

The Sun 341

Chapter 341 – Chatting with Albert

"Suit yourself," Albert said as he drank a cup of coffee that he had made before Nick had arrived.

Nick just looked at one of the windows.

He felt horrible.

'But I have to do it.'

'I did the right thing.'

Nick turned to look at Albert.

'He must be sacrificed for the good of the city.'

Albert hadn't talked to Nick in years, but he could tell that something was up with him.

Albert noticed that Nick seemed absentminded almost all of the time and that he looked in seemingly random directions without any purpose.

There was also the fact that Nick said nearly nothing.

Lastly, Nick probably wasn't just here to casually chat.

Albert could see that Nick was deeply troubled by something.

"How are things going?" Albert asked, trying to get a conversation going. "I heard a couple of things, but I want to hear what happened after I left the last time. How's the job? How are you? Did anything interesting happen?"

Albert smirked. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Nick took a deep breath and sighed.

He thought back to the last time they met.

"Working with the Dreamer wasn't difficult after you left," Nick narrated absentmindedly.

For the next hour, Nick talked about things that had happened to Dark Dream while Albert asked some questions here and there.

Overall, this could be seen as a pleasant and interesting conversation.

When Nick talked about the first yearly meeting of Manufacturers, Albert became very interested.

He asked several questions about the meeting.

That was when Nick remembered that Albert had never been to these meetings, which made him feel weird.

Albert was so much more powerful than Nick.

And yet, he didn't have the status to attend these meetings since he wasn't the owner of a Manufacturer or a Chief Zephyx Extractor.

Something that Nick had done as a John was something that Albert couldn't possibly do as a powerful Expert.

The more Nick told Albert about the past years, the more shocked and impressed Albert became.

Nick was really powerful, and it was insane how many real fights he had been in just five years.

Albert was over a hundred years old, and he had needed to fight for his life for maybe a total of three times.

When Nick heard that, he became skeptical.

Only three times in a hundred years?

"Yes, fights like that are very rare," Albert said. "Most Extractors die during their shifts. Only very few die to other Extractors."

"I mean, in how many fights have your employees been?"

Nick blinked in surprise.

Actually, yes.

There were only two times in which his employees were involved in fights.

One was when Nick had fought against Cycle.

Back then, Kiara and Jonathan had been in a fight.

Nick sighed.

Sadly, both of them were already dead.

The other time was when they had chased after the Empath, and that wasn't even a fight against another Extractor but a Specter.

Sure enough, Dark Dream's employees basically never really fought.

And according to Albert, that was the norm.

Fights were very rare in Crimson City.

"I think you have more battle experience than me," Albert said. "In fact, you might already have more experience overall."

Nick furrowed his brows. "I can get the first statement, but the second one is ridiculous."

"No, no, listen to me," Albert said. "The only thing that I did for over 80 years was to work with my assigned Specters."

"I got an assignment from my team leader, did the assignment, got another assignment, did that assignment, and so on."

"That's all I did for over 80 years."

"Have I seen more Specters than you? Absolutely, but that doesn't say much."

"I wasn't the one that found out how to work with them."

"I was very rarely involved in capturing them."

"I just worked with them."

"And when I finally quit, I joined the city's forces."

"Ever since then, I was basically cooped up in my little lab on the upper layer with my colleagues, researching things."

"I know A LOT of theoretical things, but I don't have much practical experience with said things."

"I know perfectly how to use my weapons, but I've never truly used them."

"I know exactly what to do if a huge containment breach happens, but I've never been in one. Ironically, I wasn't on duty when the Crimson Sea broke out, which meant I wasn't even part of that one."

"Meanwhile, you captured several Specters, fought against them, had many fights with Extractors, and you also created ways how you can work with Specters."

"Do you know more about how Specters and Zephyx work? Definitely not, but do you have more experience with these things? Yes, most likely."

"That's shocking," Albert said as he leaned back in his chair. "In just five years, you went through so many things."

The next moment, Albert released a sigh.

"You also saw your home getting destroyed when the Crimson Sea broke out. That was probably also hard to witness for you."

The image of the melting people of the Dregs involuntarily shot through Nick's mind.

It was difficult to look at that image.

"Yes, maybe," Nick answered absentmindedly.

He couldn't muster up the motivation to actually think about his answer and just stated it.

Albert raised an eyebrow in a concerned expression.

"Nick, why are you really here?" he asked in a soft voice.

Nick's heart rate spiked at the question, and his mind became alert immediately.

"What?" Nick asked.

"Why are you here?" Albert asked with a sigh. "I can tell that something is bothering you."

"While it's nice to think that you are just here to chat with an old man, that's probably not the truth."

"It's not hard for me to see that something is bothering you. I've seen many people in my life, and I can see when someone needs help."

Nick grimaced as he avoided Albert's eyes.

"Help?" he asked with a tone representing pointlessness.

"Yes," Albert said. "While I don't know what happened, I can tell one thing."

"You might not realize it yourself, but your entire demeanor screams two words."

"Help me."

Chapter 342 – Discussion

? 'Help me?' Nick repeated in his mind.

He became agitated when he thought about that short phrase.

Help?

Did he even deserve help?

'I don't deserve help,' Nick thought as his emotions calmed down again. 'I have done too many terrible things.'

'The time of receiving help is over.'

'I can only give help from now on.'

Nick slowly shook his head.

"I don't want any help," he said.

Albert raised an eyebrow.

"Want or need?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" Nick snapped back with some annoyance.

Albert just silently looked at Nick with a worried expression.

The more Albert looked at him, the more Nick felt guilty for his outburst.

"Sorry," Nick answered. "It's fine. I can manage on my own."

Albert took a deep breath but hid it from Nick.

"What's on your mind?" he asked. "Even if you don't need any help, you can tell me at least, right?"

Nick looked at Albert.

The caring expression on Albert's face felt like a twisting knife in Nick's heart.

Nick just wanted to run out of the house.

Everything was already over and done with.

Albert would soon die.

What was the point of staying here and talking to him?

Yet, when Nick saw Albert, he just couldn't run.

"What do you think of this city?" Nick asked.

Albert's expression changed to interest at the question.

"There are things that could be improved," he said. "I would say there's a bit too much waste going on in general. There's also quite a bit of corruption, but there's not much you can do about that."

"Is there really not?" Nick asked.

"Not what?" Albert asked back.

"Is there really nothing you can do about the corruption?" he asked.

"I mean, you can do a little bit, but if you do too much, it might go in the other direction," Albert said.

