

The Sun 401

Chapter 401 – Deadweight

After Carl introduced Nick, nobody reacted.

"Nick," Carl said in an authoritative voice, turning to Nick again. "During this mission, you are part of my team. When we are outside, it is imperative that you listen to my orders. I would also ask you to minimize the chatter unless it is mission-related. Do you understand?"

Nick nodded. "Of course."

"Will you follow my orders?" Carl asked.

"I will," Nick answered neutrally.

Carl nodded. "Good. The mission will most likely take between 16 to 24 hours. Can you afford to stay away for this period of time?"

"I can," Nick said.

"Then, we're going to leave right now. Nick, your position is beside Mark. Stay close to him and keep an eye out."

"Yes," Nick answered as he approached Mark, the Mid Veteran Manipulator with his two guns.

Mark threw a short and polite smile at Nick, but it immediately vanished as soon as he looked away from Nick again.

It was not difficult for Nick to see what the team's true opinions were.

They were not trying to keep their opinions secret.

This was a team that had worked together for years, and the last time they had had a fourth member was over a decade ago.

The three of them relied on each other, and all of them trusted everyone else with their lives.

This was Solace's most experienced team, and they had been in the outside world over a hundred times over the years.

And now, they had to escort an inexperienced and young Veteran from another Manufacturer because of politics.

The three of them had a job, which was to find and capture Specters.

Where did it state in their contracts that they now also had to be babysitters?

If Nick died outside, the fallout for Solace would be tremendous.

Sure, Dark Dream was not huge, but they still gave Solace help worth over ten million credits per month.

Additionally, while the group didn't have a high opinion of Nick, they had a very high opinion of Julian, and killing Nick might anger Julian.

They essentially had to carry Nick around outside, and they couldn't afford to let him die.

Sadly, they didn't have a choice.

Hera had a very high opinion of Nick, and she kept telling Carl that Nick would be a great help to them outside.

Additionally, helping Dark Dream was equivalent to helping themselves.

Even more, she kept telling Carl not to underestimate Nick.

Dark Dream had come out of nothing, and Nick had been their CZE for nine years by now.

Dark Dream had grown a scary amount within this time, and without a great CZE, they would have long since stopped existing.

Carl believed Hera that Nick was probably an amazing CZE.

However, traveling around outside was something completely different from running a Manufacturer.

A CZE had to know how Specters operated, how to run a business, how to work with Specters, how to organize, and a couple more things related to the business.

CZEs did not need to be strong in battle.

CZEs did not need to know how the outside world works.

Sure, Nick might be an amazing CZE, but due to his young age and his inexperience, he couldn't possibly have the skillset required to go on such a big mission outside.

Nick was supposed to look around the five kilometers surrounding the city to get a feel for the outside world.

Meanwhile, Carl and his team always went far away from the city to search for Specters.

These areas were not properly mapped, and they could fall prey to any unknown Specter.

Additionally, when they were so far away from the city, there was also a chance that they would meet somebody from another city.

That was almost always bad.

The rules dictated that nobody was allowed to kill another Extractor from the city.

There was nothing about not killing someone from a different city.

Extractors that traveled so far away from their cities were powerful and rich.

Just their Barriers cost millions of credits.

And since it was not exactly illegal to kill people from different cities, they could actually sell those Barriers.

Carl's team of four was worth over 30 million credits.

Even Specialists would be interested in that much money unless it required a lot of work to attain the money.

Going far away from the city was extremely dangerous, and the last thing the team needed was some deadweight that they had to carry with them, like Nick.

So, yeah, all in all, the team did not hold a high opinion of Nick.

Carl left the building, and Mark followed after him.

Naturally, Nick stayed close to Mark.

The last person leaving was Irwin.

"Just stay close, and everything will be fine," Mark said with a friendly tone to Nick.

Nick nodded. "Of course."

Mark smiled, but his smile quickly vanished again when he looked away.

Obviously, he was just trying to be nice when, in truth, he really didn't want to.

The four of them quickly ran around the megastructure until they were north of it.

Then, they walked toward the edge of the city.

"Have you jumped over the gap before?" Mark suddenly asked.

"No," Nick said.

"That's fine," Mark added. "Carl will make sure to catch you."

Nick just nodded again.

The four of them stopped near the northern edge of the city.

"Nick, you go after Mark. When jumping, err on the side of using too much instead of too little power," Carl said. "Remember to always keep your eyes closed. Close them before you jump, and don't open them until you hit the ground."

"Understood," Nick said.

Carl nodded.

SHING!

And then, he suddenly shot towards the north at insane speeds.

In an instant, he broke through the red curtain of mist.

"Just do it like I do," Mark told Nick as he readied himself.

BANG!

Then, Mark charged forward, and after a couple of steps, he jumped forward with all of his power.

Just like Carl, Mark vanished in the red mist.

Chapter 402 – Jump

Nick took a deep breath.

He had never jumped over the gap before.

Naturally, jumping over the gap meant jumping over the 1 to 1.5 kilometers between the city's edge and the outside world.

A very athletic Initial Veteran could accomplish that, but it was extremely risky.

Extractors were allowed to leave the city in this way, but they had to get permission from a city captain before doing so.

However, while jumping out of the city was okay, jumping into the city was forbidden.

The main reason was that, with closed eyes, the Extractor wouldn't be able to properly control their fall, which would result in people dying and houses getting destroyed.

The northern part of the city was nearly as close to the outside world as the southern part, which was the closest.

Ignoring the bridge, the southern part of the city was only about a kilometer away from the outside world.

It used to be more, but the city had already grown quite a bit.

After Nick took a deep breath, he narrowed his eyes and focused on the street in front of him.

SHING!

Nick rapidly accelerated without making any noise.

Then, he jumped, and at the same time, he closed his eyes.

BANG!

Nick shot forward, and a bit of light from his activating Barrier managed to get through his eyelids.

Nick had jumped with a lot of force to make sure that he didn't fall into the Crimson Sea.

Nevertheless, he was still nervous.

Jumping into the unknown was always terrifying.

BANG!

"Keep your eyes closed," Nick heard Carl's voice from in front of him.

Carl had caught Nick, and the two of them were now falling.

BANG!

Carl landed while keeping Nick stable.

"You can open them now," he said before stepping away.

Nick slowly opened his eyes and saw the outside world.

It was brown and lifeless, like always.

Nick took a deep breath.

