

The Sun 211

Chapter 211 – Family

The two people from Solace, Ramona and Hera, sat back down and talked a bit amongst each other.

"You know her?" Nick whispered to Wyntor.

"They are the ones supplying us with the Arclights and the artificial lights for the cheap Containment Units," Wyntor answered without looking at him. "I've met Ramona a couple of times. If I didn't know her, we wouldn't be getting our light so cheaply."

Nick nodded.

He knew that Wyntor was always busy, but he never truly knew what he was doing.

Yet, whenever Nick saw the results of Wyntor's work, he was surprised.

Wyntor was making Dark Dream so much money without even producing any Zephyx!

Because of him, the lights were far cheaper.

Because of him, the Zephyx they were selling was selling for a higher price.

He was getting the Containment Units cheaply.

On top of that, Wyntor seemed to know so many important people and had a good relationship with them.

Lastly, Wyntor's family name was protecting Dark Dream from being ganged up on by several Manufacturers.

Dark Dream had required Wyntor to survive in the beginning, and that fact hadn't changed.

If Wyntor left Dark Dream, Dark Dream would most likely go bankrupt within the year.

The room was slowly filling up.

By now, there were eleven people in the meeting room.

However, the room had become even quieter than when there had only been three.

Except for the occasional greeting, no company talked to another one.

At most, the two people from one company were quietly whispering to each other.

"By the way, are you serious?" Wyntor asked.

"With what?" Nick asked back.

"With the Nick Nick thing," Wyntor said.

Nick scratched the back of his head. "Well, yeah. I noticed that everyone was introducing themselves with a first and last name, and I don't have a last name."

"It felt awkward to only introduce myself with my first name. What if one of them thinks I'm trying to come onto them?"

Wyntor blinked a couple of times in confusion.

"Okay, but why Nick Nick?" Wyntor asked.

Nick smiled helplessly. "I had to come up with a last name on the spot, and then I remembered that I accidentally introduced myself with my first name twice when talking to the Spartans."

"If I suddenly used another last name, wouldn't they think that I made a joke of them? That might be troublesome for Dark Dream!"

"So, I just ran with it."

"But it's not that bad. I also gave myself my first name."

Wyntor looked at Nick with a complicated expression. "You gave yourself your own name?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Nick asked.

"Not sure," Wyntor answered. "I don't think so."

Nick scratched his chin before shrugging. "Well, when I was ten and lost my memory, I started to live on the streets and came into contact with others."

"I worked with a couple of them, and they wanted to know my name, and I just told them that I didn't have one."

"After that, they started to call me the nameless one as a joke, and I told them that I was getting embarrassed since they all kept calling each other by their nicknames instead of their full names."

"So, they started to call me literally Nickname," Nick said.

Wyntor looked at Nick.

He could tell where this was going.

"But Nickname was so long that they eventually just shortened it to Nick, and in the end, I started to introduce myself to others as Nick."

"So, yeah. That's why I'm Nick."

Nick scratched the back of his neck. "Or Nick Nick now, I guess."

Wyntor just took a deep breath.

A couple of seconds of silence passed.

"I'll get a form from the city for a name change. Until now, I simply kept the field for your last name empty," Wyntor said.

Nick nodded in embarrassment.

He also wasn't the biggest fan of the new Nick Nick thing.

But he had already committed.

A minute later, the doors opened again, and two more people entered.

Those two wore silver uniforms, and the symbol on their chest was of a ball with a scratch.

They were from Gemini.

Surprisingly, the two that entered looked almost identical, except for some slight differences in their hairstyles.

They both had long silver hair, and they both seemed to be in their early 30s.

They were obviously identical twins.

The two of them greeted the other companies before they focused on Nick and Wyntor.

"Mindy Wunder, CEO of Gemini," one of them said to them.

"Cindy Wunder, CZE of Gemini," the other one said.

Wyntor stood up, and Nick did the same shortly after.

"Wyntor Melfion, CEO of Dark Dream," he said respectfully.

"Nick Nick, CZE of Dark Dream," Nick said.

The two from Gemini didn't offer a handshake, and they just looked at the two of them with a bit of confusion and disgust.

They looked like they were a bit offended that Nick and Wyntor were here.

In the end, the two from Gemini just walked over to their seats and quietly sat down.

Wyntor and Nick sat back down.

Wyntor didn't seem different from before, but Nick furrowed his brows.

He felt a bit disrespected.

But in the end, he could only sigh.

'Those two should be Experts. They actually don't need to offer a handshake. Their power is worlds apart from ours.'

Then, Nick looked at Wyntor.

'Or, more specifically, mine. Wyntor still has his family. I don't.'

At that moment, a concerned expression appeared on Nick's face.

'Family.'

'Do I have one?'

'Did I have one?'

'I mean, I must have had one.'

'But they probably died when we accidentally came into contact with the Null.'

'At least, that's what Albert thinks what happened.'

Nick sighed.

'It doesn't matter anymore.'

Eventually, the door to the meeting room opened, and Nick saw another two people enter.

Based on the emblem and the color of the uniforms, they were from Ghosty's Lab.

Surprisingly, as one of the two saw Nick, their eyes lit up in recognition.

Chapter 212 – Last Person

Two men entered the room.

One of them looked quite old and had white hair.

The other one looked middle-aged and had black hair that seemed to turn grey at different spots.

Nick was a bit surprised since those two looked to be the oldest people who walked into the room, but at least one of them had to be a Specialist.

This meant that at least one of them could live for well over a hundred years without visibly aging.

So, was one of them just very old?

Chances were that they were even older than Vernon.

At that point, Nick remembered Wyntor telling him that Ghosty's Lab was the oldest Zephyx Manufacturer that was still in business.

Apparently, it had been in business even before Kugelblitz had been founded.

Every other Manufacturer had vanished.

They had either been absorbed by one of the others or had been sold and rebranded.

Two of them even got destroyed by their own Specters breaking out and wreaking havoc.

The two people greeted everyone in the room, and they even talked quite a bit with Vernon and Aria.

As the city's third most powerful Zephyx Manufacturer and the numerically biggest, Ghosty's Lab definitely had the status to casually talk to Kugelblitz.

After greeting all the other Extractors, the two of them turned to Wyntor and Nick.

Surprisingly, the two of them walked around the table to offer a handshake.

Wyntor respectfully accepted the handshake.

