

## **The Sun 311**

### Chapter 311 – Zephrus

One week after the big incident, Nick was still working as usual.

The working day was slowly coming to a close, but Nick was still busy with his job.

As he walked from his office to one of the Containment Units, he saw two people walking up the stairs.

They were just regular employees.

"Good evening, Boss," the two of them said.

Nick just nodded. "Have a nice evening."

After some friendly smiles, they walked past each other.

"Man, work was horrible today," Nick heard from one of the two. "I didn't sleep yesterday, and I felt like the day was going to continue forever. I swear, as soon as I'm home, I'm going to eat and immediately fall into bed. You can't imagine how tired I am."

When Nick heard that, he furrowed his brows.

'Sleep? Food?' he thought as he thought back to the last seven days.

'When was the last time I slept or ate?'

Nick tried to think back.

'I haven't slept in over a week, and I'm pretty sure that I also haven't eaten anything. I think I didn't even drink anything.'

Nick raised an eyebrow and looked at his arms and torso.

He flexed them and checked if they had become thinner.

At the same time, Nick imagined how it felt to drink water.

The image he saw in his mind felt neutral.

It was just like looking at the wall for him.

'Have I lost any weight?' Nick thought.

Nick quickly dealt with the thing he had come down to do and went to the central lounge.

Since it was already evening, no one was left in the lounge, and Nick walked over to a scale.

'163.5 kg,' Nick read. 'I actually gained a bit of weight.'

At that point, Nick was also sure that he didn't seem any lighter than before, even though he hadn't drunk or eaten anything in over a week.

He also didn't feel as tired anymore.

In the first two to three days, Nick had felt extremely tired, but after that, he got used to it.

And now, he actually felt pretty good, physically speaking.

Nick had a good idea about what was going on, but he was still quite surprised.

'Wyntor should still be here,' Nick thought before he went to the seventh floor.

"Hey, Wyntor," Nick said as he entered Wyntor's office without knocking.

Wyntor just nodded before he continued reading a couple sheets of paper.

"What do you need?" he asked a second later.

"Well," Nick started, "I haven't slept, drunk, or eaten anything in over a week."

Wyntor's eyebrows shot up, and he immediately looked at Nick.

There were small eyebags below Nick's eyes, but they weren't ridiculous.

Nick's skin didn't look dried out.

He didn't seem to have lost any weight or muscle.

That was when Wyntor furrowed his brows in skepticism. "Are you saying you're in Zephosis?" he asked.

"I think so. I'm just as surprised as you," Nick answered.

Wyntor still looked at Nick with skepticism. "Are you sure this is Zephosis and not some kind of self-destructive behavior due to trauma?"

Nick's heart rate increased when Wyntor reminded him of what had happened, but Nick quickly repressed the guilt again.

"I think so," Nick said. "I don't feel like drinking, eating, or sleeping."

"Alright," Wyntor said before he grabbed something from below his desk.

The next moment, Wyntor put a bottle of water onto the table.

"Drink it," Wyntor said. "I want to be sure."

Nick became a bit worried. "But wouldn't that interrupt the Zepnosis?"

"No," Wyntor said. "If you weren't in Zepnosis, you would have already died of dehydration, which means that your Zepnosis has already been completed, assuming you actually entered it."

Nick looked at the bottle of water, took a deep breath, and drank.

"Finish the entire thing," Wyntor said.

Nick did just that.

After downing about a liter of water, Nick put the bottle down again and looked at Wyntor.

Silence.

"So?" Wyntor asked.

"Nothing," Nick said. "I don't feel any different."

When Wyntor heard that, a surprised expression appeared on his face as he leaned back in his chair.

"I guess that proves it," Wyntor said.

"I guess so," Nick answered as he scratched the back of his head.

"That's... faster than I thought. I thought you would need two more years," Wyntor said.

"You're still 21, right?" Wyntor asked.

Nick nodded.

"21, huh?" Wyntor said.

"A 21-year old Veteran, or soon to be. Whatever."

Nick just awkwardly scratched the side of his head.

Naturally, he knew what Zephosis was.

Zephosis was the very thing that kept most of the Johns from becoming Veterans.

This thing was the very reason why there were so many Johns who had worked for decades with Specters without becoming Veterans.

Manufacturers could throw Specters and Zephyx at these people, and they still wouldn't be able to become Veterans.

The word Zephosis came from the word ketosis, which was a state that burned fat instead of sugar after having been deprived of carbs for some time.

Compared to ketosis, Zephosis had a more fundamental effect.

Zephosis was a state in which the body used Zephyx instead of food or water as fuel.

Normal Peak Johns only used Zephyx as a sort of nitro-fuel, boosting their powers manifold.

However, Peak Johns, who were in Zephosis, exclusively used Zephyx.

While in this state, the Peak Johns would recover their Zephyx at double the speed, and their Zephyx storage also grew much quicker.

If one wanted to become a Veteran, one needed to be in a state of Zephosis.

Otherwise, the body wouldn't be able to absorb and regenerate enough Zephyx to keep the person alive.

It would be like having a body that required over 100,000 kilocalories per day while only having a normal-sized stomach.

No matter how much one ate, one wouldn't be able to consume enough food to reach 100,000 kilocalories.

One would eventually die of starvation.

Because of that, Zephosis was necessary to become a Veteran.

Chapter 312 – Longevity

?After a while, Wyntor sighed again.

"It's unbelievable that you managed to enter Zephosis just like that," he said. "It's usually such a brutal and strenuous process that barely a third of Peak level two Extractors can get through it."

Nick just scratched the side of his head. "I guess so?" he answered with a bit of confusion.

In order to enter Zephois, someone had to undergo a cruel process.

A Peak John who was ready to undergo Zephois needed to stay awake for three days, and during those three days, they also weren't allowed to eat or drink anything.

No sleep, no water, no food.

Naturally, before they actually entered Zephois, their bodies still worked relatively normally.

So, three days without sleep, food, or water wasn't much different for them than for normal people.

The only difference was that the Extractor wouldn't enter a critical condition after three days.

Nevertheless, the pain, suffering, and panic were still the same.

Most Extractors cracked during the evening or night of the second day.

The first day wasn't very difficult, but on the second day, things became really painful and bad.

Most people could stay up for over 24 hours, but starting at around 36 hours, the lack of sleep really took its toll on the person.

The period from the evening of the second day to the evening of the third day was the most difficult.

