

Chapter I

October 6th, 2032.

“The world was as it was any other day. Babbling in the streets about gun violence, talk of politics or the next football game, anything in general to talk about under the given sun was indeed talked about, no exception. No war, no starvation, no evil intent, we were all at peace for the first time in the history of our planet with terrorism struck down by President Donald Trump in his two terms as president.

The next day looked as bright as any other at that point in time, and for good reason. Talks of assisting a neighboring nation’s health care with America’s wealth, talks of the next olympics and how we’d knock it out of the park, who would go to the super bowl... but for whatever reason, of God or Satan imaginable, it had to end. Why this night, I may never know but what I do know is that it had to have been an act of God to push us this far, him saying we were not yet done growing... why or why did it turn out like this?

Three A.M. the next morning, October 7th... so many of us were awoken by sirens... so many of us with our smart devices, our TVs, we had to know what was so important until we all saw the sky turn red. Judgment day for some, a freak accident for others, devastation nonetheless as a massive comet descended from the heavens and smacked right into the middle of the Pacific, sending tsunamis out miles high from the force. The impact not only sent waves but also volcanoes around the pacific tectonic plates. A disaster...

Japan and Hawaii alike were swallowed, poetic in a way I guess considering that old war nonsense about Pearl Harbor though we had grown away from bothering to acknowledge it in the new era... or rather the old era as it now would be known.

With volcanoes erupting and tsunamis crashing into the coasts, all life along the Pacific was wiped out in a matter of days with the aftermath affecting the rest of us as well, such as the skies being clouded out by the eruptions dumping so much crap into our atmosphere. Who knew that the last time we'd see the sun would've been on such a normal day?

Two weeks after impact with about a third of the population of the planet dead, we thought it was finally the end of the worst of it... that is until some scientists and the US Navy found the impact crater. We don't know how it happened but all of the water around the impact would not refill the area... they said it just danced around the impact point, as if some force were keeping it away? I don't really know even now.

Deep below, the crater was visible due to some sort of sky blue glow coming off of the comet... that's when they came. As if we had disturbed an ancient burial ground or something, or rather our troops, the spirits began to rise or at least it felt that way... actually, it was that way.

Once they found the meteor, strange worm hole looking things opened up in front I guess, this having been broadcast live. It was only because of the new technology to broadcast without satellites that we even had a chance when they came. Strange black

human creatures... oh but not black as in race, I'm not meaning to sound like a racist man but... these things looked like our shadows given human form and their own life.

Whatever they were, they attacked the troops investigating and filled the ship with blood. They looked just like us only all black, an abyss of evil with the ability to turn their arms into long blades. Our troops shot and shot and shot but it was no use. They died immediately except for one, a priest who had gone aboard. In an attempt to stop them, he torched the ship but before the fire even touched many of them, they retreated screaming.

Our leaders figured that was the immediate weakness, natural light. Well, it gave humanity about a day to prepare as before we knew it, their worm holes began to appear on the coasts everywhere with those Black Creatures spilling out. Gun owners fired, soldiers fired, nothing worked and so many had to die because we weren't ready.

World Leaders couldn't do anything but watch as our world was taken from us in a matter of months, us being able to only prolong it. The technology wasn't there thanks to the impact knocking out so many things. It was so hard to produce light unless in an explosion or from flamethrowers. Guns everywhere became useless unless used on one another but that did happen...

Human nature is self preservation and that's exactly what happened. Humans everywhere began to riot, pillage, rape, the works. On top of fighting these Black Creatures, we were fighting ourselves it seemed. Oh man, what a load of shit, what would God say!? Or was this all his will?

No matter what though we eventually managed to hold the line after months though it wasn't enough as our food supplies and water were targeted. They didn't need either so they poisoned what we DID have. Man that sucked too.

August 22nd, 2035... hope by then was lost with less than a few million people left. Man how we wished to have had that beautiful sunshine back... but wait, we did!

August 22nd was a surprise for all, especially those Black Creatures as the clouds finally began to fade away and let sunlight peer into our world, burning away so many of those creatures. This was the chance! We did what we could to harvest natural sunlight everywhere while fighting them off. The war turned to our favor but only for so long as in weeks, they retreated though we all knew it wouldn't be long till they found a way around it. We knew we had to act!

The Church at that point was the only ruling class left and had built a fair number of domed cities, domes harnessing the power of the sun to make a shield of some sort. By March of the next year, the Black Creatures had returned but by then, they could do nothing as we retreated into the domes.

Any that tried were killed. At that point, the Church waited, licking its wounds from the war that lasted so long. We all were grateful to the Church, a big mistake in the long run looking back on it.

Fifty years after, the church began scouting and trying to reclaim our home but to no avail as the Black Creatures, now known as Darkling, continued to push us to our breaking points. Eventually it was decided, we're better off inside our dome cities, the

few hundred thousand of us that remain. What, did I forget to mention? They domes couldn't fit everyone plus the intensive labor, many more died. Had to happen.

Well... I'm in my ancient now and have no right to really complain anymore as the kids of today know not what we once had... probably the Church's longterm goal to control. Ugh... god damn... well, I'm signing off for now... I'm sure there are other stories about Humanity's struggle that sound just as good, ones better to listen to. Yeah... if only one day, things could go back to how they once were..."

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"But that was almost seven hundred years ago... little brother, that is the story of our ancestor. He came from an era of fear but now, we can fight back with the help of the Church. There is no doubt in my mind that we can all accomplish this with the Church's guidance!"

"Wow brother, that's so cool! I can't believe it, was he an elite too?"

"Haha, I'm not sure but maybe."

"Gee Shawn though, if you go scouting again be careful. Those things sound so evil!"

"Don't worry, nothing will happen to me bro nor to Dawn."

"Shawn, hurry up, we'll be late!"

"Coming! Already Ron, take care, Ms. Synthia will be here to watch you in five. Dawn and I need to get to the Church."

"Alright Shawn, good luck and be safe!"

Chapter II

“NEXT!”

“Cadet fifty-seven o’ eight. HYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-”

THUD!!

CRASH!!!

“Ow!!”

“NEXT!”

“Cadet nine o’ two five. Feast your eyes as I-”

“NEXT!”

“But I didn’t do anything!”

“Precisely cadet, too much fuzz before doing anything. The enemy won’t give you a chance, nor shall we. Now... NEXT!”

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“Heh... I remember my first initiation into the Elite Corps...”

“Do you... do you really brother?”

“Yeah Dawn, I do, as if it were just yesterday... heh, I still remember Sergeant Man kicking me in the ass while forcing me to eat dirt. Disgusting.”

“Mine was easy because I passed my exams.”

“Pft... you’re only a tactical fighter, not an actual fighter. It’s rough on the rest of us.”

“Hey you two, I couldn’t help but hear you talking,” came the voice of a third walking up behind both Shawn and Dawn, of which both turned round slightly to get a look.

“Oh, Steven, Francis!”

“Hey guys, how’re the newbies?”

“Well...”

“They’re crap!”

“That bad?”

“Steven here’s gotta be Mr. Nice Guy while I just, HYA, NRGH, GAH, RAAAAWWW, ya know, just HRRRRRRGH, and a HYA, and HURF. It’s like that you know?”