"Thanks."

Carl didn't answer.

Right now, Carl, Nick, and Mark were in a small valley north of the city.

South of their position was the wall surrounding the Crimson Sea.

Carl kept looking upward.

"You shot out with quite a lot of speed," Mark said from beside Nick with a surprised voice. "You could've flown for another 500 meters, probably."

BANG!

At that moment, a black object shot out of the red curtain.

Carl immediately jumped and intercepted the black object, which was obviously Irwin.

Veterans had a terrifying amount of power, and the speed at which they were jumping out was terrifying.

As a Mid Veteran, Nick could move at speeds of over 500 kph, and if he put everything into a jump, he could even move at nearly 700 kph.

Because of that, it looked like Irwin had been a cannonball.

"Come, stay close," Mark said as he walked towards Carl and Irwin.

Carl motioned forward, and everyone followed.

Nick and Mark ran past Irwin, and Irwin then followed after them.

Nick had only been at the south and the east of the city.

He had not yet been to the west or the north.

However, he knew what was around the city.

Far to the southwest was the iron mine.

Directly to the west was the isolated field with the carbon plants.

The field was called the Carbon Field.

Directly to the west of the Carbon Field was the Land of Desires, which was the reason why the city had decided to place the Carbon Field to the city's west.

The Land of Desires was an area with a width of about two kilometers, which was completely covered in delicious food and drinks.

Huge trees filled with fruit.

Bushes filled with nuts.

Crystal clear waters.

Flowers filled with sweet nectar.

Cooked chickens growing out of the ground.

Cooked meat hanging from trees.

Of course, the Land of Desires was a Specter, and just as expected, eating anything from there would be bad.

If someone ate from the Land of Desires, they would immediately grow addicted.

Without interference, the person would remain inside and gorge themselves to death.

But even if somebody could be pulled away, the withdrawal symptoms were brutal.

Shivers, panic, terror, aggression, heart palpitations, fever, existential dread, suicidal thoughts, and many other things.

If someone ate from the Land of Desires, the chances of their death would be over 60%, and that was assuming that they immediately got medical attention.

The Carbon Fields occupied the area between the city and the Land of Desires.

The reason was, of course, the slimes.

The slimes attacked the Land of Desires just as they attacked the Forests.

The only difference was that the Land of Desires didn't lose any Zephyx.

After all, the Specter was present, and it simply used its natural defenses to fight off the slimes.

This didn't work for the Forests since they were not the Specter.

They were minions or objects of power of the real Specter.

They had limited batteries, which couldn't be refilled.

The Land of Desires created an amazing defense for the Carbon Fields, which left only the north, northeast, south, and southeast open for attacks.

The northwest, west, and southwest didn't need to be defended, and the east was occupied by the Crimson Sea.

What about the north of the city, the place where Nick currently was?

Well...

There wasn't much.

While the other areas around the city had many noticeable Specters, like the Forests, Slimes, Infesters, Corrosive Dust, Desert, and Land of Desires, there was no noticeable Specter to the north of the city.

And that was concerning.

Why were there Specters around every other part of the city while there was no Specter to the north?

Nobody really knew.

Was there a Specter that stopped all other Specters from coming here?

Maybe, but nobody had gone missing in that area over the past 20 years.

Everyone that ran through this area managed to survive without any incident.

Nevertheless, traveling through that area was quite creepy.

In a way, the complete absence of Specters made this place especially creepy.

Chapter 403 – The Forbidden Zone

The four of them ran towards the north.

Everything around Nick was just a wasteland.

There were a couple of hills here and there, but that was it.

Brown and beige nothingness everywhere.

After running for around ten kilometers, they turned towards the right, running towards the east.

By now, no bit of human civilization could be seen.

There were no people or cities.

They were just in a dead world.

As they kept running towards the east, Nick sometimes glanced towards the north nervously.

While there was nothing close to the city in the north, that was bound to change as one went further and further away from the city.

And about 15 kilometers away from the city, that happened.

Even though Nick was about five kilometers away from the Forbidden Zone, he still looked towards its direction.

The Forbidden Zone started 15 kilometers to the north of the city and expanded for an unknown distance.

The city did not know what was inside the Forbidden Zone or what it looked like.

They only knew one thing.

Every single person who had ever crossed this line had died.

Even a Hero had vanished once.

Many years ago, one of the city's Heroes thought that they were strong enough to enter the Forbidden Zone.

Sadly, they never returned.

This event was one of the biggest reasons why Kugelblitz managed to come to power since that Hero had been from the biggest Manufacturer before Kugelblitz had attained that title.

The running theory was that a neutral Fallen was living there.

Adversaries often affected gigantic areas, and their influences could be seen in many different places.

Yet, the Forbidden Zone seemed to be a more localized thing, which most likely meant that a Fallen lived there that didn't view humanity as its enemy.

Either way, entering the Forbidden Zone was akin to suicide.

The team kept running towards the east, always staying about five kilometers away from the Forbidden Zone.

After about ten kilometers, Nick looked towards the south.

Right now, they should be about five kilometers to the north of the Desert.

Naturally, since going further towards the north was suicide, the group was leaving towards the east.

The reason as to why they had first traveled so far to the north was to avoid attracting the attention of anyone from the Desert.

The team's goal was the wilderness far to the east of the city, and the best way to get there without getting noticed was to jump over the gap and run eastward while staying close to the Forbidden Zone.

The four of them continued running, and soon, even the Desert was far to the west.

Right now, Nick was over 20 kilometers away from the city, the furthest he had been yet.

While the surrounding ten kilometers of the city were common knowledge, anything further away was kept secret.

Scouting the surroundings took a lot of work, and the Manufacturers didn't want to share their findings with other Manufacturers.

So, while some very noticeable areas were not kept secret, everything else was.

For example, there was one area to the east of the Desert and to the south of Nick's current location.

It was an extensive cave system.

There were many holes and crevices in the ground that led into the earth.

One could find these crevices and caves within an area of four kilometers, and the crevices seemed to be placed in a big X.

Crimson City suspected that at least one Specter had to be in there, but not much was known about the cave system.

Many Manufacturers had looked at it, but they didn't say how far they had gone or what they had found inside.

However, the cave system also wasn't the group's goal.

While it wasn't directly adjacent to the city, the cave system was still too well known, and they were bound to meet other Extractors if they went there.

They had to go further away.

So, they kept on running.

