

The Sun 371

Chapter 371 – Way Back

Nick left the room with all of the monitors and made his way back to the cave.

About 45 minutes had passed since he had gone back into the mountain, and he had found many interesting things.

Sadly, many things didn't seem to make much sense.

Why were this building and these suits made of steel while the weapons could destroy steel so easily?

How did all of these people die?

What did all these things on the monitors mean?

How could that big machine produce Zephyx?

Sadly, Nick didn't have the means to uncover all these mysteries.

He had no idea how to speak the ancient language or how to operate these machines.

'These things are beyond my paygrade,' Nick thought as he walked out of the big building.

'Maybe these things will make sense at some point, but right now, I have no idea what any of this means.'

Nick looked into the darkness of the cave.

'And it's also not important. Knowing more about these things won't help me in improving the lives of the weaker people.'

'What's important is that we can use this to earn a lot of money, which will help the weaker people in the long run.'

Nick started to shine in a weak light.

By now, his Zephyx had already fully recovered, and it would be enough to get back to the entrance without having to go through another torture session with the Nightmare.

Nick ran through the cave and jumped up into the hole again.

Shortly before he reached the exit, he stopped.

"Everyone still here?" Nick shouted.

Nick heard some shuffling and saw Jason peeking over the edge of the hole.

"Welcome back, Boss! We were worried about you," he said.

"Everything alright?" Nick asked as he slowly approached the exit with closed eyes.

"No issues," Jason said as he moved to the side. "Petra woke up."

"Good to hear," Nick said as he grabbed the wall of the mountain again. "Sound off."

"I'm here, Boss," Nick heard Jenny from his left.

"Here," Clayton said from below Nick.

"I'm here," Petra said, also from below Nick.

"Eh, here," Jason said from beside Nick.

Naturally, Nick didn't dare to look around right now, which was why he asked them to sound off.

"Is the Specter here?" Nick asked.

"Right here, Boss," Jenny said.

Nick moved to his left and extended his hand.

He felt the cold and rugged hairs of the Specter's spidery limbs.

Nick pulled the Specter over to himself and put it under his left arm.

"Let's go," he said before he started to descend.

Then, the group started to descend the mountain.

Descending the mountain was still quite scary since none of them had seen the foot of the mountain in a long while.

What if someone was there?

Eventually, everyone reached the bottom, and Nick was the first to look around.

After not being allowed to look in one direction for so long, everyone was nervous about turning around.

What if they could still see the Crimson Sea?

Nick was the only one who was calm since his ability had already reactivated.

Of course, he had to throw the Specter to the side first to test whether or not the Crimson Sea could see him.

For the first time in a long while, Nick looked around his surroundings.

Nothing special.

It looked just like before.

"It's fine. You can look around," Nick said.

Everyone else slowly looked around, and their anxiety vanished when they couldn't see the Crimson Sea.

Then, everyone looked at the Specter.

Only Jenny and Nick had seen the Specter properly.

When Petra, Clayton, and Jason saw the Specter, they were quite surprised.

They weren't surprised by the Specter's appearance but by the fact that it was obviously missing several limbs.

It seemed like Boss had done quite a number on it.

Right now, the Specter was still recovering, and only the lower part of its jaw had recovered.

In probably half a day, it would have recovered its head, after which it would focus on its limbs.

All in all, it would probably need around two days to recover fully.

"Boss," Petra said after a sigh.

"We can talk later," Nick said as he grabbed the Specter. "We need to get back to the city first."

"Sure," Petra said with uncertainty.

Nick looked around the group. "Everyone ready?"

He saw a couple of nods.

Nick nodded back and ran towards the south while his team followed him.

Right now, Nick was especially careful.

After all, they were carrying quite a conspicuous Specter.

A minute later, they reached the Swallowing Swamp.

It wasn't very noticeable, but the Swallowing Swamp had lost about two centimeters of depth.

The most dangerous part of the journey was over.

After all, the most powerful Extractors were near the Desert, which had been just beside the mountain.

Luckily, the people there didn't like looking towards the city for obvious reasons.

The group continued traveling towards the west.

Suddenly, Nick's eyes were drawn to the south.

There, he met eyes with another person.

The person was a man with dark hair who was looking at Nick with furrowed brows from a distance of about 300 meters.

He wore the uniform of a Veteran belonging to Anatomy.

It was quite obvious that the Veteran had just been near Anatomy's Infester and was just going elsewhere.

'Just my luck,' Nick thought.

"Change trajectory," Nick ordered his team.

The next moment, they started to run towards the northwest instead of the west.

Instead of running towards the valley, they were now running past the northern wall of the valley, directly towards the city's entrance.

The reason why they had traveled through the valley was that it was difficult to see them from a distance unless someone else was looking directly into the valley from one of the edges.

But since they had been spotted, they no longer needed to stay hidden.

In fact, it was now better to travel as openly as possible.

After all, killing was still very illegal, and Kugelblitz would love seeing someone from Anatomy trying to kill someone else.

When the man from Anatomy saw Nick change trajectory, he turned around and ran towards the south, towards Anatomy's Infester.

Chapter 372 – Black Hair

Nick's heart rate increased when he saw the man running towards the south.

'There is most likely at least one Expert there,' Nick thought.

"Jenny, take the Specter!" Nick shouted as he threw the Specter to Jenny.

Jenny caught it, and Nick jumped past her.

"Continue towards the city, everyone!" Nick ordered. "I will keep watch over our back!"

The team started to run at full speed while Nick ran behind them.

Fortunately, his ability had activated again, which meant that no one was looking at him right now.

Nick kept looking towards the south as he ran after his team.

They were about four kilometers away from the city's entrance, but there were a couple of hills between their current location and the entrance.

"Do not turn around! Just keep running!" Nick ordered with a shout as he felt his ability deactivate after Petra glanced back.

Petra quickly turned forward again, but she was still worried for Nick.

After a couple of seconds, Nick turned to look at his team.

He wanted to make sure that if his ability suddenly deactivated, it wasn't because one of his teammates was looking at him.

Twenty seconds later, only three kilometers were between them and the bridge.

Nick's ability deactivated.

Nick rapidly looked in all directions.

But there was nobody!

He couldn't see anyone looking at him!

"DO NOT TURN AROUND!" Nick shouted.