“What Francis said I guess. They don’t know how combat works... at least not with Darkling. Although there are at least three new guys that aren’t too bad from the Southern Dome District.”

“Oh really? Heh, just put them in front of Sergeant Man and I’m sure they’ll crack.”

“Mr. Man isn’t that scary Shawn... but then again...”

“ROUGH EM UP MAGGOTS!”

All four would turn back towards the training grounds and sigh, “Yeah he is,” they’d then all say.

“Anyways uh, Shawn, Dawn, question for you both. Francis and I were wondering if you two would like to come show the rookies how its done.”

“Doesn’t the Church have anyone to spare that’s actually fought a Darkling?”

“Would you believe me if I said we asked that same question only to be laughed at?”

“Oh...”

“Bunch of bastards running the front of affairs here, GYAH!! It makes me angry!”

“I hear you Francis.”

“Actually we were talking about the Church earlier about some things related. Anyway, Shawn and I would be happy to assist.”

“Perfect. Let’s go then and Francis, try not to scare them this time when we get back.”

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!!!!!”

“I know buddy, I know.”

“Is Francis going to be ok? He seems pretty upset...”

“Eh... he’s just being... Francis. Anyway, follow us I guess.”

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The four would walk down a long hallway, multiple doors on each side, tiled floor, wood walls painted white but rather old looking, with a few cracks. The ceiling, definitely in need of repair with various holes and cracks, some plaster having actually

fallen down. The smell of cooked rice also filled the air of this hallway as they moved forward.

“You know, I’m grateful for you two coming along to help. I’m sure Francis is too, if he’d only just admit it though.”

“Shut up Steven!”

“Sorry Francis, so sorry but it’s true, I think.”

“Shut it pretty boy.”

“Oh I’m not that pretty Francis but thanks for the compliment.”

“It was an insult dumb ass!”

“Ah that doesn’t matter to me. I’m not going to let insults or anything else bother me, I’m just going to remain the same old me no matter what!”

“You should take some examples from Steven, it might improve your lifestyle Francis.”

“GAAAAAH!”

A single kick and FLING, forward Shawn went crashing into a pole face first, then onto the floor.

“Shawn!”

“Francis that was uncalled for!”

“HEY WHAT THE HECK WAS THAT FOR YOU JERK!? I WAS TRYING TO BE HELPFUL!” Shawn then barked flailing his arms with a giant red line on his face from the impact.

“Keep your unneeded opinions to yourself like Steven should!”

“I’ll roll you into traffic with a single punch Francis, don’t screw with me!”

“Don’t screw with me!”

“Both of you shut up!” Dawn barked, turning red in the face.

Steven look from Francis to Shawn, puzzled as both turned a bit blue, getting small especially with their attitudes, “I need to learn how you do that Dawn, it seems like a nice skill.”

“It’s easy once you show them who the boss is Mr. Steven, take my word for it.”

Chapter III

The sound of a crash the moment the four walked into a door, a large gymnasium and before them three dozen people, one standing atop the other, his hair long and black, a wide smirk on his face, his lips parted.

“Zedd, what the hell is wrong with you!?”

“You bumped me dumb ass, you should’ve apologized and yet you didn’t. It reflects poorly on me if I don’t take action, don’t you know?”

“What the hell is your problem!?”

“You, that’s what.”

“Zedd, enough...”

“Oh shut up Ellie.”

“ALL OF YOU SHUT THE HELL UP!” came the bark of Francis.

All of the students immediately turned towards Steven, Francis, Shawn, and Dawn, the eyes of both Ellie and Zedd traveling first and locking eyes with the both of them.

“Francis, hush. Alright, that’s enough of a ruckus everyone. We’ve brought two of our elites to show you how it’s done.”

Stepping aside as did Francis, both unveiled Shawn and Dawn who stood observantly.

“These two are three year elites so pay close attention. Dawn here is an elite tactician for the battle field and Shawn an elite warrior of the church, both blood.”

“Bah, they don’t look like much,” Zedd chuckled.

“We’ll see... Francis, activate the puppet walkers if you would.”

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA, YOU ALWAYS MAKE ME DO EVERYTHING!!!”

“But Francis, exercise is healthy!”

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA, now you’re calling me FAT!?”

RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA, STEVEN!!!”

With the groan, Francis then began to stomp off to the right towards the control panels, roaring the whole time while walking, Steven stepping back, “Step back students, the elite will show you quickly how it’s done.”

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!?”

“Oh quiet down Francis.”

“HRRRRRRRRRAA!!!”

“I will deal with you later just turn on the thing.”

“UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Damn that guy is pissed,” came the muttering of Shawn.

“Well... he is Francis after all.”

Pressing several buttons, a noise generating from the panel, it began. On the ceiling to the far back of the gymnasium, lights began to turn on moving away from the others. One, two, three, four, and then with light number five several mechanical mixed wood monstrosities about the build of a human stood in the back. Wood plank feet, hands, joints, and a chest plate, the rest all metal.

CLANG!

Springing to life with their eyes glowing, four of the things launched from the wall, landing on their wooden feet, observing the area with their heads turning left, then to the right, then straight ahead to identify Shawn and Dawn as targets, all four ready to engage then and there rushing forward like an average running man.

“Now watch. The relation of a Tactician and any soldier is one of trust, trust in the soldier’s abilities. These also aren’t Darkling... though they are fairly tough. Watch as Shawn deals with them while Dawn gives him commands.”

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“Shawn, the rightmost is shorter and the leftmost is taller, the two middles are faster and the short stack is-”

“I know sis, I’ll give it my best-”

Taking hold of a wood staff on his back, Shawn in turn began to step forward, breaking into a run.

SWEEP

SWOOP

SWASH

CRASH

First with a swing forward, the two middle leaped over as did the right most though that left one, easily swept in mid leap and sent crashing down with the pole

slamming through its back and through a circuit board, shutting it off immediately.

Flipping round...

CLACK

CLANG

CLACK

CLACK

CLANG

CRASH

Blocking and parrying each strike. Two coming at him at the same time, blocking both by pushing the staff forward as they struck it, to then step back and deflect the strikes of one and in turn the other working with, skidding under pulling with the staff to send both flopping forward, a swift left strike, then a right, and a shove, and smash through the head on the last one, deactivating it just as easily.

Behind, the two standing only for Shawn to whip around and bash another through the bottom, snapping the staff and jamming the half through the back of the other.

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Applause broke out instantly as all of the students cheered, all but two that is... Ellie and Zedd. Ellie standing silent and bored, Zedd even more bored looking and snarky.

“Pft... you call that striking?” Zedd muttered.

“Now the rest of you will fight in groups of three against one set to hard mode...

Francis if you would.”

“HRAAAAAUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”

“Thanks good buddy!”

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Clash

Clash

Clang

Bang

Thud

Crash

SMACK

Ten minutes into the exercise, both Shawn, Dawn, and Steven stood beside one another, immediately analyzing.

“Team B Seven seems a little slow...”

“Yeah but check out X Fifteen, they’re being knocked around like nothing.”

