

Kill the Sun

- Chapter 1: Nick

Chapter 1: Nick

"You should kill yourself."

Inside a dirty alleyway filled with oily pipes, electrical wires, and broken walls, a young man sat on the ground with his back to the wall.

His head was lowered as he lifelessly stared at the ground visible between his legs.

The sun was positioned in the middle of the sky, perfectly above this boy. Because of that, the alleyway was brightly lit.

"I know that it comes as a bit of a shock, but I genuinely think the best course of action for you in this situation would be to kill yourself."

The boy didn't lift his head as he heard these words.

At this moment, a dirty and disheveled rat was sitting on top of a small rusty box made of metal. The rat was lightly scratching its snout as it looked with widely opened eyes at the boy, trying to establish eye contact.

"Listen," the rat said as it jumped down from the box and slowly walked towards the boy. "We all know what happened. It's not like I'm suggesting suicide without a logical basis, you know?"

As the rat came closer, the boy's eyes suddenly gained life, and he looked at the rat with intensity.

The rat's eyes widened, and it went on its hind legs as it slowly retreated. "Calm down, Nick. I'm not going to hurt you," it said with a nervous smile as it stopped retreating. "Look at me. I'm just a rat. How am I supposed to hurt someone that managed to get through the Zephyx Extractor Exam?"

The boy, Nick, looked back at the ground.

When Nick just lifelessly looked at the ground like that, he looked like a frail homeless person, but when he just looked at the rat, his entire demeanor changed.

In fact, Nick's body was anything but frail. While he wasn't very bulky, his muscles were pretty defined, which wasn't surprising, considering that he had trained for the last four years in hopes of finally getting out of the Dregs.

"Hey, Nick," the rat said, not daring to get any closer. "I know that you're still holding onto some hope, but we both know that believing in this fickle light of hope is just delusional."

The rat slowly moved around Nick's body, but it didn't dare to get too close to his body. "Over the last four years, you worked so hard on yourself. You trained every day, and you even committed some terrible acts just to avoid paying the Blood Tax."

"You didn't want to do these things, but you still did them. Why? Because you saw a way out of the Dregs."

"And you did it! You managed to get a spot in the Zephyx Extractor Exam for Ghosty's Lab, and you even managed to pass it!" the rat said with a lot of enthusiasm.

And then, the rat just sighed. "But your Zephyx Synchronizer was already attuned to a Specter. You managed to pass the exam, but Ghosty's Lab can't use a Zephyx Extractor with an already synchronized Zephyx Synchronizer."

"And you know that they are not the only ones," the rat said as it stopped on Nick's right side. "No Zephyx Manufacturer will hire you like this. You know as well as I that all the companies have specific Specters for their Extractors. Without the abilities from these Specters, you will either die very quickly or will cost the company more money than you bring in."

"So, what now?" the rat asked, looking at Nick with a sympathetic expression. "What's the plan now?"

"You don't have an education."

"You don't have contacts."

"You don't have a place to live."

"You don't even remember anything from before you were ten."

"You can't even join the gangs or any of their businesses since you vehemently refused to pay them their fees."

"There's no way out."

"Are you willing to continue living like this?" the rat asked with a sad and pained voice.

"I don't want to see you go through so much pain every day."

"Just stop."

The rat was carefully and slowly moving toward Nick.

As the rat moved closer to Nick, several pairs of eyes appeared behind the dark sewer grates in the alley.

They were watching everything with excitement.

Nick just continued looking at the ground.

"Don't you just want to rest?" the rat asked as it very carefully moved forward.
"Every day, you sleep with one eye open, fearing that something or someone will attack you."

"You don't even have a single friend or family member."

"What's the point of fighting?"

"What's the point of living like this?"

"And now, even your last hope is gone."

The rat looked with a sympathetic gaze at Nick.

"Trust me. I've talked to millions of people, and I know a hopeless situation when I see one."

"I can make it quick and painless. If you want, I can even pay special attention to some people you dislike."

"At least, like this, you can go out on your own terms instead of just starving to death."

"Your death would actually have a purpose."

The rat managed to get so close to Nick that it could even touch his leg.

The rats behind the sewer grates slowly and carefully stepped out, but they still remained at a great distance.

