

The Sun 411

Chapter 411 – Disbelief

Nick opened the camera and took out a tiny roll of film.

CRK!

Nick crushed the roll of film in his hands and threw the camera to the ground in front of him.

After that, he walked to the side.

Several seconds of walking in silence later, Nick took hold of the pen and paper with the confession on it.

Nick quickly read through it.

It stated that Irwin had tried to kill Nick and that neither Solace nor Carl were involved in the matter.

Nick pocketed the confession and looked at Carl.

For a while, the two only looked at each other.

'Is he actually different?'

This was the thought that Nick had had several times over the last minute.

Back when Irwin had taken the picture, Nick had immediately used his third ability to blind everyone.

At the same time, he had turned into mist while falling to the ground.

Nick knew that Irwin was two levels above him and that he was a Sniper.

Snipers had the most terrifying attacks out of all Extractors, and Nick was quite sure that his Barrier wouldn't be able to block such a shot.

So, his only option had been to turn into mist.

The shot would still hit him, though.

Nick only hoped that Irwin used a precision attack instead of an area attack.

Good Snipers could release both kinds of attacks.

A precision attack was an attack that focused as much power as possible onto a tiny point, which would increase its penetrative power a lot.

Meanwhile, an area attack was the opposite.

Back when Nick had seen Envy's avatar and after he had used the alarm, the entire house in front of Nick exploded.

That had been the doing of a Specialist Sniper from high up on the megastructure.

If the Specialist Sniper had used a precision attack, there would have only been a tiny hole going through the house.

Instead, the surrounding 30 meters had been turned into nothingness.

This was an area attack.

If Irwin had used an area attack, Nick would have died in his fog state.

However, there was no reason for Irwin to use an area attack since that would waste a lot of his power.

Since he was targeting an Extractor, he needed to get through their Barrier, and the best way was to use a precision attack.

With a precision attack, a good part of Nick's mist would have been destroyed, severely weakening and injuring him.

However, Nick would survive.

Then, he would hide and recover before starting his counterattack.

But that never happened.

Instead, Nick didn't feel any attack hit him.

He only saw Carl standing between him and Irwin.

Of course, at that moment, Nick didn't think about any of these things and immediately moved through the dust clouds Carl had created by charging towards Nick at such speeds.

Nick quickly flowed into one of the cracks and hid between two boulders.

At that point, he was already planning his counterattack.

But then, he noticed that Carl and Irwin were fighting, and he watched them from his hiding place.

When Nick saw the half-dead Irwin getting thrown into the middle of the boulder formation, he became skeptical and confused.

Was this some kind of scheme to get Nick to come out of his hiding spot?

But that didn't make any sense.

After all, Carl saved him.

Why would Carl save him just to kill him in a completely convoluted scheme?

When Carl had asked Nick to come out, Nick hesitated.

All of this felt too strange.

Over the years, he had learned again and again that almost all humans were only interested in gorging themselves on others' belongings until their bellies nearly burst.

All the Manufacturers were turning the lives of the normal people into nightmares, and the government was complicit in all of these things just to keep their own asses from receiving any bruises.

Even Julian kept telling Nick again and again that the average human causes more damage to humanity than the average Specter.

Nick fully expected Carl to not be any different from all the other humans.

But then, Carl threw the camera away.

Initially, Nick was sure this was some kind of scheme to lure him out, even though logic dictated that Carl wouldn't do something like that.

It was just that hard for Nick to believe that someone powerful wasn't an irredeemable monster.

But when Nick actually held the camera in his hands and saw the film inside, he was forced to believe Carl.

And when Carl called him out again a bit later, Nick decided to come out.

'He's actually different,' Nick thought, looking at Carl.

'He never wanted to kill me, and even when his own survival was on the line, he followed his own morals.'

'Sure, he believed that I was still there, but that wasn't a certainty.'

Nick had to wrestle hard with his outlook on humans as a whole.

Now that he thought about it, he also remembered Simon Francium and the Champion of Light.

People like those two were the only reason why humanity was still around.

'Nevertheless, the vast majority of humanity is still only interested in themselves and their immediate family,' Nick thought. 'If that weren't true, Aegis wouldn't need to suppress everyone and force them to commit their lives to humanity.'

'However, there are still good people around.'

'And maybe they are not as rare as I actually thought.'

Nick almost felt like none of this was real.

Someone in this world was willing to put their own survival at risk for their morality.

This was so rare and strange that the chances of being in some kind of hallucination created by a Specter were higher.

After a bit, Nick walked towards Carl, who looked at him with a relieved expression.

Nick stopped a couple of steps in front of him.

His blades were not out.

"This almost caused at least one good person to die," Nick said. "But thanks to your efforts, that won't happen."

Chapter 412 – Shame

"Nick, listen, I'm sorry for what I said earlier," Carl said. "I did not mean to say-"

"It's fine," Nick interjected. "I get what you mean. You don't need to apologize."

Carl looked at Nick in relief.

"In fact," Nick continued. "I should be the one who should apologize."

"You were just asking what happened, but I immediately jumped to the conclusion that you wanted to bury this entire matter and silence me."

Nick sighed. "I nearly killed you because of an unfounded speculation."

"We talked about this earlier," Carl said. "We both made a mistake. Two idiots, right?" he added with a smile.

"Two idiots," Nick repeated with a small smile of his own.

The two of them fell silent.

It was relieving to talk like this, but there was still one obvious matter that hadn't been dealt with.

Nick looked at Irwin, who refused to look at Nick.

Irwin was turned to the side, and Nick could only barely see the side of one of his eyes.

Naturally, Nick could tell what Irwin was feeling.

He was ashamed.

However, there was one thing Nick wasn't sure of.

Was Irwin ashamed of what he had done, or was he ashamed that he hadn't succeeded?

If Irwin had succeeded and several hours or days passed, would he regret his actions?

How closely was Irwin's mind connected to his emotions?

Someone could do something horrible when they felt infuriated, which they would never do under normal circumstances.

However, the way the human acted after the deed had been done was different from person to person.

Some of them wouldn't regret it since they had succeeded in what they had done.

In short, as long as there were no extrinsic consequences, they wouldn't really feel bad.

But there were also humans that would feel appalled and disgusted by what they had done.

For some of them, receiving no extrinsic consequences was even worse than receiving them.

Some people were riddled so much with guilt that their lives ended.

