

Voices From The Hedge

By Alldenspa

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CHAPTER ONE

At H-E Corporate Headquarters. Well, one of those.

"Agent, where are you? Get in position!" shouted the voice on the comlink.

"Yes, Sir! I'm — Wait, who are you talking to? With respect, Sir, I don't —"

"To you of course, heavens!"

The operator seemed nervous himself. Maybe that was the reason everybody on this mission seemed so on edge. He didn't sound very old himself — Maybe twenty, at most. It was probably his first time on the stand.

"I'm sorry, Sir. You see, this is actually my first deployment in the field."

Eos was trying hard to sound professional, but obviously failing. It was his first real mission, and the fact that he had been a last-minute addition to the squad also meant no time to prepare or to get to know his colleagues. Surely they could have been a bit more forthcoming with a beginner like him.

As he ran across the field towards 'the objective', he heard the young operator give some rather unclear orders to the other agents. Eos had no idea who the other operatives were, apart from the fact that they apparently weren't all rookies. He wondered what they could be thinking right now. What was it like, starting an infiltration like this — but at the same time having done dozens, maybe hundreds of them in the past? Did it lose its touch after a while? He had only talked to three other operatives since he had arrived from headquarters, but those had all been rather young themselves, and during his time at Enster's class he had never really thought about it.

"Keros, are you listening? Report, rookie!" said the operator in a harsh tone, dragging Eos back out of his imagination and into embarrassment. He shook his head to get himself together.

"Oh, yes Sir, Eos Keros reporting, loud and clear! Sorry Sir, the... the weather! Please, repeat!"

It was indeed a clear and very hot night for this time of year, so Eos was relieved that he could use that as an excuse. Being based on Portal spells, the comlink tended to work only in moderate temperature, and tonight was clearly too humid for comfort. Of course, in class Eos had been through exercises in any possible weather, but the reality of it was something else entirely. The smallest things suddenly seemed so important, just because this wasn't an exercise. It was a real mission.

Eos reached the end of the field and found himself behind a large hedge that served as the outer boundary of the H-E complex. The building was in sight — A large, unwelcoming box of

bricks with at least ten levels and almost no windows. The depressing façade of our corporate reality, he thought.

“...know how the connection is and whether you can hear this, but I’ll come back to you after I’ve put the other agents into position. I wasn’t prepared for this, really... Stay put! Keros, I mean. Stay put.”

Eos, realizing that he had once again sunken into daydreaming instead of listening to the operator, sighed in resignation, although he couldn’t help but chuckle at the young man’s own tension.

In any case, it was true — Why was he so unfocused? Wasn’t this the day that he had been preparing for, training for during the past two years? Then again, now that he thought about it ... Being on edge during your first mission, that had to be the most common thing. Unprofessional and pretty pathetic, but surely common, right?

Just get yourself together, he said to himself. You know all this, it’s a standard infiltration. He put his large backpack down onto the ground and looked along the hedge to both sides. This wasn’t really the coziest spot, nor the most optimal as far as he was concerned, but it was the designated position. Orders over preferences, that was number one. But really, why hadn’t they put him somewhere more to the right? That looked like a much more central position, at least to him.

So here I am, thought Eos. Under a hedge, just like the stories told you. *A hedger, sitting under a hedge.* With leaves everywhere and branches poking in your face, classic. Just because ‘magical security experts specializing in long-range spellcasting to provide outside support for their field colleagues’ were commonly referred to as hedgers, didn’t mean that they needed to actually crawl under one. That was so yesterday.

Of course, Eos knew that precisely this habit had given his profession its name: Agents that were lying in wait outside the building while their partners were infiltrating it, giving occasional help and keeping a watchful eye on the situation, and of course most importantly breaching magical locks remotely. The corporations were always up-to-date on tasteless exterior decorating (or the complete lack of it), and having thick hedges around their complexes was common. Although the job was more multifaceted nowadays, Eos knew that during the early days of hedging, crawling under the ‘corporate hedge’ and doing your work from there had been the reality of his profession. Legends like Tronkar Ankuro had probably spent more time hiding from security in the shade of their hedge than within the agency office. If this hole of turf was where hedging legends were born, Eos would gladly join.

As he laid out his equipment in front of him, the young operator’s voice came through the comlink once again.

“This is operator to Keros on private connection, do you copy?”

“Yes, loud and clear. I-I’m sorry for the inconvenience earlier!” replied Eos. It was the truth — From what he had heard, a handful of very experienced agents were participating on this run; People like Numow or Professor Ubtra, people that could decide his future by letting him become their apprentice — or not. He wanted to give a good first impression in front of all these professionals.

“Don’t mention it, rookie,” said the operator, “Are you at spawn position?”

Eos was a bit unsettled by the fact that this desk kid on the other end of the line was calling *him* a rookie when it was obvious that he was struggling himself, but of course it was true — Eos was the one underperforming so far.

“Yes, Sir. In position precisely. Ready for movement— I mean, activity! Ready for activity, sorry.”

Eos bit his lip at the thought of having confused movement and activity calls. It was exactly this sort of thing that he had wanted to not happen at any cost, and he was frankly very grateful that this talk was on a private connection and not in front of the seniors.

“Good,” responded the operator, “We’re looking for teleport locations for your partner now. He’ll contact you on channel 51 as soon as he’s in the building.”

“Copy that, operator,” said Eos quickly, and trying to regain a professional look on his face he made a quick note of the channel number on his cuff in an effort to not let past mistakes affect his performance. That was the second rule — Always stay professional.

Meanwhile the operator continued talking: “And another thing. I read here that it *really is* your first mission — You weren’t lying! Well, good luck, small one!”

That would have been a nice touch if it hadn’t been spoken with such an arrogant voice. Eos closed his eyes and his ‘professional look’ gave way to a sarcastic grin. Of course, you moron. Would you like to come down here and try this for yourself? Go on, make it more difficult for beginners when it’s obviously your first try as operator, too. Heck, from what Eos could tell this newbie had already broken three or four rules of action.

The young operator had disconnected. Silence fell on the comlink, and all around Eos. Time to get ready, he thought. There wouldn’t be much time for mistakes once his partner entered the building. Better have everything prepared.

He caught himself adjusting the position of his Henrik Table for the third time and took a deep breath. It would be fine. This was a regular mission, there wasn’t even expected to be any agent opposition, just stupid security guards that honestly any three-year-old could take out with one hand. No surprises for Eos and his partner, and even *if* they were to screw up, which wouldn’t happen, they were *Team Four*. There were three other teams already at work, each one with much more important jobs than what they were supposed to do. No pressure at all.

Eos pulled out a piece of paper that he had been given by the quartermaster just before the mission. His airship had been late, so he had missed the briefing and everything had been pretty rushed. Excluding some explanation by the quartermaster on their way here, this short note was the only information he had about the mission, but it was easy to grasp and there were no intricate or complicated points, so Eos was feeling confident enough. Regardless, he better went over it one last time.

‘Operation Morning Light, Team Four. Two agents, field and support,’ he read. Why did these bureaucrats always make it sound as if field agents were more important than hedgers? Of course, sitting under a shrub and playing with magical toys wasn’t exactly as cool as fighting corporate guards, placing explosives, stealing documents, and the like. None of that awesome agent stuff. But everybody knew that without mainframe support, any scout or field operative should better go home on the spot. His job was just as essential as any other position’s.

At least that was what they said. Eos nervously moved the Henrik Table from his left side to his right again. They said some agents were so skilled, they would just hedge their bets themselves, leaving their supports to bite their thumbs in the meantime. And with seniors involved in this mission, who could know? Maybe Eos would just be sitting here, doing nothing while Mr. Fantastic was bringing order to the corporate world for him. Or at least, order to this specific building.

It was a pleasant idea, but Eos had looked forward to the opportunity of showing his worth to the professionals. He had trained hard for this night. With a sigh, Eos returned his attention to the piece of paper.

'Team Four, objective: Recover delicate corporate documents from H-E possession.'

Well, steal the papers, got it, thought Eos with a grin. His field partner would know more about the exact location.

The comlink produced a muffled noise. Hastily, Eos switched the channel, just in time to hear a rough, deep voice that made him feel young and fresh, but at the same time slightly incompetent and naïve. A voice full of experience and grit, one that you could only get by seeing some things.

"Yo, kid. What's up."

Silence. Eos didn't know how to respond. Agents were supposed to—

"Are you there? I don't have all day," continued the voice, and a quiet snicker was audible from the other end of the comlink. Eos caught his composure.

"Yes Sir, this is Agent Keros. Your support, Sir! But— aren't you going to do security questions first, Sir? According to guideline 2 of part 14 ADG the field agents asks security questions to confirm—"

"What's the color of the operator's pants?" asked the old voice with a sigh. Eos wasn't sure he had understood it correctly.

"Excuse me, Sir?"

"The color of his pants, kid. That's my security question, or whatever."

Eos face took a decidedly unnatural color, probably approaching that of his operator's underwear. He was making a complete fool of himself, in front of this obviously *very senior* agent.

"I'm sorry, Sir!" he said hastily, "I shouldn't have—"

From the other end of the line, a burst of laughter was audible.

"Oh, this never gets old," replied the voice. "Relax, kid, I'm fooling with ya. Anyway..."

All of this was going a bit too fast for Eos, but he tried his best to stay focused. Returning to his 'professional face', he went over his notes again, in doing so knocking over a large artefact to his left. He hastily picked it up again, silently cursing his nervousness while on the comlink, the field agent's steps echoed back from the walls around him.

"Are you alright over there, kid?" he asked, "It doesn't sound like it."

"Yes Sir! I'm— fine!" replied Eos quickly, "Ready for activity, Sir!"

The old man chuckled again.

"Yeah, aren't we all..." From the sound of his steps, he was moving around the room.

"This doesn't look like the third floor, though," he said, "More like the cellar."

Eos took a deep breath. They hadn't even started and this was already so far from anything he had prepared for in Enster's class.

"Can you... report your position, Sir?" he asked, "My interface isn't picking up on your location."

"Probably can't reach underground, your interface," responded the old voice. "Recalibrate for a different layer, or something. Don't these things do that automatically these days?"

"Yes, Sir! No, Sir! I mean, they don't do it automatically," said Eos hastily, his face returning to that unnatural color. He should have recalibrated immediately, without needing a reminder from his partner. He was probably making such a bad first impression right now.

"Listen, kid," continued the old voice, "You don't work with older partners often, do ya."

It was more a statement than a question — Clearly Eos was not making it hard to tell.

"Being addressed Sir all the time is nice and all, but— Just drop it, will ya? It's annoying."

"Oh, yes of course, S— Yes, naturally."

From the other end of the line, another chuckle.

From what it sounded like, the senior agent was going through files and searching documents. This wasn't part of the mission, but Eos didn't want to annoy his partner any more than he had already done, so he just remained silent. Almost a minute passed without any of the two saying anything.

"Aren't you gonna do something, kid? Like, remind me that this isn't part of the mission? Honestly, these files are boring as hell."

Startled by a sudden sound, Eos looked down.

"I have your position, S— Mister! Clear to proceed," he said, trying to stay focused on the goal instead of his mistakes.

"The name's Sarc," replied the old voice over the sound of drawers being closed, "Kelem Aretz-Sarc. Howdy."

"The pleasure is mine, Mister Sarc," responded Eos quickly, "But aren't we forbidden to tell our names on comlink? Because of unwanted listeners?"

There was a short pause.

"You ever been spied on over the comlink?" asked Sarc.

"No, but—"

"That's because it doesn't happen, son."

Silence. Eos was too embarrassed to respond — He was trying so hard to keep up with the experience and routine that Mr. Sarc was showing, yet he still made one stupid mistake, one impolite question, after the other.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sarc," he said finally, "I don't—"

"You're worrying too much, boy," interrupted Sarc, "Better get me out of here. Door's locked."

"Oh, yes— Of course!" Eos reached for his interface nervously. Again, he should have thought about this on his own.

"I'm sending a Norkis Algorithm, can you tell me anything about the lock?"

A short pause — Sarc was probably inspecting the lock for any information about the construction, or even the passcode itself. The Norkis Algorithm would crack any lock with less

than three digits of passcode sooner or later, but it was generally later rather than sooner, so any information about the lock was highly useful to speed up the procedure.

“Why am I in a cellar, anyway. The target was the first floor, seems like they can’t even teleport correctly these days— Who is our operator on this gig?”

Eos couldn’t help but grin seeing justice being served upon an arrogant newbie that thought himself better than everybody else, just because he was sitting high up there in his ‘operator’ chair and not down here in the dirt, with pointy branches in his face. “He’s a newcomer, Mr. Sarc.”

“Thought so,” replied Sarc, “Kid’s straight out of class, is that it? Dangerous choice for an operator if you ask me... The Lock’s Type 7, by the way. Looks like standard construction, probably two digits. Try 97 as a code.”

Eos swallowed hard at the idea that Mr. Sarc was displeased with newbies, but he didn’t have any time to think about the fact that he was one himself. He fumbled hastily at a cheap artefact for the Unlock spell that he had been given by Enster two years ago, back when he had started at the class. It was worn down by all the practicing he had done, and Eos felt bad about it — According to procedure, artefacts were to be replaced at least every ten months. Then again, he couldn’t afford to buy a new one in his current financial position.

When he tried 97 as the spell’s passcode, a comforting *click!* sounded from the other end of the comlink. Unbelievable... Eos wanted to ask Mr. Sarc how had known the code, but he was afraid of making another stupid mistake. It was probably obvious

“Remember that one, kid,” said Sarc, as if responding to his thoughts, “H-E used that was a code for all their maintenance doors in ‘55. Still used in some places.”

Hastily, Eos wrote down the number on his cuff. This was the kind of knowledge you could only get through years of being in the business. His respect for this Mr. Sarc was growing by the minute.

“You got plans of the building with ya? I’m at the staircase now, probably north side of the whole thing.”

Eos timidly searched his notes for anything he might have overlooked, but he knew all his equipment by heart.

“I’m sorry, the only plans provided to me are for floors two and up,” he replied.

“Unbelievable,” said Sarc with a tone of confirmed expectations, “Just who are these operators? Plans are number one, kid. Number one. Guess we’ll go without, then.”

While Mr. Sarc made his way up the stairs, Eos suggested setting off a diversion alarm in the cellar, eager to make use of the ample preparation work he had done during his multi-hour airship flight, but Sarc advised against it. They were still unnoticed, after all. Eos was a little disappointed, but Sarc clearly had the authority here, and his argument was convincing.

“Alright,” said Sarc quietly as he reached the third floor, “I’m close to the prize. There’s two doors at the other end of the hallway, can I get both unlocked? Gonna be there in a minute.”

“Of course, I’m on it,” responded Eos immediately, and with a quick look at the interface and the floor plan he determined the position of the two locks. Sarc had been absolutely right about the importance of knowing the building — Naturally, knowing the position of any magic device was essential for hedging it. In class, Eos had of course practiced both hedging using an

interface to tell the other agent's location, and 'blind hedging', the more difficult form where the field agent would merely describe the device's position, and the hedger had to guess its exact location based on floor plans or, at times, nothing at all. That was the method that had been in use for years before the interface had been invented — The 'true' form of hedging, as some would call it. The method that had been deployed by Tronkar Ankuro and his men, and basically every other hedging legend Eos looked up to.

97 was not the correct code for either of these doors, so Eos set up a Norkis Algorithm on the first one and was just about to do the same for the second, when a sudden noise from the comlink made him jerk up. On the other end of the com, Sarc seemed to be in trouble, and three or four loud thumping sounds, followed by a door being quickly opened and closed, signaled that Eos' partner had made contact with some unfortunate H-E guards.

"Sarc, are you alright? ...Sarc?"

Silence. Then, after a few seconds that seemed to Eos like a full minute: "Yah, I'm fine. Nothing to worry about, kid."

Eos let out a sigh of relief. This had been the peak pressure of his career so far — Which, now that he thought about it, wasn't difficult to do given his time of service.

"I just had a look at these lads' pockets, you know?" said Sarc on the comlink.

"Mr. Sarc, is that— protocol?" asked Eos timidly, "Our mission states stealth, and—"

"Don't worry about it, hedgeboy. They didn't see what hit 'em."

Eos suspected that he might have misheard that. "They?" he exclaimed in surprise, "As in, multiple?"

Taking down one unsuspecting target was in fact very easy if you knew how to do it — Everybody in class had learned that even if they didn't want to, it was standard agent stuff. Eos could do it himself. But two or more opponents was a different challenge entirely, and the risk of being seen or raising an alarm was very high.

"Yah, whatever," responded Sarc with an indifferent tone as if nothing of importance had happened, "These boys had some nice spare change on them. Anyway, let's move on with the operation. Are these doors open?"

Footsteps along the corridor were audible.

"Yes, the first one is clear," replied Eos, a bit startled by Sarc's maneuver, "I'm still working on the second one."

"Tough luck, kid," said Sarc, "I've got a passcard now. No need for regular counterclockwises, though I think that second one might be special access only."

Eos had no idea what counterclockwises were supposed to be, but it was good news that Sarc had pulled a passcard from one of the guards — It would save them a great deal of time on any standard door, although corporate security normally came with multiple levels of door cards. He wanted to ask what counterclockwises were, but his partner was already at the other end of the corridor.

"I'm at the door, kid. Open, sesame."

"I'm setting up a Norkis now," replied Eos, hastily reaching for the artefact to his right, "Sorry, Sir."

“Cut the Sir business,” came Sarc’s immediate response, “And this might take a while. From what I can tell, this one has an advanced Born on it. I’m gonna take a look at this side room while we wait.”

Eos heard a door opening. This was going way too fast for him — He had no idea what a Born was supposed to be in this context, and even though the term itself was of course familiar to him from it’s usage as a name for a spells passcode, he couldn’t tell what Sarc was trying to say.

“Uhm, sorry Sir, but—” he began slowly, “What’s an advanced Born, if I may ask?”

Sarc chuckled. “It’s senior lingo, son. ‘Additional binary’ is what the kids call it these days.”

Of course, though Eos, that made more sense. The classic Lock spell that corporations used in their security didn’t allow for more than three digits of passcode, but some of the more modern versions added a so-called additional binary, or a simply yes-no-modifier that essentially doubled the number of possible codes and was supposed to make attacks using the Norkis Algorithm more time-consuming. It would take at least two minutes, probably more, to determine the passcode of that door — He better got right onto it.

While Eos was working on the algorithm, Sarc continued to talk over the com, his voice mixing with the sound of drawers being opened and documents rustling.

“So tell me, hedgeboy — What’s your status these days?”

“My status, Sir?” replied Eos, slightly confused, “I’m at spawn location, equipment deployed and active. Will need time to pack, although—”

Sarc interrupted him with a laugh. “That’s not what I meant, son. Your status as in experience. I’ve never heard your name before — Keros, was it? Unusual name, that.”

Eos was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable, not only because of the advanced ‘lingo’ that Sarc was using, but of the question itself.

“Uhm, actually, Sir—” he replied slowly, “It’s my first mission in the field.”

There was a pause. Even the sound of rustling paper had stopped. Then after a second, Sarc continued as if nothing had happened.

“Huh, that so...” he said plainly. It was hard to read the subtext, and Eos didn’t know how to respond.

“Yes, actually it’s a great honor to work with such an experienced senior agent immediately, I—”

“Thanks for the flowers, kid,” interrupted Sarc in the same indifferent and hard-to-read voice, “So our idiot of a support operator isn’t the only one straight out of class, aye? Tell me all about it...”

Eos bit his lip in anticipation. He had no clue what kind of impression he had made so far, and he didn’t quite understand what ‘Tell me all about it’ was supposed to mean here. All in all, working with a senior was just about as complicated as everybody at class had told him it would be, including the ‘cool senior lingo’ that all the class kids tried to emulate, but couldn’t quite keep up when it came down to it, and now this — Could Sarc be one of those infamous ‘old agents’ that hated working with younger colleagues?

On the other end of the comlink, Sarc was still searching the side room.

“Well, you’re doing just fine, rookie,” he said after a while, “Honestly, I had no idea.”

Eos grinned — He couldn't help it.

"Thank you very much, that's a great thing to hear on your first run," he said with a slightly trembling voice.

"Yah, I guess so," responded Sarc. "Listen, I've got some stuff here that Central will want to take a look at. How's that Norkis coming along?"

The decryption was almost finished.

"It's going to clear any minute now. Proceed to target! ...Please!"

Sarc let out a laugh.

"Yeah, that's what I'm gonna do. Proceed to target. Careful with that door though, it seems to be their summit area. Check for trapdoors and all that, you know the drill."

Eos got right onto it. His determination newly fueled by Sarc's trust in him, he quickly assembled some artefacts to run trapdoor tests on the door — A standard procedure to find hidden alarms inside the Lock mechanism. Sarc was right: If the documents that Central was looking for were in this room, there might be a trap set up on the entrance.

"Leave out the complicated tests, nobody uses those old-fashioned types anymore," said Sarc just as the Norkis finished with a pleasing click. A moment later, the tests were done.

"Trapdoor tests finished, no traps, Sir!"

Eos heard the door opening, and Sarc's heavy footsteps entering the room behind it.

"Good, I've got a safe with Type 3 lock to my left, and an astral server at the back end of the room. Look into that while I check out the safe, we won't have much time," commanded Sarc, and Eos didn't hesitate. Astral was a spell used to store away objects and produce them if needed, but as with Locks one normally had to get past a passcode to access the goods, which were — that much was certain given this situation — most likely the sequence lists Central was so interested in, or in other words: *the objective*.

"Actually," said Sarc over the sound of him trying to open the safe, "The more I think about it... there's no real way that door wasn't tripwired. Or maybe they have something on the floor here, I don't know. But it's too easy otherwise. I guess I'll have company soon."

"Do you want me to extract you?" asked Eos, slightly concerned about the idea that Sarc might just have triggered a general alarm across the complex.

"Can you even do that?"

"I could teleport to you and extract both of us," suggested Eos, who was quite proud of his idea, but Sarc wasn't too impressed.

"That would take ages, you'll be far too slow," he replied, "In any case I can deal with it. Just get that server open for me."

"Roger that, Sir!"

Cracking the server was surprisingly easy — A simple two-digit identity that Eos' equipment found in less than a minute. Just as he activated the mechanism remotely, the familiar buzzing sound of stored objects materializing came through the comlink, followed only a second later by Sarc's voice.

"Yeah, I see them. Thanks for pulling these down for me," he said as he walked across the room towards the server, and was just about to continue when another, different set of footsteps echoed from down the corridor. Eos swallowed hard.

"They're here already," whispered Sarc, "And it's more than I thought. They definitely saw this whole thing coming. Lad, this might be a serious problem."

Silence on the comlink. Eos didn't dare to say anything, fearing that his voice might give away Sarc's position. His hands stopped. There was a sound of multiple men running down the hallway, then a door being kicked open, and Sarc's calm breathing on the com. Not far from him, two guards were talking with angered voices, shouting orders into their own communication devices, things like "Switch to emergency channel 1433!" or "Place more sec on the lower levels!" and none of it sounded like good news.

Sarc's breathing rendered a bizarre contrast to this background, and it made Eos feel uncomfortable in a way that he had never felt before. How could you keep your cool in that kind of situation? The men were searching the room now.

"Keep calm, kid. I can deal with this."

Sarc's voice was no more than a whisper. Eos wanted to protest, but he didn't dare to say anything. He wanted to remind Sarc that the whole building was probably coming for him, that there were more security guards on their way and that most importantly, *engaging them head-on was the most idiotic thing to do now.*

But then Eos remembered that he was the rookie on this team. That Sarc would know all this already, that he likely had a plan prepared for scenarios that Eos couldn't even think of. For a while, there was silence — The guards were whispering to each other quietly while coming closer and closer to Sarc's hiding spot, and then—

"Kelko at Ecrient, son. Sarc out."

Eos' eyes widened. He hadn't expected this. Kelko at Ecrient was a code command — It signaled that the agent would cut communication with his colleagues, normally because they were at risk of being captured and didn't want to allow the comlink or interface to be tracked by the opposition. It was a security measure to keep the team safe if one operative was in danger, but opposed to the old times of hedging, when the command had been rather common, it was now understood to be too drastic, and rarely used. Which made this even more concerning than it already was.

His hands frantically dashing back and forth between interface and comlink, Eos tried to reach Sarc, but he knew that it was no use. The line was dead silent.

A gust of wind went through the hedge, and with the comlink taken out, Eos' attention suddenly came back to the fact that he was hiding somewhere on some field in the middle of the night, completely and utterly alone.

What was he supposed to do now?

CHAPTER TWO

Kelko At Ecrient

Eos' experience with Sarc so far told him that it would be alright. His partner would take out the guards, contact him on an emergency channel and they would continue as normal — But if everything was alright, why cut communication in the first place? Why make it a bigger deal than it was? There was something dark going on, and none of Eos' training could tell him what to do now.

Then, Eos had an idea, and all of a sudden he felt very smart. Hastily, he grabbed his comlink and adjusted the channel to 1433. Immediately, he could hear security forces shouting from all corners of the complex.

"Blue Third, are you alright? What's your status? Report!"

"Blue Third, come in! What's the matter up there?"

"This is Red First, I'm going up there with two! Cover the rear entrance, somebody!"

"Yellow First here, I'm at the rear entrance. Just what's going on?"

"It's a break-in at the summit room," replied Red First, "Server is compromised."

No it isn't, thought Eos with a tense frown, not yet! At least now it was clear that whatever H-E was storing in there, it was important.

"Red First, we're at the staircase, taking the floor now. They can't be far," continued Red First, and a door was kicked open.

"Blue Seven here, I'm coming up as well. Check the upper floors, they might have an exit prepared for them somewhere!"

"Good call, Blue Seven — Anybody up there?"

"Yes Sir!" replied a young man with a high-pitched voice, "This is Green Five, we'll arrange a perimeter immedi—"

"Contact!" yelled Red First, and two shots were fired. "Single attacker, with salvaged weaponry from our side. Backup, now!"

This wasn't looking good at all, thought Eos. Panicking, he knocked over two artefacts to his right, but he didn't care. Dozens of men were closing in on his partner. He wanted to do something, to help in some way. He thought about emergency locking some of the doors, but it was too late and the guards all had passcards anyway. A diversion alarm wouldn't do anything either — With the interface shut down, how was he supposed to help? He didn't even know where Sarc was!

Noise on the comlink, followed by Red First clearing his throat.

“This is Red First, we got the man. Company assets recovered. Situation is under control, but he had help.”

“Do we have a location, Sir?”

“His communication is cut off, there’s no trace. Search the whole complex ground, they could be anywhere.”

“Yellow Second here, what are we looking for?”

“Hedgers, scouts, mobile strikers — Anything,” replied Red First, “They might be armed, stay sharp.”

Eos threw a fearful look over his shoulder. The first hints of sunlight tinted the field. Looking down at his equipment, he realized he wouldn’t have enough time to pack everything. Hastily, he began shoving his artefacts into his bag, while on the comlink Red First shouted orders across the complex. The red team was securing Sarc, while the green and blue squads were commanded to move to different parts of the building to reinforce security on other valuable objects.

Eos shouldered his bag and crawled out of the hedge. He had no idea where to go. Of course he had an exit portal prepared and ready, but he couldn’t abandon Sarc. All of this was happening so fast — His partner captured, the mission objective out of reach, himself hunted... What were you supposed to do in such a situation? Throwing nervous looks along the hedge to both sides, he switched to the operator’s channel. That was the last person he had left to talk to.

“Hello, operator?” he shouted into the device, quickly lowering his voice as he realized, “This is Agent Keros, my location is compromised, actually, our whole team is compromised and — Is anybody there? Operator!”

No answer. He tried a different channel, still nothing. Great, thought Eos with a nervous grin. This really was getting way too hot for a first mission. Had the other teams been captured as well? Even the operators? If that was the case... He didn’t even want to think about it.

From his right, he heard shouting. Eos turned around and saw a flashlight in the distance, moving up towards him. Two figures were searching the hedge.

He suddenly became aware of his own increasingly fast heartbeat. He looked out over the field that he had crossed earlier — At the other end, the city’s buildings were visible. If he ran over there now, he would be seen — The field was too open and provided no cover from gunshots. It wasn’t an option. Timidly, his eyes turned to the other side, where the corporate hedge extended eastwards. Just why didn’t I pack an Invis coil, he thought. Then again, it wouldn’t matter anyways since those guards probably had disruptor devices with them...

Staying close to the cover of the hedge, Eos began slowly walking eastwards, but to his horror, another set of voices soon signaled that a second team of guards was coming from that side as well. Two flashlights swept the field in front of him, and Eos instinctively dashed back into the leafs of the hedge, but it was too late. They had seen him.

Angry shouting from both sides echoed through the night. Petrified, Eos cowered between the branches of the hedge, his thoughts racing but producing no useable result. It would be mere seconds until his capture. His gaze flew over the field — No doubt: If he ran, he would be shot.

But shots could miss, couldn’t they... Was it worth a try? He didn’t have any other option. Invis Coil — Didn’t bring one. Illusion coil — Didn’t bring that one either. Teleport out — Too

slow. Diversion alarm— Ridiculous. He reached into his bag, a drop of sweat rolling down his face. None of these gadgets could help him now— None of his hedging skills could, either.

It was at this point that a voice echoed in Eos' mind. It was the voice of Enster, his teacher at class. 'Be unorthodox in everything,' it said. Right, thought Eos, that's it! He put down his backpack, hastily pulled out only the most essential artefacts, and flung open his Henrik Table to the first page. Movement spells of every sort. He grabbed the bag, threw it to the ground just outside the hedge, smacked his fist onto one of the spell circles from the Henrik Table, and with probably more power than was advised for this spell the bag flew out across the field, sliding through the short grass and pulling his artefacts with it.

Shots were fired. Eos turned around and quietly made his way through the thick web of branches, a hint of a grin on his face. Behind him, the men with the flashlight spells chased after the bag, converging on the field somewhere while Eos crawled out of the hedge on the other side, now standing on corporate ground.

On this side of the green wall that was the infamous corporate hedge, everything was dimly illuminated by light from the few windows of the building ahead. Looking for cover, Eos quickly crossed down a slope and reached the outside of the unwelcoming block of dark bricks. He had to admit to himself that his plan hadn't stretched this far. What was he going to do now? Find a place to hide and start preparing a spell to teleport out of this mess? His little trick with the bag had only bought him time, and the guards would return to the building soon. Staying outside wasn't safe. If he could manage to get into the complex somehow, it would be easy to find some storage room where he would have more than enough time to work on any advanced spell. Teleporting out from there wouldn't be a problem, although the thought of leaving behind his partner was something Eos didn't even want to consider.

He had heard the guards talking about a rear entrance earlier, but it would be guarded. Then again, Eos was feeling quite confident in his fighting skill, and he had no other option — There was a complicated Portal variation that he had prepared in advance to tunnel straight through a wall, but the materials for it were in his bag. And in any case, the spell had a tendency to literally explode.

Eos kept his hands to the wall as he silently moved around the building. It was huge, now that he thought about it. Luckily, it didn't take long until he reached what had to be the rear entrance, a large cargo door probably used to transport goods out of the building. There was a lonesome man leaning against the wall next to it, likely the 'Yellow First' that he had heard speaking earlier. That wouldn't be a problem, thought Eos and ducked behind a line of shrubs nearby. Yellow First didn't seem to have heard the shots fired earlier — Or maybe he didn't think of what happened at the other end of the complex as his responsibility. The command had been clear: Guard the rear entrance, and that was what he was doing.

A few moments of silence passed before was violently hit in the head by a small pebble. Much to his displeasure, a second one came flying soon later, bouncing off the brick wall as the man jerked to the side in surprise. He looked to the sky, unsure whether to call an alarm on comlink. Something moved in the bushes to his right. The man pulled out a flashlight and began to carefully approach the source of the rustling. Then, everything went very fast. From the opposite side, a shadow sped out of the bushes and pounced onto the man's back, propelled

through the air by some Movi or other. Before the guard had time to turn around, he had already been knocked unconscious by a precise punch from Eos, who in the same movement pulled out a coal pencil from his pocket and quickly drew a spell circle onto the man's forehead. He activated it with a slap of his hand and stood up, the guard fast asleep on the ground.

"Eat magic, sucker!" whispered Eos with a proud grin as he turned away from the man as cool-looking as possible. He caught himself looking around casually to see if anybody had witnessed his 'moves', and quickly cleared his throat, a bit embarrassed about himself. He had practiced stuff like this a lot in class, but actually taking down a grown man, and with a fancy mid-air move at that, was something else. It felt great. He took the man's gun — An outdated model, but it would do if worst came to worst. Of course, Eos had brought a sidearm with him as well, but that was still in his backpack somewhere across the field. This would come in handy if the situation got scary again.

The Lock spell on the door was easy to break — In accordance with his training, Eos first pulled out the Norkis Algorithm, but then reconsidered and tried some codes manually. The spell's identity was 97. Of course.

He suddenly remembered Sarc, and his confidence was quickly swept away with guilt. His partner was probably chained to a chair somewhere in the building right now — Eos knew that it hadn't been his fault, but he couldn't help it. He should have ignored Sarc's advice and searched for additional trapdoors. He should have seen the alarm coming and set off a diversion somewhere else. All of these textbook techniques that he seemed to have forgotten once in the real field... Eos had always taken great pride in his knowledge and hedging skill, yet he had been the one to make one stupid mistake after the other on his first official mission. And now his partner, probably one of the agency's oldest operatives, was in captivity because of it.

Eos knew that he could help him. He was inside the building, unnoticed so far and in prime position to take action. But he also knew that protocol ordered him to abandon his partner — He was to evacuate as quickly as possible in order to stage a well-coordinated rescue mission later, instead of putting his own life at risk for an improvised hero's act, risking that tonight the corporation would take two agents, not one. But still... Maybe Sarc was nearby? Maybe they had locked him into a storage room on ground level? No, thought Eos, not even corporate pigs would be that stupid. They would have taken him to one of the uppermost levels in order to make a rescue more difficult. Or maybe the basement. Or a different building entirely.

After a short while, Eos found a small storage room branching off from the main hallway. He had run into a security guard on patrol, but the rooms on ground level were full of crates, large screens of linen, and towering document saves, so dodging the man's sight had been pretty easy.

He quickly locked the door and sat down — At least he wouldn't be actively hunted here. He had caught his breath a long time ago, but his heart was still pounding like crazy from the thrill of stealth. As a hedger, he hadn't expected any of this to happen, and much less had he been trained for it. His job should have been over the second Sarc had entered that summit room. Or maybe after he had cracked that astral server. If only he had set up a diversion...

Still unsure what to do, Eos started pacing the room, pondering whether to just evacuate, or stage a daredevil rescue mission for an agent that he hardly knew. It was clear to him that his

chances of freeing Sarc, even only reaching him, were very small. After all, he was just a rookie, on his own in a corporate building he had never visited before, missing most of his gear, and without a clue as to where his partner was being held. What would his assault plan look like? Find the dungeon, take out all the guards, and escape with Sarc? Yeah, right. In that case, he—

Eos stopped dead in his tracks. On the floor of the small room, glowing blue lines were appearing, forming a familiar pattern beneath Eos' feet as they intertwined to produce a tight array of shimmering lines and circles. It didn't take him long to see that it was a Portal spell. Somebody was teleporting in.

Eos wanted to hide somewhere, but the room was too small, so he had no choice but to wait as right in front of him the figure of a person materialized. Seconds later the blue light that had flooded the chamber was gone, and when Eos' eyes had gotten used to the half-light again there was a young man standing at the center of the room, probably around his age. He had brown hair in a weird cut, light eyes and was visibly just as confused about Eos' presence as vice versa. The more he thought about it, the more sure Eos was that he knew this boy.

Some tense moments passed, and Eos, still trying to remember why the other's face was so familiar to him, noticed with growing concern how the stranger reached for the gun on his belt. Both were obviously unsure how to react.

Finally, the young man said something in a rough tone, and Eos had a hard time hearing whether he was altering his voice on purpose or just spoke in an arrogant manner.

"You're not corporation, are you?"

"No," replied Eos slowly. He definitely didn't look the part, that was for sure.

"Then why are you here? Who are you, exactly? ...Are you from the Social Insurance?"

Eos was 100% not from the Social Insurance — As far as he knew, none of the Insurance's agents were actually any good. But then again, he didn't want to give too much of his identity away to a stranger.

"I could ask you the same," he said after a pause, trying to make his voice sound mature.

The eyes of the other man widened. He seemed relieved for a second, but regained his composure quickly. He cleared his throat and said: "I recognize your voice. You're Team Four's hedger, aren't you?"

"No way," replied Eos instinctively, "What are you talking about?"

"Listen to yourself — I'm your operator, you moron!"

Eos stopped mid-gesture. He had expected many things, but not this. He stood straight, trying to maintain a cool and controlled expression.

"Prove it," he said plainly, "What's your name?"

The young man sighed.

"Meri Kurdibt, codenamed Benx," he replied, "And you know it, you recognize my face. Heck, we were at class together for almost a year, don't play games with me!"

Now that 'Benx' wasn't altering his manner of speaking anymore, Eos could remember the voice from earlier on the comlink. And indeed, Meri Kurdibt was telling the truth: They had been classmates at Enster's for some time before splitting up to go into their chosen specializations and not meeting each other at all for another year, which was probably why Eos

hadn't recognized Benx's face instantly. He couldn't help but frown at the memory of their time as classmates — Their relationship hadn't exactly been a pleasant one.

"Yeah, it's you," he said with a nod and turned to the door casually, only to stop halfway and quickly come back around, drawing the gun he had salvaged from the guard before. Benx seemed genuinely shocked.

"What are you doing here," asked Eos slowly and with a completely serious expression, "You're supposed to keep your agents safe, not abandon your post and teleport into random places!"

Benx didn't like the fact that a gun was pointed at him — Not in the least. His gaze flew around the room nervously and his hands started to make weird gestures that didn't produce much sense.

"Listen, I can explain—"

Then, with a sudden fling of hand, he drew his own gun. Tense silence followed as they exchanged stares at gunpoint, and Eos didn't know if he should be worried or amused by how cliché the whole situation was.

"Yeah, suck it, rookie," said Benx.

"What are you talking about?!" barked Eos angrily, "You abandoned your post, that's punishable by expulsion, and you know it — How did you get in here?"

Benx frowned.

"I teleported in, you idiot," he said, "You were standing right there."

The two guns almost touched each other.

"But why?" shouted Eos, "I could be dead right now if I hadn't been so clever, and all because you weren't there when your agents needed you!"

Benx didn't seem to care much. He probably had no idea what Team Four's situation was actually like.

"What happened, superboy? I thought Sarc was your partner, what went wrong?"

Eos bit his lip. All of this felt distinctively familiar; Benx was behaving exactly how he remembered him from his time at class.

"He's captured, and we will be too if we stay here too long."

Benx lowered his gun, an expression of disbelief on his face. "...How?"

Eos looked away.

"The man's a living legend, how did you managed to get him captured?!" shouted Benx, angrily taking a step towards Eos but quickly retreating again at the sight of his gun.

"They saw us coming, that's all," said Eos plainly after a short silence.

It was not all — There had been much that Eos could have done, but this arrogant brat of a support operator was the last person he needed critique from right now.

"You screwed up big time if you got Kelem Aretz-Sarc captured," said Benx.

"Thanks!" hissed Eos. There was a short silence, and Benx seemed somewhat uncomfortable, maybe even sad.

After a while, he forced a smile and continued:

“Listen, agent — This fits in pretty well. Because honestly—” He returned his gun to his belt, “—This whole operation is a complete nightmare. Team Two is captured entirely, and One and Three had to evacuate empty-handed. They got close, but it wasn’t enough.”

Eos couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Benx stared at the wall.

“The operators’ room was like a bomb site,” he continued, “The Chief is already reporting this as an utter failure, and the other guy threw it — Actually I don’t think he’s coming back to the agency at all.”

So even among the three operators this had been a disaster. While Benx might not have been in mortal danger, his situation at the agency was clearly not much better than Eos’... Now that he thought about it, Eos couldn’t help but feel sorry for the boy.

“In that sense...” said Benx slowly, “You might say I screwed up as well. Got a senior agent captured — Two now, counting Sarc.”

He buried his hands in his pockets.

“This is my third mission as support operator. Turns out, stuff gets real pretty quickly, doesn’t it.”

It was a general statement, not aimed at Eos. Benx turned his head and threw a sideways glance to him.

“You see, I don’t have anything to lose. Now... Why are you in here?”

Eos lowered his weapon, then put it back into his pocket. He didn’t know if they had time for him to tell the whole story. There was a chance that Benx’ Portal spell had been picked up by one of H-E’s devices, and it wasn’t clear if they were safe in here anymore.

“Sarc went off communication and I overheard the corps on their channel. They were looking for his partner so I had to move. Going in was the only option.”

“And now you’re preparing a portal to make your exit,” completed Benx the thought.

“That’s right.”

For a moment, Benx looked as if he was considering, then suddenly he drew his gun again, pointing it at Eos with a shrug.

“Sorry, brother, I can’t let you do that.”

Eos sighed.

“Listen,” he said, “We both know that we can’t fire shots in here, we’ll be found within the minute. So cut the cool boy act.”

Benx opened his mouth, but hesitated for a moment.

“I could take you down with my hands as well,” he said finally.

“Yeah, try me,” replied Eos with a welcoming gesture. Benx looked away.

“Why ‘can’t you let me’, anyway?” asked Eos after an awkward pause, and the young man across of him let out a frustrated sigh.

“I got to admit, I didn’t really think this through,” he said.

“What were you going to do,” replied Eos with raised eyebrows, “Teleport in, rescue all our agents, teleport out?”

There was a pause.

“Yeah,” said Benx.

Eos couldn’t tell if it was a joke or not.

"If that wasn't the plan I wouldn't be here!" exclaimed Benx, quickly lowering his voice again, "They're being held on the tenth floor of this building, I overheard it on the com. I'll rescue them, and that's going to make up for me and the other operators letting this whole raid go to hell. If I can't do it, I might just as well not go back at all. Third mission, lost us two top-class agents. See you later, honestly—"

He seemed desperate, his hands gesturing wildly in front of Eos.

"I was hoping Intergard could get us a portal after I've saved her, but if you can do it then you're going to stay and help!"

Eos stood up. He didn't know what to say. All of this was so confusing and messed up. Then, he suddenly turned to Benx, only now really catching up to what he had said.

"...Wait a minute, what did you say? Intergard?"

Benx gave him a confused look.

"Yeah, she's there," he replied. "That's the three seasoned agents on this gig. Sarc, Ubra, Intergard."

Eos couldn't believe his ears.

"You mean... *the* Intergard? The hedging legend that literally *invented* the Interface?"

Benx looked to the floor.

"Yep, that's the one," he said weakly. "You see, we really screwed up. It doesn't happen every day that you feed a living legend to the corps. Luckily, Ubra got out in time."

Eos took a deep breath. Intergard was his hero, his deity. His Interface was handmade and signed by her. Heck, he had started hedging in the first place because of her. He still couldn't believe it. His first mission, together with Intergard — Just... how?

"Ok, I get it," he said, turning to Benx. There was too much at stake to back away now.

"We're going to rescue them."

The hallway outside was silent. Apparently nobody had noticed Benx teleporting in — Still, better safe than sorry. Eos had quickly prepared some spells that he thought might come in handy, but he didn't want to lose too much time. As they sneaked down the hallway, Benx already had a finger on his gun, his whole hand shaking.

"Stay calm, man," said Eos in a hardly convincing fashion.

"What, you're the veteran now?" replied Benx hastily as he threw a timid peek around a corner, "Just because you talked to Sarc for ten minutes?"

"Who is he, anyway? I've never heard his name before," whispered Eos. He was genuinely interested.

"I haven't met him either, but the chief operator had us study up on all personnel for this run, of course. It seems he used to be a big thing within the agency."

They reached the end of the hallway, where a small door led to a dimly lit staircase. Eos knelt down and started working on the lock.

"But something came up, and now he's rarely in action anymore," said Benx from behind him.

Eos looked up. "Something came up? You mean, like an injury? Drinking?"

"Yeah, something like that. Apparently he 'had an argument with Central' because of it, and you know what that means. Honestly I think the only reason he's still around is because he's

just the best. I mean—” He closed the door behind him and followed Eos up the stairs, “—Have you seen that man’s record? He’s a monster.”

Eos wanted to respond, but the sound of footsteps from a few levels above them echoed down the staircase, accompanied by muffled voices. Instinctively, he dashed into the shadow, pulling Benx with him.

“How good is your hand-to-hand, Benx?” he asked very quietly, thinking back on the young man’s reaction earlier, “Because I think you might need it.”

They exchanged a look, and Eos could tell from Benx’ face that close combat was not his strong suit. Above them, a door closed and the voices were gone. Eos sighed in relief.

“Well, you know,” he whispered as they continued to climb the stairs, “I’m a hedger. It’s not my job to bash people.”

“It isn’t mine either!” countered Benx quickly as Eos approached the door to the second floor.

“Let me quickly lock this up so that our escape doesn’t get cut off,” he said over his shoulder, pulling out his coal pencil.

For a moment, Benx watched silently as Eos drew out a large spell circle on the metal surface of the door.

“Actually, I’ve listened to hedgers doing their work for two weeks now, but I’ve never been there in person,” he said finally, his eyes still following the quick movements of Eos’ hand. A few seconds later, the Lock was finished.

“Well, you must have seen it in class, right?” said Eos as they continued to go up.

“Yeah, I—” began Benx, but Eos signaled him to be quiet as he reached for the door to the third floor, slowly pulling it open.

“What are you doing?” hissed Benx. Eos pointed down the corridor towards the room that Sarc had been in earlier.

“There’s our objective,” he whispered, “Let’s take a look.”

“Are you mad?” Benx grabbed him at the jacket and dragged him back. “You’re going to set off a dozen alarms! The papers won’t even be there anymore, what’s the point?”

Eos, now leaning backwards against Benx and his arm still gripped tight, gave the support operator a look over the shoulder.

“You’re right,” he said, “Human assets before physical assets.”

“That’s what Enster teaches, isn’t it?” asked Benx as he closed the door. At least he seemed to remember *some* of his training.

“Yes — Let keep going up.”

Eos locked the doors to the fourth and sixth floor as well to cut off reinforcements that would arrive from the guard common rooms on those levels. On the seventh floor, corporate officers suddenly started coming down the staircase and Eos and Benx had to evade into the corridor, make their way down the whole length of the building and trying their luck at the other end, where a secondary staircase was less infested with patrols. Then on level eight, the door to the hallway opened just as the two young agents were sneaking past it, and it was merely thanks to Eos’ quick reflexes that he managed to knock out the guard and put him to sleep at the foot of the stairs to level nine, taking his security card and gun in the process. Benx was very impressed.

“So, what’s the assault plan, *operator?*” whispered Eos with a proud grin as they left the sleeping man and continued to go up.

“Don’t stare at me like that, I have no idea!” replied Benx, giving Eos an indifferent look and trying his best to sound unimpressed, “What kind of spells do you have?”

“Shouldn’t you know that? As my team leader?”

“I got it written down, yes. But I don’t have my notes with me.”

Eos looked down at himself.

“Not much, actually,” he said, “Most of my equipment had to go when I dodged the search party earlier. We’re working on paper here.”

They reached the ninth floor. Benx looked confused — He probably didn’t know what ‘working on paper’ meant.

“Can you do Naikra?” he asked after a pause, “We could sneak in and get them from behind!”

“Sorry, that stuff takes literal years to learn,” replied Eos. The darkness spell was indeed very useful, but no easy variations of it existed, and as a result there was no top-class agent that Eos could think of who used it, apart from Sarb Igsher of course.

“Harc, maybe? Or Thobonkow?”

“For gods’ sake, Benx!” hissed Eos, turning around to his colleague with an annoyed expression, and maybe a hint of frustration that he couldn’t (yet) cast any of these spells, “Have you got any idea how difficult all these spells are? Besides, a hedger specializes in Locks and Astrals. What you’re talking about is advanced spellslinger material — *Very* advanced!”

They had almost reached the tenth floor, still without any real plan, when a subtle noise made Eos stop.

“Do you hear that?” he asked, raising a finger.

“Yeah, what is that? A clock? Sounds like ticking to me,” replied Benx, carefully taking the last few steps to level ten and slowly approaching the door.

“Of course it’s not a clock, rookie,” whispered Eos, proud that for once he had an opportunity to show his superior knowledge.

“Well, what is it, then?”

Eos didn’t answer. Instead, he slowly pulled open the door to the corridor. Both boys peeked around the corner.

The hallway was dimly lit by two Fallos artefacts on both ends, shedding grey light down the polished floor and across the dirty ceiling. On the wall, additional light spells were installed at regular intervals, but they only faintly flickered every once in a while, and Eos didn’t take long to see the reason for it: At about halfway between them and the other end of the corridor, a heavy steel door led into a side room — Next to it, a lone security guard was leaning against the wall, apparently asleep, and in front of him on the floor stood a large metal box on an elaborate stand with a two small pendulums swinging back and forth beneath it. From within the device, the strange ticking sound echoed down the corridor.

“Is that... a bomb?” asked Benx with an expression of genuine confusion.

“No, you moron,” replied Eos quietly, “Don’t you remember anything from class? It’s a silencing device! Look at the lights, they’re all out because it disrupts them.”

"Yes, I know what a silencer does," replied Benx, his expression a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment.

"Apparently you don't," countered Eos as he pushed the door open, careful not to make any loud sound.

"Well," whispered Benx after a pause, "I guess we expected that, didn't we? I mean, Intergard is in there, they would be idiots if they didn't install something against her spells."

Eos frowned. "Honestly, I'm confused she hasn't blasted it remotely already. Those things can be overridden easily. Unless she doesn't know where it is—"

Eos stepped out into the corridor. If this guard with his silencer was really the only security measure protecting his fellow agents, this would be much easier than expected. He looked around for signs of a trap, but there was nothing unusual.

"Careful for traps, man!" hissed Benx from behind. Eos replied with a sarcastic frown and turned to the wall.

"What's your plan, agent?"

Eos didn't answer. Instead he gave Benx a triumphant grin and pulled out his coal pencil.

"Textbook, operator," he said as he started drawing on the wall, "Textbook. Watch and learn."

"You can't take him out with a spell, you idiot!" whispered Benx hastily, "That's what *Silencing Device* means!"

Eos continued drawing, a confident smile still on his face.

"That's why I'm going to take out the silencer first, and *then* him."

Benx opened his mouth to counter, but couldn't seem to think about anything good to say. His eyes dashed back and forth between the pencil's lines on the wall and Eos' face.

"You... can do that? I mean, isn't that what a silencer is supposed to prevent? It prevents spells?"

Eos turned around, careful not to whisper too loudly.

"Listen, I can't explain this to you now, he would wake up! Just watch!"

Benx stood silent as Eos continued to fill the wall with lines, always throwing quick glances over to the guard to make sure he was still sleeping, and to check if his distance estimates were alright. From what Benx could tell (and it wasn't much, spell theory had been his nightmare in class and he hadn't gone into hedging at all), Eos was preparing two separate spells, one of them a basic Relintz to cancel the silencer, and the other one some sort of sleep or knockout spell, but there were modifications all over and he didn't understand any of them.

Eos had been trying to keep as quiet as possible, but soon his efforts to not brag in front of Benx were bested — They were rescuing a living legend, after all.

"The ticking is characteristic," he whispered while drawing, "If I'm not mistaken, that's a two-layer silencer with a standard Nath going on inside, supported by a number of basic distractors to act as a failsafe while the real silencer reboots. I'll send a directed Release and Cancel to knock out both layers, but we won't have much time to manually deactivate it. Luckily I can fit a Sleep in there as well and—"

Now it was Benx' turn to be worried about his colleague waking up the guard.

"What are you talking about, I don't understand any of this!" he hissed between his teeth, "Just do it!"

Eos stepped away from the wall with a deep breath.

"I hope I didn't screw any of this up," he muttered to himself. He didn't want to blast the wall to pieces, after all.

A bright flash illuminated the corridor as Eos activated his construct. Immediately, the ticking from inside the box stopped — At the same time, the sleeping guard slowly tilted and fell over, lying still on the floor next to the silencer.

"Yes, man!" whispered Eos with a wide grin as he gestured Benx to follow him to the door, "Magic!"

They quickly crossed the remaining distance down the corridor and Eos sat down next to silencer. As he opened the cover of the large metal box, Benx said:

"Well, it didn't look like much, but I got to admit — That was... impressive."

"Thanks, Benx," replied Eos as he stood up again, smiling both at the funny rhyme and his victory over the machine, "That thing is down for good. Let's start working on the door before the next guard change."

They both turned to inspect the door supposedly leading to their captured colleagues. It was a massive steel entrance covered all over with a complicated array of lines and circles. Eos' smile quickly gave way to a depressed frown, and he was just opening his mouth for a classic 'This is going to take a while' when suddenly they heard voices from within the room.

"Quiet! Something's off."

It was the voice of a woman, yet deep and strong despite the fact that it was just a whisper. After a short pause, a younger voice answered:

"It's the ticking from the silencer, Madam. It stopped."

"Corporate engineering, ladies and gentlemen," added another voice.

"You're right, agent," replied the woman, "Time to go."

Eos could hear steps approaching the door from inside.

"There's no time for objectives, they could come get us any minute," continued the woman, now standing directly behind the layer of steel, "I'm sealing the door and we'll port out."

Eos and Benx exchanged a quick look, and careful not to raise his voice too much, Eos tried to contact the woman.

"A-Agent Intergard— Madam," he started with a slight stutter in his voice, "There's a misunderstanding, this is Agent Keros of Team Four, accompanied by the support operator, we're here to rescue you!"

Silence. Behind the door, there were footsteps and the sound of somebody standing up. Then, a rough voice.

"Is this you, kid?"

Eos' eyes brightened. "Yes, it's me, Mr. Sarc," he replied quickly, "Open the door!"

"If it were that easy," said the woman's voice with a chuckle, "What kind of lock is it, rookie? Any info?"

A grin on his face from the thought of Intergard talking to him, Eos hastily took a step back and inspected the chaotic pattern on the door's steel surface. If this was really *the* goddess of modern hedging standing there on the other side of the steel plate, he better made a good first impression. On the other hand, the circle in front of him was not easy to read. It seemed like the

room wasn't supposed to be a prison cell, and that one of H-E's wizards had probably just installed a quick makeshift lock to contain the captured agents. In an effort to hide the lock's identity, he had added meaningless lines and entire modulations all over the door, which made it hard to see the lock's passcode just from looking at the circle.

"Uhm—" began Eos slowly, careful not to say anything stupid as his eyes dashed back and forth over the chaos on the door, "It's cluttered in distraction lines, but I think it's three-digit — No, two digits! The identity is... one second... Five! And... Seven, I think, but—"

He wanted to say more, but was interrupted when the lines on the door suddenly burst into light from Intergard's immediate Unlock spell. The steel plate flung open, revealing the view into a small room not unlike the one Eos and Benx had been in earlier.

The floor at the center of the room was covered in a complex magic circle that Intergard had apparently prepared beforehand for the unlikely event of the silencing device shutting down. Some parts of it were still incomplete, but Eos could see that it was a Portal spell meant to guarantee a quick escape as soon as the silencer's effect would end.

Around the circle stood three characters that could hardly have been different in appearance. At the back was a young man in his twenties with a ponytail and very athletic build, but seemingly wearing nothing more than short pants — quite possibly his underpants. Next to him stood a large man in a long coat with a face made almost unrecognizable by an impressive beard and a scar running across his forehead. That had to be Sarc, thought Eos, who until now had only heard Sarc's voice on the com, but not seen him in person.

In front of the two men, however, stood a woman that easily surpassed both with her sheer presence. She wasn't taller than Sarc, but had just as massive arms, and her shoulders were at least as broad as his, probably a good deal more. Her blonde hair framed a sharp face that was home to two vibrant blue eyes. Scars crossed her full lips and all in all, her appearance was by far more compelling and awe-inducing than most men could say of themselves.

After some tense moments of Eos being utterly speechless and Benx enjoying it with a mischievous grin, Intergard crossed her arms in front of her impressive chest.

"What's the ruckus, rookies?"

Sarc chuckled in the back. "Get in, kids. We're catching a ride out of this place."

Intergard stepped aside, and the two junior agents entered the chamber. She closed the door behind them, revealing an unfinished Lock spell on its inside.

"Let me finish this quickly, and we'll be out of here in no time," she said, pulling out her coal pencil and getting back to work on the circle.

Eos was trying hard not to stare, but he couldn't help himself. No stroke of the pencil, no movement of Intergard's large hands was missed by his enchanted eyes. It wasn't just the way she worked her magic— Her whole appearance was unbelievable. Eos had seen Intergard many times from afar, but from up close she was even more impressive.

Meanwhile, Benx had only now noticed that the young agent at the back end of the room apparently wasn't wearing any real clothes. He let out a loud burst of laughter at the sight, but quickly regained his composure and turned to Sarc, visibly confused. Sarc himself turned to the young man, who sighed and sat down on a small chair behind him.

"It's a long story."

"We have time," replied Benx with a grin, but a subtle cough from Intergard made him stop the pleasantries.

"Well, yes. Agent Rekkar, if I remember correctly? Very unfortunate that we had no opportunity to talk until now."

Of course he was right, after all he had studied the profiles of all agents involved in this mission, and he had probably seen Rekkar during the main briefing, at the very least.

"Correct, Sarb Rekkar is the name, I'm Agent Intergard's scouting support," said the young man in a deliberately formal tone, "...And these are my underpants."

Apparently, Benx (like Eos) had a much easier time talking to agents of roughly his own age instead of famous seniors that had 'respect and authority' basically written on their foreheads. He walked over and leaned down to 'inspect' the pants.

"Honestly man, what happened?" he asked with a chuckle in his voice.

"You know how the cool kids have their equipment in their coat pockets, not a bag?"

Eos managed to draw his gaze away from Intergard.

"Excuse me, but my bag saved my life literally half an hour ago."

He was not joking.

"How that?" asked Rekkar as he stood up and came over to take a closer look at Eos. They had only spoken once right before the mission.

"I used it as a diversion to get some corporates off my tail," said Eos, trying to sound cool, but his badly hidden pride felt completely obvious.

Rekkar extended his hand.

"Nice, man — Didn't expect that from a hedger straight out of class."

"Thank you, Sir," replied Eos as they shook hands.

Behind them, a sudden flash of light on the door signaled that Intergard had finished the Lock. "If they ever manage to get their sleepy meatsacks up here, that's going to hold them for hours," she said, pushing the three boys aside with a gentle but powerful motion of her arm as she moved over to the circle on the floor.

"This won't take long to finish," she added as she kneeled down, "Two more minutes and we're out of here."

Sarc let out another chuckle and turned to Rekkar.

"Seems like we're not getting your clothes back tonight, son," he giggled, "...Makes for a better story sometime, anyway."

From his pocket, he produced a thin slice of smoking rod and turned to Intergard.

"Sorry to bother you, Madam," he said, mimicking a young newbie, "Can you give me a light?"

Intergard looked up with some confusion, and frowned when she saw the rod. Grunting something, she raised one of her arms, and Eos noticed a small mark on the back of her extended hand. It was a magic circle, tattooed onto her skin.

So it's true, thought Eos. He had somewhat expected that a seasoned veteran like Intergard would have those, but still he was captivated by the sight. From what he had heard, using your own skin as an artefact to activate a spell could be quite painful — A large prize to pay for the fact that you couldn't lose it.

Sarc held the tip of the smoking rod next to Intergard's hand, and with a quick shake of her wrist she lighted it. With a sigh of relief, Sarc took a deep inhale of fresh smoke.

"It's finished," said Intergard and stood up, "Everyone, gather round!"

The five stepped onto the mark on the floor, and Eos gasped for air as he was harshly squeezed between Sarc and Rekkar.

"Steadfast," commanded Intergard, "Priming in three, two, one — Primed!"

Seconds later, except for thin lines of smoke rising from the floor, the room was empty.

CHAPTER THREE

At The Agency Hideout, 15 Hours Earlier

The briefing room was so full of people that there was hardly any way to maneuver. The sound of notes rustling, glasses chinking against each other as they were put onto the table, chairs being dragged across the rocky floor and voices chatting echoed from the ceiling to create an unpleasant carpet of noise that made Han Osrakey's head pound. He was very nervous. In his seven months of service as an operator, he hadn't ever been chosen to organize a mission of this caliber. Even during the short time that he had ran equipment raids at the Egeldan base, his teams had always been comprised either of complete newbies or agents with close to zero experience in the field. Actually leading a mission that not only had just two complete beginners (or 'class kids' as they were endearingly called), but in fact included three absolute legends of the business, was nothing short of a promotion to him. As a result, his stress levels before the briefing were accordingly high.

He was standing at the center of the room in front of a long table. Directly across on the other side, Kwifeldis Intergard had already taken her seat and was inspecting the two large H-E blueprints that Han had spread out earlier. She looked tired, but visibly tried to maintain a professional expression. That's a relief, thought Han — Seeing that even people like her got tired sometimes.

Sarb Rekkar, who would assist her for Team Two as a scouting support, was supposed to take the seat next to her to the left, but he wasn't here yet. The two following chairs were empty as well, but their owners, Niekar Turur and Suren Ubtra ('The Professor'), were standing nearby, engaged in quiet chatter. They would be Team One.

To the other side of Intergard, who was now scribbling something into her notebook with large, flowing handwriting, sat a young man named Ienge Alagdi, a newcomer straight out of class with bright green hair. Kids these days, thought Han with a weak smile as Ienge casually leaned over to catch a glimpse of Intergard's notes. He didn't seem frightened at all by the fact that he was sitting within touching distance of 'The Godmother of Hedging' herself — on the contrary. Or maybe he just had no idea who she was. That was probably more likely.

Next to Ienge and sporting a look that might have come from numerous nights without sleep was his partner for Team Three, Leit Shichal (or something like that, Han hadn't really memorized all the names so far). From what Han had read in preparation for the briefing, he was a promising engineer and mechanics specialist about two years older than Ienge, and far more mature. Given, he only had half a year of field experience, but his record was already impressive, and he continued to surprise Central Headquarters with creative and unorthodox

strategies that kept winning his team the equipment and scouting missions he was normally assigned to.

On the other side of the table were seats for the organizing staff of this run. At the center was Han himself, next to him his two new colleagues that formed Team Zero: The operators.

Vice chief of operation was a large young man named Rane Uegus that Han had only talked to briefly since he had arrived this morning. He seemed even more on edge than Han himself, and judging from the erratic gestures of this hands he wasn't very confident, nor indeed feeling well at all. It was probably his first important mission too, thought Han.

Support operator would be taken by Meri Kurdibt, commonly called Benx for his reputation of mischief, although in reality he was very controlled and not impulsive at all, at least from what Han could tell. He had worked with Benx once before, on a minor intelligence raid some days ago, and they gotten along very well.

Apart from that, there were two more agents planned for the mission: Kelem Aretz-Sarc, the infamous veteran of the agency that Han had only met twice before but who had still left a permanent imprint on him, and a newcomer called Eos Keros, supposedly a promising young talent in spellcasting. Both would arrive at the hideout only later due to delays of their airship, so Han would have to hold the main briefing without Team Four. He had assigned the vice chief of operation to do a small unofficial briefing later for Keros, and as far as Aretz-Sarc was concerned, he didn't have any worries. It would probably be fine even if he had him teleport in without any briefing at all. Frankly, the man was incredible.

Han was dragged out of this thoughts and back into the noise of the room by the sound of a door opening. It was Rekkar. He quickly took his seat next to Intergard and filled a glass in front of him with water. The other agents had already sat down, turning to Han with looks of readiness, in some cases even anticipation. Next to him, Rane Uegus was shifting nervously on his chair.

"Yes, uhm—" began Han, clearing his throat, "Thank you all for coming, this is the central briefing for Operation Morning Light, starting in fifteen hours. I'll be formally introducing the staff."

He turned to the nervous man next to him.

"This is Agent Uegus, vice chief and equipment coordinator, and this—" he turned to the other side, "Is Agent Kurdibt, support operator in charge of personnel and communication during the mission. My name is Osrakey, pleasure to meet you all and I'm looking forward to our cooperation."

Murmur went around the table as everyone mumbled 'Pleasure to meet you' or 'I'll do my best', standard procedure for every briefing. Most of the operatives already knew each other, in some cases they had worked together for years, but such was the protocol and Han didn't want to seem sloppy in the face of Intergard and the Professor.

"Very good," he continued, "Central Headquarters has received intelligence that H-E is planning to move sensitive documents from one corporate complex to the other tonight. These are extremely valuable assets that will not only fetch a high price on the information market, but could also be used for our agency directly, so we are staging a large-scale interception raid. Make no mistake, these documents are some of H-E's most confidential files right now, and

they're protected accordingly, so we have some of the agency's best assets here within this room."

Han tried not to make eye contact with Ubtra or Intergard as he said this.

"There will be four independent teams on this raid. Team One—" He nodded in the direction of the Professor and Niekar Turur, "—will intercept the transport and acquire the case that stores these documents. Because of the various security measures what I will elaborate on shortly, it will probably be too big to be carried by hand, so prepare an extraction portal or gain control over the vehicle completely."

He pointed to one of the large sheets that were spread out across the table, illustrating the assumed properties of the document container and where it was stored within the vehicle.

"This container is secured by a state-of-the-art Lock mechanism that will make it difficult to extract the assets even with sufficient time, and virtually impossible to do so immediately. It's protected by a system of combustion spells and mechanic parts that will destroy both the container and the documents if any intrusion beyond using the legitimate codes is attempted."