After that, it would become easier, and things would continue to improve after that.

Naturally, not everyone was willing to go through something this horrible just for their job.

A Peak John could already live comfortably in the Inner City.

They already belonged to the top 10%.

Additionally, becoming a Veteran could alienate some people from their loved ones.

After all, the Veteran would no longer have any desire to eat, drink, or sleep.

A Veteran's partner would always go to bed alone, and they would always eat alone.

Additionally, Veterans were often expected to work more since they also didn't need to sleep anymore.

Instead of eight hours a day, most of them worked for twelve hours a day.

As with everything, becoming a Veteran had its advantages and disadvantages, and it depended on a person's priorities in life whether or not to advance.

Assuming they could get through the process of entering Zephois.

Nick had heard about this from his old teacher, Manela.

Apparently, her relationship was ruined after she became a Veteran.

Reynold, Nick's other teacher, told Nick that having a relationship was difficult, which was why he told Nick that he should only consider becoming a Veteran if he valued his career over a relationship.

Sure, there were cases in which Veterans married each other, but these cases were rare.



Due to conflicts of interest, Veterans were not allowed to marry Extractors from other Manufacturers, which meant that they had to choose from their immediate colleagues.

And very often, there was no one that they clicked with.

Especially since so many Veterans were not even interested in relationships.

In fact, almost 70% of Veterans were single.

Lastly, there was one more reason why Veterans often didn't enter long-term relationships.

Longevity.

The more a body and Zephyx combined, the longer a person could live.

Veterans generally lived up to 130 years, and their bodies and minds didn't start deteriorating until they were around 110.

A 110-year-old Veteran would look like a 50-year-old normal person who lived in the Inner City.

Of course, things would get even crazier later.

Experts could live for around 200 years.

Specialists could live for around 300 years.

Sadly, no one inside Crimson City knew for how long Heroes and stronger could live.

The city hadn't existed for that long yet.

Nevertheless, being able to live for that long was a blessing but also a curse.

Sure, one would live for much longer, which was considered a good thing, but that also meant that one would watch all their friends and family die unless they also were strong Extractors.

One only needed to imagine a picture of a young mother cradling her newborn child and compare it to an image of the same mother holding the hand of a bedridden elderly person, with the mother maybe visibly having aged only ten years or so.

Luckily, or unluckily, depending on the viewpoint, Nick didn't have this issue.

He didn't have a significant other, and while he felt quite close to Wyntor, Nick didn't feel some kind of extremely deep friendship with him.

They had each other's backs, but there was still this distance between them.

Additionally, Nick didn't have a family.

Based on his memories, he never even had one.

He just woke up in the streets one day.

"How come you are already able to enter Zephothis?" Wyntor asked. "I thought you needed to be about 80% of the way to advancing."

Nick shrugged. "I don't know. I think I should only be around 50% of the way to becoming a Veteran. Maybe something happened?"

Wyntor furrowed his brows. "The only way would be if some powerful Specter used a lot of Zephyx around you."

Nick scratched his chin as he thought back.

Sure, the Crimson Sea had released Zephyx while Nick had been working below the city, but that wouldn't have been enough.

None of Dark Dream's Specters could have given Nick that much Zephyx.

He also hadn't been in contact long enough with any of the Spartans' Specters.

So, if there were some kind of powerful Specter that used a lot of Zephyx around Nick, it would have to be a wild one.

At that moment, Nick remembered the nightmares he used to have.

'Didn't the Parasite say that these nightmares came from a Specter?' Nick thought. 'What if it's that Specter?'

Nick furrowed his brows.

"By the way," Wyntor said, "do you know what kind of ability you want next?"

Nick was pulled out of his thoughts and looked at Wyntor.

Then, he nodded.

"I already know what I want."

Chapter 313 – Solace

?Nick leaped over a wide gap and landed on a relatively thin rail of metal.

The rail vibrated a little but didn't break.

Then, he continued running down the rail, dodging a long piece of metal that moved across the rail.

Right now, Nick was running across the rails on the middle layer of the Inner City.

As a Peak John, he had the strength to jump the gaps between the rails easily.

Without needing to use Shweebs, moving across the middle layer of the city was actually very efficient and fast.

After all, he could literally jump to wherever he wanted to be.

In the past, Nick hadn't dared to do something like this.

Back then, he had felt that jumping from rail to rail was too dangerous.

One wrong move, and he would fall for two kilometers or so.

But now, Nick just wasn't as afraid anymore.

It just didn't feel as big of a problem anymore.

Nick kept going upward for a while as he looked around.

After a bit, he finally found his target and ran towards the south of the middle layer.

There, Nick saw a huge building over a hundred meters high and wide.

The building was incorporated into the megastructure and hung from the wall like a wasp nest.

Countless white lines came out of the building, which traveled across the city.

Nick had seen these thin white lines before, and he knew what they were for.

These were special Zephyx lines, and they were delivering artificial light made by a Specter to many different households and even Manufacturers.

Naturally, only one Manufacturer in the city was known for delivering that much light to everyone.

Solace.

After jumping from rail to rail for a while longer, Nick took one last jump and landed on the big entrance platform of Solace.

Surprisingly, there were no guards whatsoever.

Although, Dark Dream also didn't have any guards standing at the front door.

The guards were only inside the building.

Nick walked forward and entered the huge building.

As soon as he entered, he saw a young woman reading something behind a table in the middle of the entrance hall.

The young woman heard the sound of the door opening, calmly put the thing that she was reading away, and looked at Nick with a polite smile.

"Welcome to Solace! How can I help you?" she asked with a bright and friendly voice.

Nick walked forward and nodded in greeting. "Hi, is Hera Marion available? Could you tell her that Nick is here?"

The woman looked at Nick with a raised eyebrow.

She had never seen this person before, but he was asking for the Chief Zephyx Extractor?

"Of course," she said a moment later. "Please wait here while I get my supervisor. I don't have the authority to contact Miss Marion."

Nick just nodded without saying anything and waited.

The next moment, the receptionist walked to the side of the central hall and knocked on one of the doors.

A middle-aged man opened the door, and the two of them talked with hushed voices.

Then, the middle-aged man walked to the reception desk and looked at Nick with a polite tone.

"Might I ask how you know Miss Marion? I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but we only want to disturb her if it is necessary. I hope you understand," he said.

Nick wasn't surprised about their reluctance.

Hera probably had a lot to do.