"Herman Reichert, CEO of Ghosty's Lab," the older man said.

"George Meander, CZE of Ghosty's Lab. People generally refer to me as Ghosty," the other man said.

"Wyntor Melfion, CEO of Dark Dream," Wyntor said with a polite smile.

"And you're Nick, right?" Ghosty asked with a smirk as he looked at Nick.

Nick blinked a couple of times in surprise.

"You know me?" he asked.

Ghosty chuckled slightly. "I remember your file. I was the one who told Albert about you."

Nick's eyes widened!

It was him!

He was the reason how Nick managed to become a Zephyx Extractor in the first place!

If Ghosty hadn't sent Albert to Nick, Nick would have never understood his ability, and he would have never found Wyntor.

He would have stayed in the Dregs for the remainder of his life.

"You know Albert?" Nick asked.

Ghosty nodded. "He used to work for us before he left to work for the city. He was one of the best Extractors I've ever had the pleasure to work with."

"How is Albert doing?" Nick asked.

Nick hadn't seen Albert in almost two years.

"He's busy with some confidential things. Not even I know exactly what project he's involved in. I only know that the city views it as very important," Ghosty said.

"We can talk some other time," Ghosty said after seeing Herman motioning him to leave. "It's a bit awkward to talk in such a crowded room."

"Of course!" Nick said politely.

Nick watched Ghosty with wonder.

Obviously, Ghosty's Lab was named after him, which meant that he was probably quite capable and famous.

"He's the second oldest person in the city," Wyntor whispered to Nick. "Many breakthroughs in how we deal with Specters exist only because of him. He also had a major hand in the creation of the modern Containment Units."

"As far as we know, he's the first person ever that managed to capture a Force Specter."

Nick took a deep breath.

This meant that he was essentially sitting at the same table as a living legend.

However, Nick couldn't think about these things for long since the doors opened again rather quickly.

This time, two people with green uniforms and the emblem of a puppet walked into the room.

The two of them were men with black hair that looked to be in their thirties.

As soon as Nick saw them, he felt nervous.

He felt like he should not interact with those two.

They felt dangerous.

The two of them walked over and greeted Vernon and Aria.

After that, they offered their hand to Ghosty and Herman.

And then...

They just sat down in their seats.

They didn't even look at the other Manufacturers.

It was like they didn't exist to them.

"They are from Anatomy," Wyntor whispered to Nick. "The guy on the left is one of their directors, Zarren Harrow. As far as I know, he's a Peak level four Zephyx Extractor."

"The other one is their Chief Zephyx Extractor, Mundus Stairwell. He's the only level six Zephyx Extractor that Anatomy has."

Nick nodded. "They feel dangerous."

"They are," Wyntor confirmed. "Try not to come into contact with them."

Nick nodded and looked around the room.

There were 17 people in the room now.

Three normal people at the bottom.

Nick and Wyntor near the bottom.

John and Kallum from the Spartans.

Hera and Ramona from Solace.

Cindy and Mindy from Gemini.

Herman and Ghosty from Ghosty's Lab.

Zarren and Mundus from Anatomy.

Vernon and Aria from Kugelblitz.

And yet, the head of the table was still empty.

But everyone seemed to be present.

All the major Zephyx Manufacturers in the city were present.

So, Nick waited for the meeting to start.

But it didn't.

Several minutes of silence passed.

Nick looked around in confusion.

"What are we waiting for?" Nick asked.

"We're still missing someone," Wyntor said.

"Who?" Nick asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Wyntor asked.

Nick shook his head.

"The governor," Wyntor said.

"The governor? Who's that?" Nick asked.

Wyntor was immediately taken aback, and he looked at Nick in shock.

"You don't know who the governor is?" he asked in surprise.

"I don't even know what a governor is," Nick said.

Wyntor rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"How did you work for two years for me and never came into contact with the concept of a governor?"

"I don't know. I don't even know what or who that is," Nick said with annoyance. "Don't always act like I'm an idiot."

Wyntor took a deep breath.

"The governor is the oldest and officially most powerful person in the city, and he is the leader and ruler of Crimson Fungus City."

"The only one that might be able to match his power is Aria, but I wouldn't bet my money on her."

Nick's eyes widened in wonder.

Then, the doors opened.

Chapter 213 – Governor

A middle-aged man with black hair entered the room.

As soon as he did, the entire atmosphere seemed to change, and the temperature seemed to drop by several degrees.

He wore a suit with the same colors as Nick's uniform, which showed that he belonged to the city.

The man took slow and methodical steps, and without greeting anyone, he walked towards the head of the table.

"That's Markus Julius, the strongest human in Crimson Fungus City and the owner of everything we know and love," Wyntor whispered.

"Basically," Wyntor added for clarification.

As Nick looked at Markus, he couldn't help but take deep breaths.

He felt so powerful!

Nick had never seen anyone this powerful before!

After sitting down, Markus looked around the silent room.

Everyone was respectfully looking at him in silence.

Naturally, Wyntor also stopped talking and just waited for the governor to start the meeting.

"The official meeting of all Manufacturers in the city commences," he said with a slow and deep voice.

"Introduce yourselves," he commanded.

Vernon immediately stood up and bowed politely. "Vernon Melfion, Senior Director of Kugelblitz."

After that, Aria stood up. "Aria Light, Chief Zephyx Extractor of Kugelblitz."

Then, the next person stood up. "Zarren Harrow, Senior Director of Anatomy."

All the others introduced themselves as well, starting from the strongest person and going to the weakest.

"Kallum Sondur, Chief Zephyx Extractor of the Spartans."

"Wyntor Melfion, Chief Executive Officer of Dark Dream."

"Nick Nick, Chief Zephyx Extractor of Dark Dream."

Then, one of the people at the bottom of the table spoke up.

"Zack Howitzer, representative of the common people from the middle layer."

"Nirolas Smark, representative of the common people from the lower layer."

"Gungis Landrow, representative of the common people from the Outer City."

And with that, everyone except for the governor had introduced themselves.

Including the governor, there were now 18 people in the room.

The room didn't seem as empty anymore.

Everyone sat back down, and the governor took out several sheets of paper.

"First order of business: The taxes of all Manufacturers have been paid on time and in their full amount. Continue like this."

No one answered.

"Second, after many long discussions with my advisors, I have decided to call for another general round of inspection. The inspectors will arrive at your premises within the week."