Ienge Alagdi raised his hand, and after Han nodded he asked: "Why are they risking to destroy the documents if they are so important to H-E?"

"I suspect that these are copies of the original files sent to a customer for trade, which is both a very risky business transaction and —given the sensitive nature of the traded information— highly illegal."

"As if that would stop the corps from anything," mumbled Rekkar.

"That's right," added Han, "But in any case we have no access to the original files, just to these copies. However, I assume that even as such they will be highly valuable."

"So you plan to raid the transport and get a hold of the case, then extract it and work on opening it later?" asked Ubtra in a concerned tone.

"If everything goes as planned, we won't need that," replied Han. "While you and Agent Turur gain control over the vehicle, Team Two—" he nodded to Intergard, "—will infiltrate the building where H-E stores the access codes, and steal them. This will be a delicate and risky task as the codes are well guarded, but given your experience I'm confident you will prevail. I have assigned Rekkar as your support to provide his scouting and stealth skills, but for accessing the data itself your magical expertise will be more than sufficient."

Nods of confirmation around the table. Ienge raised his hand again.

"That's all well, but what's the objective for Team Three and Four?"

Han gave a quick look down to Rane Uegus sitting next to him, and was handed a piece of paper with notes.

"This is an important business opportunity for H-E," he continued, "So I suspect they will have armed forces standing by to provide reinforcements if anything unusual happens. This has been their strategy in the past, and it is likely they will use it again. To prevent having these reinforcements called in when we raid the transport, we will install disruptor devices at the estimated point of confrontation beforehand, but more importantly—" his eyes returned to Ienge, "H-E has set up a makeshift communications base nearby, from where all comlink connections in this transaction will be coordinated. Team Three will infiltrate there."

Telling looks were exchanged around the table. The communications base was always an infamous target.

"Infiltrating there will be hard, but your objective is very easy to reach. Sabotage the infrastructure and plant disruptors to jam communication, then get out. I guess you understand now why I've put you and Agent Shichal onto this."

Ienge leant back in his chair, nodding. He didn't seem uncomfortable with such a risky and difficult job at all.

"Team Four," Han continued, "Isn't here at the present time, but they will try to acquire a side objective within a nearby building that might make it easier for us to access the documents if we fail to secure the passcodes."

He looked around the table, clearing his throat.

"My colleagues and I will provide each team with additional information separately. Team Three will help Intergard in placing the disruptors this afternoon, apart from that you're free to prepare at your own discretion. Are there any questions?"

Nobody raised a hand.

"In that case: All agents, dismissed."

He sat down while polite clapping echoed around the room. If his information about H-E's manoeuvre was right, this mission as off to a good start.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Last We Met Our Heroes

Intergard had aimed her Portal for a filthy side street some two or three leagues away, probably one of the prearranged extraction points given to each team by the chief operator. Eos had planned to use point 1, a quiet part of the field behind a group of trees, because as a rookie his teleports couldn't reach very far and were frankly not very precise, so aiming for a spot close to walls or any other solid material was quite dangerous. This had be point 3, maybe 4. Just as he had expected from a hedger of Intergard's caliber.

They reached the agency hideout quickly. It was hidden within an old cellar below an abandoned storage building, a network of narrow tunnels connecting to the sewers further down and housing a number of larger rooms on two levels. Water was everywhere. It dripped down from the low ceiling, forming dirty puddles on the rough ground within the tunnels, and even created small streams flowing down into the larger halls when it was raining outside. Eos had only been transferred to this branch of the agency the morning before, when he had been chosen to support Sarc on this mission. Before that, Eos had never left his hometown, so the trip had been a huge event for him. Of course, being a small outpost rather far away from agency headquarters, this hideout was nothing compared to the 'White Cave' home base at Ilierka, more than fifteen hundred units away. The operative dorms couldn't really be called anything other than 'non-existent' and even the briefing room was tiny, just like everything else about the place, but for Eos it carried the thrill of real action, of serious missions in the field. That had been his feeling when he had first arrived, and it still was his feeling now, even after that (frankly alarming) outcome to his maiden flight. You could just feel the professionalism everywhere — Nothing looked particularly fancy, actually most of the equipment was either very old or very wet, but whenever Eos came into the briefing room, seeing major figures of the agency debating around the central table, or when he, passing through the tunnels, caught a glimpse of a seasoned hedger working on an advanced spell in one of the side chambers, he could feel it in the air — *Espionage*. That was why he had started Enster's class in the first place (more or less, he hadn't really seen any alternative back then), and to him it was what modern magic meant today: High-risk, High-reward stealth and infiltration based on hands-on skill and technical excellence. Eos had to admit that he wasn't looking good on that first part so far, but as far as excellence in magic theory was concerned, he was getting there. Slowly.

They reached the briefing room, where chief operator and hideout quartermaster Han Osrakey was sitting at the table, in front of him numerous sheets of notes, floor plans, and blueprints. At the sound of the door opening, he looked up, and his troubled face brightened in sudden surprise.

"A-Agent Intergard!" he exclaimed as he hastily stood up and came around the table in quick steps, "You're all unharmed! What in gods' name happened?"

Smiling quietly, Intergard stepped aside to reveal Benx, whose chest looked as if it could explode into proud accomplishment any moment.

"Teams Two and Four, reporting," said Sarc in a deliberately formal fashion. "Your junior colleagues staged a rescue mission for us."

The chief operator was visibly confused. His eyes went quickly from one agent to the next as he tried to comprehend how all of this could have happened.

"So that's why everything went to hell — Because you left your post!"

"With respect," replied Benx, moderately upset, "Everything had already gone to hell when I decided to salvage the operation and rescue these four agents! ...With help, I must admit."

He turned to Eos, who was rather embarrassed about everything, despite knowing that he should be proud.

"Sir," added Eos, "It's likely that H-E had intelligence about our raid, at the very least they definitely knew we would be coming for that astral server—" He gestured towards Sarc, "—So it's safe to say that the result of this operation was not Agent Benx' fault—"

The chief operator raised a hand, and Eos stopped immediately. He had a hard time reading what Osrakey was thinking. After a moment of awkward silence, the operator took a deep breath and sighed. He was starting to grasp how these events had unfolded, but he wasn't sure how to deal with it. He opened his mouth, but couldn't decide what to say.

"You understand," he began finally, "That this goes straight against protocol, both you not evacuating after his partner had been captured, but more importantly Mr. Kurdibt here abandoning his post as comlink coordinator."

He looked to Benx with a serious expression, unsure how to react to all this.

"If Team One had not already gotten out of there and Team Three had not had the common sense to play it safe when they lost comlink, this would get you expelled — Yes, you hear me. Expelled."

Tense silence in the briefing room. Eos and Benx couldn't tell if there would be a 'but' coming after this, and judging from the chief operator's expression it was unlikely.

"But," continued Osrakey after a pause, "Given that you recovered three operatives, two of them seasoned experts with high value to the agency, I will... try to report this to Central in a benevolent fashion."

His mouth produced these words, but his eyes were telling a different story, one more along the lines of 'I'm very happy to see you all and especially Intergard and Sarc, honestly I'm so glad that nothing happened to these agents under my watch, and as far as you two boys are concerned, my sincere gratitude for pulling me out of this mess, very good job indeed, goodness this could have been a complete disaster so thank gods for your initiative'.

Eos could tell that he was genuinely relieved, even if he didn't admit it openly.

"In fact," the operator continued, "I was just in the process of developing a rescue plan, but seeing as you're all here—" He went back to the table and closed his notebook with a satisfied gesture, "—That won't be necessary. Have a drink, everyone."

The five agents crossed the room towards the glasses and cups arranged on a shelf above the blueprint crate, and Sarc approached the chief operator, a smoking rod already in hand. As Osrakey handed him his lighter, he realized that Rekkar was still wearing no more than his underwear. He burst into sudden laughter and dropped the lighter, much to Sarc's displeasure.

"Again, Rekkar? I'm telling you, if you continue this you'll end up with a *reputation* for carrying hidden equipment. The corps will strip you naked every time they catch you!"

"Well, luckily they'll never catch me again, thank you very much," countered Rekkar with a sarcastic smile.

"Are the other agents all sleeping?" asked Ienge.

"It's the middle of the night," answered Osrakey, "What do you expect? You should get to sleep as well, there's no knowing how soon you will be needed for a mission again."

"Is there any news from Central Headquarters?" added Eos while nipping at his glass of water.

"Nothing so far. I'll send off a new, updated report of this mission tonight, and we'll see what response comes."

He nodded over to Sarc and Intergard.

"Of course, these guys were already set for their next gig, and now that it turns out they're not in prison I suppose that's what they will be doing. Not sure about you, however."

They stood in pleasant silence, drinking from their glasses as a feeling of satisfied tiredness settled in. At the blueprint crate, Rekkar and Benx were arguing passionately over something trivial while Intergard was checking documents from the drawers at the other side of the room, Sarc smoking his 'Seaside Supreme Flavor' next to her. The atmosphere of relief was visible all around.

"Well, you know," continued Osrakey, "There is always stuff to be done. Even with only eleven people here at the moment, I'm sure you will have no problem filling the time until your next assignment, be it here or some other place. That's what the agency expects of you, anyways... that you continue your training on your own in your free time."

"Of course," replied Eos in a formal tone, "I'm looking forward to it."

He actually meant that.

"I thought that if perhaps Agent Intergard is staying at this outpost for longer, I might—"

Osrakey let out a chuckle.

"Looking to learn from the best, are we?"

Eos didn't know what to say. He could feel himself blushing.

"Yes, well—"

"I'll keep you updated, rookie. If she sticks around, you'll notice."

They continued talking for a little while, but now that the action was over and everybody was cooling down, Eos was suddenly feeling very tired, so after a while, just as Intergard was going over some floor plan with Osrakey in a loud fashion, he bowed himself off and went to sleep.

His bedroom was one of the hideout's spare chambers on the lower level, even further into the deep than the briefing room, and very unwelcoming. During his first night, Eos had loved the room, but thinking back on it now, it might just have been the thrill of arriving at the outpost and preparing for his first real mission. Now that the raid was over, it didn't feel very comfortable at all, but Eos was too tired to really take notice. He fell asleep so quickly that he even forgot to write down some lines about the fancy variation on the Portal spell Intergard had used earlier.

When Eos awoke on the next morning, he didn't feel much more energetic than before, but chatter echoing from the hallway indicated that it had to be quite late already. Protocol stated that agents should be awake at sunrise, but of course that was hard to tell if you lived in a hole deep underground, and for agents recovering from missions at night the rule was much less strict. Osrakey, who seemed to be factually in charge of running the hideout, was probably making an exception because Eos was a newbie.

He quickly prepared himself and went up to the briefing room, where he was relieved to find that some of the breakfast Osrakey had organized was still left. The chief operator himself was there too, engaged in a conversation with Ienge Alagdi of Team Three. When Eos entered the room, both of them turned around to see what the noise was about, and Ienge quickly came over with a cheerful expression.

"Daaamn, rookie! What did you do there, last night?" he exclaimed as Eos was getting a glass of water from the shelf. "I heard you went rogue, or something!"

Eos shrugged casually and tried to maintain a relaxed tone, although it was hard to hide that he was glad to see Ienge again.

"Honestly, just some crazy rescuing going on there. Team Four, standard stuff."

Ienge burst into laughter and Osrakey let out a chuckle as well.

"I'm just glad you came back from that mad trip, man!"

Ienge and Eos had been friends at Enster's class for the whole year that Eos had been there — When he had first started training under Enster, Ienge had already been his apprentice for three months, and the two boys had quickly become close friends. For this mission Ienge had arrived only very late as he had been transferred from another hideout on short notice, so Eos had only talked to him briefly on the evening before the mission. Departing from Ilierka for what would be his first field deployment, he had been very relieved to hear that there would be someone he was familiar with joining on the raid, and in secret he had hoped to be assigned to Ienge's team, but given the fact that Ienge specialized in roughly the same skills as Eos, it had been unlikely anyways.

"So, how good is Intergard, actually?" continued Ienge excitedly as the three sat down at the table, "I mean, is she as much of a goddess as you always say? I've seen her in training, but it wasn't anything super-impressive. What did she do?"

"You bet, she's very good!" replied Eos. Granted, he might not have seen much of Intergard's skills, but the small portion he had witnessed the night before had made a lasting impression. Her custom Portal variation was very smart indeed, and Eos could only begin to imagine how well done and efficient her other trademark spells had to be.

“She specializes in Thendar spells and such, right?” asked Ienge, turning to Osrakey. Of course, over the time with Eos at Enster’s class he had been made an involuntary expert on Intergard fanboying through the sheer amount that Eos talked about her, so he knew very well what her skill set looked like. Still, he had never seen her use actual lightning spells for real.

“Well,” replied Osrakey, “At the level she is operating on you might as well say that she specializes in everything. But her trademark is Thendar, that’s correct.”

“It’s a rare field to specialize in,” said Eos with his mouth half-full, “Of course many spellslingers use the technique but I think there’s only a handful wizards across the continent who really focus on it.”

“Yes, I must admit,” said Osrakey with a nod, “Her Blask usage is top-notch, I’ve never seen anything like it. We’re very lucky to have her as one of our agents! I can’t imagine what the agency would look like if she was working for Kengnatz or the Insurance.”

Eos nodded solemnly. Intergard was truly one of the best wizards of her time, maybe even *the* best. Once you got to a certain level, it became very hard to say which of two wizards was more powerful, but Intergard was definitely up there, and not only because of her lightning spells. Of course, Blask was one of the most difficult spells to cast, and from what he had heard that white ball of condensed lighting was quite painful to handle even if you succeeded to summon it. But it would have been foolish to think that was the only ace up her sleeve.

“So, operator—”, began Eos, but Osrakey interrupted him with a snicker.

“Please, just Han. We’re not in a meeting or anything.”

“...Okay,” said Eos slowly, realizing that he was quite uncomfortable with calling his superior agents by their first name, “Han... What I’ve been meaning to ask, is there any news as to the next mission? Any orders from Central Headquarters?”

“You mean, any news since you last asked that question ten hours ago?”

Osrakey let out a laugh — Eos opened his mouth, but couldn’t say anything against it.

Ienge leant back in his chair with a grin. “You just can’t wait to get into another one of those, can you? Do I hear a hidden desire for *adventure and thrill* speaking from behind that academic face?”, he said mockingly, waving a finger in front of Eos’ eyes.

“If you ask me,” Eos replied with a weary smile, “The next mission could well be less intense than this one!”

“Well, actually,” said Osrakey, “There is indeed something that came up while you were sleeping. Interesting lead, that’s for sure. I can’t tell you people any more until I’ve checked other sources, but it looks like there is one more H-E gig coming in a few days. I’m going to have a word with some of the voices from the streets around here, and if this is true then we’ll probably have another mission together, seeing as we’re all here already—”

His speech was interrupted by the sound of the door opening, and into the briefing room came Sarc, carrying a large bag and wearing the same long coat that he had used during the infiltration the night before. Osrakey abruptly stopped talking and stood up, his chest pushed up in an effort to look professional. He cleared his throat.

“Agent Sarc, you are set?”

“Yeah, that’s right, off to the airship,” replied Sarc, sending a smile to Ienge and Eos at the table, “I’d like to catch the one at midday, so I’m gonna take my leave here.”

“Very well, I hope your journey is comfortable!” said Osrakey in a formal tone, and added: “What is your next mission? Ilierka?”

“Yeah, Central is having trouble with Kengnatz there, doesn’t sound very pleasant actually. Wants me to help out. It’s a long trip, I hope I’ll make it in time— Don’t want the bosses to bash my head for being late, aye?”

He let out a tired chuckle as he turned to the door again.

“Anyway, pleasure working with you kids, and—” he turned back to face the boys at the table, “—Nice rescuing there, lad. I’m gonna follow your stuff more closely from now on.”

Eos wanted to keep it professional, but he couldn’t help grinning widely. Next to him Ienge raised his eyebrows in surprise about the comment, failing to produce a witty comment against the unexpected praise from Sarc.

Sarc grabbed the handle of the door and pulled it open again.

“Well... Later, kiddies!” he said over his shoulder, and left the room. A second later, his heavy footsteps down the tunnel outside were audible.

“So,” Eos looked up to Osrakey, unsure whether he had spotted a hint of concern on Sarc’s face, “Has he been called back to Ilierka?”

“Yes, that’s what I was telling you about yesterday,” answered the chief operator, “He has another mission coming up the day after tomorrow if I’m not mistaken. My report to Central telling them that Sarc is in captivity is probably still on its way, and the other one correcting that, too. In any case, if he’s available he might as well go over there, I hear the bonus on high-stakes Kengnatz missions is quite considerable at the moment.”

Ienge let out a sigh and sunk deeper into his chair.

“I wish I would be assigned to missions that have bonuses attached to them!” he exclaimed, “Could definitely use that money. Stuff’s expensive...”

“I’m sure you’ll get there,” said Osrakey with a benevolent smile, “Who knows— if this thing that I’ve heard about is big, then you might be in just the right position now.”

Ienge raised his head, not quite understanding what the chief operator had said.

“Well, think about it,” Osrakey explained, “This is so short-term that we’ll likely not have the option to transfer in more seasoned agents, so I will have to use whoever is currently here. And last I checked, that’s you guys.”

“But,” replied Ienge with slight concern in his voice, “If this gig you’re talking about is actually that heavy, I don’t think we’re up for it, honestly. Just the two of us, going into some highly secure H-E treasure house?”

He seemed genuinely confused, and worried. After all, it was not his privilege to decide which operations he would be assigned to, and at times that could make you quite uncomfortable.

“Take a break, kids!” Osrakey sat down, “You don’t even know yet what the mission is about — Besides, you’re not going to be the only agents for this, of course. I hear that Sarb Rekkar might stay, at least if I can get the right to use him. With Central so far away, organizing our personnel is quite an annoying task. And apart from that, I don’t think Niekar Turur has anything on her schedule for the next week, so she might join as well, and there is some agents in nearby cities that I might have the option of calling in for this gig if the objective is really as promising as I’ve heard.”

“For heaven’s sake, man!” exclaimed Ienge, grabbing his glass and taking a quick gulp with an energetic gesture of his arm, “Just tell us what this is all about!”

Osrakey snickered.

“Sorry, operatives— Can’t do that. But I’ll keep you updated.”

He went over to the shelf and put his glass back to the others, then returned to the table.

“No matter how this ends up,” he added, „I recommend that you prepare. You have about two days, so use the available time. And—” he leaned down to Eos, lowering his voice, “—use the available personnel, too.”

Eos nodded. If Intergard was staying at the outpost for now, he would definitely go and see if there was anything he might do for her, and maybe she would even show him some of her trade secrets. Who knew? It *was* possible. Hopefully. Maybe.

Not much later, Osrakey ordered Ienge to accompany him on the intel gathering that he was about to do, and they left the briefing room. Eos was just about to return to his room when the door opened again and Sarb Rekkar appeared. Eager to start his approach onto the godmother of hedging as soon as possible, Eos asked him if he had seen Agent Intergard recently, but he hadn’t.

“From what I’ve heard this morning,” Rekkar explained, “She’s out acquiring materials for some thing or other. Not sure whether that has to do with any mission or her personal needs.”

“Do you know when she will return?” asked Eos keenly.

“Not sure— Just check her room regularly I guess? Honestly though, you should come join the action upstairs. They’re doing a group training session at the abandoned storehouse — Can definitely recommend, that stuff is exhausting!”

He went over to the sink and poured himself a large glass of water, emptying it in one gulp before returning his attention to Eos.

“It’s a stealth exercise that Niekar started this morning. You should check it out!”

“Definitely, Sir!” replied Eos with a nod as he left the briefing room and went down to his own chamber to fetch his things. He felt uncomfortable wandering around without at least some basic artefacts in his pockets. It was probably just his fresh-from-class training, but having the equipment for a Reflect or Sleep spell ready gave him a feeling of security in this foreign environment. Maybe that was the reason why expert wizards often had magic circles stitched into their clothing, or tattooed onto their skin... You definitely didn’t lose any time pulling out the artefact if you used such a method, and in a pinch that extra split-second could probably save your life.

He took the steep stairs back up and made his way out of the underground tunnels connecting the hideout to the outside world. Once at the surface, he walked around the large storage building and reached the rear entrance on the other side. From here it was still quite a long way through thick bushes if you wanted to reach the street and the other buildings of the town, which made the area well suited for a secret base. The only thing one needed to be careful about was not to attract too much attention through people coming and going, so there were five premade routes off the premises. Eos had only taken one of those until now, both when he

had first arrived, and later when going out on and returning from the mission, but of course he had memorized each of the other ones as well — After all, preparation was key for any hedger.

From inside the storehouse came a voice. It was Benx, leaning against a large crate close to the entrance, and looking out towards Eos with an expression of surprise.

“Oh, you here, Keros? I thought they didn’t order hedgers to participate in stuff like this? They should, if you ask me, but—”

“Actually,” replied Eos, trying to ignore a sudden flashback of the numerous defeats he had suffered against Benx at games like this during the short while they had been together at class, “I’m not really participating, I don’t even know what *this* is.”

Benx pushed himself off the wooden planks of the crate and jumped out of into the daylight with a quick motion. In his hand was a shiny brass cylinder that reflected the sun and made Eos’ eyes hurt.

“Oh, I see,” he said with a smile, “That.”

It was a common type of field practice that Enster had been having his students do all the time during class, and one that was still done by agents to keep in shape. Within a confined area (in this case the warehouse, Eos guessed), every participant tried to move around unnoticed and sneak up on his opponents. Everybody was equipped with a brass artefact for a weak lightning spell that could be used to fire at other agents from close to medium distance. The goal was (of course) to zap as many opponents as possible, and not get zapped yourself.

“Rekkar just left to get a drink,” said Benx, casually throwing the metal box into the air and catching it again, “I think I’ll do the same. There’s spare zappers in that box over there—” he gestured to a small packet next to the storehouse’s entrance, “But you might as well take this one. Stay clear of the door, Rekkar’s going to be back in a minute!”

He dropped the polished artefact into Eos’ hands and disappeared behind the corner of the building. Eos wanted to say something along the lines of ‘I didn’t actually want to play!’, but now that Intergard was out buying equipment he might as well pass the time. He flicked his hand quickly to test out the artefact, and a thin spark of magic lightning, almost invisible in the bright daylight, shot out from its front end and went into the ground in dry ground with a fizzle. He did it a couple more times to test the shot limit, and it seemed the device could fire two sparks in quick succession, but then needed to take a small break before it could be used again.

They called me ‘The Gunslinger’ when I was a kid, thought Eos with a mischievous grin as he entered the dark shadow of the storage building, only to be hit immediately by a spark flying out from between the crates that went into his chest with a satisfying hiss and send him against the inside of the building’s wall.

“Ouch, no fair!” he exclaimed, almost dropping the zapper. Lightning spells produced a form of magic jolt, not actual lightning, and shots of this caliber didn’t really hurt, but Eos had forgotten how strong their power to push back their targets was, oftentimes even sending them flying if the spell was powerful. He rubbed his chest with a disappointed frown as Niekar Turur stepped out from behind the crates.

“Careful there, junior. Traps wait everywhere, even at your first step.”

Eos wanted to counter with a clever comment, but his proud obedience towards superiors got the better of him.

“Yes, Madam!” he replied, straightening up and trying to look resolute, “It won’t happen again.”

“That’s right, carry on,” said Niekar with a serious expression, pushing her long blonde hair out of her face. “Back into it!”

She jumped back into the shadows of the crates and was gone. Eos had some difficulty to see in the darkness, but after his eyes had adjusted to the surrounding he slipped into the maze of walls and crates that filled the entire hall. Now that he thought about it, he had no idea who was participating in this game of hunting and being hunted, but that part of the challenge and translated well into the reality of not knowing all participants on a mission. From what he could tell, Sarc had left the hideout earlier, Osrakey and Ienge were out on duty, and so was Intergard, which left only five other agents (not counting the vice operator who had still not returned after abandoning post the night before, and Eos was confident that wouldn’t change): Sarb Rekkar, who was temporarily pausing, Niekar Turur, Benx, Leit Shichal of Team Three, and Suren Ubtra, the Professor, although Eos heavily doubted that he would join a group exercise like this. So only up to three opponents until Rekkar would return — A small number, which made going unnoticed and drawing no attention to yourself even more important.

In fact, the game continued for at least five minutes without anything happening, as was common for this type of exercise. Then, Eos noticed two faint flashes of light reflecting from the ceiling high above him, followed by quiet laughter from the other end of the hall. Eos decided to leave his hiding spot at the entrance where he had been waiting for Rekkar to return, and made his way between the crates towards the origin of the laughter, when he noticed the shape of a person standing in the shadows close by. Eos instinctively jumped to cover and while in the air shot out two sparks toward the figure, but as the faint bolts of magic lightning illuminated the darkness, he realized that it was nothing more than a play of light and dark. He let out a frustrated hiss and quickly ducked behind a large crate. A stupid mistake, honestly — The first rule in this game was to not act rashly. Now he had given away his position to everybody through sound and light. In fact, the shape in the corner could be a trap set by somebody specifically to achieve this effect. Eos needed to move away quickly. He turned around just in time to almost bump into a dark figure that had hastily come around the corner — Both jumped back and Eos fired another two sparks, but they missed as the slender shape dived behind cover. For a moment, Eos thought that he had recognized Benx’s face illuminated by the sparks, but he wasn’t sure, and indeed was forced to drop the thought when behind him a subtle sound signaled the presence of another agent. He jerked around, desperate for something to hide behind, but the crate he had ducked behind earlier didn’t give him cover from this angle.

“Alliance?” he shouted to the figure behind the wall of wooden planks that he had just almost crashed into.

“Pleasure, there’s one more here!” returned Benx’s voice, and Eos let out a sigh of relief, but in front of him, some steps further down the corridor created by towering objects on both sides, the third agent stepped out of the shadow, revealing himself to be Leit Shichal. He wasn’t too tall, and his black hair and clothes made him hard to see, but Eos had met him briefly the night before and recognized the heavy boots. A triumphant grin on his face, Leit took a step forward and Eos wanted to send a volley of sparks his way, but hesitated. There was something wrong

in that unorthodox maneuver, and Eos didn't know what that young man's skills looked like, so the by-the-book hedger within him stopped the shots.

"You can use spells, you know?" said Leit from the other side of the passage.

So if he can talk, at least it can't be an illusion, thought Eos and shot his two sparks at him, but Leit quickly dodged and began sprinting forward. At the same time, zapping echoed from behind and Eos heard a frustrated yell that sounded a lot like Benx.

"You're all out, friend!" shouted Leit as he flew towards Eos, drawing his own brass cylinder, but Eos was ready. Stepping back, he quickly drew out one of his own artefacts, and with a slap of this hand activated a Reflect spell just as a spark shot out towards him. In the grey light created by the two spells, he could see Leit's expression changing mid-air from a triumphant smile to a surprised frown as his own spark bounced off the faint shield hanging in the air in front of Eos, hitting him on the arm and hurling him backwards. He lost his balance and came down to his feet next to Eos, quickly regaining composure.

"Well played, I didn't see that coming," he said with a conceding raise of his eyebrows. Eos wanted to reply something, but a sound behind him made him fly around. He instinctively shook his hand, but the zapper was still cooling down. Behind him stood Niekar Turur, her own brass artefact in hand.

"Watch your back, cadet!" she said, her voice more a gentle advice than triumphant taunt.

A sudden flash illuminated the walls around and Eos already thought himself knocked out of this round when he realized that it was not Niekar that had fired. Instead, she let out an unsatisfied groan as she stumbled forward towards Eos, propelled by the force of a spark hitting her back.

Out of the shadows behind her stepped Sarb Rekkar, and before Eos could overcome his surprise at the sudden manoeuvre and react, he had already been hit by the second of Rekkar's shots.

"That's right— Always watch your back," he said giggling as Eos untangled himself from Leit, who had been standing behind him and had absorbed most of the momentum of Eos being thrown backward.

"You didn't see that one coming, Niekar, did you?" added Rekkar as he casually passed his colleague and patted Eos and Leit Shichal on the shoulder.

"Very good, I must admit," confessed Niekar. "In the end, it really doesn't matter who clears out everybody, as long as you end up getting them afterwards."

They continued the training session for two more rounds. During the second set, nothing important happened for a full twenty minutes before Benx stumbled into a Sleep trap that Eos had set up just seconds earlier, and the noise from his zapper taking out the sleeping Benx quickly attracted the other players. In the skirmish that followed, Leit Shichal managed to take the round by launching a surprise attack from above, and the idea of moving on top of the crates was soon adapted by the opposition. The third round went more quickly, because Niekar succeeded in a risky assault to take down Leit and Rekkar who had been locked in a tense duel for some minutes, after which Benx and Eos teamed up once again in an effort to better protect themselves from her attacks. However, when Niekar made her move towards the boys, Benx backstabbed the unsuspecting Eos as had been his prearranged deal with Niekar, and a long drawn-out duel between the two ensued. In the end, Niekar took the round, much to Benx's

displeasure, but Eos was happy to see his colleague's trickery not paying off in the end. Not that he would have declined Niekar's idea himself, but with this outcome his frustration of not having been able to go one-on-one against the obviously very skilled Niekar because of his own 'ally' was at least partially sated.

CHAPTER FIVE

Meanwhile At The Erkom City Half-Weekly Market, Only A Few Streets Away

Ienge had a hard time keeping his eyes away from all the delicious goods on display across the numerous stands scattered around the marketplace, not to mention some of the more handsome people around. He still had some money left and wanted to spend it, but Osrakey had insisted that they would finish their official task first, and go for the pleasantries later.

"After we've visited the information dealer you can have as many snacks as you want, but I'm on a tight schedule. From what I've heard, information like the one we're after is not easy to come by this time of day, and there might be other people interested," he said as they maneuvered through the crowd, "Better safe than sorry if you ask me, this opportunity could be a gold mine if it's really as good as I have reason to believe."

They left the market area and entered a narrow side street where Osrakey pulled out a piece of paper. He read over it quickly and returned it to his pocket with a frown.

"I don't think I have worked with this specific dealer before. That might make things more difficult."

The alley led between two high buildings and almost no sunlight reached into it. Ienge had difficulties not tripping over the small crates that were lying all around as his eyes were still adjusting from the bright surrounding earlier. After a while, they reached a dead end.

"Wait — Is that it?" asked Ienge with a skeptical look, "Where is the dealer?"

"Patience, man," replied Osrakey, his eyes wandering from one closed door to the other.

Ienge didn't know what to look for.

"These are normal houses, Sir," he said as his eyes followed the chief operator's around, "People live here! You don't want to visit a shady dealer in his own home, do you?"

"Actually, that's what you normally do," said Osrakey with a sideways glance to Ienge, "Have you never done something like this before?"

Ienge shrugged.

"No," he said truthfully, "I always thought information gathering was the operators' job, not mine."

Osrakey sighed.

"That's correct, but since the vice operator abandoned ship during our last mission—" He took a step towards one of the doors to inspect the name written on it, "—We're a bit short on personnel, I must admit. And these negotiations normally run much smoother if you bring company, if you understand what I mean."

He had found what he had been looking for: One of the doors leading off from the street into the ominous buildings towering on all sides had a cat flap built into it.

"This must be the one," he said, pointing to the flap.

"You mean, that's the 'secret signal'? A cat?" asked Ienge with an expression of disbelief, gesturing at the door while sending a nervous look down the narrow alley, but nobody was there.

"In fact, yes," replied Osrakey, turning to Ienge, "If you ever want to contact an information dealer in a public area without raising suspicion, look for the person carrying a cat around for no apparent reason. That's their trademark."

"Huh!" said Ienge with a shrug, "The more you know."

Osrakey knocked at the door and found it unlocked. He gave a quick look to Ienge, and they both entered.

Within the residence, a tight hallway led further into the building, and the two agents could hear voices coming from a room at the end. They approached silently, their steps swallowed by a thick carpet.

As they reached the door, Osrakey peeked into the room. He rechecked his pockets, took a deep breath, and with a quiet "Don't show any weakness" to Ienge that caused more anxiety than comfort, he pushed the door open.

Behind it was a room filled with crates that stacked up towards the ceiling on all sides, but colorful sheets of thin cloth were hung over them to brighten the atmosphere. A large and elaborately decorated Fallos artefact hung from above, bathing all in warm yellow light. At the center of the room, a small table carried numerous glasses and bottles, and playing cards were scattered all over it. Around the table sat five men of varying age with rough demeanor that made Ienge cower behind the chief operator instinctively at the sight. They had been chatting lively while playing, taking large gulps from their glasses and laughing loudly, but the creaking sound of the door made them look up, and all five pairs of eyes were now fixed on the two agents that had entered.

Tense silence followed. Ienge didn't know what to do, and Osrakey seemed to simply exchange mistrustful stares with the strangers around the table.

After some seconds, the silence was broken by the sudden meowing of a black cat that appeared on top of one of the crates. Osrakey looked up to it, but quickly returned his eyes to the men around the table and cleared his throat nervously.

"Excuse the interruption, but we are looking for a cat owner that goes by the name of Isardja. Is he present?"

The men looked at each other quietly, but gave no answer. Then, the one closest to Ienge, a well-built trader in a fine but heavily used jacket, put his cards down and said: "If he were, what dealings do you have with him?"

"I have been close acquaintances with Ketten of Ilierka for a long time, and I would like to discuss a business matter," replied Osrakey in a stern tone, and Ienge guessed that he had used that sentence many times before.

At the other side of the table, an old man raised his head, and with a deep voice he said slowly:

"I am that shrewd and knavish sprite that calls himself Isardja."

Visibly relieved, Osrakey smiled and responded: "Are you not he, who frights the maids in all the villagery?"

Ienge had no idea what was going on. Was this some kind of passcode or secret sign that Osrakey was exchanging with the dealer to confirm his identity? He had heard about practices like this, but as he had never been to such a meeting himself, he had never witnessed it first-hand.

At the far side of the table, the old man nodded and turned to his right, where a younger colleague with sharp facial features and eager eyes rose up from the pillows and put down his glass with a snicker. His long purple robe ran around a thin and fragile body, and Ienge had a hard time guessing if he was graceful, or ill. But it was definitely not his type of man, that much was for sure.

"It's me," he said. "What do you want?"

"What all do want," replied Osrakey, and after a short pause he added: "Information."

Isardja nodded and gestured towards a passage at the left side of the room hidden by a length of blue linen hung across it. The cat meowed.

"After you," he said, and the men at the table continued playing as if nothing had happened.

Hesitantly, Ienge and Osrakey entered the room, quickly followed by Isardja and his small black cat.

This must be the dealer's office, thought Ienge as he looked around across the numerous shelves and drawers, all crammed with strange objects, boxes of documents, and the occasional candle to illuminate the windowless chamber. On a small table to the left, numerous playing pieces of different shapes were arranged on a dirty wooden board with a glass next to it, and to the right there was a large but unstable desk with documents and trinkets stacked on top of it.

Isardja was the one to start talking. His voice was rather high, and an air of mischievous delight was noticeable in everything he said.

"So, an acquaintance of Ketten, are you? Tell me, how is he these days? Still as arrogant and snobbish as ever?" he said in a tone that didn't allow any interpretation, but his raised eyebrows and sarcastic smile showed how he felt about his colleague.

"He is very well, from what I have heard," answered Osrakey politely, his body motionless but his eyes fixed on Isardja.

"Good — Dreadful business in Ilierka currently... I haven't been there in some time, but I hear stories—"

Isardja pulled up a bottle from behind a crate and began pouring a thick red liquid into three small glasses.

"The news get more intense every day," he said casually while doing so, "Verily, these Kengnatz people have a tendency for drama, we must admit that. I haven't seen them make such a fuss since that whole business with Ekses back in the day."

He walked over to Osrakey and Ienge, handing each of them one of the glasses. Ienge had no clue what kind of potion this could possibly be, but he still accepted with a polite smile. Osrakey took a sip of the liquid and returned his attention quickly back to Isardja, who had continued his monotone speech while walking back to his desk at the other end of the room.

“And now this new business with the rebels. As if the ruckus from the corps wasn’t enough already. I mean—” He sat down, “—Their new leader, Red Flag — She’s a strong woman. But unpredictable, hard to handle.”

Osrakey let out a confirming ‘Hmm!’ as he took another gulp from his glass. Ienge hadn’t managed to try the strange syrup until now, but a subtle glance from his partner reminded him to drink. The thick fluid had a strong aroma and was hard to swallow at first, but once you got used to it, it was actually delicious.

“I wonder,” continued Osrakey, “If there is anything you can tell me about the rebel operations? I hear they are not in any position to threaten the provincial government yet!”

He said this with deliberate emphasis, as if trying to impersonate someone that didn’t know very much, but to Isardja the message was clear — He pulled open a drawer, putting away some documents from his desk, then turned back to Osrakey with a mischievous smile.

“Oh, I think they are much stronger than everybody assumes — They have, should you say... hidden talents.”

Osrakey raised his eyebrows, but Isardja’s smile quickly transformed into an exaggerated frown, reminding him that no information was without a price.

“That’s not why you are here, is it?” continued Isardja while lighting a smoking rod, “You are here for the H-E manoeuvre tonight. Isn’t that correct, Mr. Osrakey?”

The two agents exchanged a nervous look. Osrakey cleared his throat in a theatrical fashion.

“You are well informed, Isardja — I must admit that.”

It was just a polite gesture — Osrakey had been well aware that this shady fellow likely knew far more about them and their agenda than he gave away. Indeed, the information brokers’ ability to gather knowledge and use it to buy people was terrifying at times, and this Isardja person was obviously no exception.

The dealer stood up from his chair again. With the dim light that filled the office but barely, Ienge noticed only now how small he was, and how strangely oversized his gesturing hands seemed in relation to his head. All in all, he gave a rather curious impression.

“It’s hard not to be, honestly. With the success that your institution has had over the past years, it’s difficult to go anywhere without hearing of your agency’s achievements against the corporate tyranny. Your involvement with the Doge of Helengeldan last year is perhaps my favorite.”

Osrakey gave a polite nod at the compliment, but Ienge had no idea what the broker was talking about. Probably one of the many legendary raids the agency had been involved in over the decades — Even after two years and a lot of ups and downs it still baffled him how little he knew about the institution he was part of. He had seen Central in person only a couple of times, and apart from the Professor and a handful of seniors that taught Enster’s class every now and then, Ienge’s knowledge about his more experienced colleagues was surprisingly thin.

When he had been assigned to the H-E mission here at Erkom and heard about who would be participating, it had been the same thing: Of course he had heard of Intergard, quite frankly it was hard not to given the amount that Eos spoke about her, but hearing names like Aretz-Sarc or Niekar Turur, allegedly highly important operatives with decades of history at the agency, but who Ienge had wondrously never heard about until now, always made him feel a bit funny about what it meant to be part of the agency.

“I hope your company continues its work in the future,” said Isardja, his expression blank — Ienge blinked a few times and pulled his attention back to the thin man.

“But now, Mr. Osrakey — to business!”

CHAPTER SIX

At The Agency Hideout, that night

“Everybody, please, attention!” shouted Osrakey, trying to overpower the chatter that filled the briefing room. The mood was much less tight than it had been on the last conference — all in all, everybody was looking great. The surprising success of the earlier rescue mission had lifted team morale visibly, and the day of training together could not have been more helpful in getting all agents to know each other better, especially of course in the case of the newbies. Osrakey had seen this happening numerous times: When a team got shuffled together for a mission, everybody was usually on edge, but when due to scheduling the same constellation of people went out more than one time, everything tended to be much easier to organize. And in honesty, thought Osrakey, with this difficult cast of rookies on one hand and insanely famous seniors on the other, that was exactly what he needed.

Indeed, the four young agents were his prime concern — Osrakey had already lost one man to pressure and although Rane Uegus was not dead (hopefully), he would not let anything like that happen again.

Naturally, Intergard was about as far from being a rookie as you could get, but when it came down to it she was just one agent, and there would need to be teams without her. When separated from these newcomers, even she would not be able to protect them.

The room was slowly cooling down and everybody was taking their seats. Next to Osrakey sat Benx, who would be reprising his role as operator, and across from them at the other side of the table, Intergard, Rekkar, Ienge, Leit, Niekar, and Eos were taking their seats. Ubtra and Sarc had left the hideout earlier and would not take part in the coming deployment.

“Attention, please. This is the central briefing for Operation New Feathers, starting in approximately 50 hours. I’ll be formally introducing the staff,” stated Osrakey in a monotone voice, knowing that everybody in the room already knew the personnel on this mission.

“Agent Benx here will be vice chief of operation, and my name is Han Osrakey, as you all know. All of you are formally assigned to this mission, apart from Agent Intergard, who is not yet sure whether she will be staying at this location or return to Ilierka tomorrow, so just to be safe she will be attending this meeting as well.”

He gestured to the floor plans that were spread on the table.

“As you can see, this will be another raid at an H-E facility here in Erkom. I have received intelligence that a new and strictly secret series of magical armor prototypes that have been in development for the past year are now being stored in this building, within the secure locker room here—”

He pointed towards one area of the plan.

“We don’t know any details about these prototypes, but they are highly valuable both in their direct asset cost and their potential selling value. A number of corporations are interested in using this new technology for themselves, which makes these prototypes a gold mine for their owner. Now, the special something that we will have to deal with on this run—” He took a deep breath before finishing the sentence, “—is that there will be opposition.”

Silence around the table as the chief operator took a pause, and Ienge let out a dramatic sizzle. After a slow look around, Osrakey continued:

“These prototypes have arrived at this location only today, and will be removed under heavy security in three days time. Additionally, I have intelligence that there will in fact be a raid aiming at this very objective, performed by agents of Kengnatz, just like the operation we are about to undertake. The corporation is planning to steal the prototypes, and I have decided to coordinate our operation with that. My sources are secure, so we can count on them being there.”

Ienge raised a hand.

“With respect, Operator, but why not steal these before they do? We still have the whole day and night tomorrow, and the day after.”

“In fact,” answered Osrakey, who had of course prepared for this question, “H-E has received an anonymous tip that a Kengnatz attack might be coming tomorrow night, so it would be foolish to make a move at this time. As soon as the information turns out to be false, security will be lighter. Furthermore, coordinating with this third party that is provided by Kengnatz can, if done well, make our own task much easier: You will infiltrate the complex and stay completely hidden while monitoring the progress of this raid by Kengnatz, then afterwards when their agents have acquired the objective, you will ambush them and take it. In this way, we’ll use their assets for ourselves and get out on top.”

On the other side of the table, Ienge was visibly uncomfortable.

“But—” he began, “—this means that we will actually have to fight those Kengnatz agents, doesn’t it?”

“That is correct,” replied Osrakey, “And while it will only be an ambush, I understand your concern. That is why I have called in another agent for this mission, as at this time I cannot guarantee that Madam Intergard will join you. If everything goes well, he will arrive tomorrow, and I will introduce you then.”

Nervous nodding around the table. Eos didn’t feel any different from Ienge — Working against the moronic corporate security guards was one thing, but having professional agents from another company as your adversaries was quite a different one.

“Until then, assume that you will be accompanied by at least one very seasoned agent,” said Osrakey with an assuring smile, “As far as I know, Kengnatz will be completely oblivious as to our presence there, so taking them down should be easy.”

They continued to go over smaller details of the mission, but most of it wasn’t very interesting, at least not to Eos. According to Oskarey’s strategy, a large part of the infiltration would be done by Kengnatz’ agents anyway, and only at the very end they would seize the

prototypes. Until then, most of the mission consisted of waiting and monitoring the events within the building.

There would be two teams: Team One, consisting of Eos, Leit Shichal and the 'seasoned agent' that would either be Intergard or another operative (although Eos was secretly hoping for Intergard), would be guarding the primary area where Kengnatz would escape after their heist. Eos was quite proud to be part of Team One — Normally, that was the team that went for the 'main objective' or just in general had the most important job, and given the fact that this was only his second mission, Eos was very excited about the position. Team Two was made up of Rekkar, Ienge and Niekar, and would be positioned at an alternative exit in case Kengnatz changed their strategy on short notice. All in all, the plan seemed solid and without too much risk.

"Very well, then for some final remarks," added Osrakey after having concluded going over the team assignments, "Here is what we will be doing *in preparation* for this mission."

Benx handed him a sheet of paper that he had been working on beforehand, just like the previous vice operator had done for the mission the night before.

"The two of us—" Osrakey gesturing towards Benx and himself, "—will be handling reconnaissance and general preparation. Apart from that, the mission is about stealth and combat, so you will be working on that during the coming two days. Niekar will be running stealth and infiltration training during the mornings," he nodded to Niekar as he spoke, "And the afternoon will be individual preparation within your team. Work on team routine, combat ability, and your personal assets — And don't be afraid to learn from your superiors."

He gave a telling look to Eos and Intergard, but only Eos understood what he meant. There was general nodding around the table.

"Very good, then. If you have questions, talk to me afterwards," concluded Osrakey.

"All agents, dismissed."

Eos looked around with a satisfied smile as glasses were emptied on all sides and the rustling of agents packing away their notes filled the briefing room. Ienge came walking around the table with a disappointed frown.

"Shame that we didn't make it into the same team, I asked Han about it specifically!" he said as he sat down on the chair next to Eos.

"I guess it can't be helped," replied Eos, trying to sound disappointed when in reality he had to admit that he preferred Intergard to Ienge in any circumstance, despite the latter being his friend. "At least we'll have Niekar's training sessions together, I guess?"

Eos watched Niekar Turur leaving the briefing room as he said it.

"Yeah, looks like it. I hear her training routine is harsh, though. We'll have to see how much fun it actually is," said Ienge, but Eos interrupted him with a gesture of his hand when he noticed Intergard signaling them from the other side of the room, where she appeared to be talking to Leit Shichal.

"Wait a minute," said Eos as he stood up, "I think Intergard is having a team talk."

Eos pointed at himself with a questioning expression, and Intergard nodded. He turned back to Ienge and grabbed his glass excitedly.

"I'll speak to you later, don't go anywhere!"

Indeed, Intergard had been discussing their team composition with Leit, and when Eos joined them after carefully clearing his throat and trying to check on his outward appearance by using the reflection in his glass, she said: "I think we got a nice team here, junior. As the operator said, I don't know if I can stay for this party, but if I leave, it will be tomorrow night, so we'll be training together in the afternoon in any case."

Eos was internally screaming. "That is— very good to hear!" he said, trying hard to sound professional when in reality the only thing he could think about was getting private lessons from the hedging godmother.

"I've been discussing our team line-up with Agent Shichal," she continued, "We're definitely up to the job, whether it's me that will be accompanying you, or Agent Sibrodi. But in any case, I'd like to go over some things with both of you just to make sure."

Both younger agents nodded quickly, and Eos couldn't help but feel relieved to see that Leit was apparently not left completely untouched by the idea of training with Intergard either.

"Good. I'll work with you, Agent Keros, in the afternoon—" She pointed to Eos with her lighter-hand, "And with Agent Shichal in the evening before I leave. Any questions?"

Eos and Leit exchanged a quick look, then shook their heads with a simultaneous "No, Madam!".

Intergard let out a chuckle.

"Great," she continued, "Then I'll see you two youngsters tomorrow. Prepare some stuff, you'll need it!"

She raised her eyebrows in a dramatic fashion, and left the boys.

Eos and Leit looked at each other silently for a moment, and Leit took a deep breath.

"I— don't know what to prepare," he said without moving a muscle.

Eos felt the same way. With trembling hands, Leit pulled out a small notebook.

"Does she mean, like—" he stuttered as he hastily wrote down some words in tiny, hard-to-read handwriting, "—Tactics? Spells? Escape routes? Materials?"

Eos tried to give a calm impression, but in fact he was feeling rather nervous himself all of a sudden.

"I don't know, man," he said, "I think for me she means spells, but I don't know what she will be going over with you."

"Damn it, lad," replied Leit as he put his notebook back into his pocket, "I know two spells, that's it! How am I supposed to—"

His words lost themselves as he was trying to come up with a satisfying plan.

"I think it's fine," said Eos assertively. "Just be ready to use them, I guess? You have the whole day to prepare."

"Hmm," replied Leit, taking a deep breath while chewing on his lower lip nervously, "I guess so."

He took the last sip from his glass and returned it to the shelf.

"Well, I better get onto that, huh? Talk to you later, partner!" he said with a what-can-you-do smile and turned to the door.

Eos finished his own drink and left the briefing room as well. It was rather late already, but he was unsure whether he could afford to go to sleep, or if he needed to practice his spells for

Intergard's training session. She hadn't been very clear about what she was planning to go over with him and Leit, so Eos had an ominous suspicion in his stomach that it might be a good idea to come prepared.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Equipment And Training

Eos hadn't slept well. In fact, he had spent most of the night pondering his lost artefacts, and what Intergard would be practicing with him in their private session. During breakfast, he talked briefly to Ienge and Leit, but he couldn't really concentrate on the conversation. All he was thinking about was how to best approach the chief operator about his need for money.

Leit and Ienge luckily didn't really take notice of this absent-mindedness, and after a while they left the briefing room to prepare for Niekar's training session. Eos knew that he was supposed to do the same, but as he was putting back his dishes onto the shelves above the rusty sink, he heard the door opening behind him, and Han Osrakey entered the briefing room. Perfect, Eos thought. Time to talk.

"Uhm—" he started, turning to Osrakey with a nervous cough, "Chief Operator, I have a question."

Osrakey looked up from the book he was carrying and smiled kindly. "Yes of course, agent. What is it?"

"I must admit," Eos muttered as he walked over to the table to take a seat, but changed his mind and just kept standing next to it, "I lost some of my hedging equipment during the mission two days ago."

Osrakey put his book away and eyed the boy with an observant look. Eos caught a glimpse of the cover, and the realization that his superior-in-chief was reading a trashy romantic drama didn't help him to concentrate on what he wanted to say.

"There were some — complications with corporate security, and I had to abandon position... and equipment," Eos continued shyly, "That is why I would like to make a formal request to have new artefacts supplied by the agency. In the interest of performing well on the mission ahead—"

He was interrupted by Osrakey, who had exchanged his gentle smile for a serious glare.

"—You want me to give you agency money to buy new artefacts?" he asked in a strict voice. Eos looked to the floor.

"Yes, Sir."

Silence. Eos didn't dare to look up. After some tense seconds, Osrakey broke into sudden laughter, and Eos raised his head in confusion.

"Sir, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have bothered you with—"

"Take a break, son!" exclaimed Osrakey, almost unable to speak between his bursts of amusement that echoed from the low ceiling and made it all seem at least twice as loud to Eos. The trashy romance fell to the floor.

"What are you apologizing for? That's what the agency money is *supposed to do!*"

Eos forced a smile, still not really understanding the situation, but getting the idea that he was supposed to feel at ease.

"Sir, does this mean that I can—"

"For heaven's sake, yes!" Osrakey sat down and pulled out a notebook from his pocket. Eos wasn't sure what to say, or do.

"So," said Osrakey, still giggling from the absurdness of the situation, "What is the problem? You lost your equipment because you had to escape from the corps?"

Eos sat down. "Yes," he said nervously, "In fact I took the most essential things with me, but a large amount of the artefacts and other materials that I had brought were left behind when I needed to flee from the corporation. Sir."

He said all this way too fast — A side effect from practicing his speech a dozen times beforehand.

Osrakey seemed to understand that there was a lot of misconception going on in Eos' mind about what the agency's original purpose was.

"Listen, you're fresh from class," he said in a kind voice, "So you shouldn't feel bad for making this mistake, but providing fancy gadgets for our agents is precisely what the agency does — That's the main point of getting together as a larger group instead of working all on our own: That we can cover each other from the randomness dealt to us in this business. You made extra loot? That money goes to me. And then: You've lost your stuff? I got you covered. Like an insurance. Honestly—"

He shifted on his chair.

"If there had not been a certain operator abandoning post as well, this would have happened immediately, this very morning! Heck, it's one of my jobs as quartermaster of this whole outpost." He cleared his throat.

"So, tell me — What exactly do you need?"

Eos was infinitely relieved.

"Well," he began, "If there is enough time tomorrow and the day after, I can craft the artefacts myself, but I will need brass or iron to use as a base... And—" He hesitated for a moment as he remembered the saddest part of all, "—my interface is gone as well, I'm afraid, Sir."

This didn't seem to concern Osrakey as much as Eos had feared, even given the fact that the interface was without doubt the most expensive piece in any hedger's arsenal, and even more so if like Eos you owned an Intergard Original. The operator wrote some words down into his notebook and looked up.

"Interface, huh? But didn't you have one of the... Oh."

Eos nodded. He tried not to think about how much he already missed it. For him, it felt as if a part of his body was still at H-E.

"Well," continued Osrakey with a comforting tone in his voice, "We got the expert at hand, verily! But I doubt that Intergard will have enough time tomorrow to build you a new one... However—" he raised a finger as if having just come up with a great idea, "I hear that Leit

Shichal is also very good at magical devices. I'll ask him about this. Don't you worry about your interface, man!"

Eos nodded thankfully. Now that he thought about it, the idea of having an interface made by Leit Shichal had him appreciate the luxury that he had been getting this past year even more, but it probably couldn't be helped... Nothing against Leit, he thought quickly as if defending his colleague from his own thoughts, but... Well. He would just see what was going to happen, it would probably be fine. After all, he should be happy to have Osrakey trying to arrange all of this for him, and in all honesty he had expected a lot more trouble and quite a bit of punishment for his losses — In that sense, he was more than glad about how everything had played out.

"As for your artefacts," continued Osrakey while taking notes, "It's normally handled by operators like this: Either you go out and buy your own equipment, because after all you know best what kind of stuff you want, or you make a list and I get it for you. You can craft it yourself as well, but that's normally only done if the money is scarce, and let me tell you—" He gave Eos a telling wink, "Right now it definitely is not. Well, unless of course you want to build in custom modulations and stuff that you can't get on the public market. But..."

He looked to Eos with raised eyebrows.

"Well, no," replied Eos quickly, "All my things are available on the market, for sure!"

He thought about it for a second.

"I use a custom Reflect, but I still have that with me. Of the equipment that I lost, nothing was particularly extraordinary. I mean, apart from the interface..."

"Great," said Osrakey, handing his pencil to Eos, "Then just write down here what you need, I'll get it for you tomorrow. I have some free time around midday, anyway."

"Thank you, Sir, that's very nice—" stuttered Eos, and he was quite sure that he was blushing, but Osrakey made a swooping gesture with his hand and stood up.

"Don't think about it, rookie. That's precisely what a quartermaster is for."

He picked up the trashy romance and left the briefing room, leaving behind a blushing but very relieved Eos.

Stealth training with Niekar was exhausting. Her teaching style was a combination of precise drills that needed to be executed quickly, silently, and exactly, and on the other hand an assortment of shattering partner exercises that were positively arduous. Eos didn't enjoy it in the least, but then again that was obviously not the point of why they were doing it, and he (priding himself on discipline and compliance) tried his best to keep up. Naturally, older agents like Rekkar, or ones with better fitness like Leit, had a much easier time with Niekar's distinctively physical approach to stealth, but as long as he stayed focused and didn't let his thoughts stray too much towards his afternoon session with Intergard, Eos found that he could manage. They did silent sprints, maneuvering around cover objects, intelligence gathering, and what Niekar called 'an advanced form of Hide And Seek' that basically consisted of agents trying to stay in possession of a small brass bell while the others were trying to take it from them. At one point, Leit surprisingly gained possession of the bell by pulling off an unbelievable mid-air tumbling move that left even Niekar slightly impressed, and Eos completely blown away. As it turned out, the near-perfect record that Leit was holding over his missions so far was not a coincidence in the slightest.

In the second round, Eos teamed up with Rekkar in an effort to find the holder of the bell, and only after ten minutes of him fiercely defending Rekkar from confused attackers did he find out that his partner had been holding the bell for all that time with a Voicemute spell to nullify the sound, utilizing Eos as a clueless pawn for his defense. He felt rather stupid afterwards.

At Midday, the session was finally over, and Eos could see from panting colleagues all around him that he hadn't been the only one to find Niekar's drills more than demanding. Without delay, he made his way back to his chamber on the lowest floor to prepare for his next appointment. Curiously, Intergard had not given him any information about when or where they would meet apart from Osrakey's order to have practice during the afternoon, but this problem was solved quickly when Eos reached his room, as he found a piece of paper attached to the outside of the door.

Intrigued, he grabbed it and pulled it off. On the paper, a large and intricate spell circle had been drawn with thin pencil lines. Eos swallowed. Was he supposed to — cast this? Right now?

Panicking, he pushed the door open and dragged his equipment from under the bed. He was absolutely sure that he would not be able to do this. The circle was so complicated, Eos could not even see what kind of spell it was — Heck, he had no idea where to even start practicing to cast this monster. He sat down on his bed with a sigh, the piece of paper still in hand. Obviously, he had underestimated what Intergard was expecting of him. If this was meant as a preparation for the actual session later this afternoon, he was done for.

He laid down with a depressed frown and took another look at the circle. It looked like a Movement spell at its center, but the outer modulations were complex and difficult to understand. Eos managed to discern a targeting branch, meant to tell the position of the object that was to be moved, and several Main Frame shielding mechanisms that he had never seen on a Movement spell before. There was some kind of passcode or timing modulation worked into it as well, and again Eos had difficulties remembering if he had ever encountered a Movement circle protected by passcode...

He sat up. Maybe, he thought, if this was just a regular Movi, he might be able to cast it after all. Eos closed his eyes, visualizing the circle (or what he remembered of it), and concentrating hard he slapped his hand onto the piece of paper.

Nothing happened. That in itself would not have been a guarantee for failure since the spell was tied after all, but the paper hadn't even warmed up from the released magical energy, and Eos knew very well that spells of this size normally went up in flames immediately if you drew them out on something as flammable as paper. Great, he thought, of course. Why would it be that easy. In fact, he had never encountered a single spell simple enough so that he could cast it on his first try, but from this attempt he could at least tell that in this case it had not been his fault. The circle felt heavy and hard to use, like some of Eos' own creations from when he had still been in class. Definitely not Intergard-level optimization.

He let himself fall back down onto the thin bed and laid there for some minutes, not knowing what to do, or think. Then suddenly, it dawned on him. A spell circle that seemingly made no sense, consisting of coordinates to indicate a position and a timing mechanism, and all that buried under a load of meaningless modulations that had no synergy at all? Of course. The time and location of his appointment with Intergard, worked into something that only an experienced wizard would be able to decipher. It was so obvious!

It didn't take Eos long to figure out the precise information Intergard had hidden within her 'advanced circle'. As he sat on his bed, leaning over the small piece of paper and his eyes hastily sweeping over it from one point to the other, he began to understand what the numerous seemingly meaningless additions to the spell meant. Most of it was simple distraction that didn't have any real function for the spell, but the target coordinates were clear to read if you knew where to look, and it didn't take Eos much time to find them. It was a relative coordinate pointing to somewhere on the upper level of the hideout, at least that was what Eos guessed from estimating the distances. The timing branch was configured to activate the circle twenty-five minutes after it was primed by a wizard. That must mean twenty-five minutes after Niekar's training session ended, Eos thought. Indeed, he had probably taken about twenty minutes in total to figure out Intergard's puzzle, so if his theory was correct he still had about five minutes left.

He quickly went back down to the floor and looked through the remainders of his equipment, trying to guess what Intergard could have prepared for him. Would he need his Norkis Algorithm for this? Probably not... right? You never know, he thought, as he put the delicate brass cylinder into his pocket.

When he finally got up from the floor a minute later, he had packed almost all of the artefacts that he had been able to save on his last mission. Really, he didn't dare to leave anything behind and risk not being armed properly for whatever Intergard was planning to practice with him. He left his room pondering about the optimal arrangement of all the cylinders, medals, and tokens in his numerous pockets, concerned about whether he would be able to pull them out quickly enough. Obviously, his only real way of defending himself, a simple Reflect spell that he had crafted himself a couple of months earlier and which had come in very handy against Leit during the group exercise the day before, was placed in prime position within a small pocket on his right sleeve. From there, he could quickly pull it out with his left hand and slap it onto the back of his right to activate a fast barrier in front of him, or in a pinch just smack onto his sleeve directly and, knowing the artefact was there, activate it in that way, which was not as reliable, but faster and easier to pull off. But apart from that, he really was very unsure about the best way to arrange everything, and when he reached the location on the upper level that Intergard's coordinates had denoted, he was a bit irritated himself at the realization of it. What are you thinking, he said to himself, focus! There's more important things to concentrate on now.

Eos had reached a narrow hallway branching off from the main tunnel just in front of the briefing room. As far as he knew, this area of the tunnel network was not being used by the agency — There was nothing here except wooden planks scattered on the floor, and puddles of dirty water everywhere.

However, at the end of the corridor Eos could see a door leading to an adjacent room. That had to be it. He walked down the tunnel and slowly pulled open the heavy steel entrance.

Within, he found a large, surprisingly well lit room that was completely empty, apart from an old table at the opposite end and a dirty board installed onto the wall across. Dim light flooded into the room from a narrow window in the ceiling, and its diffused reflection from the

unplastered walls resonated around the chamber. Additionally, there were two Fallos artefacts fixed onto the walls that glowed in pulsating grey light, and high above just below the ceiling, a small iron ball was sliding silently back and forth on top of a thin pole that spanned the whole length of the room, its calm clacking when it reached the end and began moving back towards the other side echoing across the room, filling it with its slow, tranquil rhythm.

Nervously, Eos stepped into the chamber, unsure of what to do or how to react to this setup. He reached the center of the chamber and looked around. The board on the wall was dirty, but had nothing written on it, and the rest of the objects around him didn't seem to carry any hint, either. Eos looked up to the iron pole just below the ceiling. The small sphere had just reached the left side with a reverberant clacking when Eos heard a sudden voice shouting from behind him.

"Think fast, junior!"

Eos jerked around in sudden apprehension and saw Intergard's massive figure filling the door frame. He opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment Intergard took a strong step towards him that echoed back from the walls of the room, and extended her arm, almost as if to piece Eos from the other end of the hall. A bright spark of lightning shot out from her extended fingers and dashed across the room in a zig-zag line that sliced through the air towards Eos.

Inside Eos' head, his mind was trying to process what was happening, but everything went far too fast. Instinctively, he flung himself to the side, crashing hard onto the rough floor of the room, but dodging closely the sizzling spark before it went into the wall behind him with a disappointed crackle.

The calm 'clack!' of the iron ball above them echoed through the tense silence that followed. Eos laid panting on the floor, his heart racing from this sudden attack. Across the room, Intergard stood silently. Both of them exchanged stares — Eos' eyes wide open as he was trying to comprehend what had happened, Intergard with an emotionless expression that made it impossible to tell what she was thinking.

Above them, a clacking sound signified that the iron sled had again reached the left end of the room.

"Very good," muttered Intergard without moving a muscle.

"Very good indeed."

She crossed the room with large steps and dropped a small bag onto the table. Eos took a deep breath and stood up, still gasping for air. When he noticed that Intergard was looking at him, he raised his head nervously and tried his best to stand as straight as possible. It wasn't every day that you were alone with the Grand Mother herself.

"Where you come from, most kids don't have that," Intergard said with a satisfied smile, "The ability to avoid danger without thinking."

"You mean— the kids from class, Madam?" Eos asked shyly.

"That's right. They think hedging is all about knowledge. About skill. About magic circles drawn in their books and how well they can remember them."

She spoke with a calm, deep voice.

"But that's not what our business is about."

She walked towards Eos as she spoke.

"It's about conflict — About fighting. That's how you survive when you're stealing from the strong and powerful: By being strong and powerful."

As she reached Eos, who was still standing stiffly at the center of the room, she raised her massive right arm, and Eos flinched. Intergard chuckled and let large hand drop onto Eos' shoulder.

"Let's start."

She turned to her bag again, and while walking towards the table her right hand patted gentle onto a brass token that was dangling from her belt. Immediately, the steel door at the other end of the room slammed shut, and Eos recoiled from the sudden loud sound.

"Listen, junior," Intergard said while searching through the contents of the bag, "I don't think I will be with you youngsters on that gig tomorrow night. I have other appointments coming up, so Agent Sibrodi will probably take my place. That's why we won't go over strategies or team training. I want to focus on *your* ability. In particular—" She drew a small object from the bag and threw it to Eos with a flick of her hand, "—your ability to defend yourself."

Eos caught the shiny object, and looked at it closely. It was a small metal artefact for the Reflect spell.

"Madam, I—" he began while pulling out his own version of the spell from the small pocket in his sleeve, but Intergard interrupted him.

"Compare," she said plainly, and Eos inspected the two circles in his hand. His own was a simple version that summoned a shield in front of the wizard, but the one that Intergard had thrown to him was more elaborate, and Eos could not immediately see what the spell's properties were.

"Your Reflect will defend you reliably because it's easy to cast, but it can only shield your front. Your colleague Shichal told me all about it. If you are going up against Kengnatz wizards, that won't be enough."

Eos lowered his hands and looked to Intergard, eager to soak in all that say had to say.

"That one," she continued and gestured towards the second artefact, "Is a more versatile model that you can summon on all sides, depending on what you need."

She walked over to him while extending her hand, and Eos dropped the small token into it.

"See," she explained, holding the circle with her left and pointing towards the various modulations within the spell with her right hand, "As you probably know, this thing here... It's called a Self-Reference. It works with your mind."

Eos had indeed known about Self-Referencing before — It was an important tool to make circles more versatile and applicable to more than one situation.