"I'm Nick Nick, and I'm the Chief Zephyx Extractor of Dark Dream. Hera told me that I should call for her if I ever decide to visit," Nick said.

The eyes of the two widened in surprise.

So, this was the Chief Zephyx Extractor of Dark Dream!

Obviously, almost the entire city knew about Dark Dream by now, but while the Outer City saw Nick on almost a daily basis, the Inner City very rarely saw him, which was why he was a bit of a mystery.

Additionally, Chief Zephyx Extractors were usually more involved in business between companies, and they often traveled from Manufacturer to Manufacturer.

Meanwhile, almost all business-related matters for Dark Dream were handled by Wyntor, which was why Nick so rarely visited other Manufacturers.

"You're Dark Dream's Chief Zephyx Extractor?" the supervisor asked with surprise.

Nick just nodded.

"Then, please wait a moment. I will call Miss Marion right away," he said as he walked out of the central hall.

Nick just waited.

Naturally, all the Chief Zephyx Extractors saw each other at least once per year during the yearly meeting.

Because of that, Nick had already built a connection with basically all of them, except for Anatomy.

Even the twins from Gemini had warmed up to Dark Dream and didn't treat them like annoying children anymore.

Only Anatomy still acted like Dark Dream was unworthy of their notice, but that wasn't anything special.

They acted the same way to Solace and Gemini as well.

Only Ghosty's Lab and Kugelblitz could actually talk to Anatomy normally.

Nick had met Hera Marion several times already, and they had even talked a couple of times.

Compared to the Spartans and Gemini, Solace had immediately been friendly to Dark Dream, which made Dark Dream prefer Solace over the other two in business matters.

Ramona Illium, the CEO of Solace, was actually quite a good friend of Wyntor's by now.

They even had a lunch date every two weeks in which they just ate lunch together and talked about all kinds of things.

Nick waited for a couple of minutes in the central hall.

Eventually, one of the doors opened, and two people walked through.

One of them was the supervisor from earlier.

The other one was a beautiful blonde woman who looked to be in her thirties.

She had bright blonde hair, and her disposition put anyone at ease.

She had this certain Aura that made one immediately feel relaxed in her presence.

When she saw Nick, a bright smile appeared on her lips.



"Nick, welcome to Solace!"

Chapter 314 – Blood Wolf

"Thank you, Hera," Nick said with a smile of his own as he shook her hand in greeting.

"Come, I'll show you around," Hera said, leading Nick to the back of the hall.

Naturally, Hera knew that Nick was here for some business-related matters, but it was common courtesy to show someone around the facilities when they visited for the first time before getting down to business.

"Of course. Thank you," Nick said politely.

For the next couple of minutes, Hera introduced the building to Nick.

Surprisingly, even though the building was much bigger than Dark Dream's, it only had ten floors.

However, each floor was almost ten meters high, which made Nick feel like he was in some huge and grand hall.

Apparently, the floors were designed to be of this size so that Solace could hold huge Specters.

Most Specters were not that big, but there were a few that were quite big.

And if one didn't have a Containment Unit of a fitting size, one wouldn't be able to contain such a Specter.

Having high ceilings allowed Solace to use Containment Units that were up to ten meters high, and a couple of them were already in use.

"Do you want to have a little fight?" Hera asked suddenly as she stopped in front of one of the Containment Units.

"Against you?" Nick asked in surprise.

"No, of course not," Hera answered with a laugh.

Hera was an Expert already.

The next moment, she knocked on the door. "Against the thing in here. It's a Blood Specter at the Late Adolescent level."

Nick looked at the door a bit.

In the past, fighting seemed exciting but also frightening to him.

But ever since that huge incident happened, Nick hadn't felt the same.

He felt like all the fights had lost their stakes.

The thing he would lose if he lost just wasn't as valuable as it used to be, making the fights lack excitement.

"Sure," Nick said neutrally.

When Hera heard that, a small glimmer appeared in her eyes.

Her asking the question had several purposes.

First, politeness. Offering an Extractor a fight with a Specters was essentially giving them a bit of Zephyx.

Second, information gathering. She wanted to know how Nick felt about fights and how he viewed them. And if Nick accepted, she would also get to see how Nick would fight.

Lastly, personal interest. Hera just wanted to see Nick fight because she was interested in him as a person.

Not in a romantic way, but in a friendly way.

Nick was someone from the former Dregs, and he had become a Chief Zephyx Extractor while being so young.

Naturally, many people were interested in Nick.

Nick's most interesting aspect was that he hadn't been replaced yet.

Wyntor was an heir to the Melfion family, and he had a scary number of connections with powerful people.

While he hadn't had the resources to get a good Chief Zephyx Extractor when Dark Dream was still new, the same thing wasn't true anymore.

Dark Dream had over ten Specters by now, and Wyntor could easily convince one of the Veteran team leaders from Kugelblitz to join as his Chief Zephyx Extractor.

Naturally, the difference between someone like that and Nick was huge.

And yet, Wyntor kept using and relying on Nick as Chief Zephyx Extractor.

There had to be something that made Nick special, but Hera hadn't seen that special something yet.

Nick was friendly, but he also seemed insecure in many things.

He didn't seem like a Chief Zephyx Extractor.

Of course, that made Hera interested in Nick.

What was so special about him?

"Good to hear!" Hera said with a smile. "I heard you got the Blood Hawk and Blood Horse from the city. So, you should know how to fight a Blood Specter."

Nick wasn't surprised that Hera knew about the Blood Hawk and Blood Horse.

The Specters had belonged to the city, and everyone who worked for the city basically knew all the Specters that the city's forces had access to.

The absence of two Specters definitely attracted attention, and it wouldn't be difficult to find out where they were now.

Nick just nodded.

Hera opened the door and walked inside.

"It should be in its recovery phase. Beating it once should be enough," she said.

Nick entered as well and quickly saw a huge red wolf.

It was almost three meters high and about five meters long.

At this moment, Hera was calmly holding it back by just pushing it away whenever it tried to run forward.

It was important to note that experienced Extractors could use their Zephyx to build a powerful connection with the ground.

If Hera didn't do that, she would be flung away, even though she was much more powerful than the Blood Wolf.

It was simply a matter of weight.

But by using her Zephyx to connect her to the ground, she could make perfect use of her power.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Sure," Nick said.

"Here it comes," Hera said as she jumped to the side.

The huge Blood Wolf immediately ran aggressively towards Nick.