Nick knew very well how it felt to have such heavy guilt.

So, what kind of person was Irwin?

Would he have regretted his actions if they had succeeded or not?

Nick couldn't be sure.

Was he a good guy who made a mistake or did he only act like one, and his true nature actually came to light just now?

"Let's deal with this issue when we're back," Nick said as he turned to Carl. "I don't think we can continue our excursion right now."

Carl released a sigh.

Naturally, he hated Irwin for what he had done, but he still felt bad for him.

If Nick forgave Irwin, he would have said so right now.

Yet, Carl couldn't fault Nick.

Irwin had tried to kill him.

That was as bad as it got.

If there were truly unforgivable things in the world, that would most likely be among them.

"Of course," Carl answered. "Nick, you can walk behind me."

Nick nodded.

"Irwin," Carl said, and Irwin glanced at him. "You walk in front of me, please."

Irwin took a deep breath, sighed, and nodded.

"Go," Carl said.

Irwin started to run towards the west, and Carl followed after him.

Nick was running just behind Carl.

The three of them reached the tunnel and ran through it.

When they came out from the other side, they ran further towards the west.

The things that Nick had seen should have left by now.

Sure enough, over the next couple of minutes of running, they didn't see anyone else.

Eventually, they reached the lifeless area north of the city.

Instead of jumping into the city, they walked around it counterclockwise.

They quickly saw the Carbon Fields and the guards there.

After exchanging some words with the guards, they passed through the Carbon Fields.

The Carbon Fields were filled with green bushes that didn't have any kind of fruits or flowers.

They were essentially just made of green leaves and brown bark.

After they left the Carbon Fields, they quickly reached the southern entrance of the city.

They greeted the guards and entered the tunnel.

"Any Specters?" the two Experts guarding the bridge asked.

"No," Carl said.

One of the guards nodded and motioned for the three of them to pass.

Moments later, the three of them entered the city again.

They were back home.

It was actually shocking how short this excursion was.

From the time they had left the city to the time they had returned, barely an hour passed.

Yet, so much had happened within that hour.

"Nick," Carl said as he looked at him. "I'm going to bring Irwin to Solace and tell Hera and Marion about what happened. If you have the time, please come and tell us what you've seen. You still didn't tell us what these things that had been searching for us were."

"Sure," Nick said.

Irwin shot a short glance at Nick before gritting his teeth.

He looked like he wanted to say something.

Yet, he just looked away again.

Nick glanced at Irwin, who was refusing to look in Nick's direction.

Carl took a deep breath, put his hand on Irwin's shoulder, and guided him towards the Inner City.

The two of them left Nick behind in the Outer City.

For a while, Nick didn't move.

Eventually, he jumped to the side and traveled from rooftop to rooftop.

After some seconds, Nick reached the roof of a familiar house.

He hadn't been here in a long time.

The last time he had been here, he had been thinking about what to do with Wyntor.

That was also when Julian had shown up.

For a while, Nick just looked at the red curtain of mist in front of him.

Irwin had attempted to kill him.

He deserved to die.

And yet, as Nick looked at the red curtain, an image popped into his mind.

It was an image of himself.

And that image overlapped with Irwin.

Nick saw a lot of himself in Irwin.

Nick had done many things he regretted, and he still felt indescribable guilt.

Wasn't the reason why Nick was doing all of this to redeem himself?

Wasn't he searching for forgiveness?

Nick thought about Irwin.

Then, he thought about himself.

'But do I even deserve forgiveness?'

Chapter 413 – Irwin's Fate

Four people sat in a meeting room.

The atmosphere was heavy and tense.

Irwin sat in one of the chairs and looked at the table, his eyes wet with tears.

Carl looked with seriousness at the two people on the other side of the table.

Ramona Illium was rubbing the bridge of her nose.

Hera Marion looked at the table with deep thought.

Silence.

"What do we do now?" Carl asked.

Ramona sighed. "It's not up to us."

"It's up to Nick," Hera said without looking up from the table. "What we do doesn't matter."

"He was the victim, and whatever he wants to do is what will happen."

"The best thing we can hope for is that Nick won't fault Solace," Hera said.

"I don't think he will," Carl said. "I spoke to him, and he seemed like a genuine guy."

Hera didn't seem certain. "I thought so, too, a couple of years ago, but I'm not sure if that's still accurate. He changed quite a bit."

"He used to be really nice, almost naive, but he hasn't been like that in years."

Knock, knock, knock!

"Come in," Ramona shouted to the door.

The door opened, and the receptionist peeked through the door.

Irwin didn't seem to react.

He knew that this was probably his fate knocking on the door, but he just didn't care anymore.

"Miss, the Chief Zephyx Extractor of Dark Dream wants to talk to you," the receptionist said.

Almost everyone in the room took a deep breath.

"Bring him here," Ramona said with a neutral voice.

"Of course, miss," the receptionist said before she closed the door again.

"Well, at least we don't have to wait for much longer," Hera said, looking away from the table and leaning back.

Carl looked at Irwin.

Irwin's fists were clenched as his gaze was fixed on the table.

He hadn't said anything ever since he had returned.

The four of them waited in silence.

Knock, knock, knock.

The atmosphere in the room became tense.

Ramona and Hera took deep breaths.

"Come in," Ramona shouted.

The door opened fully, and the receptionist gestured for the person beside her to enter.

Naturally, it was Nick.

Nick wordlessly walked into the room with a neutral expression.

The door behind him closed.

Hera stood up. "Nick," she said with a careful voice.

"It's fine," Nick said, casually waving her off. "I do not fault Solace. Carl did everything he could to help me, and since he was the leader of the excursion, he also represented Solace. As far as I'm concerned, Solace did its absolute best to help and protect me."

Near the table, Ramona sighed in relief.

Hera also sighed, and a relieved smile appeared on her face. "Thank you, but still, one of our Extractors has done something horrible, and we still feel like we owe you an apology."

"If it makes you feel better, sure, I'll accept the apology," Nick said.

Hera just smiled.

Next, Nick looked at Ramona and nodded in greeting.

Ramona returned the nod with a smile.

Next, Nick looked at Carl with a quick smile.

Carl returned a weak smile.

Finally, Nick looked at Irwin with distant and disregarding eyes.

Irwin didn't dare to look at Nick.

"Irwin, look at me," Nick said.

Irwin's body shook, and he turned his head to the side.