No one showed any reactions, but Nick could tell that the atmosphere in the room had become much tenser.

And Nick wasn't surprised in the least.

While the specifics of the Specters were kept secret, they couldn't be kept secret from the city.

One of Nick's duties was also to create thorough documentation about all the Specters Dark Dream owned.

That included their names, their abilities, their powers, where they were kept, how to work with them, what abilities they granted others, and many other things.

It included everything.

And these documents had to be handed to the city biannually.

This meant that the city knew everything about every Specter that was being kept in any Containment Unit inside the city.

Naturally, this kind of information was kept top secret, and there hadn't been a data breach within the last several decades.

So, technically, there wasn't a reason to feel scared about telling the city the truth about one's Specters, right?

Wrong.

There were several reasons why a Manufacturer wouldn't want to be honest.

First, if they had fewer Specters, the city wouldn't ask for high taxes.

Second, while the city allowed almost every kind of method of working with a Specter, there were still a very select few that the city didn't like.

Specters that required children to work with them were one example.

Another example were Specters that needed large-scale destruction.

Something like spreading a plague, and the more people caught the plague, the more Zephyx the Specter produced.

Another reason why one might not be honest was when suppressing a Specter wasn't very easy.

A Manufacturer needed to show that they were able to suppress every Specter they owned.

If the city found out that a Manufacturer might have issues suppressing a Specter they owned, the Specter would be confiscated by the city and handed to a more competent Manufacturer.

Kugelblitz had benefited from that policy several times.

Yet, there was one last reason why a Manufacturer might not be fully honest with their documentation.

As the strongest human in the city, the governor needed to regularly work with a Demon to become stronger, and the only suppressed Demon in the city was the Crimson Fungus.

This meant that the governor was working with the Crimson Fungus regularly, and he was also officially one of the four Heroes working for Kugelblitz.

While it was definitely the governor being in charge, people still didn't feel comfortable with the governor working for Kugelblitz.

While there had not been a data breach yet, the Manufacturers were still suspicious.

"Sir, please consider postponing the inspection," Zarren Harrow, the CEO of Anatomy, said.

"Give me a reason," the governor demanded.

"We are currently in the process of restructuring, which means moving many Specters from one Containment Unit to the other. Leading an inspector through all the Containment Units in this scenario is bound to lead to confusion and danger," Zarren calmly explained.

"Why would that lead to confusion and danger? You can simply explain that to the team of inspectors," the governor asked coldly.

"Due to a recent paradigm shift in working procedures, the documentation for the move is not centralized, and many localized reports could cloud the greater picture, leading to misunderstandings of us trying to keep information hidden from the city, which is not our intention," Zarren explained with a smooth voice.

While Zarren sounded extremely confident and calm, what he said didn't fully make sense to Nick's ears.

And if it didn't make sense to Nick's ears, it definitely didn't fool any of the other people in the room.

Except for the three representatives at the bottom of the table, of course.

Everyone knew that Zarren was bullshitting.

He just didn't want to get investigated.

Chapter 214 – Pressure

The governor looked at Zarren Harrow with a solemn expression.

"The number of Debilify cases has spiked in recent times," the governor said. "We are suspecting that one of the Manufacturers is keeping an illegal Specter."

"These inspections are also a strain on the city's forces, and if it weren't for the high number of cases, I wouldn't call for one."

"So, no, I can't reschedule the inspection," the governor explained.

'Debilify,' Nick thought. 'Is that a disease?'

"Sir, Anatomy is willing to investigate these cases and search for an effective method of prevention," Mundus Stairwell, the Chief Zephyx Extractor of Anatomy, said.

The governor looked at Mundus and remained silent for several seconds.

"Many of the hotspots for Debilify are in areas where Extractors of Anatomy are already assigned to, and we have witnessed no progress in the investigation yet," the governor said.

"Sir, we are not trying to keep some kind of secret from you, but if you go ahead with the inspection right now, we fear that our intentions will be misunderstood," Zarren Harrow said.

"If there is no way for us to reschedule the inspection, we can only ask for a delay in exchange for results in the investigation of Debilify."

The governor glared at Zarren. "Explain."

"We have recently found a preventive measure that seems to reduce the chance of suffering from Debilify."

"Why have I not been informed until now?" the governor asked with an annoyed voice.

"We are still in the testing phase. We have been running trials, but we are not yet sure if the preventative measure causes any secondary issues," Zarren explained.

"Secondary issues worse than being unable to move and focus on anything for more than ten minutes a day?" the governor asked with an undertone of aggression.

"No, but the secondary issues can impact people not suffering from Debilify, which might cause additional, unnecessary suffering," Zarren explained.

"How long has the preventative measure been in the testing phase?" the director asked.

Silence.

"About seven years."

The entire room seemed to turn to ice.

Even some of the other Zephyx Extractors threw glances filled with hatred and rage at the two people from Anatomy.

The glare of the governor was so cold and intense that Nick felt the urge to run out of the room, even though he wasn't the recipient of it.

Silence.

Eventually, the governor took a deep breath through his nose.

"I expect the relevant files and documentation of this preventative cure on my desk before the evening," he spoke slowly and seriously. "If the preventative measure proves to be effective, I am willing to delay the inspection for a year."

"I will deliver the documentation to you personally later today, sir," Zarren Harrow said with a grateful voice. "Anatomy thanks you very much for your magnanimity."

The governor just glanced at Zarren Harrow without saying anything before turning to the middle of the room again.

"Expect a message regarding this matter by the end of tomorrow," the governor told the other Manufacturers.

The others nodded.

"Next on the list: I have read through your documentation regarding the investigation of the False News Specter and the Parasite Specter and have come to the conclusion that not enough resources have been put into the investigation," the governor said.

"Frankly, the pages upon pages of documentation boil down to nothing more than 'we don't know'. I expect the combined force of over a thousand Zephyx Extractors to produce significantly more than that."

"If, by the next meeting, I don't see a significant improvement in the quality of the results, I will put a leash on the Extractors that are dedicated to the city but still unofficially spend surprisingly much time near their official place of employment."

The governor's tone was reprimanding and annoyed.

No one in the room answered him, but it was obvious that they had understood.

"Naturally, Manufacturers without at least one level five Extractor are not involved in this matter," the governor added.

Nick just kept listening to the meeting with rapt attention.

He hadn't been sure what exactly the meeting would be about, but he hadn't expected it to be this serious and important.

