

Zompiewolf 531

Chapter 531 Something Sinister (1)

"You with the bow, get to the next training section," Vimur ushered Shian away from the common testing area.

Ashton had given his lieutenants complete freedom over the selection process, and Vimur wasted no time exploiting his privileges and ushered Shian towards the combat section.

The applicants would have to face each other in a knockout tournament, but it was scheduled to be the next round. However, Vimur allowed Shian to skip a stage, stating he had already proven his worth.

In hindsight, Vimur intended to clear his doubts regarding Shian and being the brute he was, a spar was the only way he knew to accomplish his objective.

"Um... I appreciate the offer, but I would like to continue with the hiring process like the rest of us-"
Upon noticing Vimur's stature, Shian tried wiggling out of the situation, but Vimur had other plans.

"Hm, fine. You can leave now." Vimur said politely.

As Shian headed towards the others, Vimur grabbed the archer by the shoulders and pushed him towards the exit. The confused archer stared back at Vimur, unaware of what was happening.

"Sir-"

"Disobedience means immediate termination. As your superior, I asked you something, and you failed to deliver." Vimur said with a poker face, "As such, you are disqualified from further-"

"Vimur, can I have a word with you?" Laihud interrupted with a smile.

Laihud had noticed Vimur's weird obsession with Shian and decided to act before the brute did something troublesome. This incident wouldn't have been out of the ordinary if Shian was stronger than him, as Vimur had a habit of challenging stronger individuals to spars to test his mettle.

However, being a marksman, Shian was much weaker than he was, and the gap between their combat skills was evident to Laihud, so Vimur's strange behaviour was a bit concerning.

"What's wrong with you?" Laihud whispered, "Picking on the weak isn't something you'd do-"

"He isn't weak," Vimur calmly replied, "That fucker is hiding something! Think about it for a moment; there's a bounty on Reaper, and anyone could try to-"

"Vimur, what are you-"

"Shush! Don't interrupt me, and listen! Would there be a better opportunity than now to get closer to Reaper and blindside him later?"

Laihud opened his mouth to say something but then opted for silence. ONI officials had run countless extensive background checks on everybody present there.

However, if someone like the Metal sharks or the unknown cult truly intended to do, they could send someone undercover with some difficulties.

Laihud casually gazed back towards Shian and understood something weird was going on. The man was way too calm than he should have been in such a situation.

"Fine. Do what you have to but don't-"

"I won't overdo it," Vimur smiled, clasping Laihud's hands with his, "you have no idea how much I love you now!"

Laihud stood staring, flustered by Vimur's words, as he raced towards Shian.

'Goddamn it! My shitty luck never leaves my side!' Shian complained.

The news of the first sparring session spread across everyone like wildfire. Within moments hundreds of spectators had gathered inside the area while more eagerly watched on from the outside.

"You ready?" Vimur asked the archer while flexing his wrists.

The Ghosts cheered for their beloved lieutenant, but something was off. Unlike his previous brawls, he wasn't carrying his precious shield. It seemed it was giving the poor archer a handicap to make things fair.

However, Laihud knew better. Although Vimur primarily went into battles as a 'tank', he was an equally gifted martial artist. Though he did not like to show his skills, unlike his behaviour, he didn't like beating down anyone with his fists.

'The last time he used his fists, he couldn't restrain himself, and his opponent had to be rushed to the hospital.' Laihud remembered, 'God, I hope it doesn't get to that point this time.'

"I'm ready."

A simulation of a forest replaced the empty arena, and the crowd broke into cheers. It was the perfect setting for an archer as it had a lot of places for Shain to hide and attack without fearing Vimur's rampant attacks.

Shian drew an arrow from his quiver and nocked it onto his bowstring. He pulled the string back to his cheek, took aim, and without any hesitation, released the arrow.

The arrow whistled through the air and found its mark in a tree trunk near Vimur, who had been slowly approaching his opponent.

Having revealed the archer's location, Vimur, unperturbed, dashed toward Shian. He dodged to the left as Shian fired another arrow and then darted forward with a lightning-fast punch into the tree Shian was camping on. Shian leapt backwards to avoid the strike, narrowly missing it.

He quickly reached for another arrow, but before he could nock it, Vimur closed in and delivered a flurry of punches and kicks. Shian tried to keep his distance and fire arrows, but Vimur was too quick, too relentless.

The spectators gasped as they hadn't thought Vimur would go all-out since the beginning.

Shian knew he had to change his tactics. He waited until Vimur's guard was down and then lunged forward with his bow as if it were a staff and swung it at Vimur's legs, hoping to knock him off balance.

"Nice try," Vimur smirked, "but you're too weak."

"Overconfidence is a bitch." Shian revealed his crooked smile, Vimur realised something was off, but there was no time to react.

He leapt over the attack, but Shian had anticipated this and fired an arrow at Vimur's exposed back. The arrow struck true, but Vimur barely flinched. People did not call him a rhino for nothing. His thick hide cushioned the arrow's blow, and it hardly damaged him.

Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for Shian.

Vimur spun around and caught the next arrow out of the air with his bare hand, throwing it back at Shian with deadly accuracy.

Shian was taken aback by the move, but he quickly regained his composure, dodging the arrow at the last possible second. He then fired another arrow at Vimur. This time, however, Vimur was ready, and he caught the arrow between his teeth and closed in on Shian.

"What the hell!?" Shian exclaimed.

Countless people had countered his arrows before, but it was the first time someone used their teeth to stop the attack. Vimur was an animal!

Shian didn't know what to do. He had never encountered a martial artist like Vimur before. He fired off another arrow, hoping to buy some time, but Vimur caught it in mid-air and snapped it in half.

"The more you panic, the easier it is for me to kick your butt." Vimur snarled.

Shian bit his tongue. With no more arrows left, Shian was forced to fight Vimur with his bow as a makeshift staff. Unlike him, Vimur didn't have a weapon. As long as he could outsmart the raging martial artist, he had a shot at victory.

The two combatants clashed, trading blows back and forth. Shian was a skilled archer but was no match for Vimur's martial arts prowess. Within moments it was clear that Vimur was toying with his opponent.

'Maybe I was wrong about him...'

In the end, Vimur emerged victorious, knocking Shian to the ground with a swift kick to the chest. As Shian lay there, gasping for breath, Vimur stood over him and extended a hand.

"Good fight," he said, helping Shian to his feet, "You're a worthy opponent."

Shian nodded, still catching his breath. "You too," he said, admiration in his voice, "I've never fought anyone like you before. So thank you for it."

Vimur smiled, "That's what makes it fun, isn't it?"

But before Shian could reply, his vision went dark. Something ominous was about to happen. He could feel it. Something was taking control over him... something sinister.

Chapter 532 Something Sinister (2)

Vimur watched warily as Shian miraculously got up on his own. It shouldn't have been possible from the level of beating he had taken. But what surprised him even more, was Shian threw away his bow and brought his fists up to his face.

Shian stared at him like a man possessed. Bloodlust dripped from his eyes... the Shian in front wasn't anything like the one Vimur had put down mere moments ago.

"Guess I was right after all," Vimur scoffed, "I don't know what going on, but even a dumbass like me knows you're not the same as before."

Vimur got tensed and ready for the fight that was about to come. He knew that Shian wasn't a skilled martial artist, but he had never seen him fight like one before, and as such, he was unsure of what to expect.

The two men circled each other, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Finally, Shian struck first, his fist lashing out with lightning speed.

"What the hell?" Laihud mumbled under his breath while the rest cheered for Shian.

Vimur barely managed to dodge the blow, but before he could counterattack, Shian was on him again, moving with a fluid grace that seemed almost supernatural. Despite his years of training, Vimur needed help to achieve the level of skill Shian displayed.

Vimur fought back as best he could but soon realised he was hopelessly outmatched. Shian's movements were too quick and precise, and his blows were too powerful to withstand.

Vimur was struggling hard as Laihud watched on from the sidelines. However, it didn't take a genius to figure out something was amiss. That said, Laihud couldn't sit idle.

"Vimur, keep him busy!"

"Doesn't look like I have any other choice, Lai!" Vimur yelled back before covering his face with his forearms to block the strike.