"You tried to kill me, and now, you don't even want to do me the small favor of looking at me?" Nick asked neutrally.

Irwin's body became very tense.

And then, he slowly moved his head to look at Nick.

Nick looked into Irwin's eyes.

"Do you regret what you've done?" Nick asked.

Irwin's eyes fell, and he looked at the table again.

"Look at me," Nick said.

Irwin looked at Nick.

"Yes," he said with a soft voice.

"Do you feel guilty?" Nick asked.

Irwin sighed and nodded.

"Are there other things you regret? Have you done things in the past you would change if you could?" Nick asked.

Irwin looked at the table again with forlorn eyes.

Nick didn't tell him to look at him.

A couple of seconds of silence passed.

"I don't know," Irwin said. "I looked at some of my past mistakes positively since they brought me to where I am today."

"But now, I don't like where I am."

"So, maybe I should have regretted some of my mistakes more."

It was quite obvious that Irwin was honest.

The best thing for him to do was to answer with yes and recount a couple of minor bad things to show that he wasn't a bad person.

Yet, he said that he didn't know.

Many times, when someone found themselves in a horrible situation they had never been in, they didn't know what to think or how to evaluate themselves.

"You regret your current situation, not the situations you have placed others in?" Nick asked coldly.

"What does it matter?" Irwin asked.

Silence.

Nick looked deeply at Irwin.

Irwin hadn't looked at Nick again after he initially looked away.

He had a rebellious look on his face, almost like a teenager who had been caught doing something bad.

Thanks to all of Julian's lessons, Nick could take a good guess as to what was going on.

Oftentimes, people didn't act according to their true feelings.

Nick took out the confession that Irwin had written.

"You're not like me," Nick said.

Crrr!

Nick tore the confession apart, put the torn pieces on top of each other, and tore them apart again.

He did that a couple of times until only tiny bits of paper were left.

The other three looked at Nick with wide-open eyes.

Irwin didn't look at Nick, but his body shook.

Nick let all the pieces fall to the ground.

"Carl is someone I learned to admire, and he believes you to be a good person," Nick said.

"Today is the closest you have ever gotten to death, and it is 100% your own fault. If you had died today, it would be completely on you."

"Your past has led you to this point."

"Take this as a wake-up call."

"This is the last chance you're going to get."

"Change or die."

Then, Nick looked at the others in the room and nodded.

"We'll talk some other day."

Finally, Nick walked out of the room.

Chapter 414 – Irwin

The people in the room were left in complete shock.

None of them had expected Nick to forgive Irwin.

This seemed very unlike him.

And they would be right.

In the past, whenever anyone had gone against Nick in any way, Nick retaliated.

But this time, he didn't.

Why?

Well, there were several reasons.

Before Nick had come here, he hadn't been completely sure what to do.

He was more on the side of letting Irwin go, but he hadn't been completely sure.

To be sure, he had to talk to Irwin and look at him.

He wanted to see how Irwin would act.

The fact that Irwin refused to look at Nick spoke of deep shame.

But what kind of shame?

Was it the shame of having done something horrible, or was it the shame of being confronted with one of your biggest mistakes?

Did Irwin resent Nick?

Nick could tell that Irwin resented him a little bit.

He regretted not succeeding.

Nick could tell as much.

However, Nick knew a lot about people now.

If someone was with their backs against a wall without being able to fight back in any way, one would believe that this person would show their true self.

And in a way, that was correct, but not completely.

Irwin had not tried to paint himself in a positive light at all.

In fact, he was even a bit dishonest when it came to his portrayal of himself.

He was overly harsh and presented himself as uncaring.

Was he truly uncaring?

Most likely not.

Carl and Mark had been very close friends with him, and Irwin had been so insanely close to Mark that he had lost control of himself.

This showed that he could feel very deeply for others.

A cruel and cold person wouldn't have attacked Nick in this scenario.

A cold and cruel person would realize that attacking Nick would be absolutely stupid.

Yet, the pain Irwin felt from having his friend die riled him up so much that he lost control and did something horrible.

And when he had said that it didn't matter what others thought, did he truly mean that?

In his opinion, yes.

But he was wrong.

Very often, in highly emotional situations, humans were atrocious at evaluating what they truly felt and wanted.

So, what was the real reason why he portrayed himself so horribly?

He wanted to be punished.

He didn't think that he deserved forgiveness.

Of course, Irwin didn't actually consciously know that.

He just thought that he truly was a cold bastard and acted as such.

Naturally, Irwin wasn't some kind of saint or altruistic person.

He was just like everyone else.

Of course, Nick couldn't be completely sure about all of this.

Whenever it came to evaluating people, there was a big degree of uncertainty.

If you get one thing wrong, the entire result may be the exact opposite.

It was possible that Irwin truly was some kind of deeply scheming and cold person.

This uncertainty was why Nick hadn't been sure.

In fact, he was still unsure now.

But he was fine with that uncertainty.

Something that was uncertain now might become certain with time.

And when that time arrived, it was still possible to take action.

Nick returned to Dark Dream and told Julian about everything that had happened.

When Julian heard how Nick had dealt with Irwin, he chuckled.

"I'm surprised," Julian said with a sinister chuckle. "I didn't think that you could make such a rational decision in such a situation."

"If everything works out right..."

Nick didn't say anything.

He knew that his decision had a chance of benefiting Dark Dream, but that wasn't the reason for making it.

"As for these red people, I think we can get some good money out of that," Julian said with a toothy smile.

"Nobody knows the reason why the zone to the north is forbidden, and I think that knowledge is worth quite a bit."

Nick also didn't give an answer to that.

Eventually, Nick left Julian's office and went back to work.

Over the next couple of days, a couple of things happened.

First of all, Irwin was fired.

Naturally, Solace wouldn't keep someone like Irwin employed.

Next, Carl and everyone else in Solace broke contact with Irwin.

Carl just couldn't forget how Irwin had smiled when he had shot at Nick.

That was not the person he had thought Irwin would be.

The reason why everyone else broke contact was due to Solace's order.

They didn't state the reason since it would be considered keeping a crime secret if that information reached the city.

Irwin had lost all of his friends and contacts in one day.

And he didn't care.

It didn't matter.

For days, he just kept walking around aimlessly.

Sometimes, he looked at the red curtain.

Sometimes, he looked at the megastructure.