It was important not to induce a fight or flight response in their target. Adrenaline can bring momentary life to the black hole inside the chest of a suffering person.

This had to be done methodically, slowly, and carefully.

"Just lay down, okay?" the rat said slowly. "I am going to lightly touch your leg now. Don't be afraid. I won't do anything."

The rat slowly extended its claw to touch Nick's leg.

BANG!

A powerful fist hit the rat, turning it into a bloody paste.

An instant later, all the other rats fled back into the sewer.

Silence.

The fist unclenched and took hold of the smashed rat.

Then, he took out a filthy, old, and disgusting brown sack and put the rat into it.

A moment later, Nick straightened his back and took a deep breath.

"This sucks," he said, his voice a bit deeper than the average man's.

But then, a small smile formed on his lips as he lifted the dirty brown sack.

"But at least dinner is secured."

Suddenly, Nick's eyes narrowed as he shot up to his feet.

He glared down one of the alleyway's exits.

Just now, a muscular man wearing a black coat and black hat had appeared near that exit.

At this moment, Nick could see a mysterious smirk adorning the man's lips as he looked at Nick with amusement.

"What do you want?" Nick asked with a harsh and threatening voice.

Nick had seen many people, and he knew that someone that was acting like this wasn't up to anything good.

"I don't buy drugs, miracle cures, Specters, Zephyx, or whatever you have to sell," Nick said.

A moment later, Nick's eyes widened a bit, and he put the brown sack behind him. "I'm also not selling you the rat!"

The man looked slightly taken aback, but he started chuckling in amusement.

"Your rat? You think I'm after your rat?" he asked with a smirk.

Nick eyed the man suspiciously. "I'm not buying anything! Also, it's rude to enter someone's home unannounced."

"Home?" the man repeated in confusion as he looked around the alleyway.

After looking for a bit, the man saw a small shack made of bits and pieces of discarded and rusty metal.

The man took a deep breath and sighed before his black hat vanished, revealing his handsome face.

There were a couple of covert wrinkles on the man's forehead, and Nick could also see a couple of individual grey hairs among his usual black hair.

The man just chuckled a bit. "You asked me what I wanted," he repeated.

"Well, you could call me a scholar," the man said with a smile as he looked at Nick. "I study Specters. More specifically, the powers Specters can bestow to humans."

"I said I'm not buying anything!" Nick shouted.

The man took another deep breath and released a sigh.

"I am a consultant to many Zephyx Manufacturers, and Ghosty's Lab is one of them," the man said as he slowly lifted his right index finger.

The next moment, a ball of bloody tools made of metal materialized above his finger. The tools were rapidly circling above the man's finger.

When Nick saw that, his jaw nearly hit the floor, and his eyes shone.

"You're a Zephyx Extractor?!" he asked in shock.

The man chuckled. "In the past," he said as the tools vanished again. "Nowadays, I am just a researcher."

Nick still looked with wonder at the man.

A Zephyx Extractor!

Nick gulped.

"Okay," he slowly said. "So, what do you have to sell?"

The man snorted in amusement. "I'm not here to sell anything."

"I'm here because my friend at Ghosty's Lab contacted me. They don't know what kind of power you've attained or from which Specter it comes. My friend knows that I am interested in these things, which was why he told me about you."

Nick became nervous when he heard that.

That sounded like some evil experimentation stuff!

When the man saw Nick's apprehensive expression, he nearly groaned.

"I'm not here to hurt you!" the man half-shouted with annoyance. "I'm just here to look at how your powers work. I will even refer you to some Zephyx Manufacturers if your power proves to be useful!"

"This is a good thing for you!"

Nick was taken aback, but his expression quickly morphed into one of skepticism.

Help?

A good thing?

In the Dregs?

Not even children would believe that!

"And what do you want in exchange?" Nick asked.

"In exchange?" the man repeated. "Do you even have anything that can interest me?"

Nick struggled to think of something.

"Nothing in this world is free," Nick said with suspicion. "Something advertised as free will very quickly turn into something that's not free after some time."

The man's expression turned deadpan. "Oh my fucking god," he said in exasperation.

Suddenly, the man appeared in front of Nick.

BANG!