WHOOOOM!

Suddenly, a huge ball of light appeared around Nick.

The four Extractors running in front of Nick felt like everything behind them was being swallowed by light.

Nick lost 80% of his Zephyx by making the ball of light so bright but now was not the time to save Zephyx.

And it was worth it since his ability reactivated again.

As soon as it did, he turned his back to the direction of the city and jumped.

Nick was jumping backward over his group while reaching a height of nearly a hundred meters.

At that height, Nick had to be extremely careful not to look at the city accidentally.

However, it also allowed him to see the person that had just been looking at him.

Right now, the person was rubbing their eyes furiously.

This was why Nick's ability cost so much Zephyx.

It had such a strong blinding effect that even Veterans and weak Experts would lose their eyesight.

Even more, the standard Barriers on the market were not designed to block this kind of light.

"Woman from Anatomy! Standardized MK-45 guns! Black hair! At least Veteran!" Nick shouted as loud as he could, his powerful voice traveling for over two kilometers.

By now, the woman's eyes had recovered, and she glared at Nick, who was touching the ground again in front of the group.

Her hands shook in frustration.

And then...

She turned around and ran towards the south.

Naturally, this had been Nick's goal.

If a dead person loudly announced the appearance of a person moments before they died, it would seem very likely that this person would be the killer.

Nick had announced enough attributes of the woman's appearance so that anyone could identify her.

Naturally, her goal had been to kill Nick.

She was one of Anatomy's Experts, and her position was already high enough that she was involved in several of Anatomy's illegal activities.

Anatomy was looking closely at Dark Dream, and Dark Dream's CZE was one of their main targets.

Yes, the woman had actually not been interested in the Specter.

She hadn't been here to steal the Specter but to kill Nick.

Sadly, she had just heard about Nick being outside from the Veteran who had run towards their Infester.

If she had time to prepare, she would put a cloak on, change her weapons, and stalk the group until she could take care of them in silence.

However, the group was already running back to the city on high alert.

Because of that, she didn't have any time to prepare.

And since Nick had just uncovered her, she couldn't kill him anymore.

She definitely had the power to kill Nick and his four teammates.

That would barely take five seconds.

But what if someone else was present and heard Nick?

What if the guards at the city's entrance heard him?

After all, his shout had been extremely loud.

Well, if Nick suddenly died, everyone would look at her.

She would most likely be found guilty and executed, and even more, Anatomy would receive brutal punishment as well.

Even if she were willing to sacrifice herself, killing Nick now would make Anatomy furious.

Yes, they wanted Dark Dream, but the risk-to-reward ratio was atrocious right now.

The good thing was that she hadn't committed to attacking yet.

Even if Dark Dream reported her, she could just say that she was passing by.

However, one thing still severely annoyed her.

'Lucky bastard,' she thought. 'He used that flash exactly when I was aiming at him!'

Nick landed in front of the group and looked towards the east, the place where that Extractor had just aimed at him.

Fortunately, nothing happened in the next couple of seconds.

When the team was only two kilometers away from the bridge, they got to a spot that was visible from the city's entrance.

"Hey!" Nick shouted, waving at the distant guards.

Some of them looked at the distant Nick.

They had heard his shout earlier, and they knew exactly what happened.

When they saw the black body that Nick was carrying, they knew why someone had targeted them.

Naturally, the guards were not happy to see Nick carrying a Specter.

These four guards were working for Anatomy, Kugelblitz, and Ghosty's Lab, and they would rather have the Specter in their companies.

Sadly, there was nothing they could do.

They just watched as Nick's group approached them and walked past them into the corridor.

"Lucky bastard got a Specter," one of them commented.

No one answered him.

When Nick saw the two Experts in front of the bridge, he sighed in relief.

They were safe now.

Chapter 373 – Back at Dark Dream

Nick and his employees approached the two guards in front of the bridge calmly.

The two people at the entrance of the bridge had already noticed them, and when they saw the black body on Nick's shoulders, their eyebrows rose in surprise.

"You got another one already?" one of them asked in surprise.

Nick nodded. "I was lucky," he said as he dumped the black body onto the ground.

The two guards looked with interest at the body.

"What does the Specter do?" one of the guards asked.

"Nothing related to mentality," Nick said. "It's only physically dangerous, and the Zephyx Suppressors around it are still active."

Naturally, Nick was telling them that he wanted to pass and that there were no issues.

One of the guards looked at the Zephyx Suppressors around the Specter. "How strong is it?"

"Adolescent," Nick said. "Between Mid and Peak."

The two guards still looked with surprise at the Specter.

It wasn't that they were surprised that there was a Specter but that Nick managed to catch two in less than two hours from each other.

He had to be insanely lucky!

"Alright, everything checks out," one of the guards said, gesturing towards the bridge with his head.
"You can go."

Nick grabbed the Specter and put it over his shoulders again. "Thanks," he said before he walked to the bridge.

"You're not getting a third one today, are you?" one of the guards asked.

"If I go outside again, I will not return alive," Nick said.

The two guards knew what Nick meant.

They used to work for other Manufacturers, and they knew about the hidden conflict.

"Understandable," the guard said.

Nick and his employees walked across the bridge.

When the guards guarding the inside entrance saw the Specter, their eyebrows rose in surprise.

Dark Dream got a Specter?

Naturally, every Manufacturer in the city would know about Dark Dream's new Specter within the hour.

"We're done for today," Nick told his team when they arrived in front of Dark Dream. "Good work. I expect you back at work in two days."

The four people relaxed noticeably.

They had been quite nervous during the entire excursion since any person could have died out there.

And their fear had not been unfounded.

After all, Petra had nearly died, and they had also been spotted by Anatomy near the end.

Luckily, they got what they wanted.

Two Specters!

"Thank you, Boss," Clayton said with his dark voice.

"I'm the one that should thank you," Nick said neutrally.

"Big guy! Let's grab a drink!" Jason shouted with laughter as he grabbed Clayton's shoulder.

Clayton looked at Jason, and his serious expression relaxed a bit. "It's been a while," he said.

"I know!" Jason shouted.

Then, he turned to Petra. "Hey, you also wanna come?"

Petra looked at Jason and thought for a bit.

"Of course, just give me a small moment," she said.

Then, she turned to Nick with a very serious expression.

