

Tab 1

The Four Bakas consist of four friends: Kai, Q, Blockhead, and Spade. The story opens following our first character, kai.

Prolodge the realms.

You see, in the world of the Four Bakas, the universe is ruled by four main realms: the Realm of Cartoonia, the Realm of Scarlet Aethel, the Realm of the Blocks, and the Realm of the Angels/Demons. These realms came together to form other realms such as Greed, Wrath, Love, Joy, Envy, Fear, and Sloth, which are the most well-known ones. Their leaders were the embodiments of each realm.

The strongest realm was Scarlet Aethel, which is the realm Kai is from. In that realm, they have special powers and magic called Chaos Magic. The first wielders of Chaos Magic were the original leaders of the realm. Their powers were said to be so strong that, to contain them, they had to create an entity to wield all that power. However, it came with a drawback.

That entity was too powerful—so powerful that it took over the leader and stated that she would take a vessel: the son of the king who would marry a demon. The child would bear wings and horns, hold immense strength, fall in love, destroy the realm for love, and bear that guilt forever.

Chapter one: Gabriel's sin.

We skip forward to Kai's father, Gabriel. He was a rule breaker, and that would lead to very severe consequences. He was wandering around the Demon Realm, for he was next in line to the throne, when he saw the most beautiful demon he had ever seen. Her long hair reached the floor; it was black and luscious, and Gabriel couldn't help himself. He went up to her and told her that she was beautiful.

She had a huge crush on him, so, as one would do, he asked her out. She said yes. However, since she was a demon, they shouldn't have been together. So Gabriel told her to follow him to a secret place in the woods where they could ask someone for help.

She followed him into the woods and saw a deep red light calling to her. She followed it.

It told her, "I know what your problem is. I know what you wish for. I can give you your desires."

She told it that she would do anything.

"Anything you say? I'll give you what you wish, but it will come at a cost. Your future child will be the strongest person in the world, part archangel and part archdemon. They will fall in love one day and will be held by this curse, for your ancestors created me, and now you must face my deal once more. I'll give you the ability to hide your demon traits. I'll give you wings and Chaos Magic, as long as you accept my deal, of course."

"I don't know," she said.

But I do love him this much, she thought, so I accept your little deal.

“Haha,” it laughed. “You think that’s all? Why do you think no one has ever tried to break the rules? They know that if they accept my deal, your child becomes my vessel and is destined to become the Scarlet Witch/Demon. No, no—don’t do this, please! Your child is destined to destroy the world. Good luck. Enjoy your little boyfriend.”

“Uh, Gabriel?”

“Yeah?”

“I talked to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I made a deal with it, and it didn’t really go well.”

“No... You didn’t. TELL ME YOU DIDN’T!”

“I had to. I did it for us.”

“Fine. As long as we get to be together forever, I don’t care what happens.”

Chapter two: Kai son of Gabriel.

We skip to the birth of Kai. He was born with long, dark black hair and so much Chaos Magic that anytime he tried to exert even the slightest amount, it could destroy a country.

Kai was nice and loyal, and he met a girl named Amy. She was part of the royal family, but she wasn’t directly related to Kai. They had chemistry the moment they met, and many people started to say that they would end up together.

You see, Amy was the prettiest girl in the realm, and everyone liked her. One of these people was a known troublemaker. He liked her since they were young, but he knew Amy would never fall for him, so he decided to plan against her. He planned to attack her one day when Kai’s guard was as low as it could be.

Kai and Amy grew up side by side and fell in love. One day, they went to their favorite spot—the large oak tree far from the palace—to hang out together. It didn’t end well, though.

You see, the man who wanted to attack Amy was waiting in the shadows. As soon as Kai left to get flowers, he attacked Amy.

Kai felt Amy’s cry and ran back. He saw her being attacked, and he couldn’t hold back. He let his full power out, and the entity came out with it. The raw power alone caused the entire realm to be destroyed.

Kai was proclaimed the new heir to the throne of the realm.

Everyone in the realm was destroyed along with it. Kai thought that Amy was killed as well, so he was taken by the ruler of the angels, who kept him in a room.

“The court is now in session. The defendant, Kai, the prince of the realm of Archangels/Archdemons, has caused the destruction of the realm and has now become its king. Does the defendant have anything to say for himself?”

“I couldn’t help it... I had to save her. I had to do something. AND I DON’T KNOW IF ANY OF YOU REALIZE THAT WASN’T ME—THAT WAS THE ENTITY YOU ALL MADE!”

As Kai screamed, his horns started to grow out of his head, and his wings burst from his back. The judge started to speak until the leader of the angels flew down to Kai’s side.

“Kai, don’t worry, my child. Calm yourself. I am here now,” she whispered in his ear. “Your love is still out there.”

Kai opened his eyes and shed a happy cry, sighing in relief.

“Listen, I know you all are smarter than that. This child has no control over the grave consequences of his power, even in the slightest. So I implore you all to allow me to help this child and help him find his new way of life. “Very well the court will allow it”

Kai went with the leader of the angels to the realm of angels. “What’s your name?” Kai asked. “My name is Haley and those angels over there are Clare and Gloria, so do you wish to stay here with us or.” “I wanna go to earth.” Kai said. Very well I’ll take you there right now.

Chapter three: The letter Q and The Blockiest Head Pablo.

Kai was sent to earth. On earth Kai was wondering around until he meets Q. Q was an alien from the planet cartoonia, cartoonia is a hexagon and has 3 moons, it has 10 corners, the smallest moon blue second smallest green biggest is red. They met because Kai was fighting off people trying to kill him and Q came in and killed them all.

Q asked Kai.

Q: “What’s your name?”

Kai: “Kai.”

Q: “You don’t look human, ooooh are you an alien like me?”

Kai: “No I’m from the realm Scarlet Aethel.”

Q: “OH ***T PLEASE DONT KILL ME, well I mean you could try.”

Kai: “ Don’t worry, your fine I won’t hurt anyone.”

Q: “Whyyyyyyyyy that’s boringggggg.”

Q: “Let’s go kill criminals!”

Kai: “Fine!”

They went on to kill 900 criminals in a day. As they were going to kill more people they met someone who was dressed as a knight.

“Who are you guys?” Blockhead said while drawing his swords.”

Q: “We are the duo bakas!”

Kai: “No we are not Q.”

“I’m Kai from the realm of scarlet Aethel and that’s Q from cartoonia.”

“Nice I’m block head from the land of the blocks.”

Q: “I can tell.” “OWWWW no need to punch me!”

They went on to become friends and got an apartment building. They moved their stuff into the apartment.

Q: “I get the big roooooom.”

Kai: “Fine Q we don’t care, I guess I’ll get the one above yours.”

Block: “I’ll take the top room.”

After they moved in Kai went off. He went to the billboard of the heavens. It’s called that name because it is so high in the sky that no one survives a fall from it. Kai tried to jump, he couldn’t. He tried again, he couldn’t. He went on to do it five times until he couldn’t take it anymore he screamed, he screamed so loud that holograms of golden wings shimmered behind him along with dark red horns. The scream caused a sonic boom that destroyed a town and a crack in the reality above that spot.

Kai went home that day sipping vimto in Q’s living room. Q and Blockhead sat next to him.

Q: “Kai what’s wrong?”

Kai: “I tried to jump today.”

Block: “For gods sake Kai please don’t tell me you caused the accident over there.”

Kai: “That might have been me.”

Block: “Just remember we care about you we’ll keep you happy.”

Kai: “Finnnnne.”

Chapter four: The fourth Baka.

The trio had been having fun taking out bad guys and spending Kai’s money. Q told Kai.

Q: “Kaiii someone is at the sign you tried to die on.”

Kai: “I’m trying to get rid of that memory.”

Block: "Please can you go get him."

Q: "Pretty please."

Kai: "Fine."

Kai went to go get the guy on the sign. When he arrived he saw a winged figure crying on it.

Kai: "Hey get down."

The guy on the sign: "Why should I?"

Kai: "Tell me your name."

"Spade."

"Cool I'm Kai."

Kai: "I was here once you know"

Kai: "In the same position as you right now."

Spade: "how did you come down?"

Kai: "Because I realised that I had friends to live for."

Spade: "I don't have any though."

Kai: "You have some now, come back with me."

Spade: "AlRight."

Spade followed Kai to their apartment and the four friends got along great. They went around causing trouble. after they went and caused trouble they found someone being restrained buy a gang with power defying weapons.

Block: "Look at these dummy's."

Kai: "Help that girl Q."

Q: "But I wanna eat my Krispy Kreme donuuuuuuts."

Block: "Q just do it."

Q: "Fine."

Kai and Blockhead went to distract the gang, for they are great with swords and are fast. Q went to save the person in distress.

Q: "Hey idiot."

The girl in distress: "Who are you?"

Q: "im someone who is forced to help you."

The girl in distress : "then leave."

Q: "nah I'd win."

The girl in distress: "What does that even mean?"

Q: "Shut up!"

Q: "What's your name anyway?"

"V."

Block: "Oh my god you idiots stop fighting and just go home now!"

Chapter five: The realm of depression

A portal opens that allows them to go home, Or so they thought that portal took them to the realm of depression. You see the realm of depression isn't like the other realms. It doesn't have a leader, they don't have a power system, all they do is just walk sleep eat and be depressed.

Block: "Dang this place is pretty gloomy."

V: "It's the realm of depression."

V: "What did you think was gonna happen."

Q: "Hey lady leave Blockhead alone!"

Block: "Anyways what should we do."

V: "Well... we can't really leave."

"Pardon." Spade said with a sad look.

V: "Yeah from all the depression we can't rly use our powers."

Block: "Oh my god Q this is why we don't let you make the portals."

V: "Hey where's Kai?"

Q: "Yeah where's my twm?"

Kai left the group to go call up one of the people who helped him after his realm was destroyed.

Kai: "Sarah. Sarahhhhh."

Sarah: "What do ya want Kai."

Kai: "We are in the realm of depression and none of us can do anything to help us leave."

Sarah: "Yay I can use my powers!"

Kai: "What."

Sarah is the embodiment of joy one of the most powerful leaders of the realms.

"It's a bird."

"No it's a plane."

"No it's the embodiment of joy Sarah!"

Sarah started flying over the part of town the group was in and made their people happy. After she made them happy the four idiots were able to use their powers again, and then Sarah sent them home after she beat them up with cotton candy clouds shaped like Percy Jackson.

Block: "Finally Home!"