Nick just silently looked at Albert, waiting for him to continue.

"You see, there are individual interests, commercial interests, and class interests."

"Individual interests are what individual people and their families want."

"Commercial interests are what a company wants."

"And class interests are what a class of people want."

"When you go against someone's individual interests, you have to contend with that individual and their family. Of course, for the city's government, that's not very difficult."

"Going against commercial interests is much harder, but the city can still do that."

"You run into trouble when you go against class interests."

"For example, everyone knows that the Manufacturers are not squeaky clean. They are definitely doing illegal things below the guards' noses."

"If you stop one of these things, you can stop it, but if you try to stop all of them, you make an enemy out of all the Manufacturers."

"At that point, an entire class is against you, and the city needs that class."

"In a protest, the Manufacturers might deliberately cause damage to the city."

"Oh? You want to stop me from this illegal deal? What if I kill a couple of people? What if I start secretly ransacking the homes of the people in the Outer City? Is that what you want?" Albert said, imitating an executive from a Manufacturer.

"It's difficult, Nick," Albert said with a sigh. "You can have all the veggie cubes in the soup, but if you don't give others some of the broth, you will suffer."

"The examples I named are not even that extreme. If things go really badly, the Heroes of Kugelblitz might decide to kill the governor outright in a rebellion."

"The governor is the connection between the city and Aegis. While the city can't resist Aegis, everything that happens inside the city is still under the city's control."

"What can Aegis do if every single person in the city says that the governor died heroically against an invading Demon?"

"Aegis can't just execute all the Heroes on a baseless suspicion."

"So, all in all, yeah, the city could be better, but there's not much you can do to improve the status quo," Albert said.

Nick looked at Albert with furrowed brows.

All of that made a lot of sense.

However...

"What if the governor were a Protector?" Nick asked.

"Well," Albert answered. "The revolution wouldn't be an issue anymore, but the silent crimes and the refusal to help the people would still persist."

"What if the governor has total surveillance over the city and deals with anyone that isn't willing to help the city?" Nick asked.

Albert looked a bit uncomfortable. "That would make him worse than the Manufacturers."

"That would take all the freedom from the people, essentially turning them into nothing but productive machines."

Nick narrowed his eyes.

"How is that different from having laws?" Nick asked. "The only difference would be that criminals wouldn't be able to get away with their crimes."

"You still have your home, your belongings, your power, and so on."

Albert obviously wasn't the biggest fan of this thought.

"Fine," he said. "For the sake of the argument, let me concede that fact."

"Another issue would be that the city's destiny would be in the hands of one single individual, and if only a single individual had power, only that single individual would have their desires fulfilled."

"You can't just put all of the power into the hands of one person. People are flawed. What if that person has some kind of unreasonable hatred for people from the Outer City? What if that person wants to kill all the Specters? What if that person is power hungry?"

"Sure, dictatorship makes it easier to implement sweeping changes, but when only a single person decides all matters of a city, they are bound to make huge mistakes."

Albert's words didn't do anything to deter Nick's determination.

"All of your arguments are based on the weakness of the person."

"What if that person is very altruistic and wants to improve the lives of as many people as possible while also being very competent in leading a big group of people?" he asked.

Albert rolled his eyes.

"Sure, if all of these things actually happen, and if such a good and nice person actually manages to climb to such a high position, it might prove to be a good thing for the city," he admitted with some annoyance.

"But these people are basically nonexistent, and betting on a person to be one of these people without perfectly knowing them is a surefire way to lose your bet."

Chapter 343 – Argument

"So, it is possible," Nick said.

Albert groaned in annoyance. "Theoretically, yes, but it's not practical. You can also say that a cockroach can become a Hero if it just so happens to be beside Specters all the time without getting killed or noticed."

"You can also say you can theoretically become humanity's first level nine Extractor, but that doesn't mean that it will actually happen."

"The chances of finding such a perfect and good dictator are insanely low. Mainly because such a person wouldn't even have a high chance of reaching such a high position."

"At some point, you need ruthlessness and flexible morals to advance," Albert said with a sigh.

"Having flexible morals is sadly an advantage in this world, and when everyone around you makes use of that advantage, you are at a disadvantage if you don't use it."

"However, making use of that advantage wouldn't make you much different from the others, in which case you wouldn't fit the criteria for this perfect dictator."

Albert noticed that Nick's expression didn't show any strong reactions.

It was almost like Nick wasn't even entertaining the arguments Albert presented.

"Albert," Nick said after a bit. "If we ignore the practicality and just think about a world with endless possibilities..."

Albert did his best to stop from rolling his eyes.

"If you had the power to change the fate of the city right now, would you do it?" Nick asked.

"Of course, I would," Albert said. "Many people would do that. Not everyone is solely focused on their own power."

Nick nodded. "What if you needed to do horrible things to change the city, but you are sure that you will succeed?"

"Nick, the ends don't justify the means," Albert said. "You can't just kill one person, save ten people, and say that you did a good thing."

Nick looked deeply into Albert's eyes.

"Maybe not," Nick said, "but let me ask you another question."

"You said that killing one person to save a hundred would be wrong, right?" Nick asked.

"Yes," Albert said.

Nick nodded.

"Now..."

"If put before this decision, what would the hundred people vote on?"

Albert looked a bit uncomfortable.

Then, he sighed.

"Obviously, they would want to save their own skin. There's no way that a hundred people would sacrifice themselves for one person of their own volition."

Nick didn't look away from Albert's eyes.

"Would they consider it moral that the single person dies for them?" he asked.

"Yes, but just because many people believe something doesn't make it true or right," Albert answered.

"So, most people are interested in their own survival, and if their survival is threatened, they would think that they were unjustly killed in the vast majority of cases. Is that about right?" Nick asked.

"Sadly," Albert answered. "Many people talk about how nice and helpful they are to their community, but as soon as their quality of life actually declines, all their words and opinions suddenly change."

"If it comes down to it, most humans will sacrifice many strangers to keep their own lives or to protect the lives of their loved ones."

Nick just kept looking at Albert.

"Then, doesn't it make sense that the survival of the majority would be the most moral thing?" Nick asked.

"No, because morality is objective," Albert said. "Things that are wrong are just plainly wrong."

Nick narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Are you telling me that a starving child in the Dregs or the Outer City isn't allowed to steal some food because stealing is wrong?" Nick asked.

Surprisingly, Albert's expression didn't change.