After another ten kilometers, Nick was now over 30 kilometers away from the city.

Now, things were starting to get dangerous.

This was a distance where it was no longer realistic to run to the city to get help if one got attacked.

There were also far fewer Extractors running around out here, which was both a good and a bad thing.

Good because the chances of getting found were lower.

Bad because there were no witnesses around if anything happened.

Nick had officially entered an area that he knew nothing of.

He did not know of any other big landmarks or Specters this far away from the city.

He didn't even know if the Forbidden Zone still extended to there.

In fact, not even the city knew.

Since the Forbidden Zone couldn't be seen, the city couldn't find out if they could go towards the north now or not.

Finding that out required sending someone, which would most likely kill that person.

Even if they used criminals to scout, that wouldn't give them any new information.

After all, if the Forbidden Zone was still there, the criminal died, and if it wasn't, the criminal would just continued walking northward to escape.

In both cases, the city would learn nothing.

Of course, Carl's group was not planning on finding out if the Forbidden Zone extended toward this place or not.

In fact, they were slowly changing their direction towards the southeast instead of the east.

What if the Forbidden Zone curved a bit?

They didn't want to take the chance.

During the past couple of minutes of travel, nobody had said a word, and Nick was just silently following.

However, after traveling for a couple more kilometers towards the southeast, Carl finally said something.

"Want to see something interesting, Nick?" Carl asked. "Take it as a present from Solace to Dark Dream."

Naturally, presents were not really presents.

A present between companies was a show of goodwill and said goodwill was expected to be returned.

Information about the outside world was precious, and Carl naturally wanted to cash in on that.

Nick knew what Carl meant.

"Always," Nick answered.

Solace and Dark Dream worked very closely with each other, and there was no issue in accepting something like that.

In fact, refusing such a gift might even be considered as rude.

Chapter 404 – Endless Blue

The four of them continued running towards the east.

Eventually, they reached a distance of 40 kilometers away from the city.

This was now the true unknown.

Suddenly, Carl slowed down.

In front of Nick were grey cliffs, which looked quite different from the beige and brown cliffs everywhere.

In a way, these cliffs appeared "clean".

The smell in the air was also quite different.

For some reason, this smell was very familiar, but Nick couldn't place it.

Carl slowly and carefully approached one of the big cliffs and motioned Nick to come closer.

Mark and Irwin ran towards the side, hiding while surveilling the area.

"Stay close," Carl whispered to Nick, "and don't make any noise. Additionally, do not use your Zephyx in any way. Even if you want to use it to remain quiet."

Nick frowned.

Staying quiet without using Zephyx?

That felt contradictory, but Nick nodded and followed Carl's orders.

Carl slowly and quietly pulled himself up one of the cliffs.

Nick quietly followed him.

The cliffs were only about ten to twenty meters high, and they reached the top rather quickly.

Carl looked at Nick and motioned for him to come closer.

Nick came closer, and Carl motioned for him to look over the edge.

Nick approached and slowly moved his head to look over the edge.

Then, his eyes widened.

Blue waves of water crashed against the cliffs as the familiar scent of salt blew through the air.

Nick could see a two-kilometer-wide body of crystal-clear water!

It was difficult for Nick to come to terms with what he was seeing.

He had heard of the concept of a lake and sea, but he had never really heard of a specific one.

As Nick finally recognized the familiar scent as salt, he also came to another realization.

'Salt? According to Julian, only the biggest bodies of water in the world are made of salt water.'

Nick felt Carl touch his shoulder, trying to gain Nick's attention.

Nick looked back, and Carl gestured for Nick to look more towards the left.

He did just that, and Nick could see the body of water extending.

While the body of water only stretched towards the south for around two kilometers, the same thing wasn't true when Nick looked toward the north.

Endless!

The two-kilometer-wide channel of water eventually expanded further and further until the water was everywhere!

'But if that's the case...' Nick thought as he turned towards the northwest. 'Isn't the Forbidden Zone also covered in salt water?'

'Could it be that the Forbidden Zone is a huge body of water?'

Nick turned towards the northeast again and looked at the endlessness of water.

He was mesmerized by it.

He kept looking at the water.

The water near the shore and the cliffs was almost white.

If one went further out, the water was blue.

But eventually, while the water on the surface still looked blue, there was a murky blackness beneath it.

Nick knew that these parts were most likely so deep that no light reached the bottom, making it look like a black void.

And yet, as he kept looking, he felt like something was moving inside the void.

Carl got Nick's attention again and motioned for him to come down.

Then, Carl started to descend the cliff quietly.

Nick looked at Carl as he was descending.

Then, his eyebrows rose, and he looked for Mark and Irwin.

He couldn't find them.

He looked back at Carl, who was focusing on silently climbing down.

None of the three could see him.

Then why...

'Didn't my ability activate again?' Nick thought as his heart rate increased.

Nick ducked behind the cliff.

His ability reactivated!

Nick started to sweat.

He looked over the cliff again at the huge body of water.

His ability deactivated.

Nick searched desperately for anything moving.

Something was looking at him!

However, nothing had happened yet!

Nick had been looking at the water for over a minute by now.

Anything that could possibly threaten Nick could have easily reached him in that time frame.

And yet, nothing had happened.

'What the hell is going on?' Nick thought as he looked into the darkness of the water again.

'Is something moving in there or not?' he thought.

It didn't look like it.

And yet, Nick felt like something was moving.

The endless darkness in the water.

Was it moving?

After some moments, Nick felt like tentacles made of darkness were squirming below the surface, and the horizon seemed to be darker than usual.

It was almost like storm clouds were appearing.

And then, something caught his eye.

Far away, Nick could see a small object above the surface.

It looked like a long and thin stick.

It was tiny, and it seemed to come out of the water.

Nick looked at the distant stick.

Suddenly, he felt something tap his leg, and he looked down.

It was Carl, who was glaring at him with a serious expression, motioning for him to come down.

Nick held his arm out in a stopping gesture and pointed towards his ears and then to the body of water.

He wanted to convey that he was sensing something.

Naturally, Nick had told everyone that he was a Senser, and one should always listen to what a Senser had to say.

Carl understood what Nick meant and frowned.

After a second, he gestured upward.

Nick nodded and looked back at the ocean.

The stick had grown!

It was over twice as big now!

Nick's heart rate spiked as he focused on the stick.

And then, the stick grew some more, and something else appeared near its bottom.