Despite his best efforts, Vimur found himself slowly being pushed back, step by step, as Shian continued to dominate the fight. He was forced to retreat, dodging and weaving as Shian's fists and feet came at him from all angles.

As the fight wore on, Vimur began to feel a sense of unease. There was something different about Shian, something that he couldn't quite put his finger on. His movements were becoming more erratic, and his eyes began glowing with an eerie light. But nothing seemed weirder than his crooked smile.

It was then that Vimur realised that Shian had been possessed by some dark force, something that was using him as a vessel for its own twisted purposes.

Despite this, Shian continued to attack relentlessly, his possessed form becoming more powerful and devastating with each passing moment.

Vimur struggled to keep up, trying desperately to defend himself against the flurry of blows that Shian unleashed upon him. But it was all for nought. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Shian delivered one final, crushing blow that sent Vimur crashing to the ground, defeated and broken.

By now, even the spectators realised the fight had turned into a battle for life, with Vimur trying his best not to die. But alas, they could do nothing due to the shield separating the spectators from the fighters.

"Fuck, someone get the lieutenants!" Someone yelled.

"I'll go try to get the barrier down." Yet someone else chimed in.

The arena broke into havoc with the mercenaries trying their best to get the situation under control.

As he lay there, battered and bruised, Vimur realised that he had never faced an opponent like Shian before. He knew he'd been lucky to escape with his life and wondered what would become of Shian now that he was under the control of something so dark and sinister.

'Fuck, I'm on the verge of dying, and I'm wondering about my murderer's well-being? What the hell is wrong with me?'

Shian's second personality had taken complete control over their body, and it was clear that he would not give up without a fight, even if his opponent was already down. Vimur lay on the ground, battered and bruised, as the possessed Shian approached him again.

The second personality was different from Shian's usual demeanour; he was ruthless and merciless. It seemed to relish in the pain he was causing Vimur, striking him with powerful blows that sent him reeling.

Vimur could feel himself losing consciousness, the world around him growing dim and fuzzy. He knew he was no match for this otherworldly force and was about to meet his end.

"Kekeke, go to sleep!"

But just as the second personality was about to deliver the final, crushing blow, a figure appeared out of nowhere. It was Ashton, and behind him was Laihud, who had rushed to call him for help.

Ashton had seen the possessed Shian manhandle Vimur and knew that he had to act fast to stop the madness before it was too late. He charged forward, moving with a speed and precision that outmatched Shian's own.

Thanks to his training with Mazton, Ashton's moves were on a whole different level. For the first time, Shian dropped his smile with a look of a grimace.

"You have nothing to do with us! Leave and let me enjoy my prey!" Shian snarled, but his voice was nothing like his usual self.

"Your prey?" Ashton scoffed, "I think you're mistaken, fucker. That's my ally, and you're the prey."

The two clashed in a flurry of blows, each trying to gain the upper hand. But Ashton was different from Vimur. He had the experience that only a few achieved, and he knew how to read his opponent's movements.

The skill didn't make Ashton invincible, as many predictions were involved, which wasn't always on point. However, the talent was more than enough against an opponent like Shian.

Shian had been fighting for a long time, and slowly his movements got sloppier. Capitalising on it, Ashton landed a powerful punch that sent Shian's second personality reeling.

The punch was like a trigger. As if a switch had been flipped, and Shian was back in control of his body once more.

He stumbled back, looking around in confusion as if trying to figure out what had just happened. Vimur lay on the ground, gasping for breath, as Ashton approached.

"You okay?" Ashton asked, extending a hand to help Vimur up.

Vimur nodded, still dazed from the beating he had taken. He looked over at Shian, who was now standing there, looking shell-shocked and bewildered.

"What happened?" Shian asked, his voice trembling.

Ashton sighed, wanting to punch Shian some more.

[That kid's back to being himself.]

'Tsk, such a shame.'

[Ashton...]

'Yeah, yeah, I'm not doing anything.'

Shian noticed everyone's hostile gaze. Vimur groaned in pain; it was then he saw Vimur's pathetic state.

"How-"

"You have a split personality disorder," Ashton said. "And your other personality just tried to kill Vimur. But don't worry, you're not in trouble, and I'll get you the help you need... hopefully."

Shian looked down, his face twisted in pain and confusion.

"I don't understand," he said softly, staring at his bloodied fists, "Something like this has never happened before!"

Ashton looked at him with a mixture of sympathy and concern, unlike before.

"It's okay," he said. "We'll get through this together. Alright?"

Chapter 533 Ganbare!

Anna sat across from Ashton as they discussed the possible recruitment of Shian. Anna had reservations about bringing him on board, but Ashton seemed convinced he would be a valuable asset.

After all, Malekith had handpicked him also after seeing what Shian or, well, what his second personality was capable of, Ashton knew he couldn't let him go.

However, the Ghosts wouldn't be pleased with his decision, especially after what Shian did to Vimur. His unpredictable and explosive nature would cause unease among the faction and might get in the way of their missions.

"I'm telling you, Anna, this guy is exactly what we need," Ashton said, leaning forward in his seat. "He's skilled, resourceful, and not afraid to get his hands dirty, well, at least his alternate self isn't. We need people like him on our team if we're going to survive in this business."

Anna shook her head, her brow furrowed in concern.

"I don't know, Ashton," she said. "There's something off about him. I don't trust him, and I don't think he's a good fit for our group. On top of that, he can't even control his other self!"

Ashton sighed, clearly frustrated with Anna's reluctance. Even then, he knew Anna wasn't being adamant for her sake but for everyone's well-being.

Also, what she said about Shian not being in control of his strength was entirely true. But with Astaroth's help, Ashton was confident he could tame Shian's rogue side.

Another reason Ashton was adamant about including him was his selfishness. In a way, Ashton saw himself in Shian when he first discovered Astaroth and wanted to help him reconcile with his other half like he and Astaroth did before it was too late.

"I understand your concerns, but we can't afford to be picky," he said. "We need all the help we can get, and who knows, this guy could be the difference between success and failure on our next mission!?"

Anna crossed her arms, still unconvinced. Indeed they need to recruit strong individuals for the team, especially with the Cult and Metal sharks on their tail. But Shian was like a double-edged sword, and his involvement could become a curse at any moment.

"But what if he turns on us?" she asked. "What if he's working for someone else, or he has his own agenda that doesn't align with ours? What is the second persona is an act?"

Ashton shrugged, a determined look on his face. He had already confirmed Shian's words through [Heartbeat Sense] and [Detection]. However, he couldn't explicitly tell Anna about it.

"We'll keep an eye on him, of course," he said. "But we can't let fear control our decisions. We need to take risks if we're going to stay ahead of our enemies."

Anna sighed, knowing that Ashton had a point. They were always in danger, always one step away from disaster. They needed every advantage they could get, even if it meant taking a chance on someone who might not be entirely trustworthy.

"Trust me, will you?"

"Fine," she said reluctantly. "But if anything goes wrong, it's on your head, not mine."

Ashton smiled, standing up from the table.

"Don't worry, Anna, I've got this," he said. "Love you!"

"...Love you too, buffoon."

Anna watched him go, feeling a sense of unease in the pit of her stomach. She knew that this decision could come back to haunt them, but she also knew that there was no turning back now. They would just have to hope that their new recruit was as valuable as Ashton believed him to be.

The next day...

Ashton knew that he had a big task ahead of him. Shian was still struggling to control his powers, and Ashton knew that if he didn't intervene soon, the consequences could be catastrophic. He had seen what Shian was capable of when his powers were unleashed, and it was frightening.

Ashton called Shian to his training room, an ample space filled with all kinds of equipment and weapons. Shian walked in nervously, knowing that Ashton had something important to discuss with him.

"As you know, Shian, your powers are getting out of control," Ashton began. "If we don't do something about it soon, there's no telling what kind of damage you could cause."

Shian nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. He had been struggling to control his powers and knew he needed help.

"That's why I'm going to help you," Ashton continued. "We're going to work on your control, focus, and discipline until you're able to use your powers without them taking over."

[It's funny you're lecturing someone about losing control.]

'...let me focus, could you?'

[Right, sensei! Ganbare!]

