

The Sun 381

Chapter 381 – The Strongest Human

"Wait, what?" Nick asked. "It's not a fairy tale?"

"It is a fairy tale," the governor said. "All these things about replacing the Sun and vanquishing the Eternals is just a story. However, the Champion of Light himself is real."

"He's humanity's champion, the leader of Aegis, and the strongest human that exists."

Nick felt like his mind had been hit by a bombshell.

The strongest human!

The leader of Aegis!

"He's the only human with a Zephyx Synchronizer attuned to the Sun," the governor said.

Attuned to the Sun?!

That was possible?!

'That's even crazier than being attuned to the Null!' Nick thought.

At that moment, several thoughts shot through Nick's mind.

'So, he has the Sun's ability.'

Nick thought about the story about the Champion of Light again.

'He takes all the hopes of the despairing humans and ushers in a new tomorrow.'

'The story has been designed to be memorable and easy to retell.'

'So, this story has been spread by Aegis.'

'The more people that know about it, the better.'

'Does this mean that the Champion of Light gains power by people believing in him?'

'But if he has the power of the Sun, doesn't that mean that the Sun most likely has the same activation condition for its power?'

"Does that mean that the Sun gains power by being seen and known by people?" Nick asked.

"You're quite fast," the governor said. "Yes, Aegis believes that the Sun's power is the opposite of the Null's power."

"The Null doesn't want to be seen by anyone."

"The Sun wants to be seen by everyone."

"Aegis even suspects that the Sun has a hand in the Nightmare's creation."

"Where there is darkness, there is no Sun."

"The more dangerous the darkness, the more the people want to be in the Sun, and the more they are in the Sun, the more they pay attention to it."

"The Champion of Light becomes more powerful the more people know him and the more often they think about him."

"Many years ago, Aegis used to constantly post pictures of the Champion of Light in all the cities while reminding everyone of him."

"Ironically, that ended in people getting annoyed by him, which made them hate him, which made them not put their hopes in him."

"The damage was devastating, and the Champion of Light had been weakened during that time."

"I still remember that time."

"Eventually, they just told the cities to bring the fairy tale of the Champion of Light to the people."

"The older people who remembered the pictures of the Champion of Light got annoyed, but the young people enjoyed the story."

"Eventually, it just became normal, and only older Extractors remember the time before the fairy tale."

"The story has shown remarkable success, and today, the Champion of Light is at his most powerful."

"The only reason why humanity's greatest enemies haven't eradicated us yet is his presence."

"The enemy Adversaries can only use guerilla warfare. They can only poke us before running away again and hiding."

"None of them can fight the Champion of Light on their own."

"If they banded together, they might have a shot at winning."

"However, Specters are inherently selfish, and they would rather continue growing at their normal rate instead of risking their lives like this."

"Additionally, time is on their side."

The governor became silent for a while.

"The Champion of Light doesn't have much longer to live."

"He's an ancient man by now, the oldest one in existence."

"He will die within this century."

The governor frowned.

"We don't know if we can resist the Adversaries when that happens."

Nick's heart rate had been elevated for quite a while.

The things the governor was telling him were crazy.

It was like the governor was telling Nick about the approaching end of humanity.

"Is there nothing humanity can do?" Nick asked.

"I don't know," the governor said. "I know of the problem, but I don't know what Aegis is doing to solve it."

"The things I'm telling you are known by everyone that's involved with Aegis. None of these things are considered secret."

"It is simply discouraged to tell people who are not involved with Aegis since it could start a panic, and nobody would benefit from that."

Nick just looked at the governor, unsure.

Sure, these things were no secrets, according to him, but it was still strange that the governor took the time to tell Nick about them.

"Why are you telling me about these things?" Nick asked.

The governor looked at Nick before looking back at the square in his hand while tapping on it some more.

"Because of how Simon Francium treated you after your conversation with him," the governor said.

Nick was reminded of Simon Francium, the Protector who had talked with him after Nick had met Envy.

Nick had told Simon about his power, fully expecting that he would be put to death.

Instead, he had received a foreign piece of Zephyx, which he could access to end his life in an instant.

In the end, Simon made sure that nothing would happen to Nick and that he would receive appropriate compensation for his services.

"Aegis does not usually get involved in the cities' local politics," the governor said. "The fact that Simon Francium made sure that you were properly rewarded was very unlike a representative from Aegis."

"It is very obvious that Aegis is interested in you, and they are most likely keeping an eye on you."

"I do not know what you talked about, and I don't know why they are interested in you."

"But the fact is that they are."

"In some way, you are involved with Aegis, and that is a good thing for you and for me."

"Every governor of every city is also an agent from Aegis. While the governance of every city is up to the governor, the purpose of the cities' existence is to further humanity's power and survival."

"This means we are working for the same team."

"It means that we are allies."

Chapter 382 – Strong Leader

Allies.

Nick didn't know what he should think of that word.

The governor had told Nick a lot about the world, but these were things that were just far too distant.

When one looked into the distance, one could see where the governor was coming from.

Humanity needed the Champion of Light.

The cities were created to further humanity's survival and strength.

All the governors were agents of Aegis, and Aegis' goal was to protect humanity.

The Specters were extremely dangerous, and humanity had to fight against them.

All of Aegis had to work together against the Specters.

'But doesn't that sound way too pure and one-sided?' Nick thought.

'All of humanity working together?'

'All humans are working to deal with the Specters?'

'Everyone is acting in humanity's best interest?'

While Nick thought about these things, images from his past showed up.

People who couldn't pay the blood tax were turned into husks by the mosquitos.

Extractors that could kill whomever they wanted from the Dregs just for some credits.

Manufacturers that squeezed every bit of money they could out of the normal people.

'For the good of humanity,' Nick repeated in his mind with abhorrent disgust.

The governor's words sounded very idealistic.

However, the governor was also quite persuasive and good at convincing people of his viewpoint.

Maybe Nick would have bought what the governor said...

If it weren't for Simon Francium.

Simon Francium had told Nick things that he would never forget.

'No organization is without internal conflict, and Aegis is not an exception,' Nick repeated Simon Francium's words in his mind. 'Many of the Protectors are forced to fight for humanity. Without the Shields keeping them suppressed, most of the Protectors would just stay inside a city and keep being normal Extractors.'