The governor was constantly talking about critical issues that were relevant for the entirety of Crimson Fungus City.

This was less like a meeting between companies and more like an official meeting between rulers!

It was like the fate of Crimson Fungus City was being decided within this very meeting!

The governor continued talking about one issue after the other, and by now, the tone of the meeting was all too obvious to Nick.

The governor was putting a gigantic fire under the Zephyx Manufacturers' asses!

He was reprimanding them left and right while handing out threats without end.

After talking for over an entire hour about city-wide issues, the governor started to turn to the Manufacturers individually.

He kept giving out demands to all the Manufacturers, and the Manufacturers all acted subserviently and complied.

"Dark Dream," he said with a serious tone as he looked at Wyntor and Nick.

Nick's heart rate shot through the roof, and he started to sweat profusely.

This guy was putting immense pressure on even Kugelblitz and Anatomy, and now, he was focusing on them!

"I realize that several of your level two Specters are special and do not pose a significant threat after they break out, but I still find the lack of level two Extractors in your company worrisome," he said.

"By the next meeting, I want to see at least six level two Extractors working for Dark Dream. Otherwise, the city will confiscate Specters until I feel comfortable," he said with a serious tone.

Below the table, Wyntor kicked Nick.

Extractors were Nick's job, not Wyntor's, and he was supposed to answer.

Nick quickly shot up from his chair.

"Of course, sir! We will immediately get to fixing that issue, sir!" Nick spoke loudly and clearly.

The governor nodded once, and Nick sat back down.

After that, he turned to Wyntor.

"With the addition of your newest Specter, you've entered the next bracket, and the contributions to the city you are expected to pay will increase by 2%," the governor said.

Wyntor stood up and nodded. "There will be no issues in the payment, sir," he said respectfully and clearly.

After that, the governor became silent for a couple of seconds.

"That's it for the matters regarding the city."

Chapter 215 – Taxes

"It is now your time for your matters," the governor said before turning to Aria and Vernon. "Kugelblitz first."

"Thank you, sir," Vernon said with a smile while standing up.

"The number of people paying their contributions via their blood has dropped by 2.4% this year," Vernon said. "While that is a great matter for the health of the city, it makes it more difficult for our Heroes to grow stronger."

"At the same time, according to several studies Kugelblitz has performed, the objective value of a credit has decreased by almost 4% within the last year."

"Therefore, we would like to ask the city to increase the taxes of the outer layer of the Outer City by four to five credits," Vernon said.

Nick's eyes widened, and he almost felt like he had been thrown into an icy cold pool of water.

Vernon had just asked the governor to raise the taxes for the people of the Dregs!

Memories of the countless times Nick had seen people almost killing each other just for a couple of credits for the taxes shot through his head.

The people of the Dregs were already beyond desperate!

But now, Vernon was asking for even more money?!

Was he trying to kill them?!

At that moment, Nick came to a terrifying realization.

Right, the blood from the Dregs was what allowed the Crimson Fungus to produce Zephyx.

If the Dregs stopped producing blood, Kugelblitz would lose a huge chunk of its revenue, power, and growth potential.

Naturally, Nick's goal was to improve the lives of the people in the Dregs.

But if that happened, he would essentially be threatening Kugelblitz's power!

The next words that were spoken didn't register in Nick's head as he kept thinking about what all of this meant.

Earlier, Nick had expected that it wouldn't be that difficult to improve the lives of the people in the Dregs.

He just needed to get some stands with free food, which would allow the people to save up a bit of money while also giving them more energy to earn money.

Naturally, that wouldn't solve the fundamental issue, but it would put a band-aid on it until a more permanent solution could be found.

But after hearing Vernon, Nick realized that this wouldn't work.

Kugelblitz would notice the drop in revenue and would go to the governor for an adjustment in the taxes.

Then, everything would return to how it was, and the people would still nearly die each month because of the taxes.

And the worst thing was that this state could only be achieved if Nick kept helping them!

The people would suffer just as much as they were suffering now.

But if Nick then stopped helping...

Terror!

Chaos!

Death!

The people wouldn't be able to pay their taxes anymore, and a huge number of them would die of blood loss!

Of course, in the next meeting, the taxes would be adjusted again to the old level, but that wouldn't bring all the dead people back.

'If I help them now, I am essentially taking out a loan of lives!' Nick realized.

'I might be able to save a couple of lives now, but the same number, or even more, will die when it is time to repay the loan!'

As Vernon and the governor kept talking, Nick kept thinking about what to do with his life now.

He thought that he could start helping them now, and, in fact, he had done just that.

He had given a bit of money to just a couple of people.

Him getting rid of several members of the Riker Strikers had also helped with the overall health of the Dregs.

And sure enough, the amount of blood paid had reduced!

But now, Vernon was about to put it back to its old level!

Or even higher!

Nick started to pay attention to the meeting again, and he heard Vernon and the governor arguing about the value of a credit.

Nick felt the overwhelming urge to get involved.

This was his opportunity to make a difference!

Wyntor looked at Nick with narrowed eyes.

He was ready to intervene if Nick decided to do something stupid.

Nick gritted his teeth and clenched his fists.

Unending rage and hatred were building inside of him.

Subconsciously, Nick's eyes focused on Vernon in an intense glare.

He felt betrayed.

He had liked Vernon!

He had enjoyed talking to him a lot!

But now, Vernon was casually dooming many innocent people to a life worse than hell!

Nick's clenched fists shook.

Then, he clenched his teeth and looked away.

He hated himself at this moment.

He hated himself for looking away.

So many people were being doomed right now, and Nick despised himself for looking away.

'But what am I supposed to do?!' he thought in frustration and rage.

'If I get involved, it will cause trouble for Dark Dream.'

'If Dark Dream dies now, I will never be able to help the people of the Dregs!'

'I'm not strong enough!'

Nick had never hated his own weakness this much in his life.

He was so weak that none of the other Manufacturers even needed to pay attention to him.

Wyntor kept looking at Nick calmly.

He could tell what Nick was thinking about.

Sadly, Wyntor couldn't do more than Nick.

In the end, he just sighed.

"If the rate of blood donations sinks again this year, I will consider increasing the taxes," the governor said, "but I will not increase them this year. That is my final decision on the matter."

"Of course, sir," Vernon said with a polite smile before he sat down again.

When Nick heard that, he released a sigh of relief.