Ashton knew that teaching Shian to control his powers would be slow and challenging, but he was determined. They started with basic breathing exercises and visualization techniques to help Shian focus his mind.

Ashton was no yoga expert, but he kept following Astaroth's advice, hoping the bastard wouldn't make a fool out of him. Ashton noticed the doubt on Shian's face and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Trust me," he said. "We'll start slow, and we'll work our way up. You'll get there, I promise."

Shian took a deep breath and focused his mind. He reached out with his powers, which was easier than expected. However, the archer did not expect to see a familiar face inside his head.

"Rodrick?"

The same man who had kissed his hand before Vimur dragged him for a spar. It also meant everything that happened with Rodrick was inside his head.

"Hellos, junior," Rodrick bowed once again, "have you made a decision yet?"

"Decision?"

"Yes, to give up your desires and submit to me!" Rodrick snarled, "I'm confident you'll love the experience-"

Shian's vision got clouded, and despite trying his best, he couldn't control himself. Rodrick was once again in control of his body, but the moment Ashton sensed things did not go as planned, he knocked Shian out.

"It's going to take a while, isn't it?" Ashton sighed, staring at the unconscious Shian.

[You didn't expect to achieve your goal in a day, did you?]

"Would it be too much to ask for?"

Chapter 534 Gangster Of Econium (1)

After a few days of practice, Shian began to notice a difference. He could hold his focus for extended periods, and his powers were becoming more predictable.

However, Rodrick refused to accept defeat. He would pop up once in a while and relentlessly attack Ashton as if everything was his fault. Had Ashton not interfered, Rodrick would have slowly assumed control over Shian's body like a parasite.

To counter the raging moron, Ashton started introducing more advanced exercises, such as involving his summons to tame Shian's rogue side. At first, Shian's opponents were Celeste, Gokung and Sven, as they could control their strength while keeping Shian or Rodrick in check.

The progress was slow, but it was steady. Shian's control improved bit by bit, and he was able to channel his powers with more precision. But there were setbacks too. Sometimes Shian's emotions would get the best of him, and his abilities would spiral out of control.

In those situations, Ashton would immediately call out Atlas or Dolos. Those two did not show their enemy mercy, whether it was Shian or Rodrick.

Soon, Rodrick grew docile, but only in Atlas' or Dolos' presence. He was still hostile towards Ashton and sometimes, even his summons would fail to control him.

Ashton was always there to help him through those challenging moments when they happened. He would talk to Shian, calm him down, and guide him back to his training.

If not, he would kick his over and over till Rodrick retreated on his own. Ashton being the kind and gentle soul he was, never gave up on Shian, even when it seemed like progress was slow.

"Ow, ow! Stop, It's me! IT'S ME!" Shian screamed in pain as Ashton kept kicking him.

"Don't blame me. You're the one who failed to keep him in check." Ashton smiled before offering Shian a hand.

Eventually, Shian was able to master the basic techniques, and they moved on to more advanced exercises, like sparring with himself or with Drakon, the Chimaera.

Once Shian began sparring with them regularly, He discovered his dormant powers to create powerful energy blasts and even move at superhuman speeds. It was a remarkable transformation.

Ashton was proud of what Shian had accomplished, but he knew the journey was far from over. Shian's powers were still unpredictable, and he needed to learn how to use them in a controlled and focused way.

After a week of recruitment drives, the Ghosts had expanded to the point they could take on multiple jobs simultaneously and were no longer required to move together to finish a meagre job.

"The expansion was much needed because of this," Ashton mumbled while staring at his personal tablet given to him by Mazton. "That reminds me, I still need to find a way to defeat him."

"Focus on the task at hand first!" Malekith squeaked from inside the tablet, "Ahem, as per your request, I have sorted the job requested based on difficulty, urgency and payment. No need to thank me-"

"Thanks, your lordship!" Ashton exclaimed mockingly, "Now go and help Anna. She mentioned needing your assistance a while ago."

"...fine!"

Ashton shook his head, amused by the little god's temper tantrum. Most of the jobs will be handled by the new recruits, and the remaining will be taken care of by the lieutenants.

But more importantly, Ashton wanted to try something.

After Shian gained some control over his powers, Ashton decided it was time for him to start using his abilities in the field. It was why he was going through the list of job requests.

Just then, a mission caught his eye. The task was to stop a dangerous gang causing chaos in the city of Econium, located on an essential monetary planet close to the Tower.

The gang was involved in various illegal activities such as drug trafficking, arms dealing, and extortion, and they were becoming increasingly violent.

The gang was led by a ruthless leader named Diego, who had a reputation for being cruel and unrelenting. He had a large number of loyal followers who would do anything to protect him and his interests.

No one had seen what he looked like, but according to the intelligence attached to the job request, Diego would be leading the charge in their next escapade.

According to the reports, the gang was planning a major heist at a bank in the city. Thankfully, Econium was a well-mapped planet with exclusive jump portals that Ashton and the Ghosts could use to reach the planet in less than three hours.

Ashton decided to act quickly and assemble a team, including Shian, to intercept the gang before they could carry out their plan.

"Time to see you in action, Shian."

"Eh?" Shian expressionlessly stared at Ashton.

The next day.

The sun was just starting to set as Ashton led his team towards the bank, where they needed to intercept the thugs before they could carry out their plan.

Ashton led his team of mercenaries towards the bank, his eyes scanning the surroundings for any signs of danger.

Apart from Viper and Shian, most were newbies they had recruited mere hours ago. Ashton gestured for his team to huddle up, and he spoke in a low voice.

"Alright, listen up. This is a high-risk operation, so we must be on our toes. We need to move quickly and quietly to avoid attracting any unwanted attention. Whatever happens, don't get caught in the crossfire. Is that clear?" Ashton asked, looking around at his team.

The mercenaries nodded in agreement, their expressions solemn.

"I can't stress the importance of staying alert enough. Keep your eyes open and your weapons ready at all times. We don't know what kind of opposition we'll be facing, so be prepared for anything," Ashton added, his tone firm.

Shian spoke up, his voice low but confident. "Don't worry, captain. We've got this," he said, his eyes glowing with energy.

Ashton smiled, nodding in approval. "I know you do. But remember, we're a team, and we need to work together to make this happen. Let's move out," he said, gesturing for his team to follow him.

The mercenaries moved out, their weapons ready and their eyes scanning their surroundings. Ashton led the way, his mind focused on the task at hand.

He knew that the success of this mission depended on his team's ability to work together and stay alert. And he was confident that they were up to the challenge.

As they approached the bank, Ashton could see the tension and apprehension in Shian's eyes. He knew that this was the first real test for the young man, and he had to make sure that he didn't let his powers get the best of him.

"Don't depend solely on your fists," Ashton placed a hand on his shoulder, "You're an excellent archer as well, try to use it to your advantage if things get out of control."

Shian nodded and left to hold his post inside the bank along with Viper. While the team set up a perimeter around the bank, preparing for the gang's arrival.

Ashton had instructed everyone to be on high alert and to wait for his signal before engaging the enemy. They did not want innocent blood to mark their clothes.

Minutes turned to hours, and the team grew increasingly anxious. They knew the gang would arrive soon, and they had to be ready for anything.

Suddenly, Ashton heard a faint sound in the distance. He signalled to his team, and they all readied their weapons.

A few seconds later, a convoy of strange cars appeared in the distance. Ashton could see the gang members inside, per the images attached to the report. All of them were heavily armed and ready for battle.

"It's been a while since I have used one of these," Ashton smiled while assembling a sniper rifle.

Ashton gave the signal as the cars approached the bank, and the team sprang into action. Gunfire erupted as the two sides clashed, and chaos ensued.

Taking advantage of the chaos, some gangsters snuck inside the bank, thinking they'd be safe. Not even a moment later, their unconscious bodies were thrown out of the bank as Viper and Shian charged towards the enemies.

Shian, for his part, was a force to be reckoned with. He moved quickly and skillfully, dodging incoming fire and taking out gang members left and right with his energy blasts and superhuman strength.

In the meantime, Viper backed him up expertly. No one could get close to the deadly duo, despite using a shit ton of bullets to put an end to them.

As Shian and Viper engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy, Ashton kept a watchful eye on them, ready to provide backup if needed. He picked off any enemies that tried to sneak up on Shian or Viper, his aim precise and deadly.