Kai: "Hey guys wanna go driving together?"

Q: "Sure sounds fun!"

"I'll stay I need to finish my show." Spade said

Block: "Ok the four bakas it is."

They went to the car and started her up.

V: "I swear to god if Kai makes Q drive I'm not sitting in the car."

Q: "Great we'll tie you to the top of the car!"

Block: "I'm just gonna listen to my music."

Kai: "Blockhead what are you listening to?"

Block: "None of your business monkey."

Kai: "Fine I guess?"

They started driving around town until they were being chased by the police because Q was speeding.

V: "Q!"

Q: "What Krispy Kreme's closing I gotta get there fast!"

Kai: "Q slow down I'm gonna drop my Vimto!"

Block: "Kai maybe you've had enough."

Kai: "Nah I'd drink."

V: "GUYS CAN YOU LET ME IN THE CAR! IM GONNA DIE."

Before they knew it the car was about to crash. In that moment we see v's backstory.

Chapter six short chapter: V's backstory.

V is half vampire half ribbon arm demon. Her real name is Vanessa and she is a princess, the daughter of the embodiment of greed. she was born in the greed realm with ribbon people, and all the people there have the ability to steal powers and its sealed off so they can't escape unless they change what they are. As v was lingering through her town she found a vampire, but she didn't want to lure him away. They then became friends then suddenly years later the vampire was going to die because they found out about him before they knew his location he chose to make v a vampire also so she can leave this horrid place. Then she went out and met Kai,Q,Blockhead, and spade.

Chapter seven: The crash.

We see a flash back of the four bakas. They are at a beach for block head's birthday playing volleyball.

Kai: "Q pass!"

Q: "Here Kai spike it!"

Q: "BOOM! Easy point."

Block: "Not so fast buddy boy."

Q: "Heyyyyyy no using clones."

Kai: "What clones Q?"

Q: "This is why I love you twin."

V: "The score is 23-22 who will win."

Q: "V shut up."

V: "Ok."

Spade takes the ball he shoots it up. He uses his strongest move fire wings! He flies up and spikes the ball onto Q and Kai. 24-22

Q: "Enough."

Q: "Twin lend me your strength!"

Q started levitating and spike the ball from across the planet and after he scored Kai sent the ball back with his powers to gain them a double point. 24-24. Who will win?

Block: "Spade watch out!"

Kai jumped into the air aiming to spike the ball onto spade, but he blocks it exultantly.

Spade: "Haha blocked."

Block: "Spade you have done a huge mistake."

Kai started levitating sideways.

Kai: "Throughout heaven and earth I alone am the honoured pump.

Kai hits the ball crushing the opposing team and winning the game for him and Q.

Block: "Well done Kai."

Kai: "Good game guys."

We move back to present day in the car crash. Where our main characters are in a life or death situation.

Q: "Oh crap."

Block: "Q you are never driving again!"

Q: "Well its not my fault. its the idiot in the camry's fault."

Block: "I guess your kinda right."

V: "Yeah we almost died bro."

Kai: "I'll call spade to pick us up."

Spade went over to pick them up.

Spade: "Guys how did you crash another car this is the sixth time!"

Q: "Idk."

They go back home, but on the way there they meet a strange foe.

Chapter eight: The Fiction Minded

Unnamed foe: "Hello there idiots."

Spade: "No..."

Unnamed foe: "Hellooooooo spade."

Unnamed foe: "What happened to your face oh yeah I destroyed it."

Spade: "What do you want?"

Unnamed foe: "I want to settle lose ends of course."

Spade: "I hate you."

Unnamed foe: Awww I hate you tooooooo."

That person was the second commander of TFM. TFM were the people ruling the earth. You see TFM were banned from the angelic realm and the demonic realm and were sent down the nothingness. However that came with a draw back. The leader of TFM gathered them all next to him and told them.

The leader: "Listen here all of you."

The leader: "I know how to get us out of here."

Tfm member: "How?"

The leader: "We all still have our powers and as you all know are powers are water, gold, clay, etc. and we can manifest our powers by manipulation. So I say we propose to them that we go to earth then we build 8 pillars being the source of our power then we feed of peoples obedience."

The leader: "WHO'S WITH ME!"

Then they went to earth and put there plan into action and they started to rule the earth in secret.

The second commander of TFM: "Well spade come on let's fight!"

Spade: "No we already fought once and it did this to me I won't fight you again."

Chapter nine: spades backstory

spade and the commander were best friends back in the day. Well spade thought so. The commander hated spade he tried many times but his angelic powers wouldn't let him die. So one day the commander ask spade to come with him to the volcano and as they were at the top the commander pushed spade off and cut off his eitith pair of arms to wrap them around spade. The fire gave spade fire powers because a clocked figure was watching from afar and brought him back covered his face and turned the fire from his worst fear to his advantage against that commander.

The second commander of TFM: "Come on fight me spade."

Spade: "I WONT!"

Suddenly Blockhead came out of nowhere and started fighting off the commander.

The second commander of TFM: "Well then I see someone has made friends."

Block: "We will be back just you wait."

Block: "Are you alright spade?"

Spade: "Yeah I'm fine Blockhead but I still want to find that clocked figure."

Block: "Maybe it was Kai?"

Spade: "No no Kai's powers are different Kai uses reality warping and chaos magic no no this was different. It was almost as if it was positive energy."

Block: like Sarah."

Spade: "EXACTLY but stronger."

Block: "Wait could it be the legend."

Spade: "You don't mean the man who formed and gave Sarah the embodiment of joy her powers?"

Block: "YES THE EMBODIMENT OF HAPPINESS."

The rest of the group came to them.

Kai: "what happened are you guys alright."

Spade: "no."

Spade: " we are all left."

Q: "LET ME AT HIS A** RIGHT NOW."

Kai: "Q NO!"

Q: "Fiiiiine."

They went home to discuss the recent issues with The second commander of TFM.

Chapter ten: The realm of joy

Kai: "Alright everyone I think we shouldn't discuss this here, for we don't know if they are watching us. Sarah has kindly allowed us to go to her realm and discuss there."

Q: "yay! She has the best cotton candy eveeeeeer."

They went over and started discussing the recent issues with TFM.

Kai: "thank you Sarah for allowing us to discuss here."

Sarah: "ofc anytime you want."

Block: "ok so what do we do about them?"

Q: "can't we just kill them?"

Spade: "I wish it was that easy. TFM have taken over the entire earth. 90% of the population have been brainwashed. If we kill them now surely they have something up their sleeve."

V: "He's right, TFMs leader has the strength to rival anyone. He would just have 8 commanders for no reason."

Kai: "we could sneak up on the leader and kill him?"

Sarah: "in all my years of living, not once have I ever seen a foe like TFM's leader. That man isn't a force you want to mess with. His IQ is the highest I've seen. His strength could shake universes, his goals were all ways met. And his first and second division commanders are not far off him. The first commander has the power of despair. He also predicts your every move. Well spade knows what the second commander can do."

Q: "so your telling me there's nothing we can do?"

Sarah: "there is one thing that might just give you lot a chance to survive the fight you have brought upon yourselves." "Hahahahahah"

Block: "First up, how the actual f*** do you know all this? Second, what do you mean we brought this upon ourselves? We did nothing."

Sarah: "him over there the one with wings. He's your friend no?"

Block: "yes."

Sarah: "and he survived a murder attempt from the second commander no?"

Block: "he did."

Sarah: "and isn't the main agenda of TFM covering up lose ends?"

Block: "it is."

Sarah: "So why do you think he's targeting you guys?"

Block: "to get spade?"

Sarah: "OFC IT IS OFFFFFFFFF! You guys are pmo."

Kai: "calm down guys. Sarah how do we stand a chance against them?"

Sarah: "now you want to know. Offfff fine."

Sarah: "so, TFMS power comes from influence basically. They use pillars to contain their power and distribute it amongst the division commanders. If you go to destroy the pillars. You lot might stand a chance. Hehehehehehehehehe."

V: "well, that is a lot to process."

Q: "how many pillars are there?"

Sarah: "eight."

V: "wow that's just wow."

V: "well thank you very much and may I just add you look amazing."

Sarah: "heh."

They went back home with their new found information.

Chapter eleven: The plan

Kai: "ok this is fine this is fineeeee."

Q: "uh Kai you ok?"

Kai: "no no I'm totally fine we just found out we have a bounty on our heads from the ruler of the world! How on earth would I be O K?"

Q: "but your strong..."

Kai: "uh uh you do not understand TFM, They will destroy us. So, we must destroy their pillars so we can stand a chance you heard Sarah."

Kai: "I I just can't I'm going to my room."

Q: "well that didn't go well."

V: "you think?"

Kai was severely affected by the news about TFM. So they started planing on how to destroy the first pillar.

Spade: "alright we should create a plan to destroy the first pillar."

Q: "uh we all go in a break it."

V: "the pillars are heavily guarded and they are surrounded by civilians. We can't just go in."

Kai: "well I asked the embodiment of fear about them. Turns out until you get to the main tower your powers are nullified aka no powers."

V: "Kai doesn't your demon bypass those restrictions?"

Kai: "she doesn't like helping me."

Q: "tuff."

Kai: "I'll go talk to her wait don't wake me up!"

Kai went inside his mind to talk to the entity.

Kai: "uh hello? Helllllllllo?"

Entity: "what do you want?"

Kai: "we need help with..."

Entity: "defeating TFM Ik."

Kai: "yes so can you lend me your strength."

Entity: "I will buttttt."

Kai: "uh oh."

Entity: "since your powers are basically music. You're going to save the civilians by holding a concert."

Kai: "I mean what would I sing?"

Entity: "your playlist darling."

Kai: "But I don't wanna do it though."

Entity: "then I won't help."

Kai: "ok finnnne I'll do it."

Entity: "of course you will darling."

Kai tapped back into reality to check on his friends.

Q: "what happened."

V: "are you alright?"

Kai: "yeah yeah I'm fine."

Block: "can you like answer Q?"

Kai: "she said she will help."

Spade: "that's great!"

Kai: "buuuuuut."

Block: "of course there's a but."

Kai: "I can only protect the civilians while boosting you guys."

Q: "so we can use our powers?"

Kai: "no it shall buff your physical strength and stuff."

Kai: "by the time we even find the Pilar we would've trained anyways."

Chapter twelve: the realm of jujutsu shenanigans

Kai, Q, Block, V, were sitting in the living room one night until a portal opened that no one there had opened.

