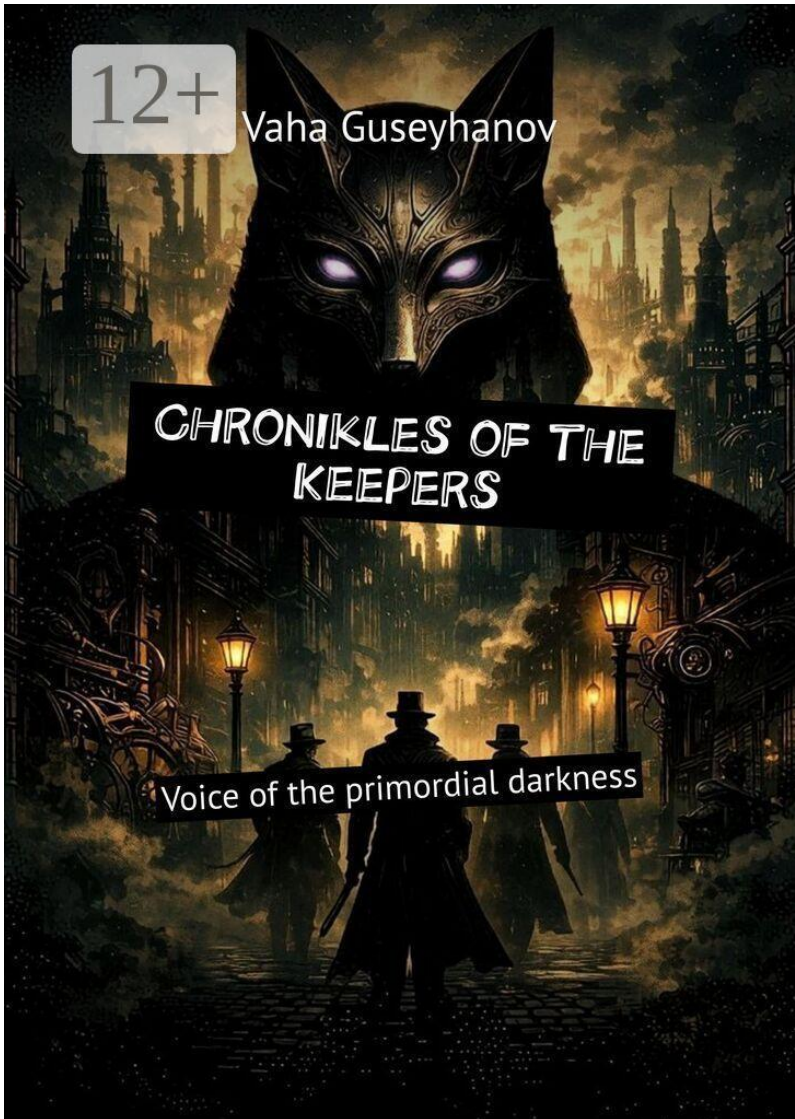


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Vaha Guseyhanov

CHRONIKLES OF THE KEEPERS

Voice of the primordial darkness



Vaha Guseyhanov
**Chronikles of the Keepers. Voice
of the primordial darkness**

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Аннотация

Arkhanum remembers everything: the endless rain, the fog hiding the dead, and the secrets crawling through its streets. Lloyd DreigFell only wants to protect his sister and survive. But after inheriting the Namécon, a living book bound to primordial darkness, he becomes host to an ancient voice. Now he must face the Healers of Death, three immortal surgeons obsessed with perfection, before they turn the city and the world into their experiment.

Содержание

Chapter 2. An Unexpected Encounter	11
Chapter 3. The Agency	21
Chapter 5. Whisper of Oblivion	47
Chapter 6. Oneiron: Origins	60
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	66

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Chapter 1. The Nightmare

The boy ran, choking on the icy air that cut his throat and filled his lungs, as if the city itself was trying to suffocate him. The stone pavement beneath his feet was slick with moisture, and between the stones, dirty water collected, reflecting the dim

light of sparse street lamps. Every step threatened to be his last. Night in Arkhanum was never truly silent — it just whispered: the creak of old signs, distant barking, the rustle of rats in the alleyways.

Behind him, never losing a step, a figure glided.

Huge. Wrong. As if torn from someone else's nightmare. A grinning skull with an elongated, fox-like muzzle — twisted and alien, as though the form had once been correct but had been distorted. Around it swirled a black aura, not mere darkness, but something alive, viscous, breathing. In place of a body — a long, writhing smoky tail, skimming above the pavement without touching it. And only the eyes — two burning coals, unblinking, undying, fixed on his back.

He stumbled.

His fingers slipped on wet stone, his legs gave way, and he crashed onto the cobblestones, scraping his skin on the sharp edges of the slabs. Pain came, but it drowned instantly in fear. He squeezed his eyes shut for a fraction of a second and spun around.

The figure was already there.

Too close.

It loomed over him, blocking the streetlamp's light, and silently clicked its bony jaws. Beneath them, thick black ooze slowly dripped, falling onto the stones and vanishing into them, as if the city had long grown accustomed to such things. The darkness around it tightened, coiled like a beast about to pounce.

It was ready.

The boy jerked sharply and sat up in bed, gasping for air. His heart pounded somewhere in his throat, and a dull ringing filled his ears, as though he was still falling onto the stones.

The room returned reluctantly. Darkened walls, a narrow window with grimy glass through which pale morning light filtered, an old wardrobe with a crooked door. Arkhanum was waking, but it did so the same way it fell asleep — without much enthusiasm.

That nightmare again.

— Loyd! Breakfast is ready! — came his sister's voice from downstairs.

A living voice. Warm. Alien to everything that had just been.

Loyd ran a hand over his face, wiping away sticky sweat, and sat still for a few seconds, trying to separate dream from reality. It wasn't working. He remembered those eyes too clearly.

He swung his legs heavily off the bed. The floorboards creaked softly, reminding him the house was old. As he washed, the ice-cold water burned his skin and brought him back to himself. His breathing steadied, but his thoughts had already drifted back — to where they returned every time.

Eight years ago.

He was ten when it all began.

The attic of their old house had seemed like a world of its own — dusty, stuffy, steeped in the scent of old wood, fabric, and things that had lain unused too long. Light filtered through a narrow window, breaking against the dust in the air, and

everything around looked as though it existed slightly apart from reality.

Curiosity had led him there.

As always.

First just to look, then to open, then to touch what shouldn't be touched.

The chest stood against the far wall — heavy, with darkened metal fittings, the kind you don't throw away not because you need it, but because something you don't speak of is tied to it. Loyd stared at it for a long time before lifting the lid.

The creak cut through the silence.

Inside lay a book.

Leather-bound, almost black, cracked with age. On its cover were embossed patterns that formed neither letters nor familiar symbols, yet they seemed... meaningful. Too meaningful.

He took it in his hands.

The book was heavier than it should have been.

As if there was more inside than just pages.

Loyd opened it.

And the air in the attic changed.

From between the pages, a clot of darkness burst forth. Not smoke, not a shadow — something dense, alive, hissing. It rose into the air, writhing as if searching for a shape, and gradually began to coalesce into outlines.

A skull. A fox-like muzzle. Empty eye sockets.

And light.

Violet.

Calm.

The entity drew a deep breath, as if tasting air for the first time in years, then slowly turned its head toward the boy.

— Greetings, master, — a voice sounded directly in his mind.

Velvet. Quiet. With a faint hiss that sent a chill down his spine.

Loyd didn't scream.

Didn't run.

He just stood there, staring at it, as if fear hadn't yet caught up with what was happening.

— I am Sumrak, keeper of the Namekon of Primordial Darkness, — the voice continued. — I served your ancestor. He was wise and managed to touch only a fraction of my power... but he did not uncover everything.

The figure tilted its head slightly.

— And he was not meant to.

The silence grew thicker.

— You are still too young to understand even the beginning of this path, — Sumrak said. — But you will grow.

The violet light in his eyes softened.

— And then you will try.

He drew nearer, not touching, but becoming tangibly closer.

— Until then... I will protect you.

The words came calmly. No threat. No grandiosity.

Like a promise you couldn't refuse.

From that day on, the Namekon became part of his life. The

book with the emblem of a metal fox face was always close. Loyd carried it in a leather case on his belt, hidden under a loose shirt — the way you carry things no one is supposed to know about.

The house remained the same. The streets — the same. The people — the same.

But the world was already different.

And sometimes, in the quietest moments, when the city paused between noise and silence, Loyd caught himself wanting to snap back at the voice in his head.