The man hit Nick's head, and Nick fell to the side, unconscious.

"Is it so hard to accept that someone just wants to help you?!"

Silence.

The man took another deep breath and sighed.

SHING!

The bloody tools from earlier appeared in front of him.

"Now, let's see what kind of power you have."

Chapter 2: The Sign

A young man walked through the streets of a lively but dirty city.

At this moment, it was 2:00 am, but the sun was still shining.

It was always shining.

There was not a single moment where it wasn't shining.

This was how it had been for thousands of years and how it would continue to be for thousands more years.

The sun was directly in the middle of the sky, seemingly perfectly above the walking young man.

Surprisingly, even though the sun was in the middle of the sky, its light wasn't very bright and overwhelming but subdued and more orange-yellowish in color.

For the citizens of Crimson Fungus City, it was currently nighttime. Although, when one talked about night, they were referring to the time between 10 pm and 6 am. This had nothing to do with the state or location of the sun since that was always static.

Most people slept during the night time. No one really knew why, but most people followed that social norm since their parents, grandparents, and everyone else had done the same.

Some crazy people said that people slept during the night because, somehow, the sun used to do something called setting in the past.

Naturally, that was idiotic.

How fast would the sun need to move to go around the Earth?

How would it even move?

It made no sense.

As the young man continued walking, he saw several dirty, grimy, and rusty pipes coming out of the ground, which then slithered up the damaged and dirty walls of buildings.

The floor of the city was uneven, with half of it made of craggy rock and the other half made of rusty grates that led deep underground.

The smell of gas and oil blanketed the "streets", but the people living here had already gotten used to it.

CRACK!

Suddenly, one of the grates below the young man's legs broke, and the young man began to fall.

However, the young man just reflexively spread his arms and grabbed the grates to his side, stopping his fall.

The young man took a deep breath and released it before he pulled himself up.

After pulling himself up, he looked around the street for something.

He saw a couple of thin people that were sitting at the side of the road, talking with each other. Since it was nighttime, not many people were here.

"Hey, do you know where I can get a big sheet of metal?" the young man, Nick, asked the group.

It had been two years since Nick had met the "scholar," and Nick was now 16 years old.

The scholar had told Nick about his power, and he even taught him a couple of things over the next couple of days.

Right now, Nick was about 180cm tall, which was enormous for someone living in the Dregs. The available food was horrible, which made it difficult for people to grow tall.

Nick's body was also still quite muscular, giving him quite an intimidating appearance.

The group collectively furrowed their brows as they looked at him. Nick's bulky figure intimidated them a bit. "What do you want?" an older lady among them said with a tone of threat in her voice.

"I just told you what I want," Nick said as he scratched the side of his head. "I just want a sheet of metal."

"Why?" the older lady asked with annoyance.

Nick just pointed at the hole in the grates with his thumb.

The group just threw a couple of glances at each other.

"You want to repair the hole?" the older lady asked with skepticism.

Nick nodded. "I'm strong enough to stop my fall and pull myself out. Others aren't," he answered.

The lady's expression became even more skeptical. "And you care about that?"

Nick just scratched the back of his head. "I mean, I broke it. I should also fix it," he said with a shrug.

The group looked at each other again.

Then, the older lady pointed at one of the houses at the edge of the street.

The house was basically a ruin. A third of it was already missing, and all the metal of the house had already rusted.

The city had an overabundance of metal, and all the metal that the wealthy parts of the city didn't need anymore ended up in the Dregs.

This was also why nearly all houses here were made of rusty metal.

"The occupant of it said it two days ago," the older lady said, her voice neutral.

Nick nodded. He knew what it meant to "say it".

It basically meant that the person had committed suicide via a specific method.

"Thanks," Nick said as he walked over to the derelict house.

After a bit of searching, Nick saw a two-meter wide and long plate of metal and began to pull.

Sadly, the builder of the house seemed to have had a phobia of his house collapsing, which was why he welded everything together.

Nick tried for a while, but the metal plate only shuddered and made creaking noises.

Nick just sighed and looked around.

Then, he walked into the house, away from all prying eyes.

BANG!

A dent appeared in the metal plate.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

After four hits, the metal plate broke away from the house and fell to the ground outside as Nick exited through the new hole.