Q: "What the heck is that!"

V: "don't go in!"

Kai: "no one asked V, let's go everyone!"

They went inside the portal to the portal.

Q: "what is this place!"

Kai: "I'm not sure, if I had to guess we're in the realm of jujutsu shenanigans."

V: "and what exactly is the realm of jujutsu shenanigans?"

Block: "it's just a fighting realm where your powers don't work."

Q: "we don't use powers then?"

Kai: "no there's powers specifically for this realm."

Block: "butttt, we don't know how to use them."

V: "well that's just great isn't it?"

Q: "oh be quiet V, don't be a gloomy person."

Kai: "I'm glad spade's at home, at least we'll have some form of backup."

"who is heavens name are you guys?"

Q: "same goes for you, why are you here?"

"well im pico the embodiment of playfulness and your in my territory, idiot!"

Q: "don't call me an idiot or I'll destroy you right now!"

Pico: "try me!"

V: "ENOUGH! Quit fighting, were the four bakas. I'm V, that's Blockhead, over there that's Kai, and you were fighting Q"

Pico: "wait a minute Kai? As in destroyer of Scarlet Aethel Kai?"

V: "yes that's him, do you know him?"

pico: "know him, he's my cousin!"

Everyone's jaws dropped. This was shocking, Kai had a cousin no one knew about.

Q: "Kai is this idiot your cousin?"

kai "yeah he is, he's from my mothers side."

V: "how come we never knew?"

Kai: "how come you never asked?"

Block: "what are we here for exactly?"

pico: "well, your looking for the first pillar of tfm and if you want to get closer to it you must beat this realm."

V: "how would we do that?"

pico: "I dunno..."

V: "WHATTTT?"

Kai: "he's my cousin and all, but he's still a dumb ass."

Pico: "heyyyyy...."

pico: "ok if you look up there's a character menu pick a character and train when your ready ill take you to the real people."

Kai: "ok."

they listened to pico and they each picked a character.

Block: "Jane juliet, seems rad ill pick em."

V: "blood manipulator, ill pick that guy,"

Q: "restless gambeler, eh good enough. Wait he likes donuts F**K YEAHHHH!"

Kai: "star rage, she seems sick."

They started training for the fight ahead of them.

Kai: "hey Q?"

Q: "yeah?"

Kai: "hows it going with your character?"

Q: "eh."

Kai: "an eh from you is good!"

Q: "be gratefulllll."

Kai: "I just said its good."

Block: "idiots stop fighting we need to fight against eachother to train more thoroughly."

V: "When did your vocabulary get that large pablo?"

Block: "Oh shut up v its none of your business."

they started fighting each other to see if they were ready to fight the people they don't know.

Kai: "hey V!"

mass breaker!!!! V was hit with a punch that sent him flying.

V: "ow!"

piercing blood!!!! V hit kai with a blast, but kai blocked it with gurruda(garuda is a shikigami, Garuda being a shikigami means it can move independently.)

V: "how in the world is that fair?"

Kai: "don't hate the player vanessa, hate the game."

V: "DON'T CALL ME VANSSA!"

super nova!!! suddenly orbs that were shadowing the group exploded and sent kai into a building.

Q: "Hey back off!"

Shutter doors!! Two metro doors closed on V.

V: "teaming much?"

Q: "oh shut up!"

Reverse balls!!! Q flicked exploding balls onto V.

Piercing blood!!! V sent a beam of blood towards Q.

The blast sent V flying into the super market.

Granite blast!!! A beam shot from blocks hair, it seems as if it's moving on its own towards Q.

It hit him. Q: "what the hell man!"

Block: "toughen up kid!"

Garuda started coming to the pair in the shape of a ball.

BOOM!!! Block head and Q were sent back.

Kai stucked his tongue out, Q and Block head did the same.

Second helping!! Block tried to slam Kai.

Garuda stab!! Garuda stabbed Block and sent him away.

Fever breakdown!!! Q crashed into Kai and sent him into shutter doors.

Pico: "I think you guys are ready!"

V: "finally!"

Block: "thank god!"

Kai: "we're gonna beat them!"

Q: "yeah we will!"

They were sent to fight the other people that were in the challenge.

Pico: "if you guys are in a life or death situation your powers will be activated other than that you use the powers you have chosen, good luck to you all!"

V: "There's way more people than I anticipated."

Kai: "we know V, let's try win people."

Garuda rebound!! Kai: "I got one!"

Shutter doors!!! Reverse balls!!! Q: "another one bites the dust."

Granite blast!!! Block: "Eat my dust!"

Piercing blood!! V: "that was easy, why though?"

Furnace..... BOOM!!! Everyone gets sent flying.

Q: "you had to say it right?"

V: "shut up Q!"

Dismantle!! The person used on Q and V.

As they were about to be hit Kai blocked it with Garuda.

Kai: "you guys have to focus!"

Q: "who is that guy?"

Block: "I have no idea, but he's probably the guy pico told us about."

V: "what?"

Kai: "when?"

Q: "whos pico?"

Pico: "I actually forgot to tell you guys, he's the most powerful person here named black vein, bye."

V: "WHAT!"

Q: "his names stupid."

Block: "really stupid."

Black vein: "who you calling stupid"

V: "calm down they don't mean it, we just want to stop TFM."

Black Vein: "I hate TFM. Tell you what I'll leave you guys alone when we get out of this place we'll work together to beat them."

Kai: "deal!"

Black vein left leaving the four bakas alone together.

Q: "how could you just accept without asking us?"

Kai: "last I checked I'm the strongest one here if he's not good I'll turn him into a wine glass."

V: "not everything about strength Kai, and you can't even do that."

Block: "can we just finish beating everyone!"

They went on to finish their task.

Pico: "well done everyone, you five will be allowed to leave."

Black Vein: "don't get used to it."

The portal back home shimmered open in front of them, a lot calmer looking than the one that had dragged them in.

V: "how will you know if we need you again?"

Pico: "I'll find you. that's how family works right?"

Block: "we've known each other for like an hour."

Pico: "well i've know kai for years and your his friends so your my family."

Block: "can we please just go home, I've been punched by garuda enough for one day."

Q: "same, also I'm starving."

V: "you're always starving."

Q: "and I'll always be right about it."

They stepped through the portal one by one, Black Vein hanging back a second to glance at Pico.

Black Vein: "honor me while I'm gone."

Pico: "we'll see."

The portal closed behind them, and just like that, the realm of jujutsu shenanigans went quiet again, waiting for the next group of idiots to wander in.

Back on the other side, the four bakas and Black Vein stumbled back into the apartment, exhausted, bruised, and somehow already arguing about dinner.

Spade looked up from the couch, still in the middle of his show.

Spade: "you guys smell like a battlefield. also who's the new guy?"

Q: "long story."

Block: "very long story."

Kai: "we'll explain over food."

Spade: "did you bring food?"

Kai: "no."

Spade: "then I don't want to hear the story."

They explained to spade what happened and who black vein.

Chapter thirteen: Sarah's price

The portal to Sarah's realm opened easier this time, like it recognized them now. They landed in a field of soft golden light, cotton candy clouds drifting lazy overhead.

Q: "Ooooh free food realm let's gooooo!"

Kai: "Q we're not here for the food."

Q: "Speak for yourself."

Sarah was sitting on a swing that wasn't attached to anything, just floating there, kicking her legs.

Sarah: "back so soon? Did you guys not get the message?"

Block: "no, we actually wanted to ask you something."

Sarah: "ooooh a question, how exciting."

V: "you've helped us twice now. Info, the whole cotton candy rescue thing. What do you actually get out of that?"

Sarah stopped swinging.

Sarah: "that's a good question actually."

Q: “wait she’s being normal, that’s scary.”

Sarah: “shut up donut boy.”

Sarah stood up, and for a second the golden light around her flickered, just slightly, like a candle in wind.

Sarah: “you wanna know the price? fine, I’ll tell you.”

Sarah: “I’m joy, not a person who’s happy, I mean I am the concept. and concepts don’t run on nothing, they run on real stuff. real feelings.”

Sarah: “so when I give you my power, I’m not losing energy like you idiots do. I’m losing myself a little. and to get it back I need something real. not the fake stuff you all hide behind.”

Block: “the fake stuff?”

Sarah: “yeah; Q’s jokes, Kai’s little ‘I’m fine’ routine, V’s whole ‘don’t call me Vanessa’ thing, that’s armor, not feelings.”

Q went quiet, which almost never happened.

Sarah: “so here’s my price. one of you tells me something real, not a bit, not a deflection, something that’s actually true and actually hurts a little to say.”

Kai: “that’s it?”

Sarah: “that’s it. that’s the whole payment.”

Silence. The clouds kept drifting.

V: “that’s worse than a favor.”

Sarah: “yeah it usually is.”

Q looked at the ground for once, no jokes lined up.

Q: “I don’t remember what my planet sounds like anymore.”

Everyone looked at him.

Q: “like I remember what it looks like. the moons and stuff, but the sound, wind, or whatever cartoonia had for wind. I can’t hear it in my head anymore, and that scares me more than any of the TFM stuff.”

Nobody said anything for a second. Sarah’s light steadied, warmed a little.

Sarah: “there it is.”

Sarah: “thank you Q.”

Q: “yeah whatever don’t make it weird.”

Block: "Q.."

Q: "I said don't make it weird Blockhead."

Sarah smiled, soft, not her usual chaotic grin.

Sarah: "that's my price paid. I'll help with pillar one whenever you're ready."

Kai: "wait, that's really all it takes?"

Sarah: "that's really it."

They left the realm quieter than they came in. Q didn't crack a single joke on the way back, which somehow worried Block more than anything TFM had done so far.

Chapter fourteen: The Blockiest Breakdown

Ever since the jujutsu realm, Block had been the one holding everything together. Breaking up fights. Reminding Q to actually help people instead of eating donuts. Checking on Spade. Checking on Kai. Nobody ever really checked on him.

They were back at the apartment arguing about the pillar plan for the third day in a row.

Q: "I still think we just go in swinging."

V: "we've been over this Q, civilians."

Q: "civilians shmivilians."

V: "that's not even a word."

Kai: "guys can we just—"

Q: "no Kai you always side with V."

Kai: "I do not!"

Block: "GUYS!"

Everyone stopped.

Block: "do you ever hear yourselves? we have little to no time until we have an actual pillar to destroy, a commander who predicts every move we make, and you're arguing about who gets to say 'shmivilians.'"

Q: "...it's a good word."

