

# SLEEPLESS FLAME



ODIN OXTHORN

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*FLAME*

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BOOK ONE

ODIN V OXTHORN

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## PROLOGUE

### ##0.1##

She always loved the Rain, the way it traced chaotic patterns over the indentations of her skin. She rotated her arm to direct them, but the Rain never followed orders. It was strong-willed, an admirable force to be reckoned with.

A smile crept across her face as she stared up at the grey sky, diverting the path of the soothing beads of water gently caressing her face. For once in her long, tumultuous life, she was at ease with herself.

With a gentle nudge, the Wind made their appearance known in the somber concrete ruins. She glanced over her shoulder as they manifested, watching the grey spectral figure shrouded in fog and a wry smile. They offered her the ornamented hilt of a long sword, and she gladly accepted it, understanding the rules of this engagement. As she tested the weight of the weapon in her grip, the Wind unsheathed their own, dramatically saluting her before raising the point of their blade in her direction.

She followed their lead, adjusting her posture as the rush of battle swirled around her senses. The weapon fused with the palms of her hands, a seamless extension of her body. She looked up to meet the widening grin of the Wind, acknowledging the ability of her opponent.

They invited her with a gentle nod, and she did not hesitate, lunging at

them with a torrent of whistling air. Metal rang through the dense atmosphere as the Wind intercepted the strike, accepting her challenge. Neither of them wavered, neither of them strained. The two combatants were impeccably matched. The aim of this engagement was never to win, but to control.

The Rain watched in judgment as they advanced and retreated. A strike led to a counter, a counter led to another through a whirl of synchronous motion. Back and forth they continued, faster and faster in harmony as each strived to circumvent the defenses of the other, a jovial choreography that had been established generations ago, at least in her mind.

The Wind gently pressed her back, and she permitted them, gradually giving up her ground as she increased the ferocity of her attacks. The pavement dissolved into a cloud of billowing air, lifting the arena into the sky. Their waltz continued as they skimmed over the surface of the deserted streets, cavorting past the cityscapes and into the lush green world outside, their blades resounding with every counter and parry.

The Rain escorted them as the bout continued across valleys, back and forth. The trees stirred as they witnessed the dancers, craning their branches to watch the caper. Birds burst from their hiding places within the foliage, splashes of color weaving in and around the opponents, synchronized with the pattern of their attacks.

The combatants swirled around each other, a whirlpool of motion flowing across the sky. Faster and faster they churned until the performance abruptly halted with a simultaneous swing. The thunderous clamor resonated in the vibrant air, commanding all observers to silence.

She watched the Wind closely as the steel shuddered in her grip, resisting against her pressure. Neither of them moved. Time stood still as the two pondered, frozen at crossed blades.

The Wind smiled as they lowered their attack, retracting their weapon with a jaunty salute. With a dramatic step back, they dissipated into the air, leaving her with the visage of their radiating grin.

Saddened that the dance ended so abruptly, she watched as the ground rose to meet her feet, the ancient trees looking down at her with curiosity. She wandered the forest, admiring the bright vegetation, each bloom an unassailable fortress of beauty.

Discovering a quiet glade in her leisurely stroll, she sat down on the moist earth and soaked up the tranquility, the fervent life surrounding her. The Rain continued to wash over her, a murmuring sentinel offering guidance. She could stay here forever, nothing would ever disturb her again.

An invasive yet soft tremor cracked through the peace as the ground beneath her let out a pained groan. She looked down questioningly as the forest around her grew disturbingly silent. Her nerves twitched inside her as the ominous atmosphere thickened, the air congealing with despair.

The Rain had disappeared, replaced by an ominous entity pummeling her with sickly black oil, the liquid seeping into her flesh. The color drained from the flowers, each petal crying out as its life was sapped from the stalk, leaving behind shriveled, agonized forms. She looked up at the sky as it transitioned from its soothing grey to a menacing blood red.