"If you use this, you can raise defenses on whatever side you need them, by directing it with your mind just like how you always do it in spellcraft."

She dropped the artefact into Eos hand again.

"Use that one, it can save your life."

"Yes, Madam!" Eos exclaimed with an eager nod, but Intergard gestured towards the empty space across the room.

"It isn't that easy — You'll need to practice. Sit down over there," she said, pointing to the floor at the center of the chamber.

"Of course," replied Eos quickly and took a more or less comfortable seat on the coarse cement floor. Meanwhile, Intergard had drawn a piece of paper from her pocket, and looking up to the small iron ball that was still calmly sliding back and forth on top of the rail below the ceiling, she tapped onto it. The paper went up in flames immediately, and with an amazed grin Eos saw the iron ball lifted up from the rail and silently floating down, until it stopped and remained motionless in the air next to Intergard's shoulder.

It was the Pri-Rinner spell, in the opinion of Eos one of the most awe-inducing and aesthetically pleasing things that wizardry had to offer. It allowed to control and move an object around freely, similar to what the Levitate variation did to your own body.

Noticing Eos' amazement, Intergard let out a quiet chuckle and walked over to the opposite side of the room, where she sat down near the door, facing Eos. There was some distance between them now, but Intergard's figure still seemed just as massive as before as she made herself comfortable (or, as comfortable as possible on this kind of ground), the iron sphere still floating next to her.

"Alright, on your guard!" she said with a smile. Eos took a deep breath and concentrated on the small token in his hand.

"Summon one in front of you," Intergard ordered, and Eos clenched his fist eagerly, his mind focused on activating the spell just as she had instructed. With a sound like glasses striking against each other, a familiar layer of sparkling magic manifested between him and Intergard, reflecting the light of the two Fallos lamps in all colors of the rainbow before disappearing again some seconds later.

"Nice," said Intergard, "That's easy for you because this is how you have been using that spell so far. When you cast it, your mental image decides where the shield appears, and because you are used to it appearing in front of you, that's where it appeared just now. But what about the other sides?"

She gestured with one of her hands as if inviting Eos to show her how easy it was.

"Try left!"

Eos cast the spell just like before, this time trying to visualize the barrier building on his left side. However, the faint layer of color still appeared right in front of him, just as before. He let out a frustrated huff. This was more difficult than he had thought it to be.

"You're not trying hard enough," Intergard said.

"Close your eyes!"

Eos did as told, and tried again — Even without opening his eyes, he could tell from the sound that he was still just as successful as before.

"Again," ordered Intergard, "And again, and again."

They continued this for at least ten minutes, during which Eos had varying success in summoning the barrier in front of him, to his left, to his right, or not at all. Luckily, this kind of practice was not physically exhausting like Niekar's drills earlier, and Eos was enjoying himself. Intergard was not showing any sign of disappointment or impatience as she called out her instructions from the other end of the room, and her stoic anticipation of Eos' success motivated him to do his best. After another twenty minutes of intense casting, breathing exercises, and

Intergard talking about magic, energy, and indeed the universe, Eos was at last able to summon barriers all around him, at least most of the time.

"Very good, junior," said Intergard, finally, "Take a breather."

She detached a small flask from her belt, took a sip from it, and then threw it across the room to Eos, who caught it with his eyes wide in surprise.

You must be joking, he thought, not able to believe what he was seeing. Startled in pleasant astonishment, he took a gulp from the flask.

Intergard's flask, he thought. This can't be happening.

If he wasn't mistaken, then this was the very flask that had been to Kengnatz Headquarters during the famous Swift Crow raid. The flask that had been there when Intergard had declined the offer to be promoted into Central's uppermost level of authority, the flask that she had carried with her to prison and then into the base of the Red Flag rebels, all in one night. And now, Eos was drinking from it. It was probably the best gulp of clear water he had ever drunk.

Careful not to take too much from it, he lowered the flask again, closed it, and timidly threw it back to Intergard.

"Great," she said as she caught it and with a quick hand returned it to her belt, "Now for level two."

Eos couldn't help but swallow hard when by a casual gesture from Intergard, the iron sphere that had until now been floating at varying points around her, started moving towards him. Intergard smiled gently, but with a hint of mischievous anticipation.

"Close your eyes or look at me," she said as the small iron ball started to slowly circle around Eos. He closed his eyes nervously.

"Defend... Behind!" Intergard exclaimed, and Eos, tensing his whole body, quickly summoned his barrier behind him. He was trying hard to keep his eyes closed, but still he could hear the metallic fizzle of the iron ball crashing against the magic shield and rebounding off of it violently. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, which admittedly wasn't easy given the fact that he was being viciously attacked by a small flying pebble.

"Defend... Left!" shouted Intergard. This time, Eos was too slow. He had been too distracted by the idea of the iron ball flying around him, ready to strike at any moment, to focus on casting the spell in time. He let out a sharp yell as the small sphere penetrated into his side, and his eyes flung open.

"Focus, Eos!" said Intergard in a strict tone.

"Clear your mind — No distractions at all! That's why you have your eyes shut. You need to react quickly, don't be distracted by *anything!*"

She shifted her weight on the rough floor.

"Again."

It would be a long time and a great number of iron pebbles to the stomach, the back, and to the sides before Eos finally managed the drill. They continued to practice like this for what seemed to him as at least one hour, and although they took regular breaks, Eos found it hard to focus. In fact, after getting his third iron ball to the back, he was convinced that his efforts to concentrate and calm down made the whole exercise even more difficult, not easier.

He asked Intergard if he could try it while seeing the ball, and she allowed it. As it turned out, it was just as difficult, and slowly Eos began to understand what his teacher had said about clearing the mind. He needed to be able to cast his spell immediately upon noticing the danger, without any delay, similarly to how he had dodged the lightning bolt earlier, just now using not his body, but his mind. Only with complete concentration and complete tranquility at the same time would he be quick enough to react, should he be attacked during a real mission.

"Let's go through the whole drill again," said Intergard from her seat at the wall, "I'm convinced you can do it."

Eos took a deep breath and sat up straight.

"I'm ready," he replied and closed his eyes for the thousandth time.

"On your guard," ordered Intergard calmly, "Left!"

Eos blocked the strike convincingly.

"Behind!"

Again, he blocked the iron ball in time.

"Front! Left!" Intergard shouted without moving a muscle. He defended against both just barely in time.

"Front! Behind! Right!"

Her attacks came in quick succession, the small pebble dashing through the air around Eos so fast that he could hear it.

"And... *Above!*"

"What!?" shouted Eos, his eyes still closed. Panicking, he extended his hands over his head to protect it from the iron projectile while trying frantically to cast the spell. Then, a metallic screeching from above and the iron pebble landing on the ground next to him signified that his defense had been successful.

Without a word, Intergard stood up and returned the ball to its place on top of the long rail with a large gesture of her massive right arm. It immediately started to continue its never-ending trip back and forth on the pole, and its slow rhythm of clacking against the walls once again filled the room while Intergard stood there in silence, and Eos, his hands still raised above his head in an effort to shield it against the attack, looked up.

"Very good indeed, junior," she said finally. She walked over to her bag, and Eos stood up.

"Thank you, Madam, it's an honor—", he replied, his voice hardly hiding the fact that he was very proud, but Intergard turned to face him and raised her hand, two fingers extended and pointing at Eos' chest.

Shortly afterwards, Eos found himself hurled into a corner of the room, his head pounding from the shock and his body aching from a bolt of magic lightning straight to his stomach. He cursed himself silently for not having seen that coming.

"Never let your guard down," said Intergard from the other end of the room, where she was still standing next to the table exactly like before.

"Apart from that — It's a pleasure to help."

Eos coughed and got up from the dirty ground, patting the dust from his clothes.

"Yes, Madam!" he said weakly in-between his panting. He caught the flask that Intergard had once again thrown to him and took a large gulp.

Only now did he notice that the bottle was rather tiny, at least compared to what he and his teacher seemed to have drunken out of it over the course of the lesson. Confused, he shook it to see how much water it still held, and it was completely full.

Intergard laughed.

"It's an Astral," she explained, "Just not for important corps documents, but water. If you ask me, that's the more essential of the two anyways..."

She picked up her bag and began searching for something in it again.

"There is one more thing that I want to go over with you," she said over her shoulder as Eos came walking across the large room.

"You think you can handle it?"

Eos was still panting from being propelled into the wall, and the hour of defense spell practice had definitely taken its toll. He tried to produce a relaxed expression and straightened his back in an effort to seem ready for whatever that second part might be.

"Yes, Madam!" he said eagerly. In fact, he was positively loving this lesson so far.

Intergard turned to face him with a look of anticipation.

"What kinds of offensive spells do you know?" she asked, her eyes fixed onto Eos.

Eos looked to the floor — He could feel himself blushing.

"Uhm—" he said slowly, "None, Madam."

"Really?" replied Intergard with a bland voice. It wasn't a question, nor an expression of surprise, more along the lines of a reminder that Eos might have missed something.

With her right hand, Intergard picked up her bag and pulled out (much to Eos' surprise) a large orange carrot. She extended her hand, holding the carrot about an arm's length away from her, and stepped to the center of the room. Turning to Eos with a completely serious expression, she said: "Make that carrot hit me in the face."

Eos didn't know how to react. For a couple of seconds, they just stood there, Intergard motionless with her hand holding the carrot.

"Uhm... Yes, of course!" stuttered Eos after a while and pulled out the Henrik table, his hands slightly shivering from the idea of making a vegetable fly into the face of the agency's best wizard.

He opened the table, searched for the proper spell, and cast it. Immediately, the carrot was propelled sideways and crashed into Intergard's face, green first. She caught it as it was falling down to the floor, and looked up to Eos.

"Now, tell me how that was not an attack, junior."

For a moment, Eos was speechless. He had to admit that she was right.

"Listen: *Movi* is *the* most fundamental spell, and that is because of its versatility. If you use the right object, it can be a deadly weapon."

She reached to her belt, pulled out another piece of paper, and once again activated the Free Movement spell that she had used to maneuver the iron ball in their practice earlier. With a gesture of her hand, she lifted the pebble from its place on the long rail below the ceiling, and as if to illustrate the point she had just made, she hurled her hand towards the opposite side of the room in a broad movement, and with a sharp hiss the iron ball dashed through the air, crashing

into the wall next to the door and leaving a deep hole in its cement core. Eos was positively terrified.

Intergard relaxed and led the pebble back onto its original spot above them, where it continued its journey back and forth across the room.

“A gun from your hand, Eos,” she said solemnly as she turned back to him, “A gun from your hand.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Fencer And The Artefact Shop

Eos spent the rest of the afternoon in his room, practicing what Intergard had shown him earlier. He felt somewhat stupid given the fact that while he had known about Self-Referencing in spellcraft for a long time, he had never thought about applying it to his defensive spell. Then on the other hand, he had to admit that until now, he had never needed to defend himself in any other direction than the front. Even in magic duels...

Eos was rather proud of the fact that during his time at Enster's class, he had gotten into secret and probably forbidden duels with other students no less than three times, and he had won them all despite not knowing any offensive spells, just by clever use of his Reflect. Well, or at least 'despite not knowing that he knew any offensive spells'! Intergard was obviously right about Movi and how it could be applied as an attack. Of course, for her it was a special case in more than one way: Firstly, the Free Movement variation that she had used to demonstrate the destructive nature of a small iron pebble was very hard to use and could easily be called the most difficult of all the Movi variations. Secondly, even on relatively easy versions of the spell, it needed a top-notch wizard to accelerate the target object as drastically as Intergard had shown him. If Eos himself were to try an easy version of the technique, he would probably not be able to reach more than half of that speed. Then again, if the object was sufficiently heavy, or sharp at the tip, he could imagine that such a projectile would deal considerable damage on impact nonetheless.

He kept practicing the defense drill until he was relatively comfortable with it, and moved on to try for himself what Intergard had demonstrated. Using a small brick that he had found lying outside his chamber in the hallway, he tried to replicate the effect that he had seen done to the wall of Intergard's room, but of course he had little success. At first, he used the significantly complicated multi-dimensional Movi, but when it turned out that he could not even make the brick reach the ceiling of his small chamber before coming down to the floor again, he switched to much easier, 'linear' variations of the spell.

Indeed, that variant had been the one that he had used during his previous mission, when he had tried to stage a diversion by having his bag dash across the empty field. It had worked beautifully in that instance, Eos thought, so technically speaking he should be able to replicate the effect directly onto this brick, which by his estimate could not possibly be heavier than his half-filled bag.

Fortunately, the linear Movement spell was much easier to handle than the multidimensional one, and using it Eos did not take long to figure out the finer points of the technique. Not much

later, he had already become quite proficient at hurling boulders into the walls of his room, much to the displeasure of his bed, which by the end of it was covered in dust and small pieces of brick all over, and at one point his own foot, on which Eos had this method's ability to deal pain demonstrated in a very convincing fashion.

As after a long evening of practice Eos returned to the upper level and entered the briefing room to see if there was any kind of 'operative's dinner' being organized, he was surprised to find Osrakey standing at the end of the room near the blueprint crate, engaged in a conversation with a large man that Eos hadn't seen before. He was clothed in a formal coat with long tails, and from what Eos could see just by looking at his back, it was a relatively old man.

As he closed the door to the briefing room behind him, the man and Osrakey turned to check who had entered, and Eos now had the opportunity to see the stranger's face. Two small but lively eyes, almost covered entirely by thick greyed-out eyebrows, shone out from deep within a wrinkled face, directly above a large nose that ended in a sharp tip. His mouth was hidden under an elegant moustache and a short beard that matched the grey color of his combed-back hair. He was approximately sixty years old, maybe more. In fact, Eos thought, he had to be older than even Sarc. As he turned to face the sound of the door, the man was just about to return a small, well-polished pocket watch to the side pocket of his fine jacket, which was probably just as expensive as the overcoat he was wearing. Without doubt, the man had just arrived, as rain was still dripping from his sleeves and the lower end of the grey coat. Suspecting that this man might be a high-ranking officer of the agency, Eos instinctively straightened up and cleared his throat nervously. Osrakey greeted him with a pleasant smile.

"Ah, very well, Eos," he said with a welcoming gesture, "Come here, I'd like to introduce you to Agent Sibrodi!"

So that was Sibrodi, thought Eos. The senior agent that would replace Intergard on the mission tomorrow night. He quickly walked around the table towards Osrakey and the large man, extra careful about his appearance and demeanor. When he reached them, Sibrodi extended a hand, and Eos shook it politely.

"A pleasure to meet you, young Agent Keros," said Sibrodi in a gentle, calm voice, "I'm looking forward to our cooperation tomorrow."

"Indeed, Sir!" replied Eos with a quick nod of his head that didn't even reach up to Sibrodi's diamond-patterned neckerchief.

"Lovely," said Osrakey from the side in a formal tone, "Then I will be showing you your room, Agent."

"Yes, of course!" answered Sibrodi with a smile as he reached into his pocket and once again drew out the small pocket watch. Even in the dim light of the briefing room, its polished case was shimmering brightly. After a quick look, he let it sink back into his jacket, and as in this motion his wrinkled hand gently pushed away the wet layer of coat to reach the inner pocket, Eos noticed a thin knife on the inside of the old agent's grey coat. He shuddered slightly. Of course, being armed was completely natural for an agent, even more so for a seasoned veteran such as Sibrodi obviously was, and on a second thought, Eos couldn't explain why it had put him off. Maybe it was the fact that he had not expected such a nice and gentle old man to carry a hidden weapon. He couldn't explain it reasonably.

They left the briefing room, and Eos (now alone) sat down at the central table with some bread and a delicious soup that Osrakey had probably made earlier. He had gotten the opportunity to taste three different soups since he had arrived at the hideout, but so far he had never stopped to wonder who made them — Now, after the talk with Osrakey about his duties as a quartermaster, Eos suspected that it was him that made the meals, which Eos was in fact very surprised to realize as he hadn't imagined Osrakey to be this good at cooking.

As Eos was sitting there, peacefully slurping his soup, the door to the briefing room opened again, and Leit Shichal entered. To Eos' surprise, he had an exhausted expression on his face, and under his lump arm he was carrying a package that he put onto the table with a relieved sigh before he sat down next to Eos with a large glass of water, which he emptied on the spot.

"What's wrong?" asked Eos, confused, his eyes wandering back and forth between Leit and the large bundle on the table.

"...Intergard," was the only thing Leit said, and Eos remembered that his colleague had probably just now finished his private lesson.

"How was it? What did she practice with you?" he asked, his spoonful of soup frozen on its way to his mouth.

And then, to Eos utter surprise, it burst out of Leit.

"Everything, for heaven's sake!" he exclaimed, swinging up his arms in a shrugging gesture, his eyes showing that he did not even know where to start, "Everything, man. She had me do the spells that I can cast, of course, and her advice was unbelievable, honestly I had no idea that it was that easy, I haven't been able to produce any actual fire in my whole life and she just takes the Nawich spell that I can do and shows me how I can change it to be an actual Kenkri, the woman is incredible, I am seriously impressed—" he stopped to take a breath, "—And after that she had me run around the block seven times with one minute breaks in between, you have no clue how exhausting that was, but I can tell you I am going to do this every day because that's exactly what a devices expert needs, she's completely right on that—"

The words were just flowing out of Leit's mouth, and Eos still hadn't finished his spoon of soup because of the amazing vocal performance that his teammate was giving — he had thought Leit to be more of the cool, silent type because of his frankly insane skill combined with his classy air of relaxed preparedness, and definitely not the kind of person to share his emotional state just like that, but after this training session with Intergard it was clear to see how relieved he was that everything had gone well. Eos didn't dare to imagine how much Leit had prepared for his lesson, given how concerned, even panicked, he had been on the evening before, and he was comforted to see that his colleague had survived everything. Meanwhile, Leit had continued his speech unhindered and not any slower than before:

"And after that — check this out — she gave me sword fighting lessons, well, more like stick fighting, but—" he reached into the large package on the table next to him and drew out an elegant wooden staff of about an arm's length, his eyes quickly returning to the nodding Eos as he continued, "—Those were so cool, she said I should take this with me on missions and use it for self-defense because she said it was too much effort to learn decent spells so I might just as well focus on physical fighting, and I definitely will because get a load of this—" catching new breath, he gave the staff to Eos, almost knocking over his glass in the act, "—It's enchanted to be less exhausting when you swing it, so you can fight with this like some super-wizard and not

get tired from it at all, it even accelerates faster, honestly I had no idea stuff like this was possible—”

While he said this, he pointed to various small spell circles that were engraved into the wooden surface, and Eos’ jaw dropped at the sight. He had heard about enchantments like this before, but never seen one in person — As far as he knew the technique was based on a secret and highly complicated variant of the Movi spell that the very founder of academic Inlia Magic, Enoc Rogeikan, had invented to power the sword of his famed son, Finmac Kuul. Or at least, that was what the legend said, and indeed Eos had thought the whole tale was an elaborate myth, yet now he held in his hand a weapon powered by that same mechanism. He couldn’t believe it.

“You got to be kidding! Can I—” he stuttered, “Can I try it?”

“Of course,” replied Leit with a smile as he leaned back in his chair, letting out an exhausted sigh from all the talking he had done, “Naturally, it needs to be activated, but Intergard did it for me and she says the spell lasts for about two weeks before it needs to be reapplied by an expert. So I’ll be able to use it anyways.”

Eos stood up from the chair, his eyes still fixed on the fine golden lines that made up the three spells of the staff. Stepping away from the table, he tried to swing the weapon very slowly as you would swing a sword, careful not to apply too much force, but the rod immediately dashed down at such a speed that Eos could hear the sound of it cutting through the air.

“What!?” he exclaimed with an amazed laugh, stumbling back a few steps, “It works!”

He tried again, this time only barely missing the handle of a drawer next to him.

“I can’t believe it!”

“See? ...Pretty cool, huh?” said Leit with a confident grin as he stood up. Eos gestured wildly, unable to find the proper words.

“And, she—” he stuttered, “She just gave this to you? Like that?”

Leit shrugged — Eos couldn’t tell if he genuinely hadn’t thought about this, or was just playing it cool.

“Uhm, yeah.”

“Unbelievable...”

Eos carefully gave the staff back to Leit and slowly returned to his soup, his eyes gazing into the distance as if he was trying to grasp the meaning of the universe.

“These things are legendary... How does she just ‘have one in reserve’ that she can give out to people?”

“I don’t know,” Leit responded, “She said I should give it back to her when I see her, but apart from that — She just gave it to me, yeah.”

Eos was at a loss of words.

“Unbelievable,” he said again, and continued with his soup, still shaking his head slowly in astonishment.

After this, the evening went down without any interesting events, and Eos, who had to admit that the day of training had been more exhausting in retrospect than he had experienced it to be, was left with no other option than to fall into his brickdust-covered bed virtually as soon as he entered his small chamber after dinner. It turned out to be a wise choice, since on the following

morning Eos was no longer protected by the privilege of having had a night mission to recover from, so he — like everybody else — was hit hard by Rekkar entering his room at first sunlight, shredding a badly tuned lute at such a volume that it was impossible to continue sleeping in any way. Eos recognized the instrument as the Alagdi heirloom he had often seen Ienge play, and assumed that Rekkar had borrowed it from him — Over the years, Ienge had grown to be very good at it and Eos had always enjoyed listening to his friend play classic tunes from the south, but it was made utterly clear to him now that the same instrument in two different people's hands could produce sounds of very diverse quality.

Additionally, when Eos went up to the briefing room, rubbing his eyes sleepily and his foot hurting from having walked straight into the rough brick on his chamber floor while getting ready for the day, he had to find out that Ienge and himself had been assigned to organize the operatives' breakfast. As a result, they spent the time until seventh bell walking drowsily through dusty streets already bursting with lively people all around, buying various things at the morning market (not far from Isardja's house, as Ienge couldn't help but notice), including an expensive brand-name radish that Niekar had requested explicitly, and then walking back to the hideout with two large and way too heavy bags full of groceries.

"Come join the agency!" Ienge exclaimed as they had almost reached the abandoned storage hall, ending a casual talk they had had about the architecture of Erkom.

"See the world! Crush the corps! Save the people!"

He kicked open the small wooden gate that led into the backyard behind the building.

"And buy radish for your superiors!"

Eos couldn't help but let out a chuckle — Their whole situation was indeed slightly absurd. He always tried to stay serious about all parts of his job, as was his superiors' (and his own) expectation towards himself, but at times like these the danger and thrill of infiltrating evil corporations seemed just a bit too far away. A few steps ahead of him, Ienge let out a sigh and eyed the radish.

"I like the shape," he said, and Eos had no idea what he was talking about.

Breakfast was highly entertaining — Somehow, everybody seemed to be in a good mood, and the time that it had taken for Eos and Ienge to fetch breakfast had given the other agents an opportunity to switch from stumbling through the tunnels of the hideout while still half asleep, to pleasant anticipation of the day to come.

However, that mood was bound to change all too quickly again when Niekar, gnawing on her radish, announced her training plan for the morning. It was even worse than on the day before, and the ominous feeling that especially the younger agents started to have during her explanation was harshly confirmed half an hour later, when they started her drill just outside the entrance to the hideout.

Indeed, thought Eos while doing an exhausting grass sprint to retrieve some small object that Niekar had randomly thrown into the bushes, the thing that made this training routine so horrible was the fact that while it was positively exhausting, it was also unbelievably boring — Hard work, and nothing interesting happening. Truly dreadful.

Then on the other hand, Eos was still wondering what the afternoon would bring for him and Leit. After all, Intergard had left the outpost the night before, which meant that they would

either have their evening training under Agent Sibrodi, or maybe — just maybe — they would be free to do whatever they liked. After Niekars training regime, that would be the appropriate thing anyways.

It didn't happen, though. After three hours of the most physically demanding exercises that Eos had ever done, fortunately mixed with various stealth drills that not only gave everybody involved a chance to catch their breath, but which were also quite cool and exciting as far as Eos' opinion was concerned, Osrakey informed the two boys during lunch that they would be helping him in 'acquiring important agency assets in preparation for tonight'.

Eos raised his eyebrows, and Leit almost choked on his drink.

"But... Sir!?" he exclaimed, watching Ienge next to him spill water all over his plate, "You mean— A special mission?"

He and Leit exchanged looks with an excited expression.

"What are these assets that you want to acquire?" Eos continued after a short pause, trying to stay professional at the sound of him possibly being part of a short-term special mission, the most prestigious kind of all.

"What are they?" added Leit, "H-E documents that you want to steal? Prototypes?"

Eos' eyes were so wide in anticipation that they couldn't open much more as Osrakey burst into laughter on the seat next to them. Eos and Leit exchanged another quick look, confused.

"Take a break, kids!" exclaimed Osrakey in-between his laughs, "We're going shopping! That's what 'acquiring assets' means — Eos still needs his artefacts replaced, remember?"

Leit leant back in his chair, his face bright red. It was obvious to see that he felt unbelievably stupid, and Eos shared his reaction. He was not the type to overly regret his mistakes as long as he learned from them, but for someone like Leit, who Eos assumed was rather concerned with keeping up appearances (or maybe that air of coolness just came naturally to him, now that Eos thought about it), this had to be very embarrassing. Then again, it was true that he still needed new versions of large parts of his equipment, and he was glad to hear Osrakey hadn't gone back on his promise of buying them for him.

"While we are in town," the chief operator continued, "We will also have the opportunity to get any other materials that you think you'll need on the mission, so take some time to consider before we head out."

"Yes, indeed," replied Leit quickly, as if remembering something. He gave Eos a proud look, then returned his attention to Osrakey.

"I have been working on that custom interface that you requested, Operator, but I will need some special parts. There weren't any left in the outpost's reserve, and I think it might be time to refill those stocks anyway."

"Very good," said Osrakey with a confirming nod, "I'll hand you the money later, and you can just get whatever parts we need. Very nice to see that somebody around here is paying attention to our supplies. Good job."

He stood up.

"I'll meet you outside the storage hall in twenty minutes. Don't bring any kind of weapon, those are forbidden in any decent shop. We are going out as civilians."

He gave a quick nod to Eos and Leit, then left the briefing room. Eos, in awe, wanted to ask his colleague how on earth he had found the time to work on building a new interface for him in-between Niekar's and Intergard's training sessions, but he didn't know how to phrase it — When he finally opened his mouth, Leit was already gone.

Eos had already made a list of all the artefacts that he was missing, and as he had assumed that Osrakey would be buying them without his help, he had added very detailed explanations on which exact versions to choose — As a result, he already had a very good idea of his shopping plan, and preparation was easy. As they exited the hideout and made their way into the inner city where most shops were to be found, Osrakey explained that if you ignored all the non-brand garbage, there were supposedly three important magic shops in total, with one of them being a shady second-hand seller that Osrakey didn't expect to carry any quality goods, so they decided to visit the larger of the two other ones, but Leit said that he would need to ask around for specific parts at some additional merchants as well, so for the sake of saving time they decided to split up, and after having been handed an impressively large purse of coins by Osrakey, Leit went off on his own to buy the materials he needed to complete Eos' new interface.

Meanwhile, the chief operator led Eos across a number of busy marketplaces, through narrow streets, and over twisting stairways, until at last they reached the workshop they had been looking for.

'Djomelk's Magic Supplies' was a large store full of people browsing through a sheer infinite variety of devices for all sorts of spells. Tokens, sheets of leather and paper, metal chains with artefacts attached, staffs, wands, countless variants of Henrik and Falsraw Tables... Everything was there, spread over the numerous tables, put on display on the shelves, and hung across the walls of the large, multi-level room. It was the type of shop that Eos had often visited before due to him having been a hedger-in-training, but his allowance had never really permitted him to buy anything else than the most basic of artefacts, which was a real shame because this shop really had them all.

Indeed, visiting a magic supplier like this, Eos couldn't help but be reminded of his childhood, and it wasn't a good feeling — Back in Ilierka, shops like this one had been the very object of his hopes and dreams: All the artefacts he knew about gathered in one place, plus a hundred more — Yet none of it in reach for an orphaned street kid with no money.

Now on the other hand, he and Osrakey were here on a business matter, and accordingly, their budget was of a different size entirely.

The chief operator pulled out the piece of paper that Eos had written for him, and began walking straightly towards a table at the left side of the room. Obviously, this wasn't his first time buying magic equipment, and although to Eos' knowledge Osrakey was not a wizard himself, he assumed that as operator, he probably had to do this for his agents regularly.

It didn't take Osrakey very long to gather all the artefacts that Eos had written down for him, and while he walked from one table to the next, Eos had a hard time not losing sight of his superior among all the other customers of the shop while still catching a glimpse of all the

wonderful objects on display. Many of these artefacts he had seen before, and most of the time the ample variety of goods spread out on the tables was misleading since many spells came in a multitude of variants and every one of them normally had their own artefact, but all in all he could not get enough of the store's assortment of magic supplies. They even had circles for some of the more difficult and rarely used spells, and Eos couldn't help but wonder what kind of wizard would just casually walk into this shop and buy an artefact for Ekgjenc or Duun-Metzer, both spells that he had seen on display, but especially for Ekgjenc he was sure that probably only a handful of wizards in this city would be able to use it. Apparently, it was just part of running a magic shop to have artefacts in stock which were so difficult and rare that nobody would ever buy them. In fact, even owning that caliber of spell was very impressive in Eos' opinion.

"Don't even think about stealing any of those," whispered Osrakey over his shoulder, obviously having noticed what Eos was looking at.

"I would never!" hissed Eos back quickly, looking around nervously. He straightened up and tried to keep a cool expression, but in reality he was struggling hard not to think about a certain store on the outskirts of Ilierka, where four years ago a small boy had attempted to do exactly that. There was nothing that Eos was more ashamed of.

"You might not see it, but these are better protected than the governor's jewels, I can tell you that much," continued the chief operator as he was browsing through a table of Nawich artefacts in search of the one listed on his piece of paper. Apparently he had no idea what was going on inside Eos' head.

"Which one of these do you need?"

He turned around to face Eos, in his hands two small brass medals with Nawich circles engraved onto them.

"Because this one has a self-security modulation, and the other one hasn't. How do you want it?"

Eos raised his finger nervously and looked at the two circles. He felt slightly bad for making Osrakey buy all these supplies, and in this case specifically as he couldn't even cast the Nawich spell properly any more since he had started specializing in hedger spellcraft — He had just added it to the list in order to make sure he had one to practice with.

"Uhm..." he replied, unsure what to say, "...The one with security is good, Sir!"

"I thought so."

Osrakey added it to his growing collection of items and returned the other piece to the table.

"Then that's the last one. Anything else that you think you might need?"

Eos looked around. He had already added more to the list than he really needed, out of sheer excitement at the idea of getting all those artefacts for free, and now he didn't know if asking for anything on top was appropriate.

"No, Sir," he said with a quick shake of his head, "That's all."

Osrakey let out a chuckle and nodded.

"Ok, Sir, yes, Sir," he said and turned towards the central counter to pay for his items. As he unloaded his arms in front of the shopkeeper, Eos could almost see the twinkle of gold coins in the eyes of the bearded man behind the counter, and even more so when Osrakey leant forward and said quietly:

“Do these... Unlisted, please. I'll take the twenty percent penalty.”

It was truly a sight to remember, thought Eos — He wasn't sure if he had ever seen that many coins come out of one purse at the same time, and although he had to admit that judging from his background, you could say he likely wasn't used to handling larger sums of money, the delight in the shop owner's face confirmed to Eos that he was not the only person to think so.

The man packed up all the items into a large set, and as he handed it to Osrakey, he raised one hand to form a fist, but with his thumb still extended straight.

“Crush the corps,” he whispered with a wink.

To Eos' surprise, Osrakey followed suit, forming the same gesture.

“Simple man provides, stalwart rebel fights,” he replied, with a sparkle in his eyes.

CHAPTER NINE

At H-E Regional Redistribution. Or Whatever It's Called.

A bright glow of sudden blue light bathed the walls of a small storage room, and three silhouettes appeared from out of a dark corner behind a large crate. Eos blinked a couple of times, his eyes having some difficulty in adjusting to the abrupt change of environment. Next to him, the sound of Leit stumbling over a small wooden box signified that he was not the only person having that problem.

"Sibrodi here, Portal successful," whispered Agent Sibrodi into his comlink and turned around to face the two boys. From the other end of the line, they could hear Benx replying a short confirmation.

"Everything as planned," said the old man with a serious expression and walked over to the door of the small room. He didn't take any effort in muffling the sound of his footsteps, which shocked Eos at first and he wanted to make a polite remark about it, but then he reconsidered as he recalled that other senior agents, such as Intergard or Sarc, had also displayed this habit, and it started to make sense to him now that he thought about it. Why try to be silent when there is nobody to hear you? Seeing Sibrodi positively stomp his way across the small chamber was — from this point of view — a testament to his skill and awareness of his surroundings, not a mistake indicating carelessness or lacking diligence. Although, Eos had to admit, he would rather just be silent all the time and not take the risk of being heard.

"On my mark," said Sibrodi as they reached the door leading towards one of the main hallways, "Get to your positions and execute Step One."

He put one ear against the steel surface of the door, and subtle movements of his lips showed that he was counting the length of pauses in his head.

Osrakey had supplied all agents with information about the guards' patrol patterns — He and Benx had chosen this small storage room as an entry point specifically because it would allow them to get to their individual positions unnoticed, simply by exploiting the fact that the regular sequence of guard movement, according to Osrakey's intelligence, had a relatively large hole for that part of the hallway.

But in any case, they would need to be quick. By another impressive feat of Osrakey's seemingly never-ending agency purse, all three members of Team One had been given Invis Coils to make the stealth part of their job easier, but the floor plans that the operators had 'acquired' indicated disruptor devices scattered across all main hallways, so they would be able to go invisible only after having reached their designated positions.

"Now!" hissed Sibrodi, and pushed the door open. Outside, the hallway was dark and empty, and the only sound to be heard was the monotone ticking that came from numerous small brass boxes mounted on the walls down the corridor. Without a word, Sibrodi rushed forward and opened a door on the other side of the hall, entering another room without looking back to Leit and Eos.

Leit, as if reminded of their task at hand, gave a quick nod to his partner and started sneaking down the corridor to one side, Intergard's enchanted staff already in hand, while Eos, after a quick glance onto his brand-new (and pocket-sized!) interface to make sure everything was working properly, made his way in the other direction.

The guard patrol seemed indeed to be exactly how Osrakey had anticipated, and Eos reached his position without any problems. It was a narrow closet on the floor above, branching off from a smaller hallway that was connected to the main ring below through a creaking staircase that Eos didn't even try to guess the age of. On this level there were no magical countermeasures in place, so he reached into his bag and pulled out a small medal. He attached it to his jacket by means of a needle on the backside of the artefact, activated it with a slap of his hand, and a subtle flicker in the air that tinted everything in a slight pink assured him that the invisibility spell was working.

"Keros, Step One finished," he whispered into the comlink.

"Shichal, Step One— This thing is ancient! How— Uhm, Shichal, Step One finished!" was the response a couple of seconds later.

"Sibrodi, Step One finished."

Now for the boring part of the mission. Osrakey had sent in his agents half an hour early to make sure that no unforeseen surprises would threaten the mission, and Eos figured that they would have at least twenty minutes of time before any sign of Kengnatz activity.

On the comlink, somebody cleared his throat.

"Uhm," said Leit's voice silently, "How do we know they didn't track us teleporting in?"

Eos scratched his forehead, more an instinctive gesture than will. It was a thing he hadn't thought about either.

"Kengnatz is going to teleport as well," answered Sibrodi, "Which means they must know that H-E doesn't have tracking devices in place, otherwise they wouldn't dare that move."

"...Unless their intel was wrong, of course," added Leit nervously.

Tense silence on the comlink, and Eos had to admit that this was not the most secure source to draw information as vital as this from. Then on the other hand, Sibrodi was most likely right, as there had been no visible change in the guards' behavior since they had entered the building.

And indeed, it turned out that Sibrodi was right. During the next fifteen minutes, which seemed to Eos like an infinite amount of time, there was nothing even remotely interesting to report, and Eos (who carried no watch as he feared the ticking might be a weakness on a stealth mission) had soon lost count of the guards' patrol sequences, and therefore the remaining time until the next guard change when Kengnatz was planning to teleport their own operatives.

Then suddenly, Eos heard a muffled noise from the room across the hallway. Having left its door open ajar in preparation for Kengnatz' arrival, he could see a bright flash of blue shining

from within the chamber on the other side of the corridor, and the sound of somebody silently clearing their throat was audible.

"They're here," he whispered into the comlink so quietly that he feared Leit and Sibrodi wouldn't be able to hear it.

"Phase Two," responded Sibrodi immediately, and Eos heard equipment rattling, probably from Leit's end. He quickly put his hand over the comlink to mute the sound.

The door at the other side of the corridor opened, and from his hiding place in the closet Eos could see the figures of two people. One of them was gesturing complicated hand signs in silence, then disappeared towards the right, and the other simply remained standing in front of the door for some seconds, apparently searching for something in their backpack. And then, to Eos' horror, they came directly towards him.

He quickly flinched away from the door of the closet and pressed himself against a shelf next to the entrance, and only a split second later the door flung open.

It was a woman. Her long blonde hair was tied to a knot behind her head, and a long coat concealed most of her physical features, but from her gentle, yet sharp and edgy face Eos could see that she had to be around thirty years old. He dared not to breathe as the woman stood in the doorway to the closet for a short time, looking around and inspecting the interior.

Thank gods for invisibility, Eos thought, because there was absolutely nowhere to hide in this small chamber, and if this woman had simply extended her arm to the right, she would have been able to touch Eos' face easily.

But in an utter stroke of luck, she didn't extend her arm. Instead, she closed the door behind her and walked over to the opposite side of the closet, where the wall was not obstructed by shelves, and the plain, unplastered brick surface was visible. In the darkness, Eos could hardly see her, but fortunately the woman pulled out a Fallos artefact and lit it, filling the room with dim, flickering light.

If now anything were to happen on any of the three comlinks, Eos' presence would be revealed in an instant. Eos knew that, and for a moment he just sat frozen while his brain was trying to process the situation, unsure what to do. Finally, he took a deep breath and deactivated the comlink with a fling of his hand.

No time for Kelko at Ecrient, he thought. He would need to re-establish connection with his teammates as soon as he had brought some distance between himself and this unknown woman, but for now there was nothing he could do except waiting for her to leave the room.

Heavens, give me a break, he thought, nervously trying to cover his apprehension with mental sarcasm. This was just great. How could it be that during his first two missions, so far not a single thing had gone according to plan?

Meanwhile, the woman had begun drawing lines onto the wall. Without doubt she was preparing a spell, but Eos could not say which kind it was precisely. After a short while, she stepped away from her work, took a final look at the circle while putting the coal pencil back onto her belt, and hastily left the room without turning back again.

Even after she had left, Eos did not move a muscle until he could no longer hear her steps on the corridor. Then, with a giant sigh of relief, he approached the wall and inspected the spell the

woman had drawn. And to his shock, he quickly understood what it was: A time-based and primed Blast/Tramar combination, or in other words — A bomb.

This hadn't been part of the plan, and Eos had no idea how to react to it. He needed to report this to Sibrodi and the operators, but of course his comlink was taken out until he could make contact with them again. There was no choice — He would need to go look for them.

As he hastily left the closet that had been his hiding spot, there was a fierce battle going on inside his head. One half of his brain was ferociously trying to argue that disconnecting the comlink had been a good idea against the emotional protests of the other half, and Eos knew that it had been the right move to take — After all, staying unnoticed by the two Kengnatz operatives was the highest priority on this mission, and nobody would expect him, nor want him, to risk it all right at the very start of the action just because he needed to stay in contact.

In any case, Sarc had demonstrated that you could get along just fine even without comlink, Eos thought. But then he realized that the exact opposite had been the case, and all of a sudden he wasn't so sure anymore about the quality of his judgement.

As he tried to sneak down the old staircase without alerting the whole building with its positively extreme creaking, the pink tint in his vision disappeared, and Eos remembered that invisibility would not protect him on the lower level. Luckily, no guards were in the area at the moment, at least as far as Eos could see. He quickly made his way towards the room across of their original entry point, where Sibrodi was supposed to stay positioned. He leant against the door carefully, and when he didn't hear anything from the other side, he pulled it open.

The room behind the door was very similar to the one that Eos and Team One had teleported into, but less cramped with objects, and a quick look around the crates and shelves was enough to see that Sibrodi wasn't there.

He must have regrouped with Leit when I disconnected, Eos thought, and turned back to the door, when in that moment he heard the sound of footsteps from outside.

Within an instant and much to his displeasure, Eos' mind switched from cool consideration to panic. Someone was approaching — Was it security, or one of his teammates? Was it maybe even one of Kengnatz' agents? While Eos stood there, petrified, the steps became louder and he realized that by now it was too late to try and close the door in front of him, or the person coming down the hallway would notice. He had no choice now.

Eos silently took position next to the door and pulled out his pencil, ready to take down anybody that might enter. He heard the steps approaching the door, then stopping right in front of it. A hand appeared within the frame, carefully pushing the door open, and Eos saw from the plain shirt that it was one of H-E's security patrols. He took a deep breath, and as the man entered the room Eos slammed a fist into his stomach, followed up with another strike and with large strokes drew a spell circle onto his chest before his victim had a chance to see what was happening. As Eos activated his spell, remembering only at the very last second to add additional power in an effort to override the disruptor devices outside, the man sank to the floor, a mixture of fast asleep and violently taken out.

"Yesss," whispered Eos to himself, his hand clenched to a fist around the coal pencil, and his face bright with a triumphant grin. This would never get old.

But now — What to do next? As Eos dragged the sleeping guard into the room and placed him behind a series of low drawers, he gradually understood that this would threaten the course of the mission more than it helped: As soon as the guard came to his senses, the whole building would be on alert, which would not only make it far more difficult for every one of the agents, but for Kengnatz' operatives as well, which put the outcome of the operation in heavy jeopardy. Then again, having this security guard taken out couldn't possibly be a larger problem than having a bomb ticking on the upper level — Eos still needed to regroup with his allies as soon as possible.

Nervously sneaking down the hallway, he tried to recall where Leit was supposed to take position during the first part of the plan.

Not that you could call this 'the plan', he thought with a sarcastic grin, but in any case Leit would probably still be closeby. He remembered that this colleague's hiding spot was a small storage room very close to the entrance to the inner part of the building, where among other facilities the secure locker room was holding the prototypes everybody seemed to want. After some silent walking, he reached the designated part of the complex without having been confronted by any security, which was unusual, but could just be coincidence based on the irregularities of the patrol routes — And in any case, out of H-E's security forces one man was already removed from duty.

Carefully, he approached the entrance that supposedly led to Leit's hiding place, and put his ear against the wood of the door. From within, he could hear muffled noises that he couldn't properly place, but Eos could already guess that whoever was in there had heard him coming down the hallway and was preparing a trap, just like he had done only some moments ago.

"Agent Sibrodi, are you in there?" he asked quietly, sending nervous looks down all directions of the corridor, "It's me, Agent Keros!"

There was the sound of something heavy being moved around within the room, and a moment later the door opened, revealing Sibrodi and Leit standing within a tiny room, Leit's magical equipment scattered across the floor and Intergard's staff readily in his hand.

"The heavens, boy!" exclaimed Sibrodi, trying to make his voice communicate the proper attitude while not being too loud for any security to hear.

"Excuse me, Sir," whispered Eos hastily as he entered the room, the old man quickly closing the door behind him, "There was an unexpected occurrence and I couldn't risk blowing my cover by having anybody speak on the air, Sir!"

Hearing this, Sibrodi turned surprisingly calm again.

"What was the occurrence?" he asked while pacing through the small room.

"There are two Kengnatz operatives, a man and a woman," Eos explained, "The woman seems to be a wizard, she has long blonde hair and sharp facial features—"

Sibrodi raised his wrist up, and with composure spoke into his comlink.

"Did you hear that, operators? Give us the facts."

After a short while, Benx's voice came through the device.

"Yes, the woman's codename is Melenda, she's an explosives expert for Kengnatz—"

"That's right!" interrupted Eos, "She placed a detonation spell onto the wall of the closet that I was hiding in, it's set to explode in less than fifteen minutes!"

“What?” Osrakey’s voice echoed between both Leit’s and Sibrodi’s comlinks.

“Then that means they don’t plan to exit by foot after all,” stated Sibrodi with a concerned expression.

“Precisely,” responded Osrakey, “We need to change the plan—”

While he was talking, Leit gestured to Eos, demanding his comlink, and Eos handed it to him. As the young engineer was busy reconnecting the devices, Osrakey continued:

“I’ll send Team Two over for reinforcements, prepare to meet them in front of the entrance to the inner sector. Meanwhile, you need to defuse that bomb and prepare an exit spell as safety in case you don’t manage to stop it from blowing up. Use the room that you are currently in as a base and have Agent Keros prepare the exit circle while Shichal goes to defuse the bomb. Agent Sibrodi will cover the sightlines and make sure nobody gets hurt. Understood?”

“Confirmed,” replied Sibrodi with a nod to the two boys.

They all knew what they had to do. Leit quickly gathered his scattered pieces of equipment to make space for Eos on the floor of the tiny room, pulled open the door and left hastily in the direction that they had come from. Meanwhile, Sibrodi had disappeared down the corridor towards the other side to meet up with Team Two and scout for any corporate forces coming from that direction.

Luckily for Eos, he had prepared a number of possible exit spells in wise anticipation for unexpected occurrences, so it wouldn’t take him long to produce the complicated circle onto the rough floor of the chamber. Outside, he could hear Sibrodi crossing back and forth a number of times with speed and dexterity that Eos had not expected from a man as old as him — One time, a muffled cracking from nearby signaled that Sibrodi had come upon an unsuspecting guard. Hearing them being taken out was an uncomfortable, but still somehow pleasing thing, but even so the situation was growing more and more dangerous. Those guards would be unable to respond to calls on their comlinks, and by and by their disappearance would be noticed. It was only a matter of time before the whole complex would be on alert.

Speaking of being only a matter of time, on the upper level the bomb was probably still ticking. The woman had set it to detonate after twenty minutes, and Eos couldn’t tell how much time had passed since then, but in any case there was not much left.

“How is that bomb defuse coming along, Leit?” he asked into the comlink, the nervous undertone hardly concealed by his deliberately casual choice of words.

“I’m at it now,” replied Leit in a muffled voice, and the closing of a door was audible. “This thing sure is complicated, ain’t it...”

Eos put his pencil down and sat up straight, pulling the comlink closer to his face.

“Listen closely, you’ll need to disrupt the timer on the upper right, then raise the resistance of the whole circle, and deactivate it with a manual override because I don’t think you can disable that security mechanism on the lower side in time,” he said hastily, trying to assist his partner as well as he could, but Leit just gave a quick snicker in response.

“Chill out, kid, I know what I’m doing,” he said in a confident tone, “Don’t forget that this is what I specialize in, after all.”

Eos wanted to reply something, but a sudden sound from the hallway outside interrupted him. He looked up nervously, unable to say what kind of noise it had been. It took him a second

to realize that it was not a sound, but indeed the *absence* of one that had drawn his attention: The monotone ticking of the countless disruptor devices outside had stopped — Eos stood up and approached the door slowly, careful not to make any noise. On the hallway, everything was silent.

Then, Eos jerked up as suddenly Sibrodi's voice came from the comlink.

"It's them," he said, "The Kengnatz agents. They've disabled the security system so that they can teleport out of the locker room immediately as soon as they get their hands on the prototypes. That is their plan."

Eos slowly leant out into the hallway and timidly looked down the corridor to all four sides. If Kengnatz had succeeded in deactivating the disruptor devices, it would not be long until they came for the main objective, and the only entrance to the locker room was this corridor. They were probably already on their way.

"Operator, come in!" Sibrodi continued on the comlink, "What is the plan of action? Speak the words, where are you?"

"Uhm, yes! This is Operator," replied Benx quickly, obviously surprised by Sibrodi's harsh tone, "Stand by, we are working on a new strategy! Regroup and —"

He was cut off by Han Osrakey's voice suddenly speaking loudly on the air.

"This is Chief Operator, regroup at Shichal's original position after the bomb is defused and finish preparation of the exit spell immediately," he said in a commanding tone that didn't conceal the fact that he was tense himself.

"Prepare for contact with Kengnatz before Team Two arrives!"

"Clearance for action?" asked Sibrodi quickly.

"Granted, we need those prototypes. Take them down."

Only seconds later, Eos could hear Sibrodi running down the hall towards him, shouting orders on comlink.

"Keros, I hope you are finished with the exit portal — Shichal, how soon can you have the bomb defused?"

"Two minutes, Sir!" came the immediate response, mixed with the noise of Leit's coal pencil working on the wall.

"Good. Make sure it does *not* go off! Keros, are you done?"

"Yes!" responded Eos, almost shouting. He hastily stood up from the spell circle on the floor and pulled the door open. Outside, Sibrodi was just arriving from the corridor to the right.

"Put up a constant release immediately," he ordered, pointing to the wall of the hallway, "They might be invisible or hasted, we can't risk either."

Eos nodded and hurriedly went over to the wall while Sibrodi turned to the opposite side to do the same. He pulled out the pencil and began drawing the spell to interrupt any of Kengnatz' attack plans, but a sudden sound from down the hall made him stop again. It was the sound of a door opening not far away. Sibrodi spun around with an alarmed expression.

"It's too late, they're here!" he shouted, "Manual release, now!"

Eos was struggling to up. Everything was happening so quickly — He reached for his left side belt pocket where he kept the release token, but Sibrodi had already pulled out his own, a

shimmering trinket on a metal chain. He slammed his palm onto the artefact with a penetrating yell.

“Release!”

Eos could almost feel the power of the spell — He had never seen anything like it. A bright spark of yellow light dashed into the metal token from above, making it flash brilliantly for a fraction of a second, and then a thundering wave of energy that made the air flicker like the desert sun burst out of the small trinket down the corridor to all sides.

To the left, it shot down towards the end of the curved hallway without result, but on the right side two figures suddenly materialized at the center of the corridor, their disguises blown away by the wave from Sibrodi’s Release with the fizzling sound of evaporating water.

“Defend me!” shouted Sibrodi as he flung back the sleeve of his coat, revealing numerous spell circles on the skin of his right arm. He stepped to the middle of the hallway towards Eos, who needed a second to understand the command before jumping in front of him, hastily pulling out his Reflect.

Time to put that training to use, he thought, biting his lip in a mixture of apprehension and anticipation. From behind him, Sibrodi was already hurling a blistering ball of magic fire down the corridor towards the two attackers.

The Kengnatz agents did not take long to understand what was happening, either. Mimicking Eos’ and Sibrodi’s formation, the woman named Melenda stepped forward and dissolved the blast with a quick spell, although it was clear that she hadn’t expected it to be quite this strong.

Behind her, the young man had difficulties holding on to two large rolled-up sheets of what looked like paper or linen while he was ducking down behind his partner in an effort to be safe from Sibrodi, who had already shot two more blasts in their direction.

Those big sheets must be pre-made spells, thought Eos — One of them was obviously the Portal that the Kengnatz agents would use to escape once they had gotten a hold of the objective, but Eos had no idea what the other could be. Fortunately, his puzzlement was immediately solved by Sibrodi, who was shouting into his comlink behind him.

“Operator, come in!” he yelled, and the echo from Eos’ wrist made it even less pleasant.

“They have two spells prepared, one for their exit and one for extracting the prototypes. Do you copy?”

“Yes, continue!” came the immediate reply from Osrakey.

“They have an astral server set up to hold the objective — Once they reach the prototypes, they’ll upload them and we’ll go home empty handed. Updated course of action in ten seconds, please!”

“Confirmed!” responded Osrakey, and Eos could hear him heatedly whispering to Benx. Meanwhile, Sibrodi was talking to Leit on the upper level while still hurling occasional fireballs at the Kengnatz agents. Eos himself did not have much to defend against as the woman was not firing any attacks towards them, but a nagging feeling in his stomach had Eos worried that the Kengnatz’ Melenda might have something in store for him yet.

“Operator here, reach the objective first at all costs except agent loss. All clearances!”

“Confirmed,” replied Sibrodi immediately, all of a sudden more relaxed and almost smiling.

“Team Two and Shichal are almost at your location, hold out until they arrive,” continued Osrakey, but he was interrupted by an abrupt roar that resounded throughout the corridor.

Eos needed a moment before he understood that it was the sound of cracking within the walls around them. With a look of sudden realization he turned to the Kengnatz agents, only to see Melenda standing at the center of the intersection of hallways a few steps away from him, her hand gripping a large brass medal, and on her face a confident expression. Only now did Eos remember that she was supposedly a detonations expert — Just in time to hear an ominous cracking in the ceiling above them.

“Cover me, I’ll deal with this,” yelled Sibrodi, raising his arms. The fire artefact he had been using fell down to the floor behind Eos, but it looked as if Sibrodi was succeeding in keeping the walls from coming down onto them.

“How long until reinforcements? They better get through here before everything comes down!” he shouted to Osrakey on the other end of the comlink, but a sudden movement in the corner of his eye took his attention before the operator could respond.

At the center of the intersection, the young man had made his way towards the inner part of the building with the two large scrolls, and the woman had kneeled down, pulling out a long cylinder from her backpack. Eos knew at an instant what she was doing, and it wouldn’t have needed Sibrodi’s command for him to know his job.

“She’s raising a Demonwall to cut us off! Stop her!”

“Yes, Sir!” responded Eos as he dived towards the side of the hallway behind a large potted plant. He drew out the Henrik Table, the first page already open.

“Thanks for the tip, Intergard!” he muttered to himself as he cast a Movement spell, and to his relief the plant dashed down the corridor towards Melenda, who dodged the projectile with a surprised shriek, but the plant came crashing onto the floor at the point where she had begun drawing out the Demonwall, its pot bursting into pieces, scattering the contents all over the floor.

Melenda stood up and patted the dust off her jacket with an expression that Eos interpreted as an acknowledgement of his creative thinking. She pulled out a piece of paper from her breast pocket and sent a spark of lightning towards Sibrodi, who was still busy keeping the corridor from collapsing, but Eos jumped in between and deflected it with a quick shield.

Melenda raised her eyebrows and after a second of pause took a subtle gesture of a bow towards Eos, then followed her partner down the hall towards the locker room.

“We’re too slow!” yelled Sibrodi as Eos ran after her in pursuit. “I can’t wait for Team Two any longer!”

“I’m almost there!” shouted Eos into his comlink, “I can do this!”

Behind him on the corridor, Sibrodi let out a frustrated hiss, pulled down his arms and reached into his belt pocket. Around him, pieces of wall and ceiling began to fall down, only narrowly missing him. But he, seemingly untouched by all this, calmly drew out a piece of linen, and it burst into flames in his hand as he activated the spell.

A few feet further down the corridor, Eos noticed that something had happened. Still sprinting towards the entrance to the inner sector, he turned around, only to see a green flash bursting out of Sibrodi’s hand and travelling quickly down the hall to all sides. At the far end of the corridor, the members of Team Two were coming into sight, but Eos was more concerned about what Sibrodi was doing.

Around the old man, the bricks and bits of plastering that were coming down from the ceiling all stopped dead in mid-air, touched by the green wave as it made its way from Sibrodi's hand. The countless pieces flying through the air all froze in time and a fraction of a second later, before Eos had any chance to react, the spell had reached him as well. His body stopped in the midst of a large leap towards the locker room, and Eos, his head turned back to face Sibrodi and the astounded members of Team Two, couldn't move a muscle as he and all his gear were suspended airborne, frozen in time at Sibrodi's hand.

It was Harc, the timestopper spell. Eos saw the old man pushing aside the floating pieces of brick in front of him and running down the corridor towards the intersection where Eos was gripped tight in midair.

"You were great, son," he said with a wink as he reached Eos.

"My thanks for the help."

And then he passed Eos' floating body and ran towards the locker room.

Eos' thoughts were all of a sudden strangely calm. It was a strange feeling. He had never been the target of a time spell before — He could still think, but every cell of his body was refusing to do anything. He saw Rekkar and Ienge at the other end of the corridor, unable to move just like him. They couldn't look at each other directly, but Eos knew too well what they had to be thinking right now. He heard Osrakey yelling agitated questions on the comlink, but of course none of them could answer.

Eos didn't know what was happening inside the locker room. He heard the sounds of doors flying open and spells being cast from behind him, and for a moment it sounded as if there was a fight going on. But then, everything was silent and the dreadful sensation of hanging in the air unable to move was all he could feel.

Then suddenly, the noise of footsteps echoed from behind Eos, and he realized who it was: The lone scout that had been busy defusing a bomb on the upper level — Leit Shichal. The footsteps came to a halt, and Eos could hear Leit directly behind him talking to the operators, his voice telling of his utter confusion and concern.

"They're... Sir, they've been caught up in a Time spell, all of them."

"What!?" exclaimed Osrakey, panic resonating in his voice, "Where is Sibrodi?"

"No sign at all, Sir. I'm releasing the spells now."

Eos heard Leit kneeling down behind him, patting his shoulder with a snicker, and he could feel a coal pencil drawing quick lines across his back. Seconds later, he fell down to the floor in an unpleasant fashion.

"Thanks, man!" he stammered, panting.

"No big deal, partner," replied Leit as he helped Eos back on his feet, "Release the others."

Eos looked down at Leit, who was covered in dust all over, in his hand the enchanted staff from Intergard.

There was blood on it.

Terrified, Eos wanted to ask what had happened, but there was no time. They ran down the hall, made their way through the countless pieces of brick still suspended in the air at the point where Melenda had made the walls collapse, and reached Team Two at the other end of the

corridor. Leit couldn't help but chuckle at their incredulous expressions, all preserved by the Harc spell.

After a minute, they had released everyone, and the group's panting and coughing echoed from the walls all around.

"I hope you defused that bomb, Leit!" said Rekkar in-between gasps for air.

"Yes, but that's not our problem right now," responded Leit, "Just what happened here?"

He gave a questioning look to Eos.

"I don't know, honestly," answered Eos slowly, trying to make sense of Sibrodi's maneuver.

"Sibrodi froze us all with a Harc spell and went into the locker room — From what I could hear they had a short fight but then everything went silent."

There was an awkward pause.

"That traitor," said Osrakey on the comlink.

"I can't believe it."

They could hear the sound of the operator falling down into his chair with a sigh of frustration.

"Check the locker room," he continued weakly, "And get out of there before the corps arrive."

The Kengnatz duo had to have deployed one beast of a diversion, seeing that even now, almost ten minutes later, this part of the building was still completely deserted. An uncomfortable silence gripped the hallway as Teams One and Two hastily, but without enthusiasm made their way towards the intersection, where Eos had prepared their exit spell in the small room branching off from the main ring. Rekkar took a short sprint to the locker room, but as they had expected everything was gone. He returned silently.

In the hall, the pieces of brick floating in the air were starting to fall down as Sibrodi's spell began to lose its effect. It was a depressing sight — One after another, they suddenly dropped to the floor, some of them breaking apart on impact. Eos turned around and entered the small room where he had prepared the Portal.

"Everyone, come in," said Leit, his hands buried deep into his pockets in a gesture of resignation. They gathered on the spell circle, and after Osrakey had grunted a confirming "Clearance to exit", Eos activated it. Seconds later, the room was empty.

CHAPTER TEN

Take To The Skies

They made their way back to the agency outpost in silence. Niekar was fuming — She walked ahead with large steps and the other agents had trouble keeping up with her in the night. Not looking back a single time, she led the group through the empty streets of Erkom straight towards the hideout, her lips pursed in a mixture of frustration and disappointment. Eos could see Rekkar opening his mouth numerous times to say something, but he always changed his mind at the last second.

Inside Eos' head, nothing seemed to make sense. Was it true? Had Sibrodi really abandoned the agency for his own good? Somewhere deep within the backside of his mind, Eos almost expected them to enter the hideout and find Sibrodi sitting at the briefing table with Osrakey, the prototypes secured and well. But at the same time, something told him that wouldn't be the case.

Judging from Niekar's reaction, he had to assume the worst. And indeed, thought Eos, committing treason on your team was probably the foulest you could do as an agent. It went straight against what Osrakey had told him earlier: The reason why people would team up instead of working on their own — Trust and mutual benefit. Sibrodi had broken the promise.

Out of all of them, Niekar seemed to be the most troubled by this, and Eos could understand why. Meeting someone for the first time and having them turn on you was a dreadful thing in its own right, even in a profession that relied as much on intrigue and outsmarting as espionage, but for the older agents it had to be something else entirely — Niekar had probably been on countless missions with Sibrodi, working side by side with him for the agency. They had probably saved each other more than once during all that time. But now, all this history of cooperation, maybe even friendship, was shaken to the core by his supposed treason. No wonder, thought Eos, that seniors are said to have a *code* amongst themselves — Without doubt, this act ranks among the worst that could happen.

They reached the hideout without having spoken a single word. Eos and the other agents almost had to run after Niekar as she rushed down the tunnel towards the briefing room, more or less kicking open the steel door as she entered. As it slammed against the wall with a metallic clang, she stopped and for a moment just stood there, her breathing echoing from the ceiling.

At the other side of the room, Osrakey was standing at the blueprint crate, in his hand a large file of documents. He lowered it and turned to face Niekar.

"I always thought that loyalty could be found even in the most sinister of professions," he said with a sigh. "Without doubt, that is not always the case."

"Explain this, Osrakey!" yelled Niekar across the room.

Osrakey walked to the table and put down the file next to his empty glass.

"We were all— outplayed," he replied, struggling to find the proper words. Eos could see that he was trying hard to stay professional and not show any sign that the matter had got to him, but his shaking left hand told a different tale, and he quickly put it behind his back.

"So, are you telling me that this wasn't your idea?" shouted Niekar, and to Eos shock, with a sudden motion she drew a long knife from her pocket. Osrakey looked up. His eyes widened briefly at the sight, and quickly he rose from the chair.

"No!" he replied decisively, "If I was the mastermind behind all this, I would not still be here!"

Niekar hissed at the argument, although she was apparently compelled by it. She reached back, and with a shriek hurled the knife across the room into the wood of the blueprint crate.

"Where is he? When do we strike back?" she barked, rushing to the table.

Osrakey took a deep breath and opened the file in front of him as he sat back down, visibly relieved that the knife was stuck in the wooden crate, and not his chest.

"One thing is for sure: This was planned weeks in advance — I don't think we *can* strike back right now."

Niekar slammed her fist onto the table in front of him.

"Bloody hell!" she yelled, her mouth almost touching the chief operator's head. He took it without any reaction, sitting motionlessly with his eyes on the file, but he wasn't reading it.

"How did you not see this coming, Osrakey?"

Although Eos was very impressed by how Osrakey was deflecting Niekar's rage, the chief operator was visibly uncomfortable with being yelled at in this way. He gave a quick look to Eos and the other agents, but none of them were feeling like they wanted to stand in Niekar's way at this moment.

Osrakey cleared his throat in an attempt to defuse the tension of the situation, and looked up to the furious woman next to him.

"It seems Sibrodi is working with Kengnatz now," he stated coldly in an attempt to bring the discussion back to a productive course. "They had arranged in advance to team up in case anything went wrong in acquiring the prototypes."

When Niekar didn't reply, he turned to the other agents and continued: "As far as I can tell, these objects are far more valuable than we thought."

Some tense moments passed, then it broke out of Niekar again.

"He made utter fools out of us, Osrakey!" she yelled, her hair dashing around through the air as she shook her head to the chief operator, then to the other agents, then back to Osrakey like a falcon eyeing her prey.

"How could you let this happen, man?"

She fell into one of the chairs with a sigh of defeat. Eos was terrified.

"He is a very powerful wizard and master strategist," said Osrakey in a neutral tone.

"He's a senile old man unarmed except for his tongue," replied Niekar weakly, looking at the ceiling.

Now Osrakey was the one to let out a frustrated huff.

"This isn't helping," he said loudly as he stood up.

"All agents, dismissed! Get sleep."

He made his way around the table, passing Niekar. Eos and the other agents stepped aside respectfully as he approached the door.

"I will keep you updated," he mumbled as he left the briefing room, his hand still shaking, stronger than before.

Leit and Rekkar left the room immediately after the operator, resignation written all over their faces. Niekar stayed seated at the table, eyes fixed on the floor and not moving a muscle. Next to Eos, a visibly confused Ienge was unsure whether to say something, but after some tense moments of silence he decided against it, and left the room with a quick look to Eos.

Eos wanted to talk — He needed to process all this in some way. But Niekar didn't seem like she wanted a conversation at the moment, so he took a breath to calm himself and left as well. On the way to his room down the dark staircase, he let the events of the night pass again: There had been the thing with the bomb — But that was just an unexpected occurrence that frankly, Osrakey could have seen coming given the fact that the Kengnatz agent in question was an explosives specialist. If his memory wasn't letting him down, Eos could not recall anything unusual or suspicious about the way Sibrodi had behaved until the moment they came in contact with the opposition. He had led the team in a standard fashion... A bit chaotic because of the bomb, yes. But completely standard. He had even dueled Melenda in the central hallway, and that had not looked like a joke to Eos. Those fireballs had definitely been real. But then, he supposed that everybody could pretend to fight like that if they had agreed on it beforehand — After all, Melenda had only defended against his admittedly easy-to-block attacks without ever fighting back, although the Intensity spell that she had used to make the walls collapse was a different thing. But if it was true that they had been allied all along, she would have known that Sibrodi would have no difficulty evading it with his time control.

Eos reached his room, still not feeling like he understood any more than before. He laid down on his thin bed with a sigh of relief, and suddenly realized how tired he was.