The eyes of the earlier group widened in shock.

They knew that this young man was strong based on his stature, but wasn't this a bit too much?!

How much power would one need to dent such a big metal plate?!

Sure, it wasn't super thick, but this was still metal!

Nick pulled the metal plate across the street with quite some difficulties, confusing the group even more.

The guy had just dented the plate, but now he had issues carrying it?!

This made no sense!

A couple of seconds later, Nick put the plate over the hole in the grate that he had created earlier and rubbed the sweat off his forehead.

He walked on top of the plate and jumped a bit. The metal was creaking, but it didn't move.

If the metal could withstand Nick jumping on it, no one would have issues walking over it.

Nick nodded with satisfaction and continued walking through the streets.

He waved a bit at the group as he left.

"Oh! Now, I know who that is!" one of the younger people in the group shouted a couple of seconds later.

The others looked at him. "You know him?"

The younger guy nodded. "He's that weird guy at the marketplace."

"The weird guy?" another person from the group repeated with uncertainty. "Oh, you mean the one that just sits there with a sign all day?"

"Yes, that guy," the other guy said with a nod. "I didn't recognize him since he looks much smaller when he's sitting."

The other people raised their eyebrows in understanding.

Some of them looked at the derelict house again with newfound realization.

That explained how he was strong enough to break the metal.

"This means he has an attuned Zephyx Synchronizer, right?"

The others just nodded. "According to his sign, yes."

The older lady in the group looked at the sheet of metal in the middle of the street.

"You know, if others actually followed his example and fixed what they broke, the Dregs wouldn't be nearly as bad," she commented.

Nick continued walking down the street, and a couple of minutes later, he arrived at a big plaza.

In comparison to the streets, the plaza was mostly made of stone, and the walls weren't too dirty.

Nick could see a couple of merchants stationed around their wagons filled with wares.

Since it was night, only the poorest and the richest merchants sold their wares.

The poorest sold their wares at night since there was far less competition, and the richest did the same since they could just hire someone to keep their shop open all the time.

The other 80% of shops were only open between 6 am and 10 pm.

Nick walked across the plaza until he arrived at the widest road in the Dregs.

The road led to one of the exits of Crimson Fungus City.

At the spot where the road and the plaza met, Nick stopped and walked to the side.

After sitting down, Nick pulled out a roll of cardboard and unrolled it before putting it on a metal rod he had brought with him.

Lastly, Nick just lifted his new sign and waited.

"Zephyx Extractor looking for work!"

And then, he waited.

Chapter 3: Protecting Oneself

People slowly woke up and exited from their derelict houses.

It was early in the morning, but just like always, the sun was high up in the sky, illuminating the streets.

Nick was still holding his sign as he watched the people with boredom.

Over 50% of the people were malnourished, and the remainder could still be called skinny. Only the richest merchants had some visible fat on their bellies.

Even though the sun was shining all day, nearly everyone had pale skin, and a couple of them even had black rings around their eyes as they slowly walked through the streets.

As Nick saw the people, he could tell that most of them were very fidgety and anxious.

Nick knew that this day would be the most dangerous day of the month since people became desperate.

Today was the worst day of the month.

The day everyone dreaded.

Nevertheless, Nick continued holding up his sign as he waited.

Albert, Nick's mentor, told him he would soon find work as a Zephyx Extractor in the Dregs. He only needed to be visible.

Albert was the powerful Zephyx Extractor that Nick had met two years ago. After Nick had woken up from Albert's slap, the two of them had gotten to know each other.

Due to the circumstances of how Nick had gained his mysterious power, Albert decided to mentor Nick for a couple of months since he saw a lot of potential in him.

Albert had left around a year ago, and he told Nick that he just needed to remain visible to find work. Apparently, someone would soon appear that would be interested in finding Zephyx Extractors.

This was why Nick was sitting in the marketplace with his sign.

Even though everyone dreaded today, to Nick, this was just like any other day.

Many people passed by Nick, and he also noticed that nearly everyone was throwing evaluating glances at him.

However, no one actually did anything to him.

Many people were scared and looked around nervously, but others seemed calm and relaxed.

All of the calm ones had small pins on their chest in the image of two crossed spears.