Sometimes, he just looked at the ground.

He was not sure what he was feeling, but for the first time, he wished that he could sleep.

Sleep had always felt like a huge waste of time to him, but now, it felt like it was the best use of time.

Irwin just didn't want to be in this situation anymore.

Everything was shit.

And most of all, he felt like shit.

For several days, he didn't care about anything.

But then, things got worse and worse.

His mental state deteriorated more and more.

He didn't need to eat, drink, or sleep.

Because of that, he technically didn't even need to spend or earn any money.

He could just exist perpetually without doing anything.

And that was the most horrible part.

There was nothing.

He had no goal.

He didn't need to do anything.

He just existed.

Feeling like shit.

He was lost.

He didn't even try to get a job.

He didn't want to do anything.

Eventually, he reached his lowest point.

He came very close to saying the Sentence.

But he couldn't do it.

He just couldn't throw his life away.

He had been put before a choice.

Die.

Keep living.

He had chosen to keep living.

And the first thing he did after making that decision was as unexpected as it was expected.

He went to Dark Dream and asked to see Nick.

Chapter 415 – Many Ways

Nick looked at Irwin with a neutral expression.

Right now, Nick sat behind his desk while Irwin stood in front of the office door.

Irwin looked at Nick with worry, fear, and desperation.

For the first time, Nick didn't need to tell him to look at him.

"I want to redeem myself," Irwin said, repeating the words he had just said.

Nick didn't answer.

"Apologizing would be making light of what I have done," Irwin said with a shaky voice. "I don't ask for an apology. I don't ask to be forgiven. No matter what I do, you might never forgive me."

"But I still want to try!" Irwin said, almost shouting.

Nick remained silent for five seconds.

"Why?" he asked neutrally.

That simple word intimidated Irwin.

Right now, in front of Nick, Irwin couldn't muster any strength.

He was like a small child begging their parents on their knees.

"I can't live with this guilt," Irwin said.

Then, he took a deep breath.

"And I also can't die," he added.

Nick remained silent for a couple of seconds.

"So, you want to feel better. You don't care what I feel," Nick said evenly.

Irwin's body shook. "No! No! That's not true! I want to make things right! I want to do everything in my power to pay you back!"

Nick remained silent for some seconds.

"Because your feelings drive you to make things right," Nick said evenly.

Irwin couldn't immediately answer.

He would love to rebuke Nick immediately.

In his mind, he was doing his best to redeem himself by helping others.

Yet, in front of Nick, he couldn't muster any strength.

He just didn't dare to talk back.

The room fell into silence.

This situation was why Julian had laughed.

There were a couple of ways things could have gone after Nick had let Irwin go.

In every case, Irwin would have been fired by Solace.

Solace couldn't afford to have him keep working for them while still having a good relationship with Dark Dream.

They had to and wanted to fire Irwin.

And when a Manufacturer fired a Peak Veteran, they must have had a good reason, which meant that no other Manufacturer would possibly hire Irwin again.

Everything after that depended on Irwin.

If he didn't feel any guilt, he would have searched for new companions and opportunities.

He would have continued training.

He would have tried to contact some people to maybe get a job.

He would have tried to get employed by the city.

Maybe he would have searched for love or built some kind of business.

If any of these things happened, Nick would have gotten his answer to his uncertainties.

At that point, he could have killed Irwin himself, told Julian to do it, or just tell the city.

Just like that, his life would be over, and Nick wouldn't need to think about any what-ifs.

The same thing would have happened if Irwin had decided to dedicate his life to revenge on Nick.

Due to what Irwin had done, Nick had full power over his life.

He could kill him without any consequences whenever he wanted.

The confession was irrelevant since he didn't need it.

And finally, what if Irwin actually felt guilt?

In that case, it could have gone a couple of ways.

Maybe he would kill himself because his entire life broke apart.

Maybe he would eventually recover and live with this guilt for the remainder of his life.

Or maybe he would try to get rid of this guilt.

Which would bring him to Dark Dream.

If Nick had directly told the city, Irwin would have been executed.

But if he didn't, Irwin would have either been executed or become one of Dark Dream's most loyal and powerful Extractors.

Someone like Irwin would most likely never betray Dark Dream.

Julian knew all of these things, which was why he had laughed.

Nick also knew that it would go either of these ways, but this wasn't the reason why he had made his decision.

Most of all, Nick wanted to see how someone else would act in this situation.

Irwin had done something horrible, which filled him with guilt.

Wasn't that just like Nick?

Nick wanted to see what someone else would do.

When Nick had said that Irwin wasn't like him, he had referred to something specific.

Nick meant that Irwin hadn't done something unforgivable.

Irwin had attempted to kill someone.

Yes, that was bad.

However, he didn't succeed.

Additionally, Nick wasn't an innocent child, and he knew that.

Meanwhile, Nick was responsible for over a thousand deaths of innocent people.

Nick knew that his guilt weighed infinitely more than Irwin's guilt.

So, Nick wanted to give him a chance.

Maybe he could make things right.

And if Irwin actually succeeded...

Maybe Nick could also succeed.

"There is nothing wrong with that," Nick said after ten seconds of silence.

"We humans are inherently selfish."

"We help others because we want to be repaid."

"We help others because we want to be seen as good."

"We help others because we want to feel good about ourselves."

"In every case, helping others is very often helping ourselves since we get something out of it almost every single time."

"True selflessness doesn't exist."

"And yet, helping someone is still considered to be more good than killing them unless they are a monster or something similar."

"This means there is a gradient."

"Since true selflessness can't exist, it is impossible for humans to reach the good end of the gradient."

"So, we have to move the goalpost."

"In that sense, the best person is somebody who helps others without expecting them to repay the deed. That is as selfless and good as it gets."

"The person still gets satisfaction and positive emotions out of that, but that can't be helped. It is the best that person can be."

"You want to get rid of your guilt, which is why you are here."

"Are you a good person?"

Nick chuckled as he looked at the table.

"You tried to kill me. Of course, you're not a good person," Nick said.

Irwin just looked at Nick in silence.

"But I see that you're trying."

"And while I have not forgiven you, I am willing to give you the chance to try."

Then, Nick took out a prepared contract.

All of Irwin's information had already been put in.

Chapter 416 – Welcome to Dark Dream!

Nick had shown that he had prepared the contract in advance on purpose.

The purpose was to intimidate Irwin.