'They wouldn't even try to fight against the Specters that view humanity as their enemy.'

'They would only care about catching Demons and normal Fallen to increase their power and the weight of their pockets.'

These were the words that Simon Francium had spoken to Nick.

'Meanwhile, the governor talks like Aegis is one unit, and whatever it does is for the good of humanity.'

'He talks like he thinks of me as an ally and that he tries to do his best to support humanity as a whole.'

'Yet, at the same time, he is willing to increase the blood tax, which results in many people and children getting sucked dry just so that Kugelblitz can have a single-digit percent of increase in profits.'

'He never pushed to have the Parasite removed, just speaking empty words of encouragement.'

'He talks about Debilify, a disease that makes life unlivable, but doesn't truly try to find it.'

'Everybody knows that one of the Manufacturers has a secret Specter that gains power by spreading the disease called Debilify.'

'Every person in the big meeting knows that.'

'And yet, he just says that we need to find a cure and that we need to find the cause.'

'He never does anything about it.'

'Simon Francium doesn't even trust him. Instead of tasking the governor with finding the secret servant of Envy, he tasked a random John to find it, me.'

'The most important thing that Simon said was that Aegis is forcing compliance upon all Protectors.'

'Without Aegis' iron fist forcing the Protectors to help, humanity would be fragmented and weak.'

'And isn't this city exactly how a world without Aegis would be?'

'The governor is trying to work together with the Manufacturers. He's obviously giving them leeway in some things and expects compliance in other things.'

Nick felt deep revulsion.

'Why should a murderer be allowed to commit two murders per year just so that they don't commit ten?'

'The murderer shouldn't be allowed to commit any murders!'

'If the murderer doesn't comply, he will die!'

'The good of humanity and the good of the community rule above all!'

'You can't focus a big group of people onto a common goal without forcing them!'

'The governor is a weak leader.'

'I am not on the governor's side.'

'I am on Aegis' side!'

'Humans are inherently selfish, and by giving several people the power to decide humanity's pathway, said pathway will inevitably lead to their bellies growing fat and their pockets heavy.'

'Humanity needs a strong leader with a good and selfless mentality, and from what the governor and Simon Francium said, the Champion of Light is such a leader.'

'He forces the Protectors to protect humanity or die, and he only allows the people he believes in to become Shields.'

'Aegis is the reason why humanity still stands.'

If Nick hadn't learned so much from Julian over the past two years, his face would have shown an obvious expression of disgust.

As it stood, he looked at the governor with his usual respectful eyes.

'You're not part of Aegis,' Nick thought.

'You're someone working for Aegis, acting like a paragon of humanity, but in truth, you're just protecting your own position and wealth by not offending anyone that can threaten your life.'

'You hang so much on your life and your wealth that you don't even dare to think about doing something that Kugelblitz or Anatomy don't want.'

'Why don't you go through with the words you say and actually look for the hidden Specter yourself in Anatomy or Kugelblitz?'

'So what if they suddenly start going crazy and doing horrible things?'

'If they do anything horrible, you just kill them!'

'Many lives will end in the process, but that can't be avoided.'

'The people in the present might resent you, but the future generations will view you as a hero!'

'If you want to get rid of the decaying piece of flesh in your torso, you will inevitably cut out some healthy pieces as well.'

"You think I'm your ally?" Nick asked in surprise.

"Your connection with Aegis suggests so," the governor said with a nod. "Are you not?"

Nick nodded.

"I am on Aegis' side," Nick said.

The governor sighed.

"I'm glad to hear that, and you don't seem to be lying."

Silence.

"Nick, would you be interested in working for the city?"

Chapter 383 – Democratic Soldiers

The only things Nick felt when he heard that proposal were disgust, annoyance, and disdain.

'If I were to work under you, the people of Crimson City would have nobody left who has their best interest at heart,' he thought.

Nick acted like he was taken aback.

"Wait a second," he said after two seconds of stunned silence. "I have to think about this."

"Take your time," the governor said as he put the square away and walked to the door. "I don't need you to show me around anymore. I've got a map now."

Nick watched with surprise as the governor left the room.

Several seconds after the governor left, Nick started to pace around as his brows furrowed.

He seemed to be debating with himself.

But why?

Wasn't it already certain that he would refuse?

Yes, it was.

However...

His ability hadn't reactivated.

Someone or something was watching him, and Nick was quite sure that it was the governor.

'Spying on me, huh?' Nick thought as he looked at the wall with a thoughtful expression. 'Not sure how he's doing it, but I guess he has some unique powers.'

Nick returned to pacing, and he even whispered to himself occasionally.

'Is this some kind of test from him?' Nick thought. 'Does he want to make sure that I'm not planning on betraying him?'

'I can't be sure. I only know that I have to act like I'm deliberating his offer.'

After about a minute of walking around, Nick sighed and looked at the door leading out of the room.

He looked at it for a couple of seconds.

And then, he exited and looked around.

Nick slowly walked through the hallway, glancing into all the doors to check for the governor.

In the end, Nick found the governor in the big room with all the screens, looking at a couple of them.

"Have you made your decision?" the governor asked without turning around, his voice somehow getting past all the noise of the alarm.

Nick took a deep breath.

"I don't think joining the city is what I should do," he said slowly.

The governor turned around and looked at Nick with evaluating eyes.

"Elaborate, please," he said.

"I'm on Aegis' side," Nick said. "Ever since I talked with Simon Francium, I knew that Aegis is the one organization that I want to help more than any other."

"You said the cities are made to ultimately help humanity."

"However, joining the city is not the best way to help Aegis or the city," Nick said.

A small gleam of interest appeared in the governor's eyes, but he didn't say anything.

"Dark Dream has grown a lot in the past years," Nick said. "We have gained more Specters, and we have gained more Extractors. We have a bigger Investigation department, and we also employ many more clerks. Of course, our profit margins have also increased a lot."

Nick looked at the governor.

"And while I can't say that we are perfectly white, the stains on our shirts are minuscule."

"We did not influence politics for our gain."

"We did not use the guards in a way to hide wrongdoings."

"We are not secretly harboring Specters that we shouldn't."

"We are not killing any people without telling the city."