Block: "Q I swear to god."

Something cracked in Block's voice on that last word. Not loud, just wrong, like a hairline fracture nobody noticed until the whole thing gave way.

Block: "I'm always the one keeping this together. Spade almost dies, I check on him. Kai shuts down, I go get him. Q does something stupid, I clean it up. Who's checking on me? Whos asking if BLOCK IS OK?"

The room went dead silent. Even Q didn't have a joke.

Block: "I didn't even want this power. I never asked for any of this. I just wanted—"

And that's when it happened. The air around him seemed to fold, like reality itself was making room. Two more Blockheads stepped out from where there had only been one, solid, breathing, glaring.

Block #2: "to be left alone for once."

Block #3: "but nobody ever asks, do they."

V: "there's three of you."

Block (original): "what."

Block #2: "oh don't act surprised, you knew this could happen."

Block #3: "we're literally you, dumbass."

The original Block stared at his own hands like he didn't recognize them.

Kai: "Block, breathe. we're here now, okay? we're listening."

Block #2 folded his arms, still glaring, still clearly furious in a way the real Block usually never let show.

Block #2: "are you though? or are you just saying that because I finally snapped and now it's convenient to care?"

Spade quietly walked over from the couch, no jokes, no deflecting, just sat down next to the original Block.

Spade: "for what it's worth. I did notice. I just didn't know how to say it without making it weird."

Q, uncharacteristically quiet, sat on Block's other side.

Q: "yeah same. sorry man."

The two clones flickered, like static settling, and slowly folded back into the original, the crack in the air sealing shut behind them.

Block (original), quieter now: "...that's never happened before."

V: "clones. you can make clones."

Block: "I guess I can."

Kai: "well that's terrifyingly useful for the pillar fight."

Block let out a short laugh, more tired than amused.

Block: "guess my breakdown came with a silver lining."

Q: "for real though. you good?"

Block: "...getting there."

Block: "just. maybe ask next time. before I have to split into three people to get a point across."

Q: "noted."

V: "noted."

Kai: "noted."

Nobody argued. They just sat there together, quiet, letting Block have the moment he never let himself take.

Chapter fifteen: The morning after

Block woke up before everyone else, which wasn't unusual. What was unusual was how long he laid there just staring at the ceiling before actually getting up.

He didn't remember falling asleep. He remembered Q and Spade sitting next to him, remembered V and Kai saying "noted" like it meant something, and then just... quiet. A good quiet. The kind he wasn't used to being allowed to have.

He got up and made coffee, mostly so his hands would have something to do.

Q shuffled in first, hair a mess, still half asleep.

Q: "morning big guy."

Block: "morning."

Q: "you good?"

Block: "you already asked me that last night."

Q: "yeah well I'm asking again. that's kinda the whole point isn't it."

Block almost smiled into his coffee.

Block: "...yeah. I'm good."

Q: "liar."

Block: "getting there. that's what I said last night and I meant it."

Q: "good enough for me."

Q grabbed a donut from the counter, the same box from three days ago, somehow still there.

Q: "so uh. clones huh."

Block: "clones huh."

Q: "that's so cool though, not gonna lie. imagine how much cleaning we could get done."

Block: "Q."

Q: "I'm serious! free labor!"

Block: "they're not Roombas, they're me."

Q: "a Block shaped Roomba. groundbreaking."

Despite himself, Block laughed, actual and full, the first real laugh in a while.

V walked in next, already dressed, already alert in that way she always was.

V: "you're laughing. that's a good sign."

Block: "Q called me a Roomba."

V: "accurate."

Block: "not you too."

V sat down across from him, quieter now, dropping the teasing.

V: "hey. for real though. how are you doing."

Block: "...I don't know honestly."

Block: "it's weird. I've spent so long being the one who asks that question I forgot what it's like being on the other side of it."

V: "yeah well. get used to it. we're not gonna stop."

Block: "Q already promised the same thing last night and immediately called me an appliance."

V: "that tracks."

Kai came in last, looking like he hadn't slept much, which wasn't unusual either, but he had that look he got when he'd actually been thinking about something instead of just spiraling.

Kai: "hey. can I talk to you for a sec. alone."

Q: "ooooh secret meeting."

V: "Q let them talk."

Q: "fine fine."

Q dragged V out by the sleeve, mostly so they wouldn't have to be told twice.

Kai sat down across from Block, quiet for a second.

Kai: "I didn't know."

Block: "you weren't supposed to. that was kind of the problem."

Kai: "no I mean. I get it now. more than you'd think."

Kai: "when everything happened with Amy, when the realm—"

He stopped, like even saying it out loud cost him something.

Kai: "everyone was so busy worrying about what I'd become that nobody asked what I actually needed. I just got handed a crown and a trial and a room to sit in."

Block: "...Kai."

Kai: "so yeah. I get it. more than I wish I did."

Block: "that's not exactly a fun thing to have in common."

Kai: "no. but I'm glad I get it. means I actually know what to say now instead of just guessing."

Block: "and what's that?"

Kai: "that I see you. not just 'the responsible one.' you. Block. Pablo. whatever you want to be called today."

Block laughed again, quieter this time, more tired but warmer.

Block: "Pablo's fine. haven't heard that in a while."

Kai: "then Pablo it is."

They sat there for a second, not saying anything, which for once didn't feel heavy.

Spade wandered in last, still rubbing his eyes, clearly having heard about the night before secondhand.

Spade: "so. clones. wish I'd been here for that."

Block: "you were on the couch. same as always."

Spade: "yeah and I feel bad about it. figured I should say that out loud instead of just thinking it."

Block: "...thanks Spade."

Spade: "least I could do. also can we please eat actual breakfast, that donut box has been sitting there for three days and I don't trust it anymore."

Q, from the other room: "I HEARD THAT AND I'M OFFENDED!"

Block: "welcome back to normal, everyone."

For the first time in a while, “normal” didn’t feel like something he had to hold together by himself.

Chapter sixteen: Splitting the difference

After breakfast — and after Q got yelled at for eating the “three day old” donuts anyway — the group headed to the empty lot behind the apartment building to actually test what Block could do.

Spade came along too, hood pulled up, the fabric sitting low enough that his eyes never showed, just like always. Nobody questioned it anymore. It was just Spade.

Kai: “alright Pablo, do your thing.”

Block: “don’t call me Pablo in front of everyone, V already ruined that nickname for daily use.”

V: “I did no such thing.”

Block: “you called me Pablo mid-argument like it was an insult.”

V: “it was a little bit.”

Block sighed and closed his eyes, trying to recreate whatever he’d felt the night before. Nothing happened.

Q: “...so is it broken?”

Block: “give me a second.”

He tried again. Still nothing. Just him, standing in an empty lot, feeling increasingly stupid.

Spade: “maybe it’s not something you can just turn on.”

Block: “what do you mean?”

Spade: “my fire didn’t work the first few times either. not until I stopped trying to force it and just meant it.”

Q: “deep.”

Spade: “shut up Q.”

Block: “meant it how.”

Spade: “last night you weren’t trying to make clones. you were just done holding everything in by yourself. maybe it only shows up when you actually need it, not when you’re just testing it like a party trick.”

Block: “so what, I have to have a breakdown every time I want backup in a fight? that’s not exactly efficient.”

V: “maybe not a full breakdown. maybe just... honesty. real honesty, not the polite kind.”

Block: “so if I just, what, say something true out loud—”

Block: “I’m actually kind of scared of the pillar fight.”

Nothing happened.

Q: “guess that wasn’t true enough.”

Block: “IT WAS TRUE!”

Kai: “maybe it has to be something you don’t normally say. something you’re actively holding back, not something you’d admit anyway if someone asked.”

Block thought for a second, jaw tight.

Block: “...I’m scared that when we actually fight TFM for real, I’m going to freeze. like I did with the gang that one time. and someone’s going to get hurt because of it, and it’ll be my fault, and none of you will actually blame me because you’re all too nice, and that’ll be worse.”

The air folded again, just like before. Two more Blocks stepped out, arms crossed, same tired eyes as the original.

Block #2: “there it is.”

Block #3: “he really does not like saying that part out loud.”

V: “...okay so it’s tied to real vulnerability. every time.”

Kai: “that’s actually kind of useful. terrifying, but useful.”

Q: “can they fight though? like actually fight, not just stand there being emo?”

Block #2, flatly: “we can hear you.”

Q: “good! that means you can also hear me say you’re doing great sweetie.”

Block #3: “I hate that this worked and I still have to deal with him.”

The original Block sighed, watching his own duplicates bicker with Q like they’d always been separate people.

Block: “okay. so. the power runs on honesty. real honesty. that’s either the best or worst thing that’s happened to me this week.”

Spade: “for what it’s worth, that’s not a bad trade. some of us just get fire. you get backup that’s also emotionally available.”

Block: “that supposed to be comforting?”

Spade: “little bit.”

The two clones flickered and folded back into Block, same as before, leaving him standing there alone again, a little lighter than before.

Kai: “so, same rules as last time — they fade back after a while?”

Block: “seems like it. don’t know the limit yet.”

V: “guess we’ll find out in the field.”

Q: “can we test it more though? like, on purpose? say more sad stuff?”

Block: “absolutely not.”

Q: “worth a shot.”

Block: “Q I love you but if you make me do that again today I will throw you into the lake.”

Q: “worth it.”

They headed back inside, one step closer to being ready for whatever chapter twenty-five had waiting for them, even if none of them knew that yet.

For once, nothing was trying to kill them. No pillars, no commanders, no portals. Just a Tuesday.

Q declared it “Fun Day” at approximately 8 a.m., loudly, while standing on the kitchen counter for no reason anyone could identify.

Q: “I HEREBY DECLARE TODAY FUN DAY!”

Block: “get off the counter.”

Q: “FUN DAY HAS NO RULES!”

Block: “it has the rule of get off the counter.”

Q got off the counter.

V came out already regretting whatever was about to happen, coffee in hand like a shield.

V: “what’s fun day.”

Q: “we do fun stuff! no pillars, no commanders, no emotional breakdowns—”

Block: “hey.”

Q: “—no OFFENSE, just, we deserve a normal day is all I’m saying!”

Kai wandered in still in pajamas, hair a disaster.

Kai: “fun day sounds fake but okay I’m listening.”

Q: “first order of business. donut run.”

Block: “we JUST talked about the donut situation.”

Q: “this is a NEW box. fresh box. clean slate.”