"Boss, you've saved my life," she said. "Thank you so much! I will repay you someday!"

"No thanks necessary," Nick said. "Our agreement was that you would be bait and that I would protect you. I simply did what was expected of me."

A relaxed smile appeared on Petra's face. "Yes, but it still means a lot to me. Not many people would have charged into the darkness to save me. Please, just let me thank you."

Nick looked at Petra, and an uncomfortable expression appeared on his face. "Okay, sure."

Clayton and Jason looked with shock at Nick's expression.

Their stone-faced and serious Boss could also have this kind of expression?

When Petra saw Nick's face, she smiled brightly. "Thank you," she repeated.

Nick awkwardly nodded, and Petra walked over to Jason and Clayton.

Jason shook his head to recover. "Drinking time!"

Then, he took the lead and walked right toward the Inner City.

Clayton looked at Petra and gestured to Jason.

"Oh, right," Jason shouted as he turned around while walking away. "See you in two days, Jenny!"

Jenny just smiled. "Have fun! See you soon!"

Petra and Clayton also said their goodbyes before leaving for the Inner City.

Nick just looked after them as they were leaving.

"You did well today," Jenny told Nick.

Nick didn't say anything since his mind was occupied with something else right now.

Jenny looked at Nick with an uncertain expression.

"I'll go talk to Taren and see if everything's alright. See you later, okay?" she said as she approached Dark Dream's entrance.

"Sure, good work," Nick said absentmindedly.

When Jenny had seen Nick's uncertain expression earlier, it was like she had been transported to the past.

Back then, Nick had had this expression on his face every day.

He had always been so unsure and lively.

But over the years, he just became quieter and quieter, and two years ago, when that thing with the Crimson Sea happened, he changed even more.

Jenny wasn't sure if she had heard Nick's genuine laughter within the last two years.

She also knew that Nick didn't even own a home or house.

He was literally inside Dark Dream all the time, only working.

Did he even have hobbies?

Did he have friends?

It didn't seem like it.

Jenny remembered the early days of Dark Dream with fondness.

They weren't rich, but it had felt quite intimate and warm with just Wyntor, Nick, Trevor, and herself.

Sadly, things were different now.

Trevor and Wyntor were dead.

All the employees they had gained from Cycle were dead.

Except for Nick, Jenny was now the employee who had been with the company the longest, and it wasn't even close.

Thinking about the past put Jenny in a melancholic mood.

But then, she perked up again.

Sure, Wyntor and Trevor were dead, but the people who replaced them were just as great!

While Taren seemed much more driven and hungry for acknowledgment than Trevor, it was easy to get along with him, and he also inspired confidence in others.

And Wyntor's successor was even better!

Julian was Jenny's best friend, and even though they were now boss and employee, their friendship was doing just as great as before.

Maybe even better!

Chapter 374 – Payment Plan

As Jenny walked back into Dark Dream, Nick looked at his three distant employees.

Petra's words made Nick feel strange.

He genuinely didn't feel like he had done anything to be proud of.

They had had an agreement, and he had simply fulfilled his part of the agreement.

He had protected his employee.

But when Petra had been so thankful, Nick felt unnatural.

It was like he was not supposed to be in this situation.

People were not supposed to be thankful to him.

He felt like he didn't deserve their thanks.

Nick knew that he had done horrible things in the past, and he knew that it was almost impossible to redeem himself.

His only hope of redemption was to make Crimson City into a utopia.

But the chances of that dream coming true were low.

If it happened, Nick felt like it would be natural to be showered with thanks and praises.

Right now, though?

It felt wrong.

'Even if I saved one life today, that doesn't even make a dent into the thousands I owe,' Nick thought as he took a deep breath.

Breathing was no longer that important for Veterans, but Nick still sighed and took deep breaths in stressful or relieving situations due to habit.

Nick just slowly shook his head, grabbed the Specter, and walked into Dark Dream.

Ironically, Petra's words made Nick feel worse.

If she had said nothing, he would feel better.

Accepting her thanks was like taking something that didn't belong to him.

He almost felt guilty.

As soon as Nick saw the first mouth on the wall inside Dark Dream, his mood returned to normal again.

Whenever he was reminded of Julian's existence, he was reminded of his goal as well.

Looking at Julian was like looking at his debt and his payment plan for said debt at the same time.

Nick walked to the third floor of the building, and just as he expected, Julian was already waiting in front of the Specter's future Containment Unit.

"You already got another one," Julian said with a chuckle.

Other people might find Julian's chuckle to be polite and friendly, but in Nick's ears, it just sounded confident and arrogant.

He was the only one who knew Julian's true face, and he hated it.

However, he still believed that Julian was a better fit for leadership of the city than the current governor.

Nick went to the console of the Containment Unit and opened it.

The alarm of the opening Containment Unit thundered throughout the entire building, reminding Nick of the alarm inside the ruin.

But right now, the Specter was more important.

Several seconds later, the Containment Unit opened, and Nick threw the Specter into it.

Then, he closed the Containment Unit again.

Done.

The Specter was now securely suppressed in the last free Containment Unit on the third floor.

The other three Containment Units on this floor contained the Bleeding Lady, the Puppy, and the Money Sink.

It was an entire floor filled with Physical Specters at the Adolescent Stage.

'Bleeding Lady is still a Mid Adolescent. The Puppy is still an Early Adolescent. The Money Sink is a Late Adolescent, but she advanced only recently.'

'This new Specter might be the strongest Specter on this floor, but I don't think that it's about to become an Adult, based on its strength.'

'The Fog and the Lover are Mid Adolescents, and the Dung Heap is soon going to become a Peak Adolescent.'

'None of them will become Adults within the next four years.'

'The Dreamer is the only one that will advance within that timeframe, and only because I had to renegotiate its ratio of Zephyx.'

'However, it needs another two years or so to become an Adult.'

'We really need an Adult,' Nick thought as he looked at the Containment Unit housing the new Specter.

'The new Specter won't be valuable enough to purchase an Adult, but it's at least something.'

Nick glanced at Julian.

'Let's hope this piece of information is worth enough. I don't want to stop advancing for several years.'

"I have to talk to you in your office, Julian," Nick said.

Julian's human body raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Of course," he said.

Nick could feel the confidence in his control in Julian's words.