Naturally, Irwin realized that everything had been prepared beforehand and that Nick had expected him to come, asking for forgiveness.

While Irwin would be extremely loyal due to his own guilt, that didn't necessarily mean that he viewed Nick as superior.

Because of that, Nick wanted to intimidate him.

Feeling predictable equaled feeling vulnerable.

Humans put a lot of value on their free will.

Free will meant freedom and being able to make one's own choices.

However, if someone could predict everything someone else did, that feeling of power vanished.

The way Nick had spoken had shaken Irwin's confidence even more.

When someone's confidence was completely broken, they were far more likely to accept almost any kind of information at face value.

Due to the sheer power imbalance, Irwin viewed everything that Nick had said as the truth.

Nick had completely intimidated Irwin, and subconsciously, Irwin felt very vulnerable and weak in front of him.

Irwin took hold of the contract with slow hands, afraid of making any sudden movements.

Nick looked at Irwin with neutral eyes.

Irwin's entire body was sweating due to pressure.

Irwin was two levels higher than Nick, but right now, he felt like a little child standing in front of an intimidating stranger in a lonely alley.

Irwin read through the contract, and he felt guilty about doing that.

His emotions were telling him that he should just sign and that reading the contract showed disrespect to Nick.

"You don't need to hurry," Nick said, his voice startling Irwin. "Take your time."

"Th-thanks," Irwin answered before he looked back at the contract.

The more Irwin read, the more shocked he became.

This contract was too good!

Sure, Irwin wouldn't get any authority, but his pay was insanely high!

10% of what he earned for Dark Dream was what he would get!

He would earn more than double of what he had earned in Solace!

When Irwin was done reading the contract, he felt even guiltier than before.

This felt more like a reward than a punishment.

Irwin's hand was shaking as he took hold of the pen.

Finally, he signed before handing the contract back to Nick.

Nick also signed the contract and stood up.

"Follow me," Nick said.

"Y-yes, sir," Irwin said nervously as he quickly shot to his feet.

"Everyone calls me Boss," Nick said as he walked out of his room.

"Sure, B-Boss!" Irwin said, quickly following behind Nick.

Nick led Irwin to another office and entered without knocking.

Irwin walked after Nick, and when he saw the person in the office, he looked away in guilt.

"My, my, Irwin. You made quite a blunder, didn't you?" Julian said with a chuckle.

"I'm sorry," Irwin said, not looking at Julian.

Naturally, Irwin felt extremely guilty in front of Julian.

After all, Irwin had nearly killed Julian's most important employee.

"It's fine," Julian said with a laugh. "Sit down. Nick already told me about everything."

Irwin did just that and sat down in the chair in front of Julian's desk.

Nick stood diagonally behind Irwin, which made Irwin nervous.

Julian just smiled and laughed. "Now, you don't need to be so nervous. You're part of Dark Dream now, after all."

Then, Julian casually signed the contract and gave Irwin a copy.

"Nick is the one that deals with all the personnel matters of the Extractors," Julian said. "He is the one that decides who gets hired and who gets fired."

"I trust him with these matters, and I just put my stamp on any matter he presents to me when it comes to his part of the business."

"Our friendship is not the reason why you are here right now," Julian said with a smile.

Irwin took a deep, nervous breath and nodded.

"Good that you understand," Julian said with a smile. "Welcome to Dark Dream!"

"Th-thanks," Irwin said.

Irwin had understood Julian's message clearly.

Nick held all the power over Irwin's fate.

And from what Irwin could see, going against him in any way was the worst thing he could do.

Julian nodded again with a smile. "If there's anything you need, you can tell Nick."

"Of course," Irwin said nervously, standing up.

He knew that Julian had just politely told Irwin to leave his office.

Nick opened the door behind Irwin, and the two of them walked out.

After that, Nick gave Irwin his uniform and his equipment.

"You can come back tomorrow. Tomorrow at 8 a.m., I'll show you around. Due to your level, I will not put you on any of the teams. You will be working directly beneath me, but keep in mind that your position is not superior to others."

"While you don't need to take orders from the team leaders, the team leaders are still my most trusted employees, and I am more likely to believe them over you if there is a problem."

"Do you understand?" Nick asked.

Irwin nodded twice. "Yes, Boss."

Nick nodded back slowly.

"See you tomorrow," he said, walking to his office.

"Thank you, Boss. See you tomorrow!" Irwin said nervously.

Irwin was left alone in the hallway, and he nervously looked around.

He now worked for Dark Dream.

That didn't feel real.

It felt especially strange since the past weeks had felt like a dark dream to him.

Maybe it had always been his fate to end up here.

Irwin turned around and left the building.

He wasn't sure what he would do until tomorrow.

Just like that, Dark Dream had gained a Peak Veteran.

As a very powerful Mid Veteran, Nick's power had been leagues above any other employee.

This had always been an issue since no other employee was strong enough to really help Nick.

But now, they finally had one!

A powerful Sniper and Senser!

Even more, Irwin had been on hundreds of excursions into the outside world.

By hiring Irwin, Dark Dream had essentially received an extremely valuable map of the outside.

Maybe that was worth even more than capturing a Specter.

Chapter 417 – Mission

Nick leaned on the big grey cliff beside him and took a deep breath.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

Then, he opened his eyes with conviction and silently climbed upward.

After reaching the top, he slowly moved his head over the edge.

He saw it, the endless sea.

Right now, Nick was at the same spot from about a month ago, when he had been on the excursion with Carl, Irwin, and Mark.

As Nick's head peeked over the edge, his ability deactivated, just as expected.

Yet, nothing moved.

Nick knew that something must have noticed him, but whatever had noticed him didn't show any indication of it.

He moved his head below the edge and over the edge repeatedly.

Every time a part of his head went above the edge, his ability deactivated.

'This makes it official. Whatever is seeing me is inside the sea,' Nick thought.

Nick kept looking at the sea for a while, closely examining it.

It was incredibly difficult to see anything inside since it was so deep and dark.

However, he still felt like something was moving.

For a while, Nick just waited here, looking at the sea.

There was nobody else near the sea.

No Extractors, no Specters, nothing.

It was just Nick and the sea.

He waited.

After about 30 seconds, Nick saw the stick in the distance, and just like before, it started to grow.

But this time, Nick knew what he was actually seeing.

It was a mast.

It was the top of a sail.

