “I hope you enjoy it!”

“Oh, you have no idea how much I need this coffee right now,” Bastiel said right before taking a sip, savoring the freshly brewed drink while his sense of smell was enticed by its aroma.

“Alright, I have more tables waiting,” said Jeanne, “You’re not the only customer here, you know?”

“Of course, of course,” said Bastiel, “Don’t let your dad find out you’re slacking on the job,” he added in jest.

“Hah! Well, enjoy your breakfast,” Jeanne said, “See ya around!” She walked away to continue her job as Bastiel began to eat his breakfast: fried eggs, bacon, and toasted bread.

Bastiel took two bites out of his breakfast, he was about to go for a third when he heard a commotion coming from the other side of the restaurant. He stood up from his table and without

hesitation, walked to find out what was going on. Distressed customers stared at a television screen in a complete state of shock and horror.

An urgent news report informed its viewers that an explosion had just taken place in Estival Station. The news anchor expressed, that as of the time of the report it was unclear how many people were injured—or worse, killed by the deadly blast.

The anchor informed, “We have just received confirmation from the office of the Prime Minister: the explosion was part of a terrorist attack. This would mark the fifth this year,” she remained stoic and informed the grim news with the utmost of calm and without losing hold of her sense of professionalism.

Everyone inside the restaurant stopped eating—they had lost all appetite, and instead began to speculate amongst themselves. The words “Ashen Reckoning” were uttered by some of the appalled customers.

Jeanne, the waitress, was shocked, the terrible news had sapped her cheerfulness away. The news anchor advised all viewers not to approach Estival Station or its surrounding areas and to remain calm. Lastly, the anchor advised everyone to listen and follow the authorities’ instructions.

Bastiel remained silent with his gaze fixated upon the television screen that showed the horrible imagery of the partially destroyed train station—a landmark of Ternion’s history, now wounded and partially crumbled. He hadn’t slept the night before and was hoping to catch a few hours of sleep after his breakfast—to grant his body some much-deserved hours of rest—the news of the attack in Estival changed everything.

Fear and speculation propagated throughout the restaurant faster than any airborne disease could ever hope to. Some customers began to call their family members and loved ones

to make sure that they were safe, while others rushed to pay for their food and left the premises of the restaurant straight towards their households. The cashier struggled to keep up with everyone's panic, to the point that a stout man—the owner of the restaurant and head of the Halcen family—had to raise his voice, urging everyone to calm down.

Two men wearing black suits entered the restaurant amidst the commotion. One of them was tall and lean bodied while the other had a strong physique and was shorter than his companion. The men spotted Bastiel with ease as his white hair and red shirt made him stand out amidst the crowd. Bastiel was approached by the two men, unsurprised by their presence.

“Bastiel Isthel,” said the taller of the two suited men, “King Starsong requests your immediate presence at the Palace.”

Bastiel knew the tall man's name, “Of course, Agent Marsh,” he replied.

The two agents escorted Bastiel Isthel out of the restaurant, they walked towards a black suburban vehicle parked right in front. A bald agent, dressed in a similar fashion as the other two, sat on the vehicle's driver seat. A pair of sunglasses concealed his eyes.

The three men boarded the vehicle. Despite the apparent urgency, the vehicle remained parked and the bald driver remained almost motionless, which immediately intrigued Bastiel.

“So, why aren't we moving?” the white haired man asked the three agents.

Agent Marsh took a long sigh before responding, “Prince Seyren snuck out last night . . . once again.”

“Oh. . .” Bastiel sighed, “What about Vesper?”

“Princess Vesper cancelled her morning appointments and Royal Security has already escorted her into the Palace,” Agent Marsh explained.

“We were hoping that you could help us locate Prince Seyren before anything happens,” said the other agent sitting next to Bastiel.

Bastiel placed his right hand on his forehead and exhaled deeply. He was not surprised by the situation that the agent described, “Williams, right? I take it you checked all of his usual spots?” he asked.

“Yes,” the agent responded, “we checked everywhere and could not find him. He is not answering his phone either.”

“I see,” Bastiel took a short pause, “whatever . . . Three Forty Seven, Sienna Lane. It’s a white and blueish glassy building. Fourteenth floor, apartment 14C . . . he’ll be there for sure,” Bastiel assured them, the disappointment and exhaustion in his words were beyond palpable.

Agent Marsh conveyed the address that was just provided by Bastiel Isthall to other Royal Security agents via radio. The bald driver immediately set the vehicle in motion, he took a turn to the right on the nearest exit and headed straight towards Sienna Lane.

As they drove by, Bastiel noticed that the streets of Ternion were almost empty. Commercial establishments were closing—some hadn’t even opened their doors at all. The parks were devoid of citizens, and so were the classrooms. Once again, an attack had paralyzed the life of the capital of the Nation of Vaifen.

Had it been a normal day, traffic would have been considerably heavy around that area. Instead, the vehicle flowed freely through the nearly barren streets in a morning that had been blessed with clear skies—and cursed with another cruel terrorist attack.

Bastiel Isthall pondered if the citizens would unfortunately have to start getting accustomed to having such abhorrent terror as a normal part of their lives. Five attacks so far, the loss of innocent life was unacceptable by any sort of metric.

“Something needs to be done to stop this,” he thought to himself as he gazed through the vehicle’s window, “and Seyren decides to complicate things again in a day like this . . .”

The young white haired man continued to stare upon the empty streets of Ternion. His mind tried to figure out how the Prince was able to successfully elude his personal guard once more—as for why he did it, Bastiel had a very plausible theory. His curiosity then shifted towards his own case, specifically, the question of how did Royal Security track his whereabouts with such apparent ease.

Bastiel took his phone out of his left pocket—nothing out of the ordinary on it. He theorized that most likely it was being tracked by Royal Security, or perhaps his personal vehicle was, which could explain how they got a hold on him so fast. An alternate theory that his mind conjured was that maybe they were aware of his regular schedule, he was a man of routine, and routines can be predictable. In any case, finding Prince Seyren was the priority task at hand and besides, he felt too exhausted and bruised to worry about his own case.

Two similar vehicles converged with them as they arrived to Sienna Lane, stopping at the building Bastiel described minutes ago. Royal Security agents stepped out from the other two vehicles and secured the area. Bastiel Isthall, along with Agents Marsh and Williams, stepped out and entered the luxurious building.

A man sitting at the lobby desk was visibly startled upon seeing the armed agents and vehicles obfuscate the building’s entrance. He noticed Bastiel—a familiar face—waving at him amongst the people entering the building, which gave him some comfort.

“Ah, Mister Isthall! Good morning,” the man greeted Bastiel.

“Morning, Drew,” he nodded at the man as he kept walking without making a stop.

Bastiel and the two agents took the elevator towards the fourteenth floor of the apartment building. Once they were upstairs, they walked to the right, stopping in front of apartment 14C's door.

“Wait here,” Bastiel said to the agents, “I’ll go pick Seyren up.”

The white haired man took a deep breath as he procured a security keycard from a concealed slot in his wallet, the card was completely white and devoid of any identification that could be used to determine its purpose. He swiped it at the door's panel and typed a passcode: One, two, four, thirty three.

The apartment's door unlocked and Bastiel entered the bachelor's residence. The modern furniture was quite luxurious and expensive; the apartment's lights were all turned off, yet the living room boasted a generous amount of illumination, courtesy of the sun.

Bastiel walked further inside the apartment and found pieces of clothing scattered on the floor that belonged to both a man and a woman, as well women's lingerie thrown on top of a blue sofa.

With the living room inspected, Bastiel sat his attention towards the kitchen, where he found two empty bottles of expensive champagne on the kitchen table. There was no need to be a master of criminal investigation to figure out what the Prince was up to the night before—and why he didn't want the constant surveillance of Royal Security.

“Of course . . .” Bastiel sardonically said to himself as he rolled his eyes, wondering if that would be the last time Prince Seyren was able to pull off such an antic, as he would surely be furiously berated by his father, the King, when he finds out about this—and he would most likely be dragged down into the Prince's mess as well.

Bastiel entered the apartment's only bedroom to find the blonde prince asleep on a bed in the company of an attractive dark haired woman who was sleeping next to him face down. He scratched his head as his mind conjured an elaborate way to wake the heir up—Bastiel was not going to let the opportunity go to waste.

He pressed a switch located at the wall, which raised the room's curtains and let the sunlight illuminate the room. However, it wasn't enough to wake up either of them. Bastiel then tinkered with a panel located at a wall, activating a music player, and raised the volume up to its maximum, startling both the Prince and his companion.

“What—what in the, Bastiel?!” a startled Prince Seyren asked, “the hell are you doing?!”

The woman lying beside the Prince was visibly scared. She immediately struggled to cover her body with the bed's sheets and out of the strange white haired man's sight.

Bastiel turned off the music, “Good Morning to you too, Seyren,” he said to the prince, “your father wants you back in the palace right now—there was another attack this morning,” he explained.

Seyren, confused and more asleep than awake, replied, “A what—another one?”

Bastiel turned on the room's television and switched channels to a news report on the attack at Estival Station. Seyren looked at the screen and finally began to wake up.

“Royal Security is waiting for you outside,” said Bastiel, “I'll tell them to give you two a moment,” he added as he exited the room to give the Prince and his friend some privacy.

Bastiel peeked out of the apartment's door. The two Agents were guarding the hallway, anxiously awaiting for their Prince, “Hey . . . could you give Seyren a minute?” Bastiel asked them.

“We need to go right away,” Agent Williams reminded him, “we cannot wait any longer.”

“Yeah well, he spent the night here with a friend . . . you know what I mean. Let them get ready, just wait a bit.”

“I knew it . . . figures,” Marsh said with a condescending tone. Prince Seyren’s latest escapade was merely yet another problem in an ever expanding list of complications caused by the Prince-heir to Royal Security’s agents.

Bastiel Isthali was aware that Prince Seyren’s womanizing antics, carefree personality, and utter disregard of security protocols caused too much trouble for Royal Security’s agents. The whole incident was certainly not helping his headache and sore muscles at all.

“Don’t worry, Marsh, I will make sure that the Prince makes it clear to your superiors so that you’re not blamed for this. This isn’t either’s fault,” he ensured the men before closing the apartment’s doors.

Bastiel walked around the apartment’s kitchen while waiting for the Prince and found an unopened box of Shockos’ cereal—his childhood favorite. The sight of the box made his stomach remind him that he barely ate, as his breakfast at Halcen’s was abruptly interrupted—and unpaid for as well. He opened the box of the chocolate flavored cereal and began to have his way with it.

Seyren got out of the bedroom after a few minutes. His long blonde hair now wet after a quick shower. He walked towards Bastiel, and immediately noticed that he was eating his box of cereal.

“Hey!” exclaimed the prince, “That’s my box of Shockos you’re eating!” he said begrudgingly.

Bastiel examined the box, “I don’t see your name on it,” he said with a mouthful as he tossed the box of cereal to the Prince.

Seyren caught the cereal box, “Come on—you’re not even the target demographic for this.”

Bastiel stared at the Prince, “Neither are you, Seyren, or perhaps you are . . . I’m not so sure anymore,” he accompanied his words with a quick chortle.

“Not my fault they’re so damn good,” Seyren frowned at him when he realized that the box was now half empty.

Bastiel smiled and shrugged at him, “Is your friend ready? Agents are waiting outside for you.”

“She should be ready in a minute,” the Prince answered, “dammit Bastiel, you just had to guide ‘RS’ to this apartment,” he made no attempts to hide his discontent through his tone.

“They came to me after they couldn’t find you, right after an explosion took down a whole train station. Of course they’re gonna be looking for you, moron,” Bastiel explained to the Prince, “They’re just doing their job. You need to stop being so carefree and realize that these agents are tasked with your protection. You will see them in your life every day until the day you die.”

The Prince remained silent while Bastiel continued to berate him.

“You owe them an apology for what you’re about to cause them, and to me as well,” Bastiel’s headache made him lash out at the prince’s apparent inability to take any sort of responsibility, “When your father starts asking questions and figures out I knew about this place all along . . . you know what’ll happen.”

“Fine, fine, you’re right. Sorry, chill, my dude,” Seyren conceded, “You just sounded like father right there, geez.”

Seyren rubbed his forehead with his right hand and closed his eyes, “I’ll apologize to them, but you better apologize to Lana too. You scared her shitless after you saw her like that. Not cool, man . . .”

“An apology for an apology, I can live with that,” Bastiel accepted the bargain, if only to force the prince to apologize to the Royal Security agents.

Mere seconds later, the stunning woman came out of the room wearing some of Seyren’s clothing: a t-shirt that was too large for her and a pair of shorts, her hair was also wet. She kissed Seyren and snatched his cereal box out of his hands before the Prince could even taste them, leaving the prince deprived of his favorite children’s cereal. She found her heels and put them on.

Bastiel stood from his seat and approached the woman, “Miss Lana, right? Bastiel Isthel,” he introduced himself, offering a handshake, “I apologize for scaring you earlier and disrupting your privacy like that, it was not my intention to do so—but please understand that our city is under attack, time is off the essence, and our Prince is . . . urgently requested at the Palace in order to deal with this crisis,” the white haired man explained to the Prince’s companion, keeping his end of the bargain while at it.

The woman shook hands with him, “It’s alright, I understand,” Lana answered, “say, you’re a Nasivern, right?” she asked.

“That is correct,” Bastiel answered her question, “What gave me away? My hair color I presume?”

“Well, yeah. I think it’s kinda cool if you ask me.”

Seyren interrupted the exchange by clearing his throat, “Don’t believe his bullshit, Lana. This guy should’ve been an actor or something,” he said, not buying what he considered a faux apology by Bastiel.

“Whatever, we have to go,” Bastiel said to the couple, “There are agents waiting outside.”

Prince Seyren and his friend began to exit the apartment. Bastiel Isthel grabbed the prince’s arm and stopped him before he could exit.

“Don’t forget to apologize, Seyren,” he reminded him.

The Prince responded by sighing and rolling his eyes.

As the three of them left the apartment, Agents Marsh and Williams stood firm and saluted the royal heir.

“My Prince!” Agent Marsh exclaimed, “We are here to escort you to the Palace, immediately.”

“Yeah, yeah . . . listen, I’m sorry for causing you trouble,” Seyren apologized, “I just needed a little privacy last night. Tell your boss to talk to me before he starts chopping heads off,” he added as he placed his hand upon the Agent’s shoulder and winked at the stern man.

“My Prince. You don’t need to apologize to us—but I must insist, we should go at once.”

Prince Seyren snapped his fingers, “Oh, right! Can one of you guys take Lana here to her house? I wouldn’t want her to be out there by herself since there was an attack and all.”

“My Prince, with all due respect, that doesn’t fall into Royal Security’s respon—” Agent Marsh wasn’t able to finish his sentence.

Prince Seyren tapped the Agent’s shoulder once more, “I know, I know,” he said, “just do me this favor, will ya?”

“Yes, my Prince . . .” The Agent conceded, “Tell Powell to handle it,” Marsh said to his fellow agent as they all boarded the elevator.

Prince Seyren and his friend smooched at the back throughout the whole ride down, while the two Agents, along with Bastiel Isthel, looked elsewhere, at themselves—anywhere else, in what rapidly became, the most awkward elevator ride in their lives. As they exited the building, a tall, dark skinned agent approached them.

“My Prince, Agent Powell,” he introduced himself, “I will be escorting your friend to her home.”

“Thank you, Powell.” Seyren replied. “Stay safe Lana, I’ll call you,” he said to his friend right before sharing one more kiss.

The agents carried out their vehicle boarding security protocols in perfect synchrony with one another to secure the vehicle that was about to carry Bastiel and Prince Seyren towards the Royal Palace of Vaifen.

One agent opened the door, while two on each side made sure that the area was clear. Bastiel and Seyren boarded the same vehicle that first brought Bastiel along with Agent Marsh, while Agent Williams boarded a different vehicle.

The vehicle that now carried the Prince’s friend and Agent Powell departed first; the other two did so shortly afterwards, heading straight north, where the Royal Palace was located. Bastiel yawned as they passed through the barren streets of Ternion.

“So, you didn't sleep either?” Seyren asked.

“Nope . . . to be honest, I haven’t slept at all,” he answered, “I had a long night.”

The Prince pointed and poked Bastiel’s arm, “Ah! Is that so? Finally decided to have fun like a regular human being does?”

Bastiel closed his eyes for a moment, “Relax, it’s not what you’re thinking. I’m sure my night was quite different than yours,” he said as he felt the same pain he felt earlier on his right shoulder.

Prince Seyren yawned, “Well, as you can guess, I didn’t sleep much.”

“Uh huh, I’m sure she had a lot to do with it,” Bastiel said with a snide tone, “who was she anyways? This week’s ‘girlfriend’?”

“Lana is just a friend, can’t I just have some fun time with a friend for a night?” Seyren replied, “I know the concept of ‘fun’ is foreign to you and your kind.”

“Oh, I sure hope you had enough fun for a while, because your father must be very furious at you now for escaping from your guards,” Bastiel responded, “You do realize that you won’t be able to pull that trick again, probably never, ever, right?”

Seyren sighed, “You and Father need to relax. Don’t be so boring, please don’t ever end up as boring as Father.”

The Prince leaned forward and spoke to the two Royal Security agents, “We should stop and eat somewhere before we go, my treat,” he suggested, “I’m kinda hungry, you know!” The heir-apparent then stared at Bastiel, “Stealing my cereal should be punishable by law. You and Lana stole it from me, I’m sure my cereal had royal immunity or something,” Seyren said to Bastiel.

“Negative, my Prince,” Agent Marsh replied, “we’re already running way behind schedule, we’re not stopping until we’re at the Palace.”

“Oh don’t feel bad my ‘dear Prince’,” Bastiel replied with sarcasm, “I’m sure there’s a deep, valuable lesson to be learned from that cereal; something about royal burdens, princely

sacrifices for the good of this Nation's citizens, and all that sort of stuff that you never pay attention to," he added while struggling to contain his laughter.

"Oh shut up, Bastiel." Seyren shook his head. The Prince received a message on his phone from Lana and his attention shifted towards conversing with her.

Bastiel took out his phone as well, noticing that he received a message from an unknown sender that asked for his whereabouts.

"I'm ok. I had to look for Seyren. Going to the Palace right now, I'll let you know if something happens," he wrote as a reply to the unknown sender's message.

"Well, if it makes you feel better, I can't deny you got good taste," Bastiel said to Seyren.

"Jealous? Oh, that's right, I forgot you only have eyes for one person only."

Bastiel stared at the Prince, "Quiet now. You may be right, but it's not like that's going to save us from your father."

"Yes. We're screwed, aren't we?" Seyren said, finally coming to terms with his current predicament, "dammit, if they hadn't attacked the city Father wouldn't have ever noticed."

"Oh yes we are Seyren, we are . . . thanks to you once more." A disdainful Bastiel muttered, "I mean, was your friend really worth all this trouble?" he asked.

"Yes," Seyren answered without hesitation.

"Never change Seyren, never change," Bastiel leaned his head forward and he took a deep breath. Both of them laughed as they approached the Royal Palace's vicinity.

The Royal Palace of Vaifen, the pristine seat of the nation's Crown held by King Sulwyn Starsong, was now visible from the vehicle. The Crown was the first of the three branches of power in the Nation, alongside the Senate and the Tribunal—a trinity that guided the destinies of Vaifen's people, leading them towards a better tomorrow.

The palace was a majestic pearlescent ivory and golden structure, regal, and solemn. Its imposing presence was a constant reminder of the might and tradition of the Nation of Vaifen. Due to the terrorist attack that took place at Estival Station, the entire perimeter of the palace was heavily guarded.

Its magnificent fountains and impeccable green grass were obfuscated by the heavy presence of the National Guard and by a redoubled contingent of members of Royal Security. All road access to the palace had been restricted and what few public traffic traversed by the area was immediately rerouted without exception.

The vehicle that transported Bastiel Isthali and Prince Seyren Starsong entered the complex through a side entrance located at the north-western side of the Palace, passing through the gate's checkpoint and scanners, and stopping at one of the Palace's back entrances; several Royal Security agents got in position to open the vehicle's doors.

As the Prince walked inside towards the Palace he was greeted by security guards and the palace staff, all of which promptly saluted the Starsong heir-apparent.

Bastiel walked next to the Prince as both of them were then greeted by the Palace's Caretaker, Harold Vogel; a tall man, dressed in an impeccable peacock suit, white shirt, and an indigo tie.

Gray streaks coursed through Harold's dark hair, which was quite kept. His hands were held on his back, and his straight posture was enviable. He bowed with a remarkable grace at the two men.

"My Prince Seyren, young Bastiel!" said the caretaker, "We have been expecting you for a while now."

Seyren shook the Caretaker's hand, "Hi Harold. How have you been?"

“Vogel,” Bastiel saluted the man as well.

“There will be time to chit chat and converse later,” Harold said to the two young men, “King Starsong will have a word with you two once his current meeting is over and he is done addressing the Nation.”

“Cool . . . cool . . .” Prince Seyren replied. His response lacked enthusiasm.

“The upper lounge has been prepared for you three should you prefer to await there,” Harold explained, “Princess Vesper should be there by now.”

“Ah, sure,” Seyren exclaimed, “come Bastiel, let’s go get lectured by my sister.”

“I have other matters to attend to, if you both excuse me,” Harold once again bowed with grace before walking away.

The Prince and the white haired man continued to make their way towards the second floor. Statues and numerous works of art adorned the hallways of the Palace; its internal beauty had been preserved ever since its construction, which took place over four centuries ago.

Several security, electrical, and communications installations had been placed in order to modernize the Palace’s operations and day-to-day activities—all while making sure that the renowned aesthetic and design of the Palace’s inner facilities was kept intact.

Both Bastiel and Seyren, along with Princess Vesper, grew up playing and running around those royal halls, causing numerous mischiefs and all sorts of trouble during their childhood. Back then, those corridors seemed enormous and peaceful, but that was not the case on that morning. The Palace was crowded, too many people walked from one point to another—talking amongst themselves and forming a dissonant cacophony.

Nearly everyone Bastiel and Seyren crossed paths with wanted to salute the Prince. Bastiel wondered whether or not those people saluted Seyren out of respect or if it was simply an act stemmed out of sheer sycophancy.

Whatever was the case, Seyren's love of attention compelled him to reciprocate each and every greeting and salutation—engaging in brief conversations with some of them, which only served to further slow their walk towards the second floor's lounge room, much to Bastiel's dismay.

Both of them continued their march until they arrived at the main hall. Two curved staircases made of pure marble and ivory lead the way to the second floor of the palace, as if they were two large open arms. That central room—massive in size—served as a central hub to all of the Palace's wings and sections.

A massive spiral-shaped fountain spread its magnificence in between the two staircases, made of pure marble and one of its kind in the world. The fountain was built to near perfection over a hundred and fifty years ago and it constitutes, in itself, one of the palace's most remarkable pieces of art.

As they were about to take the leftmost staircase and make their way towards the second floor, Seyren gazed upon a woman wearing an intern badge as she walked opposite to them, both were lured to her gaze as would anyone be.

“Wow . . .” muttered the Prince, “You—you go ahead, Bastiel. I'll go upstairs in a minute.”

“Don't start again Seyren,” Bastiel responded, “You've already caused me enough trouble as it is today.”

Bastiel's worlds fell on deaf ears, as Seyren walked towards the woman, unfazed by his voice. Bastiel exhaled deeply and shrugged to himself; he continued his journey alone, with his headache and still aching shoulder as his only companions.

The white haired, sleep deprived, and bruised man was finally in front of the lounge door. He opened the dark wooden door and entered the room, which was furnished with luxurious sofas and couches, destined to the relaxation of its visitors. A massive television screen hung on the rightmost wall, it was tuned to a news channel reporting on that morning's attack. The announcer informed that the King was to address the Nation in a matter of minutes. An unlit fireplace rested below the television screen.

Opposite to the room's entrance were a pair of glass sliding doors, which led to a balcony with a clear view of the palace's inner gardens. There was a matching set of lavish red and golden curtains and carpets which, together with the room's wooden accents, and the air conditioner's mild temperature, created a luxurious yet comfortable ambiance. There was a small bar at the southwestern side of the room, fully equipped with all sorts of beverages and snacks.

A beautiful slender woman was sitting at one of the bar's stools, she was enjoying an orange colored drink. Bastiel walked towards her, she turned around and stood in front of him. Her long hair was fiery red, green were her eyes, and her skin was fair. She wore an elegant pearlescent white business dress and a matching set of golden jewelry. The makeup she wore greatly exalted her beauty, her entire attire and presence exuded royalty and nobility.

"Bastiel Isthall Nystrom," she said before taking another sip of her drink.

"Princess Vesper Juno Starsong Valmont," Bastiel replied to her in a similar manner as he bowed and smirked at her.

She touched Bastiel's face and moved his head around, inspecting his appearance, "My, oh, my, you look terrible . . . more than usual that is," she commented.

Indeed, the stark contrast of her elegant dress and Bastiel's attire—which barely classified as casual clothing—was like day and night.

"I suppose this is the part when I'm meant to complement and say how radiant and stunning you look, right?" Bastiel was allured by the rose scent of the Princess's perfume but still chose to make a slight jest.

Vesper placed her drink on top of the bar, and without saying another word, kissed him. Time froze for Bastiel, he forgot about his headache and lack of sleep, about the attack, about Seyren, about his impending talk with the King, and everything else.

The only woman he ever had eyes for—his one weakness—was right in front of him, his lips touching hers.

"You're still such a terrible kisser, Bastiel," she said with a soft tone.

"That's not what you said to me last time in your—"

"Shh!" Vesper hushed, placing her right index finger on Bastiel's mouth, interrupting him. They both smiled at each other

"Not right now, it'd be awkward with all that's happening, too many people around. Maybe later, if things are quieter," she winked at him.

Before they could do or say anything else to each other, the room's doors opened once more. Prince Seyren entered the room, still talking to the intern he now flirted with.

"Call me," he whispered at her as he did a hand gesture that reinforced his words.

Bastiel closed his eyes and sighed, and so did Vesper, both wishing that the Prince had not ruined the moment.

“Seyren . . .” Bastiel and Vesper whispered at each other in unison.

“Ah! Hello sis—am I Interrupting something?” Seyren asked as he laid down on a couch and seized possession of the Television’s remote control.

“No, not at all . . . oh my dear Brother, you have no idea the trouble you got yourself into this time,” Vesper said to her older sibling. She discarded what remained of her drink on the bar’s sink, “you’ve really done it this time.”

Bastiel gazed upon a comfortable looking recliner and sat on it, “Don’t torture him that much, Vesper. Leave some for your Father,” he said in jest.

Vesper let lose a small, but most sardonic chuckle, “Oh, don’t think for one second that he will go easy on you too, Bastiel,” Vesper said to him, “I can’t wait to see your faces when Father lashes out at you two—that is something I don’t want to miss!” she said with the utmost of satisfaction.

“I know, I know, stop reminding me . . . I’ll figure it out, sis, chill!” the Prince said to his sister, “anyways, when will Father see us?”

“He’s currently in a meeting with the Prime Minister and some members of the Senate. He will address the Nation afterwards, and then he has yet another security meeting—briefing rather,” Vesper explained, “So I suppose you two have about two . . . maybe three hours of life remaining.”

“That’s enough time for me to sleep a bit,” Bastiel said as he pulled the recliner’s lever to get himself into a more comfortable position, “could you turn the lights off, please, Vee?”

“Yeah, sis, I should take a quick nap too,” Seyren added.

Vesper frowned at the two oldest sources of headaches and troubles in her life, “Oh grow up you two,” she said with disdain.

The Princess's phone beeped, she checked it immediately, "I'd love to stand here and look at you two doing nothing as you usually do—but unlike you two I do have responsibilities," the Princess said, "next time, please try to look more presentable when coming here, especially when there's going to be dozens of people staring at you."

Seyren stared at Vesper, "Ah, don't get started with that, Vesper," he said before jesting, "it's not like Father finally made you Minister of Fashion like you always wanted."

Vesper let out a long, drawn out sigh. She shook her head as she walked out of the room without turning the lights off.

Seyren begrudgingly got off the couch to turn the room's lights off and crashed back on it afterwards. Having found nothing on the television to entertain himself with, he proceeded to turn it off.

"Have you thought about what you will say to your father when he asks how and why you got an apartment that nobody didn't know about? Bastiel asked, "Except me."

"Well, not really," the carefree Prince confessed. "The worst part is that it's been what? A month and a half since I got it? It was my first night there . . . talk about timing."

"Better think of something, and you better don't drag me all the way down with you," Bastiel said as he closed his eyes and attempted to relax. "I don't know why I even agreed to hold a spare key for you. That makes me your accomplice whether I like it or not."

The Prince waved his hand as he turned his body sideways, "Relax, Bastiel, just sleep, I'll think of something—leave everything to me!"

"That . . . doesn't inspire me much confidence, Seyren."

Both of them fell asleep after a couple minutes.

II: CRIMSON DREAM

A loud thud caused by Princess Vesper Starsong woke up both Bastiel Isthall and Prince Seyren Starsong; the red haired princess also turned the lounge's lights on.

“What the—” Seyren said as he struggled to wake up.

“It's time,” said Vesper, “Father is expecting us three.”

The Royal Caretaker, Harold Vogel, stood behind the Princess, his hands held a silvery tray with two white cups.

Bastiel sat up on the recliner he rested at. He leaned forward and took a deep breath, running his hands through his face—wishing he could have slept just a bit more—barely mustering the willpower to stand up.

The white haired man yawned, “How long has it been?” he asked.

“About five hours,” Vesper said to him. “Look at you two—such a mess,” she added with a condescending tone.

Bastiel stretched his limbs and neck. The pain on his shoulder was now more bearable. He couldn't help but be fixated on Vesper eyes, which were staring back at him, casting a patronizing gaze upon Bastiel.

“What?” Bastiel asked.

Vesper sighed, she raised her right hand and did a twisting gesture aimed at Bastiel's unruly hair, "That," she said, "do something about that hair of yours."

Bastiel used the room's television screen as a makeshift mirror to fix his tousled hair using his hands. Caretaker Vogel served Seyren and Bastiel the cups on his tray.

"Now, now . . . Drink the tea, it'll help you lift those weathered spirits of yours," Vogel said, "But please hurry, you mustn't keep His Majesty waiting."

Both Bastiel and Seyren chugged the warm green tea with great haste. Its minty and smooth flavor was rather pleasing to their palates.

"Alright, let's go," said Seyren.

"The King is awaiting you three in the eastern conference room," Vogel remarked.

The four of them left the lounge and proceeded to walk towards the main hall of the Palace in a silent journey, and then towards the eastern side of the Palace's second floor. Numerous statues, some of which depicted soldiers and warriors of times past, stood firm as they approached the conference room; pieces of art adorned the walls of the hallways, much like the rest of the Palace.

As the marching quartet arrived in front of the room's doors they were greeted by two Royal Security agents that guarded the room's entrance. Caretaker Vogel saluted the two guards.

"The King is expecting them," the Caretaker said to the guards.

Without saying a single word, one of the guards slid a keycard on a panel and the wooden doors opened. The rectangular shaped room was much larger than the lounge Bastiel and Seyren rested at—and much less cozier as well, completely devoid of the luxury that could be found in other areas of the palace.

The room, which had no windows, had two rows of seats at opposite sides that could accommodate a total of two dozen bodies. A large light wooden rectangular table was placed in the middle, it occupied a considerable portion of the room's space.

None of the black and silver seats around the table were occupied, except for the furthestmost of them, which was rotated opposite to the room's doors. The man who sat there watched several display screens at once, each tuned to a different television channel—yet all of them related to the explosion that took place hours ago.

Caretaker Vogel walked forward and approached the man, “My King, as requested, your children are here.”

“Thank you Harold, you should take a break,” said the regent, “get some rest, I will let you know if I need anything.”

Caretaker Vogel nodded his head and bowed, “As you wish, my King,” he turned around and left the room.

King Sulwyn Starsong pressed a button on a remote control and all of the screens turned off at once. He rotated his chair and gazed upon his children and Bastiel, his imposing stature showed as he stood upright.

The King wore a sleek indigo ensemble; the suit's neck and sleeves featured a golden embroidery. His intimidating and stern gaze was fixated on the three persons in front of him. His blonde hair and beard were accompanied by gray colored hairs, with a streak of gray hair on the right side of his head being the most prominent.

Despite the King's mighty appearance, height, and impeccable outfit, the invisible burden of the crown and the ever inclement passage of time were evident on his visage. Being the ruler

of a Nation will always take its toll, one way or another—being the ruler of a nation under siege, such as Vaifen, even more so.

“Father,” Vesper and Seyren said in unison.

Bastiel bowed in reverence, “My King.”

The King noticed Bastiel and Prince Seyren’s less than formal appearance, which made him take a deep breath, “My dear children, oh how I wish I could be as carefree as the three of you,” he spoke.

“Excuse me, Father,” said Vesper, “the three of us?” She did not wish to be lowered to the same category as Bastiel and Seyren, “I know these two are just irredeemable but—”

“Take a seat,” The King interrupted his daughter, waving his hand towards the seats around the table.

Vesper walked towards the other side and sat next to the King. Seyren also sat next to his father and opposite to his sister, while Bastiel sat next to Seyren.

King Sulwyn sat down again on his chair, “I don’t need to explain to you three that there was another attack this morning. There are people out there actively conspiring against this Nation, against the Crown, against us,” the King said, “people that would just love it if all of us simply died one day.”

“Do you mean the so-called ‘Ashen Remnants’ or whatever they are called, Father?” Seyren asked.

“The ‘Ashen Reckoning’, Seyren.” The King corrected his heir, “they claim they want to liberate our people whilst hiding like the cowards they are—spouting their nonsense and false messages, all in the name of their misguided ideologies. They have taken responsibility for the recent wave of attacks, Estival being the fifth this year alone.” King Sulwyn explained.

The regent's strong voice continued to resound across the room, "This is a problem I do not want you to inherit when it's time for you to sit on the throne, Seyren. I will see through that every single one of these terrorists pays for what they've done."

Prince Seyren tried his best to contain his yawn, still exhausted from a night of excessive partying, but was betrayed by his body.

King Sulwyn, visibly upset for what he considered a disrespectful gesture coming from his firstborn, proceeded to scold his son, "Am I boring you, my son? I know you feel like the crown you wear lets you make and do as you please, without any consequence—you might even think that everyone is here to serve beneath us, but it isn't that way at all." The Regent of Vaifen raised the tone of his voice, "Get that misconception out of your head for the sake of everyone in this Nation, Seyren. You must begin to take your position in this world more seriously."

Prince Seyren remained in silence while his father continued to speak.

"You are the Heir Prince to this Crown! My burden will be yours one day. Someday, you will have the duty of serving our people, to protect them, to guide them, and to lead them towards prosperity as we march towards the future, together as a Nation on this planet," time and time again, King Sulwyn had explained in numerous ways the responsibilities of the Starsong Family, and what wearing the Crown of Vaifen meant to both the Royal Family and to the citizens of the Nation.

"I'm sorry Father—I just had a long night, that's all. I've barely slept," the Prince said as justification.

King Sulwyn, with his gaze firmly set upon the Prince, interlocked his fingers, "I am fully aware of your 'nocturnal' lifestyle, Seyren. I was young once too, but this is beyond reckless." The disappointment in the King's tone was evidence of the disapproval of his son's

behavior, “Picking up different women every time, I bet you always promise them the world, don’t you? This isn’t acceptable by any means—it’s time to stop playing around before you hurt someone or ruin someone’s life!”

Prince Seyren, Princess Vesper, and Bastiel Isthall were almost motionless, seemingly frozen by King Sulwyn’s mighty voice.

“And acquiring property under a false name, hiding it from Royal Security—from me? For what reason?” The King demanded answers from his heir.

Seyren looked down at the table and placed his right hand on his forehead. “I . . . I just wanted a private place without all these people constantly looking. A place where I can be alone, that’s all,” he said in his defense.

The King then laid his gaze upon Bastiel Isthall, “Bastiel, I was informed that it was you who led the Agents straight to this place—so I take it you knew about it all along?” he demanded an explanation.

“Yes, my King.” Bastiel responded to the King’s inquiry with complete honesty, “I didn’t think it’d be that much of a deal, my apologies if I’ve wronged.”

“I expected more of you two.” The King’s strong voice echoed throughout the room, “an attack happens and as if that wasn’t enough, Royal Security tells me you broke every single one of their security protocols, and they had no clue of your whereabouts. Also, I need to reiterate that Royal Security isn’t meant to transport one night affairs or any sort of ‘friends’ whatsoever,” The King added.

“Yes Father, sorry about that. I’ll apologize to them,” the scolded son said with a soft tone, “it’s not their fault.”

Princess Vesper had a smug look on her face, she felt an immense satisfaction seeing both Seyren and Bastiel get scolded, as if they were still children. “You both should know better, how disappointing of you two,” her words added salt to their wounds.

King Sulwyn pinpointed his daughter with his eyes, for he also had words for her, “As for you, young lady, they’re not meant to go around carrying your shopping sprees either, nor are they there for performing any menial tasks related to your lavish frivolities.”

The Princess was caught off guard by her father’s accusations.

“Vesper, Royal Security agents are there to ensure your safety, not to be misused fulfilling your whims and desires,” King Sulwyn said. even his treasured daughter wasn’t exempt from scolding that afternoon.

Vesper was shocked, she did not expect to be accused at all, “I’m sorry Father, it won’t happen again,” she lowered her head.

“And your exorbitant spending on clothing and jewelry,” King Sulwyn continued to speak, “you do not need to purchase copious amounts of clothing every week—especially like the absurdly expensive dresses you got three days ago.”

“But—those weren’t ‘that’ expensive, Father,” the otherwise charismatic Princess struggled to come up with a better response.

“I’ve seen the receipts, Vesper, and I know you too well. Most of these you’ll wear only once, if at all . . .”

Both Bastiel and Seyren’s frowned faces turned into sneers in a flash. They both looked at Princess Vesper—the tables had turned—something that neither of them would have predicted. Vesper Starsong was now also sitting in the dock.

The Prince heir laughed, “No way! ‘Princess Perfection’ got caught doing something bad!” he said.

“Vesper did something that she shouldn’t? Impossible! I must be dreaming!” Bastiel said before laughing at her.

Vesper blushed, “Shut up you two!” She yelled with fury at the two of them.

“Enough!” The King yelled even louder than her. His voice felt like a thunder that had just split the heavens apart and crashed right in the center of that room.

“I have a world of problems in my hands right now. Our nation was attacked! Innocent citizens died today! And as if that wasn’t enough I still have to suffer your childish antics over and over!” The King said before he pointed at Vesper, Seyren, and Bastiel, “you three have been adults for six, seven, and eight years respectively—it’s time you start acting like such!”

Neither of them had seen the King that furious in years. The inherent stress of that day’s terrorist attack, coupled with the problems caused by his two heirs coalesced into a perfect storm inside the Regent’s head.

Bastiel, Seyren, and Vesper were like scolded puppies; they apologized to the King, who took a deep breath and calmed down. Silence descended upon the room, a tranquility that lasted only a couple of seconds—a calm after the storm.

“You three are spending the night at the Palace, and none of you leave anywhere unless I say so,” King Sulwyn ordered.

“But Father!” Seyren exclaimed.

“But what?” King Sulwyn replied, with his sharp gaze fixated upon his son.

Seyren lowered his head again, “No—nothing, never mind,” his attempt to appeal was defeated by just two words and a pair of blue eyes staring at him.

The regent continued to pass sentence towards his heirs, “I will be personally reviewing and making some changes in your personal guards so these incidents do not repeat again. I will be also auditing all of your expenses from now on, until you two prove me that you are responsible adults—and responsible heirs to this Crown.”

“Yes, Father,” Vesper said with a soft tone, “once again, I’m sorry.”

“Okay, Father,” Seyren said in acknowledgement.

“That will be all for now, you may leave the room,” The King said, “I still have two more meetings and another status update briefing. I shall nonetheless meet you all for dinner.”

Prince Seyren was the first one to stand up from his seat, followed by Princess Vesper. Bastiel Isthall was about to stand up when they all heard the King speak again.

“Bastiel, you stay. There is something important that I must discuss with you.”

Bastiel, surprised, immediately obeyed the King’s command and remained seated.

The thoughts on Vesper’s mind danced between curiosity and concern. What was it that the King wanted to speak with Bastiel in private—and for what reason? Nonetheless, she and her brother left them alone in the room. The brother and his sister bickered among themselves on the way out. Bastiel Isthall remained silent in his seat, he heard the sound of the doors closing, and stared directly at the King.

King Sulwyn looked upon his protégé and interlocked his fingers, “Bastiel Isthall Nystrom. I know we haven’t talked much these days, and for that I apologize.”

“There’s nothing to apologize, my King.” Bastiel replied with a smile, “the Crown’s responsibilities and the Nation are more important than me.”

“Nonsense,” the King responded as he made a circular motion with his right hand, “how are you, child? You look like you haven’t slept well,” King Sulwyn remarked.

“I’m fine, My King,” Bastiel responded to the King’s question with modesty, “I just couldn’t sleep well last night. I’ll be fine once I catch up on lost sleeping hours, maybe a cup of coffee or two is all I need,” he spoke a half truth, for he hadn’t slept the night before.

“Seyren and Vesper keep getting you into unnecessary trouble, don’t they?” King Sulwyn asked, with a pinch of disappointment in his tone.

“It’s all right, my King, they can’t help it, and I can’t help it either,” Bastiel said. “Truth be told, Seyren getting me into some sort of trouble—that was kind of overdue, way behind schedule I’d say,” he added.

King Sulwyn’s face showed a very short lasting faint smile, a rare sight on its own.

“So, you had trouble sleeping. Is everything alright, child? Not doing anything reckless, I hope?” King Sulwyn inquired.

“No, my King, everything is ok. If I may say so myself, you look exhausted—perhaps more than I do,” Bastiel attempted to deflect the question whilst hiding a mild discomfort coming from his still bruised shoulder.

King Sulwyn was not pleased with the answer Bastiel just gave him. He knew Bastiel was lying to him, and being lied to was something that Sulwyn Starsong was not fond of. The regent silently stared at the white haired man for five seconds before speaking again.

“I suppose I should cut to the chase then,” King Sulwyn said, “I want to ask you something, and I want you to answer me with nothing but the truth.”

“Of course,” Bastiel felt fear, “Oh crap, he knows about me and Vesper,” he thought to himself.

“What do you want in life, Bastiel Isthall?”

“I—I’m sorry, what?” Bastiel asked for clarification.

The King expanded upon his question, “Seyren, despite his recent activities, will one day take my place and rule this nation as its King. Vesper is currently taking care of the Starsong Foundation, her path in this life is inexorably bound to this crown as well. Those two may at times want something else for their lives . . . but the choice was made for them from the moment they were born.”

Bastiel remained in silence while the King continued to speak.

“That leaves you, child. You did not further your studies nor did you choose to pursue a career, yet, that was never meant to be your life, right?”

Bastiel lowered his head, “I suppose so,” he answered, “numbers, words, people—that was never my thing.”

The King sharpened his gaze towards Bastiel. He already knew the answer but he wanted to hear it from Bastiel’s own mouth.

“I . . . I just want to make a difference, to protect and save lives like my parents and grandmother,” Bastiel Isthel responded.

“Such was the way of your people, the doctrine of your ancestors.”

Bastiel nodded in response, “Correct. To protect what I cherish, to destroy whatever threatens it.”

The King let loose a very faint and brief smile that spawned from his heart, “You certainly do have the talent for that, and a proclivity towards it.”

The regent took a small red device from one of his pockets and inserted it on a port located on his side of the table. The table’s light wooden top darkened and interactive information began to be displayed on its surface, holograms were also displayed above the table.

An assortment of reports were shown: policemen finding gangs beaten up with no conclusive explanation, criminals being stopped mid act under odd circumstances by an unknown figure, testimonies of would-be victims, and other unsolved mysteries of the night.

At the center of the information stream were several pictures of a person whose face was concealed by a sleek black and red helm with a dark gray mouthpiece. The unidentified man wore a black jacket, pants, and gloves, with a vermillion red scarf around his neck that extended towards his back.

The King then pressed a button on his remote, videos and several collected security footage from different sources began to play; they all showed the same masked person fighting against criminals and beating them to a pulp with different melee weapons, sometimes with just his fists alone, stopping robberies, and saving innocents. The name ‘Agito’ was referenced in some of the reports and on witness’ testimonies.

“That’s you, isn’t it?” King Sulwyn asked. His fingers were once again interlocked and his gaze fixated upon a now astonished Bastiel, “I remember you wearing that same jacket about a year ago, because I bought it for you . . .”

“My King . . . I can explain . . .” Bastiel’s mind and mouth struggled to coordinate words. He was certainly prideful of his actions under the ‘Agito’ guise, but on the other hand he could not justify what was very much considered to be illegal vigilantism under Vaifen law to the man he respected the most in his life, not with that sheer amount of evidence flashing through his eyes.

“I suppose this right here was also of your doing,” King Sulwyn pressed another button and a new report was displayed on the interactive table regarding the capture of Silas Kowalski, leader of the Blood Serpents crime syndicate, which had taken place the night before.

“My King, if you allow me to explain myself I—”

“While my son is out there spending his days whoring himself out and having a lavish nightlife, you’re out there spending your nights playing the hero. This so called ‘Agito’ vigilante that at first was nothing but a mere rumor happens to be you? You want to do your part in the betterment of this nation and its citizens? Admirable, yes—but reckless, very reckless, Bastiel.

“You have no idea how many strings I had to pull to keep this buried away and contained from the media as much as possible, so that it remained what it began as: a rumor. However, your fame and deeds continue to spread more and more among our citizens, and we all know the Net isn’t something you can simply contain.”

“I’m deeply sorry my King, I didn’t meant to cause you any trouble,” Bastiel apologized, he felt that his actions had disappointed his King, adding one more unnecessary burden to an already troubled ruler.

“See, you have this thing, you sometimes apologize to me when you shouldn’t—you know that?” King Sulwyn chuckled, “I said reckless, yes, but I also said admirable. You managed to capture the leader of the Blood Serpents, something Ternion’s police had been unable to accomplish in all these years, be it by corruption or by legitimate incompetence.”

“I just wanted to—felt compelled to—do the right thing . . . like I said, to save people just like my Father, Mother, and Isthara,” Bastiel said, “I’ll stop if that is what you desire, my King.”

King Sulwyn remained silent for a split second, “You want to be a hero like your father and grandmother, right? You’ve always wanted that.”

“Yes,” Bastiel responded without hesitation.

“The heroic call of justice runs deep in your Nasivern blood, there’s no denying that,” King Sulwyn removed the device from the table and placed it back on his pocket, the

holographic projections stopped immediately and the table returned to its normal state, “I have a way for you to do achieve that,” the King added.

Bastiel was confused by the King’s words, “I don’t quite follow.”

King Sulwyn grabbed the remote control he used earlier from the table and pressed a button on it. All of the screens behind him turned on, displaying the different channels he was previously watching, all of them still focused on the terrorist attack at Estival Station.

“Do you see this, all this death, all this chaos . . . make no mistake, Bastiel. This is not the work of simple fanatics with twisted perceptions and an even more deranged message of liberation and equality, they’re but mere puppets, pawns in a larger scheme. Their end goal? To take control of this Nation under their false song, to shatter the sovereignty we’ve fought so hard to maintain, crush our hope, our pride, our resolve, and to make us all submit to their pandemonium—or be wiped out by it,” King Sulwyn expressed.

Bastiel Isthall was intrigued by the King’s words, he continued to listen with all of his attention.

“We must cull these puppets, find the hands pulling the strings, drag the puppeteers from their shadows into the light, and put an end to all of this once and for all before they keep hurting more of our people,” King Sulwyn made no effort to mask the disdain towards the perpetrators of the past attacks in his tone.

“Could Svarzfal be behind this? Could they be behind the rise of this ‘Ashen Reckoning?’” Bastiel asked.

“That is a growing hypothesis, Bastiel. They will obviously deny it if that were to be the case, of course. It wouldn’t be the first time they try to take us down, had it not been for the help

of your father and the Nasivern, we would've lost the war against them," King Sulwyn answered, "our victory against them is our greatest deterrent, and they know that."

A sense of pride invaded Bastiel's mind. He grew up hearing people talk about his Grandmother, the legendary warrior, Isthara, who was also known as the 'White Blaze', as well as the tales of his father, Aeoros Isthala, the 'Indigo Blaze', and all their heroic deeds throughout the history of his fallen race, the Nasivern. And yet, the twists of fate had prevented him from meeting them in life. It is only through the tales and memories of others that he has been able to learn about his family.

"But I'm afraid that the truth is never that simple," The King said to Bastiel.

"How so?"

"I am growing old, my child . . ." King Sulwyn said with disappointment, "We have many enemies, Bastiel, both domestic and foreign. They think it's time to step out of the shadows to put an end to the Crown of Starsong, to threaten the sovereignty of Vaifen. Even the Union would very much like for us to hand over the reins like most of Orbis has. As we speak, actors from within our own nation's government conspire against the crown—and I strongly believe that the Ashen Reckoning is a fundamental part of our enemies' plans. I'm asking you to help me put an end to it—to bring peace to Vaifen once more—I'm asking you to serve this Nation."

"Anything for Vaifen and for the Crown of Starsong, my King," Bastiel ensured the regent, "but I am just one man, I cannot fight against all of our enemies alone, not even Isthara herself was able to do that."

"Indeed, which leads us to this," King Sulwyn Starsong grabbed another data device from his pocket, a gray one this time, and inserted it in the table's port. After a biometric scan verified

his identity, a new set of information and reports began to be displayed on the table and on holograms.

“Bastiel Isthral, this is Initiative S-1XA: the Gestalt project.” The King announced. “An initiative between the Crown and Vaifen’s National Intelligence Center. A small but effective task force, with specialized members from different backgrounds and areas of expertise. A counter terrorism unit and response team comprised of Vaifen’s finest sons and daughters—or if you’d prefer to call it in a more Nasivern fashion: a group of formidable warriors or knights, with exceptional operational liberties and technology that other forces do not have access to. Gestalt is tasked with ensuring the safety of the Nation.”

With a great sense of pride, King Sulwyn continued to present the project to the prospective candidate, “Gestalt will stop the current threat of the Ashen Reckoning, and any further threats to the Nation’s peace and stability, no matter who they are or where they hail from. I want you to join the team as their fifth member.”

Bastiel was perplexed at the King’s offering. He tried to muster words but he found it difficult, “I . . . I don’t know what to say, my King.”

“You have often said to me in the past that you would want a chance to do something for the Crown and for Vaifen—this is your chance, child, to make a difference. To be the hero you’ve always wanted to be, and to save people just like your family did in their time,” King Sulwyn knew exactly what words to say to encourage Bastiel.

Aeros Isthral’s final request to his trusted friend, Sulwyn Starsong, was for him to take care of his then infant child before Aeros fought his last desperate fight during the tragic fall of the Nasivern race. A request the King did not hesitate to comply with. He raised and took care of Bastiel and loved him just like he loved his son and daughter.

“I don’t have words—I just can’t think of what to say to express how honored I am, my King. I would do anything for the Crown and for this Nation—of course I accept!” Bastiel Isthel said as enthusiasm began to fill his body, “But are you sure that I am fit for the job?” he asked.

King Sulwyn smiled at the young Nasivern, “That ‘Agito’ persona of yours, your training in the ways of your people, and the things you’ve done with those two weapons gave both the Director of the NIC and myself more than enough confirmation that you’re up to this task,” the King assured his protégé, “besides, given the state of things, I’d very much like to have eyes and ears I can trust from within.”

Bastiel nodded, “I understand.”

“General James Exley is the Director of our National Intelligence Center. Gestalt is being run under his direct supervision, but unlike the rest of the Center’s units and divisions that have to answer to the Senate, Gestalt will directly answer to the Crown, through Exley, of course,” King Sulwyn explained, “it will allow for a more unrestricted operation. The Senate and the Prime Minister won’t like it at first, but I’ll deal with them when they start parroting their usual nonsense and complaints—like they always do.”

“Is the unit operational?” Bastiel Isthel asked, “I mean, are they operating right now?”

“Your soon to be companions were recruited months ago. They’re under final preparations, but after today’s attacks Director Exley and I agreed to speed things up and start operations in tandem; the safety of the Nation demands it so. This means that you will have to catch up to them, I am sure this won’t be an issue, besides, you love a challenge don’t you? Nothing you can’t handle, I’m confident of that.”

The King’s unshakable confidence in him filled Bastiel with courage and excitement, “When will I be joining them?” Bastiel asked.

“Tomorrow. I already spoke to Director Exley and arranged everything as I knew you’d accept,” King Sulwyn said.

Bastiel let a nervous smile, “I will not let you or this Nation down, my King,” he assured, excited and anxious for the opportunity and the importance of the journey he was about to start, like a child who had just received a brand new toy.

“That’s the spirit, child!” King Sulwyn said.

Bastiel smiled once more. King Starsong removed the data device from the table, and the table’s surface returned to its original light wooden appearance.

“Your Grandmother founded Daybreak, and they were able to bring peace to the Nasivern long before your father was born. You could say that in a way, Gestalt is largely inspired by her and the famous Daybreak group she commanded. When I brought up your name to General Exley he was very interested in having you on board,” The King explained.

“Have I met Exley before?” Bastiel asked, “the name seems oddly familiar.”

“I believe you might have, back when you were a kid. He fought alongside your father when the Nasivern helped us fight back against Svarzfal.”

“Ah, yes, I think I remember him now,” Bastiel said.

“Well it certainly has been a long day for all of us. By the way Bastiel, how’s Alma these days?” the King inquired.

“She’s doing fine, my King. She gets a bit moody sometimes, reminiscing of the past but that’s understandable, given how she perceives things. I suppose she feels bored and constrained and it makes her nostalgic,” Bastiel said.

“I’m sure she is your accomplice on this ‘Agito’ scheme, hopefully she kept you and herself out of trouble. Say hi to her for me please.”

“Of course my King,” Bastiel said. “How have you been these days, my King?”

“Busy days, child, busy and convoluted days . . . even before this attack happened. The Senate has been just one headache after another. They all seem more interested in getting reelected and preserving their damned seats, so they’re trying their best to look good in the eyes of the people . . . useless, all of them . . .” the King vented, “and don’t get me started with those boring judges at the Tribunal. I wonder if there is something buried deep down on that place that sucks the life out of them,” the King added while letting loose a warm smile.

Bastiel chortled upon hearing the King’s honest opinion of both the Senate and the Tribunal, “Well, unfortunately that’s something I can’t help you with, as much as I’d love to be able to,” he said.

King Sulwyn smiled, he felt relieved that he had someone to converse in a more personal way that afternoon, unburdened by the formalities of the Crown he wore, “Thanks for accepting the offer, Bastiel, I’m sure you will do great and be a force of good in this Nation,” King Sulwyn said as he checked the time on his watch, “we will have to continue talking at dinner, I have an upcoming meeting in a few minutes.”

“It’s okay my King, no problem. Once again, thanks for this opportunity.”

“Once things settle down, and peace is restored to Vaifen, you and I need to sit down so you can tell me all about your adventures as this ‘Agito’ persona, I’m quite intrigued how you managed to find and capture this Kowalski guy.”

“As you wish my King, it will be my pleasure to do so,” Bastiel nodded at the King.

Both Bastiel Isthall and King Sulwyn Starsong stood up and shook hands, thus sealing the deal, Bastiel was now part of the nascent Gestalt project.

“Isthara saved the Nasivern and brought peace to your people in ages past; your father, Aeoros, upheld that peace, brought Vaifen and the Nasivern together, saved my life, and helped me save this Nation—I will always be in his debt,” the King resumed some of the major exploits achieved by Bastiel’s family, “You may be a child of the Nasivern, but you are a son of this Nation as well. I’m eager to see what you’ll accomplish, Bastiel Isthala. I know this might feel like a far cry from what your Grandmother’s legend encompasses, but every great new legend has to start somewhere. Don’t you think?”

Both of them smiled. Bastiel bowed in respect. The young Nasivern Bastiel Isthala had taken the initial steps towards carving his own legend using the vigilante persona Agito, he would now continue to carve his path under Gestalt.

“Take some rest, child, you will certainly need it for what is to come. I’ll see you later.”

Bastiel left the room, King Sulwyn’s words continuously echoed in his mind. That was it, the chance to be a hero like his family, to make a difference in Vaifen’s history, it is what Bastiel had always wanted: to forge a legend worthy of his lineage, so that perhaps one day, the spirit of Isthara would be proud of the heir of her blood and legacy.

He needed a place where he could sit down and process everything. Having spent his infancy running through the corridors and areas of the Royal Palace, Bastiel knew exactly the perfect place to wind down and organize his thoughts: the inner garden, he began to walk towards it.

Thrilled, anxious, happy, scared, excited; the young white haired Nasivern didn’t know exactly what and how he should feel about the King’s proposal. He continued to walk by mere inertia, with body and mind separated, until he bumped with a man, who accidentally dropped his tablet device. Fortunately for him, Bastiel snapped back to his senses and thanks to an almost

involuntary quick reflex, managed to grab the device before it landed on the floor and suffered any kind of damage.

“Oh shi— I’m so sorry sir! I wasn’t paying attention!” Bastiel apologized to the man, who had a palace staff badge pinned to his chest. He handed over the device to its rightful owner.

“Don’t worry, it’s ok,” The man replied, “Thanks for catching my tablet, my boss would kill me if I broke it.”

The incident had bought Bastiel Isthel back to reality, it was then when he realized that during his daydreaming walk he had made it almost all the way to the garden’s entrance, which was only mere steps away.

He continued to walk and crossed the garden’s entrance, and found it unblemished and lush as ever. Green corridors of perfectly shaped shrubs of all sizes, a few trees, all of which were older than him, and intense colored flowers that contrasted with the green grass.

Bastiel saw purple, blue, yellow, red, and white flowers, the garden was kept in pristine condition by the hard work of the Palace’s groundskeepers, who had begun to wind down after another long day of work.

He walked the garden’s stone walkways and headed towards the fountain located at the exact center of the garden. The fountain was a magnificent life-sized statue of a woman made of the purest white marble, and shaped in the likeness of the late Queen Ellene Valmont, who in life was a Doctor and the wife of King Sulwyn Starsong, mother of Prince Seyren and Princess Vesper, and sole owner of Sulwyn’s heart.

The statue’s hands were open, and her face looked towards the stars, her long hair and dress were sculpted with the utmost of precision—the Queen’s likeness forever immortalized and preserved in marble.

It was commissioned and sculpted after the Gustav-Denton syndrome claimed the queen's life, a rare condition that attacked her central nervous system and impaired her organs, shutting them down one by one. Queen Ellene passed away five years after giving birth to her daughter, Vesper. The nearly two decades old statue replaced the old ornamental fountain that used to be in its place.

Bastiel sat on a marble bench, took a deep breath, and gazed at the statue. His mind went through all of the words King Sulwyn had spoken to him, his ominous words about the state of Vaifen, his proposal, and the Gestalt Project that would turn the tide of it all.

"I knew you'd be here," Vesper said to an unaware Bastiel as she sat beside him.

Bastiel looked at her, "Just thinking some stuff," he replied.

"So . . . why did Father want to speak with you? Was it about us? Don't tell me he found out?" A concerned Vesper inquired upon the nature of that private meeting.

"Oh, no, relax," he smiled at the ever so radiant Princess, "he offered me a job."

"Hah!" Vesper, now relieved, let loose a short yet sarcastic laugh, "You, a job? Where?"

"Intelligence Center, a new division, top secret stuff," Bastiel winked, unsure if he should even divulge the name 'Gestalt' to her.

"I see. So, the mighty Isthel is going to be a . . . super-secret spy?" Vesper said as a joke as she smirked at Bastiel.

"Not quite."

Both of them contemplated upon Queen Ellene's statue, the sun was setting on the horizon.

Bastiel pointed at the statue's right hand, "Remember when you got so angry you took my old bat and threw it at us, but you ended up hitting the statue and broke its hand instead?" he reminisced.

"Shut up," Vesper responded, "Father was so furious that day, I think he's still mad at us for the incident and it's been more than fifteen years since it happened—it was all you and Seyren's fault!"

"As I recall, it all started when we didn't wanted to play with your silly dolls in that stupid girls' house."

"Yes, you jerks kept mocking my dolls," Vesper said with a faint smile on her face.

"I don't know how this place survived us three, we were so terrible," Bastiel said, looking back on the mischief and terror the three of them caused upon everyone and everything during their childhood years.

After a short period of silence, Vesper looked again at her mother's statue, "I wish I had known her, you know," she said with sadness.

Just like Bastiel and his family, the cruel hand of fate took away her mother's life. The princess barely had any memories of the Queen.

Of all the people in the Princess' life, Bastiel was the one that truly understood how Vesper felt on that subject, "I know. Wish I had known my parents too," he said.

"At least you and Seyren remember more of her, I was only four when she died."

"I'm only two years older than you, I don't really remember her much . . . I remember she was always kind to me though," Bastiel said.

Vesper remained in silence and absent in her thoughts.

“She loved you, Vesper,” Bastiel reassured her as he grabbed her hand, “she loved your father, your brother, everyone, and she still had love for me—a ‘space baby,’” his words made Vesper’s sad visage slowly turn into a faint smile.

“Either way, my action figures were cooler than your stupid dolls anyways, that I know for sure.” Bastiel’s jest was intended to sway Vesper’s brooding mood.

Vesper threw a weak punch aimed at Bastiel’s right arm, “How can you still be so wrong about that after all these years?” she said.

“Ow!” Bastiel grossly exaggerated his reaction and pretended that the punch he received was more painful than it was.

“You deserve that,” the Princess exclaimed.

For Bastiel Isthall, the weak punch was more than worth it, the Princess had smiled once more. His smirk turned into a smug visage in a flash.

“You look so cute when you get angry, did you know that?” he seized the opportunity to kiss Vesper’s mouth.

“Stupid Bastiel,” she whispered.

Moments later, Harold Vogel, the palace’s caretaker, approached them.

“Excuse me my Princess—Mister Isthall,” the gentle Caretaker’s words were accompanied by a bow, “I would like to inform you two that your respective rooms have been prepared for the night. You should both freshen up and change clothes for your upcoming dinner with the King. I have personally arranged some fresh clothing for you as well, Bastiel.”

“Yeah, we should. Thank you Harold!” Vesper replied as she stood up, “Let’s go, Bastiel,” she extended her hand at him.

“Of course, thanks for everything, Vogel,” Bastiel said.

“Excellent! If I may give my honest and humble opinion: you two make a fantastic couple,” The Caretaker said.

Both Bastiel and Vesper blushed in embarrassment. Bastiel let loose a short smirk while Vesper looked at the ground.

“Now, now you two, you should hurry and get freshened up, it has been a long day for all of us. If you excuse me, I must go elsewhere—so much to do, so little time.”

“Yes, yes,” Vesper muttered.

Caretaker Vogel took the eastern path. The palace’s bedrooms were located on the second floor of the western wing. Princess Vesper Starsong and Bastiel Isthel took the western path, they left the garden’s premises, and continued to walk inside the Palace’s pristine hallways.

Upon reaching the western stairs, Bastiel and Vesper were intercepted by a slim woman who had dark and wavy hair, slightly shorter in stature than the Princess. Her name was Annette Hughes, Princess Vesper’s assistant, right hand, and loyal confidant. Her partner in crime.

“My Princess—wait!” she yelled as she frantically ran towards them like a vehicle without brakes. She took a moment to catch her breath and adjust her rectangular shaped glasses, as well as her hair.

“Annie!” the Princess greeted her assistant, “What’s going on, girl?”

“Hello, Annette,” Bastiel greeted her as well.

Annette gasped and tried her best to breathe normally, she was no professional marathon runner, her elevated heart rate reminded her that much, “My Princess . . . I’ve been looking for you everywhere . . . here’s the revised schedule for next week’s charity event . . . it’s pending your approval,” she showed her tablet device to her boss.

“Do I really have to right now, Annie?” Vesper wanted to share some additional time with Bastiel before their upcoming dinner. For once, she wished Annette wasn’t so diligent at her job, if only for just that one time.

Annette had regained much of her breath, “I’m afraid so, my Princess. Royal Security made us change all of your schedule and security protocols—I have to respond to them ASAP. I need your signature for the Foundation’s donations to the Estival victims, and review your speech, of course.”

King Sulwyn had placed her daughter in charge of the Starsong Foundation, the Crown’s charity and patronage organization. The Foundation was tasked with a multitude of goals and activities, from providing financial aid to Vaifen’s less fortunate, scholarships to gifted students, or to simply bring a smile to those who needed it most, as well as many other tasks.

The Foundation represented a more amiable facet of the Crown, one that despite having its fair share of criticism and detractors, was well regarded by Vaifen’s populace.

Vesper stared at her assistant, she sighed, and conceded, “Fine, but only if you promise me that you will disconnect and rest after this, it’s been a terrible day for everyone.”

Annette nodded, “As you wish.”

“Bastiel,” Vesper beckoned him, “you go ahead without me.”

“Sure . . . boss?” the man responded.

Bastiel left the two women to deal with their work affairs, there was nothing he could say or do to be of any help in that situation. The Nasivern continued his journey upstairs alone, approaching what used to be his old childhood bedroom.

Long gone were the childlike decorations and numerous toys of his infancy, the room was refurbished a handful of years ago.

With a blank stare, Bastiel stood motionless and thought upon how that bedroom used to look when he was a child—a complete warzone. Numerous toys scattered everywhere, mountains of clothing on a corner, it would take a miracle for someone to walk inside the room without stepping on something.

Bastiel recalled the countless times when he would use the bed sheets or the bathroom towels to fashion himself a cape or a scarf whilst wielding toy swords and other types of plastic weaponry. With the unlimited power and of a child's imagination, he transformed himself into a super hero that fought for peace and justice, against mighty evil foes of all shapes and sizes.

The memories of his childhood antics bought a smile to his face, in the end his current dream was still the same dream of that child: to become a hero—he just happened to have a more idealistic and fantasized version of it during his infant years, but the essence of that dream still persisted through the years, and now he was hours away before it began to materialize.

As the focus of his thoughts came back to the present reality, he noticed that just like Caretaker Harold Vogel had said to him earlier, clean clothes had been left for him on the bed: a dark blue sports trousers and jacket, both part of a matching set, and a white shirt. The sports jacket had a stylistic rising golden eight-pointed star embroidered on the chest—the symbol of the Starsong family and therefore the Crown's emblem. The star-shaped symbol's bottom point was elongated and extended downwards, where it split into two trails that converged further down. A pair of clean white boxers and socks were next to the clothes.

In addition to the attire, a set of red silken pajamas were also left for him on top of the bed; Caretaker Vogel knew that Bastiel was fond of that color, so he specifically selected those

particular pajamas for his use. Bastiel entered the room's bathroom and, without wasting a single moment, he began to take a hot and relaxing shower, just what he needed to wind down after what it had been one of the longest and most restless days he had in awhile.

He looked at his body in the bathroom's mirror and inspected the bruises on his body obtained the night before—courtesy of Silas Kowalski and his Blood Serpents. Had it not been for the helmet he wore, his face would have fared terribly.

Bastiel wore the clean clothes left for him after he got out of the shower. He immediately left the bedroom and knocked on Vesper's door but received no response—the same occurred after he knocked on Seyren's door. Bastiel then walked further down the hall and took a right turn, where a small dining room was located.

The modest dining area was built at the King's request in order to have a more private and cozy place to eat with his children and her Queen once her health began to decay, thus eliminating the need to use the Palace's large dining hall outside of events or formal acts.

During that time, that area of the palace received further work in order to provide it with its own kitchen and living room, among other facilities. The remodeling's goal was to create a private and small residence inside the Palace itself, yet seemingly isolated from the rest of the royal edifice's more public areas, so that the King's heirs and Bastiel Isthel could have a semblance of a normal household as they grew up.

Bastiel entered the dining room and found Prince Seyren already seated around the table, talking over the phone with someone. The heir wore a similar attire to his, but purple tinted instead of Bastiel's dark blue. The tone of Seyren's phone conversation was rather affective, and borderline corny, according to Bastiel's own assessment.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow, baby, love ya,” Seyren finished his phone call and then noticed that he was no longer alone, “Oh, hey Bastiel. Man I’m starving, I think I will pass out if I don’t eat soon,” he said.

“That makes two of us,” Bastiel replied.

“We survived our father’s wrath Bastiel, we did it man!” A triumphant Seyren boasted, “I knew there was nothing to worry about—see, you worry too much!”

Bastiel gave his opinion on the matter, “If you say so. Maybe we just got lucky and the old man has more pressing matters on his table,” he said, “all the crap that happened today lessened your punishment.”

King Sulwyn Starsong and his daughter, Princess Vesper, entered the room. Vesper wore a more casual light blue dress, her red hair was soaked wet. She wore no jewelry nor makeup, but that made her no less beautiful in the eyes of Bastiel Isthali.

The King however, still wore the same indigo suit he had been wearing all day, his face silently screamed exhaustion. As per customary, both Bastiel and the Prince Heir stood up when the Sovereign of Vaifen entered the room.

“No need for that, take a seat,” King Sulwyn said in a soft voice as he waved his hand and sat. The burden of the crown, ever so apparent, heavily weighted upon the troubled regent.

The room’s door opened once more mere seconds later. A handful of people belonging to the kitchen staff entered the dining room and began to serve dinner dishes on the table for the four of them in an orderly manner and in absolute silence. All of them promptly left the room once they were done.

“We haven’t had dinner together in so long,” said the King, “it’s good to be all here together, just like old times,” the regent added as he looked upon his children.

Being able to enjoy a moment like that with his family, to put aside all of his responsibilities and troubles—even if it was just for an ephemeral moment—was enough to lift Sulwyn’s spirit after an excruciating day.

The four of them began to eat dinner: a perfectly seasoned steak with mashed potatoes and sliced carrots. King Sulwyn stopped and looked upon his children and his protégé, reminiscing of a time long past—over twenty years ago, when Bastiel Isthall, and the King’s two heirs, Seyren and Vesper, were young children.

“Oh how troublesome these three were back then,” the King pondered. It would only take a small incendiary spark from one of them to incite a critical reaction in the other two, and then it would all descend into childish bickering and name calling, with food often being used as projectile ammunition. Those times were a stark contrast of the current picture: all three grown up adults, quietly eating and in complete peace.

“Times change indeed,” Sulwyn thought to himself as he chewed another piece of his steak.

King Sulwyn broke the reigning silence, “As much as I dislike talking about work while we’re at dinner—Seyren, Vesper,” the Regent addressed his heirs, “you two are coming with me tomorrow to Estival Station for a wreath laying, and to pay due respects to the victims—you two are saying a few words as well.”

“What? Me? Giving a speech? Tomorrow?” said a bewildered Seyren, “Aw, come on,” he grunted.

“Yes. It’s time you start taking a more active role in the Crown’s affairs. Perhaps I have myself to blame for your carefree approach towards the Crown, but it’s time we correct your

path,” the King’s tone shifted to a more stern and serious one, “you need to start getting the hang of how things work around here, my son. It is long overdue.”

Seyren had no comeback words to say, no witty response—this time for the best. He had faced his father and made it out unscathed just a couple hours ago, not pushing his luck was the smartest decision the Prince Heir could’ve made.

“Vesper’s hands are full handling the Starsong Foundation. I have assigned upon Bastiel a very important task, which he is set to start tomorrow. You are all no longer kids, but rather full grown adults, we must all do our part to serve and protect this Nation,” King Sulwyn explained to Seyren.

“Yes, Father,” the Prince complied, “I’m just not very good at the whole ‘speaking to the public’ thing,” he added.

Vesper looked at her brother, and spoke to him with contempt, “Oh that’s right, Seyren. We all know your charming words are only good for lying to women and getting them all straight towards your bed—I don’t think that’s going to be appropriate at all for tomorrow.”

Bastiel Isthall almost spilled his drink upon hearing the Princess’s words.

“Hey now, Vesper! It’s not my fault women find me charming and irresistible,” Seyren said, “being me isn’t easy—”

“That’s enough,” King Sulwyn interjected. His words quelled the flames before they set the room ablaze. Perhaps his previous thoughts were incorrect, and unfortunately those three hadn’t changed the slightest, and in essence, remained the same three bickering children they used to be.

“After we finish dinner, I expect both of you in my office,” said the King, “I’ve summoned Byrne, and together, we will go through tomorrow’s activities, and the matter of your speech, Seyren. You two are then free to rest afterwards.”

“Okay, Father.” Seyren said. He had other plans for the night, but deep down he knew that it was a fight he could not possibly hope to win.

The four of them finished their dinner and their hunger was properly satiated. The quartet conversed for a brief moment until the palace’s staff took the dishes away.

“Bastiel, you should go wind down and rest immediately, you have a long day ahead tomorrow,” King Sulwyn advised him, although his words seemingly sounded like a thinly veiled command.

“Of course, my King.” Bastiel replied, always respectful of the Regent.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I will be waiting for you two in my office,” With those words, King Sulwyn Starsong got off from the table and left the room.

“Dude, what is that task that Father said he to gave you, Bastiel?” Seyren asked, unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

Bastiel responded with air quotes, “Top secret.”

“No really, what is it?” the Prince insisted.

“You’ll see,” Bastiel gave a vague response.

“Fine! Don’t tell me anything, geez!” Seyren said, he checked his phone and his attention shifted to it. He left the dining area in order to make a private phone call.

Princess Vesper sighed, “I guess I will go brush my teeth and go to Father’s office, I just want to rest,” she said to Bastiel.

The princess walked towards Bastiel and gave him a kiss, “In case I don’t get to see you later and I end up leaving early tomorrow—you know, for good luck.”

Both of them wished for that moment to last longer, if not forever, but alas, she had responsibilities to attend to, and he required proper rest if he wanted to be in top condition for his upcoming responsibilities.

For Bastiel Isthala, the young Nasivern, a new journey was about to begin the next morning, and he would need all the rest he could get from that night. The two secret lovers smiled at each other.

“That will have to do for now, ciao,” Vesper waved with her right hand and left the room.

Moments later, Bastiel finally stood up and walked towards what used to be his bedroom, he brushed his teeth, and changed into the pajamas that were left for him. Bastiel crashed on the bed and stared at the ceiling. The bed felt most comfortable and the brand new pillows were as soft as they get, yet, he could not close his eyes—how could he? He was hours away from officially joining Gestalt and the questions and anticipation kept piling inside his head.

Excitement, anxiousness, nervousness, anticipation, a plethora of emotions ran amok in his mind in a most chaotic symphony. Would he finally become a hero like he always imagined as a child? Would he save lives in more ways than the Agito persona he crafted was able to? Would he be able to make a difference and restore the safety of the Nation of Vaifen by eliminating the threat of the Ashen Reckoning and making sure that Vaifen attains everlasting security? Would he live up to the legacy of his Grandmother, the legendary Nasivern, Isthara, his Father, Aeoros Isthala, and his mother, Anya Nystrom?

He kept asking himself over and over. Seconds became minutes until eventually he finally succumbed to a profound sleep.

III: THE FIFTH BLADE

The sun blessed the City of Ternion with its radiant warmth once more, a magnificent sunrise had raised the curtain on a new day all across the Nation of Vaifen following the tragic events of the previous day. The skies were as clear as they could be, and the sound of birds singing in unison could be heard yonder.

Bastiel Isthall was still asleep when there was a knock on the door, the knocking was more than enough to wake him up in an instant. Bastiel sat on the bed for a moment after going through the initial commotion of being suddenly pulled from his sleep. He took a deep breath, walked towards the door, and opened it. Caretaker Harold Vogel stood outside the room, his left hand held the clothes Bastiel wore the day before, they had been thoroughly washed and taken care of.

“Ah! Good morning, Mister Isthall,” Caretaker Vogel greeted him, “still suffering from morning hair, I see,” he commented with regards to Bastiel’s tousled hair.

“Morning, Harold,” Bastiel said as he tried to fix his hair with his two hands.

“I have bought your clothes, all washed up and ready for you,” the Caretaker extended his left arm towards the young white haired man.

“Thanks,” Bastiel grabbed his attire.

“King Starsong is waiting for you at the Lobby.”

“I’ll be there—just gimme a min.”

Caretaker Vogel nodded, “Please do make haste,” with his characteristic grace, he turned around and walked away.

Bastiel Isthall closed the door and without wasting a single second walked towards the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his face. As the cold water rinsed the soap off his face, he asked himself how many hours of sleep he had managed to accrue the night before.

He still felt a modicum of exhaustion—aware that he still owed his body dozens of missed hours of sleep, but in any case, whatever hours of rest he had managed to avail himself with the night before would have to suffice for now. His body ached far less than the previous day, which allowed him to stretch his body without issue.

Just as the Palace’s Caretaker requested, he dressed up with great haste. Bastiel looked at himself on the bathroom’s mirror and properly combed his white hair, “Perhaps I should get a haircut,” he thought to himself, a consideration that he rapidly dismissed, for he was fond of the way it was.

“Here I go,” Bastiel said to himself, his words accompanied by a deep breath. He stepped out of the room and headed straight towards the Royal Palace’s lobby.

The Palace was substantially less crowded than it was the day before, the earliness of the hour had much to do with it; the hallways felt empty and much bigger as a result. Bastiel arrived at the Palace’s vast lobby, large red carpets rested on top of the ivory white floor, rows of pillars, made of pure black marble and adorned with golden accents stood firmly at its sides; a massive golden chandelier hung at the center of the ceiling.

Armors that belonged to Vaifen soldiers of times past kept an eternal vigil with their swords, pikes, and axes firmly grasped, all in pristine condition; only a handful of Royal Security agents, King Sulwyn Starsong, another man, and a young woman were present in the lobby.