A nerve-wrenching uproar filled her ears as she stood, a persistent droning hum that steadily amplified, vibrating inside her skull. A thunderous crack erupted from the ground behind her, followed closely by a voracious rumble, a grinding of rock. Louder, closer.

She whirled around, watching the earth behind her split into a jagged maw, the chasm widening as it raced toward her. The ground at her feet crackled as it tore itself apart, splintering in precarious webs that threatened to snatch her balance. A haunting moan escaped from the fissures, and she watched in awe as a flood of colored spectral forms rushed out of the cracks, fleeing the confines of their underground prison.

Shrill screams assaulted her senses as the phantoms clawed past her, their hollow eyes and fearful expressions burning into her memory. She strained to lift her legs, to retreat from their accusatory barrage, but her body was

paralyzed, unable to move with the speed of her thoughts.

A swell of gravity plunged her insides down, and the soil crumbled beneath her. Air refused to pass her lungs as she slipped into the ravenous chasm, leaving her gasping for breath. She tore at the soft earth, desperately burrowing her nails under the surface to keep herself from falling.

The droning noise intensified, pounding inside her head with percussive force. The horde of wailing souls battered her around as she tried to maintain her grip, her muscles screaming for relief as she pulled herself up. She pressed an ear against her shoulder, trying to block out the tumult as she felt the crumbling soil in her clutches shift and harden, solidifying to stone.

Her eyes moved downward to see the column of pitted rock stretching into a featureless void of black. Her thoughts reeled as she felt herself slip toward the unknown horrors below. The rock jabbed at her fingertips, pushing her away as it mutated again, shifting from porous sandstone to slick obsidian.

Her flesh squeaked with warm friction as she frantically clawed at the glossy surface, scrambling to keep herself above the abyss. Her struggle ceased as her mind restrained her, forcing her to behold her reflection on the shiny stone.

A demonic visage met with her gaze, its eyes filled with an unquenchable fire, staring back at her with unhinged glee. It moved as she did, grinning with a jagged smile, enormous silver pointed teeth outlining its distorted lips.

Fear fueled her limbs as she felt herself sliding, flailing over the unyielding surface as the noise elevated to a deafening roar. The obsidian wall thwarted her escape as it jabbed a chilling wave through her fingers, the surface slickened with a frigid ichor. The oily crags toyed with her hands, rejecting her advances as she slipped further down the column. An invisible force slapped her arms away, pushing her off the precipice. Her eyes widened as the earth pulled at her, plunging her into the vile murk below.

The din infected her brain as she sank, tearing at her sanity as she

dropped deeper into the infinite chasm. She hurled a roar at the sound, trying to drown the noise out with her anguish. But the sound was relentless, engulfing her senses as the abyss claimed her.

Darkness swallowed her vision, leaving her alone with the pulsating screech as it tore her awareness apart.

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**##0.2##**

***BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.***

THE ALARM CLOCK berated her with its infernal shrieking, drilling into her brain with a maddening tempo.

“FU-UCK!” Nara bellowed as her fist slammed the source of the annoyance. She rubbed the crud from her eyes, letting out a dismayed grunt as she slowly gained awareness of her surroundings.

Flashes of the dreams replayed through her brain, flooding her with disgusted bitterness. A grimy revulsion crawled over her skin as she unwittingly reflected on the semi-sentimental themes. She loathed her psyche. The lack of control left an unclean, violating taint over her thoughts, as if an outside observer was toying with her mind for amusement, forcing her to think in ways aberrant to her nature.

She barely had time to curse out her heritage before her NetCom shattered her attention with a demanding buzz. As the device’s persistence intensified, she laboriously rose from her bed to respond to the call, letting off a sharp growl as she lurched toward the living room.

“What do you want, Annon?!” she snapped as she jabbed at the device.

“Good morning to you too, Sunshine,” a dry, masculine voice hissed through the speaker. “I’m calling about your contract. I assume you were able

to complete it?”