It jumped forward and opened its mouth to consume him.

But the Blood Wolf missed.

Nick seemed to have vanished from its vision!

In truth, Nick had simply sidestepped at an incredible speed just moments before the wolf clamped down on him.

At this moment, the wolf didn't know where Nick was, and Hera was behind the wolf.

She also didn't know where Nick was.

Nick's ability activated, and he jumped forward.

BOOOOOOM!

Nick punched the Blood Wolf's head, which separated from its body, hitting the wall.

BANG!

Then, Nick kicked the wolf's body toward one of the walls, but since his ability wasn't active anymore, the wolf basically only stumbled backward toward the wall.

Then, its body collapsed.

It was in recovery mode.

The head started to vanish rapidly.

Nick turned to Hera and nodded.

When Hera saw that, a gleam appeared in her eyes.

Chapter 315 – Young

?Hera had expected that Nick would have, at least, some troubles with the Blood Wolf.

Sure, the Blood Wolf was technically a level below Nick, but it was huge, and due to its size, its physical power was also very impressive.

Due to its great power and fast regeneration, Solace always sent a team of four Late Johns to work with it.

A single Peak John would most likely not win since the Blood Wolf would outlast them.

Specters very often were more powerful than Extractors on the same level.

Hera had expected Nick to be stronger than the average Peak John, but she hadn't expected Nick to be that much stronger.

The Blood Wolf might as well have been a Hatchling with the way Nick dealt with it.

Another interesting thing was Nick's ability.

Extractors almost exclusively fought with their abilities, and they rarely used their physical powers.

Obviously, Nick had used his ability since a Peak John's physical power wasn't enough to decapitate the Blood Wolf.

Yet, impressively enough, Hera basically didn't learn anything new about Nick's ability.

Nick had used his ability perfectly when she couldn't see it.

The only thing Hera could say was that Nick's ability had great potential for destruction since it managed to decapitate the Blood Wolf.

Sadly, she hadn't seen how exactly the ability decapitated the wolf.

All of this information boiled down to one thing.

'He's very experienced in fighting,' Hera thought.

Naturally, that hypothesis was backed by the fact that Nick didn't seem even a slight bit nervous in front of the gigantic and terrifying Blood Wolf.

"Impressive," Hera said as she opened the entrance again to walk out. "You're really good at fighting."

Nick nodded as he followed Hera outside. "Thanks."

"You almost seemed like a Veteran during the fight with the way you dealt with the Blood Wolf," Hera said with a smile.

"Well," Nick said. "That's actually related to why I'm here."

Hera hadn't finished the tour yet, but since Nick brought up the topic, she engaged with it.

"Oh? Why are you here?" she asked, looking at Nick with interest.

"I'm here to purchase an ability for myself," Nick said.

Hera blinked in surprise. "Isn't that a bit early?"

"No," Nick answered. "In fact, I've been in Zephois for about a month now. I'm ready to advance."

This completely dumbfounded Hera.

Wasn't Dark Dream only five years old?



Hadn't Nick been a fresh Newbie just five years ago?

And now, he was claiming that he was about to become a Veteran?

"Sorry, but I have to make sure that I heard you correctly," Hera said. "You said that you are ready to become a Veteran, right?"

Nick nodded.

"Right now," Hera added.

Nick nodded again.

Hera blinked a bit in surprise.

"Sorry if this is a rather personal question, but how old are you?" she asked.

"I recently turned 21," Nick said.

Hera had no idea what she should think about.

Most people only became Zephyx Extractors during that age.

One of the harshest criteria in testing applicants for the position of Zephyx Extractor was courage without recklessness.

Many teenagers didn't lack courage, but their courage was often accompanied by recklessness.

On the other hand, most adults didn't have the required courage, but they also weren't as reckless.

Most Extractors only became Extractors between 19 and 28 years of age.

It was rare to see someone older or younger become an Extractor.

Hera knew that Nick was young, but she hadn't known that he was this young!

Based on her math, Nick would have needed to be Dark Dream's Chief Zephyx Extractor when he was just 16!

The next shocking thing was that Nick had managed to become a Veteran in just five years!

The average time required to become an Initial John was around two years, and the average time required to become an Initial Veteran after becoming an Initial John was seven years.

Becoming a Peak John after becoming an Initial John generally took around three years, and gathering the Zephyx for Zephris and achieving said Zephris took around four years on average.

So, all in all, becoming an Initial Veteran after becoming a Zephyx Extractor took nine years on average.

If a 22-year-old became an Extractor, they would become an Initial Veteran at around the age of 31.

But Nick was barely 21.

He was about to become an Initial Veteran when others were just starting to become Extractors.

This was a lot to take in.

There had been cases where people as young as 14 managed to become Extractors, but they also tended to take about two years longer than the average to become Veterans, making them Veterans at around 25 years of age.

That was already very impressive.

But 21?

Hera wasn't sure if she had ever heard of anyone becoming a Veteran at such a low age.

It took her quite a while to come to terms with what she had just heard.

"Sorry," Hera said after several seconds of silence. "I zoned out there."

Then, she sighed. "A 21-year-old Veteran. That's hard to believe, even for me."

"That's really impressive, Nick."

Nick nodded. "Thanks."

Hera gestured down the hallway.

"Let's keep the tour for another time," she said before walking down one of the hallways.

Nick walked behind her, and after ascending a couple of floors, Hera led Nick into her office.

Hera's office was quite bright, and it was littered with different kinds of plants.

Plants were a luxury inside Crimson City, and Nick hadn't seen that many yet.

"Give me a second," Hera said as she opened one of the drawers.

A moment later, she took out a sheet of paper and handed it to Nick.

"Here, that's what we have to offer," she said.

Nick looked at the sheet.

The sheet had the names and abilities of ten Specters on it.

Naturally, Manufacturers also made money by selling abilities to other Manufacturers.

It was some easy money for basically no investment.

The only drawback was that the Specters were obviously going to be made public, which could be a security risk.

When Nick looked at the ten Specters, his brows furrowed.

"The one I want isn't on this list."

Chapter 316 – The Blinding Light

?Hera's brows furrowed when she heard Nick.

Naturally, every Manufacturer gathered information on every other Manufacturer, and Manufacturers often knew about Specters that other Manufacturers didn't want to be known.

Nevertheless, spying on others was still seen as sneaky, and highlighting something that the other party obviously wanted to be kept a secret was quite rude.