I suppose it's the middle of the night, after all, he thought. But still...

Now that he thought about it, Sibrodi would have had more than enough reason to pretend he was still fighting for the agency for as long as he could. After all, it was highly probable that the Kengnatz agents would have succeeded in acquiring the prototypes anyway, even without his help. In that case, he could have stayed undercover within the agency for even longer.

And then the prototypes themselves... Eos had been so close. Maybe he would have reached the locker room in time to stop the Kengnatz from teleporting out with them — Maybe not.

None of this made any sense.

Eos didn't sleep very well. All of the emotional implications of having a team member desert to the opposition were taking their toll on the young man, and of course the fact that most of it didn't seem to make any sense was not helping to calm his slumber, either. When Eos awoke the next morning, he felt awful. He had fallen out of his bed twice during the night and his back

was hurting like crazy. Hopefully somebody around here knew basic healing spells, he thought as he stood up.

Groaning, he quickly made himself ready for the day, doing his best to make his clothes look acceptable despite the fact that he had slept in them. He had always known that his desire to look tidy and composed would one day come back to haunt him. Grunting to himself as he tried to squeeze his hair (which was verily all over the place) into an arrangement that remotely approached a 'hairstyle', but without any real success, he turned to the door and was just about to open it when it was pulled from outside, making Eos stumble forward and straight into the arms of Osrakey.

"Whoa there, junior!" said the chief operator with a kind smile, helping Eos to regain his balance. He was looking much better than the night before.

"Already energetic so early in the morning?"

Eos looked up to him with an unsatisfied smirk.

"Not really, Sir," he said, trying to suppress a yawn. Confused, he looked down the hallway to both sides.

"Why are you in front of my room, Operator? What's the matter?"

Osrakey cleared his throat, a clear sign that something of official nature was coming.

"Well, there is news," he replied in a formal tone. Obviously he was doing his best to get back into the routine of being the hideout staff after what had happened the night before. He pulled out a piece of paper and waved it around in front of Eos, who could only see the agency insignia on it, but not read the text.

"What is this?" asked Eos, more mumbling than speaking, as he took the paper from Osrakey, reading it.

"It's a note from Central Headquarters. They are ordering some of the agents here back to Ilierka," explained Osrakey. Eos nodded absent-mindedly as he was reading through the short letter. Apparently, all agents on this outpost were being transferred to various other locations, most of them back to the 'White Cave' that formed the agency home base.

"This arrived just some minutes ago, with high priority," continued Osrakey, taking the note back from Eos and putting it in his pocket, "Central is of course aware that we had an important run last night, but as soon as that one is concluded — now, that is — we are to vacate the outpost."

The chief operator made it sound like a sad and depressing matter, but a procedure like this was completely common. There were numerous smaller hideouts not currently in use scattered all across the country, and only when missions were set to happen in that area they became populated for a few days, maybe a week. In all honesty, Eos was somewhat relieved to hear that he would be returning to Ilierka as soon as possible — Being the agency base, everything was far more comfortable there than at the small outpost here.

Osrakey wanted to continue, but he was interrupted when a sleepy but visibly enthusiastic Rekkar came around the corner of the hall, greeting them with a quick "Morning!" as he approached. They both raised their hands for a quick salute, and the chief operator continued:

"Your airship leaves in two hours, so better get ready. I—" He paused as Rekkar squeezed himself through between Eos and Osrakey, trying to be as polite as possible in this narrow

tunnel. Rekkar gave an apologetic grin to both of them, then turned and continued down the hallway towards the staircase, whistling.

“—I have your ticket here,” said Osrakey as he reached into his pocket again, “All the transfer agents to Ilierka are on the same flight. You will meet up in front of the briefing room in one hour.”

Eos nodded as he took the envelope from Osrakey.

“Yes, Sir,” he confirmed. To his surprise, Osrakey put a hand on his shoulder.

“Good luck, kid,” he said, “We will probably not be seeing each other anytime soon. Stay safe out there, ok?”

Eos could feel himself blushing, and he had difficulties not looking down to the floor.

“Of course, Sir! It’s— it’s been a great pleasure working under you.”

Osrakey chuckled.

“The pleasure is all mine, Agent Keros. You did a great job, I can tell you that much. I’ve never heard of a class kid that had to deal with this caliber of mission for their first two runs, and you are looking fantastic in your record so far.”

Eos looked up, eyes wide.

“Thank you, Chief! That’s— very nice of you to say!”

“It’s the truth,” replied the quartermaster with a kind smile, and turned towards the staircase, giving Eos another pat on the shoulder. “Now better start packing, you don’t want to be late!”

Four operatives would be transferring to the agency base: Eos himself, Benx, Leit Shichal, and Ienge — All in all the four youngest members of the group. Rekkar and Niekar would move to the base in Kelda-Elenperdjo far to the south, and Osrakey himself would wrap up the hideout before travelling to the agency equipment stash in Gikken. Eos was pleased to hear that he would continue to work with his friends, although leaving Osrakey was not the best news of the day. Of course, they had known each other for only a few days, but the chief operator’s helping hand in resupplying Eos with artefacts and his kind and caring attitude made it feel like months. As he carefully packed up his equipment into a large bag not unlike the one that had saved him at H-E, Eos couldn’t help but wonder when they would most likely get the chance to work together on a mission again. Given that most agents specialized in something and therefore had very particular skill sets, it was common for Central Headquarters to frequently order operatives to change location when they were needed for a run someplace else, so team constellations never stayed the same for very long, and after a couple of months Eos would probably have worked with most of the agency’s personnel at least once (apart of course from Central himself). It most likely wouldn’t take long until he met Osrakey again — Eos had heard that the young operator was an all-round very successful team leader, and a rising star within the agency, so he was headed the same way as Eos: Straight up to the top. And from his own research Eos knew that Osrakey specialized in raiding the western H-E subsidiaries north of the coast, so if he was ever ordered to return to the area around Erkom, chances were that it would be for a mission under Osrakey’s command. Frankly, Eos was already looking forward to it.

Packing up all his things took Eos much longer than expected despite the fact that his arsenal of gadgets and magical devices, clothing (both casual and for the job), paper and pencils, and

two old books about spell circle theory wasn't extraordinarily large — Maybe it had to do with the problem that Eos couldn't seem to remember the arrangement that had made all his things fit into a bag of this size on his trip to Erkom about a week ago, or his habit of trying one way of packing, but then pulling everything out again afterwards in an effort to find a more efficient arrangement. The process continued for more than half an hour, with additional time for catching something to drink from the briefing room and getting unwillingly involved in a passionate conversation between Ienge and Benx about the morality of egocentrism and treason (without doubt sparked by Sibrodi's desertion, but Eos was definitely not in the mood of any more of this depressing matter), and an extra ten minutes of Eos 'just quickly looking something up' in one of his books and having to forcefully stop himself from continuing to read two chapters later. In the end, Eos reached the briefing room with his bag five minutes before the arranged time.

Ienge and Leit were already sitting around the table inside the large room, their own bags of equipment leant against the wall next to the entrance. Being a hedger himself, Ienge's package of gear were roughly the same size as Eos', but the other bag was significantly larger, confirming to Eos that indeed it belonged to devices specialist Leit.

At the table, Ienge and Leit were in a conversation when Eos entered the briefing room and walked up to the sink on the other side to get a glass of water. Ienge seemed to have finished his earlier argument with Benx and was now carrying the issue to Leit, who was visibly unimpressed with the boy's elaborations on whether putting one's own interests before others' was legitimate or not. It was surprising, thought Eos, since from the impression that he had gotten of Agent Shichal during these few days, he would have expected him to be interested in these kinds of questions. All in all, Leit seemed like the deep type, more concerned with what things could mean than with what they actually were. In fact, that was an approach that Eos had always found to be rather cool and he tried his best to apply that kind of thinking as well, but normally he wasn't very successful with it.

Benx arrived right on time and the boys took their leave from the hideout, but not without meeting Rekkar outside the storage hall and having a small farewell chat with him. Eos was somewhat disappointed that he hadn't had any opportunity to get to know Rekkar more — He seemed like a very funny and pleasant-to-be-around person. Hopefully they would meet again in the future, thought Eos as they made their way through the bushes at the rear side of the property, cutting through onto a quiet street near the Half-Weekly Market.

The airship port was at Erkom's very center — Eos had been there once before when he had come to the city in the first place, but he couldn't remember the exact location. Luckily, Leit was prepared, or maybe he just had a good memory. They took the main road, crossing a number of smaller marketplaces and busy plazas where they had difficulties keeping Ienge from buying some of the delicious snacks that were being offered, and after roughly twenty minutes the airship port was finally in sight.

It was by far the highest building of the city — A towering structure of bricks and steel that branched off at the upper levels into various gates for airships to dock onto, making the building wider in the air than it was on the ground. Sight of the gates facing the young agents was almost completely blocked by two large airships that were floating in the air next to the

building, one of them in the process of docking, the other one maneuvering around the tower to enter a gate on the other side. In the distance to the east, Eos could see another ship approaching, the color of the emblem on its balloon signaling the Eastern Entdellic Trading Company. That was probably the ship that would take them to Ilierka.

They entered the airport and found themselves within its huge entrance hall, an impressive sight that Eos hadn't witnessed on the day of his arrival, as he and Osrakey (who had picked him up) had used a rear exit on the other side of the building. They walked over to the counter on the left side of the hall and pulled out their tickets. Eos had only briefly looked at his when Osrakey had given the envelope to him earlier, and he really hoped that it would be in order. After all, he didn't have any significant money on him to pay for a new one.

Luckily, the four tickets were perfectly fine, and the station officer redirected them towards a series of elevators on the far side of the entrance hall.

"Thank heavens there are elevators!" exclaimed Benx as they made their way across the sleek floor, "I've had enough of staircases since that ruin of an airport at Gikken!"

Leit nodded with a smile as if reminded of an amusing memory.

"Yes, the Gikken airport... A true legend!"

Eos had never been to Gikken, and he was relieved to see that apparently, Ienge hadn't either.

"Is it very high?" asked Ienge as they entered one of the elevators and began their ascent to gate two, "I heard they have difficulties with the construction on some of those larger airports."

"It's true," replied Leit, "The static doesn't allow for the kind of heights they would probably like. After all, airports are always prestige projects as well, so the idea is normally to be as big as possible. Even if the landing procedure is easier for the airship captains when they are closer to the ground."

There was a round of approving nods. Obviously, none of the other boys had anything meaningful to add to Leit's statement.

They made the rest of their elevator trip in silence and soon reached the third level, where at gate two their ship would leave in half an hour. They left the small cage of the elevator and found themselves on top of a staircase leading down onto a wide, open platform overlooking the city.

The gate was already buzzing with people. Across the length of the platform, which was significantly larger than what Eos could have crossed with a stone's throw, there already were a good hundred people of all sorts standing around, sitting on benches while reading the newspaper, or running hastily from one staircase or elevator to another. It was a magnificent sight, and the clear morning sun allowed for a stunning overview over the city extending in all directions below.

The boys made their way across the plaza towards the gaping chasm where the airship would dock soon. They found a row of empty seats near the end of the platform and sat down. Across of them in the empty space above the city, the ETC airship was already beginning its docking procedure, and announcements of warning echoed across the station.

"Not that big of a ship, is it," said Leit, more a statement than a question, as they watched the large zeppelin slowly make its way towards the concrete projection of gate two.

"I've seen bigger," replied Benx with a knowing nod, "Not flown in one, but seen them."

Eos didn't know how to contribute to this admittedly very deep talk — To him, the ship seemed rather large. But then again, he was not precisely the most experienced when it came to air travel, or indeed any kind of travel.

The docking procedure was tiresome at best, and it would be more than twenty minutes before the boys finally boarded the ship. Eos shuddered as he slowly walked across the plank towards the entrance of the main gondola, trying hard not to look down into the abyss below. Of course, there were railings on both sides, and the beam of wood and metal was broad enough to walk on comfortably, but still Eos had not quite gotten used to the feeling of walking onto a large floating vessel high above the roofs of the city. After all, it was only his second flight — From what he could tell by looking at the other agents' faces, they were all much more comfortable with the situation at hand, or at least they succeeded in making it look that way.

The large gondola at the bottom of the ship that also served as the entrance and exit was meant for Third-Class passengers, so there were no seats, and hardly anything else either, just a large hall with neat wooden paneling and some shelves on the side to store baggage. The captain's assistant was welcoming the passengers and directing them to their respective areas, and the young agents were shown towards a narrow staircase to the left that led out of the main compartment and diagonally upward into one of the other gondolas grouped around the balloon of the massive ship. The staircase was so tight that Eos had to hold onto his backpack as they made their way into the Second-Class gondola, and Ienge complained twice about pieces of metal in his face as he followed closely after his friend.

Here in the Second-Class gondola, everything was much nicer than below on the main floor. A long hallway extended straight ahead from the end of the stairs, and branching off from it were numerous smaller compartments for the individual passengers. Everything was stylishly coated in beautiful wooden panels, and overall Eos couldn't help but feel very rich and distinguished. If this was Second-Class, he could scarcely imagine how luxurious the First-Class compartments had to be.

"We've got number seven," said Benx, who was leading the group of boys with long steps down the corridor. Eos quickly drew his ticket out from his shirt pocket and inspected it — Indeed, they had all been grouped into the seventh compartment, which was apparently a four-passenger cabin.

"Ah, it's here."

They stopped halfway down the hall as Benx turned to face the door to compartment number seven, and pulled it open with a quick movement.

Within, they found a small but comfortable chamber with two beds on the left side, and another two on the right, illuminated by the bright midday sun that came through a window at the other end of the cabin, a good four steps away from the door. Ienge and Benx exchanged a quick look.

"Top!" exclaimed Benx immediately, closely followed by Ienge. They both threw their bags onto the top beds and quickly took position to secure them while Leit and Eos were still standing at the door.

"No fair, the door isn't even big enough," said Leit with a sarcastically plain tone, "I couldn't get into the room in time."

His expression made clear that he couldn't care less about which bed he was receiving. He entered and flung his large bag onto the lower bed to the right, his equipment rumbling and clanking within it. That left Eos to take the lower one opposite of Leit, an option he was completely fine with.

"Does anybody know how long the flight is?" asked Ienge from above.

"Didn't you get here from Ilierka in the first place?" replied Benx with a confused look as he pulled a small bottle of water out of his bag, taking a sip from it and handing it down to Leit, who was already extending his arms in a begging gesture — Apparently he had been so preoccupied with his enormous amount of equipment that he had forgotten the most essential travelling gear of all.

"No, I got here from Gikken, didn't I mention that earlier?" answered Ienge, dangling his arms down from the rail of his bed so that they swung back and forth in front of Eos' face.

"It's rather long, that's for sure," said Leit after having taken an obviously needed, still politely small gulp from Benx's bottle, "I'd say we should arrive at about third bell. Depends on the wind, really."

Benx took the bottle back with a shocked expression.

"What, three *in the night*? Gods!"

He let himself fall back into his sheets in resignation.

"I'm already set up for sleeping. Bring it," he added weakly.

Eos nodded absent-mindedly. His flight from Ilierka to Erkom had taken roughly the same amount of time, but from what he had heard it always depended heavily on the wind situation and currents across the continent that he didn't know anything about, so back and forth flights normally differed in travel length by a substantial amount.

"Well, in any case, we will have lots and lots of time to gossip about other agents," said Leit, still an ironic smile on his face, "Or about how the mission at H-E went."

Eos got the impression that he was not really up for talking, but the fact that he was still (kind of) following protocol and suggesting a post-mission debriefing made Eos raise his eyebrows nonetheless in appreciation of his colleague's diligence. Just as he thought that, Leit pulled out a book from his bag and threw it onto his pillow. Eos couldn't catch a glimpse of the title, and as he opened his mouth to ask, Leit added: "...Or, to address the elephant in the room, maybe we want to guess why we're on this ship in the first place."

"What kind of book—," Eos started, but he interrupted himself when Leit mentioned the missions, "—Yes, about that. Does anyone of you actually know what is supposed to happen at Central? I mean, why are we being called back?"

He looked around, but Benx and Ienge above on their beds just shook their heads with expressions of puzzlement.

"Well," started Leit, laying back into his sheets and opening the buttons of his jacket, "I might have heard a thing or two."

From above, Eos could virtually hear Benx's eyebrows rising, and he was feeling the same way. It was hard to describe, but somehow Leit's whole figure and the way he was behaving, the way he talked so calmly and quietly, and how he phrased his sentences in simple, yet subtly unorthodox ways, all things that the other boys had noticed individually but not as a whole, were now combining with the elegant and unbelievably relaxed manner in which he opened his

jacket to finally tip the balance on a feeling that Eos and the other boys had had for some time: That their devices specialist was just ridiculously cool.

"What now... Do tell!" demanded Ienge from above as Leit drew a sheet of paper from his bag. He unfolded it, and Eos could see that it was a page of handwritten notes, but the heavy cursive of the writing made it hard to decipher anything from where he was sitting.

"Well, as opposed to the impression that I get from some other people," said Leit calmly as he quickly reread it, "You might say that I am actually paying attention. And there is a number of interesting things going on."

He wanted to continue, but was interrupted by Benx's hand waving wildly in front of his face — The boy on the top bed had his whole upper body leant downwards over the side in an effort to get a hold of the piece of paper, but Leit was quick enough to pull it away.

"Don't even try it, Kurdibt," shouted Leit without any change of expression as he turned the paper around, revealing to the boys a spell circle drawn onto the other side. Eos realized immediately that it was a Self-Detonation mechanism.

"Holy smokes, Leit!" he exclaimed, "Talk about being dramatic!"

Above, Benx timidly pulled back his arm as Ienge just let out an amused snicker, obviously enjoying the performance.

"Anyway," began Leit again, "Remember how they called Aretz-Sarc back to Headquarters after our first raid?"

Nodding from the other boys.

"I spoke to him about it. From what it sounded like, there is some kind of a crisis at the Ilierka base at the moment."

Silence in the compartment. Leit looked from one boy to the other.

"Wait, a crisis?" asked Ienge, visibly confused, "What kind of crisis?"

"It didn't say in his order, but he told me that sudden calls like that don't normally happen. I mean—" Leit took a new breath as he folded the piece of paper and put it back into his bag, or maybe it was just a tactical pause to fuel tension, "—Of course short-notice calls happen all the time, but Sarc said this was a different kind. Something with the tone of the letter. Unfortunately I couldn't take a look at it myself—"

He was interrupted by Benx, who was still dangling dangerously from the side of his bed just above Leit's head: "Wait-wait-wait! Let's quickly do the math here. Sarc left on the day after the first raid at H-E, right? So that would mean that he arrived in Ilierka about one day later, and then two more days pass and we're all called back as well! That can't be a coincidence!"

Ienge nodded approvingly.

"Yes, if you take into account that orders from Headquarters take about half a day at minimum to get to Erkom, that would fit perfectly — They called Sarc, he arrived, but they didn't get the situation under control so they ordered more agents!"

He was speaking quickly and excitedly, and all in all Leit seemed to be the only one of the three to keep a cool mind, at least from what Eos could tell. Honestly, who knew what was going on behind that collected mask of his, he thought. From his past experiences with Agent Shichal, he was a highly changeable personality.

"But then why would they order in *us* of all people?" countered Leit the two boys on the top beds, "We're rookies. Let's not be too hasty, we don't know anything specific yet. I'm sure, if

there had been a real emergency, the other agents, I mean Rekkar and Niekar, would have been called back as well."

Eos nodded, but something was still concerning him.

"But what about Intergard," he asked, "She left Erkom too, just one day after Sarc."

"Yes," replied Leit, "But was she in fact going to Ilierka?"

Eos had to admit that he didn't know. Intergard had only ever mentioned 'other missions coming up' in a different area, but never where these missions would take her.

"Still," he continued with a concerned tone, "She could have talked to Sarc beforehand, and when he arrived at Central and wrote to her, she decided to leave as well! That's why Osrakey wasn't sure whether she would stay for the second raid on H-E until the last minute!"

It all seemed to make sense, in a way. Then again, Eos had to admit that he had no real proof for his theory, and Leit's skeptical look reinforced that doubt.

After a short pause, the devices specialist across of him (who, as Eos could now tell, was a very solid wizard as well) sat up straight again and said: "Well, luckily, these rumors are not the only lead we have in this enigma."

He chose to ignore Ienge's question of "What is an enigma?" and pulled out a second piece of paper from his pocket.

"You might not have known this, but on the morning before the second mission at H-E, I didn't attend Niekar's training. That was not because of laziness, but because of the fact that the chief operator took me to accompany him on a meeting with an information broker in Erkom named Isardja."

"Wait, what?" interrupted Ienge, "He did the same thing with me, two days earlier!"

"That's right," replied Leit calmly, "Osrakey chose to revisit the informant because there had been 'an unexpected development that raised new questions' as he put it. Unfortunately, I don't know what it was about, but later, although I didn't hear what the operator discussed with Isardja in private, I had the opportunity to ask the man a few of my own questions as well."

"But—," Eos started, confused about basically everything Leit had said, "—So you had your own session with this information broker? Why didn't you hear what they discussed in the first place?"

"They met on a public marketplace and it was very busy," replied Leit in a slightly annoyed way, but Eos chose to interpret that as him being embarrassed about his inability to fetch that valuable information, and not because of Eos' question about it.

"In any case," he continued, "As I said, when later that day we went to Erkom again to buy your artefacts and split up because I needed to visit some 'special merchants', I had the opportunity to speak to Isardja again, this time without Osrakey, and he gave me a very informative briefing on the situation in Ilierka at the present time."

There was a pause, the three other boys struck by a mixture of being visibly impressed and slightly intimidated. Finally, Benx extended a finger and opened his mouth to form a question, but hesitated as if considering, and spoke it only after this short delay.

"But, every information dealer takes fees for his knowledge. How did you pay him?"

Leit smiled. Eos got the impression that he had hoped somebody would ask.

"With money that I stole from H-E on the first mission."

Benx and Ienge audibly gasped, and Eos couldn't help but feel surprised and verily awestruck himself. He clearly remembered that Leit had received a large purse of coins before leaving him and Osrakey — Apparently, this young agent's code of honor stretched as far as acquiring his own money to pay for the dealers he spoke to behind the operator's back, instead of using the money that Osrakey had readily provided without questioning his intents at all. Eos caught himself staring onto the wall with an open mouth as he realized all this, and quickly closed it with a cough.

"You *what!*?" shouted Ienge, who apparently also had needed some time to process this. Leit only shrugged without giving a response, and Eos had to admit that this time he couldn't quite tell what his colleague might be thinking — Was is that he really didn't care, neither about the fact that he was supposed to hand all acquired assets to the operator after a mission, nor that he really had acted behind Osrakey's back? That seemed so unlike him all of a sudden. Or was it that perhaps he felt bad for doing it and was now trying to downplay the incident? Or maybe he felt that it had been his own choice and was trying to not be emotional about it afterwards. In any way, Eos was growing more and more impressed by the sheer amount of cleverness, professionalism and independent thinking that Leit was displaying. He had been completely oblivious until now that this boy was such a competent and hard-to-predict agent, no matter in which official or less official way it might manifest.

"So, judging from what Isardja, who by the way has a cute black cat that seemed to utterly love me, disclosed, there is a kind of high-stakes power struggle happening around the Ilierka region right now. There is H-E and Kengnatz, who are locked in a fierce fight for dominance over the market there, and of course our own agency as well as other minor intelligence companies, but according to Isardja, two other actors are starting to play a significant role."

He stopped for a moment to relish in the fact that all the attention in the room was on him.

"You're talking about the rebels?" asked Ienge with a puzzled look on his face.

"Yes, that's one of them. They are not the amateur institution that they once were."

Leit frowned at the thought of them.

"I have spoken to Niekar, who ran a large number of equipment raids against various rebel cells last year, and at that time they were still no match for any of the larger players on the political scene because the cells themselves were at war with each other too, but—" He interrupted himself to catch new breath, creating another tense pause that he visibly enjoyed, "—Isardja has solid information that they have solved their internal struggles and are almost as powerful as they once were. So my bet would be that there is trouble with rebel strikes against Ilierka, probably the Red Flag Rebels, or the Mountainside cell."

There was approving nodding around the small room.

"But," began Eos, not yet completely convinced, "Why would the rebel cells target our agency? Because of these equipment raids from ages ago?"

"That might be a possibility," replied Leit, "But you are right — I think they have bigger fish to fry, and the provincial government is not going to just leave them alone either."

Benx, who had lied down on his mattress in an effort to think more clearly, now leaned over the edge of his bed again with another thing to consider: "Maybe those cells aren't involved at all. What about the second newcomer that this Isardja person told you about?"

"It's the Social Insurance," answered Leit plainly and immediately, much to Eos surprise without any kind of tense buildup or pause.

"You must be joking!" exclaimed Ienge, "The Insurance agents are hipsters!"

"And very good ones at that," countered Leit, "I wouldn't underestimate them anymore. In fact, I was beaten by them on a mission just some weeks ago."

Eos exchanged a quick look with Benx on the upper level. At least Leit has any kind of record to draw from, he thought with an ironic smile. Must feel great to already have dozens of missions under your belt.

"In any case, I think it makes more sense to assume that the Insurance would make a move against our agency, rather than any rebel cell," said Ienge, "Then again... I would guess they have bigger problems at the moment, too."

"Kengnatz, for instance," added Leit with raised eyebrows. Again, a round of approving nods.

After this, there was not much real content being discussed within the small compartment that the four young agents shared. Leit started to read his book, which turned out to be a collection of theoretical essays by Sebind Irkem about advanced silencing devices and other fancy contraptions from the distinguished engineer's arsenal, and Ienge and Benx on the top beds quickly drifted into a state of being half-asleep, too tired to really discuss anything but not in the mood to take a midday nap in front of the other boys. Later, they played dice with Eos, who had up to that point been trying to read one of his own books, but given the fact that his collection of literature wasn't exactly extensive he had difficulties finding a part that he didn't know already, and even his strong tendency to get caught up in reading about magic couldn't help it.

During the game, there was a lot of witty and at times passionate banter — Being essentially a bluffing game, Ienge and Benx were in their element and Eos couldn't help but feel sorry for Leit on the bed at the other side of the compartment, who was visibly struggling to understand anything of what he was reading. After some minutes of him trying to ignore the noise of the other boys talking and the clacking of dice on the small brass table mounted to the wall below the window, he finally gave up and with a sigh joined the game. A severe problem, as it turned out, because he continued to crush Benx and Ienge in only a few rounds. Sitting directly after him in the turn order, Eos had the advantage, but even then he didn't stand much more of a chance than his colleagues.

After a number of rounds that only happened because Benx would not acknowledge his defeat and demand another go at the game, the boys eventually grew tired of rolling dice, and Eos accompanied Ienge down to the main gondola where the latter intended to "check out the situation" — A phrase that Eos could not completely comprehend, but he went with him anyways because there was nothing better to do. After all, they were on an airship undertaking a multi-hour flight to the other end of the nation. Or at least halfway.

"You don't fly very often, do you," asked Ienge casually as they left their small compartment and made their way down the narrow hallway towards the stairs, careful not to disturb any of the other passengers. The corridor was essentially just a sequence of doors that led into the various compartments, but on the other side a row of windows allowed a beautiful view over

the vast landscape below, entirely tinted in golden evening light. Eos was so distracted by the sight that he didn't even hear Ienge's question at first.

"Oh, uhm, no..." he eventually replied as they had almost reached the staircase, "I never travelled during my time at Enster's class, and as you know I've only been on active duty for two weeks now, so..." He lost his line of thought again as he looked out of the window, trying to guess which cities these could be. They were probably half-way on their journey at the moment, maybe a little less.

"Well, it's a great sight, isn't it," continued Ienge, following his friend's eyes to the clusters of tiny buildings and streets below, "Definitely one of the perks of this job."

There was a short pause, and then Eos added: "Don't forget getting to buy brand-name radish for Niekar."

They entered the main gondola below, and Eos now had a chance to see it as it was meant to be: Filled to the brim with people of all kinds of social status. So this is the Third-Class compartment, he thought, and Ienge almost immediately confirmed it with a slightly disgusted shrug at the sight of the rabble that was gathered here.

Eos himself didn't feel comfortable with looking down on these people, however. After all, if Enster had not recruited him into the agency all those years ago, he wouldn't even be able to afford an airship flight now — Indeed, he was unsure whether he would have actually survived until the present day in the first place. Ienge on the other hand, who had ran away from his relatively rich family at young age to join the circus and had only later been spotted by one of Enster's assistants, obviously had a very different standpoint in these kinds of questions.

Then again, the third class was not reserved for folks from the lower end of society — It was simply the cheapest type of ticket, and accordingly there were all sorts of people scattered around the large hall. Eos could spot families with mothers timidly holding on to their children in the crowd, old men with hats that made it hard to see their faces sitting around an improvised table playing cards, a group of sailors engaged in lively chatter, and even a few of those most curious youngsters from the capital, easily recognized by their crazy outfits and flamboyantly dyed hair. Ienge was already making his way through the crowd towards the central counter when Eos managed to drag his attention away from watching the crowd and back to the task at hand. He followed his friend across the hall, trying carefully not to offend any of the passengers standing or sitting all around, and caught up with Ienge as he was just paying for a large bottle of water at the counter.

"Oh, give me one of those smaller bottles as well, please," Ienge added with a charming glance towards the officer currently in charge of overseeing the counter. The young man turned around with a confused look on his face and picked up another bottle from the shelf behind him, blinking several times as if to shake the image out of his memory.

"Thank you, dear," said Ienge as he received it, and dropped two small coins onto the counter. "Keep the change for your break, will you? I hear the First-Class gondola is—" He leant forward ever so slightly, confusing the young officer even more, "—exceptionally lovely at sunset."

He gave the young man a wink and turned back to Eos, the smaller of the two bottles still in his hand.

"This is for Shichal, I thought he'd like something to drink," he said after a pause, misinterpreting Eos' irritated look to be about the question why he had bought two bottles, and not about his interaction with the young man at the counter.

"Uhm— yes, of course, good idea," muttered Eos, now rather embarrassed with his reaction.

"Anything else you think we should get the boys upstairs?"

Eos looked around, his answer already clear.

"I don't have any money," he said plainly.

"But I have," replied Ienge.

"From where? Don't tell me you took some from H-E as well!"

Ienge turned back to face Eos with a grin.

"Travel provision from Osrakey. For stuff like this, all you need to do is ask."

Eos didn't reply — He hadn't thought about that.

"You see, as far as my opinion goes, it's all very easy," continued Ienge, waving the bottle around in his hand as he made his way back towards the staircase, "You either get things, or you don't. But if you do—" He turned back to Eos with eyebrows raised, "—Make sure you use them."

"What was that at the counter all about?" asked Eos as they climbed the stairs to the Second-Class gondola, "I mean— If you like him just ask him directly, no?"

Eos was of course completely familiar with how Ienge went about his romantic involvements.

"What, that?" replied his friend with an amused look over his head, "Even after all these years, you still have no idea how this stuff works, do you?"

He let out a chuckle.

They reached their compartment only to find the other two boys exactly as they had left them: Leit reading his book, and Benx lying on his top bed pretending to be awake but in fact fast asleep. Or at least it looked like that on first glance. As he sat down on his bed, Eos noticed that Leit was working on something.

"Mister Shichal, compliments from the house," said Ienge as he handed him the smaller one of the two bottles he had bought, and Leit looked up from his book with a pleasantly surprised grin.

"Well thank you very much, Mister Alagdi," he replied as he took the bottle, revealing to Eos that he was in fact not merely reading the book in his hand, but looking something up in it as he was drawing out a spell circle on the wooden paneling behind his bed. Eos raised his eyebrows as he realized that it was one of three defensive spells that Leit had already sketched out using the thin pencil Eos had previously seen sticking out of Leit's jacket.

"What are you drawing up there behind you?" he asked, and Leit threw a concerned look towards the circles on the wall before he returned his eyes to Eos.

"Just some defenses for the night, nothing special," he replied with a shrug and Eos, to his horror, had to force himself not to let out a dreamy sigh at the way his colleague said this.

"You don't think we're being attacked, do you?" exclaimed Ienge, who had now noticed the drawings as well, "We're on an airship!"

"One can never be too sure," answered Leit with a warning look, "Even in a zeppelin soaring the skies. And besides, it's not like there is anything better to do, is there?"

“...How will you activate them, though?” countered Ienge with a skeptical sideways glance towards the circles, “You said you only know two spells and I don’t think these can be activated by just anyone.”

“Actually,” said Leit, “They can.”

He pointed towards the largest of the three circles, the one still unfinished.

“This is, as you can see, a constant release against invisibility or haste—” He proceeded towards the smaller ones, “—This is a manual silence to activate in case we are ambushed, and the third one is an alarm in case the door is opened during the night.”

Ienge nodded approvingly.

“Very good,” he said, “I trust you get all those to run properly, because I don’t think Eos and I can cast silences of any kind if there is a real emergency.”

Eos wanted to protest because he could definitely cast silences, but Leit was quicker in his response.

“Absolutely. Stuff like this is kind of what I specialize in, after all.”

The evening went by without any incidents — Being confined to a small compartment on a relatively small airship, the options of how to best pass the time were quickly used up. For Benx, this part of the flight was all too easy to endure, but then again he was mostly sleeping on his bed above Leit, who visibly had a much harder time trying to keep himself interested in any of the numerous books he had brought along. Unfortunately, the other two boys were in similar situations, and even Ienge’s surprisingly extensive collection of games could, although it provided them with ample means to pass the time, not cover all of the seemingly endless hours until the ship would finally arrive in Ilierka. When they had tried out every kind of dice, card, or other game that Ienge could come up with, they still had not even reached sundown, and everyone in the compartment knew that their flight would continue until long after midnight, possibly even until morning. Eos was genuinely hoping for a chance to just fall into his bedsheets and wake up again when they had reached their destination, but he was not feeling tired at all, and his attempts to force himself asleep were completely unsuccessful.

At eighth bell, Ienge came down from the bed above Eos, excused himself, and left the compartment, leaving behind a confused Leit that was visibly feeling like he was missing something, and a snoring Benx that was not taking any notice at all, but of course Eos knew what was going on, and he couldn’t help but wonder if Ienge was indeed about to have a quiet meeting with the young officer from the counter. He couldn’t imagine that the man would actually show up, and the more he thought about it, the more he really wanted to find out, but of course he would never follow Ienge to check for himself. That was simply not done.

So with a sigh of resignation at the fact that time seemed to stand still on this vessel, he fell back into his mattress and gave sleeping another shot — Surprisingly, this time it seemed to work.

But not for long. Eos awoke from the shrill sound of a high-pitched shriek that ripped him out of his slumber immediately, and he could not tell at first what it was. The compartment was dark and from the window came no light, so it had to be the middle of the night already. The shriek ended as suddenly as it had come, and Eos turned his head as he noticed a shadow

moving on the other side of the compartment. A moment later, the light below the ceiling turned on, and after his eyes had adjusted to the bright flash, Eos beheld a strange and concerning scene.

Across of him on the opposite bed sat Leit, his finger on the light switch and on his face an alarmed expression as he looked towards the door, which had been opened forcefully despite the lock. Within the doorframe stood a large figure in a long black coat, the face hidden by an enormous hat and a scarf that obscured almost all of his facial features, except for a long nose that ended in a sharp tip. It took Eos a second to realize who this person was, but when it hit him, his jaw dropped in sudden shock. It was Agent Sibrodi.

Apparently, Sibrodi himself was just as surprised as Eos about the situation, but he regained his composure quickly.

“Well played, Shichal,” came his voice from behind the scarf, confirming to Eos that he was indeed the old agent who had deserted to Kengnatz the night before.

“For you, anything — Devil!” replied Leit quickly as he slammed his fist onto one of the spell circles drawn out on the wall behind him, and with a yell of “Silence!” he sent a wave of flickering magic across the compartment and down the corridor outside.

Not a second later, Leit was on his feet and Eos did his best to do the same as Sibrodi let out a hiss and returned a small brass token from his hand back into the pocket of his large coat.

“You are much better prepared than I had expected, Shichal,” he whispered as he took a step back out of the boys’ compartment and into the dark corridor. Leit didn’t reply — Instead he reached towards the corner behind his bed and pulled up Intergard’s enchanted staff, gripping it fiercely in his left hand as he stood at the center of the compartment, his eyes fixed on the dark area below the hat where Sibrodi’s face had to be, and only taking small steps toward the tall man in tense anticipation.

Sibrodi chuckled and drew out a long knife from under his coat. For a second, the two agents just stood there staring at each other, until Sibrodi suddenly lunged forward, the tip of his blade dashing towards Leit. But Leit was quick to respond, and deflected the thrust with a fast swipe of his staff from the side, knocking Sibrodi’s whole arm to the left towards Eos, who flinched back just in time as Leit was already delivering a counterattack, the staff rushing through the air at such speed that it was hardly visible. It hit Sibrodi’s extended arm with full force and the old man let out another sharp hiss, retreating quickly towards the doorframe again.

“Nice toy — You got that from Intergard I assume,” he said mockingly into the silence that followed as the two duelists once again stood motionlessly, awaiting the other’s move in tense anticipation. “Let’s take this outside, shall we?”

Sibrodi took a step sideways and disappeared into the corridor. Eos, pressed against the window from his jump back earlier, anxiously looked at Leit, relieved to see that his colleague seemed to understand this was a trap. If Sibrodi moved far enough away from Leit’s silence spell, he would be able to use his techniques again, and Leit would not stand a chance against him despite holding the superior equipment. Above on the top beds, Benx was slowly coming to his senses, and from what Eos could hear, Ienge was already awake, watching the fight speechlessly.

“What now, Leit?” asked Eos timidly as he looked out of the door into the dark hallway.

“We can’t follow, he will destroy us,” was Leit’s quick response, interrupted by his quick breathing. “But we are at the advantage anyways.”

Leit turned back to his bed and once again slammed his fist onto the wall, this time manually reactivating the alarm that had sounded earlier. For a second time, the ear-shattering shriek resounded along the corridor, and Eos could already hear angered voices from the other compartments.

Genius, he thought. If the whole gondola was in chaos and Sibrodi was seen by anyone, he would have no choice but to retreat for now. Unless of course—

Leit and Eos exchanged a quick look, both realizing that despite Leit’s clever thinking, Sibrodi might have the last word yet. At that very instant, a green burst of light dashed down the corridor outside, bathing the boys’ compartment in bright light before it disappeared on the other side, travelling fast down the hallway. Eos could feel how for a split second, his whole body froze up on the spot, only to be freed again one moment later by the constant Release spell that Leit had set up in wise foresight. The same was happening to the other boys, and a quick look from Leit confirmed to Eos that their concern had been realized.

“Our release only works for this compartment!” exclaimed Ienge from the bed above Eos, who had only now understood what was going on, “The other passengers are still frozen!”

Leit nodded sharply, his eyes dashing back and forth between the circles on the wall, his backpack, the door, and Eos, who could almost see the stream of ideas inside the panting young man’s eyes, but none of them seemed to be usable, and when the sound of footsteps echoed down the hallway outside Leit quickly returned his attention to the door, where only seconds later Sibrodi’s large figure reappeared.

“Your reinforcement isn’t coming, boy!” barked Sibrodi, his long knife still ready. Leit raised the enchanted staff slowly with both hands, ready to defend against another of the old man’s lightning-fast attacks at any second. Surprisingly, Sibrodi flung his blade to the side, and immediately Leit dashed forward, jumping onto the opening he had seen in the cloaked man’s defense. But Sibrodi was ready, his ‘mistake’ merely a bait to draw out Leit from the compartment, and he quickly sidestepped into the corridor, Leit following closely behind him. They disappeared towards the left, and Eos, eager to offer any help that he could, dashed out into the corridor, now dimly lit by scattered lights that had been turned on within the other compartments before their passengers had been caught up in Sibrodi’s spell. He found the old agent a few steps to the left, positions switched with Leit and now facing away from Eos and towards the end of the corridor where the narrow staircase led down into the main hall, driving Leit further and further along the line of dark windows with a series of violent strikes of his saber-like knife.

“Guys, help!” shouted Leit from behind Sibrodi’s large figure, and Eos sprinted towards them, his hand already reaching out for the spot where on his jacket a small pocket held an artifact for a simple Movement spell, only to realize that of course he wasn’t wearing his jacket—Indeed, he was completely unarmed.

Further down the hallway, Leit stumbled backwards and fell to the floor, Sibrodi leaning over him menacingly. The fact that the constant release over Leit’s bed might have lost most of its impact by now wouldn’t make any real difference, for the fight seemed all but decided. Panicking, Eos turned back to the compartment and was just beginning to take a desperate

sprint back to his equipment when far at other end of the corridor, he saw the dark shadow of another figure appearing, running towards Eos and the two fighters behind him at break-neck speed.

“Out of the way!” yelled the man as he quickly approached Eos, gesturing wildly with one hand while the other pulled out an artefact. Eos, who had long stopped trying to comprehend any of what was happening and was now in a trance-like state of not being able to decide whether this new character to the scene was friend or foe, threw himself to the side just in time to dodge a bright purple flicker dashing along the corridor from the extended fingers of the unknown young man and straight into the back of Sibrodi, where it was swallowed by a faint layer of magic shielding that materialized just in time — Without doubt, Sibrodi had come prepared, and his Protect spell nullified the man’s attack completely. Still in full charge towards Sibrodi, the young man cursed sharply and drew back his arm, getting ready to fire again.

Having fulfilled its purpose, the shimmering protection burst into pieces and Sibrodi turned around in surprise, but he was too late. A second shot from the unknown attacker hit him on the shoulder as he was turning, and the old man was hurled back over Leit’s exhausted body on the floor, crashing onto the carpet a couple of feet further down the corridor next to the top of the staircase and lying there motionless.

For a moment, there was silence, and the only thing audible was Leit and Eos panting in unison. Then, Ienge and Benx stumbled out of the compartment directly into the arms of the unknown wizard, and as Leit slowly regained his senses and stood up, Eos now had a chance to inspect the mysterious attacker.

It was a young man in his twenties with glasses a lively face framed by a fancy, bright blue hairstyle — Certainly one of those modern fashion styles from the capital, very similar to Ienge’s. Eos had the nagging suspicion that he had seen this man before when he had visited the main gondola with Ienge during the afternoon, although he wasn’t sure. The man wore a white shirt and an elegant pair of suspenders connecting to long, thick working trousers with lots of pockets and a large belt with numerous artefacts dangling down from it on thin metal chains, along with other pieces of equipment and numerous tools, even a small hammer — All in all, he gave the impression of an impish factory worker much more than that of a professional spellcaster, but his Stupefy shots against Sibrodi and the fact that the second one had propelled the old man multiple feet down the hallway made it clear to Eos that this young stranger was indeed a wizard of considerable skill — And it didn’t take Ienge’s raised eyebrows and volume-speaking look as he inspected the man to convince Eos that this dapper wizard had the looks to match it, too.

“No need to worry, boys — You’re out of danger,” said the man with a kind voice and cheerful smile, “Not implying that you wouldn’t have been alright without me, of course.”

Ienge and Benx were visibly confused and struggling to comprehend what had just happened. Down the corridor, Leit threw a quick look to Sibrodi’s motionless body, found it to be convincingly taken out, then picked up Sibrodi’s knife and tossed it down the staircase. He reached into the old man’s coat and pulled out various small artefacts, discretely letting them slip into the pocket of his shirt. Then he turned to face the other boys and quickly walked back to them, only to notice that all eyes were on him. He let out a chuckle and shrugged, on his face a precious smile as he turned his attention to the stranger.

“Who are you?” asked Eos the mysterious man, who had very obviously rescued them from almost certain stab-death. The young wizard gestured with his hands, indicating a polite bow.

“My name is Chou, a pleasure,” he said with a grin.

“Why did you rescue us, Sir?” added Leit, only now reaching the area in front of the boys’ compartment where his friends and Chou were standing, “And how did you know we were in danger?”

Chou opened his mouth, hesitating for a bit as if trying to come up with the best way to say it.

“Well yes, about that—” he started, “In fact it would be best if you all get dressed. We don’t have much time until the timestopper spell around here loses its effect.”

And seeing the confused looks on the four young agents’ faces, he added after a pause: “My employer would like to meet you.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Enter Djoutunhaim

They did not have much of a choice. Eos saw no problem with following suit to this strange man's suggestion as after all he had saved their lives, but Leit was more skeptical. Then again, even he had to agree that the boys were not in a position to protest at this moment, and although Eos had the slight impression that Leit was playing with the idea of going up against Chou, he was pleased to see that his friend refrained from such aggression in the end. The four boys, now hastily dressed, followed the mysterious young man down the corridor towards the right, from where he had appeared earlier. As they passed the other compartments, gripped in the eerie silence created by the timestopper spell while gradually working their way up to number one at the far end of the gondola, Benx threw a couple of concerned backward looks to the still motionless body of Sibrodi, but Chou just gestured calmly with his hand and said: "Don't mind all this, I will take care of it later. For now, just follow me."

They turned around the corner behind compartment one and Eos was surprised to find another narrow staircase leading up towards another gondola. The polished paneling of the walls was even more distinguished here, and a thick carpet muffled their steps as they climbed the stairs. It was only a short ascent, and soon the young agents found themselves at the entrance to an additional gondola holding three exclusive compartments. The doors in front of them, labeled "X1", "X2" and "X3", were made out of thick, expensive wood with polished handles, and Fallos devices above them shed dim light around the circular antechamber, all indicating that this group of cabins definitely had to be part of the First Class, if not something else entirely.

Chou approached the door to X3 with a smile and pulled it open. Surprisingly, there was a thick purple curtain directly behind it, probably installed to keep away prying eyes while the door was open for people to enter and leave. Eos shuddered. He had never been to a room of this caliber before.

"We're here!" said the young man kindly, his blue hair performing a little bob as he nodded towards Eos and the boys, "Please, after you."

He held the door open as the four agents cautiously approached, entering the mysterious compartment one after another with skeptical sideways glances towards Chou. He was still smiling just as gently as before and Eos was all of a sudden reminded of Osrakey — Of course he had to admit that all of this was very suspicious, but maybe the stylishly-dressed stranger named Chou had good intentions after all. He certainly looked like it.

Eos was the last to enter the compartment. As he pushed away the thick curtain, he was almost dazzled by the brightness of the room behind: Numerous candles and light spells scattered around the large chamber illuminated it in a warm, comforting glimmer, and from the far end of the room, where the whole wall was replaced by a large window, came the sparkling brilliance of a thousand lights shining up from the city they were flying over.

In front of the window, atop a large, elaborately knit carpet that filled out the entirety of the rectangular room, rested a massive wooden desk and numerous expensive chairs arranged in a circle in front of it. The whole scene looked as if a group of people had just left the room, leaving everything as it had been during their conference.

“Please take a seat,” said Chou as he appeared behind Eos, closing the door, “My employer will be with you shortly.”

The young agents slowly walked over to the arrangement of chairs and sat down, Eos still marveling at the sight of the room. Chou took position next to the imposing desk and crossed his arms behind his back in a gesture of complacent readiness.

Some seconds of silence passed, and the slow ticking of a large grandfather clock in the corner of the room was the only thing to be heard. Then, Ienge cleared his throat.

“Who are you, exactly?” he asked with raised eyebrows, and Chou let out a chuckle.

“You can’t tell?” was his reply — Ienge and Eos exchanged puzzled looks and Leit was visibly searching his memory for any sign of where he might have met this man in the past.

“Maybe you should ask your operator-in-training, then — Personnel information is his specialty, after all. Can he not help you out?” said Chou plainly, shifting his head to the side in a playful grin. All eyes were suddenly on Benx.

“As a matter of fact,” started Benx, meeting the other boys’ glances for a short time before returning his eyes back to Chou, “It turns out that I can.”

Eos noticed how Leit raised his eyebrows at the sound of it, being both amused and slightly disappointed that his colleague hadn’t expected more of Benx than what he obviously did.

“You call yourself Chou but in reality your name is Erin Enchou,” continued Benx with a stern look, ostensibly excited that he finally had an opportunity to pull off the classic ‘I know all about you’-speech, “You’re a spellslinger from the capital that specializes in a mixture of offensive wizardry, hands-on hedging and solid combat abilities. And you have a reputation for being very good at it, if I might add. Your trademark is Stupefy — although you have other assets as well — and of course your hairstyle. You used to work on your own, but one year ago you were discovered and now you are employed as a high-ranking operative by —” he stopped for a second, throwing a quick glance over his shoulder towards the door, “—The Social Insurance.”

There were quick looks being exchanged all around and Chou opened his mouth to deliver a witty counter, but at that moment the door behind them opened again and Chou changed his mind, straightened his back, and moved his glance from Benx towards the person that had entered.

The thick purple curtain moved sideways to reveal a tall, elegant man with an enchanting smile and lively, energetic eyes. He was wearing a black turtleneck sweater and expensive suit pants that gave his whole silhouette a sleek, compact impression, and his face was home to a carefully shaved moustache that formed a subtle, but strong shape around his mouth.

He walked over towards Chou and the young agents in long, energetic steps, made his way around the table while eyeing each of them quickly and exchanging a nod with his assistant, then sat down in the large armchair behind the massive desk and folded his fingers in front of him, his elbows on the black leather armrests.

There was a moment of tense silence in which this animated and strangely charismatic man's look swept over the four boys one after another, and Eos could hear Benx swallowing hard on the chair next to him. Without a word, Chou walked over to a small side table at the left end of the large room and picked up a beautiful carafe of water with numerous glasses, which he brought over and placed them on the table in front of his employer.

"Please, have a drink!" said the man with a welcoming gesture and poured water into the glasses. His voice was natural, well pronounced and generally rather pleasant to listen to.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all — I trust you have gotten along well with my dear assistant here?" He looked up to Chou, who nodded briefly.

"Very nice. It's always great to meet colleagues from the profession, isn't it?"

"So you are an agent as well, Sir?" asked Eos hesitantly, as he still had no idea who this mysterious stranger might be. Based on his clothes and demeanor, he had to be some kind of bureaucrat from the Insurance.

The man looked up and paused for a moment, then replied with a smile: "Well, you could say that, I suppose. I hear you already know all about my friend Chou, so it is no surprise to you when I say that he is from the Social Insurance Company. As for my part, I too hold a minor office within that company's management — My name is Djoutunhaim."

Now, Eos suddenly understood his friend's reaction to the man's appearance earlier, and he couldn't help but shudder himself at the thought that this stranger was indeed the man only referred to as "Djoutunhaim".

Djoutunhaim was the Social Insurance Company's chief covert councilman — In other words, one the most powerful and influential people within the institution and the head of all of the Insurance's covert operations. As intelligence agencies such as S&E, the one Eos was working for, had grown in power over the last decades, corporations had gradually realized that they would need to fight fire with fire and train their own agents to meet the threat — Within each company, so-called 'Covert Departments' had been established to basically function as a small private agency under the corporation's control. Just like Central was the leader and head of S&E, the corps would appoint a group of 'Covert Councilmen' to handle running these departments, and being their chairman was equivalent to holding power over the whole agency. In that sense, it might well be said that Djoutunhaim was on one level of influence and power with H-E's Enso, Nora Lephon of Kengnatz, or verily the agency's own Central. And now he was calmly sitting in the same room as Eos and the other boys, a kind smile on his face as he listened to his assistant Chou about what had happened earlier in the agents' compartment.

"Unbelievable," he exclaimed, shaking his head, "This Sibrodi person has no shame. To prey on his former teammates in their sleep — What has this profession come to?"

He took a gulp from his glass and let out a dismissive hiss.

"I'm very pleased to hear that you were prepared for his attack," he continued, giving an approving nod toward Leit that made the boy turn red like a strayberry, "And of course it's

nothing short of a stroke of luck that Chou was in the area to assist you. Indeed, this night could have ended much worse!”

The boys nodded solemnly. Eos wanted to ask how Djoutunhaim had known about Sibrodi being their former teammate, but he decided against it — After all, for somebody in that kind of position the information was probably very easy to acquire, if not obvious from the start. Someone at Kengnatz had probably noticed the arrival of their new ally and leaked it to the information brokers — Being a large corporation with thousands of employees, there was no way Kengnatz could guarantee something like this to stay secret for long.

Eos’ consideration was interrupted by Leit clearing his throat after having more or less recovered from being commended by Djoutunhaim just a moment earlier.

“But Sir, a question, if you would allow,” he said, putting down his glass on the massive desk.

“Of course, my boy,” replied Djoutunhaim with a kind wink, “Ask away!”

“I cannot help but wonder,” continued Leit with a frown, “How Sibrodi could have known that we were all present on this airship. He would have needed to have this information in order to stage the ambush, but I cannot think of any way in which he could have heard about it.”

Djoutunhaim leant back in his armchair with a long “Hmmm—”. Eos was taken aback as well, and had to admit that he hadn’t thought about this yet.

“I would imagine,” began Djoutunhaim slowly, still thinking, “That being a senior agent, he had access to the missions that your organization has planned in the near future, and that’s how he could tell that you would leave Erkom soon after this raid at H-E last night. That would be my guess...”

Eos shuddered again — So the Insurance knew about the failed raid, too. He was starting to doubt if there was actually anything happening between the corporations that Djoutunhaim wasn’t immediately aware of.

“Or perhaps he took a look at your operators’ notes while he was still at your hideout? I don’t know, there is many possibilities,” he continued, gesturing with his hands while leaning forward. He took another sip from his glass.

“What do you plan to do with Sibrodi, Sir?” asked Leit in a deliberately emotionless tone, “Is he of any interest to your company?”

Djoutunhaim nodded.

“Yes, indeed. From what I hear, he has defected to Kengnatz, hasn’t he? Frankly, it makes sense that the Lady Lephon would send him to assassinate you four as soon as possible, while they can still utilize the information he probably stole from your superiors. The more time she gives you to change your plans, the less likely it would have been that they can draw maximum effect from this vile act of treason.”

He reached into the pocket of an expensive jacket that was spread over the backrest of his massive armchair and pulled out a small pipe from it. From a drawer left of him, he produced a box of matches, lit the pipe, put it in his mouth with a few quick inhales and returned his attention to his guests.

“I have to ask,” he said, “Are you youngsters feeling alright? It’s a harsh thing, being ambushed at night. It can affect your emotional wellbeing.”

There was an awkward pause — Eos had to admit that he was very glad to even be still alive. Judging from the faces of his friends, they were struggling with the same thing, too. After a few exchanged glances between them, Ienge looked back to Djoutunhaim and said: “Well, I think we’re all feeling ok.”

It wasn’t very convincing. Djoutunhaim nodded slowly.

“If there is anything you kids need,” he continued with a kind wink as he leant forward, “Feel free to ask me or Chou about it. It is my pleasure to help.”

The young agents nodded thankfully and Djoutunhaim stood up from his armchair, walked around the table, and kindheartedly patted each of the boys on the back.

“The ship will arrive in Ilierka in four hours, I’m afraid there was a significant delay. It should be early morning when we land, so you all should better get back to sleep. After all, you want to be ready for whatever might be your job at the agency base, don’t you?”

He emptied his glass and looked out of the large window, still standing next to the desk.

“I’ve ordered for your compartment to be returned to order, and of course I will be taking dear Mister Sibrodi into custody. I have been dealing with Kengnatz recently, and this proof that they are sending agents on vile assassination missions at night is just the kind of scandal I was waiting for.”

He turned back to Eos and his friends.

“You can return to your cabin below at any time, but if you would like —and I can completely understand if it makes you feel safer— you can move into my own compartment for the rest of the night. It’s just next door, and there should be enough beds for all of you.”

The boys exchanged quick looks and Eos could see Ienge opening his mouth to accept Djoutunhaim’s generous offer, but Leit was faster.

“Thank you very much, Sir,” he replied politely, “But we don’t want to be a burden to you. We’ll return to our own compartment immediately.”

Djoutunhaim shrugged with a smile.

“Well, then I hope you have a good night’s sleep — Or, what’s left of it, anyway.”

He crossed the room towards the entrance with his large steps, moved the curtain away and pulled the heavy wooden door open.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, I hope we see each other again sometime!” he said with a benevolent grin as the young agents exited the room, each returning the smile to Djoutunhaim as they passed him. They quickly walked down the narrow staircase, Ienge and Benx already chatting excitedly about what had just happened.

“Honestly, I— don’t know what to say! He’s so young!” exclaimed Benx, trying to keep his voice down while gesturing with his hands to indicate a long beard on his face, “I always thought you have to be old and boring to get into that kind of position!”

“It’s the Insurance, man,” replied Ienge, just as excited, “They have that reputation after all.”

“And this Chou guy,” continued Benx as they reached compartment number one and started to walk down the hallway towards their cabin, “He is so cool, honestly I had no idea Stupefy was so ridiculously effective!”

“Yeah, it took out Sibrodi in *one shot!*” added Eos, who as himself very impressed by Chou’s performance earlier. Of course he hadn’t seen much of his spellcasting, but the two knock-out spells the young spellslinger had sent towards Sibrodi had been of extraordinary power. That

was why the first one had destroyed Sibrodi's protective shield instantly. Indeed, Eos was glad he had dodged to the side in time to not be hit by it himself — A shot like that was sure to take you out for hours.

As they approached their compartment, the corridor completely clean and no trace of Sibrodi or his rampant Time spell, Leit turned around to the other boys.

"Frankly, the thing that impresses me most—" he said with a look that told of his deep affectedness, "—Is that we just legitimately had a private meeting with one of the most powerful men in the country — I mean, that was *actually the SI's Djoutunhaim!*"

He turned back to face the way they were going, shaking his head in disbelief.

"...Incredible."

Of course, there was no way any of the boys would be able to sleep after this. Apart from Benx, who apparently had no difficulties completely ignoring the fact that they had just talked to SI's Djoutunhaim and who virtually fell asleep the minute the young agents returned to their beds, there was an awkward air of uncertainty filling the compartment, and in the darkness Eos could hear Leit shifting his weight around in the bed next to him, never staying in one position for long and obviously struggling with calming down. Eos had to admit that he didn't feel much different himself.

To be honest, Djoutunhaim had never been a very important figure in his view of the political situation, but the more Eos thought about it, the more apparent it became to him how truly extraordinary it had been to meet this man. After all, the Social Insurance was well on its way to become one of the most powerful corporations in the world, and being its chief covert councilman, Djoutunhaim was basically the most influential person within the institution, and therefore the world. Just like Eos would never dare to hope to actually meet Central in private (or any of the other leaders, for that matter, especially not the Lady Lephon), he wouldn't have thought it so easily possible to get into a chat with Djoutunhaim. The more Eos considered all this, the more unreal and straight-up bizarre the meeting that they had just had seemed to him. Djoutunhaim was truly an extraordinary person, and Eos could easily see why his Social Insurance stood representative for a new movement in the corporate world, away from aristocratic stiffness and an outdated status quo towards modern, professional individuality with a touch of cool style and held together by raw skill. Djoutunhaim definitely exemplified all this, especially of course the 'cool style' and 'break with outdated corporate traditions' parts.

As it turned out, Eos ended up falling asleep after all, and when he was called out of his rightly confused dreams by a loud bell that signaled the ship's arrival at the Ilierka airport, it was already morning and gentle sunlight filled the young agents' small compartment.

Above him, Ienge was already awake and getting dressed, but Leit and Benx had just been woken up by the signal too, and were still as sleepy as you would imagine them after a night with sudden and positively terrifying disturbances such as this one. Besides, sleeping on an airship was not the easiest or most comfortable task, because of the steady noise and the unusual air conditions, and Eos had had problems with this on his first flight as well — This time, it had not been as bad, but then again there had been certain other influences during the trip that could be counted as sleep-unfriendly.

Eos quickly got up and rushed to the small window of their compartment before the other boys had a chance to do the same. He was eager to catch a glimpse of Ilierka from above — When he had left the city two weeks ago, the bad weather had disrupted most of the beautiful sights that airship trips were known for. Besides being the fastest means of travel, of course. The small circle of the window didn't allow for much of a look-around, but in the clear morning haze the city of Ilierka laid spread out far below the ship in all its vast size, and Eos marveled at the sight even though they were still at such a height that he could hardly tell the different buildings apart.

Positioned on a slope near the foot of the Thinwood mountain range, pierced through by the river Ilien and reaching out in all directions with its arms of grey and brown roofs, twisting roads and patterned fields, the city was an impressive sight to behold, and as far as Eos could tell from his experience, it looked far larger and more intricate from above than when you walked down its streets or stood on one of its busy marketplaces.

From down there, the airship the boys were on still had to seem like a tiny, ant-like dot in the sky, but they were making a rapid descent straight towards the city's bustling center. There, the towering construct that formed the Ilierka airport was by far not the only building of impressive size, and indeed: Within the bounds of the old city walls that encircled the inner part of town, where the streets were narrow and people were still wearing traditional clothing instead of those modern business costumes, tall buildings could be seen sticking up into the morning sky like needles from a pin cushion — Eos counted at least fifteen of these impressive, almost monument-like structures, their brick and cement walls throwing their shadows across the whole district and their countless windows reflecting the rising sun brightly in all colors. Most of these larger complexes were of course in corporate hands, being used as their regional headquarters or just to signify power through awe-inducing architecture, but the most impressive one of all was the seat of Provincial Government — A massive complex with three towers that reached into the air far above any of the normal buildings all around, with flags mounted on every roof and chimney. Eos could almost hear the national anthem by just looking at it.

In recent times, governmental forces had regained a hold on the middle-eastern parts of the continent, and Ilierka, being one of the most important and economically strong cities within that region, had been a priority in their efforts to maintain what little control they still had. It was clear to the eye that Ilierka's cityscape had been a stage for this power struggle between the corporations and their government, and Eos knew: The calm sight of the inner town's quiet streets, the charming riverside with its countless trees along the water's course, and the gentle morning sun that bathed it all in a sweet, cool hue all belied the mortal brawl for power and influence that was raging beneath the surface — Not only here, but in every larger city on the continent.

It was that battle that Eos and the other boys would return to as soon as they stepped off this airship — But then again, they had never really been away, had they? Given the nightly attempt on their lives, Eos had a hard time feeling in any way distant from the corps' ever-reaching grasp. Airship trips like this one were normally considered very safe because nobody knew which ship you were travelling on, and during the flight it was impossible to enter or the leave the vessel, so attempting any kind of attack was very difficult and required careful planning.

And yet Sibrodi had been there — Eos threw a look over this shoulder to Leit's bed, where his colleague was just rubbing off the spell circles he had drawn on the wall behind him. Fortunately, they didn't leave a trace on the elegant wooden paneling. With a shudder, Eos was reminded of the state in which they had found the corridor outside when they had returned from their chat with Djoutunhaim during the night — Sibrodi had been gone without a trace, swept away by the Insurance to be used against Kengnatz later.

Indeed, he thought, there are no rules in war. And this certainly was a war — It had been one for decades.

He returned his attention to the window to see that the ship had already descended to about halfway on its approach towards the Ilierka airport. The towering structure was now not far away, but from what he had experienced on his last trip, and considering what the young agents had seen on the platform of the Erkom airport, he expected this landing procedure to continue on for at least another five minutes, after which the tiresome exiting of the numerous passengers would begin. Luckily they were in Second-Class, he thought.

Behind Eos, Benx jumped down from his bed, almost crashing at the landing because he was still so sleepy, and walked over to the door, pulling it open in an effort to clear the air within their compartment. Outside, passengers were already passing back and forth occasionally, carrying large bags around while getting ready to leave the ship.

"What a night, huh?" said Benx with a weak grin, more of a statement than a question. Leit only grumbled in agreement.

"Well, at least we got to meet Djoutunhaim, guys!" countered Ienge from the bed above, still getting dressed. Benx shrugged.

"I guess that repays us for almost getting killed!" he muttered.

A single signal from the bell they had already heard earlier indicated that the First-Class passengers were asked to get ready to leave the ship — Eos sent another quick look out of the window, only to notice that they were already docking onto the platform. Apparently, the maneuvering process had been pleasantly short this time.

"If you ask me, the thing is—" began Ienge as he finally climbed down from his bed, "—We got ordered here via a priority message from Central himself, so we are probably going to have some tough missions coming up. I don't know what he has planned for us, but I'm inclined to think that this night just now was a fitting preparation for what is coming for us. Honestly though, I'm just happy that you had those defenses in place, Leit!"

He didn't sound particularly thrilled about what he was saying, and the other boys nodded approvingly — They all knew he was right to think that there could well be some difficult days ahead of them, and with this dreadful incident on the ship, they were already off to a convincing start into whatever tough mission they were supposed to undertake here in Ilierka.

Eos too couldn't help but feel uncomfortable at the thought of what might be happening during the next few days, but still his impression of the situation was vastly different from Ienge's. As his friend had said, all four of them had been called back to the White Cave on short notice — It was not uncommon for such a thing to happen as of course agents switched locations all the time, but Erkom was so far away from the agency base that Eos couldn't help but wonder why Central had not ordered in some agents from other locations instead. It was almost as if he had had no other choice — Or maybe (and Eos had to admit to himself that he

liked this version much better) the four boys had been chosen specifically because of their skills... Who knew? As for Leit, Eos could definitely see how Central would regard him as a very promising young agent worth of special care and encouragement. And although he didn't want to brag, Eos himself had been one of the most talented spellcasters of his year — After a quick crash course under Intergard and the fact that he had stood his ground (more or less) against Kengnatz' Melenda, it didn't seem too far-fetched how he could qualify as "promising" as well. Although of course he had to admit that from what he had seen so far, Leit's performance and skill level were far more impressive than his own. Overall Leit just seemed so confident and capable — Last night he had even dueled a fencing master and done rather well! And after all, Eos couldn't imagine that Intergard would give away an insanely rare enchanted staff to just anyone unless she was convinced that the person had serious potential.