"Whenever there has been a conflict, we have not been the aggressors and have only defended ourselves."

"Dark Dream has had many opportunities over the years, but Julian and I have never taken more than we were owed."

"The other Manufacturers are not like that," Nick said coldly.

The governor still looked at Nick.

"I do not need to tell you what they do. You know that better than me."

"The fact is that Dark Dream is not nearly as parasitic to the city as the other Manufacturers."

"And that's why I think remaining with Dark Dream is the right thing."

"The guards and the government are shackled by laws and don't have much freedom to act."

"Meanwhile, Dark Dream has all the freedom."

"In Dark Dream, I can support Aegis better than as a city agent," Nick said.

The governor looked at Nick with unimpressed eyes.

"You believe the government is ineffective in enforcing its laws?" the governor asked.

Nick looked into the governor's eyes.

"With ten Specialists, 20 Experts, and 40 Veterans, would it have been possible to remove the Parasite's influence in the past?" Nick asked back.

The governor furrowed his brows and looked into Nick's eyes for a while.

Nick just looked back.

"The answer is no, it wouldn't have been possible," Nick continued speaking.

The governor was a bit surprised about that statement.

After all, it should have been possible to get rid of the Parasite with such a force, and the city had access to something like that.

"Because most of the city's forces are borrowed," Nick said. "At least one, if not several, of the people assigned with the mission would have deliberately overlooked many of the rats. After all, the guards do not belong to the city. At most, they are temps."

"Their true loyalties lie with the Manufacturers, not the city."

"So, yes, I do believe that the city is not able to properly enforce the laws, but that is because most of its people are criminals themselves."

As the governor looked at Nick, the image of Nick in his mind changed.

Nick had always seemed quite inexperienced and naïve in the governor's mind. The only really good thing about him had been his altruism and his power relative to his level.

Yet, the confidence with which Nick spoke made the governor realize that he might have underestimated Nick.

Nick had highlighted the biggest flaw of the city.

The city didn't have many Specters, which meant that it couldn't produce a lot of Extractors truly loyal to it.

The fact that it had to borrow Extractors from Manufacturers was why it was so difficult to keep the Manufacturers in check.

While the head of the government was, technically speaking, a dictator, all his soldiers and guards acted according to democracy.

A democracy in which only big companies could vote.

Logically, the big companies voted for what was best for the big companies, and many times, these things broke the laws set by the dictator.

Chapter 384 – Hoard

"I see," the governor said after a while. "A shame."

Nick evaluated the governor's answer but wasn't sure about why he had worded it like that.

Nick was quite sure that he had illustrated his point quite well, and the governor should have voiced his agreement if he were of the same opinion or voiced his disagreement in the opposite case.

Yet, he basically only brushed all of Nick's words off.

"I'm sorry," Nick said.

Silence.

Nick was just standing near the entrance of the room without moving.

He felt a bit awkward, but there wasn't anything he could really do about it.

If he ran back to the city on his own, he might come across someone from Anatomy again, and he might get killed.

The governor was the one who had brought Nick here, and Nick wouldn't return without him.

After all, he didn't want to die.

For the next ten minutes, the governor kept looking through the different monitors, sometimes pressing a couple of buttons.

Nick just waited in silence.

Eventually, the governor walked to the entrance of the room and motioned for Nick to follow him.

The two of them wordlessly walked to the entrance of the building.

The governor started to shine with light again and ran towards the hole.

The two of them climbed up the hole and exited, Nick making very sure that he didn't accidentally look towards the city.

But then, the governor stopped walking and just stood beside the hole.

"You think you and Dark Dream are different?" the governor asked.

Nick didn't immediately answer since the governor's tone made it obvious that it was a rhetorical question.

"Dark Dream is just like every other Manufacturer," the governor said calmly.

"You might have broken fewer laws than every single other Manufacturer, but that doesn't mean that you are different."

The governor looked at Nick, who couldn't look back since that might make him look at the Crimson Sea.

"In my experience, someone that forgoes an opportunity to amass personal profit only does so because they see an opportunity for even more personal profit in the future."

"The ones that act the most innocent are often the worst ones."

"And if you are genuinely only trying to help, prove it with your actions over the coming years."

"Until then, you are no different from all the other Manufacturers."

The next moment, Nick felt like he was levitating.

And then...

WHOOOOOOOM!

The entire world spun in Nick's eyes, and everything turned into chaos.

DING!

That was when Nick touched something hard with his back.

Nick still didn't dare to open his eyes and just touched the thing behind him.

Metal.

A long and solid sheet of metal.

That was when Nick heard a couple of people talking.

Nick opened his eyes and looked around.

He was in Crimson City!

In fact, he was lying on the street in front of Dark Dream's building!

Apparently, the governor had thrown Nick back into the city.

'I didn't even feel like I moved.'

Nick stood up and looked in the direction of the mountain.

Sadly, he couldn't see it due to the wall of red mist.

'The ones that act the most innocent are often the worst ones,' Nick repeated in his mind.

Nick cleaned a bit of the dust from the streets of his uniform.

'From his viewpoint, that might be true for Dark Dream. After all, our goal is to take over the city.'

'However, the only people not benefiting from that are the big Manufacturers and the governor himself. In short, everyone who currently has a hand in running the city.'

'Are we the worst ones because we want to stage a coup, even though the coup is for the good of the people?'

Nick just jumped back to Dark Dream and entered.

'Just another fat old man sitting on his hill of valuables who is deathly afraid of hands reaching for his hoard.'

When Nick entered Dark Dream, he noticed that the mouths were still absent.

Julian was probably still careful since the governor might return at any moment.

Nick went to Julian's office and told him how everything had gone.

"Why did you not accept his offer?" Julian asked.

Nick looked at Julian with a neutral expression.

"Things are going pretty well for me here," Nick said.

Julian chuckled.

He believed that Nick didn't accept the offer since he didn't want to die, like every other human.

After all, suddenly working for the city could be seen as a betrayal to Julian, and Nick didn't want to take that chance.

Of course, in truth, that was partially correct but didn't show the entire picture.

The bigger reason was that Nick hated the governor for the state of the city, and he hated the thought of working beneath someone like this.

He would much rather work for any of the Specters instead of the governor.

After all, the Specters were, at least, honest about their desire to consume all of humanity.