Spade, hood up as always, appeared in the doorway like he'd been summoned by the word "donut."

Spade: "I'm in."

Block: "of course you are."

They somehow ended up at the Krispy Kreme, which Q treated with the reverence of a sacred temple.

Q: "everyone bow."

V: "I will not be bowing to a donut shop."

Q: "your loss."

The cashier, visibly unbothered by five people who looked like they'd walked out of several different fantasy novels, took their order without blinking.

Cashier: "and for you?"

Q: "one of everything."

Cashier: "...everything?"

Q: "everything."

Block: "we are not buying one of everything."

Q: "Block it's FUN DAY."

Block: "Fun Day doesn't mean bankruptcy day."

They compromised on two dozen, which Q still considered a personal loss.

Back at the apartment, "fun day" devolved into increasingly chaotic activities. First it was Mario Kart, which ended with V throwing the controller so hard it left a dent in the wall.

V: "Q I SWEAR TO GOD."

Q: "blue shells are FAIR GAME V."

V: "YOU HIT ME THREE TIMES IN A ROW."

Q: "SKILL."

Block: "that's coming out of your allowance."

Q: "I don't have an allowance I have STOLEN VILLAIN MONEY."

Block: "...okay that's actually fair, never mind."

Then it was truth or dare, which nobody actually wanted to play but somehow got roped into anyway.

Kai: "Spade, truth or dare."

Spade: "dare."

Kai: "kiss the wall."

Spade: "...that's it?"

Kai: "I panicked, I didn't think this far ahead."

Spade kissed the wall. It was, by unanimous agreement, extremely anticlimactic.

Q: "my turn my turn. V, truth or dare."

V: "truth."

Q: "do you actually hate being called Vanessa or do you secretly like the attention?"

V: "I WILL END YOU."

Q: "that's not an answer."

V: "TRUTH OR DARE ISN'T SUPPOSED TO BE INVASIVE."

Q: "that's LITERALLY the whole game."

Block, from the couch, not even looking up from his phone: "she likes the attention."

V: "PABLO."

Block: "sorry. force of habit. saying true things out loud."

Q: "OH MY GOD IS THAT GONNA MAKE CLONES OF YOU NOW TOO?"

Block: "please do not test that theory."

By evening they'd somehow ended up on the roof, all five of them lying on their backs looking at a sky that, for once, had no cracks in it, no portals, no sonic booms waiting to happen.

Kai: "this was actually really nice."

Q: "told you. Fun Day works every time."

Block: "this is the first Fun Day."

Q: "and it worked, so."

Spade, quiet for a while, finally spoke.

Spade: "can we do this again. before the pillar thing."

Nobody answered right away, because nobody wanted to say what they were all thinking — that a day like this, easy and stupid and normal, might be rarer than any of them wanted to admit once things got serious.

Kai: “yeah. we will.”

V: “promise?”

Kai: “promise.”

Q, ruining the moment as efficiently as always: “can Fun Day number two include more donuts though.”

Block: “absolutely not.”

Q: “worth asking.”

They stayed up there a while longer, five idiots on a roof, pretending — just for one day — that the world outside wasn’t waiting to test all of them.

Chapter eighteen: Something’s watching

The morning after Fun Day started slow, in the best way possible. Q was still riding the high of “one of everything,” recounting the donut count like a war story nobody asked to hear.

Q: “and THEN, I ate the twenty-third one, and Block said—”

Block: “I said stop before you throw up on my couch.”

Q: “which I DIDN’T.”

Block: “barely.”

V sat curled up with coffee, still not over the Mario Kart incident, occasionally shooting Q a look that promised future violence. Spade was on the couch as always, hood up, half-watching whatever was on TV, half just enjoying the quiet.

Kai came out last, stretching, actually looking rested for once.

Kai: “so are we doing Fun Day two or—”

He stopped mid-sentence.

Q: “...Kai?”

Kai: “does it feel colder in here to anyone else.”

Block: “it’s the same temperature as always.”

Kai: “no I mean. wrong colder. like something’s off.”

V set her coffee down slowly, actually paying attention now.

V: "Kai doesn't get weird about nothing."

The room went quiet, actually quiet, the kind of quiet that made you notice things you normally wouldn't — the hum of the fridge, the faint sound of the street outside, and then, underneath all of it, nothing. The street noise had dropped out entirely.

Spade sat up slowly, hood shifting as he turned toward the window.

Spade: "...someone's outside."

Block: "TFM?"

Spade: "don't know yet."

They moved to the window carefully, and there, standing in the middle of the street, was a figure in a long dark coat, hood up similarly to Spade's, perfectly still, facing directly at their building.

Q: "okay that's creepy."

Kai: "who is that."

Spade squinted, studying the posture, the stillness.

Spade: "...that's not a commander."

Block: "how do you know?"

Spade: "commanders don't stand still like that. that's someone trying not to be noticed. badly."

V: "a scout."

Spade: "probably."

Q, already grinning: "so we go grab him?"

Block: "Q—"

Q: "WHAT he's just standing there! free intel!"

Kai actually considered it for a second.

Kai: "...Q's not wrong. if TFM's watching us, we should know why. and how much they actually know."

V: "that's assuming he doesn't just run the second we go outside."

Spade: "he will run."

Block: "then we don't give him the chance to."

They actually put a plan together fast, faster than expected, everyone slipping into a kind of focus that hadn't shown up since the jujutsu realm training.

Kai: "Block, clones by the back alley in case he tries to bolt that way."

Block: "on it."

Kai: "V, you're fast, cut him off from the main road."

V: "got it."

Kai: "Q, you're loud and annoying, so—"

Q: "excuse me?"

Kai: "—so you distract him head on while we box him in."

Q: "...okay that's actually a compliment I'll allow it."

Kai: "Spade, stay close to me. if this really is a scout, and he sees you—"

Spade: "he might recognize me. yeah. I know."

Kai: "you sure you're good?"

Spade: "no. let's go anyway."

They moved fast, spilling out of the apartment and down the stairs, adrenaline doing most of the talking. By the time they hit the street, the figure hadn't moved, still just standing there, watching the building like he hadn't noticed five people were now barreling straight toward him.

Q, sprinting ahead, way too loud: "HEY BUDDY, NICE COAT, WHERE'D YOU GET IT, TFM GIFT SHOP?"

The figure's head snapped toward them immediately, and for the first time, they got a look at his face — young, sharp-eyed, startled in a way that read more nervous rookie than seasoned threat.

Scout: "...crap."

He turned to bolt down the alley, exactly where Block had already sent two clones waiting.

Block #2: "going somewhere?"

The scout skidded to a stop, spinning the other direction, straight toward the main road — where V was already there, faster than he expected, cutting the angle off before he could even build speed.

V: "nope."

Scout: "oh come ON."

He tried one more direction, a narrow gap between buildings, and that's when Kai and Spade closed in from behind, boxing him in completely, nowhere left to run.

Q strolled up last, entirely too pleased with himself.

Q: "and that's how it's done."

The scout raised his hands slowly, breathing hard, clearly not trained for actually getting caught.

Scout: “okay okay, I surrender, please don’t kill me, I’m literally just an intern.”

Block, still mostly clone-form flanking the alley: “an intern.”

Scout: “TFM has interns! it’s not glamorous work! I just watch buildings and report back, I don’t even get benefits!”

V: “that’s somehow the funniest and saddest thing I’ve heard all week.”

Kai crouched down slightly to actually look at him properly.

Kai: “who sent you.”

Scout: “I I can’t say that.”

Kai: “who sent you.”

The scout’s eyes flicked nervously toward Spade, who hadn’t said a word since they cornered him, hood still hiding whatever expression he had.

Scout: “...the second commander wanted eyes on you guys. specifically him.”

He nodded slightly at Spade.

Spade finally spoke, voice low.

Spade: “of course he did.”

Block: “what’s he want with intel on us exactly.”

Scout: “I don’t know, I swear, I just watch and report, that’s literally the whole job description!”

Q: “so what, you just stand in the street all creepy and take notes?”

Scout: “...yes actually. that’s exactly the job.”

Q: “that’s the worst job I’ve ever heard of.”

Scout: “TELL ME ABOUT IT.”

Despite the tension, a couple of them almost laughed at that, the sheer absurdity of catching a terrified TFM intern instead of some looming mythic threat.

Kai stood back up, thinking.

Kai: “okay. here’s what’s gonna happen. you’re gonna tell us everything you know, and in exchange, we don’t hand you over to whatever happens to failed TFM scouts.”

Scout: “oh god, yeah, okay, deal, please, I really don’t wanna know what happens to failed scouts.”

They brought him back to the apartment, more out of necessity than trust, Block keeping one clone stationed by the door the entire time just in case.

Once inside, the scout — who introduced himself, nervously, as Dennis — actually turned out to be a decent source of information, if a scared and rambling one.

Dennis: “look, all I know is the pillars are being reinforced lately. like, extra security, extra everyone. the higher-ups are nervous about something.”

V: “us?”

Dennis: “probably? I mean you guys blew up a whole realm once, according to the files.”

Kai flinched slightly at that, and Spade noticed, shifting a little closer to him without saying anything.

Dennis: “and the second commander specifically wanted updates on him—” he nodded at Spade again “—which, no offense, seems personal.”

Spade: “it is personal.”

Dennis: “yeah figured, sorry, not my business.”

Block: “what about the first commander. despair guy.”

Dennis went pale at just the mention.

Dennis: “I don’t talk about him. nobody talks about him. that’s like, rule one of being an intern.”

Q: “worse than the second commander?”

Dennis: “the second commander yells at you. the first commander doesn’t have to.”

That got quiet fast.

Kai: “alright. Dennis. thank you. you’ve actually been really helpful.”

Dennis: “so can I go now? please? I have a report due and if I’m late they’ll—”

Block: “we’re letting you go. but you’re gonna tell them nothing about this conversation.”

Dennis: “oh yeah, obviously, I’m not stupid, I’ll just say you guys chased me off. which, to be fair, is true.”

He left in a hurry, practically sprinting once he hit the street, clearly relieved to still be alive.

The group stood in the apartment afterward, processing everything.

V: “well. that was easier than expected.”

Q: “I still think we should’ve kept him. free intel forever.”

Block: “he’s an intern Q, not a pet.”

Kai stayed quiet for a while, thinking about the file Dennis mentioned, about the words “blew up a whole realm,” about how casually that had been said, like it was just a line item in a report somewhere.

Spade noticed.

Spade: “hey. you good?”