Then on the other hand, Ienge and Benx were not the kind of person you would immediately characterize as "competent"... Eos and Ienge had been friends for a long time, but his experiences with his colleague only reassured Eos that Ienge was not naturally meant for greatness, nor indeed (and more importantly) trying to achieve it. And as far as Benx was concerned, the situation was similar — The more Eos thought about it, the less he could think of anything actually impressive that Benx had done during those two past missions. Of course, his attempt to rescue the captured agents at H-E had been heroic and brave, and Benx definitely struck Eos as being a loyal, reliable friend with a pure heart, just not exactly a particularly talented one.

So why then had Central chosen these four boys to participate in whatever was supposed to happen here? Eos scratched his head in puzzlement as he watched the people outside on the platform, all waiting for the boarding procedure to begin just like they had done in Erkom.

"Has anyone seen my Falsraw Table, guys?" asked Leit behind him, searching the room with a confused look, "I must have dropped it somehow when I drew out the spells on the wall yesterday..."

He went down to the floor and checked under his bed, and in that moment Eos noticed a familiar head of bright blue hair outside on the corridor, moving quickly from one side of the other. It was Chou. He noticed Eos' surprised look and raised a hand, almost dropping the large leather bag he was carrying.

"Well, folks," he said, stopping briefly in front of the boys' compartment, "Have a nice day, whatever you're planning to do here in Ilierka—" He grinned and gestured a quick salute with his hand, "—And stay safe!"

With that, he continued down the hallway and was gone before Leit got up on his feet again.

"Who was that?" asked the young engineer with an irritated look towards the open door as he patted the dust from his sleeves.

"It was Chou..." replied Eos, himself slightly confused. He walked over to the door and leant out into the corridor, looking to both sides in order to catch another glimpse of the tall man, but the only thing he was able to spot was Chou's bright hair disappearing down the staircase towards the main gondola.

"And no sign of Mister Djoutunhaim," he added, returning from the empty corridor just as Leit opened his bag to store away the Falsraw Table — Apparently, it had indeed dropped to the floor unnoticed the night before.

“I suppose that solves the mystery of what class that compartment was,” said Ienge, picking up his luggage.

“We should get going as well, Second-Class will be next.”

Nodding, they all shouldered their bags and left their compartment, careful not to leave anything behind — Outside on the corridor, the passengers of the adjacent cabins were getting ready to leave the ship as well. It was a wildly mixed group of people, and Eos spotted two families as well as various businessmen travelling alone, and even an elderly woman from compartment number one. It was a strange feeling, thought Eos, to watch all these people preparing to exit the airship. Nothing he was able to spot could possibly have signified the dire incident during the night, although of course all of these passengers had been affected by it. Yet now, there was no trace of the nightly phantasm — Or maybe they were just not showing it. Could it be that the Insurance had paid off every single one of these passengers for their silence? That seemed a bit extreme, he thought.

“Move it, hedge boy,” shouted Benx playfully from behind Eos, and he realized only now that he was blocking the way.

“Ah, yes... Sorry,” he replied with a wave of his hand, and the boys made their way towards the staircase down to the main gondola.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The City Of Dark Secrets

S&E Private Intelligence, or —more commonly— simply *the agency*, had been founded officially only a few years ago, but the group of people that made up its core had been in the business of espionage for decades, in some cases since the height of the rebellion. The exact numbers were of course confidential, but from what Eos had heard, the agency was rumored to have over five hundred employees, not even counting the numerous freelancers that were commissioned for smaller jobs here and there on a regular basis. It's home bases and secret hideouts extended over the whole country, from the deserts of the far west all the way into the warring provinces of the east. It was something more along the lines of a spy network rather than one centralized institution like the corporations sometimes were, but the White Cave Home Base on the outskirts of Ilierka was its official headquarters, and the very top of the company was gathered here. Having grown up in Ilierka, Eos had spent all of his hedger training here, and he was relieved at the thought of returning to the city after his brief, but stressful stay at the Erkom hideout.

Fortunately, the process of leaving the ship was not as tiresome as what they had experienced in Erkom. At least it seemed that way to Eos — After a good three minutes, they were already walking down the thick plank towards the platform, far below them the city's buildings at the bottom of the gaping chasm. Leit was walking in front, his eyes sweeping up and down the platform as if looking for something in particular. As they stepped onto the concrete of the building, he let out a quiet "Ah!" and turned to the other boys.

"There is our contact," he said, covertly pointing towards the broad staircase to the right, leading up to a series of elevators. At the foot of the stairs stood a man in a long grey overcoat and an elegant blue hat that didn't quite seem to match with the rest of his outfit. He was apparently waiting for somebody, as his gaze was switching back and forth between the newspaper in his hand and the crowd of people leaving the ship. When he noticed the four young agents, he raised his hand and momentarily touched his hat, as if adjusting its position. Leit nodded and they made their way across the platform towards the mysterious man.

"Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show," said Leit in a formal tone as they approached the stranger.

"...But wonder on, 'til truth make all things plain," he responded with a grin and took off his hat, then extended a hand towards Leit, who shook it quickly.

“A pleasure, you can call me Idesiord,” continued the man with a kind look to the other boys, “I am an assistant of Ketten, the information broker. Please, this way.”

He picked up an elegant briefcase that was resting on the floor next to him and turned towards the staircase. The four agents followed him and quickly climbed the stairs to one of the elevators.

“I must admit, you are not in luck,” said Idesiord as they entered the small cage, “Ketten himself wanted to come and pick you up—”

Eos’ eyes widened in surprise. Ketten of Ilierka was one of the most influential men in the country, and accordingly busy. Although he would have loved to be given the honor, Eos would never have expected a man of such caliber to bother with a mundane task such as this.

“—But something got in the way, so now you have me. Anyway, the occasion is not exactly a happy one, is it? So let’s not be too merry so early in the morning.”

He paused and looked to the ceiling as if with that sentence everything important had been said. But of course that wasn’t the case. The boys exchanged concerned looks.

“What occasion exactly?” asked Benx with a nervous undertone in his voice, phrasing out what all four of them had been thinking. Idesiord hesitated for a second.

“I will tell you all about it when we reach our destination. Have patience.”

Eos found that this comment multiplied his worries instead of reducing them.

“But,” replied Ienge, “We all know how to get into the White Cave, it’s our home base after all. Why would you need to guide us?”

“I will accompany you,” answered the tall man, “Because the White Cave is not where you are going.”

With that, he opened the door of the elevator and stepped out into the vast entrance hall, signaling to the boys that private chatter time was over, at least as long as that many passers-by were around. The young agents followed him, trying to look inconspicuous as they crossed the marble floor towards one of the glass doors leading out onto the Ilierka main marketplace.

Outside, the city was already bursting with busy everyday life, and the five agents had a hard time getting to the other side of the large plaza, where a small tram station connected downtown to the other districts. After a short wait, they took the tram towards the west end.

There was a strange feeling hanging in the air between the four boys and Idesiord as they sat in the tram jolting their way out of the inner city. Because of the many passengers all around, Idesiord was not allowed to disclose any sensitive information, and besides they were supposed to act like normal citizens anyway, so the concerning statement that Ketten’s assistant had made earlier was now put on hold without confirmation, or indeed any explanation. The boys exchanged irritated sideways looks as the tram took a turn towards the old mansion district — That was not the direction of the White Cave, so Idesiord had told the truth: They were not going to return to the agency base for now.

Eos was struck by sudden anxiety when he realized that perhaps this man was not Ketten’s assistant Idesiord at all — Of course, Leit had made sure he was the correct contact man by exchanging the prearranged phrase, but security measures like that could be found out just like any other password... Maybe the boys were walking straight into a trap.

Apparently, the man pretending to be Idesiord had noticed the sudden concern on his face, as he leant over to the four boys and said quietly: "Don't worry, kids. This isn't a trap."

"Well, that's reassuring," hissed Ienge, who by the looks of it had just realized the same thing as Eos, "What's your proof?"

"You will have to trust me."

Ienge leant back with a huff, his expression a mixture of concern and slight panic, but he relaxed when Leit put a hand on his shoulder and said: "It's fine, he is speaking the truth — I know where we're going."

They exited the tram at Old Graveyard and took a turn into one of the side streets leading up a hill towards the forest. At the next crossing, Idesiord stopped and pointed towards a large building on the other side of the street near where the first trees of the woods behind Old Graveyard started to throw their solemn shade onto the scattered graves.

"That is our destination," he said and continued walking.

The building was an extraordinary sight. On the front, two large tower-like structures extended into the sky for at least four levels, while towards the back the whole building lowered down until at the far end of it, where Eos suspected a small backyard, it was only two floors high. All in all, it gave the impression of an old mansion built by some rich landlord or other, and meant to be used as their residence.

But the most striking and bizarre feature about it was the gaping hole in its front side. Between the two towering halves of the building, a large part of the structure from the second floor up to the very top had been blasted away by an explosion of some sort, and the damage hadn't been repaired yet. Large portions of the upper floors were gone, and through this yawning fissure the sky behind the building was visible. At the points where the explosion had ripped open the interior of a dining room or a bedchamber, large sheets of fabric had been installed to keep away the rain, and a number of long wooden planks connected the two sides on each floor in a makeshift effort to allow moving from one side to the other. All in all, the building seemed so bizarre and preposterous in its appearance that for a moment Eos didn't believe what he was seeing.

They crossed the street and followed Idesiord up the stairs to the wooden entrance door. As the tall man reached for a ledge to his right and pulled out a rusty key, Eos noticed the words "Know yourself, stay away" painted onto the old wood of the door — He couldn't help but shudder. Idesiord unlocked the door and with a quick swipe of his hand disabled a hidden Lock spell, then returned the keys to its hidden position atop of the ledge and pulled open the creaking door.

Within, the boys found a large hall with numerous coats and jackets already hanged up on the hooks to one side — Apparently this hideout was being used by other agents already.

"Welcome to the Grey House," said Idesiord in a ceremonious tone.

"Please, put your bags down somewhere and follow me."

Eos had heard about the Grey House before, but never until now visited it in person. The agency had a number of hideouts and secret (or less secret) meeting places scattered all across the city, and while Eos had been to the so-called Blue and Green Houses before, this was his first time at the grey one.

As he had expected, Leit seemed to have been here before, and noticing the disoriented looks on his friends' faces, he said: "Don't be fooled by the bizarre exterior, it's a normal meeting point that the agency uses. Just like Blue and Yellow."

And after a pause of the young agents putting down their bags, he added with a grin: "Although you got to love that hole in the upper floors."

They followed Idesiord through a scarcely decorated living room and up a narrow staircase to the second floor, and Eos now had a chance to see the building in its full glory — The large room that they entered had been ripped apart entirely to a point where even the dusty carpet on the floor looked as if it had been cut off at the line where the floor ended and the room opened up to the warm midday air.

"Don't fall down," reminded Idesiord the young agents as they passed a rusty table and an arrangement of armchairs. He pulled away the thick blanket that covered the open side of the room and stepped out onto the elaborate system of wooden planks that connected the two halves of the house.

Eos had to admit to himself that he hesitated briefly at the sight of the street below, and while it wasn't very high up, he nonetheless was reminded of walking out of the airship earlier. Trying not to look down too much, he quickly crossed the length of the plank and entered the room on the other side, Ienge and Benx following closely behind him.

The room was large, tidy, and well lit — A number of chairs was placed around a long table, and to the side a neat arrangement of drawers, cupboard and a small sink immediately reminded Eos of the briefing chamber at the Erkom hideout. To the far end of the room, an open door led into what seemed like a closet, and three comfortable-looking armchairs on a circular carpet, accompanied by an elegant side table, completed the impression that this side of the house was undeniably in active use by the agency, despite the state of the other part of the building. Eos realized that this was no mistake — The operators in charge of this hideout probably wanted it to seem like either an abandoned or hardly ever used house, and only those parts of the interior that were a bit harder to reach revealed that operatives had a busy come-and-go here on a daily basis.

Idesiord walked over to the closet door and pushed it shut, then sat down at the table where another man was already sitting, calmly reading the newspaper without looking up to the young agents as they entered. He was wearing a sophisticated white shirt that seemed even brighter on his very dark skin, and a tailored vest that made him look like a distinguished nobleman, but the shirt's sleeves were rolled up, revealing numerous scars on the man's arms that told a different tale entirely. His hands were manicured and very smooth, which created a strange contrast to the state of his arms, and a delicately trimmed beard combined with elegant glasses to complete the look of a well-educated and renowned intellectual that wasn't afraid of hands-on brawling if the occasion called for it.

Eos immediately knew who the man was: Suren Ubra, or — as he was more commonly called — the Professor. Eos had met him briefly on the day before his first mission, where Ubra had been part of Team One, but even before that he had seen the tall man numerous times during his years at Enster's class, as Ubra used to give regular workshops in hand-to-hand (that was to say, unarmed fighting) for the students — His combat skills with and without weapons were

infamous, and many highly skilled operatives, such as Niekar Turur, had been his apprentices at some point. Long ago during the height of the rebellion, when so many of today's legends had been born, Ubtra had worked as a freelancer and quickly risen to fame for publishing articles and guides about the corporations and their weaknesses in illegal rebel newspapers. His teachings had not only influenced, but positively equipped an entire generation of young anarchists in their fight against the corporate hand, which had made him famous on the whole continent and earned him his nickname. All in all, it was fair to say that he stood on one level of influence and expertise with Intergard, and although Eos couldn't help but worship the latter a tiny bit more, he had no hard time acknowledging that the Professor was another of the agency's finest employees — not even mentioning his status as living legend and people's hero.

Accordingly, the boys tensed up and exchanged a nervous look when Idesiord put down his mug of water onto the table, and the Professor folded up his newspaper.

"Do you want to have the briefing now, information broker?" he asked with a sideways look towards the mug.

"That would be helpful," replied Idesiord and gestured the boys to sit down — After a short moment of hesitation induced by Ubtra's natural presence, Eos and his friends gathered around the table and joined the two men.

The Professor, who had until now still not looked up to the four boys, rolled up the newspaper and leant down towards his briefcase, storing away the paper before returning his attention to the top of the table. He took a gulp from Idesiord's mug and finally began to inspect the young agents from behind his thin glasses. Putting the mug back onto the table, his gaze rested on each of the four boys briefly before moving on to the next, but when he reached Ienge's bright green hair, the Professor's face suddenly brightened up.

"Mister Alagdi," he said with raised eyebrows, "Well, if that isn't a surprise!"

Ienge was visibly at a loss of words, and Eos, who knew well about Ienge's natural aptitude for fighting and his successes at the Professor's class, suspected that his friend might have the same relationship with Suren Ubtra as he had with Intergard.

"T-Thank you very much, Sir," he stuttered, his expression oscillating quickly between the purest of smiles and an embarrassed giggle.

"Well, there is not any time to lose," continued the Professor with a sudden change in tone, returning to conversation to its proper course and reminding Eos of the alleged dark reason for this meeting.

"I'm here to give you a quick briefing of the situation," he said with a sigh, "And one hell of a situation it is, truly... There is no precedent to this tragedy, that much is certain."

He gestured towards Idesiord with his right hand while leaning back in his chair — On the other side of the table, Eos grew more and more aware that the boys were about to hear of something very, very bad.

"As you know, this man is not an employee of the agency, so he is unauthorized to tell you any real information—"

Ubtra returned his attention to the four boys, and after a short pause he added plainly: "Besides, being an external messenger he doesn't know anything of interest anyways — At least not officially."

His ironic smirk told a different story.

“That’s what I’m here for. Mister Shichal, something in your eyes tells me that you have news to share—”

His eyes rested on Leit, who already opened his mouth to recount the assassination attempt on the airship, but the Professor interrupted it.

“—But whatever it is, I can assure you: Compared to what I am about to say, it’s child’s play. So, important things first — What do you know about the state of things here in Ilierka?”

The young agents exchanged quick glances, unsure whether anybody was supposed to retell the information Leit had acquired underhandedly, and decidedly concerned about the tone Ubtra was using.

“Well,” started Ienge after a short silence, “From what I have heard on a meeting with Isardja of Erkom, the rebel cells are on a rise in power. But when we discussed the matter yesterday—” He looked to Leit for a brief moment, “—We concluded that they wouldn’t be a problem for the agency at this time.”

“Correct,” answered the Professor, “The rebel movement is gaining in followers and equipment, but you are right to assume that intelligence agencies are not their target at the present moment. They are rebels after all, so their aim is for the people in power.”

He took up the mug, realized that it was empty, and quickly gestured to Idesiord to refill it before continuing.

“I don’t want to talk around the matter for too long, so I will get straight to the point. There has been a series of attacks.”

Without any further comment, he took the refilled mug from Idesiord and drank. Eos was uncertain whether Ubtra was taking a deliberate pause to fuel tension, but in the silence following his statement he could almost hear eyebrows rising and worry settling in on all sides. After a moment, the Professor continued.

“Yesterday evening, an unknown enemy that we strongly suspect to be Kengnatz Magical, under the lead of their chief councilwoman Nora Lephon, staged a large-scale strike against our agency. The gravity of this occurrence can not be overstated.”

He said this in such a serious tone that there was no doubt about the authenticity of it.

“Reports are still coming in, but from what we can tell almost all of our major hideouts across the country were raided in a single, well-coordinated operation. I will give you a brief overview of the results.”

Deliberately emotionless, but failing to hide that this matter affected him just as gravely as any other agent, he pulled out a piece of paper from his breast pocket and began to read aloud — On the other side of the table, the four boys were thunderstruck.

“The Yellow House and the Green House — compromised. The Secondary Hideout at King’s Bridge near the airport — burned down in a coordinated incendiary. The hideout at Egeldan — compromised—”

As Ubtra read out the list, Eos could hear quiet gasps from Leit.

“—The hideout at Kugarahuud — compromised with suspected treason of numerous agents. All major hideouts around Old Capital — compromised or burned down. The Red, Green, Blue and Brown equipment stashes — raided with loss of more than just equipment. And most importantly—” The Professor folded the piece of paper and returned it to his pocket, “—The White Cave Home Base — compromised.”

Silence around the table. Eos was unable to think straight — This was all coming in way too fast. He took a deep breath, trying to comprehend what Ubra had said.

So that was the reason why they had been directed to this building instead of the base. He couldn't believe it. To his right, Ienge fell back into his chair with a sigh of resignation — Shock was written in the faces of the boys. Leit was visibly trying to remain professional, but it was no challenge to see that he was the most affected of all.

"Suspected further losses include the hideouts in Gikken, Kelda-Elenperdjo, Wenut, and Chodur—"

"What about casualties?" interrupted Ienge. The response was disheartening.

"Exact numbers are... unknown."

Ienge buried his face in his hands. Eos knew that his colleague had friends in Gikken and Chodur. *Good* friends. He didn't know what to say.

"There is nothing we can do at this time," continued the Professor in a deliberately decisive tone, and for a moment Eos thought to have seen a hint of a tear in his eyes before the tall man stood up and faced away. There was a slight tremble in his voice that Eos would not have expected from a physically commanding man like him.

"The agency like you knew it is gone, there is no use denying it. Now let me explain about why you are here. Central has suspected an incoming attack from Kengnatz for some weeks now. Although nobody could foresee the scale of this, it was clear that the Lady Lephon would make a move, so Central has been ordering some agents back to Ilierka for safety reasons over the past days."

So that was the real reason behind Sarc leaving Erkom after their first mission, thought Eos. He had been called back in case the hideout was raided.

"This had to be done as subtly as possible in order to not give away the fact that Central was anticipating the attack. Because indeed—" He turned back to face the four boys again, "—Central suspected he had been set up, and that there might be a covertly operating Kengnatz double agent hidden within the highest levels of the agency."

Another revelation. So Central had even foreseen Agent Sibrodi defecting to Kengnatz.

"However, if you are thinking about Orlun Sibrodi, he is out of the question for logistical reasons," added the Professor, disproving Eos' thought immediately.

"There needs to be another — One that has neither been found nor shown himself so far."

The boys could not help exchanging suspicious sideways glances with each other, despite all of them knowing that this unidentified traitor was not in the room with them.

"But who could have such a high access to information within the agency that even Central needs to be careful and still covertly work for Kengnatz?" asked Benx aloud, more of an expression of puzzlement than an actual inquiry.

"Now that *is* the mystery, is it not," replied Ubra, who by the looks of it had mistaken it for an authentic question, "Which brings us to the reason why you are all here."

He walked around the table and stopped in front of the four boys. Benx swallowed hard.

"Central has been calling in a great number of agents — Many of them are still engaged on other missions, some of them are dead now. Most of the orders are still on their way, but Kengnatz also disrupted most of our means of communication, so as it stands each region is on

its own. Frankly speaking it is a stroke of luck that at least Kwifeldis Intergard managed to arrive in time."

Eos looked up. So Intergard had left for Ilierka as well — Now that he thought about it, it made perfect sense: She had started hinting at an important mission coming up for her not long after Sarc had left Erkom. Certainly she had been part of the next wave of calls when it had gotten clear that the operatives already present in Ilierka would not suffice to defend against the incoming attack.

"She and a handful of other agents were here when the White Cave was raided," continued the Professor, "We put up a good fight, but in the end it was a dead cause."

There was an abashed pause.

"Uhm, Sir—" began Eos hesitantly after some seconds of silence, "Did all of the senior agents survive?"

The Professor shifted his head slightly, a gesture that Eos had a hard time interpreting.

"Agent Numow was killed in the action, and a number of specialists were captured alive," he replied, "Including the chief quartermaster."

Eos' eyes widened. The chief quartermaster of the White Cave was none other than Enster.

"D-Do you know anything about their wellbeing, Sir?" he asked quickly, his breathing suddenly fast — He hastily cleared his throat and stood up straight in an effort to not show how emotionally affected he was by this news. In more ways than one, Enster was to him what his father and uncle had never been.

"That is precisely where you kids come into play," said the Professor, his eyes looking down onto the four boys. They exchanged quick looks — Eos couldn't quite believe his ears.

Ubtra didn't seriously expect them to rescue Enster from Kengnatz, did he?

"No, I don't," added Ubtra, who without doubt had guessed Eos' thoughts from his face, "You are just a small part in all this, taken here by chance — But a part nonetheless."

He reached down to pick up his briefcase as he continued talking.

"Listen, kids. In a bit more than one hour, there will be a meeting in this very room. Some of the most awe-inducing people of our time will be present, all with one purpose—" He took a brief pause to fully appreciate the looks on the boys' faces, "—To dish out reckoning for the horror that Lady Lephon and the Kengnatz have brought upon this noble institution."

With a solemn look on his face, he walked towards the thick sheet that covered the exit, and with a turn back towards the young agents he added: "Be ready to do your parts."

And with that, the Professor pushed away the curtain and was gone.

Understandably, there was a long silence afterwards. The ominous negativity of Ubtra's news was hanging in the air, but now it was mixing with a new taste: The thrill of the idea that the four boys had just been invited to attend a *Source Meeting* — Definitely the most prestigious and breathtaking offer you could be given in this profession. Central himself would be there, debating the *real* questions with his most skilled and experienced agents. This was the kind of discussion that could set the course of the whole agency for months, and Eos knew that it was hopeless to try and keep calm about it. He was just not that kind of boy.

"We have to prepare," said Leit plainly, his statement phrasing out what all the boys were thinking. "There is no way I go into the same room as Central without preparation!"

They hastily exchanged glances, unsure what to actually do, and Eos realized that the man called Idesiord was still in the room with them. He had been calmly reading the newspaper on one of the comfortable armchairs at the far end of the long room (or what was left of it), pretending to have no part whatsoever in the dire matter that Ubra had revealed to the boys.

“Uhm— Mister Idesiord?” asked Eos hesitantly across the table. Idesiord looked up, eyebrows raised.

“Do you have any idea what will be discussed in this meeting, or who will be present?”

Idesiord turned the page of his paper with a smile and replied: “Don’t worry too much about it, junior. None of the agents have any idea — After all, the events just stack on top of each other so fast that nobody has a real clue what the situation is.”

He folded up the paper and turned to the boys.

“Most of the people who will be there have arrived in Ilierka just this morning. There isn’t any time to lose, so Central is working with whoever made it here in time. No offense, but that’s really the only reason why you four are invited.”

Eos nodded in agreement — He was very proud of his accomplishments as a hedger despite his short career so far, but it was obvious that none of the four young agents were at all qualified to partake in this meeting officially. Secretly, he was almost thankful for the dire state the agency was in if it allowed him to meet all these extraordinary people, maybe even work with them — Then again, what Nora Lephon had done to their organization was really nothing to joke about.

“I get that you are all a bit nervous,” continued Idesiord with a sarcastic grin, “But I suggest that you try to keep calm. There isn’t really anything that you kids could prepare right now, so just take it slow and be patient.”

That was easier said than done. For the next thirty minutes, the four boys more or less just sat around in the briefing room, gripped by a mixture of apprehension, the gradual realization of how utterly terrifying the situation really was, and their own pathetic efforts to “keep calm” — At one point, Ienge went outside to find the restroom and when he returned, claimed that he had met Sarb Igsher downstairs, a statement that intensified the other boys’ anxiety even more and induced Eos with a familiar feeling of being about to meet a person that he had worshipped for years. In the end, neither he nor Leit (who by the looks of it shared Eos’ sentiment) actually went downstairs to check it for themselves — Maybe they were too intimidated by the idea of walking down the staircase and just casually bumping into Agent Igsher in the hall, or maybe they were trying to keep up the illusion of being calm about the whole situation. Eos couldn’t really say, but as a substitute he went on to barrage Ienge with question about Igsher. What had he been like? Was his hair as fantastic up close as it was from afar? Did he have his trademark tool belt on? Was he wearing his gloves? Unfortunately for him, Ienge didn’t seem to have paid any real attention to the man except quickly shaking hands with him after exchanging a word about how they both sported a hairstyle from the capital. ‘He was very handsome’ was seemingly the only description Eos could draw out of Ienge, and while he could see that this kind of information was interesting and useful to his friend, he had to admit that he had hoped for more. Then again, if it really was true and in only a couple of minutes they would be taking

part in a Source Meeting, Eos supposed that he would be able to check for himself. Indeed, the thought of it did not get easier to process with time.

Finally, after a good fifty minutes of waiting, something happened. Eos heard voices quietly chatting just outside the thick sheet of linen that shielded the briefing room from the wind, and the rattling of wooden planks announced somebody approaching the room. A second later, the sheet was pushed aside and a familiar, massive figure entered.

"Now, who do we have here!" said Intergard with raised eyebrows as she noticed the four boys sitting at the table, "Familiar faces."

Eos grinned widely, and he was amused to see that Leit was doing the same, although with admittedly more success in hiding it. With large steps Intergard crossed the distance to the sink and poured herself a large mug of water. Without looking up, she produced a tiny vial from her pocket and added a few drops of a thick liquid that Eos had never seen before, then returned to the table, where she put down the mug and looked around.

Eos was impressed. Not because Intergard had entered the room (although it might be argued that was part of the reason), but because she looked exactly like he had seen her in Erkom two days earlier — The same wild hairstyle contrasting her slightly worn-down but otherwise impeccable jacket, the same energetic eyes glowing out from under her thick eyebrows, the same dark skin. Nothing about her appearance hinted at the fact that she had spent the night staging a desperate, but fierce defense of the White Cave against the invading Kengnatz hordes. Indeed, from what Eos could tell her whole figure was just as impressive as always. But maybe that was just Eos' almost infinite respect for Intergard speaking.

"So, kids," began Intergard as she sat down, "You made it out."

There was a solemn silence. All of a sudden, Eos realized that they hadn't heard news from Osrakey. Hadn't he stayed behind to take care of the hideout in Erkom?

"I guess you could say so," replied Leit, interrupting Eos' thoughts, "Although we were not completely untouched either."

Intergard shifted her head, signaling that she didn't understand what Leit was hinting at. Only now Eos realized that so far, nobody except the four of them knew about what had happened on the airship the night before.

"We were attacked by Agent Sibrodi on the flight," explained Leit quickly, but careful not to make it sound trivial or funny.

There was another pause, this time from Intergard. After a while, she added with a frown: "On the flight, you say? Curious..."

"Indeed," replied Leit in a formal tone, "I will make it a priority to report to Central about this incident."

Intergard nodded.

"Yes, you should. This is all very dark in nature. I wonder if..."

She interrupted herself and fell silent when once again, rattling of wooden planks outside signaled the arrival of a new actor to the scene. This time it was the Professor, accompanied by a young man not much older than Eos himself.

"Ah, that's Djelkarey," said Leit hastily and stood up, "I'll be reporting the incident to him quickly."

With that, he walked around the table and approached the young man.

Eos was meanwhile returning his attention to Intergard.

“Excuse me, Madam,” he began slowly, “Do you know anything about the chief operator’s wellbeing, by any chance?”

“Which one?” asked Intergard with a smile, “You mean Osrakey? I’m afraid not — There hasn’t been any word from Erkom after the official reports he sent about the missions, and the fact that you four youngsters left on the airship yesterday morning.”

Eos looked down. That wasn’t a good sign.

“Although,” added Intergard after a pause, seeing how concerned Eos was about Osrakey’s safety, “I doubt there is any cause to worry, junior. Keep in mind that the Erkom hideout is tiny. I don’t think Kengnatz would take the effort of staging a raid just to surprise our favorite agency dad.”

Eos couldn’t help but chuckle at the sound of it. He wanted to reply something, but was interrupted by the arrival of yet another agent announcing himself walking over the planks outside.

Or in this case, two. The figures who entered the room were two young and lively characters that Eos had never talked to before — Still, he knew immediately who they were.

At first entered a young man in his late twenties sporting a wicked fashion sense that instantly revealed him to be a “capital kid” — His black hair was styled to the side and ended in bright cyan tips that gave his whole face an artificial and almost unreal touch. His eyebrows were similarly dyed, and two decorative piercings above his right eye completed the look of a young man that could not care less about what others thought of him, and by this method succeeded in being unbelievable cool. It didn’t take Eos a look at the man’s white gloves to know that Ienge had not lied with his earlier claim: It was Sarb Igsher himself, the man that every class kid worshipped and every senior abhorred — At least that was the general gossip; From what Eos had heard, even some of the more experienced agents admitted that the man had style, not even mentioning his positively insane skill.

Closely behind Igsher followed a woman about his age with a significantly less extraordinary appearance, but her long black hair and the fact that she was missing an arm made it no challenge to guess her identity: Elettra Ankuro, the daughter of famed master hedger Tronkar Ankuro and the symbol of courage and sheer will within the agency — At the age of 19, she had sustained a fatal wound on her right elbow by a poisoned arrow, and to stop the poison from spreading, Enster himself had removed the whole arm while still in the field, which had saved Elettra’s life but destroyed her career. But she had recovered, trained to be left-handed and learned to perform all her spells with only one arm. And now she was once again one of the continent’s best hedgers. Indeed, the Professor had not lied — There was verily some of the most awe-inducing personnel present.

At the sight of Igsher and Elettra, the young man near the entrance that had until now spoken with Leit about the incident on the airship cleared his throat and gestured towards the table. He was hardly an imposing presence, and Eos had no idea what his function at this meeting could be. Still, the other agents seemed to know and respect him, and the gathered company sat down while the man tried his best to overpower the clanking of mugs and the rustling of paper with his voice.

“Uhm— Yes, so—” he started, not very promisingly, “Could I have you worthy gentlemen’s attention!”

Slowly, the group around the table fell silent.

“...And Miladies, of course,” he added with a hasty look towards Intergard and Elettra Ankuro. Intergard didn’t move a muscle.

“This is an extraordinary circumstance, and I thank you all for being here on such short notice,” he continued in a formal tone, gesturing with his hands, “It’s my pleasure to welcome you to the Grey House on this dire occasion — For those of you that don’t know me—” He threw a quick look in the direction of Eos and the other boys, “I am Central’s Chief Analyst — My name is Heaven’s Hand.”

Of course Eos had heard of Heaven’s Hand — It was a codename for Central’s advisor and second-in-command. However, he had thought that an agent in such a position would be a bit older.

“I’m afraid,” continued Heaven’s Hand, “That Central can not be here at the present time — They will be joining us shortly.”

Leit and Eos exchanged a quick look, both confused. ‘They’?

“...Hence, I will be giving you some general information until they arrive. As you know, most of our bases are at this time compromised and under corporate control—” He took a quick pause, then continued in the same serious tone, “—So during the following days we will be aiming to salvage and recover our assets, and regain a stable stance against Kengnatz. All of you are here because you were called back to Ilierka in time — In some cases because of your skill—” He looked towards Intergard and Igsher, “—in others because you were the only option available. It will be our task to team up and defend this institution as best we can during this time of dreadful need.”

He wanted to continue, but suddenly the sheets at the open side of the room were hurled aside and sunlight flooded in. On the wooden planks outside stood a large man in a grey coat that Eos immediately recognized as the figure he had only ever seen from afar until now: Central.

To his surprise however, Central was not alone. Beside him in a large wheelchair sat a woman of at least seventy years wearing an elaborately patterned jacket and eyeing the gathered agents skeptically. Everybody at the table was silent instantly — Eos could almost feel the respect suspended in the air between the gathered operatives and their leader. With a smile, Central pushed the wheelchair into the room and made his way around the table to Heaven’s Hand, who stepped back respectfully. With a quick nod, Central took his place and turned to the agents.

“Welcome, everybody,” he said plainly. Eos was surprised by his voice — It was calm and very quiet, almost a whisper, but still clearly audible. It didn’t seem to fit the large man at all.

“I would love to get straight to the point,” he continued, “But seeing as there are some relatively young agents here—” His face hinted at a smile as he threw a quick look over to the four boys, “I guess I have some explaining to do first.”

Eos was very confused by all this — Next to him, Ienge and Benx were whispering something that he couldn’t understand, and around the table some of the older operatives were eyeing them with expressions that ranged from anticipation to slight impatience.

“First of all, you might know me as Central,” said the large man at the end of the table, “But the reality is not that simple. It needs more than one man to lead this agency.”

Eos raised his eyebrows in a state of puzzlement. Central wasn’t actually suggesting that this woman in the wheelchair had anything to do with it, was he?

“Seven individuals make up Central — My name is Liberty, and I might be the face of it, but two other parts, both more essential, are also present here.”

He turned around and gestured towards Heaven’s Hand, who gave an embarrassed smile to the boys. Then, his hand wandered to the other side, forming a welcoming gesture at the woman in the wheelchair. Eos couldn’t quite believe it.

Liberty took a step back, and the woman made her way to the point where he had been standing. Now, it looked just like a normal person sitting at the table.

“My regards, young agents — The name is Emerald. I’m responsible for Personnel and Operations,” she said in a strict and emotionless voice.

“Let’s start talking.”

With a look to Intergard, the woman called Emerald reached into her breast pocket and pulled out a small plate of brass, which she flung onto the table with a quick movement of her hand. At the other end of the room, Intergard nodded and raised her hand, and with a bright flash numerous large sheets of paper materialized at the center of the table on top of the small token.

“Our task is recovery,” continued Emerald, “What we need for that is money, equipment, and most importantly personnel. Many of our agents have been killed, but some are still being held alive by Kengnatz for information — The first step of this operation will be to rescue them before they die.”

Eos shuddered. The way Emerald said all this, in her formal tone without any emotion, was either testimony to her cold personality, or to her experience and efficient way of solving the problems at hand. Everything about her appearance — the way she gestured with her hands, the determined look in her eyes, the respect that even the most skilled agents seemed to have for her — All this let Eos quickly forget that she was a disabled woman sitting in a wheelchair, and made it more and more clear to him that this unimposing individual was indeed the chief operator of all chief operators.

“The good news is: We know where they are being held, and that gives us an opening,” Emerald continued, “There is no reason to hold back on this run. Agents Intergard, Igsher, Ankuro, and the Professor — You’re all assigned to this. Heaven’s Hand will give you additional information as soon as we have formed a strategy. Meanwhile, the young kids in the back will be undergoing training to brush up their skills — We will need every man we can get during the coming days, and you four are all I have available at the moment.”

Emerald briefly made eye contact with Eos before turning her wheelchair to face Liberty, and the agents around the table were already starting to discuss the news quietly with each other when she suddenly turned back, and with a sharp voice added:

“Make no mistake, agents! We are on a vengeance mission, but it isn’t against any corporation. This whole debacle was made possible only by the fact that information from my hand was leaked to the Kengnatz by a senior agent. Central might not have the means to punish this at the moment, nor do we know who did it—” Her piercing gaze went slowly from one

agent to the next as she spoke, “—But we learn quickly, and I can guarantee: If the traitor is in this room right now, hear this: I will be coming for you next.”

There was a pause. Nobody dared to even breathe. Eos was terrified by the sudden change in tone, and so were his friends. Then, Emerald leant back and sighed, almost as if she had been pulled out of a trance.

“However,” she added as she turned her wheelchair to leave, “The most suspicion obviously lies on the man that *isn't* in this room.”

And with that, Liberty took the handles of her wheelchair and they left the briefing room.

Eos exchanged a concerned look with Ienge next to him.

“Who is she talking about? Was there someone else supposed to be here?”

Leit visibly struggled with forming an appropriate answer.

“Indeed,” he said after a pause, “The man that defected to Kengnatz at the climax of the headquarters defense yesterday and surrendered the chief quartermaster and his assistants to the enemy — Agent Sarc.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Sour Sensation Of Feeling Incompetent

The meeting dissolved soon after. Idesiord, who had been sent out of the room during the briefing, returned for a quick update from Heaven's Hand and left again, but not without a sarcastic remark about the agency's dire situation — As he left, Heaven's Hand turned to Eos and his friends, who were still sitting on their chairs at the far end of the table. He told the boys that Central was planning to utilize them only in later missions of this recovery effort — Just as Emerald had hinted at during the meeting, the upcoming rescue operation was thought far too difficult for them, and only experienced experts would be going. Eos could understand, but it was slightly irritating to hear this from a man so young that he could have been Eos' brother. Then again, the thought of this made him almost embarrassed as he realized that out of all the operatives, Heaven's Hand was probably one of the most stressed at the moment — Organizing the logistics of the agency in a time such as this had to be an absolute nightmare, and Eos was definitely happy that he was *not* Emerald's assistant in this chaos.

"Until such a time as Emerald assigns you to anything", added the young man, "You are to stay here at the Grey House and practice your skills. You might all be talented young agents, but you will need to step up your game if you want to make a difference in our fight against Kengnatz."

"But Sir," replied Eos, confused, "What are we supposed to practice?"

"Well, you will need to hand in a skill list by tonight," answered Heaven's Hand, "So that Emerald and the other operators can judge your strengths and weaknesses better."

The agents nodded.

"Then," continued the chief analyst, "You will be receiving special training from some of the more experienced agents when they have the time. I hope you know what a great opportunity this is for all of you."

Eos knew it very well. Indeed, he was already looking forward to this, no matter if it would be Intergard training him again, or somebody else. Frankly, he thought, getting a spellslinging crash course from Sarb Igsher himself had to be the best thing he could think of. He could hardly contain his anticipation.

"And speaking of operators," added Heaven's Hand, turning to Benx, "Agent Kurdibt, you are a bit of a special case in this."

Benx swallowed hard.

"Since you specialize in mission control, it wouldn't help to have you learn field skills all of a sudden, so we will take a bit of a different route with you. And besides—" Heaven's Hand took

a telling pause, knowing that Benx already saw it coming, “—Emerald is very low on quality operators these days.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Benx instantly, his face a single expression of bliss, “Yes, Sir!”

“I thought so,” confirmed Heaven’s Hand with a smile, “You are going to be fourth operator on the Enter rescue mission. I hope you like that.”

Benx opened his mouth to reply, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. After a while, he produced a short “Yes, Sir!”, visibly struggling to control his excitement.

Eos was just as happy for his colleague as he was himself. Indeed, it was pleasing to see that he was not the only youngster in the agency getting excited about things like these. Sometimes, he got the impression that his almost childlike enthusiasm about everything and everybody important stopped him from being truly professional — When he looked at people like Leit, he always couldn’t help but think that he was expected to somehow ‘grow up’. Yet, he was just a bit more aware of the great opportunities he was being given, was he not?

Heaven’s Hand led the boys back over the wooden planks outside and into the main part of the house while explaining the room assignments. The four young agents were to share a large room on the very top floor, below the roof. He directed them up another staircase, and to Eos displeasure it turned out that the attic could only be accessed via a ladder on the other side of the building, so they had to cross over to the detached other half again, now one level further up (although the construction of wooden planks outside was hardly any different, except that the route had apparently not been reinforced to support wheelchairs). Eos was already looking forward to making a quick side-trip to the cold wind outside whenever he wanted to fetch something from his bag, but his mood was soon repaired as they entered the attic.

It was a large, dusty room with four beds, and the tilted wooden walls combined with dim yellow light from the floor below to immediately make it comfortable, almost like a cozy hideout from Eos’ childhood days (that was to say, if he had had cozy childhood days). The boys loved it.

“Listen,” said Heaven’s Hand, “Igsher slept here until now, so don’t mind the scribbles on the walls — And if you hear strange noises from below during the night, don’t worry. That’s Intergard practicing. She has the room below you.”

The four agents nodded eagerly, smiling at the thought of Intergard producing irritating noises at midnight, and Heaven’s Hand turned towards the ladder.

“Kurdibt, don’t miss the briefing tonight at tenth bell,” he added while climbing down to the floor below, “Apart from that — I’ll keep you kids updated.”

And with that, he pulled down the trapdoor and was gone.

Eos immediately went over to the far end of the attic, where the two sides of the roof converged and most of the wooden surface had been covered in markings and scribbles with a coal pen.

Ienge let out an amused sigh.

“Don’t tell me you’re an Igsher fanboy now, too! Isn’t Intergard enough for you?”

“Of course I am, what are you talking about,” countered Eos, his fingers following the intricate lines of the wall, “I mean — Have you seen him cast? He is like... like—”

He didn’t really know how to describe it.

"Like a dream of heaven," he said finally, although he had to admit that this had sounded much better in his head.

Ienge laughed. "Why don't you *pick him up*, then? He's roughly your age!"

Eos looked back to him with a sarcastic frown.

"Well, that would be your job, wouldn't it," he said dryly.

At the other end of the room, Ienge let himself fall onto one of the beds.

"Touché, my dear," he replied, mockingly clapping his hands a few times, "And I must admit that I have checked him out already. Briefly though. I'll have to see if he is my type."

He laughed again. Meanwhile, Leit was silently unpacking his large bag onto the bed on the far right, and next to him Benx was already lying down, feigning a snore.

"What are you doing, Benx, we can all see you're not asleep," said Ienge with an unimpressed sideways glance to his friend.

"Well, my good man," replied Benx immediately as he sat up with a grin, "Maybe I need to rest, because last time I checked—" He took a dramatic pause, Ienge still giving him the unimpressed face as he waited for the response, "—I'm the one who is going to be the assistant of the assistant of the assistant of actual Central."

This, too, had sounded much better in his head.

"Yeah, what about that," said Ienge, more an expression of curious disbelief than a question, "How did you earn that position, I wonder. Then again—" He turned to Benx, realizing his opportunity to counterattack with the next piece of witty banter, "None of the agents present at the meeting are operators, so I guess they just had no choice but to appoint you!"

Suddenly, Leit tuned into the discussion from behind his bag, instantly taking the attention of the other boys with his respect-inducing voice.

"That might be true, but think about all the top notch personnel that will be working alongside you on that mission — Emerald as chief operator, and I guess Liberty will be her assistant — Then Heaven's Hand as analyst, and you as fourth operator."

He looked up from behind his bag.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you just received the biggest promotion I have ever seen."

Benx let himself fall down into his mattress again with a satisfied grin. He didn't have anything to add to that.

At the far end of the room, Eos had to admit that he didn't understand any of the scribbles that Igsher had left — Either they were too advanced for him to grasp, or perhaps he was just distracted. Indeed, in his thoughts Eos was still at the briefing table, recounting what Emerald and Leit had said about the traitor within the agency.

Could it really be Sarc? For Eos, that was unthinkable — He had gotten along so well with the old agent during his first mission, and even afterwards there had never been a moment that had made Eos doubt the veteran's allegiance. How could such a seasoned, long-standing member of the agency with such a vast history of working for Central and contributing to the organization's goals, be suddenly accused of treason? To him it made no sense at all.

Then again — and Eos shuddered at the realization of this — he had to confess to himself that the more he thought about it, the more reasons came to his mind suggesting that Sarc might not be all too innocent after all: Had Sibrodi not been in the very same position as him? He too was an experienced expert that had been working for Central for decades, and none of that had

prevented him of suddenly deserting to Kengnatz. Just because Eos didn't know Sibrodi personally, he was inclined to think his desertion was somehow more understandable or likely — Accusing Sarc on the other hand was completely out of the question for him. But yet, Eos had to agree: For somebody who didn't know Sarc, the situation might well be the complete opposite — And if Sibrodi had done it, why not Sarc as well?

And then there was the thing that Emerald had brought up, too: During the headquarters defense, Sarc had apparently switched sides to Kengnatz, but nobody was sure what exactly had happened. For somebody in Sarc's position, the most natural next step would be to show up to the Source Meeting the next day, and clear up the misunderstanding. But as Emerald had said, he had chosen to stay away, and even Eos could see that this essentially proved him guilty of the deed.

During the evening, Eos wasn't feeling well — He kept telling himself that it had nothing to do with the news about Sarc, and that he was supposed to be happy about his new position at the core of the agency, but it didn't help. The afternoon went by, then the evening, then the night.

Operatives' dinner was a strange experience — All these high-ranking agents, some of them living legends, sitting together at a long table in the kitchen, slurping some improvised soup that couldn't hold a candle to Osrakey's creations, and among them a strange air of gloom that everybody tried to mask as much as they could with casual chatter and witty jokes. Eos could hardly believe himself saying it, but he was pleased to leave the kitchen after a quick bowl, despite all the people there. Frankly, he couldn't wait getting to bed — First a mission at first bell in the morning, then an assassination attempt during the following night, and now hopefully a good portion of sleep at last, he thought.

At tenth bell, Benx left the attic to attend the briefing for Enster's rescue mission. Eos was highly jealous — Given his special relationship with the agency's chief quartermaster, he felt somewhat privileged to help in getting him out of Kengnatz' hands. Then again, he could understand why Emerald only wanted the most experienced agents to participate.

He wanted to stay awake, waiting for Benx to return and tell him all about the mission, but as the minutes after eleventh bell dragged by it became harder and harder to keep his eyes open, and at some point he couldn't keep it up any longer. The next thing he saw was a strange, hazy dream about Sibrodi and Sarc arguing in a court room, and when he awoke the next morning he couldn't remember a thing about it.

As he sat up in his bed on the far left of the attic, Eos realized that what had woken him up was the thundering sound of lightning spells hitting the wall of the room below them, and that he was not the only one to be pulled out of slumber by it. Next to him, Ienge turned around in his bedsheets with a groan.

"What time is it?" he muttered into his pillow. A few steps further down the room, Benx almost fell out of his bed as he reached for the pocket watch, prompting an amused giggle from Ienge.

"It's seventh bell, oh my gods," replied Benx and let himself fall back into his bed with a sigh of resignation. From below, another series of blasts was clearly audible.

“Out of your beds, juniors!” shouted Intergard loudly. Eos only now realized that there was nothing more separating them from the room below than the thick wooden beams that made up the floor of the attic, with thin gaps in-between that even allowed Eos to peek through into the room beneath them — No wonder every sound came through so clearly.

“Yes, Madam,” he said, trying his best to sound awake as he got out of his bed, almost stepping on his bag right in front of it. Below, Intergard was opening a cupboard of some sort.

“Get ready for breakfast, it’s first-come-first-serve,” she added as she left her room, “And don’t be late because we will be discussing your training schedule for today. Got it?”

“Yes, Madam!” said Eos and Leit simultaneously, only interrupted by an annoyed hiss from Benx as he struggled to untangle himself from the bedsheets.

“Damn it, Kurdibt,” muttered Ienge with raised eyebrows as he glanced sideways towards his colleague, “I had no idea you were so well built!”

Eos and Leit raised their heads, and Ienge couldn’t help but giggle at the sight. He even added a quick “Not bad for an operator, dare I say it”, but Benx was too preoccupied with his bedsheet situation to hear him, and none of the other two boys felt in a comfortable position to comment on the matter, either.

Minutes later, the four young agents had made themselves ready for the day and went down for breakfast — Ienge had not made any more remarks about Benx’ body.

When they entered the kitchen, two of the other agents were already there: Elettra Ankuro was sitting at the table, eating, and at the other end of the room near the sink, Liberty was leaning against the wall with a cup of tea. He nodded towards the boys with a gentle smile as they sat down, but didn’t say a word. Elettra did the same, and breakfast went on silently — The young agents didn’t even talk amongst themselves.

After a couple of minutes, the sound of footsteps on the staircase announced the arrival of another person, and moments later Intergard entered the kitchen. She approached the cupboard with her large steps, grabbed a cup of tea and sat down across of the four boys, eyeing them tellingly.

“So,” she said plainly after her first sip from the cup, “Listen, juniors. Timely Resurrection goes down tomorrow night—”

When Eos and his friends gave her confused looks, she added: “That’s the Enster rescue mission.”

“What a name,” muttered Ienge with a snicker.

“In any case,” continued Intergard, “Mister Kurdibt here has two days to get familiar with the operators team, which I hope he will use—” She gave a sideways glance to Benx, “—The rest of you have at least three until your next run. That is more than enough time to tackle something a little bigger than what we did in Erkom.”

Eos and Leit exchanged a quick look in anticipation.

“The training plan is as follows — Kurdibt, you basically stay with Central all the time. You help them do reconnaissance, talk to information brokers, form the assault plans, everything. That will make you more than comfortable with how they work... And you will need it.”

Benx nodded approvingly, trying to hide a proud smile at the idea of spending the coming two days with the agency’s absolute top.

“As for you three—” Intergard turned to the other boys, “—Alagdi and Keros, you are both hedgers, and Shichal is a devices man, so you’re all more or less magic-based. You will spend the mornings with me, Agent Ankuro and Agent Igsher — Each of us will train with one of you individually, and we rotate the constellation each day. Got it?”

Eos suppressed a satisfied “Yes, Madam!” at the sound of him training under all three of these experts.

“Good. For the afternoons, the Professor is available and will give you hand-to-hand lessons, although that plan might change later. We’ll have to see.”

Intergard took another sip from her tea and looked to the boys with an interrogative expression. “Any questions?”

“Do we need to prepare anything, Madam?” asked Leit, and Intergard let out a chuckle.

“You won’t have any time, my boy,” she replied, “Lessons start in half an hour.”

Eos was absolutely thrilled to hear that he would train under Sarb Igsher on the first morning. As soon as they had finished breakfast, he rushed up to the attic to fetch some of his artefacts, and his jacket because of the wind outside — Intergard had informed him that Igsher would give his lessons in the garden behind the house. As he made his way back to the entrance hall, from where a corridor connected to the rear side of the building, he stopped briefly outside on the wooden planks that connected the rooms, trying to catch a glimpse of the backyard from there. If he wasn’t mistaking it, the “garden” was more like a jungle of poorly contained flora behind the large house. Eos couldn’t even see a path leading through it.

He reached the main hall, where Ienge was already talking to his mentor for today, Elettra Ankuro. As Eos passed by, they were just in the process of shaking hands, which was apparently a complicated thing as Agent Ankuro was of course missing her right arm. He exchanged a quick word with them, and made his way through the rear side of the house towards the garden. After he had crossed two comfortably-looking (and as opposed to the ones on the top floor, not ripped apart at the middle) living rooms, he finally found a door out into the back yard.

As soon as he went outside, Eos’ mood changed on the spot. Surrounded by green on all sides, the only thing he could hear was the rhythmic clacking of a waterwheel at a pond that he couldn’t yet see, but clearly hear. The whole garden had an immediate air of tranquility about it, and Eos easily understood why Igsher had chosen it as their place to train.

Just as Eos thought about Igsher, a strange noise sounded from behind him. He took a few quick steps back towards the house, and saw that high above on the third floor, a window had been opened. Within the frame, one foot on the ledge, stood Sarb Igsher, his bright hair immediately signalling his identity despite him being so far above Eos.

“Good morning, my boy,” shouted Igsher with a grin.

“Good morning, Sir!” replied Eos, and he was just about to ask why his teacher was on the third floor, when without a warning the latter jumped out of the window, rushing down while striking a casual pose, and catching himself only moments before hitting the ground with a Movement spell that broke his fall. Stepping gently onto the stone paving in front of Eos, Igsher extended a hand.

“How are we today, Mister Keros?” he asked with a grin as he shook Eos’ hand, who — although using a Movi in this kind of fashion was nothing particularly special — had to admit that Igsher definitely had style. But that much had been clear anyways.

“I’m very well, Sir — Thank you,” answered Eos, slightly blushing as he held Igsher’s hand. The young man made his way along the paved stone path into the garden, and Eos followed him eagerly.

“Tell me, Mister Keros,” said Igsher as they approached the pond that Eos had heard before, “What is the difference between Djenge and Palaxefaiz?”

Eos was somewhat irritated that Igsher used Donnadezian names, but quickly answered nonetheless: “Sir, Palaxefaiz, also called the Stupefying spell, can knock a target unconscious, while the Sleep utility can only be applied to individuals that are already sleeping or knocked out in order to extend the duration.”

“Very good,” answered Igsher as they sat down on a small bench at the pond. He was dreamily looking onto the surface of the water while talking to Eos, not turning to face him even as he replied.

“Then you will also understand why you don’t need to learn Stupefy just yet,” he added after a pause.

Eos raised his eyebrows in puzzlement. He had been working to master Stupefy for months now, with little success.

“Sir?” he asked politely.

Finally, Igsher turned his head and looked at Eos with a cheerful smile.

“It’s because your hand-to-hand is good and you have no problems taking out the guards on your own, so why upgrade when you already know Sleep to complete your skillset?”

Although he was a bit disappointed that his endless weeks of practicing were supposedly all for nothing, Eos could admit that Igsher was right. So far, his Sleep spell had been completely sufficient during missions.

“Besides,” added Igsher, now looking back onto the pond, “For somebody with just two missions on his record, you already know way more than the average hedger. And as you can surely tell after all this time practicing, Stupefy isn’t a very easy spell to learn.”

“But Sir,” replied Eos slowly, “What are you going to teach me then? Frankly, I had thought Palaxefaiz would be the obvious choice.”

He thought back to the incident on the airship, where Chou had easily taken out Sibrodi with just two shots of stupefying awesomeness.

“Well, now that’s the question, isn’t it,” said Igsher, and ran a hand through his hair. Eos couldn’t help but stare — This hairstyle, and the fashion taste of the man to whom it was attached, had been the center of his universe for a long time. He had even tried to imitate it on his own head once, with disastrous results.

As he just sat there, captivated by Igsher’s hair, the young man turned to him again.

“Tell me, what are the points that you have been struggling with in these two missions? Anything that needs improvement?”

Eos needed a second to consider. Of course, the two past operations had unfolded in ways that couldn’t have been further from the plan, but those unexpected incidents were not because

of him, or his skills. Indeed, now that he thought about it, it could be argued that he had performed rather well in his confrontation with Kengnatz' Melenda a few days ago.

"I— I don't think so, Sir," he said after a pause, "I think haven't really had the opportunity to fail yet."

Igsher chuckled.

"Wise answer, although not correct at all," he replied. Eos could feel himself blushing.

"So, you think it would be best to learn something new? Something to expand your skillset?"

"Yes, Sir."

Igsher stood up.

"Then what about this?" he asked with a mischievous grin as he pulled out a small trinket from his pocket. Holding it in his hand, he snapped his fingers, and instantly the whole garden was shrouded in something that seemed like thick black smoke — Eos couldn't even see his own shoulders in the darkness.

"Naikra, Sir?" he asked into the void, remembering that Igsher was famous for his light and darkness spells.

"That's right, my boy," answered Igsher, and with a quiet rattle of the trinket the darkness faded, returning light to the pond once again. He held up the artefact with a questioning expression.

"But—" Eos was unsure what to say, "Isn't it very difficult?"

To be honest, he was perfectly fine with the idea of learning a spell with so much obvious utility.

"Depends on what you're trying to do," replied Igsher, "As long as you don't want to cover the whole city, it's not the worst. Let's get into it."

They spent the whole morning in the garden. At first, Igsher showed Eos a number of different variants of the spell and their respective circles, which Eos had no problem with as his theoretical knowledge even of spells that he couldn't do was very good — Later, however, Igsher started to practice the actual technique with him, and that was the point where it suddenly became very difficult.

Of course, nobody was expecting Eos (apart from maybe himself) to instantly learn a new technique — After months of trying to get the hang of Stupefy, he knew very well that was not how it worked. Mastering Naikra in the way Igsher had demonstrated would take years.

Now, Eos also understood why Igsher had led him to the quiet pond in the garden — Not only made the tranquil atmosphere it so much easier to concentrate, but there was a very physical reason as well: Kneeling down at the edge of the pond, Igsher ordered Eos to put his hands into the shallow water and practice the spell there — Eos didn't really believe it at first, but the fluid nature of the clear water apparently made it much easier to produce the Naikra's characteristic dark shroud. After some rounds of practice, Eos was already summoning faint hints of an opaque haze beneath the surface.

Next, Igsher commanded him to close his eyes and try to project the darkness he was seeing onto his surroundings — A method that didn't help at all. They did breathing exercises, and Igsher talked about the proper mindset for this kind of spell, but as soon as Eos moved from

practicing in the cold water of the pond to applying the spell to the air around them, he always seemed to lose all progress he had made.

When tenth bell echoed across the city, Eos was still no step further than when he had started, and it only continued that way. Igsher was a good teacher who knew a lot about spellcraft, and Eos got along with him wonderfully, but none of it helped. Two hours later, Igsher interrupted the training with a frustrated sigh.

"Listen, Eos," he began, himself almost as exhausted as his pupil, "This isn't leading anywhere. I think it would be best if you continued to practice the preparation exercises that I've shown you when you have the time tonight, and tomorrow we'll see if Intergard can help you any better than I can."

He stood up from the bench and ran his hand through his hair again — Eos felt refreshed immediately.

"It's time, anyways," he added with a glance towards the house, and Eos nodded. Frankly, he was relieved to finally stop.

They made their way back towards the Grey House, and Igsher casually told Eos a bit about his own experiences learning the Naikra spell, and how it was the only spell he didn't feel totally pathetic at — As they passed the main hall, however, they were all of a sudden interrupted when the front door flew open and Liberty rushed into the hall, followed closely by Benx.

Eos and Benx exchanged a quick look, and the expression on his friend's face told Eos that there was something going on. Liberty passed the two agents with long steps, hastily removing his jacket and gloves as he almost ran over to the row of coat hooks on the opposite wall.

"What's the matter, Sir?" asked Igsher with a puzzled expression, quickly letting the artefact he had played with in his hand slip back into his pocket. Liberty turned to face him, a concerned look in his eyes.

"There has been a development," he said plainly, "Gather all operatives that the two of you can find, I'll fetch Emerald. I want this discussed immediately."

They divided the house among the three of them and started going through each room. Eos found Leit in the attic, locked in a fierce battle with Intergard between the boys' beds — Both of them were armed with wooden sticks and Intergard was shouting commands occasionally. When she noticed Eos, she dashed forward and quickly disarmed Leit with a sweeping motion of her weapon, then turned to him with an intrigued expression.

"Uhm—" began Eos, still baffled from the sight, "Madam, sorry to interrupt, but all agents are asked to gather in the briefing room — Liberty would like to make an important announcement."

Intergard shrugged.

"Is that so?" she said plainly, and extended her empty hand towards Leit's stick, now lying somewhere in the dark corners of the attic. With the other hand, still holding her own weapon, she touched the backside of her elbow, and with a buzzing sound the stick dashed out of the shadows into her hand.

Magnet spell, thought Eos with a nod. Very professional, very effective.

"We'll be there immediately," continued Intergard with a look back to Leit, who was visibly out of breath, but gave a quick "Yes, Madam!" nonetheless.

"Tell Liberty that he won't find the Professor — He's at the market two streets further down buying those infernal smoking rod things, but I'm on comlink with him so I can get him to come back early."

"Fantastic, thank you very much," replied Eos from the trapdoor and climbed back down to the floor below, but not without involuntarily overhearing the conversation that followed in the attic.

"You're making progress," said Intergard over her shoulder.

"Thank you, Madam," replied Leit in-between his gasps for air, "Your training is — most effective!"

"But remember that you're not a true field agent — You're a specialist, so don't neglect the magical side of your job. Especially when you train with Elettra tomorrow!"

They approached the trapdoor, and Eos quickly jumped down the last couple of stairs onto the floor, careful not to give away that he had been listening. He was feeling awful all of a sudden. Of course, if Leit was making progress in his training, Eos was happy for him, and it was not like the two of them were rivals, but then again — they were, in a way. In any case, Eos was not as delighted about hearing of Leit's success in swordplay as he would have wanted himself to be.

Ten minutes later, the agency's finest had once again gathered in the Grey House's briefing room, and once again Eos was feeling somewhat out of place. Now that he had been shown first-hand the vast gap in skill between himself and Igsher, or even Leit, Eos was much less comfortable among all these experienced agents than during the first meeting. Then again, that naturally didn't concern Liberty at all when he made his anticipated announcement.

"Everyone, silence please!" he shouted across the long table, himself standing at the top end between Emerald in her wheelchair on one side and Benx, slightly sweating in the face of appearing in front of all these professionals, on the other.

"I just returned from a meeting with Meric, the information broker, and there are some news that we need to consider. These are some of the documents that I bought from him."

He produced a small astral server from his coat pocket and carefully sled it to the center of the table. As on the day before, Intergard activated it and various sheets of paper filled with intricate writing appeared on the wooden surface.

"These are documents leaked from Kengnatz by one of their employees describing an attack that occurred just this morning at second bell," explained Liberty, gesturing towards the sheets of paper, "As you can see, a secure detention facility operated by Kengnatz here in Ilierka was raided by so-far unknown forces."

He gave the agents some seconds to inspect the materials on the table, but Eos didn't understand any of it, so he looked around — Intergard and the Professor were already whispering to each other, pointing towards a drawing of a complicated spell circle found at the site. At the far end of the table, Emerald leant back in her wheelchair with a concerned sigh.

"H-E is suspected of having conducted the attack in order to free prisoners from this facility," continued Liberty, "It has been confirmed by Meric that this site was holding primarily

high-level scientists forced to work for Kengnatz after having been captured from other corporations over the past months.”

Emerald looked up to Liberty with a surprised expression — Apparently she already suspected where this was going.

“But this isn’t all,” added Liberty after a short pause, “Agent Kurdibt, please.”

He turned to Benx, who nervously cleared his throat and stepped to the table.

“Yes, the following is additional material acquired from information broker Ketten this morning,” said Benx in a confident voice. He definitely had been practicing his speech.

“According to documents leaked yesterday, H-E was indeed planning this attack, which not only confirms them as the culprit, but also reveals much about their strategy and sources of information.”

He took a brief pause to fetch new breath, his eyes nervously jumping from one agent to the next.

“Apparently, the raid was meant to recapture a highly influential former H-E scientist that had previously been taken into custody by Kengnatz, and was now being forced to research at this location. The name of this individual is Oredchimegdi Ankuro.”

There was a pause. Not because Benx had meant to take one, but because of a series of gasps around the table, the sound of Emerald sitting up with a concerned, maybe even alarmed expression, and most importantly because of Elettra, who had almost fallen backwards from her chair and was now staring towards the operators with a mixture of horror, joy, and confusion.

“M— My brother?”

Whispering started all around the long table. Nobody seemed to be left untouched by this name, and Eos took it as another confirmation that he wasn’t truly one of this community — He had never heard of the man, nor had he known that Tronkar Ankuro had had more children than just his daughter. At the far end of the room, Liberty was doing his best to continue the meeting.

“Silence, please!” he shouted multiple times, until at last everybody turned their attention to him again.

“I know this is important news for most of you, primarily of course Agent Ankuro herself, but please understand that this is not the main content of the meeting. At the moment, we have other fish to fry and I will explain how—”

Elettra interrupted him, yelling across the room.

“What do you mean, other fish to fry? His status has been unknown for two years, are you not going to do anything about it?”

“Yes, I know this is a big thing for you, but—” started Liberty again.

“I don’t care what you think it is for me, Liberty! He is my brother!”

Elettra had stood up, completely unable to understand how Liberty could ignore this.

“We need to stage a rescue, and as soon as possible! He’s an agency asset, for heaven’s sake!”

Eos was terrified. Both by the sheer tempest that was suddenly bursting out of the otherwise elegant and collected woman (although, admittedly for entirely understandable reasons), and by his own lack of knowledge. Had this other Ankuro been working for the agency in the past, yet he had never heard of him?

“Elettra, calm down! If you would let me just explain everything—” began Liberty once again, now shouting himself.

“Shut it, Liberty!” yelled Elettra, already turning to leave, “You know I can’t accept this! You damn know it!”

“Silence! All of you!” cried Emerald, her voice a high-pitched shriek as she slammed her fist onto the table.

Instantly, utter silence took the briefing room. Elettra was fuming, but she had stopped in her tracks nonetheless. Everybody looked to Emerald.

“How old are you?” she whispered finally, “Five? You lot are behaving like children, and I didn’t recruit children to fight the corps.”