These pins represented the Insurance Gang, one of the most powerful gangs that were running the Dregs from the underground.

The people wearing these pins were not gang members but normal citizens that had paid the Insurance Gang to deal with all the matters today.

BANG!

Suddenly, a man with blonde hair got punched, and a group of three men jumped the guy that got punched.

The man curled into a shrimp and held tightly onto something.

The three attackers continued wailing at the helpless man, but they were careful not to break any bones.

"Hand over your credits!" one of them shouted.

The blonde man on the ground didn't answer and kept holding onto his credits.

The three gritted their teeth.

Killing someone was forbidden, and they were also not allowed to shed any blood.

However, the city wouldn't bat an eye if they broke some bones.

But despite how things looked, the three men were not psychopaths that wanted the guy to die.

If they stole his credits and broke the blonde man's bones, they would essentially kill him in the long run.

One of the men grabbed the blonde guy's hair and pulled back with all his power, but the man on the ground didn't let go of his wealth.

Even when his blonde hair was torn out, he didn't let go.

Two of the attackers looked at their last friend with frustrated and angry expressions.

The last one took a deep breath and took hold of his victim's head.

BANG!

He shoved the man's head into the pavement, and he lost consciousness.

Surprisingly, there was no blood, and the blonde man was still alive.

This had been insanely risky.

If anything went wrong, the attacking man would be killed by the city for killing another person or wasting valuable blood.

A different guy bent down and wrestled a small stack of paper notes out of the blonde man's hands.

After counting the paper notes, he looked at his two friends and nodded.

Then, he handed all the notes to one of his friends, who broke into tears.

The crying man hugged his two friends and bowed several times in gratitude in front of them.

His two friends only assured him that it was fine.

The crying man quickly ran away from the middle of the marketplace and into the arms of a woman by the side.

The woman was also crying a lot.

A moment later, the man let go and kneeled down as he beckoned forward.

Two young girls, not older than eight, came out from behind the woman and hugged the man.

"I have enough for you," the man said with a quivering voice.

Only a couple of people were watching the event. Most people were used to seeing something like this and didn't care.

All the people in the marketplace just walked around the unconscious man lying in the middle of the street, treating him like just another piece of rubble.

Nick had watched what had happened, but he didn't get involved.

What was the point?

There wasn't enough money to go around, and it was the duty of everyone to protect themselves.

As more time passed, more assaults happened, but Nick just waited.

And then, it was time.

Everything calmed down at about 2:00 pm, and the people became very quiet.

By now, the entire marketplace was filled to the brim with people.

No one was buying or selling anything at this moment.

They all were waiting for the same thing.

Two minutes later, the sound of a gigantic swarm of insects came from one of the streets leading to the marketplace, and the sound became louder with time.

Eventually, five people appeared in one of the streets, and they were accompanied by swarms of huge mosquitos.

The five people wore red uniforms with the symbol of Crimson Fungus City on them, showing their identities as people working for the city itself. Each of them carried a couple of big sacks with them, and they wore black gasmasks, keeping their identities anonymous.

As the five city agents walked down the streets, several mosquitos split off and entered the houses they passed.

They were searching for people that were trying to hide.

After a while, the mosquitos came out of the house again and returned to the five people as other mosquitos entered other houses.

Suddenly, an entire swarm of mosquitos charged into one of the houses.

"AAAAHHHHH!"

A terrifying scream came out of the house, but it rapidly became quieter until it vanished.

The swarm of mosquitos came out of the house a couple of seconds later, and some of them flew into the sky and retreated.

But just a couple of seconds later, new mosquitos replaced the ones that had just left.

After around five minutes, the five people arrived at the entrance of the marketplace.

The five people didn't say anything for a while.

Chapter 4: Zephyx

A bit later, three people walked out of the crowd.

All three of them were tall men with muscular bodies, and they were all wearing the same uniform.

It looked like a military uniform painted in black with grey sleeves.

This was the uniform of the Insurance Gang.

"Welcome," the leader of the Insurance Gang said with a polite smile.

One of the five city agents just extended a hand like they were asking for something.

"Of course," the leader said.

A moment later, he took out a suitcase, opened it, and handed it to the man.