Bastiel approached King Sulwyn, who was conversing with a man that was considerably shorter than the King, with dark parted hair, and brown eyes that hid behind a pair of thick-framed glasses; a charcoal gray suit and a blue tie was what he chose to wear that morning.

The man was accompanied by a young slim woman much shorter than the two men. Brown and curly was her hair, and her business attire was dark gray in color, her rectangular shaped glasses did not help much in concealing some of her nervousness and shyness.

“Ah, there you are! Good Morning Bastiel,” King Sulwyn said to him, “we were just talking about you.”

Bastiel, ever so respectful of Vaifen’s Regent, bowed to King Sulwyn, “Good morning, my King.”

“I hope you rested well, child.”

“Likewise, my King,” King Sulwyn looked less exhausted than the night before. Bastiel sincerely hoped that the King had managed to get a good night of sleep in light of all that had been going on in the Nation.

“Bastiel, I would like you to meet General James Exley, Director of the National Intelligence Center—James, meet Bastiel Isthel.” King Sulwyn introduced them both.

Exley extended his right hand towards Bastiel, “Aeoros’ son, we finally met at last. A pleasure meeting you, Bastiel.”

“The pleasure is all mine, sir,” Bastiel replied as he shook hands with the Director.

General Exley introduced Bastiel to the young woman that accompanied him, “I would also like you to meet Leah Sutherland, Gestalt’s Operator.”

Bastiel extended his right hand towards the woman, offering a handshake, “Hello, a pleasure meeting you, Leah.”

Leah reciprocated the handshake, “Hi . . . nice meeting you.”

King Sulwyn looked towards Bastiel, “As I mentioned yesterday, Exley is overseeing Gestalt, he’s come to personally take you to their premises at the NIC’s building so you can integrate yourself to the team.” the Regent explained to Bastiel.

“I’m looking forward to having you onboard Gestalt, Bastiel Isthel,” Director Exley said.

“I hope I meet your expectations,” Bastiel responded. A sense of excitement began to dance around his mind.

“I’m pretty sure you will,” King Sulwyn assured both.

“Indeed, now let us go, you have a lot of catching up to do,” Director Exley said, “If you excuse us, King Sulwyn—we shall go immediately.”

“Of course, you three have a long day ahead,” King Sulwyn extended his hand to Bastiel, both of them shook hands.

“Go forth child, go forth and seek glory!” King Sulwyn exclaimed to a prideful Bastiel, “today you begin to carve your legend through history!” the King’s words further inspired and encouraged Bastiel, who at some point asked himself if all of it was actually happening, or if it was all part of a dream.

Bastiel Isthel, Leah Sutherland, and James Exley bowed to the King before they left his presence and walked outside the Palace, where a car belonging to Vaifen’s National Intelligence

Center awaited the two of them. Exley, Leah, and Bastiel sat on the vehicle's rear seats and the driver immediately set off south, towards the headquarters of the Nation's Intelligence Center.

During the drive, Director Exley spoke through his phone, passing down instructions, and reviewed items on his tight schedule. Leah, the shy operator, remained in silence. Bastiel, who sat on the left rear seat of the vehicle, observed the streets in complete silence, he noticed that traffic was not as abundant as it should normally be, nonetheless, there was more life on the streets than the day before; things were slowly returning to a certain normalcy within the City of Ternion.

"Nervous?" Director Exley asked Bastiel after he finished his long phone call in an attempt to break the reigning ice.

"I would be lying if I said no, sir—just a little though," Bastiel answered, "but also thrilled to be part of this project."

"Hah, relax, once you meet the rest of your teammates and get properly acclimated you'll realize that you will fit just fine," Exley assured him.

"Sir, could I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Bastiel"

"King Sulwyn said you knew my father, is that right?" Bastiel asked.

"Yes—I met Aeoros Isthall back in the day." Exley answered, "he was a great man and an amazing warrior. I had the privilege of fighting alongside him during the war against Svarzfall."

"That's what everyone tells me," Bastiel spoke in a soft tone as he looked down, "I wish I could have met him though . . . I only know him from how other people remember him."

Exley sympathized with Bastiel's feelings, "What happened to the Nasivern was a horrible tragedy, unspeakable, and certainly unprecedented in the history of this planet—most of

Orbis' inhabitants are unaware of the horrors of those days. I've read almost every dissertation and report there is regarding the fall of the Nasivern home world.

“Know this Bastiel, your father died a hero. His sacrifice made possible that some survivors could safely reach Orbis, stopping the Estremoz while at it, and saving this planet as well. We owe an eternal gratitude to the Nasivern, as they were instrumental in helping this Nation against Svarzfal—and in their darkest hour we were powerless to reciprocate the favor,” Director Exley gave Bastiel his simplified and abridged opinion of the events surrounding the fall of the Nasivern race and their planet at the hands of the extraterrestrial force known as the Estremoz, events that took place over two decades ago.

“Well, I have a hell of a legacy to live up to, don't I?” Bastiel said with a faint smile on his face.

“Indeed you do. My advice? Don't let it turn into a burden,” Exley said, “carry it with pride, yes, get inspired by it every day—but make sure you walk your own path in this life, Bastiel Ithal.” he advised the young Nasivern, who responded with a smile.

“Now, there's a beautiful lady I would like you to get acquainted to,” Exley pointed yonder towards his right, “Bastiel Ithal, meet the National Intelligence Center's headquarters.”

Bastiel looked through the window, and gazed upon the imposing seven-floored structure that laid ahead. A circular shaped building that had a bright gray color and prominent dark windows that contrasted with the color of its structure. The exterior walls of the topmost floor of the building forsake most of the gray concrete and the majority of the external steel reinforcements of the lower floors for a more aesthetic glass top design. A massive array of parking lot spaces surrounded the building, with a few rectangular blocks of tidy grass separating each parking subdivision.

The young Nasivern continued to admire what would soon become his workplace as the vehicle stopped at the building's main entrance. It was his first time in his twenty-six years of life that he had first been face to face with that remarkable edifice.

A security officer opened the vehicle's doors, Director James Exley, Operator Leah Sutherland, and Bastiel Isthah got out of the car.

"Sir!" The officer stood firm and performed a hand salute at Exley, to which the Director responded in kind.

Bastiel Isthah entered the Intelligence Center's main lobby in the company of its Director and Leah. Vast, open, and massive, it was twice the size of the Royal Palace's lobby, according to Bastiel's eye measurements. Numerous people walked everywhere from one place to another; a large round desk at the center served as the workplace of five receptionists, all of which were busy between attending phone calls and providing information to visitors from other branches of Vaifen's Governance.

"Follow me, Bastiel." Exley said as he walked left towards a security checkpoint for the Center's personnel.

A guard greeted Director Exley as he walked through a scanner, which cast a green light over the Director and beeped a sound that certified that he wasn't concealing weapons, dangerous objects, or substances of any kind. Leah Sutherland went through the scanner as well.

"He's coming with me," Exley said to the guard right before it was Bastiel's turn.

"Name?" the guard asked.

"Bastiel Isthah," The young white haired man answered.

"Please walk through the scanner," the scanner emitted a beep that signaled Bastiel's turn to walk through it; after the machine did its thorough scan the same green light and sound

signaled that he was clear to proceed further inside the facility. The guard handed him over a temporary visitor's badge as he logged his entry on the system.

"Keep your badge visible at all times during your stay." The guard instructed Bastiel, "have a good morning, sir," he said to the head of the Intelligence Center.

"Good, let's hurry, Bastiel." Exley and Leah continued to walk forward with Bastiel following them behind, making their way towards the northeastern side of the circular complex. Bastiel continued to be amazed at the modern design of the building.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Exley asked Bastiel upon noticing the amazement reeking from his face.

"Certainly so," Bastiel affirmed. The man was fascinated by the pristine design of the Intelligence Center. White, gray, and chrome were the most prominent colors on the center's interior design, a sheer abundance of glass panels and walls gave it a sense of openness. Small trees and a few assortment of plants were placed in corners and in other visually appealing spots, they brought a little touch of nature to an otherwise sterile-looking environment.

As they continued to traverse the building's interior, Bastiel's hands began to feel colder, he wondered if perhaps they tend to keep the air conditioners at a low temperature here, or perhaps he was starting to feel anxious; nonetheless, he continued to walk behind Director Exley in complete silence. After a couple of minutes the trio stopped in front of a few elevators.

"Once things are less hectic I'll arrange for a proper tour of the facility for you, Leah and I aren't exactly tour guide material," Exley said as he called for an elevator.

"Of course sir, no worries," Bastiel replied.

Leah, who had remained silent during the trip, spoke a few words to Bastiel, "One thing: you can use the eastern parking lot and enter through the north side entrance, it's a shorter

distance to this area. These elevators are the ones you want to take—these take you directly to Gestalt’s section of the building.” she explained.

The Nasivern nodded in acknowledgement, “Understood.”

The Leftmost elevator arrived after a few seconds passed and the trio got inside. A group of people attempted to board the elevator as well but Exley waved his hand, signaling them to stop, he wanted to take this elevator alone with Leah and Bastiel. The group had no choice but to comply with their Director’s silent but clear request as the elevator’s doors closed.

“Destination?” the elevator’s control system asked using a female sounding voice.

“Gestalt. Sixth floor,” the Director spoke.

“Warning. Restricted Area,” the voice replied. The elevator’s screen shifted from a light blue to a reddish hue, and the words ‘Restricted Access: Authorization required’ flashed in red.

“Director Override: Exley, James,” Exley spoke in a clear manner. He placed his right thumb on a scanner located below the elevator’s panel.

“Confirmed,” the security system verified Exley’s voice and fingerprint, the elevator began to ascend right away.

“You always forget to swipe your keycard so that doesn’t happen, Director,” Leah reminded Exley.

“Yes, my bad.” Exley replied. He looked at Bastiel and spoke to him, “It took some heavy internal rearrangement but we remodeled a slice of the sixth and seventh floors so that Gestalt would have its own private area here in the complex, isolated from the rest of the center, and completely off limits for everyone that’s not involved in the project. We are going to give Gestalt its own private vehicle bay too.”

“I see,” Bastiel responded.

“Northeastern elevators, sixth floor. Don’t forget that.”

“Got it.” Bastiel nodded.

The elevator arrived at the sixth floor. “Floor Six: Gestalt,” the elevator’s interface announced. Bastiel, Exley, and Leah, stepped out and the elevator’s doors closed immediately.

“You will have to pardon the mess,” Exley spoke, “as you see, we’re still remodeling the area,” Exley pointed at an empty wall in front of them, where a few construction materials rested. To the right, two firmly shut glass doors and an access panel served as the gateway to the Gestalt enclave.

Exley pulled his access keycard from his pocket, swiped it on the panel, and pressed his right thumb upon a fingerprint scanner. The glass doors opened and they walked inside.

The trio was met by a tall man that approached them, his skin was of an olive tone and he had brown eyes. His physique was imposing and well-toned—the result of years of a rigorous training regime, his hair was trimmed in a buzz cut style, and his straight posture was evidence of a military background. The man was dressed with a matching set of a black t-shirt and sports pants, with blue lines that ran across the legs, chest, and sleeves, forming a single angular pattern.

“Good morning, General, Leah,” the man said as he performed a military hand salute towards Exley.

“Morning.” Exley responded,

“Hi,” Leah saluted him back. She looked at Exley, “Director, if I may,”

“Of course, Leah, go.”

Leah left the three men as she walked further inside the enclave.

“Erron Leitner, I would like you to meet Bastiel Isthel,” Exley introduced him.

“The fifth at last! Nice meeting you, Bastiel,” Erron said with a smile, “I’ve heard lots about you. Welcome to the Gestalt Enclave!”

“The pleasure is all mine, Erron,” Bastiel and Erron shook hands.

“Commander Erron is one of the finest warriors I’ve seen in my life, and a proud son of this Nation—truly one of Vaifen’s finest,” Exley said with pride, “he will be your team leader here in Gestalt, he’ll surely get you on track and introduce you with the rest of the team.”

“Aye, we’re all sparring today,” Erron said, “everyone else is already here—you joined us in a perfect time, Bastiel.”

The Director tapped Bastiel Isthals shoulder, “Well, I have an entire agency to oversee, time waits for no one. I leave you in good hands, best of luck, Bastiel, you’ll be a powerful asset towards Gestalt’s success.”

“We will not let you down, General!” Erron exclaimed.

Bastiel nodded, “I’ll do my best, sir.”

Director Exley waved his hand, turned around, and left the premises.

Erron clapped his hands once, “So, the famous Nasivern Bastiel Isthals. I’ve read your preliminary report, it’s—quite the interesting thing, to say the least.”

Bastiel was a bit confused, “I had no idea there was a report on me,” he said, “well, come think of it . . . shouldn’t surprise me.”

Erron chortled, “Don’t worry about it, it was some good reading. Come, let’s get you into some training clothes and see what you’re made of, follow me.”

Bastiel followed Erron further inside the enclave and reached the locker room. Upon entering, Erron Leitner walked towards a large plastic container that sat on a corner. He tossed out different sets of clothing that shared a similar design to the one he was wearing.

“Nah, wrong size. Nope, wrong color,” Erron muttered as he kept searching.

Bastiel remained in silence and in a slight state of bewilderment.

“Man of a few words, eh?” Erron said with regards to Bastiel’s stoic silence.

“Just wondering what are you looking for there,” Bastiel replied with a faint chuckle.

“Well, one with the right size and color for you, of course,” Erron said, “ah ha! Found it!” His search had ended in success: a matching set of clothes, identical in design to what he wore, but with red lines instead of blue.

Erron tossed the clothes towards Bastiel, “Here, try those on, red is the color you’ve been assigned here. You see, we all have an assigned color here—gives each member a sense of identity within the team and I personally think it makes us look cooler if you ask me,” he explained as he pointed yonder, “put your stuff in that locker over there.”

Bastiel nodded at him and changed clothes with great haste; he placed his regular clothes on a locker, along with his phone, wallet, and watch.

“Alright, time for you to meet the rest of the team!” Erron exclaimed, “Follow me!”

Erron guided Bastiel through another door that led to a large sparring room with a circular combat arena in its center. Two women and one man, wearing the same black uniform set but with different color accents were present in the room; the two women conversed with one another, while the man stretched his limbs.

“Alright team! Gather up!” Erron said loudly, “time to meet the fifth—Bastiel Isth!” his hands gestured towards the white haired Nasivern that stood next to him.

Bastiel waved at them, “Hello, nice meeting you all,” he accompanied his gesture and voice with a nod.

The shorter of the two women rushed towards Bastiel, her dark eyes were fixated upon his gray eyes; she shook his hand with much enthusiasm, “Hello! Cameron Bennett—just call me Cammy, ok? Nice meeting ya!” she introduced herself. Her black attire had pink colored lines, she was vibrant and energetic. Cameron kept her dark hair short, barely halfway down her neck.

“Welcome aboard,” said the other woman in the room, “Gale Lacroix, my pleasure,” her long blonde hair was of a lighter shade than the yellow lines on her clothing. Gale was stunning, and possessive of a calm demeanor.

“Cade Saunders, welcome,” said the man with a crew cut and with green lines on his attire. He stood further away from everyone else, giving Bastiel a most judgmental look.

Erron thrice clapped his hand, “Good! Now that you’ve all been hastily introduced yourselves it’s time to see what this rookie is made of.” Erron extended his right arm towards the circular arena, inviting Bastiel to step in.

“Sure,” replied Bastiel.

“I know it feels a bit rushed, but we’re running late as it is and this fella has lots of catching up to do,” said Erron, “Bastiel, from what I was told and according to your report you seem to have a received a rather peculiar combat training, right?” he asked.

“You could say so,” Bastiel answered, “melee weapons and unarmed combat training—that’s the gist of it.”

“Good, good, the report was rather vague about that for some reason, so . . . grab a sparring weapon from the rack over there, pick the one you prefer the most,” Erron instructed him.

“Yes, sir.”

Erron waved his two hands, “Nah, nah, nah, wait—no ‘sir’, just Erron,”

“Right, Erron.”

As instructed, Bastiel walked towards the weapon stand. Numerous training weapons were on display: staves, polearms, short daggers, and a few swords were among the types of weapons that he could choose from. He didn't give it much thought and immediately settled for a sword.

“A sword, eh?” Erron said, “I knew you'd pick that. Who wants to go against him?”

Cade Saunders immediately raised his hand and took a step forward, “I will,” he said.

“Alright,” Erron agreed.

Cade walked towards the weapon stand and grabbed a similar sword. He gave Bastiel Isthala a sharp, piercing gaze, which did not go unnoticed by the white haired man, who shrugged it off as he stretched his limbs.

“Very well. Get in position,” Erron instructed them.

Bastiel and Cade stood in the middle of the arena. Gale and Cameron sat on the side benches to observe the combat that was about to unfold.

“Sudden death, first one to get hit loses,” Erron explained the rules of the duel.

Bastiel firmly grabbed his sword with his left hand, he swung it a couple times with grace to get a sense of its weight and feel. He pointed it back downwards and stood sideways towards Cade, he raised his right hand and his right index finger pointed above towards the heavens; his gaze was completely focused on his opponent.

Cade Saunders stretched his body before he got in position, his right hand held his blade. He pointed it towards Bastiel, adopting a much different and sober stance than his target.

“Ready?” Erron asked both of them.

They both nodded in response, an absolute silence descended upon the room.

“Begin!” Erron yelled at the top of his lungs.

Cade Saunders rushed towards a patient Bastiel, who stood motionless and in complete calm, he swung twice at Bastiel but his attacks were swiftly and effortlessly dodged. Cade attempted to strike him once more but his attack was parried; Saunders swung his blade at Bastiel a fourth time to no avail—he was parried yet again. Bastiel used Cade’s own momentum to deflect his attack and divert the course of his swing.

The failure of that fourth swing had started to boil Cade’s frustration, unable to strike what he considered to be an easy target was unacceptable for him. Bastiel Isthall limited himself to side stepping movements, observing his target’s actions while keeping his blade pointed downwards. He withheld himself and did not attempt to strike at Cade—as if he had all the time and patience in the world.

“What’s wrong, newcomer? Scared?” Cade taunted his target with an elevated voice tone.

Bastiel smiled at him, not saying a single word in response.

Cade continued to lash out swing after swing of his sword, but Bastiel dodged and parried every single one of the mighty strikes with minimal effort.

Erron Leitner tittered, he knew what game Bastiel was playing on Cade, “So that report didn’t lie . . . could it be . . .” he muttered to himself.

“Huh?” Cameron Bennett noticed her team leader’s gesture.

“Just watch, Cammy,” he told her.

Cade’s frustration began to take a hold on his actions, his rage made him lash out reckless and imprecise blows, all of which were far away from being successful; he could not bear being toyed with around that way, especially not by that strange newcomer.

His merits and skills had awarded Cade the third and green spot on Gestalt's strike team. He had been training almost daily ever since he was recruited months ago, and he had taken all necessary steps to ensure that he remained at a peak physical condition, just as he was when he formed part of Vaifen's Special Forces Unit.

Bastiel raised his sword, making Cade think that he was about to ready an attack. Cade saw an opening, he rushed forward and swung with all of his might at Bastiel, however, he mistakenly overextended himself and his failed attack left him wide open.

Cade realized his grave mistake when Bastiel tackled his leg with his own and used his right hand to push him down—Cade lost all balance and stumbled down on the floor. Bastiel pointed his sword at Cade's face, he poked his right cheek with the tip of the unsharpened sword, thus winning the match.

“Woah! Awesome!” an enthusiastic Cameron stood up and clapped. Gale clapped as well, albeit at a much slower pace, unlike her highly energetic teammate.

Erron approached the two combatants with a smile, “The Absolute Doctrine!” He exclaimed, “I've never thought I'd get to see it with my own eyes—so beautiful, I'm so glad that it still lives on,” he commented.

Bastiel smirked, “Well, I'm a Nasivern, I had to represent, right?” he said.

The victor looked down at his defeated opponent and extended his right hand, offering it to help Cade stand up. Cade begrudgingly refused the gesture of camaraderie and opted to get up on his own, visibly upset and humiliated at the outcome of the duel.

“You let yourself be controlled by rage, Cade, you fell right into his trap.” Erron, the most seasoned combatant in the room, explained, “The Absolute Doctrine is an ancient Nasivern

combat style, its core concept relies on exerting control of the flow of battle. You handed it over right from the start . . . with keys and everything,” Erron explained.

Cade grunted, “He was lucky, that’s all,” he reasoned, “I wasn’t expecting to go against an antiquated and theatrical form of combat that nobody cares about from what is pretty much an extinct race.”

“And that is why you lost, pal,” Bastiel said while availing himself of the moment to let loose a short cocky laugh.

Cade casted off all sense of decorum, “Sod off!” He exclaimed.

“Hey now, we are a serious team here, not kids playing in a kindergarten,” Erron intervened, “We’re here to ensure the safety of this Nation, not fight and bicker at each other.”

“I’m sorry, Commander,” Cade apologized as he returned his weapon to its rack.

“Apologies, Erron,” Bastiel expressed.

“Now Bastiel, I can tell you really have a thing for combat,” Erron said before heading towards the weapons stand, “I want to see how your Doctrine fares against me.” He grabbed a sword that was much larger than Bastiel’s.

“If that’s what you want,” Bastiel Isthel got in position. He inferred from the size of Erron’s sword and his strong physique and height that he fought at a slower pace than him, but his attacks were heavier and packed quite the punch as a result.

“Ready?” Erron asked, “Same rules: first blade that makes contact wins.”

“Yes,” Bastiel replied as he readied his stance.

“Go!”

Erron swung at Bastiel, who chose to parry that initial strike. Despite making assumptions about his opponent, he had severely underestimated the strength of his opponent and nearly got knocked off balance by the sheer force of Erron's swing.

As soon as he managed to regain his balance he was met by another swing of Erron's sword. Bastiel had no choice but to roll sideways at the very last moment to avoid getting hit.

"He is faster than I had anticipated," Bastiel thought to himself, "I have to be faster than him—he knows how I fight."

Erron's calm demeanor meant that he wouldn't succumb to a raging frustration like Cade. His two-handed sword gave him a larger attack range and that small skirmish with Saunders meant that Erron was aware of his Absolute Doctrine. He couldn't play defensively this time, he would have to get on the offensive and break through the metaphorical wall of Erron Leitner's blade—but the deck was stacked against him.

The thrill of such a challenging sparring opponent made Bastiel's adrenaline flow through his veins. He's only ever felt that alive during those long nights when he's donned that helm and red scarf in order to play out his heroic fantasies as the Agito vigilante, fighting against crime, and during those times when he has shared intimacy with Princess Vesper Starsong.

Erron Leitner stood there and smiled at him. The two combatants continued their combat in absolute silence. Verbal communication had become superfluous, instead, they were both communicating through the clash of their swords and the grace of their movements—a language that transcended the boundaries of spoken words.

Erron attacked with his blade once more. Bastiel saw in it an opening, and went all in with a counterattack—but Erron, being the sharp warrior that he was, read his movements and kicked his chest before Bastiel's blade could touch him, pushing him back.

The stalemate continued in a spectacular display of swordsmanship. At every turn, any possible opportunity one of them would attempt to seize was swiftly denied by the other. Erron's strength and strategic perception of combat made him an immovable object—while Bastiel's nimbleness and the precise way each and every of his carefully planned steps and strikes flowed, made him an unstoppable force. Cameron and Gale stood up and continued to spectate the skirmish with much awe, even Cade Saunders began to be surprised by the intensity of the duel he was being witness to.

“Could he do it? I mean . . . none of us has even lasted that long against Erron,” Cameron asked Gale.

“Perhaps,” Gale responded.

“Huh,” Cade muttered.

Erron lashed out with all his might at Bastiel with a sideways attack. Bastiel yelled, he gathered all of his strength in one mighty final strike aimed towards Erron's blade, spinning in unison with his sword as if they were both parts of a single entity. He not only managed to deflect Erron's mighty blow, he was also able to leave him wide open. Erron was visibly shocked at that turn of events.

Bastiel finally had control of the moment; with one swift flick of his left hand, he twisted his sword down and slashed upwards from Erron's right side and towards his chest—a victory move in Bastiel's mind. However, Erron had hastily recovered his balance, and with his right hand still firmly grasping his sword, he swung one final time, aiming at Bastiel's neck in a desperate final blow that would have decapitated him had the sword been sharpened. Their blades hit their respective targets at the same time, ending the match in a draw, much to the

amazement of everyone present—the combatants moreso. Both Erron and Bastiel breathed heavily after their final exchange.

“No freaking way!” Cameron yelled and clapped with high enthusiasm.

“Whoa,” Gale’s light skin turned even paler at the amazement of someone managing to match Erron in combat and achieve a draw on his first attempt, something the three of them still hadn’t been able to manage even after weeks of training.

Cade remained silent and tried to conceal his astonishment as best as he could.

Erron and Bastiel dropped their weapons and nodded at each other as a sign of respect, they then began to laugh—neither of them was able to believe the outcome.

“That’s the spirit, the passion of warrior!” Erron exclaimed, “That’s what I want to see from you in this team!”

“That was something else, Erron,” Bastiel responded, “you are faster than you look.”

“That report didn’t lie, didn’t lie at all . . . you really are a savant when it comes to combat, a great addition to this team. The big man made a good call in recruiting you,” Erron extended his right hand at Bastiel and then both of them shook hands.

Cameron ran towards the combatants, “Wow Bastiel! You’ve got to teach me those moves—and better be soon!” she said.

Bastiel responded with a chuckle, he was glad that his fighting prowess, the only thing he considered himself to be good at at life, had earned him his first degree of acceptance among the group.

“Really impressive, good job Bastiel,” Gale commented.

“Now, let’s move onto a whole different beast: ranged weaponry,” Erron said to the team’s newcomer, “Come team! To the weapons range!” He began to walk towards a door at the

other side of the room, Cameron and Gale followed behind him, and so did Bastiel, with Cade following the group further behind.

The room was larger than the one before, yet, at Bastiel's first glance, it looked empty and barely illuminated.

"Yo, Bastiel," Cameron beckoned her new teammate, "you wanna see something cool?" she said as she tinkered with a panel located near the room's entrance.

After she was done having her way with the panel the room came to life; lights came up, barricades and obstacles protruded from the floor and from the walls. Racks of weapons popped from the sides, and holographic targets began to be displayed across the room.

"Pretty cool, eh?" Cameron said, "This is one of the coolest—and most expensive things that we have here. We can reshape it anyway we want but they don't let me add or change the presets, not after what happened last time . . ."

"Quite awesome indeed—wait what?" Bastiel hadn't seen anything like that room before but Cameron's last sentence had caught him off guard.

"She went a little overboard and almost broke the whole thing," Gale explained.

"It was just a small miscalculation!" Cameron clarified.

Erron laughed, "Let's not get sidetracked here." He commented, "Say, Bastiel, your file—it didn't mention you having any formal firearm experience, is that right?"

"I won't lie—I haven't been formally trained in firearms," Bastiel confessed his lack of experience in that field. He always had a predilection for swords and close-combat weaponry.

"Well you will have to learn, and fast," Erron commented, "either way, since you just joined us they still haven't finalized your arsenal, it'll give you some time to practice. Gale, Cammy, would you be so kind and assist him?" he asked the two women.

“Of course, Erron.” Gale grabbed two handguns and handed one over to Bastiel. “Let’s start with the basics then. Don’t worry, these don’t have any real ammunition,” she clarified as the handguns themselves were very much genuine.

Cameron fired up a basic target sequence. A group of yellow humanoid holographic shapes stood at different distances across the room. The target dummies then began to move, roll, dodge, and seek cover in a pre-established rotation.

“Now, watch my stance,” Gale firmly grasped the handgun with her two hands, elbows slightly bent, and her feet apart from each other.

She aimed forward and with a remarkable acumen and pace, began to shoot once at every target, hitting all of their heads. The holographic heads shattered upon registering the hit and the bodies dropped down in a somewhat faux yet convincing death animation.

“I know you can hit all of them if you take your time, but your goal is to do it as fast as I did it,” Gale stepped away and Bastiel stood in her place.

Cameron restarted the target sequence. Bastiel mimicked Gale’s stance and attempted to match Gale’s speed, and shot at the targets. His attempt to match the blonde woman’s acumen had a negative effect on his less than stellar accuracy. Bastiel managed to hit the first closest targets, but missed almost half of the total, especially the furthest ones.

Gale scratched her head, “Hmm, not bad for a first timer, could’ve done better if you ask me,” she gave her assertion, after all, one of the reasons she was recruited into Gestalt was her second to none expertise with firearms and rifles, one of the skills in her arsenal that made Gale Lacroix a deadly assassin. “Try to breathe more this time and take a little pause if you need to aim,” she instructed Bastiel.

“Gotcha.” Bastiel took a deep breath and readied himself for a second round.

Cameron restarted the sequence once more. This time, Bastiel went slower and took his time to aim the targets he found more difficult to hit, ending in a much improved but still far from perfect result.

“Much better,” Gale commenced, “but do remember that in a live firefight the enemy won’t give you time to aim. This was just to see how you fared and where you stand with a handgun.”

“Yeah Bastiel, this ain’t gonna be a turn based combat system!” Cameron joked. Her jest was followed by an intoxicating giggling.

“She’s right . . . in her own way,” Gale interjected, “I’ll help you improve if you teach me some of those sword moves of yours,” she offered a fair exchange of knowledge.

“Sounds fair enough to me, Gale,” Bastiel accepted the deal.

“Hey, don’t forget you have to teach me too!” Cameron reminded him.

“Of course Cameron, I will,” Bastiel said.

“Remember—just Cammy,” Cameron said with a reprimanding tone.

Bastiel laughed, “Alright, alright, my bad—Cammy.”

Erron joined the conversation, “That’s how we will succeed as a team, we will all reinforce each other’s strengths and shave off the weaknesses. And when we succeed the Nation will be safer as a result.”

All five members of Gestalt continued to practice with an assortment of training firearms, with Gale, Erron, and Cade having the best performance results, respectively. Cameron and Bastiel had the lowest overall scores, as those two were the least proficient of the quintet in that field.

After a couple of hours of training had passed, the firearm training room's doors opened, and the operator Leah Sutherland entered the room in the company of a stout man. The man wore a gray and purple t-shirt and blue jeans that were held by a dark brown belt. His dark hair was messy and the stubble on his chin and cheeks was at least a couple days old. That man could've used more sunlight in his life, as evidenced by his pale complexion—it certainly wouldn't have hurt him at all.

“Phew! I've been working nonstop since yesterday, but I've finally finished getting the 105MC ready and setup for the new guy,” the stout man said.

“Whoa, Eddie!” Erron exclaimed, “Finally got out of your cave, eh?” he said to the man as he approached him and tapped his right shoulder.

“Eddie!” Cameron yelled, “Come meet the new guy—he's a Nasivern just like you.”

“What, really?!” The man's words were sprinkled with curiosity and excitement at the expectative of meeting a fellow Nasivern, as there so few of them left alive.

“Yes, come!” Cameron grabbed his hand and guided him towards Bastiel, who was being coached about a rifle firearm by Gale Lacroix.

Leah Sutherland followed the man and Cameron.

“Eddie, he's Bastiel Ist—Isthal—did I said that right?” Cameron introduced them both.

“Isthal? Do you mean—” the man instantly recognized Bastiel's unique last name, “no freaking way! The heir of Isthara—I had no idea!”

“The heir of what now?” a confused Cameron asked.

“I'm—” the man froze and had to clear his throat before continuing, “sorry, I'm just so honored to finally meet the Heir of Isthara himself. Edram Pertz, at your service,” Edram shook

Bastiel's hands with a unique mix of nervousness and enthusiasm. Once again, the legacy of Bastiel's grandmother was made manifest.

"Relax, I'm just Bastiel," Bastiel said humbly, "nice to meet you, Edram."

"Eddie boy here is our quartermaster," Cameron explained, "he's made all sorts of cool stuff for us—and also happens to be a Nasivern, just like you."

"There aren't that many of us left, so it's always a great sight to meet another Nasivern," Edram commented, his words coated with a faint gloom.

"Right," Bastiel added. After the fall of their home world, less than a hundred thousand Nasivern remained alive on the planet Orbis.

"Well, having two Nasivern here should bring us good luck—what are the odds of that!" Cameron said, her quirk comment made the two men smirk.

"You know Cammy, I really think you're right," Edram said, "by the way, you haven't been trying to tamper with the room's presets again, I hope?" he quickly checked the holographic targeting system's panel for any sign of modification on its configuration.

"No—of course not!" Cameron said.

"You designed this training system?" a curious Bastiel asked.

"I designed the whole room!" Edram clarified, "Impressive, isn't it?"

"It really is amazing, great job," Bastiel complimented him, "never seen anything like it before."

"Oh just you wait till you get to use the combat gear I've designed, and the prototypes I have in store—once we get the budget for them, that is," Edram gloated, always prideful of his master craftsmanship that stemmed from the knowledge of the Nasivern that came before him.

"In fact, I've been working nonstop since yesterday to finish your Battle Suit," he said.

“My . . . Battle Suit?” Bastiel asked, intrigued by the meaning of those words.

“What? The boss didn’t tell you about them?”

“No, not really,” Bastiel answered.

Erron Leitner had a suggestion for Edram, “Why don’t you go show him then, Eddie? In the meantime, Cade and I should get us all some well-deserved lunch.”

“It’d be my pleasure, boss. Come with me, Bastiel,” Edram said with excitement.

“Sure thing,” Bastiel followed him.

“Oh, this I want to see!” Cameron tagged along with the two Nasivern, “Come, Leah, you could use a break too.”

“I . . . I still have a lot of things to finish setting—” Leah Sutherland was interrupted by her energetic friend.

“Nah, nah, nah, you’re coming with me.” Cameron insisted.

“Alright, alright,” Leah yielded.

“I think I’ll join you, Erron.” Gale said.

Edram, Bastiel, Leah, and Cameron left their teammates and walked west until they took a set of stairs towards the second floor of the Enclave. They continued to walk straight until they reached Gestalt’s Research and Development Lab—the domain of Quartermaster Edram Pertz.

The room had a few large tables filled with all sorts of scattered tools and a generous amount of computer terminals and displays. At the leftmost wall, a few boxes marked as ‘Prototype’ and ‘For testing purposes only’ laid on one of the tables along with an assortment of cables and circuitry boards of all colors and varied lengths and shapes.

It would seem like a hurricane had just passed through the room, given the scattered mess of all the hardware and tools present. Utter chaos were words often used to describe the scenery of Edram's workplace.

While the room seemed disorganized at first sight, there was a certain intangible order amidst all that disorder that only the Quartermaster Edram Pertz could decipher. Bastiel glanced at one of the computer displays and saw an intricate source code that was being worked on.

"Welcome to my humble abode!" Edram announced, "pardon the mess, I haven't had time to clean up."

"You've said that for months now, Eddie." Cameron reminded the quartermaster before directing her gaze towards Bastiel, "Between you and me—it was already like this by the time I joined," she muttered to the newcomer.

"Don't worry about it," said Bastiel, who continued to have a look around.

"Alright, let's get straight to business—as they say," Edram walked towards the other side of the room with Bastiel, Leah, and Cameron following his lead.

The Nasivern engineer sat down and cracked his fingers before typing out a series of commands and authorization passwords on a computer terminal, "Long story short: Gestalt's strike team will be wearing the Battle Suits I've designed when they go out on operations . . . and this baby right here happens to be yours."

A large rectangular black box that stood in front of them was seemingly brought to life by Edram's commands. Its front and side panels opened to reveal its contents: a red, dark gray, and black full body armor, with a lighter shade of gray on parts of its chest and on the joints.

The visually stunning and state of the art design of the suit was a testament to Edram Pertz's unbound knack for creation and to his abilities as an engineer. An underlying bodysuit,

made of a sleek, resistant, and flexible material granted the wearer unrestricted movement and a high grade of protection against blunt impacts and most basic forms of firearms. A complex array of wires and sensors were woven into the bodysuit, which provided all sorts of biometric data for the suit's systems to process, which were housed in its helmet.

The front of the chest featured three sharp and symmetrical armor plates bathed in a crimson red color. The unique alloy that the plates were made of was created via a meticulous and arduous process that the Nasivern used to employ—a process that Edram adapted and modified around the limitations of Vaifen's technology and available materials, with the end result being as close to the original as he could. On the backside, three segmented plates offered protection; holsters could be mounted in between each plating, for firearms and melee weaponry.

The suit's limbs featured angular armor plating that was of a similar design to the chest's, down to the same crimson red color, while the two red shoulder plates sported a round design. The full closed helmet was mostly made of the same alloy used in the suit's armor plates, and it depicted a sleek and sharp visage with a featureless mouthpiece; its menacing-looking eyes illuminated in a bright blue hue. The helmet shared the same pattern of red, black, and gray colors that the body armor sported.

A V-shaped crest was featured on its forehead, it wasn't just an aesthetic choice—it concealed two high range antennas used for communication. The imposing visage that the helmet evoked was meant to strike fear at the heart of even the most seasoned combatants, and would surely cause a scare to the most incautious.

The suit was also provided with a special belt, the buckle had an angular pattern similar to the suit's plating; additional systems were housed on it, as well as an auxiliary processor that complimented the helmet's hardware in case of a failure. The suit was powered by an ingenious

array of flexible and rechargeable batteries distributed all across the chest, back, helmet, legs, and arms.

The Quartermaster cleared his throat before introducing the suit to its would-be user, “Bastiel Isthall—behold, the GT-BS105MC ‘Nightingale’ Battle Suit,” a prideful Edram Pertz announced, “the fifth of the first generation of Gestalt Battle suits—designed to enhance its user’s fighting capabilities and grant them an unparalleled edge in combat unlike anything else out there.”

Bastiel spoke but a single word, “Amazing.” He was awed at the sight of such a mechanical wonder. It was, without a doubt, leagues better than his Agito vigilante costume consisting of a dark jacket, red scarf, and a modified biker’s helmet.

Cameron tapped Bastiel’s arm with her left elbow, “I told you—Eddie here is a genius,” she said.

“The core design is inspired by the old Nasivern suits, armors, and frames that our people used to wear in the past, but I gave it my own personal touch,” Edram explained as he continued to type commands on the computer terminal.

“Try it out, Bastiel!” Cameron said.

“Yes, I was about to say that,” Edram said. “Bastiel, please try it out, see if I got your shape right,” the last command he had inputted on the computer made the suit go into its wearable standby mode.

Bastiel Isthall took off his shoes and walked towards the crimson red suit. He began to put it on with the utmost of care: first the lower section, then the torso and arms, and finally the belt, the suit automatically snapped around his body. He took a few steps and stretched his body, the

suit fit him like a glove, “It really feels quite lightweight,” he commented, “I thought it’d be heavier and more rigid.”

“That’s the idea,” Edrams answered, “You’re not wearing a tank in terms of armor, but the special layered mesh bodysuit and the armor plates offer way more protection than the average military gear. One of my goals was to keep the weight footprint to a minimum.”

Bastiel began to throw a series of punches and kicks into the air, along with a few graceful spins and movements, all part of his Absolute Doctrine fighting style, culminating with his right index finger pointing above.

Edram chuckled, “Hah! Pointing at the heavens—classic.”

Cameron grabbed the suit’s helmet and handed it over to Bastiel, “Don’t forget the helm, dude.”

Bastiel proceeded to wear it; the helmet snapped and hermetically sealed around him.

“Now check this out,” Edram tinkered on the computer once more and the suit’s operating system booted up, the helmet’s visor began to show its heads up display.

“Whoa!” Bastiel exclaimed with the same amazement of a kid that had just gotten a new shiny toy.

“I designed the OS, it’s a work in progress though, still lacking a few planned features,” Edram said, “Gestalt OS or ‘gtOS’ is what makes all of this work. It lets us process battlefield info in real time and allows the user to receive crucial information through augmented reality—our friend Leah here can communicate with you guys, your very own ancilla.”

The shy Operator Leah blushed, “That’s—that’s right.” she spoke in a soft manner.

The Quartermaster continued his explanation, “Your vitals, any injuries received, real time hostile and teammate positioning, points of interest, building layouts, video feeds—you

name it, Leah has it for you.” Edram explained some of the features of the Gestalt OS, another daughter of his, born from the union between his hard work and his brilliant mind.

Bastiel looked around the room as Edram showcased some of the suit’s augmented reality capabilities.

Leah added some words to the Quartermaster’s explanation, “It even has the ability to interface with gtOS embedded weaponry for live ammunition counters, right there on your heads up display.”

“Right, I almost forgot about that . . . thanks, Leah.” said Edram.

“Just like a video game, eh?” Cameron commented.

“Maybe so, it’s all really impressive, Eddie,” Bastiel said, “I’ve never seen something like this before.”

“Of course you haven’t, because there’s nothing else like this—not at this level of sophistication,” Edram gloated.

“Do all of us get a suit like this?” Bastiel asked.

“Yes, these first five suits are just a first generation. Functionally, they all share the same basic features and design,” Edram answered.

“Ahem,” Cameron interjected, “except mine, because it’s the coolest.”

“Yes, Cammy—hers is the exception.” Edram said, “Her suit is actually an adapted version of the first prototype I built: the GT-BS100. The other four are part of a mass produced ‘105’ line—but like I said, they’re functionally the same at a core level.”

While Edram Pertz wasn’t the most eloquent man, he always loved to speak about his work, even if his conversation partners don’t often fully understand the meaning of his technical and mechanical jargon.

Cameron could not let the opportunity go to waste go gloat a little while explaining what his friend meant, “In simpler terms: It just means that while we all get access to some really cool gadgets I’m the only one that gets drones and neither of you do, so, yeah, mine’s better.”

“That’s just because I only had time to integrate that interface on the original prototype framework, so for now only your suit has the required chipset to gain access to the GT-SED4 Drones—the extra chipsets on Cammy’s suit allow her to fulfil her tech specialist role with ease.”

“They’re called ‘Hawk’ drones, Eddie. Hawks,” Cameron said, “we agreed on my suggested name, remember?”

“Whatever,” Edram shrugged, “Either way Bastiel, does the suit feel right? I mean, it doesn’t feel tight or loose or anything of the sorts?” He asked for feedback.

“Nope, Eddie, it fits me just fine, almost as if it was tailored for me. You did mention something about my measurements earlier, where did you get them from?” Bastiel asked, his question was sparked out of genuine curiosity.

“I was provided with them recently, no name or anything. Normally it’d take me a few days to adapt the basic frame to its user’s size, but since this is the fifth one I’ve done I got the process pretty much nailed down and optimized,” Edram answered, “Commander Erron’s was the worst due to his height.”

“Is that so?” Bastiel responded. He looked down and focused his sights on the suit’s belt and noticed that a few buttons were present on the sides, concealed by the buckle’s unique design.

“What are these for?” Bastiel asked as his fingers approached the buttons of unknown purpose, he was about to press one of them when he was startled by Leah.

“Don’t!” The woman yelled.

“Careful!” Edram yelled.

The warnings from those two made Bastiel raise both hands off the belt.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Edram said, “I forgot to explain that, my bad. Those buttons activate the suit’s Overdrive Burst.”

“The what?” Bastiel felt clueless.

“Your finishing move, man, geez,” Cameron said. Her explanation didn’t seem to be that helpful.

“It’s a new, experimental feature.” Edram answered, “When activated, it draws a huge amount of power from the suit’s reserves to overcharge either your fists or feet for a devastating blow—still needs proper testing and calibration, though, so don’t go pressing that in my lab!”

“Oh! I see,” Bastiel found it most interesting.

“Yeah, don’t pop it here, you’ll end up trashing Eddie’s workplace.” Cameron commented, “Although he does a good job at that on his own.”

“Hey now!” Edram interjected. “Anyways, everything seems fine, and there’s no diagnostic errors—let’s do some minor tests just to be sure so I can sign this off with a green.”

“Sure,” Bastiel agreed.

The two of them ran a series of tests to make sure that the suit was working properly, between kinetic movement tests that involved Bastiel further punching and kicking into the air, testing the suit’s batteries, to software and operating system tests. Cameron and Leah conversed with one another during the testing procedures, with Cameron’s energetic personality clashing with Leah’s introverted and shy nature.

Bastiel got acquainted with his new red Nightingale Battle Suit, amazed by how agile, faster, and stronger he felt while wearing it. Once the tests were finished, the Quartermaster began the shutdown procedure on Bastiel's Battle Suit and helped him take it off. He returned the suit back to its container box.

"Now that I know the 105MC is clear for use it's time to load it up in the armory with the rest of the suits," Edram said as the black box that housed the crimson red armor sealed itself.

Commander Erron Leitner walked in, "Team, you know . . . this lunch I just got for all of us ain't gonna eat itself!" He said with a smirk, "they haven't finished our lounge room up here, but we can use the briefing room's table in the meantime. Let's go, lunch lunchie time!" He clapped twice.

Bastiel, Leah, Cameron, and Edram formed a beeline behind their commander and marched towards Gestalt's briefing room downstairs. As they entered the room they saw Gale Lacroix and Cade Saunders already there, waiting for the rest of their team.

An elliptical table served as the room's center piece, the brand new leather chairs were still wrapped in their protective plastic; several bags of food and beverages laid on top of the table, awaiting to be consumed.

Bastiel Isthel sat between Edram Pertz and Cameron Bennett, Leah sat next to Cameron, while Cade Saunders, Gale Lacroix and Erron Leitner sat on the other side of the table. Erron began to take out sets of hamburgers and fries from the bags, and gave one of them to each person. He then distributed the beverages in the same fashion.

"Well team, enjoy your lunch, our first with all Gestalt seven together, the first of many to come." Erron said.

"Thank you, boss!" Cameron exclaimed.

The burgers' aroma permeated the room as each person unwrapped theirs. One by one, they began to devour them, satiating their hunger—a respite after an arduous day of training.

“Oh my, this is some good stuff right here.” Erron commented on the taste of his meal.

Cameron's inquisitive mind had much curiosity about the fifth and latest member of Gestalt's strike team, “So Bastiel, let's get to know a bit more about yourself.”

“Uh, there isn't much to know about me,” Bastiel stumbled trying to find a better answer right before he took another bite out of his hamburger.

“C'mon, lad, don't be shy!” Cameron attempted to encourage him to speak. “Let's see, I was looking for a bit of info on you while you were testing the red Nightingale. You used to live in the Palace with the King, the Prince, and the Princess, right?”

“Yeah, I used to.” Bastiel answered, “King Sulwyn raised me since . . . well, you know, the fall of Nineveh. My parents died fighting on that day.”

“Yeah! Every Nasivern knows Isthara and her son, Aeoros, he was Bastiel's father,” Edram couldn't help himself to comment with a mouthful.

Cameron tried to divert the subject, she wasn't fond of speaking about the dead, especially during lunchtime, “Eek! Well it must've been kind of cool to live in such a big place?” Cameron continued to further inquire into Bastiel's past.

“Yeah it was, can't complain. There were rules but we managed to get ourselves in all sorts of trouble, and you'd never had to worry about anything, unless you'd break an expensive statue or something,” Bastiel answered. He let loose a short lasting smile as glimpses of his childhood memories and mischiefs ran across his mind.

Cade let loose a mild, contemptuous grunt upon hearing Cameron and Bastiel's exchange. "So that's why he's here, he's the King's protégé," he thought to himself, "this Nasivern got in just by mere nepotism—the King's pet dog, that's all he is."

The green member of Gestalt and former Special Forces operative disapproved of Bastiel's privileged background amidst Vaifen's Royal Family.

Gale Lacroix's ears picked up Cade's grunt, but she acted as if she hadn't noticed it, not wanting to instigate a feud amidst lunch. She instead opted to join the interrogation, "So, that means you know the Prince and Princess very well, how's Prince Seyren? He is rarely seen in the media." she asked.

"He's alright, I guess, always busy with the Crown's affairs and whatnot," Bastiel lied, he did not want to tarnish the perception people have of the Prince heir, who in truth was a womanizer and a spoiled carefree man that had never paid the slightest attention to the responsibilities that would one day fall upon him. In spite of the truth that Bastiel kept to himself, he knew that deep down Seyren Starsong was a good, caring person, and ultimately the closest thing he's ever had to a brother.

How Seyren Starsong had not been part of a widespread scandal, given his usual antics and behavior is something Bastiel couldn't quite figure out still. If the Crown's detractors knew the truth about the Prince heir they would have enough ammunition to shoot at the crown for months, even years. Perhaps the Prince was not as reckless as Bastiel thought, and very much knew how to stay out of the public eye's scrutiny.

"Cool, cool, he's so dreamy," Cameron said, "what about Princess Vesper, I've always seen her at charities and public events."

"Yeah, she handles that sort of work," Bastiel answered as he chewed on his fries.

“Hmm, I bet you like her don’t cha’ Bastiel?” Cameron’s words were more of a joking nature, but they were like an inescapable trap laid upon Bastiel Isthall’s feelings.

“I—I, what?” Bastiel blushed. Of course he loved Vesper more than anything else, but their relationship was something they’ve kept private, away from prying and scrupulous eyes.

“I’ll take that as a yes then.” Cameron responded, “See, Leah! I told you I have an eye for these things.”

“But—but I didn’t say I did,” a slightly confused Bastiel spoke.

“And now you just did!” Cameron poked him, “All part of my plan.”

Gale Lacroix shook her head and laughed softly; Erron however couldn’t contain himself and laughed hard.

Edram gave his honest yet blunt opinion on the matter, “Well I don’t blame ya if you do, Bastiel. She’s kinda hot if you ask me.”

“Eddie? Where’s your modesty!” Cammy reprimanded him, “We’re talking about the Princess of Vaifen here.”

Erron laughed once more, “Ah Cammy, cut Bastiel some slack. Besides you should’ve seen your face earlier when you said how ‘dreamy’ the Prince is, I could see hearts coming from your eyes.”

“That—that’s. I didn’t say that! It’s—it’s not what I meant!” Cameron blushed with embarrassment.

“Oh, he got you good there.” Gale said.

Cameron continued to explain herself, but she just kept making matters worse with every word she spoke in her defense, while Cade remained silent and kept to himself and his lunch.

The Gestalt team continued to have their lunch amidst friendly jokes and banter, a friendly atmosphere radiated throughout the room. Despite having met them just a few hours ago, Bastiel Isthall began to feel accepted among the group, something he had always struggled with throughout his life given the unique peculiarities of his life and his origins.

Other than Vesper and Seyren, the only one true friend he's ever had is Evan Lecardes, whom he met during his teenage years and was now an attending physician. Bastiel Isthall smiled, he might not have been a master of conversation and social interaction, but he was enjoying that moment.

The amiable lunch was now over and they began to pick up the leftovers and collect the garbage. Erron's mobile device beeped, he read a message he had just received, words that startled him.

"Team, listen up! We have to clean fast—our boss is coming right this instant for a briefing!" Erron exclaimed.

The Gestalt team began to pick up the pace and disposed of the garbage, waiting seated around the briefing room's table. Minutes later, National Intelligence Director James Exley entered the room holding a briefcase.

"Good afternoon, members of Gestalt," he said.

"General," Erron greeted him on behalf of the team, he stood up along with the rest of the team.

"Please sit, we have a few matters to discuss," Exley said, "but first, I hope you've all been acquainted with the newest member of your team, Bastiel Isthall."

“Yes we have, Sir. Bastiel participated in today’s sparring sessions,” Erron answered, as it was his responsibility as team leader to oversee the training and performance of Gestalt’s members.

“Good, I’ll read your report later today. Gestalt will soon be fully operational, needless to say, we have high expectations for the team,” Exley said as he sat down.

The Director, and renowned General among Vaifen’s intelligence apparatus, then pulled a device from his briefcase, and after his identity was confirmed by the system, information began to be displayed on the room’s monitors.

“Let’s cut to the chase. Behold, the perpetrators behind the recent wave of attacks upon the Nation: The Ashen Reckoning.” The entire team listened to Exley’s words with the utmost of attention.

“Masquerading themselves as the harbingers of freedom and justice, they have decided to wage war against our Nation, and bring what they’ve referred to as, a ‘liberating revolution’ upon Vaifen and its people. One of their goals is the destruction of the fundamental pillars of this nation’s governance,” Exley continued to speak to the team.

“The Ashen Reckoning is led by someone who calls himself ‘Dogma’. I hate to give this man any sort of credit but he’s pretty good at hiding and covering his tracks. So far we cannot confirm his real identity or even his appearance . . . which he always conceals in his video recordings.”

“Freedom? They’re murdering innocents!” Cameron couldn’t contain the need to speak her mind.

“That we can all agree on, Agent Bennett,” Exley said. “Five attacks this year so far, the last three of them right here in Ternion, the heart of the Nation.”

“What do they even hope to achieve?” Bastiel Isthel inquired.

Exley pulled a piece of paper from his briefcase and read an excerpt from a statement written by the Ashen Reckoning, “The end of the current oppressive ruling caste and to bring forth real freedom, to shake the corrupt pillars of the nation, and give forth the rise of a new Vaifen, where its people are finally the ones in power and not the current ‘elite and monarchs,’” Exley answered Bastiel.

The Director continued his briefing, “We are yet to confirm whether or not they’re receiving external funding and aid from foreign factors—and what extent of internal complicity may exist. Our preliminary reports suggest both of these scenarios as highly possible, the implications this entails means that we must proceed with surgical delicacy.

“Now, it shames me to say this but, we have failed to coordinate effective action between the intelligence agency, police forces, and the National Guard. Bureaucracy constrains us, as a result, they’ve been successful in their attacks.”

Exley took a short pause in his exposition before continuing.

“This is where Gestalt comes into play. You are given special operating freedom and privileges for this reason. It’s time to go on the offensive, your priority is to stop these terrorists, and find anything that leads us to ‘Dogma’, putting an end to the Ashen Reckoning once and for all—that includes anyone or anything that might be aiding them in their spread of terror,” Exley explained the responsibility Gestalt would soon have.

“You heard the Boss, team, the whole Nation is counting on us,” Erron reminded them.

“It is imperative that Gestalt begins to operate as soon as possible—the old timetable is no longer acceptable, formalities and procedures will be skipped as a result,” Exley said.

“Quartermaster Pertz, I take it all battle suit tests were positive.”

“Yes sir!” Edram answered. “All five Nightingale suits are fully operational, the OS still requires some polish but I assure you that the current build is more than ready for deployment. As for the gadgets and extra equipment well—I still need some time to get everything up and ready.”

“We will have to make do and launch with what we have for now,” Exley commented, “as for the facilities, construction crews will work on the double to expedite things; yesterday’s attack demands that we get you out there in the field ASAP.”

An ‘Incoming Communication’ notification was displayed on the room’s main screen. “Now, since the strike team has been completed, I have one little surprise for you seven,” Exley said.

A video link was established between the room and King Sulwyn Starsong’s office at the Royal Palace.

“My King,” Exley bowed at the screen, “You’re now live with the Gestalt team.”

“King Starsong,” Erron Leitner said. He, along with the rest of the team, stood and bowed as a sign of respect towards the Regent of Vaifen. Bastiel bowed at his Sovereign as if he was present in the room, just as he had done so numerous times in the past.

The King began to address the team, “Greetings, members of Gestalt. These are tumultuous times we’re facing, I strongly desired to share a few words with you all on behalf of the Crown,” his strong and sharp gaze fixated upon them all, and his voice resonated throughout the room as if he was physically there with them.

“My King, on behalf of Gestalt, I have no words to express how honored we are to have this privilege,” Erron Leitner said with pride.

“A monumental task lies ahead, Commander Leitner,” the King said, “as the King of this Nation, these words of encouragement are but the least I can do for your team.

“There are those that wish to spread death and fear upon our proud Nation and our beloved citizens, they are actively conspiring with forces that hide in the shadows in order to shatter the very foundations of Vaifen, to bend the spirit of our people, and seize power through any means. Your task, which will be quite arduous, is to stop them, and to keep this—our glorious Nation—safe from any who wish to inflict damage to Vaifen’s spirit. You have all been thoughtfully selected based on your unique abilities and personal characteristics—individual pieces that in unison, will coalesce to form a mighty and unshakable gestalt, much like your namesake, and as such, you must work as a team to ensure the safety of the people of Vaifen that we so willingly serve.

“You will all soon be the knights of this nation, above all others. Your hard work and sacrifices will bring forth everlasting peace and safety to this Nation and its citizens, be it by sword and gun, by shield and technology. The crown and the people of Vaifen will be eternally thankful for your service. I want all of you to know that you have my complete confidence and support in every step of the way. Now go forth, Gestalt, and bring glory to the Nation of Vaifen and its people!”

The morale of each member of Gestalt soared to new heights upon hearing the words of King Sulwyn Starsong.

“We will not let Vaifen down, my King,” Erron ensured the Sovereign.

“We are all counting on you,” The King said before closing the video link.

“Now you are all aware of the magnitude of what is expected of you all,” Director Exley commented, “nothing but the finest of results, and nothing less—ah, one last thing.”

Exley walked towards Bastiel Isthals seat and handed over a keycard badge he had on his left pocket.

“Here, Bastiel, your access keycard. Welcome to Gestalt, Agent Isthals.”

“Yay!” Cameron clapped.

Bastiel glanced at the black and red card, “Thanks, sir,” he said with joy.

“That will be all for today. Construction crews will continue to work through the remainder of the afternoon and overnight to finish up the remaining facilities as soon as possible. Commander Leitner, Quartermaster Pertz, Operator Sutherland, you will have to stay with me to review certain pending aspects; the rest of you are dismissed, take a well-deserved rest, and stay out of trouble,” Exley imparted his instructions to the team.

“As you wish, General,” Erron said. “You heard him, fellas, you’re dismissed for the day, go home.”

“As for you, Agent Isthals,” Exley stared at the white haired Nasivern, “there’s still some formalities that we’ve skipped due to the nature of your recruitment but we cannot omit them forever—we need a medical authorization clearance from your attending physician at your earliest convenience. A formality at this point, but we’re all slaves to bureaucracy and paperwork whether we like it or not.”

“Understood sir, I will get it as soon as possible,” Bastiel reassured him.

“Get some rest, team, you all did great today. I will see you all tomorrow,” Erron spoke.

Director James Exley left the room in the company of Edram Pertz, Leah Sutherland, and Erron Leitner. The rest of the team went to the locker room to change clothes and grab their personal belongings. Bastiel changed back into his clothes and grabbed his wallet and mobile phone, when he laid hands upon his vehicle’s keys he realized something.

“Oh, right,” he muttered. Bastiel had left his vehicle parked nearby Halcen’s Restaurant the morning before. He had completely forgotten about it, the past two days had been quite a hectic rush for him.

“Is something wrong, Bastiel?” Gale asked.

“I forgot I left my car parked somewhere yesterday—it’s a long story.”

“Well, I could drive you to it. Where did you leave it at?” Gale offered her assistance.

“One block away from Halcen’s Restaurant, in a parking lot near Grand Royale,” Bastiel said.

“I think I know that one . . . hmm, I suppose it’s not a problem, I have to drive Cammy today too anyways,” Gale assured him.

“Thanks, Gale. Appreciate it.”

Gale, Cameron, Cade, and Bastiel left the Gestalt Enclave, boarded the elevator down, and walked towards the National Intelligence Center’s parking lot.

“I will see you all tomorrow, good night,” Cade said with a stern tone and a sharp gaze as he walked away from the rest of the group.

“He really seems kinda stuck up,” Bastiel’s mind betrayed him and he grumbled his thoughts.

“No kidding,” Cameron said, “he’s a former Special Forces member and comes from a family full of military dudes—duty and all that stuff.”

Gale overheard the conversation, “Don’t mind him, he’s a bit of an ass but he’s quite the good soldier.”

Bastiel handed over the visitor's badge he got earlier to a security guard at the parking lot. The three of them got inside Gale's gray vehicle and departed the National Intelligence Center's premises, a peaceful sunset painted the skies.

During the drive towards the vicinity of the Grand Royale district, Cameron continuously played different sorts of music though the vehicle's radio and sang all the way, much to the dismay of Gale.

"Yo, girl," Cameron said to the owner of the vehicle, "did you know that you can unlock this bad boy's firmware and do all sorts of rad things? If you want I can do it for—"

"Don't," Gale interrupted Cameron.

"Alright, alright, just saying."

Minutes later, they finally arrived at the parking lot Bastiel mentioned.

"Yeah—right here, thank you so much Gale. Sorry for the inconvenience," Bastiel thanked Gale with modesty.

"No problem, have a good night, Bastiel" Gale said.

"See ya, dude!" Cameron bid her farewell.

Bastiel got off the vehicle and the two women drove away. He walked over the automated parking system's console and inserted a parking ticket; he was more than a day late, almost thirty six hours late to be precise.

He had no choice but to pay the hefty overstay fees in addition to the regular parking fees if he wanted his vehicle back. Bastiel exhaled deeply when he saw the exorbitant amount that was about to be debited. With the payment sorted out he got inside his red vehicle, and took a deep breath. Without a doubt, that was the most extended breakfast drive in recorded history—at last, it was finally time to head home.

Night fell as he drove towards his apartment, which was located in Apex lane. The moonlight shone upon the city of Ternion when Bastiel arrived at his home—a recently constructed apartment tower. He parked his vehicle and walked towards the elevators, ascending to the Penthouse floor; the apartment was gifted to him by King Sulwyn Starsong himself less than a year ago. While Bastiel considered the brand new penthouse to be too much of a place for him, it was a genuine gesture from the King that he could not refuse.

Bastiel entered his apartment and the lights turned on automatically. Despite being a rather costly abode, the majority of the penthouse's large space was empty and unfurnished, with a couple of boxes and containers on top of the apartment's wooden floors still waiting to be unpacked. Bastiel found little need for lavish furniture—the bare basics was more than enough for him. The penthouse's balcony had a fantastic and unobstructed view of Ternion that some would kill for. Bastiel dropped his keys at a small table near the entrance, scratched his head, and walked towards the kitchen.

“Bastiel Isthel Nystrom. Where have you been?” a female voice that seemed to emanate from the apartment itself spoke out loud.

“Alma, where do I even start?” Bastiel said to the voice as he grabbed a cold canned drink from his refrigerator and sat on a plain but comfortable couch, one of the very few pieces of furniture available in the apartment's living room.

“Well, I'm all ears,” the voice said.

Bastiel took a refreshing sip from the can, “Alright, after yesterday's attack, Royal Security picked me up at Halcen's, then—” Bastiel paused for a moment, he remembered that he didn't pay for that breakfast that he didn't even get to enjoy.

“Go on,” the voice spoke once more.

“Then the agents couldn’t find Seyren, he had another of his adventures the night before, you can figure out the rest. So anyways, I led them to him, they took us to the Palace. King Sulwyn offered me to join a special team under the NIC, and that’s where I was at today, at the National Intelligence Center,” Bastiel gave a short resume of his past two days to the voice.

“A team? What sort of team?” the voice asked.

“Gestalt, a special task force, it’s a small group, its priority is to stop the Ashen Reckoning and keep the nation safe.”

“Interesting,” the voice said.

“Huh?”

“You, finally getting a job,” the voice said with noticeable sarcasm.

“Whatever,” Bastiel rebutted.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong—sounds like a fitting job for you,” said the voice, “Isthara’s line will always be drawn to carry out that sort of deeds, that’s how she was, and that’s how your father was too.”

“Perhaps we are fated to do so,” Bastiel said. He put the empty can in the trash bin, and walked in front of a sword that was resting inside a thick glass display enclosure. The enclosure had a dark steel frame and base, a numeric pad served as an electronic lock and alarm system; he pressed a combination and the glass enclosure opened.

Bastiel grabbed the unique sword, the hilt and pommel were a single piece that had a very sharp and angular design with a gray and black color scheme. Symmetrical lines ran across the hilt. The scabbard was black and made of a rare metal and featured engraved lines, the silver colored locket and chape shared the hilt’s pattern design.

Bastiel Isthall held Avalon in his hands; the sword that once belonged to his grandmother, the legendary Nasivern warrior, Isthara. Avalon was the weapon she wielded when she took up arms and fought for the freedom of her people in ages long past—the very same blade that she used to carve her name throughout the annals of Nasivern history. She passed down the sword to her son, Aeoros, who rightfully wielded it in order to continue to preserve the peace her mother had fought so hard to achieve.

Before Bastiel's father fell in battle during the fall of the Nasivern home world over two decades ago, Aeoros Isthall had entrusted the sword and the safety of his then infant son to his friend, King Sulwyn Starsong of Vaifen. The man once known as the Indigo Blaze asked the King to give the sword to Bastiel and to teach him the importance of all that it represented.

Avalon had been a crucial part of the Nasivern race's history and culture, and much like Isthara and Aeoros Isthall themselves, the blade had been an agent of change throughout Nasivern history. No one knew the exact count of how many lives were ended by that sword in order to carve the way for peace.

Bastiel unsheathed the sword, the silvery blade was in pristine condition—and sharp as ever. The blade had the same engraved lines design as the scabbard. It would seem like the blade and hilt were carved from a single piece of metal as opposed to being crafted separately and then assembled together; whoever forged such a magnificent weapon surely possessed an exceptional craftsmanship ability. Isthara and her son knew the origins of Avalon, but both died before passing down that tale to others.

“Feeling moody?” the voice asked upon seeing Bastiel holding Avalon in his hands.

“Alma, do you think I can live up to her legend, and one day be worthy of wielding Avalon?” Bastiel asked while thinking about the sword’s past, his face reflected upon the silvery blade.

“Don’t get all sentimental on me. Avalon is now yours, Bastiel, whatever you do you have my support no matter what—we are family after all,” the voice said. “Besides, you resemble her more than you realize. At times, you even sound like her.”

“Do you miss her?” Bastiel asked the voice.

“Every microsecond of my existence.”

Bastiel carefully placed Avalon inside its resting place and reactivated the security alarm of the display enclosure, “I just wish I had the opportunity to meet her, mom and dad too,” he said.

“We are all that’s left of Isthara,” Alma spoke with a soft, sad tone. “Her sword, her blood, which lives through you.”

“And her trusted friend and confidant,” Bastiel said as he walked away from the sword.

“Don’t forget her legacy, which lives on in the few Nasivern exiles living on this planet,” the voice remarked.

Bastiel walked into one of the apartment’s three bedrooms, a desk and computer were in it, a television screen hung from one of the walls.

He opened one of the room’s closet doors, which concealed a large computer server. After inspecting it, Bastiel checked the computer and read a few diagnostic information and logs.

“I hope you haven’t been getting into trouble while I was away, Alma,” he said.

“Oh please . . . of course not, never,” Alma replied.

“You got to be more careful now that I’m part of Gestalt. If they find out that a Nasivern AI survived all along—Isthara’s Ancilla—they’d try to take you from me, or worse, destroy you out of fear,” Bastiel reminded Alma.

“Barely survived you mean,” Alma commented, “I’m not all that I used to be . . . besides, you’d never let them get away with that.”

“Of course not, I’d kill whoever tries to harm you. You said it yourself, we are family.”

Bastiel walked into his bedroom, he undressed and entered the room’s bathroom to take a shower. The hot stream of water helped him relax and unwind after such a long day. After he got out of the shower, he opened his closet to grab a fresh set of clothes. Bastiel laid eyes upon the gray and red helmet, the black jacket, and the long red scarf—items he wore to conceal his identity as he acted as the vigilante ‘Agito’ in nights past, in his aspiration to be a heroic figure of his own.

He thought that nobody knew about his nocturnal antics, but the fact King Sulwyn showed him footage and pictures meant that he wasn’t as stealthy as he thought he was; yet however, that way of crime fighting, while being outside the margins of law, is what got him recruited into Gestalt.

Alma looked at Bastiel through one of the cameras that acted as her eyes in the apartment, she knew exactly what was going on in Bastiel’s mind, “I suppose that ‘hobby’ is off the table for now?” she asked.

“For the moment, yeah. Gestalt is more important, they need Bastiel Isthala and not Agito,” Bastiel answered her. He placed the helm and scarf on a shelf and got dressed.

“Well, I will feel better knowing that you’re with that task force group of yours—it’s safer than running around at night alone looking for trouble.”

“You may be right there,” Bastiel agreed, “Plus, I’ll be wearing a Battle Suit—an armor based on the Nasivern armors, the group’s engineer is a Nasivern too.”

“Interesting,” Alma responded. “So there’s more remnants of our technology out there than I first thought—and Nasiverns willing to share those with others.”

An exhausted Bastiel threw himself onto his bed, it had never felt that good and comfortable before, “I suppose,” he said, “Isthara and my parents used to wear those, right?”

“Yeah, you could say they used some here and there,” Alma interfaced with the room, switched off the lights and turned on the air conditioning. “You can only tinker with the lights and AC so many times before it gets boring, you know,” she joked, but Bastiel knew the meaning of her words.

“All those great adventures you had with Isthara in the past, I know you must feel bored and constrained in that box,” Bastiel said to her.

“It’s fine, I’ve been in worse places.” Alma assured him, “trust me.”

“Someday I’ll work something out, figure a way for you to do great things, just like you used to do with Isthara, I promise you.”

“Take your time, we have all the time in the world,” Alma chuckled. “Good night, Bastiel.”

“Good night, Alma,” he replied.

Bastiel Isthara was so exhausted that he had no trouble drifting into sleep for the first time in months.

IV: CHROMATIC STRIKE

The sunrise, ever so punctual, was the harbinger of a new day in the city of Ternion, a city that still bore the wounds of the attack on Estival Station. Its citizens had slowly begun to recover a sense of normalcy in their lives as the days went on, while those that lost friends and family still mourned the tragedy—a pain that, perhaps, would never subside in its entirety.

Bastiel Isthral woke up that morning with the utmost of enthusiasm, fully rested, energized, and eager to start the day—a feeling most atypical for someone so accustomed to night hours and prone to sleep deprivation. As soon as his alarm clock went off he jumped out of his bed and walked straight towards his bathroom in order to freshen himself up and brush his teeth.

Alma, the Nasivern artificial intelligence that was once his grandmother's most faithful companion and confidant, was highly surprised at what she was observing through the cameras that served as her eyes. Bastiel was the textbook definition of a night owl, mornings were an aversion to him—and yet there he was, preparing himself a quick sandwich for his breakfast at the rhythm of a tune he hummed with enthusiasm.

“Are you feeling well, Bastiel?” Alma asked. “You sure you didn’t get replaced by somebody else? Perhaps you were injected with something, or perhaps there was something in the water?”

“What?” Bastiel said with his mouth full of a sandwich bite.

“You, waking up so energetic and this early to boot. It takes an average of ten alarm snoozes for you to wake up, and then I always have to intervene,” she reminded him of what was their usual morning wake up routine.

“Well, I have a job now—if you can call it that way. Besides, I really had a good night of sleep,” Bastiel said as he finished his breakfast and cleaned his dish before he walked back into his bedroom.

“Well, duh” Alma said with a snide. “For starters, you didn’t spend the whole night awake looking for trouble or beating the crap out of street thugs and other . . . undesirables,” the artificial intelligence’s voice resounded through the bedroom.

“True, no time for that now,” Bastiel brushed his teeth and began to change clothes.

“So, what are you doing today?” she asked. “You guys have been training for some time now.”

“I don’t know, I didn’t ask to be honest. Perhaps more training, we’ll see, I do need to get better at firearms, and fast.”

Bastiel finished dressing with a red shirt and matching black pants and jacket. He gave shape to his messy white hair as best as he could. With his pockets filled with his wallet, his newly issued Gestalt security access card, phone, and his car’s keys, Bastiel was ready to depart.

“Time to go, I’ll see you later, Alma,” he bid farewell to her.

“Stay safe Bastiel,” she said, “have fun.” Alma had come to the conclusion that Gestalt—or rather, the team, was doing good to Bastiel and his otherwise lonely nature. His well being and uplifted mood gave the battered Artificial Intelligence a sense of joy and comfort.

“And you stay out of trouble,” Bastiel reminded her.

The white haired Nasivern left his apartment, he walked towards his parking spot and got inside his red vehicle. Without wasting a single moment he began to drive towards the National Intelligence Center. The car’s navigation system provided him with the most optimal route to take.

With Estival Station still closed due to the attack that destroyed much of its infrastructure, its users were forced to take up other forms of transportation to carry out their daily activities. As all of the train routes that passed through Estival were shut down, the delicate balance of the flow of traffic in the large city of Ternion continued to be heavily disrupted as a result.

Traffic was heavier than usual for such an early time of the day, since the drive towards the Intelligence Center was about to take more than he anticipated, Bastiel Isthel decided to turn on the radio; a political opinion program was being broadcasted.

“The recent attack at Estival Station shows the ongoing incompetence of our Government in keeping us safe!” A male voice spoke with an angered and elevated tone, “over two hundred and twenty of our citizens died in the last attack, and hundreds more were injured—unacceptable!”

The interviewer spoke, “Senator Easton, we must understand that we’re dealing with a band of highly trained fanatics.”

“Indeed they are my friend. Still, fanatics or not, it is the duty of our overly bloated and incompetent security apparatus to keep our fellow citizens safe and to prevent these tragedies from happening in the first place!” The angered Senator exclaimed. “How many more innocent lives must be lost? How much more innocent blood must be spilled before they wake up and decide to finally do something about it?” His voice tone was even higher than before, his anger was palpable throughout the airwaves.

Bastiel Isthel’s attention was focused on the road ahead, he found himself stuck at a traffic jam that didn’t seem to get any better. With his vehicle stuck in traffic, he spared some of his attention to Senator Thomas Easton’s heated interview.

“Prime Minister Callahan once again addressed the nation yesterday, Senator Easton, and he once again ensured the Nation that—” the interviewer was abruptly interrupted by the Senator.

“Oh please! Do not get me started on Callahan! His less than stellar addresses leave much to be desired. If he’s going to read off a teleprompter then he should at least do it right!” The Senator exclaimed.

Bastiel shrugged, “Geez! This guy.” The vehicles that were ahead of him began to move at last.

The interviewer continued to engage with his vexed guest, “Senator, the Prime Minister ensured Vaifen that our security forces are coordinating all efforts to identify and stop these terrorists,” he commented, “and in addition to that, King Sulwyn Starsong, on his most recent address to the Nation said that he will personally present an initiative that will stop the rising threat of the Ashen Reckoning once and for all.”

Senator Easton was not pleased with the interviewer's comments, "With all due respect to Star—King Starsong, but what is he going to do about it? Continue sitting on that expensive chair in his ivory palace and babble more fancy words to the Nation while he remains seemingly oblivious and utterly inert to what's happening in Vaifen? He must feel so safe with that overpaid Royal Security he has exclusively for himself and his family. May I remind our listeners that each and every one of us has to pay for their security and all of their other luxuries—or should I say, privileges—which none of us gets to enjoy," the Senator lashed out against the Regent of Vaifen.

"What an asshole!" Bastiel said to himself, not fond of the words that the Senator had just said about his beloved King and fatherly figure.

The interviewer stumbled trying to gain control of the conversation, he was being devoured by his guest's fierce tongue, "It is known that you have always had a very critical position regarding our monarchy—I mean—the Crown, and towards our current Senate. This is one of the core pillars of your campaign, Senator. And, if we're to believe hearsay, you have your eyes set upon the Prime Minister's seat in these upcoming elections."

"Indeed. When we at the New Vaifen Front win the majority of seats at the Senate—which we will—and I am elected Prime Minister, we will bring real power to the people, real change to these outdated systems of governance," Senator Easton proclaimed. "We must look forward to the future, just like all of other Nations have done so, we can no longer pretend that we can stand alone as a nation-state in this global world that we live in."

"Are you referring to the Union of Nations, Senator?" The interviewer asked.

“Yes, I am,” Senator Easton responded. “We’ve been too reluctant towards them in the past. Yes, mistakes have been made by both sides, but the Nation has much to gain from a broader bilateral relationship of cooperation with the Union.”

Bastiel ignored the interview for a moment as he focused on taking the highway, a solid plan in his mind—until he encountered another traffic bottleneck, much to his dismay.

“Oh . . .” Bastiel had no choice but to take a deep breath, giving attention to the radio broadcast once more.

“Senator, many of your proposals are also deemed ‘radical’ by those who adverse you in the upcoming elections, going as far as to claim that they very much sound like what the Ashen Reckoning proclaims it is all about, albeit in a less radicalized way,” the interviewed remarked. “Do you have any words regarding these allegations?”

“The Ashen Reckoning and their coward leader, ‘Dogma’, are massacring our people with these bloodsheds. They claim they want to bring power to the people, a ‘revolution’ they call it—a false one in all falsehood. We are the ones that do seek to bring a true revolution to Vaifen, not through a path of violence, because that is not the correct way,” the Senator answered. “If they are listening to my words, I implore them to lay off their weapons and come forth, bring change through peaceful means and not through deceit, death, and violence; perhaps it’s time to—”

The interview was abruptly cut off and replaced by an obnoxious modern pop music, Bastiel found the ordeal most strange. He considered the Senator’s words to be nothing but complete rubbish, another political charlatan that spouted pure and unhinged nonsense to score some points with the populace at the face of opportunity that Vaifen’s upcoming legislative elections offered.

Yet, no one could deny that Senator Thomas Easton's political party, the New Vaifen Front, was gaining traction among the electorate with all of their proposals of shaking the foundations of Vaifen's way of governance, going as far as to challenge the Crown of Starsong itself, which has guided Vaifen through centuries.

Bastiel switched the radio off and turned on his car's local music player, the radio began to stream a music playlist from his phone as he approached the National Intelligence Center's premises.

Upon arriving at the Intelligence Center's eastern checkpoint, Bastiel swiped his access card and was granted access to the parking lot under the watchful eyes of a couple security guards inside a booth. He parked his vehicle in a decent spot before walking inside the building.

Bastiel headed towards the same north-eastern elevator he took during his first day in the company of National Intelligence Director James Exley and Operator Leah Sutherland, but this time he shared the ride with four other workers who were all dressed in proper office attire, in shades of dark gray, black, and blue. His casual clothing and white hair made him the odd passenger on the elevator.

"Destination, please." the elevator's voice system asked.