It was a ship.

When Nick had told Julian about it, Julian had told him that it must have been a ship.

Nick knew that the world was round, but he hadn't ever seen a ship before, which was why he hadn't been sure if that had been one.

As soon as Nick saw the stick, he knew that the enemy was coming for him.

Nick immediately jumped down from the cliff.

In an instant, he landed on the ground.

BOOOOM!

And exploded towards the southwest.

Nick ran with all of his power, and with his ability active, he managed to traverse over a kilometer in barely five seconds.

As Nick ran with his full power, he felt the air becoming thicker and thicker.

It was almost like some kind of resistance was building up in front of him.

Whoom!

Suddenly, Nick's Zephyx pulsed, and the resistance in front of Nick vanished.

Starting at the Expert Stage, people could come into contact with supersonic speeds.

If one wasn't careful, one would create a sonic boom, which could damage things in one's surroundings and even deafen normal people.

Of course, if every powerful Extractor created a sonic boom while traversing the city, living there would be atrocious.

Because of that, Extractors had to learn how to use their Zephyx to create a "hole" in the sound barrier.

Like this, the Extractor would make almost no sound while moving, and at the same time, the sound would "flow around them".

Achieving something like this wasn't easy since it needed a good grasp of Zephyx manipulation, but people who had reached this level had enough experience to master something like that quite quickly.

Ten seconds later, Nick had already moved over three kilometers towards the southwest.

And then, his ability deactivated, and Nick's speed plummeted rapidly.

Nick immediately turned towards the northeast, and he saw two tiny dots extremely far away.

He couldn't see the details of the dots, but Nick knew exactly what those were.

In an instant, Nick grabbed something from his belt and broke it inside his hand.

WHOOOOOOM!

A gigantic explosion of red mist occurred.

Everything around Nick was coated in an extremely thick layer of red Zephyx.

All of this happened within two seconds.

Yet, within these two seconds, the two distant dots had already enlarged to a terrifying degree.

By now, Nick could fully see all the details of the two dots.

Just as expected, there were two people covered in red corals.

Half their bodies were filled with corals, while the other half looked like they were corpses that had been floating in the water for a day or two.

In just these two seconds, the two dots had managed to close the distance by four kilometers!

The two dots had jumped off the ship, which had still been about five kilometers away from the shore, which meant that they had jumped when Nick was around eight kilometers away from them.

And yet, in only two seconds, they had halved the distance between them and Nick.

Two kilometers per second.

Those were speeds that only Specialists and Fanatics could reach.

Nick's heart rate shot through the roof, and he kept running.

However, his speed had plummeted by a lot.

Now, he needed over ten seconds per kilometer.

Another second passed, and the two coral people were now only a bit more than two kilometers away from Nick.

In one more second, they would reach him.

Nick gritted his teeth.

His entire being was shouting at him to use his ability and escape, but Nick forcefully resisted.

Nick looked at the two coral people while he kept running.

They were gaining ground fast!

BANG!

Suddenly, the two coral people stopped in the air with a powerful punch forward, creating a terrifying explosion of wind in the air.

BANG!

Another explosion, and the two of them shot towards the north again.

WHOOOOM!

Suddenly, a bright ray of light passed over Nick at incomprehensible speeds.

In less than a second, the ray of light passed Nick and the two coral people.

BOOOM!

An explosion of light occurred between the two coral people and the sea.

And moments later, a blonde woman wearing Kugelblitz's uniform appeared in that place.

It was Aria Light, Kugelblitz's Chief Zephyx Extractor.

But she wasn't the only one.

CRRRRR!

A comet of violent fire followed the beam of light and reached the two coral people in an instant.

The comet of fire consumed one of them in an instant before taking care of the other one.

BANG!

The fire vanished, revealing three people.

The two coral people were surrounded by white chains, which were being held by the governor.

Nick took a deep breath and sighed.

Mission success.

Chapter 418 – Coral People

A moment later, Aria and the governor turned back and flew towards the city.

They didn't want to stay too close to the northern sea.

After all, even a Hero had vanished there.

"Close your eyes," Aria suddenly spoke as she appeared beside Nick in an instant.

Nick did just that, and the next moment, he felt himself getting pulled into the sky.

Naturally, Aria was carrying him back towards Crimson City.

About a month ago, Julian had started negotiations with the governor regarding the information Nick had gathered on his excursion.

Nobody knew why the north was so dangerous, and Julian was sure that this information was worth a lot.

Of course, as soon as negotiations started, the efforts of uncovering why the north was so dangerous increased.

The city believed that they would be able to find out what was happening to the north.

After all, Dark Dream managed to find out about the north.

Why wouldn't they be able to?

So, they had sent more people toward the shore to investigate.

Yet, they hadn't found anything.

Well, that wasn't completely true.

They found out that three researchers mysteriously vanished after they investigated the sea at different places.

Naturally, the governor was very annoyed when he heard that.

How was it that a little Manufacturer like Dark Dream kept coming across such valuable information?!

The governor debated whether or not he should join the research.

But in the end, he decided against it.

It was just too risky.

He had already lost an Expert and two Veterans.

Might as well just pay Dark Dream and avoid the risk.

So, Dark Dream told the governor what Nick had seen.

When the governor had heard about the coral people, he already had an idea of what was going on.

Most likely, the coral people were the minions of a strong Specter.

So, the governor tried to catch some of them.

He kept using people as bait.

And yet, it didn't work.

If anyone went to the shore to the northeast, nothing would happen.

Yet, if anyone went towards the north, they would just vanish without a trace.

The governor had lost another two Veterans like that!

So, he had complained to Dark Dream.

Were they truly telling the truth?

There was no way to verify whether or not what they said was true.

In the end, Nick made an offer.

"Let me lure them out. I did it before. Maybe it'll work again."

The governor had accepted and had told Nick how to do it.

Yet, surprisingly, Nick interrupted the governor and told him that he would do it his way.

The governor was a bit annoyed, but Nick kept insisting that he would do it his way.

Eventually, the governor relented.

Nick told the governor to stay so far away that it was impossible to sense Nick and that Nick would alert them when it was time for them to come.

One thing that Nick demanded was that another Hero would join them during the mission.

The Forbidden Zone had already taken one Hero, which was why Nick wanted at least two.

Of course, Kugelblitz very quickly volunteered.