“Yeah but that one team looks to be wiping their asses...”

“What do... no, not going to ask him... I don’t know, what do you think, Shawn, Dawn?”

CRASH

KAPOW

“Well... that one team there with the edgy kid we saw earlier... who are they?”

“What bro said.”

“They are three from the Southern Dome District... uh... the guy that flipped the kid earlier is Zedd, the leader. The girl is Ellie... and that last one, Jehkal, is their tactician.”

“Don’t they seem pretty impressive for a couple of third years?”

“Well... when you put it that way...”

“Definitely worth keeping your eyes on.”

“Agreed.”

Leaping up, Zedd slammed a staff through the cranium of the Puppet Walker, Ellie coming from behind slamming one through the back and out the chest, snapping the staff in half, then slamming it through the knee, both jumping away as the Walker collapsed, defeated, Ellie glancing left and turning her head towards the trio of Steven, Dawn, and Shawn, locking her gaze with Shawn’s, rage behind her eyes...

Chapter IV

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA, you all suck!!!”

“Francis... hush. Congrats squad from the southern region. In response to your Class S combat skill and Class A intelligence, we’re assigning you under the care of a team that has already passed the academy to go into the field. Shawn and Dawn, please step forward.”

With a nod, steps following, to the left of Steven now stood Shawn... and to the right, Dawn.

“You’ll be paired up with these two and form a squad with a Captain, likely a field officer so... expect to go out into the field and do research.”

“YOU’RE ALL DEAD!!!”

“Francis, hush, go drink your Mountain Dew or something.”

“DON’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO, HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

“Man he needs a hobby...”

Right as the sound of the iron door to the room slammed shut, Steven in turn began to speak again, “The rest of you will be reevaluated and in doing so, you might either move up or if you’re unlucky move down. Rhett, Link, and Mark will assist you however... as for the trio and the two elite, you’re being assigned to meet up with Kyndra to discuss who your captain... or captains... should be. Well, dismissed.”

“Steven, you uh... you sure we should partner up with them?”

“Absolutely not but hey, what do I know. Haha. Trust in yourselves and your peers, if you all wear smiles what can go wrong? I’ll see you two around.”

Walking away, the three began to approach with their steps echoing. On the left, his black hair fuzzy from the fighting with red eyes bright as any, a grand smirk on his face, about the shortest of the group at five foot six, Zedd. On the right, her blond hair flowing down her back as she moved forward, green emerald eyes shimmering, standing five foot ten, Ellie, with a cold stare towards both Shawn and Dawn. In the middle, brown hair covering his eyes and flowing down to his shoulders, scrawny-ish yet tall, Jehkal, at six foot four.

Their footsteps stopping, a gap as their shadows cast in front, Shawn and Dawn left to examine at a distance, his arms crossing as Zedd did the same, Ellie cold, and a glaring yet observant Jehkal. Dawn’s narrowed, eyes scanning, arms crossed as well while shooting a glare back to Zedd... and yet Shawn held a bit of a smile himself, looking at all three, “Hiya.”

“Listen punk, we don’t like you, we don’t care about you, you stay out of our way and we’ll all be happy.”

“Oh uh... alright... Zedd?”

“Are you questioning me Mr. Shawn? I’ll break your neck if you think it wise to do such.”

“How did someone as vulgar as you get into the church’s recruitment program?”

Dawn mumbled.

“Oh uh, pft, as if you need to guess. I’m just that awesome, clearly. What’s your story Dawn girl, eh?”

“I studied and trained as hard as I could...”

“Ha, weak. The real goers are those they pass by beating the shit out of whatever is in their path to show all who oppose the church how it’s done.”

“That isn’t the way of God... that’s just vulgar, right Shawn?”

“Now Dawn, remember what Steven said...”

“Yes because God is totally here to help right?”

“Zedd, that’s enough, we’re not here to cause trouble,” came the voice of Jehkal.

All eyes turned to the tall male, who in turned sighed, breathing in slightly to continue speaking, “I apologize for Zedd’s... unnecessary personality. He’s what you might refer to as a rebel.”

“Quite alright... not much different from Francis on that note I guess?”

“What the hell did you just say!? I am nothing like that damn balloon man! How the bleeding hell is he even an officer!? And that other guy, he won’t amount to much more than shit either!”

“Hey, shut up! Steven went through a lot of hell. He and Francis used to weigh the same but then Steven started to lose the weight. I’d call that more of a success than what you’ve got going for you!”

“I’m sorry but did you just talk back to me Dawn!? I will slap you like a bitch!”

CRACK!!

Standing in front of Dawn, gripping the wrist of Zedd, stood Shawn, a more serious look on his face, “I think that’s enough of that... don’t you?”

“Hell, so you think you’re man enough to take me on without a problem? Let’s test that shall we? Ellie, fight this jackass and show him who the superior force is!”

“Tch... why me?”

“Because I bet he can’t even beat the woman of our group now get to it!”

“You’re soooooooo going to owe me for this... alright little man, prove yourself so we can get this over with. You’re honestly not even worth my time.”

“Heh... we’ll see.”

Releasing Zedd, steps were then heard, Shawn and Ellie walking over to the sparring arena, he with a grin and mild amusement in his eyes, her with a cold dead stare.

“Let’s say... first to pin the other for ten seconds?”

“Works for me... you’ll be down before you know it, asshole.”

“Haha, we’ll see. Good luck to you and may the better combatant win.”

“Oh don’t worry... I will.”

Chapter V

CRASH

THUD

THUMP

SPLAT

COLLAPSE

Lying on the ground, feet swept from under him, now laid Shawn with a pole to his throat held by Ellie. Steps echoing taking aback, the clang of the wood pole on the ground with a glare resting upon Shawn, a bit of a surprised looked upon his face.

“This is truly the best the North has to offer? Pft... what a joke... it’s a wonder they needed us...”

A smile spreads, a chuckle escaping, “Haha, well ya got me Ellie, good job nonetheless,” as the motion of an arm outward with a hand outstretched connected to the smiling Shawn, Ellie looking down in disgust stepping back.

“Just stay out of my way you trash!”

“Oh uh... oh... ok?”

With a laugh, the trio of trouble from the South had begun to step away, their steps echoing in the great hall whilst Dawn stepped beside, assisting Shawn in standing.

“Damn those three are creeps.”

“Oh forget about it Dawn, let’s just get to the briefing room... they’ll come around eventually after all.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Clearly that Ellie lady has a reason for not liking us which we can learn and solve, Jehkal sides with his team, and Zedd just needs to get to know us. I’m pretty confident.”

“Truly now? Heck, that’d be unnecessary...”

“You think?”

“Probably.”

“Well, whatever, come on Dawn.”

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Not more than an hour later, sitting outside an office door labeled *Mr. Bishop* the two sat in pink chairs on either side of the door, there being about fourteen in total scattered along the walls. As both Dawn and Shawn sat, in and out, opening and closing, multiple people going on and on and on from the office, to the hall, others into the hall and in the office, like a circus.

Sat along the right wall, the trio and to the left, two other elite, Steven, and Francis. Twiddling his thumbs, Steven would glance around at the three to examine them, then to the other team of two, then to Shawn and Dawn.