"Fourth floor," a woman said. She swiped her access card to confirm her credentials.

"Floor three," a man did the same with his card, he then continued to hold a conversation with a fellow coworker.

"Five," another man complied with the system's request.

Bastiel procured his access card from his pocket, "Floor six, Gestalt," Bastiel said as he swiped the card.

The four strangers were shocked upon hearing Bastiel speak that name. Gestalt, as its purpose was kept shrouded in complete secrecy, and therefore had begun to be the source of numerous ongoing rumors and wild speculation among the Intelligence Center's personnel ever since the initial internal rearrangements within the building took place to accommodate the brand new Gestalt enclave.

"Confirmed," the Elevator accepted each request and ascended in dutiful order, making each of the requested floor stops. One by one, the passengers began to exit the elevator on their respective destinations, until only Bastiel Isthel remained inside. The elevator arrived at the sixth floor, Bastiel got off from it, and its doors closed behind him.

Gone were the building materials he saw on his first day lying on the floor, and the area had been recently cleaned up. He swiped his card at the entrance of the Gestalt enclave and pressed his right thumb against the scanner. The glass doors opened wide, and he walked inside with pride.

Bastiel heard Quartermaster Edram Pertz's voice through a speaker, "Good morning, Bastiel!"

"Eddie?" Bastiel asked.

"Yeah, you're early, no one else is here, I'm in my lab upstairs, come," Edram said.

Bastiel was surprised that he had actually arrived early despite the delays in traffic. He complied with his fellow Nasivern's request and made his way upstairs towards Gestalt's Research and Development laboratory. Bastiel carefully navigated through the clutter and boxes on the ground and approached Edram Pertz, whose undivided attention was spent on soldering a small green circuit board.

"Morning, Eddie," Bastiel said.

The Nasivern Quartermaster put away his soldering tool and took off his protective glasses, “Good Morning!” He said whilst taking off his gloves to shake hands with Bastiel.

Bastiel shook Edram’s hand and scratched the back of his head with his other hand, “So . . . did I arrive too early? Everything’s been going so fast that I haven’t even asked if we have a fixed ‘work schedule’ and all that stuff,” Bastiel asked.

“Nah, it’s fine, we don’t have a strict schedule yet,” Edram answered, “I know Erron is around somewhere in the building, and everyone else should arrive in a few.”

“I see.” A curious Bastiel pointed at the circuit board, “What are you working on there?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing related to Gestalt, just a personal project,” Edram answered. “A new logic board for Argon.”

“Argon?” Bastiel asked, his curiosity now on the rise.

Edram shook his head, “Oh yeah, that’s right! I haven’t introduced you two yet, my bad,” he said, “Argon! C’mere boy!”

Barking sounds could be heard emanating from a corner. A mechanical canine pup, who was the source of the barks, rushed towards Edram Pertz at full speed. Its outer shell was made of a flexible and transparent polymer alloy, its complex internal wiring and metallic skeleton frame was visible as a result.

A series of interconnected hydraulics granted it lifelike motion that simulated that of a real puppy. Edram held his prized creation with his two hands, the mechanical pup tried to lick his face with its synthetic tongue.

“That’s a good boy!” Edram exclaimed. “Bastiel Ithal, this is Argon,” he extended Argon’s right paw towards Bastiel.

“Uh . . . nice meeting ya,” Bastiel shook hands with the artificial dog, which cheerfully barked back at Bastiel.

“Isn’t he just the best?” Edram carefully placed Argon on the ground. The joyful artificial dog spun around in circles before he ran around in a playful manner.

“He looks like a happy fella,” Bastiel gave his first impression. He and Argon could not stop staring at each other, Bastiel tilted his head to the right and then to the left, Argon mimicked him to the best of his mechanical ability.

“Well yeah, it’s . . . a long story, but to make it short: he’s a pet project, no pun intended. He’s starting to behave like a real dog now and he can learn manners just like a real one does too!” Edram explained. “I’m working on a new main board for him so that I can scale up his processing power, he’s starting to hit some bottlenecks, a bit of a lack of foresight on my part that I’m trying to fix now in my free time.”

“I see,” Bastiel sat on a nearby chair and continued to observe Argon’s behavior. He certainly acted and behaved like a real puppy of its size would, and perhaps could even pass for the real thing if he had a more finished body.

“Argon is also, well, my first foray into artificial intelligence,” Edram commented. “You know, there was a time when the Nasivern had AIs at their disposal, during the times of the Arghest Empire and the Old World, some were used for battle, others carried out other tasks.”

Bastiel scratched the back of his head, “Yup, I’ve heard tales about them, a thing or two perhaps.” He spoke a half-truth, as one of the closest things he had to a living relative was Alma, a Nasivern artificial intelligence like the ones Edram had just described—or what was left of one in her case.

King Sulwyn Starsong once said to Bastiel Isthala that keeping her existence in secrecy was paramount to her safety, as everyone would try to have their way with her, be it for good or malicious intent. In addition to the sheer mistrust the world would have of her and what she could potentially be able to do if she hadn't been damaged in the past.

"People fear what they do not understand." the King once told an infant Bastiel, words that echoed in his mind once more.

Edram took a deep breath, "Well, I know it might look like a pipedream and it most likely is, but one day I hope to be able to create my own. It'll be my greatest accomplishment, man!" A dreamy Edram said, his eyes looking at the endless possibilities that the future could bring, "it's one of the most important Nasivern achievements of the Old World—one we lost to time and war."

"I'll gladly bet on that horse, Edram. If anyone can do it, it's you," Bastiel encouraged him.

"Thanks! That means a lot coming from the heir of Isthara," Edram replied, "if only some documentation had made it here. Maybe there's something left in Nineveh, but it's not like we can go back and check . . ."

"I told you, I'm no heir of anything, I'm just me," Bastiel said. He did not feel worthy or confident enough to carry the legacy of his grandmother.

"Don't be so modest," Edram told his new friend, "anyways, that surprise I told you about yesterday? It's ready, wait there."

Edram Pertz got off his chair and walked towards a rectangular gray container that rested on a nearby table. He opened it, and took its contents out.

“Check it out! It’s a prototype I’ve been working on for you ever since you joined us,” Edram said as he handed the weapon over, “Behold! The GT-MWS-007X, also known as ‘Judgment’, try it out!”

Bastiel inspected the weapon. At a first glance, it looked like a large odd and stylized gun, larger than a regular firearm, yet shorter than a rifle; dark gray and black in color, with a few red accents that matched the color of Bastiel’s Nightingale Battle Suit.

The rectangular barrel almost resembled an oversized multi-tool in terms of appearance. Bastiel was no firearm expert, but the piece of metal that protruded from its rear couldn’t have possibly functioned as a bump stock, it neither had the correct size or shape to be one. The shape of its ergonomic curved grip looked and felt more like a sword’s hilt than a firearm, it was tilted and not straight.

“A big . . . cool looking handgun?” A bewildered Bastiel asked.

“Yes, a ‘handgun,’” Edram answered as he air quoted.

Bastiel continued to inspect the odd weapon, aiming forward with it.

“You’ll notice there’s a hidden button a little over the trigger,” Edram informed Bastiel, “press it.”

He did as requested, activating the weapon’s mechanisms. The firearm unfolded and the weapon reconfigured itself into its sword mode. A blade extended straight forward, which answered Bastiel’s questions about the purpose of the protruding piece of metal. The lab’s bright white lights shined upon the blade’s pristine and deadly sharp edge.

“Whoa!” Bastiel exclaimed. “Now we’re talking!” He was perplexed by the weapon—now turned into a deadly and stylish one handed sword.

“That’s right,” Edram said with pride.

Bastiel swung the blade at the air with a remarkable series of graceful movements, making sure not to strike any piece of lab equipment by accident.

“So, what do you think of Judgment?” Edram asked, “It’s a special two-in one weapon I made for you. You can switch from gun to sword mode with the press of a button.”

“Amazing,” Bastiel exclaimed as he kept practicing with Judgment’s sword mode, “it does feel quite light to be honest,” Bastiel answered.

“Yeah, I may have sacrificed a bit too much of the blade’s structural weight so that I could make the switching mechanisms work,” Edram explained, “but it’s just as sturdy and sharp as a regular sword, and as accurate as any firearm, you can be sure of that!”

“Don’t worry too much about it, I can get used to it.” Bastiel assured him.

“I know you’re a sword guy, but press the button again.” Edram requested.

Bastiel pressed Judgement’s mode switch button. The weapon reverted back into its more portable gun configuration.

“It’s not loaded,” Edram said, “but do you see that sliding button on the left side?”

“Yeah.”

“It switches from single round to a three round burst mode,” Edram told Bastiel.

“Nice!” Bastiel continued to be impressed by his Nasivern friend’s engineering prowess.

Edram continued to explain, “Twelve rounds per magazine though. Couldn’t go higher because of the design, it’s a prototype and all . . . but just like the rest of the Gestalt Arsenal, it’s connected to your suit via gTOS. So your suit’s heads up display will let you know how many ammo you have left, and when Judgement switches modes, you know, in case you get confused.”

“Gotcha.”

“It goes without saying that you should take care of it, Bastiel,” Edram said with a most serious tone, “Judgement is a prototype—a very working, flawless, but really expensive prototype—so please take good care of it.”

“How much did it cost to make?” Bastiel asked.

“Believe me, you don’t wanna know,” Edram vaguely answered, “General Exley had to take a deep breath when he saw the bill.”

“Geez,” Bastiel said as he exhaled, “well, thanks Eddie, it’s one hell of a weapon.”

Edram nodded, “Don’t mention it, it’s part of the job.”

The two Nasivern were not aware that Commander Erron Leitner had entered the laboratory, his right hand holding a hot cup of coffee.

“Ah, so you finally showed Judgment to Bastiel, good, very good!” Erron’s voice startled the two Nasivern.

“Boss!” Edram almost jumped out of his chair when he heard Erron’s voice.

“Erron,” Bastiel nodded his head as he put Judgment back on its container.

“Good morning, Bastiel,” Erron said before he took a sip from his cup. “So, what do you think of Eddie’s surprise?” he asked.

“What can I say? The man’s got real talent.” Bastiel shrugged.

“Yeah, some great stuff.” Erron said. “That Judgment sword is hella more advanced than my Sentence, mine’s just a large good ol’ fashioned sword, Eddie didn’t give me none of that fanciness.”

“Well I could always try to come up with something, but considering that—” Edram was interrupted by Erron.

“Nah, don’t worry about it, I’m just teasing ya.” Erron said with a chuckle. “Well, Bastiel, what are you waiting for? Let’s head downstairs to begin today’s training, shall we?”

“Of course, right away, Erron.” Bastiel said.

“I’ll get back to work then, I’ll catch up with the team later today,” Edram Pertz put the circuit board aside and fired up one of his computers.

Bastiel Isthel walked away with Erron Leitner, they both took the stairs down and headed into the locker room. The rest of the team was already there, getting themselves prepared for the day’s activities.

“Hi everyone.” Bastiel greeted them.

“Morning, Bastiel!” Cameron responded.

“Hello.” Gale greeted him back.

Cade Saunders remained in silence. The man was still bitter from the humiliation he suffered by Bastiel on his first day, he did not think highly of the white haired Nasivern. The team changed clothes into their respective undersuits, mostly black with lines that featured their respective color among the team. After a brief warm up period, the quintet gathered in the sparring arena.

Commander Erron Leitner clapped his hands once, “Alright! Today I would like to try something different.” he said to the entire team, “As you’ve been told so many times before, each one of you was selected because you bring something unique to the Gestalt fold. Since they say you always learn something new everyday, today it would be great if each and every one of us teaches something new to the rest. So let’s start with—”

A loud alarm interrupted Erron mid-sentence. The thunderous sound resounded across the entirety of the Gestalt enclave, most of the lights in the facility switched to a reddish hue.

“The emergency deployment alarm!” A perplexed Erron exclaimed, “But we’re not on active duty yet.”

“Attention, Gestalt!” Operator Leah Sutherland’s voice was heard in every corner of the enclave. “Head to the Operations room immediately.”

“You heard her, go, go, go!” Erron exclaimed.

All five members of Gestalt’s strike team frantically rushed upstairs.

Bastiel Isthali entered the Operations room in the company of the rest of the team. The room felt cold and larger than it actually was; large screens covered the furthest wall, with a row of computer terminals placed at a distance from the large displays, and a fair amount of chairs in the back. Every piece of equipment in the room was brand new.

Edram Pertz, the Nasivern Quartermaster, was already inside, focused on observing the performance report of the room’s systems, many of which were seemingly automated, despite the amount of terminals and seats that would suggest otherwise.

The systems and computers in the Gestalt Operations room were all powered by gtOS—Gestalt OS—the software core that linked every piece of Gestalt’s arsenal with the enclave itself. Edram had designed the operating system in a way that allowed the operations room to be run with minimal staff—large scale operations could be run and managed by a single skilled operator even.

Leah Sutherland, Gestalt’s operator, was seated in the room’s main terminal. The display in front of her showed a list of self-test diagnostic results that gtOS ran on itself in order to make sure that every module was working properly.

National Intelligence Director James Exley entered the room, and went straight to business, “Team Gestalt, we have a hostage situation at the Osborne store,” he said loud and clear.

“That huge one in Midtown?” Cameron asked.

“Yes, precisely that one,” the director answered. “The perpetrators are claiming to be part of the Ashen Reckoning—a bold departure from their more secretive M.O.”

Erron scratched his chin, “I take it we are about to be deployed for the first time, right, General?” he asked.

“Indeed, Commander Leitner. This will be Gestalt’s debut, I believe it is time for this team to show what it can do,” Exley answered.

Cade Saunders took a step forward in order to speak his mind, “I would like to say one thing General—and with all due respect,” he spoke with his eyes fixated upon Bastiel Isthel. “Some rookies here have barely trained at all when compared to the rest. Are you certain that all of us present in this room are ready for the task?” his words implicitly referred to the white haired man next to him.

Bastiel, confident in his abilities, was more than eager to prove himself in the eyes of his teammates, and to prove himself to the Nation of Vaifen, despite having only joined the team a few days prior.

“I’m more than ready, Sir. I can assure you that!” Bastiel exclaimed.

“This isn’t time for egos, Nasivern,” Cade said to Bastiel, “people’s lives are at risk—you haven’t even properly trained with the suit yet.”

Bastiel looked towards Cade with a cold sharp gaze that could've pierced right through him, "I'm pretty sure I can handle this. Besides, didn't I kick your ass on my first day?" He reminded him of the outcome of their duel with sublime satisfaction.

"Now is not the time for arguments," The General said with a cold tone that emanated a certain degree of disappointment. "As you said so yourself, Agent Saunders, innocent lives are at stake here."

Erron put himself in between of both of them and looked at Bastiel, "It'll be fine, Cade—just make sure to follow my lead, Bastiel."

"It's alright, the suit basically runs itself," Edram interjected from afar.

"Do not forget that you were all handpicked for a reason, Agent Saunders. We are more than confident in each and every one of you and your abilities. Nonetheless, we expect nothing but the best of results—that goes to you as well, Agent Isthala—work as a team," Exley reprimanded them both.

Exley continued to speak to the team, "King Starsong will officially present Gestalt to the Senate and the Nation soon. It is highly important that we provide him with satisfactory results when the time to justify the enormous amount of resources that have been spent on Gestalt comes, as cold as that sounds—given that innocents are being threatened by these terrorists. This also presents an opportunity to finally turn the tide against the Ashen Reckoning."

"Understood." Erron acknowledged the director's words on behalf of the team.

Exley's words echoed through the room, "Your mission is to stop these terrorists, detain them alive if possible so we can interrogate—but above all else, saving the lives of the hostages is the topmost priority here I will oversee and provide assistance for this operation as well. Their lives are in your hands, what you do here will determine their fate. Now go!"

“You heard the General, let’s go save some lives, team!” Erron rallied his fellow teammates.

Director Exley beckoned Edram, “Quartermaster Pertz.”

“Yes?” the stout Nasivern responded.

“Please stay here and assist Leah. This is the first time your hardware and software will be put to the test.”

“Of course sir!” Edram answered, “it’ll be my pleasure.”

The five members of Gestalt’s strike team approached the Armory in order to equip themselves for the mission. The Armory room contained one colored section that matched each member’s assigned team color. Bastiel approached the cabinet around the red area of the room.

“Don’t forget, y’all got to press your fingerprint to unlock your stuff.” Erron said to the team.

Each member pressed their right thumb against their respective scanner, which triggered a retinal scan. The cabinets opened upon successful confirmation of their biometric identities, revealing their respective Nightingale Battle Suits. Bastiel gazed upon the very same red Nightingale 105MC suit he tried on his first day at Gestalt.

“Suit up!” Erron instructed the team.

The members of Gestalt proceeded to equip their Battle Suits with haste. The suit’s version of gtOS booted up automatically upon securing their helmets. Bastiel couldn’t keep his eyes off the five triangles that his heads up display showed, each colored after one of the team members; the triangles spun together in a circle, then stopping, then spinning again while the suit’s systems continued to start up.

“Nightingale: Online”, the suit’s helmet announced with matching words flashing on their screens, followed by a brief musical tune that the quintet wasn’t expecting.

“What’s up with that, Eddie?” Gale asked with regards to the suit’s announcement words and tune.

“Oh, it’s a silly addition of mine,” Edram answered.

“I like it!” Cameron exclaimed.

Bastiel chuckled at it.

With the use of Augmented Reality and a clean heads up display interface, the Gestalt team could see each other’s location and vital signs. The helmet, despite enclosing their entire heads, allowed them to see clearly, as if they weren’t wearing anything in the first place; an unobstructed field of view was one of the most crucial key goals Edram Pertz had in mind when he designed the Nightingale series of Battle Suits.

The Quartermaster spoke to the team through the suits’ communication systems, “I will be running some last minute tests while you finish prepping up, be advised that messages will pop in front of you—just ignore them.”

Just like the quartermaster had warned, each suit began to automatically run a few diagnostic tests to ensure that everything was in order. After each member of Gestalt’s strike team finished equipping their Nightingale suits, the time had come to arm themselves. The enclosure cabinet that contained the suits retreated backwards, and racks of weapons began to rise from below.

Bastiel Isthall saw the same prototype Judgment sword Edram Pertz had shown him earlier inside his assigned cabinet, and without hesitation, attached it to his lower back. Additionally, he grabbed a short knife and holstered it around his right leg. He looked around

and saw that other than Cameron, each of his teammates had a larger assortment of weapons to choose from; his available selection was devoid of any type of regular firearms.

Gale Lacroix, whose suit had a yellow color scheme, opted for a sniper rifle and two small handguns. Cade Saunders, the man in the green suit, equipped himself with an assault rifle, a knife, and a handgun.

Cameron Bennett grabbed a single handgun in addition to a peculiar looking diamond shaped metal backpack that matched the pink color of her suit, the backpack snapped on her back. Unlike the rest of her teammates' suits, Her rose pink Nightingale suit featured a unique display screen wrapped around her left arm that broke the symmetry that the rest of the suits shared.

Lastly, Erron Leitner, the team leader clad in his blue suit, grabbed Sentence, a two handed sword that was much larger than Bastiel's Judgment, as well as a handgun, a knife, and a rifle.

Just as they had finished gearing up, a notification on their heads up display informed them that all testing protocols returned positive results.

"All tests passed, you may proceed, strike team." Edram Pertz said.

"Our first mission boys!" Cameron commented. "It feels awesome!"

"A pity we don't have time for a picture, Cammy. Let's go!" Erron said.

Now clad with the state of the art Nightingale suits, and having armed themselves with bleeding edge weaponry, all five members of Gestalt were ready to proceed with their first mission; they walked towards an elevator located just outside the room.

The elevator descended all the way down to the basement floor of the Intelligence Center, its doors opened towards a hallway that was at a mere walking distance of the Center's launch bay, where a gray and white vehicle awaited its passengers.

"Huh. You'd think we'd get a unique vehicle or something," Cameron commented, "like, some sort of cool tank or aircraft even, did they run out of money or what?"

Edram took a peek at the vital sign data stream that each suit was reporting back to Gestalt's Operations room, "I can see that you're all a little nervous, relax," his words were accompanied by a small snicker.

Operator Leah Sutherland used her soft voice to lay down the strategy to follow, "Attention Gestalt strike team: you will be deployed outside the police perimeter that's surrounding the store. Agents Lacroix and Bennett, you will set up camp at the rooftop of a nearby building for visual reconnaissance and strategic support. Commander Leitner, Agents Saunders and Agent Isthel, you will infiltrate the building and neutralize all threats."

"Roger that," Commander Erron Leitner replied.

As the vehicle departed the premises of the Intelligence Center, Bastiel Isthel began to experience a wide array of emotions, from excitement to anxiousness, a small amount of fear, but also a greater dose of courage that shackled the fear away.

Adrenaline began to course wild across his veins, he had become aware of his accelerated heartbeats; that was it, the moment he had long awaited for the majority of his life, the time to be a hero and to proudly serve Vaifen, the Nation that had adopted him and the remaining Nasivern as one of their own.

"Gale, you will guard the perimeter," Erron instructed her, "Cammy, you will be our eyes."

“Yes, sir!” Both of the women said in unison.

“Commander Leitner . . . I, I am . . . sorry,” betrayed by nervousness, Operator Leah stuttered for a moment. She took a short pause to clear her throat, “I’m sorry, I am sending you the Osborne store’s schematics. I’ve highlighted the best entry point,” she spoke.

“Got it, thanks, Leah.” Erron responded. He began to review the information that was displayed through his helmet’s visor.

“Team, this is it! Let’s give hell to these bastards!” Erron rallied his team.

“Yes, boss!” The rest of the team exclaimed in unison.

Cameron availed herself of the rising enthusiasm among the team, “Operation Shopping Spree begins now!”

The rest of her teammates looked at her in complete silence, a silence that was echoed by two men and the woman back at the Operations room.

“What?” Cameron asked, “It’s not like any of you have said a better name so far.”

The vehicle stopped by a six-story building that had been ordered to evacuate when the incident began. The building offered an excellent vantage point of the emblematic Osborne Store’s four stories tall edifice.

“Girls, this is your stop,” Erron said.

Gale and Cameron got off the vehicle and immediately ascended to the roof of the building. Gale readied her sniper rifle and got herself in position, she scouted the Osborne building as well as the surrounding vicinities. The renowned Osborne store’s building was fashioned after a glassy black cube, which made it stand apart from the adjoining and adjacent buildings.

Cameron tapped the display mounted on her left arm and her four GT-SED4 Hawk drones awakened, ejecting themselves from her backpack nest. The four drones that hovered around her were shaped like birds—gray and pink in color. She directed them towards the store’s building.

The drones began to scan the Osborne store in order to map the whereabouts of the hostiles and the location of the civilian hostages. The pink Gestalt teammate took great care while piloting her drones, she made sure that the hostile forces would not become aware of their presence.

“Boss, they’ve rounded up the hostages on the fourth floor. I count . . . thirty seven hostages, there’s six hostiles patrolling on that floor,” Cameron said. “There are way more hostiles on the lower floors—wait a sec—oh no!”

“What’s wrong, Cammy?” Erron asked.

“It’s the hostages, boss. They’ve strapped bombs on them!” Cameron exclaimed. “They appear to be remotely triggered, I can attempt to disable them, but one of you needs to be in range of the detonator so I can relay a hijack signal through one of your suits—my babies are too far for it.”

“Commander Leitner,” General James Exley beckoned, “It is imperative that Gestalt successfully manages to disable those explosives.”

“Understood, we will get you that signal, Cammy, keep scouting for us,” Erron said.

“I will give the go-ahead to the police to move in once the explosives are dealt with,” Exley informed them.

The vehicle stopped right before the huge police perimeter that was set around the besieged Osborne Store building.

“Our stop, boys,” Erron rallied his other two teammates. The trio jumped off from the vehicle and ran towards the police perimeter.

“Gestalt, be advised,” Exley spoke through the voice channel, “we have a negotiator on site, he is doing a good job in distracting the apparent leader of this attack—a man that is referring to himself as ‘Occipital’. All of the building’s main entrances have been barricaded, the police has cut off power to the building, security systems and cameras have been remotely disabled as well, so they can’t use it against you.”

“What are their demands, General?” Gale asked.

“So far this ‘Occipital’ individual is demanding access to a live camera and to be allowed to broadcast a message with it across Vaifen’s television channels,” Exley responded, “of course, we won’t comply with his request—we’re merely buying time.”

Erron pointed yonder, “Cade, Bastiel, see that small building adjacent to the store? It serves as a warehouse and distribution facility, it was recently built according to these schematics,” Erron informed his two teammates. “Both of the buildings are connected through an underground basement corridor—that’s our entry point.”

“Understood, Commander,” Cade said.

“Got it,” Bastiel acknowledged his team leader’s instructions.

Ternion’s police force had set up a circular perimeter around the Osborne building. Every single media outlet wanted to desperately cover the event from the front row, a request that was irrefutably denied, their only choice was to set up camp five blocks away from the store.

Aside from the police perimetered around the besieged store and the media, that small quadrant of midtown Ternion had become a ghost town. All civilians had been ordered to

evacuate the surrounding vicinities and all nearby commercial establishments had been ordered to close shut.

“I have already arranged everything with the captain of the police,” General Exley said, “they will let you pass without any issue, Commander Leitner.”

Just like General James Exley had said, Ternion’s police force granted the blue, green, and red Gestalt men passage towards the warehouse building without saying a single word or asking a single question to them. Some of the police officers couldn’t hide their confusion and curiosity at the sight of those three men wearing strange, expensive-looking high tech suits—but they had their orders, and so they complied.

The police force’s barricades and vehicles obstructed the view that the hostile terrorists of the Ashen Reckoning had access to. A tactical advantage that Erron Leitner, Cade Saunders, and Bastiel Isthel availed themselves with as they entered the warehouse building. The warehouse’s schematics were displayed through visors, with a marker that showed them the way to the basement floor.

The men descended towards the building’s basement; numerous rows of boxes contained clothing and other articles that were to be shipped to their customers. It was very apparent that the people who worked there evacuated immediately when the main building was assaulted, several dropped items on the floor, cargo machinery that was left active and in the middle of operation served as pieces of evidence for such a hypothesis.

As they continued their march, Erron, Cade, and Bastiel’s heads up display suffered a small glitch and a momentary loss of connection with the Gestalt network.

“Whoa, what was that,” exclaimed Bastiel.

The suit's regained connection with the network and Quartermaster Edram Pertz spoke to them.

"Sorry about that lapse in connectivity," Edram apologized, "the network has some underground coverage issues, we don't have satellites of our own—yet."

Following the guidance of their navigational system the trio reached a door. Erron opened it and the three of them continued their march through a straight and narrow corridor that led them right into a room located in the Osborne building's basement.

The area was completely dark and devoid of electricity, their helmets automatically switched to night vision mode. The three men navigated through the darkness and encountered a set of service stairs that led them towards the store's first floor. Cameron directed all of her four drones towards it. The drones positioned themselves in a square pattern around the building and began to provide tactical support to the three Gestalt men.

With the use of augmented reality, each identified target's position was displayed on their visors in real time, they could see their movements and avail themselves of that information to move undetected.

"We must not alert them of our presence, not until we disable the explosives," Erron reminded his two teammates, who nodded in response.

Their suit's glowing blue eyes were turned off in order to make them further blend with the pitch black that was prevalent in the besieged store. The trio continued to traverse through the first floor of the building, where the majority of the terrorists stood vigilant at the store's entrances, with Ternion's police force at the other side of the store's entrance; both sides at a tense standstill stemmed from the threat of the Ashen Reckoning's hostages, and the explosives they had wrapped around them.

The massive store building was pitch dark on its interior, with the exception of the edges of the cubed shaped building, which had some degree of illumination thanks to the sunlight that passed through its dark glass walls. Vast corridors of clothing articles of all styles, sizes, and colors were on display. One of the terrorist hostiles was patrolling around the aisles full of merchandise, he held a rifle with a flashlight mounted on it that provided him with a modicum of illumination.

“Cade, take him out.” Erron whispered to Cade.

“Yes, Commander.”

Cade sneaked closer to his target, he carefully waited for the right moment to strike. Fortunately for him, a fancy dark leather jacket that was on display on a mannequin had momentarily caught the terrorist’s attention. The man could not believe his eyes when he read the overly expensive price tag attached to the jacket—then again, there was no one there to stop him from seizing it for himself, a small count of shoplifting was nothing compared to the crime he was being an accomplice of.

The man placed his rifle on the floor and began to try out the jacket, fascinated and ecstatic by how good it fit, almost as if it was tailored specifically for him. Cade Saunders walked behind the distracted man and assaulted him with a chokehold that incapacitated the hostile; he then drew his knife and slit the defenseless man’s throat with it. The terrorist died in silence, the jacket he coveted so much had become the instrument of his demise, which was now stained with his blood.

Erron grabbed the deceased man’s rifle, he turned off its flashlight, removed its magazine, and hid it beneath a clothing pile. Bastiel and Cade hid the deceased man’s body between racks of clothes before they continued to slowly make their way towards the other side

of the building. The absence of illumination provided them with safe passage, moments later, they stumbled upon the corpse of a man who had a gunshot wound on his forehead.

“Perhaps he dared to fight back and paid the price,” Cade commented.

“Possibly,” Bastiel said softly. He was not a stranger to death, but seeing that executed man reminded him of what was a stake.

Erron inspected the body and read his Osborne employee badge to learn his identity, he reported the casualty back to Operations.

“Robert Walker, assistant manager . . . he was executed point blank,” Erron felt nothing but contempt and anger at the perpetrators for the murder of an innocent man. It was only through the discipline he had honed through the years that he was able to keep his composure and his mind focused on the task at hand. He vowed to himself that no more innocent lives would be lost that day.

“Let’s go,” the blue commander said with a stern tone to his two teammates.

As they approached the stairs that lead to the store’s upper floors they saw two more hostiles that kept guard at the staircases.

“Commander Leitner,” Operator Leah Sutherland beckoned him, “we’ve been informed that an alarm will go off if you try to open the emergency staircase doors, it cannot be disabled remotely.”

“Understood, Leah,” Erron replied, “guess we have no other choice.”

“Indeed. You will have to dispose of the two hostiles ahead in order to go up—there’s no other available path.”

Back at Gestalt's Operations room, Director James Exley, Quartermaster Edram Pertz, and Operator Leah Sutherland had real-time access to the video feed from each Gestalt member's helmet, which let them see what they saw.

"Alright then . . ." Erron murmured. "Cade, sneak past the other side, you and I will take them down at the same time," he instructed his green teammate.

"Roger." Cade snuck past them undetected utilizing the advantage provided by the data from Cameron's scouting drones in conjunction with the augmented reality system of their suits. The blue and green men then drew their handguns, which were promptly silenced. Erron aimed at the rightmost of them, while Cade aimed towards the leftmost.

"On three, two, one," Erron counted down. "Fire!" He and Cade shot at the same time. The lives of the two Ashen Reckoning underlings that guarded the staircase ended with two simultaneous whispers. Upon hiding the two bodies they silently made their way upstairs.

Cameron's drones moved towards the second floor, which was full of household items and children's toys. Her Hawk drones scanned the entire perimeter, however, they did not detect the presence of any living being on that floor.

The way was clear for the Gestalt trio to continue onwards to the third floor, which was dedicated to sports and fitness equipment. Cameron detected the presence of four hostiles that patrolled around that floor, she marked them for her teammates.

Erron imparted instructions to Cade and Bastiel using his right hand. Following The blue commander's silent commands, the trio split and took different paths, with Erron taking on the middle, Cade towards the right, and Bastiel towards the left. They slowly walked past the hostiles without being detected, however, Cade was cut off from the rest as a sudden shift in one of the hostiles's paths made him pivot towards a dead end.

Erron modified the strategy to follow, “Cade, stay behind, if one of them goes upstairs you flank them, understood? Bastiel and I are gonna get in proximity to the detonator so Cammy can disable it.”

“But, Commander—fine.” Cade complied but felt like he was being relegated to a secondary role in favor of the newly recruited Bastiel Isthel.

Both Erron and Bastiel took different staircases towards the fourth floor, a floor dedicated to electronics and computer hardware. Their augmented reality system showed them that the hostages were rounded up in the middle of the floor in several groups of four to seven, with bombs rigged around them. As they got nearer they could hear the sobbing and cries of the terrified hostages—none of them deserved to go through such a horrifying experience.

“Boss, there are six more hostiles in that area.” Cameron informed Erron, “I think I’ve located their leader. He’s all the way back inside a management office being guarded by two thugs. He seems to be . . . talking through a phone, anyways, he’s definitely bound to have the detonator.”

“I see the office you mentioned, Cammy, but the door is closed,” Bastiel said.

“We need to lure him out somehow. Hmm,” Erron said. “Director Exley, is there any chance the negotiator might talk him into speaking to a store manager or someone in charge? That way he will have to come outside and we can jam the detonator,” he suggested.

“Smart move,” Exley responded, “I will work something out, Commander Leitner—hang on.”

A few tense minutes passed, time that seemed like an eternity for the Gestalt team. The office’s door opened, and the leader of the attack came out, guarded by two men, just like Cameron had said.

Occipital, the Ashen Reckoning member in charge of the attack, wore a full olive green body armor, with plates that covered almost every inch of his body. A white helmet that resembled a skull concealed the man's face; the helmet featured the shape and form of the occipital bone painted in black on its rear. The man held a cellphone in his right hand, he did not speak a single word as he walked among the group of scared and sobbing hostages.

A detonator device was holstered on Occipital's waist, he kneeled and placed the phone in front of a woman and turned on the phone's speaker functionality. The Police Negotiator began to ask her a few routine questions.

"I have a visual on the detonator," Erron whispered to the team.

"Working on it." Cameron used her screen in tandem with Edram and Leah's assistance back in the Operations room in order to interface with the sensors on Erron's suit as she tried to pinpoint the detonator's remote signal footprint.

Edram Pertz couldn't help himself and explained what was going on to the rest of Gestalt, "You see, the problem with these poorly made digital detonators is that they need to constantly update on the bomb's status, and that means emitting a constant wireless signal—signal that can be sniffed if you know what you're looking for."

"I've found the signal!" Cameron exclaimed with enthusiasm. "Sending you the data, Eddie!"

Back at Gestalt's Operations room, Edram Pertz and Leah Sutherland analyzed the signal data they received from Cameron and ran it through the Gestalt servers, which yielded a positive match.

"Gotcha!" Edram said as he raised his hands in the air. "Sending it right away."

Cameron received the hijack signal frequency, her drones acted as relays as she broadcasted the signal through Erron Leitner and Bastiel Isthali's suits. All of the bombs strapped to the hostages were disabled and the digital detonator Occipital was in possession of had been rendered inert.

"Now is your chance, boys!" Cameron yelled.

"Let's go, Bastiel!" Erron busted out of the shadows and drew his rifle, he shot at one of the terrorists, who died instantly as Erron's bullet pierced through his head.

Occipital was startled and shocked. He dropped the phone on the ground and sought immediate cover. Ready to give his life to the Ashen Reckoning cause cause, Occipital grabbed the detonator with his hands and pressed it—his life for Dogma's will—but nothing happened. He tried again and again, each attempt was more desperate than the previous one.

Bastiel Isthali drew his Judgement weapon, presing the mode switch button to use it as a sword, and lunged towards the third terrorist that was exchanging fire with Erron, piercing the man's chest. Bastiel gazed upon the man he had just stabbed, the piece of cloth that concealed his mouth fell and he saw the fear that emanated from that barely adult man's visage as the fatal wound slowly extinguished his life. It was not the first time the young Nasivern had ended a life, but this one was barely an adult, something that shocked the red Gestalt member—who froze for a moment.

The remaining three terrorists on the fourth floor began to rush towards the hostages upon becoming aware of the commotion. Cameron's three drones shot at the windows and entered the building, she used the machines' small cannons to intercept and eliminate all three of them. The four terrorists on the third floor ran upstairs, but were intercepted by Cade, who eliminated two of them with ease using his rifle with a finesse that only a former Special Forces member like

Cade Saunders could exhibit. One of them kept running upstairs and managed to elude him, while the fourth sought cover and returned fire at Cade.

At the same time, Director James Exley gave the go-ahead that the bombs had been disabled. Ternion's police force stormed the lower floor of the Osborne building, engaging in an intense firefight against the bulk of the terrorist force that was present there, the gunfire echoed all the way up to the fourth floor.

Bastiel Isthral pulled out his sword from the man he had just killed and snapped back to his senses; he had one prey to hunt: Occipital, who hid amidst a row of computers that were on sale. Bastiel ran towards him and was ready to strike at him with one swift swing of his blade when Erron yelled at him.

“Remember! We need him alive!” The blue team leader instructed him.

Bastiel stopped as he was just a few steps away from his target. Occipital drew his handgun and unleashed it at Bastiel's chest and head. The plates and helmet were not even dented by Occipital's bullets, the Ashen Reckoning member aimed at other areas of Bastiel's body, but the arm plates on Bastiel's arms shielded him from harm until Occipital ran out of bullets.

The white haired Nasivern sheathed back his sword and assumed a melee fighting stance. Occipital, having run out of ammunition, had no choice but to engage Bastiel in with his fists and legs. Bastiel extended his right arm and pointed towards the heavens.

The teachings of the Nasivern Absolute Doctrine that Bastiel Isthral was trained under were not limited to melee weaponry, they also covered hand to hand combat. Occipital had his own fair share of unarmed combat expertise as well, and was not going down without a fight.

The two of them began to exchange blows at each other, their respective suits providing them protection.

Bastiel adopted a more defensive stance, and lured Occipital, who chose to go all in on the offensive.

“For a free and new Vaifen!” Occipital screamed as he launched a barrage of blows that Bastiel dodged until the man in red seized an opening to retaliate against him.

Occipital received punch after punch, kick after kick, until Bastiel attacked him with a fierce kick that threw him towards a desk of computers.

“That armor of his sure is resistant, Bastiel,” Edram Pertz informed him via radio, “I think it’s time for an Overdrive Burst!”

“Are you sure about that? You said that it wasn’t still full cali—.”

“Should be fine, should be fine, do it!” Edram insisted.

Bastiel pressed one of the buttons located on his suit’s belt. His red Nightingale suit began to divert the majority of its power towards his right leg.

“Overdrive Burst: Ready.” The suit operating system informed Bastiel.

Occipital stood up and charged one more time at Bastiel, who readied his stance.

“You only have one shot, Bastiel,” Edram said, “don’t miss.”

Bastiel responded with silence, he had eyes and ears for his target and his target only. Occipital rushed at him with a knife in his hand, ready to assault the mysterious man in red. As soon as Occipital was in range, Bastiel received him with an empowered roundhouse kick—courtesy of his suit’s trump card.

The mighty kick hit Occipital’s skull-shaped helmet, the impact was so fierce that the helmet was cracked. Occipital’s body spun once before landing on the floor. The backlash of the

Overdrive Burst roundhouse kick was so intense that Bastiel was also thrown off balance and knocked down to the floor as well.

“Holy shit!” Bastiel exclaimed.

Erron was in awe at the scenery, “What the hell . . .”

“I—well, I told you guys it was still experimental!” Edram exclaimed.

“Commander Leitner!” Cade interrupted the commotion, “you have one last hostile heading upstairs!” He yelled as he killed the terrorist that engaged him.

“Moving to intercept,” Erron acknowledged. “Get on your feet and keep that man secured, Bastiel!”

Bastiel, still disoriented from the kick, tried to regain his composure as fast as he could. He drew up his Judgment sword and pointed it at the defeated Occipital.

Erron Leitner and the last Ashen Reckoning terrorist met face to face. In his desperation, the terrorist used a female hostage as a human shield while he pointed at the bomb strapped on her chest with his handgun.

“I will blow us all, put your gun down!” the terrorist demanded.

“Easy now, easy . . .” Erron said as he put his weapon down. He smiled upon noticing that the building Gale and Cameron were located at was right behind the terrorist.

“A little to your right, Erron,” Gale said to the blue man..

Erron slowly approached the man and moved sideways, “You can still surrender and I promise you will make it out of here alive, you have my word.” Despite everything Erron offered him one last sincere gesture of mercy.

“Shut the hell up!” yelled the man in response. He stopped aiming at the hostage and pointed his gun at Erron.

“Last chance,” Erron reiterated his offer.

“If you get any closer I will—” Gale’s perfect headshot silenced the man forever.

Erron launched himself towards the female hostage and secured her, the panicked woman yelled uncontrollably.

“Relax! Relax! It’s ok, it’s ok—you’re safe now!” Erron tried to calm her down. “Are you alright?” he asked her.

The woman was unable to form a single word, she was in a state of absolute shock. Erron calmed her and assured her that they would get that bomb off of her chest soon.

After the woman calmed down a bit, Erron walked towards the window and gave a thumbs up at the two women before heading back to Bastiel Isthel.

Erron and Cade met up with Bastiel, he was still aiming his sword at his captive, Occipital, who refused to speak a single word. Moments later, the police force arrived at the fourth floor, they pointed their guns at the Gestalt trio.

“At ease, gentlemen!” the Captain of the police instructed his squadron. “Who is the leader of this team?” He asked.

Erron walked forward, “That would be me,” he responded.

“Thanks for defusing the situation here. Our bomb squad will remove the bombs from the hostages’ chests and they will receive medical attention.”

“Just doing our job,” Erron responded, “Captain?”

“Parker,” The policeman responded.

“Nice meeting you, Captain Parker,” Erron shook the policeman’s hand. “We will take this man into our custody for interrogation. However it is imperative that the media is told that all of them died—this guy included.”

“That would be lying though,” Captain Parker remarked.

“Exactly. I hope I can count with your cooperation—I’m sure General James Exley will elaborate further.”

The police officer was not entirely convinced, “You guys look pretty strange in those colored suits, and it feels strange trusting a group of masked people, but we were told to comply with your requests—whatever they might be. Consider it done,” Captain Parker assured him.

“Good, our work here is done then,” Erron said as he clapped once. “We shall be going then, please make sure these hostages receive the best of attention, these poor men and women had to go through so much today.”

Occipital interrupted the exchange between Erron and Captain Parker, “You think you’ve won just because you had a little victory today. You think we will stop, no . . . we won’t stop, you can’t stop us.”

Erron now had the attention of Occipital.

Occipital continued, “We will never stop, not until we free the people of this Nation from the likes of—”

Cade Saunders punched Occipital’s chest before he could finish saying his words.

Erron got closer to Occipital.

“Listen to me carefully, because I will only say this to you once.” Erron said as the eyes on his helmet glowed once more, the blue light reflected upon Occipital’s cracked white helmet. “The Ashen Reckoning will never succeed, and if I have to kill every single one of you until none of you remain, then our God as my witness, I will,” Erron was very clear to Occipital.

“Damn,” Cameron whispered. She had never witnessed Erron act so serious in all the months that she had been part of Gestalt.

A bewildered Gale stared at Cameron. Never had she heard Erron, a usually carefree and charismatic man, talk in such a stern manner like that before.

Erron's words showed nothing but contempt towards the man and the Ashen Reckoning, even Cade and Bastiel were surprised at the sudden shift in his tone.

“Let’s go, team,” Erron said.

The blue, green, and red trio walked downstairs, Cade and Bastiel held Occipital. They continued their descend in silence, reaching the first floor—staring at the corpses of the other Ashen Reckoning hostiles, wiped out by Ternion’s police force.

“Your deaths will not be in vain, I swear . . .” Occipital whispered to himself, “for a free and new Vaifen.”

The three male Gestalt members boarded the vehicle that first brought them to the area and reunited with their female teammates. Erron and Gale secured the terrorist leader in the back of the van, handcuffing him to a seat.

“I want to congratulate you all on such a fantastic job, I am very proud of all of you!” Erron complimented his team.

“Woo! Go team!” Cameron yelled.

“Our first mission together and everything was flawless,” Erron remarked.

Minutes later, the vehicle returned to the Intelligence Center’s launch bay. Gestalt’s strike team was met by a contingent of security guards that took custody of the terrorist leader, Occipital. All five members of Gestalt took the elevator back to their enclave.

Upon returning to their armory room, all five of them returned their weapons to their respective racks and took off their battle suits, carefully placing them back in their cabinets so

that their whole arsenal could receive due maintenance at the hands of the Quartermaster at a later moment.

“Attention Gestalt,” Operator Leah Sutherland beckoned the team, “Director Exley is awaiting you all in the briefing room.”

“Go on without me, I will catch up with you all,” Erron said.

Cade was the first to exit the room, followed by Gale and Cameron.

“Bastiel,” Erron beckoned the white haired Nasivern, “Wait, I would like to speak to you for a sec.”

Bastiel Isthel turned around and walked towards him.

Erron extended his right hand, “Great job out there today, man.”

“Thanks, Commander,” Bastiel shook hands with him.

“Erron.”

Bastiel nodded, “Right, Erron.”

Both of them faintly smiled at each other.

“For someone that hasn’t trained properly in a team ops environment, you did amazing,” Erron commented, “just between us, that ‘Agito’ gig sure paid off, eh?”

Bastiel sighed, “It seems everyone knows about that . . .”

Erron laughed, “Rest assured, your secret is safe with me, I ain’t telling nobody. That report has only been seen by Director Exley, King Starsong, and myself.”

“Well, that’s . . . good to know, I guess,” Bastiel chuckled.

Erron tapped Bastiel’s shoulder, “Relax, we have a long road ahead of us, and we will walk through it together as a team. Now let’s not keep our friends waiting.”

Both of them walked to the briefing room. Everyone, including Director Exley, was sitting, waiting for the red and blue men to begin. Erron and Bastiel took a seat and Director Exley stood up immediately.

“First of all, on behalf of the Nation of Vaifen, I would like to congratulate you all on such a flawless performance,” Exley said with a satisfaction most genuine, “dozens of lives saved—all thanks to the seven of you. Good job, Gestalt.” The Director clapped.

Erron responded on behalf of the team, “It is what we were chosen for, General, it’s our duty.”

The Director adjusted his glasses before continuing, “We broke a myriad of regulations, laws, protocols, and procedures when King Starsong and I bought Gestalt to life—your first mission was no exception. We launched you way before you’ve finished preparations but it was all worth it, I am proud of every single one of you.”

Exley began to walk around the table, “There is one person that deserves special congratulations today. Edram Pertz,” he laid his eyes on the chubby quartermaster.

“Yes, sir?”

“You have single handedly crafted every aspect of Gestalt’s arsenal, down to the Battle Suits and the Operative System, please cheer for this man’s brilliant mind. Everything worked perfectly, it is thanks to your equipment that these men and women could carry out their job today. I do not have enough words to express my gratitude, Edram, keep up the good work!”

“Woo, Eddie!” Cameron cheered with enthusiasm.

The rest of the team cheered and clapped.

Erron patted his head and vigorously tousled his hair, “Way to go, my man!”

“It was nothing sir,” Edram, still shaken and disoriented from Erron’s pat, responded with modesty, “I just hope you all take good care of the gear, it’s all I ask.”

“Oh you can bet on that, Edram.” Gale said.

Exley smiled at the team with pride, for it was his mind and King Starson’s that had brought them together, “And if that wasn’t good enough, you managed to capture the leader of this attack. We will interrogate this ‘Occipital’ man and extract any information that can lead us to Dogma and the Ashen Reckoning.”

“Do we know who he is?” Cade asked.

“That’s one thing, Agent Saunders, we haven’t been able to confirm his identity,” Exley responded, “it’s like the man’s a ghost, but rest assured that we are working on it.”

Director Exley returned to his seat, “Now I do not want to ruin the mood of the moment, but there is something you need to see.” Exley inserted a device in the table’s ports, “The so called ‘Dogma’, leader of the Ashen Reckoning, released this video mere minutes ago.”

The video began to play on the room’s displays, and silence descended upon them all. The video featured a single person: the leader of the Ashen Reckoning, Dogma. A man that wore a full black suit and a pearlescent white sleek and featureless helmet that concealed his face, it looked even more menacing and fearsome than the one Occipital wore. If death had a visage, it would certainly resemble that man’s headpiece. Dogma was standing in front of a gray wall, with nothing that could identify the location the video was recorded at.

Dogma began to speak his message, the unique helmet he wore distorted his voice, making it sound almost otherworldly, “Oppressed and enslaved citizens of Vaifen. Today I would like to speak to each and every one of you from the bottom of my heart. Heed my words carefully, for they will be honest and sharp—but know this, my fellow citizens, I have nothing

but the best intentions for you. My brothers, and sisters, all that I ask is that you carefully listen to what I am going to say: You have been blinded all your life, from the moment of your birth, you have been shackled by those that govern you in order to serve beneath the boots of their corrupt machinery—a system that has forced you to surrender the very essence of your liberty, and it shames me that you, my brothers and sisters, have unwillingly danced to their tune like a fine and obedient pawn.” Dogma made extensive use of hand gestures throughout his speech.

“What in the world . . .” Edram said with bewilderment.

“Shh!” Erron hushed him.

Dogma’s pre-recorded address continued, “The Crown sits at the top of this decadent machinery, laughing at all of you—their subservient slaves. Your ‘beloved’ and ‘mighty’ King Starsong, sitting upon his shining golden throne so bright and radiant that it blinds you from seeing them for what they truly are. Sulwyn Starsong does not deserve your devotion and servitude, he is no more than you, or me, and yet, I dare to ask you: why do you let this false monarch rule you? Why do you let him step over and trample you?

“Tell me, oh my dear oppressed brothers and sisters, what heavenly authority proclaimed the Starsong family as your eternal ruler? If there was a God, a fair and just God, he would not do such a thing—no, he would prefer that you all were free, free to achieve self-determination.”

The disgust on Bastiel’s face was more than evident as Dogma carried on with his words.

“The Senate, ah, the house of lies. You exercise your right to vote for them every few years, they allure you with their sweet words, promising you all the wonders of change and opportunity, but the truth is that you vote for these men and women so they can fill their pockets and enlarge their stomachs while most of you stagnate and suffer.

“These people do not care about your problems and struggles, not in the slightest, and yet, you round up like cattle every time and perpetuate them and their rotten ilk in power—a never ending cycle of lies and deceit. Thus, I dare to ask you once again, why do you let them rule you? Why do you let them step over you?”

“And then there’s the Tribunal, the place that proclaims will give you fair treatment in the eyes of justice. They’re nothing but blind accomplices to all of this, they sell you injustice and dare to call it ‘justice’, pitiful.”

“Geez! What a drama queen,” Cameron said, interrupting the tense mood of the room with her eloquence.

Gale Lacroix hushed her whilst letting loose a small laughter thanks to her friend’s comment.

“Which is why I am offering you the means to free yourself from this corrupt trinity,” Dogma brazenly expressed, “no person alone, not even I can stand against these tyrants by my own. But if we work together, if we rise up against them, if we free ourselves, if we free our people, then we can build a new Vaifen, where all of you can dictate your very own path, where we all stand as equals, without Kings and nobility looking down upon us, without these Senators that wallow in their rotten opulence while you suffer, and without unjust judges that twist the purity of justice. That is my humble proposal to you, dear brothers and sisters.

“You may be asking who I am, I am sure that question is devouring you, isn’t it, Sulwyn Starsong? Prime Minister Andre Callahan—and your corrupt band of thieves and sycophants? Know this: I am the silent wrath of the people of Vaifen made manifest. We are nothing but the ashes of those that you’ve lied to, murdered, and manipulated. Your reckoning is at hand, this is just the beginning.” The video abruptly ended right after Dogma finished his monologue.

“What a load of bullshit,” Cade Saunders gave his honest opinion.

“I believe you’ve summed it up perfectly, Agent Saunders,” Director Exley agreed.

“Has this been released to the public?” Bastiel asked.

“Unfortunately yes,” Exley answered. “The video spread like a plague across the net. We are analyzing the file’s data in hopes of finding any leads, but so far we haven’t come with anything.”

Leah raised her hand, “Perhaps I could be of assistance in this matter, Director.”

“Yeah, me too.” Cameron also extended an offering.

“We have a full team working on this, but you two are more than welcome to do so,” Exley replied.

“Sure, just shoot us with a copy and we’ll see what we can do,” Cameron said.

Exley took a deep breath, “Now you know the kind of people we are dealing with, you saw them firsthand today during the Osborne hostage situation, and now you’ve had a glimpse of Dogma’s mind through that manifesto of his.”

“We will stop him, you can count on that, General Exley,” Erron affirmed in a resolute manner.

“I know you seven will,” Exley reassured the confidence he had on the team, “that being said, I have but one final instruction for the team today: Take some well-deserved rest, you have more than earned it.”

None of them would openly admit it at that precise moment, but they were heavily exhausted after the Osborne Store’s hostage situation, both physically and mentally.

“Have a great night and rest well, Gestalt,” Exley reworded his instructions, “The Nation of Vaifen is in your debt.”

The team left the briefing room and grabbed their personal belongings and clothing before departing to their respective homes. Bastiel hopped on his red vehicle and drove straight towards his apartment, going through the events of the day over and over in his head—especially the young man he had killed a few hours past. The look of terror on that young man’s face as his life faded away, that was something Bastiel could not wash away.

After arriving at his apartment building, Bastiel parked his vehicle and rode the elevator upstairs towards the penthouse floor. He was about to open the doors when he heard music and laughter—someone was definitely inside.

“Alma might be in danger,” he thought. His heartbeat began to accelerate, and even though he was exhausted, he sharpened his senses and readied his resolve.

Bastiel carefully opened the door and snuck inside his own abode. The apartment’s lights were all turned on; he took a peek inside the kitchen, where the music was coming from, and he found the intruder was none other than Princess Vesper Starsong. She was having a drink and holding a conversation with Alma, the Nasivern Artificial Intelligence.

“Vesper? Alma?” A now relieved Bastiel asked. His worries washed away upon seeing the face of the woman he loved.

“Oh look!” Vesper exclaimed. “The shining hero returns to his humble abode!” She jested.

“Welcome home, Bastiel,” Alma spoke. She lowered the music’s volume.

Without further hesitation, Vesper launched herself towards Bastiel and kissed him.

“I heard what happened today at Osborne. Were you hurt?” she asked.

“No, I’m fine,” he replied while caressing her red hair and looking at her green eyes.

“Father told me you and those people you’re now working with saved all those hostages, good job!” she kissed his mouth once more.

“It was a team effort, yes.”

“Well, I made you some dinner—you know, as a reward for saving the day.” The Princess expressed.

“You? Making food?” A perplexed Bastiel asked,

Vesper went to grab three bags that had a blue and white logo that depicted a dish plate and utensils.

Bastiel continued his questions, “Like, actual edible food?” He was no stranger to Vesper’s inexistent culinary prowess.

Vesper slammed the bags on the kitchen table, “Whatever . . . I bought food!”

Bastiel scratched the back of his head, “You know, buying food doesn’t count as cooking it.”

“It’s the thought that matters, you jerk. Now you sit while I serve it,” she commanded him.

“You mean ‘while I take it out of the bag.’”

Vesper frowned at him, “I hate you so much, Bastiel Isthali.” She took the meals from the bags.

The two of them sat on chromed stools that had a black leather cushion and began to eat dinner, facing each other.

There was something Vesper needed to get off her chest, something that had been troubling her ever since she had arrived at Bastiel’s apartment, “Say, how come you haven’t bought furniture or even bothered to decorate this place yet?” Vesper asked.

Other than Avalon's display, a large television screen, and a couch, there was no other piece of furniture in the penthouse's living room.

"Father sure spent a lot of money on this place—least you can do is buy furniture for it."

Vesper reprimanded him.

"I've been busy," Bastiel replied as he chewed his food.

"It's been more than six months since you moved in here, come on Bastiel," she said, "I mean, look at those boxes over there, you haven't even opened them yet!"

"I told you, I've been busy," Bastiel doubled down on his response, "I had to install speakers and cameras for Alma all by myself, that took me a while. Either way I'm certainly going to be busier now."

Vesper was perplexed, "All you have to do is go to a store, pick up stuff you like, and pay for it. You can even do that from your phone—it's not astrophysics," she said as they finished eating their dinner.

The Princess grabbed the helmet and red scarf Bastiel used as a part of his Agito vigilante costume from the bottom of the kitchen table, "Oh one thing. Care to explain this? That's not the type of stuff I'm into, but if you really want to try it then I guess I could make an exception," she shrugged at him.

Bastiel snatched the helm and scarf from her hands, "That's not what it is for!" he exclaimed, "Stop looking into my stuff!"

Vesper has always enjoyed making Bastiel feel uncomfortable at every possible moment. She considered it payback from all the countless childhood mischiefs in times past. As the Princess of Vaifen, there were facets of her personality that she had to conceal to others, but among Bastiel, she felt like she didn't have to.

Bastiel walked towards his bedroom, Vesper followed behind, he opened his closet and put the helmet and scarf back inside.

“Then what are they for?” Vesper asked whilst snickering.

“It’s nothing . . . one day I’ll explain,” Bastiel responded. “Why were you looking into my stuff anyways?”

“Why not?” Vesper shrugged again. “I was hoping to find something to tease you with, or leverage—I could always use some leverage.”

Vesper smirked at Bastiel, he gazed at her green emerald eyes that have always captivated him. Vesper grinned and winked at him in return.

“You have that look on your face,” Bastiel said to her.

“What?”

“You know, the one you always have when you’re plotting something, and those plots are often against me.”

Vesper giggled, “Lies, all lies. Why are you such a silly liar, I would never do such a thing.”

“Right . . .” Bastiel knew she was up to something, “Don’t tell me you have another one of your twisted schemes.” Whatever it was, it most likely involved him in some way.

“Of course not!” Vesper lied.

“So, that dinner was all of my reward for saving lives today?” Bastiel asked.

“I know what you’re implying, Bastiel, but that’ll have to be for now,” The Princess responded as she sent a message through her phone.

“Really now,” Bastiel frowned at her.

“Besides, Father’s ‘totally not a curfew’ which really is a curfew, is still in effect,” she said.

“A pity.”

“Indeed, some other time perhaps,” Vesper winked at him.

The apartment’s doorbell rang.

“And—my time’s up!” Vesper said, “but I will see you soon, very soon, Bastiel Isthall,” she added with an eerie and sinister tone on her voice.

They shared one more kiss before Bastiel opened the door. Royal Security Agent Marsh was standing there.

“Marsh,” Bastiel shook his hand.

“Mister Isthall,” he greeted him back. “I am here to escort the Princess back to the Palace.

“Of course.”

Vesper grabbed her purse and walked out of the apartment, “Goodbye, Bastiel,” she waved her hand at him.

Bastiel responded in kind. He closed the door after he saw both of them enter the elevator.

The exhausted white haired man took a long drawn out sigh and lowered his head, “She’s definitely plotting something,” he said.

Alma, who had been silent, spoke, “Oh yes she is.”

Bastiel looked towards one of the cameras installed throughout the apartment, “And I have the feeling that you know what it is—but you won’t tell me.”

“Me? No, of course not,” she lied.

“Whatever,” an exhausted Bastiel crashed on his couch. He turned on the television, looked at the ceiling, and took a long, deep breath.

He stared at the television screen when the news announcer began to report on the incident that took place at the Osborne Store hours earlier, “We can now confirm the identity of the only casualty, Robert Walker,” the announcer informed the death of one Osborne worker, the corpse Bastiel saw with Erron and Cade.

The news anchor continued, “All terrorists involved with this hostage situation were killed during the special operation carried to save the lives of the remaining thirty seven hostages.”

“I suppose the media played its role,” Bastiel said.

“What do you mean?” Alma asked with curiosity.

“We captured the leader of that attack alive, some nut job that goes by ‘Occipital’, but the media is falsely reporting that they all died in order to mislead his boss.” Bastiel explained.

“Makes sense,” the artificial intelligence said.

Bastiel entered his bathroom and took a hot, relaxing shower. After dressing up in a fresh pair of clothing he immediately laid on his bed face down.

“I saved people today, Alma,” Bastiel said with his voice slightly muffled by his pillow.

“I saw, Vesper kept talking about it all afternoon,” Alma replied. “How do you feel?”

“Good, I suppose—but I also killed a young man today.” Bastiel closed his eyes and saw the young man he killed once more; that stare he had as he died was something he wouldn’t easily forget.

“Didn’t we have this conversation before? It’s not the first time it’s happened,” Alma reminded him.

“I know, but this was a young man,” Bastiel said, “I just wonder what twists of fate led him to become a terrorist at such a young age. He gave me this really terrified look when I stabbed him, almost as if he regretted being there—forced even. Maybe it’s just me overthinking it, I don’t know. . . .” he spoke his mind.

“Just look at how many people you helped save, thirty seven, that’s not a small feat. In the end that’s what matters, Bastiel. To end a life to save others, to sin so you can save—it’s a hard burden that Isthara too once felt.

“Those thirty seven people that will have a future beyond this day thanks to your actions—focus on that instead,” Alma’s words comforted Bastiel

“I guess you’re right . . .” Bastiel responded. He turned sideways and covered himself with the bed sheets.

“Hope, that’s what you and your pals gave everyone today, hope that this Ashen Reckoning can be defeated,” Alma turned off the bedroom’s lights and adjusted the room’s air conditioner, “that’s what she would say . . .”

Bastiel let loose a faint chuckle, “Good night, Alma,” he yawned. The exhausted man dropped asleep in mere seconds.

V: TO FIGHT FOR THEM

More than two weeks had passed since the events that took place at the Osborne store. In that period of time, Gestalt had continued to train as a team and had been deployed in smaller operations, seeking the trail of the Ashen Reckoning, and stopping their heinous attacks upon the Nation.

Bastiel Isthral found himself inside the corridors of the Gestalt enclave. The place was barely illuminated, and what few lights worked constantly flickered. Confused, he walked around the facility in search of his teammates and answers—something was definitely off.

“Is anyone here?” He asked to a dark hallway in the hopes that someone would answer him.

An answer never arrived.

His heart began to beat faster and faster, his fingertips were cold, something terrible had occurred there, even the air felt different—foul and heavy. He entered the sparring room, two bodies that laid on the floor on top of a puddle of blood immediately caught his attention. Bastiel desperately ran towards them and turned them around. The bodies belonged to Cade Saunders and Leah Sutherland; he checked their pulses, both of them were dead.

“Leah! Cade!” Bastiel yelled.

Panic took over his mind at the sight of his dead teammates. Bastiel closed Leah's eyes and immediately looked around the room in search of a weapon to defend himself with, but his search was fruitless.

Bastiel heard a loud noise that came from upstairs and immediately ran towards the Operations Room. As he frantically made his way upstairs he found the corpses of Edram Pertz, Cameron Bennett, and Gale Lacroix outside the doors of the operations room. Bastiel's hands trembled in fear when his mind processed the horrifying imagery that his eyes saw.

He kneeled in front of the three corpses and observed the scene. A firefight had taken place there, that much was evident, and they made their last stand guarding the door before being gunned down. The walls were now decorated with a large barrage of bullet holes.

"Cammy! Cammy!" Bastiel grabbed Cameron's shoulders and shook her in a vain attempt to get a response from her cold and lifeless body.

Bastiel noticed that Edram was holding a rifle, he carefully took it from his hands and placed his right hand above his friend's heart. The fear and panic he felt morphed into rage and into an unquenchable thirst for the blood of whoever was responsible. He opened the doors of the Operations room and walked inside with rifle in hand and vengeance in mind.

The Operations Room was even colder, an eerie but invisible aura emanated from it. It was as if something had sucked out the light and life force of the room and was infecting Bastiel's psyche with fear. He carefully traversed through the darkness and encountered a wounded Erron Leitner—without hesitation, Bastiel ran towards him.

"Erron!" Bastiel exclaimed as he examined the fatal wounds on Erron's chest.

"Stop . . . you must stop him . . ." Erron muttered his last words, he pointed at the other end of the room before he succumbed to his wounds.

Following his Commander's final order, Bastiel looked towards the area Erron had pointed at and saw a tall figure dressed in black and wearing a white helmet, it was none other than Dogma, the leader of the Ashen Reckoning, in the flesh.

Dogma was not alone, King Sulwyn Starsong, Prince Seyren Starsong, and Princess Vesper Starsong were also there, tied up to chairs and in immediate danger.

"No!" Bastiel yelled at the top of his lungs. He emptied the remainder of the rifle's magazine at Dogma, the bullets however, didn't seem to have any effect on him. Dogma ran towards him with an unbelievable speed and tackled him. Bastiel was knocked away and crash landed in between two desks.

As Bastiel began to stand up, he noticed that for reasons that escaped reason and logic, his family's heirloom sword, Avalon, was at his left. The unique Nasivern sword was impaled upon the chest of his red Nightingale 105MC Battle Suit.

Perhaps it was an act of divine providence from the Nasivern mother deity herself that had placed the sword there—but whatever explanation there was for such an illogical occurrence would have to wait, it was not the best of time to ask questions.

Bastiel desperately tried to grab Avalon but the sword was stuck and would not budge, no matter how hard he tried he could not release it. Before he could continue to attempt to free the blade he was met by Dogma's fierce kick. Without a weapon, Bastiel would have to face him using his fists.

Armed with his Absolute Doctrine of the Nasivern, Bastiel assumed an aggressive fighting stance. His heart burned with rage for the death of his friends, he channeled that rage into each and every one of his blows in order to save his loved ones.

Despite putting all of his might and anger into his attacks, they had no effect against the masked assailant, who was completely unscathed by the flurry of punches Bastiel threw at him. Dogma had enough and mounted a counteroffensive, his impossibly fast and mighty blows proved very difficult to withstand.

Bastiel continued to valiantly stand his ground against the seemingly unstoppable force that was Dogma, hoping to find a weakness that he could exploit to his advantage—but he was tackled and grabbed by Dogma, who threw him away with such an inhumane and impossible strength.

Unchallenged and unopposed, Dogma turned around and slowly walked towards the Starsong Royal family. Bastiel coughed blood as he came back to his senses and recovered as fast as he could. The pain of Dogma's relentless blows ran across every part of his body, he felt utterly powerless and frustrated like never before.

When he saw Dogma slowly walk towards the King and his heirs, he mustered all of his dwindling strength and willpower in one last desperate attempt of wielding Avalon. He succeeded in wielding the legendary Nasivern blade, the same blade that once bought his people freedom centuries ago would now be the instrument of his reckoning.

With Avalon firmly grasped in his left hand, the Nasivern Bastiel Isthel did not waste a single second and rushed against Dogma with a mighty swing of his blade. His attack was parried by Dogma, who unsheathed a sword of his own, much to Bastiel's surprise.

Dogma responded in kind with swings of his blade, to which Bastiel promptly defended against. Their swords continued to clash, Bastiel began to feel slow and sluggish, the air was heavier, his vision blurred, and the room felt like it was shaking, it was difficult for him to maintain proper balance. Nonetheless, Bastiel continued to fight against Dogma, no longer

caring about the physical pain he felt, he just wanted—and needed—to kill that man, no matter what it took.

The death of his newfound friends and the danger this man posed against his King and his heirs, which were the closest Bastiel's ever had to a family, gave him the strength he necessitated to bring forth a wrathful reckoning upon the masked man. Sword clashed with sword until Bastiel managed to thrust at the heart of his opponent, confident that he had struck a decisive killing blow.

Dogma did not fall, he was unfazed by Bastiel's masterstroke. Avalon had indeed pierced through Dogma's heart, and yet, the leader of the Ashen Reckoning stood there as if he had only suffered a mere scratch. Bastiel desperately tried to pull the sword out of Dogma's body, but no matter how hard he tried, the sword was stuck once more. Bastiel could not let go of the sword either, as if his hands had been glued to the legendary sword. Dogma then drew a handgun with his right hand, he pointed it at Bastiel's forehead, and shot him point blank.

Bastiel Isthel immediately woke up from the worst nightmare he had dreamt in recent times; he breathed heavily as he tried to get back into his senses and snap out of it.

"Bastiel! Are you ok?" A worried Alma asked him.

"I . . . I just had a . . ." he looked at his hands as he tried to relax and normalize his breathing, "bad dream."

Bastiel continued to snap out of the horrible experience his mind concocted while he slumbered, shaking his head and running his hands through his face. He looked at his bedroom's window—the sun was yet to rise.

"Relax, buddy!" yelled a concerned Alma. "Whatever it was, it was just a dream."

“It felt quite real . . . that’s all.” Bastiel said as he laid on his back and looked at the ceiling.

“Well, it’s been a while since you’ve woken up from a nightmare like that.”

Bastiel closed his eyes and tried to conciliate sleep once more. Despite the fact that he tried his best at doing so he just could not sleep again—his mind was not at ease. Bastiel then tried to sleep sideways, then he flipped over, he laid face down, but no matter what position he tried, sleep just simply eluded him.

Before he knew it, the sun was already out, blessing the city of Ternion with its warm presence. Bastiel gave up on trying to squeeze in just a tiny bit more of sleep and got up from his bed, heading straight to his bathroom, feeling utterly exhausted.

He looked at the mirror and took a good look at himself: tousled hair, dark circles around his eyes—a mess, that was the first adjective that came to his mind. He washed his face with cold water, brushed his teeth, and left the bathroom, but not before fixing his white hair with his hands.

Bastiel walked towards the living room and sat on his couch, he turned on the television; a morning show was airing.

“Good morning, Vaifen! What a lovely day we have ahead of ourselves today!” A female presenter said. “Welcome to our show on this beautiful morning, we have so many great things in store today!” Her enthusiasm was almost intoxicating.

“Smile, Bastiel! It’s a beautiful day!” Alma jokingly said upon noticing Bastiel’s grumpy and frowned visage.

Bastiel simply grunted in response.

“Why don’t you make some coffee so you can wake up?” she suggested, “I would get you some . . . but you know . . .”

“No can’t do,” replied Bastiel as he zapped through channels, “because I’m finally seeing Evan today for that medical approval paperwork for Gestalt, he’s finally back from his trip. He’ll berate me if I eat or drink something.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, you know how he is.”

Bastiel continued to aimlessly browse through channels until he stumbled upon a news report that caught his complete and undivided attention.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard rumors about a mysterious group of five people, all clad in very colorful suits,” a male voice said, his words were accompanied by an assortment of footage collected from civilians and some media outlets that featured but a small glimpse of Gestalt’s chromatic team in action. One of the most shaky and unprofessionally recorded clips featured Bastiel drawing his Judgement weapon and switching it from gun to sword mode.

“Hey, you’re on tv!” Alma exclaimed.

“Could this be part of the much anticipated announcement that King Sulwyn is poised to give this week at the Senate?” The male announcer, now on display and behind his desk, said, “we’ll see.”

“Bound to happen, I guess,” Bastiel checked the time and turned off the television. He headed towards his room to dress up. The attire for the day was dark jeans, a gray shirt, and a red and gray jacket. He grabbed his keys, phone, and wallet, ready to head off.

“I’ll see you later Alma, remember, if you’re going to snoop around the Net, be smart and don’t get caught,” he said.

“Oh please. I’m too good to get caught,” the artificial intelligence responded.

Bastiel laughed and closed his apartment’s door. He hopped on his red vehicle and drove west towards the medical center Doctor Evan Lecardes held his practice at.

He listened to music along the way as he journeyed west towards the Quintex District; the flow of traffic had improved when compared to the immediate days that followed the attack on Estival Station. Slowly but steady, a sense of normalcy was returning to the streets of Ternion.

After driving for a few minutes through the Quintex District Bastiel arrived at the eponymous Quintex Clinic. A wide three story tall building that was easily identifiable by its white and beige colors and its blue tinted windows. Lush green grass adorned its front, and a diamond shaped fountain served as the entrance’s centerpiece.

Bastiel parked his vehicle and walked inside the building. As far as medical centers went, Quintex was one of the most prestigious ones in Ternion. The lobby was nothing short of elegant, wooden panels adorned most of the sidewalls while the rest were light beige colored, a few patients and visitors sat on fashionable and comfortable chairs and sofas.

A soothing and relaxing piano tune could be heard in the background. The receptionist’s desk was round and wooden. Water fell in between two glass panels all the way down from the second floor and behind the receptionist’s work area, the controlled waterfall, along with the sublime notes of the piano song, could wash the visitors’ worries away. Bastiel approached the receptionist.

“Good Morning, sir! How may I be of assistance today?” She asked kindly and with a smile on her face.

“Morning,” Bastiel greeted her back. “I’m here to see Doctor Evan Lecardes.”

“Of course, do you have a scheduled appointment?”

“I don’t think so, maybe I do. Hang on,” he responded as he typed a message on his phone.

“I’m sorry, sir, but you must have an appointment beforehand,” she insisted.

“I understand. Just a sec.”

Mere seconds later, the receptionist received a phone call.

“Yes Doctor, there’s a man here asking for you—white hair, yes—understood, at your service,” she hung up. “Doctor Lecardes will see you right away,” she informed Bastiel, “do you know where his consulting room is at?” she asked.

“Second floor, eastern area, right?” Bastiel replied.

“That is correct, sir,” the receptionist confirmed.

“Alright, I’ll head there right away.”

“Have a good day!”

“You too.” Bastiel walked towards the elevator and went up to the second floor, he continued to walk towards the eastern side of the building.

He entered a waiting area that served as an anteroom to several consulting rooms, all marked with their respective doctor’s name, the rightmost door was the only door that was open.

Doctor Evan Lecardes was standing there waiting for Bastiel. Evan was slender and taller than him, he wore an elegant cobalt striped suit, a white shirt, and a red burgundy tie with a white medical coat on top of his elegant attire. His hair was dark and swept back and had a fair share of golden highlights, the doctor wore rectangular shaped eyeglasses that seemed to have cost a hefty sum of money.

“But if it isn’t the Star boy himself. So, the world’s worst patient finally decided to pay its favorite doctor a visit,” Evan said as Bastiel approached him.

“Oh you know me,” Bastiel shrugged, “always caught up in between one thing or another, never enough time . . . I mean, I was going to come here a week ago but you weren’t even in the country.”

“Yeah, I had to attend a conference in Haufast,” Evan said, “boring stuff, but I needed the time off.”

Both of them shook hands and shared a strong fraternal hug. Bastiel Isthall and Evan Lecardes have been longtime friends. They met during their teenage high school years.

“Come on in,” Evan invited him to his consulting room.

Both of them walked in and Evan closed the door.

Doctor Lecardes’ consulting room had quite the stylish and elegant decor applied to it. Light wooden floors, white and dark indigo walls matched with blue window curtains, a set of three round white and blue couches surrounded a round glass table. His fancy desk was mostly made of tempered glass.

Evan waved at one of the three couches, “Have a seat, my friend.”

Bastiel sat down.

“Oh Evan boy, how have you been these days?” Bastiel asked.

“Same old, same old, one patient at a time,” Evan said as he sat down in one of the couches, “I’ve been taking it easy with all the horrible stuff that’s happened these past days.”

“Well . . . yeah, that’s kinda why I’m here today,” Bastiel spoke. “But first things first—what’s up with that?” he pointed at Evan’s hair.

“Oh, these?” Evan touched one of his highlighted strands of hair as he chortled. “It’s something I’m trying, got it done during my trip to Haufast. What do you think?”

“They’re alright, I guess.” Bastiel answered with a frown and a shrug, “not my thing to be honest.”

“Well, good thing you aren’t in charge of fashion around these parts!” Evan said in his defense.

Both of them laughed.

“So,” Evan said as he looked at his friend, “What can I do for you, pal?”

Bastiel scratched the back of his head, “Well you see, I need a medical evaluation and an approval signature from you—is that what it’s called? I honestly don’t have a clue.”

“Tsk, close enough,” replied Evan. “I did receive a request from the National Intelligence Center for one of those right before my trip. It’s not something you get every day, you know. I was surprised to see your name on it of all people. Is that what you’ve been up to these days?”

“Yep, I’m working there now,” Bastiel answered.

“Interesting, never took you for an intelligence officer. In what, if I may ask?”

“Top secret,” Bastiel responded with air quotes.

“Aw, come on now.” Evan insisted.

Bastiel responded by hushing his friend.

“Fine, I understand,” Evan said as he stood up. “I have a tight schedule today so let’s start this up, shall we?”

“Sure thing.”

Evan pointed towards his left, “Walk over there and change into a robe, I’ll be there in a sec, I have to dig up your file and load the requested forms from my system.”

As instructed, Bastiel Isthel walked over to the observation area. He took off his clothes and shoes and put on a light blue patient's robe. Evan entered the room holding a small tablet device.

"Make me look good in that file, Evan boy," Bastiel said.

"Oh, on the report? We'll see," replied Evan. "I don't think there's much I can do about that face of yours, though," the doctor said as he laughed.

Bastiel scooped, "Ah, shut up."

"Alright, let's begin with the basics: Name, yadda yadda, twenty seven years, Nineveh, Nasivern," Evan muttered to himself, "Stand on that scale, will ya?" He instructed his patient.

Bastiel stepped onto the scale, which instantly measured his height and weight.

"Height: Six zero. Weight; One hundred ninety five point three," Evan spoke as the automated scale sent Bastiel's weight and height data to his tablet.

"Now come sit here," Evan patted a chair.

The patient did as instructed.

"Here, wear these," Evan handed him over an armband and a small white device. "The band will measure your pressure. Put that little thing over your heart, if you do have one then it'll check it out."

Bastiel followed his doctor's instructions in silence.

Evan pointed at Bastiel's mouth, "Now open your mouth and say 'Ah!'".

Bastiel tilted his head sideways and frowned at Evan, "Seriously?"

"No, I wanted to see if you'd actually do it," Evan laughed.

Bastiel shook his head, "Oh, come on now . . ."

Evan took a close look at Bastiel's face, "Star boy, you sure you're sleeping? Did you forget that people need to sleep every now and then? That includes Nasivern too," he said with regards to Bastiel's eye circles.

"I'm not an early bird like you."

"Yeah right, you're a 'night owl', I coined that," Evan rolled his eyes. "No fractures or injuries of any kind I hope."

"Nah, I'm a good boy," Bastiel winked.