Chapter 2. An Unexpected Encounter

Returning to the present, Loyd dressed quickly and went downstairs. The house was already submerged in the grey half-light of morning, where the warm glow of the lamp seemed almost alien — too bright, too deliberate. The air smelled of dough and butter, and for a moment it created the illusion of an ordinary life — the kind that no longer existed in Arkhanum in any pure form. Julia set a plate of steaming pancakes in front of him without asking unnecessary questions, as if she already knew he wouldn't stay.

“Coffee... I need coffee... It's so invigorating in the morning...” Sumrak drawled in his head, stretching the words with lazy pleasure, as if testing his patience.

Loyd didn't answer. He ate quickly, almost mechanically, not tasting the food — just registering that his body was getting something. Time pressed harder than hunger.

— I have to go, — he said, pushing the plate away.

Julia turned, frowning, and put her hands on her hips.

— You barely ate. You need energy.

— I need to check all the job listings today. Have to get there before everyone else, — Loyd said shortly, already pulling on his jacket.

“But coffee... just a sip...” Sumrak persisted.

Loyd walked out, slamming the door behind him, cutting off

both the conversation and the voice.

The street didn't greet him with freshness — only weight. The air in the industrial quarter was thick, as if you could drink it instead of water — only the taste was coal, metal, and steam. Clouds of hot vapour rose from the grates in the pavement, mixing with the morning fog, and the city seemed like something alive, heavy, and tired of itself. Somewhere machinery hummed, somewhere metal rang — a background that never fully disappeared.

Loyd fastened his jacket and moved forward. The clatter of hooves and an angry driver's shout — "Watch where you're going!" — caught him off guard but didn't distract him from his purpose. He kept scanning for notices with his eyes. Sheets of paper pasted to walls, fences, and lampposts fluttered in the wind, layering over each other like strangers' attempts to survive. He read them on the move, barely pausing, until his gaze caught a torn scrap of newspaper.

NEWSPAPER HEADLINES:

"Secrets of the Night City: Who Is Hunting the Residents?"

Recently, cases of bodies found without internal organs have increased in the city. Police are at a dead end, citizens are in a panic.

ANNOUNCEMENT:

"Freight Delivery. Paying 10,000 pounds. Address: Engineers' District, old Transport Company building."

He stopped.

The sum was wrong. Too large to be honest. Too simple to be safe. And precisely for that reason — real.

Loyd tore off the notice, not giving himself time to second-guess, and nearly ran toward the address.

The Engineers' District met him with silence. Not the calm silence of morning, but a viscous, watchful one — as if even sound didn't want to linger here longer than necessary. The old transport company building stood slightly apart, separated from the rest like something forgotten.

The door was slightly ajar.

Loyd stopped at the entrance. A chill ran down his spine — faint, but unpleasant.

“Loyd... it smells like death here. Bad smell,” Sumrak said quietly.

Loyd gripped the paper in his hand. Opportunity. Money. A chance.

He knocked.

Silence.

— I'm here about the ad! — he called out, pushing the door open.

It gave way easily. Too easily.

Inside was dark. And the air... different.

Heavy. Warm. Sickly-sweet with rot — the kind that made you want to look away, even though the smell had nothing to do with your eyes.

Somewhere flies buzzed.

Loyd took a step. Then another. Brown, sticky trails stretched across the floor toward the far corner, as if someone had tried to leave and couldn't.

He took a few more steps.

And froze.

A body lay in a pool of dried blood. The chest cavity had been opened. Ribs stuck out like a broken grille, and the entrails were scattered around — as if someone hadn't just killed, but disassembled a person.

Loyd vomited immediately.

He staggered back, gasping, leaning his hand against the wall, trying to hold himself up while his stomach tried to empty itself of everything inside.

“Well... not for the faint-hearted,” Sumrak remarked. “But more importantly... where's the one who did this?”

Loyd straightened sharply. A chill ran down his spine.

He didn't want to turn around. But he did.

In the far corner, from behind a pile of crates, two yellow eyes stared at him.

Unblinking. Motionless. Just... waiting.

Loyd bolted for the exit.

The creature lunged after him.

Fast. Too fast for something that was supposed to follow the laws he was used to.

“Dodge!” Sumrak snapped sharply.

But his body didn't obey.

Fear was faster.

Loyd froze.

“DODGE!” Sumrak shouted.

But Loyd was paralysed with fear. At that moment, from the shadow on his chest, black, smoky tendrils with sharp claws at their ends burst out, deflecting the clawed paws of the attacking creature.

“Loyd!” — Sumrak’s mental strike lashed through his consciousness.

He flinched. Came to. And ran.

“Right!”

He veered left.

“Loyd, I’ve never been more needed than now! This is no time to ignore me!”

He didn’t answer. Just ran. Until he crashed into a dead end of rusted containers. Loyd spun around sharply.

The creature was already coming toward him. Slowly. Confidently. As if it knew he had nowhere else to run.

“It’s a ghoul,” Sumrak said, no longer joking. “A human infected by a vampire. They feed on flesh. And to it, you’re food.”

The ghoul accelerated.

“Now! Dodge right!”

Loyd jerked aside. A clawed paw whistled past his temple.

“Now side-step, around it, and sweep!”

He did it almost blindly. His leg swept in an arc, the ghoul lost its balance, and crashed through the wall of an empty crate

with a roar.

“Now RUN!”

This time, Loyd didn’t argue. He ran without looking, just to escape this nightmare.

And ran straight into someone.

A tall stranger in a long coat didn’t even flinch.

— Target 0120, “ghoul,” in range. Commencing elimination,
— he said in a flat, emotionless voice.

“We’re in trouble,” Sumrak whispered.

The stranger moved forward, but it was over faster than Loyd could blink.

The man simply raised his hand — a strange, cold light flickered in his palm — and the ghoul evaporated, leaving only the smell of ozone and decay in the air.

Returning to Loyd, the man gestured firmly, leading him out of the building into the dimly lit street. Now, up close, Loyd could see him better: tall, lean, about twenty-eight, with long black hair carelessly swept back from his forehead. His style belonged to the end of the previous century — a dark three-piece suit, an impeccable white shirt, a neck scarf. A long coat with a high collar and a massive revolver on his belt completed the image.

The man extended a business card with an elegant motion — thick, slightly rough cardstock.

— I’m Isaac, — he said, and the corners of his eyes crinkled with faint amusement. — From the “Twilight Wardens” agency.

He paused, letting Loyd read the silver-embossed name.

— We deal with, shall we say, protecting the city from paranormal filth. Like that one, — he nodded toward the empty warehouse. His gaze became intent, appraising.

— Interesting, — Isaac looked Loyd over from head to toe. — Usually, ghoul victims don't stand a chance. And if they do, they lose a limb... or a couple of internal organs.

Those words brought the gruesome image back to Loyd's mind: the open chest, the scattered entrails. He vomited again. He turned away, leaning against the wall, and swallowed the rising lump. Isaac let out a restrained, nearly soundless chuckle.

— But you, I see, are still in one piece. I take it you're an esper? — he asked.

— No, — Loyd replied hoarsely, wiping his mouth. — I'm an ordinary person. No abilities. But I saw what you did... you vaporised that ghoul. Are you an esper?

Isaac tilted his head slightly.

— Interested in espers? — he deflected. — Well, I have a few questions for you too. If you want answers — come to the agency. We'll talk there.

Without waiting for objections, he turned and dissolved into the twilight alley, his coat billowing behind him like a dark banner.

Loyd headed home. Walking along the main street, lost in thought, he suddenly stumbled upon law enforcers chatting at a post.

Officer 1: Heard about the latest murders? The fifth case this month!

Officer 2: Yeah, gruesome stuff. All bodies found without organs, but with surgical traces.

Officer 1: And the strangest part — no traces at all! No prints, no evidence. Like ghosts did the job.

Officer 2: (whispering) They say a new gang has appeared in the city. They sell organs on the black market.

Officer 1: Come on, that's impossible!

Officer 2: Then what's happening? All victims are homeless or lonely people. Like someone's choosing them deliberately.

The officers' words only added weight to the heavy burden on Loyd's soul. He quickened his pace, feeling the city's shadows closing in around him.

Loyd reached home. His sister wasn't there — she was supposed to be at the institute. An unusual silence hung in the hallway, broken only by the ticking of an old grandfather clock. Climbing to his room, he collapsed onto the bed.

Again and again, fragments of the nightmare flashed before his eyes: clawed paws, dodging shadows, a flash of light, and the ghoul's disappearance.

He got up, took the Namekon from its hidden pocket. The cool metal of the fox-faced emblem rested reassuringly in his palm. He stared at the mysterious script, trying to force meaning from it through sheer will.