Inside the suitcase were stacks upon stacks of credits in paper form.

The city agent counted the money, which took several minutes.

"474," he spoke with a distorted voice.

When the leader of the Insurance Gang heard that, he became nervous, and his smile seemed more strained.

"Excuse me, but it should be 482," he said. "Could you recount, please?"

"474," the city agent repeated.

Silence.

The leader of the Insurance Gang looked at the person to the right of him and gestured with his head.

The guy quickly took out a couple more bills and handed them over.

The city agent counted them and nodded.

"482."

The leader of the Insurance Gang also nodded.

A moment later, the three people walked to the side.

"One by one, come forward. You better not try to cheat us," the leader of the Insurance Gang shouted.

A moment later, all the people with the black pins walked forward and passed by the three men from the Insurance Gang.

The Insurance Gang inspected all of them and collected the black pins from everyone that passed by.

By the end, 479 people had walked past them.

Then, the three people from the Insurance Gang followed them, making the total 482.

After that, four of the five city agents walked towards the less-crowded marketplace and commanded everyone to come forward one by one. The last of them waited in the back, making sure that no one was trying to sneak by them.

Next, all the people in the marketplace walked forward, handing over a stack of credits each.

Nick stood up and passed through the crowd.

A moment later, he stood in front of one of the people with the gasmasks.

Nick handed over a stack of bills and walked past them just like any other person in the marketplace.

After several minutes, only around 800 people were left in the marketplace.

When no one else stepped forward for several seconds, the fifth city agent stepped forward.

"Last call," they shouted with a distorted voice. "Anyone not coming forward now will be considered as not able to pay."

No one moved.

"Alright," the man shouted. "As always, do not make any sudden movements, and don't show any aggression. The mosquitos are all minions of the Blood Mosquito Specter, and they will not drink more than what you owe."

The crowd of people became scared and nervous.

A moment later, the buzzing of the mosquitos intensified, and they flew forward.

The mosquitos scattered across the crowd and started to suck the blood of the people.

As time passed, mosquitos that had filled up flew away as new ones joined.

People were crying, hyperventilating, gritting their teeth, and praying.

Others had already grown used to it.

After around two minutes, all the mosquitos flew back to the five people in gasmasks.

The crowd of people had all become noticeably thinner and whiter.

Lastly, the mosquitos entered all the houses in the marketplace to make sure that no one was trying to hide.

And finally, the five people turned around and left the marketplace behind as they walked down another street.

It was over.

This happened every month on the last day.

Once a month, every citizen of Crimson Fungus City had to pay 100 credits to the city as tax.

One could only pay the tax in full or not at all. Partial payments were not permitted.

If one paid the tax, nothing would happen, but if one failed to pay the tax, they would need to pay with their blood.

A group of people accompanied by large swarms of sizable mosquitos walked through the Dregs once a month, and if a citizen wasn't able to pay the tax, the swarm of mosquitos would fall onto the citizen.

The swarm of mosquitos would gather blood until a collective two liters had been gathered from adults.

Children below the age of 14 only needed to pay 50 credits or one liter of blood.

Children below the age of six didn't need to pay taxes.

Naturally, losing two liters of blood wasn't lethal, and the mosquitos were excellent at not inflicting injuries on the people while gathering blood.

However, recovering from something like that usually took six to eight weeks.

So, if a citizen didn't manage to pay the tax next month as well, things would become dangerous.

Getting 100 credits in one month was nearly impossible for normal people living in the Dregs, but getting 100 credits over two months was manageable.

Because of that, around 50% of people paid blood one month, credits the next, and then blood again.

Of course, countless people had tried to fight their way out of paying taxes, but it always ended the same way.

With the person turning into a bloodless corpse.

In fact, the mosquitos weren't accompanying the tax collectors, but the tax collectors were accompanying the mosquitos.

The tax collectors only came for two reasons.

They dealt with the money.

And they stopped people from panicking in front of the mosquitos.

If the mosquitos wanted, they could kill every living person in the Dregs in less than 10 minutes.

One had to know that there were over 2,000 people living in the Dregs.

It wasn't that the mosquitos were very powerful but that there were literally millions of them, and every mosquito was bigger than a giant hornet.