Awkward silence. Liberty nervously stepped from one foot to the other.

“Ankuro — sit down. Continue the meeting.”

To Eos surprise, Elettra did as ordered, taking a number of deep breaths to calm herself as Liberty tensely cleared his throat to continue with the explanation.

“Thank you, I will now elaborate on the implications of all this,” he said slowly and with a sideways glance to Emerald.

“There are three aspects to consider for us. First of all, how to exploit it. As you all know, we are planning our own operation against Kengnatz tomorrow night, and this recent attack can only help us in this regard. Don’t let your guard down, though — After such a raid, they will be on high alert to start with.”

Affirmative nods around the table, but especially Emerald didn’t seem too sure that this incident was beneficial for their coming mission.

“Secondly, we will have to decide how to react to the fact that former Agent Ankuro has reappeared, and I will talk about this in just a minute. As to the third point,” Liberty continued, now being very serious, letting Eos guess that the following was why he had called for this meeting in the first place, “We should ask ourselves how H-E acquired the information needed to perform this attack. Not only the location of Oredchimegdi, but also solid enough first-hand intelligence that allowed them to raid this highly secure facility.”

At the other end of the table, the Professor raised his hand, and ash from his smoking rod fell down to the floor with a fizzle.

“Apologies, operator, but is it not natural to assume that H-E bought this information from a broker as usual?”

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question,” replied Liberty, “Ketten confirmed to me that no such information was on the market.”

“Could it be that they were approached by a broker privately?” asked Igsher without raising his hand, and a round of nods went down the table.

“After all, if this information is so valuable to H-E, brokers would easily see their opportunity and try to sell it to them, even if the H-E are not actively looking for intel like this themselves.”

“Well, Agent Igsher,” said Liberty with a glance to Emerald, “The content of the leaked H-E documents indicates that this material was passed to the corporation via an *anonymous tip*. There was no transaction and nobody could be traced as the original owner of the information.”

Now, *that* was intriguing news. Eos saw the other agents exchanging concerned looks, and he knew why: On the intelligence market, nothing was given out for free. The fact that H-E had received information as vital and valuable as this in the form of a gift was highly alarming.

“Do you mean to imply that somebody wanted H-E to have this?” asked the Professor after a pause.

“Indeed,” replied Liberty, “It would seem so. Now there is two questions: Who, and why. Are there any ideas?”

Among the operatives, puzzled looks gave way to quiet whispering between the more experienced agents. Without doubt, some theories were already being passed around. Finally, Igsher raised his hand.

“What about a neutral party, or perhaps even a rogue agent looking to sow chaos among the corps?”

That seemed to be the general suspicion around the table.

“Well,” answered Liberty, “We doubt that a single individual would have the resources to acquire and subsequently give away for free such information. Influential brokers like Ketten would not be out of the question, but they are highly unlikely to send such documents anonymously without the chance of payment.”

That was true, thought Eos.

“Well, if an organization is the suspect,” began Heaven’s Hand, who hadn’t spoken until now but obviously had the authority on this subject — After all, he was the chief analyst, “Then I would assume it to be rebel cells.”

“Why would they make such a move?” asked Igsher, on his face honest confusion.

“Keep in mind that Kengnatz supplies the provincial government army,” explained Heaven’s Hand, “With this move, the rebel alliance would not only pressure Kengnatz and therefore the supplies and equipment of their enemies, but also hamstring their research and development — Indeed, without one of their top scientists, Kengnatz might fall behind in the arms race between government and rebels. In my opinion, this could be a long-term calculation by someone like the Red Flag leaders.”

Emerald nodded approvingly, and around the table there were confirming sounds of “Ahh!” and “Of course!”. Indeed, thought Eos, this made a lot of sense. The rebel alliance was struggling recently in their effort to fight the provincial government, especially in regions around Ilierka where Kengnatz was strong — Being a formal supporter of the national army, it normally held true that wherever Kengnatz had influence, government would stand a much better chance against the ongoing series of assaults by the numerous rebel cells.

At the end of the table, Liberty and Heaven’s Hand exchanged quick nods, and Liberty turned to the other agents again.

“As you can see,” he continued, “It is very likely that the rebel alliance was trying to bring H-E and Kengnatz against each other. They must have known that intel about Oredchimegdi, whom the H-E still considers one of their employees, would prompt them to attack Kengnatz as soon as possible. Are there any further comments about this?”

Nobody raised a hand.

“Then I will now explain how the agency is planning to utilize this information. The rescue mission for our quartermaster tomorrow night will proceed as planned, but there will be two

other operations joining it: First of all, tonight a small team around Elettra will attempt to free and retake Oredchimegdi from H-E — I will give you detailed information on this afterwards.”

He gave a telling look in the direction of Elettra, who nodded, still visibly upset from before, but comforted now.

“Additionally, I have received intelligence that the Mountainside Cell is planning a meeting with the Red Flag rebels tomorrow night at the same time as our infiltration at Kengnatz. This wasn’t important to us before, but it is now, so I will remove Intergard from mission Timely Resurrection.” At the other end of the table, Intergard leant back in her chair, considering.

“Instead,” continued Liberty, “You will be joined by Agents Alagdi and Shichal to travel to this meeting.”

At first, Eos did not think too much of it — But then it hit him: Out of the four boys, Liberty had now assigned everyone to at least one of these missions, except for Eos. For a moment, he was almost expecting the tall man to continue talking, revealing to have assigned him to another task of even greater importance, but before long Eos understood that this wasn’t the case. He simply had not been assigned.

“Your job,” said Liberty, of course completely unaffected by the shower of disappointment and frustration that Eos was gradually being exposed to now that he tried to comprehend how it had come to this, “Will be to act as diplomatic messengers on the surface, trying to arrange an information exchange between the rebels and our agency — I will give you details on this later. Beneath the surface, you will of course be looking for any kind of clue concerning this recent incident. If the rebel alliance is indeed behind it, you should have an easy time finding information about the maneuver.”

Intergard nodded approvingly, and so did Ienge and Leit — Eos looked down into his lap, realizing how embarrassed he was. In an effort to stay professional, he sighed and returned his attention to Liberty, only to notice Ienge observing him from across the table. But when he realized that Eos had seen him, the green-haired boy quickly looked away.

There were no questions, and Liberty soon dismissed the agents. Eos was not feeling well. Going up to the attic, he once again recounted his achievements (or the lack of them) here at the Grey House — Surrounded by expert operatives, it had been made clearer than ever that he was not the talented prodigy he had thought he was, but much rather an irrelevant beginner with no real skills. Moreover, he didn’t even seem to have the talent to acquire said skills, as his frustrating session with Igsher had shown. And now, Liberty had confirmed it all by assigning his friends to these high-stakes missions while keeping him at base — Even Benx! Although they were getting along kind of well by now, Eos couldn’t help but feel jealous, even angry, about the fact that his very obviously mediocre colleague was now apparently appreciated more by the agency than he was. The more Eos thought about it, the worse it became.

In this shape, there was no way he would be attending hand-to-hand training in the afternoon. All he wanted to do was lie down in his bed and think about his life choices, and he wasn’t joking. Had he asked his friends about it, they would probably had advised him to think nothing of it, but to Eos this was a big deal — One that questioned most of what he had thought true until now.

Of course, it turned out that just sitting in the attic gnawing on his troubles was not the way to go for Eos. He couldn't keep under his bedsheets for long, and his (admittedly quite childish, but to him absolutely serious) plan to not get up until dinner was short-lived. He tried deciphering Igsher's markings on the wall, thinking only about what it might be that made the young man so much more skilled than him. He practiced the Naikra spell for almost two hours in a desperate attempt to do something productive about his situation, but it didn't help. Numerous times there was somebody knocking at the trapdoor that Eos had locked tight from inside, but he didn't listen. Outside, the sun was setting, and only as all of a sudden Intergard stepped into her room below and Eos was no longer alone, he finally somewhat managed to regain his composure. Sitting down on his bed, he threw his Henrik Table into a dark corner with a frustrated sigh. There was a depressing silence.

"Keep your cool, my boy," said Intergard from below. Eos didn't answer, knowing that she already understood everything.

"You're not stupid, and you're not untalented," she continued, drawing out a spell circle onto the floor of her room with broad motions. Her coal pencil produced screeching sounds that echoed quietly from the roof above.

"I just—" said Eos, more to himself than to her. The next moment, there was a bright flash of blue and Intergard stood right in front of him.

"Knowing that your skills are worthless is an essential step, Eos," she interrupted him, looking down onto the boy sitting on his bed. Then, walking over to the trapdoor and unblocking it with her foot, she added: "It means that you know what true ability is when you see it."

She turned to face him again.

"Look at me," she said in a commanding tone, and Eos instinctively looked up.

Intergard pulled out a small piece of leather and snapper her fingers. At her feet, a small cloud of darkness manifested and disappeared only a moment later.

There was a pause.

"That's how good my Naikra is," she said plainly, returning the piece of leather to her pocket. Eos opened his mouth, but didn't know what to say.

Intergard's eyes pierced him like knives, but she wasn't angry. She was worried about him.

"Focus on what makes you an agent, not on what keeps you from being a legend."

And after a short pause, she added: "Dinner is ready. You coming?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Much Ado About Oredchimegdi

Dinner wasn't interesting at all, but it helped Eos to get some distance between himself and his incompetence, and he felt much better afterwards — Although he admittedly had difficulties talking to his friends in the same way as before, and they noticed it immediately. As he had expected, the general opinion was to not let it get to him too much. Ienge recounted how he had been practicing the Illusion spell with Elettra, with similarly nonexistent success as Eos on Naikra — That made him cheer up more than what he felt comfortable admitting.

Later that evening, Benx left the busy kitchen to get ready for his position as operator on the spontaneous rescue mission Liberty was staging for the man called Oredchimegdi, and although Eos knew that staying among the company of Igsher, the Professor, and his friends Ienge and Leit would have been a good idea for his grasp on who this mysterious brother of Elettra really was, he nonetheless excused himself about half an hour later and left as well. After climbing the steep, uncomfortably narrow stairs to the upper floors and crossing over to the detached half of the building (although not without a shudder at the sight of the street below, which Eos explained to himself as a result of the cold, and not his fear of heights), he reached the attic only to find Benx in what had to be the least expected situation he could have thought of:

Meri Kurdibt, jacket, tie and shirt thrown onto his bed, was standing at the far end of the large room in front of the wooden wall that had been filled with scribbles from Igsher only a few hours ago. The scribbles themselves were gone, replaced by what seemed to be a large sketch of a floor plan or map of some sort that Benx had drawn out on the wall. From a notebook now lying on his bed on top of his working clothes, he had ripped out multiple small pieces of paper which were now pinned to the wall in groups at various points on the map, shakily written letters on them signifying what they represented. Benx himself, standing in front of the map with his back turned to the trapdoor, was gesturing from one marker to the next absent-mindedly, and drops of sweat on his shoulders told Eos that he had been exercising in some way.

For a moment, Eos just stood there on the ladder, one hand pushing up the trapdoor and his head peeking into the attic as he took in what he was seeing. He would have expected something like this from Leit any day, even from Ienge — but not Benx. Benx was the easy-going, laid back type that didn't care enough about excelling at his job to really work for it. This scene, however, was telling a different story entirely.

At the creaking of the trapdoor, Benx turned around, his hands mid-gesture as he was taking down some of the markers and moving them to a different position. He looked at his colleague, and Eos could see in his nervous eyes that he was already regretting not having done this in another, more private room.

"Come in, don't mind me," he said in a casual tone contrasting a not-so-casual expression. Eos took the last few steps of the ladder and closed the trapdoor behind him.

"Are you—" he started with a look towards the map on the wall, "—Preparing?"

His tone oscillated somewhere between incredulous and amazed.

"Yes, I, uhm—" replied Benx quickly, turning back to the wall casually, but Eos could see that he was doing it to hide his blushing.

"—I'm a bit... Nervous."

On his way to his backpack, Eos noticed that behind the line of beds Benx had spread out a sheet on the floor to exercise on.

"With this rescue being about Elettra's brother and all, I thought—"

Eos sat down on his bed, nodding absent-mindedly.

"Are you mad about me erasing Igsher's notes?"

Eos didn't react to the question at first. After a moment, he shook his head, blinked a few times and gave Benx a confused smile.

"No no, don't worry," he said slowly, "It's just that I—"

He wasn't sure how to say it.

"—I just thought you didn't do stuff like this. Preparing, trying hard, all that."

He scratched his forehead nervously. Benx looked away.

"I don't normally look like I'm well prepared, do I," he said dryly.

"No, I didn't mean it like that, I just—"

"It's fine, you're right," interrupted Benx, "I'm the easy-going type. But that doesn't mean I can't be worried about stuff, you know."

Eos would have liked to just disappear on the spot rather than continue this any longer. Making other people uncomfortable was one of the things he hated most, despite the fact that Benx had never been a close friend to him.

"No, I mean," he said slowly, falling down into his bedsheets with a sigh, "During class, you know. I always used to think that—"

He was glad that lying down on his bed, he didn't have to look Benx in the face as he said this.

"—I was always pretty frustrated to see that even though I practiced for hours every day, and read books like a madman, I only ever barely met the expectation, while people like you— just seemed to get by without any effort at all."

He closed his eyes, feeling like he had said too much. At first, Benx didn't reply.

"Well," he said finally, "Maybe you didn't notice, but I had a hard time catching up to kids like you. I still can't."

Eos heard a pencil falling down to the floor.

"I just don't want to drag you people down, that's all."

Eos opened his mouth to give a reply that he didn't know yet, but at that moment the trapdoor was pushed open and Ienge's voice echoed from the floor below. All of a sudden, Eos

realized how honest and intimate he and Benx had just been, and with an embarrassed frown he raised his head, giving a sly sideways look to Benx at the other end of the room, but the young man shyly avoided any eye contact and hastily turned back to the map on the wall. A second later, Ienge and Leit came through the trapdoor.

For the rest of the evening, both Eos and Benx did their best to act as if nothing had happened.

At one hour before midnight, everyone gathered in the hallway for a short final briefing from Liberty concerning the impromptu rescue mission that was about to start. The official order was for all uninvolved agents to stay at the Grey House and rest, but sleep was out of the question for Eos. In the end, Liberty agreed that Leit, Eos and Ienge would be allowed to accompany the operators to their hideout, under the strict condition that they would not interfere with their work at all. Naturally, the boys accepted.

H-E owned a series of large buildings at the center of Ilierka, but according to Ketten's information the newly captured prisoners were held in a smaller storage facility at the edge of the city. Elettra and the Professor had already departed from the Grey House one hour earlier to lay traps and secure an escape route, but Igsher and Intergard, the two remaining agents for this run, were with the operators as they covertly made their way across the city. When they got near the old building, Liberty supplied them with four comlinks and they split up — The two agents went around the complex to meet with Elettra and the Professor, while the operators, accompanied by the three boys, took position in a nearby building where an unused studio on the top floor had been turned into a makeshift operators' base. This was common procedure — Like all distance-crossing spells, the portal utility that powered the comlink only worked over short distances, so the operators always had to be in the vicinity of the infiltrated target. It was standard for them to find a quiet corner in a nearby building such as this, and set up a communications base there.

The studio was abandoned and dusty, but the main room, a large hall with windows just below the ceiling, was illuminated by numerous Fallos artefacts and on the dirty wall, a large overview of the H-E building was drawn out with rough coal lines, almost exactly like the one Benx had sketched on the wall of the attic back at the Grey House. Next to it, pieces of paper and other small objects were fixed to the wall, ready for the operators to inspect them should the need arise. It was easy to see that Liberty or Heaven's Hand had prepared the base in this way beforehand to make sure everything was in place during the actual operation. Drawing out this map had to have taken hours.

Along the opposite side of the room, a bench and two old stools invited the three boys to sit down while Liberty and the other operators were talking quietly among themselves. It didn't take long until a voice sounded from the large comlink device positioned on the floor in front of the site plan.

"This is Professor, in position with Igsher."

"Ankuro and Intergard here, we are ready," added another voice soon after, and Emerald gave a confirming nod.

"All according to plan," she said loudly, "Phase one."

For some minutes, there was nothing to be heard apart from covert steps on the grass outside the H-E building, doors opening and closing, whispered commands between the agents, and the occasional noise of a vehicle passing on the street nearby. Within the operators' room, a tense silence of anticipation and readiness held everybody in a tight grip.

"Status," commanded Emerald after a while, prompting Eos to jump up in his seat at the sudden sound.

"I'm at Connector, corner to Second Spawn. Catwalk is secure," answered Igsher immediately, an echo signaling that another comlink-holding agent was nearby.

"Team Two?"

"Ready at spawn position, Madam," said Intergard quietly, "Just waiting for the codes."

"I'm at Secret," replied the Professor, accompanied by the sound of a door closing and documents being drawn out from the shelves of some guard office. After a while, he added: "The codes are as follows."

He then proceeded to dictate a long sequence of numbers to Intergard, which Benx hastily wrote down on the wall next to the map of the complex. After Ubtra had finished, a mechanical clicking echoed through the comlink and Intergard gave a confirming "Open, sesame", followed by the screeching of a heavy steel door being pulled.

"Team Two inside Main, closing in on the service corridor, Madam," said Elettra, her voice echoing on Intergard's comlink.

"Good, proceed to Phase Two," answered Emerald in her completely emotionless tone. Meanwhile, Igsher and the Professor were running down a hallway, arguing quietly.

"Silence, Team One!" commanded Emerald, sitting up in her wheelchair and leaning forward. The chatter stopped immediately.

"Team Two splitting up at position, as planned."

Intergard's voice was muffled, as if she was speaking through a fabric of some sort.

"Installing Norkis now."

A familiar clanking of brass objects resounded and Eos couldn't help but smile. Seeing this side of an operation was very interesting for a change. At the other side of the room, Benx picked up a large interface and adjusted the position of four colored markers on the wall, his eyes dashing back and forth between the device and the map as he checked the agents' positions. Eos could see a drop of sweat on his forehead.

A satisfying click echoed on the comlink.

"Norkis finished," said Intergard, "Disabling silencers on your mark, Madam."

"Affirmative," replied Emerald, "Wait for my signal."

A second later, Elettra confirmed her position as well, and Benx once again adjusted their locations on the map drawn onto the wall.

"Team One, status!"

Igsher cleared his throat.

"At position, Catwalk still clear," he said plainly.

"Professor?"

"Ready," came Ubtra's voice in return.

Emerald and Liberty exchanged a quick nod.

"Team Two, execute!"

On the comlink, two fizzling sounds that reminded Eos of a smoking rod were audible, and seconds later the quiet ticking from Igsher's and the Professor's end stopped.

Emerald leant back.

"Phase Three."

Now, things very quickly became busy for Benx. Igsher and Ubra pulled open numerous doors, the noise of their boots running down corridors resounding on the comlink, and all the while Emerald was giving commands to Team Two who also left their positions. Eagerly working to correctly represent the operatives' locations on the map in front of them, Benx had no time to look at anything else than the wall and his interface. On the com, noises of people yelling and spells being cast resounded, echoing from the ceiling of the operators' room. Except for the obvious fact that the game was afoot, Eos had a hard time understanding what was going on, but the four operators stayed completely calm. Apparently, everything was going exactly as planned.

Or not. Just a second after Eos had finished the thought, the sharp sound of a magical lightning bolt rattled on the comlink, and Igsher let out a surprised yell as he dashed behind cover.

"Naikra!" he shouted, followed by the sound of footsteps as he quickly changed his hiding spot just moments before another deep voice countered with a calm "Release!". Igsher slammed a door and ran down a corridor, panting. In the operators' room, Eos and Ienge exchanged a shocked look.

"Special adversary sighted," whispered Igsher into his comlink, his marker on the wall indicating that he had retreated around several corners and was now dangerously far from the other agents.

"I knew it!" hissed Emerald and looked to Liberty, "Of course they'd have someone there after those information leaks — Hand, on the ready!"

Heaven's Hand, who until now had stood silently in front of the numerous pieces of paper on the wall, hastily nodded and kneeled down, opening his briefcase and searching through documents within.

"Large man, grey coat with blue pattern," described Igsher, still panting, "Impressive beard, knows lightning and Voicemute—"

"It's Ekses!" exclaimed Heaven's Hand, looking up from the documents and turning to the comlink device.

"Ekses?" replied Igsher, "Is he even still alive?"

"Yes, and his technique has improved," said Liberty in a concerned tone, "Specializes in defensive spellslinging, trademark Reflect protects him from most attacks, knows a wide variety of disruption and utility spells."

"Yeah, I know all that," said Igsher, accompanied by the sound of him standing up and getting ready again, "Just keep my back free."

On the wall, Benx had added a fifth marker indicating the assumed position of the mysterious Ekses.

"He's not the only one!" yelled the Professor suddenly, drawing Eos' attention away from the map again, "There is another one here, female with brown hair."

Heaven's Hand rushed back to his briefcase.

"I think it's Kwia Menney, but I can take her down," continued Ubtra, "Clearance for action?"

"No!" said Emerald in a sharp tone, "Retreat westwards and regroup with Igsher at Overpass! Team Two, status!"

"Thirty seconds to reach the conflict, Madam," replied Intergard, seemingly completely untouched by the action that was happening on the comlink.

On the wall, the hastily updated locations of the four agents showed that in order to get anywhere near the prisoners' cells, the two Teams would need to get past Ekses and Kwia.

"Regroup as four!" ordered Emerald, followed by muttered confirmations from the agents. Next to her wheelchair, Liberty crossed his arms and took a deep breath. It didn't need a word from Emerald for him to know that she was expecting her assistant operator to come up with a plan within the next few seconds.

"Direct teleport is our best bet," he said after a while, whispering to Emerald while signaling Benx to disable the recoding function on the comlink, "As long as the disruptors are down, there is no reason to fight them, especially not against a defense specialist such as Ekses. We should just teleport into the cell block while we can."

"It's a trap and you know it, Liberty," answered Emerald, looking up to him, "Once we are in there, somebody will restore the security system and we won't get out."

"But our line-up counters them completely," continued Liberty quickly, knowing that time was too short to discuss the situation in detail, "Ubtra can take down Menney and then we have three wizards against Ekses, he won't be able to take it."

"But reinforcements are already on their way and the stakes are far too high," said Emerald with a decisive tone, almost shouting, "If I lose these agents, the company is done for!"

There was a tense pause.

"Set up private connection to Intergard!" commanded Emerald finally, and Benx obeyed with haste.

"This is Central on private connection, where are you?"

"Ten seconds until regroup, Madam," was Intergard's immediate response.

"Set up an exit portal to secure your escape."

"Madam, are you sure?"

Intergard sounded surprised — She probably had thought along the same lines as Liberty.

"Do it!" ordered Emerald loudly, and Intergard confirmed reluctantly.

Benx quickly adjusted the markers, now converging on Igsher's position near the area nicknamed Overpass. There was a tense atmosphere in the operators' room — Eos could almost feel the pressure that Emerald was under. Indeed, if this mission was a failure and the worst was to happen, the agency was finished. There was no way they would be able to continue without these four experts.

Emerald didn't give away any hint that she was struggling from it, however — Signaling Benx to restart the open connection, she continued on the comlink.

"To all agents, Intergard is preparing your escape route. Professor and Igsher, confront the H-E operatives to create space for her! Elettra, stay with your teammate!"

A doubled "Confirmed!" echoed on the connection, and the sound of Ubtra and Igsher running down the hallway was audible. Only seconds later, they made contact with Ekses and

Kwia, and a number of sharp noises from lightning and fire spells, interrupted by the metallic fizzles of Ekses' shields, resounded in the operators' room. Eos was on the edge of his seat — The duel that was happening might have been some distance away, but he felt as if he was standing right next to it. The sounds of the various spells, all familiar to him, gave a clear picture of what was happening even without him being able to see it — Igsher was trying to overload Ekses' shields with a barrage of weaker spells as he was approaching him to get in position for close-range, but the ominous H-E wizard was deflecting all of it.

"Haste!" echoed Ekses' deep voice through the comlink, followed immediately by Igsher shouting "Release!" and the rattling of the artefacts in his hand and on his famous belt.

"Sether!"

"Cancel!"

Then, a muffled beat, followed by a quick succession of hand-to-hand maneuvers, signaled that Igsher had succeeded in closing the gap. In the operators' room, Eos almost fell over from leaning forward, eager to catch every little sound coming from the comlink device. After all, this was one of his heroes at work, and it was looking good so far.

"Elettra, calm down!" came Intergard's voice from the other team, suddenly interrupting the chaos of the duel.

"Shut it, Kwifeldis, I'm not going home without my brother."

"Elettra, No!"

Emerald sat up tensely.

"I damn knew it," she muttered.

"What's going on, Intergard? Talk to us!" shouted Liberty, Benx already at the wall to adjust the markers.

"She's run off, Sir. What do you want me to do?"

"Leave the circle for later," commanded Emerald immediately, "Get her back, I can't afford to have her mess up our progression!"

"Confirmed," said Intergard and jumped to her feet to pursue.

For a while, nobody talked, and the only thing Eos could hear was the sounds of fists punching, bodies being slammed to the wall, spells dashing back and forth between Igsher and Ekses, and muttered cursing whenever the young spellslinger missed an opportunity to strike against his mysterious opponent.

"This is Professor," said Ubra finally, after almost a minute of fighting, "I've taken down Kwia Menney, she's unconscious. Next step?"

Emerald nodded to Benx, who hastily updated the agents' positions, and Liberty let out a sigh, deep in thought. Heaven's Hand already opened his mouth to say something, but a sudden sound of something hitting the floor interrupted him. He exchanged an alarmed look with Emerald and Liberty.

"Professor, what's going on? Answer!" said Emerald loudly, and Eos could hear a hint of concern in her otherwise completely neutral voice.

For a second, there was silence on the comlink. Even Igsher and Ekses seemed to have reached an impasse in their battle, and Intergard's running footsteps gradually came to a halt as she realized that something was going on.

Clacking noises signaled that somebody was taking off the bracelet that contained the comlink, and then an ominous male voice that belonged to neither of the agents resounded in the operators' room.

"Professor down," said the voice slowly. Liberty took a step towards the comlink device in alarm.

"Who is this? Identify yourself!" commanded Emerald loudly.

"Can you not tell, my dear Emerald? After all the time we two have spent together—"

"Silence!" Emerald's voice once again became the high-pitched shriek that Eos had heard at the briefing. She took a deep breath to calm herself, but it was obvious to all that now she was struggling to stay professional and detached.

"So you are the traitor after all," she said slowly. "I should have known from the start."

Behind the operators, Eos gasped for air as he realized who the mysterious attacker was. He had talked to that same rough voice on this first mission, and now it was suddenly so clear to him that he wondered how he could have forgotten it. It was Sarc.

"Seems I've hit a bit of a weak spot by mentioning our relationship, isn't that right," continued Sarc with a menacing snicker.

"Not one more word, you bastard," whispered Emerald, crooked in her wheelchair, "I'll have your head for this!"

"Not so fast," replied Sarc, "First let me give you some advice. You might be wondering why I would show up at H-E all of a sudden. Well, let me tell you. I don't work for them, nor do I work for you anymore, and I don't have any business here. The only reason I came was to strike down one or two of your people and send a message into that deranged head of yours."

Emerald hissed in disgust, but didn't say anything.

"There will come a time when you will wish you hadn't turned me down all those years ago, Emerald. You will realize that the secrets you've told me during those nights alone in your quarters aren't safe with me anymore, and if you really are as good as everyone says, I don't need to tell you that the times where you could control me are long gone. This is my retribution to you, Emerald, and you will feel it!"

Nobody dared to say a word. Emerald turned her wheelchair and went over to the empty wall in silence. Liberty and Heaven's Hand exchanged a look, thunderstruck. On the bench Eos couldn't believe what he was hearing. Then, Emerald looked up again.

"I don't have anything to say to you, Kelem!" she said loudly. Sarc only replied with a chuckle.

"Your other agents are probably already sneaking up on me, so I guess I'll have to leave you for now," he replied in an amused tone. A second later, the sound of two agents starting to sprint down the corridors confirmed it.

"I have him!" shouted Elettra between pants as she dashed around a corner towards Sarc and the knocked-out Professor, "He's trying to teleport out!"

"See you next time, my love! Best regards to Liberty!"

And with that, Sarc threw Ubra's comlink to the floor, followed by a metallic fizzle of him reflecting Elettra's attack before the familiar sound of a Jasper Gemstone hitting the floor and activating the portal announced that he was gone.

"It was him, I can confirm it," said Elettra slowly, trying to catch new breath as she checked up on the Professor, "Ubtra is fine, no injury."

Benx, struggling to snap out of the trance-like state he had been in due to witnessing all this from up close, updated the agents' positions again, revealing that Intergard and Igsher had almost reached Elettra and the downed Professor. Apparently they both had picked up on the idea of sneaking up on Sarc, which Eos took as an impressive display of their ability to think straight even under this kind of pressure.

"Madam, the mission is still ongoing, what is our next move?" asked Intergard calmly. As usual, her voice gave no indication at all that she was in the middle of a positively alarming series of events.

"Can we—" started Liberty with an interrogative look to Emerald.

"No!" she replied immediately in a decisive voice, "Not without the Professor. We've wasted far too much time and there will be reinforcements any second now. It's too much risk!"

"Madam, I—"

"Silence, Elettra! We all get it, he is your brother, but I will not gamble with the future of my life's work for your pleasure!" yelled Emerald.

There was an awkward pause.

"I understand, Madam," said Elettra finally. There was a muffled sound that Eos interpreted as Intergard patting her on the shoulder.

"Good," replied Emerald, "Get out of there. We've had enough surprises for one evening."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

These Boots Are Made For Walking

Needless to say, the mission debriefing was not a pleasant thing for anyone involved. Granted, each of the four agents had performed as expected, and Heaven's Hand even commended Igsher on standing his ground against an arguably better positioned Ekses during their move-by-move analysis of the fight (which Eos followed closely), but all in all it came down to the fact that they had failed to rescue Oredchimegdi, which of course affected Elettra most of all.

And then, there was the thing with Sarc. Emerald was furious about it. Eos had only known her for two days now, but even he could tell that she was gravely unsettled by what the old agent had said during his surprise appearance at H-E. Additionally, the fact that nobody had seen it coming, not even Heaven's Hand who was more or less supposed to anticipate things like these, was gnawing at the morale and confidence of the whole team. The way Sarc had just casually appeared at a hostile corporate facility, obviously informed about what the agency was planning there and without any effort dancing around their four best agents just like that, was a heavy blow to Central and the operatives. Elettra was offended by the fact that she hadn't gotten to Sarc's position in time to stop him, and the Professor himself, although trying to mask it, was obviously embarrassed that he had allowed all this by letting his guard down in the first place after the fight with Kwia Menney.

One thing was certain: H-E would not give them another shot at rescuing Oredchimegdi anytime soon. Their security had been tight, and it was certain to be even better now, not even mentioning the obvious fact that the prisoners would be moved to a new, unknown location without delay. It was clear that Central couldn't afford to pursue this operation any further.

It would have been a fatal blow against the agency in its current state if not for the arguably more pressing matter of Operation Timely Resurrection — After all, in the category of agents to be rescued, Enster and his magical specialists clearly took top priority. Emerald quickly steered the gathered agents' attention back towards the run planned for the next night, and away from the things Sarc had disclosed about her personal life. Eos was certain that he couldn't be the only one left wondering what exactly had been the nature of the relationship between her and Sarc.

When Eos fell into his bed one hour later, his head was still stuffed with questions about what had happened. He might not have shown it too much, but Sarc's sudden reappearance and his blatant confession to have deserted to Kengnatz had affected him in a terrible way, and he still

couldn't quite believe that the clever old man he had worked with only a week earlier was truly supposed to be his enemy now.

The next morning, Intergard once again woke up the four boys with thundering blasts from the room below — Apparently, the rule of letting agents sleep in after night missions was not in effect while she was around. At operatives' breakfast, Liberty announced that hand-to-hand training during the afternoon would have to be cancelled. As Intergard had suspected earlier, the Professor was busy preparing for the run at Kengnatz, and everybody understood that this was definitely more important.

"We will be having a slight adjustment in our training schedule because of this," said Intergard after Liberty had finished, eyeing the four sleepy boys and in particular Ienge's wild pillow-induced 'hairstyle' (if you could call it that), "As I said yesterday, we will be rotating the pairs, so Keros now works with me, Shichal will be with Ankuro, and Mister Fancy-Hair here will have the pleasure of a spellslinging lesson from Igsher."

Eos was about to add that Ienge should better not get his hopes up, but decided against it.

"During the afternoon I'd like to polish Shichal's fencing a bit more, but we'll have to see about that because if I know Liberty well, the evening before a big mission like this is always filled with last-minute announcements and changes of plan."

She took a big gulp from her mug filled with water (although spiced up with the same mysterious liquid that Eos had seen her pour into her drinks before) and added: "Not really my style, but I guess it can't be helped."

She stood up, ignoring Eos' and Leit's "Understood, Madam!" and turning to leave.

"Ah, and another thing," she said, stopping with a look over her shoulder towards the boys, "The overnight continental flights will be arriving soon, let's see if there is anybody joining us on our noble cause."

She chuckled and left the kitchen.

It was true, thought Eos. If there were any agents on their way from other hideouts following the emergency order Central had sent out, they would be arriving on these flights. He really hoped to see some familiar faces, maybe even one or two of his former classmates. The cheerful reunion with his friends he had been looking forward to ever since Osrakey had revealed that Eos would be returning to the White Cave had been dreadfully cancelled, and this news sparked some hope inside of him that he might yet get to team up once more with some friend or other.

And indeed, it seemed the heavens were smiling down on the poor souls within Emerald's troubled agency for once: One hour after Intergard had mentioned the overnight flights at breakfast, when Eos was just getting ready for the morning session with his personal hedging hero, a loud commotion sounding from the entrance hall of the house announced that somebody had indeed arrived and was now being welcomed by a laughing Heaven's Hand, who was trying to uphold a façade of pleasant surprise but who in reality was just very grateful to have more people hitting the corporate floor on the coming mission.

Eos rushed down to ground level, almost falling on the stairs after passing a tired-looking Elettra trying to get away from the social obligations waiting in the entrance hall, and when he

casually jumped down the last couple of stairs in an effort to look as if he had just noticed there was something going on, Eos saw two men talking to Heaven's Hand, their jackets still over their shoulders and their backs facing towards him. One of the men turned around at the sudden sound, and grinned widely as he saw Eos. It was Sarb Rekkar, the easy-going scout agent that had been Intergard's partner on their missions in Erkom.

"Well, if it isn't the hedge boy!" he exclaimed loudly and they shook hands, "Glad to see you, my friend. Actually, I'm just pleased to have clothes on this time!"

He let out a laugh and Eos, who only now remembered that on the first occasion that the two had met Rekkar had been only sparsely dressed, could help but join in.

"I'm glad to see you two are getting along, but don't I deserve a handshake as well?" asked a familiar noise from behind Rekkar, and Eos looked over his colleague's shoulder to see who the owner was. With a gentle motion of a large hand, Rekkar was pushed aside and a grinning face appeared from behind him: Chief Operator Han Osrakey.

"Han!" exclaimed Eos, holding himself back just in time from giving his superior a tight hug, and going with the formal handshake instead, "I'm so pleased to see you unharmed, Sir!"

"Well, turns out it wasn't worth it to raid the Erkom base just for a second-rate operator, apparently," replied Osrakey and turned back to Heaven's Hand.

"Are there any rooms left unoccupied here? I suppose you have a full house these days!"

He added an ironic smile in an effort to not let the good mood be affected by the agency's dire situation.

"Yes, we have," answered Heaven's Hand, "It's not big, but it should be enough for both of you. This way, please!"

He guided the two agents to the stairs and they disappeared to the upper floors, Eos still standing on the thick carpet of the entrance hall, grinning. As it turned out, his wish to see Osrakey again soon had been granted. He didn't even want to start thinking about how much better everything would be now that he was here, especially the food, of course. In a profession that served mostly a wide arrangement of soups, quality cooking was something to look out for, and now they definitely had it.

Still smiling, Eos made his way to one of the large living rooms towards the garden. When he entered, Intergard was already sitting comfortably in one of the armchairs, reading the newspaper with a tired look on her face. At the sound of the door, she looked up and suddenly raised an arm, grinning evilly.

"Lightning!" she yelled, but this time Eos was ready. With a slam onto the back of his hand, he raised a shield in front of him a good second before the crackling bolt of white light reached him, sending it back to Intergard, who caught the spell with her finger and absorbed its energy just like she had released it. The metallic sound of the Reflector echoed back from the ceiling into the silence between them — Eos, smiling triumphantly for having anticipated Intergard's surprise attack, just stood in the frame of the door for some seconds, before his teacher tossed away the newspaper with a fling of her hand and stood up.

"Only one week, and you already know me that well," she said slowly, "Very good job, Mister Keros."

“Madam,” replied Eos proudly, convinced that Intergard would shoot out another bolt, but she just calmly reached into her jacket and pulled out a pocket watch to check the time.

“I hear you practiced Naikra yesterday?” she said, making it sound as if Igsher had told her, but they both knew that in reality Intergard had overheard him practicing in the attic.

“Yes, but I had no success, as you know, Madam,” answered Eos slowly.

Intergard looked up and met his gaze for a short moment.

“Do you want to continue on that?” she asked plainly, knowing full well that the previous day had not been a fun experience for the young hedger.

“Well, in fact—” Eos started, unsure how to phrase his opinion, “—I’m not convinced it is going to lead me anywhere, Madam.”

Intergard nodded, gesturing Eos to come closer.

“A city isn’t built in one day, junior. You know that.”

Eos nodded.

“You’ve been practicing Stupefy for months without achieving anything, but it didn’t stop you from trying. Yet here you are, giving up on Naikra after only one day. I wonder why that is.”

She spoke with an unemotional tone that made it hard for Eos to interpret what she had said. Indeed, this conversation made him feel caught and vulnerable all of a sudden.

“It’s— It’s not my own lack of progress, Madam,” he said finally. Intergard nodded, well aware of what he was trying to say.

“You don’t like seeing other people be more successful than yourself, isn’t that right?” she replied, more a general statement than a question. Eos nodded — He hadn’t been able to describe it until now, but Intergard’s words hit the nail on the head. He was jealous.

With a sigh, the large woman sat down in her armchair and pointed to her feet.

“You see those, Eos?”

Eos blinked a few times, not understanding what Intergard was talking about.

“These boots are made for walking,” she said in a completely serious tone, still pointing to her heavy leather boots.

“That’s what I expect of them, that’s what they can do, and that’s what they will do.”

She looked up again.

“What about you, Eos? What are you made for?”

Eos didn’t know what to say. He had a suspicion about where this could be going, but couldn’t think of anything meaningful to reply to Intergard’s question.

“Emerald expects you to be a hedger for her company, and you *can* be that — You worked hard to learn it, and now you have what it takes, three times over. Isn’t that right?”

Eos nodded, still confused. Intergard stood up again, on her face a strict and unaffected impression.

“Self-doubt and jealousy will destroy your skills,” she said plainly. “You can’t afford that, and neither can the agency. Emerald might not admit it yet, but in the coming days you are as desperately needed to ensure this company’s survival as I or any other agent. And neither Emerald nor I can afford to allow you to perform poorly in any way.”

She took a deep breath, her eyes still fixed on Eos.

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-Yes, Madam,” replied Eos immediately — He was positively terrified of Intergard’s massive figure towering over him, and her words cut into the fragile idea that Eos and her had been getting along rather well like a knife through butter. If he had to admit it, Eos was close to tears.

But then, Intergard relaxed, and all of the ominous menace in her voice gave way to a more gentle, caring tone once more.

“Excellent,” she said, turning away to face the large windows leading out into the garden.

“So your willingness to be good is more powerful than your ego, after all.”

In the end, they only did breathing exercises. Intergard couldn’t help Eos in his struggle to learn the Naikra spell, nor did she believe that he would be able to learn his so-desired Palaxefaiz in time, but of course she knew a lot about what made wizards powerful and versatile in general, and she did her best to pass this knowledge down onto Eos. She told him that his footwork and stance while casting were terrible, and at first Eos thought she was joking. After all, what did the movement of his feet have to do with the power of his spells? But in the end, after they had gone through a long series of rather exhausting drills that had Eos jump back and forth in quick succession, shift his weight in strange ways while casting his spells, and rotate his arms in a ridiculous manner while shouting the names of his techniques, he finally began to understand that there was more to ‘a wizard’s footwork’ than simply getting in range for his shots and dodging away from incoming fire. Then again, the more Eos got the hang of Intergard’s strange exercises, the more he saw that there was still a huge gap between his skills as a wizard and those of a professional spellslinger like Igsher, and it made him somewhat regret that his affinity for knowledge and technical things had made him choose hedging as the area he wanted to specialize in, and not the much cooler ‘other side’ of professional wizardry. He couldn’t help but wonder how well-versed in casting powerful spells he could have been now, if only he had specialized in it during class.

“Madam, sometimes I wonder if hedging was the right thing for me,” he said in-between gasps for air as he jumped back and forth on the carpet between the large armchairs.

“If I look at somebody like Agent Igsher, or even my friends, I can’t help but feel that I would have liked to do the work they are doing now.”

He tried to hide it, but it was obvious that he was referring to Leit.

“I mean—” He took a new breath, unsure of how to say it, “—If I think about what Igsher can do with his training, I feel somewhat— incompetent. If you understand what I mean, Madam.”

Intergard frowned and raised her hand, signaling Eos to stop jumping and listen.

“Now you better pay attention, Eos, this is precisely the thing that you can’t allow yourself to do,” she said, shaking her head, “Don’t think about what you *might* have learned if you were a spellslinger, think about what you *have learned* as a hedger. Focus on your skills, how many times do I have to say it?”

She wasn’t annoyed or angry with Eos, but he nonetheless felt stupid for having mentioned it, and of course for thinking that way — After all, Intergard was completely right.

“Let’s call it a day. You’ve done enough.”

She picked up the newspaper that was still lying on the floor and turned to the door leading outside into the garden, her eyes wandering over the surface of the glass absent-mindedly as if she was considering something that was bothering her.

“Good luck with Elettra tomorrow,” she said, looking out into the green, and then adding with a serious look back to Eos: “Just don’t lose your focus, Eos. Whatever you do, don’t lose your focus.”

She pulled open the door.

“It’s what makes you a professional.”

Still affected by a mixture of weary discomfort and the feeling that Intergard had shown him a valuable truth, Eos went up to the attic, intending to practice his Naikra a bit more — With hand-to-hand training cancelled and most of the other agents out of the house or busy preparing for the big mission tonight, there was a strange silence filling the hallways and rooms of the building, and to an untrained eye it really gave a convincing impression of being the long-abandoned residence of some landlord that had lived decades ago.

When he pushed up the trapdoor leading into the attic, Eos was surprised to find Benx lying on his bed, jacket and shirt thrown to the floor next to him and his eyes closed, breathing slowly and steadily. Careful not to wake him up, Eos sneaked across the wooden floor to his own bed, but without raising his head, Benx suddenly opened his mouth.

“I’m not asleep, don’t worry,” he said calmly, suppressing a yawn.

“Why are you undressed like that?” asked Eos, who couldn’t help but notice that Benx had done the same on the evening before and who now wanted to comment on it in some way, feeling that he should help if his former classmate was struggling in any way. Only a second later, he realized how differently he was thinking about Benx now as opposed to yesterday before their brief talk, and added a casual: “It’s not summer anymore, you know.”

“It’s because of Liberty,” Benx answered, still not opening his eyes, “He gave me a crash course in— Well, I don’t even know what it was, but it was exhausting like hell.”

He raised his head and looked at Eos.

“Something like boxing or hand-of-god, he didn’t say!”

“Hah,” huffed Eos, “I wish I knew some of those hand-of-god moves, the whole system is jaw-dropping. Give me a lesson when you get the time!”

Benx let himself fall back into his sheets and Eos had to admit to be involuntarily reminded of Ienge’s remark the day before — One could say that Benx’s shirt and jacket not purely decorated his otherwise rather ordinary figure, but also covered up some other, but not less appealing, features. Eos quickly pulled his eyes away at the realization.

“I don’t really remember much of it,” confessed Benx with a chuckle, “But I can tell you that Liberty is one impressive fighter, that much is sure.”

“Really?” replied Eos, surprised. He had always thought Liberty (or, as he had known him until only a few days ago: Central) was purely an operator that had nothing to do with the actual physicality of the job.

“I think he was a field agent some time in the past,” continued Benx, “Otherwise there is no way he would be in that kind of shape. It’s honestly alarming how strong and fast he is — I didn’t stand a chance.”

Eos let out a muttered “Huh”, genuinely surprised by what his roommate was saying. Or maybe it was time to replace those words like ‘colleague’, ‘former classmate’, and ‘roommate’ with a simpler one: ‘friend’. He wanted to reply something, but a sound from the trapdoor interrupted him.

“Oh, you kids got a great room up here!” exclaimed Osrakey as he pushed his head up through the frame of the trapdoor, “I wish I had gotten here earlier to call dibs on this!”

“Why hello, Mister Operator,” said Benx, sitting up with a glance to the smiling man, “How can we be of service?”

“Actually,” said Osrakey, “I only need Eos.”

Benx frowned and fell back into his bed. The operator couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

“Sorry, Agent Kurdibt, your expertise will be needed to sufficient lengths tonight!” he added, signaling Eos to follow him downstairs.

“I’ve been asked to run a rather important errand,” explained Osrakey as they walked down the stairs towards the entrance hall, “And I would like you to come along.”

“Really, Sir?” replied Eos, genuinely surprised, “What kind of errand are you talking about?”

Osrakey suddenly grinned, obviously recalling the breakfast some days ago when he had told Eos and Leit a similar thing, to their great delight (and later, embarrassment).

“It’s the acquisition of an important asset for tonight,” he answered after giving a short greeting to Liberty at the door as they left the building, “And this time, for real.”

He didn’t say what the asset in question was, however — As they walked down the quiet street away from the Grey House, Eos still had no idea what the mysterious object could be this time. Osrakey was cheerfully whistling, but Eos suspected that he was simply pretending in order to fully relish Eos’ puzzlement.

The operator led Eos down a series of narrow streets towards the city center, and eventually onto a large plaza somewhere north-east of Old Graveyard — Eos had to admit that despite having grown up in Ilierka, he didn’t know this part of the city very well, and he couldn’t recall the name of the neighborhood, nor of the plaza itself.

“This is the Western Half-Weekly Market,” said Osrakey over his shoulder, as if he had guessed what the boy behind him was thinking. Eos nodded, not sure whether he understood what Osrakey was trying to say with this.

After making their way through countless busy (or less busy) passers-by gathered between the many stands selling all manners of vegetables, bread, pottery, and other goods, they reached the center of the plaza and Osrakey leant against the large marble fountain, his eyes hastily searching the merchants’ stalls as if looking for something specific.

“He should be here any minute,” he said with a sideways glance to Eos, “Normally he spends the morning in front of the airport and then starts to canvass the other markets around the city at midday. If he isn’t busy dealing with something else, he will be here soon.”

Slowly but surely, Eos was beginning to suspect what Osrakey had been asked to do. Indeed, with this hint, he was almost sure that he knew what “important asset” the operator had talked about: Information. During class, Eos had been to a meeting with an information broker once, but only for a minor clarification and never something serious.

“Uhm, Operator, if you would allow a question—” began Eos hesitantly, trying to find the proper words to express something he had been thinking about for some time now. Osrakey looked up with a kind smile, his eyes squinting because of the bright sun.

“Operator, have you worked with Agent Sarc on many missions in the past?”

Osrakey nodded, understanding what this question was about.

“Well, not exactly,” he said, “In fact, prior to the missions we had at Erkom I was running mostly unimportant equipment raids, and the roster usually consisted of newbies like you. Although he has a huge reputation within the agency, I have only met the man a couple of times during my career.”

Eos didn’t answer — He had hoped for Osrakey to tell him that he had worked with Sarc countless times, and that he could never imagine him (or Sibrodi for that matter) to defect just like that.

“Desertion happens all the time in this business,” said Osrakey with an emotionless tone, revealing that Eos’ thoughts were easy to guess from his face.

“I mean, of course it’s sad — But what can you do? Money and power just have a way of talking to people.”

The operator’s eyes searched the plaza again, but didn’t seem to find the person they were looking for just yet.

“You see, the thing that bothers me most about all this,” he added, returning his attention to Eos, “Is that he reappeared at H-E during Elettra’s mission yesterday. If you change sides, that’s not something you do.”

He took a pause, gazing down one of the busy streets in thought.

“He makes it look as if we were some amateur club that you can toy with in your spare time. I mean, Heaven’s Hand told me all about it this morning — Sarc was just dancing around Emerald and Liberty on that mission. He wasn’t even meant to be there!”

Eos nodded. All of this didn’t seem to make much sense, and Osrakey was completely right that the way Sarc had acted (and more importantly, how he had gotten away with it afterwards) was so disrespectful and provocative that Central and Heaven’s Hand were understandably frustrated about it.

“He just arranged everything so well,” continued Osrakey with a sigh, “He didn’t even have to fight anyone!”

“Well, apart from deflecting Agent Ankuro’s attack at the end,” corrected Eos.

“Yes,” replied the operator slowly, a concerned look on his face as he scratched his chin.

“I wonder about that...”

Eos looked up.

“Why, Sir?” he asked, “Is it unusual?”

Osrakey hesitated before answering, apparently struggling to find a good way to say what he was thinking.

“You see,” he began, “Heaven’s Hand showed me the file he has on Sarc. And it doesn’t contain any mention of him knowing the Reflect spell.”

There was a pause. Eos was confused.

“You mean, Sir—” he replied, “—He practiced it without telling the agency?”

Osrakey nodded.

“...Which would mean that he was planning this desertion for a long time.”

They didn't continue the talk after that. For some minutes, the two agents just stood there in the sun, their eyes going up and down the plaza for a sign of the person Osrakey was planning to meet. After a while, the operator started a new topic.

“You know, I visited Isardja of Erkom twice while we were at the hideout there,” he said, turning to Eos while still keeping an eye on any unusual individuals entering from the four streets onto the plaza, “First with Agent Alagdi and then again with Agent Shichal. Alagdi was rather cute on that trip, I have to say — He had never been to such a business meeting before.”

Eos realized that Osrakey was probably mentioning this only because of the look on his face, revealing that he was wondering how this mysterious gathering would unfold.

“Yes, they told me about it,” he replied, “So we are going to meet with an information broker after all?”

“Not just any information broker,” whispered Osrakey with a telling grin, “More along the lines of *the* information broker.”

They stood at the elaborate fountain for another minute. Then, a tram stopped at the small station at the eastern end of the plaza as usual and a number of people left the wagon. The last person to step out into the midday sun was a man, and Eos immediately saw that he was visibly unlike any of the other passengers. And despite the fact that Eos had never seen the man they called ‘The silent king of Ilierka’, it took him no more than a second to realize that this was him.

“He's here,” said Osrakey and pushed himself off the stone of the fountain towards the tram station.

Eos observed the mysterious man closely as they approached each other across the plaza. He was most likely in his thirties, had a tall figure and black hair that was braided into numerous thick strands dangling from one side to the other as he moved. He carried a tired-looking checkered cat in one arm, with the other buried deep into the pocket of a large and elaborately decorated overcoat that touched the ground with each step and didn't really suit the weather well — His saturated skin was littered with freckles and a discreet moustache framed his subtly smiling mouth. His vibrant eyes were already fixed on Osrakey while they closed in on each other as if he had noticed a friend or business colleague at the other side of the plaza. As he came closer, Eos noticed large rings on nearly all of his fingers, numerous strings and patterned ribbons strapped around his wrists, and even a small earring in his left ear. There was no mistaking it: This man was the famous ‘puller of strings’, the ‘shadow whisperer’, or in short — Ketten of Ilierka.

Osrakey cleared his throat as they met at the edge of the market.

“How now, my love! Why is your cheek so pale?” he asked in an official tone, struggling to mask that he was slightly uncomfortable both with the fact that he was talking to one of the most important men in the country, and because of the content of the secret phrase, “How chance the roses there do fade so fast?”

Ketten let out an amused “Ouhh...”, shifting his head with a grin.

“Belike for want of rain, which I could well betem them from the tempest of my eyes!” he responded. Osrakey nodded, and with a turn to Eos, he added quietly: “He will talk to us.”

Ketten led the two agents to one of the streets branching off from the plaza and further down into a small backyard behind one of the tall rows of houses that towered up on either side of the busy streets.

“I hear Liberty sends you, my boy?” asked Ketten as he made himself comfortable on a rusty garden chair, gently stroking the head of the cat in his arm, “What does the famous S&E need from a humble trader like me?”

He let out a chuckle. Without doubt he went through this procedure multiple times every day.

“I am here to double-check if there is any new information regarding Kengnatz and their activities here in Ilierka,” replied Osrakey with a back as straight as that of a soldier.

“Oh, there is many things fitting that description,” said Ketten, “But I suppose you are interested in anything concerning your raid tonight?”

Eos couldn't help but shudder at the sound of Ketten so casually showing that he knew all about the agency's plans. Of course, Eos was well aware that an information broker like him could never afford betraying one of his customers by selling away this kind of information even if he held it, as he would instantly lose all his credibility, and therefore customers — Still, it was slightly unnerving to know that this man was probably well aware of almost every major corporation's plans here in Ilierka, not to mention intelligence companies like the agency. Even if Eos understood that their business secrets would be more or less safe with Ketten, it was still terrifying to imagine what might happen if one of the agency's enemies were to get a hold of him.

That was of course the main danger for any information dealer — The knowledge they possessed made them very promising targets for almost everyone on the political stage, so they were always surrounded by enemies on all sides. It was only natural that the most important skill in such a business was the ability to hide and evade the greedy corporate grasp. Yet, the reality of a broker's everyday job meant that they continually had to make themselves vulnerable, always being available to be approached by clients that might turn into mortal enemies at any moment. The only way for them to protect themselves was to always have something in store against everybody — Some dark secret or important document that they could use to basically blackmail everyone who approached them, all to assure a clean environment for them to make business and to prevent their customers from betraying them if given even the hint of a chance — For certain the most difficult profession in the whole business. Eos was certain that Ketten had this kind of security in place even now as he was negotiating with Osrakey — Truly, the more he thought about it, the scarier this hardly imposing man became.

Then on the other hand, it had to be kept in mind that brokers were only very rarely pursued by anyone. For large corporations like Kengnatz, not making more enemies than absolutely necessary was the most important thing on the political scene, and in an environment like this one, where everybody knew everything soon after it happened and where nothing stayed secret for very long, it was often far too risky for anyone to try and capture an information broker for their knowledge if it meant that soon afterwards, a dozen or more other corporations might see you as just a bit too powerful for comfort. If money wasn't a problem, the corps preferred to

simply buy any intelligence they needed from the brokers legitimately, instead of gaining an unnecessary reputation for violence.

"Well I guess it's decided then," concluded Ketten, pulling Eos back into reality as he finished his bargaining with Osrakey, "I will be expecting the money in the usual spot by tomorrow."

"Of course," said Osrakey quickly, and nodded to reinforce it, "Always a pleasure to do business with you, Ketten."

The cat meowed, and Ketten shrugged.

"The feeling is mutual. Now, this is the latest news from Kengnatz Magical."

He reached into one of the pockets of his long coat and Eos almost expected him to draw out some important document or other, but when Ketten's hand reappeared, it was only holding a long smoking rod tinted in a blueish color and decorated with elaborate markings indicating the expensive brand.

"You have fire, boy?" asked Ketten with a sideways look to Eos, who took a second to understand that the broker was asking him to light his rod with a fire spell. Without doubt Ketten had guessed at a glance that Eos was a hedger — Or maybe there was even some leaked information going around about him...

"Uhm, sorry—" stuttered Eos. He hadn't expected to be addressed by the broker directly.

"That's a shame," replied Ketten and produced a small lighter from another pocket. He took two deep inhales from the smoking rod before returning his attention to Osrakey, who still stood in front of him patently, his stature straight like a plank.

"You see", began Ketten, "I have reason to assume that our dear friend Nora Lephon might be better informed in this matter than you would like."

"Do you mean to say they suspect an attack?" asked Osrakey with a concerned look.

"Not necessarily, no," replied the information broker. He took another inhale, and Eos assumed that he was building tension on purpose.

"But you have to admit that if they just took your beloved quartermaster hostage, it's only natural to assume that they are expecting a visit from you. After all, 'The Lady' isn't a simpleton."

"If only that were so!" added Osrakey with a sigh of resignation — Eos had to admit that much would be easier if the head of Kengnatz' security forces was not the cunning and smart leader that Nora Lephon obviously was. Indeed, the large-scale strike that she had led against the agency only proved how dangerous she was to any political enemy.

"I'm sure that by now Kengnatz is aware that the location of their prisoners was leaked," continued Ketten, who might well have been the very reason for this in the first place, "The good news for you is that I have a report about how they are not in a position to move them at this time."

"I see," replied Osrakey, scratching his chin in thought as he gave a sideways look to Eos, "So that would mean we can still proceed with the raid as planned."

The cat meowed again.

"Well, yes," countered Ketten, gesturing with his smoking rod, "But keep in mind that they know about their weakness, and Lephon is certainly aware how—" He hesitated for a second, "—motivated, shall we say, your organization is to attack her as soon as possible."

Osrakey took the warning with a nod.

“In summary,” concluded Ketten as he stood up, the thick strands of his hair seesawing back and forth as he moved, “Don’t underestimate the amount of defense that Lephon will have in place. After all—” He turned to the narrow passage leading back out onto the street and into the midday sun, a worried expression on his face as he pointed to Osrakey with his smoking rod, “— I would hate to lose a loyal customer such as Emerald.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Timely Resurrection

Osrakey and Eos returned to the agency as quickly as possible and reported their findings to Heaven's Hand — Soon after, Liberty joined them and expressed the opinion that their assault plan on Kengnatz might have to be changed to accommodate Ketten's warning. Visibly concerned himself, Heaven's Hand agreed, and Eos couldn't help but hope that he might turn out to be part of this mission yet. The three operators left the breakfast room to work on a new strategy, and as he passed Eos next to the door, Liberty gave a telling nod to him — Neither of them said a word, but Eos knew what it meant, and he was delighted. He rushed up to the attic and found Benx and Leit there, playing dice on Benx' bed. They turned their heads tiredly as he entered, and Eos quickly recounted all the events at the meeting with Ketten as well as the possibility of a changed roster and assault plan.

"Well, I guess it doesn't affect either of us," said Leit, shaking his hand to roll the dice, "Benx is operator and I will be on a special mission at the rebel base."

Eos remembered that Ienge and Leit were set to team up with Intergard on this additional assignment — He had almost forgotten about it.

"...But I'm happy to hear that you might be part of the action as well," continued Leit, frowning at his roll, "After all, it must suck to have such a major raid going on and not be part of it."

"Actually," countered Benx while casually winning the round with a perfect roll, "I think I would prefer to stay home in that case, to be honest..."

As the two other boys looked at him with confused faces, he added: "Better not give yourself any chance to screw up if the whole agency depends on it, right?"

There was a pause. After a moment, Leit returned his attention to the dice without a reply, and Eos couldn't help but realize that Benx might be right.

Perhaps it was better if he didn't participate — Indeed, if none of his friends were there and he was to be the only beginner amongst all these experts, it would be a miracle if he didn't inconvenience them in some way. And on a mission like this one, when not only the fate of his mentor Enster, but quite possibly that of the whole agency depended on it, even the slightest error could decide between success or disaster. The more he thought about it, the less he liked the idea, and for a moment he even thought about going back down to the operators and ask Liberty to be excluded from the roster after all — In the end, however, his sense of duty got the better of him, and if Igsher was there, there wasn't really any choice in the first place. But still...

That evening after the operatives' dinner, Osrakey gathered all the agents (including Rekkar, despite the fact that he had arrived only that morning) in the briefing room on the first floor to discuss the new strategy. It was the first and only official briefing for the mission, and Eos had mixed feelings about the fact that he had been invited as well.

"Gentlemen! Ladies — Silence please!" shouted Osrakey over the noise of chatter and mugs on the table, not unlike Heaven's Hand had tried to catch the operatives' attention before Eos' first meeting at the Grey House.

"This is the official meeting for Operation Timely Resurrection, starting tonight at first bell. I will be formally introducing the staff."

Osrakey, who had apparently been appointed by Liberty to hold the meeting in his surprising absence, met each agent's gaze briefly before continuing. As it seemed, he didn't have much trouble talking to all these living legends that were sitting around the long table, although a subtle undertone in his voice revealed that he wasn't entirely untouched either.

"Team Zero will consist of Central as Chiefs of Operation and Heaven's Hand as Analyst — I, Agent Osrakey, will take the position of Mission Coordinator and Agent Kurdibt will be Support Operator."

He gestured towards Benx with a kind smile, but continued his formal speech immediately.

"As you all know, this mission is about the rescue of Chief Quartermaster Enster, at this time in custody within a Kengnatz facility here in Ilierka. Simultaneously, a separate operation will be undertaken at a rebel camp outside the city, but more on that later. First, let me give you an overview of the terrain on this extremely important run."

He produced a small astral server from his pocket and threw it onto the table. As usual, Intergard (in her position as most experienced wizard in the room, Eos guessed) activated it and a large map of a building and the surrounding grounds materialized on the wooden surface.

"Your targets are being held in a secure detention room here," said Osrakey, pointing to a central part of the building, "The whole area is very secure and will be difficult to raid. The expected presence of Kengnatz agents combined with elevated security will make this even more risky. Are there any questions regarding the terrain?"

He gave the agents a moment to inspect the map, but nobody raised a hand. Rekkar briefly looked as if he wanted to say something, but decided against it with a nod and Osrakey continued.

"Good. As you know, Agents Intergard, Alagdi, and Shichal were planned to visit the rebel gathering — Due to updated information that I acquired from information broker Ketten today, there will be a change of plans in this regard. We have reason to assume that Kengnatz is expecting our attack so I have moved Agent Intergard over. She will be participating in the rescue mission instead of the reconnaissance run."

Ienge and Leit exchanged a shocked look. Osrakey couldn't possibly be implying that they were supposed to participate in the rebel meeting on their own, could he?

"I understand that this will make the job harder for you two," added Osrakey with a look in their general direction, confirming that this was indeed his plan, "But it will be fine. Your objective is to stay safe among the rebel leaders and negotiate an information exchange with them as prearranged by Liberty. If you get any opportunity, search for hints about the rebels' involvement with the corporations, but only if you can do so without risk."

He exchanged a glance with Ienge and Leit to confirm that this was alright with them, and although Eos knew that especially Leit was deeply unsettled by the idea of going without Intergard, they nodded.

“Very good. Now for Team assignments.”

Osrakey pulled out a piece of paper and continued: “Team One will infiltrate the facility and free Enster and his men — The assigned agents are Suren Ubtra—” The Professor nodded and readjusted his glasses, “—Sarb Igsher—” Igsher let out a ‘Yep!’ and took a gulp from his mug, “—Elettra Ankuro—” Elettra leant back in her chair with a confirming look to Osrakey, “—And Sarb Rekkar.”

Rekkar nodded as well, and Eos couldn’t tell whether the young man was pleased or concerned about the assignment. On the surface, Rekkar was always in a good mood and not one to worry too much about anything — But sometimes, when he nervously reached for his collar as nobody was looking, or when he readjusted his ponytail with his hands ever so slightly shaking, Eos felt like he could see a different character beneath the mask.

“Good,” continued Osrakey, “Team Two will enter the complex from a different side and deactivate the security system within the cell block. This will allow Team One to teleport out as soon as the prisoners are secure, instead of exiting the building on foot. The agents assigned to this are Kwifeldis Intergard — and Eos Keros.”

Well — This was *very* good news, thought Eos as he leant back in his chair, exchanging a quick look with Intergard. He had been expecting the worst, but if they truly would be working as a two-agent team, perhaps this raid wouldn’t be the total disaster that it might have been with Eos assigned to a larger group of experts. After all, among the experienced operatives here nobody understood him as well as Intergard, and even if she had been shockingly strict to him earlier, Eos was sure that they were getting along very well, and — more importantly — had respect for each other. That much had been clear from his talks with her so far. And besides — He was on a two-man team with Intergard. *A two-man team. With. Intergard.*

He quickly took a large gulp from his mug to hide his excitement.

Osrakey went on to explain the finer points of the strategy, but none of it was unusual or concerning. They finished the meeting twenty minutes later and Eos rushed up to the attic to prepare his things — After all, he would be going to bed soon and when the agents got up at midnight to depart for the mission, all his equipment needed to be ready. Leit and Ienge did the same, and as the three boys chatted casually while packing their stuff, tension, excitement, and a subtle touch of panic were in the air.

Benx was nowhere to be seen. Eos didn’t think too much of it — He was likely just downstairs with the other operators to discuss some last points on the operation.

They went to bed, and to his utter surprise Eos had no trouble sleeping despite being incredibly nervous. When a number of hours later Liberty came to the attic to wake them up, he felt strangely relaxed and comfortable, completely contrasting what he had expected. Maybe you *do* get used to it after a while, he thought as they made their way out of the Grey House.