The two walked up to the seventh floor of the building and entered his office.

Julian sat down behind the desk, and his face transformed into a morphing mass of mouths.

Nick showed no reaction to Julian's appearance.

This was the ugly face of his actions, and he had to look at it every single day.

"I presume there's more?" the mouths said as he appeared and vanished from Julian's face.

"Yes, there's more," Nick said.

Nick told Julian everything that happened after he left the city for the second time.

"And you risked your life for her?" Julian asked with a ridiculing voice.

"It was our agreement," Nick said.

"Right, agreement," Julian said as if he didn't care.

Nick knew that the word agreement triggered something in Julian.

It wasn't trauma or something like that.

It was annoyance.

Julian's entire existence and power relied on bets, which were agreements.

Julian was the only being who couldn't break an agreement without causing significant damage to itself.

Naturally, these agreements made him feel stifled.

Agreements were like chains that were binding him.

That was why he had a specific dislike and disgust for people who kept their agreements, even though they could break them without any consequences.

It was like somebody who had the freedom to do something but refused to do it.

But Julian also knew that he shouldn't speak too badly about agreements.

After all, he and Nick had one, and he didn't want Nick to think that he would betray and kill him.

But Nick already knew.

While Julian's acting and his mask were perfect outside, he wasn't good at hiding his intentions when he wasn't wearing his mask.

It was not difficult for Nick to see how much Julian hated keeping agreements.

"And then, I noticed something," Nick said while recounting what happened.

"There was some light coming from behind some of the silk, and that light worked against the Nightmare's influence."

Chapter 375 – The Old World

When Nick started talking about the steel door, Julian became very interested.

Nick could tell that Julian was enraptured in the story by the fact that his mouths were not flowing as smoothly anymore.

Instead, they were sometimes flowing faster and slower.

This happened because Julian was no longer focusing on "appearing beautiful and mesmerizing".

"And you went inside?" Julian asked.

Nick nodded.

"What did you find?"

Nick told Julian about the piles of dust, the weapons, the steel armor, and so on.

However, there was one thing he was keeping secret.

And that was what he had seen on the monitors.

These things were going to be seen by Aegis, and Aegis was humanity's biggest shield.

Nick was willing to tell Julian about the building and what it contained, but he didn't want to tell him about the information from there.

Maybe Julian would have suspected that Nick wasn't telling him everything.

However, that thought didn't even occur to him since Nick dropped a bomb.

The machine!

A machine that made Zephyx!

Even if Nick kept something secret, it wouldn't be nearly as big and important as this machine!

"A machine that produces Zephyx?" Julian asked.

"Correct," Nick said. "At least, that's my assumption. I couldn't make sense of any of it."

"I wouldn't expect you to," Julian said with a chuckle. "From what you've been telling me, it seems like this ruin belongs to the Old World."

Nick was a bit surprised.

He hadn't expected that Julian knew something about the ruins.

"The Old World?" he asked.

Julian chuckled.

"The first world," Julian said. "You've seen the ruins below the city, right?"

Nick nodded.

"The first layer of ruins is built on another layer of ruins, which is built on another layer of ruins."

"Each layer has different materials and is made with a different architectural style."

Julian chuckled again. "You remember Albert? Your mentor?"

Nick just absentmindedly nodded.

"He was part of a team that worked on learning about past civilizations. I know all of this by talking to him and his colleagues."

"Apparently, there are tens of thousands of years of history buried beneath Crimson City. Civilizations upon civilizations rose and fell here."

"And as far as I can tell, the ruin you visited came from the Old World, which is the oldest civilization we know of."

"The Old World is one of incomprehensible technological advancement but also one of unprecedented weakness."

Nick's brows rose in surprise. "How is that possible?" he asked.

Julian chuckled some more.

"Because Specters didn't exist back then. At least, that's the theory," Julian said.

"Specters didn't exist?" Nick repeated in shock.

A world without Specters?

How?!

Nick's first thought was immediately about the Sun.

The Sun was a Specter, right?

So, how was the world back then?

Was it completely dark?

And with no Nightmare, was everyone just okay with living in the darkness?

Did people even need eyes, then?

But then, Nick was reminded of the lamps in the ruin.

Right!

Since they didn't have light back then, they had to make their own light!

Without light, they couldn't look at the world, which was why they created their own light!

'A world without Specters,' Nick repeated in his mind.

That seemed absurd.

Specters seemed just as eternal as humanity.

Tens of thousands of years...

That was such a long time.

What had happened back then?

'That also explains why everything was made of steel,' Nick thought. 'Without Specters, there's no Zephyx, and without Zephyx, you can't make Zephyx materials.'

'Wait, but they had Zephyx! They had this machine!'

'But with Zephyx, they also should have access to powerful materials, and the humans should have also been able to become more powerful.'

'But they didn't?'

Nick's mind was filled with contradictions.

Nothing made sense.

"The technologies from the Old World are incomparably advanced," Julian said. "Albert and his team looked at them, and for most of them, they couldn't even tell what they were used for."

"Nobody in the city even has a clue how the technology from the Old World works. The only things that make sense are their normal guns. We know how these work."

"However, the parts needed to construct these guns need to be so incredibly precise that it would take an Expert years to learn to make one, and every gun would take days or weeks of focused manufacturing to produce."

"And for what? For a gun that loses its effect on level two Extractors."

Julian chuckled again.

"The Old World is mystical."

"I'm not surprised that the Old World found a way to create Zephyx."

"But I am surprised that you found such a machine."

Nick was still lost in thought.

So many things didn't make sense.

"Why did you tell me?" Julian asked.

Nick was taken out of his thoughts and looked at Julian.

"Because I don't want to die," Nick said.

"Oh?" Julian repeated. "You think you wouldn't be able to hide it and that I would kill you for keeping it a secret from me?"

"No," Nick said. "It's not you killing me. It's the governor."

Julian remained silent for a bit.

Then, he began to chuckle.

Apparently, he found Nick's logic to be quite amusing.

However, he didn't tell Nick why he found it amusing.

"Interesting," Julian said. "You fear that the governor wants to silence you if you tell him. So, you told me first so that I can tell him since I don't need to fear such retaliation."

Nick nodded. "Also, the information about the ruin's location is probably also worth quite a bit."

"It sure is," Julian answered. "I can get quite a bit out of this."