*Oh, yeah.* Nara rubbed her face vigorously as the jumbled pieces of her thoughts slowly clicked into place. *Been holding on to that thing for a while now, haven't I?*

“Yeah, I have it.” She sniffed, rooting around the apartment for her clothes. “And I assume you want it?”

“That would be lovely,” the voice on the NetCom quipped. “I expect you to be at my office this afternoon. The client is quite eager to receive his product.”

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever. I'll be there.” She cut off the channel, walking back into her bedroom.

She idly picked up the glittering object sitting on top of her end table, a gold ring with outlandish characters carved along the thick band. In the center was a large ocean blue jewel, shining with an odd brilliance in the dim light of her flat.

Nara had grown attached to the jewel and briefly lamented having to part with it. But it was unhealthy to double-cross the people she routinely worked under for the sake of frivolous knowledge. If she were only a few years younger, perhaps she would have cared enough to deal with the consequences.

She let out a wistful sigh as she pocketed the trinket, absentmindedly rubbing the inscriptions as she headed for the front door. The sour bite of the crisp night air invaded her nostrils as she made her way outside, the desolate streets welcoming her with bitter notes of metal and carbon.

The sun could not penetrate this deep into the city, and any life inhabiting the decaying streets thrived in scant quantities. Despite the dangers of being alone and out in the open, Nara walked with confidence. Few in the Undercity were foolish enough to bother a creature of her stature. She could conceal a sizeable arsenal inside her loosely-fitted attire, creating a risk of uncertainty that most malefactors would not take.

There are, however, exceptions in every group of criminals, especially if those exceptions recognize her from a distance.

A smirk distorted her lips as she discerned the pattering of noisy humans trailing behind her, inadvertently broadcasting their presence to her sensitive ears.

*And who will it be today?* She mulled over the possibilities. *Venom Clan? Eh, too quiet. Intia-Tech? No, they're too small a company to worry over. Phylox Synthetics? Hmm.*

She led her quarry around in a maze of alleys, moving through decayed structural playgrounds, abandoned corporate buildings, and crumbling domiciles. She casually strolled through the shrapnel carpeted ground, stretching out her wrists as she navigated through the garden of concrete mounds and jagged wire beams.

She continued making spontaneous turns on her journey, and the ungainly tracks of her pursuers magnified in chaotic notes as they struggled to keep up with her. Her smile widened as she walked onward, leading them to a favorable stomping ground.

Their hushed curses and hasty stumbles aided her awareness, and she pinpointed the location of the pack using the tiny echoes they cast into the street. She counted six clamorous shadows tailing her, but deeper inspection unearthed one softer intrusion murmuring further back. Number seven advanced in contrast to the rest of the group, stifling their movements as they meticulously progressed through higher ground.

“Okay, I think we’ve gone far enough,” Nara addressed the air. “You may come out now.”

She listened to the hesitation, stretching her arms out and rotating her neck as the pack uncomfortably shifted in their hiding places. She let out a soft chortle, feeling the tension above her bubble over as the raiding party deliberated their move.

“It’s either that or I come up and get you,” she taunted, glancing down at

her nails.

Five figures emerged from the shadows, typical lackeys that infested the city with their shiny guns and smug bravado. But number six preferred a more dramatic entrance, gliding toward her with elegantly tailored clothing and a wolfish grin. His smugness was haloed by a shock of golden hair, greased back into a rigid ponytail that pulled his forehead taut.

Her smirk began to fade as she regarded the creature. The Face archetype of thugs annoyed her greatly. They were usually armed as well as they were dressed, but they rarely lifted a finger in conflict, instead hurling their haughty voices around while the meatheads did the dirty work. And they took advantage of their speaking privileges by any means.

She ignored the garish entry of the smirking goon, concentrating on the muffled disruption in the distance. Number Seven had not entered the arena, dawdling behind the raiding party in the safety of the ruins. The movements of the mysterious individual were cautious, yet clumsy, as they navigated through the fragmented floors of the buildings nearby.