“That's impossible,” Sumrak's voice came into his head.

“Sitting and staring at the pages won’t let you read them.”

— I know, — Loyd muttered. — I’m thinking.

“Look at that — we’re having a normal conversation now?”

There was a faint, barely perceptible smirk in the entity’s voice.

“I’m glad you’ve finally accepted that the voice in your head isn’t a figment of your imagination.”

— I knew that before, — Loyd replied.

“Of course. You just ignored it.”

Loyd smiled faintly.

— It’s just that if I start talking to you out loud, people will think I’m crazy. Since I’m the only one who can hear you.

“Fair enough. So what do we do?”

— Can you help?

A pause.

“I’d love to... but there’s a catch. I can’t read.”

Loyd stared at the book.

— Are you serious?

But he didn’t get to finish.

A strange sound caught his attention — muffled, rapid breathing coming from outside his door.

— Julia? — he called, looking up from the book.

In response — only a sharp rustle and the sound of hurried footsteps down the stairs. Loyd frowned and stepped into the hallway. Downstairs, the front door slammed. Loyd’s heart skipped — an instinct honed by recent days. He crept silently to the window overlooking the yard and lifted the edge of the

curtain.

Below, in the deep shadows between their house and the fence, a figure moved. A silhouette — short, feminine, in simple dark clothing. Someone was creeping along, pressed against the wall. For a second, the moon emerged from behind the clouds, and Loyd saw a glint on the stranger's fingers — brief but distinct, like polished metal... or sharp claws. And her eyes — for a moment they flared with wild, animal fear before she, noticing movement at the window, jerked back and vanished into the night with unnatural, almost soundless speed.

Loyd froze, pressed against the wall. It wasn't a ghoul or a vampire — they wouldn't have been scared off so easily. It was something else. Someone who was afraid of being seen. Someone who had been lurking right at his doorstep.

He slowly sank onto the bed, gripping the Namekon so tightly that the patterns on the metal bit into his palm. The city wasn't just teeming with monsters. It was teeming with secrets. And one of them was now lurking in the darkness outside his own home, with eyes full of the same fear he felt.

Loyd rose decisively from the bed, clutching Isaac's card in his hand.

He looked at it once more.

And without hesitation, he said:

— I'm going to that agency.

Chapter 3. The Agency

Loyd arrived at the address on the card closer to midday. The agency building turned out to be nothing like he had imagined on the way. No ominous signs, no wrought-iron gates, no crests or strange symbols on the facade. Before him stood an ordinary brick house, darkened by soot — one of many in the district, restrained, tired, and outwardly unremarkable. Only a small bronze plaque by the entrance, dull and almost blending into the brick wall, gave away its purpose. It read: “Twilight Wardens.”

Loyd hesitated at the door for a moment, not entirely sure why. Perhaps because up until that point, everything could still have been a coincidence — a strange encounter in an alley, another of the city’s oddities. But the moment he pushed the door open and stepped inside, that feeling vanished. Everything here was too gathered, too quiet, too deliberate to be accidental.

The vestibule smelled of wax, paper, old wood, and something Loyd didn’t immediately recognize but later understood: gun oil. Behind a massive reception desk sat a pretty young woman with her hair pulled back in a strict bun. Her white shirt, tie, and pencil skirt looked so impeccable that even the folds in the fabric seemed to obey the agency’s internal rules. There was something about her that immediately made you straighten up and speak more clearly than usual.

— Hello, I’m Loyd. Isaac asked me to come by... — he began,

feeling somewhat out of place.

The girl gave him a quick, appraising look. Not rude, not distrustful, but too attentive to be comfortable. After a short pause, she nodded.

— Yes, Isaac mentioned you. Go up to the second floor. First door on the right.

Loyd thanked her and headed for the stairs. The steps were wooden, smooth from age and frequent use, but not a single one creaked under his feet. Even that struck him as odd. In a house full of people, everything moved almost silently, as if everyone here had long grown accustomed to leaving no unnecessary traces.

On the second floor, he hadn't even taken a few steps down the corridor when a girl burst around the corner at full speed and crashed into him. They both lost their balance and tumbled to the floor, scattering books and papers everywhere.

— Oh! Sorry! — she cried out, immediately scrambling to gather the scattered sheets.

Loyd also dropped to his knees, collecting papers before they could scatter further. Among the books, folders, and loose pages lay the Namekon, which had slipped out from under his shirt at the worst possible moment. The girl picked it up before he could react.

— What an interesting cover... — she said with genuine curiosity, examining the metal fox emblem.

Loyd felt his insides tighten instantly. He nearly snatched the

book from her hands.

— Th-that's... my journal, — he lied quickly, tucking the Namekon into the hidden pocket on his belt.

Only then did he allow himself a proper look at her. Long wheat-colored hair was tied in a loose ponytail, with thin strands escaping. Her fair skin was dotted with freckles, and behind her thin-rimmed glasses gleamed two different eyes: one bright, emerald green; the other cold, sapphire blue. And when she smiled awkwardly, dimples appeared on her cheeks, making her face both open and lively.

— I'm Loyd, — he said, offering her the stack of books he'd gathered.

— I'm Riya, — she replied, shaking his hand firmly. — You're the newbie Isaac mentioned, right?

— Newbie? — Loyd and Sumrak asked simultaneously, one aloud, the other mentally.

A familiar voice sounded from behind him.

— Yes, he is, — said Isaac, placing a hand on Loyd's shoulder. — Come into my office. We need to talk.

He led him into a spacious office lined with shelves of files, maps, and various instruments whose purpose Loyd couldn't have guessed in three tries. The room smelled of old paper, leather, tobacco, and gun oil — and that scent somehow felt more honest than any polite smile.

— Newbie? — Loyd repeated as soon as the door closed behind them. — What do you mean, “newbie”?

Isaac lounged in his chair with the air of a man who had long felt at home in any room he entered.

— You did well at the warehouse, — he replied calmly. — Sure, your movements were clumsy, at times downright wild, but you survived and even managed to take down a ghoul. For someone with no training, that's more than luck. You also saw the dark side of the city and didn't pass out for good. That's also a quality, believe me.

He extended his hand.

— So, what were you doing there?

Loyd pulled the crumpled flyer from his pocket and handed it to Isaac. He scanned the text, pausing at the figure.

— Hm. The corpse we found belonged to a gang member. Clever move, — he muttered. — There's a quiet but very active war going on between two syndicates. Using random people for transport is elegant. No one suspects them. And if something goes wrong, another poor soul disappears — one no one would have looked for anyway.

He set the paper aside and fixed his gaze on Loyd.

— So? Are you in?

Loyd blinked.

— You're... offering me a job? — he asked, bewildered. — Here? I mean, I'm grateful, but I'm just an ordinary person. I have no gift. I'll just be a burden.

— Not all espers are born fighters, — Isaac said calmly. — And not all fighters know how to handle a weapon from the start.

We need hands. And you move well. If you join, I'll train you properly. And the pay, — he added with a slight wink, — won't disappoint.

Something stirred in Loyd's chest — the feeling that appears when a door, or rather a path, opens for the first time. Everything related to the Namekon, to Sumrak, to his past and the things he didn't understand, suddenly had direction.

— Yes, — he said firmly.

Isaac grunted, rose from his dark red leather chair, his coat rustling softly.

— Good. Be here tomorrow at eleven. We'll start then. You can go now.

Loyd turned to leave, but Isaac called him back. His voice wasn't loud, but it still made him stop.

— One more thing.

He turned.

Isaac narrowed his eyes.

— The Namekon. Where did you get it?

Hearing the name spoken aloud hit Loyd like a cold blade. Panic washed over him.

“Stop shaking. The more you hesitate, the worse it gets. Tell him it's a journal, like you told that girl,” Sumrak hissed.

“What if he sees through it?” Loyd shot back mentally.

“Then come up with something else.”

Isaac was watching him with cold, piercing interest — like a man looking not at words, but at what lay behind them.

— The... book? — Loyd finally managed. — I found it in the attic. It belonged to my ancestor. It's been passed down through the family.

“There. You told the truth without giving anything away. Genius,” Sumrak chirped.

Isaac nodded slowly. His long fingers tapped the edge of the desk.

— Interesting. Namekons rarely pass by inheritance. They usually choose their own bearer.

He rose and walked to the window, standing against the grimy cityscape. From behind, he looked almost part of that gray panorama — elongated, sharp, and not quite human.

— Your ancestor... what was he? A hunter? A mage? Or just a curious fool?

“He's right,” Sumrak noted. “I chose you because I deemed you worthy. But his deductive skills are remarkable... He's sharp, Loyd. We need to be careful with him.”