"Aegis is very interested in ruins from the Old World, and the cities have to tell them if they found one of them."

"Aegis will most likely send some people to look into the ruin, and the city definitely gets something out of this."

Julian chuckled yet again.

"It was smart of you to tell me since you wouldn't be able to make use of this information."

"But I can."

Chapter 376 – Asking for a Meeting

Nick walked past the guards and entered the Inner City.

He and Julian had talked just a couple of minutes ago, and Julian had just sent him to schedule a meeting with the governor.

Due to Anatomy, Julian still couldn't leave Dark Dream.

Nick walked past all the happy people in the Inner City and approached the central administration building.

This building was the hub for citizens who wanted to talk to the city's administration.

Nick walked past the two Johns guarding the door and entered.

Inside, Nick saw two counters manned by two normal people employed by the city.

Right now, both counters were busy.

From what Nick could hear, one of the people was talking about marriage while another one was talking about a land dispute.

In front of the city, everyone was equal.

Normal people and Extractors both had to wait.

At least, that was how it was portrayed outside.

Nick had to wait for five minutes for one of the counters to become free, and he approached.

The middle-aged lady behind the counter looked at Nick with a very polite smile, which was rather funny since she had talked to the people before Nick with a bored and annoyed tone.

Of course, she had seen that Nick was a Veteran, and she didn't want to offend someone this powerful.

"Welcome, how may I help you?" she asked with a friendly tone.

"My name is Nick Nick, and I'm the Chief Zephyx Extractor of Dark Dream," he said.

The woman's eyes widened.

A Chief Zephyx Extractor!

She had never talked to one of those!

Chief Zephyx Extractors basically all lived in the upper layer of the Inner City, which had its own administration office.

Someone working for the administration office down here never got to talk to someone with such a high status.

"And I need to schedule a meeting with the governor," Nick added.

The administrator's eyes widened again, and she took a deep breath.

There were people who asked about meeting the governor, and of course, none of them got one.

However, this was a Chief Zephyx Extractor!

Could he get a meeting?

Frankly, she wasn't sure.

Offices like this worked with processes and set rules.

And the process for asking for a meeting with the governor was a flat refusal.

Someone living in the lower layer of the Inner City couldn't be important enough to meet the governor.

But this was a CZE!

"Could you please wait a moment?" she asked as she stood up. "I need to consult my superior."

Nick just nodded.

The administrator left and entered a different office.

Over a minute passed.

Eventually, the administrator and someone else walked back.

It was a smaller man with black hair, and he wore the uniform of a John working directly for the city.

"Hello, my name is Johanson Mithras, and I'm the department head," the man said. "You are Dark Dream's Chief Zephyx Extractor?"

"I am," Nick said with a nod.

"Good," the man said. "Are you asking for a meeting, or is Dark Dream asking for a meeting?"

"Dark Dream," Nick said.

"Just to be sure, you have the authority to represent Dark Dream?" he asked.

"I own 40% of Dark Dream," Nick said, "and I was sent by the person owning the other 60%."

"Julian, right?" the man said with a smile. "I know him!"

Nick only nodded without elaborating.

"Alright, that should qualify for a meeting," Johanson said. "Excuse me, but I haven't done this process before. It might take a while."

"No problem," Nick said.

Nick waited in silence as Johanson looked through several sheets of paper.

Minutes passed.

"How urgent is it?" Johanson asked, still searching through sheets of paper. "On a scale of one to five, where one is not urgent at all, and five represents an imperative security risk to the public."

Nick furrowed his brows.

"I would say three," he said. "I'm quite sure that the governor would want to meet us sooner rather than later."

"Us?" the man asked.

"Dark Dream's CEO, Julian Nergiar, wants to meet him inside Dark Dream's building. Due to some matters, he can't leave the building right now."

Johanson seemed uncertain. "I'm not sure if that is going to work."

"Just tell him that Julian wants to meet him," Nick said. "He will come."

"Well, okay, but I can't promise anything," Johanson said. "I will send the request up to the upper layer. Sadly, I don't know how long that will take to be processed. It could be minutes, but it could also be days."

"I will send someone to Dark Dream when we know more, okay?"

"Sure," Nick answered.

The two of them said their goodbyes, and Nick went back to Dark Dream.

When Nick entered Dark Dream, he noticed an absence of mouths on the walls.

Naturally, Julian knew that the governor would appear at some point, and having his mouths all over the walls was a bad look.

Nick told Julian about what he had discussed with the administrator and returned to work.

There was nothing to do except wait.

Luckily, just two hours later, they already got their answer.

A tall man with black hair stepped into Dark Dream's building.

When he entered, he seemed a bit annoyed by the fact that the building was angled towards the side.

That seemed quite unsafe.

He walked up to the receptionist, who looked at him with widely opened eyes.

Was that the governor?!

The governor was here?!

The receptionist didn't even say her practiced line and just looked at the governor in shock.

"Julian wanted to meet me," the governor said with a neutral tone.

"Markus! You came!"

The governor, Markus Julius, looked towards the staircase.

Julian stood there with a smile plastered on his face.

Markus had met Julian a couple of times, but they had never really had the time to have a proper conversation.

One of them had always been in a rush.

"Julian," Markus said in greeting.

The governor wasn't offended by Julian using his first name.

Outside of big meetings, the governor was fine with Specialists and Heroes calling him by his first name.

"Please, come up to my office. I have some good news."

The governor raised an eyebrow.

Good news?

That was rare.

Chapter 377 – Private Meeting

"I'm glad that we finally found some time to talk," Julian said as he led Markus up the staircase.

"Agreed," the governor said. "Your absence during the big meetings might not raise many eyebrows, but people might start to suspect things if you keep being absent."

Julian laughed in discomfort. "Yes, I know. Sorry. It's just very difficult right now due to Dark Dream's status."

"If I leave, any random Expert from a certain Manufacturer might come and free our Specters. I don't think either of us wants that."

Markus didn't seem surprised by what Julian said.

Naturally, he knew exactly what was going on.

He knew that all the Manufacturers were essentially warring with each other in secret.

Sadly, there was not much he could do about it.

The only thing he could do was to make it illegal and punish whoever was caught, which increased the risk associated with starting an attack.

But that couldn't stop them.