“Galavantier sends his regards,” the sharply-dressed thug called out to her.

“Oh, how *very* nice of him.” Nara smiled widely, baring her fangs.

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### ##0.3##

*THAT WAS TOO close for comfort, Garrett thought. I need to find a better means to get down here. Baran isn't going to cover for me much longer.*

The descent into the Undercity filled him with childlike delight, even though his thoughts inevitably delved into macabre existentialism. The leisurely expedition inside the glass elevator calmed him down from the strain of his hasty retreat, soothing him with the marvelous view.

The light surrounding the vehicle warped as it traversed through the misty Haze, the perpetual sickly purple cloud that divided the bright and glowing Uppercity from the cold, polluted heart of Under. The noxious air that shrouded the buildings was responsible for Undercity's weather, or more accurately, whether it rained or not.

At this level, the glittering windows of the megascrapers owned by Uppercity corporate forces were replaced with solid blocks of foundation, the habitable areas constructed stories above the taint of the Haze. The condition of the buildings deteriorated the deeper the elevator descended, unsightly chunks carved out of the material in erratic patterns. The decay matched the aesthetic of the crumbling Undercity buildings, remnants of an era hardly known to any Upper citizen.

The elevator descended into the craggy claws of Undercity's decomposing structures, sinking into the welcoming grasp of bony steel and eroded concrete frames. With a gentle hiss, the vehicle slowed its engines, easing its way through the visceral ruins as it delicately settled onto the ground. A swirl of thick cool air curled inside the chamber as the glass doors slid open.

Garrett stepped out into the shadows, sliding his hood over his face as he paused to let his eyes adjust to the lack of light. Shifting a cautious glance at his surroundings, he sent the elevator back to his Upper home.

The massive towers dwarfed everything around him, a concrete forest eternally bound to nightfall. His eyes traced over the jarring stylistic shift between Upper and Undercity architecture, picking out his landmarks from the collection of deserted outposts and bunkers as he headed to his first stop.

The H.U.D. was a drinking establishment and inn that was easy to spot from a distance. It was one of the only intact buildings in the vicinity. The tavern was erected from fresh materials imported from Upper instead of the makeshift structures hastily welded together from chunks of ruin. A beacon on the roof radiated vibrantly through the gloominess of the environment,

accurately projecting the name of the bar, unlike its derelict neighbors, whose signs commonly spelled out obscene phrases with strategically burnt-out consonants.

Rumor had it that the keeper, Darius, was once a noble from the Upper districts, but the details regarding his arrival to the underground remained a mystery. Some of the wilder stories claimed he was a deranged criminal hiding from the police, while others said that he was a revolutionary, running a war behind the front of the bar. Others painted him as a social worker, bringing the comforts of the Uppercity to the downtrodden. And still many more said he'd grown weary of the bright lights and drama, wanting nothing more than to settle down in a contrasting environment.

It was quiet at the inn this time of day, but the ashy cloud of smoke from weeks past always managed to linger inside the walls. Darius kept a tight ship, and apart from the heady atmosphere, his bar was by far the cleanest in the Undercity. The wood-paneled flooring and burgundy wallpaper were kept stain-free, and the tables were always found upright. Fights were quickly dispersed before they erupted into chaos, and any resulting property damage was swiftly repaired.

"Garrett, my young friend!" The stout, bearded innkeeper greeted him warmly, pouring his guest a drink. "What news from the sky do you have for me?"

"Nothing lately, I'm afraid. Still the same old boring life," Garrett replied, accepting the offering. "Why do you think I'm down here all the time?"

"My charisma, perhaps?" Darius flashed a cheeky grin.

"Hah, or the free drinks."

"Don't abuse my hospitality. Just because I know you'd actually *pay* your tab . . ." Darius waggled a finger at him. "And what are you up to this dreary afternoon?"