After all, there was most likely a Specter up north, and if they could get information about it first, Kugelblitz might be able to capture another powerful Specter.

And that was how things played out.

The mission was a success.

"You can open your eyes again," Aria said.

Nick did just that and found himself on a small balcony very high up on the megastructure.

The balcony was just outside the entrance to the upper layer.

Of course, it wasn't really possible to look at the city from here anymore due to the tall wall that had been erected.

Naturally, that was because of the Crimson Sea.

This balcony had been the place from where that one Specialist had destroyed Envy's greater relay.

"Good work," Aria said with a smile.

"Thanks," Nick said with a nod.

Compared to Vernon, Aria didn't seem to view Dark Dream as an enemy.

Of course, she also wasn't viewing them as an ally.

"Thanks for helping us catch these two. Kugelblitz will be sure to remember that favor!" Aria said with a smile as she jumped and flew out of the megastructure again.

She flew up the side of the megastructure and entered through a small entrance near its peak.

That was the same place the governor had entered with the two coral people.

Meanwhile, Nick jumped onto the Shweeb railway and ran down.

After about a minute, Nick reached Dark Dream and entered.

Naturally, while Dark Dream had been involved in uncovering the mystery of the north, they were not part of the investigation.

The governor would not tell them what they had found out.

The city had paid for the information, and they had the right to keep it to themselves or to share it with whomever they wanted.

Maybe that was the governor's way of taking revenge on Dark Dream for all the people the city had lost.

But that didn't stop Dark Dream from obtaining that information just days later.

Aria Light had been part of the investigation, and Aria Light belonged to Kugelblitz.

Obviously, she told the other major shareholders so that Kugelblitz could come to a decision about what to do.

One of these shareholders was Vernon Melfion, and Vernon Melfion just so happened to be close friends with Julian.

Sure, Vernon hated Nick, but he didn't hate Julian.

After talking for a while, Vernon told Julian, but Julian had to promise that he wouldn't tell Nick.

"So, anyway," Julian said with a smile. "Turns out, the coral people are people that went missing a long time ago."

Nick didn't show a strong reaction. "I thought that's what was going on."

Julian chuckled a bit. "Just as expected, the corals are controlling the people."

"But what is surprising is that they are still alive. As in, they are not reanimated corpses."

"They've never died."

"From what they found out, the corals enter the nervous system near the neck and completely take control of it."

"This means that their brains have not been touched."

"However, the corals also release a paralyzing agent that destroys every nerve outside the brain, even the ones in the face."

"All the nerves inside them have been dissolved, basically."

"If the city were to remove the corals, their Zephoxis would end, and they would die as soon as their Zephyx storage gets empty."

"This means the coral people only have two choices."

"Follow the Specter's command or die."

Julian chuckled.

"Although, I don't think they really have a choice."

Chapter 419 – Servant

"Do we know how strong the Specter is?" Nick asked.

"Definitely at least a Demon," Julian said. "Could also be a Fallen."

Julian smirked arrogantly.

"But we know something that the city doesn't, right?" he said.

Nick nodded. "It can't possibly be a powerful Fallen. It's almost definitely within the first three levels. Most likely, it just became a Fallen recently."

Julian chuckled.

How was it possible that Dark Dream could tell how powerful the Specter was, but the city and Kugelblitz couldn't?

One reason.

The fact that it went after Nick.

Twice!

Over the past decades, the Specter to the north had never shown its hand in any way.

Whenever someone vanished, it took those people without getting noticed.

This meant that the Specter was definitely not stupid.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

This Specter was supremely intelligent.

It was so intelligent that nobody noticed it when it didn't want to get noticed, and nobody managed to escape if it didn't want them to escape.

This meant that the Specter had only attacked when it was 100% certain that its prey was alone.

When it had sent the coral people after Nick the first time, that might have still been true.

After all, it had sent a Specialist after a couple of Veterans and an Expert.

Those were quite good odds.

But if one looked closely, a couple of things seemed strange.

First of all, why did the coral people interrogate the captured Mark?

The person the Specter had seen had already escaped.

Running after that person might unveil them.

Instead, if they had just taken Mark with them, nobody would have known what they looked like, and they would have made another person vanish.

Yet, they interrogated Mark and even jumped toward the southwest in search of the person the Specter had sensed earlier.

Why?

Even more, when the city had tried to find the coral people in the weeks after that, the coral people had returned to their old way of doing things.

They only took the lone and weak people.

But as soon as they found Nick again, they charged out of the water right into the land.

Did they travel this many kilometers inland every time they wanted to catch someone?

No.

If they did, the city would have already found out about them.

Yet, whenever it was Nick, they did that.

It was almost like they desperately wanted to capture Nick.

But why would they want to do that?

Nick was just a random Veteran, right?

Well, wasn't there a Specter that was very interested in capturing Nick?

Envy.

Naturally, Julian had already told Nick about Envy's servant, the Prison, and how Julian had essentially thrown him out of the city.

The Prison had been tasked with catching Nick back then, but since it couldn't get past Julian, it sent one of its servants.

That servant infiltrated the Spartans, acted as a Possession Specter that granted wishes in exchange for favors and used the Spartans to catch Nick.

But then, the Crimson Sea broke out, and the Specter was consumed by it.

The next moment, the entire city was covered in a red mist.

Now, from an outside perspective, what did that look like?

It looked like the entire city had been destroyed.

After all, everything was covered in corrosive red mist, and it was impossible to see the city anymore.

So, the Prison had seen that and believed that Nick had died.

The Prison left and stopped trying to get into the city.

But then, Envy heard that Crimson City somehow survived years later.

And since the Prison failed the last time, Envy asked another Specter.

Most likely, the Specter in the sea to the north had either already been one of Envy's servants or was made one recently.

In any case, it was supposed to capture Nick if it found any signs of him.

Because of that, Nick and Julian knew that the Specter to the north couldn't be a powerful Fallen but only a weak Fallen at most.

After all, a Specter had to be quite a lot more powerful to enslave another Specter without actually being physically present.

Simon Francium had said that Envy was being detained somewhere far away, which meant that it couldn't possibly appear here just like that.

Someone of similar power wouldn't immediately bow in front of someone like that.

However, if that person had servants on a power level similar to theirs, things would be different.

Envy had a couple of weak Fallen as servants.

If a weak Fallen or Demon disrespected Envy, one of these servants might appear to kill them.