The only way to stop these attacks was to increase the level of surveillance.

However, that would anger the Manufacturers since that would make it extremely difficult to break the law.

Naturally, every Manufacturer was breaking the law in some way, and the governor knew that.

Sadly, if he tried too hard to catch every illegal thing going on, the Manufacturers might work together to dethrone him.

Markus was most likely the strongest Extractor in the city with Aria Light being his only competitor, but not even he could resist four different Heroes attacking him at the same time.

Because of that, it was important to give the Manufacturers a bit of freedom.

As long as they had some freedom to do what they wanted and compete, they wouldn't take the significant risk of attacking the city's government.

Markus knew very well that Anatomy was looking at Dark Dream very closely right now.

However, he also couldn't publicly acknowledge that he knew.

After all, he was supposed to uphold the law, and if people realized that he was secretly letting some crimes go, they would become furious and call corruption.

The two of them reached Dark Dream's seventh floor, and they saw Nick waiting in front of Julian's office.

Markus nodded to Nick in greeting, and Nick politely nodded back.

Julian opened the door and walked inside.

Markus followed after him, and Nick entered last.

Nick closed the door while Markus and Julian sat down in their chairs.

After that, he grabbed a chair and moved it to behind Julian's desk.

Usually, Nick would sit face-to-face with Julian, but this time, he would sit side-by-side with him.

"Coffee?" Julian asked with a bright smile.

"No, I don't have the time. Please, tell me the reason for the meeting," Markus said neutrally.

Julian just smiled more.

"Nick has stumbled upon a ruin from the Old World," Julian said directly.

Markus' eyes shone when he heard that, and he immediately looked at Nick.

"Is that true?" he asked, his voice serious.

"I do not know if it is from the Old World," Nick said. "However, I told Julian, and Julian thinks it is from the Old World."

"What have you seen in there?" the governor asked.

"Everything was made of normal steel," Nick said. "There were guns that made no sound but burned holes into a steel wall. There were many piles of dust. There were very advanced displays everywhere."

The governor narrowed his eyes as he looked at Nick.

"And...?" he asked expectantly.

"And a machine that produces Zephyx," Nick said.

The governor's eyes narrowed even further.

"How many people know of this?" he asked.

Nick became nervous, but Julian's confident demeanor reassured him.

"Only the people in this room," he said.

"Is that true?" Markus asked again.

Nick nodded.

Markus kept looking at Nick for a couple of seconds.

Nick didn't falter.

Then, Markus took a deep breath...

And sighed.

"That's good," he said. "It's important that very few people know of these things."

"How come?" Julian asked with a casual smile.

The governor glanced at Julian, not having expected that question.

"Why all this secrecy?" Julian asked. "People can't make sense of the technology from the Old World anyway. Additionally, the more the people know, the better. From the couple of times we talked, I felt like you had some altruistic characteristics. Wouldn't you want the people to know?"

The governor tried to find out what Julian's goal was with this question.

Was he calling out some hypocrisy?

Was this a veiled threat?

Was it some kind of scheme?

Yet, when the governor looked at Julian, he only saw casual curiosity.

It just seemed like Julian genuinely wanted to know.

Even though the governor talked regularly with many Specialists, they were still all very respectful in front of him.

Of course, Julian was just as respectful, but compared to the others, he also seemed a bit more personal and forward.

In a way, Julian was talking to the governor like they were old friends, but there was still deep respect audible in his words.

It was like they had been colleagues working together in the same company for years, even though they had talked for fewer than five minutes in total.

Julian was not breaking protocol, but his manner of speech was only something the governor experienced while talking to the four other Heroes of Crimson City.

Markus didn't dislike talking to Julian.

It was a bit refreshing.

The governor had been talking to people for over 200 years by now, and he was confident in his ability to unveil hidden intentions.

He was quite sure that Julian was just curious.

'Either that or he is the best manipulator I ever came into contact with,' the governor thought.

'There's no damage in telling them anyway.'

The governor looked at Nick, who looked back respectfully.

"You're right," the governor said. "It's better if the people knew about the Old World. Maybe a genius among the common people can even decipher some things and advance humanity."

"But it's impossible."

Chapter 378 – The Envious Researcher

"How come?" Julian asked, a curious expression on his face.

"It's not exactly a secret why, but it's better if the people don't know about this," the governor said.

"The less the people know about Adversaries, the less fear they feel."

Nick furrowed his brows.

So, an Adversary was involved.

"The Envious Researcher is one of the Adversaries that opposes humanity," the governor said. "Aegis is not certain if it has a personal vendetta against humanity or if its way of becoming more powerful inherently makes it humanity's enemy."

"While the Envious Researcher is not responsible for many deaths, its impact on humanity is probably amongst the greatest out of all the Adversaries."

The governor looked forward with severity, but his eyes were not focused on anything in particular.

"Whenever a significant advancement in technology is produced, the Envious Researcher gets attracted."

"If the significant advancement is only known by a handful of people, its attraction is not very strong, but as soon as the number of people knowing about it reaches the double digits, things become very dangerous."

"If, for example, you were to tell several people about the machine that produces Zephyx, the Envious Researcher will almost certainly show up..."

"And completely destroy the machine."

Nick looked with surprise at the governor.

"And the people that know about it?" he asked.

The governor glanced at Nick, and Nick felt like he had spoken out of turn.

"It depends on how much they know about it," the governor said. "If they only know it exists, nothing will happen."

"However, if they know a bit about how it works, the Envious Researcher will also destroy them."

"The Envious Researcher becomes more powerful by stopping humanity from advancing technologically. Anyone that develops new technologies is under constant danger with the Envious Researcher out there."

"Every new technology has to be kept top secret with only a handful of people knowing how it works. If we want to publicize that technology, we need to get past the stage of attraction."

"That is usually accomplished by producing hundreds if not thousands of products including said advancement, distributing them across many cities in secret, and then simultaneously teaching thousands of people all across the world."

"If enough people know about how it works and if it is too difficult to get rid of the advancement, the Envious Researcher won't try to stop it anymore."

"Sadly, publicizing every bit of advancement in this manner consumes great amounts of resources, making it very difficult and costly. Additionally, many people still die during the initial lessons."

"Teaching the public about technology is extremely dangerous."

"Luckily, you didn't tell more people," the governor told Nick. "Otherwise, the machine would probably have already been destroyed."