"I am looking for a place to soak up a bit of culture. Maybe purchase a few unique items you normally wouldn't find in a vending machine?" Garrett

expounded, taking a sip.

“The black market up on Verner’s Row has moved to this quadrant this time of year. That seems to be the best place to go if you are looking for intergalactic goods,” Darius offered with a pensive chin rub. “Though be careful that what you buy doesn’t end up back there right after you purchase it.”

“Any dealers, in particular, I should be looking for?”

“Nope. Good deals tend to find you before you find them. Just avoid looking like a fuckin’ tourist when you encounter it, and you’ll keep all of your limbs.” A wry smile etched across the barman’s lips. “But that’s nothing you can’t handle, right?”

“Of course,” Garrett evaded, tossing his head back to finish his drink. He was still shaken by the piercing gaze his guardian had cast on him before he snuck off. It pained him to see Baran so disappointed, but remaining a prisoner inside that suffocating house had forced his actions. Each trip he risked endangered both him and his friend, but Garrett hoped that when his plans fell apart, he could shoulder the repercussions alone.

Darius contemplated the young man’s distant stare. “What’s eatin’ you?”

“Nothing. It’s just . . .” Garrett sighed as he rubbed his temples. “I’m not sure how many excursions I can take in the immediate future. It’s getting harder to bribe the butler to cover for my departures. I need to think of another way to get down here quietly.”

“Why not just move down here permanently?” Darius offered, toying with the bottles behind the bar.

“Would you move out of an impenetrable fortress if you knew you didn’t have to?” Garrett shot him a stern look. “Besides, I am not exactly the most skilled at fighting, especially down here.”

“I suppose not. But a man thrown amongst the wolves tends to learn real quick how to fight ‘em off, else he gets eaten.”

“True.” Garrett frowned, resting his head in his hands. *But on the other*

*hand, if my disappearance is noticed, I will cause trouble for a lot of people. Probably start some unnecessary wars.*

“Oh!” Darius suddenly snapped his fingers. “Speaking of interesting artifacts, a customer of mine gave me this little trinket.”

“What is it?” Garrett asked as he watched the man extract a glittering object from his pocket.

“Not sure. It was in exchange for his tab. I only took it because it wasn’t likely that I was going to get any real money out of him,” Darius admitted as he passed it over. “Said it was a protection talisman from some random civilization across the galaxy, and it supposedly could summon great powers to aid the wearer.”

“Fascinating!” Garrett beamed as he delicately placed the trinket into the palm of his hand.

He traced over the elegantly crafted coin-sized medallion, pinching the twisted chain between his fingertips to assess the durability of the links. Unfamiliar characters were engraved along the circumference of the piece, jagged and swirling flourishes from a language he had never encountered. In the center was a relief of two weapons crossing, fluid hybrids of plate armor and blades. Metal knuckles on the curious devices extended into vicious edges, giving the weapons the appearance of spiked praying mantis legs.

“I’m all for respecting other people’s beliefs, but I leave the superstition to others.” Darius shrugged. “I figured you would value its cultural significance more than I would. I get plenty of culture here after a full night.”

“It’s certainly something I’ve never seen before,” Garrett commented, tilting his head as he tried to decipher the mechanics of the menacing implements.

“Maybe it could summon a great demon to help you out when you are getting the shit kicked out of you down here.” Darius paused, letting a chuckle slip from his throat. “Or up at your place. I don’t know what kind of discipline you’re in for when they find out you’re down here.”

“I . . . sure.” Garrett ignored the remark, too engrossed with the alien object. “I will definitely investigate further.”

“If you find more about it, cool. If it’s worth something, and you sell it, just think about your ol’ friend Darius here.” The man smirked as he wiped off the counter.

“I won’t forget. Thanks for sharing with me.” Garrett winked as he pocketed the piece. “I’d better head out. I only have a few hours before anyone gets suspicious.”