— I don't know, — Loyd admitted honestly. His voice sounded hoarse. — I have no one left except my older sister. And she's only a year older than me.

At that moment, the office door opened, and a man entered whose appearance immediately signaled privilege, power, and precision. The air seemed to cool. He had a sharp, aristocratic face, pale lavender hair, and eyes with irises red as glowing embers. Pointed ears hinted at something beyond human. His long white frock coat fit perfectly, revealing a light vest and an

impeccably buttoned shirt, with a gold watch chain dangling from his pocket.

— Enough pestering the boy, Isaac. You've already scared him enough with your interrogation, — he said in a smooth, polished voice.

Isaac smirked but said nothing.

— My name is Kyle Costerio, — he continued, turning to Loyd. — But you can call me Kyle. I'm the deputy head. You've already met Isaac. He's a Warden-Hunter.

Kyle's red eyes swept over Loyd, weighing him not as a person, but as a prospect.

— The girl at reception is Mila. Strict, diligent, and at times more sensitive than she'd like to admit. She also writes novels, so be careful — you might end up as a character in one of them. She's our accountant.

Isaac chuckled dryly.

— Scared him? He survived a ghoul, Kyle. That makes him more than a child. And my question was just a test to see which way the wind blows.

Kyle stepped forward.

— The wind can be deceptive, Isaac. Especially when it comes from the past.

He gave Loyd a slight nod.

— Glad to see a new face. But remember: the truth here is rarely simple. Sometimes it starts hunting you before you even know it.

A faint metallic click sounded. Kyle pulled out his watch, glanced at it, and put it away just as quickly.

— Mila's waiting for you in the dining hall to complete your paperwork. Don't be late.

Isaac, still watching Loyd, added with a hint of a smirk:

— And if you hear strange noises from the third-floor lab at night, don't go checking. Especially if it sounds like crying or tapping on glass.

"Ooh... I like your new boss," Sumrak purred admiringly. "Strict. Threatens even as a joke. He's got style."

"Do you even understand the situation?" Loyd shot back. "They know something."

Leaving the office under the crossfire of Isaac and Kyle's gazes, Loyd felt as though a heavy weight had been lifted. But it wasn't relief — it was the awareness that the danger hadn't disappeared; it had simply taken on a face.

Mila was waiting for him in the reception area, a perfectly aligned stack of documents in her hands.

— Here are your forms, — she said. — Please fill them out and sign here, here, and here.

Loyd signed where needed and received his card. The cool plastic felt pleasant in his hand. The dim silver emblem caught the gaslight as he ran his finger over the embossed title: "Trainee." A strange, unfamiliar warmth spread in his chest — not pride, but anticipation.

He tucked the ID into his inner pocket, close to his heart, and

was heading for the exit when he nearly collided on the stairs with a stocky man bending under the weight of two boxes that rattled suspiciously.

— Hey, give me a hand? — came a slightly breathless but good-natured voice from behind the crates.

— Sure, — Loyd replied, grabbing one.

It was heavier than expected. It smelled of dust, sulfur, and something bitter and herbal.

— What's in them? — he grunted, following the man upstairs.

— Reagents for my new research, — came the lively reply.

— Without them, I'm useless.

They reached the third floor and entered a spacious room that looked more like a mad scientist's lair than a lab. Shelves were packed with flasks of all shapes and sizes. Some liquids shimmered, others pulsed as though alive. The air was thick with the scent of metal, dried herbs, ozone, and something else Loyd couldn't name even if given all day.

Setting the box on a free corner of the table, he finally got a good look at his companion. He was short, about thirty, with silver hair and a darker emerald fringe covering one eye. The other eye was dark green and sharp. He wore a leather vest with dozens of pockets, a belt of flasks and tools, and gloves up to his elbows. A fabric mask covered his lower face, and protective goggles were pushed up on his forehead.

— Thanks for the help, — he said, shaking Loyd's hand firmly. His palm was covered in fine scars and chemical burns.

— I'm Sakrus. Master alchemist and enchanter.

— Loyd. New recruit.

— Nice to meet you. If you have any questions about my field, or if you pick up some paranormal gunk during a hunt, come find me. I'm almost always here.

“Loyd! He looks terrifying. But also cool! This is your chance! Ask about the symbols!” Sumrak urged.

Loyd quickly found a scrap of paper and sketched one of the Namekon's symbols from memory.

— Sakrus, do you know what this might mean?

The alchemist took the paper, his visible eye narrowing. He traced the outline with his finger, then pulled down his goggles. The lenses clicked softly, glowing pale blue.

— Unclear... but interesting, — he murmured. — I feel like I've seen something like this before. Maybe in some theurgic texts... I'm not sure. Can I keep this? I'll dig through the archives.

— Of course, — Loyd agreed.

He said goodbye and left, leaving Sakrus hunched over the scrap, already half lost in thought.

At home, he was met with silence, the smell of hot dinner, and his sister, who immediately began making grand plans as soon as she heard he'd landed a job as an investigator's assistant. Loyd wisely omitted the ghouls, the Namekon, the agency, and the likelihood of dying on the job within a week. Julia beamed with pride, already talking about how his career would help them escape the industrial district.

Later, lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, Loyd replayed Isaac's words. His mocking gaze, his questions snapping shut like a trap, his casual recognition of the Namekon. Was such a man worth trusting? Perhaps not. But there was no other path to unraveling his past and the future awaiting him.

Morning came unusually. Not with a groan, not with the urge to stay in bed, but with Loyd waking early and rising without resistance. He had already washed and dressed when he found a sleepy Julia in the kitchen, just about to wake him.

— Well, well, — she said, surprised. — Work's doing you good. Normally, I'd need an explosion to get you out of bed.

“Loyd, just one sip of coffee? We have time, right?” Sumrak crooned.

— Yes, plenty of time, — Loyd answered cheerfully, reaching for the coffee pot.

— Plenty? — Julia raised an eyebrow.

Loyd immediately realized he'd responded aloud to the wrong speaker.

— I mean... I don't have to be at work until eleven, and it's only seven, — he covered quickly. — That's all.

— I see... — Julia said in a tone that meant: I don't see, but fine.

“Phew. Almost blew it with the excitement,” Sumrak muttered. “Oh! Coffee! Coffee!”

Loyd rolled his eyes mentally but poured himself a cup anyway.

After breakfast, he headed to the agency. Mila was waiting for him in the reception area, as crisp as ever. Without a word, she led him to a room that resembled a tailor's atelier more than an armory. Rolls of fabric, mannequins, belts, holsters, patterns, and weapon parts filled the space.

— The main rule of the agency, — Kyle began, taking Loyd's measurements with surgical precision, — is that we work in the shadows. We eliminate paranormal threats without leaving a trace and avoid the attention of the police and the public.

He jotted notes quickly.

— Your uniform will be ready in a few hours.

Kyle asked about colors, style, and preferences. Loyd, slightly flustered, requested something gray-brown, practical, not flashy, with straps. When it came to weapons, he just shrugged.

— A standard Warden's pistol, then, — Kyle concluded. — Effective, reliable, and doesn't require years of training.

Next, they headed to the Wardens' office. Isaac was behind the heavy oak desk, studying an old map. He glanced up, gave Loyd a brief once-over, and got straight to business.

— There's plenty of work, — he said. — So we'll start immediately.

Before Loyd could gather his thoughts, Isaac was already moving toward the exit.

— Follow me.

They descended a spiral iron staircase into a basement. The air was cool, smelling of stone dust, sweat, and metal. Isaac

pushed open a heavy door, and Loyd paused at the threshold of the training hall. A vaulted ceiling rose into semi-darkness. Along the walls stood dummies, punching bags, racks of training weapons, and an obstacle course in the back.

— As promised, — Isaac said, shrugging off his coat, — I'll teach you technique. Show me what you've got.

He stood in the center, relaxed yet utterly unassailable. Loyd stepped forward.

“Focus. Listen to me and follow. Don't tense up,” Sumrak whispered.

Loyd lunged. His movements were sharp, occasionally surprisingly precise, but often raw, uneven, driven by instinct. He saw Isaac deliberately leaving openings but couldn't exploit them. The fight ended quickly. A few feints, a lightning-fast grapple — and Loyd was on the floor again, staring at the ceiling.

Isaac stood over him, not even winded.

— You've got talent, — he said calmly. — And some strange, almost wild skills. But your movements are awkward, you lack experience, and your body hasn't yet learned to think for itself.

The next two hours were a test of endurance. Isaac was relentless but brilliant. He didn't explain things twice, didn't spare feelings, didn't praise small victories. He simply trained the body, forcing it to learn through pain, fatigue, and repetition. Every mistake was dissected on the spot; his criticism was sharp as a blade and almost always on point.