Kai: “..yeah. just. weird hearing it said like that. like it’s just data to them.”

Spade: “to them, it probably is.”

Kai: “great. comforting.”

Spade: “I never said it was comforting.”

Despite everything, Kai managed a small laugh.

Block, looking between everyone, finally spoke up, more serious now.

Block: “okay. so. pillars are getting reinforced. TFM’s nervous. and the second commander is still fixated on Spade specifically.”

V: “which means whatever we do next, it’s not gonna get easier from here.”

Q, for once without a joke ready: “yeah. guess Fun Day really was a one-time thing for a while.”

Nobody argued with that.

Outside, the street had gone back to its normal noise, cars and people, completely unaware that five people upstairs had just caught, interrogated, and released a terrified TFM intern named Dennis — and that somewhere out there, a report about them was about to land on a desk that answered to someone far scarier than Dennis ever could be.

Chapter nineteen: The report

Dennis ran the entire way back, lungs burning, coat flapping behind him, rehearsing his story over and over in his head. They chased me off. That’s it. That’s the whole story. Chased me off, didn’t get anything, nothing to see here.

He burst through the doors of TFM’s second division outpost, still catching his breath, and immediately regretted his life choices when he saw who was waiting.

The second commander sat leaned back in a chair that looked far too nice for the room around it, tapping his fingers against the armrest in a slow, unbothered rhythm.

Second commander: “well?”

Dennis: “sir. commander sir. they, uh. they spotted me.”

Second commander: “obviously. you’re standing here instead of watching them, aren’t you.”

Dennis: "right. yes. they chased me off before I could get anything useful."

The commander's fingers stopped tapping.

Second commander: "Dennis."

Dennis: "..yes sir."

Second commander: "you've been doing this job for eight months. you've never once been caught."

Dennis: "lucky streak had to end sometime sir."

Second commander: "mm."

He stood up slowly, walking a slow circle around Dennis, who very much did not enjoy being circled.

Second commander: "so nothing useful at all. no names. no plans. no reactions."

Dennis: "nothing sir."

Second commander: "interesting."

He stopped directly in front of him.

Second commander: "because you smell like that apartment's coffee. and you've got a donut crumb on your collar."

Dennis looked down. There was, in fact, a donut crumb on his collar.

Dennis: "...that could be from anywhere."

Second commander: "Dennis."

Dennis: "okay. okay fine. they caught me. they asked questions. I panicked. I might have said some things."

Second commander: "what things."

Dennis: "just. general things. that the pillars are getting reinforced. that everyone's a little on edge. nothing specific, I swear, I didn't give up anything about the actual plans because honestly I don't even know the actual plans, I'm an intern—"

Second commander: "did they ask about me."

Dennis went very still.

Dennis: "..yes sir."

Second commander: "and about him. the winged one."

Dennis: "you were already watching him specifically. they figured that part out on their own, I didn't have to tell them anything."

The commander's expression didn't change much, but something behind his eyes sharpened, focused, the way a predator's does when it stops pretending to be casual.

Second commander: "they know I'm watching him."

Dennis: "...yes sir."

Second commander: "good."

Dennis blinked.

Dennis: "good sir?"

Second commander: "let him know. let him sit with that. let him wonder when, not if."

He turned and walked toward the window, looking out over the city, hands folded behind his back.

Second commander: "write up your report, Dennis. include everything, don't leave anything out this time."

Dennis: "yes sir. right away sir."

Dennis scrambled off toward his desk, more relieved than he probably should have been to still be in one piece. He sat down, pulled out a blank form, and stared at it for a solid minute before writing a single word.

Complication.

He crossed it out. Wrote Development instead. Stared at that too. Eventually just wrote everything down plainly, because lying on an official TFM report felt like a much bigger risk than telling the truth ever would be.

Elsewhere, in a much colder, much quieter room, the report reached someone else entirely — someone who didn't need Dennis's written version at all, because he'd already seen the whole thing happen before it happened.

The first commander sat motionless in the dark, hands folded in his lap, a faint impression of five figures cornering a sixth playing out again and again in his mind like a memory that hadn't technically occurred yet.

He'd known Dennis would get caught three days before Dennis knew it himself. He'd known the exact order they'd box him in — Block first, then V, then Kai and Spade closing the gap. He'd known Q would be loud about it. He'd known, down to the word, that Dennis would call himself an intern like it was a shield.

None of that concerned him.

What concerned him — mildly, distantly, the way something might concern a man who hadn't truly felt urgency in centuries — was the timing of it. They were getting organized faster than projected. Working together smoother than projected. The boy with wings was staying closer to the

group than projected, letting himself be protected instead of isolating like he usually did after something rattled him.

He replayed the scene once more, slower this time, watching the way Block's clones had folded seamlessly into the group's plan without hesitation, the way V had cut an angle off before the scout even committed to it, the way Kai had given orders without stumbling over them like he used to.

Interesting.

He allowed himself something close to a smile, thin and humorless, more habit than emotion.

First commander, quietly, to no one: "...recalculating."

He closed his eyes, and for a moment the impression of the five of them dissolved, replaced by something further out, something blurrier — a version of the future that hadn't fully solidified yet, full of branches he couldn't quite see the ends of. That, more than anything, unsettled him. He was not used to blur.

He opened his eyes again.

First commander: "not yet. not for a while still."

Outside his window, nothing moved. No wind, no birds, no sound at all. Just him, sitting in the dark, watching a future only he could see, quietly adjusting it piece by piece, one uncertain branch at a time.

Back at the apartment, unaware of either conversation happening in TFM's direction, the five of them were arguing about dinner with the kind of intensity usually reserved for actual emergencies.

Q: "we should get pizza."

Block: "we just did donuts and Krispy Kreme, we need actual food."

Q: "pizza IS actual food. it has vegetables on it sometimes."

Block: "pepperoni is not a vegetable Q."

Q: "I said SOMETIMES."

V: "he's not wrong that pizza exists, I'll give him that much."

Block: "V don't encourage him."

V: "I'm not encouraging him, I'm being factually accurate."

Q: "SEE, V GETS IT."

Block: "V agreeing that pizza exists is not the same as V agreeing we should order it tonight."

V: "...okay that's fair, retract my support."

Q: "TRAITOR."

Kai sat a little apart from the argument, still thinking about Dennis, about the file, about the second commander knowing they knew he was watching, turning the whole conversation over and over like a stone in his pocket.

Spade noticed, sitting down next to him quietly.

Spade: "you're doing the thing."

Kai: "what thing."

Spade: "the thing where you go quiet and stare at nothing and pretend you're fine."

Kai: "...I do that?"

Spade: "constantly."

Kai let out a breath, half a laugh, half something heavier.

Kai: "I just keep thinking about what Dennis said. that they're nervous. that we're actually on their radar for real now, not just as some annoying group of vigilantes."

Spade: "good."

Kai: "...good?"

Spade: "means we're actually a threat to them now instead of background noise. that's progress, even if it's scary progress."

Kai considered that for a moment.

Kai: "you're weirdly good at reframing terrifying things into something manageable."

Spade: "had a lot of practice."

Kai: "yeah. guess you have."

He glanced over at Spade's hood, the fabric still sitting low over his eyes even now, even at home, even surrounded by people who'd never once asked him to take it off.

Kai: "does it get exhausting? always having it up?"

Spade went quiet for a second.

Spade: "...sometimes."

Kai: "you don't have to answer that."

Spade: "no, it's fine. it's just — it's not really about hiding anymore. not entirely. it's more like. habit. armor. same as your 'I'm fine' voice, probably."

Kai: "ouch."

Spade: "you started it."

Kai laughed for real that time, something in his chest loosening slightly.

Across the room, the pizza debate had somehow escalated into Q attempting to physically wrestle the phone away from Block to order it himself, which Block was blocking with one arm while not even looking up from what he was doing.

Block: “Q I will make three more of me and we will still all say no.”

Q: “empty threat, your clones like me.”

Block #2 flickered into existence just long enough to say—

Block #2: “he’s right, I do.”

—before folding back in, leaving Block visibly betrayed by his own power.

Block: “...okay that one’s fair.”

V, laughing despite herself: “the clones have free will now, incredible.”

Block: “they’re not supposed to have opinions separate from mine, that defeats the purpose.”

Q: “too late, democracy has spoken, PIZZA WINS.”

Block sighed and finally, reluctantly, dialed the number, to a small cheer from Q that was somehow both obnoxious and endearing at the same time.

For a moment it almost felt normal again — almost — even with everything hanging over them now, even with a report sitting on a desk somewhere with their names on it, even with a first commander somewhere in the dark quietly rearranging a future they couldn’t see.

Almost.

Later that night, after the pizza was gone and Q had been banned from ordering anything ever again “as a formality,” the group ended up back on the roof, same as Fun Day, except the sky felt a little different this time. Heavier. Closer.

Kai broke the quiet first.

Kai: “we need to actually start training. for real this time. not the jujutsu realm kind, not sparring for fun kind. the kind where we’re preparing for an actual fight against people who already know how we think.”

Block: “you mean because of the commander.”

Kai: “I mean because of both of them. the one that yells and the one that doesn’t have to.”

Nobody argued.

V: “so what, we set a schedule? actual drills?”

Kai: “yeah. starting tomorrow.”

Q, quieter than usual: “...even Fun Day?”

Kai: “Fun Day stays. we just add training around it. we’re allowed both.”

That seemed to settle something in Q, some tension easing out of his shoulders that nobody had noticed was there until it was gone.

Spade looked out over the skyline, hood shifting slightly in the wind.

Spade: “he already knows we’re going to train. he probably already knows how it’ll go.”

Kai: “then we make sure it goes somewhere he didn’t expect.”

Block: “how do you plan on doing that?”

Kai: “...I have no idea yet. but we’ve got time to figure it out.”

V: “that’s either really reassuring or really not.”

Kai: “little bit of both, probably.”

They sat there a while longer, five people on a roof, no jokes this time, no arguments, just quiet, watching a sky that — for now — still had no cracks in it.

Tomorrow, that would start to change.

Chapter twenty: Day one

Kai’s alarm went off at six a.m., which was, by unanimous prior agreement, the earliest anyone in that apartment had woken up on purpose in recorded history.

Q, face down in his pillow, voice muffled: “I take it back. I take back agreeing to this.”

Block, already dressed, already annoyingly awake: “too late, get up.”

Q: “kill me instead.”

Block: “get up or I bring a clone in here to physically drag you.”