Naturally, not all of the mosquitos accompanied the tax collectors. There were only around 100 following each tax collector, but if things became serious, millions of them would appear.

Even more, the mosquitos were the minions of a very powerful Specter, the Blood Mosquito.

The rat Nick had talked to two years ago was also a minion of a very powerful Specter called the Parasite.

Some Specters could control animals or create their own animals and control them. Their minions would share the perception of the Specter, and the Specter could also talk and act through the minions.

While nearly all Specters were the enemies of humanity, there were some Specters that cooperated and helped humanity.

The Blood Mosquito was one of them.

The Parasite was not.

The Blood Mosquito gained power by consuming human blood. Naturally, it could send some isolated mosquitos to gather blood from sleeping people, but if it overdid things, the truly powerful Zephyx Manufacturers would notice it and kill it.

So, the Blood Mosquito had decided to help humanity instead, and Crimson Fungus City was the perfect place.

Crimson Fungus City was named after the strongest Specter that was being confined inside the most prestigious Zephyx Manufacturer, the Crimson Fungus.

In contrast to nearly all powerful Specters, the Crimson Fungus was not intelligent.

As the name implied, the Crimson Fungus was just a huge fungus living inside a containment unit.

Just like the Blood Mosquito, the Crimson Fungus gained power by absorbing human blood.

But in return, the Crimson Fungus was creating electricity and, most importantly, Zephyx.

Zephyx could be used for basically everything.

It could be transformed into electricity, heat, movement, and so on, and it was extremely efficient at it.

Even more, Zephyx could also be used to increase the powers of Zephyx Extractors, and it could also be used to create powerful weapons that could deal with Specters.

The Crimson Fungus was the reason why the Blood Mosquito had chosen this city.

The Blood Mosquito would help the Zephyx Manufacturer in collecting the blood, and it would get to keep some of the blood in exchange.

The remaining blood would be sprinkled onto the Crimson Fungus, which would then produce Zephyx.

The Zephyx Extractors would collect the Zephyx, and they would be allowed to keep a bit of it as payment.

The Zephyx Manufacturer would then use the harvested Zephyx to increase the power of their company or sell it to other cities.

But if the Zephyx Manufacturer wanted to get bigger and earn even more money, they needed even stronger Specters.

And to get these even stronger Specters, they needed stronger Zephyx Extractors.

This was what Nick wanted to become.

Being a Zephyx Extractor meant being able to become powerful and having a better life.

Nick wanted to get out of the Dregs and finally live a better life.

Chapter 5: Young Man

After the tax collectors left, things returned to normal in the marketplace.

The anxiety of most people had been replaced with either relief or acceptance.

Sadly, even though many people lost two liters of blood today, they couldn't go home and rest.

They needed to work and earn money. Otherwise, they would need to pay with their blood again in a month.

Nick returned to his usual place and continued holding up his sign.

Nick trusted Albert, and he was sure that Albert wouldn't have told him to make himself noticeable if there were no point to it.

Sadly, no one of note talked to Nick, and he had to go home after a while since he was getting hungry.

By now, Nick was no longer living in a small cube made of metal but in an actual house... which was also made of rusty metal.

One of the richer people died recently, and his house had become available.

Well, available might not be the correct word.

The man died, and his son was actually now the owner of the house.

The problem was that the son was only eleven years old.

Naturally, the gangs wanted to take the house from the kid, but Nick went between the two sides and protected the kid.

Nick would protect the kid and his inheritance, but in exchange, Nick was allowed to use their money to eat and pay his tax.

Of course, the kid didn't have any other choice and accepted.

After a couple of fights, the gangs decided that it wasn't worth the trouble.

If Nick were just a normal guy, they would just send in like ten guys to beat him up, but Nick actually had an active Zephyx Synchronizer.

No one was heavily injured or dead yet, but if they escalated things, things might change quickly.

They were certain they could take Nick down, but they were not willing to pay the price. The house wasn't worth enough since it was just a bit above average. Also, the kid had a claim on it, and the gangs couldn't get too overbearing.

Smart, organized criminals knew that leading a flock of willing and happy sheep was easier than leading a flock of terrified sheep.

That was also why the leader of the Insurance Gang had been willing to pay the difference in the taxes out of pocket.