“All right then, don’t get killed out there, you hear?” the barman warned.

“I’ll try my best.” Garrett smiled and headed out of the building, setting off to find adventure.

To the foreign observer, the Undercity was nothing more than a haggard web of decaying buildings cast in constant darkness. But to Garrett, the underground was a place of history, remnants of a thriving empire that spanned over horizons instead of skies. On his more fortunate expeditions, he could find traces of this glorious past buried in the debris piles left ignored by passersby. He had unearthed fascinating artifacts, recordings of personal journals, audio scraps of popular music, and even the occasional shred of painted canvas.

Garrett let his mind wander as he approached a set of crumbling high-rises, climbing up the precarious levels to avoid the perils of walking alone on the road. He hauled himself through a gaping hole in the wall, yanking his clothing from the jagged edges of cracked tiles as he crawled across the floor. Wedging himself behind a slab of concrete, he projected a map from the NetCom on his wrist to collect his bearings.

Undercity was composed of a series of concentric circles, the boundaries of the territories within shifting based on the movement of the various dangers that threatened the citizens. At the very center was the Civilized Zone, the most sterilized area of Under where bold tourists from Uppercity descend from government-controlled public elevators to embark on an

exciting escapade behind the safety of the corporate police checkpoints.

From there, the borders blended into Uncivilized Space, where the locals of Under could live their lives in peace without meddlesome Uppercity politics infecting their business. Though it was the quietest area of the city, a trusted weapon, or several, and a spare set of eyes were necessary for journeying to the hidden gems of supply vendors and nomadic marketplaces.

Beyond this precarious region was the Fringe, where only the most armed, or luckless, individuals dwelled. Gangs of varying sizes, influence, and technologies squabbled over scraps of land, and disgraced street doctors performed unsavory experiments on the hapless wanderer. Their cruel medical procedures were often cut short by a stray bullet, an unintentional act of mercy.

The deepest reaches of Under were sealed off by No Man's Land, a physical border of swirling blue fog that coated the remainder of the planet's surface. Rumored to have been created by a combination of lax environmental control and corporate curiosity, the exact purpose of the caustic shielding is unavailable to the public, sealed off inside digital archives built generations ago. Crowdfunded expeditions run by The Cartographer's Guild had attempted to study the enigma with inconclusive results, leaving the greater part of Arcadia's earth uninhabitable.

A stir below him disrupted his navigation, a crunch of a footstep across the crusted carpeting. Garrett lowered onto his stomach, slithering toward a jagged pit torn into the floor. Peering over the edge, he spotted a man dressed in dark colors on the level below him, creeping forward in a hunched posture while fixated on the street outside.

Garrett hoisted his torso up to window level, squinting through a gap in the shattered pane to get a look at what the man was staring at. He spotted another figure strolling nonchalantly across the road, a giant compared to the average human, cloaked in a hooded calf-length leather coat that obscured their features. The mysterious brute seemed to have an air of confidence

about them, as if they knew they were being followed, or blissfully oblivious to the ambush.

Garrett edged closer to the window while his common sense tugged at him, urging him to seek shelter from the backlash of conflict. But his burning curiosity fueled a dangerous mood, tempting him to observe the engagement.

He watched the giant stop in the center of a parking lot, stretching their arms out as they heaved an exaggerated breath of air. They called something out into the street, then stood patiently on the asphalt. On their summons, the man beneath Garrett emerged from the building and into the road, advancing on his target with hands in pockets. More men appeared from out of hiding, surrounding the figure with self-satisfied smiles.

Frustrated with the inability to hear the conversation, Garrett slipped through the window, planting a careful foot onto the rusted fire escape that tenuously clung to the face of the building. He cringed as he eased outside, treading forward in dainty steps over the rickety metal.

Despite his vantage point, he still could not make out the exchange in the street. Squatting down in slow, controlled movements, he slipped his feet into the rungs of the half-attached ladder, ignoring the shuddering of the cantankerous balcony as it argued with his shifting weight. He awkwardly descended in timid steps, pushing back his anxiety that relentlessly questioned the stability of the structure.