At least the people of the Dregs didn't need to suffer this time.

'But if I keep helping them like this, the governor will increase the taxes,' Nick thought.

'If I want to help the people of the Dregs, I need to do it in a different way.'

Nick glanced at Vernon.

'Kugelblitz wants blood, but they don't care where the blood comes from.'

'As long as I can increase the amount of blood, the taxes won't increase.'

Chapter 216 – End of the Meeting

After Vernon was done speaking, Aria stood up.

She talked a bit about the Extractors that every Manufacturer needed to dedicate to the city and tried to change a couple of allocations.

All these changes seemed to be unimportant and uninteresting to Nick. Especially since these changes were only relevant to people in the Inner City and bigger Manufacturers.

After a couple of minutes, it was time for Anatomy to say their piece.

Yet, surprisingly, they didn't have to say anything.

"They don't want to challenge their luck," Wyntor whispered to Nick.

Nick nodded in understanding.

The governor had made it clear that he was suspicious of Anatomy earlier when they had talked about the inspection.

Anatomy managed to buy a year of time, and they were not willing to risk that year just to ask the governor for some minor advantages.

After that, it was time for Ghosty's Lab.

Ghosty's Lab only talked a bit about their recent scientific research.

Ghosty himself talked about the research for almost 20 minutes.

Nick wasn't sure what the point of all of that was until Ghosty talked about a new product.

Ghosty's Lab was developing a method of converting a normal Containment Unit into one that could suppress Force Specters without the need to relocate the Specter inside it.

The product was still in its test phase, and Ghosty was asking for public funding for his research.

The governor declined.

However, Nick could tell that this had never been about the funding.

Ghosty had simply used this opportunity to present his new product in detail to the important people of every Manufacturer.

And sure enough, Nick saw a couple of people looking at Ghosty with interest.

"Some Physical Specters can turn into Force Specters after they advance a level," Wyntor whispered to Nick after seeing his confused expression. "If that happens, that Specter will almost certainly breach, and in the best-case scenario, the city will demand hefty fines that are well in excess of the value of the Specter."

Nick's eyes widened in surprise.

That was the first time he had heard about one kind of Specter changing into another kind.

"That can happen?" Nick asked.

"It is very rare, but there are precedence cases," Wyntor said. "If, by chance, something like this happens to one of the Manufacturers, the issue will not be the fine they will have to pay, but the loss of trust and confidence."

"The city will start demanding more Extractors in relation to Specters, which will essentially gut the profits of a Manufacturer for several years."

"For Manufacturers like Kugelblitz and Anatomy, converting almost all their Containment Units to avoid this risk is worth it, and it's also cheaper, based on what Ghosty said," Wyntor explained.

Nick could only nod in agreement.

After Ghosty's Lab was done, Gemini talked about their strongest Specter, the Distortion.

Surprisingly, they publicly said what kind of ability the Distortion granted people.

It gave people the ability to distort their surroundings, which could disorient others.

However, more importantly, that ability could be used in conjunction with others, which will result in much more power.

And with enough power, Prephyx could even be partially isolated from an area.

As soon as the other Manufacturers heard that, they focused on Gemini with interest.

Even Wyntor looked at the two from Gemini with interest.

Nick knew how Specters worked, and he knew exactly why everyone was interested.

Ghosty was the one that asked the question that was on Nick's mind.

"Does that help in suppressing Force Specters?"

Mindy Wunder, the CEO of Gemini, only smirked.

"Yes, it does."

Immediately, the Chief Zephyx Extractors started to talk to their CEOs and Directors.

The potential for this ability was immense!

They could save millions of credits!

On top of that, the base ability was also useful in many other fields and even had a great potential for future evolutions.

Naturally, Gemini was using this opportunity to announce their new initiative of creating Newbies.

Gemini had the second biggest number of Newbies, and now, they were going to get even more.

Of course, they were getting more so that other Manufacturers would purchase them.

The price?

A million credits.

Per Initial Newbie.

That was quite a bit more expensive than what Ghosty's Lab wanted for their Newbies, but the value of the Distortion spoke for itself.

In the end, she just asked for some idiotic funding that would never get granted to make it a relevant topic for the meeting and stopped talking about it.

But Gemini had achieved its goal.

After that, Solace talked a bit about the Extractors they had to dedicate to the city.

Apparently, they needed more Extractors for the next three months and asked for the city's help.

The governor said that they would only need to dedicate 10% of their Extractors to the city for the next six months, but he would expect 30% for the six months after that.

Solace just thanked him and accepted.

Then, it was the turn of the Spartans.

And they dropped a bomb.

"We found a level four Specter within ten kilometers of Crimson Fungus City, and we are asking for competitive protection due to our major investments in uncovering this Specter."

The other Manufacturers became interested.

"You don't have the manpower necessary to suppress a level four Specter," the governor said. "I can only give you one if you find a partner with enough power and show me proof of your significant investments."

"I can only give you a temporary one for one week. If I am not convinced by then, the information on your Specter will be publicized to the other Manufacturers," the governor said.

The Spartans just thanked the governor and nodded.

Naturally, this was also just an advertisement.

The top five Manufacturers were all interested in an Elder Specter, especially Solace. After all, Solace already had an Expert but no Elder to increase their power.

Meanwhile, Gemini wanted to keep Solace from joining the level of Manufacturers that owned an Elder.

Everyone knew that a brutal bidding war would take place between those two.

Both of them would want to become the Spartans' partner and claim the right to capture the Specter.

And finally, it was Dark Dream's turn.

"We have nothing," Wyntor said.

Nobody reacted to Wyntor's words.

Then, one of the representatives stood up.

"No issues here," he said.

Some seconds later, the governor stood up.

"Meeting adjourned."

Chapter 217 – Power to Change

The room started to empty, with the governor being the first to leave.

After that, the Manufacturers left one at a time.

Eventually, the representatives also left.

The last remaining people were Aria, Vernon, Wyntor, and Nick.

Wyntor and Nick walked over to Vernon and Aria, who were just walking towards the exit as well.

"Another uneventful meeting," Vernon said after yawning.

Normally, Nick would have laughed a bit, but right now, he didn't want to laugh at all.

Nick just couldn't view Vernon the same way as before the meeting.

However, Nick didn't decide to confront Vernon.

While they had talked quite a bit, they were obviously not close enough for something like that.

At most, they were acquaintances.