Highlighting something like that was like going through someone's personal belongings behind their backs and then asking them about something they found.

"And which one would that be?" she asked.

"The Blinding Light," Nick said.

Hera's brows lifted in surprise, and her annoyance vanished.

She had thought that Nick was about to ask for one of their more secretive Specters.

Instead, Nick asked about a Specter that was actually quite high profile.

The Blinding Light used to belong to Kugelblitz, and it was also the Specter that gave Wyntor his ability.

About six months ago, Solace bought the Blinding Light from Kugelblitz for a hefty sum.

Since Solace was in the business of selling artificial light, they wanted to see if they could expand it with the help of the Blinding Light.

Solace's biggest moneymaker was the Possession Specter, the Bright Candle.

The Bright Candle was a Late Adult, and it looked just like a normal candle.

When someone approached the Bright Candle, its light became brighter, but the body of the approaching person would start to catch fire.

However, the fire was very different from normal fire.

The burning person actually didn't feel any pain during the process, and they actually didn't receive any noticeable injuries.

At least, that's how it was for Extractors.

Normal people would just vanish within two seconds.

The reason for the difference was that the Bright Candle consumed Zephyx.

An Extractor that touched the candle would have their Zephyx burned away in exchange for warm and calming light.

Of course, if they actually ran out of Zephyx, they would still die.

Five Veterans and 25 Johns were dedicated to working exclusively with the Bright Candle.

People were constantly stationed around the Bright Candle, and the light it produced was sent across the entire city.

This was how Solace earned most of its money.

Some years ago, Solace got an idea for an upgrade.

They already had built all these expensive lines for light to travel to, and they found a way to expand that network with only a little bit of investment.

Like this, they could not only send light to people but also heat.

People could warm their houses with the heat, and they could also use it to cook food.

Making a fire was difficult and expensive due to the lack of burnable materials.

Most food was cooked by putting it below huge lenses that gathered the light.

Naturally, there were many drawbacks to such a method.

With Solace's new service, people could just open a valve and have fire come out.

That would give people the possibility to cook their own food, which would improve the lives of many people...

And also make Solace a shitload of credits.

The most fitting Specter to produce the heat was the Blinding Light.

Naturally, Kugelblitz knew that and asked for a brutal price.

Three billion credits.

For an Adult.

That was ridiculous.

But not really as ridiculous if one knew about the Shadow Shrouds.

Without the Blinding Light, it would be much more difficult to create the Shadow Shrouds.

In the end, Solace bit the bullet and paid the money.

And now, they owned the Blinding Light.

Because of the huge waves the acquisition made, everyone knew about the Blinding Light.

"You want the Blinding Light's ability?" Hera asked with surprise.

Nick nodded.

Hera looked at Nick with confusion and skepticism.

The Blinding Light's ability was not something that Extractors generally wanted.

The Blinding Light's basic ability allowed Extractors to create a burning domain, which had different effects based on where the enemy looked.

If the enemy looked at the person using the ability, their eyes would become blind very quickly due to the insane brightness.

But if the enemy looked away, their body would start to burn, which would result in the accumulation of injuries.

However, the burning effect wasn't strong enough to be viable for combat.

Because of that, the Blinding Light's ability was only given to Extractors that only wanted to run away.

When it came to fleeing, the Blinding Light's ability was incredibly useful.

Right now, Hera was confused as to why Nick would want such an ability.



Sure, when advancing, a Specter's ability would integrate into the Extractor's main ability, which would create different effects, but even with all of that, the Blinding Light couldn't be considered to be a fit for most Extractors.

Nick seemed to be very experienced in combat, which meant that he most likely wasn't someone who immediately ran from a confrontation.

So, why did he want to have the Blinding Light's ability?

Hera had no idea.

"Well," Hera said after a bit, "usually, we don't just allow anyone to get any of our abilities."

Nick just looked at Hera.

"But since I know you, I'm willing to help you. Even if it's against the rules I established," she said with a smile before walking to the door.

Nick looked at Hera as she was leaving. "Thank you, Hera. This really means a lot to me."

"How much is it?" he asked.

Hera just waved dismissively. "Forget it. You're getting it free of charge. View it as a favor from Solace."

Nick's eyes shone.

While this seemed to be a nice gesture, it was actually a higher price than a couple of million credits.

Trust was imperative in business relationships.

Because of that, if Solace asked for a favor in the future, Dark Dream would need to reciprocate.

Otherwise, they would be viewed as disrespectful, sneaky, thankless, and untrustworthy.

However, Nick and Wyntor had expected as much.

After all, Nick was a Chief Zephyx Extractor, and Manufacturers were willing to fork over huge piles of money for their Chief Zephyx Extractors.

"Then, thank you," Nick said, accepting the offer.

It was a high price, but it was worth it.

Nick's ability was just too important.

A moment later, the two of them left Hera's office and walked to the Blinding Light's Containment Unit.

Chapter 317 – Preparing for Work

"Here it is," Hera said after stopping in front of a huge door.

Surprisingly, the two of them had descended the stairs instead of ascending them.

Apparently, Solace was keeping the Blinding Light in their basement instead of their attic.

Of course, since Solace was in the middle layer of the Inner City, the basement was still over a kilometer above the actual ground.

The door Nick stood in front of was absolutely massive.

It was ten meters high and ten meters wide, which was insane for the door of a Containment Unit.

But it actually made sense if one thought about how much Solace had paid for the Blinding Light.

If someone paid billions of credits for a Specter, saving a couple of million on the Containment Unit didn't make a lot of sense.

Nick didn't know how strong the Containment Unit was, but he assumed that not even Elders would be able to break out of this one.

Maybe not even Fanatics.

On the walls of the Containment Unit, Nick could also see a ton of white lines and empty pipes.

He assumed that Solace hadn't yet managed to find a way to make the Blinding Light's power usable by the general public.

They were probably still experimenting with it.

The next moment, Hera walked to the side of the Containment Unit and greeted two people standing in front of it.

They were both level two Extractors.

It seemed like Solace valued the Blinding Light so much that they even stationed two Johns in front of its Containment Unit just to be safe.

The two Extractors respectfully greeted Hera and opened the door.

They didn't ask why someone not belonging to Solace was allowed to enter the most secure Containment Unit in the entire building.

After all, their boss' boss was escorting him.

Surprisingly, Nick didn't see any light when the employee entrance to the Containment Unit opened.