"That isn't relevant because the child needs to have someone taking care of them. It is not the child's responsibility to get the food. If the child starves, it's the fault of their guardian. If their guardian is dead, the city has to take care of the child, and if it dies, the city is at fault."

Some anger appeared in Nick's eyes.

"And if the city doesn't take care of the child? Do you want it to starve?" Nick asked.

"I don't want the child to starve," Albert said. "If it really needs the food to survive, it will steal the food. However, that doesn't mean that the child is without guilt."

"It could have chosen not to steal the food."

"And die?" Nick asked.

Albert shrugged.

Nick's eyes narrowed.

By now, he had gotten quite angry.

'Wasn't he the one talking about practicality earlier? And now, he wants a child to starve because it isn't allowed to steal.'

Nick looked at Albert.

'If he were the child, he wouldn't think like that.'

'I bet he would say that it would be absolutely okay for him to steal since the person he would be stealing from wasn't starving and that they didn't need this food to survive.'

Nick glanced around the cozy room.

Warmth.

The entire room spoke of warmth and calm.

It was the room of an old person who had come to terms with life and had accepted their position and situation.

"How much are you paying each month to keep living here?" Nick asked after a couple of seconds.

Albert's eyes narrowed. "This does not concern you. In fact, I don't think I want you inside my house anymore."

Nick looked at Albert.

"I wanted to help you, but instead of telling me what's going on with you, you're trying to posture your superior morality in front of me. You might not have said it clearly, but your intentions are obvious to me."

"You think I'm well off and that I ignore the blight of the common people."

"That might be true in your viewpoint, but I have earned all of this. I have worked my ass off for over 80 years for this!"

"Compared to others, I'm not constantly demanding more and more things. I'm not even eating any of the delicious and expensive food since I view it as a waste of time."

"There are way worse people out there, and compared to them, I'm a saint!"

"Don't forget that I helped you back then without expecting anything in return."

"And after I did that for you, you're suddenly talking to me like I'm some kind of monster."

Albert stood up.

"Get out of my house, and I don't want to see you again until I get an apology for your ungratefulness!"

Chapter 344 – They Are the Enemy

"Fine," Nick said as he stood up.

Then, he turned around and walked towards the door.

Albert kept glaring at him from his chair.

Nick opened the door, stopped, and glanced at Albert one last time.

"Go!" Albert shouted.

Nick turned around and left the house.

Now, Albert was alone again.

"Ungrateful brat," he grumbled to himself as he made another cup of coffee. "That's why I don't have children! They're nothing but trouble!"

Meanwhile, Nick slowly walked away from the house, his eyes filled with conviction.

Nick's resolve had been strengthened by talking to Albert.

'Morality is not objective,' he thought.

'Things that are wrong in one place might not necessarily be wrong in another place.'

'And since morality is subjective, the worth of one's morality is equal to the number of one's lives, namely one.'

'If 49 people were to be sacrificed for 51 people, maybe the majority would believe it to be wrong since not everyone is the same.'

'However, if it is ten to a hundred, the chances of it fluctuating are minuscule. In almost every case, a majority of people would vote for the minority of people to get sacrificed for the majority's survival.'

Nick turned around and looked at Albert's distant house.

'The more people survive, the more moral it is.'

'If I sacrifice a thousand people for the survival of over 10,000, I will have been right in my actions.'

Nick turned away from Albert's house and continued walking.

'I have already sacrificed over a thousand people.'

'I have already taken out a loan, and the interest is scarily high.'

'I can't fail now.'

'If I fail now, I will be a monster.'

'But if I succeed, I will be a savior.'

Nick's eyes narrowed.

'I can't lose!'

'I can't allow myself any distractions!'

'Right now, I am an absolute monster, but if I do it right, I won't be anymore.'

'I can redeem myself!'

'It will just be very, very hard and will take a long time.'

After talking with Albert, Nick's guilt had lessened quite a bit.

He still felt bad about killing him, but...

'I'm sorry, Albert, but for the good of the city, you have to be sacrificed.'

'I have already sacrificed over a thousand people.'

'One more won't make a difference.'

After a while, Nick reached the exit of the upper layer.

He put the clothing for visitors away and put his old clothing on again.

Even though the clothing for the visitors was much more comfortable, Nick liked wearing his own clothing far more.

After he put on his old clothing, Nick looked at the entrance to the upper layer again.

'Less than a thousand people are allowed to live in this utopia.'

'There were more people living in the Dregs than people living here.'

'And yet, one person living here could sacrifice just a bit of their wealth to vastly improve the lives of the people in the Dregs.'

'I don't think that all one thousand of them are pure monsters. At least one of them would be willing to give a bit of their wealth for the poor.'

'But they can't.'

'The greediest part of these people would make the lives of the less-greedy part hell.'

'And in the end, humans are more interested in their own gain.'

'Would they sacrifice their lives for a thousand people?'

'No.'

'The moral minority of people want to help the less fortunate, but the rulers of this city won't allow them.'

'But if they get an opportunity to vocalize their opinions without any repercussions, they will show their support.'

'In the end, it's all about Kugelblitz and Anatomy.'

'They are the enemy!'

Nick stepped out of the wooden locker room.

"Oh, already back?" the Specialist asked Nick.

Nick looked at her and nodded.

"How was your talk with Albert?" she asked.

"We had a little argument," Nick answered. "If you'll excuse me, I have somewhere to be."

"Sad to hear," she said with a friendly voice. "Come by again, okay?"

"Sure," Nick said before he jumped onto the rails.

About a minute later, Nick reached the lower layer of the Inner City again, and he walked out of the southern exit.

He reached Dark Dream pretty quickly.

Nick felt like quite some time had passed, but in truth, not even three hours had passed since his talk with Julian.

After he entered Dark Dream, Nick greeted the employees he met on the way and went to Julian's office.

He opened the door without knocking.

There was no point in making his presence known since Julian's presence was all over the building.

Julian's human body was currently talking to someone in another room, but that didn't matter.

Julian's office was still inundated with mouths.

Nick calmly walked to the chair in the middle of all the mouths and sat down.

"It's done," he said. "I visited Albert."

"Yes, I can feel it," Julian said. "Well done. That goes a long way in proving your loyalty."

Nick looked at the mouths with determined eyes.

"Talking to Albert made me realize that I did the right thing."

"I want to help the majority of people, and with you leading the city, more people will survive than now."

"Yes, you will consume Experts, Specialists, and maybe even Heroes, but the number of lives you are going to take will be fewer than the number of lives those Experts, Specialists, and Heroes are taking."