"Why did you ask for an increase in taxes for the people in the Dregs?"

Nick looked with surprise at Wyntor, who had just asked that question.

"Didn't I explain that well enough during the meeting?" Vernon asked.

"Yes, but I want to know why you asked for the raise. I'm talking about you, not Kugelblitz," Wyntor said.

Nick knew that Wyntor wouldn't have asked these questions if it weren't for him.

Once more, Nick felt a bit guilty for doubting Wyntor.

"What am I supposed to do otherwise?" Vernon asked with a shrug. "It's my job."

"While I have significant influence over the manner in which Kugelblitz is operated, I have to represent Kugelblitz in these meetings."

"The decision to ask for an increase has already been made internally, and if I didn't ask for it during the meeting, I might lose my job," Vernon explained.

"It doesn't matter what my opinion is. I only represent Kugelblitz as a whole in these meetings."

When Nick heard that, he realized that things were more complicated than he had expected.

It was possible that Vernon actually didn't want an increase in taxes.

However, it was also still possible that he wanted it.

Nevertheless, Nick realized something important.

'Not even Vernon has the power to change these things,' Nick thought. 'He might represent 20% of Kugelblitz, but if 50% of the other 80% want something, he can just comply.'

'It's difficult to change anything.'

'If I want to permanently change the lives of the people in the Dregs for the positive, I need even more power than Vernon.'

'And there are only four ways to achieve that.'

'First, buy a significant portion of Kugelblitz. If I can change the way it operates, I can solve the issue, but that needs billions of credits.'

'Second, buy parts of Dark Dream and make it stronger than Kugelblitz. But to do that, I need to become a Hero and capture a Demon.'

'Third, become an extremely high member of the city government. With that, I can subtly change the laws and make it better for the people in the Dregs. However, I probably also need to be a Hero to achieve that. At the very least, I need to be a powerful Specialist.'

'Lastly, become the strongest person in the city. If I am so powerful that nobody in the city can possibly hope to fight me, I can force the change on the Manufacturers. Yet, that also requires me to become an extremely powerful Hero, which means I have to work with a Demon, which means I have to catch one since I can't rely on the Crimson Fungus if I want to go against Kugelblitz.'

'In the end, it all boils down to two things.'

'Money and power.'

'And to get such a large amount of money, I also need a great amount of power.'

'No matter how much I think about these things, it all boils down to power in the end.'

"Nick?"

Nick was taken out of his thoughts as Vernon called for him.

"Yes?" Nick asked.

"Do you want another cup of coffee?" he asked.

Nick definitely loved coffee, but he couldn't care less about it right now.

The things he was thinking about were far more important to him, and he felt like he would be wasting his time by drinking coffee with Vernon.

"No, thank you," Nick said. "I have to go back to Dark Dream and check up on my Extractors. I also have to think about how to properly increase the power of my Extractors since the governor wants Dark Dream to become stronger."

Vernon just waved dismissively. "Oh, that? Markus is actually very happy with the progress of Dark Dream. He just has to be all tough in public and act like he is not happy with any of the Manufacturers."

"If you have two or more Adolescents, you will easily get that number of level two Extractors in a year. Markus essentially only demanded Dark Dream to not shrink and become weaker within the year," Vernon explained.

Usually, Nick would feel relieved, but he just didn't care right now.

"That might be, but I still have to go back to Dark Dream," Nick said.

Vernon sighed. "Sure, I get it. The life of a Chief Zephyx Extractor is busy. Anyway, it was nice to get to know you, Nick. If you're ever interested in some coffee, tell Wyntor, and I will try to find an opening in my schedule."

"Of course," Nick said neutrally.

"Then, I'll no longer keep you," Vernon said.

"Thank you. I learned a lot today," Nick said.

Nick also nodded at Aria.

"Do you need help getting to Dark Dream?" Wyntor asked.

"No, I remember where to go," Nick said as he left the room.

After Nick left the room, Vernon looked at the door with a bit of confusion and concern.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

Wyntor looked at his father evenly. "He grew up in the Dregs, and you've asked for an increase in the taxes."

"Oh," Vernon said as he scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

"I guess he's still new to the world of business," Vernon said.

Wyntor didn't answer.

"He's still mixing business and private affairs."

"He does," Wyntor said. "Anyway, I should follow him. He will probably get lost on his way back. See you later."

The three of them said their goodbyes, and Wyntor also left the room.

Chapter 218 – Shares

Nick quickly climbed down the stairs in Kugelblitz while he kept thinking about what to do regarding his future.

He had to become powerful.

There was no other way.

For that, he needed stronger Specters, for which he needed more people, for which he needed more money, for which he needed more Zephyx, for which he needed more Specters.

'I have to buy parts of Dark Dream since that will be what I will be relying on to become stronger.'

'The stronger Dark Dream becomes, the stronger I become.'

'And my first priority should be to get an Adolescent Specter that I can work with.'

'I am already a level two Extractor, and I need much more Zephyx to become stronger. Yet, while I'm technically working with three Specters, I am only absorbing Zephyx from one, the Bleeding Lady, and she's not even an Adolescent.'

'I don't have the time to work with the Fog or the Dreamer.'

'I need an Adolescent that produces a lot of Zephyx in a short time.'

By now, Nick had reached the bottom of the stairs and walked towards the exit of Kugelblitz.

Outside Kugelblitz, Nick looked for one of the people who were responsible for the Shweeb and told them to retrieve his Shweeb.

"Learned something today?"

Nick raised an eyebrow and looked to his right.

Wyntor had just arrived.

Nick furrowed his brows and looked downward.

"I always knew that power was important, but I only realized today how important it is."

"I know what you mean," Wyntor answered. "Everyone in the room could tell what you were thinking when dad asked for the increase in taxes."

"Everyone could tell?" Nick asked.

Wyntor nodded. "It's not difficult. Powerful Zephyx Extractors have terrifying senses, and your gnashing teeth were very audible to them. The only one that didn't notice was dad since he was busy focusing on the governor."

Nick didn't know how to feel about that.

He wanted to keep his feelings a secret from the others, but in the end, they still knew exactly what he was feeling.

Wyntor looked at Nick and could tell what he was thinking about.

"That might not have been a bad thing," Wyntor said.

"Why?" Nick asked.

"I can't be sure, but there might be a possibility that your intense display of emotions has swayed the governor's decision in the matter."