Nick looked at the governor with a bit of uncertainty. "Is there no way to deal with it?"

"I'm not privy to these things," the governor said. "Naturally, Aegis views the Envious Researcher as one of its greatest enemies, but a mere Hero is not someone that can get involved in such matters."

Nick just nodded, showing that he didn't intend to ask any more questions.

"Where is the ruin?" the governor asked, looking at Nick.

Nick blinked a couple of times in discomfort.

Sluuurp.

At that moment, Julian drank some coffee and released a sigh of relaxation.

Markus furrowed his brows in annoyance.

"You will get an adequate reward," the governor said.

Julian smiled brightly and turned to Nick.

"Nick, could you please lead our governor to the ruin?" Julian asked politely.

"Of course," Nick said, standing up.

Markus also stood up.

"Oh, Markus, one more thing," Julian said.

Markus turned to look at Julian with a bit of annoyance. "What?"

"I got something else that might interest the city, but it's not as important as the ruin. When you're done with the ruin, could you come back so that I can show you?" Julian asked.

"What's this about?" the governor asked.

"It's a Specter with a peculiar ability. Based on some theories, it might help against the Forests, and it might even help in weakening the Crimson Sea. However, that second part is not a certainty yet."

The governor was definitely interested, but just like Julian said, the ruin was of greater importance.

"I'll come back later," Markus said, walking out of the office while Nick held the door open.

Julian just smiled.

Nick quickly led the governor out of Dark Dream.

Nick was running at a high speed, but the governor had no issue in keeping pace.

Surprisingly, the people the two ran past didn't even notice the governor.

Not even the guards looked at him.

With enough power and experience, Zephyx could be used for many different purposes.

For example, Nick regularly used Zephyx to quieten the impact whenever he landed on the ground after jumping a great distance.

Someone as powerful as the governor probably didn't have any issue using his Zephyx to stay hidden.

"Just run past them," the governor said as the two of them approached the bridge.

Usually, Nick needed to identify himself whenever he left, but this time, apparently, he didn't.

Nick ran past the guards, and none of them batted an eye.

Even the two Experts on the other side of the bridge didn't seem to notice Nick.

When Nick saw that, the anticipation he felt lessened.

What if he ran around outside, and an Extractor of Anatomy decided to attack him?

Wouldn't it be great if they attacked him while the governor was just beside him?

Sadly, the governor also hid Nick from the outside.

The two of them left the corridor and ran towards the east.

A bit more than a minute later, the two arrived at the foot of the mountain.

"It's in there?" the governor asked.

Nick nodded.

"How did you find out that there is a ruin in there?"

"We were attacked by a Specter," Nick said.

Nick told the governor what happened while jumping towards the place where the hole was.

"You jumped into the darkness to save your employee?" the governor asked with furrowed brows.

Nick nodded before jumping into the hole.

The governor looked at Nick jumping into the darkness with an interested glint in his eyes.

Then, he jumped after Nick.

Chapter 379 – Answers

Nick landed in the middle of the cave, inside the darkness.

The Nightmare had already become active again.

However, the Nightmare's influence vanished very quickly as the governor landed beside Nick.

Markus was giving off a bit of light, and he looked at Nick expectantly.

Nick was a bit surprised that the governor could create light without any noticeable device.

'Does he create the light just by manipulating Zephyx?' Nick thought.

'Actually, isn't that how Zephyx Synchronizers work?'

'Zephyx Synchronizers just synchronize with a Specter's powers, which basically means just copying the way they use their Zephyx.'

'So, if someone knows exactly how an ability works, and if someone has the skill to manipulate their Zephyx this finely, wouldn't that allow them to use that ability without a fitting Zephyx Synchronizer?'

'However, I can't even imagine how difficult that would be to achieve. That's like trying to run while manually giving commands to every single strand of muscle I have in my body.'

"I'm using Zephyx Manipulation," the governor said after noticing that Nick was just looking at him.

"Please hurry up. It's quite costly to keep producing the light."

"Oh, right, sorry," Nick said.

Nick quickly ran down the cave, and the governor followed him.

A couple of seconds later, the two of them arrived at the door that Nick had destroyed.

The alarm was still loudly making itself known, and the light was still pulsing.

When the governor saw that, his eyes narrowed.

"Lead me around," he ordered.

"Of course," Nick said.

The two of them entered, and Nick showed the governor the steel suits in the lockers.

The governor went forward and looked closely at them.

"Why are the suits so weak and the weapons so strong?" Nick asked over the loud alarm.

The governor furrowed his brows without looking away from the suit.

It seemed like he was thinking about something.

Then, without saying a word, the governor put the suit down and went to the other room.

Nick watched as the governor took hold of one of these insanely powerful rifles.

Without saying anything, the governor pointed the rifle at one of the suits and pulled the trigger.

SSSS!

Surprisingly, several places on the walls were starting to sizzle while the suit didn't show any signs of damage!

When Nick saw that, his eyes widened.

How was this possible?!

Nick could tear these suits apart easily, but the guns were an actual threat to him.

And yet, the suits could resist that threat without any issues!

"Do you know how the people in the Outer City cook?" the governor asked.

Nick was taken aback by the seemingly unrelated question.

"Yes, they focus the light-"

That was when Nick realized what was going on.

"Wait, this is light?!" Nick asked.

The governor nodded. "Correct," he said. "And the shell of this suit is made of something that disperses the light. The only way to get through one of these suits is with physical force, and without Extractors, the only way would be high-caliber rifles."

"We believe that the light rifles were used to break through barricades and to kill humans who were not wearing these suits."

"We can see what these weapons can accomplish, and we can also somewhat understand how these suits defend from them, but we have no idea how these weapons manage to condense this much light to such a degree while using this little energy. We also don't know how to produce the material that defends against the light."

"We know it's possible, but that's the extent of what we know," the governor said.

Nick nodded as he looked at the suit with newfound respect.

'I didn't expect him to answer, and I certainly didn't expect him to tell me this much,' Nick thought with surprise.

After that, the governor asked Nick to show him more of the ruin.

"Remains of a deceased Old One," the governor said as soon as he saw one of the piles of dust. "Have you noticed something about them?"

Nick was a bit surprised that the governor asked him such a question.