"I want to help you in achieving control over the city," Nick said with determination.

The mouths in the room chuckled.

"You would be fine with me killing powerful people as long as it meant that the weaker people would survive?" he asked.

"A rich person's death and a poor person's death is not different," Nick said.

"So, why would a powerful person's death and a weak person's death be any different?"

The mouths chuckled again.

"Lucky me, I suppose," they said.

Nick remained silent for a couple of seconds.

"Julian, there's something I want," he said.

"Oh? What is it?" Julian asked.

"I am physically strong, but there are many things I don't know."

"I don't know how Zephyx works exactly, and I also don't know how to properly negotiate with others."

"I don't know how I can discern if someone is trying to manipulate me or not."

"If I want to achieve my dream, I need to rectify these mistakes."

"Julian, can you please teach me these things?" Nick asked.

The mouths didn't say anything for a while.

Then, they suddenly chuckled.

"Sure, why not?"

Chapter 345 – Metal

?Time continued to pass in Crimson City.

Months had passed since the Crimson Sea broke out.

During these months, the Outer City underwent drastic changes, while the Inner City barely felt any difference.

Sure, a couple of wares in the Inner City had hiked up in price, but everyone could still afford them without any issues.

Meanwhile, metal became extremely expensive in the Outer City, something that had never happened before.

Crimson City had always had a huge abundance of metal, and even if one found a pristine plate of metal on the sidewalk, one wouldn't even bother picking it up.

The only kinds of metal that were worth anything were steel and metal treated with Zephyx, but those were not materials that normal people came into contact with.

The rusty metal in the city always seemed to be everywhere, but now, things were different.

All the spare pieces of metal had been cleared off the streets.

In the past, if someone needed some metal to fix a hole in their house, they would just walk to the streets, grab a plate, and fix it to their house.

But now, they just couldn't find any loose metal anymore.

When the first shops selling normal metal popped up, the citizens became confused.

Selling metal?

Which insane person would buy metal?

And when these same citizens needed the metal, they became angry that they had to pay for it now.

Nevertheless, many of them paid the exorbitant prices.

The ones that refused to pay for the metal just waited.

At some point, metal would become free again.

Yet, just a couple of weeks later, things became even worse.

All the metal shops closed business.

Metal could now only be sold via the city.

Someone who had a lot of metal and wanted to sell it needed to contact the city to sell it, and somebody who needed metal also needed to contact the city.

The people who had too much metal could quickly sell it since the city was basically buying every single piece of metal on the market.

Sadly, the people who needed metal found it almost impossible to get it.

It was really, really hard to get the city to sell some metal to the people.

If one needed metal, one better had a good damn reason for it.

A hole in the ceiling was not a good reason.

So? That's just another light hole.

You're missing an entire wall? Just take half of another wall to close the hole.

The people felt like they were living in a different reality.

Something that had been abundant just months ago was now impossible to come across.

But then, something changed again.

A trend appeared.

Sleek one-strip houses.

Instead of having a house made of thick and cold metal with many holes in it, a company appeared that was offering a service to change the houses.

The company would take the old and rusty plates of metal and replace them with new, thinner, and cleaner plates.

Naturally, there were also no holes in these plates, and the entire house would even have a uniform style and look.

They also didn't even ask for any credits!

Just 20 liters of blood donated over an entire year would be enough!

Naturally, this company was owned by Kugelblitz.

Of course, not many people were fans of paying with their blood, but it was actually the best solution to their current problems.

But there was another problem.

Losing 20 liters of blood was a lot for one person.

It could even be life-threatening.

That was when the next change took place.

The price was per household.

Not per person.

While families didn't have issues with the cost, people living alone didn't have it as easy.

Even two people living in a house might not be completely fine with the price.

But they still needed usable houses.

So, these people looked to the streets.

At the displaced people from the Dregs.

Many people of the Outer City offered the people of the Dregs to live in their houses for one year in exchange for ten liters of their blood donated across the year.

The blood was basically seen as rent.

Even more, the actual owners of the homes would even pay the measly 100 or so credits of taxes for them so that they wouldn't die of blood loss.

In the end, the sudden rise in the metal prices resulted in the elimination of almost all homelessness.

Within months, most houses were replaced with newer and better-looking ones.

Naturally, the company offering the service got more metal than they were using, which they then sold to the city for a hefty profit.

In a way, one could say that the Outer City was skimmed off an entire layer of metal.

And what happened to all the metal that the city bought?

The first pieces of metal were turned into Crimson Shields, lovingly called Cockroaches.

The deaths on the city's underside had been brutal, but after the Cockroaches had been introduced, the deaths drastically reduced.

A Cockroach was a 2.2 by 1.2-meter bowl of metal with several straps attached.

Someone working on the underside of the city would strap that bowl on their back and grab the underside of the city.

The bowl would then encompass their entire body and only leave a small gap of about 10 centimeters through which the worker could see the outside world.

The small gap and the good distance it was away from the eyes assured that the person couldn't see the Crimson Sea, no matter how much they turned their heads.

Additionally, people could use the Cockroach as a big bucket in which they could store their tools.

The Cockroaches were a great invention, which reduced the deaths by a ridiculous amount.

Of course, the Cockroaches were named as such due to how they looked when someone wore them and worked on the city's underside.

A worker crawling along the city's underside looked like a metallic cockroach moving out from the city, leaving a trail of grips behind like footprints.

Working on the underside of the city was also called Roaching from then on.

Chapter 346 – Hell Gates

After the Cockroaches were created, the city used the metal to produce grips and uniform steel plates.

These new plates would become relevant a couple months later.

Four months after the beginning of Roaching, Roaching was changed.

There were no more places close to the city center without any grips, and every single Roacher, the name of the people working on the city's underside, needed to travel at least 50 meters into the red mist.

Weak Johns with horrible Barriers would need to turn around just when they got to the place where they needed to put their grips.

Because of that, all Initial, Early, and Mid Johns were no longer required to work as Roachers.

Sadly, that also meant that the hours for the Late and Peak Johns increased, but there was nothing they could do about it.

After around ten months, a bit over half the underside of the city was covered in grips.

The Crimson Sea had already been below the city for almost a year by now.

By now, almost all luxury goods from outside the city had been used up.

The price of coffee skyrocketed.

Certain kinds of expensive meat were no longer available.

Salt was getting rationed.

However, the city could survive.

The Inner City produced enough food for everyone, and water wasn't an issue since it rained regularly.

But now, even the people in the Inner City felt the effects.