Q: “you WOULDN’T.”

A second Block appeared in the doorway, arms crossed.

Block #2: “try me.”

Q: “...fine. FINE. this is workplace bullying.”

Block: “we don’t have a workplace.”

Q: “exactly, so it’s WORSE.”

By six-thirty, all five of them stood in the same empty lot behind the apartment, groggy, unenthusiastic, and — in Q's case — visibly plotting some kind of revenge for the early wake-up call.

V, stretching, still half asleep: "so what exactly is the plan here."

Kai: "we're not just sparring for fun anymore. we're building actual coordination. real drills. stuff that'll hold up when someone's trying to kill us for real."

Spade: "so, basically today."

Kai: "basically today, yeah."

Block: "alright. first thing. we need to know exactly what everyone can do, on record, no guessing. so we're going one at a time."

Q: "boring. can we just fight each other instead."

Kai: "that's phase two."

Q: "there's a PHASE TWO?"

Kai: "there's a phase seven if we need it."

Q: "...I hate that I respect that."

They started with Block, mostly because his power was the newest and least understood. He stood in the center of the lot, everyone else a safe distance back.

Block: "okay so. it's tied to honesty. real honesty. so I guess I just—"

He hesitated, clearly uncomfortable doing this on command instead of naturally, like last time.

Block: "...I still think about the gang fight. the one where I froze for half a second before Q pulled that girl out. it wasn't even long. but I think about it more than I probably should."

Two clones split off from him instantly, same as before, arms crossed, same tired eyes.

Block #2: "there it is again."

Block #3: "does it get less humiliating each time or—"

Block: "no. no it does not."

V, taking notes on her phone like this was a science experiment: "okay so it's consistent. real vulnerability, real result. how long do they last."

Block #2: "we're standing right here, ask us directly."

V: "...right, sorry. how long do you last."

Block #3: "no idea. nobody's ever tested that."

Kai: "let's test it then. clones, try to hold as long as you can."

The two extra Blocks nodded and split off toward opposite sides of the lot, taking up defensive stances. Everyone else watched, waiting.

They lasted almost twenty minutes before flickering out simultaneously, folding back into the original Block, who staggered slightly like he'd just run a mile.

Block: "okay. that. that takes something out of me."

Spade: "makes sense. borrowing that much of yourself probably isn't free."

Block: "cool, love that, very cool that my trauma has a battery life."

Q: "twenty minutes is actually really good though! that's basically a whole TV episode of backup!"

Block: "please stop measuring my emotional damage in TV episodes."

Q: "no promises."

Next was V, who approached her turn with significantly more reluctance than Block had.

V: "do I actually have to demonstrate or can we just talk about it."

Kai: "we kind of need to see it in action, V."

V: "fine."

She held her hand out, focus tightening, and a thin ribbon of blood lifted from a small cut she opened on her own palm, curling in the air like a living thing before solidifying into something closer to a blade.

Q: "okay that's actually really cool ew but cool."

V: "it gets less cool the more I use it. it pulls from me directly, not just, like, ambient blood or whatever."

Block: "wait, your own blood? every time?"

V: "yeah."

Kai: "V that sounds actually dangerous, why didn't you say that before?"

V: "because it hasn't come up before! we've mostly just been punching stuff, nobody asked about my resource management."

Spade: "how much can you use before it's a problem?"

V hesitated, longer than she probably meant to.

V: "...I don't actually know. I've never pushed it that far. figured it was smarter not to find out the hard way."

The group went quiet for a second, the weight of that landing harder than V probably intended it to.

Kai: “okay. so, new rule. we find your limit here, safely, not in the middle of a pillar fight.”

V: “that’s fair. terrifying, but fair.”

They spent the next hour carefully testing V’s threshold, Block hovering nearby the entire time looking increasingly nervous, until V finally hit a point where her hands started trembling and the ribbon in the air lost its shape entirely, dissolving back into nothing.

V, breathing hard: “okay. that’s the wall. found it.”

Kai: “good. now we know. we build around that.”

V: “great. can’t wait to have a documented weakness.”

Block: “we all do now. that’s kind of the point of today.”

Q went next, and predictably, made it as chaotic as possible, cracking jokes through every single demonstration until Kai finally had to stop him mid-sentence.

Kai: “Q, seriously, can you take five minutes without a joke?”

Q: “no.”

Kai: “Q.”

Q: “...fine. five minutes. starting now.”

The five minutes lasted about ninety seconds before Q cracked, but the actual power demonstration underneath the jokes was solid — quick bursts of movement, sharp precision attacks, more control than his personality let on.

Spade, watching closely: “you’re better than you let people think.”

Q, genuinely thrown off by the sincerity: “...don’t do that.”

Spade: “do what?”

Q: “be nice. it’s weird. stick to the hood and the mystery thing.”

Spade: “noted.”

Kai went last, mostly because everyone silently agreed to save him for the end, aware of how much more complicated his power was compared to everyone else’s.

Kai: “I don’t really want to go all out here. last time I did that outside a real fight, I destroyed a town.”

Block: “we know, Kai.”

Kai: “so maybe we just. don’t test the full thing today.”

Nobody argued. Some things didn't need to be tested to be understood.

By the time the sun was fully up, all five of them were exhausted, sprawled out in various positions across the lot, sweat and dust and the particular kind of tired that came from being honest with yourself more than from actual physical effort.

Block: "okay. day one. that was a lot."

V: "understatement of the year."

Q: "can Fun Day please happen again soon I am begging."

Kai, staring up at the sky: "yeah. we'll get there."

Spade, quiet for a moment: "this is good though. actually knowing each other's limits instead of guessing mid-fight."

Kai: "yeah. exactly. that's the whole point."

Block: "well. day one down. only, what, a few weeks of this left before we're ready?"

Kai: "something like that."

Q groaned dramatically into the dirt.

Q: "I've never wanted a donut more in my entire life."

Block: "we just ate two dozen three days ago."

Q: "AND I WANT MORE."

Despite everything — the exhaustion, the exposed weaknesses, the looming reality of what they were actually training for — there was something steady about the five of them lying there together in the morning light, a little more prepared, a little more known to each other than they'd been the day before.

It wasn't much. But it was a start.

Day two of training started with Q already awake before everyone else, which had never once happened in recorded history.

Block, walking into the kitchen half asleep, nearly dropped his coffee.

Block: "...why are you up?"

Q: "can't a guy be excited for his own training day?"

Block: "no. suspicious. what did you do?"

Q: "NOTHING. I'm just READY."

Block: "you're never ready this early for anything that isn't donuts."

Q: “today IS about donuts, spiritually.”

Block decided not to ask further and just accepted the day was going to be weird.

They gathered in the lot again, everyone still a little sore from yesterday, Kai walking with a slight limp he refused to acknowledge.

Kai: “alright, Q. your turn.”

Q: “FINALLY. okay, everyone stand back, this is gonna be sick.”

V: “you say that before literally everything you do.”

Q: “and I’m usually right.”

Q: “usually.”

Block: “that’s not reassuring.”

Kai: “alright, walk us through it properly this time. we’ve all seen you fight, but nobody’s actually broken down what you’re doing, mechanically.”

Q rolled his shoulders, grinning.

Q: “okay so. back on Cartoonia, everything runs on charge. the planet itself, the moons, all of it — there’s this current running through everything. when I came to Earth, that current came with me. I just store it and let it out.”

He held up a hand, and small arcs of blue-white energy crackled between his fingers, faint but sharp, like static given shape.

Block: “so it’s not physical strength.”

Q: “nah. it’s charge. the more I build up, the harder I can hit, the faster I can move, all of it. problem is —”

V: “there’s always a problem.”

Q: “— problem is, the longer I hold a charge without releasing it, the more unstable it gets. and if I let it build too long, it doesn’t exactly ask my permission before it goes off.”

Kai: “so what’s the actual limit?”

Q: “no idea. never actually let it build all the way. seemed like a bad idea to test that one alone.”

Spade: “so today we’re testing it, together, safely.”

Q: “..yeah. guess so.”

He planted his feet, closed his eyes, and let the charge start building. At first it was subtle — a faint hum in the air, the hair on V’s arms standing up slightly from a few feet away — but it grew steadily, the crackling arcs along his hands thickening, brightening, climbing up toward his elbows.

Block: “how’s it feel?”

Q: “fine so far. kinda tingly. like my whole body’s a phone charger.”

Q # — wait, no clones, just Q, entirely present, entirely alone in a way that made the tension of it more obvious than usual, nobody else there to share the load if something went wrong.

They pushed further, the charge building past where Q had ever taken it before, his usual chatter thinning out the longer it went, replaced by tight, controlled breathing.

Q: “okay — okay this is starting to feel less like a phone charger and more like a bomb.”

Kai: “then let it go, don’t hold past that.”

Q: “no — no wait, I wanna see how far—”

Block: “Q.”

Q: “I’m FINE—”

The charge spiked, arcs of energy snapping wildly around him, the ground beneath his feet scorching in a rough circle, and for a split second his usual grin faltered into something closer to real fear.

Q: “...okay that’s the wall. that’s definitely the wall.”

Kai: “let it go, now, slow release, don’t just—”

Q exhaled hard, and the built-up charge discharged in a controlled burst upward instead of outward, a column of blue-white light shooting into the sky and dissipating harmlessly above the rooftops. The scorched circle beneath him smoked faintly, and Q dropped to one knee, breathing like he’d just sprinted a mile.

V, already at his side: “hey. hey, you okay?”

Q: “..yeah. yeah, that was — that was a lot.”

Block: “that’s the closest any of us have come to actually looking scared this whole week.”

Q let out a shaky laugh, still catching his breath.

Q: “yeah, well. don’t get used to it. temporary weakness. very temporary.”

Spade, watching closely: “what happens if you don’t release it in time?”

Q went quiet for a second, longer than his usual jokes allowed for.

Q: “I don’t actually know. and I’ve kind of never wanted to find out.”

The lot went still at that, the weight of it landing harder than expected.

Kai: “Q..”

Q: “it’s not, like, a secret secret. I just — back home, overcharging was the thing that killed people. actual people, from my own colony. not monsters, not enemies. just — a mistake. holding on a second too long.”

Block: “is that why you left? Cartoonia, I mean.”

Q was quiet for a moment, uncharacteristically so, the kind of silence that made everyone else go still too.

Q: “...partly. yeah. it’s easier to be the funny one. the loud one. means nobody looks too close at the fact that I’m terrified of my own power, same as literally everyone here apparently is of theirs.”