“STEVEN YOU FRICKEN CREEPY EYED MOTHER, STOP BEING ANAL AND NERVOUS!!!”

“Hey, preach love and life buddy, don’t be a jerk.”

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH”

“Pst... Shawn.”

“Yeah?”

“Why are the others here?”

“Not sure... but I’m two seconds from dropping a two by four on top of Francis’ head...”

“I HEARD THAT!!!”

“Good you loud jerk.”

“WHY YOU-”

SMACK!!!

“Enough Francis!”

“HRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAA, WHY!?!?!?”

The creak of a door, then a slam against the wall, in the doorway rushing out a team of three, their steps echoing as they flew off, Shawn following them with a glance, “What the..?”

“Alright, next.”

Steven and Francis both stood, turning and walking, followed by the other two, then Shawn and Dawn, then the trio of trouble right inside. Inside, they cluttered around a large wood desk, book shelves and various stands around with weapons, fine china, art, photos, and various other things. On the desk, a large lamp, several open books, a plaque with the words *Mr. Bishop* on them. The room, oak wood mostly with a tiled floor and sealing but above all, on the basic side.

“Alright, howdy guys, I’m Timothy Bishop, mission officer for this entire city if you don’t know and these two are my assistants.”

“Protonathan Jonathan.”

“Emile and that’s all you need to know.”

“Right then so I’ve just been handed down order requests. We’ve received a report of a Darkling Attack occurring on a smaller domed village to the South East and the higher ups would like me to dispatch one of our finer teams to the scene to investigate.”

“So you’re sending two Combat Trainers who don’t do field work, us fresh elite who have never seen combat, two elite that are new to the city, and three new recruits also new to the city...”

“Hey I mean whatever we have available right Tim?”

“What John said so we just need you guys to go out and do a sweep because we can’t really pay any advanced teams to do the job right now...”

“Plus the elite teams are all busy because Emile fucked up the paper work.”

“Hey it’s not MY fault I didn’t know which stack of paperwork was right.”

“You were told to do the work on the left!! How can you mix up your rights and lefts, honestly!?”

“Hey it was an honest mistake!”

“Just like that time you mixed up North and South!?”

“Hey that compass was new!”

“IT HAD AN N ON IT FOR NORTH!!!”

“Uh... yeah anyways, you guys can just go... here’s the paperwork and good luck?”

Turning out of the office with work in hand, Steven lead the group with Francis close behind, exiting as Emile and John continued to argue, leaving Tim to simply sigh.

“God, what is up with this place’s higher ups?”

“If we knew, we might never be heard from again brother...”

“I hear you there Dawn.”

“So do I,” Steven grumbled.

Chapter VI

The sound of a loud steam whistle immediately ringing out into the air, a large train with several cars docked in a large train station, people rushing about everywhere. Up stairs, down stairs, across boardwalks, up elevators, on and off various trains. Chattering, yelling, screaming, marching, rushing, stomping, so many various sounds, so loud and disruptive.

Mostly grown adults moving around, some dressed poorly, others dressed in fancy attire, then a plethora of soldiers marching around, several guards by the many trains and cars. No more than fourteen trains would be in operation here with plenty of tracks for spares if necessary, each hooked up with several cars and large guards on the front of each train, armed guards sitting on the top, looking around though relaxed.

This era, trains had become the best means of travel from city to city due to their fast speed, power, and above all... the ability to move practically undisturbed and transport vast quantities. Trucks and other such craft were no longer worth the trouble with the Darkling able to block roads on the outside during the night... not to mention, bandits at a time when there are no guards.

Of course that said, there also was no guarantee of train tracks being cleared though considering the difficulty it takes to stop a train these days, most Darkling are incapable even if they do sabotage by placing something upon the tracks. Old transport yet very effective in the wilderness...

By this method, people and cargo can be transported along the lines from city to city safely or from city to village if need be.

“What’s with the guards mommy, I thought shooting Darkling doesn’t work, and don’t trains only move when the Darkling can’t be outside?” a child would often ask at any given point.

The answer to this, the bandits that move during the day often as a means to make their lives easier.

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“Alright gang, this is it, Platform Twenty-two B. We’ll be taking a passenger transport.”

“Seems decent Steven...”

“Oh... why thank you Francis. I did what I could to lock one in.”

“Beats those rickety old box cars we used to have to travel in.”

“Yes Shawn but times are changing. The Church is making transport more luxurious for the White Guard Corps.”

“What about the Silver Guard Corps?” Shawn questioned.

“Well Shawn... the Silver Guard still gets civilian travel arrangements since they just protect the cities. The Bronze Guard goes with the civilian trains and soldiers... and the Gold Guard gets the highest class for protecting high Church officials.”

Glancing to Steven, Jehkal’s mouth opened, asking forth, “And what about the Black Guard?”

“SHH!!!” Steven immediately snapped with a hiss, the entire group stopping in place, “The Black Guard isn’t to be discussed in public under any circumstances, even by Elite!”

“S-Steven?” Dawn murmured surprised.

“I... I’m sorry... we just can’t talk about them out in the open... all I can say is that the White Guard is viewed as the Holy Light of the Church, taking out external threats to society. The Metal Guards are the Holy Shields of the Church, protecting the people alongside troops... the Black Guard is the exact opposite of the Holy Light... they are the Holy Darkness and do the exact opposite. That’s all I’ll say.”

“So... you mean they... they-”

“That’s enough Shawn, there’s a reason why that information is kept under wraps. If they hear us talking about them, they’ll probably take us away for interrogation... now let’s just get on the damn train.”

“Uh, right, sorry.”

Stepping forward, the group of nine would near the train, a large old style steam train with five luxury train cars: a caboose for baggage, a dinning car, two cars for the White Guard with three rooms per car to accommodate for two people each, then the crew car and actual train & coal car.

While simplistic, the many cars boast luxurious design for second class travel, comfortable for the White Guard of the Church.

Once aboard in the third car down from the actual train, they would look, “Whoa.”

“The ocean design is incredible!”

“This is...”

“Dope!”

“Haha, this’ll be great!”

The inside, painted ever so delicately, a true mobile home for those of second class if not borderline first class.

“Alright... you’ll be sleeping in assigned order. Cabin One will be Dawn and Erin. Cabin Two will be Stevenson and me. Cabin Three will be Francis’s. Ca-”

“Why does he get his own!?”

“Because... you just... you don’t want to know... Cabin Four will be Zedd and Jehkal. Cabin Five will be... out of order because we’re transporting a representative of the Church from the next city over. Cabin Six I guess will have to be Ellie and Shawn so long as they don’t try anything funny.”

“Like, puhlease, I wouldn’t want to do anything with that loser!! Why am I stuck with him!?”

“No complaints here since she can just beat me up if anything happens.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“GYAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH, why can’t I have a woman in my cabin!?”

“Because Francis, the last girl you bunked with complained and we had to pay her several thousand gold pieces to stay quiet.”

“HYRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

“You and Shawn are being bunked up because I don’t have to worry about you two sharing a room. If he bugs you, you’d just beat him up. If you bug him, well he probably wouldn’t give a damn.”