It was quite wide.

The stick grew even more, and the wide part also became longer.

Nick fully focused on the object.

This was an object from the Forbidden Zone!

And then, Nick realized what was happening.

The object was not growing but coming closer!

Together with the fact that Nick knew that he was being sensed, he realized what was going on.

This object was coming for them!

Chapter 405 – One Friend

"Something's coming!" Nick shouted and immediately jumped away from the cliff.

The hearts of all three of Nick's teammates nearly jumped into their throats as Nick's loud shout broke through the silence.

"They already know we're here, but they don't know that we know!" Nick shouted urgently as he landed on the ground.

"Shut the fuck up!" Irwin shouted aggressively. "You're blowing our-"

"We can't run!" Nick shouted back. "Most likely, they are too fast! Follow me!"

Carl looked at Nick with narrowed eyes.

Did Nick go insane?

Did the Forbidden Zone have some kind of effect on someone's mentality?

BANG!

Nick punched the ground with all of his power, and a huge crater appeared.

The eyes of the team widened in shock.

That must have echoed throughout the surrounding kilometer!

BANG!

Nick punched the bottom of the crater just half a second later, creating a hole that was over five meters deep.

"Follow my lead or die!" Nick shouted.

And then, all the debris Nick had thrown into the air by punching the ground fell back down on top of him.

A lot of the debris was scattered around the outside, but there was still plenty of debris left to bury the bottom two meters of the hole.

Naturally, Nick immediately went to the ground and lay there, completely flat.

A normal human would have been bludgeoned to death by the falling rocks and sand, but something like this couldn't hurt a Veteran.

At that moment, Carl's mind was going wild.

He believed that Nick went insane.

However, he also remembered the trust Hera had put in Nick.

Additionally, Carl remembered that Nick had allegedly survived an ambush of ten Extractors.

Carl wasn't sure if he believed something like that.

How could one survive when ten similarly powerful Extractors combined their powers to kill one?

Sure, one might be able to kill two enemies, but then, eight attacks would hit them at the same time, and one couldn't possibly survive that.

Carl was conflicted.

However, as an experienced leader, he quickly and decisively came to a decision.

"Do what he says!" he ordered.

The next instant, an earthen shield appeared in front of Carl, and he jumped into a dune of dust and stone.

Surprisingly, it didn't get destroyed, and it looked like Carl slipped into it like he was part of the dune.

Irwin was furious at Nick, but his leader had given him an order, and he complied.

A light appeared around Irwin, and he became blurry as he bent down to lay on the ground.

Mark had already vanished.

The three of them were extremely experienced, and all of them had ways to stay hidden.

Silence.

The area seemed completely empty.

There was just debris scattered around, which wasn't unusual since this was how the entire world looked.

Deep underground, Nick didn't dare to move.

His ability had activated again, which meant that nobody was currently perceiving him.

At this moment, Nick hoped that his ability wouldn't deactivate.

If it did, he would die.

Several seconds passed.

Tap.

Nick felt a very light vibration coming from above him.

Something or someone must have stepped on the ground on top of him.

Silence.

Tap. Tap.

Nick felt two more vibrations.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

More vibrations.

It was like several feet were walking over the ground.

Nick didn't dare to move.

Silence.

A couple more taps.

"No, please! Spare me! I'll tell you everything!"

Nick's heart rate increased as he heard Mark screaming and talking.

Whatever was up there found Mark.

Silence.

"I don't know what you want! Can't you just tell me, please?!" Mark nervously shouted.

Silence.

"I don't know what you're trying to say!"

Nick didn't dare to move.

"Fine! Fine! I'll tell you!" Mark shouted. "But please, let me live, okay?"

Nick didn't move.

"Okay! Yes, I'm here with a friend! Please, take him instead of me, okay?"

Nick felt a rush of fear and hatred going through him.

One friend?

This fucker was selling him out to save his two friends!

"He's there! He's the one that you saw earlier! He burrowed into the ground there!"

At that moment, Nick's ability began to fluctuate.

It was switching between active and inactive rapidly!

Nick knew what this meant!

Over the years, Nick had experienced this sensation before.

This happened whenever someone believed that they knew where Nick was and were right.

For example, if Julian told Jenny that Nick was working with the Talker, Nick's ability would fluctuate.

That was because Jenny knew where Nick was but wasn't technically sensing him.

The important part was that she believed she knew where Nick was and was actually right.

If Julian told Jenny that Nick was not in the building while he actually was, Nick's ability wouldn't fluctuate.

In both cases, Jenny believed that she knew where Nick was, but only in the first case would it fluctuate.

Of course, to properly deactivate it, one needed to sense Nick.

Additionally, to make it fluctuate like that, one had to get Nick's approximate location down to a couple of meters.

Just telling someone that Nick was somewhere in Dark Dream's building wouldn't make his ability fluctuate since this was way too big of an area to properly pin his location down.

The fact that Nick's ability was fluctuating right now meant that Mark had pointed towards Nick.

At this moment, whatever was up there believed that Nick was buried below this part of the ground, and they were right.

"Please, I told you where he is. Can't you just, please, no, please!"

Mark had been pleading for his life just now before his voice suddenly became quieter and more distant.

Nick could tell that Mark was being pulled away.

Apparently, whatever was up there didn't kill Mark but kidnapped him.

Nick felt his ability fluctuating constantly.

Tap. Tap.

Two taps came from on top of Nick's location.

Nick's mind was going crazy as he desperately tried to think of a way out of this situation!

BOOOOM!

Everything around Nick exploded!

Chapter 406 – East

The ground exploded into a shower of debris and dust.

BANG!

BANG!

More and more explosions occurred, and more and more debris and dust scattered.

At this moment, a humanoid figure stood in front of a collection of craters, each one about ten meters deep.

The humanoid figure was red, and many different growths were coming out of it.

However, these growths were not blood or flesh.

These growths were hard as bone and spiky.

The humanoid had half of a human face, with the other half being covered by the growths.

The single eye on the left half of its face had no glimmer of independence inside of it.

The red growths looked almost identical to corals.

It was like somebody had been infested by corals!

Scattered around the area were three more humanoids, who also were infested with corals.

All of them were looking at the craters without moving.

They waited.

There was nothing there.

BANG!

Then, the person that had destroyed the ground jumped into the distance, covering two kilometers of distance in an instant!

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The other three jumped after the first person, but they were several times slower.