When the session ended, Loyd was drenched in sweat,

exhausted, barely standing. Isaac, in contrast, looked as composed as ever.

— Two hours a day, every day, — he said. — It won't get easier. Just more familiar.

Loyd only nodded.

— Your gear should be ready by now. Go pick it up, — Isaac said over his shoulder as he disappeared down the hall.

Loyd headed to the armory, where his new uniform waited on a mannequin. The fabric was tough, gray-brown, fitted perfectly, and allowed full freedom of movement. Straps, pouches, buckles — every detail was carefully considered. Nearby lay a standard Warden's pistol, sleek, heavy, and menacing.

He changed and faced the mirror.

The reflection staring back was no longer the boy who had wandered the industrial district hunting for work. He wasn't a fighter yet. But he no longer looked like someone who had stumbled into the wrong place.

“Wow...” he thought.

“Completely different,” Sumrak agreed. “Sharp. Dangerous. I like it.”

When Loyd re-entered the Wardens' office, the air was thick with leather and wax. Isaac was reading a heavy tome called *The Saga of the Ebony Pact*. He finished the page, inserted a silk bookmark, and closed the book.

— You know, — he began, — people for whom honor is a purpose, not a convenient word, tend to exceed their own limits.

For the team. For the commander. For what they believe in. And those for whom honor is just empty sounds drag everyone down.

He leaned back and fixed Loyd with a heavy stare.

— What drives you, Loyd? What's your engine?

From the shadows by the shelves, Kyle stepped forward.

— You're too harsh with people, Isaac. Words sometimes wound deeper than claws, you know.

Isaac paused, then nodded.

— Perhaps. But I know people. And I see a core in him.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes boring into Loyd's.

— And I will be watching you very closely. Are you ready for that?

Loyd felt his pulse quicken under that gaze but nodded anyway.

Just then, the door burst open and Riya rushed in, agitated and breathless.

— Urgent call! A body found! Organs missing, but the chest was surgically opened!

In an instant, Isaac transformed. All his casualness vanished, replaced by cold efficiency. He rose sharply.

— Where?

— Western district. Arkhanum's slums. A homeless man, found in a garbage container. The smell's so bad you can't get close.

— Meaning his "friends" are already there, — Isaac said

grimly, referring to the insects. — Understood. We're moving out.

He turned to Loyd.

— Get ready. Your first mission. And bring bags — just in case.

— For... evidence? — Loyd asked uncertainly.

— No, — Isaac replied with familiar sarcasm, already draping his coat over his shoulders. — For your weak stomach. I don't want you to contaminate the crime scene before we've examined it.

Chapter 4. The Trail of Death

The carriage jolted over potholes, racing through the increasingly grim and neglected districts of Arkhanum. The farther they traveled from the more respectable streets, the more the city shed its mask. Stone facades grew lower and dirtier, windows narrower and darker, alleys tighter. Here, soot didn't just lie on the walls — it seemed to have seeped into the brick itself. The rare lamps burned dimly, with a sickly yellow glow, and even through the carriage glass, it felt as though the outside air tasted of rust, coal dust, and something rotten.

Loyd sat across from Isaac, feeling the tension inside him mount with every passing minute. He tried to breathe evenly, but his chest still tightened, as if packed with wet cotton. Isaac watched him in silence for a while, then, without changing his posture, broke the heavy silence:

— Steady your breathing. They usually don't appear at crime scenes twice. More likely, we're looking at routine evidence collection.

His voice was calm, almost lazy, but beneath it lay a steel thread.

— Don't relax, though, — he added. — We never know for sure. Their logic is... different.

Loyd swallowed.

— Who... are "they"?

Isaac frowned. His gaze grew distant, as if momentarily falling into far older memories than today's events.

— The Death Physicians, — he said. — Or, as they pompously call themselves, "Project Immortality." They're doctors obsessed with eternal life. They hunt people and take the freshest... and most unique organs to transplant into themselves.

Loyd felt his insides twist.

— But... how? — he forced out. — Why? And how is that even possible?

— Their medicine is far beyond ours. Much farther, — Isaac replied. — Organs aren't eternal, Loyd. They age. Wear out. Fail. And the Physicians are forced to constantly replace them, like parts in a machine. Only this machine is the human body. And it breaks down far faster than they'd like.

He paused for a few seconds, staring out the window at the hunched houses, narrow yards, and faces that had long since lost anything but exhaustion.

— Rumor has it there's more than one or two, — he continued. — That they have a structure. A hierarchy. Hunters who find the raw material. Surgeons who process it. And someone at the top who controls it all. Someone for whom another's body is just a catalog of spare parts. A Collector.

"Collector..." Sumrak echoed quietly in Loyd's head. His voice was unusually thoughtful, not mocking. *"An old word. Very old. And it doesn't smell of blood — it smells of dust, formalin, and locked rooms."*

— They've lived among us for a very long time, — Isaac said. — Possibly for centuries. And now, with more people, hunting has become a trade for them. Almost a craft.

Loyd shook his head, unable to fully absorb what he was hearing.

— And no one's ever seen them? No one knows?

Isaac let out a short, humorless laugh.

— Witnesses exist. Sometimes. But they're either terrified senseless or remember nothing at all. Total amnesia. Convenient, isn't it?

The carriage lurched harder than usual, then the driver's voice called out from outside:

— We're here!

The vehicle screeched to a halt.

The moment they opened the door, the stench hit them.

Not just the strong smell of decay, but something thick, sticky, sickly-sweet and rotten — enough to make Loyd's stomach

clench. Isaac, as if anticipating this, silently handed him a handkerchief soaked in the sharp scent of camphor and mint.

Loyd pressed it to his face and only then managed to take a breath without feeling like he'd collapse right into the mud.

They entered the alley. Garbage lay in heaps, the walls were damp with old moisture, and the darkness between them seemed thick even in daylight. Flies swarmed around the container where the smell originated. There were so many they looked like a living black shroud.

Covering their faces, they approached.

Three bodies lay inside.

Even through the horror and nausea, Loyd immediately noticed something wrong. Not just cruelty — a difference. A handwriting. Several different hands working in the same nightmare.

The first was a middle-aged man. His chest had been opened with terrifying precision. The incision was straight, as if made not with a hurried knife but with a surgical instrument. The edges were almost geometrically perfect.

The second was a young woman. Her face bore not an expression of terror, but a kind of empty, almost mesmerized stillness, as if in her last moment she wasn't looking at her killer, but at something no one else would ever see. Shreds of sheet music lay scattered around her, mixed with mud and blood.

The third body was the largest. An older man, with the heavy hands of a fighter. But his chest hadn't been opened — it had

been torn apart. Ribs protruded, bones broken roughly, flesh shredded. It looked more like the work of a beast than a surgeon.

Isaac stared at them in silence for a long time, then said quietly:

— Different handwriting... Or different specializations. As if three different masters worked here.

Only then did Loyd notice, in the torn chest of the third body, a faintly gleaming mechanical part. It resembled a gear with thin wires embedded directly into the dead flesh. The metal pulsed with a weak, sickly light.

— What is that? — he whispered.

— I don't know, — Isaac answered, narrowing his eyes. — But it's not their usual method. It's... something new. An experiment.

Dazed, Loyd reached for the mechanism without thinking.

— Don't touch it! — Isaac snapped.

But it was too late.

Loyd's fingertips touched the cold metal.

At that moment, the corpse jerked.

First sharply, convulsively, as if a charge had passed through it. Then, with a bone-crunching sound, it tumbled off the pile of garbage, struck the pavement, and began to rise with unnatural, spasmodic movements. Empty eye sockets fixed on them. The gear in its chest clicked and began to rotate with a sickening hiss. Its movements were jerky, wrong, but they carried blind, animalistic fury.

— What the hell?! — Loyd shouted, jumping back. — It's...

alive?..

“Not alive!” Sumrak yelled sharply. “It’s a forced impulse! Someone implanted an alchemical stimulator into the corpse!”

— Shoot it! In the mechanism! — Isaac commanded.

Loyd drew his pistol and fired. The bullet struck the metal part, ricocheted, only bending one of the wires. The corpse roared and lunged at him.

It was no longer a ghoul. No vampire taint. Nothing that still held a trace of humanity. Before Loyd moved a dead body turned into a weapon by someone’s cold will. And that was far more terrifying than any supernatural nightmare. There was no hunger, no rage, no curse here. Only calculation.

With a bony scrape, it charged forward.

“Strike! Right!” Sumrak warned.