"Good work, team. Keep it up," Ashton said, speaking into his earpiece.

Shian and Viper continued to fight their way through the enemy forces, their movements swift and precise. They worked well together, taking down their opponents with ease.

It was only a matter of time before the goons decided to retreat, only to be trapped by the local law enforcement. The mission appeared to be successful, but was it true?

Chapter 535 Gangster Of Econium (2)

Ashton's team was making good progress, taking down enemy after enemy as they made their way closer to the bank's entrance. However, just as they were about to reach their objective, things suddenly turned for the worse.

A loud explosion shook the ground beneath them, and Ashton's team was thrown off balance. The blast had come from a nearby building, taking out a large portion of the street in front of the bank.

Dozens of gangsters were also killed in the explosion, but it didn't seem like anyone cared about them.

Law enforcement couldn't reach the gangsters anymore. The gangsters were overjoyed. As long as they took care of the Ghosts, no one could stop them.

"Fucking hell..."

Ashton quickly assessed the situation, realising they had stumbled into a trap. The enemy had planned for their arrival and had set up a series of explosives to take them out.

"Fall back, fall back!" Ashton shouted into his earpiece, his voice urgent.

Shian and Viper quickly disengaged from their opponents and followed Ashton's orders, retreating to a nearby alleyway. The rest of the team followed suit, their movements swift and panicked.

Ashton had intended to refrain from interfering in the job directly as it was supposed to test the new recruits. But considering how things had taken a sudden turn for the worse, he might have to put an end to the drama himself.

He scanned the area, looking for any signs of the enemy. He knew they were in a vulnerable position and needed to regroup quickly if they were going to survive.

"We need to get out of here, now. Move it, people!" Ashton said, his voice firm.

The team moved quickly, their weapons at the ready. They ran through the streets, ducking behind buildings and avoiding enemy fire. Ashton used his sniper rifle to take out any enemies that got too close.

"Fuck it. Let's head back now, Shian!" Viper urged before throwing a couple of Diego's foot soldiers.

Shian didn't say a word and nodded, agreeing with Viper. However, before they could make it to safety, a man appeared out of nowhere and charged straight at them.

He was tall and muscular, with a shaved head and a thick beard. His eyes glinted with anger, and his fists were clenched tightly at his sides.

"Well, well, well. Look what we have here. A bunch of rats trying to steal from the big cheese," the man said, his voice low and gravelly. "You two are the worst of the lot, so you'll face the worst punishment as well."

As he approached, he let out a fierce roar, and Viper and Shian stepped forward to confront him. But the man was too strong, too fast, and he manhandled both of them, slamming them to the ground with brutal force.

Ashton watched in horror as the man continued to pummel his teammates, his fists moving in a blur of motion. He knew that he had to act fast if he was going to stop him.

Without hesitation, Ashton stored the rifle in his inventory and jumped into the fray, tackling the man to the ground. The two rolled across the pavement, fists flying as they fought tooth and nail.

But as they grappled with each other, Ashton used [Detection] and realised something. The man he was fighting was none other than Diego, a notorious criminal who had been eluding the authorities for years.

"You?" Diego gasped before laughing despite his pain. "Reaper? The famous mercenary?"

Ashton looked down at him, his face grim. "What are you talking about, Diego?"

Diego laughed again, his voice wheezing. "You really don't know shit, do you? This entire operation, it was all a trap. The cult had been planning it for weeks. I thought it was all for nothing, but here you are... trapped like a rat in a cage!"

With that, Diego lunged at him.

Ashton's eyes narrowed as Diego charged at him, fists flying. He sidestepped the first blow and brought his elbow down hard on Diego's back. The man stumbled forward but recovered quickly and spun around, lashing out with a powerful kick.

Ashton dodged the blow, feeling the wind from it brush past his face. He took a step back, his mind racing as he tried to figure out Diego's next move.

Diego moved fast, his punches and kicks coming in rapid succession. Ashton ducked and weaved, dodging each blow with ease. He knew he was the better fighter and his opponent lacked proper training, but Diego was relentless.

He seemed to have an endless supply of energy and showed no signs of slowing down. In the meantime, the Ghosts extracted Shian and Viper while clearing up a path for the police to arrive. But they couldn't go further away due to heavy fire.

Finally, Ashton saw his opening. Diego overextended on a kick, and Ashton used the opportunity to sweep his legs out from under him. Diego hit the ground hard, his head bouncing off the concrete.

Ashton moved in for the finishing blow, but Diego's eyes snapped open before he could land it. The man let out a wild laugh, and suddenly he was on his feet again, his fists flying.

"What the-"

Ashton was caught off guard, and for a moment, he was on the defensive. Diego was more robust than he looked and fueled by some kind of primal energy that gave him superhuman strength. Diego's eyes when black as a new surge of energy filled his body.

But Ashton was no slouch. He countered each blow with precision and power, slowly pushing Diego back. Diego's actions got increasingly erratic, but Ashton finally got another opportunity to shut him down.

He delivered a swift uppercut to Diego's chin and crumpled to the ground. Ashton stood over him, panting. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest.

For a moment, he thought that the fight was over.

But then Diego's eyes flicked open again, and he laughed wildly. "You really are something, Reaper. Too bad it's all for nothing."

"Oh, shut it!"

Ashton landed a powerful punch to Diego's stomach, causing him to double over in pain.

Diego stumbled backwards but quickly regained his composure and lunged at Ashton again. Ashton sidestepped him and delivered a swift kick to his back, causing Diego to fall to the ground. He rolled over and got back up, a twisted smile on his face.

"You're good, Reaper," he said, wiping blood from his mouth. "But you can't beat us. You can't beat the cult!"

Ashton tensed up, wondering what Diego was talking about. Diego tried to attack again, but Ashton was too quick.

"That's enough," a voice called out from behind them.

Ashton turned to see Viper standing there, holding Shian up with one arm. Viper had a nasty cut above his eye, but he seemed to be holding his own. Shian, on the other hand, was slumped over, barely conscious.

"You've already lost," Viper said, his voice steady and controlled. "Feel free to stay back if you want to spend the rest of your life in prison."

Diego's grin faded as he looked around and saw that his fellow cult members had been taken down by the Ghosts and police. He sighed and shook his head.

"You haven't seen the last of us," he said before disappearing into the darkness.

Ashton watched him go, his mind racing with questions. The cult was growing more desperate, but most importantly, it seemed the Ghosts or at least the Tower had some rats leaking his plans to the enemies.

"I might have to take care of these bastards sooner than I thought."

Chapter 536 No Victor

After returning to the Tower, Ashton, Anna, and Mazton sat around a table in the meeting room, discussing the events that had just transpired.

Anna was frowning, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She had a feeling things were going too smoothly and something would go wrong. However, even she hadn't expected the Cult to be the source of their problems again.

"I can't believe the cult was behind all of this," she said, shaking her head. "We should have seen it coming."

"Diego is a loose cannon." Ashton leaned back in his chair, his expression grim. "Who knows whether what he said was even true or not."

"Whether it was true or not, we'll need to do a full investigation into the Cult's activities on this planet. They may have other operatives here." Mazton cleared his throat. "I'll get the president's approval for the mission and let you know."

Anna nodded, her eyes relaxing a bit. "Thank you. Also, we'll need to be more careful moving forward. We can't afford to let them catch us off guard again."

Ashton nodded in agreement.

"We'll also need to reevaluate our recruitment process. We can't risk bringing in any more operatives who might have ties to the Cult."

"What?" Anna was taken aback, "One of us betrayed us?"

Ashton shrugged. He wasn't sure about it; hence he wasn't pointing fingers. But thinking the Cult's presence on Econium was a coincidence would be a fool's gamble.

He pulled out a tablet and began typing. Moments later, Malekith appeared before them; his voice no longer represented a god but a loyal AI.

"I'll start compiling a list of potential candidates for further screening," He said and disappeared into the tablet.

Anna sighed, running a hand through her hair. "This whole situation has been a mess. But at least we could stop the Cult's plan before it could do any real damage."

Ashton remained silent on the topic. Diego said it wasn't over and that Ashton was trapped, and as for damage... Shian's critical condition was enough to wound Ashton's pride.