“Ugh... why not stick him with his sister!?”

“Are you kidding me, what kind of sicko do you take me for!?”

“Great...”

“Oh come on Ellie, I’m not that bad. Plus, this’ll give us a chance to learn about our respective cities.”

“Just... don’t talk to me...”

“You might as well get your bags to your cabins, where we’re going is about three days of travel away.”

Chapter VII

Clicking

Clacking

Clicking

Clacking

Down the tracks would go the Excessive Espresso, the high second class train would be moving, chugging along with several people atop wielding riffles though hunkered down, able to be atop due to the train not moving utterly too fast.

Inside, nothing but luxurious colors painted all around as the many people on board would begin to settle in, loading their cabins, while workers would be moving around inspecting, the train truly abuzz.

-

Inside Cabin One, Dawn and Erin would begin to settle in real quick, Erin lying on her bed and Dawn in a desk chair.

“So Erin, what’s it like out in the deeper field?”

“Well, I suppose it isn’t too glamorous... mostly it’s just working with Stevenson and a couple of jack ass bosses like Revan or Sgt. Copper... or as I call him, Twinkle Toes because he always dances in a sword fight. Kinda sucks... how about you, what do you do?”

“Well, I’m a tactician... uh, I haven’t really done any major assignments too far from the cities. Shawn and I have been out to do minor things but that’s about it.”

“Ah... seems relatively decent and not as bad as my job. God though I got stuck under Francis once... it sucked.”

“Haha, I’m sure it did.”

Both would laugh.

-

“So Steven...”

“Yes Stevenson?”

“Our names are similar...”

“Yes, I can tell.”

“That seem normal to you sticking two guys on the same thing with similar names?”

“I mean, it’s not that complex, not like we’re the same person.”

“True.”

-

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH, WHERE IS MY MOUNTAIN DEW YOU SONSABITCHES!?!?!?!!!”

-

Silence...

-

Emptiness...

-

Silence would fill Cabin Six, no communication from either Ellie or Shawn. Ellie, lying on the top bunk rolled over and covered, then Shawn below sitting up on the side looking out the window, sighing.

“What..?”

“Oh uh, nothing...”

“You better not be planning to try sneaking a peak at me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it Ellie.”

With that, Shawn would stand, moving towards the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Out to get some food... you uh... you want anything?”

“No.”

“Alright, whatever,” he’d mumble walking out shutting the sliding door.

-

Now in the hallway, Shawn would walk towards the back of the train, pulling the sliding door open and entering a small plastic shoot of about 3 feet in length, to the other side another sliding door which he opened, shutting both behind as he now entered the Dining Car.

To the side, a buffet bolted down and to the back right, a shop and in the middle to the right a small kitchen, steam drifting with some humming as the two chefs were hard at work, then to the direct right a couple of tables and chairs.

Stepping forward inside now, Shawn would look around and approach the buffet when the door slid open once more, “RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA, sonsabitches, I want my food!”

“Uh, hi sir, how can we-”

“HRRRRYAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH, SONSABITCHES, FOOD!”

With that, Francis would run over to the buffet and immediately pick up the whole table, tilting it towards his mouth as food would fall towards it.

Stepping back, Steven would turn a little green in the face and be quick to back out. As he’d enter his car, he’d quickly identify Dawn and Erin, putting both hands up, “You don’t want to go in there.”

“Why Shawn, we’re hungry?”

“Uh...”

“SONSABITCHES, BRING ME MORE GRAVY!!”

Dawn and Erin would look to each other and nod, backing away, Dawn chuckling, “Ah uh alright we uh, we get the picture.”

“God when that man is hungry get the hell out of his way... Stevenson nearly got run over for being too slow.”

“WHERE THE FUCK IS THE MOUNTAIN DEW GOD DAMMIT!? AND WHERE IS THE GRAVY!?!?!?”

All three would laugh before turning to walk away, deciding it best to eat later.

“Oh my.”

“That man has no manners...”

“Who doesn’t now Erin?”

Stevenson and Steven would walk up, both looking forward hearing nothing but grumbling and roaring, then nomming.

“Oh...”

“Of course Francis had to find the buffet first.”

With that, all of them broke into laughter, leaving all but three of their own out... three very dark individuals...

Chapter VIII

The sun, still high up in the sky though only sinking a little, relatively beautiful to look at as the clouds dance with the wind. The train, clacking down the track undisturbed as the scenery would gradually shift from a more luscious greenery to the shifting sands of a more desert type biome.

Trees, gradually having shrunk into bushes, now gradually into cacti, and to few of anything; forest birds now becoming buzzards with coyotes clearly resting in shady areas, though some awakening at the sound and sight of the train though not too many.

On board in the dining cart, Dawn would have herself sat against a window with subtle glances out looking around whilst Francis, still stuffing his face, would sit on the other side of the room, most of the others also present at tables. Moving up next to her and sitting across the table, Shawn.

“Hey sis, have you tried the muffins yet? They are incredible!”

“Oh uh, no not yet, I’m just sorta thinking.”

“About?”

“About what’s out there... I’ve never done actual combat before you know.”

“Hey, neither have I but I wouldn’t worry about it. I bet those shadow bastard guys aren’t all that terrible.”

“Heh, I appreciate your optimism,” she’d chuckle raising a cup of tea to her lips, gradually sipping before placing it back down on the plate still looking out as if day dreaming at present.

“I’m telling you Erin, nothing will happen, we have some of the best with us. Francis may be a big gorilla but he can probably take the head off a goat if he wanted to.”

“Uh...”

“... right behind me isn’t he?”

“Mhmm.”

Turning around, Shawn would lock eyes with Francis who would be standing right there behind him with a bit of a grin.

“Oh uh, hi sir.”

“Ya know kid... that last part just saved your skin.”

Walking away from them both, Francis would bark at the waiter for more fried chicken, leaving Shawn to simply sigh, “Damn... close one...”

The sound of the door sliding into the room as a man stepped forward, speaking, “Everyone, please be ready for our next stop here shortly as we pick up an official for the Church itself.”

With those words, the train would begin to slow, up ahead a platform catching the eyes of some in surprise.

“A stop?”

“Out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“I thought it was supposed to be in a city.”

In mere moments the train would come to a halt, people in gold robes and hoods standing with staffs, amongst them a man dressed in black with a book, a clergyman, all of which would soon step forward and disappear, most likely onto the train despite the sight of this being limited.

“Was that the Gold Guard Steven?”

“Yes Erin, I believe it was. It’s rare for me to even see it myself... but they won’t be with us for long. In about 8 hours it will be night and by then we should be in a dock port for the night... and then tomorrow as I recall, they’re getting off at the city before our destination.”

“So... what do we do?”

“Absolutely nothing Shawn, we let them do their own thing in their cabin and must not disturb them. The Gold Guard is supposed to take care of the Church officials, not us.”

“Oh uh, alright then.”

“Has anyone seen our three newbies?”

“Probably in their cabins yet sir, they don’t seem to like to mingle with us...”

“Well they’re new so what can you really say.”