As on the mission before, the teams split up and took their positions quickly. Leit and Ienge departed for the mountains where in two hours the meeting of the rebel leaders would start, and the rest of the agents took separate night trams across the city to an eerily quiet industrial

area on the east end. Before long they had reached the Kengnatz facility which supposedly held the Chief Quartermaster — The operators were once again stationed in a nearby building from where they would be able to communicate with both teams, and while Team One took point at their spawn location near the front entrance of the large complex, Intergard and Eos stealthily made their way around the infamous corporate hedge to the rear side of the Kengnatz grounds, from where they planned to infiltrate the security office and deactivate the whole facility's silencers via a master control device.

"Are you feeling alright?" asked Intergard quietly as they passed the corner of the hedge, approaching their designated position.

"Very good actually, Madam," replied Eos, who had difficulties keeping up with Intergard's large steps. She shook her head.

"That's a bad sign, junior. Don't let your guard down for even a second, understood?"

"Yes, Madam."

She seemed concerned. They reached the prearranged point and Intergard, disgustedly leaning away as far as possible, pushed aside the branches of the hedge in an effort to clear enough space for her massive figure to pass through.

"I hate this part," she said with a frown, and Eos let out a chuckle before hastily returning to a more serious expression. He could feel his face turn red in the darkness.

After some seconds of struggle, she gave up and reached into one of her pockets. Eos raised his eyebrows in surprise as she produced a polished brass token on a thin chain and held it into the thick green of the hedge. The next moment, the leaves and branches a good arm's length around the artefact burst into flames and were gone immediately — Eos jumped back in shock only to catch himself a second later, and his sense of embarrassment grew even stronger.

"Who cares," said Intergard plainly as she stepped into the hedge.

Within the sphere of burnt-away leaves there was more than enough space for the two agents to fit in, and Eos was pleased that they would be spending their waiting time more comfortably than he had done on his first mission, standing back to back with his hedging hero instead of having pointy branches poking his face from all sides. Nonetheless, he was having difficulties concentrating on the task at hand, and the knowledge that Enster's freedom depended on his success didn't make it any easier.

"Relax, Eos."

"Madam, I—"

"Don't make excuses, the whole district can hear your breath!"

She turned around and grabbed his arm, her eyes piercing through Eos like needles.

"Relax!"

It was not a gentle suggestion, but an order. Eos couldn't respond. After a few seconds of silence and deadly glaring, Intergard let out a sigh and looked towards the unwelcoming building.

"Team Two, in position," she whispered into her comlink, and a confirmation by Osrakey followed closely after.

"We're scouting the guard patrols, wait for my signal," said the operator, and the clicking sound of him switching between the two channels echoed on the two agents' coms. For almost a minute, Eos and Intergard stood motionlessly inside the hedge, around them complete darkness

only illuminated by the few windows scattered along the bleak outside of the facility. Eos could tell that Intergard was silently hoping Osrakey's signal would come as late as possible to give him more time to calm down. She knew he wasn't ready for this.

"Team Two, you're clear to move. It's pattern B," commanded Osrakey after a while, and Intergard gave a telling look to Eos.

"Time for action," she mumbled, and as they both stepped out of the hedge onto Kengnatz ground, Eos could feel his hedging deity's heavy hand on his shoulder for just a second.

The facility was nothing unusual — A slope led down towards the complex, which admittedly had a more interesting architecture than what Eos had seen at H-E, but overall posed the same challenges as any other standard corporate building: None.

They quickly made their way towards the shadow of the brick walls and crept around the towering structure. Eos tried to guess how many floors it could be, but then recalled that Osrakey had explained during the briefing how a main portion of the facility was in fact a network of underground halls beneath his feet. Luckily, the prison cell was on ground level, so it wouldn't be as dangerous to reach. Then again, that wasn't Eos' job anyway, and Team One was more than sufficiently equipped for the task. Pressed against the rough wall, he took another deep breath to calm himself, and they continued their way around the building.

As they reached the end of the outer wall, Intergard peeked around the corner and quickly gestured Eos to follow — Apparently, there was no guard positioned outside the rear entrance. They gathered around the door and Eos pulled out the Norkis Algorithm, but Intergard shook her head.

"No need," she said and put one hand on the locking mechanism. After some unsuccessful tries, a satisfying 'click!' confirmed that she had guessed the right combination. Eos put the Algorithm back to his belt and the feeling of incompetence haunting his mind grew even stronger, but Intergard only chuckled.

"Experience, junior. You'll get there."

Inside, the corridor was dimly lit by a number of Fallos artefacts, and completely empty.

"We're in Second Main, no opposition so far," reported Intergard to the operators.

"As expected, very good," replied Osrakey, "But be careful for traps — Remember that they might expect us."

"Lephon would be a poor councilwoman if she didn't," added Intergard dryly, and they silently made their way towards the guard office.

On the stairs to the second floor they encountered a lone security guard passing around the corner, but Intergard had heard him approaching and easily took out the man with a single slap of her huge hands. The corridor after that was locked with Demonwalls in regular intervals and it took them some time to break through all the locks with Norkis and targeted guessing, but in the end they made it to the large steel door that supposedly led to the main guard office, from where — among other things — the whole building's security system could be deactivated (for 'maintenance purposes', of course) via a panel of switches called a master control device.

"I expected more opposition," said Intergard with a concerned look as she inspected the lock, "Run all trapdoor tests on this, there's no way that lone man downstairs was all of their security measures. I'll check some of the other rooms."

Eos nodded and got right onto it, eager to finally start being helpful. There was not the slightest chance he would not be thorough in his search this time, after what had happened with Sarc on his first mission.

"You have three minutes until the patrol returns," echoed Osrakey's voice on the comlink, and Eos' heart sank noticeably.

"That won't be enough," said Intergard quickly, "How many men are there?"

"Most likely four," answered Osrakey. Intergard and Eos exchanged a concerned look across the corridor.

"Alright, we can deal with this," continued Intergard after a moment, "Clearance for action?"

"Raise no alarms," replied Osrakey immediately, "If you can do that, alright."

Intergard turned back to Eos.

"Can you do Voicemute?"

"No, sorry, Madam," answered Eos. Another highly useful spell that he could not yet do, and another entry on the long list of 'Eos didn't have a spell ready when his partner depended on it'-situations.

"Luckily I can, though," said Intergard and gestured him to come over to the staircase.

"Let's do manual overrides on these three silencers."

She pointed to the small boxes installed at regular intervals on the ceiling along the corridor.

"Then I'll take out the guards with lightning and we'll be fine."

Eos nodded hastily and ran over to the first of the silencers while Intergard started working on the one closest to the stairs. Indeed, it was a good and simple plan — Once the devices were deactivated, the two agents would be at least partially able to cast spells as long as they stayed in this corridor, not unlike what they planned to do to the whole building when they got into the guard office. As soon as they had this option, Intergard would initiate a Voicemute spell to nullify all sounds within the area, and they would have no problem taking out the approaching guards with Intergard's powerful spells, all while making no sound at all to alert the other patrols through comlink. The only question was whether they could disarm the silencers in time.

Eos quickly sketched out a spell circle on the floor directly below the device — Judging from the characteristic double-ticking, it had to be a combined Two-Layer silencer, very similar to what Eos had already beaten during his first mission. Not exactly innovative, nor very secure, he thought as he exchanged a quick look with Intergard to confirm that his guess about the type of mechanism was correct. After a good minute, the circle was finished and when Eos activated it, carefully timing his attempt to precisely meet the interval in-between the two ticking sounds, the noise stopped immediately. As always, he couldn't help but grin triumphantly.

Down the corridor towards the stairs, Intergard had just finished her own circle, to the same effect — She quickly approached the remaining device and signaled Eos to go back to the steel door for his trapdoor tests, which he did with haste.

"One minute," said Osrakey on the comlink.

"Yes, we're well on schedule thank you very much," countered Intergard immediately, slightly annoyed but still completely calm.

The trapdoor tests were half-finished when footsteps resounded from the staircase. Intergard had just successfully disarmed the last silencer and now hastily drew out a simple Voicemute

circle on the wall close to the entrance to the stairs, before stepping into the shadow next to the door just in time as four figures appeared at the foot of the staircase to the third floor. Eos quickly dashed into cover behind a large post, and dared not to breathe as he watched in anticipation.

The four men walked through the door silently. At that very moment, Intergard slammed her hand onto the circle on the wall, and a faint white glimmer burst out of it, travelling down the corridor and momentarily putting a strange numb feeling all over Eos' body as it reached him. Eos, whose last encounter with a voicemute spell had been his final exam back in Enster's class, shook himself irritably, but down the hallway Intergard was already pouncing onto the men, her fingers blazing as she shot out one bolt of lightning after the other. Everything gripped in utter silence, the walls of the corridor flashed up brightly and Eos couldn't take his eyes off the spectacle, but after not more than a few seconds the four security guards were already knocked out, bashed against the walls by the momentum of Intergard's bolts. She stood up straight among the unconscious bodies while readjusting her collar, cleared her throat (a noise that Eos naturally couldn't hear, just like the fizzling of Intergard's shots and the dull thumping of the guards' bodies hitting the walls), and cancelled the Voicemute spell with a silent snap of her fingers.

Instantly, sound returned to the hallway. Intergard quickly deactivated the men's communication devices and walked over to Eos at the other end of the corridor, putting the cuffs of her shirt back in their proper position as if nothing had happened.

"Good, now let's continue with the mission," she said casually into her comlink. Eos hastily turned back to the door to hide the fact that he was grinning like a madman, and wordlessly continued the trapdoor tests.

After another minute, all tests concluded without any traps found. This increased Intergard's puzzlement, but they nonetheless entered the office quickly and began searching for the security system.

"Shouldn't we take some of these documents with us, Madam?" asked Eos as his eyes fell onto a promising stack of apparently confidential Kengnatz papers.

"Not really," replied Intergard, "Kengnatz is a huge corporation, we'll hardly have enough luck to pick precisely the material we can use. Ah, I found it."

She pointed to a plate of metal covering a compartment in the wall, and pulled it open. Within, three small switches in different colors connected to wires going into the wall.

„Electricity? Who even uses that," mumbled Intergard as she quickly sketched out two small Release counterspells above the panel to nullify any traps on the switches themselves. Then she turned her attention to the wires, nodding a few times as she inspected them.

"Funny how you can control the whole building with these little things," she said without any sign of fun in her voice, and pushed all three of the switches to 'off' with a quick flick of her hand.

For a moment, Eos was not quite sure what had happened. The omnipresent ticking echoing through the corridors had stopped, confirming that they had succeeded in their job. That wasn't all, however.

The two constant Releases Intergard had activated above the switches flashed up, and with a fizzling sound the plaster around them began to melt. The coal lines on the wall caught fire, a terrifying indication that Intergard's safety measures had been overcharged, and thereby nullified. A faint light filled the office, and it took Eos a second to realize that it was coming from the floor. Both agents looked down, and to Eos' shock a thin blue line, extending from beneath Intergard's feet and branching off into countless strands that formed an intricate pattern on the floor, soon filled the entire office.

"Screw it, get out!" yelled Intergard immediately and jumped away from the switches. Eos, who stood right next to the door, dashed out into the corridor so fast that he fell over and violently crashed onto the polished floor, but Intergard wasn't so quick. As Eos jerked around to see what was happening to his partner, she was almost at the door, sprinting from the other end of the room in large steps, but just as she touched the doorframe with her massive hands, blue light filled the office and with a flash of magic, Intergard was gone.

Eos's arms numbed, and he fell backwards, his head hitting the floor and sending his senses flying. No way, he thought.

Inside his head, everything was spinning. How could I let this happen..? — *How?*

"You like that, kid?"

A sudden voice echoed down the corridor. Eos opened his eyes, terrified as he realized whose voice it was. He jumped to his feet.

There he was, stepping out of a room near the staircase: Kelem Aretz-Sarc, smiling menacingly with his head held high as he looked over to Eos at the other end of the hallway.

"Team Two, are you there?" came Osrakey's voice suddenly over the comlink on Eos' wrist, "What's going on over there?"

"You traitor," whispered Eos through his gritted teeth, ignoring Osrakey and his eyes fixed on the old man. He wanted to add a spiteful "How could you do this?!" but Sarc cut him off with a dismissive spit to the ground. A second later, the tall man was storming down the corridor heading straight for Eos, his large fist clenched and ready to deliver a punch that could end a man, but Eos was determined to hold his ground. He stood motionless, his knees shaking, up until the very last moment, and with a yell of "Reflect!" he summoned the glimmering shield between him and Sarc not a moment too late. The old man's fist crashed into the faint layer of light with full force, but to Eos' own surprise the defense held, and Sarc's whole arm was violently hurled back with such strength that he fell over, his body propelled back as the shield burst into sparkling pieces. Eos, himself thrown back by the clash, gasped for breath, but Sarc gave him no pause. Mid-air on his way to the floor after being thrown backward by the power of his own punch, he reached under his coat and pulled out a silver gun, pointing at a terrified Eos and pulling the trigger just before his massive body hit the floor. Eos dashed to the side, and the bullet went into the wall next to his ear a mere split-second later.

On the comlink, the operators were shouting. Eos couldn't understand a thing, but of course he wasn't listening anyway. He had other problems right now. With a groan, Sarc got back to his feet to start a new attack, only to be hurled back down the corridor even further when Eos sent a strong Movement spell his way — The man roared and grabbed the frame of one of the security doors, stopping his slide immediately, but Eos didn't intend to lose any time. Riding on

a wave of confidence, he pulled out some useless artefacts from one of his pockets and threw them to the air in front of him, quickly casting another Movi to send the tiny brass medals dashing down the hallway straight for Sarc. But the old man was quick to defend himself and conjured a shield of his own, from which the projectiles bounced off with a metallic screeching before coming down right in front of Eos feet.

“Enough!” yelled Sarc, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a long object that looked like a metal cylinder with an elaborate decorative pattern. At first, Eos tried recognize the artefact to anticipate which spell Sarc would use next, but then he realized that the object was not technically an artefact in the first place. It was a silencing coil.

With an triumphant smile, Sarc began slowly shaking the cylinder back and forth, and as the clacking of the mechanism echoed down the corridor, Eos’ confidence sank terribly. With no spells to attack or defend himself, he wouldn’t stand a chance against the massive man.

“Are you all out of tricks, boy?” croaked Sarc as he raised his gun slowly, until it pointed right at Eos’ face. There was a long pause, and Eos’ exhausted knees gave way to the pressure, sending him to the floor with a cough.

“Explain how you could do this!” he shouted to the ground in a defiant effort, fully aware that he had lost.

When Sarc didn’t answer, Eos looked up, and after a tense moment of their eyes meeting, he spit to the floor.

“You treacherous swine, you—”

“Silence, boy!” interrupted Sarc with a yell.

“How could you *live* with this team for decades and just—”

“Shut up!” barked the old man, “Shut up and *die!*”

At that very second, a large object suddenly jumping out from somewhere near the stairs behind Sarc dashed down the corridor and buried itself into the backside of Sarc’s knees, forcing the him onto the floor with a savage cry as the polished silencing device escaped his hand and hit the stone tiles between Eos and the startled old man. Sarc jerked his head around to see what had attacked him, and was hit directly in the face by a purple flash speeding out from the darkness of the staircase. He crashed backwards onto the floor, sliding a few steps in Eos’ direction before stopping motionless next to the still spinning silencer coil, his face distorted in a ghastly grimace.

There was an eerie silence. Eos, who had in his mind already prepared to be shot and who couldn’t quite believe that somebody had supposedly saved him, very carefully sled towards the silver coil on the floor, eager to remove the one thing that countered his entire skillset, but his eyes were fixed on the darkness of the staircase, ready to react to anything that might jump out of there.

But when the mysterious attacker finally stepped out into the dim light of the corridor, Eos stopped mid-motion as a bright blue mane of hair and elegant suspenders on a white shirt made clear who had saved him.

“Chou?” he whispered in puzzlement.

"That very same!" replied Chou with a wide grin as he walked down the corridor towards Eos, picking up the gun and storing it in the vast depths of his trousers' pockets as he passed the knocked-out Sarc.

"But—"

"Keros, are you still there? For heaven's sake, speak to me!" yelled Osrakey, who apparently had been shouting to Eos on the comlink during the entire duel without the boy even noticing. Hesitantly and still rather confused, Eos raised his wrist to respond.

"Uhm, well— Sir, We have reached the objective. All silencers are down, I think—"

"Definitely not, but Team One is working on that," responded Osrakey anxiously, "More to the point, what happened over there?"

"Sir—" Eos turned around to the guard office, "—Intergard was hit by a banishment trap, it seems she was teleported out—"

Osrakey hastily exchanged a whisper with the other operators. Ostensibly, the situation was rather confusing.

"Yes, she's alright," he replied back to Eos, "We've found her outside the building."

Eos' face brightened up.

"You mean, she is unharmed?"

"Yes, she's fine. Lady Lephon would never kill an agent with a trap like that — It's not her style. She just wanted to make sure you were on your own for the ambush that followed. Now tell me what happened!"

Eos returned his attention to the unconscious Sarc on the floor, and Chou, who calmly stood next to him with his hands in his pockets, waiting for Eos to finish the talk just as if he was waiting for the tram on a pleasant afternoon.

"Yes," explained Eos, "It was Sarc, he—"

"Sarc?!" exclaimed Osrakey, his tone revealing genuine shock — Apparently Eos had not been the only one secretly hoping that the veteran agent was not a traitor after all.

"Yes, it would seem so, Sir. I had a brief duel with him and I was doing alright, but he had a silencer coil. He was planning to kill me, Sir, however—" Eos took new breath, eager to move away from the fact that he had very closely escaped being shot just now, "—However, Agent Chou of the Social Insurance is here, he took down Sarc but I don't know what allegiance—"

"Yes, that's alright," replied Osrakey immediately, interrupting Eos as if he knew what the boy was about to say, "The Insurance is incidentally on a raid here as well, Team One has already met their Agent Hatzat. It's all a bit confusing but we've agreed on an alliance for the time being."

Eos raised his eyebrows and exchanged a look with Chou, who shrugged with a smile.

"So, does this mean we are working together, Sir?" asked Eos, and Chou nodded.

"Yes, you do," confirmed Osrakey.

"Great!"

"Well actually—" Judging from the operator's voice, fun time was over, almost as if the last five minutes had in any way been funny for Eos, "We're in a bit of a bad spot — It turns out that Kengnatz' Melenda and the traitor Sibrodi are guarding the prison cell, and they've installed detonators to prevent anyone from entering. Team One is looking into that right now."

“Copy that, Operator,” replied Eos, trying to get back to his feet but still shaking, “What should I do in the meantime?”

There was a brief pause as Osrakey and the other operators discussed the situation. Next to Eos, Chou was whispering into his own communication device, taking instructions from a female voice that Eos guessed to be the Insurance’s Chief Operator.

“Well,” returned Osrakey’s voice, “It would be best if you and your new friend teamed up to take care of the Insurance’s objective, so that Agent Hatzat can help our agents rescue the prisoners. You will get all the details from Agent Chou. Confirmed?”

Eos and Chou exchanged another look, both smiling.

“Oohh, confirmed as heck!” exclaimed Eos, bouncing up and down on his feet at the thought of teaming up with Chou, only to regret it a second later when his knees gave way again and forced him back to the ground. Eos decided to take it as swift punishment for his informal tone to the Operator, but apart from his difficulties in controlling his legs, his confidence and motivation were fully restored. After having been rescued from rather certain doom by the Insurance’s dapper spellslinger for the second time now, Eos had to admit that he was quite possibly almost as cool as Igsher. It was hard to decide, really.

“Operator, send someone to take care of Agent Sarc here, I don’t have time for it,” said Chou into his comlink before eyeing the unconscious body on the floor for a last time and signaling Eos to follow him to the staircase. As they reached the door at the end of the corridor, Eos having a hard time hiding how insanely exciting all of this was, Chou explained his part of the mission.

“I’m afraid our job isn’t as dramatic as yours, Mister Keros — The Insurance is here to procure some documents that might be of high interest to one of our customers. Apparently, Kengnatz has been covering up a series of accidents in one of their facilities, and a number of workers died. It’s only natural that we were asked to find out what happened, and force a repayment from the corporation. After all, that’s what an insurance does.”

Eos nodded eagerly — Helping in bringing the corps to justice was exactly his idea of being an agent. If this was the kind of mission the Insurance was normally engaged in, maybe he should consider switching employers, he thought with a grin. The coworkers definitely seemed really cool at Djoutunhaim’s company.

“Where are these documents stored?” he asked, trying to be as formal and least exhausted-sounding as possible.

“On the third floor, as it would seem,” replied Chou as they began climbing the stairs, “Come on — It’s not far.”

Compared to what Eos had just gone through, finding and securing the documents the Insurance was interested in turned out to be a piece of cake. All of the security forces were busy fighting off Team One and Agent Hatzat in the prison complex, and from what Eos could hear on the comlink, their part of the mission was going smoothly as well — As far as that was possible given the fact that they hadn’t anticipated the detonators everywhere, nor the presence of Agent Sibrodi. From what it sounded like, Igsher was not having an easy time standing his ground against the highly experienced wizard that Sibrodi obviously was. Luckily, Elettra and

the Professor were there to assist him, not to mention the apparently very skilled Agent Hatzat. Overall, it was apparent that their victory would only be a matter of time.

Chou didn't even have to use any of his spells, apart from Unlocks to open the doors and a makeshift portal to tunnel through a wall because he didn't want to wait for a Norkis Algorithm to finish on the Lock mechanism. Eos had only ever used this short-range variant of the Portal spell in training and for practice, and although he liked to think that he would be able to do it himself if given enough time, he had never actually been in a position to use it seriously before. To him, seeing Chou cast this kind of spell was highly impressive.

"Those are the files," said Chou with a satisfied smile as they entered a large office on the third floor, gesturing towards a number of thick folders on the desk. Crossing the room in a few steps, he pulled out a coal pencil and began drawing a spell around the documents to upload them. Eos wanted to protest at first — As everyone knew, Astral wasn't in fact very well suited to *transport* objects, only to *store* them: If something was pulled out of storage too far away from the point where it had been uploaded, the violent effect of basically being hurled instantly all the distance from the upload point to the download point made many everyday objects, especially paper and wood, go up in flames immediately. Then again, the Kengnatz agents had used the same method to extract H-E's prototypes — The Insurance had probably arranged beforehand to download the documents somewhere near the building directly after Chou had uploaded them, likely by a support wizard sitting somewhere in the hedge just outside. It was a clever way to secure the objective as quickly as possible, and needless to say Chou would have a much easier time escaping if he didn't have three large folders to carry around with him.

"Good, then we're finished here," said Chou as he put the last lines onto the circle, activating it with a slap onto the desk. A second later, the files had vanished.

"Operator, objective two is secured. You can access them now," he continued into his comlink, and a confirmation from the woman's voice reported soon after that the files had been pulled down by the hedger outside. Chou nodded and turned to Eos.

"Well, my boy," he said with a cheerful smile, "It's sad to see that I can't stick around to chat with you a bit more, but I need to be on my way. Important business awaits!"

Eos wanted to reply something, but changed his mind as he didn't want to object to anything the skilled spellslinger said. Chou walked over to the reinforced window of the office, one of the few that the towering building had, and pulled it open. Checking the height and wind, he produced a Movi artefact from his pocket, ready to break his fall just before hitting the ground below. Turning back to Eos with a last wink and grin, he jumped out into the night and was gone.

Eos witnessed the remainder of the mission only through chaotic noises on the comlink, although it was apparent that the agency was somehow winning — If he understood correctly, Igsher and the SI's Hatzat had defeated Sibrodi and forced him to escape; At the same time, Elettra had dueled Kengnatz' Melenda in a stunning solo performance while the Professor and Rekkar had gone for the prisoners, freeing all of them without problems. Having locked himself into the large office that Chou had stolen the files from while he was preparing an exit portal to make his escape, Eos listened in to the action intently and sometimes even cheered silently to himself when an agent reported another small victory. It seemed the peace treaty between the

agency and Djoutunhaim's operatives was working wonderfully, and Agent Hatzat was a fantastically useful asset. Eos couldn't wait to meet up with all his colleagues again at the Grey House, and he had just finished his exit portal when Osrakey officially declared the mission a success. Everything was just perfect.

If now a concerned observer had assumed that bliss such as this couldn't last, he was wrong, at least as far as the next two hours were concerned. When Eos, who had regrouped with Intergard and the operators, arrived at the Grey House, he found the other agents and the rescued specialists already there, filling the rooms of the hideout with a new wave of warmth and merry chatter that made Eos instantly feel at home just like the White Cave Home Base had always made him feel.

There was a long series of handshakes and people being introduced to each other, but of course the highlight of the night for Eos was getting to see Enster again — And indeed, the chief quartermaster's kind and gentle, but at the same time experienced and intelligent face hadn't changed a bit from when Eos, then the newly graduated hedger, had left a month ago. It was a strange feeling to know that merely four weeks had passed since then — To Eos, it felt like half a year, maybe more. So much had happened since his final exams, yet in this time of dire turbulence and change the kind embrace of Enster was still the same, and Eos realized only now how much he had been missing it. Of course, he was not regularly getting hugged by the chief equipment expert of the agency — Officially, he was just another graduate of Enster's class. But it would have been foolish to claim that Eos didn't take a special role among the seasoned wizard's students, and Enster took a special role among the boy's teachers. Not the one of a father, perhaps, but something very close to it.

After more than an hour of pleasantries and general celebration at the important success of Timely Resurrection, Eos went up to the attic, admittedly rather tired — Clearly he wasn't used to having impromptu parties in the middle of the night, much less after a positively exhausting, not to mention lethally dangerous, mission. He knew of course that there was no way he would be able to sleep — Not with Ienge and Leit still out in the field at the rebel gathering. Still, he was too tired to continue the merry chatting with the agents downstairs, so he just lied down on his bed and recounted the events of the past days in his head, up to his reunion with Enster and the rescue of the specialists. Granted, he had little success in realizing any new aspects of the things that had happened — The fact that Sarc had not only abandoned the agency, but actually tried to kill him in their duel still made Eos' chest ache, and even the wonderful things that had spawned from these past days all combined could not override the sour feeling that every employee of the agency was sure to feel when they thought about it. Eos hoped the Social Insurance would treat him well — Then again, Sarc definitely hadn't shown that sentiment towards him. He gave himself a shake at the thought, eager to banish any sort of kind or merciful ideas from his head as long as they concerned that vile traitor.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Statute Of Liberty

Eos didn't know for how long he had been sleeping, and he couldn't remember what he had dreamed about. The sound of the attic's trapdoor echoed in his sore head. Within seconds, he was wide awake again, hastily sitting up in his bed just as a familiar green shock of hair appeared at the other end of the room. Seconds later, Ienge Alagdi had walked over, hurled his equipment aside and let himself fall into the sheets with a sigh of relief.

"How was it?" asked Eos quickly, happy to see his friend return from the mission unscathed, "Did you find anything?"

"Oh man, it was great actually," replied Ienge with a look towards his sleepy colleague, but something in his voice made Eos hesitate with his response — There was a concerned tone mixed into the satisfied statement.

"You... don't sound too pleased, though," he said, nervously glancing at Ienge and the equipment on his bed.

"Well, it's not all good news—"

Ienge sat up and pushed his hair out of his face, looking over to Eos as he tried to find a good way of saying what worried him.

Eos suddenly panicked — He jerked his head over to the trapdoor, hoping for Leit to appear, but Ienge sensed his thought.

"Don't worry, he's fine," he said quickly, and Eos visibly relaxed.

"Honestly, you should have seen him. I knew he was some kind of prodigy but really, his skills are mad. *Mad!*"

Eos turned back to Ienge, suppressing a yawn.

"What happened?"

"The good news is that Aria Tsuyoi, currently the leader of the Red Flag Rebels, agreed to the information exchange, which means that we will hopefully have detailed info on how Kengnatz raided all our hideouts very soon. The bad news—" He readjusted his seating position on the mattress, "—Is that we found not a single document hinting at the rebel cells being involved in that whole Oredchimegdi business."

He noticed Eos' slightly irritated expression and explained: "It basically means that Liberty's original theory, namely that rebels leaked information to H-E enabling them to raid Kengnatz and retake that scientist, might be wrong, at least there is no indication of it to be found where we thought it would be. Now generally speaking, this doesn't pose any danger to the agency and us, but it still begs the question how H-E got that intelligence."

He paused a second, and then added with a serious glare: "If you ask me, there is another, so far unknown actor using the corps against each other for their own good. The whole thing is scary, honestly..."

Eos thought about all this for a moment and was just opening his mouth to reply, but Ienge continued: "No, that's not even all of it. There's something else, far more alarming — We found it by accident, but it's very, very concerning."

Eos turned to him, a worried expression on his face as he rubbed his eye sleepily. Ienge wanted to go on talking, but the sound of the trapdoor opening took the boys' attention. It was Leit.

"So, it's true after all?" asked Ienge ominously. Leit nodded, his eyebrows furrowed with concern.

"Crisis meeting. Come downstairs."

The briefing room was gripped in a tense and uneasy atmosphere. It was obvious to see that after Timely Resurrection, nobody was in the mood for another important briefing at the expense of their sleep time. Around the long table, rumor was already playing its dark game of misinformation and worry, and none of the agents seemed to really know what had happened. Mugs were being emptied nervously and everybody was awaiting Central to make their appearance. A minute later, the sheets at the entrance were hurled aside, cold night air flooded in, and with it Liberty and Emerald. The room fell silent.

"Thank you for sticking around," said Liberty tiredly as they made their way around the table to take position at the far end, "Shichal, give us a briefing!"

Next to Eos, Leit stood up nervously and looked around the table — All eyes were on him. He cleared his throat before starting to speak in a formal and very professional tone.

"Agent Alagdi and I just returned as planned from attending the rebel gathering. As most of you already know, we were surprisingly not able to find any compromising material regarding the rebel cells' involvement in H-E's rescue of Oredchimegdi. This again poses the question how H-E acquired the necessary intelligence, that is to say: Who gave them the anonymous tip. But this is not the most concerning thing to spawn from our investigation."

He exchanged a quick nod with Liberty and produced a large piece of paper from his pocket, unfolding it carefully as he spoke. It didn't look like anything special.

"This is a message," he continued, "Intended for Red Flag leader Aria Tsuyoi, sent to her just this afternoon and written by none other than information broker Ketten of Ilierka. The text reads as follows."

He cleared his throat again, this time more anxiously, and Eos was on the edge of his seat waiting for the content of the letter — Judging by the way everyone was acting, this was of prime importance.

"To the honorable leader of our resistance, Aria Tsuyoi of the Red Mane. It pains me to say it, but I must speak my mind. I'm afraid Djoutunhaim has beaten me. His agents are everywhere, and I must fear for my life. It has been made clear that he intends to take me hostage for information, I will not be able to evade capture much longer. You, of all people, know best the essential nature of my person to the rebel cause, and I should not need to convince you that my capture and forced leaking of rebel intelligence to the Insurance will destroy what you have

built all these years. I urge you to send a team of resistance fighters to the Social Insurance Headquarters to rescue me before it is too late — There is not any time to lose: By the time you read this message, I will already be in Djoutunhaim's custody. With admiration, the humble information broker Ketten of Ilierka."

There was a pause. Agents exchanged concerned looks, and Eos knew why: Information traders were almost never caught — Too strong was their ability to evade the corporate grasp and blackmail their way out of almost any dangerous situation. The corporations had long realized that it wasn't worth it to spend resources on a broker hunt if they could just negotiate with the man instead, buying the intelligence they wanted from him directly instead of going through a long and exhausting cat-and-mouse game before finally realizing that the only thing getting them closer to their goal was money going into the broker's hand — officially. As a result, intelligence brokers were almost enjoying a fool's freedom on the political scene, and if the very *king of information*, Ketten of Ilierka himself, had indeed been captured alive by the Social Insurance, then this was big, *big* news.

"No proof of the letter's authenticity was found," continued Leit without any sign of emotional commitment after giving the other agents time to process, "But Heaven's Hand has compared it to other documents and indeed, it is Ketten's handwriting."

Concerned sighs went around the table. Liberty stood up again, giving a grateful nod to Leit, who returned down to his seat and took a deep breath, a tiny drop of sweat on his forehead.

"We can assume," said Liberty, whose lack of sleep was easily visible on his face, "That a number of similar letters were sent to other institutions, possibly including our agency, but seeing as we were uninformed of this, it is safe to say that Djoutunhaim must have anticipated Ketten's calls for help and intercepted the respective letters. Apart from this one, of course."

At the other end of the room, the Professor raised his hand.

"So what's our plan, Sir?"

Liberty shook his head.

"Let's not be too hasty," he replied, "I would advise against taking immediate action on this."

He wanted to continue, but Igsher interrupted him: "What do you mean, 'you would advise against'? I can't imagine any reason preventing us from going in there right now!"

"Except for sleep deprivation," muttered Ienge on the seat next to Eos.

Liberty gestured with his hands, struggling to find an opening for him to explain his position, but the storm had already started.

"You know full well that this is Ketten we're talking about," said Igsher loudly.

"Aye, we can't afford to let the Insurance get this kind of advantage!" added the Professor decisively, although not in the same volume.

"What about the intelligence he has about us? Do you want to risk that going the way of—"

"Silence! All!" yelled Emerald from her wheelchair, the first thing that she had spoken during the whole meeting. There was instant silence.

"When will you learn to act like professionals?" she said, more a statement than a real question. "Liberty, continue."

Liberty readjusted his collar with a timid look to the woman next to him, and turned his attention back to the agents gathered around the table. Igsher was visibly unsettled.

“The Insurance has been cooperating with us to fantastic effect on the mission earlier tonight, they have saved four of our agents from Sibrodi’s assassination attempt,” His eyes rested on the four boys for a moment, “And I have an extensive and increasingly pleasant correspondence with Djoutunhaim. This is the first time in years that our agency is close to forming a stable *alliance* with another company. None of you can deny that this is an opportunity we cannot pass up — The advantages are simply too great.”

Osrakey and the Professor scratched their respective chins, deep in thought, and across the table of Eos, Intergard leant back in her chair with a concerned expression. Without doubt, everyone was realizing that Liberty had a point — It was a great opportunity, one the like of which the agency had not had in a long time.

“I disagree,” said Intergard decisively after a short pause of thinking, “If the Insurance succeeds in extracting any kind of information about us from Ketten, they won’t need this alliance any longer. You can chat with Djoutunhaim all you want, but the fact remains that in the end everyone looks first to their own.”

The Professor nodded approvingly — Apparently he shared Intergard’s opinion, and he wasn’t the only one around the table.

“No,” replied Liberty with unusual vigor in his voice, “Even if they are successful, a treaty would still be advantageous for both sides! The fact that Ketten is captured might be moderately concerning, but it isn’t a threat to our peace negotiations, and I will not let it become one because you can’t see what’s good of the agency in the long run!”

“Liberty is right, Kwifeldis,” added Elettra with a look to Intergard, “Even if Ketten’s capture poses a danger, we can still try to release him covertly after the peace treaty is decided, or feed information about it to other corporations and let them do the job for us! Keep in mind that nobody knows we found this letter, so whatever kind of intel we leak about this, it won’t be traced to us.”

Intergard didn’t respond — Although the truth in Elettra’s explanation was easy to see, she was obviously uncomfortable with leaving so much valuable knowledge in the hands of another party. Whether the Social Insurance, or Kengnatz, or any other corporation had control over Ketten didn’t make much of a difference to her, and neither did the fact that Central had worked together with Djoutunhaim to positively life-saving success only three hours ago.

“I still disagree,” she said plainly, apparently refusing to argue over this any longer.

From looking around the table, Eos could see that she was not alone with her opinion. Some of the other agents, especially the Professor and Igsher, were exchanging reinforcing looks with Intergard and each other, almost as if stealthily forming some sort of agreement without speaking at all.

“Be that as it may,” said Liberty, trying to conclude the argument in a diplomatic way, “I will continue to negotiate with Djoutunhaim — If I am successful, we will have an official alliance treaty ready in two or three days. Until such a time—” His eyes rested on Intergard and the other members of the opposition for some seconds before he continued in a very serious voice, “—Nobody, I repeat, *Nobody* will take any action concerning Ketten’s capture. Do I make myself clear?”

A round of sometimes confident, sometimes hesitant responses of “Yes, Sir” went around the table, and nobody dared to object openly. After all, even with the White Cave gone Liberty and Emerald still held the absolute authority within the agency.

The meeting concluded, and the boys went back to the attic. Eos was 100% ready for bed — All this had strained his physical as well as his emotional capacities more than enough. In the room below, he could hear Intergard pulling drawers in quick succession and the sound of her door opening multiple times as if she was going back and forth between the hallway and her desk, but Eos tried not to be too intrusive so he paid no attention. A minute later, all lights in the attic were out and the four boys laid motionless in their beds. Although the news was alarming, even Benx didn’t feel strong enough to continue chatter for long.

The room below, however, was still as busy as before. Eos had no idea what Intergard was doing. He could even hear voices — Voices belonging to a number of agents, not just her. Was she giving a casual tea party down there? He tried not to listen in, but it was hard given the lack of anything else happening in the darkness of the night.

“This is very serious,” said a male voice that Eos assumed to be Igsher’s, from what he could hear.

“We need to act quickly, that much is certain,” replied the Professor, but a quick “Hush!” from Intergard made him lower his voice immediately.

“This room isn’t soundproof,” she reminded him, her whisper almost inaudible on the attic above.

“What, you’re concerned the kids upstairs will go tell daddy?” asked Igsher in a mocking voice, and Eos’ eyes flung open. What were they talking about? He sat up in his bed, very careful not to make any noise, and the dim light coming from between the wooden beams on the floor was enough for him to see that Benx was doing the same. Just what was going on?

In the room below, Intergard continued whispering, her energetic voice now clearly understandable.

“Listen, this is a lethally dangerous plan, I will not allow some kids to be dragged —”

“They’re not kids!” said the Professor harshly. Intergard sighed.

“We’ll need all the help we can get if we really want to do this; You know that, Kwifeldis,” added Igsher, “You know there’s no other option — Go get them down here.”

Intergard let out a groan of resignation, and opened the door of her room. Her heavy steps echoed back from the roof as she climbed the ladder to the trapdoor. One moment later, a column of light illuminated the attic as she pushed it open.

Ienge sleepily mumbled something, but it wasn’t convincing. Intergard eyed them with a look of frustration mixed with the knowledge that this was necessary. After a short silence of exchanged stares, she shrugged and just said: “You lot have probably heard everything anyways. Get dressed.”

Eos suddenly realized that he was wide awake. Granted, he had mixed feelings about what Intergard and the other agents were planning downstairs, but the thrill of the forbidden seemed to have washed away any bit of exhaustion that had gripped him just a moment earlier. It didn’t even take a full minute for all four boys to hastily get into their clothes and quietly but quickly climb down the ladder to join whatever was going on.

Intergard's room was large and scarcely decorated. A wardrobe with a rattletrap desk on one side and a massive steel bedframe holding a thick mattress on the other were the only things she deemed necessary — The desk was filled with notes and small brass artefacts, giving a strange contrast to the otherwise empty room. A single but rather strong Fallos artefact hung from the center of the wooden ceiling and on the floor, a circular shape where the wood was lighter than elsewhere indicated that a carpet had been lying there for some time, but it had been removed.

Within the room were four people: Intergard herself was leaning against the wall next to the desk, her arms crossed in front of her chest and with a concerned expression on her face. Sarb Igsher was sitting on the bed, his legs crossed and looking much less tense than her, although more tired — Next to him stood the Professor, scratching his nose absent-mindedly. And leant against the opposite wall, hands behind his back and eyeing the boys with a subtle smile as they entered, was Han Osrakey.

"Welcome to the fellowship," said Igsher with a cheerful grin.

"What's going on?" asked Leit, although Eos suspected that he already knew.

The gathered agents exchanged a series of looks, and Intergard's answer was plain: "We're going rogue."

Eos had to admit: From what they had overheard in the attic, he had figured that much — But still, he would never have expected people like Intergard and the Professor to willingly disobey their superiors, much less only half an hour after they had given the precise order to not.

"With respect, Madam, but you want to go against Liberty's direct command?" he asked with a face that told of his genuine confusion.

"Not quite," answered Intergard, "If leaving Ketten at the hands of Djoutunhaim was actually Central's wish, I probably wouldn't be here. But it isn't."

Eos still didn't quite understand.

"Liberty wants us to stay away so that he can seal that alliance pact with the Insurance," explained the Professor, "But everyone can see it's a mistake. The only reason he wants it to happen is because he's friends with Djoutunhaim and he overestimates the importance of this treaty."

"Or to be more precise, he has become friends with him very recently," added Igsher, whose frown revealed that he didn't think too highly of Liberty's point of view.

"I've spoken to Emerald. She wants us to go," said Intergard decisively and pushed herself off the wall, "That's the only reason why I'm alright with this, though."

The Professor nodded — It was clear that he disagreed with her idea of obedience, but he knew very well that there was no point in, nor any need for discussion.

"We appreciate it, Kwifeldis. Now, what's our plan?"

Osrakey raised a hand and gestured towards the four boys, still standing at the entrance of the room, all seriously impressed by what was going on.

"Not so fast, we still need to make sure that these kids here actually want to do this. It's not a pleasant joyride, after all."

"You bet we want to!" exclaimed Benx and turned to his friends, who all gave affirming nods. Eos couldn't quite believe that the senior agents were planning an actual rogue mission, and

much less that he was supposed to be a part of it now. All the sleepiness that had gripped him only minutes before was completely gone.

Igsher shrugged with a grin.

"Told you."

"Well, it helps upgrade our roster, that much is sure," said Intergard with a sigh that showed how uncomfortable she was with the idea of exposing four rookie youngsters to the mortal danger of this kind of mission, "In that case, we will have three teams. Eos Keros will go with me, Igsher will team up with Leit Shichal, and Ienge Alagdi should go with the Professor."

She pointed at each of the other agents as she called out the line-up.

"Operators will be Osrakey and Benx Kurdibt. Any concerns?"

There was a short pause as everybody was trying to come up with any possible issues, but the constellation seemed solid, if unorthodox. Intergard nodded and walked over to the wardrobe, opening it with one hand and pulling out a large sheet of rolled-up paper with the other. As she spread the blueprint on the floor for everyone to see, she continued talking.

"The Insurance Headquarters has over a dozen floors plus basement, and we don't know where Ketten is being held. Actually, we don't know if he's even in the building—"

"But it does seem like the natural choice, doesn't it?" interrupted Igsher, "Djoutunhaim will want to interrogate Ketten himself if he gets the chance. I don't think another location would make sense."

Intergard confirmed it with a nod.

"We can assume he is there, I agree. But we will need to look for him, that's why we go in small teams and split up. I'll take the top floors, Igsher will go for the mid section, and the Professor takes the basement. Alright?"

Another round of approving confirmations as Intergard pointed out various areas of interest on the blueprint. Eos tried his best to memorize as much of it as possible.

"Objective: Find Ketten and secure his safety. Don't compromise any Insurance assets, if possible. We don't want to hamstring Liberty's efforts for peace any more than necessary. Be as covert as is practical, ideally don't give away our allegiance with the agency at all. If there is opposition, try not to be lethal. Understood?"

"Yes, Madam!" was the general answer, even from Igsher and Osrakey. Without doubt, Intergard was respected highly even among the most talented operatives of the agency. That was probably the reason why she was leading this rogue squad in the first place, thought Eos with a smile of admiration. He was still as much of an Intergard fan as ever.

"We shouldn't waste any time," said Igsher as he stood up from the bed, "I have an automobile stored some streets further down, we can use that to get into the city center."

"Alright," replied Intergard and rolled up the blueprint, "Five minutes to get equipment, we'll meet at the front door. Let's move."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Social Insurance

They made their way out of the Grey House as silently as possible. Eos didn't know who else was still in the building — The only other agents were Elettra and Rekkar, who both knew about their plan despite having declined to come. Liberty and Emerald were never in the house during nighttime — They probably had a private residence somewhere nearby.

Igsher's automobile was more of a rusty metal box of doom than a working means of transport, and it made strange noises every time the young man adjusted the Movement spells that propelled the vehicle forward, but it somehow managed to hold all eight agents and move them (more or less) safely towards the inner city. The region around the Ilierka airport was stuffed with large prestige buildings that each served as some minor corporation's headquarters, and the occasional government building that pierced the night sky just like the other towering structures.

The Social Insurance Tower, as it was called, was in itself a fashion statement. Perfectly in line with the general idea of the company's public image, namely that of a modern and stylish newcomer group that did everything so refreshingly different when compared to any of the 'old players', the whole tower was colored in various bright shades of green that made it stand out against the other buildings so obviously that Eos would have been able to identify it from the window of a sky-high airship. In fact, he had done just that on his flight into Ilierka a few days ago.

Igsher stopped the automobile one street away from the tower and the group walked the rest of the way in silence. Osrakey and Benx stayed in the car with Intergard's maps — The two of them would lead the mission from there. The rest of the agents stealthily made their way towards the tower, careful not to bump into any other nightly travellers. They truly were a strange sight to any possible onlookers, Eos thought — Then again, the bright hairstyles of Igsher and Ienge probably assured that they would have no problem passing as Social Insurance employees to any uninvolved passer-by.

Searching for a rear entrance, Intergard led them around the building. At the backside they found two small delivery terminals — Both were unguarded.

"Careful for hidden alarms," whispered Igsher as Intergard approached the Lock mechanism of one of the doors and tried a handful of codes. It didn't take her long to find the right one.

With a satisfied "Easy!" she pulled open the heavy door and the group was just about to enter the building when the Professor let out a sharp "Stop!" that made the other agents freeze with shocked expressions on their faces.

Without a word, Ubtra kneeled down and pointed towards the doorframe with a concerned look: A thin tripwire was suspended a hand's length above the floor between the posts of the entrance, and Intergard already had her foot dangerously close to it. She and the Professor exchanged a worried nod, and carefully the group stepped over the trap, Intergard already looking for more unpleasant surprises in the narrow corridor behind.

"Likes it traditional, the dear Djoutunhaim," said the Professor as he carefully pulled shut the entrance after all six of the agents had stepped in, "You'd think it goes against his style, but really — In a world where nobody does the old things any more, tradition suddenly becomes fashion."

They looked down the poorly lit corridor; There was nobody in sight.

"Let's split up," commanded Intergard, nodding towards a small side door to the right that led to a staircase, "Everything according to plan. Operators, we're in the building."

"Good," came the immediate confirmation from Osrakey. Indeed, with so much raw expertise combined on this mission, he probably wouldn't have to do much. Frankly, this squad didn't need much directing. And in general, thought Eos, Osrakey and Benx were rather poorly equipped in this case, with only a map of the building and no other information to go on.

"Did you bring the list of SI agents that might be in the tower, Kurdibt?" asked Intergard, indirectly proving Eos wrong — Apparently they had material to work with after all.

"Yes, Madam, but I couldn't get lower than fifteen possibilities," replied Benx, accompanied by quiet rustling of paper.

"That's alright, just have the info ready so that you can brief us when we come upon any of them."

"Yes, Madam!"

The Professor and Ienge had already left towards the basement to start their search, and Igsher was ready to get in position, too. Intergard gave Eos a look, and he nodded. Everything was set.

A couple of minutes and a great number of stairs later, they reached what needed to be the eighth floor — Eos was panting, but of course Intergard seemed just as untouched as usual. She stealthily approached the door leading from the staircase, peeked around the corner into the main corridor, and immediately pulled her head back.

"Two groups of guards," she said plainly, "They're circling the hallway."

"Two?" asked Eos, his look genuinely puzzled. They had come upon no indication of guard presence at all while making their climb towards this floor — Why now?

Intergard could see what he was thinking.

"I think we've hit the jackpot, junior."

She raised her hand and spoke silently into the comlink.

"Intergard to Operators, two squads of security on the eighth floor. No indication as to the reason so far."

"Confirmed, Intergard," replied Osrakey, "The Professor is dealing with a similar thing in the basement. It seems SI only guards the floors where they have valuables stored."

"Copy that. We'll take a look."

She lowered her arm again and peeked around the corner for a second time.

"We might have an opening to switch to one of the rooms on the other side," she said, pointing down the hallway, "...Or we just take them heads-on."

Eos didn't respond — He was too busy thinking.

"What about silencers?" he asked after a pause, and they both leaned towards the door of the corridor, listening intently. Eos could hear nothing apart from the security guards' footsteps.

"No silencers?" he asked, turning to Intergard with a confused look.

"Could be muffled — Djoutunhaim likes those," she replied, pulling out a small artefact from her pocket.

"Let's test it out."

Hearing in to the guards' steps and counting silently, Intergard stood motionlessly at the door for almost a minute, before suddenly dashing into the corridor at the right moment, holding out the artefact and trying to cast the spell — The token flashed brightly, illuminating the empty hall in yellow light, and with a confirming look to Eos she quickly returned to him, pulling shut the door just in time before at the far end of the corridor the squad of guards reappeared.

"There's no silencers," she admitted, rather confused herself. With a frown, she turned to Osrakey on the comlink.

"Operator, do we have any indication of this being a trap so far?"

There was a short pause.

"No, Madam," came Osrakey's response after some whispering between him and Benx.

"There is no disruption devices on the eighth floor," continued Intergard, "What am I supposed to make of this?"

Osrakey took another second to double-check with his assistant, then replied: "Apparently some of the guards know basic spells. They use flashbang devices as well, according to the Professor."

"Oh, great," muttered Intergard, rolling her eyes as she returned her attention to the door.

"There's no opening!" whispered Eos, who had been listening in on the guards' movements himself while Intergard had been talking to Team Zero, trying to find an opportunity for them to take one of the squads by surprise without being threatened by the other. Intergard nodded.

"Either none of the squads, or both. We can't reposition either, the side rooms are probably all locked."

They stood silently at the door for another moment, Intergard deep in thought about what would be the best move here. Eos couldn't help but wonder what the other two teams were doing right now — The Professor and Ienge had supposedly already confronted the security forces. If that was the case, why was the building not on alert? Had they succeeded in taking them out stealthily, perhaps? Eos' wanted to ask Osrakey, but his line of thought was interrupted when Intergard finally came to a conclusion.

"Ok, this is the play here: We move in—" She searched her pockets for something specific, and found it soon after, holding up a small but intricate metal object for Eos to see, "—I activate this Invis bomb and we ambush the first squad at the end of that corridor. At that time the second one will still be far enough away that we have time to reposition and get ready for them. Roger that?"

Eos admittedly had to take a second to visualize the plan, but he understood it quickly.

“Confirmed, Madam,” he replied eagerly after a moment, failing to hide his excitement about getting to use an Invis bomb.

Intergard approached the door again. Slowly, she raised her hand, and when both of the security patrols had disappeared around their respective corners, she pulled open the door and the two agents jumped out into the corridor.

There was nobody in sight. If Intergard’s counting was correct, they had about seven seconds until the squads reappeared, which was more than enough time for the massive woman to hurl her small gadget onto the ground, where with a melodic fizzle and flash of yellow, the complicated spell circle on the device activated, and a moment later Eos’ sight was tinted in pink, confirming that he had indeed been rendered invisible.

Intergard didn’t intend to lose any time. Her shape, hardly discernible but still kept mostly visible to Eos by the advanced modulations of the spell, ran down the corridor towards the point she had mentioned, and Eos followed her quickly, careful not to make too much sound with his footsteps. In his head, he was still counting down the seconds until guard contact, and they reached the corner of the long hallway not a moment too early. As the three security men appeared, Intergard was already more than ready, the effects of the camouflage spell stopping immediately as she delivered a massive punch to the stomach of one of the guards, but it was already too late for the unfortunate man, and before anybody knew what had happened he was knocked out on the ground. Meanwhile, Eos was trying to do the same to the smaller of the remaining two, and although his bodily might was no match for Intergard’s he still succeeded in delivering the takedown, and just as his partner sent the last man crashing into the wall with two quick strikes of magic lightning, Eos sealed the deal on his own target with a hastily drawn Sleep spell.

The silence that followed was almost as instant as the noise they had made with their ambush. Eos looked up to Intergard, who was about to shout a command when at the far end of the corridor, the second squad of guards appeared two seconds earlier than anticipated. With a shocked look, Intergard dashed to the side, dragging Eos with her into cover, and just a split-second later two bullets went into the wall right where they had been standing, accompanied by alerted shouting and the sound of three men sprinting down the corridor towards them.

Intergard sighed, a mixture of concern and frustration.

“Operator, we have a situation here,” she yelled into her comlink, “Send another team up to the eighth floor!”

Osrakey didn’t respond immediately, but when he did, the message was disheartening: “Operator to Intergard, no other teams available — There are fights breaking out all over the building!”

Intergard let out a frustrated hiss, wildly gesturing with her hands before regaining her composure a moment later. She turned to Eos, eyes switching back and forth between him and the opposite wall, where faint shadows signaled the approach of the guards.

“We can take them down if they make a mistake, but there will be reinforcements coming in for them very soon. We need to move quickly,” she said, her voice surprisingly calm. Eos nodded nervously.

For a few seconds they both stood in silence, leant against the wall right next to the corner of the corridor, when the shadows on the white surface across of them revealed that the three guards were taking positions, firearms ready.

"They'll try to storm us with a flashba—" began Intergard, but at that very moment a small object was thrown around the corner, landing on the floor in front of Eos. A flashbang artefact.

"Look away!" yelled Intergard, and Eos jerked his head around, eyes buried in the sleeve of his shirt, just in time before a blinding flash erupted from the small cylinder. For a moment, Eos didn't dare to look, and the only thing he could hear was the three guards shouting and jumping out of their cover to storm around the corner, but Intergard sent a pair of massive bolts of lightning across the hallway to stop their advance, and although they were blindly shot, they still managed to keep the security forces at bay. Hesitantly, Eos looked up from his sleeve again, unsure of how long you were supposed to cover your eyes against a point-blank flashbang grenade, but luckily the flash was already over. Intergard leant back against the wall next to him again, letting out another, this time more annoyed sigh.

Eos shuddered. Ambushing lone guards was one thing, but giving them a full-scale shootout was a different one entirely. Intergard might be a top-notch wizard, but against armed and highly alert opposition that even outnumbered them (and, by the way, had the advantage of the surroundings here given that their reinforcement would come from the opposite direction and cut off the agents' escape route), fooling around would not do the trick, and as each of these guards was ready to fire on sight, any mistake might very well cost one agent's life.

"Can you shield me from their bullets?" asked Intergard without looking to Eos, her eyes checking the shadows on the opposite wall as well as the staircase at the far end of the hallway. Eos swallowed hard — He had defended against a number of things now, but bullets? Then again, it was true that he had been able to pull it off against Sarc a few hours earlier — once.

"Yes, Madam," he said after a brief pause.

"I'm counting on it, because we're running out of time," replied Intergard, pointing to the end of the corridor, where at that very moment a door was kicked open, and a second later four figures dashed out of it, yelling.

"On my command, junior."

Eos took a deep breath. Intergard hadn't said what her plan was, but he knew. Against the newly arrived reinforcement squad, their position provided no cover at all, so they needed to move around the corner within the next couple of seconds. But they would only have one chance.

"Now!" yelled Intergard and jumped away from the wall, speeding to the side and directly into sight of the three surprised guards around the corner. Not a moment later, Eos followed, dashing in front of his partner with artefact ready. In the split-second that he had the chance to catch a glimpse of the three guards, he saw their startled faces quickly change into determination, and without losing any more time he pulled up the Reflect just as the guards opened fire on them. Intergard ducked down behind him, the metallic screeching of bullets crashing into the layer of magic harshly echoing down the hallway and mixing with the angered yells of the reinforcement squad running towards them.

But the shield didn't break. From behind the cover of Eos' defense, Intergard delivered a bolt of lightning that hit the leftmost of the three guard right in the head, launching his body

backwards onto the floor where he slid for a few steps before lying motionless. Eos shuddered and looked away — His hedging deity was really not taking any chances here.

In a similar way, Intergard took out the two remaining men, and although (to Eos' horror) one of the bullets grazed her arm and pierced the fabric of her shirt, ripping off a piece of metal chain under it, both of them stayed unharmed — And their victory over the three guards came not a second too early, as now the rapidly approaching reinforcement squad was opening fire.

"Move!" yelled Intergard, and the two of them sprinted down the hallway, passing the three security men in their cover spots as they fled from the shots and angry shouting behind them.

"What's— the plan— Madam?" panted Eos, trying hard to sound relaxed and professional, but the fact that Intergard could see him struggling to keep up begged the question why he was even trying.

"Keep running!" commanded Intergard in-between sending bolts of lightning over her shoulder to keep the pursuers at bay, "We need to find whatever they're guarding on this level. It can't be far!"

They dashed past the entrance to the opposite staircase and continued down the corridor around the next corner.

"There!" shouted Eos, pointing towards a large steel door halfway down the hallway.

"That's the target — Charge!" commanded Intergard and gestured Eos to continue while she stopped just behind the corner to send another blazing surprise the guards' way. Eos ran down the corridor, already pulling out the Norkis Algorithm and taking the last few steps sliding on his knees before starting to work on the door. Behind him, Intergard was shouting into her comlink.

"Intergard to Operator, our situation's more or less under control — Keep those backups, I'd love to talk but right now it's a bit diffi—" She interrupted herself as around the corner the four guards came into hearing distance, and quickly leaning over to the side she shot two bolts in quick succession, dashing back into cover just in time to avoid the bullets that came flying her way instantly.

"I'll talk later, just keep an eye on the other teams!"

She pushed herself off the wall and sped down the corridor towards the steel door, but the Norkis decryption was far from done.

"Madam, the unlocking—" began Eos, but Intergard only brandished her hand in his direction, pulling out a rather large bronze plate from one of her trouser pockets.

"There's no time, just get back!" she commanded, and Eos quickly pulled away from the door while Intergard slammed the plate onto the steel surface, throwing quick looks over her shoulder towards the corner of the corridor, but the guards had not yet appeared. Eos took another step back, just to make sure.

"Intensity!" yelled Intergard, and the thin engravings on the plate flashed orange for a split-second before the whole door burst into pieces, sending large chunks of metal and brick all across the corridor while an ear-shattering sound rattled the air. When the dust settled, a gaping hole was all that remained of the fortified entrance.

Behind it, an amazed Eos could see a scarcely decorated empty room with water dripping down the unplastered walls and an old chair in the corner as the only piece of furniture. On the chair, with his long robes almost completely covering it as they reached down to the dirty floor,

sat Ketten of Ilierka, looking up at the exploded door with a surprised expression that quickly turned into a satisfied smile. From his lap, the startled cat jumped down to the floor with a meow and snarled at Eos — He wanted to say something, but Intergard grabbed his arm and rushed into the room as down the corridor the security men came around the corner, and bullets hit the walls outside the cell not a second later.

“Intergard to Operator!” she yelled into her comlink while giving a quick but respectful nod to Ketten, “Is the room layout the same on all floors? Quickly!”

It took a second for Osrakey and Benx to respond — Eos couldn’t blame them: Given the chaos that had broken out not only for Team One, but the other teams as well, it would have been a miracle if the operators had even the slightest idea what was going on inside the building.

“Eos, cover the door!” commanded Intergard.

“What!?” Eos jerked around to his partner, “I can’t shoot back!”

Intergard gave him a look that could have exorcised a demon, but quickly reconsidered.

“Can you draw up a portal to get us up to the ninth floor?”

She pointed at the ceiling, coal pencil already in hand.

“Uhm—” Eos hesitated for a moment, not having expected that, “—I think so?”

“Then do it, quickly!” she replied, handing Eos the pencil while dashing past him and Ketten to take position at the blasted-away entrance to the cell.

“The layout is roughly the same on all floors except the basement!” came Osrakey’s delayed response, echoing between the comlinks on the two agents’ wrists, “But can somebody please report to me what’s going on, for heaven’s sake? Speak the words!”

His voice didn’t sound angry, but very concerned.

“Well,” began Eos as he sat down on the floor, realizing that his partner was too busy shooting bolts of lightning down the hallway to talk to Team Zero, “We found Ketten of Ilierka, repeat, we found Ketten—” He had a hard time shouting over the noise of an explosive from the security men detonating in the hallway after Intergard had just barely managed to push it out of the room with a quick Movement spell, “We’re trying to set up a portal to the ninth floor to get distance between us and the guards — Lethal action here at the moment, but Agent Intergard has got everything under control, it seems—”

Most of his report was drowned by angry shouting coming from the corridor, where Intergard had just used a Frost spell to turn the polished floor outside into a slippery track of ice, and the sound of guards falling over already echoed down the hallway.

“How long until extraction?” she shouted with a satisfied smile and a quick look to Eos as she hurled another bolt in the guards’ general direction.

“Ten seconds, Madam!” replied Eos immediately, doing his best to complete the spell as quickly as possible, but not daring to leave out a circleclearing modulation to cover their tracks, “Mister Ketten, Sir, if you and your cat could kindly—”

Ketten, who had until now sat calmly on the barren chair, watching the spectacle with a mixture of amusement and genuine interest (or worry?), stood up with a knowing nod, called back his cat and walked over to Eos and the almost-finished circle. At the same time, Intergard shot out a last barrage of lightning against the guards, who were slowly but surely making their way over the ice towards them, and hurried across the room just as Eos finished the circle.

"This is Keros to Operator, we have the package. Evacuating to the ninth floor now!"

"Good copy," replied Osrakey, "I'm sending the Professor up there to meet you!"

With a quick tap of her foot, Intergard activated the portal and the three of them (plus one cat) were engulfed in the familiar blue flash that accompanied every teleport. A second later, the light faded as instantly as it had burst out of the circle, but the agents quickly realized that Eos' skills at improvising portals were not exactly perfect yet: As it seemed, he had overestimated the distance to the floor above, resulting in the three agents and Ketten's cat materializing not on the floor of the room directly above the cell, but in mid-air and much closer to the ceiling than Intergard would have liked. They crashed down violently and the swirled-up dust made Ketten and Eos cough hard.

"My sincere apologies, Madam," stuttered Eos in-between gasps for air as he tried to get back to his feet, having a hard time even seeing his surroundings clearly because of the dust in his eyes.

"Uhm— If I may be so bold," began Ketten slowly, but Intergard already knew what he was going to say.

"Operator?" she said loudly into her comlink.

"Operator listening," answered Benx, and Intergard let out a confused sigh, apparently overwhelmed by whatever it was Eos could not yet see.

"We have— a situation."

Some seconds passed before Eos managed to rub the dust out of his eyes and perceive clearly what *situation* they were in. The room they had ported into was roughly similar to Ketten's cell below, with unplastered walls and a dirty floor, no furniture and overall giving the impression of an unused storage room. However, an additional row of thick steel bars spanning the whole length of the room divided it in two, with the agents next to a heavy steel door leading outside into the hallway while on the other side of the massive bars, a large man laid sunk into a corner at the far end of the cell, his coat ripped to shreds in multiple places and a dirty hat covering his face. Eos gasped and made a step towards the prisoner, but Intergard pulled him back.

"Careful, junior," she said quietly and sneaked up to the door, putting an ear against the steel to hear if there were any guard patrols covering the corridor outside. Eos looked at the prisoner — Whoever that was, he was looking dreadful. Ketten at least seemed as if he hadn't been suffering too much in his captivity, but this person, whatever it was he had done to displease Djoutunhaim and the Insurance, looked like he had been in here for a long and terribly trying time.

Intergard returned from the entrance and inspected the iron bars separating the room. Eos noticed only now that there was no door in them — How were you supposed to get into and out of the cell?

"It's a portal cell," answered Intergard his unspoken question, "Without doubt, this prisoner is not a wizard..."

She began pacing the room, her foot sweeping the dust off the floor at various places in search of something that was apparently buried underneath.

"Operator, we found another prisoner," she said into her comlink, "I'll give you information on his appearance as soon as we reach him, prepare to hand me his identity. Confirmed?"

There was a short silence on the comlink, and Eos could almost hear Osrakey and Benx exchanging confused looks.

“Confirmed, Intergard,” replied Osrakey finally, “Professor and Alagdi are on their way but there is fierce opposition.”

Great, thought Eos. They were probably running into those same guards that had fought Intergard just a minute ago. And what about Igsher and Leit? Were they having troubles getting out, too?

“Ah, it’s here,” said Intergard and pointed to a spell circle on the dusty floor. She wanted to continue speaking, but was interrupted when all of a sudden the prisoner at the other end of the room rolled over and let out a loud grunt. The agents jerked up at the noise, and Intergard approached the bars to take a closer look at the miserable-looking man.

With another croaking noise the figure tried to get to his feet, but failed and sunk back to the dirty floor of the cell. His hat fell to the ground, revealing thin grey hair and a large scar running across his forehead and down into his face. With two exhausted eyes staring from deep within a wrecked face, the man looked up to Intergard and slowly opened his mouth.

“...Kwifeldis, is that you?”

Eos hadn’t recognized the man, but he remembered hearing this voice, and when the thick eyebrows, the ripped-out beard, the scar over one eye, and the croaking of the man’s question found each other inside his head, he suddenly knew who this prisoner was.

Intergard let out a hiss.

“So they took you in,” she said with a dismissive frown, “What a pleasant surprise coming across an old friend in a place like this — Isn’t it, Sarc?”

Kelem Aretz-Sarc was only a shadow of his former self. His bent figure on the floor of the cell gave such a weak and wholly spent impression that Eos needed a second to convince himself that this was the same man he had dueled at Kengnatz not more than four hours earlier, but there was no doubt. Overwhelmed by sudden anger, he rushed to the iron bars.

“Traitor!” he hissed into Sarc’s face, pushing hard against the steel with both hands, “How could you do this to us? I wanted to believe you were better than Sibrodi! I believed in you until the last second! And you let us down, you filthy swine!”