Naturally, this was a hyperbole, but it put into perspective what Nick's opinion of the governor was.

Nick talked with Julian for a while.

Eventually, a couple hours later, the governor returned.

Obviously, he didn't act any different from usual, and he asked Julian about that Specter he had been talking about.

Julian quickly showed the Spilling Bottle to the governor, and the two talked about it for a while.

Some minutes later, the governor left with the bottle.

He said that he would send it to some of his researchers, and they would check how effective it would be on the Forests and whether or not it would be effective on the Crimson Sea.

This would take a couple of days, and Dark Dream would only get to know how much they would be getting out of this trade after the researchers were done with the Spilling Bottle.

As for the ruin, Dark Dream wasn't told.

Most likely, some people from Aegis would arrive or had already arrived to check it out.

There wasn't much that Dark Dream could do but wait.

However, there was at least something interesting that Nick had to do.

He had to take a look at their other new Specter and figure out a way to work with it.

It had been over two years since Nick had needed to do that the last time.

Chapter 385 – Talking with the New Specter

Two days after he had met the governor, Nick went into the Containment Unit of their new Specter on the third floor.

By now, it should have recovered.

Nick opened the door and saw the Specter standing in the middle of the room, its eyes turned to look at Nick.

Seeing a 2.5-meter-tall guy with spider legs and pure black eyes looking at one from the middle of a room was quite scary.

Even Nick was slightly creeped out.

But that was about it.

Nick wasn't afraid of the Specter since he knew that he could just punch its head off if need be.

The fact that the Specter didn't immediately attack Nick showed that it was intelligent to some degree.

Specters that had human shapes were often quite intelligent, which meant that it was often possible to reason with them.

Sadly, that wasn't always the case.

The Bleeding Lady was a good example of that.

"Can you understand what I'm saying?" Nick asked.

Silence.

The Specter just looked at Nick.

Then, its mouth opened wide, revealing a deep and dark void.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

A terrifying scream came out of the mouth, and Nick's face scrunched up in discomfort.

A bit later, the mouth of the Specter closed again, and it just looked at Nick.

"I'm taking that as a yes," Nick said casually, rubbing his right ear. "To make things easier, I would prefer if you could just communicate with your spider legs or whatever those are."

"Scratch on the floor with one of your left legs if you want to give a positive answer like yes, a sign of agreement, or something similar. Scratch with-"

Scratch!

One of the Specter's right legs scratched on the ground, and Nick raised an eyebrow.

"That was your right leg. I assume you do-"

Scratch!

It scratched again with its right leg, and Nick furrowed his brows.

"Okay, seems like-"

Scratch!

This time, it was a left leg.

"Could you stop for-"

Scratch!

Right leg.

"Stop it, or I-"

Scratch! Scratch! Scratch!

Nick glared at the Specter as it kept scratching the ground with its spider legs in an alternating pattern while it kept looking into Nick's eyes.

Nick just watched the Specter for a while.

About ten seconds later, it stopped.

"Alright, the hard-"

Scratch! Scratch!

Nick narrowed his eyes.

A moment later, Nick turned around and left the Containment Unit.

The Specter stopped scratching the ground and just aimlessly looked forward.

About a minute later, the door opened again, and Nick entered once more.

This time, he brought something with him.

It was a bucket and quite a big one at that.

This bucket was completely black, almost a meter tall, and nearly half a meter wide.

As soon as Nick entered, the Specter started to scratch the ground again.

After putting the bucket down, Nick started to walk towards the Specter.

SHING!

In an instant, Nick exploded forward, and the four spider legs on the left side of the Specter were cut off.

"AAAAAAHHHHH!"

The Specter opened its mouth again, and the terrifying screech returned.

At the same time, several strands of black silk shot out of its mouth, right towards Nick.

BANG!

Nick just kicked the Specter and sidestepped the silk.

BANG!

The Specter's back hit the wall with a lot of force.

SHING!

The next instant, all the spider legs on the Specter's other side were cut off.

"AAAAHHH-"

BANG!

Nick rammed the Specter against the wall again as he grabbed its neck and squeezed, shutting off its scream.

"Listen here," Nick said in a deep voice.

"We can do this the easy or the hard way."

"Today, you're going to see what happens if we do this the hard way."

CRRRKSH!

Nick grabbed one of the Specter's arms and tore it out of the body.

Surprisingly, the Specter had stopped attacking Nick.

However, that actually made sense.

The Specter had realized that it couldn't win against Nick, and continuing to attack him might provoke Nick into actually killing him.

The most optimal way to stay alive was to not resist.

Nick tore the other arm and both legs off the Specter before throwing the torso and head into the corner.

Then, the two of them just looked at each other for a while.

"I don't know if you know what Manufacturers or Extractors are since you were outside the city," Nick said, "but we are not necessarily enemies."

"We want Zephyx, and you produce Zephyx if you become more powerful. Every Specter has its own way to become stronger, and we are interested in that."

"You becoming more powerful is also what we want," Nick added.

The next moment, Nick gathered the cut-off limbs like they were loose pieces of metal and held them in his arms.

"But if you are not cooperative, we can get our Zephyx also in this way," Nick said.

And then, he dumped all the limbs into the bucket.

SSSSSSSSS!

A sound similar to tens of saws activating came out of the bucket, and the limbs that were halfway sticking out of the bucket started to shake before seemingly shrinking and falling into the bucket.

Nick looked into the Specter's eyes.

After about a minute, the limbs completely vanished, and the bucket became quiet again.

Nick took hold of the bucket and walked towards the door.

"Next time, I would like to have a normal conversation with you. If you're uncooperative, I will do the same thing again."

Nick slowly opened the door and turned to look at the Specter.

"You should be good to go in another two days. See you then."

Nick stepped out of the Containment Unit and closed the door.

The Specter just kept looking at the employee entrance.

Silence.

Then, it slowly opened its mouth again.

"AAAAAAAHHH!"

And its mouth closed again.

Silence.

No Specter liked it when its limbs were removed.

Specters wanted to grow more powerful and survive.

Losing all one's limbs weakened one's defense, making it harder to survive.

Sadly, there wasn't much the Specter could do.