Nick was only supposed to show the governor around, right?

But now, the governor was showing him things, and he was even asking him things that the governor most likely already knew.

"I noticed that their placement seems very organized," Nick said. "Most of them are in places where you would find humans. Above beds, guarding doors, in front of monitors, and so on. Only very few of them were in random places."

"I suspect that they were killed in an instant and that they weren't prepared for their deaths," Nick said.

"That's correct," the governor said as he took hold of one of the small squares lying in one of the piles. "It's like this in every single ruin of the Old Ones. At least, according to my knowledge."

The governor tapped on both sides of the square and shook the dust off it.

"We think that the Old Ones all died simultaneously without any prior warning."

The governor searched through the pile until he found a long cord.

"Every Old One in the entire world died at the same time. We do not know who or what did it."

The governor put the cord into the square and then walked over to a wall, searching for something.

"Our most likely suspect is the Sun."

Nick's eyes widened when he heard that.

Wait, the Sun?!

He knew that the Sun was incredibly powerful, but he hadn't expected that it could kill every single human in the world simultaneously without any of them being able to react!

Can Nurse Alice do this as well?

Can the Nightmare do this?

It didn't seem likely.

Nurse Alice always showed up personally.

By now, Nick knew quite a bit about Specters and Extractors, and he could also tell how Nurse Alice managed to show up this quickly whenever anyone said the Sentence.

It was actually very simple.

It was not some kind of illusion, teleportation, or domain.

No, Nurse Alice was just very fast.

Very, very, very fast.

Chapter 380 – Champion of Light

The difference in power between a common man and Nick was staggering.

Even without his ability, Nick was around 150 times more powerful than his base physical body.

He could jump for over a kilometer.

He could run faster than 200 kph.

He could lift things that weighed over ten tons.

And he was only an Early Veteran.

The difference in power between a normal person and an Early Veteran was the same in terms of magnitude as the difference between an Early Veteran and a Mid Specialist.

A Mid Specialist could clear over 50 kilometers in a single jump.

Their speed would have to be calculated in kilometers per second.

They could lift over a thousand tons.

And then, the same difference in magnitude applied again when one went from Mid Specialist to Late Protector.

The power of such a person was unimaginable.

And finally, a similar jump would happen when one went from Late Protector to the power of the Eternals.

Nurse Alice could probably move thousands of kilometers per second.

She could lift millions of tons.

Assuming someone on the other side of the world spoke the Sentence, Nurse Alice would barely need a couple of seconds to get there.

Nurse Alice was unimaginably powerful.

And yet...

Could she kill every single human in the world at the same time?

She could probably go to a city, obliterate it with a single strike, jump to the next city, do the same, and so on.

She could probably destroy a couple of cities in a single second like that.

But that would be the extent of her power.

She couldn't do what the Sun had done.

What about the Nightmare?

Well, there was an important distinction between physical power and an ability.

The Nightmare's influence was simply its ability, while the Nightmare itself had to be present in a certain location in the world.

If it wanted to, the Nightmare could jump from city to city and destroy them, just like Nurse Alice.

Encompassing the entire world with its ability while ignoring the sunlight, on the other hand, was most likely too much for the Nightmare.

So, the Nightmare also wouldn't be able to accomplish what the Sun had most likely done.

The Maw?

The Maw was most likely a Physical Specter, and even though it was theorized to be humongous, it also couldn't be present at the same time everywhere.

So, the Maw also couldn't do the same thing.

The Null?

Not much was known of the Null, but since it was possible to see it, as evidenced by Nick's loss of memories and his ability, it was most likely also a Physical Specter.

Maybe it had some kind of ability that could get rid of every person who knew about it, but that was a qualifier for its power, which put it on the same level as the Nightmare.

Most likely, the Null also wouldn't be able to accomplish something like that.

The Sun?

What kind of ability did the Sun have?

Where was its body?

Well, the Sun was in the sky.

Above everyone.

At all times.

No matter where.

No matter when.

It was omnipresent.

And if it was present, it could probably also act upon whoever was in its presence.

Could it kill every human in the world?

...

Most likely.

'Is that it's ability?' Nick thought. 'Is the Sun that we always see its true body, or is it just part of its ability?'

'Is the Sun actually the Sun?'

'The other Eternals all need certain conditions to use their powers.'

'Someone has to say the sentence.'

'A certain amount of people need to reach a certain level.'

'Someone has to be in the darkness.'

'Someone has to know something about you.'

'What about the Sun?'

'Does its power have conditions?'

'Or can it just use its power however it wants?'

Nick had been looking at the ground for quite a while now while the governor kept clicking on the square he held in his hands.

None of them said anything.

After a bit, Nick glanced at the governor.

He was unsure.

Why was the governor telling him all of these things?

'If he wants to kill me, I'm already dead. There's no point in being afraid of asking too much,' Nick thought.

"Does the Sun have an activation condition for its ability?" Nick asked.

The governor didn't answer immediately.

"Have you heard the story of the Champion of Light?" the governor asked.

"No," Nick said.

The governor stopped tapping on the square and turned his head to look at Nick with furrowed brows.

Nick just looked at the governor normally.

"Is this some form of joke?" the governor asked.

"No," Nick said. "Should I have heard of that story?"

The governor looked at Nick like he couldn't believe what Nick was saying.

"That's very unusual," the governor said. "The story of the Champion of Light is told to every child. It's a short story about a champion who is the manifestation of every despairing human's dreams and hopes."

"The Champion of Light is the manifestation of these hopes, and the more people wish for a brighter tomorrow, the more powerful he becomes."

"Eventually, when humanity is at its lowest point, the dreams of the despairing humans reach a crescendo, and the Champion of Light finally gains the power to destroy the Sun and replace it with himself."

"The eternal light of the Champion of Light banishes the Nightmare, incinerates Nurse Alice, seals up the Maw, and vanquishes the Null, ushering a new age of prosperity and hope."

"Parents tell this story to their children to make their lives just a bit more magical."

Nick wasn't quite sure why the governor was talking about a fairy tale. "But I've never heard about it."

"Which is why I was so surprised," the governor said. "The story has been deliberately designed to be easy to remember, like, and retell. It's a classic."

"The story has been created by Aegis, and it has a real purpose."

"After all, the Champion of Light is real."

Nick's eyes widened.