All of them were jumping towards the southwest.

Meanwhile, around the different craters that the humanoid had just created, the dusty clouds slowly calmed down.

Yet, a moment later, one of the dusty clouds stealthily moved into one of the craters.

BANG!

Nick appeared inside the crater, his entire body covered in sweat.

Next, Nick rapidly dug into the ground, and a second later, he was completely gone.

Buried beneath the crater, Nick was trying his best not to lose consciousness.

The attack just now had nearly consumed all of Nick's Zephyx since he had transformed into mist shortly before it hit.

When the humanoid had kicked the ground, a ton of debris and dust was scattered across the surroundings, and Nick had transformed into mist in hopes of staying hidden among the clouds of dust.

A human body would have been noticed immediately, but a bit of mist amidst clouds of dust was not nearly as noticeable.

Just like the debris, Nick had been pushed outward, and just like the clouds of dust, his misty body lingered around.

As the humanoids kept destroying the ground, more dust appeared, allowing Nick to stay hidden.

Fortunately, they had left after just a couple of seconds.

'Most likely, they thought that Mark was protecting me. They probably thought that he told them that I was here when, in reality, I ran towards the city.'

Nick gritted his teeth.

'Their opinion of him surely was high!' he thought with hatred.

Now that Nick was no longer in immediate danger, all his rage and hatred of being betrayed exploded to the surface.

'This fucker wanted to pull me down with him!'

Over a minute passed, and during that time, no sound occurred.

Everything was completely silent.

"It's gone."

Nick heard Irwin's voice.

Silence.

"Nick? Where are you?" Carl shouted next. "Whatever it was, it's gone. You can come out."

Nick narrowed his eyes as he did his best to bury the rage and hatred deep inside.

Then, he came out of the ground and looked around.

Carl quickly appeared at the side of the crater when he heard the sound of moving earth and looked at Nick.

Right now, Carl had a serious expression on his face.

"No time to waste," he said. "I don't want to stay in this location anymore. We need to leave immediately!"

Nick glared at Carl but complied.

He jumped out of the crater and saw Irwin, who was glaring at Nick.

The next moment, Carl ran towards the north.

Nick was surprised since the Forbidden Zone was to the north.

However, he quickly understood when he saw Carl stopping after just 500 meters.

Carl approached a spot between two rocks, put his hands into the ground, and lifted.

A huge part of the ground was lifted, and Nick could see that the bottom of this piece was made of metal!

It was a big lid!

Below the lid was a dark hole.

Carl quickly touched a switch on the wall, and the hole started to light up.

There were artificial lights scattered across the hole, and most likely, they also helped against the Nightmare.

After all, Carl and Irwin were from Solace, and Solace specialized in making lights that worked against the Nightmare.

Irwin jumped into the hole, and Nick jumped after him.

When the two of them were inside, Carl put the lid back over the hole from inside and followed them.

The hole turned into a tunnel a couple of meters down, and Irwin ran through the tunnel.

The tunnel could almost be described as a slide since it curved down a lot!

Nick and Carl ran after Irwin, and after some time, the tunnel became horizontal again.

After running for around two minutes or so, the tunnel curved upward, and the three of them had to run up a slope.

Eventually, Irwin pushed away another lid and jumped out.

Nick came out as well.

Behind him, Carl pressed a switch, and the tunnel turned dark again.

Lastly, he put the lid back on the hole.

"We can talk over there," Carl said, gesturing to the east.

The three of them ran towards the east, and after around three kilometers, they went to a couple of big boulders in the middle of the wasteland.

Then, they finally stopped.

Nick could approximately tell where he was.

The tunnel had led towards the east, which was the place where all the water had been.

The fact that the tunnel had curved down that far meant that it had been below the body of water, and they had come up again at the other side.

Then, they ran another three kilometers toward the east.

Right now, Nick should be about three kilometers east of the big body of water.

This meant that he was around 50 kilometers away from the city.

Quite far away from home.

The three of them took some breaths.

Then, Carl turned to Nick.

"Can you explain to me what just happened?"

Chapter 407 – No Evidence

"That's what I would like to know," Nick said with a severe voice. "Your friend told them where I was. Your friend tried to fucking kill me!"

Carl gritted his teeth.

"Shut up!" Irwin shouted from the side. "This is all your fault anyway! You were the one that led this thing to us in the first place! Mark was not the one who killed you! You were the one who killed Mark!"

"That was not my fault," Nick said with a seething voice. "I acted just like your leader. If they saw me, they would have seen him as well."

"You were up there for way longer than Carl!" Irwin shouted as he aggressively gestured to the west. "I saw Carl coming down way earlier than you, and I even saw him going back to get you! You were the one that led this thing to us! You even knew that it was coming!"

"That's because I'm a Senser," Nick answered. "From what I've seen, one of these things has the power of a fucking Fanatic! If that thing had seen me, we wouldn't have been able to hide in time! That thing would've arrived within a fucking second!"

"Then, how could you possibly say that this thing didn't see you if it was that strong? For that matter, why didn't it arrive within a second? As far as I can see, there was nothing coming towards us until you punched the ground like a lunatic!" Irwin shouted back.

"I can assure you that they have already noticed us before that. If it weren't for me, the two of you would be dead right now!"

"Quiet!" Carl suddenly shouted, looking at both of them. "Arguing like this won't achieve anything."

"He's the reason why Mark is dead now!" Irwin shouted, throwing an accusatory finger at Nick.

"And how do you know that?" Carl asked, looking at Irwin. "I've looked at the sea for longer than him before, and nothing happened. The reason why I told him to be quiet is because the area is very open behind the cliff, and there is a high likelihood that an Extractor from the city might be here."

"They run experiments on the sea all the time, and I've seen Extractors even swimming in it before. Why didn't they get found out? Are you telling me that Nick is more noticeable than several Extractors standing directly in front of the water?" Carl asked.

"Then, it was bad luck, sure," Irwin said, not letting up. "However, the thing could have still seen him while you were coming back."

At that moment, Carl put his hand on Irwin's shoulder while looking him in the eye.

"Mark was my friend as well," Carl said. "I'm also filled with anger due to his death, but accusing Nick of being the reason for Mark's death will just end up with more deaths. As it stands now, there is no evidence that supports Nick being the reason for the appearance of this Specter."

Irwin gritted his teeth and clenched his fists.