Then there was the energy surging within Diego. Had it not been for that stupid power, Diego would be under arrest, and they'd be interrogating him instead of solving mind puzzles on their own.

Ashton nodded in agreement. "We'll need to remain vigilant, though. This won't be the last time we'd face the Cult."

"We also need to figure out how to handle the financial repercussions of this," Anna said, her brow wrinkled in concern. "Econium is demanding compensation for the damage caused during the mission."

"Tell them to pound sand-" Ashton lashed out but soon regained his senses, "How much-"

"Don't worry about it," Mazton mumbled, "They have no right to demand compensation from the Ghosts as the contract prohibits them from doing so. The most they can do is refuse your payment, which they already have."

Ashton nodded. Money wasn't his concern at the moment, and the well-being of his trusted soldiers took precedence over everything.

"We also need to focus on Shian's recovery. He's in the hospital right now because of my mistakes." Ashton sighed.

Shian was supposed to be his tool like Balmond was. But now he got turned into a potato because of his stupidity.

[Relax, he'll be fine... or so I hope, at least.]

An hour later...

Ashton stood before the glass window, watching Shian lay unconscious in his hospital bed. He had been there for several hours now, recovering from the injuries he sustained in the battle against the Cult. Viper joined him, standing silently beside him, his eyes fixed on Shian.

"How is he?" Viper asked softly, breaking the silence.

He was injured as well and was covered in bandages. But Viper's astonishing healing speed did wonders for him.

Ashton sighed, running a hand around his neck. "The doctors say he's stable, but he's not waking up."

"Do you think it's because of his powers?" Viper frowned.

"It's hard to say." Ashton shrugged. "We don't know much about his abilities, but I'm starting to think they might have something to do with it."

Viper nodded, his eyes still fixed on Shian. "It's a shame. He's a strong fighter. It would be a loss to our team if he can't continue."

"We'll give him all the time he needs to recover. And then we'll help him get control of his powers so that he can fight with us again." Ashton turned to him, his expression serious.

"We'll need him. The Cult won't stop coming after us." Viper nodded in agreement.

Ashton turned to the window, his gaze fixed on Shian's still form.

"We'll be ready for them. And we'll make sure Shian is ready too."

The two men stood in silence for a few more moments, lost in their thoughts, before Ashton turned to Viper.

"Let's go. We have work to do."

Viper nodded and followed Ashton out of the hospital room. All of them had to be prepared at all times to face the Cult.

The cult leader sat in his dimly lit chamber, seething with anger. He had just received the news of the failed operation on Econium, and he was not pleased. His followers trembled in fear as he paced back and forth, muttering curses under his breath.

"Damn it, damn it, DAMN IT!"

The cult leader, a tall and imposing figure with a face covered in a hood, slammed his fist on the table in anger. The other members of the Cult covered in fear as he yelled at them for their failure to capture Reaper.

"I trusted you all to carry out this mission successfully, and you have all let me down!" he bellowed. "You were supposed to bring me Reaper, not disclose our plans to him on a platter."

The cult members hung their heads in shame as the leader continued his rant.

"We cannot allow him to interfere with our ultimate goal. We must find a way to eliminate him before it's too late."

One of the members spoke up hesitantly. "But, my lord, Reaper is a skilled and powerful mercenary. He also has the support of the Kernel Tower and the Empire. Fighting him head-on would be catastrophic!"

The cult leader let out a growl of frustration. "Excuses! Do you think that will appease me? We had everything riding on this operation, and you and that bastard, what was his name... Diego! You and Diego, let him slip through your fingers."

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. "We cannot let this setback stop us. We will regroup, we will come up with a new plan, and we will strike again. But this time, we will not fail."

His subordinates nodded in agreement, relieved that their leader's rage had subsided, at least for now. But they knew that the cult leader would not rest until he had achieved his goal, no matter the cost.

Chapter 537 A Prisoner's Request

In the days that followed, the Ghosts continued their raids on Econium's cities. No corner was left unturned in their search for clues, but every raid proved fruitless.

The goons working for Diego were clueless about his whereabouts or his affiliation with the Cult. To them, they were still part of a liberation army fighting for the oppressed, and Diego had brainwashed them so much that they refused to see the blatant truth in front of them.

Ashton realised there was no point in interrogating them since they knew nothing useful. But one day, a surprise revelation came from one of the goons.

He claimed that right before the attack on the bank, Diego had met with a hooded figure who had given him a file of tablets. After consuming the pills, Diego's strength increased drastically.

Ashton now knew how Diego kept bouncing back even after receiving a severe beating; he was high on drugs.

The goon further revealed that the meeting with the hooded figure was why they had arrived at the bank way past their planned schedule. Unfortunately, that was all the goon knew.

Based on the goon's description, Ashton had no doubts that the hooded figure was a representative of the Cult. However, there was no way for him to determine the identity of the man Diego worked for.

"It wouldn't matter even if you had a crystal-clear photograph of him," Mazton mumbled through the comms. "The Cult is a secretive organisation that never sees the light of day. They always hire people like Diego to do their dirty work while reaping the rewards from the shadows."

Ashton nodded in agreement. Although the Metal Sharks and the Cult were colluding against him, he knew that the Cult was far more dangerous than a mere terrorist organisation. The Tower and ONI had some information about the Metal Sharks, but the Cult was a complete enigma.

After Mazton mentioned it, even Ashton realised a pattern in his interactions with the Cult. Despite constantly being in each other's way for god knows how long, Ashton had never had a direct confrontation with the Cult.

Whether it was the incident on Euphoria, Occuna, or Econium, the Cult had always hired run-of-the-mill mercenaries or gangsters to stop him, but they never came face to face with him.

While the Cult didn't have the numbers that the Mercenary Tower or the Metal Sharks possessed, their secretive nature was enough to topple any power bigger than their own.

Ashton felt a sense of unease as he contemplated the power of the Cult. He had been too focused on taking down the troubles on earth and the Xyrans, believing them to be the main threats.

But now he realised that the Cult was the true enemy he should have focused on all along.

He wondered how many other organisations had been destroyed by the Cult's shady tactics. How many other people, like Diego and his goons, had been manipulated and brainwashed into doing their bidding?

Ashton knew he needed to find a way to take down the Cult, but he had no idea where to start. The thought of facing an organisation that was so elusive and powerful made him feel small and powerless.

Ashton clenched his fists in frustration. He was tired of playing this cat-and-mouse game with the Cult. But what could he do against an enemy he couldn't even see?

Ashton sighed heavily, realising the gravity of the situation.

"So, we're pretty much screwed then?" he asked, a tinge of frustration in his voice.

Mazton paused for a moment before responding, "Not entirely. We still have a few leads we can follow up on. It's just that the Cult operates differently than the other organisations we've faced before. ONI and I will do our best to track down those sly cowards."

Ashton nodded, understanding that this was going to be a difficult task.

"I do have someone who could help us," Mazton spoke softly. "I'll send you the details in a while. Meet me there and come alone. Involving anyone else could put their lives in danger."

"A prison, really?" Ashton asked Mazton as the prison popped into view.

"Sometimes you got to see things from the other side," Mazton nonchalantly replied before turning towards the pilot. "Take us to docking port B12."

"Affirmative." The pilot replied before taking a sharp turn.

The intergalactic prison was a vast, sprawling complex, occupying an entire moon on the galaxy's outer rim. From a distance, it looked like a metallic monolith, its jagged edges glinting menacingly in the harsh light of the system's sun.

As their ship approached, Ashton could see the intricate web of security systems that guarded the prison's perimeter. A ring of energy shields, powerful turrets, and swarms of automated drones created an impenetrable barrier that would deter even the most daring of escape attempts.

The ship docked at the designated bay, and Ashton stepped out, his heart racing with a mix of anxiety and excitement.

He had never set foot inside an intergalactic prison before, and the thought of facing some of the most dangerous criminals in the galaxy made him want to turn them into summons.

[Hm.. they would be great foot soldiers if you could get them on a leash.]

"It's an honour to meet you, sir!" The prison warden awaited their arrival and immediately jumped to greet Mazton.