Many of them were even willing to spend some of their money to expedite the construction of the city's underside.

The governor accepted their proposition and made use of it.

Extractors could now volunteer for Roaching in exchange for competitive pay.

Every hour of Roaching was a thousand credits.

While most of the Extractors were not interested in the offer, quite a few of them actually jumped at the opportunity.

Anatomy and Ghosty's Lab had the most Johns, but they didn't have that many Adolescents.

The Adolescents that the two of them had were divided among younger Extractors with more potential.

Johns, who had been at the peak of their level for many years, only had to work for around maybe three hours per week.

While they still earned a lot, they definitely didn't earn nearly as much as the younger Johns.

Because of that, Roaching became a lucrative alternative.

After the governor had introduced the voluntary Roaching, the speed of the construction had doubled.

Even though everyone needed to travel even further, the remaining parts of the city's underside were completed within another four months.

Now, the entire underside of Crimson City was covered in grips.

That was when the next phase of the construction started.

Huge beams made of steel were placed on the big central support, supporting the metallic plates further away.

Since the city had had over a year to plan for this phase, not many problems happened.

Strengthening the city's underside was finished in barely two months.

Then, it was time for the next phase.

A bridge to the outside world.

Builders hung from the underside of the city's edge and placed the central steel beam.

Yes, steel.

This bridge was of monumental importance, and the city had converted all the metal it had received into steel.

After placing the steel beam, the lower and upper steel plates were fixed to the beam.

For now, the bridge would only be two meters wide since reaching the outside world was important.

Sadly, after about 300 meters, the builders could see that the steel could no longer withstand the insane stress.

The bridge needed more support.

Eventually, the governor himself had to get involved.

A humongous pillar of extremely durably and expensive metal was produced, and the governor jumped into the Crimson Sea with it.

The Crimson Sea wasn't strong enough to endanger the governor in the short term, which meant that the governor could travel through it.

After sinking for a while, he reached the bottom of the Crimson Sea.

The floor was made of exceedingly hard metal of unknown origin, and the governor needed to use almost all of his power to create the small holes needed to fix the huge pillar of metal to the floor.

Eventually, he succeeded, and the pillar was created.

This central support was used to keep the bridge and this part of the city's edge stable.

Construction resumed.

By using more steel beams diagonally going from the pillar to the city, the builders made another 500 meters of bridge.

Then, it became problematic again.

Luckily, they were close enough to the outside world that the builders, who were Veterans and Experts, could safely jump to the outside world.

From there, they resumed the construction, jumping back and forth for materials.

Fortunately, the walls of the huge crater were made of durable metal from the ruins below them, making it easy to create more support for the bridge.

Sadly, the construction needed six months instead of the projected four.

The reason was that one of the supervising builders had mysteriously vanished.

Albert Eibrecht had simply vanished when no one was looking.

Since no one had heard him laughing, it probably meant that he didn't jump into the Crimson Sea.

This meant that something extremely dangerous was lurking in the surroundings.

Because of that, security had been bumped up several notches, and construction only continued under the supervision of a Specialist.

Luckily, no more incidents occurred, and the bridge was finally constructed.

Crimson City had been isolated for almost two years.

Finally, it was connected to the outside world again.

The people from inside the city could finally see the other end of the red mist.

The bridge was 1,200 meters long, and it led through a long corridor surrounded by thick walls of red mist.

Since no one was traveling through it yet, it seemed eerie.

A big gate was placed on the edges of the bridge so that passing caravans could see that Crimson City actually still existed.

Over the years, the caravans would also give names to the gates.

The Hell Gates.

Chapter 347 – Manufacturer Problems

?Almost two years had passed since the Crimson Sea had broken out.

A bridge had been created to the outside world, and the city was recovering.

Aegis knew that Crimson City still existed, but all the caravans and the cities didn't know that.

The caravans that usually visited Crimson Sea just saw a huge red cloud of unknown origin in the place where Crimson City was supposed to be.

Almost all of the caravans immediately turned around as soon as they saw the red mist.

Sure, the caravans were very powerful, but this was something that could destroy an entire city.

Getting close to it wasn't a good idea.

And that had been the right decision.

The few people who actually decided to come closer and investigate quickly came face to face with the Crimson Sea.

The Crimson Sea had claimed a couple of Experts from the Caravans, and even a Specialist would have nearly died if they hadn't reacted perfectly.

The Specialist had fought the Crimson Sea's mental pull with all of his power, and several people kept holding him back.

The only reason why the Specialist had survived and recovered was that he had been a Late Specialist, while the Crimson Sea had been an Early Fanatic.

As for the cities, they had simply not heard anything from Crimson City, and the people they had sent either didn't come back or reported that only red mist was left of the city.

In any case, no one knew that Crimson City still existed.

The first order of business after building the bridge was to send out messengers to the surrounding cities and to tell them what was going on.

While Crimson City had permanently changed, it would eventually recover.

Yet, while the city was releasing a proverbial sigh, the Manufacturers became tenser.

The Crimson Sea's presence had impacted the Manufacturers the most.

First of all, the Crimson Sea had gotten rid of the Parasite's presence, and the governor used this opportunity to keep a constant watch over the single bridge that led into the city.

Every single animal that approached the city would be killed.

Over several days, three animals were killed.

A rat, a bird, and a dog.

After that, no more animals showed up.

All of these animals had been sent by the Parasite, and all of them had been killed.

While finding the Parasite inside the city had been almost impossible, finding him outside the city was extremely easy.

After all, not much moved in the outside world.

The only things that moved were the wind, caravans, Specters, and minions of Specters.

Nothing else.

The Parasite's minions were like chickens in a desert.

There was no place for them to hide.

Since the Parasite couldn't enter the city anymore, it became much more difficult for the Manufacturers to find Specters.

Nearly every Manufacturer had been trading with the Parasite.

Another change was that the Crimson Sea also consumed Specters.

Most Hatchlings that newly appeared inside the city accidentally looked at the Crimson Sea since they didn't know about it, and many more powerful Specters had been killed as well.

The number of Specters roaming free in Crimson City had probably dropped by over 70%.

Of course, the normal people were happy about that change, but the Manufacturers were not happy.

The longer things stayed this way, the more Kugelblitz's power grew.

They had the most powerful Specters, and they kept producing more powerful Extractors than everyone else.

For example, Kugelblitz received another Specialist, giving them 21 in total.

The second place was Anatomy, with just six.