Naturally, the city knew none of that.

As far as they knew, Nick was just very good at luring the coral people out.

Why would such a strong Specter be interested in such a weak Extractor?

"But none of that matters," Julian said with a chuckle. "We got what we wanted."

"What did we get?" Nick asked.

"One Initial Adult and two Early Adolescent," Julian answered.

Nick furrowed his brows.

Sure, that was great, but he needed a Late or Peak Adult to grow stronger.

An Initial Adult barely helped him.

"We got the Initial Adult for the information and the two Early Adolescents for capturing the two coral people. The city is going to prepare them and deliver them to us within the next two weeks," Julian said.

"Sounds good," Nick answered.

Naturally, Nick didn't want to appear too angry about the fact that the Specters were not useful to him personally.

It was important that Nick acted like Dark Dream was more important.

After all, Nick didn't want to seem like he knew that Julian would one day try to kill him.

Also, it wasn't so bad, actually.

Dark Dream needed more Adolescents anyway.

The number of Johns Dark Dream employed was pitifully little.

Solace had over 50.

With enough Johns, Dark Dream would also gain far more Veterans in the future, and with many Veterans, they could capture more Adults.

Chapter 420 – The Blaze?

A couple of days passed, and Nick eventually called for the government to bring the three Specters that Dark Dream had been promised.

There was no issue during the transport, and the three Specters arrived in Dark Dream within just a couple of minutes.

'Alright, one Possession Specter and two Physical Specters,' Nick thought after the guards left. 'A bit sad that the Adult is the Possession Specter since it can't grow anymore. Although, that might be good for the future. After all, at some point, we need ways to strengthen several Veterans.'

Nick nodded to himself and walked to the fourth floor, the floor housing the Possession Specters.

Adult Possession Specters were quite rare, and not every Manufacturer had one.

For example, Gemini didn't have an Adult Possession Specter.

Possession Specters were about as numerous as Physical Specters, while Force Specters were the rarest.

However, the higher one went in the level, the rarer Possession Specters became.

This was due to Possession Specters not being able to grow more powerful.

But then, how did Adult Possession Specters come to be?

Well, when they started existing, they were already Adults.

No one in Crimson City had seen a Specter forming, but the researchers had been able to extrapolate how something like this probably happened.

Physical Specters and Force Specters just appeared out of nowhere. At least, that was the assumption.

At most, a bunch of Prephyx probably gathered in the air, compressed, and eventually created a Specter.

However, Possession Specters were different.

Just based on their name, one could infer that Possession Specters possessed something that already existed.

Crimson City had done a lot of research on how Possession Specters appeared. After all, if they could learn how to make Possession Specters, they could create their own Specters.

They wouldn't even need to hunt and suppress them.

Sadly, they didn't know how that happened yet, but there were a couple of theories.

Ghosty's theory was the most probable one.

Ghosty had already come up with the theory that the Specters' reason for existence was to bring suffering to humanity, and he had used that theory to also come up with a theory for how Possession Specters were created.

He believed that objects surrounded by negative emotions were more likely to become Specters.

For example, a hammer that had broken the arms of 20 people had a far higher chance of becoming a Specter than a hammer that was used for construction.

If an object had caused a great amount of suffering, the negative emotions would act as a form of pull for Prephyx.

Sadly, while this theory seemed to make sense, it didn't explain how strong a Possession Specter became.

The durability of the object was of no consequence. After all, the Screaming Coffin, which was a big and hard coffin made of wood, was far weaker than the Glasses, which were just glasses.

The only thing one could say for certain was that Possession Specters had to be born at their power level since they couldn't gain power any other way.

Of course, the more powerful the Possession Specter, the rarer it was.

As for how much rarer, it was basically always an increase of five.

On average, for every five Hatchling Possession Specters, one Adolescent Possession Specter existed, and for every five Adolescent Possession Specters, one Adult Possession Specter existed.

Dark Dream only had four Possession Specters in total, and one of them was an Adult, while two others were Adolescents.

This showed the quality of Dark Dream's Possession Specters.

However, Dark Dream didn't have many.

For example, Solace had over 15, and Ghosty's Lab had over 70!

Just to put this into perspective, Solace had about as many Possession Specters as Dark Dream had in total.

Getting more Possession Specters could definitely increase the number of Extractors Dark Dream could employ and train.

'But that's for the future,' Nick thought. 'For now, I should check our newest addition.'

After Nick arrived at the fourth floor, he looked at one of the Containment Units in the east of the building.

Nick approached the door and walked in without hesitation.

After he closed the door behind him, he looked at the object in the middle of the room.

There was a big metal stick standing in the middle of the room. Its base was wide, and it was obviously designed to stand.

Two metal bars came out of the edges of the base and spiraled around the central stick like twin helixes, making it look quite ornate.

Eventually, the two helixes bent inward and combined with the stick in the center.

At a height of about 150 centimeters, they combined into one and extended for another 20 centimeters.

Yet, these 20 centimeters were completely engulfed in crimson fire.

Nick could already feel the heat from where he stood.

This was the Blaze.

Nick took a deep breath and approached the Blaze.

Then, he gritted his teeth and extended his hand into the fire.

Nick tightly grabbed the fiery metal in the middle.

SSSSSS!

The fire became more violent, and Nick felt his arm burning.

Nick took violent breaths as he fought against his instincts telling him to pull his arm out.

It hurt like hell!

'Eight, nine, ten!'

Then, Nick pulled his arm out and looked at it.

Surprisingly, his uniform looked just like always. It was almost like it hadn't been inside fire just now.

Nick's hand, on the other hand, looked red, black, and sinewy.

It looked just like it had been on fire for a while, unsurprisingly.

And it hurt about as much as it looked.

If Nick hadn't been confronted with the Nightmare's torture so many times, he would be screaming right now.

This pain was far worse than what the Can caused someone.

Nick walked to the side of the room and pressed a button on it.

The next moment, a drop of green liquid came out of a faucet and landed on Nick's burned hand.

The green liquid vanished immediately, and the hand regained a bit of its strength.

It no longer looked as bad, but it hadn't fully recovered.

'But it doesn't hurt as much anymore, which is the most important,' Nick thought as he looked at his hand. 'With my recovery, it should fully recover within a couple of hours.'

Nick glanced at the faucet.

'One drop costs about 10,000 credits. Let's see how much the Blaze produced.'