Chapter 386 – The Abductor

Two days later, Nick returned to the Specter, and this time, it didn't immediately annoy him with constant scratching.

It seemed like it was finally cooperative.

For the next hour, Nick asked the Specter several questions, and it answered by scratching the floor.

Left scratch for a positive answer.

Right scratch for a negative answer.

Left and right scratch for neutrality.

No scratch for uncertainty.

It turned out that the Specter did not know what Extractors were.

It had been in the outside world all its life, and it had grown stronger by slowly capturing stronger and stronger humans, which surprised Nick since there were probably not very many Newbies running around outside.

After Nick explained the concept of Manufacturers and Extractors to the Specter, it actually became even more cooperative.

In the outside world, it barely received any food.

It had taken decades for the Specter to become this strong.

But now, it was going to receive regular food, and it wouldn't even be in danger?

If it had known that this was the fate that would befall it if it were found by a human, it would have voluntarily given itself up.

Of course, if it could actually enter one of the cities, it would rather stay free.

But how was it supposed to do that?

It was quite noticeable, and it couldn't disguise itself.

After talking some more with the Specter, Nick finally found out how it grew more powerful.

It abducted people, and it grew more powerful based on how many people it kept as prisoners and how strong they were.

There had been many cocoons attached to the walls of the cave where Nick had suppressed the Specter.

These cocoons had once been filled with humans.

The Specter had simply caught humans, surrounded them in the silk, hung them up on the wall, and never touched the cocoon again.

Naturally, all the humans in the cocoons had died so long ago that only dust remained in them.

After talking some more, Nick made a plan on how to improve the Specter's powers.

Annoyingly, when Nick had said that the Specter couldn't kill the people who were sent to it, it seemed to become confused, angry, and annoyed.

It took Nick almost half an hour to explain how letting its food escape would allow it to get more food in the future.

Since it wasn't secret anymore, why would anyone want to get captured by it if it just killed them?

Eventually, the Specter finally understood what Nick wanted, and it agreed.

While it was intelligent enough to have a conversation with, Nick could see that it wasn't the most intelligent Specter.

Yet, the ability to communicate already made it the third most intelligent Specter in Dark Dream.

The only two who were more intelligent were the Money Sink and the Dreamer.

The Bleeding Lady was also intelligent, but she was crazy in the head.

Although, the Lover might also be smart since it fed on human mentality.

Sadly, it was quite difficult to judge its intelligence since it got quite handsy very quickly.

After finishing his talk with the Specter, Nick gathered a couple of Dark Dream's Newbies.

Dark Dream had quite a lot of Newbies compared to the number of Hatchlings, which gave the Newbies a lot of downtime.

Luckily, their newest Specter could work with potentially endless people simultaneously.

From now on, the new Specter would capture and contain two-thirds of the Newbies assigned to it.

The last third would remain in the Containment Unit but free.

The reason for that was because, due to the Zephyx-absorbing properties of the silk, they couldn't gather any Zephyx for themselves while surrounded by the silk.

So, two of them would be sent to produce the Zephyx, and the last one would absorb the Zephyx.

Naturally, the positions switched regularly to keep things fair.

Near the beginning, Nick kept watch over the proceedings, but eventually, Nick would only check on them every couple of hours to make sure that nothing bad was going on.

Luckily, the Specter was quite cooperative.

Surprisingly, the Specter had turned out to be far more useful than they had expected since it could train many weaker Extractors simultaneously.

Over the coming days, Nick also hired a couple of new people to check what kind of ability the newest Specter offered.

It was silk.

Any Extractor that received its ability could release long and thick strands of black silk.

Sadly, the silk couldn't absorb Zephyx.

Another disappointment was the fact that the Specter's silk could only retain its physical form if the Specter was close to it.

If the silk left the Specter's side, it turned into Prephyx a couple of hours later.

That sadly made it worthless as a material.

Nick had hoped that they could compete with the Fear Queen's Ghost Wires, but sadly, they could not.

Eventually, Nick also came up with a fitting name for the Specter.

The Abductor.

As for its Stage, it was a Late Adolescent, making it one of the stronger Specters belonging to Dark Dream.

By now, Nick's days had become quite busy.

He had to deliver the trash to the Dung Heap.

He had to regularly check up on the Abductor.

He sometimes had to force one of the newer people to stop working with the Puppy.

He had to give the Money Sink money.

He had to give the Screaming Coffin its corpses.

He had to free the people working with the Fog.

He had to gather all the Zephyx containers.

And on top of all that, he had to deal with most of the executive stuff, like planning the future, dealing with personnel issues, working with the Investigation department, writing guides for the Specters, reviewing profiles, making budget reports, keeping the books, meeting with other companies, and a couple more things.

He was glad that he had Taren and Jenny dealing with the management of the employees.

Luckily, since Nick had so much experience already and since he was working 24 hours per day, he could deal with all of this without any issues.

Finally, two weeks after his conversation with the governor, Nick finally heard back from the city regarding the Spilling Bottle and their reward.

Chapter 387 – Solace's Success

The research into the Spilling Bottle was finished.

The results were that it worked in reducing the Forest's power.

Sadly, its sludge strengthened the Crimson Sea instead of weakening it, which meant that it couldn't be used to deal with the Crimson Sea.

However, disadvantages often had advantages of their own.

Even though the sludge couldn't be used to weaken the Crimson Sea, it could make it produce a bit of Zephyx, which meant that it was possible to harvest its ability.

The governor could take some of the city's new recruits or advancing Extractors to the sea once every few months or so, spill some of the sludge into the sea, and allow his Extractors to get the Crimson Sea's ability.

The bit of sludge used to achieve this was equivalent to barely half of a gram of Zephyx, which was nothing for a Fanatic like the Crimson Sea.

All in all, the city was very interested in the Spilling Bottle.

Julian negotiated with the city for a couple of days before they finally came to an agreement.

Another couple of weeks passed.

Clank!

Nick landed on top of a big platform on the middle layer of the Inner City, and he looked forward.

A huge building was in front of him.

There were no guards.

Nick cleaned his uniform a bit to make himself presentable and slowly walked into the building.

He found himself in an entrance hall.

"Mr. Nick!"

Nick looked over and saw a beautiful receptionist waiting in front of the stairs.

He walked over and nodded in greeting.