"Likewise," Mazton smiled before introducing Ashton. "I don't think I need to tell you who this young man is?"

"Of course not. Who wouldn't know the Tower's successor?" The warden replied and shook Ashton's hand. "Shall we proceed?"

Mazton nodded, and they headed inside. The entrance to the prison was a massive, reinforced gate guarded by a team of heavily armed soldiers in sleek, black armour.

They scrutinised Ashton's credentials before allowing him to pass, thanks to his background as a mercenary, warning him that any attempt to cause trouble would be met with deadly force.

The warden could only look at the guests as the prison's AI kept warning them over and over.

The prison was a maze of narrow corridors, dimly lit cells, and the constant hum of machinery. The air was thick with the smell of disinfectant, and the sound of clanging metal echoed throughout the complex.

The cells were tiny, cramped spaces, barely large enough for a single occupant. The walls were made of dull, grey metal, and a small, barred window offered a glimpse of the desolate landscape outside. Each cell was equipped with a simple cot, a sink, a toilet, and nothing else.

Ashton walked past row after row of cells, each containing a lone criminal. Some were sitting quietly, staring at the walls with vacant expressions, while others were yelling and screaming, their voices echoing down the hallways.

Despite the bleakness of the surroundings, Ashton could sense a quiet tension in the air, a feeling of suppressed violence that hung over the prison like a dark cloud. He knew that the slightest provocation could ignite a riot at any moment, and they would be caught in the middle of it.

They made their way through the corridors of the high-security prison, their footsteps echoing off the walls. He was here to visit an old friend who could help him take down the Cult.

"We're here," The warden announced before opening the cell. "Remember, you only got ten minutes."

Mazton nodded before entering the cell. Ashton followed suit.

"Mazton, my man! Long time no see," the prisoner said, looking up to see who had come to visit him.

"Hey, Jack," Mazton said, smiling at his friend. "How have you been holding up?"

"I'm doing okay," Jack replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Same old routine, but it's better than the alternative."

Mazton nodded sympathetically before introducing Ashton.

Apparently, Jack had been a skilled hacker who had run afoul of the law when he had gotten involved in some illegal activities. Mazton met him while working on a case years ago, and they had become good friends.

He then convinced Jack to turn his life around and use his skills for good, and he helped him get a reduced sentence in return for his cooperation.

Once Mazton was done, Ashton explained the situation to Jack and asked for his help in tracking down the Cult. Jack listened intently, nodding every once in a while.

"I can definitely help you with that," Jack said after Ashton had finished. "I have some contacts in the underground hacking community who might be able to get me some information on the Cult."

Ashton smiled, relieved. "That would be great, Jack."

Jack grinned. "Anything for you, Mazy man. But, there's a catch."

Mazton raised an eyebrow. "What kind of catch?"

"I need you to do me a favour first." Jack hesitated before replying.

Ashton frowned. "What kind of favour?"

"It's... complicated," Jack said, his expression turning serious. "I need you to break someone out of this prison."

"What? Jack, that's crazy! We can't do that!" Ashton's eyes widened in surprise.

"I know it's a big ask," Jack said, holding up a hand. "But this guy needs to get out of here, and I can't do it on my own. He's a good man, Ashton, and he doesn't deserve to be locked up in here."

Ashton thought for a moment, weighing his options. On the one hand, he needed Jack's help to take down the Cult. On the other hand, he couldn't risk his freedom and reputation by breaking someone out of prison.

"It would have been one thing to get you out of here. But if it's someone else, I need to think about it," Mazton said finally. "I'll get back to you."

Jack nodded, understanding. "Take your time, man. Just remember, I'm here to help you. And I know you won't forget about me."

Mazton nodded, smiling slightly. "Of course, Jack. You're my friend, and I appreciate everything you've done for me."

Ashton turned to leave, feeling conflicted. He knew he needed Jack's help to take down the Cult, but Ashton didn't want to risk everything he had worked for just to help a stranger escape prison.

"You're seriously considering his proposal?" Ashton exploded as soon as they were alone.

"Look, if I go through with it, and that's a big if, it would not be for your sake but for everyone," Mazton replied. "The Cult is getting out of hand, and I don't want rogue organisations like them to cause chaos in the galaxy. Let's just leave..."

As he walked through the corridors of the prison, Ashton's thoughts were consumed with the dilemma he faced. He needed to find a way to take down the Cult without compromising his values or putting himself in danger. No matter how tough it might be.

Chapter 538 Uncharted Territory (1)

Despite not wanting to entertain Jack's request, it was the only shot Ashton had at tracking down the Cult. However, before that, he wanted some sort of guarantee that Jack knew something worthwhile.

Mazton conveyed Ashton's words to Jack, who gave him a couple of coordinates and dates. Ashton immediately knew what it was and dispatched ONI agents to verify his doubts, and they did.

Both of the coordinates were places with Cult's presence. Unfortunately, even those people were being used by the Cult, like countless others. Not a single cult executive was found in either of those places, but thanks to Jack's help, the Ghosts were able to evade two massive disasters.

Jack had proved his worth, and it was Ashton's turn to do the same. Even though it wasn't going to be easy.

Ashton leaned back in his chair, the glow of the holo-table casting a dim light on his face. He looked up at his team, who were gathered around the table, deep in discussion.

Mazton, Anna, Leon, and Otiga - the most resourceful individuals he knew, had all gathered to plan the prison break. The stakes were high, and the risks were enormous. But Ashton knew that if anyone could pull it off, it was this team.

As for Otiga, Ashton had to use the portal of Eastern Palace to get her to the Tower as fast as he could. Planning a prison break would require her knowledge and expertise. In front of them was a detailed map of the prison. It wasn't easy to get, but Mazton came through.

The prison was a massive, sprawling complex, even more, extensive than what Ashton had expected. It was heavily guarded and fortified with the latest technology, making it nearly impossible to penetrate. But that was precisely what they had to do.

"So, here's what we know," Mazton ran his fingers over the map, studying it intently. "The prison is located on the edge of the galaxy, far from any major trade routes. It's a high-security facility constructed by the Orion Empire, heavily guarded by their military personnel."

Leon nodded in agreement. "The facility is also equipped with some of the most advanced security systems in the galaxy. We're talking about biometric scanners, energy shields, and surveillance cameras that detect the slightest movements."

Ashton leaned forward in his seat, his eyes fixed on the map. "So, how are we going to get in?"

"Despite their defences, we have one advantage. The prison was built over a hundred years ago, and it hasn't undergone any significant upgrades since then." Otiga chimed in. "The security systems might be advanced, but they're still outdated compared to what we have today."

[No wonder that AI was pissed. No one wants to run on a bad circuit!]

Ashton ignored Astaroth's comment and continued with the discussion.

"If that's the case, why hasn't been a single escapee in decades?" Anna raised a valid question.

"The entire prison is one planet. One might escape the prison, but how will they escape the planet without transportation?" Otiga replied.

"That's good news. But we need more than just outdated security systems to pull this off." Ashton sighed. "We need to know the facility's defences, the guard rotations, and their weaknesses. Everything."

"Do you have any info regarding it?" Mazton immediately turned towards Otiga, who shook her head.

"The Orions are notoriously secretive about their military operations. We'll have to gather that information ourselves."

"We know the emperor, right? Why don't we get help from them?" Anna quizzed, but Ashton immediately shot down the proposal.

Just because they were on friendly terms did not mean Lord Testickles would help them. Moreover, they had no idea where the Cult could have their spies. Therefore calling for their help would be like broadcasting their plans for the entire galaxy.

"For now, let's try and keep this within ourselves," Ashton replied. "I'll think about asking them for their aid when there's no other way. What about the target?"

Otiga cleared her throat before speaking.

"I've managed to gather some intel on the prisoner we're breaking out. His name is Dr Tarek, a brilliant scientist who was wrongfully imprisoned for refusing to work with the Xyrans."

Alarm bells went off in Ashton's head.

'Xyrans? What the heck do they want from a scientist?'

[It beats me... we're too prideful to ask for someone's help even if we were in dire need of it.]

'Could Xyrans be behind the cult-'

[Don't be ridiculous. Why would we engage in something of that sort? If we wanted to dominate the lower civilisations, we'd have done so without much thinking.]