Looking down and then to a wall, Shawn would let out a sigh, “Well... they’ll have to get used to it eventually right?”

“That’s the spirit, haha.”

“Yeah...”

“Hey Shawn, why don’t you go and see how Ellie is doing, win her over, ya know?”

“You think that’ll work Stevenson?”

“Probably.”

“Well... alright.”

Shawn would turn and quickly walk to the door, shutting it behind him, leaving Steven who would look at Stevenson, “You really like to stir the pot don’t you?”

“Eh, it’s a natural talent Steven.”

-

Opening the door to Cabin Six, Shawn would walk inside, giving a general look around and then see Ellie on the floor in the corner, holding her legs looking down at the floor, at least until the door slid open. One glance up and she shot up, “What do you want?”

“Hey, we’re partners now, can’t we at least talk?”

“Hell no, I have nothing to say to you, pretty sure.”

“Yeah but... we’re comrades now, we should at the very least get to know one another, don’t you think?”

“Pft... yeah comrades whatever... just leave me alone.”

“Alright, fine...”

Exiting and shutting the door, Shawn would let out a sigh, “Damn...”

“Oh shit!”

Chapter IX

Chugging into the day yet, the night swiftly behind with nothing out of the ordinary, the Excessive Espresso would still be on its way to the proper destination. The second day of travel with the sun glistening over the horizon, bringing those inside the cabins to a waking point.

Shawn's eyes slowly opening looking upwards at the bunk above him, where Ellie would be, then turning his head over to look and see the rest of the room, slowly rolling and pushing himself over; sitting up on the side of the bed with another glance around, drowsy, he'd then yawn, standing and stretching trying to be quiet, glancing back only to see Ellie would not be in place.

"Hmm?"

The sliding of a door as he'd step out in his pajamas, looking left then right, a worker walking by, "Hey uh, have you seen my bunkmate? She's blond, green eyes, wears dark."

"Oh uh, yes sir, she was actually up about twenty minutes or so ago heading towards the back of the train uh... something about wanting to see something."

"Oh uh, thank you," Shawn would say respectfully bowing.

Walking to the back, he'd open the door and walk into the dining car, seeing Francis already, slobbering down a buffet of pancakes, though not wishing for a repeat of what occurred prior in the night he'd walk on and ignore Francis.

Opening the next car and walking in, the baggage car, mostly loaded with weapons and other goods, then outside on the platform with her back to the car, door open, stood Ellie, her hair flowing with the wind as the sun slowly began to rise up in front of her.

Her emerald eyes shining with her gaze upon the rising sun, a slight smile watching as the basking light would glow right over her, shining off of her ring, the reflection trailing back inside the car. All would be right, at least to her, with Shawn slow to approach, speaking out, "It's beautiful isn't it?"

Her smile fading with a slight glance back, "What do you want?"

"Nothing," he'd say approaching, "I just figured I'd come see the sunrise... had no idea I'd find you here... though if you want, I'll leave."

A sigh would leave Ellie, "No... stay if you want but only this one time."

"Thank you," Shawn said with a nod, walking forward stepping out onto the platform a fair distance away from Ellie, also watching, "I don't know why but every time it's just breathtaking to see... we don't really get to inside the domes."

"Hmph... I... I've never seen the sun rise before... I've always wanted to but I've just... never been able to."

"Not even on missions?"

"Er... no, I come from a region of... nothing but clouds," she'd say, a slight nervous tone to her after each pause.

“That’s unfortunate... they say the sun is a beacon of hope for mankind, shining as a precious gem of peace and true justice. Without it, we would have lost to the Darkling but now they’re running scared.”

“Oh really?” she’d mutter glancing at him as if annoyed by his words, that is...

“But... I can’t help but feel bad for them.”

Her eyes would light up, though only a little, “Why is that?”

“Ya know... I just can’t help but feel that if they could experience this, maybe... I don’t know, it might make some sort of difference... like, if we could share our views and share the same gem, we could coexist but... oh well, foolish thinking I suppose.”

“It’s thoughtful thinking... no, more like wishful. I don’t believe it would ever work out between either race. One is a bunch of monsters who tore the other asunder, the other playing as the victims out for revenge.”

“Yeah, it’s likely it wouldn’t end. Oh well... I suppose they aren’t really intelligent anyway.”

Eliie would glance at him and sigh, “I think we’re done here,” she’d mumble turning and walking back inside, leaving Shawn to turn and stare, sighing himself, “That could’ve gone better...”

-

As the day would go on, two in the afternoon, twenty-two after the train would come to a halt at another station as the Church Representative and their Gold Guard stepped off, before the train would continue on its way again.

As it'd get moving, Shawn would knock at the door of Cabin One.

"Come in!"

Sliding it open and walking in, Shawn would find Dawn alone, "Where's Erin?"

"Out talking to the other leaders, heh, where's Ellie?"

"Probably looking to take Cabin Five... I don't get why she doesn't like us."

"Oh bro, bro bro bro, one day, you'll learn why she is giving you attitude."

"Anyways... we're one day out I guess from the village we're supposed to report to."

"You scared bro?"

"No, not at all. I've been trained for this after all... besides, those creatures are still just creatures and we have moderate weaponry to fight them with finally."

"Yeah, haha, just keep me, the Tactician, safe and we'll get through it alive. Oh sigh sigh sigh, I can't imagine what you guys would do without me, eh? Haha."

"Oh who knows, we might mistake left for right," he'd chuckle.

"Oh haha..."

Both would sigh, looking out the window, Shawn's mind quick to wander, though not for long.

"Have you seen the other two? Ellie's partners?"

"Uh, no... have they really not come out of their rooms?"

"Not even to use the bathroom I guess but the workers say they're in there. Kinda weird."

“Well, maybe they’re just as strange as Ellie... heck, maybe they’re just not used to us I guess?”

“I suppose that’s possible.”

“Anyways, I’m going to change quick into some casual clothes, maybe later we can go have lunch with Steven and, I don’t know... discuss the politics of the Church?”

“Haha, sure thing sis.”

Backing out of the room and shutting it, Shawn would find himself sighing, turning and walking away back to his cabin. Sliding the door open and going inside, he’d look around, not seeing Ellie inside.

“Well, I guess that’s that, she took Cabin Five...” he’d say locking the door, quick to toss his shirt off and then drop his pants & underwear... though, in a second, the door would slide open as the latch unlocked.

He’d turn and stare right at Ellie, in a towel, her hair freshly washed sighing though upon opening her eyes they’d go wide and her towel would slip, leaving Shawn’s eyes wide.

-

The screams of both male and female, and then a massive slap...

Chapter X

“How the hell did that happen bro!?”

Shawn, sitting at a table with Steven, Stevenson, and Dawn, would have a large red welt on the side of his face, very swollen.

“Well... I locked the door... and I guess the lock was broken... I thought she would’ve moved out into Cabin Five.”

“She surprisingly never put a request in... don’t know what to tell you.”

“Yeah well I found that out the hard way.”

“Ha, damn that’s swollen.”

“Yeah I know sis, thanks for reminding me!”

“Well Shawn, first time seeing a girl naked I’m sure, how was it?”