Having given up on eavesdropping, Garrett turned his grip in the ladder, determined to witness the scenario behind him. He pleaded the force of gravity for mercy as he turned his shoulder around, leaving the tenuous stability of the wobbly ladder as he adjusted his view.

*AH, yes, Galavantier, Nara grumbled. Should have guessed that one first. He only sent seven this time?*

“You have been inconveniencing him greatly,” the haughty leader addressed Nara.

“Take it up with my agent. I don’t need a pack of dogs yapping at my ankles,” Nara chided. The men chuckled synchronously at her insult.

“Pleasant, as always.” The leader paused to bask in his wit. “My employer has suffered substantial profit losses due to your . . . *antics*. He is requesting compensation for the damage you have caused.”

“I would hardly call my work ‘antics.’ And despite our previous history, it’s just business. Nothing personal.” As she brushed her coat sleeve, the henchmen twitched, synchronously snapping their arms up to reach for their weapons. Nara glanced around at the posturing display, her lips curling into a sneer. “However, your presence is certainly making it personal.”

A subtle scratching sound hit her ears, a metallic squeaking from the buildings behind her.

*What the hell is Number Seven up to?* she mused as kept her face stone, masking her perception from the mob. *They can’t belong to this crowd. Probably a scavenger waiting to pick up the leftovers.*

“You see, *someone* has to pay for the damages done. You are the only annoyance that consistently disrupts my employer’s production.” The leader dramatically folded his arms.

“And I was severely overcompensated, considering how easy it was to break into that compound,” Nara scoffed. “He should have paid me to protect his shit twenty years ago before he decided to unleash his foaming hounds on me instead.”

“As if he would have given you the option.” The man laughed derisively as his supporting goons exchanged eager glances.

The obnoxious scraping amplified as Number Seven fidgeted in their hiding spot. Nara unlatched the holster on her wrist, sliding a pistol down her

sleeve. Civilian or not, the observer was not worth the risk to her.

“Whatever. Are we going to do this or not?” Nara griped, loosening her shoulders with a slow rotation. “I have places to be, and your squeaky voice is irritating.”

With a cacophony of discordant laughter, the goons advanced.

A skin-shriveling screech tore through the air as the rust-seasoned ladder gave a final protest of Garrett’s fidgeting, drowning out the pained screams from the mob behind him. The piping lurched toward the pavement in a spray of sparks, causing a yelp to burst from his throat as he clawed at his fleeting support, wrapping his limbs around the grimy metal.

An explosive crack disrupted the air, breaking his concentration on his dire predicament as an invisible force violently shoved him forward. Metal clanged through his ears as his forehead smacked against a ladder rung, only to be overshadowed by a lance of pain that tore through his shoulder, sending searing lashes across his chest. Stunned by the sensation, his numbed arms unfurled, letting gravity pluck him into its embrace.

He blinked rapidly, fighting back a pressure swirling around his brain as he struggled to process the events. He watched in awe as his garments shifted color, darkening with a slick crimson hue.

*Funny*, his morbid thought process proclaimed, *gunshots didn’t hurt this much in the simulations.*

He somehow mustered the strength to cough out a weak laugh at the absurdity of his farce, the storm in his head amplifying to a percussive agony.

The pitiful moans of the two thugs writhing on the ground did not drown out the sickening thwack of Number Seven’s body hitting the concrete. Nara tightened her grip around the throat of Number Three, ignoring the distraction while she watched the movement of the pack leader.

“It’s not fair to bring another person on your team,” the cocky man taunted, maintaining his gaze on her as he kept his smoking gun pointed at the street. “The odds aren’t exactly even as it is.”