Some of his people had obviously siphoned some funds out of the collected taxes, and they would hold an internal investigation.

If the leader had decided to simply hand over the eight people with the missing cash, his Insurance Gang wouldn't be as trustworthy anymore, and next month, they might only get like 70% of their previous customers.

The Insurance Gang asked for 10% of the taxes as a protection and processing fee, which meant that adults would pay them ten credits to protect their 100 credits.

With about 480 customers, that came to 4,800 credits. Even when the leader paid 800 credits out of pocket, they still made a profit of 4,000 credits.

If he had refused to hand over the 800 credits, they would have saved 800 credits today, but they might pay 1,500 credits in lost profits for every following month for a long time.

Even though they were criminals and this was the Dregs, it was still important that people were satisfied with the services provided.

And waging war against someone that was protecting a vulnerable child was bad.

It wasn't worth it.

Of course, everything had its advantages and disadvantages.

While Nick got a nice home and had no money problems anymore, he had permanently destroyed any opportunity to work for any of the gangs.

For two weeks, Nick kept going to the marketplace to wait with his sign raised.

One particular day that didn't seem different from any other, someone approached Nick in the marketplace.

It was a young but tall man with light-brown hair. His hair was chaotic, but it was clean. His brown shirt and trousers were torn but just as clean.

As someone that had lived in the Dregs for his entire life, Nick could immediately tell that the guy in front of him was trying to act poor when he obviously wasn't.

The guy probably hadn't even seen a poor person up to today. Otherwise, his disguise wouldn't be so superficial.

The man walked up to Nick with a friendly smile, but Nick could see that the guy was very nervous deep inside.

"Hey, you're a Zephyx Extractor?" the man asked as he looked at Nick's sign.

"I got through the entrance exam for Ghosty's Lab, but I never worked as one since my Zephyx Synchronizer is already attuned," Nick answered as he looked with suspicion at the guy.

A small glimmer appeared in the guy's eyes when he heard that. "Your Zephyx Synchronizer is already attuned?"

Nick nodded.

Silence.

The guy seemed uncertain about how to proceed with the conversation, and Nick could practically read his thoughts with how expressive his face was.

Nick was quite certain that the guy was trying to find a way to get Nick to tell him more about himself without seeming like a shady person that wanted to scam him.

"You know Albert?" Nick asked.

The guy's eyes widened for just an instant before he smiled uncomfortably. "There are many people called Albert," he said awkwardly.

'Bullshit,' Nick thought. 'Nobody here is called Albert except for that one guy.'

"Black and grey hair, and he summoned a couple of things that can hover. Maybe you can fill out the last detail to make sure that we are talking about the same person," Nick said with a suspicious expression.

The man blinked a couple of times. "He is fond of tools," the man added after a while.

When Nick heard that, he smiled brightly. "Finally," he said as he stood up, making the man move backward. "Albert told me that someone would come with a job in the near future. I guess you're the guy?"

The man also became excited. Apparently, he had also expected to meet someone.

But then, his expression fell, and he became suspicious.

"I know him, but I don't think I have the capital to hire you. I also live in the Dregs," he said carefully.

At that moment, the surrounding people threw incredulous looks at him as they stopped walking.

The man noticed, and he felt like he had said something wrong.

"Dude," Nick said, making the man turn to him, "you just said capital. Also, your disguise is horrible. Nobody will believe you. If they did, they would have already shaken you down for everything you have, based on how uncertain and fearful you look."

The man's smile turned more uncomfortable. "I'm not sure-"

"Come with me," Nick said as he grabbed the guy's arm to pull him away.

The guy looked with shock at the place where Nick was grabbing him, and for just an instant, his eyes turned pure white.

But he quickly calmed down again, and his eyes turned back to normal instantaneously.

He had never seen anyone that just grabbed a stranger and pulled them away.

"Hey, I can walk on my own," the guy said as he pulled his arm out of Nick's grip.

"Then, come," Nick said, gesturing with his head to the distance.

The man took out a handkerchief and cleaned the spot where Nick had touched him, and followed after him.

After a couple of minutes, they arrived in front of Nick's temporary home.

The man became a bit uncertain again, but he just took a deep breath and entered.