Within the last two years, a total of five Specters had been captured by all of the Manufacturers combined, which was ridiculously little compared to the average of 10 to 20 that had been captured each year.

Sadly, Dark Dream didn't get any of those.

The battle for the Specters was more brutal than ever before, and Dark Dream just couldn't compete with the more powerful Manufacturers.

Over the last two years, Dark Dream managed to recover from all of its losses.

They now had one Early Veteran, which was Nick.

One Peak John, which was Jenny, the team leader of the Johns.

Five Mid Johns, with Taren being one of them. Taren was the team leader of the Newbies.

Three Early Johns.

Four Initial Johns.

And ten Newbies of varying levels of power.

Sadly, they still couldn't even hope to compete with the other Manufacturers.

The destroyed Spartans had had five Veterans and over 30 Johns.

Dark Dream couldn't even compete with the destroyed Spartans with their single Veteran and 13 Johns.

Dark Dream was by far the weakest Manufacturer.

The next weakest one was Solace, with over 20 Veterans and even two Experts.

Dark Dream didn't even have 10% of their power.

If it weren't for Julian, Dark Dream would have already been consumed by the other Manufacturers.

Julian was everyone's friend, and none of the other Manufacturers viewed Dark Dream as a threat thanks to him.

Why would someone fear a weapon if that weapon was wielded by their best friend?

However, Julian still had to be extremely careful.

While it seemed like Julian could freely walk around the city, it actually wasn't that easy.

Julian's mental powers worked very similarly to the Crimson Sea's mental powers.

It wasn't difficult for Julian to completely manipulate the minds of Experts or weak Specialists, but strong Specialists had quite some resistance.

Trying to influence a strong Specialist was extremely risky for Julian.

If he won, he would gain another tool, but if he failed, Julian would definitely die.

After all, the Specialist would attack Julian, call over more powerful Specialists, who would also be resistant to Julian's powers, and suppress Julian.

This was why Julian's public perception was imperative to his survival.

Everyone, from commoners to Experts, felt like they regularly met Julian somewhere and talked to him.

However, the Specialists, and especially the Heroes, extremely rarely met him, and if they did, Julian would only say hello before making himself scarce.

Being around such powerful Extractors was dangerous since many of them had tools and methods to confirm if someone was a Specter or not.

As for the Heroes...

They had never really seen Julian.

That meant that Julian also wasn't really their friend.

They knew that someone named Julian existed and that he was viewed in high esteem, but that was basically it.

So, all in all, this meant that Dark Dream was safe from Solace and Gemini, but that didn't necessarily expand to Ghosty's Lab, Anatomy, and Kugelblitz.

Chapter 348 – Pressured to Leave

?Julian was known by the CEO and CZE of Ghosty's Lab, but they hadn't met him yet.

Julian had made it a point to never come into contact with Ghosty himself.

Ghosty was an extremely old genius.

Ghosty alone had revolutionized the way Manufacturers worked and contained Specters.

Someone like that was bound to be unfathomably intelligent.

As long as Julian couldn't guarantee winning a mental battle against Ghosty, meeting him would be a horrible idea.

While the CEO of Ghosty's Lab was only an Expert, Julian also avoided meeting him.

The CEO was close to Ghosty, and if Ghosty suddenly noticed a change in his friend, he might grow suspicious.

A normal person might not grow suspicious when a previously closed door had opened without their notice, but a genius would definitely notice. The genius might even notice the door handle being in a different position than normal.

Influencing anything around Ghosty was risky, and Julian knew that which was why he avoided him.

Luckily, and ironically, manipulating Kugelblitz was easier for Julian.

The difference was that Ghosty's Lab was owned by two powerful people, while Kugelblitz was owned by many.

Kugelblitz's CEO was a strong Specialist, and they owned 30% of the company. Naturally, Julian avoided them.

Aria Light, their Chief Zephyx Extractor, owned 20% of the company, and Julian also avoided her.

However, Vernon Melfion, who owned 20%, was only a strong Expert. Julian had already met him, and the two were friends.

The remaining 30% of Kugelblitz was distributed among random Extractors and rich people of the upper layer.

About 70% of those considered Julian their friend.

This meant that if Kugelblitz decided to do something to Dark Dream, they would face quite some opposition.

Sure, the majority could overrule the minority, but that was never a good idea unless it was an emergency.

Offending Vernon and the shareholders might result in them selling their shares, which would be troublesome for Kugelblitz.

Because of that, Kugelblitz definitely wouldn't go after Dark Dream.

A single little Dark Dream wasn't worth the internal drama.

Sadly, Julian also had zero control over Anatomy.

Anatomy was run differently from all other Manufacturers.

For example, Anatomy didn't really have a CEO.

Anatomy was led by a trio, with Mundus being the unofficial leader.

Mundus Stairwell owned 40% of Anatomy and was their Chief Zephyx Extractor. Naturally, Julian didn't dare to meet him since Mundus was Anatomy's only Hero.

Zarren Harrow owned 30% of Anatomy and was one of their two Directors. He was a powerful Specialist, and Julian never met him before.

Sadly, Ariel Cerillion, their second Director who also owned 30% of Anatomy, was also a powerful Specialist.

Compared to Kugelblitz, all of Anatomy's owners were also powerful and active Extractors, making it extremely difficult to manipulate or control them.

Anatomy was the biggest danger to Dark Dream because of that.

While Julian also had no control over Ghosty's Lab, Ghosty's Lab wasn't aggressively expanding by any means necessary.

Ghosty's Lab was essentially indispensable due to its incomparable contributions to technology.

Anatomy was different.

Anatomy didn't have any specific or special things that it contributed to the city.

They just had a lot of powerful Extractors and a lot of Specters.

They didn't contribute much to science.

They didn't have something as special as Solace's network of light.

They didn't have as much sway in the government as Kugelblitz.

If the chance presented itself, Kugelblitz would consume Anatomy without a second thought.

The only reason why it hadn't happened yet was that fighting against Anatomy would strain the entire city.

The governor couldn't possibly put his city in such insane danger, which meant that the governor would help Anatomy.

Suddenly, it was no longer four Heroes against one but three against two, with the strongest Hero in the city fighting for Anatomy.

Kugelblitz either needed an insanely good reason to attack Anatomy, or they needed to assassinate the governor before doing it.

Naturally, Anatomy knew that which was why they were violently clawing for any kind of power they could get.

Luckily, thanks to Julian, Anatomy wouldn't have an easy time against Dark Dream.

Anatomy had six Specialists, but everyone would notice if one of their Specialists did something suspicious.