*Seven didn't belong to them, she thought. Interesting.*

The flagellating spectacle of another henchman disrupted the atmosphere as he babbled unintelligible curses, terror flickering through the light of his augmented eyes as he fixated on the buildings behind. He staggered back to the leader, who snarled in warning as they collided. The muttering soul could not hear the reprimand, frantically reaching an arm behind him to seize the man's attention.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" the leader barked, dodging the frightened man's desperate smacks. The grunt gathered the courage to turn around, leaning in to the leader's ear. Upon hearing the whimpering words, the color drained from the leader's face, his expression stretching to horror. "What has gotten into you? You're so full of—"

"Enforcers!" Another thug shouted, leaving his comrades behind as he bolted into the streets.

*Shit*, Nara growled as she dropped her hostage, shoving them away. *Not what I need right now.*

As the thugs picked themselves up and dashed from the scene, Nara ran in the opposite direction, taking shelter amid the debris of the building where Number Seven had fallen. She slid under a slab of concrete, pulling the body out of sight, and waited for the ominous patrol to appear.

An ethereal hum resonated through the street, announcing the arrival of a squadron of towering black-cloaked figures. They glided to the center of the arena, systematically situating themselves to form a perfectly proportioned square barrier around the scene. The hum waned as the last unit slid into their designated space, and the collective stood in pensive silence, analyzing the pavement for their indiscernible purpose.

The Enforcers were the ubiquitous remnants of a law enforcement system that had served centuries ago before the divide of Upper and Under. With their infrastructure long since dissolved, the remaining active units drift amid the desolate streets, hunting for perpetrators against an unknown power. No

one has deciphered their motivations, or dared to try, but fearful speculation painted the blame on them for innumerable disappearances of Under citizens.

Nara remained frozen inside her derelict fortification, releasing her breath in soft, controlled wisps. Despite their ill-omened presence, the Enforcers possessed a notoriously short attention span, allowing her to wait patiently from a safe distance while they collected their arbitrary data. She turned her attention to the body next to her, questioning the sanity of an individual who would spy on a conflict this deep inside Uncivilized Space.

A glint on the pavement stole her curiosity, and she traced her eyes over a golden chain trailing from the human's pants pocket. She stretched her arm out, delicately hooking the necklace under a finger. With a gentle tug, a coin-sized focal playfully jumped out of hiding, revealing its regal inscriptions.

*What the fuck?* Her eyes widened as she regarded the familiar medallion, gingerly placing it in the palm of her hand. She traced over the engravings in disbelief, a perplexing resentment warming her skin.

Panic churned through the fragments of Garrett's consciousness as his brain struggled to process reality. His body was frozen, numbness binding him to the pavement as the tearing agony spasming across his chest stifled his movement. Macabre thoughts of mortality coursed through his mind, swelling with the torrent of dizziness as he struggled to stay awake. He twitched as he felt a tickling sensation slide over his leg.

*Shit, I can't die now,* he fretted, sending his heart thundering through his agonized body. *Baran would find me and kill me again. Why did I come here? I'm so fucking foolish.*

"Shh," a voice softly chastised.

*Oh gods, is he here already?* his paranoia babbled. *Fuck! Lay still. Maybe he won't find me.*

He peeled open his eyelids to discern the source of the warning, only to be welcomed by the horrifying visage of a scarlet-skinned demon, their animalistic eyes alight with an icy fire. The massive figure scrutinized him

with a cold, unfeeling expression. Fear crippled his thoughts as he beheld the emissary of Death, permitting the creeping fog of darkness to overtake his consciousness.

Nara fervently examined the suspicious human, uncertainties grinding at her discomfort as she questioned the identity of the upstart Upworlder. She poked her head out of her shelter, watching the drove of hooded ghouls depart with a silent flutter of tattered gossamer. When peace had settled in the streets, she slung the human unceremoniously over her shoulder, shifting her glance before heading back toward her apartment.

*What the fuck am I doing with my life?* she scolded, adjusting the body in her grip. *This tool had better have some damned good answers for me when he wakes up.*