"Sure you are. Alright, heart and pressure looks fine, you can take those off. Now for the fun part, let's draw some blood," Evan said, "I really hope you didn't eat anything before coming—because that will affect the results."

Bastiel looked at Evan, "No mom, I didn't." If one was to use an apparatus to measure the amount of sardonicism in Bastiel's words, the result would've been off the charts, a result that was largely influenced by his stomach's cries for sustenance.

Doctor Evan Lecardes wore a pair of gloves and grabbed a small cylinder-shaped device. He attached a sterile needle to its tip and a sealed tube to the other end. He tied a tourniquet on Bastiel's right arm, sterilized the antecubital area of his arm with alcohol, and tapped it with his finger in order to locate a suitable vein from which to draw blood from.

"Take a deep breath and don't cry like a baby," Evan said as he introduced the needle in Bastiel's vein. The device drew blood from it, filling the vial.

"That's it, what a good Star boy!" Evan removed the needle and cleaned the punctured area. He placed a small bandage on top of it.

"Gee, thanks," Bastiel once again spoke with a sardonic tone.

“Alright let’s see,” Evan placed the vial on a rectangular sampling machine, which began to analyze it, procuring results in less than a minute.

Evan read the results of the blood test, “Nasivern blood, VX Factor: type 1. No presence of narcotics or substances in blood—huh who knew, you really are a good boy,” he chuckled. “The rest of the hematology looks within acceptable ranges.”

Bastiel shrugged, “I told you.”

“Next step.” Evan pressed a button on the wall, the room’s lights dimmed, and a few letters of different size and colored shapes displayed on a wall in front of Bastiel.

“Read the letters and identify the shape and colors—correctly, of course.” Evan instructed the patient.

Bastiel did as requested, “N. D. M. Z. T. E, green square, red triangle, yellow octagon, blue pentagon, orange rectangle, pink trapezoid, X. F. G. L. C. A. V. R. T. O. P. W. Q. Nation of Vaifen, Ministry of Health, standardized visual acumen test, twelfth revision.”

“That last line wasn’t part of the test . . . but okay,” Evan commented. “I think that’s all. Strange, these kinds of things usually ask for more thorough stuff but this is all they asked, it’s not even a quarter of what an actual report of this nature entails,” he double checked the form to make sure he wasn’t missing anything.

“The whole thing is more of a formality to be honest,” Bastiel explained, “you know, bureaucracy and paperwork.”

“One thing though, doesn’t the NIC have their own doctors that can do this? I mean I don’t mind doing you the favor but yeah . . . for such a big place they ought to have at least one doctor or physician,” Doctor Lecardes commented.

“Well, this is sort of a new, separate unit,” Bastiel said. “Don’t forget I’m not from around these parts—that’s probably why you need to be the one to do it, Nasivern regulations and all.” he speculated on the reason.

“I suppose so . . . in any case, you can get dressed again. I’ll wait for you at my desk.” Evan left to give his patient some privacy. Bastiel put on his clothes and walked towards Evan’s desk and took a seat.

“Well your request has been signed off and sent, you have my a-ok for whatever it is you need it for,” Evan said whilst holding his right thumb up.

“Don’t I get a receipt or anything, or even a piece of paper?” Bastiel asked.

“Oh no, this is all handled instantly, they’ve already received it, look,” Evan rotated one of his display monitors and showed him the acknowledgement of receipt.

“Oh, that’s great, I guess,” Bastiel said. “So how much do I owe you for the trouble, Evan boy?” he asked.

“Come on, Bastiel, you know I would never charge you any fee,” Evan felt slightly insulted at the mere insinuation of charging his best friend any sort of consulting fee.

“I know, the pleasure of my friendship is priceless,” Bastiel said as a joke.

“If only,” Evan let loose a short laugh. “Guess we got a couple minutes to chit chat, my first scheduled patients should arrive soon, though.”

Bastiel checked the time, “I suppose we do.”

The two friends conversed for quite some time, catching up on a myriad of topics. Bastiel, who always had trouble socializing, always found it easy to speak his mind with his longtime friend.

“I take it you and Princess Vesper are . . . you know, still a thing?” Evan inquired.

“Yes,” Bastiel answered. “Be careful about mentioning that to anyone, Evan,” his voice took a serious tone.

“Of course, I’d never break your trust—Doctor and Patient confidentiality, remember?” Evan winked. “But seriously though, when are you two finally making it official?”

“To be honest, it’s something we haven’t even talked about yet. When the time is right, whenever that is, if ever,” Bastiel confessed. “Since we are on the subject, what about you, Evan boy. Still looking for the right one?” he asked back.

“Oh I got no time for love—just a few dates here and there, nothing serious,” Evan spoke as he was browsing through his system for the medical files of the patients he was to attend that morning. “I have three scheduled surgeries in the afternoon, fifteen scheduled patients for the morning, and that’s just today.”

“Just make sure you’re careful who you end up dating, I can’t bail you out of trouble all the time—or do I need to remind you about Thompson?” Bastiel laughed, remembering the circumstances that allowed their paths to cross.

“Of course, I learned my lesson back then.” Evan’s mind went through the memories of that day.

He remembered the day he and Bastiel met over a decade ago, during their late high school years. A teenage Evan Lecardes’ amorous adventure took a turn for the worse and ended with him in an alley nearby the school he attended, severely beaten up by an equally young man who was a fellow classmate that wished to restore his desecrated honor at the face of what he claimed, were heinous hearsay and rumors. The aspiring athlete assaulting Evan was in the company of four of his most trusted companions.

Evan found himself in that afternoon covered in his own blood and in severe pain, he thought that he was moments away from perishing. In his agony, he let loose desperate cries for help that seemed to be heard by no one.

Fortunately for him, Bastiel Isthel happened to be at the right time in the right place, he heard the screams and pleas of help and rushed to investigate. He found the five men beating up the helpless Evan. Bastiel, at the face of an injustice, decided to take matters into his own hands. He tore a loose steel pipe from a nearby drain and yelled at the group of men, commanding them to leave the helpless victim alone.

The leader of the group spoke on behalf of the rest, ordering that weird white haired boy to get lost, but Bastiel was having none of it. He challenged the five assailants with pipe in hand, and one by one they fell at the hands of the young Nasivern, who in exchange received his fair share of pain, bruises, and punches.

As he broke the arm of the group's leader, he issued an ultimatum to all of them: If those five men so much as touched Evan again, dared to look at him, or worse, if their minds ever dared to form a thought regarding him; if Evan so much as broke a nail or sneezed, then Bastiel's wrath would descend upon them until they would be reduced to ashes, and then they would know true punishment.

The five men ran away upon hearing the ominous words of that weird boy, words that continued to echo through their heads every time they gazed upon Bastiel at school—avoiding crossing paths with him. Bastiel helped Evan stand up and accompanied him so he could receive proper assistance. The pain of that day served as the foundation of their unshakable friendship and mutual loyalty towards each other.

“Thompson wasn’t the same ever since that day,” a reminiscing Evan said. “Is that warning you gave him still valid?”

“Of course!” Bastiel assured him. “Do you need me to remind him? I can do that.”

“No, no, no! Bastiel, relax,” Evan gestured with his two open hands.

“Just let me know if they need a reminder, I could pay Thompson a post-midnight visit, you know, for fun,” Bastiel chortled. He leaned forward towards Evan, “I know where he lives,” he said with a menacing tone.

“It’s been more than ten years,” Evan responded, “it’s in the past now.”

Bastiel shrugged, “Just making sure.”

Evan checked at the time, “Oh my goodness, I need to start seeing my patients, I don’t like to keep them waiting.”

“I suppose I should be heading off too—shouldn’t arrive late and all.”

“Indeed, we definitely need some time to hang out,” Evan said, “just like old times.”

“Definitely,” Bastiel agreed. “It seems that we don’t have much free time like we used to back then.”

“You’re right, my friend, we don’t,” Evan smirked.

The Nasivern and the human doctor stood up and shook hands.

“Stay safe, Evan boy.”

“You too, Star boy. Take care of yourself, and good luck out there.”

“See ya around,” Bastiel said as he walked away. As he made his way out he saw a handful of people sitting outside Evan’s consulting room.

“Ah, Louise, my darling! Please come on in!” Evan spoke to an elderly woman, who surprised him with a kiss. “Lovely as always!” he exclaimed.

Bastiel couldn't help but notice the affection Evan gave to his patients, and how well it was received. For all of Evan Lecardes' eccentricity, he gave his all to his profession and poured all of his humanity and empathy in his medical practice.

The now late Bastiel walked outside the Quintex center, got onto his vehicle, and drove towards the National Intelligence Center.

Traffic was on his side that morning as he managed to drive all the way there without much delay. His stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten anything yet, but as much as he wanted to treat himself to a nice breakfast, he had no time to spare—he was already late enough as it was.

Bastiel Isthel arrived at the National Intelligence Center, he parked his red vehicle, and with great haste, made his way towards the north eastern elevators to ascend towards the Gestalt enclave. Upon entering the enclave he heard Edram's voice call him through a speaker.

“Ah! You're finally here,” said Edram, “everyone's waiting for you, Bastiel.”

Bastiel scratched the back of his head, “Yeah, yeah. Good Morning, Eddie. Sorry I'm late,” he replied.

“Go get yourself ready, everyone is sparring and they could definitely use your presence.”

“Sure thing.”

Bastiel changed clothes into his black and red uniform, and without wasting another second, joined his teammates in the sparring arena. Gale Lacroix and Cameron Bennett were having a skirmish between them, Gale wielded a long staff, while Cameron wielded two short swords.

Commander Erron Leitner carefully observed the duel and the performance of his yellow and pink teammates whilst Cade Saunders punched a heavy bag in solitude. Bastiel was relieved to see them all safe and sound after the horrifying nightmare he experienced mere hours ago.

“Good Morning, Bastiel,” Erron said to him without looking away from the two dueling women, “you’re late.”

“I’m so sorry, Erron, won’t happen again,” Bastiel apologized. “I finally went to get that medical approval thing Director Exley requested.”

“Yeah, I understand, no worries . . . paperwork is such an annoying thing, right?”

“Yeah,” Bastiel replied with a small chuckle.

Bastiel Isthel observed the duel between Gale and Cameron. As the fight heated up his mind flashed through the horrible sequence of events and the grim scenery of his nightmare. Gale and Cade’s bodies on that very same floor, and all that blood he saw, he shook his head to shrug off the unpleasant imagery.

When he began to refocus his attention on the combat once more it was too late, the one-sided duel was over, and Gale had emerged victorious.

“Aww, not fair! I can’t land a hit against that staff of yours!” A begrudged Cameron exclaimed.

Gale patted her head, “That’s the idea, my dear Cammy.”

Erron clapped, “Good, good. You got too impatient in the end, Cammy, but you’re improving,” he commented.

“Bah! this isn’t my thing—oh look, Bastiel’s here!” Cameron ran towards him, “he will avenge me! Will ya, Bee?”

Bastiel, who was still somewhat absentminded, was caught off-guard by Cameron's overly energetic personality.

"Uh sure . . . if you say so," He did not fully grasp what Cameron's request entailed, but went along with it nonetheless.

"Yes!" Cameron was more than satisfied by his answer, "that's what I wanted to hear! Now go! Beat that meanie for me!" the pink member pointed at the yellow Gale.

The ordeal caused Erron to let loose an intense laughter, "Well, Bastiel, since you're a bit late, why don't you make up for it by finally teaching all of us here a thing or two about the Nasivern's Absolute Doctrine? I mean, I know it's got quite the . . . religious or cultural importance, so whatever you feel comfortable with sharing with us, I won't push ya."

Bastiel nodded at his team leader, "I suppose I could give you all a crash course. It'd be pleasure, boss—I mean, Erron," he stretched his limbs before grabbing his preferred instrument of combat from the weapons stand, a sword.

Cade Saunders overheard the conversation and stepped forward. The wounds of his defeat at the hands of the newcomer Bastiel on his first day at Gestalt were still wide open, a defeat that he still considered most humiliating. He saw the perfect opportunity to reclaim the lost honor he perceived he had lost, and he felt more than ready to do so.

"With all due respect Gale, allow me to rematch the Nasivern. This time he will stand no chance against me." Cade walked at the center of the arena with one goal in mind, to defeat Bastiel Isthel in combat.

Bastiel sniggered at Cade's impetuous request, "Not again," he thought to himself, most amused at the prospect of another victory against his stuck up green teammate.

Gale shrugged, “Sure, whatever,” she poured a cup of water for herself and stepped back to observe.

Bastiel got in position and readied his stance, “So, the Absolute Doctrine—where should I begin?”

Cade Saunders readied himself as well.

Bastiel pointed his right index finger at the heavens, just like during his first duel with Cade, he cleared his throat, and began to speak.

“Long before any of us here were born, long before this Nation existed, and even before the humans of Orbis discovered things such as electricity, the Nasivern developed and practiced a code whose original name was lost to time. It’s been referred to as the Path of Conquest, the Way of Life, the Soul of the Warrior, the Road to Absolution—ultimately, it was decided that it should be called the Absolute Doctrine.”

Bastiel usually wasn’t a talkative person, but there he was, with words full of confidence, talking about a subject he was well versed and enthusiastic about.

The red gestalt member continued his explanation, completely relaxed and uninterested in his eager opponent, “The Absolute Doctrine is the culmination of centuries of combat techniques coalesced into one. A harmonization of opposites, a conciliation of all of the warring elements within a warrior’s life and soul. In simpler words, the Doctrine is a set of methods and fighting styles designed for one primary purpose: to obtain and exert control of any battlefield and its outcome.”

Cade mistakenly assumed that he could surprise Bastiel as he went on with his monologue and rushed against the Nasivern with a quick swing of his sword. Bastiel dodged his attack with a graceful and effortless spin of his body.

“The Doctrine is all about controlling your opponent,” Bastiel said as he rapidly swung back at Cade, who blocked his attack.

“His emotions, his fears, his desires. You seize them all and turn them into a weapon against your opponent,” Bastiel moved sideways and firmly gazed upon his prey as he continued to describe to his teammates what the Absolute Doctrine of the Nasivern entailed. “It’s all about manipulating the flow of battle to your exact and specific needs.”

Bastiel launched himself against his opponent and dealt four powerful precise strikes against Cade’s sword. Each hit got Cade closer to losing his balance, he had to jump backwards in order to dodge a fifth swing of Bastiel’s blade that would’ve otherwise struck him.

Edram Pertz ran all the way from his laboratory as fast as he could to observe the combat firsthand, sitting next to Erron, Gale, and Cameron. Bastiel had the complete and undivided attention of his four spectators, the combat arena had transformed into a stage that exclusively belonged to him, and he had seized that play’s leading role.

“The Doctrine is the path to victory—everlasting and absolute.” Bastiel taunted Cade, he mimicked a gun gesture with his right hand towards Cade in order to infuriate him, “how can you go against that, my friend?”

Cade tried his best to keep his head as cold as he could, lest he would once again let rage dictate his actions, a costly mistake on his part when he first fought against Bastiel. He considered the circumstances of his current encounter and weighted them against the previous one. During his first duel against Bastiel Isthel he went all on the offensive, as it was more in league to his accustomed fighting style. Cade concluded that he needed to try a different approach and fight more on the defensive. He changed his stance accordingly and slowed down his pace.

Bastiel read through Cade's intentions like an open book and planned his next set of moves, "Let me put it this way—each step you take, each swing of your weapon—it all must flow in perfect harmony with one another. The warrior's body and weapon become one, spirit and soul as well." He lashed out against Cade, forcing him further into a defensive position and denying him of any opportunity to mount up an offensive counterattack.

"Everything you do in combat, every action, every choice," Bastiel continued his explanation, "it's all part of a symphony of life and death of which you are the sole composer and conductor."

Cade tried to gain a firm stand against a relentless Bastiel, who continued to strike at him with all of his might.

"And when you force the world to dance to your song, when you make the world revolve around you," Bastiel said as he continued to deal mighty blows to Cade's sword, whose defenses and strength kept diminishing after each strike.

Cade stepped sideways to escape from the incessant flurry of Bastiel's attacks, which is exactly what Bastiel wanted him to do. Bastiel used Cade's own momentum against him to bolster the might of the next swing of his blade; his powerful attack made Cade drop his weapon, much to Cade's surprise and subsequent frustration.

Bastiel Isthel pointed his sword at his disarmed opponent's neck, "Glory and victory is yours for the taking," he tapped Cade's throat with the tip of his training sword. "The warrior seizes the victory they sought for themselves, painting the portrait of their triumph with the blood of the vanquished—that, my friends, is just a small glimpse of the Absolute Doctrine."

Cade felt even more frustrated than ever before. Never in his life had he gone through such a demeaning experience that could even begin to compare to what he felt after that defeat.

He could not bear the frustration of losing and being toyed with not only once, but twice in a row—especially against someone who he considered a rookie that lacked all of the training and accolades that he possessed; someone who got into Gestalt by simply being the King’s groomed alien pet, unlike him, Cade Saundes, selected to be part of Gestalt due to his near perfect and impeccable Special Operations record and astounding qualifications.

All Cade wished was to forego all pretenses and simply punch that cocky and arrogant Nasivern face.

Bastiel extended his right hand and offered a handshake as a sign of good sportsmanship. Cade had no choice but to painfully swallow his pride and reciprocate the handshake, lest he would look like a bitter fool at the hands of his peers, he retreated and sat alone in an attempt to quell his anger towards his opponent and towards himself.

“Impressive, Bastiel! Most impressive!” Erron clapped, “if I may ask, who trained you in the Absolute Doctrine? I mean don’t get me wrong, but there’s so few remaining Nasivern that I thought that there weren’t any practitioners of it alive. When I was on active duty we’ve always thought of it to be nothing more than an exaggerated rumor—boy, I’m so glad to be wrong about that,” he spoke.

Bastiel scratched the back of his head with his right hand, “Well . . . it was a Nasivern, yes, that much I can say,” he answered, “King Starsong said that it was the least I could do to honor the legacy of my family and my people—to make sure that the Doctrine lived through me and that I wielded it with pride, while doing some good with it,” he added as he looked down on the ground. “As for who it was . . . well I’m not in the liberty to say,” Bastiel said with a smirk on his face which could had been interpreted as the sign of a lie.

“I’d say it was time well spent,” Cameron commented, “some awesome moves right there, my dude.”

Edram Pertz speculated to himself about the identity of the person that trained Bastiel, “Now I’m curious,” he said.

“Awesome stuff,” Erron said, “I would love to meet that person someday.”

“Yeah! I bet he . . . or she is quite the fascinating teacher,” Cameron gave her opinion, “I bet it’s some mystical esoteric recluse like in that film I saw recently.”

“One day perhaps, it’s complicated—to say the least.” Bastiel responded. “The man loves his privacy and I have to respect that.” There was a hint of awkwardness in his words, it was a subject he did not feel comfortable talking about. “Anyways, wasn’t I supposed to ‘avenge’ someone?” he reminded everyone in order to quickly divert the subject of the conversation.

“Oh yeah! Me!” Cameron said, she dragged Gale towards the center of the arena.

Gale frowned at her friend, “Do I really have to fight him Cammy?”

Cameron grabbed the staff Gale had previously wielded against her in their previous sparring duel and placed it in Gale’s hands, “Oh yes, you have to pay for what you’ve done to me! Now fight, you two!”

“Erron?” Gale tried to make her Commander stop the duel.

Erron laughed, “Of course there’s nothing to avenge—she won fair and square, but practicing against Bastiel won’t hurt ya, Gale. It can’t be harder than all this paperwork I have to go through,” he pointed at a tablet device he held in his left hand.

“Fine, fine, whatever.” Gale got in position.

Bastiel readied himself as well. The two combatants nodded their heads at each other.

“Ready?” Cameron asked. both Gale and Bastiel responded affirmatively at her.

“Go!”

The match between Bastiel Isthel and Gale Lacroix had started.

Bastiel remained calm as he watched his opponent’s moves, letting Gale take the initiative so that he could assess the nature of her fighting dance. He dodged and parried the initial swings of her staff with minimal effort.

“Exerting control of the battle,” the words Bastiel had previously spoken echoed in Gale’s mind. “He’s surely analyzing me right now, the clever fella . . .” she thought to herself, letting lose a faint smile at him.

Bastiel smirked back at Gale and tested her defenses with a series of strikes. She proved to be quite proficient with her weapon of choice as none of his attacks managed to break past the defensive perimeter of her staff. While the red Gestalt member had already given a brief explanation into the Absolute Doctrine of the Nasivern warriors of old, he felt compelled to explain another facet of it.

"The Absolute Doctrine isn't just a bunch of theatrical fighting tactics and metaphors about symphonies and victories," Bastiel confessed, lowering his sword and moving sideways to make some distance between himself and Gale. With his gaze completely fixated upon his blonde opponent, he continued with his explanation of the Absolute Doctrine.

"It was also a way of life for the Nasivern warriors of old, tenets that helped them interpret their reality as preservers of life, or as harbingers of death," Bastiel’s words resounded among all of those present in the room. For someone that wasn’t very talkative in a social environment, Bastiel’s words emanated quite the palpable confidence

The yellow Gestalt member was intrigued by the ominous words her white haired teammate had just spoken. Gale swung her staff at him several times but was met with a formidable defense that rivaled hers.

Bastiel charged at Gale with a mighty strike of his blade that clashed with Gale's staff, "So, I have to ask, what drives you, Gale Lacroix?" he asked her. "Do you have a reason that guides that weapon you wield?"

"I beg your pardon?" her answer was stemmed out of honest confusion, as she did not expect to be asked such a question right amidst the clash of their weapons.

Bastiel retreated his attack and stepped back, "I have my reasons, they're always here in my mind," he tapped his temple twice with his right hand.

He closed his eyes for a moment and saw a clear memory that flashed through his mind, the remembrance involved a smiling Bastiel Isthel as he blew the candles of his tenth birthday cake in the company of a smiling King Sulwyn Starsong, Prince Seyren, and his beloved Princess Vesper. It was one of the few genuine moments of happiness for the troubled Regent that Bastiel had the pleasure of being witness to—a memory that he held most dearly.

He also heard the voice of Alma, the Nasivern artificial intelligence under his care, and saw the face of Evan Lecardes, his best friend. He even saw the faces of every member of Gestalt's team, whom he had begun to consider as not just comrades in arms and close friends, but family as well.

"And they are all also here, in my heart," Bastiel tapped his chest four times. "The reasons for which I fight, they are the ones that guide my blade in our missions, and they are the ones that give me the strength that I have. So I ask you again, Gale, do you have something that's worth protecting? Something that is worth fighting for?"

After listening to the words and observing the behavior of his opponent, Gale understood the important lesson Bastiel was trying to impart to all of those present. Before she joined Gestalt, Gale was part of Vaifen's intelligence apparatus, dealing with death and espionage almost on a daily basis.

Her former line of work often made her cast off her moral principles and embrace an unscrupulous cloak that detached her from the moral quandaries of a spy, such as the lies, the deceits, and the blood on her hands. Gale's espionage career came to a grinding halt when she made the mistake of mixing love with the mission, something that almost ended the prolific blonde spy's life.

Yet, fate sought fit to bless Gale with the gift of life, in the form of a daughter: Lilly. Bringing her daughter to the world changed everything for Gale. With Bastiel's words still in her mind, Gale closed her eyes and saw her daughter Lilly. The picture was crystal clear in her head, she felt the same joy she had felt when she first held her in her arms after giving birth to her.

Gale also remembered the painting her daughter had made for her that morning before she sent her to school, when Gale opened her eyes back and looked towards her opponent she did so with a joyful smile and a most serene tranquility.

"You're an interesting person, Bastiel Ithal," she said to him.

Bastiel looked to the ground and chuckled.

The duel resumed, Gale's staff and Bastiel's sword continued to clash with one another. Gale's attacks were now seemingly empowered by an invisible force, her motivation now burned so intense that Bastiel felt that he was about to lose the match. Their audience watched their duel in absolute silence.

“Now you’re getting it, Gale. The Absolute Doctrine is utterly useless if you don’t have a righteous cause to fight for,” Bastiel explained. “To draw passion from that which you love in order to protect it. To draw the strength to destroy that which opposes it. To reach a harmony within the war that rages within, so that the warrior can achieve the victory he seeks and create their own reality through battle—that is the Absolute Doctrine.” His words brought down the tempo of the battle, allowing both combatants a brief moment of respite as they took a few steps back from each other to catch their breath.

Gale smiled at Bastiel and he smiled back in response, there was no further need for words. Time slowed down for the two combatants as they gazed upon each other, Bastiel firmly grasped his sword with his left hand and raised it above his shoulder, the tip of his unsharpened blade pointed at his opponent’s face.

The yellow Gestalt member spun her staff a couple times before she tightened her grasp on it. Bastiel charged towards her with his blade still raised high, Gale began to run towards his opponent, she put it all on a sweeping strike aimed at Bastiel’s legs, he caught a glimpse of her intentions at the very last moment.

Bastiel jumped forward at the right time and avoided the touch of her staff, he landed right on top of it and stopped her sweeping motion with his own weight, availing himself of the momentum to propel himself forward.

As gravity began to pull Bastiel to the ground, he passed the blade to his right hand and twisted it down with grace. He poked the back of his astounded opponent with a gentle tap of his blade right as he landed behind her.

Cameron jumped from her seat, “Holy shit!” she yelled.

Bastiel and Gale breathed heavily, both looking away from each other. The difference on their facial expressions was like black and white. The smile on Bastiel's face denoted satisfaction at the success of his gambit, while Gale's face denoted astonishment and surprise at what had just transpired. Both of them turned around and faced each other.

“Well I'll be damned . . .” Erron proclaimed as he almost dropped the tablet device.

“That's how we do it!” Quartermaster Edram exclaimed. His enthusiasm could only be compared to that of an exhilarated child.

“Erron . . . you told me to teach you all a thing or two about the Absolute Doctrine. I guess that works for a starter, eh?” said Bastiel.

“That was some deep words there man! I'm moved by them—but even more amazed at that finale.” responded Erron.

Bastiel and Gale shook their hands and acknowledged each other with respect.

“Phew! That was—definitely something else, whew!” Bastiel exclaimed, still trying to process what he had managed to pull, “first time I try something like that.”

“First time with a real woman? Made you sweat, didn't I?” Gale jested.

Bastiel blushed at Gale's jest, “No, what I mean is—I mean, I—” he was interrupted by Cameron before he could finish his sentence.

“Geez Bastiel! You're like, unbeatable!” Cameron exclaimed.

“No one's unbeatable, you just have to pretend to be,” Bastiel answered.

“Hah! Good thinking!” Cameron replied.

Bastiel pointed at his sides, “Either way, you got quite the defensive perimeter with that staff, Gale, breaking past it is not an easy feat. The movie-like jump was a big gamble on my part but I'm glad it worked out in the end.”

Gale shook her head, “And I feel right into that trap,” she commented.

“Don’t feel bad. You’re quite impressive at handling that staff,” Bastiel complimented her prowess.

“Oh you child, you have no idea of the things I can do to a staff.” Gale ended her suggestive comment with a wink.

“Wait, what?”

“Whoa!” Cameron took a few steps back while raising both of her hands, “Gale!”

“Hey now, Gale! We’re in kiddie hours,” Erron said, he leaned back before he laughed. “Leave the lad alone.”

Cade Saunders was the only one that didn’t seem to enjoy the banter, jests, and friendly nature of the atmosphere that permeated throughout the room. There was no room for such frivolities during his tenure at Vaifen’s Special Operations force.

Gale tapped Bastiel’s forehead with her index finger, “Don’t forget, you ought to teach me some of those moves.”

“If you help me with firearms. That was the deal remember?” Bastiel reminded her of their bargain.

“With pleasure,” she said before returning her training weapon back to the stand.

“Alright team!” Exclaimed Erron, “let’s not get sidetracked here. I hope you all paid attention to what Bastiel said moments ago. We all have our different reasons and we all have loved ones. We’re doing this for them, and for everyone else in this Nation too, we have an obligation to ensure their safety. That’s our goal here, never forget that.” The Commander’s words echoed through the room.

Gale nodded, “Of course, Erron,”

“And the only way we will succeed is if we work together—we’re still taking our baby steps, but we will continue to improve and help each other improve while we’re at it,” Erron added.

The Nasivern Quartermaster Edram Pertz drew a small device from his pocket and proceeded to type notes on it, an action that caught the attention and curiosity of Cameron Bennett.

She approached the stout man, “Eddie, what are you writing there?” she asked.

“Oh, don’t mind me. Just a few design notes for when I start work on the second generation of suits,” he answered.

“Second? What’s wrong with our Nightingale suits? We’ve barely used them, you know!” Cameron, curious as always, continued to inquire.

“I always think ahead, Cammy. I like to plan for tomorrow today. I got a few ideas in store already.”

Bastiel was returning his training sword when he overheard the conversation.

“Now I’m curious too, Eddie,” Bastiel spoke, “what have you planned so far?”

Edram began to explain, “Alright, so, the Nightingale one hundred series is just that, a ‘mass produced’ line—a foundation. Your current suits are all similar in functionality, the only difference is the color finish and measurements of course. Cammy’s suit is the only exception, hers is the only one with the extra hardware that lets her integrate with the GT-SED4 drone pack and do her hacking magic.”

“They’re called ‘Hawk’ drones, Eddie, remember? Geez,” Cameron reprimanded him as she rolled her eyes, “and it’s not magic . . . its art.”

“Ye—yes Cammy,” Edram laughed before he continued. “So, for the next gen each one of your suits will be more distinct in form and function, I’m aiming for specialized features suited to your strengths and needs. It’s what I originally wanted them to be like, but I scaled down and went with a more generic all-purpose approach with the Nightingale series since I didn’t know who would end up using them.”

“Well, I got a suggestion, if you don’t mind . . .” said Cameron.

“Of course, what’s on your mind, Cammy?”

“A music player,” Cameron answered, “Can’t you just like . . . install one on the current suits?”

“No,” the Quartermaster’s answer was resolute in his answer.

“Hmph!” Cameron puckered at Edram.

“Why not?” Bastiel asked Edram. “That would be cool to—”

“No,” Edram insisted.

The members of Gestalt’s continued to joke and converse among themselves for some time until Operator Leah Sutherland spoke to them through the enclave’s communication system.

“Attention, Gestalt. Lunch has arrived at the Lounge,” Leah’s soft voice was heard throughout the room.

“Wait, the lounge is ready?” Cameron asked.

“Oh! That’s right, yes! I forgot to tell you all, my bad,” Erron excused himself.

“Goodie! Let’s go, team!” Cameron rallied them.

“You heard her, let’s go, you’ve all earned it,” said Erron as he placed his tablet device on hold, “we got a brand new lounge awaiting for us.”

All six of them formed a beeline and walked upstairs towards the recently finished lounge area. The enclave's lounge was located at the edge of the building's seventh floor and was shaped like an arc. The exterior windows of the National Intelligence Center, which also served as its furthestmost wall, provided them with a gorgeous and clear view of the city of Ternion in all of its magnificence; the view served as a reminder of the things they had sworn to protect: The Nation of Vaifen and its citizens.

No expense was spared in the décor of Gestalt's Lounge. Soft lights complemented the warmth bright of the sunlight that illuminated the room during daytime, elegant and modern furniture was spread all across the room; a large television screen hung on the westernmost wall.

At the eastern side, a brand new and state of the art kitchen and bar was at their disposal. Leah Sutherland was standing over there, bags that contained food had been placed on top of the bar's table. The room also had several amenities such as a sound system, and a few game tables for the rest and relaxation of Gestalt's members.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Erron said to his teammates. He had seen the initial plans for the lounge months ago, that was his first time laying eyes upon the complete room.

Cameron was the first to give her opinion, "Oh baby, this is definitely going to be my favorite area of our lovely base!"

"Very nice indeed," Cade Saunders spoke.

"I have to agree with you there, Saunders." Bastiel said as he waved at Leah.

The seven members of Gestalt grabbed a meal from the bags, they walked afterwards to a set of tables located next to the exterior glass wall. The girls: Cameron, Gale, and Leah sat in a table, while Erron, Cade, Bastiel, and Edram sat in another.

All seven began to eat, copious amounts of chatter could be heard from the women's table, mostly from Cameron Bennett, who kept inquiring and asking questions to the shy Operator Leah Sutherland.

Edram took a sip from his drink and cleared his throat, "Bastiel, I've been wondering to ask you something," he said to his fellow Nasivern.

"Hm?" Bastiel had a mouthful, it was the first meal of the day for the white haired Nasivern, his stomach felt respite at last.

"You know . . . the Flame Festival is in a couple months," said Edram.

"The what now?" a curious Erron asked back.

"The Flame Festival, it's an ancient Nasivern tradition," the Quartermaster responded.

"Don't think I know about that one." Erron replied.

"Well, every year we try to keep that tradition alive at the Nasivern Cultural Center, but not too many people attend nowadays. It would be great if you'd join us this year, Bastiel, I've never seen you there before."

"Do you often go there?" Bastiel asked his fellow Nasivern.

"Every now and then to lend a hand or two," Edram answered, "Although I've been absent these past weeks for obvious reasons."

"I don't know, Eddie." Bastiel did not wish to be disrespectful towards his Quartermaster and fellow Nasivern's traditions, but he wasn't too keen on the idea.

Despite being a Nasivern that wielded the Absolute Doctrine, and the grandson of a celebrated Nasivern hero, he neglected many aspects of their now fading culture. The last time he had visited the Nasivern Cultural Center was over twenty years ago; the center was an edifice that was inaugurated at the earliest days of the encounter between the Nation of Vaifen and the

Nasivern—a bridge between two cultures. A counterpart center used to operate in Nineveh, the now fallen Capital of the Nasivern.

“It’s just that I’ve never been active in that sort of stuff,” Bastiel spoke to Edram with honesty, “I don’t want to disrespect anyone, but yeah.”

“But we need to pay respects to what’s left of our people’s culture, it would be the perfect time to ask Mother Sollente for the good fortune of Gestalt,” Edram further tried to sell the prospect of participating in the event. “Besides, it’ll be a great morale boost if the Heir of Isthara joins us at last, come on, man.”

Bastiel continued to be hesitant, “I don’t know, Eddie.”

Erron stepped in and gave his opinion, “You should definitely go, it’s not going to hurt anyone, wishing for good fortune will definitely come in handy, ya know.”

Bastiel remained silent and looked at his food for a few seconds, “Alright, fine. I’ll go, Eddie . . . I promise.”

“Yes! That’s the spirit, let’s keep the flame alive!” Edram exclaimed. He was thrilled that the event was now going to count with the presence of Bastiel Isthala, the Heir of Isthara—the White Blaze.

The Gestalt team finished eating their lunch. Moments later, they received a hail message from National Intelligence Director James Exley. The message instructed them to gather at the briefing room. The team did as requested and immediately headed downstairs.

After arriving at the Briefing Room, the team sat down around the large table. Erron Leitner activated the room’s large display. Director Exley addressed the team through a video link.

“Good Afternoon, Gestalt,” Exley spoke while sitting in his office at the other side of the Intelligence Center’s complex. His elegant wooden desk was visible in the video feed.

“General,” Erron saluted the screen with his right hand.

“I thought it appropriate to inform you that in two days, King Starsong and I will officially present the Gestalt Project to the Senate,” he announced.

“I will finish going through the documents today, boss. I’m halfway there.” Erron spoke.

“Excellent,” Exley remarked. “We broke all procedures and protocols by establishing the unit without the knowledge and consent of the Senate. Our King will defend the project—and its hefty budget costs—citing special circumstances.”

“Everything will go smoothly, I’m sure,” said Erron.

Exley nodded his head, “Indeed it will,” he said. “Now, on the subject of our guest . . . the man known as ‘Occipital’. He continues to be quite uncooperative, which was to be expected.”

Cade Saunders raised his hand and readied his voice, “General, have the authorities been able to confirm the identity of that man?” he asked.

“That’s where things get interesting, Agent Saunders,” Exley said, “the man is a ghost, he has no identity.”

“Say what?” Cameron exclaimed.

“It appears that he has been seemingly expunged from existence. His fingerprints, dental, and DNA samples do not match anyone in our records.” Exley explained as he wiped his glasses with a soft cloth. “Even the dead bodies of his unit cannot be identified by any means, not a single one of them.”

“That’s strange,” Erron commented, “what about the foreign databases at our disposal.”

“No matches either,” the Director answered. “We have checked through every civil registry database that we’ve ‘borrowed’ from other nations via our intelligence apparatus. Foul play is certainly evident here, Commander Leitner.”

“Has he said anything at all?” Gale asked.

“Yeah, has our ‘bony’ friend spilled the beans at least?” Cameron eloquently asked the same question.

“I’m afraid not, he only keeps babbling ideological nonsense, claiming that the Ashen Reckoning will free Vaifen and all that humbug,” the Director responded.

James Exley showed them a live feed of the cell where Vaifen’s authorities kept the captured leader of the Osborne hostage situation, the man that called himself Occipital. The concrete cell was barely illuminated.

The man’s face showed a few fresh bruises and injuries, and yet he was there, sitting on the cell’s concrete bed with his eyes closed. He looked absolutely relaxed, as if he was devoid of a single worry in the world, for he knew they had nothing to threaten him with, not even his real name, let alone his past.

“The man is very loyal to his fanatical cause, and to the so-called ‘Dogma.’” Exley commented, “sooner or later he will slip, they always do.”

The video feed switched back to Exley’s desk.

“Even if our friend there does not cooperate, the National Intelligence Center will continue to pursue all of the leads that we have on the table.” Exley remarked. “As soon as we gather enough information to strike back, Gestalt will launch a counteroffensive against the Ashen Reckoning.”

“General, you can have the assurance that we will be ready to hit these bastards at any time and at any place,” Erron said, determined as always to bring peace to his Nation.

“That’s what I wanted to hear, Commander, good. I’ve read your latest progress report and I’m more than pleased with the results of the team’s training this week.”

“Just doing our duty,” said Erron.

“Agent Isthel,” Exley beckoned Bastiel, “thank you for finally attaining the medical approval forms from Doctor Lecardes today.”

“I hope it satisfies your requirements, General,” Bastiel responded.

“It does, everything seems in order—bureaucracy, you know. We need to prepare everything for the King’s upcoming audience.”

Cameron raised her hand, “Um, General—Director Exley?”

“Yes, Agent Bennett?” Exley interlocked his fingers as he gave her his attention.

“I have a question . . . you said Gestalt will be presented to the Senate, does that mean that our names will be mentioned at some point?” she asked.

Leah had the same concern as her friend, “Director Exley, I wanted to—” she stuttered for a moment and cleared her throat, “sorry, I wanted to ask about that too, Director.”

“Your anonymity—I understand your concerns,” Exley said. “There is no plan to reveal your identities to the Senate in any way whatsoever. Protecting your privacy from the scrutiny and meddling of the Legislative is paramount.”

“I bet some Senators, like that Thomas Easton guy will want to know our names though,” Gale commented.

“We certainly expect opposition from the likes of Easton and his New Vaifen Front,” Exley responded, “but rest assured that we will keep your identities a secret for your own safety and the safety of your families,” he assured the team.

Cameron nodded after receiving an answer, “I understand, thanks.”

“Do not concern yourself with the Senate. Have faith in our King just as he has faith in all of you,” Exley expressed before checking his phone.

“Of course, does anyone else have any additional questions or concerns?” Erron asked his teammates.

“No,” Cameron said as she moved her head.

The rest of the team answered in a similar fashion.

“Well, with nothing else to refer to, this short briefing is over. Always a pleasure talking to you, Gestalt. Remember, I’m always at your disposal if you need me,” Exley said with a smile. “Say, you’ve all been training hard this past week, why don’t you all take the rest of the day off? You more than deserve it.”

“We will. Thanks, General,” Erron spoke on behalf of the team.

“Remember, Vaifen is counting on you. You’re dismissed,” Exley closed the video link and the screen went dark.

Erron stretched his arms, “Well, I still have a mountain of pages to read and review for the Senate hearing, you’re free to do as you please for the rest of the day,” he said to his teammates.

“Yay!” Cameron cheered. “I don’t know about you guys but I sure want to check what games they set up for us at the lounge, pretty sure I will have to demand some additions—you know, for the good of the team! C’mon Leah,” she held Leah’s arm and tried to pull her.

“But, I still have so much to read about the Gestalt operating system and whatnot,” she answered her.

“Nonsense! You’re smart! You already figured all that out, I’m sure, you need to have fun, girl.” she began to drag her out of the room.

“Boss-man Erron, you coming?” Cameron asked Erron. “You need some time off too! You work too hard!”

“Oh no, Cammy, I’m sorry I can’t. I seriously need to finish this today,” he answered her.

“Fine, if you need us—you know where we’ll be at!” Cameron left the room with Leah as her hostage.

Gale took a deep breath and sighed, “I’ll go make sure she doesn’t break anything.

“Gentlemen, if you excuse me,” she said before walking out of the room.

“I think I will continue my training routine, Commander Leitner.” Cade said.

“I’d take the free time if I were you, Cade,” Erron commented, “I’m not going to stop you, though.”

“I suppose I’ll go back to work in my lab,” said Edram, “care to tag along for a bit, Bastiel?”

“Sure.” Bastiel agreed.

“I suppose I could work from there, at least Cammy won’t be there to distract me,” Erron said while looking through documents on his tablet device. He let loose a long sigh, “I’ve never been a paperwork person,” he muttered.

Edram, Bastiel, and Erron walked to Edram’s messy laboratory. The five Nightingale battle suits: blue, yellow, green, pink, and red were present in the room along with a few weapons, including Bastiel’s Judgement blade, and Erron’s Sentence sword.

All of the suits had been wired through to a hub that linked them to Edram's computer terminal. The suits' armguards had been recently improved and enhanced, keeping the same angular design, but allowing new gadgets to be installed.

"I've been tweaking the Nightingales a bit based on the performance data gathered from these past days." Edram said, "and also installing and enabling the new gadget drivers that I talked you guys about."

"So diligent, Eddie," Erron chuckled, "so about these gadgets—"

"I'm glad you asked, Boss," Edram interrupted the tall man, "for now, only the grappling hook and stun darts are in."

"Nice, very nice." Erron found a clear table and sat on a chair. His attention then exclusively shifted towards his tablet device and all the Gestalt-related documents and reports that he still had to review and submit in his capacity as leader of the team.

Bastiel grabbed his Judgment blade, he switched it from its gun mode to sword mode.

"So, you've really grown fond of Judgment, eh?" Edram asked, "I'm really glad it's suited you well."

"Yeah," Bastiel answered. "At first it felt a bit light, but you get used to it quickly," he swung it at the air, making sure he didn't hit something by accident.

"Why don't you try Erron's Sentence? It's over there." Edram suggested.

Bastiel tried the heavier and larger two handed sword for a moment. Sentence was not a weapon of grace, it was more suited to overwhelm one's opponent with raw physical strength.

Erron stopped reading for a moment and observed how Bastiel danced with the blade.

"It's a fine sword, but slow and heavy isn't my go to style," Bastiel finished a series of moves with the large sword before placing it on a table.

“I see,” Edram said. He stood in front of his computer and began to search his notes, “I’d appreciate it if you guys keep giving me your opinion, you’re the ones that end up using the weapons I design—so help me fine tune them for you.”

“Sure thing, Eddie!” Erron said from afar.

Edram pressed a few keys on his computer, “This is something I’ve been meaning to show you two.”

A hologram of a conceptual blade design was displayed in the middle of the room.

Erron and Bastiel got closer to observe and listen.

Edram began to speak, “Many don’t know about this, but during the days of the Old World, the Nasivern had achieved quite the wonders when it came to weaponry—courtesy of the Arghest Empire—but still, wonders. Anyways, after the fall of the empire and the war that almost wiped us most of that tech was considered lost. People were working on reclaiming and reintroducing Old World tech into new types of weaponry . . . right before the fall of our race.” The quartermaster continued, “I managed to get my hands on some scarce notes and info about the subject and mixed them with some conceptual theories of mine—be mindful that this is just a conceptual idea so far.”

“A Nasivern sword, eh?” Erron asked. “Hmm.”

“Imagine, a method of superheating the edges of the blade so that it could cut through anything like if it was butter,” Edram said to the two men present. He continued to show information and videos of his proposed concept.

“Interesting,” an impressed Bastiel observed the images, “I dig it.”

“This is just a pipedream, though,” Edram shut down the hologram display. “First, I’d need a material that can withstand the heat, and then I’d need an actual power source that can fit

inside a sword and be able to provide enough power to do it for extended periods of time—not to mention the heat dissipation and stability issues. Like I said, it's still a pipedream, but someday though, someday you two will be wielding such a blade . . . wouldn't be a pipedream if I hadn't lost so much . . .”

“I'm sure you'll figure it out, Eddie.” Bastiel said.

“Yeah Eddie,” Erron commented, “one step at a time, the Nasivern have all the time in the world anyways.”

“So many concepts and projects and only two hands to work with,” Edram muttered. “Enough of that, since we're on the subject of swords, there is something I've very much been wanting to ask you, Bastiel, and I believe the time is right.”

“What's up?”

“Well, is it true?” Edram asked.

“True . . . what?” a confused Bastiel responded.

“You see, I heard a rumor a while ago, just hearsay, a rumor that says Avalon was able to make it out of Nineveh . . . right before the fall.”

“Where have you heard that?” concern was evident in Bastiel's words and facial expression.

“I heard a Nasivern say it a couple of years ago, I mean, what kinda Nasivern doesn't know the history of Avalon,” Edram slightly shrugged, “and since you're the Heir of Isthara well, what better person to ask about it?”

“Yes,” Bastiel confessed. “My father entrusted it to King Starsong at the final hours of the Battle of Nineveh, I have the sword in my possession.”

“Fantastic!” Edram yelled with the excitement of a child. His voice was so loud that it startled Erron to the point that it almost made him drop his device.

Edram got closer to Bastiel, “Would it be possible for you to show it to me someday?” he pleaded.

“Uh, of course,” Bastiel smiled upon seeing Edram so happy at the idea.

“I’m sure a blade like Avalon is more akin to your likings when it comes to weight and feel,” said Edram, “if you show it to me so I can get a glimpse of its magnificence then I can craft a blade more appropriate to you, Bastiel.”

“Sure, Eddie, but don’t worry too much about it, Judgement is on a league of its own,” Bastiel said, “both gun and sword, that’s not something you can do with a regular blade or even with Avalon.”

Erron paused his work for a moment and rejoined the conversation, “I don’t wanna ruin the mood,” he said, “but what is Avalon?”

“You serious!?” Edram reprimanded Erron, “it’s the sword Isthara used to fight against the Arghest Empire!”

“Relax Eddie, I’ve never claimed to be an expert on Nasivern history,” Erron tried to calm down Edram, “it’s not something you learn at school here, ya know—I hope you take good care of it, Bastiel, seems like it’s a very important heirloom, take care of it with pride,” he said to Bastiel.

“Of course I do,” Bastiel responded, “it’s one of the few things I have of my father and grandmother.”

“You think you can bring it here someday?” Edram asked.

“I don’t know about that,” Bastiel answered.

“How about at the Flame Festival? I know a few people that would love to see it, I know the Archon would.”

“I think it’s best if I keep a low profile about it,” Bastiel said.

“Fine, but at least show it to me.”

“Yeah, I promise.”

“Thanks, Heir of Isthara.” Edram said with a smile.

Bastiel looked at Edram, “Stop with that,” he said.

“Stop being modest,” Edram rebutted.

“Whatever.”

The Quartermaster returned his attention to his computer screen, where he continued to work on an update patch for the Gestalt Operating System that ran on the Nightingale Battle Suits. Bastiel was about to approach the suits when he tripped on a cable and almost fell on the ground.

“Whoa there!” Erron exclaimed, “you ok, buddy?”

“Geez, Bastiel!” Edram was startled.

Bastiel regained his balance, “I’m fine, it’s just this cable that got in the way.” he said after the commotion had transpired.

“Damn Eddie, come think of it, your crib could use some cleanup,” Erron commented.

“I know, I know. I’ve been meaning to, boss, but I just can’t seem to get enough time to do it,” Edram excused himself.

“Do you want me to help you with that?” Bastiel offered his help.

“I’ll do it later—for sure,” Edram said, “I still got to finish this patch—it’s going to take me hours.”

Edram Pertz loved to work and unleash the full extent of his mind and talents. His passion and dedication to creating technological wonders was second to none, however, the ability to keep a workplace organized and tidy was a talent that he lacked.

“Relax, Eddie, the suits can wait,” Erron said to the Quartermaster, “I’ll tell you what, we three are going to clean this place right now.

“But don’t you have paperwork to do, boss?” Edram rebutted.

“That’s an order,” Erron commanded him.

Edram reluctantly agreed, “Fine, boss,” he muttered.

The trio began to tidy up the disastrous workplace of Edram Pertz, putting tools in their right place, arranging materials in their respective containment boxes. Numerous cables were untangled and rerouted out of the way. Tables were moved, boxes were placed and stacked in corners, and much sweat was shed.

When Bastiel Isthall first offered his assistance, he did so as a genuine gesture of kindness to his friend and fellow Nasivern, but he had no idea of the trouble he had gotten himself into. The trio spent the entire afternoon carrying out such a surprisingly arduous task.

In the end, their hard work paid off. Gestalt’s Research and Development Laboratory was now tidy and organized—presentable even. There was now much more walkable space, it felt like the room had grown in size.

“We did it guys, at last . . .” an exhausted Bastiel said.

“Good job!” Erron commented upon seeing the results of their hard work.

Edram Pertz sat on his favorite chair and looked upon his now organized domain.

“Thanks guys, I couldn’t have done this by myself,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah . . . and to think I had to trip on a cable just to make it happen,” Bastiel commented.

Erron Leitner laughed and looked at the time, “Oh wow, it’s almost night time. You two should go home, take some rest.”

Bastiel took a deep breath, “Sure thing, need a ride, Eddie?”

“Nah, don’t worry, I’ll just finish updating these two modules for the patch and call it a day,” he answered.

“Well, if you say so. I’ll head off now,” Bastiel replied, “have a good night, you two.” He shook both of their hands before leaving Edram’s laboratory.

Bastiel changed back into his regular clothes before walking out of the Gestalt Enclave and rode the elevator downstairs. He made no stops until he found himself in front of his red vehicle.

He looked at the setting sun on the horizon, a beautiful twilight sky devoid of clouds, the colorful panorama was mesmerizing, even for the young Nasivern that never paid much attention to sceneries. A gentle breeze graced his face before he sat inside his vehicle and drove towards his home.

The dark night had begun its reign upon the city of Ternion by the time Bastiel arrived at his apartment building. The missing hours of sleep from the night before, coupled with that day’s events were exerting their combined burden upon a heavily exhausted Bastiel, who wanted the building’s elevator to simply hurry up and arrive at the fifteenth floor already.

Bastiel opened his apartment doors and turned the lights on, and immediately noticed that something was different. The ceiling lamp above him had been replaced and he certainly had no recollection of ever having bought that model—or having installed it at all.

“What the . . .” he said to himself as he noticed more pieces of furniture that weren’t there in the morning.

For a moment Bastiel thought that he had entered the wrong apartment, he turned around and opened the apartment’s doors again and looked at the hallway, he also looked above the door. Yes, that was indeed his apartment, his penthouse was the only apartment on the topmost floor—that surely had to be his home, he entered back and closed the door.

“Alma?” he asked, hoping to receive a response from the artificial intelligence, but he obtained silence in return.

Bewildered, he walked into his living room, which was now completely furnished. Small square tables, a few modern ornaments, and stylish abstract paintings that weren’t exactly of his liking were among the things that caught most of his attention. As he continued to look around he immediately noticed that his favorite couch was missing—a brand new larger and sleek one took its place.

“Avalon!” he thought to himself, his bewilderment swiftly turned into panic for the safety of the legendary sword.

Bastiel turned around and walked to the place where Avalon rested, he found it standing there, inside its protective glass enclosure just like he had left it. He took a deep breath and exhaled his worries away.

The confused and exhausted man then heard the laughter of two women that came from the balcony, two distinct laughters that he had heard so many times before in the past and thus, immediately recognized. He walked towards the balcony in search of answers.

Princess Vesper Starsong and her loyal assistant and right hand, Annette Hughes were outside in the balcony, sitting on two comfortable loungers. Each of the women was enjoying a drink amidst their laughter and chatter.

“Annie, don’t forget to call Ashcroft’s people and tell them I’m not going to that stupid pompous Midsummer Charity Ballroom of theirs—or whatever the hell they call it,” Princess Vesper instructed her assistant, “I can’t stand those idiots.”

“Of course, my Princess. I’ll do that first thing in the morning,” Annette responded.

“Nah, you know what, wait a few days before officially cancelling it, perhaps a day or two before the event, just to annoy them. I definitely don’t want to deal with the nobility, especially Miranda’s faux charity,” the Princess expanded upon her instructions.

Bastiel approached the two conversing women, “So, I take it you did this, Vee?” he asked Vesper.

“Ah, the valiant hero returns,” Vesper responded. She laid eyes upon him and his tousled hair, “geez, comb that mess or get it trimmed.”

“Good evening, Bastiel,” Annette greeted him.

“Annie,” Bastiel greeted her back with a nod of his head. “So, what did you do to my house?”

The Princess stood off the lounge, “Do you like it?” she asked.

“Too modern for my taste—that’s not what I mean,” he gave her a sharp gaze, “How? And why?”

Vesper waggled the hand that held the glass she was drinking from, the three ice cubes danced around the beverage, “I know you were never going to do it, so I did it for you.”

She offered a sip of her glass to Bastiel, the princess placed the glass around his lips and he savored the taste of orange and a slight punch of alcohol.

“How did you pull this off in one day?” he asked, full of curiosity as to how she had managed to accomplish such a feat, “I’m pretty sure it wasn’t like this when I left this morning.”

“With the right contacts and the right staff,” she answered, “oh, and the right phone calls of course, the rest is a trade secret.”

Bastiel pointed at the ceiling, “And what about—” he was interrupted by Vesper.

She leaned over him, “It’s ok, no one noticed Alma—she cooperated with me, relax,” the princess whispered in his ear. “Come, see your new and improved home!” she gestured her hand towards the inside of the apartment.

The three of them walked inside.

“I know how much the Nasivern love symmetry, it’s like your people have that concept hardwired in your brains or something. So we kept that in mind as a central focus on everything, didn’t we, Annie?” the Princess commented.

“Indeed, my Princess,” Annette spoke whilst she fixed her glasses.

“I see there was a lot of hard work put into this, I’m not gonna deny that,” Bastiel said, “but where is my couch?” He much desired to know the fate of the only meaningful piece of furniture that his living room had before, a couch that he was most fond of.

“That piece of crap? I gave it away to charity,” the Princess’s cold answer was devoid of any remorse or regret with regards to the piece of furniture.

“Why would you?! To who?!” Bastiel demanded answers.

“I’m not going to tell you. I know you too damn well, Bastiel Isthel. If I tell you where it ended up going then you’ll probably go look for it right this instant,” she said, denying him a proper answer.

“It was my couch . . . that couch had history,” Bastiel spoke, “we did . . . things there together, you and me,” Bastiel spoke in a lower voice tone, his soul wept for the loss of his inanimate companion.

“Which is why I had it sent someplace so it could be upholstered and renovated first, you wouldn’t even recognize it, and you will never find it, ever again.” Vesper said with a sneer in her face.

Bastiel was bewildered, he remained in silence.

“Tsk! Boys, they can be so possessive and attached to their things,” Vesper added upon seeing Bastiel’s still perplexed visage.

Princess Vesper leaned down towards a briefcase that was sitting next to the new couch and procured a booklet from it. She slammed it against Bastiel’s chest.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Your invoice, of course,” she sneered. “My people don’t work for free, you silly, and neither do I.”

Bastiel glanced through the pages of the booklet and read a few words.

“Paragon hero—dark lord. This is not an invoice,” he said, completely confused.

“How perceptive of you,” the princess responded. “It’s the script for one of the plays we’re doing for the Children’s Day tomorrow at the Royal Hospital. It’s co-written by Annie and yours truly,” the Princess and her assistant smiled at each other.

“Why is my name handwritten next to this ‘Dark Shadow Lord’ character though?”

Vesper walked closer to him, “It’s your payment for all of this, you’re part of the play. Congratulations! You get to be the bad guy!”

“But—” Bastiel attempted to say something, but he was instantly interrupted by the Princess.

“Ah! Ah! Ah!” she waved her index finger at him, “are you telling me you’re going to let all those sick children down, are you going to let me down?”

“This is what you plotted that night, I knew it . . .” Bastiel said as he pointed at Vesper, “you had that look on your face.”

Vesper remained silent, she shrugged and smiled at him.

“All of this just to get me into participating in a play . . . you really are evil, Vesper.”

Bastiel Isthel would otherwise deny it, but he knew that the Princess was his one weakness. In the end he could not refuse her, not with those green eyes staring at him, not with that long red hair that he loved so much to caress, and certainly not with that immaculate smile of hers. She went through great lengths just to force him into being part of her charity event.

Bastiel exhaled, “Fine, you win. You know me too well, and I know you too well, I can’t refuse now, not after all of this,” he reluctantly agreed.

Princess Vesper had played her cards well, her masterstroke was without flaw, “My perfect plan worked!” She cheered and spun around with a few dancing moves before giving her assistant a high five.

“Welcome aboard the Children’s day festivities, Bastiel,” Annette said.

“I suppose . . . Vesper, do remember that I have an important responsibility now, if I’m called to action I will have no choice but to bail on you, alright?” he reminded her.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure they can live without you for a morning,” Vesper waved her hand at him.

“In all seriousness, though, the invoices should be arriving in the next few days. None of this stuff was cheap, Bastiel.” Annette remarked.

“Yeah, I sure hope you’re getting paid well at that new job of yours,” Vesper said, “I’m not paying for any of this.”

“What?” Bastiel exclaimed.

“You heard her,” Vesper responded.

The man sighed, “One headache at a time, please.”

“Anyways, please learn your role and memorize all of your lines, you have . . .” Vesper glanced over her wristwatch, “about twelve hours to get into the mindset of the Dark Lord, and I do not tolerate mistakes.”

“Please arrive at least two hours before the event for makeup and costume prep work,” Annette suggested.

Bastiel stared at the Princess, “You girls are going to be the end of me.”

“One day, perhaps,” Annette joked.

“Now that we’ve settled this, we still have lots to do for tomorrow, those kids have long waited for this to happen, we can’t and won’t let them down,” said Vesper. “I’ll see you tomorrow, my dear Dark Shadow Lord,”

Vesper kissed Bastiel, “Come Annie, let’s go,” she said to her partner in crime.

“See you tomorrow, Bastiel,” Annette grabbed the princess’s purse as well as hers.

The two women left the apartment and closed the door.

Bastiel took one of the longest deep breaths he had ever taken in his life, “You knew about this, didn’t you, Alma?”

“Of course,” the artificial intelligence answered. “She convinced me of all this and I let them in—about time this place had some furniture, it looks good, even if I don’t get to use any of it.”

“When I said you girls are going to be the end of me, that includes you too.”

Bastiel walked to his kitchen and prepared himself a snack. He stared at the new couch and gave it a shot, crashing on it as he turned on the television and took off his shoes.

“How’s the new couch?” Alma asked.

“Oh damn, this is really comfy.”

The new couch was indeed better and far more comfortable than the old one. Bastiel took off his red jacket and laid on it.

“Whoa, it really is comfortable—don’t ever tell her I said that,” Bastiel would never betray his now gone couch, and he certainly would never admit to Vesper that she had made the right call in replacing it. His body began to relax on the soft and cozy couch.

“My metaphorical lips are sealed. You know, it’s not like I have lips—or a mouth, but yeah, you get my point,” she joked. “I wonder what Princess Vesper is truly capable of when she really commits to something, just look at all of this.”

“One day we’ll find out, I guess . . .”

Bastiel grabbed the play’s script booklet and glanced through it, “There’s no way I can memorize all of this, I will have to improvise,” he said.

“I think the correct term people use is ‘ad-lib’,” Alma remarked, “either way, you were good at this as a child, remember?”

Bastiel loved to dress up and wear costumes during his childhood, allowing his innocent imagination to run rampant as his mind transported him into a myriad of fantastic worlds and scenarios, many of which starred him in a heroic role.

“As a kid maybe, I don’t know now,” Bastiel answered.

“Whatever, don’t let me distract you, I’ll just go amuse myself.” she spoke.

“Do what you must.”

Bastiel began to read the pages of the script, hoping that his mind would at least retain some of the words written on it. He read through an endless barrage of words and cheesy one liners, some of which made him laugh even if those lines weren’t supposed to elicit a comedic response.

He skipped a few pages ahead and read through the end of the play, “Oh what a surprise, the bad guy loses in the end—that means me,” he said to himself.

“It’s targeted for children, Bastiel, what do you expect,” Alma said sardonically.

“A deep, intricate story, full of metaphysical allegories, and implications about life and death, I don’t know,” he laughed, “you can tell Vesper wrote this.”

Bastiel continued to read through the booklet and took on a faux villainous voice tone, “Your pathetic light is no match for the powers of the void,” he read the line out loud. “Oh dear,” he exclaimed as he kept going through the pages of the script, “what have I gotten myself into . . .”

He continued to read while fighting a battle against his now overwhelming exhaustion, a battle he ultimately lost and had no hope of winning in the first place. Bastiel fell asleep on the couch with the script on top of his chest.

VI: AND FOR THEIR SMILES

Gray clouds covered the skies of Ternion that morning, and yet not a single drop of rain had descended upon the city. The weather forecasters had announced a cloudy morning devoid of precipitations—and so far, their predictions were once again accurate.

It was a special day for the planet Orbis, the entirety of its populace was celebrating the International Children's Day, and the Nation of Vaifen was no exception. Numerous activities of all types had been planned across all of Vaifen's cities for the enjoyment of all families, and the children who would one day inherit the world.

As a result of the recent wave of attacks perpetrated by the Ashen Reckoning, a heavy contingency of Ternion's police force had been deployed all over the city. The wave of terror and death they had unleashed upon the Nation over the past months would not deprive the children of Vaifen of their joyous day.

Dawn had already taken place a couple of hours ago, Bastiel Isthel was still asleep on his brand new couch, exhaustion had taken its toll on him the night before, the man could now be considered to be way past the threshold of oversleeping.

"Bastiel!" Alma exclaimed to the sleeping man in an attempt to wake him up from his slumber. "Wake up, Bastiel!" She tried again to no avail.

The Nasivern had fallen into a profound sleep.

As a last resort measure, she played the noisiest and loudest heavy metal music she could procure from the Net. The ravenous and dissonant cacophony echoed through every single speaker Bastiel had installed on his apartment for her communication.

The screeching sounds did more than just wake Bastiel Isthral from his slumber, it scared him. Bastiel fell off the couch and dropped to the ground. The script booklet he was reading from the night before flew across his living room in rightful obedience of the laws of physics.

“Ow!” Bastiel exclaimed after his head tested the resilience of his apartment’s wooden floor. “What the hell is wrong with you, Alma!?” he expletively demanded answers from her.

Alma immediately turned off the dissonant music, “You finally woke up! You’re going to be late for your appointment with Vesper, you know,” the Artificial Intelligence spoke the truth, the morning was well underway and his time was running short.

Bastiel scratched his head and yawned, “Oh shit, you certainly didn’t have to wake me up like that—now I can’t even remember what my dream was all about,” he struggled to open his drowsy eyes.

“You overslept—but I suppose that’s a better alternative than not sleeping at all,” Alma remarked.

Bastiel took a deep breath and immediately walked towards his bathroom, he took a hasty shower and brushed his teeth. After dressing up with a gray shirt and blue jeans he walked to his kitchen to make himself a hot cup of coffee.

As he smelled the caffeine’s aroma and savored its bitter taste, Bastiel began to feel more awake. It was then when he noticed that the script booklet he was supposed to have learned his theatrical role from was lying on the floor.

“I don’t even remember half of what I read last night,” he remarked as he grabbed the booklet.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Alma replied, “just improvise or something, you’re supposed to die at the end anyways.”

Bastiel let loose a long and drawn out sigh, “Vesper is going to kill me for this,” he said after glancing over the new pieces of furniture that now inhabited his living room.

“Oh yes, she will,” Alma said with a laugh. “It was nice knowing you, Bastiel Isthel.”

“I can see the headlines: ‘Princess kills Nasivern exile over botching a child’s play,’ great,” Bastiel jested as he prepared a quick breakfast—he certainly was not going to face the day ahead with an empty stomach. He brushed his teeth once again after he was done with the most important meal of the day.

Bastiel looked at himself on the mirror, he stretched his limbs and took a deep breath, “Well, I’m off to my execution, I’ll see you later—if I survive all of this that is.” he bid his farewell to Alma.

“See ya, have fun! But in all seriousness, don’t get yourself killed!” She bid her farewell as well.

Bastiel rode down the elevator with the script in hand and drove his red vehicle towards the northern area of the city of Ternion, where the Queen Ellene Royal Hospital was located.

Upon arriving at the massive pearlescent white medical edifice he immediately noticed the heavy presence of Royal Security agents that patrolled the perimeter, as well as several media vehicles parked at the sides.

The hospital was packed that morning, no nearby parking space was available for the white haired Nasivern, much to his dismay. Bastiel finally managed to find a parking spot almost at the end of the lot after a couple minutes of doing laps around the overly full parking area.

He grabbed the script and walked inside the impeccable Hospital's vast lobby. At the center of the lobby stood a life-size statue of the late Ellene Valmont, former wife of King Sulwyn Starsong, and Queen of the Nation of Vaifen.

Queen Ellene was a Doctor before she wore the Crown and all the responsibilities that it entailed, and she continued to do so even after joining the ranks of Vaifen's nobility. The Queen-Doctor—that is how her colleagues used to affectionately call her.

The statue, made of pure ivory, had immortalized her beauty much like the one in the Royal Palace's garden. The Hospital was renamed after her by order of King Sulwyn Starsong shortly after the Gustav-Denton Syndrome that afflicted her claimed her life.

Water flowed through the eight different cardinal points of the lobby and converged around the statue, the water represented the love, kindness, and compassion the Queen felt for each and every one of her patients.

For a moment, Bastiel was captivated by the statue's immaculate beauty, it made him remember the times the Queen sang to him as a child at night. He also remembered her shining smile and her unshakable sense of humor that not even the terrible ailment she suffered was able to tear down.

As he looked around the vast lobby he realized that he lacked one crucial piece of information—he did not know where he was being expected. The Royal Hospital was by far, Vaifen's largest medical center, he didn't asked neither Princess Vesper nor her assistant where

should he go that morning, then again, neither of the two women remembered to tell him, so the blame didn't entirely fall on him.

Fortunately for Bastiel, a couple of people dressed in full clown getup, down to the red noses and colored faces, walked beside him. What businesses would a group of clowns have in a hospital if not to entertain children on their special day, that was the first thought that ran through Bastiel's mind. Naturally, his first instinct was to follow the clowns as they walked through the vast Hospital, eventually arriving at the pediatric wing.

The wing was heavily crowded, children ran from one place to another, balloons of all colors and long strings of streamers adorned every corner and every wall. Bastiel walked around while observing the joyful children having the time of their lives. Princess Vesper and by extension, the Starsong Foundation under her command, had spared no expenses for the event, the smiles of those sickly children demanded no less.

Clowns and a few entertainers made balloon figures for the children, they painted their faces in all sorts of shapes and colors, they even gave colorful wigs to those unfortunate children whose illness and treatment had deprived them of their natural hair.

At one corner, an illusionist performed graceful and elaborate sleight of hand tricks upon an impressed and innocent infant audience who could not stop cheering in amazement. Their young hearts pumped with excitement at what they perceived was, the reality-warping mysteries of magic that granted the illusionist the 'ability' to translocate objects from one place to another.

The watchful eye of Royal Security's agents kept vigil over the premises, they provided security to the event, and most importantly, were tasked with ensuring the safety of the Royal Princess and her retinue. Their dark suits and earpieces, coupled with their sternness, heavily contrasted with the colorful attire of the clowns and entertainers present in the area.

Bastiel Isthel continued to walk until he found an empty corner and stood there. He tried to hastily read through the script, hoping to at least retain some of the lines written therein, but the sound of laughter and the joyful screams of the children, along with all the people that walked around, and all the talking and music made it quite impossible for him to focus on what he was reading. It was then when he heard a familiar voice that emanated from his right, a female voice that startled him.

“Ah, you’re here, Bastiel,” Annette Hughes spoke to him.

Bastiel closed the booklet before he greeted her, “Good—good morning, Annette,”

The Princess’s assistant held a personal tablet device that allowed her to coordinate all aspects of the event, ensuring that everything unfolded just as her boss had meticulously planned. She also had a headset mounted on her right ear that she constantly used to communicate with the foundation’s personnel that were spread all over the hospital.

Annette wore a circular pin that depicted a group of children on top of her beige blouse, a commemorative pin of the Children’s Day festivities that were taking place that morning.

“Come, the Princess has been expecting you for a while,” she spoke to the soon to be theatrical actor.

Annette guided Bastiel to an area that was being used by the foundation’s staff as a makeshift backstage. Two Royal Security agents guarded the entrance, their task was to make sure that no unauthorized person gained entry to that area.

The Princess’ assistant nodded at the two guards as they entered. Princess Vesper, in a white and rose pink business attire ever so glamorous and elegant was inside the room, she had the same pin as her assistant. Vesper was imparting orders to a couple of her staff members before she turned around and gazed upon Bastiel Isthel.

“Vesper,” Bastiel was only able to speak her name before she raised her right index finger and interrupted him.

“No time, you’re late. Go get yourself ready,” she pointed towards another room with the same finger.

“Eh, okay, boss,” Bastiel said sardonically as he shrugged.

“It’s ‘Princess Boss,’” Vesper’s tense mood was more than tangible. She was focused and absolutely determined on making sure that everything went just as she had planned it. There was no room for mistakes in her plan.

Without saying another word, Bastiel followed her Princess’ command. Inside the room were a few people dressing up into several costumes and getting the corresponding makeup done onto them. Another group of people was getting ready for their upcoming theatrical performance and doing last minute rehearsals.

Bastiel noticed the absolute sense of professionalism that emanated from the group of actors that were up next, he weighted it against his lack of acting prowess and complete ignorance of the script in his hand.

“Shit, I’m dead,” he whispered.

Annette Hughes handed him a black and dark purple costume wrapped in protective plastic, and a key with the number forty-two written on it.

“Go get changed and then sit on that chair over there for makeup,” Annette said, “use the key on the lockers there to store your stuff in the meantime,” she instructed him without even looking away from her tablet device.

Bastiel did as instructed and changed into the costume, which was indeed tailored for an evil dark lord. The black silken robe had a stylish dark purple embroidery that ran across it, he

also buckled up a dark leather belt around his waist. The costume fit Bastiel like a glove, almost as if Vesper had intended him to be its wearer all along.

He sat on a chair to await the torture of makeup and then realized, much to his surprise, that the man sitting next to him was none other than the Prince heir, Seyren Starsong.

“Oh no, she got you too,” Bastiel said to the Prince.

“Ah, hi there, Bastiel,” Seyren greeted him back. The prince was wearing a white, gold, and blue polymer armor, its golden shoulders fashioned in the shape of a fierce lion’s head. The Prince’s costume evoked a heroic knight straight out of a fantasy epic tale.

“Please don’t tell me you’re the hero,” Bastiel said with disdain.

“Please don’t tell me you’re the bad guy,” Seyren reciprocated in tone.

“Well—” the thunderous cheering of the children nearby interrupted Bastiel.

“Yes, I’m the good guy,” Seyren responded, “which means I get to defeat you on this play—I guess. I honestly didn’t read the damn thing at all,” the Prince confessed.

“Oh that’s just great,” Bastiel took a deep breath, “anyways, how did she trapped you into all of this?” he asked, his head resting upon his left hand.

Bastiel knew the Prince heir too well enough to know that he was not to participate out of his own free will—Vesper had surely something to do with that.

“She promised she wouldn’t tell father I snuck away from the palace two nights ago to spend some time with Lana,” the womanizing Prince confessed.

Bastiel shook his head, “You’re irredeemable, Seyren.”

“What about you?” Seyren asked in return.

“She forcefully furnished my apartment and this is how she’s making me pay for it.”

“Geez,” Seyren exclaimed. “All I know is that Vesper said that as a last minute addition to her plan. We’ll be using some sort of prop weapons in our pretend combat and we have to make sure to press the buttons on the hilt for special effects or something like that.”

“Oh boy,” Bastiel said in response.

Two women approached them and began to apply the corresponding makeup. Bastiel’s face was made to look as pale as possible, with dark paint around his eyes. Bright, glowing purple lines were drawn across his face that gave the impression that his skin was cracking out and purple shadow energies seeped out of the cracks, his hands received a similar treatment.

The Prince however, received a simpler makeup treatment on his handsome face. His long blonde hair received work at the hands of a stylist afterwards. Once the stylists were finished on the two men they looked at each other. Seyren, upon seeing Bastiel’s villainous pale face, let loose a long and loud laughter.

“Oh God, you look so funny,” Seyren said amidst his continued laughter, “straight out of a cartoon!”

Bastiel Isthel however, was not fond of the Prince’s reaction, and gave him a sharp, contemptuous gaze in return. If looks could indeed kill, Bastiel's gaze would have been classified as a weapon of mass destruction.

“Oh sod off, Seyren,” Bastiel said to a still laughing Prince.

The Prince required a few more seconds for his laughter to subside, “Alright, alright, I got that out of my system. So, what are we going to do?” Seyren asked while still giggling, “I bet you memorized the lines—give me a quick rundown!”

“To be honest I barely know a line or two . . . all I know is that you’re the good guy light warrior whatever, and I’m the bad shadow guy something,” Bastiel confessed his complete lack of knowledge of the script that they both were about to enact in front of the children.

“Shit . . . let’s just improvise,” Seyren suggested, “just make sure I win in the end!”

“We have no choice,” Bastiel nodded, “let’s hope Vesper doesn’t murder us for botching this up.”

Princess Vesper entered the room right after Bastiel had finished his sentence, “Boys,” she said.

Both Prince Seyren and Bastiel Isthall froze in absolute panic upon hearing her soft voice and the approaching sound of her heels. Bastiel fiercely grasped the arms of his seat hoping that the Princess hadn’t heard his last sentence.

“Oh shit,” Seyren whispered. He could not even muster the courage to turn his head around.

Vesper walked in between the two men and placed her hands upon their shoulders, “Good, good, you’re all ready to go! You two are next, right after the current play, she informed the duo, “just a couple more minutes, boys.”

“Sure thing, sis,” a still afraid Seyren muttered.

“No problem Princess boss-woman lady—I mean, Vee!” Bastiel said in nervous jest as a way to conceal his utter panic.

Vesper checked their costumes and makeup, noticing how nervous both of the men were, “My, relax you two . . . you both look the part better than I had thought.”

“Well, like you said, everything for the children!” Seyren nervously exclaimed.

The loud cheering of the nearby children resounded once again. Vesper rubbed her hands, “I think it’s opportune to inform you two that this is all being televised—it’s all airing live!” she leaned over and her face lined up right between theirs.

Vesper smiled at the mirror in front of them, her smile contrasted with the two men’s terrified faces, she then fiercely gripped their shoulders before issuing a threat, “So don’t . . . mess this up.”

“Oh man, can’t we just ask you to forgive us for whatever it is you’re punishing us for?” Seyren instantly pleaded for mercy.

Vesper laughed. She gently pushed their backs with her hands to make them stand up and guided them all the way until they were behind the stage’s curtains.

“What’s that thing they say? Break a leg?” her words were coated with a menacing tone, “Go and break all four,” Vesper winked at her victims. She turned around and left the two men alone to face their eager and energized crowd.

Bastiel took a furtive peek from behind the red curtain. The auditorium was teeming with children, some of the infants were accompanied by their parents, while some less fortunate only had other children and their doctors as company. Around half of the children had their faces painted, and just as Vesper had informed them, the media was present in the back—their cameras were broadcasting the event across all four corners of the Nation.

“I think this is yours,” Seyren handed over a sword sheathed in a black scabbard to Bastiel. The prince had wrapped a sword that matched his costume’s colors around his waist.

Both of them drew their prop weapons and noticed a series of buttons around the hilts. Bastiel pressed one of the buttons and his sword immediately glowed in shifting shades of purple as well as emitting loud sounds.

“Hey! Turn that off!” a stage assistant scolded him.

“Sorry!” Bastiel quickly scrambled trying to turn it off.

A couple of staff members prepared the stage. They placed a lightweight dark throne on the right that was made of plastic. Bastiel and Seyren looked confused, trying to make sense of what was going on.

“Hey, you,” a backstage staff beckoned Bastiel, pointing at him, “Shadow Lord guy.”

“Who?” Bastiel pointed at himself, me?”

“Yes, you—what are you doing?”

“What?” Bastiel asked back in a complete state of confusion.

“Get on your starting position already!” he exclaimed.

“Where?” Bastiel kept asking.

“Dear God, you must be kidding me—the chair! Hurry you’re about to begin!”

“Oh, ok.” Bastiel sat on the throne just as Seyren was being guided towards his starting position.

The throne’s frame was of a dark purple hue and it matched the robes Bastiel wore. A few purple crystalline shapes adorned it and gave it a unique form, black and purple were the color palette of evil, as chosen by Vesper Starsong for that theatrical play.

At the other side of the stage’s curtain, Princess Vesper grabbed a microphone and took the center stage. The room’s main lights were dimmed and a couple of soft spotlights were casted upon her.

“My precious children, are you enjoying the show?” she asked all the boys and girls in the room.

The audience responded positively at her question, yelling from the top of their lungs.

“Let me tell you a secret . . . I’ve saved the best for last!” Vesper informed her audience, “You’ve all laughed and cheered, now prepare to be amazed—as the final showdown between light and shadow takes place right here, in this very stage!