But the same thing wasn't true for their Experts.

One Expert alone could kill everyone in Dark Dream except for Julian on their own.

Julian alone couldn't keep hold of an entire Manufacturer on his own.

So, as long as Anatomy could kill Nick and most of his employees, they could take Dark Dream for themselves.

If they kept killing Dark Dream's employees, no powerful Extractor would want to work for Dark Dream anymore, and at some point, Anatomy could just complain to the city about Dark Dream's lack of strong Extractors.

Naturally, killing Nick was the best way to reach that goal.

But they couldn't do it inside the city.

A Specialist's senses were terrifyingly sharp, and attacking Nick anywhere close to Dark Dream's building was suicide.

As long as Dark Dream's employees didn't move far away from their place of work, they were safe due to Julian.

Luckily, just like every other Manufacturer, Dark Dream was now under immense pressure.

All the Specters had been obtained by the other Manufacturers, and the more time passed, the more powerful they grew.

If Dark Dream ever wanted to walk out of their shadows, it needed to capture more Specters.

And since Dark Dream couldn't get any Specters from inside the city due to the overwhelming power difference, it could only look out of the city.

Specters existed outside the city, in the outer world.

However, Julian couldn't go there.

If he did, Anatomy might decide to assassinate Extractors inside Dark Dream.

He had to stay here.

If they wanted Specters, they needed to buy them or capture them from outside the city.

Sadly, due to the scarcity of Specters, their prices skyrocketed.

Dark Dream couldn't buy any of them easily.

Even more, there was another issue.

Dark Dream didn't have an Adult.

The fact that Nick became an Early Veteran after two years without an Adult was already shocking and raised a couple of eyebrows.

Usually, a Veteran needed an Adult to progress in power, which was why it was strange that Nick managed to advance.

Naturally, Nick couldn't tell them that Julian had helped him with his own Zephyx.

Instead, he said that he had simply worked with a crazy number of Peak Adolescents.

If Nick managed to become a Mid Veteran without Dark Dream having an Adult, everyone would know that something fishy was going on, and Julian's secret would be unveiled.

This meant that Nick's power progression was stuck.

As long as Dark Dream couldn't get an Adult, he couldn't advance anymore.

Because of that, Dark Dream was forced to look outside the city.

They had to get an Adult from there, or at least a couple of weaker Specters, which they could exchange for an Adult.

And since Julian couldn't leave the city...

That only left Nick.

He had to leave Julian's presence and go into the outside world.

Otherwise, Dark Dream would stagnate until it eventually collapsed.

Chapter 349 – Adult Nick

?Two years had passed since Nick became a Veteran, and he had just recently advanced to become an Early Veteran.

At this moment, Nick wore the new uniform of Dark Dream.

Since Dark Dream officially had a Veteran now, they were finally strong enough to get their own uniforms. They no longer needed to use the city uniforms.

Dark Dream's uniforms were mostly dark purple, but there were also a couple of black streaks in them.

Dark Dream's official new logo was the eye of an owl, namely the Dreamer, which was surrounded by a small black swirl, making it seem like the eye was drawing someone in.

A Newbie would have one eye.

A John had two eyes, which were side by side.

And Veterans would have one big eye with three eyelash-like protrusions coming out from its top.

The protrusions were necessary since the symbols of a Newbie and a Veteran would be too similar otherwise, which might cause confusion or an incident.

Nick's weapons had also changed.

The silver spears and blades he had received from Wyntor had long since become unusable to him.

On Nick's back were three small cylinders and three big ones.

The cylinders were only about ten centimeters long. The smaller ones were only around two centimeters wide, while the bigger ones were almost five centimeters wide.

Naturally, these cylinders would turn to spears as soon as Nick pressed a button on their side.

The three small ones were perfect for throwing them without Nick's ability being active, and the three big ones were perfect for throwing them with his ability being active.

Sadly, due to weight issues, Nick couldn't carry too many with him since the bigger spears were far heavier than the smaller ones.

The good thing was that Nick could still move without any issues with his current loadout.

As for his fist weapons, they weren't even visible.

Nick's fist weapons only looked like thick wristbands in their normal state, but after he activated them, a huge blade would shoot out of them.

A new addition to his fist weapons was that a cover for his fists would also extend outward and wrap around his fists.

Nick had specifically wanted his weapons to be like this in case his blades broke off.

His frame was still wide and muscular, and most people still felt intimidated when they saw him.

In fact, due to his new demeanor and aura, the number of people who were intimidated only increased.

Nick no longer seemed like a happy-go-lucky teenager.

He no longer seemed nice, happy, and helpful.

Over the past two years, Nick had a lot of time to come to terms with his new life and his new goal.

Naturally, this had changed him.

His smiles were rarer, and they mostly only appeared when he was trying to be friendly or polite.

During all other times, he either looked neutral, bored, serious, or annoyed.

He had been a Chief Zephyx Extractor for seven years by now, and he had become fully used to his authority, power, and role.

Yet, while strangers often felt intimidated by Nick, the same thing wasn't true for his employees.

If one got to know Nick more, they would realize that it was easy to talk to him and that he was quite helpful.

While he wasn't very talkative anymore, the things he said were often valuable and thought-through.

Of course, Nick's new goal in life was only partially responsible for this change.

Another major factor was his lessons under Julian.

Ever since he had asked Julian about teaching him, Nick had been learning from Julian almost every single day.

Julian knew that it was important for Nick to grow as a person and to learn more things if he was to be a good assistant.

Naturally, Julian would never completely trust a human, but he was confident enough in his power to teach Nick a scary number of things.

While learning something, two things were important.

Intelligence and determination.

Intelligence allowed someone to learn things quicker and to more easily understand complex concepts.

Determination allowed someone to learn more and to internalize the learned things quicker.

An intelligent person without determination would pick up things here and there, but only if they were interested in them.

A determined person with little intelligence could learn most things, but it would take a lot of effort and some time. Additionally, more complex concepts would be very difficult to learn.

In terms of intelligence, Nick was not a genius, but he also wasn't stupid or average.

One could say that he was above average.

Many people might have believed him to be dumb since he knew so little and constantly had to be taught by people, but that assumption was actually incorrect.

The reason why Nick had always appeared dumb was his lack of knowledge, not intelligence.

Knowledge was the amount of information accrued over a person's lifetime, while intelligence was the speed with which knowledge could be accrued in a focused state.

Nick hadn't been unintelligent in the past.

He had simply been uneducated.