Loyd instinctively dodged, avoiding the grab. The dead hand sliced through the air where his head had been a second before.

“Watch out, that’s not all!” Sumrak cried.

The corpse twisted its joints with a crack that made him want to cover his ears, and raised its arm again. This time, Loyd froze a fraction of a second too long.

A shot rang out.

Half the creature’s head exploded, and chunks of rotten flesh splattered across Loyd. Two more precise shots — and the body collapsed.

— Next time, be more careful, — Isaac said flatly, reloading his revolver. — Your life is on the line. Unless you have a spare

one lying around.

Loyd exhaled, but relief didn't come.

The corpse twitched again.

Then it began to rise.

The surviving muscles tensed with new, blind force, as if death itself no longer understood why this meat was still obeying orders.

"Loyd, watch out!" Sumrak shouted.

The bony hand was inches from his temple when the world suddenly erupted in blinding white light.

— Oneiron, — Isaac said quietly.

And everything changed.

The sounds of the slums vanished, as if erased. Colors faded. The world became flat, cold, and too silent. The corpse lunged at Loyd — and its fist passed through him like smoke. His body dissolved, scattered like morning mist.

A moment later, Loyd stood beside Isaac, whole and unharmed, unable to understand how he'd gotten there.

— Wh-what was that? — he gasped. — Did I... die?

"No. I sense an ability being used. It's an illusion created by Isaac," Sumrak replied quickly, his voice tense with the weight of unfamiliar power.

Loyd looked at his mentor.

Isaac's eyes glowed with an unnatural, bright gray light. His pupils looked like molten silver. He clapped his hands sharply.

The corpse crumpled.

Not thrown. Not torn. It was crushed by an invisible monstrous force, reduced to a flattened mass of bone, flesh, and metal. Isaac exhaled slowly, and a cloud of frosty vapor escaped his lips, as if the air around him had briefly turned to winter.

The next moment, everything returned to normal.

The slums. The stench. The flies. The container.

— Let's go, — Isaac ordered shortly, already turning away.

They quickly left the dead end and moved deeper into the quarter. As soon as they rounded the corner, shouts and heavy footsteps echoed behind them.

— Police! Are you sure the shots came from here?

— Look... bodies!

Loyd ran after Isaac, who didn't look back, walking with the quick, confident stride of a man used to leaving before questions were asked.

"That was... powerful," Sumrak breathed. "A terrifying ability. To create such a realistic illusion in an instant..."

Loyd's mind was a chaos of fear, gratitude, confusion, and a flood of questions for the man who had just saved his life with a power bordering on the impossible.

They rode back in silence.

The carriage swayed as heavily as before, but now Loyd barely noticed the jolts or the noise of the wheels. In Isaac's hands lay the mechanical part extracted from the dead body. It was cold to the touch and continued to pulse with a dim, sickly light, as if it still didn't understand its work was done.

When they returned to the agency, Isaac wasted no time and headed straight for Kyle's office. On the way, he handed the device to Loyd.

— Take this to Sakrus. Tell him to examine it immediately.

Loyd mechanically took the mechanism. It was cold, unpleasantly heavy, and seemed to vibrate faintly in his palm, like a weak, sick pulse.

He didn't ask questions. He already had too many.

He ran up to the third floor and pushed open the lab door.

The next second, the world was swallowed by a violet flash.

A deafening bang, and the shockwave threw Loyd back against the opposite wall. The air was knocked out of his lungs. Rainbow circles swam before his eyes.

"Loyd! Wake up!" Sumrak's voice broke through the ringing in his ears.

Consciousness returned slowly. Through the white haze, Sakrus's silhouette began to take shape. He stood over him, shielded by a smoking energy barrier, his voice muffled, as if through water:

— Loyd! Are you okay?

— I... think so... — Loyd managed, trying to push himself up on his elbow.

— Knock first! — Sakrus scolded sternly. — This is a lab, not a kitchen.

But his visible eye held more relief than anger.

He helped Loyd up, and they carefully stepped inside. The lab

floor was slick with a sticky, slowly evaporating violet liquid.

— Don't touch anything, — the alchemist warned. — Otherwise, it'll dissolve your flesh and leave only bones. I was... uh... testing a core for new anti-ghoul bullets. Their skin shrugs off regular rounds way too well, but with this, — he gestured proudly at a smoking machine, — the problem disappears.

Recovering, Loyd handed him the mechanism.

— I brought this. Isaac asked me to give it to you. We encountered a strange corpse on the mission. It came alive and fought, despite decomposition and... a half-blown-off head.

Sakrus's expression shifted — or rather, his eye did. Where annoyance had been after the explosion, professional interest now sparked. He took the device, turned it over, held it up to the light.

— Interesting... — he murmured.

Then, without looking away from the mechanism, he nodded toward the table.

— About that symbol you brought before. I haven't fully deciphered it, but I found some records with similar descriptions. Might be useful.

On the table lay two worn books and an old leather journal.

Loyd approached, picked them up, and held them close.

— Thanks.

— Don't mention it. If it's connected to that thing you just gave me, better to start digging before it's too late.

Loyd nodded, carefully avoiding the violet puddles, and left the lab. Books in hand, too many thoughts in his head, and the

second floor and Kyle's office waiting ahead.

Chapter 5. Whisper of Oblivion

Opening the door, Loyd found almost the full team already gathered in the office. Isaac, as usual, stood by the table with that careless grace that seemed innate but had actually been honed by years of dangerous living. Kyle's office was sharply distinct from the chaotic energy of the rest of the agency. Everything here was measured, quiet, and in its place. The air smelled of expensive cognac, old leather, wood polish, and the dry pages of ancient books. Behind the massive ebony desk, Kyle was studying some old manuscript, but hearing Loyd enter, he closed it without haste and set it aside.

— In one piece? — he asked calmly. — So you've already experienced firsthand why the lab is not the safest place in the agency.

Isaac, without even looking at Loyd, added lazily:

— If you came back from there with arms, legs, and the ability to speak, that already speaks to incredible luck.

Loyd was about to respond, but Kyle had already shifted his gaze from him to Isaac. His red eyes were cold as two droplets of wine left forgotten in the snow.

— As I understand it, the loud "cleanup" in the Arkhanum slums was your handiwork?

— My hands, — Isaac replied impassively, dropping into a chair without invitation. — But not my work. The Death

Physicians left us not only bodies but also a surprise. A mechanical trap and a reanimated corpse.

Loyd, still not fully recovered from what he'd seen, couldn't help himself:

— But how is that even possible? Corpses don't come back to life. It's impossible. Spirits, ghouls, vampires, dhampirs, the Death Physicians... and now this? What's next, zombies on leashes?

— That's exactly what we didn't need, — Mila said wearily, standing slightly aside with a folder under her arm.

Isaac shook his head.

— No. It wasn't quite a zombie. Not resurrection in the usual sense. Rather, the mechanism caused forced activity. Probably controlled remotely. But the device itself is undoubtedly the work of the Immortals.

Kyle crossed his arms.

— The question isn't how they did it, but how we fight it and prevent their experiments from escalating into something far more dangerous.

— We've been chasing these Immortals for ages, — Riya sighed, throwing up her hands. — And there's never any evidence. They don't even leave fingerprints.

Kyle nodded slowly and clasped his fingers on the table.

— I've already received a report from the patrol. They found a witness.

He turned his head slightly, as if rereading the account from

memory, and his voice grew drier, more official:

— The investigator asked if he'd seen anything the night of the murder. The witness said: only shadows... and a strange light. When asked what kind of shadows, he answered — large, human-like, but moving unnaturally. The light, he said, was violet. Like from a lamp, but not an ordinary one.

Kyle paused briefly.

— When the patrol arrived, they found a mess. And not a single clue as to what had caused it. Standard work.

His gaze fell on Loyd.

— And what about you, newbie? What are your impressions from your first field outing?

Under that gaze, Loyd felt less like a person and more like a page being read aloud. Still, he forced himself to straighten up.

— I... failed. Almost got myself killed and nearly ruined the whole investigation.

— At least you're honest, — Kyle noted, and the corners of his mouth twitched in something faintly resembling a smile. — Stupidity is fixable. Cowardice — sometimes. But lies...

He didn't finish.

The office door swung open soundlessly.

Everyone in the room felt the newcomer before they turned their heads. The air grew thicker. Quieter. As if the space itself straightened its shoulders.

— They leave traces, — came a low, velvet voice. — But different ones each time.