"Is Mr. Nergiar not here with you?" she asked.

"He can't make it," Nick said. "The governor has been informed."

"Oh, what a shame," the receptionist said.

Then, she gestured to the staircase behind her.

"Please, follow me," the receptionist said with a polite bow and friendly smile.

"Thank you," Nick answered.

The two of them walked up the staircase and down a hallway.

"Please, in here," she said before opening a door and gesturing for Nick to enter.

Nick nodded and walked inside.

"Oh, Nick! Welcome!" Hera Marion, the CZE of Solace, shouted as she stood up with a smile.

Nick smiled back and approached her, shaking her hand. "Julian couldn't make it, sorry."

Hera sighed, and Ramona, Solace's CEO, who was sitting at the table, shook her head helplessly.

"Again?" Hera asked. "Well, he did say that he was pretty busy recently."

"I also thought as much," Ramona said from the table. "I talked to him just three days ago. He said he is quite busy with something, and he also gave me a cryptic hint."

Ramona looked at Nick. "He told me that we would find out what he was busy with during the big meeting today."

Nick nodded and approached Ramona, who stood up and greeted Nick with a handshake.

Usually, Nick wouldn't dare approach someone more powerful than him for a handshake, but the relationship between Dark Dream and Solace was very close.

They even had a program to exchange abilities.

Some of Solace's Extractors could get abilities from Dark Dream's Specters and the other way around.

Nick and Julian also met with Hera and Ramona regularly.

Nick exchanged a couple of pleasantries with the two of them before he looked at the big table in the middle of the room.

He met eyes with two women wearing uniforms from Gemini.

Nick nodded, and the two of them wordlessly nodded back.

That was about as close as Dark Dream was to Gemini.

Nick could theoretically walk forward and offer a handshake without committing social suicide due to the fact that Dark Dream had Julian, a Specialist.

However, that could be viewed as a power move and might strain the relationship between the two Manufacturers.

"Is Julian busy again?"

Nick looked over at the other end of the table, at Ghosty.

"I'm sorry, but he's quite busy. The governor already knows about it," Nick answered.

Ghosty chuckled. "If only I had his freedom," he lamented with a joking voice.

Beside him, Herman Reichert, CEO of Ghosty's Lab, just smiled bitterly. "Sorry," he jokingly said to Ghosty.

Nick walked to his seat at the end of the table, right beside the representatives of the common people.

If it wasn't obvious by now, today was the big meeting of the Manufacturers, and this year, it was held inside Solace's building.

This was the first time in which Solace was allowed to host the meeting.

The reason why Solace was allowed to host the meeting was because of their recent accomplishments.

One of their Specters advanced and became an Elder!

After years, Solace finally managed to join the big Manufacturers, and they didn't even need to go through the trouble of capturing an Elder!

Specters grew at different rates, and the advancement of some Specters was very slow and sometimes even impossible.

Additionally, Specters generally needed more time to advance than humans, which meant that relying on advancement was not a good idea for becoming more influential as a Manufacturer.

But Solace lucked out, and one of their Specters actually advanced!

Usually, since Solace now had a new main Specter, they would rebrand themselves.

However, they decided against it.

The reason was the Specter's... peculiarity.

It was called the Perversion, and it was a floating party.

It was basically a mixture of the Dreamer and the Lover since it put people to sleep and sexually tortured them in their dreams.

Having a floating party as the main symbol of a Manufacturer was a bit...

Additionally, since Solace mostly focused on their light and heat business, they also had a good argument for branding themselves after the Blinding Light and the Bright Candle.

Funnily enough, the Perversion was one of the biggest reasons for Solace's and Dark Dream's close relationship.

The Dreamer, the Lover, and the Perversion were essentially made for each other in terms of abilities.

Solace was advancing rapidly in the city, and Dark Dream was happy for them.

After all, Solace and Dark Dream were close allies.

Chapter 388 – Significant Contribution

Over the next couple of minutes, Mundus and Zarren from Anatomy arrived.

They just threw a glance at Nick before sitting down at their position.

A minute later, Aria Light and Vernon Melfion entered.

Aria greeted everyone with a friendly voice, while Vernon just greeted a couple of people with some casual words.

"Oh, Julian isn't here? What a shame," Vernon said, looking at the empty seat beside Nick.

Then, he just turned to his own seat and sat down.

He hadn't looked at Nick even once.

However, Nick had expected as much.

The incident after Wyntor's death had completely ruined his relationship with the Melfions and had soured Dark Dream's relationship with Kugelblitz.

While Kugelblitz wasn't actively going against Dark Dream due to Julian "being friends" with several of their shareholders and Vernon, they also didn't show much politeness to them.

Aria Light mostly didn't care about all this drama, but Kugelblitz had to appear united in front of outsiders, which was why she also ignored Nick.

But behind closed doors, she didn't support Vernon's vendetta against Nick.

Vernon had said that he suspected that Nick had a hand in his son's death, but there was no proof.

Nick had been just a John back then.

How could someone like that have the connection or ability to mentally manipulate an experienced Veteran and perfectly place them at the perfect spot to kill Wyntor?

Additionally, everyone knew that Nick was a naive idiot.

How could someone like that plan something like this?

When Vernon had shared his suspicions with Aria, she had asked about Dark Dream's new CEO. Couldn't he have killed Wyntor?

However, Vernon denied the possibility.

He knew Julian very well, and he couldn't imagine Julian doing something like that.

So, in the end, there was no reason to suspect Nick.

Yet, Vernon kept feeling like it was Nick who had killed his son.

Although, that was only partially the reason why Vernon hated Nick.

Much more important was the fact that Nick had humiliated Vernon in front of others!

Vernon hadn't been this humiliated in years!

Naturally, Vernon wanted to take his revenge on Nick, but that had proved to be impossible over the last two years.

Kugelblitz didn't allow any of their owners to use Specialists for personal matters without permission from the other shareholders, but without Specialists, it was impossible to covertly assassinate Nick inside the city.

Usually, Vernon would just send an Expert, but he knew that he couldn't risk letting one of his Experts get caught.

That would cost Kugelblitz billions of credits!

But then, a month ago, Nick had left the city!

Finally, a chance to kill him!

Sadly, he had already gone back into the city before Vernon had even heard about Nick leaving.