Then, he glared at Nick with fury.

Nick just looked back with narrowed eyes.

Then, Irwin turned around and walked out of the formation of boulders.

"I'll keep a lookout," he said with repressed anger and hatred.

Of course, he just wanted to leave Nick's presence.

If he stayed, he might not be able to keep himself in check.

The next moment, Carl turned to Nick.

"Nick, I need to know what happened and what you saw. You keep saying 'they'. Are you saying that there was more than one?"

Nick looked at Carl with narrowed eyes.

"Do you think keeping this guy from blaming me somehow makes me feel indebted to you? You forget that your so-called friend told them where I was and that he wanted to kill me," Nick said with a venomous voice.

"Nick, just how there is no evidence of you attracting these things, there's no evidence of Mark telling them where you are. You are still here, right? By your own admission, one of these things has the power of a Fanatic. If Mark told them where you were, you wouldn't be here right now. Maybe he told them an incorrect location."

At that moment, Nick froze.

What the fuck did Carl just say?!

No evidence?!

This fucker Mark told them where he was, which immediately made Nick's ability fluctuate! Even more, that thing stopped right on top of Nick's location before it created a crater exactly where he was!

Nick fell completely silent as his eyes, opened widely in fury, looked into Carl's eyes.

No fucking evidence, he said!

'Oh, I get it,' Nick thought as his eyes slowly narrowed. 'This traitor Mark belonged to Solace, and if Carl admits that Mark tried to kill me, Solace might be in huge trouble!'

'This is about money, huh?' Nick thought as his hot anger turned into cold hatred.

'While friendship between businesses always relies on mutual benefit, I would have believed you to be smarter, Hera. Is this how you taught your vice-CZE? He sees that Solace might have to pay a bit, but instead of paying and securing a continued partnership, he's supposed to completely ruin the alliance just so that you don't have to give Dark Dream something?'

'Or maybe you plan on getting rid of me so that you don't have to pay anything.'

'How disappointing.'

'I genuinely considered you my ally,' Nick thought coldly.

"I see," Nick said with an eerily calm voice. "That's how we're doing this."

Carl furrowed his brows when he heard Nick's words.

In fact, right now, Carl was concerned.

The shift in Nick's demeanor was way too abrupt.

"Are you planning on silencing me?" Nick asked coldly.

Carl's eyes widened in shock.

"Is your friend aiming his gun at me at this moment?" Nick said.

"You think you can catch me? After not even those things managed to get me?"

Nick looked deep into Carl's eyes with confidence.

Chapter 408 – Image

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!" Carl shouted in rapid succession. "What silencing? What killing? What are you talking about?!"

Nick's eyes glance around the formation, looking for Irwin.

Most likely, Irwin was already looking at him with his gun readied.

"Nick, you have to calm down!" Carl said with seriousness. "Nobody is trying to kill you! I'm asking about what happened!"

Nick turned to look at Carl and sneered in disgust. "Do you honestly think that I'm that dumb?" he asked. "You already made your stance clear."

"What stance?!" Carl asked in frustration and confusion. "I just want to know what the hell is going on!"

"No evidence?" Nick asked with a disgusted sneer. "You must have heard Mark's shouts as well. He told them that he was here with a friend, and then he pointed at my location."

"And then, the area around me exploded, and I was in the middle of a crater."

"No evidence, no evidence. You act like you've not heard shit when you've been even closer to the surface than me with even superior senses."

"You saw me getting punched in the face and claim that the punch never happened."

As Nick kept talking, an expression of uncertainty appeared on Carl's face.

"The area around you exploded?" Carl asked, his voice having lost a lot of its power.

"You heard the explosion," Nick said. "Even though you say that you just so happened to be blind and deaf during that minute."

"I am not claiming that!" Carl said with severity. "I heard the explosion, and I felt the vibrations! While that happened, I was scared that it was about to find me!"

Nick narrowed his eyes in skepticism and suspicion as he looked at Carl.

"Nick, is that the truth?" Carl asked. "Are you sure Mark told this thing where you were?"

Nick kept looking into Carl's eyes in suspicion.

Carl took a step forward.

BANG!

Nick instantly jumped two meters back, his blades ready.

"Nick, stop!" Carl shouted, taking two steps back to show that he didn't plan on attacking. "Nobody wants to kill you!"

"You think I believe you?" Nick asked coldly. "You think I'm that naive just because I'm in my twenties?"

"Almost all humans are only interested in their own wealth, and they don't give the slightest shit about anyone else."

"You see how your friend tried to take me down with him, and instead of doing what's right, you want to silence me so that Solace doesn't lose any of its precious profits."

"Whoops, sorry, Dark Dream's CZE was taken by a couple of funny red men from the north. Sorry. We can take your next CZE with us on another expedition, though. We toootally promise that nothing will happen to them," Nick mocked.

"Do you honestly believe Julian would buy that?" Nick asked with disgust.

"No, I don't!" Carl shouted. "He wouldn't believe that! Nobody would believe that!"

"That's why I'm not planning on doing anything like that!" Carl added.

"Solace voluntarily took a huge risk by taking you with us to the excursion."

"Because, if anything happens, we are the prime suspects."

"Even if we planned to kill you, we wouldn't do it during this expedition! Angering someone like Julian would be akin to suicide!"

"Killing you would be risking Solace's survival!" Carl shouted.

Nick looked at Carl in suspicion.

"Listen, Nick," Carl said, using a calming tone. "I genuinely didn't know what happened."

"See things from my perspective. I'm buried in the ground and listening to Mark begging for his life. After that, I hear a couple of explosions, and I'm constantly fearing for my survival!"

"Then, I hear them or it or whatever taking Mark away. I'm not sure if it or they are still here or not, and I'm just waiting."

"Finally, I hear Irwin's voice and come out, and moments later, you come out."

"How does that look from my perspective? The weakest member of our team manages to survive an encounter with something that even the strongest member would be helpless against."

"What's more believable? That Mark told them exactly where you were, and you somehow still managed to hide from them, or that Mark gave them the wrong location, keeping all of us safe?"

Nick kept looking at Carl in skepticism.

"You said there's no evidence," Nick said.

"Because I thought you made that up!" Carl quickly answered. "I thought you were trying to gain something out of Solace!"

An annoyed expression appeared on Nick's face. "There's a time and place for manipulation and sincere cooperation. When dealing with a partner that severely outclasses you in power, manipulation is the wrong approach."