Des Arron filled the doorway as if it had been built for him. He was nearly two meters tall, broad-shouldered, powerful, but without the slightest heaviness. His figure gave no impression of brute force — rather, of force long accustomed to self-control. His short dark hair fell in soft waves across his forehead, and his thick, neat beard emphasized a strong chin and a sharp jawline. He wore a burgundy shirt of heavy, expensive fabric, sleeves rolled to the elbows, revealing forearms crisscrossed with a fine network of old scars. On his right hand, a black leather glove fit so tightly it seemed like a second skin. Dark trousers, suspenders, and a jacket casually draped over his shoulders — everything about him spoke of taste, not showiness.

He had presence. Not Kyle's aristocracy or Isaac's predatory irony. A different kind. The presence of a man who had gone through too much to waste time on gestures. Someone people follow not because they have to, but because they have no doubt.

— Don't forget who we're dealing with, — he said, walking into the room. — They long ago exhausted their original appearance. They're no longer people in the usual sense. They're puzzles assembled from other people's body parts.

Everyone present rose almost simultaneously. Even Isaac, who had been lounging in his chair, stood and gave a slight nod.

— Good evening, Commander.

Only then did it fully dawn on Loyd who stood before him. Des Arron. The head of the agency.

Des stopped in the center of the office, his gaze slowly

sweeping over all those gathered. He lingered on Loyd a moment longer.

— The newbie's already acquainted with our hospitality, — he said. — Alive. That's a good start.

A faint, almost imperceptible smile touched the corner of his mouth. Then he turned to Isaac.

— I've read your report. Bring me the device as soon as Sakrus finishes with it. And... don't look like the world just ended. They just found a new way to cover their tracks. So we'll find a new way to follow them.

He tucked his fountain pen into his inner pocket and added:

— Kyle, order dinner for everyone. Discussing strategy on an empty stomach is a bad habit. And the newbie deserves a double portion after a day like this.

After dinner, the atmosphere in the office shifted. The food didn't soften the conversation, but it lent it the focused quality that comes when people stop being distracted by their bodies and start thinking with their heads. A map of the city was laid out on the table, plates pushed aside. The gaslight fell on Arkhanum's streets as if it weren't a city plan but an anatomical drawing of a sick organism.

Isaac broke the silence first. He pointed a finger at the slums.

— The epicenter is here. But they won't return to the same spot. They're not predators circling one lair — they're rabbits changing burrows. Still, they have a pattern.

His finger slid toward the port district.

— All previous victims linked to the Physicians were found within two hundred kilometers of the docks. Which means they either use the port for equipment or for storing... raw material.

— Makes sense, — Kyle said calmly. — Warehouse districts are ideal hideouts. But searching them all would take weeks — and we'd lose the element of surprise.

— Maybe we should set a trap? — Riya suggested.

Everyone looked at her.

— If they're hunting for fresh organs, — she continued, — we could give them the perfect target. A staged homeless person with a tracking device.

Isaac shook his head immediately.

— Too crude. The Physicians aren't fools. They've eluded us for decades. Their selection process is far more refined. They don't just take the weak — they take those who won't be missed.

His gaze flickered to Loyd, making him uncomfortable.

— It's a filter. They weed out anyone with family, connections, anyone whose disappearance would cause noise.

"He's right," Sumrak said quietly. "They look for the lonely. The invisible. The ones easier to erase from the world than to notice are gone."

— Then we need to think like them, — Mila said. — Where would they find their next victim? Not a shelter. Not a flophouse. Something less obvious.

— Employment offices, — Isaac replied immediately. — Soup kitchens. Places where desperate people look for a last

chance. We need lists of recently registered homeless and unemployed. Single, family-less, physically healthy.

— That's possible, — Kyle nodded. — The police will release archives on request. We'll need the Commander's signature.

All eyes turned to Des.

He had been silent until then, watching, and now he slowly pulled out his fountain pen and opened a leather notebook.

— There will be bait, — he said. — But not a person.

Silence met his words.

— Sakrus, — Des continued, not looking up from the pages. — His latest developments. He's synthesized muscle tissue infused with alchemical reagents. To the Physicians, it will look like the Holy Grail. An organ with incredible regenerative properties. They won't be able to resist.

He began writing quickly, clearly.

— We'll plant a body with this organ in a morgue they likely control. Riya and Kyle will handle surveillance. When they try to extract it, we'll take them.

— Too passive, — Isaac objected. — They might send intermediaries. We'll only catch small fish.

Des looked up.

— That's exactly why it's not just bait. The organ will carry a surprise. Sakrus will implant a nanite beacon that activates not on movement, but on attempted dissection. It will lead us straight to their lair.

His gaze rested on Isaac for a moment.

— You'll lead the assault team.

The pen moved across the page again.

— And I'll add one restriction, — he said quietly. — Just in case.

He wrote a few words in quick calligraphic script.

— Cannot use teleportation or spatial distortion.

The notebook closed with a soft click.

The plan was ready. Cold, clean, precise.

— Questions? — Des asked.

Loyd, who had been silent, finally raised his eyes.

— And me?.. What do I do?

Isaac turned to him. For the first time all evening, something resembling approval flickered across his face.

— You, newbie, will watch and learn. And if you're lucky...

— he grinned darkly, — save those bags. They might still come in handy.

— Questions? — Des repeated, and this time his gaze slowly swept over everyone present.

A brief silence followed, broken only by the crackling fire in the hearth.

— Technically, it's feasible, — Kyle finally said, steepling his fingers. — But we'll need our own pathologist for the body staging. Official morgues won't work.

— We have Dr. Embry on reserve, — Des replied calmly. — He still owes us for that incident with the wendigos in his private clinic. He'll do it clean.

— What if the Physicians sense the trap? — Riya asked, fidgeting with the edge of her notebook. — What if they scan the tissue for magical or technological traces?

— Sakrus's alchemical composition masks any energy signature, — Isaac answered. — It mimics pure life force. To them, it'll be like the smell of fresh bread to the hungry. They won't be able to resist. Their own obsession will become their noose.

"Clever," Sumrak noted with respect. "Very clever. Using the enemy's greed against them. Your commander thinks like a true hunter."

— Then we're wasting time on discussion, — Des concluded, rising.

His shadow, falling across the map, briefly covered an entire district.

— Kyle, contact Embry. Riya, prepare surveillance equipment. Isaac, assemble your team. In twelve hours, the assault group must be in position.

Then he turned to Loyd, who still felt like an extra cog in a large, precise machine.

— As for you... — Des's voice softened slightly. — Your first hunt for this kind of prey isn't for green rookies. But everyone starts somewhere. You'll be on remote comms. Monitor the feed, track the beacon signals. If anything goes wrong, report to Kyle immediately. Understood?

— Yes, sir! — Loyd straightened so sharply it seemed his life

depended on it.

— Good, — Des nodded. — Then get to work.

The meeting ended, and the office came alive almost instantly. Kyle was already dialing Dr. Embry, Riya had left, muttering about frequencies and ranges. The plan was in motion. Now all that remained was to wait for the trap to close on those who had eluded them for too long.

Isaac shrugged on his coat as he moved.

— You're with me, — he said to Loyd. — I'll show you where the command post will be. And I'll explain what to do if everything goes to hell. Which, — he smirked darkly, — it will.

Loyd nodded and followed, feeling fear and anticipation churn into a single heavy knot in his throat.

They stepped into the twilight of the hallway. Isaac suddenly turned and tossed a journal to Loyd with a casual motion.

— Take a look.

Loyd barely caught it.

— Uh... yeah. Of course.

His fingers trembled. He opened the journal about halfway. The pages were covered in small, hurried handwriting and strange symbols. Then he froze.

His gaze stuck to the paper.

He tried to look away — and couldn't at first. A strange feeling stirred inside him. Not understanding. Recognition. As if these symbols had already been inside him, somewhere deep, buried under layers of forgotten memory.

He turned the page.

A drawing. A black outline, like a human or animal figure in an unnatural pose. But the lines weren't right. They seemed to tremble, bend, creating the illusion of motion. The drawing shifted before his eyes, pulsing with a faint light, until it took on clear, disturbing contours.

— Looking for this? — Isaac asked quietly.

A chill ran down Loyd's spine. Isaac knew. Or at least suspected far more than he let on.

Sensing his tension, Isaac dropped the mocking mentor act. He stopped and turned to Loyd, this time without irony. Seriously.

— I used to be like you, — he said quietly. — Afraid of my own power. Trusting no one. Including myself. It almost cost me everything.

He leaned against the cool stone wall, and the shadow fell across his face, sharpening his features.

— I was a detective. The best in my field. Reason, logic, evidence — that's what I had. Until I came across a Case with a Spirit of Curses. An entity that poisoned minds, sent nightmares, and drove people insane.