“Well considering she walked in on me I was more stunned than observant so I don’t know Stevenson.”

“Guys just lay off him, I’m sure it was truly an accident.”

“Yeah but it’s still funny as shit man, that doesn’t happen every day.”

Both Dawn and Stevenson would laugh, Dawn practically rolling over laughing while Stevenson would slap the table repeatedly with his head down. Shawn, in turn annoyed, would simply glare at the both of them and sigh, “Well... so much for getting on good terms with her.”

“Oh trust me,” Stevenson said, still chuckling, “If she liked what she saw you’ll be- be- hahaha!!”

“Very good terms!” Dawn finished still laughing.

“Oh grow the hell up!”

“N-n-nyahahahahahaha!!!”

Steven with a sigh would look to Shawn and shake his head, “You might as well give up for now Shawn, I don’t think you’ll be getting anywhere.”

“Really!? I never would have guessed!”

“Oh calm down Shawn, it’s not like you slept with her. God will forgive you for an accident.”

“Yeah but my brain... god it will never unsee what I saw... and you people will never shut up I’m pretty sure!”

“Hahaha!”

-

Chugging along, night swiftly approaching with the setting sun... though ahead, a large dome with metal door entrances, dark on the outside though very lit inside, the train slowly pulling in now and then, stopping, steam bellowing out, the second day of travel now complete.

“Well... guess that’s it for now then.”

“Hmm... yeah.”

“Aye, I’ll see you later bro, good luck with your roomie.”

Standing and skipping away, Dawn would depart the table now of three, Stevenson and Steven both yawning and standing, “Same for us Shawn, lot of work to do tomorrow when we arrive. Will you be fine?”

“Uh, yeah, hopefully. If she tries to skin me well, I’ll just... I don’t know, hit her with a broom?”

“Ha, so unprofessional,” Stevenson in turn laughed leaving with the others.

“See you later too then, asshole.”

“HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH, WHERE IS THE DAMN ICECREAM BUFFET!?!?”

“But sir you’ve... you’ve eaten most of the supplies we have, we don’t have anymore icecream!”

“HYRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!!”

“And that’s my cue to split.”

Standing and walking out, a sigh escaping him, Shawn would quickly pull open the door as Francis would shout louder, “SONSABITCHES!!!”

“God that man does nothing but bitch...”

Looking down while walking forward to his cabin, he’d soon stop, a pair of feet in front of him, looking up to find Ellie standing there, looking right at him with the other two.

“Heh... heh heh heh... so this is the guy that you exposed yourself to... interesting... but such a pity, he’s a scrawny nobody, heh heh heh heh heh...”

“Nice to see you again too, Zedd.”

“Oh, you remember my name eh? Heh heh heh... been awhile since I’ve bothered with you eh kid?”

“Kid? Hmph... we’re both kids idiot.”

“The both of you have issues, how fascinating,” came the chuckle of Jehkal.

“So did you enjoy sneaking a peak at Ellie then, little man?”

“It was an accident because some idiot broke the lock.”

“Heh heh... I’d say he wants you, Ellie. Want us to hold him while you two thrust thrust thruuuuuuuust?”

“Ugh... you’re such a pig Zedd... one day, that’ll get you killed, without a doubt.”

“Oh? Is that foreshadowing I wonder?” came the laugh of Jehkal.

“Shut your fucking ass bitch,” came the growl of Zedd.

Shawn, with a sigh, would push forward slipping quickly through the middle walking to the door of his cabin, “You should all focus on something other than being a bunch of jack asses.”

“What’s that!?”

“Heh... he has you pegged, Zedd.”

“Tch, shut it Jehkal.”

“You boys need to just quit... come along now...”

“Hmm... right.”

The three would walk away into the dining car, leaving Shawn by himself to look back and sigh, “They’re not normal...”

Chapter XI

The third day, yet again another start as before, Shawn's eyes opening, him sitting, though this time an arm would hang down next to him, Ellie's arm. Standing, he'd look back throwing his shirt on seeing her asleep, then seeing the train moving even though it was dark out, "[What the? Why are we moving in the night?]"

Slowly sliding the door open and walking out, his head moving around glancing, then stepping left going forward, moving into the next car only to see Francis, "Hey uh, Francis, why are we moving in the middle of the night?"

Francis would turn, a rather serious yet not angry look on his face, at least at first, his teeth gritting, slowly muttering, "It isn't... we're in the village."

"What do you mean?"

Opening a side door, a bellow of smoke would roll right inside for about three seconds until Francis shut it up quick, "It's eleven right now... the city, burned."

"What!?" came the gasp of Shawn.

A door up ahead quick to roll open, Steven jumping in, "Francis, we- oh good, Shawn's up, he can come too."

"What's going on sir? Why did the city start on fire? What's going on?!"

"When we rolled in the dome was shattered and smoke was bellowing out the top like a volcano. We're about to pull up out of the smoke cloud and need a team ready to go out and survey the area."

"How did this happen?!"

“We don’t know Shawn, truly we don’t... but we suspect it might have been a malfunction with the grid, letting the Darkling inside to attack.”

“I thought that wasn’t supposed to happen!?”

“The Church is dispatching the Black Guard here immediately to dig deep, at the moment, no one knows what happened.”

A rumble, sending Shawn flying forward into a stumbling Francis and sending Steven back, the train coming to an abrupt halt, sending people rolling out of their beds, then movement on top of the train from the White Guard moving quick.

“Now what?” Steven would growl stumbling up walking to the door, opening it only to hear shouting and splatter of liquid, shock filling his eyes, “It’s the city’s main center, it’s in total ruin!”

“So the chance for survivors is-”

“We can’t dwell on that now. For now, we must act quick and get out there. Shawn, you and Francis wake up the others. Come on Francis.”

“Right.”

Opening the door, both would quickly fly outside into the smoke and rubble, practically disappearing as Shawn walked up to the door, shutting it. Stepping back and leaning against the wall, breathing in heavily, he’d look around just in time to see Stevenson, Erin, and Dawn walking into the car.

“Bro, what’s going on?”

“We just arrived at the place and... the whole dome is shattered and the town is on fire. Steven thinks the dome malfunctioned or something.”

“But that can’t be!”

“No way-”

“Where are Steven and Francis?”

“They both went out with the White Guard to look around.

“Then what are we waiting for, let’s get going!”

“We need the three angry jerks first.”

The sound of gun shots outside, quickly making Shawn turn and rip the door open with a bolt out, stepping down onto black ash and some dirt, quick darting glances around till the next set of shots, moving quick towards them as Erin and Dawn would spill out, “Shawn, come back!”

Dawn running first, then followed by Stevenson and Erin heading right towards the source in formation, arms pumping, weapons forgotten by Shawn who in turn was seeming to be reckless with this approach. Skidding to a halt, his face turning blue, before him, a mound of burned corpses, some burned to the bone, some with the skeleton burned black and cracked, the lingering scent of rotting flesh leading to him to drop forth to his knees and heave.

The sound of spray splattering on the ground with his heave, while the others would run up though also stopping, seeing the sight.

“Oh god.”

“What even?”

“Huh!?”