Ashton nodded understandingly. The Xyran were the overlords of the galaxy, and they were the last people to use underhanded tricks to achieve their goals. Unless they are dealing with Precursors...

Meanwhile, Otiga continued, "Tarek is being held in the highest-security cell, and the only way to access it is through a biometric scanner. We'd need the Warden alive and cooperative to pull Tarek out."

Ashton sighed. These complications were the reason he wanted no part in Jack's scheme. Unfortunately, it was too late to back down anymore. Mazton knew what was happening inside Ashton's head, so he continued the meeting instead.

"As for the infiltration, we have a few options. The first is to infiltrate the prison by posing as guards or officials. But that would require a lot of preparation and resources, and there's a high risk of being discovered."

"What's our second option?" Anna asked, her eyes bright with anticipation.

Mazton smiled. "The second option is more daring. We'll fly under their radar, land near the prison, and breach the walls with explosives. It'll be a high-risk operation, but it's our best chance."

Leon frowned. "It's not the time for jokes, sir. No amount of explosives would ever breach those walls."

"My bad," Mazton shrugged. "I have thought of something. Since the Prison AI is always frustrated, no one pays attention to it. The AI also happens to be the one controlling all of the prison's defence and surveillance."

"Which means if we could replace the AI, we'd be in control of the entire planet!"

"Exactly. Otiga can figure a way to get one of us inside to do the job." Mazton proposed, and Otiga readily agreed.

But Ashton knew that the most challenging part was yet to come. "Alright, we have the intel, and we have the tech. But how do we get in and out of prison without being detected?"

Mazton smirked. "That's where I come in. I've already made arrangements for a diversionary attack on a nearby Orion military outpost. It'll draw their attention away from the prison, giving us the window to get in and out undetected."

Ashton leaned forward, his eyes locked with Mazton's. "But what if something goes wrong? What if we're caught?"

Mazton's smile faded, "Then we're screwed. But we're not going to be caught. We're going to plan this meticulously every step of the way. We'll practice our infiltration and extraction methods until we can do it in our sleep. And when the time comes, we'll execute flawlessly."

Ashton nodded, feeling a sense of determination rising within him. "Alright, let's do this. We'll start gathering intel and training immediately."

Chapter 539 Uncharted Territory (2)

A week later...

"He got hit?" The warden roared in a fury. "This bitch had one thing to do, and he got hit by truck-kun?"

The warden stood tall, towering over most beings with his imposing presence. He was an alien with broad shoulders, standing over eight feet tall. His skin was a deep shade of purple, and his eyes were a piercing yellow that seemed to glow in the dimly lit prison corridors.

The warden's face was stern and unyielding, with a strong jawline and a square-shaped head. His hair was short and spiky, a dark shade of black that contrasted with his purple skin.

The warden wore a black, form-fitting uniform that hugged his muscular physique, with golden accents that denoted his rank. But the one thing everyone feared about him was his weapon of choice.

The warden carried a large staff made of an unknown metallic material, which he used to control the prisoners and enforce his authority. The rod emitted a low hum, and the end was adorned with a glowing purple gem, which seemed to pulse with energy.

At the moment, the messenger on his knees in front of him was moments away from tasting the warden's massive rod.

Fortunately for him, the warden had essential matters to care for, "Leave! Don't show me your face till it's time to collect your salary!"

The messenger did not waste a moment and darted out of the chamber with his dignity intact. However, the warden didn't have the pleasure of feeling at ease.

Since the prison was located near the end of the Orion Empire, the Emperor or his officials rarely checked in on the happenings on the prison planet.

The warden had the freedom to do as he pleased, and in a way, he was the uncrowned king. However, something happened that could take away his crown.

Despite the protocol stating that no unauthorised person should be allowed to stay on the planet without the Emperor's approval, the warden appointed a plethora of women under false identities to entertain him after a long tiring day.

It wasn't like women were forbidden from living there. It was just that spouses who had been with their husbands or wives for more than fifteen years and were good citizens were allowed to live with their spouses.

It was a measure so that the prison employees don't leak some crucial information under the guise of love or lust. Also, not having unnecessarily eliminated the risk of escapees finding shelter in the deserted world.

While the warden could have used his position of influence to wiggle out of any enquiries if the Emperor was provided with definitive proof, there was nothing much he could do to save face.

That's why the warden feared his secret might get leaked after Mazton's unexpected visit and rushed to make arrangements to avoid detection.

Zorathar, the warden's right-hand man and accomplice in his crimes, was supposed to get the women off the planet and was transporting them, women, in a prison vehicle to the ship.

However, the truck never made it to the launching pad, and today he got the news that another car had apparently hit the vehicle. Zorathar was unconscious in the hospital, but the ladies were missing.

"Goddamn it, Zorathar!" the warden slammed his fists on the table. "I can't even question him since the fucker slipped into a coma!"

It was then a sinister plan popped into his mind. "Zorathar and I are the only ones that know about the ladies. Even if I can't find them, I can kill Zorathar and pin the blame on him!"

Little did the warden know the messenger was still waiting outside the chamber. Listening to his plans.

"This motherfucker..." the messenger mumbled as his demeanour did a complete 180, "Otiga, you got that?"

"I got a lot more than just the recording, Reaper." Otiga's calm voice echoed through the earpiece. "That should be enough to keep the warden busy for a month or two. For now, find and output, plug Malekith in and let him take over the prison."

"Roger," Ashton replied before adopting the messenger's awkward and scared demeanour.

Ashton had been practising his [Alteration] ability for a week, and his efforts were totally worth it. Not one soul suspected him, and with the warden's panic-stricken state, fooling him was no difficult task.

"Just wait, you disgusting bastard. Karma will soon rain on your parade."

The warden was correct. Mazton had noticed the illicit activities he had been nurturing, and Ashton was the one who took down Zorathar.

As for the girls, they were on their way to the Tower with Anna. That too in the same ship that the warden had 'booked'. Ashton knew he must thank the ONI agents for mishandling the warden's request.

The warden was exploiting the girls, and the prisoners were allowed to have fun with the ladies for an appropriate price.

The fact that the girls were trafficked to the prison and held on the planet against their will was enough for Ashton to rip the warden's genitals and feed them to him.

But he had to keep his calm. The warden will receive what was in store for him, just like Zorathar did. Any consideration Ashton previously had for the warden's well-being was no longer in his mind... he was going full scorched earth.

"I hope you'll enjoy this gift half as much as I would, bastard," Ashton mumbled as he finally arrived at the control room, where the prison's AI system was.

He took a deep breath and walked up to the gate. The guards standing there checked his ID and credentials, and after a quick scan of his face, he was allowed inside... on the warden's special instruction, which he never gave.

The room was empty, except for the hundreds or so systems that were present there. Ashton rushed to the nearest computer and immediately plugged in the drive containing Malekith.

"Wow, you made it here!" Malekith commented moments before the prison's AI detected a threat.

"Intruder alert!"

The AI yelled, but Malekith, being the superior one, quickly overpowered the existing AI before shoving it into the drive Malekith was inside mere moments ago.

Ashton's heart raced while he waited for Malekith to succeed. He knew that if he were caught, the consequences would be dire. But he had a mission to complete.

"Mission accomplished," Malekith said with a smile. "Now leave! It'll take a while for me to take over the systems completely. Come back in a week, and I'll be ready."

"Got it," Ashton replied before heading towards the gates. "You take care now!"

"This human..." Malekith sighed. "He is so annoying."

Ashton took a deep breath and made his way out of the prison, taking care to avoid the guards and cameras. He changed his face back to his own as he left the front gate and walked away, feeling relieved that his mission was a success.

Outside, Otiga was waiting for him in their ship; all smiles as she shoved a screen into Ashton's face.

"We did it! Most of the prison systems are under our control."

Ashton nodded. The prison's systems were sound. It was the useless warden who made it so weak to infiltrations. After all, if not for the warden who used his fund to buy sex slaves instead of investing it in upgrading the prison, things would've been very different.

Chapter 540 Xylopiian Trouble (1)

While Malekith worked his magic to corrupt the prison's systems, Ashton and the rest of the team focused on making money. Why? Because they had too much time on their hands and they also wanted to test the recruits.