Isaac paused, looking past Loyd as if seeing the scene again.

— My mind scrambled for excuses. Optical illusion. Hallucinations. Lack of sleep. Anything. But bullets couldn't touch it. Back then, I didn't know bullets don't work on spirits.

He exhaled slowly.

— It cursed my consciousness. And I started seeing enemies everywhere. In neighbors. In strangers. In every face. On the brink of madness, my ability activated on its own. I didn't control it — it controlled me. And I nearly became a monster, killing dozens of innocents.

Loyd listened in silence. The cold, sardonic Isaac in this story seemed almost impossible. But that's precisely what made it terrifying.

— Then they appeared, — Isaac continued. — Des and Kyle. They dealt with the spirit. But I couldn't be stopped. My power surged out of control and devoured everything in its path. Then Des... — he shook his head with bitter respect. — He simply stopped me. Explained what was happening. Didn't turn me over to the authorities. Didn't order me eliminated as a threat. He reached out. Took me into the agency. Taught me not to stifle my power, but to channel it. To set boundaries for chaos. Control it with logic.

Isaac straightened and stepped closer to Loyd.

— I don't know what you're hiding. And that's your right. But I want you to understand one thing: we in this agency... all of us here... we're a little crazy, sometimes dangerous, but still a family. And you can trust us. I'm saying this not as a mentor, but as someone who's already been through this.

His gaze dropped to Loyd's belt, where the outline of the Namekon was visible.

— I saw you give Sakrus that drawing. I saw you searching

for answers.

Isaac pulled a folded, yellowed sheet of paper from his inner pocket and handed it to Loyd.

— I dug through the old archives. The professor's journal I gave you... should help.

Loyd was about to say something, but Isaac suddenly clapped him firmly on the shoulder. And for the first time, his face held not a sardonic smirk, but something like a paternal smile.

— Don't rush yourself. But don't get stuck in the past either. — He said quietly, "It has a habit of catching up."

With that, he turned and vanished into the deepening twilight of the hallway, leaving Loyd alone with heavy thoughts, a buzzingly admiring Sumrak, and an ancient secret now warm in his hands.

Chapter 6. Oneiron: Origins

Isaac entered his office, shrugged off his coat onto the rack, and sank heavily into his chair. The leather creaked softly, accepting his weight like an old accomplice long accustomed to evenings like this. He tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling, where a web of cracks spread across the plaster like a map of long-forgotten battles — no one remembered the victors, but everyone still lived with the consequences.

He took a deep breath.

“Family, huh...” — he repeated his own words inwardly, and his lips twisted into a bitter smirk.

The irony was thicker than the slum smog.

He, a man who had spent his entire adult life relying solely on cold reason, control, and distance, was now telling someone about trust, about family, about not having to carry everything alone. The moment that thought fully formed, the past raised its head, as if it had been waiting for just that.

Seven years ago.

Nineteen-year-old Isaac, shaking raindrops off his eight-panel cap, adjusted his tie and barely suppressed a smile as he looked at the sign: *“Verdict Private Detective Agency.”* His gray vest, wide trousers, and boots polished to a modest shine were cheap but immaculately clean. Back then, he still believed that order could be restored if you were just smarter than chaos.

He became an assistant to Miles Henry — a detective with a quiet but impeccable reputation. Miles wasn't a celebrity and didn't like high-profile cases, but in Arkhanum, those who understood the value of real work knew his name. He was about fifty, his pipe rarely left the corner of his mouth, and his gaze from under heavy lids seemed lazy only to those who couldn't tell calmness from attentiveness.

His very first case proved Isaac had landed where he belonged.

It was a burglary case involving a factory owner's safe. At first glance — dirty but routine work. A broken lock, ripped-open drawers, frightened servants, an angry owner, and accounting books that everyone only flipped through for show. It was in those books that Isaac noticed a discrepancy. One digit. One omission. One movement of money that didn't match the rest. That was enough to expose a fraudulent accountant — and then the entire scheme.

Miles looked at him for a long time then, blowing smoke from his pipe.

— Kid, — he finally said with a hoarse chuckle, — you've got a mind like a chess grandmaster. Sometimes it's almost scary.

Isaac averted his gaze, pretending the praise hadn't touched him. But inside, something quietly, almost shyly, straightened its shoulders.

The work was going well Isaac had solved numerous cases. Miles had even considered retiring and handing the agency over to his clever protégé. The work on Miles's last case took a week.

They tracked down the kidnappers, but unknowingly pulled a thread that led not to petty thieves but to one of the syndicates that held the district in an iron grip. When they entered a dead-end alley for a meeting with an “informant,” it all ended before it became clear exactly what had gone wrong.

Fire opened from the warehouse windows.

A lead downpour struck them suddenly and thickly, like rain from a rotten sky. The world slowed down. Isaac heard his heart pounding against his ribs, heard the clatter of falling shell casings on wet cobblestones, heard Miles curse through his teeth. Then something rose inside him.

A hum.

At first distant. Then closer. As if someone was swinging a pendulum right inside his skull. The air around him trembled, tautened, and began to turn white.

He came to sitting on the ground, leaning against a wall.

In his ears wasn't silence — it was its deafening absence. The white mist slowly dissipated. No mafiosi, no gunfire, no screams remained. Just the wet alley, dead light, and Miles lying a few steps away.

His mentor's vest was slashed with dark stains spreading rapidly across the fabric. His eyes, still alive, sharp, ironic not long ago, stared at the gray sky, seeing nothing. There were no bullets, no casings around. No traces of the shootout except his body, riddled with lead that seemed never to have existed.

Isaac didn't understand what had happened then.

He only understood that Miles was dead.

And that in the moment the world turned white, something had happened to reality that shouldn't have.

Five years ago.

Isaac was already working alone. He had a license, a decent suit, his own clientele, and exactly enough reputation that people with money and problems came to him. He moved precisely, spoke little, worked cleanly. From the outside, it might have seemed like he had everything under control.

If you didn't look into his eyes.

If you didn't notice that sometimes, too-long pauses came not from thoughtfulness but from internal struggle.

That day, he was interrogating a witness. Routine work. A room, a chair, a glass of water, the smell of old wallpaper and cheap soap. The witness was nervous, mixing up details, trying to remember the color of a coat he'd most likely never really seen. Isaac had almost guided the interrogation where he needed it when the world began to drift again.

Not sharply.

Worse.

Slowly.

The edges of objects began to blur, like ink on wet paper. Contours of the table, faces, windows — everything became uncertain. Panic, cold and too familiar, gripped his throat.

No. Not now. No. No-no-no.

Isaac swallowed hard and stared at the wall behind the witness,

as if he could force reality back into its frame. Several agonizing seconds passed before the world became solid again.

— Are you feeling unwell, Mr. Isaac? — the witness asked cautiously.

Isaac picked up the glass, took a sip of ice-cold water, and muttered:

— Migraine. Continue.

From then on, fear became a constant companion. Not open. Not loud. Worse. Quiet. The kind that sits at the back of your mind and waits for you to forget about it long enough to strike again.

At night, he was haunted by the same nightmare: an endless, dark, soundless space with no sky, no floor, no exit. He ran, but the walls closed in, the ground gave way beneath him, and the darkness grew denser until he understood that this wasn't a dream about a trap. It was the trap itself. A prison made of his own mind.

He woke up screaming, in a cold sweat, and the first hour of the morning was spent convincing himself: the ground beneath his feet was real. The room was real. Breathing was real. And he hadn't yet been permanently locked away in that white, silent void.

Four years ago.

The fateful case.

The disappearance of the Hawkins family.

The house on the outskirts smelled of dust, old wood, and

an apple pie that had never been finished. It was the kind of smell that made you uneasy not because it was frightening, but because it was too human for a place where something inhuman had already happened.

Isaac crossed the threshold.

The heavy oak door slammed shut behind him with a bang, as if struck by a gust of wind.

Only there was no wind.

Chaos reigned inside. Not the kind left by panic, but something wrong. In the living room, a vase fell and shattered with a crash, though no one was near it. In the dining room, a salt shaker tipped over on its own, white grains scattering across the tablecloth like ash on a coffin lid.

A draft. Settled floor. Logical. All logical.

He repeated this to himself almost angrily, like a man who knows he's lying to himself but isn't quite ready to stop.

The air was thick, sweetish, with a hint of ozone, like after a thunderstorm, and something rotten. Then he heard a groan.

Quiet.

Prolonged.

Inhumanly cut off mid-sound.

Then another.

A child's.

Isaac's heart slammed against his ribs so hard it drowned out everything else for a moment. He almost ran up the stairs, gripping his revolver.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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