"I know that Hera and Ramona are most likely more experienced than me. Trying to manipulate them would be stupid."

"Even if I wanted to manipulate them, I wouldn't do it spontaneously by accusing one of their employees after something unforeseen happened."

"See?" Carl asked. "That's very similar to what I said. I said it would be idiotic to kill you, and you said it would be idiotic to falsely accuse someone."

"But we both believed that the other one did just that."

Carl took a deep breath and sighed.

"That only means that we both thought the other one to be an idiot."

Nick didn't move for a while and just looked at Carl.

"We don't plan on killing you, okay?" Carl said. "Look, I'm going to prove it."

The next moment, Carl turned around, showing his back to Nick.

"See? We don't want to kill you. Turning my back to you is very risky, but I trust that you won't attack me," Carl said.

Nick furrowed his brows.

Carl had turned his back to him.

And yet...

Why hadn't his ability activated?

Nick quickly searched through the area.

Then, on top of one of the big boulders, he saw Irwin.

DING!

A bright light appeared from Irwin's location.

In Irwin's hand was a strange device, and Nick recognized it.

This was one of the things that Solace sold to the general public.

It was a device that could capture an image on a small piece of film, which could then be enlarged onto a bigger piece of paper.

A camera!

At that moment, Nick realized what this looked like.

Right now, Carl was showing his back to Nick while his blade was readied.

Didn't that look exactly like he wanted to assassinate Carl?!

The next instant, Irwin pulled out his rifle and pointed it directly at Nick.

At the same time, an earthen shield appeared around Carl.

BOOOM!

Irwin's rifle fired at Nick!

Chapter 409 – Emotions Running High

WHOOOM!

An explosion of light appeared as soon as the gun fired.

BOOOM!

The bullet hit something solid and was stopped.

The light vanished and revealed a huge earthen shield.

A hole had appeared in the huge shield, but it didn't manage to get all the way through.

The next moment, the shield vanished into thin air, revealing Carl, who had an enraged expression on his face.

Carl immediately turned to look at Irwin with barely contained fury.

Irwin looked back in annoyance.

"You let him escape!" Irwin shouted.

Nick was nowhere to be seen.

BANG!

Carl jumped towards Irwin with all of his power.

Irwin noticed what was going on and jumped back.

Yes, Carl was an Initial Expert, but Irwin was a Peak Veteran.

There was only one level between them, even though that level was bigger than the usual ones.

"Stop!" Irwin shouted. "I got the evidence! I took a photo!"

Irwin waved the camera around.

Carl jumped after him with rage.

"This is the best-"

BOOOM!

A huge earthen shield came out of Carl's right arm, and he rammed it against Irwin's Barrier with all of his power.

Electricity ran all over Irwin's Barrier as the spikes on Carl's earthen shield released some kind of gas when they hit it.

Irwin's eyes widened, and he took a deep breath as he was thrown into the distance.

Even though he was powerful, the physical impact of Carl's attack was brutal, and Irwin's entire body shook.

Irwin coughed.

BANG!

Carl reached Irwin in the air, summoned another Earthen Shield, and hammered Irwin down onto the ground.

BOOOOM!

Irwin hit the ground and created a crater.

Carl rushed into the crater.

BANG!

Irwin's Barrier fizzled and broke down.

At the same time, Irwin's face turned completely white, and he looked like he couldn't breathe.

Carl frowned, and his hand went into one of Irwin's pockets.

The next moment, Carl retrieved a small disk from the pocket.

It was Irwin's Barrier.

Then, Carl took hold of Irwin's rifle.

Lastly, Carl put his hand on Irwin's chest and pushed some of his Zephyx into him.

Irwin took a deep breath, and life appeared in his eyes again.

If a Veteran or stronger ran out of Zephyx, their survival was uncertain.

Zephsis was a cycle that required Zephyx.

It essentially needed Zephyx to turn Prephyx into more Zephyx.

If there was no Zephyx, no more Prephyx could be turned into Zephyx.

At that point, the entire body would stop working.

Taking all the Zephyx from an Extractor was akin to sealing a normal person's airways.

Next, Carl grabbed Irwin and jumped back to the formation of boulders.

BANG!

Carl threw Irwin into the middle.

"I'm not sure if you're still here, but I can assure you, I did NOT want to kill you, Nick!" Carl shouted.

"Irwin worked on his own!"

Silence.

No answer.

At this moment, Carl's mind was filled with a mix of negative emotions.

He genuinely didn't think that Mark had told these things where Nick was.

After all, if he did, Nick would be dead.

He had thought that Nick wanted to get some kind of advantage out of Solace by accusing one of their dead Extractors.

Yet, Nick's reaction had been too extreme and genuine.

Carl had worked and talked with many people, and he was quite certain that Nick had been genuine with his outburst.

So, Carl tried to calm Nick down, but as soon as he stepped forward, Nick jumped backward, taking his step as a form of aggression!

Nick had even accused him of wanting to silence him!

That thought was scary.

Yes, Carl had fought other Extractors in the past, and yes, he had caught many Specters.

However, he had killed less than five people in his life, and he still vividly remembered every single person he had killed.

One of the main reasons why Carl wanted to become a Veteran decades ago was so that he didn't need to sleep anymore.

After all, in his sleep, he met the people he killed again and again.

Of course, all these deaths had been necessary, and he knew that.

However, killing Nick was definitely not necessary, and Carl would never want to kill anyone unless it was absolutely necessary.

Earlier, when he had turned his back to Nick, he had noticed a flash of light coming from on top of one of the rocks and looked over.

That was when he had seen Irwin with his camera, and Carl felt like his world was breaking down.

He had immediately rushed to Nick to defend him from the shot.

But then, an explosion of light occurred, and Nick had vanished.

Luckily, Carl remembered exactly where Nick had been and where the rifle had been pointed at.

He made it in time and blocked the bullet.

At that moment, he had felt terror, frustration, anger, and hatred.

Irwin had ruined everything!

However, even though he absolutely hated Irwin right now, he knew why he had done it.

Irwin, Carl, and Mark had been best friends for over a decade now.

They were together almost all the time.

They worked together, drank together, had fun together, and so on.

Mark had been the only one in their group with a wife and kids.

Naturally, as Mark's best friends, Irwin and Carl also very often visited Mark's family.

Mark's kids even called them Uncle Irwin and Uncle Carl.