With a growl he spit on the ground in front of Sarc, his eyes sparkling angrily.

From behind, Intergard pulled Eos away from the exhausted prisoner, whose tired look slowly went from Eos to her, then to Ketten and his cat, and back to Eos with an expression of confusion and general weakness both of body and mind.

“What— what are you talking about, kid?” he finally managed to say, creeping closer to the bars. Eos jumped back in a mixture of fear and disgust.

“How much did she offer you?!” he barked, still gripped tight by Intergard, “How much did Lephon need to pay you to make you sell your friends?!”

Furious, Eos fought himself out of Intergard’s grip and turned away to face the wall.

“You were one of our best men — And that’s how much we’re all worth to you. Shame... Shame!”

Intergard was not in any mood for jokes, either. She went to her knees and lowered her head towards the bars, until she and Sarc were so close to each other that she could have touched his face.

"You've obviously been tortured for information after the SI captured you from Kengnatz earlier — Pity that I wasn't there, I would have *loved* to put you to the ground myself."

She smirked, her expression a rare hint at the pure disgust hidden behind her façade of professionalism.

"These four hours must have been rough for you," she continued, "But mark my words: Don't expect that I will go any easier on you because of that!"

She threw these words at him like an insult, but Sarc didn't respond — Eos couldn't tell if he was just too weak to talk or trying to act all strong and fierce, but frankly he didn't care either way. Intergard reached into the inside of her jacket, and from the depths of her lowest pocket she pulled out a piece of metal that she had not used in a long time. But that wouldn't keep her from using it now.

"I will only give you one chance, traitor," she hissed, "Tell me why you deserted to Kengnatz and what you told them about the agency, how you got into our raid at H-E and what you told Djoutunhaim and his underlings about us!"

She raised her hand with the small, diamond-shaped token.

"Speak now!"

Sarc slowly looked up at the artefact, then into Intergard's eyes, and sunk back onto the floor.

"I— have no clue what you're talking about, Kwifeldis," he said weakly, closing his eyes, "I didn't desert to Kengnatz— They captured me when we fought for headquarters—"

His voice was so quiet that Eos could hardly hear it.

"They didn't capture you, you deserted to them!" yelled Intergard, "I saw it myself, Sarc! Lephon was there herself, she led the raid! And you went over to them when you hadn't even been injured yet!"

Sarc opened his eyes again, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Kengnatz? No... Not Kengnatz..."

Achingly, he rolled over to once more face Intergard, the iron bars being the only thing separating them.

"The Insurance— They were there... They captured me and put me into this cell, I've been here for weeks—"

"What?!" yelled Intergard and stood up. Sarc rolled over, slowly realizing something. Then all of a sudden, he burst into weak, but heartfelt laughter.

"Oh, you've been *played*, Agent Intergard," he said, giggling.

His amusement was short-lived, though. Intergard let out a frustrated roar, and with a yell of "Torment!" a bright spark of red light sped out of the pointy artefact in her hand and into Sarc's body.

Sarc let out a cry of pain, but caught his composure quickly.

"Your torture won't help you, I'm speaking the truth", he said, turning around to look her in the eye, "I'm not the villain you seem to think I am— I didn't abandon you—" His words were cut off by a series of violent coughs, testimony to his miserable state.

"It's hopeless, Sarc," said Intergard, lowering the Torment artefact, "I saw you join their ranks! You ambushed us at H-E! You knocked out the Professor just to throw insults at Emerald! Elettra saw you, she confirmed your identity! Heck, you even learned Reflect in secret to have something in reserve that Central didn't know about!"

She took a deep breath, then continued more calmly.

“And needless to mention, you dueled Eos when we attacked your beloved Kengnatz to rescue the quartermaster, not five hours ago! You can’t seriously think this was all —I don’t know — *somebody else?*”

She shouted those last words directly in Sarc’s face, but he only continued giggling.

“I’m sorry, Kwifeldis,” he said finally, his hands slightly shaking, “I shouldn’t be laughing, but— You’ve never been so wrong, my dear.”

Intergard only hissed. After a moment, Sarc looked to Eos, then to the comlink device on his wrist, then back to her.

“Tell me,” he said, trying his best to rise at least a bit from the dirty floor, “Did you really fall for it? Did any of you, really?”

There was a pause, and Sarc sighed.

“I can’t do Reflect spells, Kwifeldis. Never could, never will.”

Intergard didn’t respond. For a second, she seemed to be thinking, then all of a sudden she raised the Torment artefact again, just this time not against Sarc — but Ketten. The cat let out a panicked cry.

“Tell me, information broker,” said Intergard slowly as she approached the young man, the artefact pointing to his chest like a gun, “Is there any wizard in the Social Insurance’s employ specializing in Illusions and Shapeshifting?”

Eos eyes widened. Surely she couldn’t be implying—

Intergard and Ketten stared at each other for a long and dreadfully tense moment. Ketten was petrified.

“...There is,” he finally answered with a sigh.

Intergard flung the artefact to the floor in frustration and turned to the wall with a savage roar. There was a pause — Eos couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“His name is Glen,” said Ketten into the silence after a few seconds, “To Djoutunhaim, he is like a son — His ultimate secret, you might say. The boy’s a prodigy — He does exclusively Yellow Magic and is rumored to be able to copy not only how somebody looks, but also— their voice.”

He exchanged a look with Eos.

“In fact, it was this very information that earned me my imprisonment here. Naturally, Djoutunhaim couldn’t afford me selling this knowledge to Liberty and with it leave your leaders to figure out the rest for themselves.”

Eos couldn’t believe it. Was it actually possible that none of those Sarc’s they had encountered— had actually been Sarc?

“So it’s true,” said Intergard slowly and returned to the bars, her expression frustrated and tired.

“You are not the traitor, after all.”

Sarc smiled weakly and shook his head. He didn’t have to say anything — Ketten’s testimony, his very presence here at SI, proved that he was right.

Intergard stepped away from the old man on the floor, raised her wrist to call Osrakey, but then changed her mind and lowered it again, all the while gazing onto the wall in deep

consideration, visibly unsure what to do with this stunning new piece of information. Finally, she nodded and unmuted her comlink.

"Intergard to Operator, my apologies for the lack of updates, it has been a bit confusing here."

"Operator listening," replied Osrakey after a pause, "I've been hearing really weird things, so could somebody please explain?"

Intergard gave a sideways look to Ketten and Eos, then one to Sarc on the floor.

"We found former Agent Sarc on the ninth floor. He was captured by the SI about a week ago."

"What?"

There was another pause as Osrakey and Benx sat speechless in Igsher's automobile — Intergard had to explain some things, but in the end everybody seemed to understand that Sarc's story was trustworthy. When Intergard mentioned it, Osrakey could confirm that he had heard rumors about a shapeshifting expert that had been surprisingly quiet in recent days. But nobody had known he was apparently able to imitate voices as well, so Central had discarded the idea of an impostor early.

"Anyway, we need to take him in, he's been tortured since the White Cave Defense," concluded Intergard, "How many more days will it take for the other teams to get here?"

Osrakey chose to ignore the sarcastic comment and coordinated briefly with the other teams, then informed Intergard that the Professor and Ienge were well on their way to Sarc's position — Igsher and Leit on the other hand were still held up by a so far unknown enemy that kept them from coming to help. Not a dangerous situation, as Osrakey assured them, but Eos couldn't help but worry. All of this was happening way too fast for him to comprehend.

"One thing I don't understand, though," he said slowly, "Why do this? I mean, setting up an impostor for Sarc and letting him defect to Kengnatz? That sounds so... elaborate?"

Intergard lowered her arm in thought and looked to Ketten, who said nothing and looked to the floor. The cat meowed.

"Why take all this effort just to make sure we think Sarc is a traitor?"

"Perhaps Djoutunhaim wanted to destroy our morale?" suggested Benx on the comlink, now being able to listen in on everything after Intergard had un-muted the connection.

"No, it's not worth it after Lephon's raid — White Cave is gone, many of our people captured, some killed — Our morale is bound to be terrible anyway," she replied, and already wanted to continue speaking when all of a sudden her eyes widened in alarm.

"—But of course...!"

Eos gave a puzzled look to Ketten, but he just shrugged. Intergard turned around, now wide awake and worry written all over her face.

"It's because of the moles," she said, "Central knew there were moles within the agency. Sibrodi showed himself, but there had to be another one, somebody selling our intel away to the corps behind Central's back. That's the reason!"

On the comlink, Osrakey gasped, but Eos still didn't quite understand. He opened his mouth to ask, but Intergard saw it and continued.

"Sarc was never the traitor, Eos! Djoutunhaim set up this shapeshifter to make it look as if Sarc was the obvious second mole, when in reality he was here all that time!"

"But why would he do that?" replied Eos, "It doesn't make any sense!"

Intergard took a deep breath, her expression still one of grave concern.

"Yes, it does," she said, "Djoutunhaim had to do it. He had to make Sarc look like a traitor to conceal who the *real* second mole was."

Silence fell in the cell and on the comlink. Intergard's revelation was as shocking as it was plausible. But if she was right, then it would mean that not only was there another, undiscovered mole within the agency, virtually unopposed since Central had concluded Sarc was the culprit, but also —and possibly even more concerning— that this second double agent was not under Kengnatz' command, as everyone had assumed. It had been the Insurance pulling the strings all along.

Intergard pulled up her comlink again.

"Operator, secure the assets, I'm going in to confront Djoutunhaim and clear up this devilish mess once and for—"

She wanted to continue, but a sudden crash from outside the cell interrupted her, and a second later the heavy steel door flung open.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Dapper Spellslinger

Within the doorframe stood a single man. His clean white shirt created a strange contrast to the filthy cell he had entered, and the numerous artefacts dangling from his belt were still rocking back and forth from when he had ran down the corridor. His face was a mixture of concern, apprehension, and genuine surprise at the sight, and above it a bright blue hairstyle instantly signified to Eos who the intruder was.

“Chou!” he shouted, but Intergard pushed him aside as she stepped to the center of the room directly opposing the elegant man, her eyes fixed on him and her hands hovering above her pockets, ready to draw out any spell she might need.

“Madam, wait! He’s—”

Eos was cut off by a thin spark of lightning dashing across the room out of Chou’s finger, only to bounce off into the wall a moment later as Intergard pulled up a quick shield with a fling of her hand. A second shot followed closely after, this time at a different angle, but Intergard blocked it easily, and with narrowed eyes the two duelists returned to a tense state of motionless readiness.

“Whatever you wanted to say, junior — Is he really?” said Intergard without looking at Eos. It wasn’t a question.

Eos swallowed hard. Of course he knew that people were not always what they seemed to be, and he was aware that in his profession appearances and first looks were often used to deceive — Still, he found it hard to get his head around the idea that Chou, alongside the whole Social Insurance, was supposed to be their enemy now. Then again, if he truly was loyal to Djoutunhaim, there was hardly anything not to understand.

“Benx?” shouted Intergard, still motionless just like Chou, “Young man, elegant clothing, spellslinger from the looks of it. Blue hair and cocky smile. Talk to me.”

Chou grinned. Eos expected him to attack now that Intergard had requested information about him, but apparently the young wizard didn’t think it necessary to disrupt her. Instead, he just stood there, politely waiting for Intergard’s operators to give her a profile of his skills.

“Erin Enchou, Madam,” came Benx’ confused response after a pause, and Eos could understand how irritating all this had to be to his friend. Just like he had done on the airship, Benx recounted what he knew about the dapper man at the cell door.

“Trademark is Stupefy — Versatile skillset, acrobatics, decent hand-to-hand, but weak against powerful spells because of his physique.”

"I appreciate it, boy," replied Intergard, taking a deep breath before sending a massive bolt of magic lightning towards Chou, who simply stepped sideways into the corridor behind him only a split-second before the bolt dashed into the wall on the opposite side.

"Come get me, Intergard!" came a mocking yell from around the corner. Intergard quickly took position at the side of the door, signaling Eos and Ketten to move into cover.

"Madam, what's your plan?" whispered Eos tensely as he hurried into the shadow of the doorframe to the other side of Intergard.

"Djoutunhaim's office is on the top floor," she replied, pressed against the wall and throwing careful glances out into the corridor where Chou seemed to have vanished into thin air, "Even if he isn't there, we can get enough evidence to confirm everything. We need to find out who the second mole is, or our whole agency is in danger!"

Osrakey started talking on the comlink, giving an affirmation to Intergard's plan and telling them about the status of the other teams, but his report was cut off by a sharp yell from Intergard when a small metal object flew into the room from outside and landed on the ground at the center of the cell.

"Magnet bomb!"

A split-second later, the artefact contracted and a faint yellow light burst out, instantly filling the whole cell. Sarc's powerless body was hurled violently against the iron bars, and Intergard, Ketten, and Eos were all propelled towards the center of the room with such force that Eos had no success gripping onto anything in time. He landed face-first on the dirty floor of the cell, next to Ketten and his visibly disgusted cat — Behind him, Intergard had turned around mid-air to land on her feet and was now facing the door, where Chou had already stepped into position to take the agents by surprise. Two bolts of lightning were followed by a burst of fire that ricocheted off the ceiling in an attempt to bypass Intergard's massive figure and hit Ketten instead, but she deflected all three attacks without a word, standing strong in front of the two young men behind her on the ground. Eos was in awe.

"Blue to Godspeed, I'm not sure I can beat them," said Chou slowly into his own comlink and took a step back into the hallway.

"That's right, boy," replied Intergard with a menacing smile, "Your tricks are naught but farce... Arrogance is the tyranny of the mind — And Heaven's Light all evil purifies."

She said this in a low, monotone voice, almost like a chant. Chou seemed to recognize the words, but his expression was impossible to read, although at the sound of "Heaven's Light" his eyes seemed to brighten up a little, almost as if in joy or anticipation.

Eos had never seen Intergard like this. She was one to follow protocol strictly and never show any sign on personal involvement, but now that the agency's safety was at stake (not to mention Eos' and Ketten's, too), she seemed to draw from a different source of strength entirely.

With a broad movement, Intergard pulled back her sleeve, revealing the numerous spell circles tattooed onto the skin of her arm.

"Oh, now it's on," said Chou with a broad grin, pulling one of his own artefacts from his belt.

Without a reply, Intergard slapped her left hand onto one of the circles, and her whole arm seemed to vaporize in a blinding eruption of white brilliance.

"Lightcore!"

"Finally," whispered Chou.

Eos had only ever heard about the spell, and never seen it in person. Blask was the technical term, Ball Of Thunder or Lightcore the common names. It was Intergard's trademark technique, the very spell she was famous for. Some said she had invented it, and although Eos knew that wasn't true, it was clear that she had given it her personal touch. Speechless, he watched as in the air above Intergard's shoulder, the raw lightning covering her whole arm condensed into a blinding white dot fizzling with energy, and not a second later, a flick of Intergard's hand sent it dashing through the air towards Chou at such speed that Eos couldn't follow it with his eyes, but the young spellslinger at the door was ready. With a sidestep and an angular Reflect, he redirected the sparkling bullet of light down the corridor to one side — The defense worked, but his shield exploded into pieces instantly. Still smiling, he returned his eyes to Intergard, but she only pulled back her arm, and to Chou's shock the Lightcore came flying back, missing the young man closely as he ducked down with a startled yell.

Now Intergard had the initiative. With a jump she followed Chou into the corridor, calling the Lightcore back to her with a gesture, only to send it dashing out for another attack a second later. They disappeared behind the steel post of the door, and after a moment of being completely petrified by what he had just seen, Eos rushed to the door to watch the duel — A few steps down the hallway, Chou was doing his best to stand against Intergard's attacks, but his shields were not powerful enough to deflect the sparkling orb for long, and Intergard was pushing him back towards the corner of the corridor. Eos shuddered at the thought of what Intergard might be planning to do to Chou once she had gained the upper hand completely — In her current state, he was convinced that she wouldn't shy away from anything, and the fact that she had casually used a torture spell on her former friend earlier just made it even more terrifying.

Eos was just pulling up his comlink to report to the operators that Intergard was winning the duel, but down the hallway, Chou had suddenly turned the tables: With a pointy piece of metal directed straight into the Lightcore, he had managed to destabilize it, and in the split-second that Intergard was busy calling the orb back to her to keep it from exploding, he had mounted a counterattack. Admittedly, the large woman had little difficulty deflecting the various bursts of fire and lightning that Chou now shot at her, but the young spellslinger was steadily gaining ground again with a series of quick and very clever attacks at seemingly unpredictable angles.

Eos had to help. Signaling Ketten to stay inside the cell, he ran down the corridor towards the duelists, but Chou saw it. He directed a last bolt towards Intergard on a high line of attack that forced her further back, then pulled out a long chain from his breast pocket. With a mischievous look up to Eos, he gripped the small token at the end of the chain, and a moment later his body was gone in a puff of dark shroud.

At first, Eos thought it was a Naikra spell, but of course Intergard already knew what was happening. With an alert expression, her head flew around, searching the whole corridor with her eyes but stopping instantly when she saw him.

"Eos, behind you!"

Eos jerked around, but it was already too late. Directly behind him, Chou had reappeared as instantly as he had vanished at the other end of the hallway, slapping his hand with the artefact down onto the ground in front of Eos' feet. Eos wanted to jump back, but a spell circle had

already materialized on the floor around him, and a second later a violent force gripped him from all sides, pulling him up towards the ceiling.

The next moment, everything was silent, and Eos didn't immediately understand what was going on. Everything around him was white — From far above, strange black drops were slowly falling down towards some unknown floor deep below, forming patterns in the air like ink in water as they descended in eerie silence. Eos was floating. He could move, but only ended up rotating around himself without ever getting from the point where he seemed to be fixed onto the thin air.

He sighed.

"So this is what the astral plane looks like," he said to himself, but his mouth made no sound.

It would have been a great experience to visit this strange and mysterious place some other time, but right now Eos was very concerned about Intergard's safety, and anxious to understand what was really going on behind the façade of the Social Insurance, so this trip into Chou's Astral didn't delight him very much at all. Of course he knew that the spell didn't work very well on people, and that it would only be a few seconds, maybe a minute, before he reappeared in the corridor exactly at the point where Chou had banished him, but these seconds could decide the duel between the young wizard and Intergard, and although Eos had no doubt that his partner was the stronger fighter by far, he still wanted to help her, instead of floating around like an idiot somewhere on the astral plane just because he hadn't expected Chou to catch him off guard like that. Honestly, he should have seen that Blink spell coming.

It was a smart move by Chou — that much was clear. He probably didn't know Eos' skillset and therefore had to have assumed that the young boy was at least somewhat skilled in battle (which of course, Eos wasn't — not really), so separating his two opponents and fighting them one after the other was the correct move. Eos had an easy time acknowledging that Chou was playing this possibly decisive encounter absolutely by-the-book, which in Eos' opinion earned him a lot of credit, but on the other hand the Insurance was supposedly their mortal enemy now, so maybe Eos shouldn't be praising the opposition all too much without —

His thoughts were interrupted when all of a sudden, the black drops of ink around him were sucked back into the void above, and Eos' body squeezed down through what felt like a hole the size of a Fallos artefact — One moment later, with a blinding flash of color and movement returning to his senses, Eos found himself back in the corridor at the SI headquarters.

He looked around — The hallway was empty. He rushed to the cell, where Sarc was still lying on the dirty floor just like they had left him.

"Sarc, what's going on, where is everybody?" asked Eos, alarmed and throwing timid sideways looks down the corridor. Sarc looked up, visibly astonished.

"You're still here, kid?"

Eos jumped up and down on his feet in apprehension.

"Yes I am, where is everyone?"

"They ran off," replied Sarc weakly, letting his head sink back to the floor, "Intergard was chasing that Insurance youngster..."

Eos turned towards the direction of the staircase, then changed his mind and came back to the cell, quickly running over to the spell circle on the floor.

“What about Ketten? Is he with them?” he asked as he started to cast it. Sarc looked up again, searching the room in surprise.

“He was here just a second ago, and that damned cat—” The rest of his comment was drowned in a series of coughs and grunts as the activated spell under Eos’ feet teleported the old man from behind the bars to the center of the room, where he reappeared with a startled expression.

“Don’t waste your time with me, kid!” he shouted, gesturing, “I’ve spent a week in that cell, I can wait a little longer—”

“Nonsense,” replied Eos plainly, kneeling down next to Sarc and checking his forehead for heat, “I need to make sure you’re out of danger. Intergard will be fine.”

Sarc sighed and sank back to the floor. Eos was frankly very confused by his own thoughts — Minutes ago, Sarc had been the living embodiment of treachery and evil to him, and now...?

“Operator!” he shouted into his comlink while checking Sarc’s body for any injuries, but the man seemed to be alright, “I have no idea what the current mission status is, but Agent Sarc is still disabled and here for the taking, where are those bloody reinforcements?”

He immediately regretted his tone — Not only because of Osrakey hearing it, but more importantly because it violated his own idea of how to behave on a mission. Apparently, the pressure was taking its toll after all.

“You’re alright, these injuries aren’t dangerous,” he said quickly, turning to Sarc, “Just wait here, we’ll get you out.”

Sarc gestured weakly with one hand as if chasing away some insect — Eos nodded and stood up.

Approaching the door, he pulled up his comlink again, and only now noticed that being sent to Astral had severed the comlink connection. With a sigh at the question why it always had to be him who lost communication, he ran down the corridor towards the staircase.

He turned right to follow Intergard onto the upper levels, but at that moment two familiar voices echoed up from the left, and a second later Ienge and the Professor came up the last few steps to the ninth floor.

“Gods’ graces, what took you so long?” asked Eos in-between pants, and immediately wanted to retract the question — After all, this was the Professor he was talking to.

“We were delayed, not unlike Igsher,” replied the Professor, slightly exhausted from running up all these stairs, “Where is Intergard?”

Eos pointed up.

“She’s chasing SI’s Chou, we should cover her!”

“What about Sarc?” asked Ienge.

“He’s fine.”

The Professor nodded and with a quick motion of his hand adjusted his cuffs.

“The agent we fought in the basement escaped towards the upper levels, too,” he said, “Quickly, let’s go!”

The tenth floor was silent, with no guard nor agent in sight, so they continued to go up. Eos had no clear idea of how many floors the building could have — From outside, it had looked

like ten or twelve, but the windows were arranged in such a chaotic way that it was hard to count reliably.

When they took the last stairs to the eleventh floor, a silent 'Shh!' came from behind a massive glass door branching off the staircase. A large, stylish calligraphy that filled the whole surface of the door indicated that this was indeed Djoutunhaim's personal office — The very center of his power, some might have said. The Professor raised a hand.

"Professor to Intergard, we're at the—" he started, but noticed quickly that Intergard had muted her connection. He sighed and stealthily approached the glass entrance. The two boys followed closely behind.

Peeking around the corner, they spotted a familiar figure. Relieved, the Professor pulled open the door and the three agents entered the small antechamber behind, where Intergard was standing leant against the wall next to a large wooden gate that without doubt led into Djoutunhaim's office.

"Status?" asked the Professor quietly as he took position next to Intergard.

"They're in there," she replied with a nod towards the entrance, "At least two of them."

Ienge and Eos, leaning against the wall on the other side of the large door, exchanged a look that revealed how relieved both of them were to see each other unharmed. Eos didn't exactly know how the fight in the basement had gone, but if his own experience was any indication, it could well have been fatal — Still, he had an eerie feeling that the worst was yet to come.

"You want to go in?" asked Ubtra, carefully touching the surface of the door to check for enchantments.

"We don't know about any other entrance, so there's little choice," said Intergard, "I take it you people know about the whole Sarc business already?"

"More or less."

"Then I don't need to tell you that Djoutunhaim—" she continued, "—Has documents that reveal the identity of his mole, and without which our whole company is still in danger. Needless to say, they're probably trying to destroy them right now, so if you ask me there really isn't any time for strategy."

The Professor nodded.

"I cover the front," said Intergard, and with a look over to Eos and Ienge she added: "You kids need to defend the sides. Professor, we'll cover you — Analyze the room and call our shots."

Ubtra nodded again.

"Everyone, disable comlinks. If one of us is captured we don't want to give away the operators' position."

"Confirmed," came Osrakey's voice through the devices. He sounded worried, and with good reason.

"Best of luck, agents."

They switched off the comlinks and Intergard stepped in front of the large double-doors leading into the office. They exchanged quick looks, and then, with a mighty tackle of her body, Intergard bashed open the entrance and they rushed in.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Real Djoutunhaim

They found themselves within a huge room at the foot of a series of polished stairs leading up to the opposite wall, where elevated on a podium a large desk and armchair, surrounded by numerous drawers and cabinets, stood overlooking the nightly cityscape through a window that spanned the whole width of the office. To the sides, eerily illuminated abstract sculptures were on display within small aisles branching off from each of the levels of the stairway, forming a line of stone effigies pointing diagonally upward towards the top level of the room. The ceiling converged into a tip high above them, and below the roof a ring of connected balconies looked down to the agents like silent watchmen. Thick lengths of fabric in dark colors hanging from the balconies threw their shadows across the stairway from both sides, backlit by the shimmer from behind the sculptures. The polished marble of the floor was filled with thin gold lines that could well have been a giant spell circle, and the creaking of the heavy wooden door after Intergard's tackle echoed back from the ceiling and the platform at the other end of the office in a ghastly way.

There was no attack. No bolts of lightning dashing down from the balconies, no ambushers jumping out from behind the sculptures. The whole office lay silently in front of them. Eos and Ienge, artefacts ready, exchanged a confused look.

"Cover me while I get the documents," said Intergard and took the first stair, but hesitated, and after a moment signaled the other agents to stop. Searching the dark balconies above for any sign of the two Insurance agents she had pursued earlier, she pulled back her sleeve and touched one of the spell circles on her rough skin. A faint white haze travelled across the whole length of the room, but revealed no invisible objects of any kind. Still suspicious, Intergard sent out Release and Cancel spells as well, convinced that there had to be some sort of defense mechanism in place. She was just about to turn to her colleagues with a confirming nod, when a sudden noise echoing down from the platform ahead made her stop dead in her tracks. She jerked back around and pulled out an artefact from her jacket, a faint spark of lightning already jumping from her fingertip and hitting the ground with a quiet fizzle.

Above on the platform in front of the large window, the armchair started to turn. Slowly, the man sitting in it came into sight — A charming smile on his face and clothed in an elegant business jacket similar to what Eos had already seen on the airship, Djoutunhaim leant back with a sigh and wordlessly smiled down to the agents at the other end of the office. Intergard hissed, adjusting her stance while next to her the Professor took a step forward.

Djoutunhaim opened his mouth to speak, but Intergard was quicker. With a large motion of her arm, she sent a powerful bolt up towards the handsome man, but to the agents' shock the bolt bounced back in mid-air only a few steps in front of Intergard, dashing down again and hitting the polished floor at the very spot where she had stood just a moment earlier before dodging to the side with an alarmed expression. A faint shimmer travelled through the air from one side of the large hall to the other, like a reflection on an invisible surface dividing the room. Intergard hissed again.

"Demonwall," she whispered through her teeth as she searched the walls for any sign of a spell circle. But there wasn't one, and without knowledge of where the circle was, a Demonwall was impossible to release from inside.

"Oh, my dear Intergard," came Djoutunhaim's voice from above. Backlighting by the lights of the nightly city, it was hard to see his figure in the black armchair.

"Always so intense, so powerful."

A sudden sound from the side made the agents jump up — To the left, somebody stepped out of the shadows between the heavy lengths of cloth, his blue hair quickly revealing him to be Chou. At the same moment to the right, a cloaked figure jumped down from the balcony and landed in front of one of the sculptures half-way to the top of the platform. The slim body indicated a woman, and she was carrying a polished sword on her back. That had to be Hatzat, the assassin that had worked with them on their earlier rescue mission, thought Eos. He stumbled back as the mysterious figure drew her weapon, but a strong arm caught him from behind.

"Don't panic, Keros," said the Professor as Eos regained his balance, "As long as we're in here, they can't touch us any more than we can touch them."

Of course, Eos knew this — Still, being served on a polished platter (literally) to one of the most powerful men on the continent had an eerie touch. Although at present they seemed to be at the numbers advantage, once the Demonwall disappeared the agents really were sitting ducks for any attack.

"The trick is up, Djoutunhaim!" yelled Intergard across the room, "We found Sarc, your little disguise game is at an end!"

Djoutunhaim nodded slowly in the shadow of his armchair.

"I understand," he replied quietly, and Eos couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic.

"In that case I'd like to introduce you — officially."

He gestured with his hand, and from behind one of the sculptures on the left side, a massive figure appeared. With large steps that echoed across the office, the unknown stranger crossed the hall and took position in front of the Demonwall directly opposed to Intergard. Only now Eos could see that the large silhouette was indeed that of Intergard herself, a virtually perfect copy of the woman standing right next to him. It was as if a mirror spanning the width of the room was reflecting her image back at them.

"I see, I cannot fool your intellect, Madam," continued Djoutunhaim, slowly rising from the armchair and walking down towards them, "Why don't you elaborate a bit more on what you think I did to annoy you?"

Intergard let out a dismissive huff.

"We don't need to explain ourselves to you, Djoutunhaim!" she yelled, rushing forward and slamming her fist against the shimmering Demonwall. The sound of it rattled the office, but the spell took no damage.

"Indeed you don't," said Djoutunhaim gently after taking the last few steps down to where the invisible barrier divided the room. He was now standing right in front of Intergard, the thin layer of magic being the only thing keeping his face unharmed by her massive fist.

The Professor stepped forward.

"Why do this?" he asked calmly, "Why go through all this trouble to keep your mole? Just for information to sell away to the highest bidder?"

Djoutunhaim raised his eyebrows as he turned to Ubtra.

"No," he said plainly, "Actually I just want to destroy you."

He said this as if it was the most reasonable thing, as if he was explaining the weather or talking to a child about something completely normal.

"Well, not you as people, of course," he added quickly, gesturing with his hands apologetically as a reaction to the agents' startled faces, "Your company. I can't stand it!"

He turned to the shapeshifter next to him, who now looked exactly like Liberty, long coat included.

"Naturally, inside intel is very profitable as well," he continued as in front of him the image of Liberty transformed, shrinking, until to Eos shock the small figure of Emerald in her wheelchair appeared silently in front of them, looking up at Djoutunhaim with a frightened shiver.

"So it's just a personal vendetta?" barked Intergard. Djoutunhaim looked up, slightly confused as if he had been unexpectedly interrupted.

"Well, yes," he replied with a quick nod, "The people you call 'Central' haven't done anything to me directly, but they are indeed evil and they're blocking the way of my company, so I intend to kill them."

Intergard's face contorted in a disgusted expression, moving even closer to the transparent shimmer that separated them.

"Just you wait until we get through here, I will *annihilate* you," she whispered through her gritted teeth, "Malice warrants retribution, but the deepest circle of hell is reserved for greed!"

Djoutunhaim turned away with a snicker.

"Shout all you want, Intergard, but the truth is that I have won."

He threw a quick glance onto his wristwatch.

"In not more than ten minutes, my agent will sneak up on Emerald and Liberty to kill them in their sleep. Enster and Heaven's Hand will be next, and since you're all here, there is nothing you can do to stop it."

He turned back to the agents below with a menacing grin and gestured towards the door.

"You can make your retreat right now, if you want — But we all know that you won't be there in time."

Eos shuddered. Was this even possible? Could Djoutunhaim have anticipated all this in advance? No way.

A moving shadow behind a sculpture to the right made the agents turn around, and one moment later a familiar figure in a long rough cloak stepped out of the shadows. It was Orlun Sibrodi.

"I trust you already know each other?" said Djoutunhaim playfully as Sibrodi approached the group, exchanging tense stares with Eos and Ienge as he passed.

"You defected again?" snapped the Professor, almost annoyed, but the old man on the other side of the Demonwall only let out a chuckle.

"My allegiance was never with Kengnatz," he replied with a nod to Djoutunhaim, "Why simply desert when you can double it and play both sides?"

So that was the truth, though Eos. Kengnatz had never been behind any of the traitors, it had all been the Social Insurance pulling the strings from the very start.

"Then I suppose it was you who sold our hideout plans to Lephon!" shouted Intergard, her voice so sharp it could have cut straight through Djoutunhaim's perfectly ironed shirt.

"That's right," replied the Insurance leader with a casual gesture of his hand, "All part of my grand design to put all the blame on greedy Kengnatz. You see, it's rather easy if you have that many tools at your disposal."

"But hold on," interrupted Ienge, who had just noticed something, "If Sibrodi was working for you all along, then why did Chou save us when we were attacked by him on the airship? Did you order to deflect your own attack?"

Djoutunhaim, who had been slowly walking up the stairs to his armchair again, stopped and turned around, raising a finger with a smile.

"In fact, yes," he said, returning to the Demonwall, "Naturally I could have had you four killed, but then again you didn't seem very important to the agency at the time. You still aren't! So I took the opportunity to stage a fake rescue to get to know you better."

"...And by that convince us that you were a nice and honest man," added Eos. Djoutunhaim nodded proudly, almost like a child.

"Simply another piece in my scheme of Who-Would-Ever-Blame-Djoutunhaim. To be honest, I did the exact same thing for a second time when I sent my agents to assist you in your raid for Enster and had Fake-Sarc duel dear Mister Keros, just to be saved by a miraculous appearance of Chou, *again*? How you people did not think that was fishy is completely beyond me," he said, giggling. Intergard spit on the floor.

"Or remember that one time when I sent Oredchimegdi's location to H-E through an anonymous tip to provoke them into rescuing him, just so that afterwards when you all came crawling to get Ankuro's brother back, I could send Fake-Sarc over to play with Emerald's mind? Wild times, but so funny! The thing with the Reflect spell was an unfortunate mistake, but I didn't have to worry — After all, I was never in danger since you were so very convinced that Sarc was working for Kengnatz after he so blatantly deserted to them at the White Cave. Or, maybe I should say: After my infiltrator Glen deserted to them."

There was a shocked pause. Everything seemed to make sense all of a sudden. Djoutunhaim rushed up to the Demonwall with a snicker, his face now so close to Intergard's that they could have felt each other's breath if not for the magical barrier between them.

"It was me, Intergard," he whispered, his eyes sparkling with pride, "From the very start it was all *me*."

Intergard roared, but the Insurance leader moved no muscle at the sight. He stood in front of the Demonwall silently like a visitor at a zoo watching the lions roar.

“But how did you know which flight we were on?” asked Eos, now finally posing a question that should have bothered him from the start.

Djoutunhaim smiled silently as he turned to the boy. There was a short pause, and the Professor and Intergard exchanged a worried look that Eos had a hard time interpreting.

“Now you’re finally onto something, young one,” said Djoutunhaim, “Funny how none of your legendary superiors thought of that earlier, wouldn’t you say?”

A few seconds passed without anybody speaking. Intergard was looking over her shoulder to Eos, whose thoughts were dashing back and forth in his head as he tried to understand how anyone could have gotten hold of their flight time. Because after all, they hadn’t told anyone, and Osrakey had given them their tickets in private, had he not?

And then it hit him. *Osrakey had not.* Indeed, had there not been a certain someone passing through the narrow corridor in front of Eos’ room at the Erkom hideout just as Osrakey had handed him the ticket, squeezing through between the two of them to get to the stairway, all while playing pure-and-honest with a cheerful greeting on his lips while he secured that lethal piece of intel for Djoutunhaim in the shadows? No way... Eos couldn’t believe it.

“That’s right,” said Djoutunhaim lovingly as he saw the startled expression on Eos’ face, almost proud of him.

“The name of my friend at the agency is... Sarb Rekkar.”

For a moment, there was silence in the large office. Intergard’s eyes quickly went over to Eos, then Djoutunhaim, then Sibrodi, reflecting how her mind was processing the news. Ienge turned to his friend, but Eos just nodded. He should have known. Leit should have known — They had thought about it all so much, and with only a tiny bit more logical thinking from their side, all this could have been averted.

The Professor opened his mouth to speak, but all of a sudden, a sharp yell from high above on one of the balconies echoed down to them, and Eos immediately knew whose voice it was.

“Release!”

A bright flash illuminated the ceiling of the hall, and Eos could spot two familiar faces leaning over a balcony to the right: The ‘heavily delayed’ Team Two, Agents Igsher and Shichal. The light flooding out of Leit’s hand quickly reached the group standing below on the polished floor, and with a sound of shattering glass the Demonwall exploded into glittering pieces that hovered in the air for a short moment before disintegrating into countless glowing particles that reflected in Djoutunhaim’s startled eyes.

Intergard grinned.

“And now, for payback!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hand-To-Hand

This was it. The moment that it all came down to. Rekkar shuddered. Just two stabs in the right places, and all this madness would be over.

He was sitting in his room at the Grey House, alone. A single candle on the barren desk illuminated the walls and sent flickering shadows across the ceiling. Rekkar sighed and stood up. It was now or never.

He pulled his equipment out of the old wardrobe, put on his boots and packed an additional pair of slippers — for stealth. Two knives were strapped to his left arm and leg, sent by Djoutunhaim himself. *Domination* and *Shatterer* were their names — One for each of the agency's leaders.

Rekkar pushed open the window and began climbing down into the garden. Central's private residence wasn't far. By now, the agents around Intergard that had gone rogue to infiltrate SI Tower were probably walking right into the tripwire at the rear entrance. He swallowed hard — The thought of these people walking straight into Djoutunhaim's arms was... uncomfortable.

Hatzat and Glen had told him over and over that this was what he wanted. That the destruction of the agency and their leaders would make him rich — Frankly, until now Rekkar had tried to not give it too much thought, but if the price of riches and power at Djoutunhaim's hand was sending all his friends into capture and death, he wasn't so sure anymore if this was *really* 'what he wanted'.

In any case, it was far too late to back off now. He had already given away so many of the agency's secrets — Regardless of the outcome of this night, there was no future for him here.

He silently walked down the empty street, timidly looking over his shoulder every couple of seconds — He knew there was nobody in sight, but he couldn't control it. He had never been part of something as important as this. If he went through with his plan tonight, the agency would crumble and Djoutunhaim's Social Insurance would be the most powerful corporation on the continent.

Needless to say, Rekkar would not have to worry about anything ever again — Djoutunhaim would make sure of that. Granted, everybody knew that a councilman's word on a matter such as this couldn't possibly be trusted, but Rekkar had thought of everything. The weeks of hiding among all the clueless people he had sold away to the Insurance without them even suspecting anything had given him more than enough time to see this through. If he really was to betray his friends, he would do it his own way, and that meant making sure the disgusting swine that

called himself Djoutunhaim wouldn't get any more out of this deal than was absolutely necessary.

Then again, it had never been concerns about the reward that had made him reflect on his choice — Deep down, Rekkar had understood a long time ago that he was about to do something terrible, something that would haunt him for the rest of his life. But since he had made this deal, there had been no way back, and now only one thing was left to do.

He arrived at a small house two streets further down the hill, and started climbing the back wall until he reached a low balcony with a glass door leading in to the second floor. He pulled out a thin needle and began working on the lock.

Whether he wanted to do this or not was irrelevant. It really came down to that. Whether his choices in the past had been right or wrong didn't matter, either. The only truth of this moment was that he had no other options: Come morning, every detail of Djoutunhaim's plot would be revealed — Even if the agents didn't find the imprisoned Sarc at SI, Djoutunhaim had made clear that he would unveil Rekkar's true identity, even if just to make him suffer for his indecisiveness. If he fled now, the face of this devil in a turtleneck would follow him everywhere as the man that had made him an outcast and a traitor. Then again, it was true: He had betrayed everyone he knew — If he backed out now, if he made it out safely and even if he were to manage running from Djoutunhaim's assassins for the rest of his days, he wouldn't be able to live with it.

Rekkar pulled open the door. In fact, he knew very well that he wouldn't be able to live with this no matter how it ended. But if he couldn't change that part of the result, it was only natural for him to try and get the most out of it, no? Certainly. He had never wanted it to end this way, but it had to be done.

He put on the additional pair of shoes and sneaked into the living room, where a large clock welcomed him with slow ticking that echoed down the hall. He crept up to the room at the far end of the corridor, reached for the handle, but hesitated. He took a deep breath.

"It's alright," he whispered to himself, "I'll go in there, stab her, and everything will be fine. She won't suffer."

His hand was shaking. Slowly, it moved towards the door, but just as it touched the handle—
"I should have known."

Rekkar jerked up, air hissing as it was sucked into his lungs. He didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

"Liberty — I'm sorry," said Rekkar quietly.

"Look me in the eye as you say it, boy!" replied Liberty in a forceful tone that made Rekkar tense up even more. Timidly, he turned around. Why did all this have to happen to him?

"I'm sorry, I really am," he said again, this time looking the large man straight in the eyes. Liberty raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Rekkar, you don't have to do this."

There was a pause. Rekkar looked to the ground.

"You're wrong, Sir," he replied with a sigh, "I have to."

He turned back to the door and pushed down the handle.

"You know I can't let you go through with this," said Liberty behind him. Rekkar looked over his shoulder.

“And I also know that you can’t stop me, Sir,” he answered, “With respect, but you being awake doesn’t change anything. If you engage, I’ll destroy you — I’m younger, better trained, and better equipped. You wouldn’t stand a chance and you know that.”

Liberty didn’t respond. After a moment, Rekkar sighed.

“See, it’s true. You can’t do anything to save her, so don’t make this any uglier than it needs to be. And never fear—” He pulled out one of the knives and pointed to Liberty, “—My list has four names on it. Just be patient, when I’m finished with—”

The rest of his speech was cut off when to his surprise, Liberty dashed forward. A second later he had caught up with Rekkar, punching his extended knife to the side and following up with three quick fist attacks. But Rekkar deflected all of them easily, taking a sidestep and slapping Liberty on the neck with a mocking snicker. The tall man hissed in disgust and stumbled into the wall.

“Why are you doing this?” asked Rekkar. He wanted to look triumphant and confident, but he couldn’t. What he was bound to do did not deserve any praise.

In front of him, Liberty caught his composure again. It was easy to see that the man had not engaged in physical activity for some time.

“You’re a fool if you think I have any other choice but to fight you,” he replied, already panting. Rekkar let out a chuckle.

“Come at me, Sir.”

Liberty charged in for another attack, but this time Rekkar couldn’t defend against all of it — With a metallic sound, the knife in his hand fell to the floor as he took a hefty punch on the wrist. A shocked look in his eyes, he started a counterattack, but Liberty anticipated it and grabbed his hand, turning it and forcing Rekkar to jump back. A moment later, the sound of their hands slapping against each other gave way to the slow ticking of the clock in the living room again.

Liberty, now standing in front of Emerald’s room, pushed down the handle, but the door was locked. With a huff, he quickly turned back to Rekkar.

“You’re in luck, boy,” he said in-between gasps for air, “If Emerald didn’t have Voicemute devices installed to help her sleep, she’d be long gone by now — It looks like I have to fight you after all.”

He let out a sigh, and Rekkar grinned. A second later they were locked in fierce combat again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Fray

The Social Insurance leader was quick to dodge the two bolts of lightning that Intergard sent his way not one second after Leit had released the demonwall, but Intergard wasn't done. Jumping up the stairs, she chased after Djoutunhaim, still shooting out salvos of lightning, but Sibrodi jumped in. With a quick series of shields, he sent her attacks into the walls around, while behind him Djoutunhaim hastily opened the buttons of his jacket and reached into the inner pocket.

"Not so fast, Kwifeldis," shouted Sibrodi with a menacing grin, "Pick a fight with someone your size!"

"Sibrodi, old friend," replied Intergard, her wild hair covering her eyes so that only two rows of smiling teeth could be seen, "No-one is my size."

They pounced onto each other, the screeching and fizzling noises of their spells thundering around the large room. Above them near the desk, Igsher and Leit jumped down from the balcony, cutting off Djoutunhaim, who stumbled back with a muffled shriek. Igsher was already raising a hand to stupefy the insurance leader, but Sibrodi noticed what was going on behind him and jumped back, deflecting the attack just in time.

"Chou, Glen — Take them!" he yelled with a look over at the other insurance wizards as Intergard charged towards him. With a Movement spell, he pushed her back down the stairs, and Chou quickly dashed in to cut her off while up on the platform, Djoutunhaim was regaining his composure, pulling out an artefact of his own and — to Leit's surprise — sending a ball of fire his way, which Leit could only closely dodge with a large jump to the side that had him crashing into one of the sculptures.

Below at the foot of the stairs, Hatzat drew her sword against Eos and Ienge, but the Professor joined them, taking her attack and exchanging a series of close-combat blows with the slender but athletic woman, whose thin weapon seemed to give her no advantage at all against the shockingly precise attacks of the Professor.

At the wall to the left, the shapeshifter named Glen, now sharing the appearance of Igsher in an effort to confuse the agents, took a few steps back and pulled out a gun, aiming at the disoriented Leit above on the platform, but Ienge jumped forward, pulling out a spell from his sleeve pocket and sending Glen's whole arm against the wall before dashing into close range and engaging the mysterious impostor hand-to-hand. For a second, Eos just stood there, half dazzled by the chaos around him, half gripped in amazement at the sight of his colleagues. Then he realized that without his help, the battle would hardly be won, and it was just in time

as above him, Hatzat landed a strong fist blow to the Professor's stomach, giving her enough time to pull out her own gun and shoot at Eos, who deflected the bullets not a split-second too early with a panic-induced shield before the Professor regained his senses and took over again, engaging Hatzat with another series of punches so strong that they sent bits and pieces of her equipment flying across the large room.

Sweeping the scene with his eyes, Eos tried his best to find any opening for attack, or any sign of one of his friends needing help. To his left, Ienge was doing impressively well against the false Igsher, a sight that only confirmed to Eos how Ienge was indeed the young hand-to-hand prodigy of the agency, explaining easily why the Professor had always taken specific interest in him as a student of his classes. Above, Ubra was visibly struggling against the much more lethally armed Hatzat, and although there was no doubt that the Professor was far more skilled, it would be some time and a lot of unknown variables before the duel would be decided. Eos wanted to help, but just at that moment the Professor yelled a sharp "Alagdi, to me!", and Ienge exchanged a look with him, nodding quickly before leaving Glen to assist his master.

That was his signal, thought Eos. He rushed over to Glen, continuing the close-combat duel in Ienge's place before realizing that his hand-to-hand was decisively rusty and couldn't hold a candle to Ienge's, so he jumped up the stairs in an effort to get some distance between him and Glen, deflecting another bullet from the shapeshifter's gun in mid-air with an impressive rear shield that earned him an approving look from Intergard before she pounced back onto Sibrodi, cancelling out yet another of his time spells with a mighty punch.

With Ienge's help, the Professor had succeeded in grappling Hatzat and winning her gun, jumping back from his opponent while aiming at Djoutunhaim above on the platform, who had sidestepped Igsher cleverly (much to the spellslinger's disdain) to get to a ladder leading to the balcony and who was now starting to climb up, but he didn't fail to notice the attack from below and deflected the Professor's shots with a hasty shield of his own.

Realizing that their main concern was Djoutunhaim escaping, Igsher pulled out a Movement spell and propelled himself up onto the balcony in a massive jump, cutting off the insurance leader's way. Djoutunhaim hissed and shot a salvo of fireballs up towards Igsher, but Leit canceled them mid-air from below on the floor, forcing Djoutunhaim to jump back down and regroup with Sibrodi.

Meanwhile, Glen had fired two more shots against the Professor that had gone into the wall just a hand's length away from his face and was now aiming for Intergard, but Eos was quick to react and pulled out a Movement spell, casting it at Glen's arm in the same way as Ienge had done before, which threw the shapeshifter off balance and sent his gun to the floor. At the same time, a sharp yell from above signaled that Intergard had succeeded in landing another decisive blow against Sibrodi, who stumbled back with his coat ripped apart after Intergard had tried to take away his artefacts to disarm him, all while defending against Chou's fizzling Stupefy shots pressing in on her from behind.

At the ladder next to the window, the fabric hanging down from the balcony had caught fire, and Leit turned to release the Flame spell with a quick flick of Intergard's enchanted staff while Igsher dashed towards Djoutunhaim, but the insurance leader outmaneuvered him again, once more ending up closest to the ladder.

With Sibrodi recovering from the blow, Intergard turned to Chou, quickly releasing his attempt at a Haste spell as she jumped onto him, but Sibrodi was quick to regain his balance behind her back.

Eos saw it — This was his chance. With a shout of “Sibrodi, you swine!” he started running towards the old man, who turned around quickly, but it was already too late. With a Movement spell of such intensity that Eos would go on to be proud of it for a long time afterwards, Sibrodi’s body was hurled towards him, and before the tall wizard could react he had already been propelled full-force into Eos’ fist. He crashed down onto the floor with a groan and Eos, already sure of his victory, knelt down to cast a Sleep spell, when at that moment a bullet from Glen’s gun grazed his body so closely that it pierced through his equipment pockets, sending his artefacts through the air from the torn-apart fabric of his belt. Eos jerked around, just in time to deflect another shot before Glen lowered the now empty gun, but Sibrodi had already come back to his senses. With a mighty kick, he sent Eos sliding across the polished floor towards Intergard, who was driving Chou back towards the wall with a freshly summoned Lightcore that sent flickering shadows across the ceiling. Struggling more and more to stand his ground against the massive woman, Chou stumbled back, and when he finally approached the wall behind him with nowhere left to go, he threw a desperate look to Djoutunhaim before propelling himself up to the balcony and running towards a door on the opposite side directly above the entrance to the office. Below, Intergard relaxed with a smile.

“Not so loyal after all, huh,” she said, slightly out of breath, then turned around to assist the other agents, but Djoutunhaim’s followers were abandoning the fight everywhere: Down at the foot of the stairs, Hatzat jumped away from the Professor and escaped through the entrance into the staircase, while to the left Sibrodi had limped over to Glen and opened a portal on the floor to secure their escape. From the other side of the office, a purple spark dashed out of Igsher’s hand, sped across the room and went straight into Sibrodi’s chest while another closely missed the young shapeshifter next to him, but it couldn’t stop the two wizards from fleeing the scene.

At that moment, a strange sound, resembling the working of some huge machinery or mechanism, resounded around the whole office. Eos, still kneeling on the floor, turned around to see that Djoutunhaim, overlooking the room with a terrified expression as all his operatives were fleeing, had his hand on a secret switch next to the ladder, and a moment later the Fallos artefacts behind each of the sculptures lining the room turned off and an elaborate mechanism activated Naikra traps up on the balconies, suddenly removing all light from the office.

Quickly, Eos got back to his feet in the darkness, while footsteps echoed from somewhere near the desk, and a moment later Igsher’s voice yelled a loud “Illumination!”, closely followed by a ball of bright light bursting out of an artefact in his hand and flying through the air up to the converging roof, where it stopped and was quickly joined by a second one, merging with it to form a blazing radiance that illuminated the entire room even through the shrouds of darkness covering the balconies.

For a moment, Eos looked around the hall to see what had happened, but Intergard was already dashing up the stairs towards the ladder.

“Leave the other ones, Djoutunhaim is our goal!” she shouted, and Eos noticed only now that the insurance leader had climbed up the ladder and was pulling open a small door on the

balcony before disappearing onto the roof outside. Propelled by Movement spells from Igsher, the agents reached the balcony only a few seconds later.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Emerald And Liberty

The slow ticking of the clock down the hall mixed with the sound of two men gasping for air in the darkness of the old house. Rekkar was leaning against the wall, his arms weak from the ongoing fight. He hadn't expected Liberty to be so skilled and resilient — In fact, the dozen times he had played out this night in his head had never included any real combat.

At the other end of the hall, Liberty picked up the knife on the floor, himself panting and one of his knees shivering from a blow he had suffered earlier.

"Why don't you just run away from it all, boy?" he asked, looking to the floor as he shook his head in puzzlement.

"I can't, damn it!" hissed Rekkar, feeling like he was saying it for the thousandth time. Liberty looked up.

"People defect all the time, it's the corporate reality—" With an unsteady arm he raised the knife supposed to stab his very own heart, "—Nobody blames you for giving in to his offers."

"Yes you do!" shouted Rekkar angrily, pushing himself off the wall and towards Liberty, the blades of their knives crashing into each other with a metallic screeching.

"I can't go back!"

They continued fighting, both men brought to their limit by the strain of the duel. Finally, Rekkar landed a cut on Liberty's arm, and the tall man stumbled back against the door to Emerald's bedroom.

"What keeps you from giving up, Liberty?" asked Rekkar, trying to look collected but at the same moment falling to the side as his leg gave way for a second, "Emerald is enough for me — You can escape!"

It was meant as a compromise — Liberty grinned tiredly, letting out a dismissive huff at the offer.

"You don't understand anything, boy — I will fight you all night rather than step away from this door."

Rekkar hesitated, confused. Leaning against the wall, he lowered his knife.

"And why is that?" he asked with an irritated shift of his head, "Are you her son?"

Liberty laughed, but it sounded more like a mix of panting and coughing noises.

"You fool," he responded, "Come and punch the truth out of me!"

Three times Rekkar charged in, throwing slice after slice against Liberty, but the tall man seemed to have tapped into new sources of strength, deflecting every blow without ever

countering an attack. After the third round, he stepped away from the door and pushed Rekkar back down the hall with a mighty tackle. Rekkar yelled.

"Fight me, old man!" he cried, bashing his knife into the wall next to him while his eyes were fixed on Liberty, "You— Why can't you make this easy for me? I'm too weak for this! Too weak, damn it!"

He crashed back onto the wallpaper in exhaustion, keeping himself upright by gripping the knife like a branch sticking out from the wall. There was a pause, and with a downcast expression in his eyes Liberty slowly looked up.

"Seven years ago, I was her apprentice," he said.

"She was a majestic woman then—"

Rekkar pulled himself up, his head shifting.

"She taught me everything she knew," continued Liberty, "How to get information, how to fight, how to bargain. I was her best agent."

"So you were an agent after all," said Rekkar with a sigh, "Explains a lot—"

Liberty just nodded.

"Then one day, there was a fight," he said slowly, narrowing his eyes as if trying to remember everything, "Our hideout was raided — It wasn't the White Cave back then; we called it the motherlode. One of ETC's agents got through our defenses — A promising spellslinger by the name of Ekses."

Rekkar's eyes widened. *The Ekses?* The defense expert and master wizard?

"Yeah, that one," said Liberty weakly, answering Rekkar's thoughts, "He was an ice mage back then; Skilled staff fighter, too. He took us by surprise."

There was a pause — The atmosphere in the hall had shifted completely.

"What happened?" asked Rekkar.

"We fought him. Just me and Emerald — It was looking good, but our combat was rusty, and he noticed. After a while, he realized that Emerald wasn't a fighter any more, she was an operator now. So he focused on me, and— I couldn't take it."

Rekkar opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind. With a gloomy chime the clock in the living room signaled the full hour.

"He froze my legs and my left arm. I couldn't move. Actually, it would have been the end of me, but—"

He hesitated. Rekkar already saw it coming.

"Emerald jumped in and took the blow. She fought him until our agents arrived. In the end, Ekses escaped — But the damage was done."

Rekkar shuddered at the thought.

"You mean — the wheelchair?"

Liberty nodded.

"She was in agony for weeks. Sometimes it comes back. She hardly sleeps."

He took a deep breath and looked to the ceiling.

"It's because I was weak," he said plainly, "She had trained me and I let her down. And now she suffers for it."

There was a tense silence. Rekkar swallowed. He was trying his best to shut off all emotion about his mission tonight, but it was impossible.

“Actually, Ekses didn’t just walk away from it either,” added Liberty quickly, “Turns out he was a decent man, too. When he heard about what had happened, he swore to not hurt anybody ever again.”

Rekkar looked up from the floor.

“...So that’s why he only uses defensive spells now,” he whispered.

“Yeah,” replied Liberty and pushed himself off the door. Rekkar could tell that playtime was over.

“So now that you know the story, let’s get this over with,” sighed the tall man, “I suppose I don’t need to tell you that you won’t get through to Emerald while I’m alive.”

Rekkar didn’t attack. He just stood there, breathing slowly. His hand was shivering as he pulled the knife out of the wall. His eyes searched the floor — He couldn’t look up to Liberty. Two times he opened his mouth to speak, but didn’t say anything. Then, he took a deep breath and raised his head.

“That’s what our trade is all about in the end, isn’t it,” he said. Liberty didn’t respond.

“On the surface, it’s all violence and death, and intrigue, and people playing from the shadows for power and influence. But inside—” His eyes met Liberty’s for a moment, but he quickly looked away again, “—It’s really about covering each other from all the evil that’s happening around us, isn’t it. The Professor, Intergard— Even you and Emerald...”

He turned towards the open door to the living room.

“Liberty, I— I don’t know what to do,” he said slowly, his expression growing more and more overwhelmed as in his head each of his options revealed itself as stupid and childish.

“I want to turn back, but I—”

“We don’t need to fight any longer, boy,” interrupted Liberty with unusual vigour in his voice, “You’ve lost and you know it.”

“But I’m younger, and faster, and—” Rekkar gestured helplessly, trying to convince himself of what he was saying, “Why am I not—”

“None of that matters, Rekkar!” shouted Liberty, “I’m drawing from strength that you can’t deal with! You’re powered only by Djoutunhaim and his money, but those won’t make you overcome me as long as I’m protecting the people I look up to!”

He paused for a second, then sighed tiredly.

“You know it’s true. It drives you mad — You’ve had an eerie feeling about giving in to him for a long time, and you’ve had your chances to get out of it. You didn’t take them, boy. You’re screwed because of your own choices, and no matter how this ends you’ll not get away. You’ve understood that now — You’ve understood that you’ll not get anything from the insurance either way. So what’s keeping you, Rekkar?”

Their eyes met for a second.

“When nothing matters anymore, what’s keeping you from doing the right thing?”

For a moment, there was silence. Even the ticking of the clock seemed to have slowed down. Then, Rekkar turned back.

“If I—” he started, but his mouth stopped, trying to form words that his mind hadn’t decided yet.

“I should just walk away, shouldn’t I?”

His voice was not more than a whisper. Silently, the two men looked at each other like dependants at a funeral.

"You're right, Liberty. I've done so much damage, willingly... I kept going because I wanted to believe something good would come from it in the end — For me, at least. But you're right — It's not going to happen."

Their eyes conveyed the rest of the meaning. For a moment, the pale moonlight from the window of the living room reflected in a single tear on Rekkar's cheek.

"I've been stupid about so many things," he whispered, more to himself than to Liberty, "And I was prepared to take the blame for it. I was bent on seeing it through to the end, you know? But now that it comes down to it..."

He fell silent for a second.

"...Maybe I'm not a bad person after all."

"Prove it!" said Liberty plainly. He looked at the blade in his hand, then threw it across the hallway at Rekkar's feet. For a few long seconds they just exchanged wordless stares, and it was more than enough.

Rekkar turned around — And a moment later, the knives on the floor were the only hint that he had ever been there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Cold Wind Blows

Eos was one of the last agents to reach the balcony. Leit, Intergard and Igsher had already stepped out onto the roof, and Eos quickly followed them.

Outside, a three step wide platform without a balustrade was installed around the pointy roof, similarly to how the balconies encircled the room inside. As Eos stepped onto the metal plates, gunshots echoed around the tower, followed by the metallic screeching of bullets hitting a Reflect shield. Hastily, he ran after Intergard towards the corner of the roof, while Igsher and the Professor took to the other side in an effort to circle around from both directions simultaneously.

“Haste!” came Djoutunhaim’s voice across the pointed roof, nullified a moment later by a sharp “Release!” from Leit. Eos shuddered — From the sound of it, his friend was fighting the Insurance leader all on his own on the other side of the catwalk, and although Djoutunhaim was neither very skilled nor experienced in battle Eos still couldn’t help but feel startled and in awe; Not only because Leit’s opponent was one of the most powerful men on the continent, but more importantly because the fate of the whole agency might depend on it.

“Silence!” yelled Leit as Intergard and Eos dashed around the last corner. At the center of the catwalk, Djoutunhaim had stopped running, apparently ready to jump off the roof into the black void below — Only a metal token in his hand signalled that he had planned to break his fall with a Movement spell before hitting the pavement. A few steps behind him, Leit had fallen onto the rough plates that made up the platform, his enchanted staff stuck somewhere between the large tiles of the roof and his arm bleeding from the fall. A small Silence artefact gripped tightly in his hand, he looked up to Djoutunhaim, then turned to Eos and Intergard with an expression of painful, but satisfying triumph before letting his body sink onto the plates of the catwalk completely.

“Magnet!” shouted Intergard from behind, her fingers on the spell circle on her elbow. Violently, the artefact in Djoutunhaim’s hand was pulled out and dashed through the air towards Intergard, who merely ducked away, throwing a dismissive glance after the shiny token as it disappeared into the night behind her.

There was a tense pause, Djoutunhaim’s nervous looks to the side revealing that the Professor had come around the corner on the other side, while above on the roof, Igsher had appeared, cutting off all routes of escape. After a moment, Intergard stepped forward.

“It’s over, Djoutunhaim,” she said loudly, her voice easily audible over the cold wind that howled around the tower, “You’re beaten.”

Djoutunhaim didn't respond. All the confidence and arrogant pride he had shown earlier seemed to have left him.

"I give you a choice," continued Intergard, "There are two ways down this tower for you: Knocked out and in our custody, or—" She pointed to the black depth behind Djoutunhaim while slowly advancing across the catwalk, "—To your death."

Djoutunhaim's eyes wandered slowly from one agent to the other. Eos could see that he hadn't given up just yet — Behind this façade of fear he was still looking for a way to escape, even now that Leit's almost sacrificial Silence had rendered him completely unarmed.

"No pressure," said Intergard, a hint of a sarcastic frown on her face. Djoutunhaim didn't answer, his expression growing more and more desperate as his eyes shot back and forth between Intergard, the Professor, and the black chasm behind him.

Eos' ears were ringing from the wind that blew around the tower as the agents slowly approached the Insurance leader from all sides. Intergard picked up the enchanted staff and kneeled down next to Leit, pulling out a band-aid to tend the wound on his arm but with her eyes were still fixed on the tall man a few steps in front of her.

"What's left for me here, I wonder?" shouted Djoutunhaim, throwing his hands up in a theatrical gesture, "But grief, and vile resentment!"

His head slowly turned to the dark void behind him — Eos could see in his eyes how he was preparing to jump. But then all of a sudden—

A gunshot ripped through the howling of the wind. Djoutunhaim stumbled sideways, his eyes wide in terror as he stared at Intergard, but she was unarmed. Slowly, he looked down to his chest.

Like wine spilled over, blood stained his shirt and jacket. His head turned up again, now looking past Intergard and Eos towards the corner of the roof.

"The world has no place for a devil like you," came Sarc's voice weakly from behind. Eos jerked around and saw the old man, his heavy body leaning against the roof, a gun in his shivering hand.

"No place but death, trickster."

And with that, he sunk down unconscious.

Djoutunhaim opened his mouth to yell, his eyes skyward, but it was too late. His face contorted into a ghastly frown, his body tilted backwards and one moment later the Social Insurance leader was sucked up by the black depths of the night — An even the wind seemed to stop for a moment as Djoutunhaim fell from his skyhigh throne.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Debriefing

Intergard stood up with a sigh. The Fallos artefact dangling from the ceiling above her flickered.

"We checked the body on the pavement," she said, "I've never seen anybody *that* dead. We couldn't even tell it was him anymore."

The agents sitting around the table nodded approvingly, Eos and Ienge shuddering. It had been a terrifying sight.

"It will look like a suicide," added Heaven's Hand, leaning against the wall next to Liberty, who turned away with a huff as Intergard's eyes met his.

"An overwhelmed young businessman that saw no other way — The insurance will be fine."

There was a tense silence. Everybody could tell Liberty was furious about the fact that Djoutunhaim hadn't been taken alive, but after almost forbidding the mission in the first place, he wasn't in a position to pose any demands. Besides, Sarc hadn't been in a good state; Even if killing the man had been wrong, it was easy to get behind why he had done it.

"So," said Intergard plainly, "These are the facts. The insurance was behind everything from the start."

She sent a reproachful look to Liberty.

"Yes. It's true," replied the tall man, still facing the opposite wall.

"Look me in the eye when you say it," commanded Intergard, to the young agents' surprise.

For a moment, there was a pause, then Liberty turned, and looking the massive woman straight in the eye, he said slowly: "Yes, I was mistaken and your judgement saved the day."

Intergard nodded— and after a moment she said: "Good work defending Emerald against that scout boy. Frankly, you did the most important job."

Liberty shifted his head in thought and behind him, Heaven's Hand raised an arm hesitantly.

"Uhm, I hate to interrupt, but with Djoutunhaim dead and the White Cave still under Kengnatz control, what will become of—"

"Silence, Denso!" shouted Liberty, his kind smile revealing that he wasn't angry, but happy. He turned around to face the young analyst.

"There's been more than enough happening tonight — We must address all this, but not right now. There's a time for worry, and a time for celebration! After all, it's not every night that you save your agency from certain doom."

"Yes, Sir," mumbled Heaven't Hand. Liberty put an arm around his shoulder.

“Cheer up, boy,” he said, “We won. Yeah sure, White Cave is still in Kengnatz’ hands, Lady Lephon is still evil, Ketten’s hairstyle is still the worst... But let’s take it easy for once, shall we?”

Ienge quickly reached for the cupboard above him, and a few moments later everyone held a glass of Intergard’s mysterious liquor in their hands. The Professor raised his, and everyone followed.

“To Central, to the Agency, and to Justice!” he said ceremoniously, and around the table ten very tired, but relieved voices joined in:

“Crush the corps!”