“Will our hero of light prevail? Or will the shadow of the void devour us all? We’re about to find out!” she eloquently announced.

All of the children were now intrigued and curious. Vesper stepped out of the stage. The dimmed white lights increased in brightness and shifted into a purple hue.

“Let the final battle begin!” Vesper exclaimed. She returned to her front row seat next to her loyal assistant and partner in crime.

The curtains began to roll up, a series of connected displays at the back of the stage began to show a computer generated imagery—a barren wasteland forever scarred by a large conflict that had taken place. At the end of the field, a purple and dark gray spire touched the skies, a large moon shattered in three complimented the chaotic destruction that the imagery evoked. The picture zoomed towards the top of the spire—then both the screens and stage went dark.

The digital background scenery changed to the inside of the spire’s throne room. An eerie cold music began to play through the auditorium’s speakers, and a light fog began to flow through the stage’s floor—setting the mood for what was to come. A light yellow spotlight that emanated from the top illuminated the Warrior of Light, Prince Seyren’s role. A purple light did the same to the Herald of Darkness, the Dark Shadow Lord—Bastiel’s character.

The two men where seemingly confused and remained in utter silence, missing their respective initial cues, something that would not have happened if the two men had memorized their roles or where even allowed to rehearse. Vesper began to worry, and with good reason, for the two men were standing there, motionless, not speaking or acting at all.

“I think we have to start now,” Seyren whispered, hoping that Bastiel would hear him.

Bastiel nodded in response.

Unbeknownst to the duo, microphones placed around the stage caught the Prince’s whisper, and his voice was heard all across the room. The children and the adult audience laughed at the amateur actor’s mishap.

Bastiel looked at Vesper’s menacing visage, as soon as she looked upon him he quickly focused his gaze away and looked upon Seyren. He took the initiative and broke the ice, speaking with a faux villainous tone.

“Ah, the mighty hero has finally arrived, ready to dispense its false justice upon me,” he tried his best to sound as menacing and as evil as he could.

Seyren cleared his throat, “That is correct! I have come to beat the crap out of you, evil guy . . . dude!” the Prince’s choice of words made for a poor impression of a shining warrior.

A few giggles could be heard from the audience. Vesper grunted and scoffed instead, it was more than evident that her simple script had not been memorized by either of them. Learn a few simple lines of dialogue and engage in combat, that’s all they had to do.

Bastiel gave his audience a most faux evil laughter, “Nonsense. You have come to your end, Warrior of Light!” he exclaimed.

“You will not win this day, fiend,” responded Seyren, “for I wield the coolest, most awesome sword in the world!” the Prince drew his sword and pressed a button, the sword’s blade shined with a golden light.

The children were amazed at the sight of the shining sword, their excitement could barely be contained.

“Give me that!” Vesper snatched a copy of the play’s script from Annette’s hands. Those two had not been following the script, not a single line of it.

“So be it, in the end all will be consumed—all will serve under the shadow of the void,” the faux dark lord Bastiel got off the throne and brandished his sword. He turned it on and the children gasped upon seeing his blade glow in shadowy purple. “Despair awaits you at the end!” Bastiel taunted his soon to be opponent.

The final battle between light and shadow had begun for the impressed audience of sickly children. Bastiel rushed against Seyren, who, unlike the members of Gestalt, had no combat experience aside a few minor classes that he took years ago and a bit of coaching from Bastiel himself—lessons in which Seyren had spared the bare minimum of attention and effort.

Had it been a real duel, the Prince Heir would have perished already at the hands of Bastiel’s Absolute Doctrine. The prop glowing swords had motion sensors on its insides, which made them play different sounds as the two actors swung their respective weapons at each other; they were also wirelessly connected to the stage’s sound systems, which amplified the audio special effects.

The avatars of light and shadow continued to fight as part of their theatrical performance with a continued clash of their prop swords, with Bastiel on the offensive and Seyren playing a more defensive role. The children tried their best not to blink, they did not want to miss a single moment of the action—rooting at all times, of course, for the shining savior, even if Seyren was not the most heroic fighter there was.

Bastiel became too immersed in his role and began to increase the tempo, becoming more relentless in his attacks. Seyren was no match for the seasoned Nasivern combatant, even though he tried his best to stand his ground.

“Face upon the true might of the void and tremble!” Bastiel fiercely swung his blade, disarming Seyren with one powerful stroke of the prop he held with his left hand.

The Prince stumbled and fell down; he tried to get up as quickly as he could but remained on his knees.

“Hey man!” Seyren broke character, “I’m supposed to win this!”

The children laughed once more.

“What the hell are these two idiots doing . . .” A furious Vesper whispered to her assistant. She fiercely grabbed her assistant’s left arm to the point that it was causing her pain.

“My princess . . .” Annette tapped the Princess’s hand.

Vesper looked down and saw what she was doing, “Sorry, Annie,” she apologized to her.

Bastiel realized that he took his role a little too far and was about to defeat the hero of the story. He quickly tried to remedy the situation and came up with a solution.

“As I said, all will be consumed in shadows!” he looked upon the audience and let loose another faux evil laugh.

The children responded by booing at the gloating villain.

Bastiel walked towards the center of the stage and readied his words, “Your hero is powerless to stop me! If only you could lend some of your power to him then perhaps—oops! I shouldn’t have said that!” he covered his mouth with his right hand.

Seyren caught up with Bastiel’s intentions and continued to build upon the improvisation, “Children, please! Raise your hands and lend me your power!” he pleaded to his audience, “let us defeat evil together!” he extended his arm.

The innocent children raised their hands towards the hero of the play.

“Focus a yellow light on him, yes,” Annette instructed the bewildered stage staff.

A dim golden spotlight was cast upon Prince Seyren. The light grew brighter and brighter in intensity as the children yelled and cheered towards their would-be savior with their hands up in the air.

“Yes, yes!” Seyren yelled, pretending that the light represented the energy the children were providing him with, “that’s it children, almost there, keep lending me your power!”

“No! No! This cannot be!” Bastiel acted surprised. As he was about to strike Seyren, the stage light shined its brightest. Bastiel pretended that the light had repelled him, and jumped back.

“No! You will not win this day, bad dude!” Seyren firmly stood and began his counterattack against Bastiel, who this time, eased on the swordplay and limited himself to defend against the now empowered Warrior of Light’s attacks. Seyren launched a flurry of sloppy strikes that lacked any sort of finesse.

Vesper, furious that those two had not followed her script, nearly bit her lip, she could barely contain her wrath. Had it not been for the media and the audience, she would have stopped everything right there and lashed out against her brother and her lover, but the subsequent scandal would have been too much of a disaster. All she could do was wait it out and hope that the two idiots she had suffered through her entire life ended their performance soon.

“Impossible! What is this power?” Bastiel acted surprised as he let himself be cornered for the grand finale.

“It’s the power and hope of these children! Now die, fiend!” Seyren thrust his sword against Bastiel.

“No!” Bastiel yelled. He pretended to have been mortally stabbed by Seyren’s final strike.

“Be gone with your darkness!” Seyren exclaimed.

Bastiel fell to the ground, slain by the empowered bringer of light.

“The light has won!” Seyren yelled. “Thank you for lending me your power kids, wow! You guys are so powerful! Here, have it back!” he waved his hands at the audience.

The stage’s staff followed through and casted golden lights that moved in randomized patterns around the audience.

The children stood up and clapped, cheered, and whistled more than all the previous performances combined—they were completely ecstatic. The darkness in the background display was replaced by a shining sunlight, a new dawn where evil had been forever vanquished had begun.

Bastiel, still pretending to have been slain, opened one of his eyes and looked upon the audience of joyful children, they were overflowing with happiness and excitement.

Princess Vesper’s fury subsided after she saw how much the children loved the silly and obviously improvised ad-libbed performance of Seyren Starsong and Bastiel Isthali.

Her anger transmuted into a smile, for despite everything, Seyren and Bastiel did their best to entertain and amaze the sickly children, they had accomplished their primary objective. She got on top of the stage and offered her hand to Bastiel, he accepted the help and got up.

The Princess turned on her microphone again, “Please give a round of applause to my brother, Prince Seyren Starsong, and to Bastiel Isthali!” she said to the audience.

Once the crowd realized that the hero of the story was none other than the Prince Heir of Vaifen they clapped and cheered even louder than before, even the adults present gave their fair share of thunderous applause to the performers. The amateur actors bowed to their audience in gratitude.

Bastiel looked at the smiles of the children, now with his two eyes wide open, and realized, perhaps for the first time in his life, that he was capable of bringing joy to others, especially to those sickly children who desperately needed it the most. Bastiel, a man of two worlds that always felt out of place around others; a man that only knew how to fight, how to kill, and how to save lives through the use of the Absolute Doctrine was now aware that he was capable of much more.

The absurd makeup, the costume, the silly faux weaponry, the ridicule and grossly exaggerated ad-libbed lines—it was all worth it. Those children would never forget that exciting experience.

Bastiel expressed his thoughts through a genuine smile as he continued to look at the audience.

“I will be back with all of you in a bit, my fellow prince and princesses!” Vesper said to the children, “I still got more surprises in store for you all!” she threw a kiss at them.

The curtains rolled and as soon as they were out of sight from the audience, Vesper grabbed Seyren and Bastiel by their arms and dragged them into the makeshift changing room.

“Could we have the room, please?” she said to the people inside.

“Of course, Princess Vesper.”

Vesper waited with a smile on her face until only the three of them remained in the changing room. As soon as the doors closed her smile vanished away.

“Where do I even begin . . .” Vesper said with disdain, “You two assholes ruined my play!”

“I’m sorry, sis,” Seyren apologized.

“Vesper, I don’t know about Seyren here, but you can’t seriously expect me to memorize the whole thing, not when you gave me less than twelve—” Bastiel could not even finish his defense’s opening statement.

“Shut up, you imbeciles!” she yelled. “It was foolish of me to expect you two to do it right—I suppose I have to blame myself for expecting you two to do something right for once.”

“But you’ve got to admit that the children loved our daring take on your play,” Bastiel claimed in their defense, “even though you never gave us time to prepare, or allowed us to rehearse or anything—that’s not how it should be.”

“Yeah, Sis!” Seyren gave his endorsement to Bastiel’s words, thus cementing the main premise of their defensive argument. “Did you see them cheer at us? They loved it!”

“Well . . . yes, the children loved your improvised act. I have to give you two credit for that,” Vesper reluctantly agreed.

“It all worked out in the end,” Seyren scratched his head.

“I have to ask, did you guys come up with that during makeup— or you made it up all on the fly?”

“We made it up on the fly,” Seyren answered, “we made a good team, didn’t even had to plan a single line at all!”

“If you wanted us to do it your way you should’ve just let us rehearse days beforehand, Vee,” Bastiel suggested.

“I will keep that in mind. Needless to say, you two did a good job . . . I guess, circumstances aside and all,” Vesper took a long sigh after she spoke. She found it difficult to congratulate the two men.

“So, that means you won’t be murdering us?” Seyren asked for her verdict.

“Not today. Consider yourselves saved by those children,” she announced her decision, “I’ll give you some privacy to change—it’s time to give the children their presents.”

Vesper left them alone in the room.

“Phew! We live, Bastiel, we survived her!” Seyren felt so relieved. He shook a perplexed Bastiel and then shared a strong high five with him once the Nasivern recovered from the royal shakedown.

“For now, I guess,” Bastiel responded, “she’ll find a way to make us pay for this in the future, you can be sure of that.”

Bastiel Isthal saw a vial of a commercial makeup removal product on top of a table. He immediately grabbed it alongside a box of cotton pads and started to clean his face and hands, using copious amounts of both items. Seyren removed his makeup and changed into his regular clothes, black pants, black shirt, and a stylish indigo and cobalt leather jacket.

“I’ll go walk around and greet people or something,” Seyren said to Bastiel, “do some princely stuff and all that, see you around, dude.”

“Yeah, you go be pretentious somewhere else,” Bastiel joked as he continued to waste the entire bottle of makeup remover on himself.

After a few minutes passed, Bastiel had finally succeeded in removing the makeup from his face and hands, he then changed back into his normal clothing. He walked outside the room and drifted around the pediatric wing, stopping at a vending machine, he treated himself with a nice cold soda beverage before he continued to walk around.

Bastiel saw children playing with toys that were just gifted to them. From dolls to action figures, from toy vehicles to talking stuffed animals, some of the children were peacefully

playing together in small groups. After he took a left turn, Bastiel saw Prince Seyren talking with a young nurse at the end of a hallway.

“He never learns. . .” Bastiel thought to himself as he shook his head and chose to walk elsewhere.

The white haired man continued to wander around the pediatric wing until he noticed a solitary young boy near the corner of a room. The boy was playing alone with a colorful toy sword that emitted different lights and sounds, the hero of his own imaginary tale. Bastiel saw a piece of his infant self reflected on that lonely child. The boy continued to swing his sword against an illusory enemy—everything pointed towards the boy having the upper hand, and victory was now his.

Bastiel approached the lone child, “Hey there, fella,” he kneeled in front of the boy, “wow! That’s a really cool sword you got there,” he commented.

“Thank—thanks, sir,” the shy kid muttered. “It’s the Prismatic Sword from the new Robo-Knights television show.”

“It’s a fantastic sword if I may say so myself, it looks very powerful! It’s even cooler than the old sword I have at my home,” Bastiel said to the sad looking child.

“It is!” The kid exclaimed with enthusiasm. “Only a legendary Robo-Knight leader can wield its power!” he quoted a line from the cartoon show the sword was a licensed merchandise of.

“And look at you, wielding it like it is nothing,” Bastiel said, “that must mean that you are very powerful indeed.”

Bastiel’s words bought a faint smile upon the kid’s visage.

“Yes!” the boy’s spirit rose from the depths and soared high upon hearing the white haired man’s encouraging words, “I want to be a powerful hero like the Robo-Knights!” He passionately shared his dream with Bastiel—a dream they both had in common.

Bastiel tousled the boy’s dark hair, “I’m sure you will kid. I know a great hero when I see one, and you, my friend, are going to be the greatest hero ever when you grow up!”

“Yay!” The kid raised his sword and pressed its trigger, the toy began to flash in a colorful array of colors and emitted sounds that resembled an energy blast.

“What’s your name, child?” Bastiel asked.

“Ax—Axel, Axel Ingram,” he responded.

“Well, Axel, my name is Bastiel Ithal. Nice to meet you,” Bastiel introduced himself, “say, wanna know a cool pose you can do to make bad guys be totally afraid of you?”

“Yes sir!” an enthusiastic Axel nodded.

“Let me borrow your powerful sword for a moment.”

Axel handed him over the toy sword.

“Wow! I can feel its power—I can barely wield it!” he pretended to be overwhelmed by the sheer imaginary immense power of the toy sword. “Now look at me,” Bastiel wielded the weapon with his right hand instead of his dominant left hand so that he could demonstrate. Bastiel stood sideways and extended his right arm, pointing ahead with the sword, “You point at the bad guys like this,” he showed him.

Axel nodded in acknowledgment.

Bastiel slowly switched sides so that the left side of his body was in the front, he lowered his right arm, the sword pointed downwards while he raised his left hand above.

“Then you raise your finger like this,” he pointed at the ceiling with his left index finger, “it signals the Gods and the heavens above to bear witness to your victory. Let them know that this battle belongs to you and you alone,” he paraphrased and adapted an ancient Nasivern combat mantra.

Axel, being just a child, was vastly impressed and overwhelmed by Bastiel’s signature pose. One of the first things he learned out of the Nasivern’s Absolute Doctrine.

“Here, try it out,” Bastiel returned the sword to its rightful owner.

Axel tried to emulate Bastiel’s moves, and for the most part, he accurately replicated them.

“Like this, sir?” Axel asked as he raised his left index finger.

Bastiel clapped, “Yeah! You’re a good learner, Axel. One day you will be the best hero ever!” the would-be hero encouraged his prospective colleague.

“Are you a hero, sir?” the innocent kid asked the Nasivern.

“I hope to be one,” Bastiel winked at him.

The young Nasivern had always aspired to match the heroic legend of his grandmother and parents. Both his grandmother and father had carved their paths across the history of the now near extinct Nasivern race with the sword Avalon in hand, which now rested at Bastiel’s residence.

He did not consider ‘Agito’, his vigilante persona, as a full-blown hero in league with Isthara, Aeoros Isthala, and his mother, Anya Nystrom—Agito was rather far from it. Bastiel hoped that perhaps his deeds as a member of Gestalt would allow him to claim the title of hero he coveted so much in the near future, a title he would definitely wear with pride.

“One more thing, Axel. Always use your sword and your powers for good in this world,” Bastiel advised Axel, “I’ll be looking forward to see you in action someday, hero.”

“Of course sir. Thanks!” Axel felt encouraged like never before.

With a now bolstered vigor, the child continued to fight against more of the imaginary foes that his mind concocted, and spoke lines from his favorite television show—a show he was deeply fascinated with.

Bastiel smiled, it was a sincere smile that emanated deep from the bottom of his heart. Axel Ingram’s happiness was intoxicating and refreshing for him.

“I haven’t seen Axel this happy in months,” said a woman that approached Bastiel from behind.

Bastiel turned around and approached the woman that had just spoken to him.

“He is determined to become a real hero,” Bastiel said with a chuckle. “Excuse me, Bastiel Isthel,” he extended his hand.

“Molly Fairfield,” she shook Bastiel’s hand, “I’m Axel’s mother.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Fairfield.”

“Are you with the Foundation?” she asked.

“Sorta . . . you could say I’m lending Princess Vesper a hand today.”

“I see, he was looking forward to this day ever since it was announced. His treatment has been such a torture, but today, today he’s just like his old self,” the mother explained.

“I’m glad he’s enjoying it,” Bastiel said as both of them observed the young child let loose his innocent imagination from afar. “If I may ask, what’s wrong with him?” he inquired about Axel’s health.

“Tendler’s.” Molly said. Her words suddenly drowned in sorrow, “It’s a rare congenital condition, his heart isn’t as good as it should be.”

“I’m sorry,” Bastiel looked unto the mother’s teary eyes, struggling to find appropriate words to say to the concerned mother, but words eluded him.

“Doctors say there is a possibility that his heart will start to fail within a year,” Molly explained the seriousness of Axel’s condition, “I cannot thank the Starsong Foundation enough, they’re covering all of the costs of the treatment—I can’t afford any of this on my own,” the humble mother said.

“That’s what they’re here for.” Bastiel spoke, “what about his father?”

“It’s a long story, I rather not talk about him,” Molly’s sorrowful tone changed into one of disdain at the mere mention of the child’s father.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to meddle into personal stuff,” Bastiel apologized.

“Don’t worry.”

The mother continued to gaze upon her child and his ongoing state of happiness and excitement. It was as if the needles, the cries of pain, the rigorous medication schedule, the sleepless nights, and all the torturous experience her son had gone through over the past months had not happened at all. Axel was happy, just like any other child deserved to be.

“He is stronger than he looks, Mrs. Fairfield. He will overcome this and defy all odds. I’m sure he’ll do great things in the future,” Bastiel said to Molly Fairfield, his words were intended to bring a spark of hope to the distressed mother, who had seen her son suffer so much at the hands of fate’s cruel designs.

“Thanks,” the mother responded. She let loose a hopeful smile.

“I’ll leave you two now, take care of him,” Bastiel said.

“Will do sir, thank you once again,” Molly replied.

“It was my pleasure,” Bastiel nodded at her.

Bastiel approached the young child, “Well Axel, I have to go do stuff. I will see you around, hero! Goodbye,” he bid his farewell with a hand salute.

“Bye sir! Thanks for the cool pose lesson!” Axel shook his hand.

“Don’t mention it.”

Bastiel nodded at Axel’s mother as he walked away. Seconds later, he was intercepted by Princess Vesper. She had witnessed the whole ordeal, her mood had vastly improved since their last conversation.

“My, who knew you actually had a heart inside of you all along?” Vesper spoke.

“Vee,” Bastiel approached her.

“Now you see it. This is what this is all about . . . to give these families hope,” she spoke to Bastiel as she meddled with his white hair. “To make them forget, even if for just a single day, of the bad experiences and suffering that they’re going through. Their smiles make it all worth it.”

Bastiel smiled at her, “I take it you’re no longer angry at me,” he said.

“I’ve suffered you two numbskulls all my life, and I’m sadly stuck with you two until the end of it. Not the first time you’ve pissed me off, and I know it’s not going to be the last,” Vesper paused for a moment to salute a few passersby, “I thought about it—even though you two screwed it all up and didn’t even bothered to read such a simple script that didn’t needed to be rehearsed at all, in the end you made those kids happy, they really loved you two buffoons.”

“It all worked out in the end my dear Vee, you know me,” Bastiel said with a wink, “I make the impossible possible,” he gloated.

Vesper looked back at Bastiel, “And look at that kid, you gave him and his mother hope—a faint spark of hope that can grow into something wonderful. He’s probably overheard doctors say that he won’t live long, that’s got to be rough . . . but you came in and by calling him a ‘hero’ you gave him a dream, a hope, to aspire towards greatness—you gave him a future to fight for,” she explained with that beautiful smile that Bastiel loved so much, “I don’t know Bastiel, but that makes you a real hero in my book,” Vesper tapped over Bastiel’s heart.

“It means a lot coming from you, Vee.” Bastiel smiled in return, infatuated as ever by her green eyes, “Axel reminded me of myself. When I was younger all I wanted to be was a hero, remember?”

“Yeah, and now you get dressed in that red suit of yours and get to do it with your new friends.”

Bastiel responded with a chuckle, “I suppose so.”

Vesper reminisced upon the legacy of her late mother, Queen Ellene, who was a celebrated Doctor long before she was betrothed to King Sulwyn Starsong, “Mother could heal their illness and treat their wounds. I’m no Doctor—perhaps I should’ve—I am the princess of Vaifen and yet I can’t do much. I can’t cure these children . . . all I can do is use the Foundation to bring hope, joy, and excitement to their young hearts every now and then.”

Wanting to live up to the legacy of their parents was a burden Bastiel Isthel and Vesper Starsong both shared in common. Sometimes they both felt like they would never live up to such high expectations.

“You lift their spirits, you help lessen their burdens, Vesper,” said Bastiel, “look there,” he pointed at a room across the hallway, where a mother and father looked upon their bedridden daughter who was connected to intravenous fluids.

The young girl, who had lost her hair, was smiling at the doll she had received from the Starsong Foundation, caressing the hair of the doll she had long wished for. She was ignoring the burning sensation of the fluids being pumped into her veins and the displeasure inflicted by the nasal cannula that aided her breathing. None of that mattered for her, all she could focus on was on her brand new doll. Despite all, the innocent and suffering girl seemed happy.

Vesper smiled upon seeing the fruits of her hard labor, “The Foundation covers the costs of those that cannot afford it—that was all Mother’s idea. This is my way to help them heal and overcome the unfair burden life has placed upon them. Like I said, it’s all about bringing joy to their hearts.”

Bastiel remained in silence for a moment.

“It’s for their smiles, that’s why I do all of this,” Vesper reinforced her own thoughts with her voice.

“That’s what makes you so great Vee,” Bastiel said, “that’s why I love you.”

“Oh is that so? Follow me,” the Princess instructed him.

Both of them locked themselves inside a small deposit room. The two secret lovers availed themselves of that privacy to embrace each other.

“You were a naughty, very naughty boy,” Vesper placed her finger around Bastiel’s lips, “you ruined my script, and yet, I think you do deserve a reward.”

“Oh course I do,” Bastiel winked.

Vesper passionately kissed Bastiel. A kiss that for the two of them, seemed to have lasted an eternity.

“So, you liked me being the bad dark lord, eh?” he winked at her.

“Maybe. Maybe I like it, maybe not,” she toyed with him with a vague answer.

“We’ll have to find that out later then,” Bastiel whispered into her ear. “Anyways, how did you even come up with that dark lord—shadow void nonsense?”

“Remains of an old project of mine,” she kissed him again, “I dug it up just to torture you and Seyren since I had some actual performers bail out on me—killed two birds with one stone, filled that empty slot while making you two idiots work for me while at it.”

“Oh! So you finally confessed your true intentions. You’re pure evil, Vee,” Bastiel snickered.

“I can tell you idiots didn’t even bother to learn your respective characters’ names, whatever, I don’t care anymore,” Vesper smirked.

Both of them continued to embrace each other passionately until Bastiel received an emergency message on his phone. The resounding loud string of beeps was amplified by the small room’s acoustics.

Vesper was disturbed by the inopportune sound that had ruined the romantic mood, “What the hell is that?” She asked with her eyes closed.

Bastiel took a deep breath before he placed all of his attention on his mobile device. His presence was urgently required at the Gestalt Enclave.

“Duty calls,” he answered her.

“Aw, that’s too bad then—don’t hurt yourself, hero,” Vesper replied. She tapped Bastiel’s forehead, “Go kick some ass.” she commanded the would-be hero with a soft voice.

“Of course,” he accompanied his reply with a wink, “I love you, Vesper.” The aspiring hero and the royal daughter shared one more kiss before he left her alone in that small room.

As much as he would have preferred to stay just a little bit more with the sole owner of his heart, it was time to put his training and combat prowess at the service of the Nation of

Vaifen. Bastiel Isthall rushed towards his vehicle and drove to the National Intelligence Center as fast as the traffic and the city's speed limits permitted him to do so.

Whatever that emergency hail entailed, he was determined to give his best to ensure the safety of the Nation of Vaifen, its citizens, his King, his Prince, and his beloved Princess.

VII: IS OUR DUTY

Bastiel continued to drive towards the National Intelligence Center as fast as he could. The smiles of the children that witnessed his improvised but ultimately successful theatrical play were present in his thoughts. He also pondered on Axel Ingram, the young sickly child that shared the same heroic dreams as he did—and last, but not least, the love he and Princess Vesper Starsong shared in secrecy.

All those thoughts and experiences represented pieces of an invaluable treasure worth protecting, all worthy causes to fight for with all of his will, skill, and might. As part of Gestalt, it was his duty to protect their smiles.

Bastiel's daydreaming came at a huge cost, he inadvertently took a wrong turn and found himself right in the middle of a traffic jam at the very heart of Midtown Ternion. Driving through that area during peak traffic hours was a terrible mistake, a mistake that Bastiel had now committed.

"Oh shit," a frustrated Bastiel exclaimed to himself amidst a cacophony of car horns, "I'm gonna be so late," he scoffed as he placed his two hands and his forehead on the wheel.

The traffic jam extended the length of his drive from the Royal Hospital to the National Intelligence Center by over thirty minutes—arriving at the center almost one hour after he received the emergency call.

Bastiel entered the building and approached the elevators without wasting a single second, ascending towards the Gestalt Enclave with great haste. When he opened the doors of the briefing room he found most of his teammates already seated around the room's large table. The only absentees were Director James Exley, Operator Leah Sutherland, and the team's pink member, Cameron Bennett.

"You finally show up, Nasivern," Cade Saunders said to Bastiel with subtle, yet noticeable disdain attached to his words, "second day late in a row, Isthel, what do you have to say about that?"

Bastiel greeted everyone in the room, "Good afternoon—I apologize for being late. It's a long story, to say the least . . ." he said as he took a seat.

"It better be a good one," Cade said with evident contempt.

"A story for another time, Saunders," Bastiel said in response.

Commander Erron Leitner sat on the table's rightmost seat, his thoughts were immersed in the upcoming mission.

"Doesn't matter, you're here," that was Erron's only comment concerning Bastiel's late arrival. He had more important things dancing around his mind than a back-to-back lapse in punctuality, his constant tapping on the table was an uncharacteristic physical evidence of his burdened mind.

Seconds later, Cameron Bennett stormed into the room like a crashing thunder. Her boisterous entrance was so loud and intense that even Erron Leitner and the ever so stern Cade Saunders were visibly startled, with Erron and Bastiel nearly jumping out of their seats.

“Boss—everyone! Sorry I’m late!” Cameron exclaimed as she tried to catch her breath.

“Geez, Cammy! Chill!” Erron pleaded to her, his heart had just skipped a beat thanks to her.

“Well, at least we’re all here now. . .” Cade commented. He was dismayed at the apparent lack of professionalism that his red and pink teammates sported.

Cade Saunders, a man of military background and tradition, was not appreciative of how irresponsible the two youngest members of Gestalt’s strike quintet were with regards to the concept of punctuality. He considered their visibly lack of discipline and lack of formal training in any relevant professional career as troublesome weaknesses to Gestalt’s fold.

He was a man accustomed to rigorous and disciplined environments; being the only person in the team that was once part of Ternion’s Special Forces unit made him feel that he was the only person in the room that truly understood what was at stake: the safety of the Nation. Therefore, he came to the conclusion that he was the only one with the discipline required to be part of such an important task force—after all, Gestalt was no friendly social club.

“Perhaps General Exley was mistaken when he recruited these two,” Cade Saunders thought to himself, “I’m sure Isthel got in here due to his ‘circumstances’, but what about Bennett . . .”

Cade had arrived at the enclave shortly after dawn, hours before Commander Erron Leitner himself did, in order to train both body and mind. He chose to reserve further comment in the matter despite his growing concerns regarding the glaring lack of discipline that he

perceived. The lack of any disciplinary action from Erron towards his two tardy teammates did nothing but exacerbate his concerns.

“So, what’s up?” Cameron asked everyone in the room. She greeted Gale Lacroix and sat next to her friend.

“We’re working tonight,” Erron answered.

“Aw, really?” Cameron sounded and looked displeased, “I had really important plans for tonight—”

Gale interrupted her friend, “Cancel them,” she said.

“Yes,” Erron concurred, without emotion, and without hesitation.

Cameron felt disappointed, “But tonight’s the Neon Glow . . . dude, really? Tonight? Of all nights?”

“Don’t know what that is—don’t care,” The blue commander said to the pink teammate.

“It’s one of the best music nights there is! Laser show and all that good stuff!” Cameron explained, “I’ve been waiting for it for so long and was going to even drag Leah with me cause that girl could use some fun in her life—whatever, duty calls, right?” she came to terms with her duty to the nation. “So, what’s the gist?”

“Our ‘bony’ friend like you nicknamed him—the NIC managed to get his name and everything,” Erron answered. “He ‘spilled the beans’, as you’d say.”

Cameron was confused at her team leader’s answer, “Say what?” she asked for clarification.

“The ‘Occipital’ guy, Cammy, they figured out his identity.” Gale duly clarified.

“Oh! That’s good!” Cameron exclaimed, she looked at Erron’s concerned visage, “Isn’t it?”

Erron proceeded to answer, “Yes. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg—” he paused for a moment to attend a notification he had just received on his phone.

“Don’t leave me hanging, boss!” Cameron exclaimed. The suspense was devouring her.

“I think it’s best if our actual ‘boss’ explains it, Cammy,” Erron replied to her as he pointed towards the room’s doors.

In an act that could’ve been said was choreographed, National Intelligence Director James Exley entered the room right as soon as Erron’s index finger pointed at the doors.

“Good Afternoon, Gestalt,” the Director walked inside the room.

“General,” Erron greeted him. The Commander got off his seat and saluted the General in kind.

The rest of Gestalt’s team members followed suit.

“Please, be seated,” Exley instructed the team. “We sent that emergency hail because the time has come to strike at the Ashen Reckoning,” he stared towards the team’s operator and analyst, Leah Sutherland, “Operator Sutherland, you may proceed.”

The shy operator nodded. She tinkered with a tablet device in her possession and then all of the room’s screens were brought to life.

General Exley began to brief the team, “First, let me begin by introducing you all to the man behind the ‘Occipital’ mask. Gestalt, meet Sergeant Carl Wheeler, former Ternion police sergeant.” The screens focused on the records of the police officer, “A man that died five years ago in the line of duty—or so the Nation thought.”

“Excuse me?” Cameron was confused by the Director’s last comment.

Cade Saunders, as well as the rest of the team immediately noticed that the photograph on Carl Wheeler's registry file depicted a completely different man than the one they had detained days ago during the Osborne incident.

Cade Saunders raised his hand, "Excuse me, General. With all due respect, are you sure that's Occipital?" his index finger pointed at the room's largest screen, "the file photo shows a completely different man."

"Yeah, he doesn't look like the guy we captured—what gives?" Cameron, ever so spontaneous, also commented on the glaring discrepancy. The facial features, and even the skin tone were completely different from one another.

"That's because Carl Wheeler's records have been altered, all of them," Erron spoke, his words evoked concern, "this is the 'tip of the iceberg' I mentioned early."

"This is why we could not identify the corpses of the Ashen Reckoning members that died during the Osborne incident," Leah explained to the group, "all of their civil registry records have been tampered with, which makes them impossible to identify."

"Indeed." Director Exley affirmed, "our preliminary analysis indicates that Vaifen's national civil registry database has been extensively modified and can no longer be trusted. There is enough evidence to hypothesize that every person that's part of the Ashen Reckoning has been either seemingly expunged from existence or they've had their data modified like Sergeant Wheeler here, his apparent death was just a ruse.

"The only way the Ashen Reckoning could've managed to do something of this magnitude is with internal help from the related institutions—a presumption that I find abhorrent, if you ask me."

Cameron asked an obvious question that the rest of Gestalt's team would have asked if she had not otherwise taken the initiative to do so in the first place, "Wait, if Vaifen's civil records have been hacked and compromised, how can we be sure that this is in fact, our guy?"

"I must confess that it was all due to a stroke of luck," Exley said. "Occipital, or rather, Sergeant Carl Wheeler is a rather stern person that kept refusing to cooperate with us. However, he is a bit of a sleep-talker. The man had a slight mishap and spoke two names in his sleep: Cora and Scott, this gave us a small but crucial clue. The team of analysts I assigned to the case didn't take long to piece the puzzle, those are the names of his wife and son."

Gale found herself concerned by Exley's words, "So, it's safe to assume that after physical torture yielded no results you got him to talk by blackmailing the man with his family?" she asked the General.

As a former spy and intelligence agent, Gale knew exactly how far things could go when torture and interrogation are involved—especially on a high-profile individual such as Occipital of the Ashen Reckoning. Erron's troubled facial expression further cemented Gale's presumptions.

"Do not concern yourself with that, Agent Lacroix," Exley said to the blonde woman, "Sergeant Wheeler came to his senses and decided to cooperate with the Nation. The choice ultimately came of his own volition, we would never raise a hand and endanger our citizens, no matter the circumstances."

Gale wasn't entirely pleased with the General's words, but she clearly knew what was at stake when it came to the terrorist group known as the Ashen Reckoning. She reserved further comment, as her opinions and points of view regarding the morality of torture and the blackmailing of prisoners was not what she was recruited for.

Exley looked straight towards Gale, “What matters here are not the methods, but rather the information he gave to us in return. Operator Sutherland?” he beckoned Leah once again.

The Operator pressed another series of buttons on her device. A series of satellite photographs replaced Sergeant Wheeler’s information on the displays.

“In addition to almost every known swear and curse there is in the dictionary—things I rather not repeat, Wheeler, or Occipital—if you prefer to call him like that—revealed some insight about the inner workings of the Ashen Reckoning, and Dogma himself.”

With the undivided attention of everyone present in the room, James Exley continued his exposition.

“If we are to believe Wheeler’s words, Dogma built the entirety of the Ashen Reckoning’s organization with extreme compartmentalization—several independent clusters united under one single leadership, Dogma’s.

“Each section of the whole acts independently, and they’re only provided with the bare minimum amount of information required to carry out, what they claim, is Dogma’s will; thus, not even Occipital himself knows the full hierarchy of the organization,” Exley informed the Gestalt team.

“Clever way to run things,” Erron said to everyone in the room, “hate to admit it.”

“Indeed,” Exley commented, “Although not unheard of.”

Gale asked the General a question, “So how—or where does Occipital fit in all of it?”

“Occipital operates under what Dogma has baptized as the ‘Cranial Unit,’” Exley answered, “a branch of the Ashen Reckoning adamant in causing chaos and spreading death all throughout Vaifen—the voice and will of Dogma itself, or so Wheeler claims. Their operations are split among four groups, we’ve defeated Occipital’s, so that leaves—”

“Three to go then,” Cameron interrupted.

“Yes,” Exley continued. “Occipital, Sphenoid, Parietal, and Frontal. Needless to say, capturing or eliminating the remaining three leaders of the Cranial Unit is one the topmost priorities.”

“Well, they sure have a thing for bones, eh?” Cameron once again made use of her eloquence. “First Occipital, now Sphenoid, Parietal, and . . . oh I get it now! Parts of the skull—Cranial Unit, duh!” she exclaimed out loud. Her elevated voice tone dismayed the rest of the men and women present in the room, “Then we just need to get an anatomy book and find out which are the rest of the parts of the skull to figure out how many bad guys we have to defeat before we can kick Dogma’s ass!”

Erron chuckled, “I don’t think it’s that easy, Cammy, it never is,” he replied to her.

General Exley waved his hand, “Enough of that. Let us discuss the reason you’ve all been summoned for. Former Sergeant Wheeler claims that because of Dogma’s compartmentalization of the Ashen Reckoning’s operations, he knows nothing of the plans of the other three commanders of the Cranial Unit—but he swears that Dogma is planning something big, something unprecedented . . . something he claims will shatter Vaifen to its core. The only information he claims he knows about this alleged major grand plan is an address right here in Ternion, Leah?”

The Gestalt operator showed the relevant map and information through the room’s displays, “The address provided points to a building that, according to civil records, has been leased by a new tech startup known as ‘Astral Solutions,’” Leah explained to the team.

“A mere facade,” Exley added. “While he swears he only knows nothing else beyond that address, Wheeler claims that the building is where ‘Sphenoid’ is doing his part to achieve Dogma’s greater plan against the nation.”

While the Director continued to address the Gestalt team, Cameron used her own personal phone device to further look into Astral Solutions, “I mean, come on, look at this mission statement for crying out loud,” she said before reciting the words that her eyes were gazing at, “‘to make the world a better place through revolutionary software and applied technological solutions’, what a load of nothing.”

No one in the room understood what Cameron meant, silence was not the response she expected.

Erron broke the veil of silence, “It’s time to hit them before they do more harm to the city and its people,” he said to his peers.

“Or we’re being led to a trap,” Gale presented the room with a different conjecture.

“Regardless, it’s our best and only course of action right now,” Exley gave his assertion. “Gestalt. Your mission objectives are as follows: Assault the building and disrupt, if not outright stop, whatever plans they have in store against Vaifen, Capture ‘Sphenoid’ if possible, and find anything that can lead us to Dogma himself and his alleged major plans.”

“Consider it done, boss,” Erron said to the General.

“We haven’t passed down this information to other components or institutions, not the military, not the police, or even Special Forces, and it’s in everyone’s best interests that we continue to operate this way from now on,” Director Exley informed them, “which means that you will be alone in this mission.”

“So we’ll have no backup then, just the five of us?” Cade Saunders asked.

“We can’t trust the civil registry anymore,” Exley said, “we can’t trust any other branch of the government until we figure out what has been compromised, so for now we’ll have to avail ourselves of Gestalt’s compartmentalization and operating independence—I won’t hold it against you if you find that a bit ironic, considering the apparent nature of the Ashen Reckoning.”

Cade expressed his concerns through a question, “Fighting a war against the Ashen Reckoning on our own?”

“We’ll be fine Cade, we’re a kickass team,” Cameron assured him with a raised thumb and a wink.

Bastiel let loose a faint smile, Cameron’s confidence was intoxicating and outright contagious.

Cade however, didn’t feel reassured by her words.

“Aye,” Quartermaster Edram concurred. “Besides, all five Nightingales have the extra arm tools installed and I patched the OS to improve their performance a bit, that’ll give everyone an extra edge.”

Director Exley once again spoke to the Gestalt team as a whole, “King Starsong is going to present Gestalt to the Senate tomorrow—a formal matter that can no longer be delayed. It is perhaps providence that has granted us this opportunity to strike back at the Ashen Reckoning. Show the Senate what you’re all made of, the King has his faith placed in all of you and so have I.”

“We will give our best, sir!” Erron exclaimed.

“I know you will,” Exley responded. “You’ll strike at night—I suggest you start warming up and get ready for the mission.”

Erron nodded at the general, “You heard the boss—let’s prep up and get ready!” he rallied his teammates.

The hours passed, and the night covered the city of Ternion with its starry blanket. All five members of Gestalt’s strike team, clad in their black and colored undergarments, headed towards the armory. Operator Leah Sutherland made her way into the operations room in the company of Director Exley, who was going to oversee Gestalt’s latest mission.

Each member approached their corresponding stand and began to equip their color-coded Nightingale Battle Suits. As part of the Quartermaster’s Nightingale development roadmap, the suits’ arm plates had been replaced with an upgraded design similar in shape but with the ability to be loaded with a series of gadgets, another mark of Edram Pertz’ engineering prowess.

The Gestalt Operating System embedded on the suits immediately booted up after the team put on their respective helmets. A notification announced that software updates had been recently applied to the suit’s firmware.

Edram Pertz spoke to the team through the helmet’s communication systems once the boot sequence was finished, “Good after—I mean, evening, ladies and gentlemen. All gtOS modules are ready and operational,” he said, “I’ve done a few small tweaks to the suits based on your performance these past weeks, everything should be snappier and the suit should feel more natural now, a slight power boost for you all, if you wanna call it that way.”

“Thanks Eddie!” Erron responded to him, “you’re the best.”

“Just doing my job, Commander Erron,” Edram replied.

Bastiel Isthall grabbed the same prototype Judgment sword he had been using ever since his first mission, he also grabbed a smaller sidearm blade.

The five members of the strike team: blue, yellow, green, pink, and red, now properly dressed and armed for the occasion, boarded the launch elevator, and descended to the launch bay. Bastiel Isthel reflected on the day's earlier events: he brought joy and emotion to sick children, smiles that even if they lasted but for a faint moment, were invaluable, that was a talent Bastiel didn't know he possessed. The love of his life, Princess Vesper Starsong, also flashed in his thoughts.

It was time to use his capacity as a fighter to quell the threat of those that wish to bring terror to the Nation of Vaifen. It was time to use the Absolute Doctrine of the Nasivern that he wielded in order to push Vaifen one step closer to peace.

Commander Erron Leitner closed his eyes, aware of his responsibility as team leader and all that the mantle entailed. He sought guidance in the teachings of his mentor, General Michael Traxler, the man that took him under his wing and taught him everything he knew about being a soldier and a warrior when he was but a young cadet of Vaifen's Military. Traxler had sacrificed his life so that Erron would see another daylight.

General Traxler once taught him the importance of trusting his friends and fellow brothers in arms. As the leader of Gestalt's strike team, he entrusted his life to his four other companions just as they have entrusted their own lives to his leadership over the past weeks.

Gale Lacroix, aware that she was moments away from killing people, silently prayed for the safety and guidance of not only herself, but her friends as well. There was no room for personal feelings or opinions regarding the methods the Intelligence Center employed to force the man known as 'Occipital' into submission, in the end, ensuring the safety of the Nation of Vaifen was all that mattered. When she closed her eyes, she saw her young daughter, Lilly, smiling at her.

To kill so that her daughter can grow up in a peaceful Vaifen, that's a burden Gale would gladly carry a thousand times over.

Cameron Bennett was the only relaxed member of the team, only annoyed by the fact that the sudden call to action had ruined her plans for that night. The Neon Glow was a party she was highly looking forward to, and had even plans to drag the introverted Gestalt Analyst, Leah Sutherland, along. She hummed a tune to herself as the elevator continued to descend.

Cade Saunders, disciplined as ever, repeatedly checked the status of his weapons, making sure that all of his armament was in optimal conditions, a malfunction could very well mean the difference between life and death on a battlefield.

After the elevator stopped and its doors opened, the strike team boarded the vehicle that awaited them. The gates of the launch bay opened, and the vehicle began to move under the calm night that covered the city of Ternion.

Erron reviewed the schematics of the building that they were about to pay a visit to, "Are you guys alright?" he asked the team under his command.

"Yes," Cameron responded.

The rest of the team responded in kind.

"Cammy, I need you to work your magic and be our eyes in the sky," Erron instructed her.

"You got it, boss," Cameron nodded at him, "my babies will take care of us."

Minutes later, the vehicle stopped at the edge of Ternion's Avenue 45, known for the myriad office buildings of numerous shapes and sizes that resided on it. The chromatic quintet jumped off the vehicle, and marched forward.

The team began to walk closer to its destination, the dark skies were as clear as they could have possibly been that night, a beautiful starry night obfuscated by the tall edifices on both sides of the avenue. Their helmets automatically switched to night vision mode.

“What a lovely night,” Cameron commented.

Following their Commander’s instructions, the team concealed themselves in a narrow alley, mere steps away from their destination. They overlooked towards the target yonder—a leased building still undergoing renovations. A few high post lamps and external reflectors, as well as a wired fence around its perimeter were among the first things they perceived.

The wide office building was nowhere near as tall as some of its peers in that avenue, its open parking lot had a few construction trucks resting on it. Safety signs that indicated that the building was undergoing renovations and that it would soon be the workplace for a company known as ‘Astral Solutions’ blocked the front entrance.

Erron carefully observed the area and analyzed the situation, entering the building through the parking lot’s side doors seemed like the best course of action for the seasoned soldier.

“Girls,” Erron beckoned the yellow and pink members of the team, “proceed,” he instructed them.

Cameron Bennett tapped the small touch screen strapped on her left arm and the four small Hawk-series drones mounted on her suit’s backpack sprung to life. The small avian-shaped drones began to silently fly above the factory’s courtyard, running its scanners all throughout the building’s exterior.

Gale Lacroix ascended through the fire exit stairs above the alley that the team was at. She readied her sniper rifle and scouted the parking lot, spotting one man that patrolled the area.

Her target was armed with a rifle and a flashlight, and dressed with regular jeans and a jacket, with his face concealed by a piece of clothing.

“That’s a very interesting security uniform,” Gale said to the team.

Cameron’s drones began their external scan of the building.

“Boss,” the pink teammate said, “looks like the building’s empty . . . there’s no one’s inside.

“Huh,” Erron muttered, “let’s deal with our friend over there and walk in then,” he instructed the team.

Gale had her sights on the man patrolling the parking lot. She readied her rifle and with a single tap of the trigger, sent a whisper that pierced through the man’s forehead—ending his life in an instant.

“Coast is clear,” Gale said.

“Cade, Bastiel,” Erron beckoned them, “with me,” he pointed yonder.

The red and green Gestalt members followed their blue leader, and slowly began to cross the lonely avenue, concealing themselves in shadows and avoiding the sparse light. The three men crossed past the empty booth that granted entryway to the parking lot and hid themselves beneath a construction truck.

Gale holstered her rifle and descended from the stairs, and together with Cameron, joined their male peers.

“Good job so far, team,” Erron complimented them, “that door over there is our way in—but of course, there’s a camera above it, there’s always a damned camera,” he pointed at the door.

“Oh please, I got this,” Cameron said. She piloted one of her four drones using the touch screen device mounted on her left arm, and carefully positioned it above the camera. A connecting cable emerged from the bottom of the drone, the machine plugged into the camera’s service port.

Cameron spent a few seconds tinkering and tampering with the camera’s systems, “Gotcha!” she said with enthusiasm.

“What did you do?” Cade asked.

“I hacked into the camera, it’s displaying a loop now, they’ll never know we paid them a visit.”

“Excellent work, Cammy,” Erron congratulated her. “Let’s go, team.”

“Easy peasy!” Cameron exclaimed.

“Almost too easy,” Cade replied.

With the only guard dead and the security camera promptly dealt with, all five Gestalt members casually walked towards the building’s side door.

Cameron recalled her four hawk drones, and each one latched into their respective corner on Cameron’s backpack nest as she stood in front of the door alongside her four other teammates.

Erron placed his right hand upon the door’s knob, and much to his surprise, found that it was unlocked. He slowly opened it, making the least amount of noise possible. Cade and Gale immediately entered and respectively secured the left and right perimeters of the hallway, with Cameron and Bastiel entering shortly afterwards.

The group slowly and carefully made their way towards the building’s lobby, finding themselves in front of an empty receptionist’s desk. The team looked above and saw that the

building was designed with an open space in mind. It's offices were located at the edges, and corridors ran from one wall to another, connecting all sections of the rectangular-shaped edifice.

While the signs located at the building's exterior informed passersby that the place was undergoing renovations, the truth was that it was only a facade, meant to disguise what underwent inside. The interior, while certainly unfinished, showed no signs of recent construction or renovation work, electrical power was also completely cut off.

"Commander," Cade spoke, "this facility is empty, I'm not detecting any signs on my sensors."

"You're right, Cade." Erron responded, "I'm not picking up a single thermal signal either."

"Maybe that Occipital guy lied," Bastiel commented.

"Yeah, this place is a ghost town" Cameron also gave her comment, "kinda creepy, if you ask me."

"Focus," Erron said to the team. "Bastiel, Cammy, Gale, check that left path upstairs. Cade come with me to that right hallway."

The team split and continued to navigate through the insides of the empty building. Bastiel, Gale, and Cameron head left and ascended upstairs towards the building's first floor. The trio entered a large empty room and found nothing. Cameron looked through the room's windows, and saw flashes of light emanating at a distance—the Neon Glow musical event that she was going to attend that night was well underway.

Cameron sighed, "I really wanted to go . . ." she lamented to herself, catching another far and faint glimpse of the visual spectacle that underwent yonder.

Gale Lacroix tapped her shoulder twice, “It’s ok, there’s always next year, right? Besides, you said you liked spending time with the team,” she said to her friend.

“Yeah, yeah . . .” Cameron said, “because we’ve had so much fun tonight so far . . .” the sarcasm was rather evident in her words.

Erron continued to carefully observe his surroundings as he made his way through office desks and furniture. He signaled Cade to stop after he noticed several caches of weapons and boxes with a huge label that warned of the explosive nature of its contents.

“HQ,” Erron beckoned to Gestalt’s operations room, “it seems the Ashen Reckoning is using this place to stockpile weapons and explosives.”

Back at the Gestalt enclave’s Operations room, Director James Exley, Operator Leah Sutherland, and Quartermaster Edram Pertz observed the video feed coming from Erron Leitner’s helmet as he gazed upon a dozen more similar weapons cache.

“There is no way they’ve managed to move these many weapons around without some sort of aid,” Exley commented with his left fingers on his temple. The Director was most contemplative of what he was witnessing through the large screens of the operations room.

“Aye,” Erron concurred, “that’s a given.”

An unlocked weapons cache caught Erron’s attention and he took a rifle from it. He meticulously observed the weapon and instantly recognized the type of rifle he was holding in his hands.

“This is a series eight Reznik—a classic,” he remarked, “the serial number has been scrubbed off.”

“Impossible . . .” Exley commented, “these were all accounted for and dismantled years ago.”

“Yeah, phase out old stuff when its life cycle is over—that’s how it goes,” Erron responded.

Gale joined the conversation from afar, “Well, looks like not everyone got that memo,” she said as herself, Cameron, and Bastiel, entered another room that had more weapons caches stored.

“Huh,” Cameron muttered, “so much for renovations, eh?”

“How were they able to snatch so many of these without no one noticing?” Erron asked as he placed the rifle back on its crate.

Cade Saunders continued to secure the perimeter with his weapon in hand until he stepped on something that cracked under the weight of his foot, he kneeled down to check out what he had just stepped on.

Just as Cade was kneeling, he felt a bullet pass too close to his head. The green team member immediately sought cover behind a wooden desk.

“Cade!” Erron yelled after hearing the echoing sound of the bullet resounding all across the room, and the sudden motion made by his green teammate.

The team’s suit sensors went haywire and became erratic, detecting the presence of countless entities that seemed to swarm all around them like locusts.

“What the crap is going on!” Cameron exclaimed.

“We’re being jammed somehow!” Gale said as her suit’s sensors continued to present unreliable readings.

“No way!” Edram exclaimed. The Quartermaster was shocked that someone was capable of doing that to the state of the art Nightingale battle suits he had designed, “I . . . I don’t, doesn’t make sense!” His mind tried to piece together a plausible answer amidst the commotion.

A barrage of bullets flew straight towards Cade Saunders and Erron Leitner, the green Gestalt member began to reciprocate with his rifle. Cameron Bennet, in a fit of panic, attempted to seek cover, only for her path to be cut short by another barrage of bullets. Bastiel Isthel was quick to react and pushed Cameron out of the line of fire and towards a corner.

“Ow!” Cameron exclaimed after being pushed by Bastiel.

“You can thank me later, Cammy,” the red man said to the pink woman, “are you ok?” he asked her while he checked for any injuries on her body.

Cameron, still startled and shocked, gave him an affirmative nod in response.

A monotone male voice was heard all throughout the building, “So, the clowns that killed Occipital have come to pay us a visit,” the flat voice was magnified by a series of speakers spread across the facility, “pathetic, pluck them out and wipe them.”

“That must be Sphenoid,” Gale said to her team through the suit’s comm channel.

“Are you alright, Cade?” Erron asked him.

“Yes, Commander,” he replied, “the bullet missed me.”

Dozens of Ashen Reckoning soldiers began to emerge from the dark corners of the building, with a large majority emerging from the upper floors. The soldiers began to seek out the Gestalt team.

With their helmet’s sensors disrupted, Gestalt’s strike team could not accurately count the extent of the enemy forces nor predict their location. One thing was certain, they were vastly outnumbered.

Cade Saunders fired his rifle and killed one of the enemies with a straight shot at his chest, and wounded another in the process. Erron also managed to kill a handful of soldiers from his location. Both of them knew that they didn’t have enough ammunition to spare for each and

every one of the soldiers under Sphenoid's command, they would soon be swarmed and overwhelmed by the Ashen Reckoning.

"We can't go against these many on our own, that's for sure," Gale said to her teammates, "we're outnumbered."

"Took the words out of my mouth, Gale," Erron concurred.

Cameron continued to take cover in a corner until a large panel on the wall caught her attention. Bastiel Isthel brandished his Judgement weapon in its gun mode configuration and reciprocated the enemy fire as best as he could.

"Guys, I got an idea!" Cameron exclaimed.

"I'm all ears, Cammy!" Erron responded. He had just thrown a flashbang grenade that momentarily disrupted the advance of the enemy forces towards his location.

"I think I can stir things up."

"Do what you gotta do," Erron said as he began to reload his rifle.

"Cover me, Bastiel!" the pink tech specialist asked the help of her Nasivern teammate.

Cameron stood up and snuck towards the large gray panel while the rest of the team fended off the Ashen Reckoning soldiers. She instructed one of her Hawk drones to connect with the panel and began to frantically type on the panel's keyboard. As she cracked through the building's systems, her team continued to fight and delay the advance of the enemy forces.

"I'm so good at this, damn!" Cameron gloated of her prowess, "Get ready for this!"

One by one, the building's lights began to power up, Cameron also forcefully triggered the building's fire alarm, and the sprinklers began to shower the entire facility, surprising the enemy forces therein—the commotion bought a halt to their march against Gestalt's team.

Erron, Gale, Cade, and Bastiel took advantage of the distraction and availed themselves of it to end the lives of a few flummoxed enemy soldiers.

One Ashen Reckoning soldier dashed through one of the upper pathways that ran across the building's empty central area. Bastiel Isthral attempted to shoot at him, hitting the man on his shoulder; the impact, coupled with the water raining from above, made the man trip and fall through the first floor corridor and into the lobby, breaking his legs in the process.

"That's got to hurt," Bastiel commented upon witnessing the results of his actions.

Erron signaled Cade Saunders to advance on his own, the green teammate split apart from his blue leader and headed towards the upper floors. Cade displayed his remarkable ability and former Special Forces training as he fought his way up the stairs using both his rifle and his knife in conjunction.

Bastiel Isthral, Gale Lacroix, and Cameron Bennett reunited with Erron Leitner; they slowly began to push together towards the fifth floor, where Sphenoid waited for his forces to dispose of the colored intruders.

Gale found an upper vantage point in a corner and decided to set up camp there.

"Don't worry, I'll keep you all safe." she said to the rest of her team, "keep going!"

"I know you will, Gale." Erron replied with his right thumb up.

Bastiel, Erron, and Cameron continued their advance towards the upper floors of the office building until they were ambushed by five enemy soldiers. Cameron, without thinking it twice, tapped the panel on her left arm and the four Hawk drones under her command formed a square pattern in front of them, projecting a light blue energy barrier that blocked the barrage of shots the Ashen Reckoning soldiers had greeted them with.

"Haha! Take that, suckers!" Cameron gloated, "they're no match for my girls—"

Her gloat was short-lived, her four drones could not sustain the barrier for long and overheated, shutting down and dropping on the floor. The three Gestalt teammates split and sought cover once they lost the protection of the short-lived energy barrier.

“Eddie!” Cameron berated the quartermaster, “what the hell man! Your shield-thingy broke my babies!” she explained the situation.

“I told you! That’s an experimental feature! It’s still unfinished!” Quartermaster Edram Pertz responded from the Operations room with his eyes focused on reading the diagnostic data of the malfunctioning shield that the drones reported back right before going offline. “I hard-disabled that feature for a reason! How and why did you even re-enabled it on the firmware? Stop messing with my code!”

“Quiet, you two!” Erron yelled as he returned fire to the enemy forces, “there’ll be enough time for that later!”

Cameron crawled and secured her four drones while Gale provided cover for her pink friend. She frantically tried to bring them back online but found no success in doing so, Cameron continued to desperately reactivate her weapon of choice and was completely absorbed by it.

“Screw it!” Edram yelled, “I’m launching the Gryphons even if they’re untested and unauthorized!” The stout man began to type a series of commands on his computer terminal. “Hang in there guys, help is on the way!” he informed the five strike team members.

Director James Exley was about to deny Edram’s idea, but abstained from doing so, “Do what you must, Pertz,” he said.

Bastiel Isthali was running low on ammunition, he noticed that two enemy soldiers were rushing towards a seemingly distracted Cameron. He raised his weapon and fired a couple of rounds at them, completely missing his targets..

“Whatever,” Bastiel switched Judgement to sword mode and drew the smaller side blade he had equipped himself with. He ran through the crossfire with great haste and intercepted the two Ashen Reckoning soldiers before they could reach Cameron.

With a single fast and graceful motion of his body, Bastiel stabbed one of the two men with the shorter side blade before he slashed the other soldier’s chest with Judgement and pushed him down towards a certain death—a quick but spectacular display of the Nasivern’s Absolute Doctrine. Bastiel retrieved his smaller blade from the impaled man’s chest.

A third and fourth hostile approached the Nasivern from behind, Bastiel turned around and used his suit’s newly mounted arm plate tool. He extended his right arm and fired a small but strong grappling hook that latched on the rightmost soldier, pulling him towards his body, and stabbing him in the process. The other Ashen Reckoning soldier fired at Bastiel but his comrade got into the way. Bastiel threw his smaller blade at him, impaling his target’s chest.

Erron had witnessed Bastiel’s actions, “Way to go, Agito!” he exclaimed over the radio.

Cameron Bennett and Cade Saunders caught up Erron’s words, both of them became curious as to why Erron had referred to Bastiel Isthel as ‘Agito’ but the time and circumstances were not appropriate to make any sort of questions about it.

Another Ashen Reckoning soldier ambushed Cade and was about to stab him with a knife, Cade was quick to react and used his rifle to block the enemy’s blade. With a swift move of his weapon he broke the assailant’s nose using the butt of his rifle, he pushed the man down the staircase.

Bastiel rejoined with Cameron, who was still trying to reactivate her four drones, “Just leave them, Cammy!” he pleaded.

“No! Maybe if I—” Cameron was interrupted by a bullet that ricocheted right between the two of them. The pink teammate yelled after being surprised by the stray bullet.

Bastiel shielded her companion with his own body, he switched Judgement to its gun mode’s burst mode, raised his left arm and shot his last three remaining bullets without thinking, without aiming—and yet somehow, all three hit the man that had shot at them, a man whose mouth was covered by a piece of cloth.

Bastiel was in awe of how the perfect strike he had pulled, “Nice,” he looked at his weapon and then looked at the corpse of the man he had just killed with his last three bullets, still in absolute disbelief, but satisfied by the results nonetheless.

Gestalt’s team continued their standoff against the Ashen Reckoning forces, but they had begun to run low on ammunition. The Ashen Reckoning was slowly but surely emerging victorious in the war of attrition that raged inside the office building—the tide was heavily in their favor.

“Eddie, where’s that backup you mentioned?” Erron asked, “we could really use whatever you’re sending us right now!”

“Almost there, Erron!” Edram responded.

Seconds later, two large drones broke through the building’s windows at impressive speeds, instantly gaining the attention of everyone inside.

The two mechanical wonders resembled large and fearsome bird-like creatures, each one was much larger than Cameron’s four avian-shaped drones combined. One of them had been painted in a predominantly white, blue, and orange color scheme, the second one had shades of red instead of blue, but was otherwise similar to its twin.

“Behold! My latest—and untested creation!” Edram exclaimed, “the GT-SED10A and B Gryphon Remote Assault Drones,” full of pride, he announced to the Gestalt strike team.

The Gryphon Assault Drones were deadly twins, born of Edram’s brilliant brainstorming, mechanical prowess, and love for all mythical creatures of old. While part of the Gestalt arsenal, the Gryphon drones were still not cleared for use, a myriad of bureaucratic regulations stood in the way.

Both of the Gryphon drones were being controlled by their creator, the Nasivern quartermaster Edram Pertz himself. The two machines extended their metal wings and deployed a pair of mini-guns, raining down death upon the Ashen Reckoning’s forces.

“Whoa, Eddie! You’re a savior!” a relieved and now out of ammunition Erron exclaimed.

“Holy shit!” Cameron exclaimed.

“Way to go, Eddie!” Bastiel said with enthusiasm towards the timely arrival of his fellow Nasivern’s aid.

The pair of Gryphon drones continued to terrorize and eliminate their enemies, the Ashen Reckoning soldiers opened fire at them.

“Mind the painting!” Edram exclaimed. He made the red-coded drone under his command launch a stun grenade at a clump of Ashen Reckoning soldiers.

With the hostiles now focused on taking down the remote assault drones, Gale Lacroix was able to use her sniper rifle with more freedom. She took down targets that were firing at the Gryphon Drones from a new vantage point.

Cameron Bennett was finally successful in reactivating her four Hawk drones, “My girls are back!” she exclaimed with happiness. Without wasting a further second she instructed them

to hover and fire their limited supply of ammunition upon the remaining Ashen Reckoning soldiers.

Cade Saunders rushed towards the administrative offices of the building, located at the rear end of the fifth floor. He took the rightmost hallway and ran towards his destination, shooting his way and leaving a trail of corpses in his wake.

Edram's Gryphon drones kept the enemy forces occupied. A man kept trying to shoot down the large bird-like drones with his rifle. Bastiel rushed at him as fast as he could and tackled him, stabbing the man in the chest. He looked up and noticed that Cade had almost reached his destination.

Edram made one of his Gryphon drones descend next to Bastiel, "Need a ride?" he asked.

"Uh—are you sure?" Bastiel replied.

"Of course, hang on tight!" Edram responded, "it should be able to carry your weight—in theory . . ."

"That—doesn't inspire confidence," Bastiel grabbed the Gryphon drone's feet. The machine began to fly him through the battlefield while its twin along Cameron's small drones continued to clean sweep the area.

Gale continued to take down enemies from afar using the last of her sniper's bullets. Erron, who had run out of ammunition, took up one of the enemies' weapons to continue fighting.

The Gryphon drone that carried Bastiel wobbled for a moment.

"Whoa!" Bastiel yelled.

"Sorry, I did say that these bad boys were untested," Edram said, "they're not even legal to use around the city."

Bastiel jumped from the large drone after he was as close as possible to Cade's location. The Gryphon drone that carried him returned to help dispose of the now few remaining Ashen Reckoning soldiers.

Bastiel ran towards the building's administrative offices, he found Cade pointing his rifle at Sphenoid, a slender and tall man dressed in black. Sphenoid's face was concealed by a white mask similar to the one Occipital wore during the Osborne store assault, except his mask had the shape of the sphenoid bone painted on it instead. His two bodyguards laid dead on the floor, having received a warm welcome at the hands of Cade's rifle mere seconds ago.

Cade aimed his rifle at the man's face, "On your knees, now!" he yelled to the masked man.

"Kneel? We will never kneel to the likes of you," Sphenoid refused to comply. "We will not rest until Vaifen is freed from those that have enslaved our brothers and sisters. We will break the Crown, the Senate, and the Tribunal—all of it, not even their ashes will remain, and then, at last, our people will—" his right leg was shot by Cade Saunders before he could finish his ominous speech.

The bullet wound forced Sphenoid to drop and kneel, he chose not to grunt or make any sort of sound that could be interpreted as pain, a satisfaction he did not want to give to his green and black attacker.

"I said, kneel," an enraged Cade reiterated.

"Cade, chill," Bastiel tried to calm down his exacerbated teammate, "we got him."

Cade took a deep breath, "I don't need your help, Nasivern." he said while keeping his gaze on his target, "just give up, you've lost."

The sound of gunfire from the lower floors had ceased. Gestalt had successfully eliminated all other Ashen Reckoning forces. Erron Leitner, Gale Lacroix and Cameron Bennett began to converge with one another before they began their march towards Bastiel Isthel and Cade Saunders, with the two gryphon drones hovering around the area, now banged up and dented after being shot at.

Sphenoid fought through the unbearable pain of his injured leg and began to stand up, “Lost? Oh, this merely the beginning, you have no idea,” he gloated with that monotone voice of his.

The masked man began to chuckle, his chuckle transformed into laughter, and then his laughter became louder and sinister.

“Stop laughing!” Cade shot at Sphenoid’s left leg and the man, now with his two legs injured, fell on the ground.

Cade got closer to him and aimed at his head. Sphenoid almost let loose a cry of agony but contained himself, he continued to chuckle through the pain.

Bastiel began to hear a beeping sound that seemingly emanated from Sphenoid himself, the beep became faster and faster.

“Cade, no!” Bastiel yelled. He rushed and pushed Cade out of the way. A small but powerful explosive concealed in Sphenoid’s mask went off—the man exploded in a thousand pieces.

Had it not been for the Nasivern’s timely intervention, Cade Saunders would’ve gotten caught in the explosion. Gale, Cameron and Erron dropped on the floor to protect themselves from the blast, Erron was the first to stand up after the commotion had passed.

“Cade! Bastiel!” the blue leader yelled.

“What happened?” Director James Exley yelled from Gestalt’s operations room.

“Oh no . . .” a worried Leah got off her Operator’s seat.

Cade Saunders came back to his senses, Bastiel Isthali was on top of him.

“Are . . . are you alright?” Bastiel asked Cade.

Cade grunted, “I said I didn’t need your help.” his back and right arm took the majority of the impact.

Bastiel scoffed and rolled sideways, “You’re so annoying, Cadem” he replied as he stared at the ceiling, breathing heavily, “you’re welcome, by the way.”

“I suppose ‘thanks’ are in order,” Cade swallowed his pride and expressed gratitude towards his red teammate.

“Whatever.”

“We’re fine, Commander,” Cade informed his team leader via radio.

Bastiel and Cade sat on the floor, both of the men took off their helmets and breathed.

Cameron rushed to aid her two friends, “Oh my, are you two alright?”

“Director, Sphenoid blew himself to smithereens,” Erron informed Exley. “Call our ride, our job is done here—time for forensics to do theirs,” he said as he walked around the ruins of the room where Sphenoid had taken his last stand in the company of Gale Lacroix.

A damaged desktop computer caught Erron’s attention, the blast had deformed its case. Erron force opened its side panel and took a damaged disk drive from it.

“Erron,” Gale tapped his shoulder and pointed at a corner. A dislodged security camera rested on the floor.

The blue commander approached the damaged camera, the explosion had made it fall from its wall mount, but it was still active and connected. Erron stared at its cracked lens.

Suddenly, Erron had a cold and eerie feeling, as if someone had observed their entire assault and they were still being watched at that moment. He tore the flimsy power cable and the camera powered down.

“Team, let’s go home. Good job everyone,” Erron said. He and Gale reunited with the rest of the team. Erron offered his hands to Bastiel and Cade so that they could get up.

Bastiel and Cade put on their helmets back. The two gryphon drones flew back on their own towards the Gestalt Enclave. The team walked out of the office building through the same door they used to enter it. A crowd had gathered to witness the ordeal—drawn by the sounds of their firefight and the detonation that took place minutes ago.

Police forces attempted to establish order through peaceful means, forcing the gathered crowd to stay at a distance. A team of forensics sent by Director James Exley began to make its way inside the building. The Gestalt team continued to walk towards the vehicle that first brought them there.

The gathered crowd of civilians attempted to take pictures and video recordings of the Gestalt’s chromatic quintet, some of them cheered, while others tried to squeeze in through the crowd to grab content for their social media accounts. Bombarded by a non-stop barrage of camera flashes and a cacophony of voices, the Gestalt team continued to walk.

Bastiel Isthel looked at his surroundings, one particular arm among the crowd caught its attention. The arm was adorned by tattooed roses and thorny vines that covered most of it. The man clad in red could not discern who the arm belonged to, as the person hid behind a large man—but whoever that arm belonged to had managed to take a clear picture of Bastiel’s red Nightingale suit.

The team boarded the vehicle and the driver immediately set course towards the National Intelligence Center. All five members of Gestalt took off their helmets now that they were out of sight, their exhaustion was more than evident on their faces.

“I just want to say how proud I am of every one of you,” Erron said to his friends, “you were all beyond amazing back there.”

“It was nothing, Erron. It’s our job,” Gale answered.

“What she said.” Bastiel said with his eyes closed, it had been an excruciatingly long day for him.

“We really are the best there is!” Cameron exclaimed. “Operation ‘Not Neon Glow’ was a success!”

Erron looked at Cameron, “I don’t recall ever calling this mission like that,” he said to her.

“Too bad, I just did, we forgot to give it a name anyways.”

Erron let loose a short laugh. Cade remained silent, trying to shrug off the pain of his bruises.

Minutes later, the vehicle had finally returned to the National Intelligence Center. The team put on their helmets before exiting the vehicle.

“Welcome home, Gestalt.” Operator Leah Sutherland spoke to them through their helmet’s communication systems. “Please head to the briefing room at your earliest convenience.”

The team boarded the elevator and arrived into the armory room, promptly returning their equipment. A fresh set of clothing awaited them on their respective color-coded lockers.

“I have to give this drive to Eddie right away,” Erron said. He left the armory room with the damaged drive he had retrieved firmly grasped on his left hand.

The other four members of Gestalt grabbed their issued fresh set of clothes and walked towards the showers to freshen themselves up. The hot stream of water cleansed their bodies and washed over the stress of the mission, with Commander Erron Leitner doing the same shortly afterwards.

They all emerged from the showers freshened up, but thoroughly exhausted. The team formed a beeline towards the briefing room, where National Intelligence Director James Exley, Operator Leah Sutherland, and Quartermaster Edram Pertz awaited them.

“Excellent job tonight, Gestalt.” Exley congratulated them, “please, take a seat,” he waved his hand.

Gale and Cameron sat on the right side next to Leah, while Erron, Cade, and Bastiel sat to the left, next to Edram.

“I will try to make this short—I know all of you just want to rest,” Exley chuckled, “first things first, you’ve all dealt a great blow to the Ashen Reckoning. Forensics is still cleaning up the place as we speak, we will have their report in a few hours,” he explained.

“There’s still the mystery of how and why had they obtained all those weapons,” Erron spoke.

“Indeed,” Exley responded. “All that weaponry you found, such as the Renzik rifles, belonged to Vaifen’s army—equipment that was allegedly dismantled years ago when newer firearms replaced them. They shouldn’t exist, they do not exist anymore, according to our records.”

“If someone in the army is funneling weapons to the Ashen Reckoning then we need to find out who it is,” Cade Saunders commented.

“That seems to be the case, a long term ploy from the looks of it. Just the mere thought of it disgusts me.” Exley responded to him, the concern on his words was palpable. “You simply don’t become a legitimate threat towards the safety of a nation overnight, not without money and resources, and they’re surely getting lots of them from someone, somewhere.”

“It’s obvious that the Ashen Reckoning has a list of hidden benefactors and patrons,” Gale said, “someone very interested in taking down our Nation’s government.”

“Certainly so, Agent Lacroix,” Exley responded to her, “a shame that we could not capture Sphenoid alive.”

“What about the drive we found? Can we salvage anything from it?” Erron asked, hoping that at least some valuable files contained therein could provide them with a lead.

“I don’t know yet . . . the drive’s in a pretty bad shape,” Edram gave his preliminary assertion as he scratched his dark hair, “getting data out of it ain’t gonna be easy—then again, there’s no fun in cracking open an intact drive, this is a challenge I’m looking forward to.”

Director Exley stared at the overweight Nasivern, “Quartermaster Pertz, I am entrusting you with handling the damaged drive, please do your best and recover as much information as possible from it.”

“I will, Director. I will not let you down,” Edram nodded towards his boss, “in fact, I should start working on it right away, I need to rebuild its connectors and most likely write a custom software to—”

Exley interrupted the eager quartermaster, “I admire your determination, Edram, but please do not overwork yourself out,” he said. “Another thing, the existence of those ‘Gryphon’ drones—that’s between us here, we’ll sneak them through paperwork once the time is right.”

Edram nodded, his face screamed exhaustion and sleep deprivation.

“It’s best if you take a good rest before touching that drive, I know you’re eager to crack that puzzle, but I need everyone in top condition, and that includes you,” Exley advised the quartermaster.

“As you wish, Director,” Edram conceded.

“The same goes to all of you,” Director Exley pointed at the rest of Gestalt’s team with his right index finger, “the sun is about to rise, spend the night here, or what’s left of it anyways. Take a well-deserved rest, you’ve more than earned it.”

Bastiel Isthali has always preferred the solitude of his residence, “It’s not a big problem, Director Exley, I can drive back home,” he tried to bargain but yawned immediately upon finishing his sentence.

“Nonsense, Agent Isthali. We built dormitories on the enclave for a reason, start using them,” Exley remarked. “As for me, I will grab a large cup of coffee and freshen up before I go meet with King Starsong, the Gestalt audience at the Senate is a couple of hours away.”

“But Director, you should get some rest too!” Cameron expressed her thoughts.

“I’m afraid that is a luxury I cannot afford at the moment, Agent Bennett,” Exley answered the young agent’s concern, “greatly value every hour of sleep that you can seize, not everyone has that luxury these days.”

Director Exley stood up from his seat and fixed his gray suit, “Alright, I have a long day ahead of me, it’s time to make my leave—once again, good job tonight, Gestalt. Have a good night.”

“Good night, General.” Erron spoke on behalf of the team.

Exley left the room, all seven members of Gestalt: the five strike team members, the operator, and the quartermaster remained seated, all seven of them were at their physical and mental limits.

Cade Saunders’ mind kept going through the near-death experience he was part of hours ago. Had it not been for Bastiel Isthral’s timely intervention, he would have returned to the Gestalt enclave under very different circumstances. Once again, he let his rage take the best of him and let it cloud his judgment when he was dealing with Sphenoid. The fact that Gestalt had access to those two Gryphon drones, which, due to their nature, were illegal to operate in Vaifen soil, was something that troubled the ‘by the books’ man.

“Well, you heard the boss, time to sleep, team.” Erron stood up from his seat.

Everyone else followed suit.

All seven of them walked towards the western side of the enclave, and then they took a right turn towards a hallway, where numerous doors on each side were present.

Erron took a deep breath, “Here we are—our home away from home,” he said.

“So, which one is my room, Boss-Erron?” Cameron asked.

“The doors are color-coded, Cammy,” Leah explained, “yours is the one with the pink stripe on the door, girls to the right, and boys to the left.”

Bastiel stared at a door with a red stripe. “Oh, makes sense,” he commended.

“Duh, of course . . . everything is color-coded,” Cameron berated herself amidst a long and drawn-out yawn.

“Yeah, yeah, have a good night team! Or morning I guess, it’s almost dawn . . .” Erron chuckled.

“Night y’all!” Cameron exclaimed as she opened the door with a pink stripe on it.

Gale entered the room with yellow on its door, Leah approached the one with an orange stripe. Cade silently entered the green one, Erron approached the door identified with blue, Edram went to the purple one, and Bastiel walked through the door with a red stripe across it.

Bastiel Isthel closed the door of his dormitory, the room was cold and dark. He touched the wall with his left hand until he felt a light switch, he pressed it and the room’s lights turned on.

The room wasn’t as big as his apartment’s bedroom, but it was cozy and very well-furnished. A full-sized bed, a couch on a corner with a table in front of it, a television screen, a small window, a desk with a computer on it, and even a small sound system. The dormitory also had its own private bathroom inside.

“Not too shabby,” the white-haired Nasivern gave his first assertion of the room, which had nothing to envy from some of the top-most quality hotel rooms in Ternion.

Bastiel wondered just how much money was spent into the Gestalt project so far, from funding Edram Pertz’s battle suits, weapons, and gadgets, to the design of the enclave’s facilities.

He turned off the lights and immediately crashed on the brand-new bed. He took off his shoes and tucked himself in, letting loose a long and loud sigh—his body was finally resting after a long and excruciating day.

It didn't take long for Bastiel to relax. His mind went through the dichotomy of events that he took part during that day: from the Royal Hospital to the office building located at Avenue 45. From cheering innocent lives through laughter and bringing hope to Axel Ingram—to ending the lives of Ashen Reckoning members with blade and gun.

Bastiel turned his body sideways and looked at the room's window, the sunrise was starting. The window's blinds automatically closed once the light of the sun began to shine through it.

The young Nasivern began to drift towards slumber, hoping that he had brought good to the Nation of Vaifen with his actions both at the Royal Hospital and at the office building.

VIII: AND OUR REASON

The grace and radiance of the sun blessed the city of Ternion once again with a magnificent morning. The chirping symphony of a chorus of birds, and the calm sound of the water fountains was all that could be heard in the gardens of the Royal Palace. The sun's warm light passed through the elegant gold and white curtains of King Sulwyn Starsong's bedroom.