He had expected that the Blinding Light's light would immediately start frying him.

Instead, Nick found himself in a small room.

"You have a room inside a Containment Unit?" Nick asked in surprise.

"Yes, we built this room as a buffer. We don't want the light to burn anyone that walks past the entrance whenever the door is open," Hera explained.

Nick had never seen a Containment Unit that had a small room inside of it.

The door behind Nick had closed again, and the door in front of him had not yet opened.

The only source of light was a small white line on the room's ceiling.

Since Solace provided the light to Crimson City, they didn't need to pay for their own light.

Even though their building had access to sunlight, they preferred using their own light over the sunlight due to security concerns.

"Have you worked with the Blinding Light before?" Hera asked.

Nick shook his head.

"Alright," Hera said. "The Blinding Light creates Zephyx whenever it blinds people, and it only blinds people whenever they look at it. Looking away from it will protect your eyes, but your body will start burning. Sadly, that process doesn't produce any Zephyx."

"That means that you have to become blind. Can you do that?" Hera asked.

Naturally, Hera asked that since not every person had the willpower to look into a bright light until their eyes were destroyed.

This process involved a lot of suffering and panic.

Of course, even Nick wouldn't have it easy.

Yes, Nick had worked with many scary and powerful Specters, but becoming blind was still terrifying in his mind.

"Yes," Nick answered.

Nevertheless, despite not liking it, he had to do it.

Hera nodded and went to a small cupboard on the room's wall.

She took out a small green bottle and showed it to Nick. "Do you have Recovery Liquid?" she asked.

Nick's hand went to his toolbelt and retrieved a small green bottle, showing it to Hera.

Hera nodded and put the green bottle back.

Next, she went to a wardrobe and opened it.

Inside the wardrobe were many big harnesses made of some kind of leathery material.

"You have to put this on," Hera said as she approached Nick with one of the harnesses.

Nick didn't resist and allowed Hera to put the harness around him.

That was when Nick noticed that the leathery harness also included hand, foot, neck, and head cuffs.

"Human instinct is to protect your eyes," Hera said. "Because of that, we have to restrain you."

"The harness is made of materials that can even hold me for quite a while. You don't have to be scared of accidentally breaking something," she said as she finished putting the harness on Nick.

Nick took a deep breath but didn't answer.

Then, Hera led Nick to the outer wall of the room, which had several tiny platforms hanging from a railing.

"Stand here," Hera said as she pointed to the platform closest to the door.

Nick did just that.

Next, Hera connected the footcuffs to the platform.

Then, she connected Nick's handcuffs to the part hanging from the railing.

After that, Nick's torso was connected.

Lastly, Hera grabbed a metal thing from the railing, which she then put around Nick's chin and forehead.

Nick's heart was racing since he couldn't move anymore.

The panic of being powerless made being here almost unbearable.

"Almost done," Hera said. "One last thing."

That's when Hera retrieved two clamps.

Nick's heart rate increased even more as he saw Hera's finger come closer and closer to his eyes.

He did his best to remain stationary.

A minute later, Nick's eyes were forced open by the two clamps.

Even though his body was insanely powerful, Nick couldn't damage any of the things restraining him.

Hera nodded once. "That's everything. Are you ready?"

Nick took a deep breath and tried to nod.

Of course, he couldn't nod due to the thing holding his head in place.

"Yes," he answered after a bit.

"Alright," Hera said as she approached a button near the door.

"One session takes 15 minutes. When the time is up, you will automatically be returned to this room. I will be waiting here."

"Have fun!" she said with a grin.

Then, she pressed the button, and the door shot open.

Chapter 318 – Veteran

Nick's body was rapidly pulled to the side as the platform started to shoot into the actual Containment Unit.

As soon as the door opened, Hera had already vanished, her body hidden behind a wall of light that suddenly appeared between the two of them.

Nick's entire world had already been replaced with white.

The only way Nick could tell that he was moving was his sense of balance since the white world in front of his eyes seemed unending and unchanging.

DING!

The platform stopped abruptly, and Nick finally saw something slightly different.

It was very difficult to see, but there was one spot in Nick's vision that was a bit whiter than the other spots.

Sadly, Nick couldn't tell how big or far away the spot was.

The only thing that he could tell was that he was in immense discomfort.

Nick had just seen the brightest thing in his entire life, and his reflexes acted accordingly.

Nick's eyelids wanted to close, but they couldn't.



Nick wanted to turn away from the light, but he couldn't.

Nick's hands wanted to cover his face, but they couldn't.

"Ah, fuck!" Nick said with pain as his eyes tried their best to look to the side.

Yet, his eyes perfectly pointed forward, and he couldn't move his body.

The next moment, he felt his eyes becoming hotter and hotter.

It felt like somebody was heating up the inside of his brain!

Nick's pupils had already turned into pinpricks, and the white eyeball surrounding his iris was turning red as it got filled with blood.

Nick gritted his teeth as the pain got worse and worse.

He felt like all the moisture was leaving his eyes!

He wished for nothing more than to be able to rub them.

Except for Nick's groans of pain, everything else was silent inside the Containment Unit.

Nick's eyes had already started watering in an effort to keep them moist.

But it didn't matter.

The water vanished in an instant.

After an unknown period of pain and misery, Nick couldn't see any white light anymore.

He wasn't even sure what color he saw.

Was it grey?

Was it white?

Was it black?

It was like the things his eyes were delivering to him no longer made any sense.

Nick assumed that the small part of the retinas behind the pupil had been destroyed and that the worst part was behind him.

Sadly, that wasn't true.

Nick could still technically see by expanding his pupil, which meant that he wasn't blind yet.

He would only be blind when his eyeballs had become useless.

So, it continued.

Nick's eyeballs lost more and more of their moisture until they actually sunk into his skull as shriveled bags.

The pain was immense.

At that moment, Nick remembered something.

Wyntor had the Blinding Light's ability.

Additionally, Wyntor had needed to work with the Blinding Light several times to get it.

Lastly, Wyntor had gotten that ability when he was just a child.

This meant that Wyntor had gone through this thing several times when he was just twelve years old or something like that.

Surprisingly, thinking about that made it easier for Nick.

If even a child could do that several times, why couldn't he?

So, even though the pain Nick was feeling was immense, he still tried to focus on the Zephyx in the surroundings.

Since Nick was in the process of becoming blind, the Blinding Light had to be producing Zephyx.