And now, Nick was constantly inside the city again!

So, in the end, Vernon was stuck waiting for his chance again.

Someday, he would finally get a chance to kill Nick!

A couple of minutes passed, and finally, the last person arrived.

The governor, Markus Julius, walked over to his seat at the end of the table.

He calmly greeted everyone, and everyone returned his greeting.

"Julian couldn't come today since he is busy in Dark Dream," the governor told everyone.

None of the people were surprised, and they shot a glance at Nick.

Once more, they had to deal with Nick as the sole representative of Dark Dream.

Nick just apologized to everyone about Julian's absence.

"And since we are on the topic of Dark Dream, I might as well announce a couple of things related to them," the governor said casually.

Everyone turned to look at the governor with interest.

If the governor was the one announcing it, it was probably something quite important.

"About a month ago, Dark Dream helped the city not once but twice," the governor said.

Different expressions of intrigue and interest appeared on everyone's face.

Twice?

Everyone had heard about the Spilling Bottle by now.

After all, the Spilling Bottle belonged to the city now, and the city's Specters were not kept secret.

When they heard that the Spilling Bottle came from Dark Dream, they felt annoyed and envious.

The Spilling Bottle was worth a lot!

Of course, the origin of the Spilling Bottle also hadn't stayed secret for long since the Swallowing Swamp had almost completely vanished by now.

When they realized that the Spilling Bottle had been the reason for the Swallowing Swamp, they grew frustrated.

They had all inspected the Swallowing Swamp at least once, and none of them had found the Spilling Bottle!

The fact that Dark Dream could do something that they couldn't annoyed them to no end.

However, what about the other helping hand?

The Spilling Bottle was the first thing that Dark Dream gave the city.

What was the other one?

"During their excursion, Dark Dream found a ruin from the Old World," the governor said.

It was like a bomb had exploded in the office, and everyone looked shocked at the governor.

Even the two from Anatomy looked intensely at the governor.

A ruin from the Old World!

There could potentially be technologies in there that could grant them incredible benefits.

Ghosty especially was interested in the ruin.

"The ruin has been handed over to Aegis, and Aegis has already collected it. You don't need to look for it," the governor said.

'Collected it?' Nick thought. 'Did they put it in their pockets and fly away with it?'

'I'm pretty sure the mountain is still there. I would've heard of it if it just stood up and walked away.'

"Aegis wants to express its deep gratitude to Dark Dream and is willing to support them with a significant financial contribution," the governor said.

"Dark Dream has accepted the contribution and decided to reinvest it into the city by making a significant purchase."

"In a month, Dark Dream will move into the central headquarters of the city forces in the lower layer, and the central headquarters will move towards the building previously owned by the Spartans."

"Additionally, Dark Dream receives the Adult the Talker."

Chapter 389 – Regular Topics

When the people heard that, they turned and looked at Nick.

All of them had different expressions.

Hera and Ramona were excited.

Mindy and Cindy were wary.

Ghosty and Herman were interested.

Mundus and Zarren just glanced neutrally at Nick.

A small gleam appeared in Vernon's eyes, and Aria looked like she hadn't heard anything.

Not only was Dark Dream receiving a new building, but they were also receiving an Adult.

The Adult in question was one that all the present Extractors knew of since Specters belonging to the city were not kept secret.

Working with the Talker was stressful, but it produced a good amount of Zephyx.

The Talker was a great Specter for Veterans who wanted to become more powerful.

"Dark Dream has already told the city that they will move into their new building in a month when the city's forces have cleared. Expect a great number of moving Specters during that day," the governor said. "Naturally, guards will be sent to supervise the proceedings."

None of the present people said anything.

"Now then, onto the regular topics," the governor said.

After that, he talked about the False News Specter.

Ever since the Parasite had lost its grip over the city, the False News Specter had become the biggest troublemaker, except for the Crimson Sea.

The False News was the most powerful, uncontained Specter inside the city.

It was at least a Fanatic, and no one managed to find it yet.

The False News started fake rumors in the city that gained a lot of traction.

For example, one of these rumors was that Anatomy and the governor had joined hands to get rid of Kugelblitz.

This rumor affected Kugelblitz's stock price and their public perception, and it also caused a lot of chaos and unrest in the public.

Another rumor stated that the organization behind the hospitals was sometimes capturing some of their patients and shipping them out of the city to be processed into Recovery Liquid.

Naturally, the organization behind the hospitals got angry by such baseless accusations and put pressure on the city to deal with them.

Another one was that Ghosty was secretly a powerful Specter who manipulated everyone's minds.

Usually, rumors were just rumors, and they were just part of everyday life.

However, these rumors were extremely difficult to clear, and even if a public statement regarding the rumor was made, over 70% of the people who had believed the rumor would continue believing it afterward.

It was like no kind of logic or diplomacy worked on them.

The False News didn't kill or injure anyone, but it still caused immense financial damage to the city.

Sadly, nobody could find the source of any of these stubborn rumors, which should be the False News.

And as always, no Manufacturer had any good news regarding the False News.

Everyone was just as clueless as last year.

The next thing the governor talked about was Debilify, the debilitating sickness that swept through the city.

The preventative measure Anatomy had introduced a couple of years ago helped to some degree.

The people that actually had the money to afford the preventative measure didn't get Debilify as often anymore, and if they got it, it would only affect them for around two months instead of their entire lives.

However, everyone else was out of luck.

Nobody living in the Outer City could afford this preventative measure, and cases of Debilify had increased in the Outer City.

Compared to the False News, there was actual progress to be reported in today's meeting regarding Debilify.

Ghosty's Lab created its own preventative measure, and it was a quarter of the price of Anatomy's measure.

Naturally, Anatomy was not happy at all about their lost profits, but they couldn't push too much since the governor was looking at them with severe eyes.

The next topic was about the city's plan of expansion.

For the past two years, the city had to be extremely careful about its usage of metals, but with a reestablished connection to the outside world, this was no longer a concern.

The governor had reopened the old iron mine about ten kilometers to the southwest of the city, and they were gaining tons of iron every day.

The city was also in the process of creating a big but isolated field of plants.

In the west of the city, they had created a two-by-two-

kilometer-wide isolated zone with huge walls.