That said, Ashton and Anna couldn't accept jobs recklessly as they both were the targets of the Cult, and they also had to prepare for the prison break. As such, the responsibility fell on Laihud's and Vimur's shoulders to guide the newbies.

Laihud's nurturing nature and Vimur's strictness were the perfect combinations to teach the newbies everything they needed to know. Meanwhile, Inhumans and Metahumans joined them in their quest, hoping to earn some quick buck.

"It's a shame Viper wasn't cleared to participate in this mission," Alina whispered as the inhumans got ready in the hall.

Jay being the reserved, enigmatic guy, only nodded. He was more interested in the mission. After all, it was their first mission as mercenaries, and he wanted to ensure he performed exceptionally.

Alina knew what was going on inside the dumbass's head. So she decided to distract him by giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Can you relax?" She joked. "It's a run-of-the-mill mission! Moreover, we have two of the best Lieutenants to carry us! Be bold and smile, moron."

Jay finally gave in and smiled. After all, she was correct. The monster subjugation mission shouldn't be difficult, especially with the calibre of machinery they were carrying.

Just then, everyone's communications pinged. It was a message from Laihud with an attachment. Jay immediately clicked on it, and all the information they'd need to complete the mission was inside the file.

Alina and Jay stood in the small briefing room, reviewing the data they had received about their upcoming mission. The planet they were going to, Verdantia, was known for its harsh terrain and dangerous wildlife, making it difficult to operate in.

"Okay, so we're looking for a creature called the Zorax," Alina said, pointing at a holographic display. "It's known for its extremely potent venom, and we need it for the cure Tower's pharma company is developing."

"I thought it was a mission to kill the beasts, not kidnap them?" Nicols, one of the Metahumans, shrugged. "Might as well kidnap some big tiddy-"

However, before he could finish expressing his carnal desires, Laihud and Vimur entered the room, all geared up for an adventure.

"Good to see you all so energetic this morning!" Vimur barked. "I hope you all received a message from Lieutenant Laihud?"

The crowd of four hundred mercenaries nodded simultaneously.

"Good, because you should know about your enemies before striking them! Lieutenant Laihud would give you the rest of the debriefing as well."

With that, Laihud tapped the centre table twice, and a holographic map materialised out of thin air. It was a map of a section of Verdantia.

"Not a lot is known about Zorax as they mostly keep to themselves. But recent reports have shown the peace-loving Zorax attack anyone and anything that comes their way."

Vimur continued, "It's our job to get things under control, and while we are at it, trap some of them and bring them back to the Tower for further examination."

Laihud tapped the table again, and the terrain map was replaced by one that depicted the cave system.

"We have reason to believe that the Zorax is located in a cave system on the other side of the planet."

"Which means we'll have to trek through some pretty rough terrain," Alina said, checking her equipment list.

"Exactly," Laihud nodded. "However, don't worry about the equipment. Vice-president Mazton has been kind enough to lend us everything we'd need."

With that, Laihud and Vimur exit the room, leaving the recruits to do their thing before boarding the ship. However, as they were going, Vimur couldn't help but show his dumb side.

"Do we really have everything?" He asked. "I mean... that cave system is extensive, and Zorax is not the type of creature anyone wants to be trapped within a close space."

"I think so," Laihud said, holding up a small device. "I've got this scanner to help us locate the Zorax once we're in the cave system. And we've got plenty of food and water for the journey, and whatever we lack would be taken care of by the locals."

Soon the Ghosts boarded three ships. The first two carried a hundred recruits, while the smaller ship belonged to Vimur and Laihud.

While the other two ships mainly served as cargo ships, the latter was equipped with all amenities, making the recruits feel a tinge of jealousy towards the lieutenants.

"You look excited about our first mission." Jay teased Alina.

Alina nodded, her eyes scanning over the maps again. "Okay, we need to be prepared for anything. We don't know what kind of creatures we might encounter on this planet."

Jay grinned, his eyes bright with excitement. "Sounds like my kind of mission."

Alina smiled in return. "Just remember, we're not here to have fun, and we're here to get the Zorax and get out. No heroics, got it?"

Jay's expression turned serious. "Got it. I'm here to do my job."

"Good."

The entire ship was filled with excited chattering of the recruits. Most of them were already planning ways to spend their share after completing the mission.

Some wanted to upgrade their gear, and some desired to waste it on booze and girls. But one thing was common with all of them. They did not want to waste their youth away.

Even though all of them were strangers at this point in time, they had a sense of unity instilled in them when they saw the skull branded on their gear. The symbol reflected their allegiance to the Ghosts and, by default, to Reaper.

"Prepare for the descent." the captain's voice echoed inside the ships.

The ghosts got into action and double-checked their equipment before giving the captain the okay.

Before they landed and the ship's doors opened, they received another message from Laihud.

"Remember, we need to be cautious. We don't know what kind of conditions this planet is going through or what kind of hazards we might encounter." His voice echoed. "No matter what, you must abide by our orders or face the consequences. For this is not a trial. Good luck to you all."

"Yes, Sir!" The recruits bellowed, their eyes fixed on the airlock doors.

After a moment of silence, the doors opened with a hiss, and they stepped out into the unknown. As they descended to the planet's surface, Alina couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement mixed with apprehension.

Yes, they were on a mission. But it was Alina's first time stepping onto an alien world. But she wasn't alone, and Jay was by her side, holding onto her hands.

As they touched the surface, they immediately began scanning their surroundings with their helmets' built-in sensors. The terrain was rocky and uneven, with sharp cliffs jutting up from the ground. The sky was a strange shade of purple, with wispy clouds drifting lazily by.

However, that wasn't all.

They had been expecting to see a jungle world, but behind the rocky plains was a metropolitan city. Hundreds of towering structures could be seen from a distance. It was then the recruits realised the planet was divided into two halves.

One was populated by the natives and had well-developed cities. At the same time, the other half was ruled over by mother nature. It was quite a peculiar sight, but at the same time, it was beautiful to see such a balance between nature and modernisation.

The lieutenants had landed way before the recruits did and were already greeting the locals who had called for their help.

In the meantime, a few guides approached the recruits, guiding them into the city.

"Welcome, travellers," said the alien leader, a tall, slender creature with bright blue skin and long, spindly fingers. "We have called you here because we are in need of your assistance."

Vimur and Laihud exchanged a quick glance before Vimur spoke up.

"Yes, we have been notified about this issue of yours. However, much of your planet is still a mystery to us."

"It'll be helpful if you could give us more information about your world and the Zorax issue." Laihud chimed in.

"Our planet is home to a diverse array of animal species," explained the alien leader. "But in recent months, we have seen a dramatic increase in the population of Zorax species."

They are causing damage to our crops and homes, and we fear that if their numbers continue to grow, they will become a severe threat to our civilisation."

"We understand," said Laihud. "And you want us to help you bring their numbers under control."

The alien leader nodded. "Yes. We have heard of your reputation as skilled hunters and believe you can help us."

Vimur and Laihud exchanged another glance. They had indeed spent many years honing their hunting skills, but they had never before encountered the Zorax in their domain. Still, they were willing to try.

"We will do what we can," said Vimur. "For now, we'll need to gather more information about Zorax and its weakness."

The alien leader nodded and led them into the densely populated city, away from the region where the animals in question were said to be most prevalent.

As they walked, Vimur struck up a conversation with the alien leader.

"What can you tell us about these animals? Are they particularly dangerous?"

The alien leader shook his head. "If we ignore their poisonous fangs, then no, they are not dangerous, per se. But they are very skittish and difficult to approach. We have tried to hunt them ourselves, but we have had little success."

Vimur nodded thoughtfully. "I see. And what kind of weapons do you have?"

The alien leader looked at him quizzically. "Weapons?"

"Yeah, how were you hunting them without weapons?" Laihud smiled nervously.

"We don't use such constructs to vandalise nature." The leader replied. "We use nature and guide her to fulfil our desired result."

"You... pitted animals against each other?" Vimur asked.

"Yes. Just like we Xylopians take care of our own problems, nature should also solve her issues by herself." The leader remarked.

Vimur had to fight the urge to either smack the leader or himself for accepting this weirdo's job request.