Vaifen's regent woke up from his slumber, he opened his eyes, and looked across the empty space on his massive-sized bed. For the past twenty years, King Sulwyn Starsong has woken up every morning hoping to see the love of his life—the late Queen Ellene Valmont just one more time, sleeping next to him, in that now large, cold, and empty bed.

Disappointed, he took a deep breath, and extended his arm across the other side of the bed, wishing that he could caress the Queen's long red hair, wishing that he could feel her breath once more, wishing that he could smell her fragrance, and wishing that he could bear witness to her radiant smile—just one more time.

It had been two whole decades since the rare Gustav-Denton Syndrome that the Queen suffered claimed her life. With each passing day, Sulwyn missed her Queen more and more.

For all the might and power that the King of Vaifen wielded, all that he could do was grasp the cold burgundy and white silken sheets of his bed.

The passage of time had bared a heavy burden upon the aging regent, mornings had become difficult for him, and nights were ever restless. The King felt that the turbulent political climate of Vaifen and the rise of the Ashen Reckoning and the wave of terror that they had unleashed upon the Nation had drained what little vestiges remained of his youth. Sulwyn got off his bed and enveloped his body in an elegant indigo blue silken robe before he entered his lavish bathroom.

King Sulwyn opened the golden faucets of the bathroom's sink to wash his face and brush his teeth. He lifted his gaze and contemplated upon the reflection of his visage on the mirror: new wrinkles around his eyes that he had not noticed before, and a more noticeable prevalence of gray on his blonde hair and beard.

"You're certainly not getting any younger, Sulwyn," he disappointingly said to himself, for not even kings are exempt from the inclement ravages of time.

He left the premises of his massive bedroom and walked all the way to a balcony that had a clear view of the Royal Palace's inner gardens. The King found his daughter, Princess Vesper Starsong, sitting there, wearing a simple rose pink dress. Her face was devoid of makeup and her red hair was soaked wet. Vesper was taking a sip from a white cup of coffee.

The royal daughter gazed upon her father, "Good morning, Father," she greeted him.

"Good morning, Vesper," the King replied as he sat opposite to her on the table, "where is your brother?" he inquired.

"Still sleeping, I suppose," she answered, "you know it's still way too early for him."

King Sulwyn scratched his head, eloquence was one of his most characteristic traits, and yet, his words could not accurately express how much he loved his two children. Although he

had no idea what to do with regards to his firstborn's carefree and spoiled behavior, he wondered if at some point he had done something wrong as a father.

Two palace servants approached the balcony, one of them pushed a tray with several breakfast dishes, which were placed on the table with diligence.

"I know you have a big day ahead, Father, so I asked them to prepare you something nice," Vesper announced to her father with a smile.

"So kind of you, my dear daughter," the King was most appreciative of the gesture. Sulwyn looked at the two staff members, "Thank you, I will head down to the kitchen later today and personally thank the staff."

The staff bowed to the royal family before leaving. Both the King and the Princess began to satisfy their palates and stomachs—especially the King, who had always enjoyed sharing a meal with his sons, an occurrence that had become sparse in recent years.

"Father, I know it might not be the best of time to ask, but I was wondering, when can I return to the residence?" The Princess asked.

During the aftermath of the terrorist attack at Estival Station, the King had ordered his two sons to stay at the palace instead of the nearby Royal Residence that they now solely inhabited, an allegedly temporary security measure that had now overstayed its welcome in the eyes of the Princess.

King Sulwyn swallowed a mouthful of orange juice, "We'll see. Are you and your brother finally going to behave?" he asked his daughter with that strong voice that he was known for.

"You know I can't speak for Seyren, but in my case, you know I don't go around doing anything reckless," the daughter alleged.

The princess's words did not convince her father, who continued to degust his breakfast.

“No deal then. You two will stay here where I can be sure that your brother doesn't spend each night partying around, and you don't go misusing Royal Security on frivolous shopping and wasting the crown's resources on superfluous things,” the King said before he sliced the eggs on his plate and ate a piece.

Vesper tried a different approach, “Father, don't you think we're a little too old to be grounded like that?”

“You two are definitely old enough to be more responsible and to be completely assuming of your role in this world,” Sulwyn said in response to his daughter's question, “hmm, this is perfectly seasoned!” the King exclaimed.

“But my clothes—the good ones—they're back there at the Residence.”

“Then by all means, go and pick them up yourself right now,” the King rebutted. He had more important things to ponder on that morning, his upcoming address to the Senate of Vaifen was far more crucial than her daughter's wardrobe woes.

The Princess poked her breakfast with her fork, thinking, scheming. She knew her father had always been a tough man to convince, but she had expected a better outcome, her breakfast ploy had so far failed.

“What if I make Seyren behave . . . I promise!” she pleaded, reinforcing her words by placing her hands together in a gesture.

King Sulwyn looked at her daughter and chuckled. She reminded him of her mother, after all, she had the same eyes as her. He remembered all the times that he had shared a breakfast with her on that very same table, for him it felt like yesterday, yet two decades have passed since fate took her away from him.

“What’s the matter, you two don’t like living in your old man’s house anymore?” he jested.

“What? No! It’s not that . . . it’s just that . . .there’s too many people around here nowadays, coming and going at every hour and at every moment—it just doesn’t feel like a home, not like it used to be. Everywhere I go here I see strangers, new faces every day, you know what I’m saying?” Despite her ulterior motives, Vesper spoke with honesty, “I just want privacy . . .”

The King took a deep breath and pondered upon her daughter’s words. Indeed, they were living in tumultuous times, Royal Security agents were all over the Palace their guards had been redoubled, between them, the maintenance crew, the Palace’s staff, the Crown’s personnel, and even the occasional members of the media had overcrowded the Palace’s facilities from day to night—not to mention the occasional visit of members of the Senate, envoys from Vaifen’s executive branch, representatives from the Tribunal, and even the Prime Minister of Vaifen himself.

It all left very little space for privacy and murdered the sense of household that the Palace used to have in years past for the Royal Family—despite the fact that there was a clear separation between the living quarters and the rest of the areas of the Palace. King Sulwyn put himself in his daughter’s position, and was now prepared for a different verdict.

“Very well, if you two really want to, you can return to the residence today,” the King conceded her request, “but if you two start misbehaving again I will permanently shut the place down and relocate the staff here,” he warned her.

“Thanks, Father!” The Princess was ecstatic, “I promise I will keep my numbskull brother in check,” she lied, for it was a promise she knew she couldn’t possibly keep, but that was a problem for another time.

“You two have to keep an eye on each other, Vesper,” the King said, “One day—sooner than later, you two will shape the destiny of this Nation and quite possibly, the world itself.”

“I understand,” she nodded.

“Just don’t become a complete stranger, be sure to visit your old man every now and then,” the aging father said with a smile.

Vesper reciprocated her father’s smile, “Of course, after all don’t forget that I carry out some of the Starsong Foundation’s work here.”

The Sovereign and his daughter finished their breakfast. The Princess stood up from her chair, she approached the King and placed her right hand on his left shoulder.

“Show those pompous Senate dorks who’s the boss here,” she leaned towards him and kissed his forehead.

“Thank you, Vesper,” he tapped her hand before she walked away.

The King, now with a full stomach, made a solitary walk back towards his bedroom. He entered his bathroom and took a quick shower. Afterwards, he walked towards his vast closet and grabbed an elegant dark purple trench coat and a set of black suit and pants from his repertoire.

The purple coat—one of his preferred colors, was tailored as a compromise between the modern couture with the regal traditions of the raiments of rulers past, a white shirt underneath the black suit and a dark tie complimented the attire.

King Sulwyn Starsong put on one of his numerous pairs of black shoes before he opened a drawer full of ornaments and jewelry. He knew exactly what golden rings to choose from his collection, his wedding ring was the first and foremost choice. Additionally, he accessorized his trench coat with a pair of golden epaulets.

Just as he was almost done donning his regalia, he heard a knocking sound coming from his bedroom's doors.

"Come on in," the King said.

The Royal Palace's caretaker, Harold Vogel, entered the room, "Good morning, my King," he greeted him with a bow.

"Ah, morning, Harold," the King greeted him back as he put on the epaulet on his right shoulder.

"I'm just here to inform you that General James Exley is on route to the Palace," the caretaker informed the King.

"Excellent, punctual as ever."

King Sulwyn stood in front of a large mirror and gave himself a good look, he turned around and carefully inspected his attire to ensure that everything was impeccable and devoid of wrinkles.

He compared the shape of his current physique with that of decades past, the results of Sulwyn Starsong's quick mental comparison disappointed him. A far cry of the body he sported during the early years of his reign, a reign that began right after the untimely death of his father, King Cadmus Starsong following a tragic accident riddled with very questionable inconsistencies.

“I’m getting old, am I, Harold?” he asked one of the few living beings on the planet that had the rare privilege of bearing the King’s utmost trust.

The Caretaker nodded his head, “We all are my King, we all are . . .” he answered with his hands on his back and his posture ever so straight, “except for our Nasivern friends, that is.”

“Hmmp,” the King gestured.

“You look fine, my King, relax,” the kind caretaker said, “considering your age . . .”

The King chuckled, “Careful now Harold. I’ll take your word for it.”

Now looking the part, King Sulwyn traversed the corridors of the Royal Palace, he was greeted by several members of the palace’s staff along the way, all of them bowed and saluted their Sovereign with respect.

When the King arrived at the doors of his office he was greeted by two guardsmen that stood outside its entrance. The two men dutifully saluted the King before each one of them opened one of the two doors for their regent.

The Royal office, elliptical in shape, was one of the most emblematic rooms of the Royal Palace, second only to the now sparsely used throne room itself. The Royal Office was the place that King Sulwyn spent most of his time and carried out most of his work at, light wood was used for its flooring, an elegant leather couch and a set of matching chairs laid on the lower right section.

A library was embedded on the walls of the lower half of the elliptical room, what it lacked in quantity, when compared to other collections in Vaifen—even when compared against the Royal Library located downstairs, was vastly overcompensated by quality.

The collection of works featured on the room had been carefully handpicked through time from one King to another. Each Starsong regent that preceded Sulwyn had added its own

share and flavor to the royal collection throughout their reign, and King Sulwyn was no exception to the tradition.

Unique pieces of literature, some of which had the privilege of being the only copies in existence, were part of the repertoire of works displayed on those walls, as well as special editions of some of the most famous books in the planet Orbis. Timeless masterpieces lived together in harmony with modern classics.

The collection featured a myriad of genres, from fiction to poetry, from comedy to drama, as well as historical accounts of past events and biographies of emblematic individuals in Orbis' history. All of these books were at the disposal of each regent of the Royal House of Starsong, so that they could learn from the past in order to preserve the present, and shape a righteous future for the Nation of Vaifen and its citizens.

King Sulwyn often pondered what types of works his son, Prince Seyren Starsong, would eventually add to the collection when the time came for him to rule Vaifen. The Royal office also featured unique pieces of art, from paintings that depicted the early days of the city of Ternion, to statues of the knights and heroes of times past, all priceless in value, but ultimately irrelevant for the current Sovereign of Vaifen.

The large desk in the room was carved from a single piece of dark wood, and immaculately preserved through time, it was once used by Sulwyn's father and by his grandfather. The most important royal decrees and edicts in the modern history of the Nation of Vaifen had been inscribed atop that desk.

The area that surrounded the desk featured that which King Sulwyn Starsong cared for the most in that room. Numerous pictures of his son and daughter, as well as his late wife

accompanied the King as he carried out his duties, with the large majority of them resting on a large table behind the desk.

Sulwyn observed each and every one of them as if it was his first time laying eyes upon those photographs before he took a seat upon his grandiose chair. Upon his desk rested the most treasured photograph of his collection, the King grabbed the photograph's frame with his right hand and reflected upon it.

The photograph was of Queen Ellene, sitting on the Palace's gardens, wearing a simple blue dress. She was carrying the then baby Vesper on her arms, wrapped in a little white blanket, Vesper was barely over a year and a half old at the time.

Prince Seyren, the young firstborn, stood at his mother's right, with a large innocent smile, and with his blue eyes facing straight towards the camera. A haircut was long overdue for the young Prince, but back then the infant child had an aversion for barbers, keeping his hair long is something Prince Seyren is very fond of.

At the Queen's left stood the Nasivern Bastiel Ithal. Unlike the photogenic Prince heir, the Nasivern child's gray eyes denoted an underlying sense of sadness and discomfort, as if he felt out of place—perhaps even scared by the camera. That photograph was one of the last pictures ever taken of Queen Ellene, months before the Gustav-Denton Syndrome began to wreak havoc on her health.

The King remembered that moment fondly, for he was the man behind the camera. A reminder of simpler times, when the scars left by the tragic fall of the Nasivern race had barely begun to heal.

If possible, King Sulwyn would give it all just to be able to go back and relive those days in absolute normalcy—to redo things once more as a normal family—without the ever-increasing burden of the Crown on his head.

The relative peace and tranquilly of those years superseded the grim chapters in the history of the Nation that took place beforehand: The long war between the Nation of Vaifen and the Republic of Svarzfal, and the fall of the Nasivern race at the hands of the enigmatic extraterrestrial force known as the Estremoz, a conflict that ended in a pyrrhic Nasivern victory during the Battle of Nineveh, the Nasivern home world’s capital.

With his most treasured photograph firmly grasped by his right hand, the King experienced a cathartic moment—a respite that was abruptly cut short when the doors of his office were opened by the Palace’s spokesperson, Cillian Byrne, a slim and tall young man with a sleek haircut wearing a gray suit.

“Good Morning, my King!” the Spokesman greeted the regent with enthusiasm.

The King snapped back to reality as a result of Spokesman Byrne’s loud salute, “Morning, Cillian,” he greeted him back.

The spokesman carried a tablet device filled to the brim with documents, “Long day ahead, eh?” he jested with a slight chuckle and a smile on his face.

“Indeed,” the King responded as he waved his right hand, “Please, have a seat.”

“Of course, of course.”

Cillian Byrne was the youngest spokesman ever to have served the Crown, a brilliant and diligent man, hardworking, and extremely efficient. He always gave his best on the job, and then some more. Eloquence and charisma were mandatory traits for anyone who aspired to become a

great Royal Spokesman, and Cillian Byrne was a man that possessed an overflowing abundance of both of those traits.

His predisposition to sycophancy however, was perhaps his most glaring flaw, one that would often get in the way. King Sulwyn was aware of it and he tried his best to ignore that which he considered a flaw; the Regent attributed it to Cilian's youth and thus, his lack of that particular type of experience that is only attained with age.

Cilian cleared his throat, "So, I hope you had a good night of sleep, my King," he said.

"You could say so, yes," the King replied, "although I've had better."

The King could not stop noticing that his Spokesman seemed quite anxious and jittery, "Nervous?" he asked him.

"Nah! Well, a little—big day ahead of us!" Cillian answered.

"Relax, Cillian, you'll get used to these situations eventually," said the King.

"Hah! If you say so, my King!" he exclaimed. "Shall we go through today's agenda?"

"Again, Cillian? We went through it last night," a dismayed Sulwyn answered.

"Just doing my job, my King. Now first things first . . ."

The Spokesman went through the King's agenda once more, detailing every meeting, describing every action, and reminding his boss of the allotted time that was to be consumed by them with the utmost of precision.

A brief meeting with the Prime Minister of Vaifen, Andre Callahan, was the first point in the agenda, scheduled right before a presentation at the Senate, where King Sulwyn was to announce a series of security measures and enacts destined to counter the rising threat of the Ashen Reckoning and their leader, the mysterious figure known as Dogma, including the much

anticipated official announcement of the Gestalt Initiative as the spearhead and cornerstone of his plan.

Cillian Byrne's monologue fell on deaf ears, for the King paid no attention to his recital. That was the third time that he had heard the spokesman repeat the same schedule, two too many for his likings, he just agreed and nodded out of mere inertia.

"I know, I know, you said I shouldn't worry, but My King! Would you consider using the speech that I prepared for you?" Cillian asked.

"Oh Cillian, I told you not to worry, I have it all here," the King tapped his forehead.

King Sulwyn had always preferred to use his own words when addressing the Nation. Borrowing another person's utterances, and passing them as his own was something he considered an act of disrespect to his listeners.

"As you wish, my King. You know what's best," Cillian replied. Even though he expected an irrevocably negative answer from his boss, he still had a small glimmer of hope for a change of heart.

The spokesman received a message on his phone, "My King, Director James Exley has just arrived at the Palace," he informed him.

"Excellent, let's get this show on the road then," the King said as he stood from his seat.

Spokesperson Byrne nodded in acknowledgement of the King's words.

King Sulwyn Starsong left his office and walked towards the Palace's lobby, where National Intelligence Director James Exley awaited alongside his small retinue.

"Ah, James! Good morning!" the King greeted his longtime friend.

Director Exley bowed, "King Sulwyn."

Following the events of the previous night, James Exley barely had time for a refreshing shower and for fresh change of clothing. He still hadn't slept since the day before, the Director had remained awake all night after Gestalt's latest mission. King Sulwyn immediately took notice of the exhaustion in Exley's visage.

"Had a long night, eh?" the King commented as he gently tapped Exley's shoulder.

"Indeed," Exley replied. "As the youth say nowadays, I 'partied all night long,'" he said in jest.

"I heard. I got your message—can't wait for you to tell me all about it," King Sulwyn said with a small chuckle, "come, the Senate awaits these two aging fools."

Royal Security agents began to enact their nearly-choreographed protocols, "We're moving. Go! Go! Go!" one of the agents exclaimed.

The King and Director Exley boarded the Royal vehicle—the centerpiece of the caravan, which began its journey southeast towards the Senate of Vaifen. The vehicle that transported King Sulwyn and Director Exley was escorted by a heavily armed squadron of Royal Security agents aboard black vehicles and motorbikes. Cillian Byrne, and the rest of the Crown's delegation, boarded another vehicle.

The long route from the Palace to the Senate had been previously closed to the public in order to facilitate the caravan's movement.

"So, tell me, James, how's the team?" the King asked, eager for the latest first-hand report on Gestalt.

"Excellent, Gestalt's seven have so far performed remarkably," Director Exley answered with pride.

“You’ve assembled a great team, James—Vaifen’s finest,” King Sulwyn complimented his friend.

“Thank you, Sulwyn,” the Director was most grateful, “but it was a mutual effort, it was you who approved of them, especially its latest addition.”

The caravan had just gone through the first left turn of its route towards the Senate.

“Speaking of which, Bastiel—how is he faring in all of this?” the King asked, always concerned about the well-being of his ward and protégé.

“The boy is truly Aeoros’ son. He still has a lot to learn and experience, but with time he will become a remarkable warrior,” the Director gave his honest assessment, “and an invaluable asset to the Crown and to this Nation,” he added.

Vaifen’s sovereign remained silent and simply nodded in response. He remembered the last time he spoke to Aeoros Isthäl—Bastiel’s father, during the battle of Nineveh; when he promised the Indigo Blaze that he was going to take care of the infant Bastiel no matter what.

“I would love to arrange a meeting with the team as soon as possible to express my gratitude to them,” King Sulwyn requested.

“As you wish. They will be most pleased, I’m sure of that,” Director Exley acknowledged the regent’s request.

The caravan continued to traverse the emptied streets of its pre-planned route.

“I read your preliminary report last night, James. Weapons that should’ve been dismantled years ago suddenly being in possession of the Ashen Reckoning is most troubling . . .” The King manifested his concern.

“Indeed, Sulwyn. It is as we suspected, we cannot even trust the military in its entirety.”

“And neither our Government, unfortunately,” the King added, “elements of our own state conspiring and undermining Vaifen deep from within, how did we come to this. . .”

Several internal and external factors were working from the shadows to undermine the peace and stability of one of the last monarchies in the planet, that was a problem King Sulwyn Starsong did not wish for his son and daughter to inherit.

He wanted to put an end to each and every one of them as soon as possible, for the sake of the continuity of the crown that he represented by right of birth.

“My team will get to the bottom of this, my friend,” Exley assured him, “and Gestalt will be ready to act whenever needed.”

“I’m sure you will, James,” the King’s words served as a reminder of the unshakable confidence he had towards the head of Vaifen’s National Intelligence.

The caravan had just completed the first half of its route.

“If I may ask . . . Sulwyn. Has the answer been found?” Director Exley asked, “or rather, has there been any progress since . . . those grave setbacks?”

“No, my friend,” the King answered, “unfortunately, the answer still eludes us, but the search continues, just as before.”

After having gone through the most pressing matters, the conversation slowly pivoted in both theme and tone. It no longer was about work-related issues—but rather consisted of friendly banter and camaraderie between two long friends; the mood had certainly become lighter inside the royal vehicle.

As the royal caravan journeyed through a section of Ternion’s eastern highway, King Sulwyn Starsong looked through the vehicle’s window and gazed upon a group of protestors of a considerable size. The men and women chanted slogans against the Crown and directly against

King Sulwyn himself, the protestors raised banners with numerous messages written on them and waved flags in the process, some of them outright called for the end of the crown, clamoring for a new era for Vaifen—a revolution, even.

Their position and timing had been strategically and meticulously determined with anticipation. Whoever orchestrated the protest very well knew that the spectacle would get the attention of King Sulwyn Starsong.

The protest itself however, was short-lived, as a contingent of Ternion's Police—in what the protesters considered an overstep of their boundaries and a gross misuse of force, swiftly dispersed the protestors.

Nonetheless, their objective was achieved: they carried out their short-lived protest, and King Sulwyn was witness to the entire ordeal—including the way Ternion's police dealt with them. The regent let loose a long and drawn out sigh, the message was sent, and received.

"I'm sure Senator Easton is behind that protest," Director Exley hypothesized.

"This 'New Vaifen Front', it has become quite the nuisance, hasn't it?" the King commented to his friend.

"As much as I hate to admit it, yes." Exley replied, "Easton has managed to acquire quite the numerous following, especially in these past few months."

"Callahan . . ." muttered Sulwyn.

Director Exley fixed his glasses, "He's been quite inert in handling Easton for sure . . ." he gave his honest opinion.

"Have I been so preoccupied with Vaifen's future that I've neglected its present?" The thought ran through the King's mind.

“Were we so distracted that we let this happen, James?” the King gave verbal form to his thoughts. “Have we been so blinded with the Ashen Reckoning, busy with our future and the answer to it, that a buffoon like Easton and his cronies have entranced our people?”

“Truth be told, Sulwyn, the Ashen Reckoning is no mere distraction,” Exley answered, “it’s a priority.”

King Sulwyn pondered in silence for a moment. If only those protestors knew of the trials and tribulations involved with keeping the peace and prosperity of the nation, of all the forces that he’s had the displeasure of contending with in the past. Every action, every step he’s taken, had been done in the name of the Nation of Vaifen and its citizens—in the name of the greater good for all that lived in Vaifen.

“If only they’d understand . . .” King Sulwyn Starsong whispered.

Exley heard the King’s whisper, “We’ll deal with Easton’s antics once we neutralize the Ashen Reckoning,” he responded—to which the King replied with silence.

“He’s always coveted the Prime Minister’s seat, having him there would certainly be a nuisance,” the King commented.

“Certainly so.”

The Senate of Vaifen was now within visible range of both King Sulwyn and James Exley. Yet another architectural jewel of the Nation, the ‘Rising Whirlpool’ as it was nicknamed by the team that designed it in decades past, evoked a calm but potent storm through its circular shape. Concrete wave patterns adorned its exterior walls, the waves rose and pointed at the skies above, defying gravity with elegance and style.

The edifice’s waves spoke a tale of the different points of views, opinions, and ideas of all the Senators, who represented the voice and will of the people that had elected them. All of

the patterns danced together in the center of the roof, converging to form the future of the Nation.

“Here we go,” Director Exley said as the vehicle stopped in front of the Senate’s premises.

King Sulwyn Starsong took a deep breath and remembered a phrase that his offspring and Bastiel Isthall often repeated during their childhood.

“It’s showtime,” he said out loud.

The doors of the vehicle were opened by Royal Security agents as part of their borderline excessive security protocol. The media eagerly waited for the King to get off the vehicle, the photographers and camera crews were most anxious to get a perfect shot of the regent for their respective outlets.

As soon as King Sulwyn stepped off the vehicle and walked towards the doors of the Senate, the media frantically began to photograph and film the King, the event was televised live across the Nation and even beyond its borders.

The King only had to take a few steps before he was ceremonially greeted by the Prime Minister of Vaifen and head of Government, Andre Callahan.

“King Starsong,” the Prime Minister bowed.

“Andre,” the King greeted him with a strong handshake.

The height difference between the two men was most noticeable, with King Sulwyn being the taller of the two. The notes of Vaifen’s National Anthem, played by an orchestra, served as the musical background of the encounter between the Crown and the Senate. The flag of the Nation of Vaifen waved up high, the flag featured two scalene triangles separated by a

white stripe that ran across diagonally, the upper triangle was red, while the bottom one was blue.

Following protocol, Prime Minister Andre Callahan invited King Sulwyn Starsong inside the Senate. As the King walked inside he was greeted by many of Vaifen's most prominent Senators, including the leader of the New Vaifen Front, the controversial Senator Thomas Easton—an up and coming political force that vehemently and openly opposed the Crown and the monarchy it represented. Their encounter was limited to a brief but tense handshake between those two men of radically different ideologies and points of view.

No words were exchanged between Sulwyn Starsong and Thomas Easton, the only thing in common between the King and the Senator was that they both were a handful of years away from officially joining the ranks of Vaifen's elderly.

Following the carefully planned agenda, the King and the Prime Minister held a brief private meeting. After the exchange was over, all of the Senators sat on their respective seats in the building's main hall as they waited for the King.

“Ladies and Gentlemen: His Majesty, Sulwyn Starsong—King of the Nation of Vaifen,” a voice announced the regent's entrance to all those present.

Once again, Vaifen's National Anthem served as the musical background as the King approached the main podium.

Silence descended upon the vast hall as the King, with a straight head and with his ever so strong voice, addressed all five hundred Senators, the Prime Minister's cabinet, the representatives from the Tribunal, the diplomatic corps, and the people of his great Nation. The King had the undivided attention of all those present.

His address was nearly two hours long. King Sulwyn was never short on words during his entire speech—which was blunt and straight to the point from the beginning: Vaifen was under attack, the Ashen Reckoning's terror was but a physical manifestation of the greater threat—a symptom of a major malady that afflicted the Nation, and it was his duty as Regent of Vaifen to quell that threat from its roots and ensure the safety of each and every one of its citizens, no matter the cost.

One of the many announcements made by King Sulwyn involved increased surveillance in key crucial regions, such as the southern region of Jera, something that wasn't well received by some Senators, including those belonging to the New Vaifen Front. Yet, the most significant and controversial of his announcements was the formal reveal of Gestalt and the first official confirmation of its existence.

Senator Easton, upon listening to the King's words regarding the unit, considered Gestalt to be nothing more than the Crown's personal armed thugs, unregulated by the Senate or the Cabinet, unlike Vaifen's Police or Military.

The Senator took great offense when the King confirmed that the unit was already operational—and had been so for quite some time now, having bypassed the mandatory approval of the Senate required for the creation of such an extraordinary task force.

King Sulwyn and Director Exley understood and were very aware of their overstepping of legal boundaries when doing so, but they knew the dangers that the Senate's bureaucracy could've caused to the project, which would've greatly delayed, mutilated, or outright prevented its creation. The hypothesis that elements hidden deep within Vaifen's government apparatus were working to tear the nation from within was another factor Sulwyn and Exley had in mind when creating Gestalt without the consent of the Senate.

Senator Thomas Easton, and his New Vaifen Front colleagues left the premises of the Senate as a silent form of protest towards the King's words and actions.

After the King finished his speech, he left the Senate and returned to the Royal Palace, the media could not stop talking about his address. Experts gave his opinion on the matter, some were favorable, and others weren't. Heated arguments were made from all sides throughout the entire morning.

Easton, in his capacity as leader of the New Vaifen Front, addressed the media right after the speech was over, making it clear that he, and his political party, vehemently and unquestionably opposed the King's address, denouncing the creation of Gestalt as nothing more than an authoritarian move—a charade to tighten its grip on the Nation against the winds of change that his party's movement sailed towards. The Senator also announced that he was going to bring the matter to the Tribunal, in the hopes that the Judges would step in and keep the Gestalt unit in check.

The hours passed and the morning was all but spent, the political diatribe following the King's address at the Senate still raged on throughout Vaifen's media. The sun was at its highest point when Bastiel Isthel finally began to wake up from his slumber in the Gestalt Enclave. His mind desired to wake up and face the day—or what was left of it, but his body refused his commands—still overly exhausted after such a long night, his body clamored for more hours of rest.

Walking between the threshold of dormancy and wakefulness, Bastiel's mind began to go through the events that had taken place in the previous night, and the lives he ended in the name of the Nation's peace. After nearly thirty minutes had passed he had finally mustered enough willpower to get off the bed, he walked towards the bathroom, and freshened his face.

Now with his limbs stretched, still heavy-eyed, and with his hair slightly tousled, Bastiel made his way to the enclave's lounge room, and found all of his teammates present. A music playlist, meticulously curated by Cameron Bennett, and tailored specifically to her audible tastes, played through the room's sound system.

"Geez!" Cameron loudly exclaimed to a dismayed and stunned Bastiel, "you finally woke up! Late again, boy!"

"Good . . . morning, Cammy." he replied as he scratched his forehead and came back to his senses.

"More like 'Good Afternoon' you mean," she corrected him. "It's past noon, you know, tsk, tsk," she tapped her left wrist with her right index finger, her pair of eyes were deeply fixated upon his.

Bastiel frowned and sighed, "I see that now."

Now aware of the time of the day and with his eyes fully opened, Bastiel only had but a few seconds to enjoy the song that was being played before he was approached by Commander Erron Leitner. The tall man wore a white cooking apron on top of his black and blue attire.

"Oi, Bastiel!" Erron greeted him, standing between him and Cameron, "good afternoon! Everything good?" The good mood that Erron sported that afternoon was highly contagious.

Bastiel nodded affirmatively before Cameron placed herself in between the two men, facing Bastiel eye to eye.

"Now, since you're such a sleepyhead, you have to go sit with the rest of the victims—I mean, with the grounded!" she commanded the white haired Nasivern.

"Wait, what?" a confused Bastiel asked for clarification.

Erron laughed, “What she means is that Gale—and yours truly—are your very own chefs this afternoon,” he informed his friend with pride. “we gotta celebrate our victories, you know.”

“That’s right!” Cameron interjected, “and you should be pleased to know that I’m the designated supreme overseer of entertainment today,” She added.

“Self-appointed that is,” Erron clarified as he rolled his eyes.

Bastiel was completely and utterly confused by Cameron’s words, “The—what now?”

Cameron cleared her throat, “It means that it is my job and my duty to make sure that we all have fun and enjoy our day off!”

“Uh, alright...” Bastiel responded.

Erron laughed, “Anyways, Bastiel, why don’t you sit with Eddie and Leah over there while you wait? We’re almost done,” he suggested.

Cameron continued her exposition, “What I’m trying to say here is that this afternoon is all about fun and no—” she stopped mid-sentence after she saw Edram Pertz tinkering with a tablet device. Disappointed at the quartermaster, she took a deep breath.

“Eddie!” she yelled at the quartermaster as she rushed towards him whilst dragging Bastiel by the hand. “Give me that!” she yanked the device from Edram’s hands and placed it away from the Quartermaster’s reach, “I told you, it’s break time! No work allowed!” she reprimanded the overweight quartermaster.

“But I was just checking on the decryption’s prog—” a scolded Edram wasn’t able to finish his sentence before Cameron berated him again.

She raised her right index finger and pointed at him in a most menacing manner, “I told you already! It’ll work! Just let it run its course, our work is done, geez, you fatty of little faith . .

.” Cameron continued to reprimand the quartermaster like a mother would do to a mischievous child.

Bastiel chuckled after being witness to the whole ordeal yet oblivious to what was going on between those two. “Eddie, Leah,” he greeted his fellow Nasivern and the team’s operator.

The Nasivern Quartermaster was visibly sleep deprived, while the Operator looked refreshed and rested, yet as shy as usual.

Cade Saunders, the team’s green member, sat on a couch alone, away from everyone else. His attention was placed on a television channel that reported on the King’s address that had taken place mere hours ago, listening to news and staying informed was perhaps his definition of fun and relaxation.

Erron had also witnessed the exchange, he laughed all the way as he approached the quartet to explain things to the bewildered white haired man, “These two, along with Cammy, have been working hard all morning trying to repair and squeeze something outta that damaged drive we bought with us,” he explained to Bastiel.

“I know when to take a break from decrypting and deciphering highly encrypted data out of a blown-up drive—but these two? Geez, all work and no fun,” Cameron expressed with her usual eloquence.

“It was a lot of work!” Edram replied, “the drive was so damaged that I had to jury-rig an entirely new input panel so that we could access it—not to mention that I had to repair and solder most of the PCB.”

“Yeah, yeah, good stuff,” Cameron replied, “and I provided my beautiful script that as we speak, is brute forcing the encryption, generating the decrypt keys, and restoring whatever files

can we dump out of the banged up bugger—all in a nice and orderly fashion for Leah here to analyze. Damn I'm good," she gloated of her technical prowess.

"I still have no idea what any of you just said, but good job one again!" Erron, his words were accompanied by a laugh and a raised-up thumb. The blue team leader was utterly unashamed of his limited knowledge in the field of technology, "Well, I'll be right back, I know you're all hungry—hang in there, food is almost done!" The Commander left the quartet to attend his self-assigned culinary duties.

Bastiel was about to take a seat on the table next to Edram and Leah when Cameron grabbed his right arm and vigorously dragged the incautious white-haired man once again. This time, she directed him towards a large screen that was not too far from the table.

"So, I, in my capacity as supreme overseer of entertainment, and because my Neon Glow plans were ruined last night, have decided that your punishment for sleeping all morning like a baby—you know while we were all working hard and all—is that you shall entertain us, or rather, entertain me!" Cameron said to Bastiel.

"Uh, what?" Bastiel felt utterly clueless once more.

Cameron grabbed a wireless microphone, "Here, sing for us!" she passed down the instrument of her sentence, "I installed a karaoke software on this thing for a reason—now pick a song and sing for us!" She waddled all of her ten fingers.

Bastiel chuckled, "I'm not really a great singer, Cammy," he said to the eager woman.

"So? Who cares, don't make me pick the song for you!" she threatened him.

Edram and Leah had approached them, both of them sat on a nearby couch to have a first-row seat of the spectacle that was about to unfold.

“Alright, fine,” Bastiel complied with Cameron’s verdict. He approached the screen and browsed through the catalog of available tracks until he found one that he was familiar with.

Cameron spoke to Bastiel as he selected the song, “Oh, why not make this more interesting . . . let’s have you dance too! Just follow the on-screen moves. Fail those or the lyrics and you’ll have to start all over!” she explained.

“Hold on, what—” Bastiel ran out of time, the song had already begun to play. He desperately tried to catch up with the tempo of the song, the screen displayed the lyrics that he had to sing as well as a series of dance moves that he had to replicate. A ‘groove’ bar, located at the top of the screen, measured his overall performance.

Bastiel had missed the first dance steps completely, and was out of sync with the song’s lyrics. Every time he made a mistake the bar lost sizable chunks and its hue turned from a bright green to an equally bright red, a signal of his performance’s impending failure.

“Hah! Amateur,” Cameron taunted her struggling friend.

As he was about to fail, Bastiel started to get the gist of it, and began to nail down the movements that the screen ordered him to perform, which were picked by a motion-sensing camera latched on top of the display. His singing progressively became more in tune with the song, despite the fact that his intonation left much to be desired.

“Oh, not going down without a fight, eh?” Cameron taunted Bastiel again, “shake that booty! C’mon!” she exclaimed as she clapped to the rhythm of the song.

Leah joined her friend in the clapping shortly afterwards, she found the whole picture rather amusing and entertaining.

It didn’t take long for Bastiel to figure out that the dance moves followed a simple, repeating pattern. With that in mind, he memorized the simple set of moves and rapidly got the

hang of it, rapidly moving his score further from red to green. Even though he wasn't aware of it at first, he was having a blast, and let himself get immersed in the singing of the lyrics. His audience: Cameron, Leah, and Edram, were all enjoying the moment.

The trio of spectators had a few laughs at Bastiel's expense during the near four minutes that the song lasted. Bastiel got a little too creative in the end, and ended the song with a spin that was followed by an overly exaggerated pose, raising his arms and spreading them in opposite directions.

"Yeah!" Bastiel exclaimed.

The Nasivern's performance, while far from perfect, had a relatively high score at the end, his rocky start was a stark contrast to his stellar third act.

"Thank you very much!" Bastiel bowed to his small audience, receiving the applause of all three of them.

"Huh, that was newbie luck!" Cameron rebutted after she saw his final score. "Close, but not enough to beat me."

Bastiel noticed that there were three more microphone sets beneath the screen. With a large sneer on his face, and a plan concocted by his mind, he grabbed one and gave it to Cameron.

"Huh?" Cameron gestured.

"Revenge time." he winked at her.

"Oh! You're challenging me? For real?" Cameron let loose a forced and sardonic laugh and instantly adopted a most serious and menacing visage, "you're no match for me," she was more than ready and willing to accept the challenge.

Both of them stared at each other with a sharp gaze. Unbeknownst to them, Leah had something better in mind; she set up a song for them to sing as a duet, much to their surprise.

“Now you too have to work and sing together,” Leah spoke.

“Wait, hold on that’s not—” Cameron tried to contest to no avail.

“Here we go!” Bastiel exclaimed.

The duo began to sing and dance for the enjoyment of Leah and Edram. Both Cameron and Basitel had their fair share of mistakes when it came to dancing, but they were both giving it their best possible performance amidst one of the hardest difficulty tracks on the system’s repertoire, as neither of the performers didn’t wanted to be outshined by the other.

Their elevated voice tone, coupled with the music, was too loud for Cade Saunders’ likings, the cacophony disrupted his peaceful viewing of the news.

“Such immaturity,” he muttered to himself. The dismayed and grumpy man relocated himself to a further corner of the lounge in search for better peace and serenity, but he was unsuccessful in doing so.

The song, which lasted well over five minutes, left both Bastiel and Cameron breathless.

“So, who won?” Cameron asked her audience and panel of judges.

It was a difficult choice For Edram and Leah. For them it wasn’t a matter of who was the best singer, but rather, they had a hard time choosing which one was the least worst.

“Let’s—let’s just call it a tie, ok?” Leah gave a conciliatory answer, “you two make a great team.”

“Well, you heard Leah, we make a good team,” Bastiel said to Cameron.

“I guess I have no choice but to agree with my girl here,” Cameron conceded, “maybe next time we can challenge the rest of the team.”

Both Bastiel and Cameron laughed, and shared a high five.

Erron Leitner yelled from across the room, “Everyone! Gather up! Its time!” he announced to everyone out loud.

“Oh! Lunch time!” Cameron exclaimed.

“Finally,” Edram commented.

Cade, Leah, Edram, Cameron, and Bastiel converged around the room’s largest table, where Erron and Gale had served seven dishes, one for each.

“Welcome to Restaurant Lacroix-Leitner,” Erron said in jest.

Gale rolled her eyes in embarrassment at Erron’s joke, “I hope you enjoy it,” she said.

“Yes, knock yourselves out!” Erron added.

The team began to devour the lunch that the two oldest members of Gestalt had cooked as a gesture of goodwill, a team-bonding activity decided by Erron himself.

Both Erron Leitner and Gale Lacroix possessed remarkable combat prowess; collectively, they had a mastery of over a dozen weapon types, as well as a fair share of expertise in martial arts and very well versed in the arts of killing, one was a seasoned soldier, and the other a former spy with a terrific career. Their culinary prowess however, was mediocre at best, had they chosen a career path in the field of culinary arts, neither of them wouldn’t have made it far.

The taste of the food they had worked so hard to prepare left much to be desired. The ingredients were not to blame, as everything Erron and Gale used was fresh and new. The steaks were over seasoned, the mashed potatoes lacked consistency and were too salty, and the rice tasted plain and lacked flavor. On the other hand, Gale’s carrot salad was without flaw, it was the only dish that didn’t have anything to be criticized for.

“So, how is it?” Erron asked for the team’s judgment.

No one dared to take the initiative and be the first to answer, even the spontaneous and eloquent Cameron Bennett needed to take a deep breath in order to arm herself with the courage needed to answer, “Well, how do I put it . . . it’s the thought that matters?” Cameron’s response, as blunt as it was, was filled with honesty and riddled with good intentions.

“Cameron!” Gale exclaimed with a raised eyebrow.

“Hey now!” Erron also responded.

Cameron tried to remedy the situation, “Chill! In your defense, I’ve had worse!”

“My steak isn’t even well-done,” Cade commented, “but it’s not a big deal.”

Bastiel responded with modesty, “It’s not so bad, honestly,” he said, even though he knew deep down that his steak was barely edible with all those extreme layers of seasoning.

“Yeah, it’s alright,” Leah lied. She was trying her best to stomach her overcooked steak.

“For real, this is good!” Edram spoke with a mouthful. He was the only one in the fold that didn’t seem to have any negative opinions towards the quality of his meal.

Despite the taste of the food being less than stellar, the team experienced an amiable moment, full of laughter and enjoyment, which was Erron Leitner’s ultimate goal: To get the team closer.

It was part of his beliefs that the team should bond more through interactions that are often taken for granted, such as a simple lunch gathering, moments that he found important, more than training sessions or in the field of battle—where life is often on the line.

After lunch was over, the Gestalt team proceeded to relax and wind down for a much-needed respite. With Cameron’s musical selection now on hold, there was a peaceful ambience in the enclave’s lounge room.

Cameron and Leah conversed with one another, Cade left the premises of the lounge and settled for the solitude of the enclave's sparring areas.

The Nasivern Quartermaster, Edram Pertz, had succumbed to his sleep deprivation; he fell asleep on one of the lounge's couches. Erron received a phone call on his personal device, he stepped away from the group in order to answer it in private.

Cameron kept poking Leah's right shoulder, "C'mon, admit it! Admit it! Admit it! Admit it!" She kept repeating to the besieged woman.

Bastiel Isthali was considering taking a page from the Quartermaster's book and getting himself a nap, he still felt like he owed his body at least a handful more hours of sleep.

"Hey, Bastiel!" Erron beckoned the white haired Nasivern from afar, unwillingly snapping the white-haired Nasivern from his predicament.

"Yes, Erron?" he replied.

Erron beckoned Bastiel with a gesture of his left hand. Bastiel nodded and approached the Commander.

"What's up?" Bastiel asked.

"Could I ask a favor from you?" the Commander asked.

"Of course, anything."

"I need to pick up some stuff and take them somewhere, would you mind giving me a ride?" Erron requested, "I don't feel like driving, ya know."

"Sure thing." Bastiel agreed to help his friend without hesitation.

"Thanks!" said the Commander. Erron approached Gale, who had just finished conversing on the phone with her daughter, "Gale, listen—we'll be back in a few, hold the fort, will ya?"

“Uh huh,” Gale muttered.

“Make sure Cammy doesn’t break anything,” Erron jested.

Gale let loose a loud, sardonic laugh, “Easier said than done,” she looked towards Cameron.

“Alright, see ya’ll in a few!” Erron bid his farewell with. The man seemed to be in a hurry.

Erron Leitner and Bastiel Isthel left the lounge and approached their respective lockers, changing back to their regular clothing. A photograph inside Erron’s locker that Bastiel hadn’t seen before caught the white haired man’s attention.

The photo depicted a younger Erron along with a group of men and women, all dressed in military uniforms. The uniforms and surrounding vehicles would suggest that the photograph was taken inside a Vaifen military base.

“Who are those?” A curious Bastiel asked.

“Oh, they were my old unit, the Silent Echo,” Erron answered with nostalgia and pride.

Erron pointed at the man in the middle of the group, who was the eldest among them, “And this was our leader . . . General Michael Traxler,” the commander explained, “I’m the soldier—no, the warrior that I am, thanks to that man,” he added with a smile.

“Sounds like he is a great leader,” Bastiel commented.

“Was, rather,” The prideful voice of Erron was then stained with sadness and regret, “he sacrificed himself to save me that night.”

“What happened?” Bastiel wanted to know the story behind those words.

“A long story, perhaps another time,” said Erron. He clapped his hands, “let’s go, I can’t be late for this.”

Bastiel nodded in response, he and Erron left the premises of the Gestalt Enclave and walked towards Bastiel's red vehicle and boarded it.

“So, where are we going?” Bastiel asked.

“I need to go to three places actually,” Erron answered. “Our first stop is right in the corner between the sixty-seventh and Feldspar. Do you know where that is?”

“I believe so, yeah,” Bastiel began to drive towards their first destination.

Traffic was light that afternoon. The skies were clear, and a gentle breeze caressed the city of Ternion.

A varied assortment of jazz and piano tunes served as the musical company during their journey, the tunes were a stark contrast to the more livid songs that Cameron had played back at the Gestalt Enclave.

Bastiel and Erron arrived at their first destination without much delay. Bastiel immediately noticed that the address Erron gave him belonged to a store that specializes in chocolate products.

“A chocolate shop? Is this the place?” Bastiel asked Erron after he parked right outside the store.

“Yup! This won't take long—five minutes top,” Erron exclaimed, “be right back!” he left the vehicle and walked inside the chocolate store.

Bastiel, in a state of bewilderment, shrugged and remained inside his vehicle.

Erron Leitner returned with a box of chocolates in his hand after ten minutes had elapsed. Bastiel opened the door for Erron, sat and fastened his seatbelt again, placing the package on the vehicle's rear seat.

“Alright, our next stop is in Hallie Street,” Erron said.

“Geez, that’s across the City.” Bastiel thought to himself. “Alright,” he replied to Erron.

After a lengthy drive, they had arrived at their second destination, which happened to be a small flower shop. Bastiel had to park a few yards away from it.

“I’ll be right back,” Erron left the vehicle.

“First chocolate, now flowers . . . hold on, is he?” Bastiel spoke to himself.

After four minutes had elapsed, Erron returned to the vehicle with a large flower bouquet in his hands. “Alright, we’re ready! Our final stop is at the thirty fifth street,” he said after boarding the vehicle.

“Is he going on a date or something?” the driver thought to himself, wondering the nature of Erron’s errands.

Bastiel drove towards their third and final destination. He could not bear being out of the blue anymore and desired answers from his Commander.

“Erron, are you going on a date?” he asked Erron as they were just a right turn away from their destination.

“Why yes of course, isn’t it obvious?” He replied with a chuckle. “I have an appointment with a very special lady—and here we are,” Erron pointed at the medical facility in front of him.

“This is a hospital,” Bastiel stated the obvious.

“Correct. It’s the Dawson Medical Center for the elderly,” Erron explained.

Now with more questions than before, Bastiel parked his vehicle and accompanied Erron inside the building. The Commander knew the layout of the center like the palm of his hand; he navigated through its corridors with Bastiel following him until they both arrived at a room on the building’s third floor.

Erron knocked the door three times before he pressed a button that made the sliding door open. He entered the room holding the flowers with his right hand, and the box of chocolates with his left hand. There was only one person inside the room, a single elderly woman that comfortably sat on a bed, her skin had the same olive tone as Erron, and her once dark brown hair was now as white as snow.

“Good afternoon, momma!” Erron greeted her with much enthusiasm.

“Erron John!” The woman replied. Seeing her son made her eyes glow with motherly joy.

“How have you been, momma?” Erron asked her.

“Great, great, and you, Erron John? Staying out of trouble?” the mother inquired her son over his well-being.

“Always, momma, you know that,” Erron’s response was accompanied by a chuckle, “I’ve bought you some special gifts!”

“Oh! You shouldn’t have bothered,” she responded with a smile on her face.

Erron presented the flowers closer to her face, and his mother smelled the fresh bouquet. Bastiel let loose a faint smile when he noticed how happy the elderly woman was, she adored the fragrance of those flowers, that much was evident.

Erron then presented the small box of chocolates to her, “And I also got you this!”

“Oh my—I love these so much!” the mother said to his son right before Erron kissed her forehead. She tried one of the rounded-shaped chocolates from the box, its center was filled with a cherry caramel, much to her delight.

Erron’s mother noticed the presence of Bastiel in the room, “And who is that man over there?” she pointed at him.

“Oh dear, where are my manners . . . Bastiel Isthel, meet Sarah Matthews, my mother,”

Erron introduced them both, “Bastiel is a friend from work,” he explained to her.

Bastiel approached Sarah, he gracefully bowed at her and kissed her right hand—a gesture he learned from the Royal Caretaker himself, “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Matthews.”

“How chivalrous!” Sarah exclaimed. She was enthralled by Bastiel’s uncommon white hair, “Oh, I like your hair!” she tousled his hair to make sure that it was real.

“Thanks,” Bastiel chuckled, “although mine is not as beautiful as yours.”

“How modest of you,” Sarah said with a smile. She turned her attention back to her son, “But Erron John . . . I thought you were going to come with your girlfriend . . . you know, the tall, blonde one—she’s so lovely,” she inquired of her son.

“Momma, I’ve told you, she’s not my—” Erron was interrupted by his mother before he could finish his words.

“Oh, what was her name? Jill? Jane? Jale?” Sarah tried her best to remember the name of the blonde woman in her thoughts.

Bastiel’s mind began to put two and two together, “Wait a sec, could she be referring to—”

Sarah snapped her fingers, “Gale! That was her name!”

Bastiel couldn’t contain himself, “Wait, what?” he said out loud.

Erron blushed, “Momma, please, stop embarrassing me in front of Bastiel. I’ve told you already, Gale is just a friend from work, we’re just co-workers, that’s all it is,” he reiterated to his over-imaginative mother.

Sarah laughed with intensity, “I’m just saying though,” she spoke.

Bastiel inferred that Erron had inherited his characteristic laugh from his mother.

“I have to—I have to go check something, I will be right back in a bit,” said a still embarrassed Erron. “Keep an eye on my momma, will ya?” he requested of Bastiel.

Bastiel nodded, “Of course, with pleasure.”

“You better don’t tell this guy any embarrassing childhood stories, Momma!” Erron knew his mother too well.

“Erron John, I would never!” the mother replied to her son.

The Gestalt blue leader left the room to inquire nurses and doctors about his mother’s health.

Sarah Matthews remained silent, she took a remote control from her lap and turned on the room’s television. She zapped through the channels until she landed on a soap opera; Sarah gave her full and undivided attention to a heated discussion between a man and a woman regarding matters pertaining their forbidden love.

Bastiel sat on a chair next to her bed and accompanied her in silence. Sarah ate a few more chocolates from the box without staring away from the intense drama that was unfolding on the television. The sweet taste of the cherry-filled chocolate delights made her throat beg for water, but she was not going to miss a single second of her favorite soap opera.

A commercial break interrupted the drama on a revealing cliffhanger spoken by the show’s lead actress, it was only then when Sarah broke the ice and requested Bastiel to give her a glass of water to satiate her thirst. Bastiel filled a nearby plastic cup with water from a jar that was kept cold inside a small fridge.

Sarah drank the cold water from the plastic cup, “Thank you, sweetie,” her worlds of gratitude were most sincere, “so, you work with Erron John, right?” she asked Bastiel.

“Yes,” Bastiel nodded, “he’s my immediate boss, so to speak.”

“Nice, nice,” Sarah smiled, “my Erron is a good boy—but that man he works with, the General . . .”

“Exley?”

“The General,” Sarah made a short pause, “Traxler . . . he’s a bad influence. He’s not a good man, not a good man at all,” she muttered with a stern face.

Bastiel noticed the palpable concern that seeped out of Sarah’s eyes as she stared at an empty wall, he was confused by the meaning of her words.

“But he’s dead . . .” he thought, “Erron just said so earlier.”

Sarah fiercely grasped Bastiel’s right wrist before his mind could further hypothesize. He was caught completely off-guard by her action. She looked straight into his gray eyes and he reciprocated the gesture.

“Promise me, promise me you will keep my son out of trouble—away from that bad man,” the mother pleaded to the bewildered white haired Nasivern as she tightened the grip on his wrist, “promise me!” She insisted.

Bastiel remained in silence for a few seconds as a commercial advertisement for a well-known fast food restaurant chain aired on the television, interrupting the tense mood with an inopportune jingle. He tried to make sense of what had just transpired. Even though he had more questions than answers, deep down Bastiel felt compelled—or rather—obliged, to grant the mother her clamorous request.

He placed his left hand on top of Sarah’s hand, “I will—I will, I promise you,” Bastiel promised her before he cleared his throat, “you have nothing to worry about, Mrs. Matthews,” he assured her.

“Thank you,” the mother felt most relieved after Bastiel agreed. Sarah Matthews had just met this strange white-haired man mere minutes ago, but somehow, she felt that she could trust him with the safety of her beloved son.

The commercial break on the television channel ended and the soap opera resumed. Sarah let go of Bastiel’s wrist and once again, gave her full attention to the television screen. Bastiel walked a few steps and took a seat to ponder. Erron opened the door seconds later.

“Alright, I’m back!” Erron said to both his mother and to Bastiel, “having fun?” he asked.

“We’re watching a soap opera,” Bastiel answered, still trying to process Sarah’s behavior and the sudden nature of her strange request.

“Oh yes—that one,” Erron was quite familiarized with that particular soap opera, “that’s Momma’s favorite.”

“Shh!” Sarah hushed his son. Erron’s voice was making it difficult for her to listen to the television screen, a character was in the process of confessing a terrible crime.

“Oh sorry, my bad,” Erron muttered, “yeah, let’s go outside for a moment, Bastiel.”

Bastiel nodded. He got off his seat and accompanied Erron outside the room.

“She’s great, isn’t she?” Erron asked Bastiel.

“She’s a heart,” Bastiel answered, “you have a great mother.”

“I wish I had known mine,” Bastiel thought to himself. His mother, Anya Nystrom, died during the battle of Nineveh, and Queen Ellene Valmont, who cared for him and treated him like a son, died when he was only seven years old.

“Aye, she is a great woman . . .” Erron said with pride.

“I don’t wanna be rude or anything, but if I may ask—what’s wrong with her?” Bastiel asked his Commander.

“It’s her mind, Bastiel,” Erron answered, “she has a hard time remembering things—her memory doesn’t work that good anymore.”

“I see, I’m sorry Erron,” Bastiel said to him. Now he understood why Sarah Matthews thought that General Michael Traxler was still alive.

“I spoke to her doctor just now—her condition is slowly worsening,” Erron explained, “there’s no cure for it, and the treatments that slow the deterioration only work up to a certain point. . .”

“I—that’s rough,” Bastiel had a hard time finding the appropriate words to say, “I’m so sorry, man.”

“Those flowers and chocolates I bought her—my dad used to buy the very same ones for her, way before I was born,” Erron explained the significance of the presents he bought to his mother.

“I see . . .”

Erron, the always stoic and joyful soldier, continued to confide the contents of his burdened mind to Bastiel, “They were never rich, you know. My father was but a simple farmer, and she was a housewife, but what they had together was pure and genuine. Now, she doesn’t remember my dad anymore—all that love they shared, the memories of those decades of marriage, it’s all gone from her head, like it never happened . . . like my dad never existed for her . . .”

Bastiel remained silent, unsure if he should say anything, and if he should say something, he did not know what words to use. He continued to listen to his Commander with the utmost of attention as he continued to share that which greatly troubled him. Perhaps Erron had brought

him there with him because he needed someone to listen to him at that moment—perhaps he needed a friend to be there with him.

“It’s foolish of me, but I always bring her the same flowers and chocolates my dad used to buy for her, who knows? Maybe one day it’ll spark what’s left of dad inside her mind . . .”

Error, who was always seen as a cheerful man among Gestalt, was overflowing with sadness.

“It’s not foolish of you, man, it’s a noble thing to do,” Bastiel’s mind was finally able to form a coherent sentence. He now understood Sarah’s request, he was now aware that her plea came not from her ailed mind, but rather, from her heart—her soul.

“Sometimes she seems to forget about my sister—she didn’t ask me about Joanna today, that was the first thing she used to do,” Error continued to vent his sadness.

The heartfelt moment was cut short by Error’s telephone. He casted away his sadness and immediately answered the call, as was expected of a Commander.

“Where the hell are you two?!”

Bastiel recognized the loud voice coming from Error’s phone, it was Cameron’s. Error was dismayed by her elevated voice tone.

“Slow down, Cammy, what?” Error had a hard time understanding Cameron’s fast words, “really? Shit—we’re on our way, hold on!”

“Something’s wrong?” a concerned Bastiel asked.

“They cracked the drive—seems like they got a lead out of it, we need to go, now.”

“Right,” Bastiel nodded.

The two men entered Sarah’s room once again to say their farewells.

Error approached her mother, “Momma, we have to go back to our work,” he explained to her. As much as he wanted to stay with his mother, he had a duty to fulfil.

“Aw, leaving so soon?” a disappointed Sarah replied to her son.

“I’m sorry, Momma, you know how it is—I’ll come back tomorrow, ok?” he promised his mother, “I love you.”

“I love you too, Erron John,” Sarah smiled at Erron, “bless you both.”

Erron hugged his mother, he did not want to let go of her. He was always afraid that the next time he visited her she wouldn’t be able to recognize him—her oldest son. Every time he said his farewells to her he was afraid that it would be his last.

“I’ll see you later, Mrs. Matthews,” Bastiel bid his farewell, “it was a pleasure meeting you.”

Sarah looked at Bastiel with a sharp gaze as her son kept hugging her, it was as if she used her eyes to remind him of the promise he made to her minutes ago. Bastiel understood what she was trying to communicate and replied with a nod and a smile of his own.

Without wasting a further second, the two men left the Dawson Medical Center for the Elderly. Bastiel began to drive back to the Gestalt enclave.

The journey back to the enclave was silent at first, Erron Leitner was immersed in his thoughts while Bastiel Isthaf focused on driving fast but safely. Bastiel wondered if urgent drives towards the Gestalt enclave would become the norm, as it has been twice in a row so far. He availed himself of a red stop light to initiate a conversation.

“Erron, what your mother said about you and Gale—” Bastiel tried to break the ice.

“Not a word to anyone,” Erron was quick to interrupt him, “especially Cameron. Besides, there’s nothing between us! That’s just my mom and her imagination.”

“Right,” Bastiel wasn’t too convinced by his answer, but there were bigger fish to fry, “I got you, can’t give Cammy that free ammunition, can you imagine her banter?”

Erron chuckled, “It’d be like giving her a rocket launcher with unlimited ammo,” he jested.

Both of the men laughed at the expense of Cameron’s personality.

“Thank you, Bastiel,” Erron set aside all joy and thanked his driver with sincerity.

“For what?” Bastiel asked.

“For your time this afternoon.”

“Don’t mention it, man, anytime, it was my pleasure meeting your mother,” the white haired Nasivern spoke without laying his eyes off the road.

“I love my mother, but sometimes I’m afraid to visit her alone, more often that I can admit. What if she forgets me? I mean, she often forgets about Joanna, like she did it today,” Erron confessed to Bastiel one of his greatest fears.

“She’ll never forget you, Erron,” Bastiel assured him, “you’ll always be in her heart.”

Erron felt relieved by his friend’s assurances, “You’re right.”

“I never deserved such a good mother,” the Commander thought to himself.

Bastiel sympathized with his commander, he now knew that Erron had something dear worth protecting, a feeling he deeply resonated with. The National Intelligence Center was now within visible range.

“Anyways,” Erron said as he clapped. The sound of his palms clashing buried his sorrows away, his mind was now focused on his duty to the Nation of Vaifen, “we might have work to do soon.”

Bastiel parked his vehicle, the two men walked straight towards the enclave’s briefing room and joined the rest of their teammates.

General James Exley was also present in the room as well, visibly exhausted after two consecutive long days. His duties had denied him of proper respite, he had only managed to close his eyes for a few minutes after he returned to his office following the Senate hearing that had taken place in the morning.

“Boss,” Erron saluted the General as he and Bastiel sat around the table.

“Everything good?” Exley asked Erron, he was aware of his mother’s delicate medical condition and knew that he was going to visit her that afternoon.

“Yes, sir,” Erron answered with a nod.

“Great,” Exley said. “Gentlemen, now that all of Gestalt’s pieces are present let us begin—Agent Bennet, Agent Sutherland, please explain your findings to your teammates.”

“Yes!” Cameron exclaimed. She stood up from her seat, “Alright! So, as expected, my infallible and one of a kind decryption algorithm worked flawlessly, it cracked what others—namely, losers and amateurs—might consider an impenetrable encryption,” she availed herself of the moment to gloat about things that many of those present in the room were clueless about. “But there was a problem, the drive was too damaged by that blast, so all the extracted data turned out to be a complete garbled mess.”

“For the most part—yeah,” Leah Sutherland added. She seemed even more enthusiast than Cameron, her face radiated excitement. The otherwise shy and introverted woman was out of her shell at that moment, “I started to go through most of the retrieved files’ strings and found a series of repeating names and initials across the contents.”

Leah displayed her findings through the room’s screens, she now had the attention of the seven other people in the room.

“It didn’t take much work to figure out that many of the files in the drive were shipping manifests, to different routes, from different destinations—but all of them belonging to one single company: Noveaux Tech,” Leah finished her explanation.

“Interesting,” Erron commented, “so that could imply that the Ashen Reckoning is moving stuff—like those weapons perhaps—using Noveaux’s cargo ships?”

“Wait, hold on,” Cade Saunders joined the discussion, “are you suggesting that Noveaux Tech, perhaps the world’s largest tech conglomerate, is aiding the Ashen Reckoning? This is troubling,” he gave his opinion.

“Precisely,” Leah answered both men’s questions with a single word, “or at least people inside their shipping department,” she further elaborated her answer.

“And you’re basing this accusation on fragments of files and strings, nothing concrete, just circumstantial scrambled data?” Cade felt that the claims were somewhat outlandish.

Cameron stepped in to defend Leah’s position, “Do you really think they’re going to write ‘guns and explosives for terrorist activities’ on their shipping manifestos? C’mon Cade, I know you’re a stuck up, but geez . . .”

“She has a point, Saunders.” Gale Lacroix commented.

“Then we need to take this through the proper channels then, have the corresponding authorities audit their ships and whatnot,” Cade suggested.

“Oh yeah, and warn them off?” Quartermaster Edram interjected, “that would burn up this lead.”

“So, what do you propose then, Quartermaster Pertz.” Cade addressed Edram.

There was a certain hint of disdain on his tone, but the quartermaster paid no attention to it.

“Simple, we infiltrate Nouveaux and hack into their servers to extract the uncorrupted shipping data,” Edram proposed, “that way we figure out where and when are they moving weapons, stop their plans, and if we’re lucky, we may nail down Dogma himself.”

“Now we’re talking,” Bastiel expressed his interest on his fellow Nasivern’s proposal.

Cameron added more of her comments, “Don’t forget that our ‘Bony friend’ Occipital claims that Dogma is planning something big, what if this has to do with it? Like, moving stuff for his master plan through ships?”

Erron pointed at Cameron, “What Cammy said,” he concurred.

“Fantastic, we’re to commit espionage and cybercrime, great,” Cade felt displeased at the mere suggestion of committing a felony—a mere suggestion that was quite insulting for him.

“Is it a crime when they’re conspiring against the Nation, though?” Gale asked the displeased green teammate, but she received no response.

“Don’t forget that we can’t even trust our very own government,” Erron reminded Cade.

General Exley nodded in response to Erron’s comment, he was about to join the conversation but Cameron chortled loudly, her chortle extended into a full blown laughter. The sound of Cameron’s laughter silenced everyone present in the room.

“It’s not that simple, you guys,” Cameron said after her laughter subsided, “breaking into Nouveaux is like . . . the hacker’s dream, it’s the crown jewel of cybersecurity. Some might call you crazy if you even mention the mere idea. The use an intricate and absurdly walled garden decentralized system, perhaps you could coerce someone with access to the shipping data, but what if that person works for the Ashen Reckoning or tells on us? The only way to do this silently and without leaving any trace in the system is by getting root access.”

General Exley looked straight into Cameron’s eyes, “Can you do it?” he asked her.

Cameron snickered and scratched the back of her head, “It sure is a tough nut to crack, but theoretically not impossible. The first layers are easy peas’, even a kid could breach them, but the deeper levels are tricky, surgical levels of precision are required. And the final one well . . . that’s the real hard part,” Cameron answered Exley.

“How so?” Exley asked.

“The only way to gain a ‘leaves no trace’ full access to their servers is with a special key, and there’s only one copy of it in the whole world.”

“How do you know all of this?” a curious Cade asked.

“Because I’m the only person that has ever come close to breaking into their servers,” Cameron confessed with pride.

“Wait why would you—” Cade much desired to further inquire Cameron.

General Exley interrupted Cade, “Let’s just say that it was part of Agent Bennett’s previous occupation.”

“A hacker then? A felon? That is what I’m inferring from all of this.” Cade had little regard for any form of criminal activity, and it showed in his voice tone and attitude.

Cameron hid her annoyance at Cade, and responded, “The best one in the business, my dude,” she said to him, wrapping her words with a wink.

“Uh, you mean like, as good as the so-called ‘Rhapsody’?” Edram innocently mentioned the name of a mythical figure in the hacking world, one that had become a global legend due to both the rumored exploits under its name, and the general lack of concrete evidence that could confirm its existence in the first place.

Cameron shrugged, “Sup?”

Edram was most surprised, “Woah! Woah! Really? You’re not kidding!?”

“Well, duh!” Cameron exclaimed, “wanted to keep that a secret but I figured out it was just a matter of time, so, whatever.”

“Shit!” Edram exclaimed, “You are the Rhapsody! Now it all makes sense, remind me not to leave you alone with my computers ever again . . .”

Cameron smirked at the quartermaster, “As if that’d help you.”

Cade was dismayed and shocked, “This girl, Bennett is the legendary criminal, Rhapsody?” he thought to himself. “A former Silent Echo member, a former spy, now the Rhapsody herself . . . exactly what kind of people are part of Gestalt?” he kept pondering.

“Focus!” General Exley returned the conversation to its rightful track before it would further deviate.

“Sorry, Boss!” Cameron apologized. “Alright, alright, so, anyways, hacking Noveaux is not an easy job—lucky for us I, the Rhapsody herself, have most of the pieces already on the board. I’ve left my hidden cards along their systems, waiting for an opening, so close yet so far— all my stuff and backdoors are useless without the final key,” she explained to the team.

“So, we just need to steal that key for you, right?” Bastiel asked.

“Exactly,” Gale supported Bastiel’s motion. “How do we get you that key?”

Cade felt out of place hearing those two openly suggest a felony. What would his father and grandfather think of him if they’d find out? Nonetheless, he continued to remain silent.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t explain it properly. You don’t steal the key, you just can’t,” Cameron answered, “otherwise I would’ve found a way to snatch it already.”

“Why is that?” Erron inquired.

“You see, the problem is that the ‘key’ is not a key, or a card, or a device or anything, its a person,” Cameron answered, “Noveaux’s CEO is the key.”

“I beg your pardon?” Gale exclaimed.

“Jonathan Foster, the CEO, is his own company’s master key. So that’s why you can’t just ‘steal’ the key,” Cameron clarified, “I mean you could like, kidnap him or something but that would be too complicated and the goal here is to do it without anybody noticing, right?”

Erron did not understand Cameron’s words, “Wait, I don’t get it . . . how is he the key? You mean, his biometrics are the key?”

“Guy’s a weirdo, dude has a bunch of implants inside his body that transmit his data to his systems,” Cameron explained, “including a one of a kind authentication signal—hence why he is Nouveaux’s master key.”

Erron shook his head in disbelief, “Geez, technology, am I right?”

“No kidding. Wouldn’t surprise me if his butt had a NFC chip that tracks the way he wipes it,” Cameron jested.

Edram scratched his head before speaking his mind, “Well, getting a hold of him is kinda hard, since he’s known to be kind of a workaholic and rarely does he is seen in the public.”

“Indeed, that was the hiccup when I tried to do this solo some time ago—for noble purposes of course, I’m not a thief, I’m an artist,” Cameron clarified, “I could never find a way to get close to him, let alone get the data off his ugly-ass body. And to complicate things, the ‘key’ signal resets every few minutes. I need a fresh one and to be at the place I planted my backdoors at for it to work,” she explained to everyone present in the room.

“Hijacking and relaying a biometric frequency in real time . . .” Edram muttered as his mind concocted a solution, “Cammy, I’m going to need all the info you got on this guy’s biometric implants, maybe I can design a device that can hijack it and instantly relay it to you before it resets,” the quartermaster spoke.

“That might just do the trick,” General Exley said.

“We’ll just need a way to get close to this guy then,” Edram commented.

“One step ahead of you, gimme a sec!” without saying a further word, Cameron left the room to procure a small computer device from her personal belongings, leaving everyone else in utter suspense.

The thrilled pink teammate returned to the room after a few minutes. She remained silent and sat down back on her seat, frantically typing into her personal device.

“Agent Bennett?” General Exley attempted to get her attention to no avail, “Cameron?”

“Just a sec, boss!” she replied without stopping.

“Cammy?” Erron also tried to beckon her.

“Shh! Hang on, hang on, hang on,” she dismissed Erron’s call, “Yes!” Cameron exclaimed with an elevated voice tone. “According to Mrs. Park’s agenda, Foster is going to attend a charity ballroom organized by someone named—Lady Miranda Ashcroft—whoever that is.”

“Who is this Mrs. Park you’re talking about?” Erron asked her.

“Foster’s secretary,” Cameron answered.

“You have access to his secretary’s computer?” a surprised Erron inquired.

“Duh?” Cameron shrugged, “I did say I left my cards planted for this in the past,” she reminded him.

“Well then, we just need someone to attend that event, get in range with the guy, and clone the key for Cammy,” Edram suggested.

“Access isn’t just the problem,” Exley said, “the Ashcrofts are part of Vaifen’s nobility. Sneaking the hijacking equipment inside the party will be hard, those events always count with

some pretty tough private security, and their list of guests is quite VIP, not even I would get an invitation.”

“Ashcroft . . . Midsummer ballroom . . .” Bastiel recalled having heard those names before. He desperately tried to remember when and where for the sake of the mission.

“Vesper!” Bastiel loudly exclaimed. He remembered the princess having mentioned that same event to her assistant days ago.

“Huh?” Cameron was confused, “what does the Princess have to do with any of this?”

“They would never dare to frisk the Royal Family, that’s how we sneak Eddie’s gear,” Bastiel expressed his idea.

“Yeah, yeah, indeed . . .” Edram rubbed his chin, “they wouldn’t have to do anything, I could operate the device from here if needed, so long as they conceal it in a pocket.”

“That—could work,” Erron said after giving it a quick thought.

“Yes. Vesper said she was going to—oh shit,” Bastiel paused for a moment, “cancel her attendance! I need to talk to her, now!”

Cade Saunders had enough of his self-imposed silence amidst all that was being conversed, “Hold on, we can’t just expose and use the Royal Family like that to commit a crime, they’re no spies, and neither are you, Isthel.”

“It’s not like you’ve bought up a better plan, Cade,” Bastiel rebutted, “we can take it up to the King then, I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“You want to employ the Royal Family in a highly contrived—and may I emphasize and reiterate—illegal technological heist?” A dismayed Cade said. He had doubts towards the viability of such an extraordinary plan that was well beyond the margins of the law.

“Yes, Cade, I am suggesting just that,” Bastiel responded to him, his eyes fixated upon his, “is there a problem?”

“We don’t have many options here if we can’t involve the government in this,” Gale expressed her opinion, “As someone from that field I say it’s our best course of action.”

“So, do we have a green light for this, boss?” a thrilled Cameron asked General Exley.

Exley remained silent, pondering the proposed course of action. The room eagerly waited for his answer.

“On my end, yes,” he gave his approval, “but this will not go in motion unless we receive King Starsong’s explicit approval, since this plan involves the royal heirs—his word will be final on this matter. I will contact him immediately, in the meantime, Leah,” he beckoned Gestalt’s analyst and operator.

“Yes, General?” the girl asked.

“Start drafting a solid proposal for this plan for the King’s consideration,” he instructed her, “Agent Lacroix’s expertise will be required, as well as Agent Bennett’s and Quartermaster Pertz’s respective technical prowess—that doesn’t mean the rest of you shouldn’t give your opinion.”

“We will, General.” Leah assured him.

“Now, if you excuse me, I shall be back in a few,” Exley stood off his seat and left the premises of the Gestalt enclave, returning to his office at the other side of the National Intelligence Center’s building.

The team started to chatter and debate among themselves, while Leah, in her capacity as analyst, began to consolidate the plan, with Gale’s experience as a former spy, Cameron’s

hacking prowess as the ‘Rhapsody’, and Edram’s engineering being the foundational backbones of it. It didn’t take long for Director James Exley to return to the premises.

“I’ll make this quick—time is of the essence. King Sulwyn has requested Gestalt’s presence in the palace tonight to discuss the matter at hand,” he announced to the group. “We have barely four hours to shape a concrete and viable plan to present to the King, so we better focus on this—and it better be airtight if you want him to agree.”

Cameron, Leah, and Edram were overflowing with pride and joy—and it showed their collective work in solving the damaged hard drive’s puzzle was what made it all happen.

“I’ll go get us some coffee then, we’ll surely need it,” Erron commented.

After four hours of intense deliberation, brainstorming, jokes, and a fair share of hard work, Gestalt had reached a consensus and prepared a solid proposal to present to the King, which they dubbed ‘Operation Midnight Rhapsody’.

With the night now well underway, the team, alongside Director James Exley, boarded a black van towards the Royal Palace.

The dark skies concealed their arrival. Arrangements had been made within the Royal Palace to reduce staff to the bare minimum that night so as to cover the sudden visit of Gestalt’s team with an additional layer of secrecy. The team was greeted at the palace’s main hallway by the royal caretaker, Harold Vogel.

“Good evening, General Exley—and distinguished gentlemen!” the caretaker warmly welcomed them with a gracious bow. “Please, follow me, our King is eagerly awaiting your presence in his office room.”

For everyone else except Bastiel Isthall and James Exley, that was their first time inside the grandiose ivory halls of the Royal Palace of Vaifen. Cameron, Leah, and Edram were the

three most thrilled and in awe, Leah was most fascinated with the elegance of the palace's interior design.

Bastiel could not stop feeling like he was at home, countless times had he ran through those corridors as a child in the company of Prince Seyren and Princess Vesper. As the team walked towards the King's office room the white haired Nasivern gazed upon a white and blue vase, a vase that was only there because he had failed to catch a ball that a then infant Seyren had thrown at him. The ball shattered the vase's predecessor, which was much larger and objectively more elegant; the memories of that mischief caused him to let loose a faint chuckle.

The royal caretaker opened the doors of the King's office room, "Please, come on in," he said to the team.

General James Exley was the first to enter the room, immediately followed by all seven members of the Gestalt team. As previously suggested by their superior, all seven members firmly stood next to each other.

The King was sitting on his desk, with Prince Seyren and Princess Vesper waiting in one of the room's large couches, as requested by Exley.

"King Sulwyn," Director Exley said. He bowed to his regent, a gesture that was replicated by everyone else, "Prince Seyren, Princess Vesper," he greeted the royal heirs on behalf of the team.

"Good evening, James," the King replied as he stood from his seat, "it's been quite the day, hasn't it?" he commented.

"Indeed, it has," Exley replied. The two aged men desperately needed rest.

Both the Prince and the Princess joined their father as he approached the members of Gestalt.

Sulwyn Starsong's mighty voice resounded in the room, "At last, I get to see Gestalt as a whole in person," the King spoke with open arms, "I've met some of you before, but how opportune it is to finally meet you all. I know you're all here to deal with an urgent request that involves the safety of our beloved Nation—James has given me an advance of the situation. Before we delve into the subject of our reunion, on behalf of the Crown that I represent, on behalf of my heirs, Seyren and Vesper, allow me to thank you all for your service," the King expressed his gratitude.

King Sulwyn continued to talk to the team, "In just a few weeks of being operational you've dealt great blows to the Ashen Reckoning, and I am most confident that you will continue to rise triumphant against them and against any threat to the Nation of Vaifen," he gave verbal form to his assurances.

The Regent of Vaifen, along with his son and his daughter, walked towards the team to salute them one by one, starting with Commander Erron Leitner. The tall man barely beat the King in height.

"Erron Leitner, Vaifen's finest soldier," King Sulwyn said to him, extending his hand towards him.

"Thanks, my King," Erron replied as he shook his regent's hand. He then reciprocated the Prince and the Princess's salute.

"Gale Lacroix, as deadly as beautiful," the King addressed the blonde woman.

Gale bowed her head in respect, greeting the royal family just as Erron had previously done.

"Cade Saunders, stalwart duty, honor, and excellence," the King said to Cade when it was time to shake hands with him.

The former Special Forces member solemnly saluted the royal family in response.

“Cameron Bennett, a song of control,” the King complimented Cameron’s unique abilities, fully aware of her alter-ego as the Rhapsody.

Cameron felt intimidated by the King’s voice and height. She had no words to say, no witty comment to elicit a chortle in response—much to Gale’s surprise. She shook his hand in silence. When the young woman gazed upon Prince Seyren, she was breathless, charmed by his handsome face, long blonde hair, and blue eyes.

“Prince—Seyren, so nice—sorry, so nice to meet you,” Cameron stuttered.

“The pleasure is all mine,” the blonde and charming Seyren winked at her, and she blushed in response.

The King now stood in front of Bastiel Isthall, his protégé, the son of his once great friend and Nasivern ally, Aeoros Isthall.

“Bastiel Isthall, the Crimson Blaze,” the King proudly proclaimed with a smile, a smile that was reciprocated in kind.