"It's a long shot, and I can't possibly be certain, but I'm certain the governor noticed," Wyntor said.

Nick looked at Wyntor with a shocked expression.

"I repeat, I can't be sure, and I am only making a guess here. It is only a possibility," Wyntor said when he saw Nick's expression. "But as far as I know, he generally doesn't let issues like that hang. Dad had a

very solid argument that was based on indisputable facts, but in the end, the governor said that he would make a decision on it next year."

"Maybe he wanted to give a certain someone an opportunity to change things," Wyntor said.

Nick's mind was going wild with possibilities.

Nick was easily earning enough to pay the taxes of every person living in the Dregs, which meant that he had the monetary means to help them.

The issue was the politics and the implications of interfering in this matter.

Nick would probably be costing Kugelblitz tens of millions of credits per month if he went all out.

Chances were high that Nick would "vanish" a couple of days later.

"He's giving me an opportunity?" Nick asked.

"Like I said, I can't be sure," Wyntor answered. "It's only a possibility."

Nick furrowed his brows and kept thinking about how to proceed.

'I can only think about how to solve this issue when I know more about it.'

'For now, I should focus on my power. Every day without a good Adolescent Specter I can work with is a day wasted.'

'But first...'

"I want to buy shares in Dark Dream," Nick said.

"I was waiting for you to say that," Wyntor said with a smile. "It seems like the meeting has helped you a lot."

Nick released a sigh.

He was glad that Wyntor knew him so well and was so agreeable.

"Chief Zephyx Extractors usually own between 10% and 30% of a Manufacturer, and that is actually something that both sides want," Wyntor said.

"Why both sides?" Nick asked.

"Well, the Chief Zephyx Extractor wants some say in the company, and they also know that they will increase the value of the company. Because of that, investing in the company is like just claiming free money."

"On the other side, the company wants the Chief Zephyx Extractor to own a significant portion to bind them to the company's success. If the company fails, the Chief Zephyx Extractor will lose a lot of their wealth since a significant portion of it is tied to the company. Therefore, Chief Zephyx Extractors are incentivized to do their absolute best for the company," Wyntor explained.

Nick looked at Wyntor with interest. "So, you're willing to sell me some shares?"

Wyntor nodded. "For now, I'm willing to sell you 30% of the company, but that might get diluted in the future if we need significant funding for a project. But I can assure you that it will never fall below 20%."

Nick nodded. "That sounds good. What's the price?"

"Naturally, since you are a significant reason for Dark Dream's success, I'm essentially gifting these shares to you."

"You get 30% of the company for 1.5 million credits. You should have that lying around," Wyntor said.

Nick took a deep breath.

1.5 million credits were a huge chunk of his savings.

However, Dark Dream could probably be sold for around 50 million credits currently.

30% of that would be 15 million credits.

Wyntor was essentially selling Dark Dream's shares to Nick at 10% of their actual value.

Nick and Wyntor ironed out the details of the deal before they drove back down to the lower layer.

Some minutes later, they left the Inner City.

After Nick entered his office again, he immediately focused on the next point on his agenda.

He took out a file from one of his drawers and looked at it with narrowed eyes.

On the front of the file were only three words.

The Riker Strikers.

Chapter 219 – The Scary Outside

"You wanted to see me?" an older man asked as he walked into an office.

"Yes, I've got something for you," Nick said as he put the file of the Riker Strikers onto the table.

The older man was the leader of the Investigator team of Dark Dream, and he quickly walked over, sat on one of the chairs, and read through the file.

As the Investigator kept reading, his eyebrows kept furrowing.

"Do you think a Specter is involved, boss?" the man asked as he put the file down again.

Nick nodded. "I'm pretty sure Riker himself is a Specter. Jenny and I have both noticed it. Additionally, Jenny said that when she met Riker personally, she felt like she was looking at her natural enemy. Naturally, that was before she became a Zephyx Extractor."

The Investigator hummed a bit. "May I?" he asked while reaching for a piece of paper and a pen.

Nick just gestured for him to take it.

After that, the Investigator started to write down several things related to the Dregs.

The Investigators had been working in the Dregs for over a year, and they knew a terrifying amount about it.

In fact, they knew more about the Dregs than even the people that lived there.

After all, it was their job to know.

The Investigator kept writing down several names and organizations before drawing lines and arrows between them that described their relationships with each other.

Nick just waited for the Investigator to finish writing.

After a while, the Investigator just looked at the diagram he had created and furrowed his brows.

"It's possible," the Investigator said. "At least, nothing speaks against it."

Then, he sighed. "To think that I overlooked such a huge lead. What have I been doing for the past year that I didn't even notice any of the signs?"

"And so did everyone else," Nick said. "Kugelblitz and the others also haven't found out."

The Investigator sighed and looked at the piece of paper for another couple of seconds.

"It seems so obvious now," he said. "Yeah, he most likely is a Specter. I presume you want us to gather information?"

Nick nodded. "Riker is very smart. About two years ago, I severely weakened the Riker Strikers by killing about ten of their people. The other gangs used that opportunity to go after him, but somehow, he managed to evade them and even managed to get his old gang to the same level of power as back then."

"If you guys are not very careful, he will notice that a Manufacturer has become suspicious of him, and if he finds out, he will probably run out of the city and go to another one," Nick said.

The Investigator nodded.

This was always a danger when it came to hunting Specters.

Almost nobody inside the city knew what the worlds beyond the huge city walls looked like.

The only thing they knew was that it was extremely dangerous out there.

Only level three Extractors and stronger dared to leave the city, and any information about the outside world was kept confidential.

After all, every expedition into the outside world cost a huge amount of money, and the Manufacturers didn't want others to benefit from their work.

Humans very rarely entered the outside world, but except for the strong Extractors, there was another exception.

Global companies.

For example, the hospital that had treated Nick two times already was one of these companies.

The Merchant, the Specter that the hospital used to get its Recovery Liquid, was at least a level six Specter. It might even be a level seven Specter.

And the Merchant was not located in Crimson Fungus City.

Every couple of months, a small caravan would enter the city to refill the stocks of the Cleansing and Recovery Liquids.

There were also a couple of small groups of people that came to Crimson Fungus City and left again.

Back then, Nick had had no idea why they were here, but now, he knew why.

They were merchants.

They sold stuff produced in a different city to Crimson Fungus City and bought the stuff that was produced here to sell someplace else.