While working as a Chief Zephyx Extractor, Nick had learned many things, which had improved his education.

During the first two years, he still seemed naïve and dumb.

During the next two years, he had finally gotten used to his job and could actually give orders with some confidence.

By the time he was 20 years old, he had already learned quite a bit about finance, Specters, working with people, politics, laws, and a couple more things.

He had learned most of these things by working with Wyntor and by occasionally reading a book.

However, three more years had passed since that moment, and Nick was now 23 years old.

Even more, during the last two years, he had learned even more things from Julian than he had learned from Wyntor.

After all, Wyntor had been constantly busy, while Julian was basically ever-present in Dark Dream.

Additionally, Nick's determination was almost incomparable.

Whenever Julian taught Nick something, he listened carefully, repeating the new concepts several times to himself throughout the day.

"When someone is lying, they often use more words to deceive than if they were honest."

"When someone is bad at lying, they will avoid eye contact. If someone is good at lying, they will look constantly into your eyes, but that is just as unrealistic."

"Prephyx is attracted by Zephyx, and Prephyx will move to wherever Zephyx is."

"If you feel nervous around a very friendly person, that is most likely your instincts picking up on a subconscious disconnect between the person's words and their bodily language."

"When negotiating, genuinely try to find a compromise instead of trying to get as much money as possible. One repeat customer is more valuable than several new customers."

These were the kinds of concepts Nick repeated to himself to internalize them.

He knew that he had to learn many things if he ever wanted to achieve his goal of improving the lives of the people in Crimson City.

Nick wasn't an economist, lawyer, politician, salesman, or psychologist.

But, by now, he knew more about these things than the average person living in the Inner City.

Julian was an amazing teacher, and Nick was an amazing student.

All in all, one could summarize all of this in one sentence.

Nick had grown up.

Chapter 350 – The Team

"Have you all made your preparations?" Nick asked the four people in front of him.

Right now, Nick stood in front of Dark Dream's entrance, looking at four of his employees.

The four nodded.

A couple of days ago, Nick had called the four of them to his office one by one to tell them about his plan.

They would leave Crimson City and search for Specters.

Nick had long thought about whether he should go on his own or in a group.

In the end, he had decided to go with a small group.

Even though three of the four people in front of him were far weaker than Nick, their combined strength was still scary due to their abilities.

Fighting a Specter wasn't always straightforward, and sometimes, it was almost impossible to beat one with a conventional method.

The Crimson Sea was the best example.

It was far weaker than the governor, but the governor was essentially helpless against it.

The goal of this excursion was not to kill powerful Extractors but to capture Specters.

And for that, Nick needed more people with diverse abilities.

However, there was another use of traveling with a group.

Nick did not like this at all, but he had to accept that the chances of attracting a Specter were higher if there were a couple of weaker people in a group.

Essentially, weaker people also acted as bait.

Nick had been transparent with his employees and had told them that this was one of the reasons why he wanted them to come with him.

They obviously could refuse.

And, sure enough, the first group Nick had asked to come with him had refused.

The first group had been the three Early Johns with the Distortion's ability.

Sadly, the three of them hadn't felt comfortable going outside with Nick.

So, Nick had gone to his second choice, a group of three Initial Johns with variations of the Money Sink's ability.

Luckily, those three had accepted.

The first of these three was Jason, a black-haired man of average size and average stature.

He had two holsters on his belt with two revolvers, loaded with projectiles that could absorb his ability and Zephyx.

Jason had the ability of the Money Sink and had evolved it with the Dreamer.

By using his ability, he could suck Zephyx from an enemy from a distance while also causing tiredness in the target, making it harder for them to focus.

If he used his weapon and hit an enemy, they would lose a lot more of their Zephyx than normal while also getting tired.

The second person in the group was Petra, and just like her two colleagues, she was also an Initial John.

Petra was a taller woman with red and black hair, making her seem rather rebellious. Luckily, she was easy to get along with.

Petra also had the Money Sink's ability, but she had evolved it via the Bleeding Lady.

Just like Jason, she could absorb the Zephyx of a distant enemy, with the difference being that she injured the enemy as well.

She also had a firearm, but hers was an automatic rifle that could make use of the bleeding effect of her ability.

The last person was Clayton, a huge and muscular man with a face shaped like a boulder. He was over 190 centimeters tall, and he was the only employee of Dark Dream who seemed even more muscular than Nick.

However, that was mostly due to Clayton focusing on raw power instead of a mix of power and agility.

In the small group of three, Clayton was responsible for being the frontrunner.

His Barrier was vastly more expensive than normal, and it could also be activated and deactivated very easily.

The reason for that was that Clayton's weapons of choice were two huge gauntlets that also acted as big shields.

Clayton also had the ability of the Money Sink, but he had evolved it via the Puppy.

The evolution increased the potency of the absorption with proximity to the target.

In essence, the closer Clayton was to his enemy, the stronger the absorption was.

The three of them had been hired by Dark Dream at the same time about three years ago.

They were supposed to be a team from the very beginning, but they were also supposed to test how the Money Sink's ability could evolve with different Specters.

Nick had asked these three to accompany him since their abilities were extremely powerful when used on the same enemy.

While they couldn't capture some Force Specters, they could probably kill them by consuming all their Zephyx.

The last person in the group was Jenny.

By now, Jenny had become a Peak John, and she was someone who could even threaten Nick if she got the drop on him.

Jenny carried a rifle on her back that was over a meter long.

The rifle used Jenny's Zephyx to produce a projectile and fire it.

The rifle was extremely expensive due to one specific property.

It constantly consumed 50% of Jenny's Zephyx to keep a bullet ready to be fired.

If Jenny were to hit Nick's Barrier with such a bullet, he would lose about 50% of his Zephyx, even though he was two levels stronger than her while also using a very expensive Barrier.

Sadly, after firing the rifle, Jenny would need about five seconds to condense another bullet, and since she had already used 50% of her Zephyx on the first round, the second one would be weaker and would also lower her Zephyx to dangerous levels.

Jenny had the Dreamer's ability, which sadly wasn't a combat ability.

She had evolved her ability via the Dung Heap, which made it at least a bit useful in combat since she could now release tranquilizing gas around her.

This was Nick's team.

Jenny, a Peak John.

Jason, an Initial John.

Petra, an Initial John.

Clayton, an Initial John.

And Nick, an Early Veteran.

"Good," Nick said after seeing that everyone was ready.

"Then, we go to the bridge."

Nick walked forward, and his team walked after him.