It wasn't easy to focus, but Nick managed to feel the presence of Zephyx.

Ever since he had entered Zephosis, Nick's ability to perceive Zephyx had increased tremendously.

He tried his best to relax his body and to let the Zephyx in the surroundings enter him.

The pain still made him cramp up from time to time, but he was slowly making progress.

Some time later, Nick felt something near the bottom of his neck.

Right in front of the foreign Zephyx that Simon Francium had given him was Nick's Zephyx Synchronizer.

At this moment, Nick felt a feeling similar to having a stomach filled to the brim with water.

It felt a bit like being hungry but being unable to eat.

Nick focused on that feeling.

The next moment, he felt the Zephyx in the surroundings rapidly entering him.

It was like a whirlpool had suddenly opened up at the place where his Zephyx Synchronizer was.

At the same time, the muscles all over Nick's body tensed.

Between the brutal waves of pain, Nick could feel himself growing more powerful.

He was doing it!

He was advancing!

At that moment, things became far easier.

The pain was still there, but it no longer mattered as much.

He was becoming a Veteran!

He was coming closer to his goal!

And suddenly, he stopped moving.

He just looked into the light aimlessly.

His advancement was forgotten.

His pain was forgotten.

A couple of seconds later, Nick advanced to becoming a Veteran.

And yet, he wasn't even thinking about that.

No, he was thinking about something completely different.

'My goal?'

Silence.

'What goal?' he thought.

'Wasn't my goal to help the people in the Dregs?'

'Didn't I want to make things right for Horua?'

Silence.

'But the people in the Dregs are dead.'

'They're all dead.'

'And I killed them.'

Nick just kept facing the light.

'I don't have a goal anymore.'

'The only reason why I was doing all of this was to redeem myself.'

'But instead, I only made everything worse.'

'By trying to make things right, I only ended up making them worse.'

Nick had finally become a Veteran after years of hard work.

And yet, that didn't matter.

It made no difference to him.

Nick wasn't interested in power.

He was interested in being happy and making things right.

Sadly, he couldn't do that anymore.

So, what was the point of growing more powerful?

'Why am I even doing all of this?' Nick asked himself again.

'I don't even have a goal anymore.'

Nick kept looking at the light in front of him aimlessly.

There was so much light.

Sadly, his eyes couldn't see any of it.

Chapter 319 – Apathy

?For the next few minutes, Nick didn't even try to move.

His eyes had already burned away.

The only trace left of his eyes were a couple of black spots at the bottom of his eye sockets.

Nick had finally become a Veteran, but it just didn't feel important.

Power was never Nick's goal.

It was only a means to achieve his goal.

Sadly, with his goal invalidated, attaining the means to achieve said invalid goal became meaningless.

What was the point of becoming stronger when Nick felt just as shit as before?

Nick was stronger than 99% of all the people living in Crimson City.

However, he was also unhappier than 99% of all the people living in Crimson City.

The only ones feeling more miserable than him were people who were about to say the Sentence.

'I just don't know what to do,' Nick thought.

From time to time, the image of the red mist engulfing the Dregs reappeared in Nick's mind.

This was his doing.

This was what he had done.

With Nick's eyes unable to generate images, his mind was now the only thing generating them.

The visualization of Nick's past had never been this clear before.

Horua.

Pator.

The people of the Dregs.

Nick's hands felt bloody.

He couldn't tell whether this was an illusion or reality created by his clenching fists. Visit [no\(v\)eLb\(i\)n.com](http://no(v)eLb(i)n.com) for the best novel reading experience

'Why am I still alive?'

'Why am I still doing this?'

'Why am I still trying?'



Nick felt his insides shake as the black hole in his chest seemed to grow.

He wanted to say the Sentence, but he didn't even try.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to actually go through with it.

'I can't even kill myself.'

Silence.

At that moment, the platform below Nick began to move, and he heard the door opening.

"Welcome back," Nick heard from in front of him. "Let me just take these things off."

The next moment, Nick felt the harness and all the restraints being pulled off his body.

"There we go," Hera said with a cheerful voice.

Out of habit, Nick's hand went to his toolbelt and retrieved the green bottle with Recovery Liquid.

Nick wasn't even actively thinking about healing his eyes as his hands put two drops of Recovery Liquid into his eye sockets.

'Why am I even doing this?' Nick thought as his hand put the Recovery Liquid away with practiced ease.

"So, how did it go?" Hera asked.

"I'm a Veteran," Nick said without turning to her.

Recovery Liquid took a couple of minutes to regrow limbs and organs, which was why Nick still couldn't see Hera.

"Congratulations!" Hera said with a slightly excited voice. "You're probably the youngest Veteran we have ever had in the city!"

Hera seemed to be genuinely surprised and excited, but Nick just didn't feel it.

"Thanks," he said absentmindedly.

Hera looked at Nick with raised eyebrows.

She had expected that Nick would be a bit more excited.

Usually, she would think that Nick was just trying to act cool and talk like this wasn't a big deal, but she could tell that Nick genuinely seemed disinterested.

Hera had been an Extractor for decades, and she was very good at recognizing subtle signs of a person's true thoughts and emotions.

It wasn't difficult for her to see that something major was troubling Nick.

However, the reason why she didn't ask was the same reason why Nick didn't comment about it.

They barely knew each other, and they only had a business relationship.

It was not Hera's place to ask, even though she was interested.

It was not Nick's place to burden Hera with his problems, even though he wanted to.

In the end, Hera just made a couple of casual comments, and Nick gave curt and disinterested answers.

Eventually, Nick's eyes recovered, and the two of them walked out of the Containment Unit.

"Is there anything else you need?" Hera asked with a friendly smile.

"No, thank you," Nick said, trying to sound polite but only sounding distracted.

"Alright," Hera answered. "Then, excuse me, but I have to return to work. It was nice talking to you. When you visit next time, maybe we can finish that tour. How about it?"

Nick just nodded. "Sure. Thanks. Bye."

Nick's disjointed manner of speech made Hera smile uncomfortably.

The next moment, Nick just turned around and started to slowly walk towards Solace's entrance.

A moment later, two guards joined Nick and followed behind him.

Even though Nick was considered a friend to Solace, they still wouldn't allow him to walk around their headquarters alone.

Hera looked at Nick for a bit, sighed, and turned around to leave.

Nick walked out of Solace's entrance a minute later, and the guards wished him a good day before entering the building again.