Luckily, since strong Extractors could carry tons of materials in one go, they only needed about a month to build these huge walls of steel.

This huge wall was necessary to fight off all the slimes that would inevitably try to destroy the plants.

Inside the isolated location, Recovery Liquid had been sprayed on the ground together with water, filling the dried-up dirt with life energy.

Soon, they would cover these fields with plants.

However, these plants were not meant to be eaten but to be burned.

The goal was to produce huge amounts of ash, which mostly consisted of carbon.

Then, the city would combine the iron and the carbon to make steel, and they would use this steel to expand the city.

Over the next years, the city would focus on covering the entire Crimson Sea.

As long as there was no hole in the ground, and as long as everything was covered, the Crimson Sea might as well not exist.

Additionally, far in the future, they might even be able to convert the "container" of the Crimson Sea into some form of Containment Unit, and the city might even gain a powerful Specter that produces a lot of Zephyx.

The governor didn't know everything about the world, but he was still quite sure that not many cities could contain such a huge Force Specter.

With the current speed of production of steel, the city predicted that it would take around ten years to cover all of the Crimson Sea.

When they were done talking about the plan for the city's future, the governor talked about the next part.

Since Dark Dream now had one Specialist and one Veteran, they were powerful enough to be eligible for guard duty.

From now on, Dark Dream would have to dedicate 20% of their Johns to the city at any given time.

Chapter 390 – The Yearly Meeting

Sadly, there wasn't much Nick could do about that since every Manufacturer was required to do that.

The only positive aspect was that neither Nick nor Julian needed to join guard duty due to their executive positions.

After all, Dark Dream needed to be able to run.

Assignments of guards were done in intervals of one month, and the first shift of guards would soon start.

Nick decided to send Clayton, Petra, and Jason for the first month.

According to what Nick had heard, working for the city was considered boring, which was often preferable to dangerous.

Most of the time, the guards only needed to walk around, stand in front of entrances, and do a couple of errands.

Sometimes, they also just needed to stay inside a room and be ready for any kind of emergency, which rarely happened.

Even more, working for the city meant working for ten hours a day, only five days a week.

Apparently, the Extractors got two free days per week, which was crazy.

Because of all these things, many Extractors preferred working for the city instead of Manufacturers.

Sadly, becoming stronger was impossible since none of the temporary guards would work with the city's Specters.

However, only the temporary guards had such an easy life.

The people who actually dedicated their lives to working for the city didn't have it as good.

They had to work more, and their responsibilities very often forced them into positions that were hostile to some powerful Manufacturers.

Guards rarely died, but it still happened.

Even more, below the surface, a lot of dark dealings were going on.

Clayton, Petra, and Jason would be sent to work with the city after Dark Dream moved into their new building.

The governor talked about a couple more topics, but they were not as relevant as the previous ones.

Eventually, it was time for Kugelblitz to talk.

The main thing they talked about was the blood tax.

Apparently, since the shortage of metal had ended, the amount of blood they were receiving had dropped sharply, and they needed a new way to gather blood.

They had already added a way for someone to pay their normal taxes in exchange for their blood, but not many people accepted that.

People seemed to not like the idea of giving their blood in exchange for money.

Funnily enough, this was exasperated by a rumor which stated that a human's soul was connected to their blood and that losing blood equated to losing part of one's soul.

Naturally, this rumor also came from the False News.

The governor kept shooting down all of Kugelblitz's proposals, but Kugelblitz just wouldn't let up.

The amount of Zephyx the Crimson Fungus was producing had dropped a lot, which slowed the advancements of their Heroes.

After all, the Crimson Fungus was the only source of power for all of the Heroes.

Right now, it was barely enough for Kugelblitz's Heroes, which meant that there wasn't much the governor could absorb.

Of course, the governor knew that this was bullshit.

Yes, Kugelblitz didn't have access to as much blood as previously, but they still had access to a lot.

It should be enough for all of them to advance at a comfortable pace.

However, he couldn't just call Vernon's bluff.

These were internal matters of Kugelblitz, and if he forced himself into these matters, other Manufacturers would push back.

After all, if the governor forced himself into Kugelblitz's matters, what stopped him from forcing himself into their matters?

Almost all Manufacturers wanted the government to be involved as little as possible in their matters.

The governor and Vernon argued for quite a while, and in the end, not a lot of progress had been made.

But that was to be expected.

This was a negotiation, and these negotiations always took a long time.

Kugelblitz wanted to squeeze the people dry of their blood, and the governor didn't want that to happen.

However, if the governor didn't relent in some aspects, only the Heroes belonging to Kugelblitz would have access to the Crimson Fungus.

Within a couple of years, the Heroes might not even need to unite to kill the governor...

Aria Light on her own might just be enough.

This was a brutal negotiation, and nobody expected any results from today's meeting.

Today's meeting was essentially just the baseline for any future negotiations.

Anatomy brought up a couple of topics, but none of them needed a lot of deliberation.

Ghosty's Lab once more announced some new equipment.

Gemini was asking a couple of questions, which led the conversation in a direction that suggested supporting stronger Manufacturers was better for the city than supporting weaker ones.

Of course, they were talking about finances.

While Gemini had led the conversation to the topic very naturally, everyone in the room, except for the three normal people, were experienced business people, and they could all tell what was going on.

Gemini was trying to make it harder for Solace and Dark Dream.

Solace's recent advancement had probably scared them, and they wanted to keep their lead.

However, the governor very quickly shut that topic down.

He would not consider financially supporting one Manufacturer favorably without something equally valuable in return.

Unfortunately for Gemini, they didn't have any leverage when negotiating with the governor.

They were not Kugelblitz, and they were not Anatomy.

Solace just talked about their newly advanced Specter and their expanding network for light and heat.

Nick just talked about Dark Dream's approaching relocation.

There was nothing else that Dark Dream needed to talk about.

And with that, the yearly meeting was over again, and everyone left.

Except for Nick.

After everyone left, Nick talked for a while with Ramona and Hera.

They were very close to each other, and this was a good opportunity to talk about a couple of details regarding their cooperation.

Eventually, Nick also left.

Within the next month, nothing of note happened.

And finally, it was time for Dark Dream to move.

They would finally move from the Outer City into the Inner City.