The white haired Nasivern was no longer the King’s ward, he now stood proudly as a crimson knight at the service of the Nation of Vaifen. The salute from Seyren and Vesper was less formal, as they’ve known each other for all their lives.

“Look at you, my man!” said Seyren to Bastiel as he grabbed his shoulders and shook him.

Vesper rolled her eyes and shook Bastiel’s hand, “Hey there,” she said to him.

The King continued his salutations, “Edram Pertz, a boundless spark of creation,” the Regent complimented the quartermaster’s inventive prowess.

“And last, but certainly not least, Leah Sutherland, the smartest person in this room, I’m sure of that,” the King addressed the seventh member of Gestalt.

The shy analyst blushed in embarrassment.

The King had saluted all seven members of Gestalt, knights of the Nation of Vaifen that followed the footsteps of knights of times past. With the quasi-protocol salutation ceremony over, King Sulwyn waved towards the couches in the room, “Please, let us seat over there so we can discuss your proposal.”

The guests did as their Regent requested. James Exley explained to the King all that had transpired: The retrieval of a damaged drive, its subsequent data recovery, and the troubling findings, which showed evidence of a possible involvement of Nouveaux Tech, the technological conglomerate, with the Ashen Reckoning and their terrorist activities against the Nation of Vaifen.

Aided by Leah Sutherland, the General, and also Director of the National Intelligence Center, further explained the necessity to corroborate said allegations, for which he made extensive use of computer imagery and detailed blueprints to properly illustrate the meticulously crafted proposal: to break into one of Nouveaux Tech’s decentralized mainframe servers in order to retrieve the uncorrupted shipping data, and any information of value that could tie them with the Ashen Reckoning’s plans.

“Operation Midnight Rhapsody . . .” Said King Sulwyn, “a two-pronged mission, complicated, but interesting, most interesting, James,” the King was intrigued by the mission’s approach.

“Indeed,” replied Exley. “Obtaining physical access to Jonathan Foster is harder than it might seem. We have confirmed that he will attend the Midsummer Charity Ballroom, an event organized and hosted by Lady Miranda Ashcroft of the Nation’s nobility.”

“And Gestalt’s plan is to intercept the man during this event in order to obtain the key to their servers, right?” the King asked for corroboration.

“Correct, Sulwyn,” Exley answered to his King and friend, his exhaustion made him forego formalities for a moment, “which is why we’re requesting the assistance of the Royal Heirs in order to get access to this ‘prestigious’ event,” he fixed his glasses after he finished his sentence.

Princess Vesper took the initiative and spoke to the General, “I’m sorry General, I was indeed invited to that event, but I plan to cancel my attendance, as I have a tight agenda with the Starsong Foundation.”

In reality, Vesper disliked Vaifen’s nobility, her decline was spawn out of disdain and not due to time constraints as she stated.

“Please, my Princess, do not cancel your attendance, it is imperative that we count with your assistance so that we can hijack Foster’s biometric data,” Exley implored, “only you and your brother are able to bypass all security checkpoints during the event,” he reiterated.

“What about their safety, James?” As much as the King was intrigued by Gestalt’s ambitious plan, the safety of his sons came first. He would not agree to anything unless he was fully assured of their safety.

“Sulwyn, your sons won’t have to do anything complex. All we request of them is that they interact with Mr. Foster long enough for Quartermaster Pertz’s proposed equipment to do its job and clone the authentication key from Foster in real time while the infiltration team led by

Agent Lacroix does the hard work and Agent Bennett uses it to access and extract the required data without leaving a trace in their logs,” the General answered the King’s question.

“And how would this equipment be introduced to the event?” the King asked.

“Quartermaster Pertz has come with a clever solution,” Exley said, “the equipment he proposes is small enough to fit in a pocket, and it will be concealed and embedded right into the attendants’ attire.”

The King rubbed his beard and pondered for a moment in silence.

“I take it you will have some of Gestalt’s members watching over Seyren and Vesper during the event, wouldn’t their presence raise questions?” the King had yet another concern.

“My King,” Bastiel broke silence, “I’m offering myself to be Vesper’s ‘plus one’ for this event,” he said.

“Is that so, Bastiel?” Vesper said to him with a concealed but noticeable sneer on her face.

“You have my word that no harm will come to them,” Bastiel assured the King.

Prince Seyren joined the conversation, “Well yeah, that makes sense, seeing as they’re in a rela—” the Prince stopped midsentence.

Both Bastiel and Vesper’s hearts froze for a second and panicked, Prince Seyren almost revealed their secret relationship to the King so nonchalantly.

Seyren became aware of what he almost did and pretended to clear his throat, “What I mean is, everyone knows he’s related—like, he’s family and all that stuff,” he tried to remedy the situation.

“Yes, that’s what I mean, and that’s why I offered,” Bastiel quickly said, he cleared his throat, “I assure you my King, nothing will happen to Seyren and Vesper.”

The King had no reason to mistrust Bastiel and decided to place his confidence in him, just as his father had once placed his confidence in Sulwyn.

“In that case then I have no objections to this plan, it is up to Seyren and Vesper if they want to participate,” the King commented. “Seyren?” the King asked the heir of his throne.

“Oh you can count with me!” Prince Seyren was immediately thrilled by the proposal and desired to participate from the get-go. He already pictured himself as an overly exaggerated secret agent in an exotic espionage adventure full of thrill, luxury, and lust.

“Vesper?” the King asked her beloved daughter.

Vesper felt displeased at the idea of attending an event organized by Vaifen’s nobility, especially one organized by Lady Miranda Ashcroft, a woman that Vesper didn’t hold in any high regard whatsoever.

She looked at Seyren, his face radiated excitement. Unlike her brother, she understood the risks involved and the potential for failure. Nonetheless, the words that his father had told her many times in the past echoed in her head.

“We owe ourselves to this Nation, we are here to entrust their prosperity, their security, their peace—to guide them into a better tomorrow, no matter the costs to us.”

The Princess then looked at Bastiel Isthel, the only man she’s ever loved. In a way, she felt like she owed him for making him go through her charity event.

The room eagerly waited for her response.

“Alright, I’m in,” Vesper agreed, but she wasn’t too content with being part of that event.

“Excellent!” Exley exclaimed. “Operation Midnight Rhapsody is approved then.”

“Indeed it is, James,” the King said, “I am placing, or rather, entrusting the safety of my children to everyone in Gestalt. My faith is, and will always be with you,” the King remembered them.

Now that they had the King’s approval, and the cooperation of both Prince Seyren and Princess Vesper Starsong, Gestalt’s Operation Midnight Rhapsody had all the necessary pieces to proceed.

With all official affairs between the Crown and Gestalt discussed, King Sulwyn offered the team a share of the Palace’s hospitality, and invited all of Gestalt to share a dinner with the royal family. Unlike the lunch they had shared hours ago, the food was superb in quality, once again, a most amiable moment was shared among the members of Gestalt—this time, with the presence of Director Exley and the Royal Family. After the dinner was over, the team returned to their respective homes to rest for the night.

For the next twelve days, both halves of the plan trained and prepared for the roles they would assume in Operation Midnight Rhapsody. Gale, Cade, and Erron studied the layout of the Nouveaux Tech facility that housed the compromised server node. Leah continued to analyze the layout of the building and optimized the action plan.

Cameron prepared herself, she readied up all of the exploits she had planted in Nouveaux’s systems in the past, cleaned up and optimized her code—with her favorite music repertoire in the background, and mentally readied herself, for she was the key figure and namesake of the operation.

Bastiel, Seyren, and Vesper also prepared for their respective parts. The event they were to attend involved dancing in a ballroom, something the Royal Heirs were much knowledgeable

about—but Bastiel did not. Instead of learning how to properly dance for an event of such prestige, he opted to simply memorize the patterns of the dance and hope to perform adequately.

Edram Pertz worked tirelessly day and night, using the specifications provided by Cameron to design the necessary equipment that would steal Jonathan Foster's biometric key data.

Cade's nature and upbringing clashed with the reality of the mission. It took a great deal of him to swallow his 'by the books' nature and comply with what the plan demanded of him. While he accepted to commit the felonies involved with the operation, the doubts he harbored with regards to Gestalt's rule-breaking antics and its teammates continued to grow in silence.

The astounding amount of preparation and rehearsals they carried out over the course of those twelve days made the Gestalt team further bond with one another, it also gave them the opportunity to get to know the Royal Heirs and share time with them. Both Vesper and Seyren became fond of the members of Gestalt in the process, considering them as genuine friends. Both Erron and Bastiel offered some sparring lessons to Seyren, who was not the best student of martial arts. Cameron incessantly requested Vesper's aid to help boost Leah's confidence, with Gale acting as a voice of reason that kept the pink teammate in check. The Princess rapidly became friends with all of them.

After thirteen days had passed, Gestalt was ready to begin Operation Midnight Rhapsody.

IX: BINAURAL SYMPHONY

The anticipated day was at hand, thirteen sunrises and twelve sunsets had come and gone since Operation Midnight Rhapsody was greenlit by King Sulwyn Starsong. Days that, for the members of Gestalt, felt like an eternity. Everyone eagerly awaited the thirteenth sunset—for it was the time of the much anticipated two-pronged operation.

All seven members of Gestalt spent the early hours of that morning carrying out the final preparations, performing last minute checks, and going through the plan over and over and over again, leaving nothing to chance was paramount—everything had to be perfect. The slightest mistake could very well cascade the delicate operation towards a catastrophic failure.

Edram Pertz, who had spent yet another restless night, kept himself awake doing the final touches to the hijacking equipment, as well as some last-minute checkups to the equipment both teams would employ. The five Nightingale battle suits would not be used in the operation and as such, were left in maintenance mode.

Cameron Bennett, the central player of the operation named after her alter ego, Rhapsody, was nervous—and with good reason; her eyes were glued to her computer screen, while her hands relentlessly poked the keyboard. She wanted to be sure for the twelfth time that she had all of her cards at her disposal when the time to infiltrate the Nouveaux Tech relay facility

was at hand. Everything that both the infiltration and ballroom team would carry out thorough the operation was going to be for her and her alone.

Not only did Cameron felt nervous, she also felt ecstatic, and anxious. For too long she had dreamed of breaking into Nouveaux Tech's systems, a feat that many considered impossible, due to the complexity of their security and the intricate nature of their network—except her, of course; she always sought it possible as long as the right flaw in the system was found, a challenge most thrilling. It was fate, perhaps, that set in motion a series of events that had finally presented her with such a unique opportunity.

Erron Leitner had prepared a light warmup workout regime for the team that morning in order to get their adrenaline flowing and their minds sharpened, while Gale Lacroix reviewed the parameters of their upcoming infiltration mission, her experience as a former spy made her the lead of the infiltration team.

Afterwards, the team shared a quick lunch together. Erron opted to order takeaway food instead of making his team go through the torture of his unique cuisine once more. Edram Pertz summoned Bastiel Ithal to his laboratory a few minutes after lunch..

When the red Gestalt member entered Edram's domain he was immediately greeted by Argon, the mechanical canine. His artificial barks alerted his maker of Bastiel's arrival.

Edram yawned, "C'mere Bastiel," the quartermaster beckoned his friend.

Three dark gray garment bags laid on top of a large table caught Bastiel's attention. One of the bags had his name written on it, while the other two had the names of the royal heirs, Seyren and Vesper Starsong. A silver briefcase rested on the table as well.

Edram waved at the three garment bags, "There, your suit, the Princess's, and the Prince's," he spoke.

Bastiel's curiosity got the best of him, he tried to open the bag that had his name written on it, but he was stopped by the quartermaster before his fingers touched the bag's zipper.

"No! Don't spoil the surprise!" he berated Bastiel.

"Woah! Woah!" Bastiel exclaimed, "I just wanna know how the suit looks like, seeing as I'll be wearing it and all," he said in his defense.

"Don't worry about that, it's, really nice—Princess Vesper chose the design, all I did was rig it up and add wires and stuff to it, but you already know that."

Bastiel chuckled, "Yeah, yeah, gtOS embedded clothing, eh?" he said in jest as he shook his head.

"Heh," Edram chortled. "That's—not a bad idea, I should explore that one of these days,"

Bastiel pointed at the silver briefcase, "And this?"

"The fake jewelry and comm devices, as well as the comm-link the King requested," Edram answered.

"Right." Bastiel grabbed the garment bags with his left hand and the briefcase with his right hand.

The Quartermaster yawned once again, "You know, I've always wanted to create an infiltration battle suit," he said, "I guess these, and the stuff the team will be wearing could count as the theoretical basis for something like that." Once again, a sense of pride invaded Edram, he was proud of the work he had done on the brand new equipment for the mission, "You know what to do right?" The quartermaster asked, "or should I go through it once again?"

"Relax, Eddie, I got this," Bastiel assured him, "you should a quick nap while you can—it's going to be a long night."

Edram took off his glasses and gently massaged his forehead and face, “You’re right. I’ll just close my eyes for a bit.”

“You do that and I’ll get going then,” Bastiel put the briefcase on the floor for a moment and shook hands with his fellow Nasivern.

“Have fun,” Edram wished to his friend.

Bastiel walked towards the lounge and bid farewell to the rest of the team, wishing them the best of success during their half of the operation; a gesture that was reciprocated by Erron and Cameron.

He placed the precious cargo that he was entrusted with inside his vehicle’s trunk and drove straight to the Royal Palace of Vaifen, entering the complex through one of its side entrances.

Bastiel was about to take out the bags and suitcase from his vehicle’s trunk when he heard a familiar voice that came from behind; his nose caught the scent of an exquisite perfume that he knew all too well.

“Finally, you arrive.”

“Vee,” Bastiel greeted Princess Vesper.

Vesper smirked, “Expecting someone else?”

“Not at all,” Bastiel smiled at her.

The Princess gazed upon the garment bag that had her name and immediately seized possession of it, “Oh, that’s mine!” she exclaimed.

“Not even a kiss, eh? Fine,” Bastiel grabbed the other two bags as well as the silver briefcase. “I have to setup your father’s communications link right away,” he informed her.

“Nah, Father can wait, he’s probably doing something else right now—come, come, first things first.”

Vesper Starsong was Bastiel Isthel’s first and foremost weakness, he couldn’t refuse her request. The two of them walked straight towards the Princess’s personal bedroom. Bastiel carefully placed the garment bags on top of an elegant dark brown chair and he placed the silver briefcase next to it.

The Princess then surprised him with a kiss.

“Are you ready for tonight?” she whispered at him.

“The question is—are you?” Asked back as a jest. He then reciprocated the kiss.

The Princess looked straight into his gray eyes, “Of course, but well, there’s something we should do first. Why don’t we . . .” her eyes then focused on the bed.

Bastiel followed her gaze and stared at the bed too, “I don’t think we should right now, Vee,” he whispered at her.

The Princess pointed at the bed, “Oh! You thought that I wanted to—no!” she laughed at his apparent naivety, “but yes, there is something we need to do, or rather, something that you need to do—and yes, there’s enough time for it, before you whine,” she caressed the strands of his white hair.

“Oh yeah?” An intrigued Bastiel spoke.

“But not here, let’s go,” Vesper instructed him.

Bastiel followed Vesper towards a room located in the far edge of the palace’s eastern wing. She had hired a handful of stylists and had the room prepared to serve as a makeshift hair salon.

Bastiel was in love, but he was no fool. As soon as he entered the room and saw what was inside of it he knew exactly what the Princess was up to.

“Oh no, no, no, no—absolutely not!” Bastiel exclaimed as he shook his head in disapproval, “I love my hair the way it is.”

“Oh yes, yes, yes, yes,” Vesper mocked him. “Sure you do—but if you’re going to be my ‘pretend date’ tonight you better look the part, we already discussed this.”

Bastiel let loose a long sigh, he closed his eyes, “Fine,” he knew he had no way out of it and time was of the essence. “The things I do for this Nation . . .” he whispered to Vesper as he laid his eyes upon her.

She simply smiled in response.

Bastiel took a seat and awaited his sentence. The issue of his tousled and messy hair was brought several times by Vesper during the Midnight Rhapsody preparations, and she had managed to convince the team. Bastiel, however, had ignored the subject of his hair and shrugged it off, considering his appearance to be not essential to the success of the operation.

Mere seconds later a hairdresser approached Bastiel and began to do her work. He felt powerless when the first strands of his messy white hair began to fall on the floor at the hands of the nimble stylist’s scissors.

Prince Seyren Starsong entered the room, he gazed upon Bastiel and pointed and laughed at him, “So, she finally got you to—”

“Shut up, Seyren,” Bastiel interrupted him,

Seyren continued to laugh at Bastiel while more strands of the Nasivern’s white hair continued to be snipped.

The Prince and his sister conversed with one another while the hairdresser worked her magic. Bastiel remained silent through the whole process. The stylist did a remarkable job on the Nasivern, his chaotic and messy white hair had been trimmed and given proper style.

Vesper took a good look at Bastiel and began to clap “There we go, now you finally look like a real person!”

“Very funny of you . . .” Bastiel responded with sarcasm.

Bastiel looked upon his ‘mutilated’ hair, the results weren’t nowhere as bad as he had expected, but he would never confide that truth to Vesper, never, ever.

The Nasivern waited for the stylist to leave before saying another word, “I hope you’re happy now, Vee, but I really need to set up your father’s equipment and give you all your ‘accessories’ for tonight—right now,” he reminded her. He was at the palace for duty, not for leisure.

“Sure,” The Princess complied.

“Just gimme a sec and I’ll catch up with you guys,” Seyren said to the couple, “I gotta call Alice.”

“Who?” Both Bastiel and Vesper asked in unison, turning around and looking at Seyren in a near perfect synchrony. They were perplexed by the Prince’s words, as evidenced by their facial expressions.

“My date for tonight,” Seyren answered without hesitation.

“What the—this is not part of the plan,” A disgruntled Bastiel expressed, “I told you a dozen times, no dates, no civilians, nothing!”

“Yeah, brother, we have work to do tonight,” Vesper said, “call her and cancel, ditch her, I don’t care! Sorry, this is no time to fool around,” she did a huge effort to conceal her growing anger.

“Not fair, what will people think if I go alone—I mean, you’re going with Bastiel,” Seyren rebutted.

“For heavens’ sake, Seyren, we discussed this so many times already,” Bastiel spoke with a loud tone, “I couldn’t give less of a damn about the event or the people there—you already know why we are going in the first place!”

“Relax! We’ll make through,” Seyren waved his hands at them, “a ‘spy’ needs companionship to ‘blend in’ you know.”

“No, call her and say no, now,” Bastiel insisted, “we have a plan, we spent almost two weeks practicing it, stick to it, this is no time to joke or play around.”

“C’mon man, do me this solid, c’mon . . .” Seyren pleaded, “you have my word that she won’t be an issue!”

“As if that’d be worth something,” Vesper shook her head in disbelief, “can you, for once in your goddamn life, think with your brain and not with that?” She pointed at the Prince’s nether regions.

The Prince continued to plead like a young child would to their mother and father when denied a desired toy, “It’ll help keep appearances while we do the thing, just c’mon.”

The debate continued until Bastiel finally caved in. The red Gestalt member arranged the necessary changes on their half of the operation, much to the protest of those in the Gestalt enclave, especially Cade Saunders. A last minute change was something no one wanted, nor expected.

“I swear, Seyren, if she jeopardizes this in any way or form . . . whatever,” Bastiel calmed himself down, “let’s go, Vesper.”

Bastiel and Vesper went back to her bedroom to retrieve the silver briefcase and immediately walked towards King Sulwyn Starsong’s office.

The guards outside the King’s office immediately opened the doors for them, Vesper and Bastiel entered the office together as the guards closed the doors behind them.

“My King,” Bastiel bowed to his regent.

“Father,” Vesper nodded her head in respect.

“Good Afternoon, please step forward.” King Sulwyn beckoned them with his right hand. “Nice change of style, Bastiel,” He complimented the Nasivern’s new hairstyle once he had a close look at it.

“Thanks, my King,” Bastiel replied with modesty.

“You can thank me for that, Father,” Vesper gloated with smugness.

“Yeah, whatever,” Bastiel rolled his eyes. “Are you ready to have your comm-link installed, my King?”

King Sulwyn stood from his seat and stepped away from his desk, giving Bastiel room to carry out his task, “Of course, all yours, Bastiel,” he waved towards his seat.

Bastiel opened the briefcase and procured a pre-configured laptop device from it, he sat on the King’s seat, something he hadn’t done since he was a child. Bastiel had completely forgotten how comfortable it was.

He gazed upon the King’s most treasured photograph, the one where he stood next to the late Queen Ellene Valmont. Seeing a memento of simpler times caused him to smile, but also made him feel a sense of longing—of what could’ve been but was not.

The doors of the office opened and Prince Seyren entered the room.

While the King and Vesper discussed with Seyren regarding the matter of his sudden inclusion of date during the mission, Bastiel went through a series of commands and security procedures that Edram Pertz and Cameron Bennett had taught him.

After his work was done, the device was successfully authorized and properly verified within the Gestalt network. The laptop was now connected through a secure line with Gestalt's operations room.

"All set for tonight, my King," Bastiel informed the regent.

"Excellent," King Sulwyn replied with a smile.

"Alright, next step," Bastiel said out loud. He took three small black boxes from the briefcase; he gave the one labeled 'S' to the Prince, and the one labeled 'V' to the Princess, while placing the one labeled with a 'B' on his jacket's pocket.

"Your 'jewelry' for the night," the Nasivern air quoted, "they're actually microphones and auxiliary scanners."

"Whoa—Eddie really made them look just like the real thing," Vesper commented.

Bastiel chuckled, "He's really meticulous like that, Vee," he said. "So as you all should know by now, the attires have been rigged with a series of scanners, the gloves we'll be wearing can copy Foster's fingerprints, and I don't need to remind you two that we need to get those as soon as possible—as well as the biometric signal."

"I've been meaning to ask, but I forgot to do it earlier," Seyren spoke, "what if the dude wears gloves tonight?"

"Cameron has access to his assistant's computer, our target is 'eccentric' and organizes everything, including his attire choices. That's how we know he won't be wearing any gloves

tonight, we triple checked,” Bastiel answered, “all you too need to do is shake hands with him and make sure you his fingers make contact with your gloves, just like we practiced.”

“Yeah, brother.” Vesper said to her sibling, “did you forget already?”

King Starsong remained silent as the trio continued to converse among themselves. He couldn’t help but feel proud of his young Nasivern protégé, his new short and kept hairstyle made him resemble his father in the King’s eyes.

Bastiel was rapidly carving his own path in a world that had adopted him, a path that he was inexorably drawn to walk—the path of a hero of the Nation of Vaifen, the only thing Bastiel ever wanted as a child.

“Remember, when the team is in position and Cammy is ready—we just need to get close enough to him to hijack his biometric implant’s signal, that’s all, the team will do the rest,” Bastiel reminded them as he checked the time, “we have less than two hours to get ready, so we should start now.”

“I’ll see you all later then,” the Princess excused herself.

“Me too, see ya soon,” the Prince departed.

“My King, if you excuse me,” Bastiel said as he nodded at the regent.

“Of course, of course,” the King nodded in response.

Bastiel retrieved his attire bag from the Princess’ bedroom and retreated to his old chambers to prepare himself for the event. Once he was inside the privacy of his old bedroom he opened the bag and laid eyes on his attire.

The Nasivern was pleasantly surprised by the suit. The design was a homage to the Nasivern attires that his father used to wear, but unlike the shades of indigo blue that Aeoros

Isthal preferred in life, the suit that had been tailored for Bastiel featured a crimson red fabric and black accents.

Vesper Starsong commissioned the suit, she had supplied one of her most trusted designers with enough photographic references of Aeoros Isthal's attires, especially those that he wore in official reunions with King Sulwyn Starsong back when the Nasivern race was establishing its first contacts with the world of Orbis and with the Nation of Vaifen decades ago.

As with all things Nasivern, symmetry—a characteristic penchant of their race's artistic design, was taken in consideration. A black buttoned shirt and a red silken tie accompanied the crimson red suit and black pants.

There was a piece of paper inside the suit's inner pocket, Bastiel grabbed it with his left hand and read the handwritten note.

"I hope you like it," read the small piece of paper. It was signed with the letter 'V.'

Bastiel smiled once he read the note, after he had finished dressing up and wearing a pair of elegant shoes that had been left in the room for him, he put on the specialized black gloves that Edram Pertz had designed to steal Jonathan Foster's fingerprints.

The gloves looked like any ordinary pair, but once activated, their entire surface acted as a concealed fingerprint scanner. Edram had hidden a flexible battery around the gloves' wrists to power them—a miniaturized version of the batteries employed in the design of the Nightingale battle suits. The state of the art technology used on the gloves made them far more expensive than the rest of the elegant attire.

Bastiel placed a small, almost featureless rectangular device in his pants' left pocket, and gave himself a good look in the mirror.

"Damn, I kinda look good," he said to himself.

Bastiel stood next to the bedroom's window, and gazed upon the beautiful sunset. The twilight sky that covered the city of Ternion was a breathtaking spectacle, one that he availed himself of to meditate for a short period of time until his telephone rang.

"Feeling lonely, Alma?" Bastiel said as soon as he answered the call.

"Nope, just wanted to check out on you before you go play 'Super spy adventures' with your friends," replied Alma.

"How thoughtful of you."

"You know, there's still time to put me in the mission too," Alma said.

"We've been through this, Alma." Bastiel said as he shook his head, "It's too dangerous for you."

"Yeah, yeah, everyone would want a piece of me if they find out I exist, blah blah—I know, I know . . ." Alma's voice had a noticeable tone of disappointment, "I'm bored, that's all."

"One day perhaps, when the time is right," Bastiel said in a reassuring tone.

"If you say so."

"Alright, I gotta go. Stay out of trouble, will ya," the Nasivern spoke, "I promise that once this is over I'll get you that hardware upgrade you've been wanting."

"It's a deal then. Take care Bastiel," Alma bid her farewell.

Following his phone call with Alma, Bastiel placed an inconspicuous and barely visible earpiece in his right ear and switched on his suit's concealed communication system.

"I'm ready, how are you guys holding up over there?" He said to those connected to the shared voice network back at the Gestalt Enclave.

"Good, good," Edram answered. "The team is gearing up right now, Leah is prepping up things at Operations."

“Alright, all set here, time to wait for the VIPs,” Bastiel replied.

Bastiel walked out of the bedroom and walked towards the Palace’s lobby. When he arrived, he found King Sulwyn alone standing in the middle of the lobby, in all of his mighty and imposing stature. He approached the Nasivern with a smile as Bastiel walked towards him.

“You look just like your Father,” said the King, “he would be so proud of you, child,”

“Thanks,” Bastiel, ever so respectful towards the King, gave his modest response.

“Godspeed—and take care of Seyren and Vesper, I’m counting on you,” the King commanded him.

“I will, my King.” Bastiel assured him.

Bastiel heard a loud screech that came from his earpiece.

“Is this working, hello?” Prince Seyren’s loud voice pierced through his ear.

“My goodness! Prince Seyren!” Edram exclaimed. The screech almost made the Quartermaster spill his coffee, he wasn’t expecting such a loud and sudden burst from his headset.

Bastiel regained his composure after that sudden startle, “Seyren . . . don’t speak directly on your suit’s microphone, we can hear you just fine, no need to yell.”

“Alright sorry, just—just making sure it works, you know,” Seyren replied, “I’m on my way.”

The Prince arrived at the lobby mere seconds later, his attire was much different than Bastiel’s. Seyren’s outfit was predominantly royal blue and with an asymmetrical cut, the attire had golden ornaments and buttons that matched his blonde hair, as well as golden epaulets—adornments that were fit for the heir to the throne.

In his head rested an elegant and lightweight crown, yet another symbol of his royal status. The crown's golden color almost blended with the strands of his hair, it featured three blue jewels—all shaped as a rhombus, with the central one being the larger of the trio. A blue band of the finest fabric ran in a diagonal line through his chest, it accentuated the asymmetrical design of his royal attire.

The Prince made a handgun gesture with his two hands at Bastiel, “You look nice, my dude,” he said.

The Nasivern remained silent and simply shrugged in response.

The King turned around towards his son as he approached his father; the regent fixed his son's tie and looked him straight in the eyes.

“That last minute ‘date’ irresponsibility is inexcusable, my son,” the King said in a most serene manner. “Just so you know, I had Exley triple check her, like I said to you before . . . don't ruin this for them. It is our duty to keep the Nation safe, I know you see this as a game, but tonight's actions are intended to keep Vaifen safe, not for your immature amusement.”

“Relax Father, everything is under control,” the Prince replied to the King, seemingly devoid of any worry in the world.

Bastiel looked at the time, “Where is Vesper?” he asked the King and Prince.

“Well, you know her, she always takes forever to get ready,” the Prince joked.

Vesper spoke through the voice comm, “Relax, boys, I'm almost there.”

Princess Vesper Starsong descended through the staircase wearing an elegant white and rose pink dress. Her long red hair had been immaculately styled and it flowed with radiance, and her make up couldn't have been more perfect.

She wore a white diadem on her head as a symbol of her royalty, much like her brother's crown. It was adorned with three jewels, rose pink in color; the design of her diadem was curved and heavily contrasted with her red hair.

Her pearlescent earrings—which were indistinguishable replicas of one of her most expensive pairs, acted as relay antennas for their hijacking equipment, her jewelry also acted as a concealed microphone.

Edram Pertz had designed the three hijacking equipment sets to seamlessly work and amplify together, in order to steal and transmit their target's prized biometric data to the Gestalt servers, which would then get decrypted and relayed to Cameron Bennet at the time of the Rhapsody's greatest technological heist.

“Damn . . .” Bastiel whispered, mesmerized by Vesper radiant and pristine elegance.

Vesper approached the group, “Well, here we go,” she exclaimed with a faux smile that concealed her nervousness.

The King stood in front of the trio, “You all have your roles for tonight, you all know what to do—do not let the Gestalt team down.”

“We won't,” they spoke in unison.

A vehicle approached the gates of the Palace, it proceeded towards the complex after it was given proper clearance, stopping at the main entrance.

“Hell yeah, Alice is here,” The Prince said, “let's greet her!” He exclaimed.

Vesper and Bastiel rolled their eyes at each other as the Prince walked outside to warmly receive his friend and companion for the event. Bastiel crossed his arms and sighed.

“Just let Seyren play the fool, we got this, Father,” Vesper whispered to the King. She felt more than capable enough to single handedly carry the task.

The King remained silent and did not say a single word in response.

Bastiel and Vesper stepped aside so that the Prince could first introduce his date to the regent of Vaifen.

“Father, I want you to meet Alice Valleires,” Seyren introduced his friend.

“King Starsong. I am most honored to meet you,” the Blonde woman said to the King. Her salutation was accompanied by a graceful bow.

The Prince’s date wore a sleeveless purple dress which was much simpler than Vesper’s in design, but elegant nonetheless. Matching long purple gloves covered her hands and most of her arms. A string of pearls adorned her neck, and golden earrings embellished her ears.

“The pleasure is all mine, Lady Alice,” The King chivalrously greeted her.

The guest looked at the Princess, “Princess Vesper, how beautiful!” Alice exclaimed with enthusiasm.

“Thanks, a pleasure meeting you,” the Princess replied. “You’re the daughter of Lord Charles Valleires, am I correct?”

“Yes, he is my father,” Alice answered.

“A stuck up nobility sycophant—great, just what Seyren needed,” a dismayed Vesper thought to herself.

“Bastiel Isthel, my pleasure,” he extended his right hand at her and shook hands with the Prince’s friend.

“Well, we’re all here, so it’s time to go!” Prince Seyren exclaimed as he raised his two thumbs, “the ballroom awaits!”

“Indeed, let’s get this show on the road,” Bastiel said whilst looking at the King.

“Have fun, all of you,” the King said.

Prince Seyren and Alice Valeires were the first couple to walk out of the lobby. King Sulwyn nodded at Vesper and Bastiel, a gesture that was acknowledged, and then reciprocated, by the two of them. Bastiel tapped his right ear, another gesture that the King understood.

The first vehicle was boarded by the Prince and his companion, a second vehicle was arranged for Bastiel and Vesper due to the unexpected guest, so that the two of them could have privacy and be able to speak to the Gestalt team as they were on route to the event.

Back at the Gestalt enclave, the other half of the operation, composed of Erron Leitner, Cameron Bennett, Gale Lacroix, and Cade Saunders, had dressed themselves with a sleek dark gray and black infiltration suit that could not be traced back to neither Gestalt nor the National Intelligence Center. The quartet boarded a black suburban vehicle that would carry them to an intermediate destination before heading to the Nouveaux Tech data center, one of many centers that the technological conglomerate owned around the world.

The two halves of the operation departed almost simultaneously. The Royal Caravan headed south-east, towards the premises of the exuberant Ashcroft Estate—the venue of the midsummer ball. The two main royal vehicles were escorted by a contingent of Royal Security agents, who were oblivious to the true purpose of the royal heirs' attendance to the charity ballroom event.

“Attention, Gestalt members, Prince Seyren, and Princess Vesper,” Operator Leah Sutherland’s voice was heard by all participants, “Operation Midnight Rhapsody is now in progress,” she announced.

Despite her usual shy demeanor, Leah’s voice denoted confidence. Cameron, along with Vesper, had been helping Leah improve in that regard over the days prior to the operation. While

Cameron did it in a somewhat annoying and overwhelming way, her intentions stemmed out of a sincere desire to help her friend boost her self-esteem.

“Team Hack is now on route,” Erron announced to the operations room.

“Team Heist is on route as well,” Bastiel also informed operations.

Cameron chortled, “Team Heist,” she made no efforts to contain her laughter.

“Cameron,” Gale scolded her, “be serious.”

“Focus, Cammy,” Erron said.

Cade sighed and remained silent. Still at odds with himself and the nature of the mission that he was a part of, as he did not deem it right by the stalwart rule of law precepts that he was raised under.

“Sorry Boss—but really, is that the best name you could come up with? Team Royale would’ve worked better, to be honest,” Cameron expressed her opinion.

“Whatever, Cammy,” Erron responded, “not like it matters.”

“Next time let me choose the name of the teams.”

Gale tapped Cameron’s arm as a way for her to keep the voice line quiet.

Cameron began to feel a bit anxious, and she kept tapping her feet as the driver departed the premises of the National Intelligence Center. She tried to adjust her suit several times, much to Gale’s dismay.

“What’s the matter?” Gale asked Cameron.

“It’s this suit,” Cameron responded, “it’s too damn tight—why did you have to choose these? I’m not as slender as you . . .” she added as she tried to stretch it once more to no avail.

“Stop eating so much junk then,” Gale said to her friend.

“Hmph,” Cameron gave Gale a mean look.

A brief moment of silence followed the journey. King Sulwyn Starsong took advantage of it to share a few words with both halves of the operation.

“Good evening. I won’t get in the way of your mission, as I promised I’d be a mere spectator. Before it all begins I just wanted to remind you all that you have my undivided trust and confidence in this, and in all future operations. I’m sure this risky venture will yield positive fruits that will get us one step closer to ending the threat of the Ashen Reckoning,” The King's words were heard by every one of them, including his son and his daughter.

“Thanks for the confidence placed in us, King Sulwyng,” Erron responded, “we won’t let you down.”

“Show our King what Gestalt can do,” Director James Exley said. He sat next to Leah in the Operations room. Both of them were joined by Edram Pertz seconds later.

“Vaifen will thank you for your service—this I promise. For the Nation!” the King exclaimed.

“For Vaifen!” the five members of Gestalt responded in unison.

“Break a leg, guys,” Princess Vesper said to the Gestalt team.

Cameron cleared her throat before speaking, “Princess Vesper, sorry—I know it’s not the time, but don’t forget, when this is over, you need to help me get Leah a makeover,” she said

“Cammy!” Leah blushed in embarrassment.

“That girl is in a dire need of a wardrobe revamp,” Cameron added.

Vesper laughed, “It’ll be my pleasure, Cameron,” she responded with joy.

Bastiel covered his mouth and laughed.

Aside from an ongoing conversation between Prince Seyren and his date, the Lady Alice Valleires, both halves of the operation continued towards their destination in silence. Both groups traversed through different streets of Ternion, yet united in one purpose.

Princess Vesper looked through the vehicle's window, gazing at the city's sights as the dark night covered Ternion with its blanket. What she saw reminded her of the one thing the crown had deprived her off—a normal life.

It was just a mere glimpse of the nocturnal life in Ternion, enough to jog Vesper's mind. People going on their usual lives, a few couples smiling, laughter, having a good, worrisome-free time, traffic jams—all small fragments of normalcy, a life that she never had the privilege of having. Vesper had always wondered what it would be like to have a normal life, away from the sheltered one she had to live through as part of the Royal Family.

The Princess started to pick her nose, as if something was troubling her. Vesper's facial expressions denoted a growing jittery, she looked up and took a deep breath. Bastiel caught notice of her apparent state of discomfort.

“Nervous?” Bastiel asked her, breaking the growing ice in the vehicle.

“Me? No,” said a distracted Vesper, “just mentally preparing myself to deal with the pompous and insipid nobility stuck ups—especially Miranda, she's such a bitch,” the Princess shook her head before realizing that she had unconsciously given verbal form to one of her thoughts.

“Woah!” Cameron exclaimed, surprised that the Princess of the Nation, ever so pristine and elegant, was capable of such a vocabulary.

Erron's chuckle could be faintly heard by everyone. Prince Seyren also chortled all of a sudden, a behavior that his companion found strange.

“Excuse the language, my friends, but between us—it’s true,” Vesper apologized. Had the fact that she was in an open and linked voice channel for the operation not slipped out of her mind she would have used a more modest adjective.

Bastiel tilted his head towards her, “Aw come on, Vee, it can’t be that bad,” he had always been aware of the Princess’s lack of good sentiments towards the nobility caste that existed in the Nation of Vaifen.

“You poor and naïve alien boy . . .” Vesper sarcastically said as she tapped his shoulder, “you’ll see, they’re all arrogant, vain, and simply unbearable, but Miranda . . . she’s is one of the worst there is,” Vesper had no qualms to disclose her dislike of Vaifen’s nobility elite.

The vehicle that carried the Gestalt team stopped at a discrete and poorly illuminated location. The team stepped off the vehicle and stood in front of a light blue food delivery truck that had been previously prepared for the mission. The delivery vehicle had been masqueraded to mimic the ones from an electrical company that provided the Nouveaux Tech facility with repair services.

As part of the plan, Cameron used one of her backdoors to sabotage the facility’s control systems and make them report a problem with the facility’s electric grid that needed urgent fixing.

Thanks to General James Exley’s arrangements—carried out through extra-official means and without the Intelligence Center’s knowledge—the call was intercepted and the Gestalt team was taking the place of the regular nightly repair crew, granting the team a concealed entryway into the targeted facility.

Erron, Cade, Gale, and Cameron wore blue overalls with the company's logo on top of their infiltration suits, along with the respective light blue hats. Their weapons and equipment had been previously concealed in toolboxes that sported the electrical company's logo.

"Team Hack is now onboard the dummy truck," Erron announced as he got on the truck's driver seat and switched the ignition on.

"Excellent, proceed with the next phase," Exley said to Erron.

As the dummy truck began its march, the royal caravan approached the Ashcroft Estate. The Estate was one of the largest mansions in all of Vaifen, its luxury had nothing to envy even the Royal Palace itself.

The two main vehicles stopped, its doors remained locked while Royal Security agents stepped outside and joined a small contingent of their fellow agents that had arrived hours ago in order to secure the premises.

"Team Heist has arrived to the party," Bastiel announced to Gestalt operations. "Get ready Seyren, Vesper," he said to the royal heirs through the comm link as agents opened the doors of both vehicles. Bastiel placed his left hand on top of the Princess' right hand and she winked at him in response.

The four of them stepped off the two vehicles in unison; the group was nearly blinded by all the camera flashes that captured their arrival. As dictated by protocol, Seyren and his companion walked in first, as the Prince was the heir-apparent to the throne. His sister, and the white haired Nasivern dressed in crimson red followed right behind.

"Ladies and Gentlemen—The Prince and Princess of the Royal House of Starsong: Prince Seyren Starsong and Princess Vesper Starsong," a male voice loudly announced to everyone present.

The ceremonial welcome received a musical background at the hands of the solemn notes of Vaifen's national anthem, which began to play as the royal guests walked on top of a red carpet. The anthem, as loud and ominous as it was, was obfuscated by all the chatter and the ravenous cacophony of the media journalists that desperately wanted a few words from the Royal Heirs themselves.

The Prince, the Princess, and their two companions continued to walk through the red carpet; a squadron of Royal Security agents guarded the perimeter while keeping distance from the event's attendants, their authority displaced and superseded that of the private security group hired by the organizers—a non-negotiable imposition made by Royal Security.

An obscene number of cameras continued to take photographs and video recordings of the arrival of the Royal Heirs to the prestigious charity ballroom, an unprecedented occurrence in the yearly charity event.

Prince Seyren was enjoying every moment of his grandiose entrance, saluting everyone with much enthusiasm. His date, Alice Valleires, was mesmerized, she felt like royalty, as all eyes were upon her and the charming Prince.

Princess Vesper pretended to be half as ecstatic as her brother was, she was focused on the true purpose of her visit instead. Vesper nonetheless graced everyone with her beautiful smile and modest hand gestures, poking Bastiel with her elbow with subtlety so that he'd also wave his hand.

“I could get used to this,” Bastiel whispered to Vesper in between smiles. Despite being so close to the royal family of Vaifen he never was one to participate in events of such nature.

“Don't get cocky now,” Vesper replied as she continued to wave her hand in salutation.

The quartet entered the mansion and were received by the hosts: the Ashcroft family. Lady Miranda Ashcroft welcomed the royal heirs and their companions on behalf of her family; she was the oldest daughter of Lord Albert Ashcroft, and the new face of the family, as well as the host of the event.

Miranda was equal in height to Princess Vesper. She wore a stylized silken black dress and was adorned with an excessive amount of golden jewelry: Four rings distributed across her two hands, large earrings, a necklace, a small golden chain that ran across the dress, and equally golden clips that adorned the dark strands of her short hair.

A large group of people that were attending the event gathered around to observe the ceremonial greeting, with a majority of them belonging to the Nobility caste of Vaifen. The list of distinguished guests also ranged from diplomatic officials stationed in Ternion to celebrities, from artists to musicians—even a handful of members of the government of Vaifen and Senators were among those invited to the Ashcroft estate that night.

“My Prince! My Princess!” said Miranda as she bowed to them, “what an honor, what an honor!” she exclaimed as she placed her hands together, smiling at the royal heirs.

“Good evening, Miranda,” Vesper was the first one to answer her greeting.

“Hello there!” Seyren exclaimed with enthusiasm.

“Words cannot express how honored the Ashcroft family is right now,” Miranda responded. “At last, our prestigious ballroom finally counts with the graceful presence of the Royal House of Starsong.”

Seyren responded to Miranda’s greeting, “Let’s just say that the time was finally right—our schedules aligned at last, my dear Miranda,” his words were accompanied by a gentle wink.

“Princess Vesper!” Miranda gazed at her, “if I may have a comment—you look even more radiant and beautiful than usual. That dress is just sublime! Magnificent!” she said to the Princess as she gestured with her two hands.

The Princess had barely been there for no more than five minutes and she already had enough of what she considered ‘fake sycophancy’ from Miranda—and by proxy—enough of all of the nobility present for all she cared, even if they had yet to exchange words with her.

Cameron, as well as the rest of the Gestalt team, heard Miranda’s words through the microphone embedded on the Princess’s jewelry.

The tech specialist couldn’t stop herself from letting her opinion known to the group.

“Damn, girl, she’s jealous of you, Princess Vesper!” She said through the shared voice link. Her spontaneous comment was merely a verbal way to further mask out some of the anxiousness and nervousness she felt as the dummy vehicle got closer to the Nouveaux Tech facility.

“Shh,” Gale hushed Cameron.

Bastiel nearly busted out laughing, he quickly covered his mouth to contain himself and faked a cough to cover it up.

Even Vesper remained silent for a few seconds, she wasn’t expecting such an unbidden comment, but found it most hilarious and eloquent, “Ye—yes, thank you Miranda,” she finally replied to the host of the venue.

Miranda Ashcroft gazed upon the Prince’s companion, the lady Alice Valeires, “Alice!” Miranda exclaimed to her, in apparent surprise. “So, you are the Prince’s date for tonight, everyone will be jealous of you this evening, my friend, that I am most sure of!”

“Good evening, Miranda.” a smiling Alice replied, the two daughters of the nobility greeted each other as they had done so many times in the past.

Cameron once again spoke her mind, “Jealous? You mean like she is right now? Cause damn, could you be more obvious? ”

“Cameron!” Gale exclaimed. She was starting to feel like she was Cameron’s mother. She gently slapped Cameron’s left leg in order to make her stop from issuing further comments.

Bastiel once again coughed to conceal his laughter, but this time his gesture was louder, and didn’t go unnoticed.

“Are you alright, sir?” Miranda asked Bastiel, “I don’t think we’ve met before . . .”

“Yes, yes—sorry. It must be the weather, it’s a bit chilly tonight,” Bastiel lied. “Right, we haven’t met before, Bastiel Isthel,” he extended his right hand at the host.

“A pleasure meeting you, Mister Isthel,” Miranda said as she shook hands with him, “that’s quite the unique attire. Red, so vivid, I love it!”

Bastiel smirked and winked, “Nasivern fashion.”

Miranda simply chuckled in response.

While Miranda’s father, the famed Lord Albert Ashcroft, along with his wife, and his youngest son saluted and welcomed the royal heirs, Bastiel overheard a voice that emanated from his right side as the guests of honor continued to exchange words with the hosts.

“Would you look at that—the Starsongs bought their alien pet,” said a voice amidst laughter and murmurs, “with a funny costume and everything.”

“That disguise is just, ugh, I didn’t know this year was going to be a costume party,” said a snobbish sounding voice from another point in the same crowd.

Bastiel wasn't able to identify the authors of both comments from all the chatter going on around him and acted as if he hadn't heard anything. The mission was all that mattered for him.

Lord Albert Ashcroft greeted an absent minded Bastiel, who was seemingly distracted from the words he had just heard despite his efforts to stay focused.

"Isthal. I met your father once. Aeoros was a fantastic individual," those were the only words from Lord Albert Ashcroft that the Nasivern managed to pay attention to.

"Indeed, he was. This nation owes my father so much," Bastiel replied loudly as he shook the hand of the head of the Ashcroft family. He hoped that the two persons that had just passed comments about him heard his words. "A pleasure meeting you, Lord Ashcroft."

"It is unfortunate that his Majesty couldn't attend," Albert's wife said to the Prince heir.

"Oh, you know my father, always working for the Nation," Seyren replied, "but hey, at least we finally made it, right?" he added in jest as he gestured with his two open arms.

"Yes, and we're most pleased to have you with us tonight, my Prince." Miranda replied.

The Lord of the house, Albert Aschcroft, addressed the guests of honor, "Please, be welcomed to our Estate. This is your first time in our house, let us give you a tour before the main event begins," he said, "if that is alright with you, my Prince, my Princess?"

"Absolutely!" Prince Seyren said without hesitation.

"Hopefully this won't be the last time we are visited by the royal family!" Miranda commented.

"Let's hope not," Seyren responded.

"First and last time, I hope," Vesper thought to herself. She really desired to give verbal form to her thoughts—to have her mouth freed from the shackles of the royal modesties that

prevented her from speaking her mind on so many occasions, but she knew better, and maintained her royal diplomacy ever so solid.

Bastiel noticed that Vesper was a bit distraught with all the faux pleasantries, the two of them remained silent as the quartet was given a tour of the Estate.

The Ashcroft Estate was a monument to the excessive and the ostentatious. Massive golden chandeliers hung from the ceiling, their purpose was less about functionality, and served as more of a testament to the opulence of the Ashcroft family itself, who seemed to be very fond of all things made of gold, a prevalent element of that family's personal brand.

"Prince Seyren, Princess Vesper, and most distinguished guests . . . welcome to the Ashcroft Estate," said Albert Ashcroft with open arms as he guided the royal family and guests through his home.

A sizable portion of the mansion's inner infrastructure had been dedicated to serve as their private art gallery, it was filled to the brim with paintings, jars, sculptures, and many other pieces of art collected by the Ashcrofts throughout the years.

Albert Ashcroft, along with his daughter, described with fine detail every painting and every piece of art in their gallery with overflowing hubris and vanity to their important guests. Bastiel paid no attention to their words; he didn't care who had painted that ugly portrait nor how much it was valued at the market—not in the slightest.

Even though the negative comments about him and his origins that he had overheard were still quite latent in his thoughts, he was focused on finding his target: Jonathan Foster, the eccentric CEO of Nouveaux Tech—but the man had yet to arrive at the event.

Bastiel began to worry, and wondered whether or not Foster would attend the event or not. Without him, all of their preparation would be for naught, and it would all be one giant and resource costly embarrassment for Gestalt.

“Boss, we’re now past the first checkpoint,” Erron announced to the operations room. “Any sign of Foster yet?” He asked.

“Negative,” Operator Leah Sutherland replied to the Commander, “although according to his schedule, he should be on the way.”

The guided tour of the Ashcroft galleries went on and seemed to have no apparent end. Lord Albert Ashcroft proudly described a set of paintings to the royal heirs, emphasizing how expensive and unique the over two centuries old set was.

Albert Ashcroft’s words had finally started to bore Prince Seyren out, which was noticed by the Lord of the house.

“And now for something more ‘deadlier’ and not for the faint of heart,” Albert Ashcroft’s words were indented to permeate their guests with an aura of intrigue, unaware that he was unsuccessful in doing so, “our war collection.”

The tour arrived at a section of the gallery dedicated to ancient weaponry. Swords, axes, staves, polearms, bows, cannons, the collection had it all. Bastiel immediately noticed that all of the weapons had been renovated—or defaced in his opinion.

Their ancient emblazonments and original hilts that denoted their origins and age had been replaced by newer and sterile designs, some more bathed in gold and black than others, but all just as tasteless in his opinion.

“Cool, cool!” Prince Seyren exclaimed. “These are your thing, am I right, Bastiel?” he tapped a disgusted Bastiel’s arm with his elbow.

“Is that so, young Isthall?” Asked Lord Albert Ashcroft.

Bastiel clicked his tongue, “Yeah, I may know a thing or two about weapons,” he replied.

“I’d expect nothing else from the son of the ‘Indigo Blaze’ himself,” responded Albert.

Without saying further words, the Lord of the House of Ashcroft took a sword out of its stand and handed it over to Bastiel, who unsheathed it and observed it with fine detail.

“Have a look at this remarkable sword,” said the Lord to the Nasivern.

It didn’t took Bastiel long to pinpoint and recognize the sword’s origins, for it was that of himself—Nasivern.

Just like every other weapon around him, the blade he held in his hands had been given the Ashcroft mistreatment of gold and black; the shape and pattern of the original symmetrical etchings on the blade, which were an unmistakable mark of Nasivern craft, still remained, now covered with disrespectful gold.

The original scabbard, which would have determined the age and exact craftsmanship origin of the weapon, had been discarded and replaced with a black leather one that had a handful of jewels encrusted, with a golden curved embroidery that danced around the colorful gems. The hilt had been completely remodeled—now etched with jewels and bathed in gold.

“This one was sold to me by a Nasivern exile,” Lord Ashcroft said, “he did not wish to part ways with it, the sentimental man, but that man—Nasivern—found himself in a dire situation, and I was happy to have engaged in a successful barter with him,” the Lord continued to explain to his guests. “I gave it a new hilt and a new scabbard to match my arsenal of war.”

Bastiel was distraught, appalled, and angered at the crime committed by the man in front of him. A Nasivern weapon was a piece of history, a fragment of what little existed of the

Nasivern people in the planet Orbis—for the rest remained buried beneath the ruins of their home world.

Lord Ashcroft's indulgence had tarnished what was once a fine weapon. A defaced remnant of the Nasivern, stripped of its pride, legacy, honor, and glory, now rested alongside weapons from Orbis' past that had suffered the same terrible fate.

Bastiel's gaze moved from the sword in his hands, and straight into the Lord's eyes, "Do you mind if I dance with it?" he requested.

"Dance? Oh!" Lord Ashcroft exclaimed, "by all means, young Isthali."

Lord Ashcroft waved his hands, and the crowd made distance between themselves and Bastiel.

"Really?" Princess Vesper muttered, she wanted to roll her eyes but once again, her royal composure prevented her from expressing with freedom.

Bastiel unsheathed the sword, and danced with it like he said he would. His graceful and precise strikes, together with the swift movements of his entire body, awed the spectators. The jewels that had been etched to the hilt, made holding and wielding the sword a rather uncomfortable experience, they definitely felt like a nuisance in the Nasivern's hands.

The white haired warrior seized the moment to silently remind those present of the prowess of the Nasivern and the sublimeness of the Absolute Doctrine—the symphony of life and death that the spectators would never embrace—through each twist of the blade, each spin of his body, and with the flow of his limbs. Bastiel's brief demonstration ended once he sheathed the sword and returned it to its owner.

The audience did not react to Bastiel's performance—until the Prince heir of the Nation clapped with vigor.

“My man knows his stuff!” Exclaimed Prince Seyren. He leaned towards a guest and joked, “that’s why you shouldn’t ever get on my bad side, or I’ll have him slice you . . .”

The words of the prince startled the guest.

“I’m kidding, chill,” the Prince said to him with a chortle.

“Impressive, most impressive,” Said Lord Ashcroft, who then gazed upon the royal heirs, “So, what do you think of our collection, my Prince—my Princess?” Albert asked them, “it is impressive, isn’t it?”

Bastiel Isthall took the initiative and gave his own opinion before Seyren was able to even open his mouth.

“With all due respect, Lord Ashcroft, it is quite the numerous collection you got there, but I’ve seen better ones—with far better treatment and respect,” Bastiel responded, “I’m not a fan of this ‘Ashcroftization’ you’ve done to them in all honesty.”

Bastiel felt like he had to speak for the weapons that laid around him—for they were unable to defend themselves on their own, especially after the defilement of a Nasivern blade, which he was still most displeased about.

Lord Ashcroft was not used to receiving negative comments with regards to any piece of its vast collection, whether it was the art pieces or the weapons, or even negative comments of any kinds with regards to his actions. It was quite possible that his close acquaintances and those under his payroll never dared to speak negatively towards him for a myriad of reasons; he felt disturbed, and displeased, Albert Ashcroft certainly was not prepared for that kind of criticism, or any for that matter.

“Well, young Isthall. The renovations and improvements done to these weapons have increased their value by at least a hundredfold,” he said in his justification, “they would just be metal junk otherwise.”

Bastiel stared at the owner of the Ashcroft collection with visible disgust emanating from his gray eyes, “It’s not the gold emblazoned on the hilt that gives them any value,” he said, “it’s the history of the weapon. Every weapon has a story—a fancy sword is just that, fancy.”

The Nasivern guest now had the attention of those surrounding him, even those listening through his microphone at the Gestalt Enclave; King Sulwyn Starsong, the silent spectator of the mission, was a bit perplexed and curious about the words that his protégé would say.

“The battles a weapon has fought in, the men and women who wielded them, the blood they drew from their enemies, the conquests, the nations and people that they saved—or destroyed. That’s what makes a weapon valuable beyond money and riches, it is their history and legacy, the path carved with them, not the adornments added afterwards, that I know for sure—part of the doctrine of the Nasivern warriors of old,” Bastiel gave an invaluable lesson to the now offended man, one that could not be measured in coin or material possessions.

“Bold words, I take it you have a—small collection of your own then? If you’re such an apparent connoisseur of weapons, that is,” said Albert with a hint of disdain towards his now bothersome guest.

“Mine isn’t about quantity sir—Lord—it’s about quality and legacy, which, no offense, is what your ‘arsenal’ seems to lack,” Bastiel said with pride and his head up high.

“Is that so? If you ever feel like selling I could take a look at what you have, see if it’s worthy of—my collection,” said the host with a sneer. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll throw a nice bonus, more than my usual rate,” he waved his right hand in a condescending manner.

Bastiel felt slightly offended by Lord Ashcroft's words, "I only have but one, but with all due respect, it's beyond your budget," he gloated.

Quartermaster Edram Pertz broke silence and spoke through his seat in the operations room, "Damn, how will he ever recover from that?" fully aware of what sword Bastiel was referring to—Avalon, the heirloom sword of his family.

The tension between the white haired Nasivern and the white haired head of the Ashcroft family was palpable in the environment. The crowd's murmurs and mutters began to multiply at an accelerating rate as the two men stared and frowned at each other.

Lady Miranda Ashcroft stepped in to break the nascent dispute before it further escalated into a full blown scandal right amidst their opulent and prestigious ballroom.

"My Prince, Princess, guests, please join me in the hall for some refreshments and snacks before we dance!" she extended her right hand to point towards the central area of the Estate, where the majority of the guests were at.

"That'd be great, Miranda," said the Prince.

"Yes, yes, of course, of course," said a bewildered Vesper.

Bastiel Isthall and Albert Ashcroft stepped back, each one walking towards their respective group. Miranda Ashcroft exhaled deeply. She felt like she had defused a bomb a mere second before its detonation.

The Prince and his date were the first to walk towards the area pointed by their host, followed by Vesper and Bastiel. As they almost caught up with their peers, Vesper stopped; she waited until there were no eyes upon them and pulled the Nasivern by his arm.

"What the hell was all that about?" An angered Vesper whispered into his right ear, "are you insane?" she added.

“Did you not see what he did? He ruined all those weapons,” he whispered back at her.

“So?” The Princess stopped her words to wave and salute a pair of guests that had approached them. “We’re not here to make public note of their insufferable lack of taste and cause a scandal while at it—you made me come here for your mission, remember?”

“I know, but the Nasivern blade . . . never mind . . .” Bastiel exhaled deeply and calmed down. “Whatever, sorry, let’s go find our target.”

The couple joined the gathering of guests and acted as normal as possible, tasting a few small appetizers and having a few drinks whilst mingling and chatting with the guests. Of the four royal guests, Bastiel was the one that conversed the least—socializing with strangers was never a strong attribute for him. He excused himself out of a conversation in more than one opportunity as he scouted the area for his target, with his gray eyes fixated upon every new guest arrival.

Meanwhile, the Gestalt team had arrived at their destination. The delivery vehicle that Erron Leitner drove had reached the gates of the Nouveaux Tech data center. As requested by the security guard stationed at its gate, Erron handed over a set of fake identification cards and a manifesto detailing the emergency work they were allegedly going to perform during the night.

The guard let the vehicle pass and Erron found a place to park, he opened its rear doors, and the rest of the team got off from it. They proceeded to unload a series of toolboxes and equipment; guided by the building’s stolen layout blueprints, made their way into the facility.

“General,” Erron Leitner beckoned Director Exley, “we’re commencing the infiltration of the facility,” he informed the status of their progress, “from this point onwards Gale has the lead.”

The former spy and yellow member of Gestalt nodded at the blue leader.

“Excellent,” Director James Exley replied, “proceed as planned.”

“Foster arrived yet?” Erron asked.

“Negative, Commander,” replied Operator Leah.

“Without Foster we have nothing, he better show up, heist team is behind schedule,”

Erron commented.

“Please continue with the plan,” Exley said. “Our other actors will carry out their part as soon as the target arrives.”

At the Ashcroft Ballroom, Bastiel Isthel continued to be on the lookout for his target while the royal heirs were occupied conversing with the attendees, and enduring their rampant sycophancy. Glasses of a champagne most fine and expensive began to be served to all guests.

One by one, more attendees began to arrive at the Estate while Bastiel continued to enjoy his drink in solitude. At a corner, a woman played a golden harp, the nimble and graceful strokes of her musical instrument produced a sublime and immaculate melody for the enjoyment of the attendees. Her amazing performance deserved far more attention than what she was receiving from the indifferent guests.

The minutes passed until at last, Jonathan Foster, the CEO of Nouveaux Tech, had finally arrived at the Ashcroft Estate.

“Guys, I see Foster,” Prince Seyren whispered with his eyes fixated upon the prized target.

“Well, you know what to do,” Vesper said to her brother as she was approached by an old acquaintance of hers.

“Yeah, you’re the closest to him right now—Vesper is occupied,” Bastiel instructed the Prince, “I’m on my way.”

Seyren had his eyes set upon his prey, “Oh shit . . .” he muttered as he stopped midway.

“What?” Bastiel murmured as he tried to inconspicuously make his way through a small crowd.

“Oh shit guys—you’re not gonna like this,” Seyren mumbled without barely moving his lips.

“Just say it already,” Bastiel replied in whispers after he had just apologized to a man for almost tripping over him.

“He’s wearing gloves,” Seyren finally answered.

Bastiel had visual confirmation of Seyren’s claims, their target’s hands were indeed concealed by a pair of simple black gloves. “Shit,” he exclaimed, “go back, go back—” he said to the Prince.

It was too late though, Jonathan Foster caught a glimpse of the Prince, and walked towards him to finally meet and salute the Royal Heir of Vaifen.

Jonathan Foster and the Prince were of similar age. Jonathan had a meteoric career in the technology world, founding Nouveaux Tech at a young age, a company that grew up to be one of the world’s leading and most innovative technological conglomerates at such a rapid pace; it easily surpassed and displaced longtime established enterprises of long tradition across the world.

“Cameron, Leah, you assured us that he was not going to be wearing gloves—the whole plan relied on that!” General Exley demanded answers after such a glaring but simple flaw to their carefully constructed plan.

“Sir I—I had access to his agenda, the guy is a control freak and organizes everything, even the socks he wears, it can’t be!” Cameron was perplexed and speechless. She and the trio

escorting her through the Nouveaux facility hid in a corner to see if everything could be sorted out before proceeding.

“I concur, General.” Leah stepped forward. “Foster is eccentric and plans everything, we even cross-referenced all of his appearances with his agenda and there was zero error margin,” the young analyst explained.

“The weather perhaps, it is kinda chilly tonight,” Bastiel said his wild hypothesis.

“That—that might be it!” Cameron exclaimed, “dammit!”

“So you’re telling me we’re committing a felony for nothing, that this whole plan has been beaten by a pair of gloves,” a dismayed Cade Saunders expressed with contempt.

“Continue executing the plan, Gestalt,” Director Exley instructed them.

“We’ll just have to improvise then,” Bastiel said. “Focus on getting Cammy to where she needs to be,” he witnessed the Prince and Foster shake hands.

“How then, Nasivern? Because—” a disgruntled Cade taunted Bastiel, who interrupted him mid-sentence.

“We’ll figure out something, Cade, shut up and hang on,” Bastiel said, “keep the line clear—just hang on.”

It was time for Jonathan Foster to salute Princess Vesper Starsong. The man showed quite the chivalry in doing so, bowing to the elegant Princess with grace and kissing her hand.

All of Foster’s fingertips were in contact with the Princess’s gloves, but no fingerprint was able to be obtained thanks to Jonathan’s gloves getting in the way.

“That would’ve been it . . .” Bastiel whispered to the shared voice link, lamenting the waste of such an easy opportunity, “damnit.”

“Damn,” Quartermaster Edram exclaimed as he ran his right hand through his hair, saddened that his state of the art technology was stopped by a mere layer of cloth.

Cameron tripped with Gale, “Ow!” she exclaimed, distracted by the chatter whilst moving forward. Cameron felt like she was to blame for the glaring flaw in the plan.

Erron placed her hand on Cameron’s shoulder, “Relax, I’m sure they’ll figure something out,” he said.

The Gestalt team continued their march disguised as electricians and carrying their toolboxes.

Bastiel rescued Vesper from the crowd she was surrounded by under a false pretense, not before grabbing new glasses of champagne for the two of them. The couple walked to a corner so that they could discuss a course of action in private.

Prince Seyren caught notice of the actions of his best friend and his sister; he excused himself from his date and from a group of diplomats that wished to exchange words with him, joining Bastiel and Vesper.

“Alright so . . . how do we make him get rid of the gloves?” Vesper asked the two of them.

All three of them looked at Foster as he interacted with Lady Miranda Ashcroft and her family.

“You could ask him,” Bastiel suggested.

Vesper tilted her head left and looked at Bastiel, “Without making it come off as weird,” she said to him.

The royal heirs and Bastiel remained silent for a few seconds, trying to concoct a plausible way to strip their target off his gloves and copy his fingerprints amidst a heavily packed

room. Many times in the past they've been in similar conundrums, nothing that a little mischief wouldn't solve—the times were now different, and they were no longer children, the safety of the Nation was in the line.

“I got it,” Seyren whispered, “I have an idea,” he said with all the confidence in the world.

“You ‘have’ an idea?” a bewildered Vesper asked with a sarcasm most evident, “you?”

Even Bastiel found the prospect of Seyren having an idea most strange, but as much as he desired to crack a witty joke at the Prince's expense he remained silent.

“Relax, sis,” Seyren said as he seized the glass of champagne from Vesper's hands, “I got this,” the Prince announced to everyone in the mission's voice link as he walked towards Jonathan Foster.

“Oh no, what is he doing?” Vesper could but only watch the actions of her brother.

Seyren was now within reach of Foster, “Yo, Jonathan! I forgot to—” the Prince pretended to have tripped on something and spilled the contents of the glass of champagne right on Foster's right hand.

“Oh crap!” Seyren yelled.

Royal security agents were swift to dash towards their Prince.

“I'm alright! I'm alright!” the Prince yelled. He used his hands to signal Royal Security to stand back

Either by a dumb stroke of luck or by an unusual display of skill, Seyren's gambit had indeed paid off, Jonathan Foster's right glove was now soaked wet. The Prince pretended to be in shock of his apparent mishap. The Ashcroft family was also in a complete state of disbelief and was speechless at the scene.

“Oh my—I’m so sorry, my dude!” Seyren apologized to Jonathan.

“It’s ok, Prince Seyren, no worries,” Jonathan said as he took his soaked right glove off.

Seyren snatched the doused glove from Foster’s hands, “Damn dude, I ruined them, didn’t I?” he said with a fake sense of regret.

“No, my Prince, you did not,” Foster responded, “like I said, it’s fine.”

“Nonsense! Just gimme the other one, I’ll have the pair cleaned up for you right away.”

“There’s no need Prince Seyren, again, it’s not a—” Foster said with modesty.

“I insist!”

Jonathan did not know how to proceed other than to comply with the Prince’s imperative and strange command, he took off his left glove and gave it to Prince Seyren.

The Prince beckoned a royal security agent and instructed him to send the set to the palace for ‘immediate emergency laundry’, he then took out a handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to Foster.

“Here man, dry your hand with it.”

No need—alright,” Jonathan Foster once again did as the Prince instructed, despite being confused by the Royal Heir’s actions.

“You sure I didn’t splashed your suit too?” Asked Seyren.

“No, you did not, Prince Seyren.”

The Prince extended his right hand, “Aight’ phew! No hard feelings, yeah?” said the prince as he offered a handshake with a smile on his face.

Jonathan accepted the Prince’s handshake. Seyren used his left hand to press Jonathan’s right hand against his so that his gloves would steal the much-coveted fingerprints.

Vesper and Bastiel were in complete awe as they observed Seyren's spectacle with open mouths. Vesper was first to snap from the amazement, she tilted her head left and looked at the still bewildered Bastiel; the Princess stole his glass of champagne right out of his hands.

"Hey now!" he exclaimed in response as the Princess gulped it all in one go.

"This is going to be a long night, isn't it?" Vesper said, she exhaled and handed over the now empty glass to Bastiel.

"Indeed," Bastiel responded, he frowned upon looking at the empty glass and left it next to a flowerpot that was located at his left.

Jonathan Foster excused himself from Prince Seyren as he went on to conversing with the hosts and other guests. Prince Seyren began to walk back to Vesper and Bastiel with a huge smug visage.

"Please tell me you all got that, my dear friends—that was a one-off for me," Seyren said to the Gestalt team and Operations room.

"We got it Prince Seyren!" Edram confirmed it. "Sending you the fingerprint data now, Cameron!"

"That's my Prince! Woo!" An enthusiastic Cameron exclaimed, "we're back in business baby!"

Erron and Gale took a deep breath while Cade remained silent.

"Nice job, Prince Seyren," Gale complimented him, "nice job indeed."

"Thank you, thank you," replied Seyren. The triumphant Prince approached his amazed sister, "who is the best? That's right, me!" He gloated.

"Not bad, not bad," responded the Princess, she let lose a faint smile.

“It’s not over yet,” Bastiel said, “we still need the biometric implant data—you should’ve talked to him more, just long enough to get it.”

“Yeah, yeah I know, but Miranda and her dad got in the way—we still have time, don’t we?” Said Seyren

“Well, you guys go do your royal mingle and get to Foster as soon as possible, don’t forget that you also have a date to take care of, Seyren” Bastiel said to the two royal heirs as he pointed towards Alice’s location across the vast room, “you’re the one that insisted to bring her along.”

“And what are you going to do then?” Seyren asked.

“Me? I’m getting myself a drink, I’ll catch you two in a bit,” said Bastiel as he walked away.

The royal heirs returned to the center of the party in an attempt to engage with Jonathan Foster and hijack the biometric data from his implants, but they were unable to locate the notorious man amidst a sea of guests, many of which wanted to have words with the heirs of the Crown of Starsong.

The Gestalt quartet continued to delve into the facility. They took a left turn and headed towards the building’s camera control room instead of going to the area where they were supposed to carry out their work. Erron and Cade procured a small silenced handgun from the toolbox that each one carried. The firearms concealed within the toolboxes had been loaded with tranquilizer rounds, as no lethal ammunition was to be used in the infiltration mission and no casualties were allowed, no matter what. The largest toolbox contained a small computer device, and one Hawk Drone, instruments that Cameron Bennett—the Rhapsody—would employ in her hacking of Nouveaux’s network.

Erron opened the doors of the security control room, “Good evening!” he exclaimed as he aimed and shot at two of the guards inside.

Cade Saunder aimed his handgun at the third man in the room and shot a tranquilizer dart at him, incapacitating him almost instantly.

Cameron sat on the room’s main console and uploaded a script that disrupted the regular operation of the camera system, forcing them to transmit a looped video instead of a live feed—hence removing any possibility of the team being recorded as they further delved into the more secured levels of the facility.

“Coast is clear guys, we may proceed,” Cameron said to her peers after the program had been successfully executed.

Gale opened the large toolbox that she was carrying and took out the laptop and Hawk Drone, handing them over to Cameron. The quartet took off the blue overalls that they wore on top of their black infiltration suits, concealed their faces with black masks, and took the rest of the weapons they hid among the toolboxes.

“Alright, time to move on,” said Gale. “Cade, I’m counting on you to keep an eye on us with these cameras.”

“Yes, Lacroix,” responded Cade. While he was upset that he was once again relegated to a less active role in a mission, he shrugged it off as he did not agree with the illegal nature of the mission itself.

Gale, Erron, and Cameron continued to walk towards the server room, walking past the now hacked cameras.

“General,” Gale beckoned Exley, “we’re escorting the Rhapsody towards the server farm floor.”

Cameron had selected that particular Noveaux data center when she first danced with the idea of hacking the multinational company as part of her Rhapsody antics due to it being one of the least staffed ones in Vaifen. While it was small when compared to its sister locations, their servers had everything she needed to fulfil the theoretically impossible task of hacking the tech conglomerate's decentralized peer to peer network.

Gale, Erron, and Cameron continued their furtive march towards the server room, arriving at the first security checkpoint. Cameron connected her laptop device to a security panel and sat on the floor.

Time to show you all what I'm made of," she said to Gale and Erron as she began to frantically type commands.

Erron and Gale stood firm and watched over her.

"So, I've been meaning to ask you something, Cammy," Erron looked at her,

Cameron responded without looking away from her laptop's screen, "What's up?"

The usually carefree young woman was completely focused on what her computer device displayed, the slightest mistake could trigger the building's alarms—as well as Noveaux's global security systems.

"Why this particular facility? Noveaux has like a dozen of these just in Vaifen alone, right?" Asked Erron.

"Because my dear Andrew Deegan works here."

"Who?" Gale asked, "is that your boyfriend or something?"

Gale's question made Cameron stop for a moment, she raised her head and looked towards Gale, "Eww, no!" She answered. "Don't be silly now, he's the guy I social engineered my way into so he'd inadvertently planted the malware I'm exploiting right now,"

“Uh huh,” Erron pretended to have understood every word Cameron had just said, but he was utterly clueless by the terminology employed by his teammate.

“I can tell you all about him, and yet I’ve never met him in person,” Cameron said. “What he does, what he likes, what he browses online—it’s amazing, the amount of information we unwillingly give for free in our lives without even knowing, it’s more valuable than money even.”

“Spoken like a true spy,” Gale said in jest. “See, Erron, our little girl is growing.”

Cameron rolled her eyes, “C’mon now . . .”

Erron let loose a short laugh.

Cameron injected Jonathan Foster’s fingerprint data to the system and produced a clearance code, she then used the code to open the way to the lower reaches of the facility.

“Easy peasy,” Cameron said as she stood up from the floor.

“Let’s keep moving,” said Gale.

“Any luck getting that biometric data?” Cameron asked through the shared voice link, “it’s the last thing I’ll need—and I’ll really need it soon!”

“Not yet, Cammy.” Bastiel responded, “give Seyren and Vesper a lil’ more time—there’s too many people trying to talk to them.”

“Alright, alright, no pressure, but please do hurry Prince Seyren, Princess Vesper. Remember, just gotta be near him long enough for the device to sniff the signal out of his butt—or whenever he shoved up that chip,” Cameron replied, “talk to him about his company’s horrible overpriced products or something.”

Back at the Ashcroft Charity Ballroom. Bastiel, tipsy after having a few too many glasses of champagne, excused himself and walked towards the Ashcroft weapons gallery. He stood in

front of the defaced Nasivern sword that he had held in his hands. The man deeply desired to steal the weapon and do anything possible restore it to its former glory, and if possible, return it to its rightful owner—or keep it alongside Avalon if he was unable to locate the person that it first belonged to.

Bastiel also gazed upon the rest of the weapons in the gallery, which in his opinion had been as defiled and mistreated as the Nasivern blade. Once again, he faintly heard derogatory comments with regards to his attire and race amidst giggles which emanated from a crowd behind him.

The condescending, and most disdainful opinions of the nobility with regards of his Nasivern ethnicity had started to upset him more than he would ever admit, even more than the defilement of the weapon in front of him; his slight state of inebriation had done nothing but exacerbate his growing disgust.

Sebastian Ashcroft, the arrogant youngest son of the Ashcroft family, was among the nobility crowd where the tasteless comments towards Bastiel were emanating from. He approached the white haired Nasivern with an aura of superiority that was palpable at a distance.

“Amazed by their glory?” Sebastian asked.

“Eh, no—tasteless if you ask me,” answered Bastiel, unaware of the identity of his listener.

“Humph! Well I’m pretty sure that a person of your ‘status’ would find a legacy of this magnitude difficult to wrap around,” Sebastian said in disdain. He looked towards his group of people and winked at them behind Bastiel’s back.

Bastiel, who had enough of the whispers, the murmurs, the comments, decided that it was time to retaliate. The angered Nasivern turned around and looked at Sebastian with a menacing visage, as if Bastiel was ready to unmake him with his two bare hands.

“And what would you know about legacy?” Bastiel’s voice was as intimidating as his face.

“I beg your pardon?” the young Ashcroft was flummoxed at the Nasivern’s words.

Bastiel walked a single step towards the young man, “Ours is a legacy of conquest,” he exclaimed to a now startled Sebastian Ashcroft, “my people, the Nasivern, who your friends seem to despise and mock so much, were born in flames and sin; forged by them throughout millennia of strife before the humans of this planet even knew how to light a spark.”

The red member of Gestalt took another step forward towards his verbal aggressor, who stepped back.

Prince Seyren, who was sharing a drink with his date surrounded by a crowd excused himself for a moment to whisper through the shared voice link, “Dude, what the hell?”

The prince-heir’s comment fell on deaf ears.

Vesper’s reaction was to immediately begin to search for Bastiel’s whereabouts.

The commotion rapidly caught the attention of more attendees as more guests began to bear witness to the Nasivern’s words.

“My family shaped the history of the Nasivern and this Nation’s as well,” Bastiel continued his monologue, lashing out at the young Ashcroft, “my grandmother was the sword that pierced the heart of an empire!”

Lord Albert Ashcroft had approached the growing scandal in search of answers, the inebriated white-haired man in crimson red speaking in an elevated tone of voice was the first thing that his eyes gazed upon, with the royal heirs approaching the area further behind.

“Sebastian! What is going on here?” Albert Ashcroft demanded an answer from his son.

“Father, I just—” the scared young Ashcroft was interrupted by the Nasivern.

“Did you father ever wielded one of these in defense of Vaifen? In defense of any people? Has he ever wielded that axe over there to save any life? To sin with it to save others?” Bastiel said as he pointed towards his right, “at least one life perhaps? Of course not, he hasn’t.”

The Nasivern’s gray eyes pierced through a perplexed Lord Ashcroft.

A vexed Albert Ashcroft demanded an explanation, “What is the meaning of this, Isthel?”

“You all have these swords, have any of them changed history like Avalon did? Perhaps some of them did—before you erased their identity with your pathetic gold and horrible leatherwork,” Bastiel said with a raised voice tone.

Edram felt ecstatic upon listening to the word ‘Avalon’ that came out of Bastiel’s mouth, “that’s my crimson blaze, yes!” he exclaimed and clapped as he jumped off his chair.

Operator Leah Sutherland and Director James Exley both gave him a bizarre look. The overweight quartermaster, having embarrassed himself, quietly sat down on his seat.

“What’s going on, my dude?” Cameron asked through the shared voice link, “having a few too many drinks . . . sheesh,” Cameron commented as she was working her magic on another computer terminal.

Gale simply gestured with her head and hands in response.

“Just what in the world is happening to that guy?” a disgruntled Cade commented to himself.

“Shh, quiet, lemme hear,” Erron said.