The groups of people coming from the outside world were all extremely powerful.

It was extremely rare to see anyone weaker than an Expert in these groups, and there were also several Specialists coming to Crimson Fungus City every year.

There had even been the odd Hero here and there.

Obviously, traveling through the outside world required tremendous power.

However, that was only true for humans.

The Specters were not in danger in the outside world unless they came across a hunting group of Zephyx Extractors, but the chances of that were very low.

The outside world was dangerous specifically because of the Specters, and the Specters didn't attack each other.

Riker could easily leave the city and enter another one.

But that was still associated with a couple of risks.

Riker needed to enter the other city either without being noticed or through a reputable group of merchants.

Since almost nobody came from the outside world, all the Manufacturers in the other cities would look at the newcomer very closely.

Even more, Riker would need to recreate his entire gang.

Because of that, Riker didn't just flee from Crimson Fungus City.

But if he found out that a Manufacturer was getting suspicious of him, he would immediately run away.

One Extractor wasn't necessarily dangerous.

But an entire Manufacturer was terrifying.

"I'm going to be extra careful," the Investigator said. "I've investigated a human Specter before, many years ago. They're the most troublesome to investigate since they are often even more intelligent than humans."

"The investigation will be slow. Expect a proper profile in a month at the earliest," the Investigator said.

Nick nodded. "Keep Wyntor and me informed," he said.

"I will," the Investigator said before standing up.

He grabbed the pieces of paper he had scribbled on and left Nick's office.

Meanwhile, Nick leaned back.

'Now, we have to wait.'

Chapter 220 – Report

Nick was sitting inside his office as he read through a file.

The file was filled with detailed information about the Riker Strikers and was several times thicker than the original one.

It had been about 40 days since Nick had tasked the Investigators to investigate the Riker Strikers, and they had finally gathered enough information to give Nick a major report.

As Nick read through the file, he kept taking gulps from his mug.

Coffee with sugar.

A couple of weeks ago, Nick had ordered a coffee machine and also asked Wyntor where he could get sugar and milk.

When Nick heard about the price of these things, his heart nearly stopped.

The coffee machine, luckily, only cost around 30,000 credits.

However, the amount of beans necessary to make one cup cost nearly 500 credits!

Half a gram of Zephyx for one fucking cup of black coffee!

And the sugar was even more ridiculous!

A tablespoon of sugar cost over 150 credits!

And milk!

Milk was 10,000 credits per cup!

Nick had purchased all of this to see how it tasted, and he hated that it tasted so amazing.

Because now, he had to spend a ton of money on this.

But then, a twist of fate happened that made it much easier to bear.

Nick found out that his bowels really weren't the biggest fans of milk.

That was when Wyntor told him that he knew that would happen.

Apparently, there was something in milk that caused issues in people who weren't used to drinking milk since childhood.

People in the middle and top layers of the Inner City generally didn't have that issue since they grew up with milk, but people in the lower layer and the Outer City would have issues whenever they drank some milk.

However, there was a way to get rid of this problem.

Becoming a Veteran.

The body of a Veteran had already changed so much that the thing inside the milk couldn't upset the digestive system anymore.

In the end, Nick decided against drinking milk. Maybe, when he finally became a Veteran, he would drink some milk again.

But not for now.

As Nick read through the report, he made a couple of interesting discoveries.

'There are more people in the Riker Strikers than I thought,' he thought as he furrowed his brows.

'They have 50 main members and over 150 honorary members.'

According to the report, the main members were the ones who actively caused trouble in the Dregs.

They were the ones that raped and robbed people in public.

They often also just destroyed stuff without any reason whatsoever.

According to the report, the main members of the Riker Strikers were the craziest and most violent people in the Dregs.

Not only was the environment promoting their craziness, but insane people from other places could see that if they joined the Riker Strikers, they could live a life without having to suppress their innermost urges.

There were not many rules among the main members.

They just had to give a bit of money each month to Riker himself, and they needed to be "badasses".

That last part was how Riker explained it.

He said that only the 50 biggest badasses in the Dregs were allowed to be the main members of the Riker Strikers.

And how did one become a badass?

Show their strength!

Rob someone!

Rape someone!

Kill someone without being noticed!

Burn someone!

Destroy things!

Violence was hilarious, and enacting violence on others made one feel great and superior!

That was the philosophy that Riker hammered into his gang.

Meanwhile, the honorary members were comprised of two kinds of people.

First, people that wanted to prove themselves and become a main member.

Second, people that were close to one of the main members.

Parents, siblings, friends, and so on.

Children were not included because having a child was perceived as soft, warm, and disgusting in the gang.

Well, unless it was a child conceived by rape.

At that point, it was seen more as a trophy since the victim would be constantly reminded of what happened whenever they looked at their child, which was hilarious to the Riker Strikers.

It was like tormenting someone without even being there.

Nick remembered the time he had killed a woman who had been wearing the emblem of the Riker Strikers.

'She was most likely an honorary member. She was probably the relative of one of the main members,' he thought.

After reading through the file for a while, Nick came to the most interesting part.

'Presumed way Riker becomes more powerful,' Nick thought.

The Investigators had listed three possible ways in which Riker could become more powerful.

Number one: Fear. The more people feared him and the stronger that fear was, the more Zephyx Riker produced.

Number two: Suffering. The stronger the suffering of the people, the more Zephyx Riker produced.

Number three: Money.

Number three was a surprising one since it was very different from the first two.

However, there was a good reason why it could also be money.

Riker was getting a lot of money from his gang members.

And the most interesting thing about that...

The money never reappeared.

Riker almost never bought anything.

He didn't have any close ones that used his money.

Nothing.

Riker was getting a ton of money, but that money had seemingly just vanished.

Either Riker was sitting on a literal hill of credits somewhere, or the money was being destroyed.

'But it doesn't really make perfect sense,' Nick thought.

'If Riker were only interested in making money, he would create a gang similar to the Peddlers, the Hub, or the Insurance Gang. He would make far more money like this.'

'On top of that, from the looks of things, the Riker Strikers mainly exist to cause as much mayhem as possible.'

'The entire money thing seems secondary.'

After reading through that part, Nick read through the closing thoughts in the report, and when he read a certain line, his eyes narrowed.

It might be possible that Riker is in cahoots with a Manufacturer. In exchange for letting Riker do his thing, they were pocketing all the money he stole.

'It's possible,' Nick thought.