Meanwhile, Nick just stopped outside the building and looked at the middle layer of the Inner City.

Nick's hair swayed back and forth.

He was thinking.

But he didn't know what he was thinking about.

It was like his mind was trying to figure something out that he couldn't describe or imagine.

His mind was working, but he didn't know what it was working on.

For over five minutes, Nick just mindlessly looked at the city.

Without thinking about it, Nick's legs walked forward and carried him to the edge.

He only stopped when the front halves of his feet were already past the edge.

He wasn't afraid.

He wasn't going to commit suicide.

But if he just so happened to fall, it wouldn't be so bad.

Nick just stood at the edge without moving.

His eyes looked down at the lower layer about a kilometer below him.

He thought the image of the lower layer from this position looked enchanting.

'That's quite far,' was Nick's first conscious thought in five minutes.

'I'm over a hundred times stronger than normal people, and I only weigh a bit more.'

Nick just silently looked at the distant ground.

'I should be able to survive.'

And then, Nick swayed forward.

He started to fall.

Chapter 320 – Investment

Nick's feet left the huge pillar that Solace's building was built on, and Nick started to fall.

He had never fallen from such an insane height.

Nick felt the air hitting his face, and the sound of rushing winds thundered in his ears.

The thought of falling from so high up used to terrify Nick, but right now, he felt something completely different.

It was some kind of freedom, but that word wasn't completely accurate.

Maybe it was some kind of calling?

Maybe it was the feeling of something terrifying ending?

Maybe it was the feeling of touching something extremely dangerous?

Or maybe it was the feeling of touching something very warm and nice?

No matter how it was described, Nick felt like something in his chest was becoming warmer.

Nick's speed was picking up at a scary pace.

The fall didn't take as long as Nick had thought.

He had anticipated that he would fall for a minute or so, but he reached the ground after only around 15 seconds.

Nick was falling headfirst, and he was looking at the ground when he was just 50 meters away from it.

The next moment, Nick repositioned himself so that his legs pointed downward.

With practiced ease, Nick used the Zephyx in his legs to cushion the impact.

BANG!

The sound of something hard hitting the ground echoed throughout the street in which Nick landed, but the sound wasn't as loud as one would have expected.

At the same time, dents in the form of Nick's shoes appeared on the metal of the street.

Meanwhile, Nick's legs just slightly buckled after landing.

Nick felt like he had needed to use quite a bit of power to retain his balance, but that was about it.

It actually wasn't as bad as he had imagined.

One could compare it to a mortal jumping into a pool of water from a height of ten meters or so.

Sure, it was scary, and it would be dangerous if one hit the water in an uncontrolled manner, but as long as one hit the water in a safe manner, not much would happen.

Some of the people on the streets turned to Nick, but they quickly lost interest again.

Veterans and stronger often reached the lower layer by simply jumping from the middle layer.

It was just that Nick's landing was a bit louder than the usual ones.

Nick looked at the ground for a couple of seconds before he walked towards the Outer City.

For just a couple of moments, his mood had improved.

The rush of doing something dangerous distracted him from the things worrying him.

Sadly, the rush didn't stay for long, and Nick's mood quickly reached rock bottom again.

He left the Inner City and slowly walked towards Dark Dream.

Without even thinking about it, Nick entered Dark Dream's building.

He had been inside the building for a month by now.

Ever since he didn't need to eat, drink, or sleep anymore, Nick had seen no point in buying a home.

Dark Dream was his home.

The building was his house, and the Specters were his pets.

After entering the building, he mindlessly started checking the Zephyx containers.

When he had collected all the containers, he brought them to Wyntor's office.

Wyntor just nodded without looking at Nick when he saw the containers.

Nick turned around to leave the office.

At that moment, Wyntor furrowed his brows.

"Everything okay?" he asked as he looked at Nick's back.

"Huh?" Nick answered like he had just been woken up. "Eh, yeah, sure."

Then, Nick opened the door to leave.

"Wait a second," Wyntor said.

"What?" Nick asked in confusion as he turned to Wyntor.

Wyntor looked into Nick's eyes for a bit.

Then, he sighed.

"Close the door," he said.

Nick raised an eyebrow but did as he was told.



"Come on, take a seat," Wyntor said, gesturing to one of the chairs in his office.

Nick sat down and just looked at Wyntor with discomfort.

"Is something the matter?" Nick asked.

"That's what I should ask you," Wyntor said. "You are lost in your head, and you barely react to anything. If you work like this, it's only a matter of time until something bad happens."

Nick furrowed his brows, guilt visible on his face.

"Sorry," he said. "I'll be more alert and careful from now on."

Wyntor raised an eyebrow as he looked with skepticism at Nick.

"What's this about?" he asked. "Did you fail in advancing?"

"No, I became a Veteran a couple of minutes ago," Nick said.

"You did?" Wyntor asked in surprise. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Nick looked to the side.

"It didn't feel important."

Wyntor looked at Nick like he had said something ridiculous.

"I think it's quite important that my Chief Zephyx Extractor managed to advance a level. That's about as important as it gets, except for a security breach, maybe."

Nick didn't answer.

Wyntor sighed.

"Okay, what's the issue?" he asked. "You weren't like this yesterday. Did something happen in Solace?"

"No, nothing happened," Nick answered.

"Really?" Wyntor asked.

"Yeah, everything's okay," Nick said.

At that moment, Wyntor narrowed his eyes.

"Nick, I'm sick of these games. Stop being wishy-washy and tell me what's bothering you. We're friends!" Wyntor said with a voice loaded with annoyance.

Nick looked at Wyntor.

Wyntor always seemed so distant, but right now, he seemed like just a normal friend who was concerned with their friend.

Nevertheless, Nick didn't forget the constant distance that was usually between the two of them.

Friend?

That didn't seem likely.

Wyntor saw the doubt in Nick's eyes, and his anger increased.

"We are friends, right?" Wyntor asked with an almost threatening tone.

Nick's body moved back in his chair as he looked at Wyntor.

"I don't know," Nick said carefully. "Are we?"

"Of course we are!" Wyntor almost shouted. "I jumped into the sewers for you! I covered for you so many times! I gave you your weapons and all of your tools!"

Surprisingly, Nick didn't show any strong reactions to Wyntor's atypical outburst.

"I don't think that's what a friend is," he said. "The first thing, maybe, but I'm not sure about the other things."

"I think you view me as an investment, not a friend."