“My father saved this nation during the war between Vaifen and Svarzfal, you’re all here, drinking and swirling in your decadent opulence thanks my people. We bailed your asses during that war,” Bastiel expressed to everyone in the room.

Princess Vesper, Prince Seyren, and Alice Valleires approached the commotion, they looked at Bastiel, and he looked back at them.

“And you have some amongst you with the audacity, or should I say, the balls, to call me names behind my back, to have a few laughs at my expense, and even dare to say that I’m nothing but the crown’s pet in a costume?” Bastiel said to his audience, pointing at a thin and tall mat amidst the crowd, “because I know it was you who said it earlier.”

The accused man was in shock, but Bastiel’s accusation was right, when the man had said some negative comments about him just a few seconds ago he recognized the voice to be the same one that referred to him as a ‘pet’ when he had arrived at the ballroom earlier that night.

“What say you, Lord Ashcroft, what is the legacy of your family then? Throwing parties and destroying weapons, smearing gold in anything and everything you can get your hands on?”

Lord Ashcroft tried to respond, but was not able to form words. Sebastian Ashcroft was just as bewildered as his father, who remained silent.

“Nothing? Figured as much,” Bastiel continued, he pointed at the man he had previously accused, “what is yours then? Being born in a rich family? Talking shit about your betters and assuming that they don’t hear you? Cause if that is the entire sum of your ambitions and aspirations—then good job, I guess.”

The man felt assaulted and intimidated by the menacing tone and visage of the Nasivern in crimson red.

Something inside Bastiel made him feel like he was free of the social burdens that he always found difficult to overcome. He enjoyed the terrified expressions of both the Ashcroft father and son, and wanted everyone to know how satisfied he felt by having inflicted them with genuine terror.

“This fear that you two are experiencing—remember it, forever.”

Lady Miranda Ashcroft approached her father and brother in the company of her mother; she was greatly offended by Bastiel’s scandal, but she knew her brother too well and presumed him to be at least partially culprit in the ordeal.

Had Bastiel not been the Royal Princess’ companion for the night, Miranda would’ve had him thrown out of the premises already. Her fury was boiling inside her body and her inability to do something about the troublesome guest devoured her from within.

“If only he wasn’t hiding in the Princess’ skirt,” Miranda thought to herself.

Princess Vesper and Prince Seyren stood next to their childhood friend as he would had done for them.

Miranda, unable to lash out at the Nasivern due to the presence of the Royal Heirs and the crowd gathered around them, withheld and moderated her words. It was the wisest approach for her, lest she’d look like a fool yelling at the Royal Heirs.

“Please continue to enjoy our most generous and warm hospitality . . . Mister Bastiel Isthel,” her words were filled to the brim with a palpable sense of disdain. She looked at him with a sharp visage that could cut through metal like a knife would do to a bar of butter, a gaze that Bastiel reciprocate in kind.

“The Ballroom dance will commence in a few minutes, I suggest that we all get ready for the main event this evening,” Miranda successfully pleaded to the crowd to join her in the main hall.

Bastiel, Seyren, Vesper, and Alice remained alone, the sea of whispers and murmurs from the attendees began to make distance from the royal guests.

“Damn dude, what got into you?” Seyren asked Bastiel as he scratched his head, “you at your face, you look so buzzed—I’d laugh but seriously, what happened to you?”

Before the Nasivern was able to respond to his Prince, Vesper raised her left hand and interrupted him.

“Seyren, Alice. Can I have a moment alone with Bastiel? Please?” she requested with that kindness that always had characterized her in public.

“Al—alright then, let’s go, my dear,” Seyren said to Alice, “I’ll see if I can smoothen Miranda and her family out with my natural charm.”

“You do you,” the sister said to her brother, “don’t forget to talk to your ‘friend’, you have a lot of catching up, right?”

“Of course, of course.”

Seyren and his date walked away, leaving Vesper alone with Bastiel.

“Vesper, I—” Bastiel wanted to sincerely apologize to her, but Vesper didn’t even let him speak.

“What the fu—what is even wrong with you?! Why would you yell at them like that and cause a scene right inside their house? Are you drunk or what?” Vesper was furious, she stood in front of Bastiel like a beast would to a defenseless prey, “did you forget why we’re even here in the first place?”

The Gestalt team and those in the operations rooms were treated to a fierce side of Princess Vesper Starsong that she would never demonstrate in public, one that she had no qualms in unleashing as she scolded and berated Bastiel as if she was her mother. At that moment, Vesper felt freed from the shackles of public modesty and was able to speak her mind.

“You were right, the nobility are a bunch of bitches, all of them,” Bastiel answered.

“I know, but that doesn’t excuse nor justifies throwing a tantrum like that,” Vesper responded, “Haven’t you learned anything yet?”

“Tantrum? Haven’t you heard what they’ve said about me all night?!” Bastiel exclaimed.

“And what do you think they say about me or Seyren in private? Or even Father? Don’t you think I’m not aware? They’re all a bunch of sniveling rats and snakes,” Vesper did a great effort to keep a lowered voice tone despite her latent anger. “Don’t ever let them get to you like that again—we’re better than them, and you know it.”

“Yeah, yeah, appearances, the Crown, all that stuff, I know,” Bastiel took a long sigh, “I’m out there busting my ass and risking my life so these runts can go on with their lives.”

“There’s absolutely no way in hell that I’m apologizing to Miranda, I’ll never give her that,” Vesper exclaimed, she rolled her eyes, and shuddered at the mere idea of doing such a thing.

Bastiel rolled his eyes at her as well, “Fine, I guess I’ll just—”

“And there’s no way in hell that I’m letting you apologize to them either,” she pressed her right index finger against Bastiel’s chest, “don’t you even dare . . .”

Vesper shook her head, she felt completely dismayed, she just wanted the night to finish already and go home and rest after Operation Midnight Rhapsody’s preparation had taken almost two weeks out of her busy life, but there was still one crucial objective left to complete.

“We came here for a reason, or did those weapons or the Ashcrofts make you forget? Whatever. I’ll just go in search for Foster on my own and finish this,” Vesper said with disappointment. “Just go stand on that balcony over there and relax—take a deep breath and sober up, I’ll see you when it’s time to do the stupid dance.”

The Princess began to walk away from Bastiel, “You’re freaking unbelievable, Bastiel Isthel . . .” Taking a page from her own advice, she took a deep breath to calm herself down, she did not want anyone in the party to see her angered, not even in the slightest, that’s a satisfaction she’d never give to the nobility nor to the Ashcroft family.

“Damn dude, you got royally own—” Cameron was about to unleash one of her eloquent comments regarding the matter, but Bastiel didn’t let her finish.

“Cammy, please, just do your thing, Rhapsody.”

Bastiel walked towards one of the Estate’s large balconies as Vesper had commanded him and stood there alone; thinking in solitude as he gazed upon the dark and calm night, a cold breeze caressed his face.

It was only then when it dawned upon him that everyone in the mission’s voice link had heard his outburst, including King Sulwyn Starsong himself, the silent spectator of Operation Midnight Rhapsody.

“Awesome, Bastiel, you made a fool out of yourself in front of everyone,” he thought, “the team and the King while at it—just great.”

He continued to be absorbed in his thoughts and was now bothered by a nascent but mild headache when he heard the sounds of a man’s slow clapping that approached him. The man happened to be none other but Jonathan Foster, the CEO of Nouveaux Tech, and the whole reason he was there that night.

“My man!” Jonathan Foster said to Bastiel as he continued to walk towards him while clapping with his hands, “that was something, phew!” Jonathan exclaimed, he opened his right hand and offered a Bastiel a friendly high-five.

Bastiel Isthel responded his high-five in kind, the rectangular device in his pocket vibrated when it detected the signal that emanated from Foster’s biometric implants.

“Yes! The device is picking Foster’s encrypted signal!” Edram Pertz exclaimed, “and it’s coming from—Bastiel’s receiver!”

Director Exley was surprised, “You know what to do then, Agent Isthel,” he said to him.

“Mister Jonathan Foster, right?” Bastiel greeted his target, “Bastiel Isthel, a pleasure.”

“Oh Please, Bastiel, drop the Mister—just Jonathan,” Foster replied with a charismatic smile.

Bastiel nodded, “Jonathan then.”

The renowned young CEO, who was slightly older than Bastiel, took out a cigarette and lit it up, enjoying the feeling of the nicotine coursing through its body as he stared into the magnificent sights that the balcony offered.

“What an interesting night, eh?” he said to Bastiel, “quite the show you made there.”

“Yeah,” Bastiel scratched his head, “sorry about that outburst, I just don’t know what happened to me back there—it’s long story to be honest. I wouldn’t even know where to begin explaining.”

Foster laughed, “Why would you be sorry? That was awesome! you made my night, dude,” he exclaimed.

“Signal hijacking is in progress, Bastiel,” Edram informed him, “keep it up!”

“It was about time that someone told these pretentious morons what’s what,” Foster continued.

Bastiel chuckled, “I suppose,” he responded.

Foster laughed again, “Someone had to do it already, glad it was you, you roasted them up good, dude.”

“Ten percent of the signal stream has been copied, keep talking to him,” Edram said to Bastiel.

“You say that as if it was easy,” Bastiel thought to himself. He wasn’t as eloquent and as nimble in establishing conversations with strangers unlike the royal heirs or the spontaneous Cameron Bennett herself.

“So, what made you come to this snore-fest?” Foster asked, “I presume it was the Royal family that dragged you here something? I’ve come to these for three years in a row and never seen you before, or them for that matter.”

“Well—I just got dragged along the way like you said,” Bastiel responded, “it’s not really my type of thing.”

“Twenty five percent now,” Edram commented.

Jonathan Foster smirked, “No kidding,” he said.

“And what about you?” Bastiel asked. “You don’t strike me as the guy that would enjoy something as pompous as this—that’s not the vibe I get from your company’s ads either,” he exaggerated a bit in his comment.

“You’re quite perceptive, dude,” Foster responded, “I’m only here because my company donates a hefty amount of money to these charities—might as well leech and drink some of the booze that I’m seemingly helping pay for, right?” he said amidst chuckles.

Bastiel laughed, “That’s an expensive way to drink, eh.”

Foster found Bastiel’s comment hilarious, “I know, right? I could just go to a bar and save myself some money,” he laughed out loud. “Ah! A breath of fresh air among these stuck up asses, finally someone interesting to chat with—besides the royal heirs of course; don’t get me wrong, but they’re kinda intimidating if you ask me,” Jonathan Foster gave his opinion.

“Nah, they’re great to be honest. They’re people just like you and me.”

Jonathan Foster continued to enjoy his cigarette, “I heard every word that you told to that asshole old prune, Albert Ashcroft, powerful words man. I’m moved, really,” he said.

“Thanks, I guess I couldn’t sit idly and have them look down on me because I’m a Nasivern,” Bastiel responded.

“Don’t let them. I’ve always been fascinated about the Nasivern, you guys changed our world and everything, yet people don’t seem to value that—we probably wouldn’t even be here right now if it weren’t for your kind,” Foster leaned towards the balcony. “Such a shame that your race had such a tragic end—you guys had some amazing tech, I mean, just what little we could learn from you guys gave us a giant leap forward,” he said.

“Sixty percent, Bastiel!” Edram once again informed the Nasivern on the progress of the signal hijacker.

“Hurry up!” Cameron exclaimed, “we’re almost to the server room.”

“Relax Cammy,” Erron said to her, “we’re on schedule.”

The young CEO turned around and looked at Bastiel, “I always heard rumors, you guys always had amazing stuff—but apparently your people had some real game-changing stuff in the works before it all went south two decades ago,” Foster commented, “you wouldn’t happen to

know anything about it now, would you? I mean, sorry if the question sounds a bit out of the blue, I know who your family was—so that’s why I’m asking if you know anything about that.”

Bastiel looked at his conversational partner, “Can’t say I know, Jonathan, sorry,” he responded, “I never got to meet my family.”

“Aw, I’m sorry about that—it was worth a shot, I guess,” he laughed.

Edram wasn’t fond of Foster’s comment, “He just wants us for our tech and the things we used to have! Everyone always—”

“Quiet, Edram,” Director Exley interrupted him, “calm down.” Exley had enough outbursts for the night. The Director of Vaifen’s Intelligence center took a pill to alleviate his headache.

Foster looked at the sky and pointed at the stars, “Just think about it, all the technology and cool stuff that must still be there in your home planet, buried forever.”

Bastiel looked at the skies above, “Maybe one day we’ll be able to go dig what’s left, we’ll see.”

“I know people have come up with some crazy nonsense—that you guys never fought and fell against the Estremoz, and that it’s all a very elaborate lie.”

“Of course it happened,” Bastiel rebutted with an obvious disagreeing tone. “We lost everything and almost everyone, but in return my people indirectly saved this planet.”

Foster said, “Nah man, I know it happened, I’m just saying that some crazy people think otherwise. Maybe Nouveaux will dabble into space exploration someday, who knows,” he added as he kept looking at the skies above.

“There! We have enough data to decrypt and replicate his biometrics, nice job Bastiel!” Edram informed everyone in the shared audio channel.

Cameron felt a strange sensation upon hearing those words, she was one step closer from accomplishing what no other hacker in the world had been able to do in the past—breaking in Nouveaux tech’s security. Now, the key she coveted for so long was within her grasp.

The Rhapsody was now one step closer from her prized goal as she continued to be escorted by Gale and Erron through the facility’s lower floors.

“Just imagine, if things had been different—what we could’ve accomplished together, Humans and Nasivern,” Foster spoke his mind.

“Indeed,” Bastiel muttered.

“But anyways, my friend. If you want advice from someone that has had to deal with these nobility assholes and all sorts of stuck up asses for some time now,” Foster paused for a moment to discard his cigarette, “don’t ever let them piss you off like that again. Always remember, it’s not who you are or where you come from, it’s what you can and do accomplish in this life that makes you rise above and be better than them.”

Foster’s words resonated with Bastiel, “Definitely man, I agree. We carve our own path,” the white haired Nasivern said.

“I was born poor, and now look at me; sure, a stroke of luck here and there, but I made it big beyond my wildest dreams,” Foster gloated with pride, “I have enough money that I could retire right now and not give a shit about anything else but I can make the world a better place through technology.”

Cameron shook her head upon hearing Foster’s words, “They all say that goddamned ‘making the world a better place’ line—give me a break,” she commented through the voice link, shaking her head once more.

“I’ll keep those words in mind,” Bastiel said. “Thanks, Jonathan.”

“You do that,” Jonathan Foster nodded at the white haired Nasivern, “by the way, that’s a kickass suit you’re wearing, I’m kinda jealous.”

“The Nasivern weren’t just warriors with cool tech and guided by faith—we had style as well,” Bastiel shrugged.

Foster laughed, he had sincerely enjoyed the brief conversation with Bastiel Isthali. He had forgotten what it was to have a conversation with a person—be it an acquaintance or a stranger, that wasn’t just a massive sycophant. Someone that, much like himself, didn’t fit with the environment.

The young CEO opened his state of the art foldable phone to check the time and some personal messages, “Alright, they’re going to be dancing soon, but there’s no way I’m doing that nonsense.”

“Well, you can always steal their booze while everyone’s busy dancing and all,” Bastiel jested.

“Dude, you read my mind!” Foster exclaimed, “time to get myself something stronger this time,” he added.

“Let me know if you find something good so I can have some of it,” Bastiel responded, “I could definitely use another drink or two now.”

Jonathan laughed once again, “Will do. See you around, dude, nice meeting you,” Foster bid his farewell.

“Likewise, Jonathan.”

Both of the men shook their hands, Jonathan left the balcony, leaving Bastiel Isthali in solitude.

“Well, that worked.” Bastiel exclaimed to those connected on the voice link.

“Good job, Agent Isthel.” Director Exley complimented him. He took a deep breath and relaxed.

Bastiel also received compliments from Cameron, Gale, and Erron. Even Prince Seyren chipped in with a faint and dissimulated whisper.

“Nice, who knew that you wilding out in public got things done,” Seyren said in jest.

“Whatever, Seyren,” Bastiel responded. “Did you get the signal, Eddie? Please tell me you did.”

“Yeah, I—wait, why? Hang on,” responded a confused Edram, “I think somethings wrong, you need to check the box in your pocket.”

“Eddie, you’re killing me here,” Bastiel said with concern, “don’t tell me that was for nothing. I don’t think I’ll have a chance that smooth again.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Edram assured him, “the device collected the data, but it crashed when sending the last fragment.”

“Are you kidding me?” Bastiel said with bewilderment.

“The data is safely there, just restart it so it sends it to us—but do it fast,” Edram exclaimed.

Bastiel gazed upon a group of people that were slowly approaching the balcony area, “People are coming here, I’m not going to do that in front of them.”

“Then go to a restroom or something!” Cameron yelled, “Geez!” Her nervousness was starting to affect her mood and it showed, she was so close to her moment of glory to have any bump in the road get in the way.

“Yeah, do that, and hurry—the dance is about to begin soon,” Princess Vesper whispered through the voice link, “Miranda is about to give her speech—and we’ll have to say a few words too, hurry.”

“Hang on, sheesh!” Bastiel said as he began to walk at an increased pace.

Bastiel entered the closest men’s restroom he could find. The Ashcroft family, who often threw parties and hosted numerous events at their Estate, had the bathroom commissioned with several private stalls so as to accommodate multiple users at once.

“Of course, even the sinks are golden . . .” Bastiel said to himself after laying eyes upon the row of four golden faucets at his left. He locked himself in the leftmost stall and procured the featureless rectangular device from his pocket.

“Alright, what do I do?” Asked Bastiel, “There’s a red light on the top.”

“Press the button next to the light until it shuts off, then press it again to restart it,” Edram explained, “it’ll do the rest on its own.”

Bastiel did as instructed, “Okay, Eddie, the red light is blinking, now what?”

“Just wait, it's sending—oh, the whole sequence again, well, hang on, let it run its course.”

Bastiel remained still for a few seconds. While he awaited, he took advantage of the fact that he was in front of a toilet and proceeded to take out his gloves and empty his bladder. The device vibrated once more a few seconds later.

“There, it’s green now,” Bastiel said to Edram.

“That’s it, we got it!” The Quartermaster exclaimed, “let me run the decrypt and send it to Cammy right away!”

“So, mission accomplished then?” Bastiel asked for confirmation.

“Mission accomplished, Agent Isthel,” Director Exley spoke, “congratulations.”

“You have a party to attend, Bastiel, we’ll take it from here,” Erron said, “the rest is up to Cammy now.”

“Yeah,” Cameron concurred, “just don’t wild out again, dude.”

Bastiel chose to respond with silence. He stepped out of the bathroom stall and was startled when he saw an overweight man using one of the bathroom’s sinks. The man stared at him with confusion and intrigue—it was more than evident that the man had heard him apparently speak to himself about red and green lights, as well as the mention of a mission.

“Oh, shit!” Bastiel thought, he needed a quick response to get out of the way.

Bastiel shrugged, “What, yours doesn’t blink?” he asked the flummoxed man, frowning at him.

The shocked man simply stood still and remained silent. Bastiel walked past by him and washed his hands on one of the four golden sinks.

“Geez, humans . . .” he shook his head in a faux sense of disbelief as he dried his hands with a paper towel and put on his gloves, exiting the bathroom afterwards.

“Wait, what?” Edram asked him.

“Nothing, never mind,” Bastiel responded. “On my way to the dance, stay safe, guys.”

By the time Bastiel had entered the Estate’s main hall and joined the ballroom’s participants, Lady Miranda Ashcroft and her family had already given their corresponding speech, words that were plagued with pretentiousness and sailing through a sea of lies and half-truths, in Princess Vesper’s opinion.

Vesper had rolled her eyes when Miranda talked about all the ‘hardships and sacrifices, lengths and extents’ that the Ashcroft family had endured over the previous year in order to aid

those in need. She found the Ashcroft family's statements to be disingenuous and utterly disgusting.

"The audacity of this bitch . . ." Vesper thought to herself as the guests applauded the host family at the closure of Miranda's delivery.

Prince Seyren and Princess Vesper also had to give a few words of their own in order to keep appearances and to comply with protocol. Seyren's speech was more moderate and simpler in tone, it was nonetheless infused with his carefree style, thanking Miranda and her family for their warm reception, and congratulating them on a successful charity fundraising.

Vesper, being more accustomed to public statements as the young head of the Starsong Foundation, started her speech just as her brother had done, thanking the hosts for their invitation, and then delivered some of the standard diplomatic phrases in her repertoire; but she also availed herself of the opportunity to publicly take stealth and subtle jabs at the Ashcroft family and those present, specially the nobility. It was her way to pay back the insults given to her date, Bastiel Isthali.

She succinctly reminded the Ashcroft family and everyone present that help was not just donations and fundraising parties between those that were the most sumptuous while patting their own backs, it also involved real action, being there for those in need in their most desperate hours, helping them build meaningful solutions to their problems, protecting their smiles, helping them shape their dreams, and guiding them towards a better tomorrow.

Those amidst the guests that vividly remembered the late Queen Ellene saw a reflection of the deceased Queen in the Princess' words. Vesper's delivery stole the spotlight, and was cheered noticeably more than her brother's, even more than the hosts' own speech, much to the discomfort of Lady Miranda Ashcroft.

Bastiel Isthall clapped alongside everyone else, the white haired Nasivern and the Royal Princess gazed at each other from afar. He excused himself as he navigated his way to Princess Vesper Starsong. The two of them then grabbed hands and walked towards the center of the hall.

“Took you long enough,” Vesper whispered, “I was beginning to think that you had chickened out of the dance.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t do that to you, Vee,” Bastiel responded with a smile, “I’m not going to leave the Princess without her dance partner—just imagine the headlines.”

“How thoughtful of you,” Vesper responded, “so, what did you think of my speech?” she asked him.

“You really pissed Miranda off, you should’ve seen her face,” Bastiel responded, “bunch of flustered peeps in the crowd too.”

“That’s how you do it, my dear Bastiel,” said Vesper, “with subtlety, not unleashing your emotions upfront like you did.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Bastiel rolled his eyes, “I’m a knight, not a spokesman.”

Lady Miranda Ashcroft and her family stood up from their central seats, she took a silver spoon and thrice tapped her glass of champagne with it, clearing her throat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please get ready for the annual ballroom,” Miranda announced.

Every couple participating in the ballroom dance got in position, grabbing their partners by their hands. The royal heirs and their partners were around the center of the stage; Bastiel tried to count the number of participants but lost count after the third dozen of couples. The handful of pre-approved photographers that were granted entry into the main hall readied themselves to capture every moment of the event with both images and videos.

“Let the dancing commence!” Lady Miranda Ashcroft exclaimed to the top of her lungs.

A group of musicians and performers began to play their repertoire of musical pieces, their melodies echoing through the vast and crowded hall as each participant began to dance with their respective partners in what could've been described as an elegant yet expensive choreography. Some danced with a natural nimbleness that others did not possess.

At the Nouveaux Tech facility, Erron Leitner and Gale Lacroix continued to escort Cameron Bennett through the corridors of the facility's lowest floor, it's rather sterile looking white and gray corridors illuminated by bright and intense white lights. One security guard patrolled the hallways, and Gale instructed her team to stand by.

She waited until the man turned around to rush towards him at full speed, by the time the man turned back and realized what was going on it was too late for him. Gale tackled him and dropped the guard to the floor, incapacitating him with her tights via a triangle chokehold.

Gale beckoned her two friends using her right hand as the guard began to faint.

"Damn . . ." Erron whispered, bewildered by Gale's actions.

"What?" Gale asked.

"Eh, nothing, nothing," Erron responded.

Cameron looked at the two of them, "You two are weird, you know?"

Erron moved the body of the unconscious man out of the way and they continued their journey further into the entrails of the server room. Three more more guards stood in the way, which were easily dealt with by Erron and Gale using their firearms loaded with tranquilizer rounds.

They finally reached the doors of the server room, which were made of a near impenetrable and reinforced steel.

"This is it, Cammy," Erron said to her as he tapped her back, "the moment of truth."

“You got this,” Gale expressed her confidence in Cameron’s abilities.

For a brief moment, Cameron considered the possibility of everything being just a vivid dream; there she was, at last, one door away from her prized goal—a Nouveaux relay server, the gateway to the entire Nouveaux database, it all felt so surreal to her.

Cameron bought the single hawk drone she carried with her online and loaded Jonathan Foster’s hijacked biometric data on it. The machine’s near field communication sensors replicated those inside Foster’s own body; Cameron also used some exploits of her own in order to successfully fool the server room’s security systems, but Foster’s copied biometric data was the absolute key required that glued everything together.

“Good evening, Jonathan,” spoke an automated message through a speaker above the door.

“Hello, hello!” Cameron said with joy as the doors of the server room unlocked.

The trio walked past the heavily reinforced doors.

“I wonder why don’t they just use a retinal scanner,” Erron asked, “I remember those still being all the rave not too long ago.”

“Because Foster believes that we’ll soon replace our eyes with cybernetic ones that can see through walls,” Cameron answered.

“Say what?” Erron replied, “you’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not even joking, Boss. Dude’s kinda weird like that,” Cameron commented with regards to Jonathan Foster.

Cameron gasped and smiled when she finally gazed upon the building’s main server tower. Long had she dreamed of getting access to one of its many sisters.

“Is this a dream, Boss, Gale?” She asked her friends as she placed her hands on top of the black and monolithic box, once again doubting if everything she was experiencing was real or if it was a practical joke of her imaginative mind.

“No, Cammy, this is definitely not a dream,” Gale answered her.

“It’s Showtime,” Erron concurred.

Cameron’s drone followed her as the doors of the server room closed behind, she pressed a button on the server and the machine’s front panel opened, revealing a large display, a keyboard, and a mouse.

She once again used the same tricks she employed at the door to falsify her identity, fooling the server into thinking that Jonathan Foster—and not someone else—was the person logging in, the only person within Nouveaux Tech’s systems to have absolute access to anything and everything in their network.

“It never occurred to Foster that someone could copy his ‘uncopyable’ master key, silly, silly Jonathan,” Cameron commented as she typed on the server’s keyboard, “gotta give Eddie credit for the device, very clever engineering and he pulled that up in record time. Hardware has never been my forte—but this, this,” she pointed at the screen, “this is my world.”

Cameron giggled and smiled, she felt like a child that had just entered the world’s largest toy store. The Rhapsody now had access to every single file that belonged to the tech conglomerate; there were so many directories and files—hundreds of thousands more than she had estimated.

Project files, products, and software that was yet to be released, things never before seen by the public; financial data and boring revenue projections that were of no interest to the young

woman. Every bit of data that belonged to Nouveaux Tech was within her grasp, and she now had full control over it.

“So, what’s all that?” Erron said as windows and tabs opened and closed on the screen at such a rapid pace while Cameron browsed through the server’s contents in an expeditious manner.

“Everything,” she muttered, utterly fascinated at the sheer amount of data that was now at her complete disposal.

“Just find what we’re looking for so we can get the hell outta here.” Erron commanded her.

“I—yeah, yeah,” Cameron responded, “just a sec.”

Erron, who was utterly clueless as to what was flashing through the server’s display, began to look around the cold, sterile, and brightly illuminated server room, “Damn, I’ve seen vaults full of gold and jewelry that are less secure than this room,” he commented.

“Get on with times, Gramps. This is the modern treasure,” Cameron replied as she gestured towards the screen with her both hands, “information, data, this is why the room is rigged with motion and thermal sensors, cameras, even the floor is pressure sensitive—but don’t worry, I disabled everything, of course,” she further explained.

“No kidding,” Erron muttered.

“This is the true form of power now, stronger than guns and military,” Cameron continued to speak without looking away from the server’s display. “The right person with the right information can topple a company—even an entire government—without firing a single bullet, all it takes is just one keyboard,” she exclaimed.

“Like you, Bennett?” Cade Saunders asked all the way from the security camera control room. He had his fair share of concern with regards to Cameron’s revelation as the legendary hacker ‘Rhapsody’, as well as the ominous words that he had just spoken.

“Perhaps,” Cameron responded, “but I’m not interested in that, not my thing. Besides, it’s too much of a complex subject for you old geezers,” she jested.

“Hey, I’m not that old,” Erron exclaimed.

“Alright, sure, whatever you say,” Cameron laughed. “There we go! The entire shipping data and schedules—look Boss,” she pointed to the screen, “these are just like the ones we found on that busted drive.”

“Good, grab them so we can go,” Erron said to her in response.

“But, just this?” Cameron asked. To have all that treasure in front of her, and only grab the equivalent of a golden coin in a sea of gold and diamonds was most disheartening for her.

“That’s what we are here for, right?” Erron said.

“Just get the things we need and let’s go, Cammy,” Gale instructed her, “nothing more, nothing less, don’t get any funny ideas and hurry.”

“Alright, fine . . .” Cameron sighed. During her browsing of the Nouveaux database she had laid eyes upon crucial and important files, some of which detailed glaring manufacturing flaws in Nouveaux products that the public had no knowledge of.

From software backdoors to hardware exploits in some devices. She needed time—and privacy in order to analyze and avail herself of all that information, as well as expose whatever needed exposing as she had done so many others under her ‘Rhapsody’ alias.

“It might take a bit since their data is decentralized, and I don’t want to raise suspicions by using the fast lanes,” Cameron said.

“Uhh, what?” Erron had no idea what Cameron had just spoken.

“It means that their data is scrambled across their servers, it’s a decentralized peer-to-peer network,” she further explained.

Erron shook his head, “You say that as if I knew what that means . . .”

Edram stepped in and explained it to Erron with a metaphor, “It’s as if the files were a jigsaw puzzle and the pieces were scattered across their servers,”

“Ah!” Erron understood, “See, Cammy, Eddie knows how to explain things to a farm boy such as myself.”

“Whatever you say, Gramps,”

Cameron spoke in half-truths. She could’ve easily fooled Erron, who was not that knowledgeable in matters pertaining computers and servers, but not Gale Lacroix, the former seasoned spy. While she did comply with the mission parameters, Cameron was waiting until Gale looked away from what she was going to get some treasure of her own.

Erron innocently began to talk to Gale, which made the yellow Gestalt member look away from Cameron and the server terminal, giving the Rhapsody a golden opportunity. As soon as Gale was distracted for a brief moment Cameron began to route files deemed worthy of her scrutiny through an alternate array of servers that belonged to her and her Rhapsody affairs.

The transfer of the large volume of extra files she had ordered the server to do was taking more time than she had expected.

“Just a little more,” said Cameron. She repeatedly tapped the rightmost edge of the keyboard, evidencing her anxiety.

The Ashcroft ballroom continued its course. The musical group began to play its third piece, one which was faster paced than the previous one.

Bastiel Isthall and Princess Vesper Starsong continued to dance with each other at the center of the vast hall. Their bodies flowed in sublime elegance—like a crimson red and a rose-pink petal that danced together in the wind, their bodies moved in a near perfect synchronicity.

With a swift movement of his right arm, Bastiel moved the Princess closer to his body, both of them facing in opposite directions. The man in crimson red looked at the host family, winking at them in obvious mockery. Lady Miranda Ashcroft and Lord Albert Ashcroft looked away, pretending to not have noticed Bastiel's mocking gesture.

“So, remind me again how this is somehow helpful to . . . whatever or whoever it is they're helping?” Bastiel asked Vesper as the two of them danced, “I mean, I know it's a charity ballroom, but what does us dancing do for charity?” He asked a second question as the two of them got closer again.

“It doesn't do anything, it's just a way for these 'nobles' to feel good about themselves,” Vesper answered, “they've probably spent more money organizing these events than the actual amount that'll end up going to charity donations.”

“What a huge waste of money,” Bastiel responded as the Princess spun around, her dress flowing with the circular movement of her body.

“Finally, you're growing up. Now you're seeing it the way I see it—so proud of you, Bastiel,” Vesper commented.

Bastiel noticed that the Princess's words were somewhat slurred.

“Vee, did you have some drinks while I was busy doing you-know-what?” he asked her.

“Just one, Bastiel,” she responded.

“You sure it was just one? You seem quite tipsy for having only had just a single drink.”

“Yeah—one, really,” Vesper insisted, “besides, you’re one to talk, after that spectacle . . .”

Bastiel also noticed that something was once again bothering her nose, he had seen the same thing happen during their drive towards the Ashcroft Estate.

“Maybe I’m just tired, it’s been a long two weeks,” Vesper deflected as the two continued to dance.

The third musical score had ended with the two of them wrapped around each other’s arms. The orchestral group received a well-deserved applause for their perfect performance.

Bastiel and the Princess wanted to kiss each other—but too many eyes lurked around them, they simply decided to withhold their passion and join the chorus of applause to the musical orchestra as they prepared themselves for the fourth piece.

“How many of these are left?” Bastiel asked.

“It’s seven, we’re halfway there.”

Bastiel grunted and sighed in response.

The musical orchestra began its fourth piece, one that was much slower in pace and highly romantic in tone. Every dancer and their respective partner followed suit, getting closer to each other and slowing down their movement to the soothing tunes.

Vesper was most amazed that Bastiel had been performing exceedingly better than she had anticipated, “You actually bothered to learn how to do all this, I’m shocked,” that was her way to compliment him.

“No, I didn’t.” Bastiel responded, “I told you, I just memorized the patterns, that’s all,” he smirked at her.

“Ah yeah, your ‘Amazing Doctrine’ applied to dancing,” Vesper chuckled as she laid eyes upon him.

“Absolute,” Bastiel corrected her, “and yes, you could say I did apply it to dancing. It worked, didn’t it?”

“Well, you’re doing better than Seyren over there,” she pointed with her head towards her brother.

Prince Seyren had struggled to keep up with Alice Valleires’ nimble pace throughout the prior musical pieces. While the Prince had some evident moments of clumsiness, Seyren and Alice were enjoying the moment nonetheless.

Alice Valleires felt in a dream, there she was, dancing with the heir of the Crown of Vaifen in front of the nobility. Many young women present in the vast hall were jealous of her, for she had the attention of the charming and handsome blonde Prince all for herself.

Despite neither Bastiel Isthral nor Vesper Starsong wanting to be there in the first place, the mood between them had become quite romantic. They both shed aside the previous incidents, even the long days of stressful preparation that they underwent for such an extraordinary mission so that they could enjoy the moment.

The whole world could have disappeared except for the two of them in that moment, and Bastiel wouldn’t have cared at all, that romantic moment was their reward for all the hard work and preparation that they underwent for Operation Midnight Rhapsody.

“Just look at these nobles,” Vesper whispered to Bastiel, “gloating in their lavishness, wasting away their riches and not serving a higher purpose—just looking down at everyone else as if they were inferior,” she gazed at the nobles around her with contempt and disdain.

“Hmm,” Bastiel muttered in acknowledgment.

“It’s so decadent. Mother was not like them and I’ll never be like them either, but we have to keep our appearances and wear masks when dealing with them, the Crown we represent demands it so.”

Bastiel simply nodded at her and continued to dance in unison.

“Let’s face it Bastiel, we’ll never fit with these people. . . they might pretend they don’t but they hate me, us, the Crown. I’ve seen it in their eyes over and over again. They hate who we are—Starsong—and what we have.”

“Then let’s not, Vee.” Bastiel responded. “Let’s stop pretending to be what we’re not just to please a bunch of stuck up ass-hats. They’ll never like me just because I’m not human or a noble, and I don’t care. I serve this Nation and your father, not them.”

Vesper smiled at Bastiel.

“One thing is for sure, though. I’m never getting invited to this ever again,” Bastiel said before he chuckled.

“If you’re not invited then I won’t come,” Vesper whispered to him, “screw them.”

“See, now you have your excuse for next year, it all worked out in the end.”

Vesper pressed her head against Bastiel’s shoulder as the fourth musical piece finished playing. She closed her eyes and smiled while the crowd around them applauded at the orchestra.

“Of all the men on this planet, I had to fall in love with you, the weird out of place alien,” she whispered to him.

Bastiel Isthaf froze in panic, Vesper had just whispered those words right next to the microphone embedded on his suit, and he was quite sure that everyone had listened to her loud and clear—including King Sulwyn Starsong.

Bastiel tapped her back, “Vee—” he tried to shut her down.

“I mean, you’re such an idiot with no redeemable qualities and a grossly unbearable hero complex. You never grew up past that sword-swinging child phase of yours, and yet I love you just the way you are, Bastiel Isthalm Nystrom.”

“Yeah, yeah . . . that’s great,” Bastiel muttered.

Bastiel tapped her back with his hand once more and then tapped his right ear to remind Vesper that they had listeners.

It was too late, the cat was out of the bag.

Vesper gasped upon realizing what she had just done, and she panicked. For years they’ve both kept their relationship a secret, even to the King himself; Vesper in particular had taken great lengths to make sure it remained that way.

The Princess had always expected Bastiel to be the one that would screw it up, or perhaps even Seyren, who had figured it out on his own years ago; and yet, to be her the one to shatter the veil of secrecy she had worked so hard to maintain, and all because of a slight and involuntary mishap, a mental lapse that followed a genuinely romantic moment guided by her heart, was most disheartening for her.

“Oh shit . . .” she whispered to Bastiel, “what have I done?”

The trio in the Gestalt Operations room looked at each other, bewildered, perplexed.

“Woah!” Edram exclaimed. He looked at Operator Leah Sutherland, who was blushing.

Cade Saunders grunted in solitude all the way in the Nouveaux facility’s camera room.

Director James Exley took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Success on the mission was expected—and demanded. Given the unorthodox nature of Operation Midnight Rhapsody, enough room for a lack of professionalism and hiccups were taken into consideration when drafting the mission plan and its subsequent estimated success probability, factoring the

involvement of the royal heirs—but nothing could have prepared him for everything that had transpired during the Ballroom half of the mission.

Vesper's accidental reveal of their hidden relationship was also cause for surprise for the trio inside the Nouveaux server room. It knocked off Cameron out of her otherwise unbreakable focus. She stopped tapping with her finger for a moment and paused so her mind could absorb and process what had just transpired.

"I knew it!" she yelled, "I always knew it!" She continued to gloat.

"Wow," Gale commented. She looked at Erron.

"Oh my God," exclaimed Erron. He took a deep breath and laughed.

"Please keep the line clear, focus," Bastiel muttered, "get that data already," he shook his head at a still shocked Vesper.

King Sulwyn Starsong, who had kept his promise of being a silent spectator throughout the mission, broke his words after such revelation.

"I'd like to have a word with you two once this is over," the King's voice echoed through the ears of everyone in the shared voice link, striking terror in all of them, specially Bastiel, Vesper, and Seyren, "and with Seyren as well."

Bastiel tried to cover the microphone with his hand, "Your dad is going to kill me now," he said to Vesper in a barely audible whisper, hoping that no one else had heard him.

Edram muted his microphone and stared at both Leah and Director James Exley, "He's so dead!" he exclaimed.

Leah giggled in return, Exley merely shook his head in disbelief.

Cameron found the whole incident most joyful and amusing, it helped her relief some of her latent anxiety as the additional files she procured continued to be transferred, “Boy, this sure has been quite the night, we should do it again sometime, don’t you all—”

The server room’s lights turned off before Cameron was able to finish her sentence.

A screeching alarm sound pierced through Gale, Erron, and Cameron’s ears. The server room was almost pitch black, only the server’s display screen provided a form of illumination.

“Oh shit!” Cameron yelled, the warning messages in front of her washed away all of her joy, she was now in a state of utter panic, “no, no—this can’t be right!”

All of the Nouveaux facility’s doors locked tight. Gale, Erron and Cameron were trapped inside the server room, with Cade locked in the camera control room. The alarm continued to resound across the entire facility.

“What is going on?!” Gale exclaimed as she readied her stance. Cade attempted to open the room’s metal doors but they were firmly locked in place.

“I don’t know, something must’ve triggered a hidden alarm—a checkup I was not aware of, I’m not so sure—it’s trying to trace—my, why!” Cameron tried to grasp the extent of the situation, unable to form the proper words to describe how grave of a predicament the team found themselves at, “I can fix it—I can fix it!” The young woman exclaimed in panic; she tried to input several commands to the server but all of them were rejected.

In the ballroom, the royal heirs had stopped dancing and skipped the fifth piece altogether—the mood for fake pleasantries and celebrations had vanished in an instant. Bastiel was most concerned, and so was Vesper, they looked at each other, powerless to do anything to aid the Gestalt team. Even Seyren was worried, but concealed his sentiments when Alice stared at him.

A man approached Jonathan Foster with great haste and whispered to his ear, the news conveyed by the man greatly disturbed the young CEO. Foster immediately put his drink aside, almost spilling it, and began to walk out of the party without talking to anyone else. Prince Seyren clearly witnessed Foster's exit.

"Something's up with Foster," Prince Seyren commented.

"Huh?" Allice gestured at the Prince, oblivious to what was going on.

Bastiel glanced over and was barely able to see Foster walk through the hall's doors. The host family found Foster's abrupt departure most strange. Miranda Ashcroft wasn't able to reach Foster in time in order to speak to him.

"Yeah, he knows something's up," Bastiel exclaimed.

"Gestalt, get out of there, now!" Exley yelled to the team, "do not get caught!"

"I'm trying!" Cameron continued to make desperate attempts that yielded no success.

The building's complete lockdown had also prevented the few active security guards inside the building from reaching the server room, unwillingly buying the team some much needed time.

As time grew shorter Cameron became more desperate, "Aw, damn it . . . I guess I have no choice now!" Cameron announced to the top of her lungs, much to everyone's confusion. She stopped interacting with the server and instead began to frantically type on her own device.

"Even if it's not finished—it's time to whip out NovaFlow!"

"Nova-what now?" Said a bewildered Erron who had given up on attempting to open the room's thick doors by force.

“I can’t believe I’m using this before it's even complete,” Cameron hesitated for a moment before confirming the activation of her most powerful digital weapon. “There, what’s done is done!”

“What the hell did you do?” Gale asked her.

“I used my secret weapon to launch an all-out cyber-attack, this will buy us some time and cover our tracks—I hope, I’ll explain everything later!”

“An attack on what?” Erron asked.

“On everything!” Cameron exclaimed in response, “or at least I hope that’s what’s happening right now. . . NovaFlow hasn’t been tested yet.”

Aided by her most powerful hacking protocol, Cameron continued to desperately try to wrestle access to the facility’s systems, until a sudden blackout cut off power to the building. The building’s emergency generators immediately kicked in; mere seconds later, all of the building’s locked doors opened instantly, and then the generators unexpectedly shut down themselves, leaving the facility in pitch black darkness but with all of its electronic doors open.

“Great! What now!?” A distraught Cameron yelled.

“Did you do that, Cammy?” Gale asked.

“No, that wasn’t me!” Cameron responded, clueless as to what happened, “that’s not what I was trying to do!”

“Well whatever it was let’s follow through our exit plan!” Erron instructed them. “Cade, reunite with us at the eastern staircases like we planned!”

“Understood!” Cade acknowledged.

“But, I—” Cameron froze for a moment trying to make sense of what had really caused the sudden blackout, until she was abruptly pulled by Erron.

“Come!” Erron insisted.

Cameron sought cover with Erron and Gale as the three of them hid behind the large server tower. Seconds later, a group of three guards entered the server room wielding flashlights and handguns. Being mere security guards, they were no match for Erron and Gale’s combat prowess.

All three of the guards were ambushed by the tall man and the blonde woman that emerged from the shadows; with a swift strike, Erron knocked off the first guard, who never saw him coming.

The other two guards didn’t fare any better, Erron knocked the second one unconscious with his fists, while Gale unleashed a barrage of kicks and punches against the third guard, sparing their lives and minimizing their injuries.

“Let’s go!” Erron beckoned and gestured towards Cameron.

“Right,” the woman grabbed her equipment and followed her team leader.

In the Ashcroft Ballroom, Bastiel Isthel’s phone had received a sudden notification, and he took it out of his pocket. It was a message from an unknown sender that read ‘Don’t panic. Relax,’ the text was followed by the letter ‘A’.

“Alma . . .” Bastiel thought, “what have you done?” He muttered.

The idea that perhaps she might be responsible for his team’s current predicament troubled him greatly.

A second message was received a mere second later, ‘I got this. They owe me one now.’ it read.

As soon as Bastiel had finished reading it the Ashcroft Estate lost all power, the blackout was not just limited to the Estate, it had affected the entire city of Ternion.

“Oh no, what now!” exclaimed a scared Vesper.

The orchestra’s music stopped abruptly as soon as the lights faded away. The nobles and many of the guests and attendees screamed in panic. The Ashcroft family was bewildered and afraid that something happened within their property, which could lead to a huge public relations disaster for the socialite family—Miranda’s worst nightmare.

Royal Security agents were swift to act, securing the royal heirs and their respective companions, pulling them out of the pitch-black hall and into the safety of their reinforced vehicles, which immediately drove them out straight towards the Royal Palace, escorted by the security caravan now on high alert.

“Well that’s—one way to get out of a party, phew!” jested Seyren. He looked straight at Alice’s eyes, holding her hands, “are you alright, my dear?” he asked her.

“I’m fine My Prin—Seyren,” she answered, “just a little shocked and startled, that’s all.”

“Everything will be fine,” Seyren tried to comfort her.

Both of them smiled at each other. Alice’s fears faded away when she crossed eyes with the Prince and his charming smile.

Bastiel nodded at Vesper and she responded in kind, Vesper tried to regain her composure after the sudden ordeal and took a deep breath.

“Eddie, Leah, what happened to the team?” asked Bastiel.

“Are the guys alright?” Vesper asked, concerned for the well-being of the Gestalt team that she had become quite fond of over the past days.

The Princess looked through the vehicle’s window and gazed upon the city of Ternion—seemingly devoid of electricity aside from sparse lights that would be seen on the horizon in a few buildings. The moon and stars above offered comfort to the darkened city.

“My goodness,” the Princess gasped, “what happened? Are we being attacked again?” A fearful sensation began to grow from within the Princess’ psyche.

“Making our way out now!” Erron answered as he ambushed another guard, incapacitating him with a chokehold, “kinda busy right now!” he added.

A guard almost snuck towards Cameron, which made her scream. Gale was swift to react and aided her friend before any harm could come to her.

The entire Nouveaux facility had been stripped of its power, and not a single source of light worked. An absolute darkness reigned over the building, one that the team took advantage of.

Gale, Erron and Cameron ran as fast as they could. Cameron’s Hawk Drone hovered around them in a non-lethal defensive protocol. Cade reunited with the trio, and the four of them continued to make their way out until they were being chased by a handful of guards, who did not hesitate to open fire at them.

Cameron’s drone stood behind the team and flashed a bright strobing light that temporarily blinded and disoriented the guards. Erron, Gale, and Cade shot their weapons’ tranquilizer rounds, putting the guards to sleep in a matter of seconds.

The quartet exited the Nouveaux Facility through the first floor’s eastern fire exit staircase, jumping and landing on a nearby hut’s roof. Cameron was the last to jump, as she hesitated for a moment.

Without the facility’s exterior lights, the four of them managed to sneak past the guards and made it out of the building’s perimeter, running away as fast as they could and having no choice but to leave the dummy vehicle behind. Had things gone to according to plan, they would’ve left the vehicle with it.

The team continued to walk through a few narrow dark alleys and corridors until they reached their destination, where a second vehicle had been left for them in case of an emergency.

Errorn reached beneath the vehicle's front left wheel and procured a key, opening the vehicle and sitting on its driver's seat. The rest of the team got on board and Errorn drove straight towards the National Intelligence Center.

"Boss, we're in the backup car—we're safe and sound," Errorn announced to the Operations room.

Director James Exley exhaled deeply, he was relieved and so were Leah, Edram, Bastiel, and Vesper.

"Good, good. Get back here," Exley instructed them, "Mission accomplished."

The royal caravan returned to the Royal Palace, which had not lost power thanks to its isolated backup generator array. Royal Security agents were on high alert and had redoubled their patrol around the ivory palace that faintly glowed amidst the intense darkness that covered the city.

The two couples left the vehicles and entered the palace's lobby escorted by Royal Security.

King Sulwyn rapidly descended through the lobby's staircase. Bastiel and Vesper both remembered that the Princess had accidentally revealed their secret relationship mere minutes ago—the whole blackout scare had made them forget about it.

Both of them stared at each other and braced themselves for the King's wrath, but instead, they received a warm welcome from the exhausted Regent of the House of Starsong.

"I'm so glad that you're all here at last!" The King said to the quartet as he approached them. "Are you all alright?"

“Yes, Father,” replied Vesper.

Seyren nodded at his father. Bastiel and Alice bowed to the regent.

The King looked at Alice, who looked back at him, “And you, young lady—how about you?” he asked her.

“Ye—yes, my King,” she replied, smiling at him, “I’m fine.”

“Good,” the Regent waved at the nearby guards so that they’d be at ease, making sure that Alice felt more comfortable with less armed guards surrounding her.

“Father, what happened to the city?” Vesper asked.

“A blackout,” King Sulwyn answered, “too early to determine what caused it, but it seems it was a cyber-attack.”

“Damn . . .” Seyren exclaimed.

Bastiel felt troubled and concerned, “Shit, what did you do, Alma,” he kept thinking.

“But don’t worry, we’ll get to the bottom of this,” the King said to them with his ever so strong voice, “let’s go get you all something to eat, shall we?” he extended the invitation to all of them. The regent then stared at Alice, “Young lady, would you like to contact your family first to let them know that you’re alright?”

“Great idea Father,” Seyren responded. “Let’s go, Alice.”

“Yes, thank you, My King,” Alice smiled and bowed at him a second time.

“Right behind you,” Said Vesper.

“My King, I’m sorry but there is ‘something’ I have to do right now, another time for sure,” Bastiel excused himself.

The King didn’t want Bastiel to leave the palace, there was one important—albeit personal matter he needed to discuss with him and with his heirs in private, but he understood

what Bastiel meant, and the inherent responsibility he had with the Gestalt team and thus, with the Nation of Vaifen.

“Very well then, take care, child,” the King said to him, “we’ll talk soon.”

“Always do,” Bastiel placed his right hand on top of his heart, he tapped it twice, and bowed once again to the King.

King Sulwyn, Prince Seyren, and Alice Valleires began to walk further inside the Palace. The King conversed with their guest, making sure that she’d feel welcomed. Vesper slowed down her pace, she turned around and pulled Bastiel’s arm as he began to walk towards his vehicle.

Vesper was amazed by what she considered was an act of cowardice on Bastiel’s behalf, “Are you seriously going to make me face Father’s wrath alone?” She whispered to his ear so that neither Royal Security nor Gestalt’s voice link would listen to them, “are you for real right now?”

“Gestalt business, the mission and now this blackout, remember?” Bastiel whispered back in response.

“No, you stay here,” she insisted with an imperative tone.

“No can’t do. Why don’t you come with me then, if ‘Royal Sec’ lets you that is,” he gestured towards the group of guards that surrounded them with his mouth.

“You know that’s impossible,” she replied, “they’re not going to even let me peek through a window with all that’s happening.”

“Just stall your father, we’ll deal with that later . . . priorities are priorities,” while he did feel a certain degree of remorse for leaving the Princess, Bastiel needed to find out what had

Alma done to cause the blackout, and if her secrecy had been jeopardized as a result. “Besides, as long as Seyren’s friend is there he won’t say anything—just act cool.”

Vesper exhaled, “I suppose you’re right—let’s hope that you are right . . .”

“One emergency at a time, Vee,” Bastiel winked at her.

Vesper shook her head in disdain, “Fine, I’ll talk to you when you finish, if I’m alive by then . . .”

The two lovers turned around and walked in opposite directions. Bastiel ran as fast as he could towards his red vehicle and left the premises of the Royal Palace.

As Bastiel drove towards the National Intelligence Center, the city of Ternion slowly began to regain electricity. One by one, sections of the city’s power grid systematically started to come back online.

His phone rang, he took a peek at the screen—it read ‘Unknown Caller’, Bastiel was most certain that the caller was Alma. He wanted to speak with the Artificial Intelligence but he did not had the privacy to do so, not with a hot microphone embedded right on his suit, which he had no way to find out if it was still active or not.

The phone rang a second, a third, and then a fourth time. He stopped at a corner to write her a message.

“Can’t talk, driving, hang on,” he wrote to her before he resumed his drive.

As soon as Bastiel passed through the National Intelligence Center’s checkpoint gate he parked his red vehicle right next to that eastern parking side and rushed in towards the Gestalt Enclave. Despite being close to midnight, the Intelligence Center had rapidly become crowded at such a late hour due to the blackout that struck the entire city. Bastiel’s unusual attire drew the attention of the Intelligence Center’s personnel.

When Bastiel passed through the Enclave's glass doors he heard Edram's voice speak to him.

"Briefing room, now!" The Quartermaster said to him.

The accelerated tone on the quartermaster's voice made Bastiel run faster until he was running out of breath. When Bastiel opened the doors of the briefing room and saw the team sitting there he felt relieved that all of them were safe and sound, he took a deep breath.

"Boy! I was so worried about you guys!" Bastiel said, "I'm so glad you're all ok." he took an empty seat next to Erron.

Cameron stared at Bastiel, "Nice suit my dude—woah! What happened to your hair?" she commented on his appearance, pointing at his radically different hair style with her finger, "Damn dude, I should've gone to that ballroom too!"

"Don't ask," Bastiel responded. He closed his eyes softly massaged them with his hands, it had been quite the night.

"Red really suits you," Gale commented.

The Nasivern responded with a brief smile.

The doors of the briefing room opened once more, Director James Exley joined the group, "Sorry for the brief delay, I can't be in two places at once—oh! Isthel, you made it," the Director sat on the rightmost edge of the elliptical table, "so, now that we're all here let's make this brief, I have a blackout to deal with."

Everyone remained silent and stared at the Director.

"What the hell happened there?" Exley demanded an explanation, specifically from Cameron Bennett.

“General Boss, I was so sure—I mean, I am very sure that I had every security measure disabled,” Cameron explained. “There could be a hidden call I didn’t see, or a flag in the file transfer perhaps, but it just doesn’t make sense—it just, it just—it just, doesn’t. Everything was accounted for.”

Cameron knew the truth of what had happened, something she kept for herself. Her curiosity made her pull too many files to her discrete servers at once, which she hypothesized, had triggered a hidden Nouveaux security countermeasure.

“What about the shipping data?” Asked Bastiel, “you guys got it, right?”

“Yeah well, at least we got it,” Cameron answered, “it’s all being unpacked as we speak.”

The Director cleared his throat, “Well, despite a few—hiccups and some unexpected incidents,” he said as he looked at Bastiel, “you all did a remarkable job. Congratulations, Gestalt team.”

“Go team, go!” Edram cheered.

“No kidding! We even had Bastiel here wild out at the nobility,” Cameron said amidst giggles.

Erron let loose a strong but short laugh, “Yeah! Man . . . that was priceless,” Erron tapped Bastiel’s left arm with his right elbow.

“Making us Nasivern proud there, woo!” Edram’s banter had a genuine share of joy.

“Hey now . . .” Bastiel shrugged, “at least it all worked out in the end, I guess.”

Cade Saunders grunted and cleared his throat, “I hope you take things more serious on our next mission, Isthali.”

“Relax grumpy man,” Cameron responded Cade, she wagged her hand and arms at him, a gesture Cade mistakenly interpreted as mockery, “we’re the best, number one!”

Cade seemed uncomfortable, as if there was nothing worth celebrating.

“With that out of the way, there are matters we need to discuss right now,” Exley spoke with a serious tone, his facial expression was far from a joyful one. “Agent Bennett, would you mind explaining to me what was that ‘NovaFlow’ or whatever software that you ran without authorization?” The Director demanded an explanation from the young woman.

“Relax, General Boss, it was nothing harmful,” Cameron assured him.

“Then what was it then?”

“Well, how do I explain this in simple terms?” The young woman looked at the ceiling and scratched her head, conjuring the right words to use out of her mind, “in theory, NovaFlow is the ultimate cyber weapon—once I finish it.”

“Cyber weapon?” Exley was visibly upset, “what exactly did you attack with it?”

“Nothing specific, really,” Cameron answered, “I mean, in theory it can destroy servers like it was nothing but what I did with it tonight was take control of servers across the globe.”

“That’s what I’ve been told,” Exley said. “I have a large list here of companies and entities that were all attacked at the same time by an unknown entity. May I ask why?”

Cade Saunders was perplexed and disgruntled, “And for what purpose would you do that, Bennett?” he asked.

“Simple, it masked our intrusion on Nouveaux’s servers by making it look like it was a worldwide attack instead of an isolated incident,” Cameron responded, “I also wanted—no, needed more horsepower from everywhere possible in order to brute force the facility and see if I could open a way out.”

Cade was bewildered, there she was, one of his teammates, openly admitting to a serious crime like it was just a childish prank on a massive scale, “You do realize that there will be an

investigation about your little trick, right, Cameron? This won't be ignored at all, and might lead to you or Gestalt as a whole."

"NovaFlow didn't affect any company or did any harm tonight—it can but it didn't. I can assure you that, Cade," Cameron responded, "it also erases its tracks once it's done doing what I order it to do. Companies, not just Nouveaux, will spend months going through millions of log files but once they start to read them down they'll see nothing really happened to their stuff, nothing was compromised nor damaged. Besides, like I said, NovaFlow erases itself once it's done, leaving no trace behind—which is one of its current weaknesses. I'd have to silently infect a lot of computers from scratch if I want to use it at such a large scale again."

Exley was aggravated that the green team member continued to ask questions of his own to the Rhapsody. His facial gestures were evidence of it; the other members of Gestalt caught notice of it, yet they could all acknowledge that Cade had valid points of concern.

The Director continued to stare at Cameron, "Indeed, Cameron. This very Intelligence Center will have to see to it, those are resources we could very much spend against the Ashen Reckoning instead. This could go for months, months of precious and invaluable time spent chasing ourselves," he said to her.

Cade asked one more question to Cameron, "And where did you even find the resources to pull up an attack like that, and for what purpose?"

Before she was able to answer, Director Exley waived his right hand at the two of them.

"Saunders, please," Exley said.

Cade Saunders obeyed his tacit request and remained silent.

Regardless, Cameron gave her green teammate an answer, “Because I am the Rhapsody, my dude,” she responded to Cade's inquiry with a prideful gloat, “but don't go telling anyone who I am.”

Exley remained silent for a moment, Cameron's actions had created a long term headache for the Nation's Intelligence Center.

“Relax Boss, I can save your precious resources and time with one simple trick!” Cameron exclaimed.

She handed a small file storage device that she had in her pocket to Exley. Leah became curious about the gray colored device.

“What is this?” Exley asked.

“The answer to your upcoming cyber-attack research,” Cameron answered. “Who to blame for the whole thing, your bad guy, motives, everything. Save yourself that investigation and the money, you have it all right there.”

Exley frowned, he looked at the device and then gazed at the smiling and joyful pink tech prodigy, ever so confident of her resources.

“And best of all, you can use that too to cover up any possible screw ups on our little excursion,” Cameron added, “feel free to verify all that intel, it's all legit.”

“Shamefully blaming someone else for your antics, Bennett?” Cade said with growing disdain. He didn't feel at ease with all the glaring violations to the normal standards and procedures caused by her in a single night.

“Well I sure as hell not gonna take the blame,” Cameron frowned at the disgruntled man, “I mean, come on—I don't think nobody in this room wants to do that.”

Exley fidgeted the storage device, he had too many problems as it is as the head of the Nation's intelligence apparatus and all the secrecy it entailed.

The Ashen Reckoning was still his topmost priority, but now a massive faux cyber-attack orchestrated by the very unit he had direct supervision of had to be explained with fallacies to the public. And if that wasn't enough, a mysterious blackout that hit the entire city of Ternion was still left unexplained.

"And who does this put the blame on?" Exley asked Cameron.

"Tangent Equation," Cameron answered.

"Who?" A curious Erron asked.

"A group of six morons that live up there in Qualie, they're beneath the hacker food chain," Cameron answered, "and well, they've always wanted to hit it big, so there they go—they should be thankful I did all the job for them," she further explained.

"Just so we are clear here, you have no qualms with blaming someone else for this?" Cade once again asked a question to Cameron. Her apparent innocent demeanor while openly talking about blaming someone else for her attack was troubling for him.

"They're hardly innocent, Cade," Cameron was starting to get upset by Cade's incessant inquisitorial interrogation, "they're a dumb but quite the malicious group—besides, like I said they've always wanted to hit it big, I just did it for them."

"That group has indeed been on our radar for some time," Exley confessed, "however, they've always been a low priority, and with the Ashen Reckoning's attacks we can't spare much resources on them right now."

"Well, their names are all right there on it. Like I said, you can verify it all if you want, but trust me, it's solid," Cameron insisted.

“So, like—have those guys done something bad?” Erron asked.

“Yeah,” Cameron responded, “they’ve stolen money, scammed, and messed up with people, good innocent people. It’s time to teach them a lesson, don’t cha think?”

“Well if that’s the case then it’s one problem solved for the Nation, and one problem solved for us,” Erron said as an implicit vote of confidence on Cameron’s proposal, “win-win.”

“Fine by me if you ask me,” Bastiel was supportive of Cameron’s proposed solution, still worried that Alma was involved in any way or manner.

“You really had all of this carefully planned, didn’t you, Cammy?” Gale was impressed at her prowess, “you really can be dangerous, girl.”

“Why thank you, Gale,” Cameron felt flattered, “but it’s a shame that I had to use my unfinished NovaFlow, now I have to spread it from scratch now if we ever want to use it like that,” she felt a bit saddened.

Exley remained silent for a few seconds, pondering, meditating, “I strongly advise you to stop engaging in that kind of ‘creative’ solution without proper clearance, Agent Bennet. I will carefully get this looked at before I even consider using it, just so you know,” he said to Cameron.

“Sure thing,” Cameron responded.

“The last thing I want to do is to make all of this worse, we have enough problems in our hands as it is.” The Director placed the memory device inside his suit’s inner pocket, “As for the blackout, was that all part of your malware too?”

“No, I don’t have an explanation for that, that wasn’t part of it,” Cameron responded, “I’m just as surprised as everyone else.”

“Then what could’ve caused it?” Exley asked.

“I just don’t know, Boss,” Cameron said.

“Well, that’s a mystery then,” Erron gave his opinion.

“But the timing couldn’t have been better,” Cameron commented.

“And why is that, Agent Bennett?” Exley was curious.

“I mean, I’d have to look thoroughly into it, but that blackout was exactly what we needed to come out of Nouveaux unscathed and undetected,” the young hacker explained.

Exley rubbed his chin, “Go on.”

“Well, whatever it was, and as excessive as it looks, it knocked off the security lockdowns, had the server not locked me out of it I would’ve attempted that too, now that I think about it,” Cameron continued to explain, “but I would’ve done it just to the building, not the whole city, of course.”

“Whatever was it—I think that it might have just gone a little too far and knocked power to everything by accident perhaps, that’s just my quick presumption,” Edram Pertz gave his opinion.

“That might have been it,” Cameron agreed, “but Ternion’s electric grid security is robust, you’d have to take down the whole thing at once if you want to cause a blackout. If one section falls the other tries to compensate. It’s really well done, but to knock every security encryption at once would require some massive real-time calculations, I didn’t even think that’s possible—I’m talking theoretical next level quantum processing here.”

“Indeed, even our Gestalt OS servers can’t even come close to do that,” Edram added.

“Are you all sure the grid wasn’t just attacked by force?” Cameron asked, “it’s easier in theory.”

“It wasn’t,” Exley answered, “all reports indicate that every power facility is completely intact—like nothing happened.”

Cameron scratched her head, “Strange, very strange indeed. It’s almost as if we had a guardian angel, that’s the only explanation I can give you all right now,” she said, “we might as well thank ’em if we ever find out who it was.”

Bastiel was concerned, “Alma,” his mind repeated her name over and over again. He was worried that she had done something that would have inadvertently revealed her existence to the Vaifen authorities.

“The stocks are surely crashing tomorrow after your trick, Cammy,” Leah broke her ice.

Cameron let loose a nervous chuckle, “Ah, can’t help it. At least these companies will take their security more seriously now; you can say that in the end I did them a favor, they’ll never thank me, though,” she said with a smile.

The Nasivern Quartermaster found Cameron’s smile a bit odd, “Wouldn’t that make things more challenging and complicated for you in the long run?” Edram asked.

“That’s what I’m looking forward to,” Cameron responded, “how else am I gonna improve when I’ve just broken into the most secure corporate network on the planet? Where do you go from there?” she shrugged at him.

Exley quickly concocted an idea to aid the young and enthusiast woman in her path to self-improvement, “well, in that case, Agent Bennett, if you want a challenge then I got an assignment for you,” said Exley, “find the truth about that blackout, who did it, how, and why,” he commanded her.

“Oh! You don’t even need to ask me, Boss,” Cameron responded with enthusiasm, “this is a puzzle I really wanna solve.”

“Let me reiterate that despite everything that happened, you all performed remarkably excellent once more.”

The Director stood off his seat, “Good job, Operation Midnight Rhapsody was a success, despite the bumps in the road . . .”

“Yay team!” Cameron clapped.

Her clapping was joined by all of her teammates’ with Cade Saunders being the sole exception.

“Leah, go through the files tomorrow first thing in the morning, get some rest tonight, you’ll need it,” The Director said to his most trusted analyst, “we need to find out what is the Ashen Reckoning doing with Nouveaux’s shipments, and how it ties to Dogma’s grand plan.”

“I will, General,” the shy woman nodded at him.

“Same goes to you all, rest well—you’ve all earned it.” Exley instructed them.

“We will, General, thanks,” Erron responded as team leader.

Exley took a deep breath, “I better go close my eyes for a few minutes before I have to deal with the fallout of this cyber-attack of yours, Agent Bennett.”

“It’s all there, Boss,” Cameron spoke, “use the files in that drive and save yourself the hassle, sorry about the whole ‘restless night’ part, though.”

The Director faintly smiled at the pink teammate. “You’re all dismissed, have a good night,” the Director readied himself to leave the room.

Cade Saunders, who had remained silent for some time now, felt like he could wait no longer. He needed to express his concerns with regards to the way Gestalt had done things so far.

“Director, a word, please,” he beckoned Exley.

“Not now, Saunders, tomorrow,” Exley refused, much to Cade’s dismay and frustration, “It’s nearly midnight, go rest—our work is far from done.”

Cade was displeased with the Director’s response, there was so much he wanted to discuss with him regarding Gestalt: the apparent lack of behavior and professionalism from some of his peers, and the recent actions that breached all legal boundaries.

He was angry, disgusted by all of it—certainly not what he had expected when Exley first approached and recruited him less than a year ago, but he nonetheless remained silent. As soon as Exley left the room he immediately left the premises of the enclave, not without the rest of his team catching notice of his apparent discomfort.

“What’s up with him?” Cameron asked her peers, “he’s been acting more stuck up than usual,” the young woman shrugged and shook her head.

“Probably just needs his beauty sleep.” Gale said as a joke.

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow, see what’s up,” Erron assured his friends, “don’t worry about him, guys.”

“If you say so,” Cameron commented.

Erron stood off his seat and fiercely clapped his hands once, “Anyways—great job everyone! I don’t know about you all but I sure am getting me something to eat and then sleep.”

“Sounds like a solid plan, Erron!” said Edram, his stomach clamored for sustenance.

With the post-mission briefing over and the midnight knocking right on the city’s doorstep, Bastiel wanted to return to his home as soon as possible so that he could converse with Alma in private. His mind would not be at ease until he had words with her.

Bastiel took a deep breath, “Alright, I think I’ll go home now,” he said.

Cameron felt disappointed at the three men, “Come on, the night is young!” she tried to drag Bastiel back into his seat, “I—no, we all have to celebrate that we just owned Nouveaux! Besides, Bastiel here needs to spill all the juicy details about his lovely date with the Princess,” she looked at the white haired Nasivern with a sneer before mocking him with a faux kissing gesture.

“I’d say it was more of a work-related event,” responded Bastiel.

“Sure it was,” Cameron replied with sarcasm, “c’mon, spill the beans! You made all those people angry when you lashed out, you must’ve been really drunk, that’s so unlike you,” she poked his arm and waggled his shoulder whilst laughing.

The Nasivern let lose a faint smile at his friend, “Can we do that tomorrow, Cammy?” Bastiel responded, “I really just wanna go home tonight—pretty sure it’s been a long night for all of us.”

“C’mon, you can just spend the night here! Let’s just have a sleepover in the lounge room!”

Gale was utterly exhausted, she just wanted to go back to her house and hug her young daughter, “Lilly is definitely deeply asleep by now.” she thought. “Let him be, Cammy, not everyone has your energy,” Gale looked at her.

“Fine! Geez!” Cameron frowned and puffed her cheeks, “Rest now, celebrate tomorrow, fine, fine,” she muttered.

“Yeah, yeah, let’s just go,” Erron said, “I’m starving.”

“But you all have to admit this was a fun endeavor!” Cameron exclaimed, “I’m sure we all had fun.”

Leah broke her silence, “Especially Bastiel!” Her words were accompanied by giggles.

Leah's spontaneous and small jab made Erron laugh uncontrollably, his laugh was so intense that it made everyone else join him in the laughter.

Erron tousled the head of the white haired Nasivern as he poked fun at him, "Boy, were you drunk or were you drunk?"

"No, I wasn't . . ." Bastiel insisted.

His statement felt like a lie to his peers.

"Too bad the King is going to kill you now," Edram commented. His words further made Cameron, Erron, Leah laugh some more.

"He's right, you're a dead man now, Bastiel," Erron jested.

Cameron got closer to Bastiel, she placed her hands together and interlocked her fingers, tilting her head and looking at the ceiling, "Ah! The forbidden love of the human princess and the Nasivern warrior!" she kept making fun of the Nasivern clad in a crimson red attire.

"Whatever," the dismayed subject of the banter and jokes shook his head, although he did find the whole ordeal humorous.

"Now, now let's calm down—if I was the King I'd let you live," Erron said, "until we capture Dogma and secure the Nation that is. So I'd say you're safe—for now," he ended his jest with a wink.

"That's comforting . . ." Bastiel frowned, "Alright guys I better head off now. I'll see you all tomorrow," he bid his farewell to the team and left the briefing room, walking straight towards the exit.

As he was about to cross the doors of the Gestalt enclave he was approached by his fellow Nasivern, Edram Pertz.

"Hey, dude!" Edram beckoned Bastiel.

Bastiel turned around, “Yeah, Eddie?”

“If the King does end up killing you tomorrow, can I keep your car and, you know, Avalon?”

Bastiel looked at him with a cold stare that scared the quartermaster, his menacing visage turned rapidly into a smile, “Fine, I suppose,” he chuckled at him.

“Nice, thanks!” Edram laughed. “Oh! By the way! Don’t forget to return that suit and the gear tomorrow, it is Gestalt proprietary equipment and all.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry, I will,” Bastiel assured his friend.

“And the Royal Heirs’ as well,” Edram reminded his friend, “I already switched the microphones off remotely.”

“Yes, of course,” Bastiel handed over the rectangular device that hijacked Foster’s data, “here, might as well return this one already.”

The two Nasivern shook hands and walked in opposite directions. Bastiel returned to his vehicle and drove straight towards his apartment located in Apex Lane. Alma continued to repeatedly call his phone and send him messages, which were all ignored by Bastiel. He did not want to speak with her wearing a suit rigged with microphones directly connected to the Gestalt enclave—that to his knowledge, may or may have not still been active despite Edram’s word. It was not a risk he wanted to take.

By the time Bastiel had driven all the way to Apex Lane, power had returned to the area. Exhaustion began to kick in as he turned off his vehicle, Bastiel closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He took off his attire’s crimson red suit jacket and left it inside his vehicle—just in case the microphone embedded on it was still active. Bastiel ascended through the elevator and entered his apartment, and was immediately greeted by Alma.

“Finally! Welcome home—wait! What’s up? You finally got a haircut?!” a surprised Alma said to Bastiel.

“Long story,” responded Bastiel, who immediately walked towards his bedroom to change clothes. “So, what in the name of Sollente did you do tonight?” He cut to the chase.

“Who? Me? Nothing of course,” the Artificial Intelligence responded.

“Come on Alma, I’m too tired for this—what did you do?” he insisted.

“Nothing, I just helped a little, relax,”

The contrast between Bastiel’s concern and Alma’s apparent lack of worry was like night and day.

Bastiel opened one of his bedroom closet’s doors. He inspected the small server that served as Alma’s body and connection to the world, as well as a strange looking device that was connected to the server through a cable.

The unique device, which could fit in Bastiel’s hand, was a silvery octagon with a crystalline blue jewel shaped like a kite embedded on its center. The blue adornment, which had a few visible cracks, glowed with an otherworldly light—like a storm that danced in beautiful harmony. The apparatus had seen better times, it was banged up, scratched, and bruised, and one of its edges had a nasty dent.

Bastiel held in his hands the vessel that contained the soul of the Nasivern Artificial Intelligence, Alma. Her very consciousness was contained in that damaged Nasivern artifact. The damage it had suffered through as she fought alongside Isthara in the past severely limited Alma’s functions and capabilities.

Isthara, the white blaze, once told her trusted confidant that those flaws is what truly made her ‘alive’ in her opinion, words she once said to the artificial intelligence in a time now long past.

“I’m serious, what did you do?” Bastiel asked a third time, “did you go out for a ‘stroll?’”

“I was bored, yes. You’re the one getting any action,” Alma said to her only living relative, “but then something happened, I noticed a huge surge of traffic coming from everywhere, so much information, so much to read, so much to see—I had to look at it.”

“Cammy’s NovaFlow,” Bastiel muttered.

“Yes! That!” Alma exclaimed, “I saw that word repeated a billion times, I had to find where it was going to—so I followed it.”

Bastiel walked towards his bathroom and washed his face with a cold splash of water, “And then?” he asked as he grabbed a towel.

“I reached out to NovaFlow and it was just . . . I don’t know how to say it, like my mind expanded, like I could fly or something . . . and then I saw the Nouveaux facility trying to request help—then I remembered that your pals were going to play around in one of those facilities, so that had to be it. That NovaFlow thing opened the way for me and I just glided in to help. For one mere instant I was able to use NovaFlow to shut down everything—I may have gone a little too far with that—then it vanished, and I could no longer find it, so here I am . . .”

Bastiel took a long and drawn out sigh, “So you are what caused the blackout.”

“Yes, but I couldn’t stop, I may have gone a little too far like I said, I didn’t want to cut power to the whole city—my bad there!” Alma confessed, “I just—NovaFlow—whatever it was, I felt free, I felt good.”

Bastiel peered over the balcony of his apartment, the city was still recovering from the blackout. He gazed towards his right and saw entire blocks in the distance slowly powering back up as a gentle breeze glanced all over his body.

“Look what you did,” Bastiel said.

“Your friends were in danger, the Nouveaux central mainframe was going to pinpoint the location of your group’s servers—would’ve been quite the disaster. You’re welcome, by the way,”

“Well, that’s all done now,” Bastiel said. “You sure you didn’t do anything that could expose you, though? Or do I have to worry that someone will knock on the door tomorrow.”

“Bastiel, please, I’m not an amateur,” If Alma would’ve had a physical body she would’ve rolled her eyes and shook her head in that precise moment, “I’m way older than you, come on.”

“Uh huh, whatever, I’m starving,” Bastiel looked into his refrigerator, almost devoid of items. With all the intense preparation for Operation Rhapsody and the marathon of activities that he had partaken with Gestalt over the past weeks he had little time to restock on groceries and food. He settled for his last pair of eggs.

“There’s also another thing . . .” Alma said to Bastiel as he had begun eating his late dinner.

“What?” He answered with a mouthful.

“I’m not entirely sure but it seems that your hacker friend dumped quite the amount of scattered Nouveaux data across many, many places.”

Bastiel chugged down a soft drink, “Explain,” he said.

“I saw so much traffic going out, but I couldn’t see where, it’s hard to explain for me,” Alma responded, “but I did see a massive amount of files much larger than the ones that I presume were going to the Gestalt server.”

“Is that so?” Bastiel was now curious about Cameron’s secret antic.

“I don’t know what it was but I’ve been thinking—and before you say a joke, yes, that’s what I do, think. I’m guessing that she got too greedy and that’s what flagged a hidden alert,” Alma explained, “That much I could infer from the logs before NovaFlow removed all evidence and vanished away from my grasp. She basically got a copy of their whole database.”

Bastiel finished his simple dinner and washed his dish, “What would she want to get all of that?” He yawned right after he said his question.

“I don’t know,” Alma answered, “Want me to find out?”

“No, stay out of it.”

“Aww, why not?” Alma asked.

“Because Cameron is going to be looking for the cause of the blackout, which so happens to be you,” Bastiel explained, “so keep a low profile, will ya?”

“So what?” Alma rebutted.

“So what?!” Bastiel exclaimed, “she’s the Rhapsody, she won’t stop until she finds the answer—and I don’t want her to find out.”

“Relax, I’m sure she’s good, but I’m better at this—or used to be.”

Bastiel began to walk towards his bed. His body and mind both clamored for respite, “How many times must I say it, if people find out you exist well—it’s too dangerous.”

“Yeah, I know your King said that to us so many times,” Alma responded

Bastiel crashed on his bed and got himself comfortable, there was a brief moment of silence between the two of them. Alma turned off the bedroom's lights and adjusted the air conditioner's temperature.

"Thanks," Bastiel said as his body began to relax.

"For what?" Alma asked.

"For saving them."

"You're welcome, Bastiel," she said, "it was my pleasure."

At long last, Operation Midnight Rhapsody was over. Bastiel began to drift into sleep, hoping that everything they had done and worked so hard for that evening would yield positive results that would get them one step closer to stopping the Ashen Reckoning and Dogma.

He was but a mere step away from falling asleep when he remembered that he still had to face the King of Vaifen on the matter of his relationship with Vesper, an inevitable discussion that was merely delayed.

"Oh shit," he muttered to himself, "I really am dead . . ."

X: DO AND DIE

TO BE CONTINUED