So, when Irwin had heard that Mark died, he had understandably been distraught.

And when humans were distraught, they very often tried to deny their reality or find something to blame.

All this fear often turned into anger, and they quickly turned resentful.

If nothing crazy had happened after that, Irwin probably wouldn't have done anything.

However, seeing Nick with a pulled-out weapon was too good of an opportunity.

Usually, Irwin wouldn't do something like this without consulting the other two, but the opportunity had been too good.

So, he took a photo.

And when that happened, it was already too late.

Nick had seen him take the photo.

Irwin knew that there was no turning back anymore and tried to kill Nick.

From an outsider's perspective, this assassination had seemed planned.

Carl would assume a vulnerable position, and Irwin would take a photo as proof.

After that, they could kill Nick without fear, right?

Sadly, or luckily, that hadn't been the truth.

Chapter 410 – Unsavable Situation

Carl waited.

No answer.

The only sound was Irwin's labored breathing as he looked at Carl with frustration, fear, and anger.

"You... let him... escape," Irwin said through labored breaths.

"Shut up!" Carl shouted in rage. "You tried to assassinate a member of the team!"

Irwin breathed in difficulty for a couple of seconds.

"I did," he said, "but he deserved it. He killed Mark."

"He did not kill Mark!" Carl said with a severe voice.

Irwin didn't answer for several seconds.

"Maybe not," he said with a neutral voice. "But that doesn't matter now anymore, does it?"

Irwin's breathing vanished as his body had finally become stable enough to no longer need it every second.

Carl narrowed his eyes, but Irwin continued talking.

"He saw us," Irwin said from the ground. "He thinks you were in on it."

"He escaped, and if he didn't lie, he's a Runner, and we can't catch a Runner with such a head start."

Carl gritted his teeth.

"He will tell the city," Irwin said neutrally. "He's going to accuse us of wanting to kill him."

"It doesn't matter if you wanted to kill him or protect him. In his eyes, you also wanted to kill him."

"Our lives are over, and Solace is going to abandon us."

But then, Irwin reached into one of his pockets under Carl's narrowed eyes.

Finally, he pulled out the camera from earlier.

"But we still have this," Irwin said with a small chuckle as he sat up.

Irwin waved the camera around. "As long as we have this, he won't be able to prosecute us."

"Instead, he will look like he tried to kill you."

"We're in the same boat now," Irwin said.

Carl glared at Irwin with aggression.

Then, he walked forward.

Irwin didn't move.

He was still very low on Zephyx, and without his Barrier or weapon, there was nothing he could do anyway.

Then, Carl grabbed the camera.

After that, he turned around.

WHOOOOOM!

And threw it into the distance!

Irwin's eyes shot open in absolute terror.

"Are you crazy?!" Irwin shouted in panic. "You've killed us!"

Carl slowly turned around to look at Irwin.

A deep look of disappointment was on his face.

"Who are you?" Carl asked.

Irwin looked at Carl with shock and confusion.

"Are you really Irwin?" Carl asked. "Is the Irwin I know really such a psychopath? Is my friend Irwin really so weak-willed that he has to kill an innocent man to cope with a tragedy?"

"If Mark saw what you did, what do you think he would say? What would Mark think of you?"

Irwin gritted his teeth, and his entire body shook.

A lot of things were shooting through his mind.

Mark's last screams.

The loud explosions Nick created.

Nick looking at Carl with his weapons drawn.

The camera in Irwin's hand.

When he shot at Nick.

When Carl attacked him.

When Carl threw the camera into the distance.

However, most prevalent of all was Mark.

Mark's face shot through Irwin's mind.

Irwin turned away from Carl and put his head in his hands.

His body shook as he violently pressed his hands into his face.

Carl just looked on in severity.

"Fuck, man," Irwin said with a shaking voice as he leaned back.

Tears had appeared in his eyes, and he looked up at the sun.

"I don't fucking know," Irwin said in defeat. "I lost control. I'm sorry, okay?"

Carl just looked at Irwin with a neutral expression.

He couldn't help but feel pity for his friend, but on the other hand, this was completely his doing.

"I'm sorry for pulling you into this," Irwin said. "I was just so angry at him. I saw an opportunity to vent that anger, and I took it. I didn't think, okay?"

"I fucked up. I fucked up majorly."

Irwin put his head back in his hands.

"I'm sorry."

"I should be the one that gets killed for treason, not you."

Carl took a deep breath.

Then, he pulled something out of his pocket.

It was a small piece of paper and a pen.

He handed these two things to Irwin.

"If you want to make things right, write down your confession," Carl said.

Irwin looked at the pen and paper with broken eyes.

Then, he released a small chuckle.

"I guess that's the least I could do."

The next moment, Irwin slowly stood up and walked over to one of the rocks.

Over the next minute, he wrote down his confession.

Lastly, he handed the confession and the pen back to Carl.

Carl took the two things and wrapped the confession carefully around the pen.

Whoosh!

And then, he threw that into the distance as well, but not as far as the camera.

Irwin looked with confusion at the distant confession.

"What?" Irwin asked.

"Take it," Carl said.

"What?" Irwin asked again.

"Not you," Carl said. "Nick."

"What?" Irwin asked in shock again.

"If there's one thing I learned in my conversation with Nick earlier, it is that he's not an idiot," Carl said. "That and that he's exceedingly good at hiding himself."

"Do you think he would have run away to the city after all that has happened?"

Irwin just looked at Carl with confusion.

"He knows that you took a picture. He knows that he would get into serious trouble as long as you still have that picture. Running to the city would only postpone the death he assumed we were planning on giving him."

"There's only one way to get out of this situation."

"To kill you," a voice finished the sentence from the side.

Carl and Irwin turned to the side and saw Nick standing between two boulders.

Silence.

Nick held up a camera.

Naturally, this was the camera that Carl had thrown into the distance.

Carl took a deep breath and sighed in relief.

He had thought that Nick would be here, but of course, he couldn't have been sure until Nick showed himself.

Earlier, he had believed Nick to be an idiot, and a horrible turn of events had occurred.

And instead of repeating his mistake, Carl chose something different the next time.

If he hadn't, they would have entered a battle with Nick within the next couple of minutes, and then, this situation couldn't have been saved anymore.

In fact, Irwin had already believed the situation to be unsavable.

But Carl believed that it could still be saved, and he had gone all-in.

And he had bet correctly.