At that moment, the skeletons would roll, black figures bolting up, looking like liquid yet solid at the same time type black, the Darkling!

“Oh shit, enemy attack!”

Three would be sent flying overhead from the right, flung shrieking as Steven slammed down, holding a light staff, “COME ON YOU BASTARDS!” Beside him, Francis with Light Gauntlets, lit up and ready to tear into something. Turning round, “Shawn, quick!” Dawn would shout, tossing forward a Light Sword to him, just as those under the skeletons launched themselves.

Round and catching, he’d twirl and slash out to hit all three, in doing so they were truly hit and would shriek in pain from the hit.

“There’s a fucking army of these things, get back to the train!”

Steven would turn around with Francis, rushing forward as an army of the bastards shot forward, crawling on four legs looking like giant insectoids. Taking on a fair portion with the White Guard closing in behind, Shawn shot forward, Erin stumbling back with two flanking her. Darting around and a swift swing, Shawn split one down the middle and then another to stab right into the brain of the second, green ooze spraying on Shawn’s face as he ripped the blade out, standing defensively.

“Get back to the train, now!” he’d shout, backing up as the others began to run quick, Shawn remaining in defensive form. It wasn’t long as three more Darkling came

rushing forward, twenty-nine of them. Turning to run with the group, they'd make a complete launch for the train door, Stevenson and Dawn getting to it with Shawn close behind that is, until the scream, "Help!"

Turning back, Erin flopped, tangled in some form of thread, making Shawn stop and bolt back much to the horror of Dawn, "Shawn, no!" Jumping and swinging out yelling, he quickly cut into one, swinging wildly to cut down two more, then to impale and side slash another for a kill count beginning to climb. Swinging left, then right, thrusting forward, repeating keeping them off as he stood over Erin, shouting while swinging down cutting the thread, "RUN!"

With a nod, Erin crawled towards the train and bolted though as doing such, Shawn would quickly find himself surrounded by shrieking Darkling. Behind him, rushing out, the trio, eyes wide with shock, Ellie looking around then seeing Shawn.

"What does he think he's doing!?" Zedd would shout as if angry.

Standing his ground, swinging out, a few leaping at him and only to cut them down, that is until the thirteenth shot into his back pinning him, the others quickly swarming on top digging their legs in and stabbing him, his yells of pain lasting only momentarily as in a mere moment, a burst of light smacked into the Darkling, sending them flying, a staff sticking in the ground, Steven's. Rushing up and grabbing him, Francis, then Steven nearby with the staff, "ON THE TRAIN!"

Chapter XII

A week had gone by since then, a week of dread. The public in an uproar, the Church feeling pressured, the entire squad in question and Steven under investigation. In light of the loss of an entire dome due to unknown means and the assault so heavily on the White Guard, Steven who had been in charge was under high investigation under suspicion of reckless endangerment... though more importantly, the Church itself was shaking and quickly looking into it... how a dome could fail.

-

Clicking

Clacking

Crashing

Standing in the battle arena, Shawn would move a wood staff back and forth, combating against two individuals, blocking one and then kicking the other in the gut to throw them back, flipping backwards himself with a single back flip. Bandaged moderately with cuts all over his still healing body, Shawn continued, grunting with each movement from pain.

“You shouldn’t be up moving, your doctor told you to rest!” his sister had often said in the last week.

“I refuse to do nothing, people died and I nearly failed to protect them, I need to keep working!”

Against his doctor, against his sister, against his peers, and even against himself, Shawn had to this point simply refused to quit, the memory of death fresh in his mind, rage boiling through his blood like a propellant.

“Shawn, you’re overworking yourself man, we don’t want to hurt you!”

“Don’t worry about me, just keep on. I... I have to get stronger, I can’t let this slow me down!” he’d snap in determination and rage.

Both his opponents would look to each other, then back to Shawn, shaking their heads.

“No way man.”

“We don’t want your wounds to open back up bud, you had best find someone else to do it for you.”

Both would drop their wood sword and back away, shaking their heads, leaving Shawn looking down gripping his staff tightly, “No... I can’t yet, come on guys!”

“We can’t Shawn, if we hurt you worse we’ll get reprimanded.”

“We like our positions here in the dome man, we don’t want to be reduced to... to your rank... and have to go out and fight.”

“Cowards!”

A female’s laughter could be heard off to the right of Shawn, left of his foes, catching all their attentions and causing a quick look to find flowing golden blond hair and emerald eyes glistening back at them, Ellie.

“You sound so determined there Shawn, it’s funny,” she’d chuckle, leaping up off the rail guard and down onto the floor, landing perfectly then to look right at him.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re so weak kid that it doesn’t matter how hard you train. You won’t become anything.”

“Then try me for yourself or need I tell everyone that you dropped your towel at the sight of my naked body!?” he’d shout with a smirk, holding his staff out knowing what would come, the red anger on her face, “Oh yeah!?”

Kicking up one of the wood sword and then to kick it back at him while at the same time kicking up a second into her hands, she’d run forward quick, swinging out. Tossing the staff aside he’d catch the sword and rush forward himself, swinging it into hers with all his might, the two locking their weapons as equals, both quivering a bit, though Shawn would be grunting more due to using greater force it would seem.

A kick up and into Shawn’s hand and to see his arm jolt up and a swift pullback of her weapon and a jab forward right into Shawn’s gut sending him stumbling backwards onto his butt, looking up to see her smirk, “Bam, you’re dead.”

“HYAAH!!”

Bolting back up and quick to swing out only to be blocked again, Ellie then pulled back stepping to the right, turning with her foot out. Unaware in time, Shawn quickly tripped and began to fall as she spoke, “See, you’re not worth-”

Left arm down and hand on the ground, pushing himself up into the air to spin round and kick Ellie's side, sending her stumbling back, "What!?" Flipping back and rushing he'd quickly begin to swing left right left right left right up and down, Ellie not quite able to move in time as her stumble began to take a toll, she'd gasp in surprise, eyes wide, mouth open, that is till she grunted flying back, a swift kick sent into her gut as a smack to her wood sword sent it twirling up.

Down onto her butt leaning back only to look forward to see both swords in Shawn's hands forming an X at her throat, a serious look on his face, "Dead am I? What does that make you?" he'd then say with a smirk.

"How the... what!?"

"It's something my father taught me," he'd stay stepping back, dropping both to the ground, "Overwhelm your enemy with speedy attacks. If they can't match your dance as he'd call it and begin to stumble, to continue till an opening shows itself. Your overconfidence cost you that round... and even with a wound to the gut, I could have moved yet... even potentially kept it in my body leaving you weaponless. My match, Ellie."

"Jackass!" she'd spit.

"Hmm... perhaps... but I must thank you. If I can pull that off on someone as skilled and smart as you, even if only a one time thing, I know I can help our group better in the future," he'd say with a smile, right hand held out, leaving a shocked Ellie to only look at it... that is... until clapping was to be heard.

Turning their heads, Zedd was visible, laughing, “Not bad Mr. Shawn, you actually beat that airhead though, that slight improvement will only get you so far. How about you try it on an actual fighter, eh?”

“You’re on!”