Block, quietly: “Q..”

Q, snapping back to his usual tone almost too fast: “anyway! we found the wall! that’s the whole point of today, right? let’s move on before I get sentimental and someone clones me into a group hug.”

Kai: “nobody’s cloning anything, that’s not even your power.”

Q: “exactly, so we’re safe. moving on.”

Nobody pushed further, though the look Block and V shared said neither of them believed the deflection for a second, and neither did Kai.

They moved into more controlled drills after that — smaller, safer charge levels, testing bursts instead of buildups, having Q work in sync with V’s speed and Block’s steady presence simultaneously, building the kind of teamwork that might actually hold up under real pressure.

By early afternoon, exhausted again, they collapsed in the shade at the edge of the lot.

V, careful with her words: “hey. for what it’s worth. we’re not gonna let you push that far again. not without someone watching for the second it starts looking like today.”

Q, staring at the sky, quieter than usual: “yeah. I know. just. wasn’t used to anyone knowing that could even happen.”

Block: “well now we know. that’s kind of the whole point of this week, remember?”

Q let out a small laugh, more real than his usual chaotic ones.

Q: “yeah. guess it is.”

Kai, from a few feet away, added without looking over: “for the record. you’re not just a countdown timer, Q. you’re annoyingly, consistently you, even when you’re scared.”

Q: “...gross, don’t get sentimental on me.”

Kai: “no promises.”

Q: “that’s MY line.”

Despite the heaviness of the day, something had shifted slightly, another piece of the group understanding each other a little more than they had that morning — one more crack in the armor everyone had been wearing long before any of this training started.

Chapter twenty-two: V's turn

V didn't sleep much the night before her chapter of training. Not because she was nervous about the drills themselves — she'd done plenty of those already — but because Kai's comment from Q's session kept circling back around in her head. We find your limit here, safely. Like her body was a math problem waiting to be solved instead of a person.

She was already outside when the others stumbled down, sitting on the low wall at the edge of the lot, arms crossed, watching the sun come up over the buildings.

Block, first down as usual: "you're up early."

V: "couldn't sleep."

Block: "nervous?"

V: "no."

Block: "...V."

V: "maybe a little."

He sat down next to her, not pushing, just present, which was more than she expected this early in the morning.

Block: "for what it's worth, yesterday wasn't about exposing anyone. it was about knowing. there's a difference."

V: "feels the same from where I'm sitting."

Block: "yeah. I get that. felt the exact same on my day."

That, at least, got a small huff of something like a laugh out of her.

By the time everyone else arrived — Q significantly less enthusiastic than his own training day, Kai still walking off soreness, Spade quiet as ever, hood in place — V had steeled herself enough to actually stand in the center of the lot without flinching at the attention.

Kai: "alright. V. same as before — we push until we find the wall, this time properly, no stopping early because it's uncomfortable."

V: "you say that like it's easy."

Kai: "I know it's not. that's why we're doing it together instead of you just telling us the number."

V exhaled, held her hand out, and opened the same small cut on her palm as before. The ribbon of blood lifted, curling into the air, catching the early light in a way that almost looked pretty if you ignored what it actually was.

Q, trying to lighten the mood: “you know, for a horrifying power, it’s kind of elegant.”

V: “gee, thanks.”

Q: “I’m complimenting you!”

V: “I know. it’s still weird.”

She shaped the ribbon into a blade, then split it into two, then three, holding the shapes steady in the air around her. Block watched closely, arms crossed, clearly cataloguing every twitch of effort on her face.

Block: “how do you feel.”

V: “fine so far.”

Block: “V.”

V: “I said fine.”

Spade spoke up quietly from the sidelines, the first thing he’d said all morning.

Spade: “you don’t have to perform being okay for us. that’s kind of the whole point of these chapters, remember.”

V faltered slightly, the third blade losing its shape for half a second before she caught it again.

V: “...it’s starting to pull. not bad yet. just noticeable.”

Kai: “good. that’s honest. keep going.”

She pushed further, adding a fourth shape, then attempting a fifth, her breathing growing heavier with each addition. The blood ribbons responded slower now, less crisp, edges blurring like ink in water.

V: “five’s rough.”

Block: “then we stop at five.”

V: “no. Kai said find the wall. this isn’t the wall yet.”

Kai: “V, if it’s too much—”

V: “I said it’s not the wall yet, Kai.”

Something sharp came into her voice, more than the moment really called for, and everyone noticed it, even her.

She pushed for a sixth shape. It didn't fully form, collapsing halfway into a formless splash of red that hit the dirt with a small, unglamorous thud. V staggered slightly, catching herself on one knee, breathing hard.

Block was at her side immediately.

Block: "okay. that's it. that's the wall."

V: "I'm fine."

Block: "you're on the ground."

V: "I chose to be on the ground, it's different."

Q: "it's really not different V?"

V let out a frustrated breath, sitting back properly instead of trying to stand, some of the fight draining out of her posture.

V: "...sorry. I don't know why I pushed that hard."

Kai crouched down near her, careful, not crowding.

Kai: "I think I do, actually."

V: "enlighten me then."

Kai: "everyone else's day, their power came with something they had to admit. Block admitted he's scared of freezing. Q admitted the six-clone thing terrifies him. yours is different — yours isn't about admitting a fear. it's tied to how much of yourself you're willing to physically give up before you stop."

V went quiet, staring at the small cut on her palm, already healing slower than it should have from how much she'd used it.

V: "...my whole life, back in the greed realm, everything was about what you could take or give. that's just how ribbon people work. steal a power, give something up for it, that's the whole economy of the place."

She looked up, something rawer in her expression than usual.

V: "so when you all sit here asking about my 'limit,' it doesn't feel like training. it feels like you're asking how much of me is actually worth something before I run out."

Nobody said anything for a moment, the weight of that settling over the group heavier than expected.

Spade, quietly, from where he sat: "that's not what we're asking."

V: "isn't it though?"

Spade: “no. we’re asking so we can stop you before you give up too much. not so we know how much we’re allowed to take.”

V blinked, something in her expression cracking slightly, like she hadn’t considered that distinction before, or hadn’t let herself.

Block, gentler now: “V. nobody here is TFM. nobody here is the greed realm. you don’t have to prove you’re worth something by bleeding for it.”

V let out a shaky breath, half laugh, half something closer to actual emotion.

V: “...that’s annoyingly nice of you all.”

Q: “we contain multitudes.”

V: “you contain donuts, mostly.”

Q: “OKAY fair, but also multitudes.”

Despite everything, that got a real laugh out of her, small but genuine, some of the tension in her shoulders finally easing.

Kai: “so. five shapes is the real limit. six is where you black out the world around you a little, based on how that looked.”

V: “yeah. that tracks.”

Kai: “then in the field, five’s the ceiling. no pushing past it. not for the mission, not to prove anything.”

V: “and if it’s life or death?”

Kai: “then it’s a team decision, not a solo one. that’s the whole point of training together instead of alone.”

V nodded slowly, something in her posture settling, less braced than it had been all morning.

They spent the rest of the day on lighter drills after that — controlled use at two and three shapes, working V’s ribbons into actual combat scenarios alongside Block’s clones and Q’s duplicates, building the kind of coordination that might actually mean something when it counted.

By late afternoon, sprawled in the shade same as every day this week, V finally let herself relax fully for the first time since sitting on that wall at sunrise.

Block: “so. good day?”

V: “...yeah. weirdly. good day.”

Q: “told you Fun Day energy carries over.”

V: “this was not Fun Day energy, Q, I bled on the ground.”

Q: "Fun Day ADJACENT energy."

V: "I hate that I understand what you mean by that."

Spade, quiet again, added without looking over: "for what it's worth. you did good today. the hard kind of good, not the easy kind."

V: "...thanks, Spade."

Spade: "anytime."

Kai watched the exchange from a few feet away, something settling in his chest at the sight of it — one more piece of the group actually seen, actually known, one more crack in six different kinds of armor slowly coming down, day by day, before the world outside gave them any choice in the matter.

He said as much over breakfast, arms crossed, staring at his coffee like it had personally wronged him.

Block: "I don't need a whole day. you all already saw the clones. we know how it works. can we just skip to drills?"

Kai: "that's not really how this is going, Block."

Block: "why not? Q got his day, V got her day, I got mine already too, technically, back on the first night."

V: "that was you finding out the power exists. this is different. this is actually understanding it."

Block: "I understand it fine."

Spade, not even looking up from his cereal: "you're deflecting."

Block: "I'm not deflecting, I'm being efficient."

Q: "that's what deflecting sounds like when a responsible person does it."

Block: "...that's annoyingly accurate."

Nobody let him off the hook, and by mid-morning he found himself standing in the lot same as everyone else had, arms crossed, jaw tight, clearly unhappy about being the center of attention for reasons that had nothing to do with modesty.

Kai: "okay. same deal as before. we push until we understand the shape of it. how many clones you can hold, how long, what it costs."

Block: "I already know some of this. twenty minutes, two clones, that's the max I've hit."

Kai: "so let's actually test past that instead of guessing it's the ceiling."

Block: "fine."

He closed his eyes, and for a moment nothing happened, the lot silent except for the distant hum of the city waking up around them.

Q, after a beat: "...is it broken again?"

Block: "no, I'm THINKING, give me a second."

Q: "thinking about sad stuff?"

Block: "thinking about sad stuff, yes, thank you for narrating."

He tried again, and this time the air folded, two clones stepping out same as before, arms crossed in that same mirrored posture.

Block #2: "here we go again."

Block #3: "does he ever get tired of making us relive his worst moments on command."

Block: "I can hear you, and also, yes, constantly."

Kai: "alright. try for a third."

Block hesitated at that, something tightening in his expression.

Block: "I don't know if I have a third one in me."

V: "what do you mean?"

Block: "the first two came from real stuff. actual fears. I don't know if I can just, manufacture a third one for the sake of testing."

Spade: "you don't have to manufacture it. it's probably already there. you're just not used to looking for more than one thing at a time."

Block: "that's not comforting, Spade."

Spade: "wasn't trying to be comforting. just accurate."

Block: "you and Kai should start a club."

He closed his eyes again, breathing slower this time, actually searching instead of just performing the exercise for the group's benefit. The lot stayed quiet, everyone giving him the space to actually sit with it instead of rushing him.

Eventually, quieter than usual, he spoke.

Block: "...I'm scared that one day, being the one who holds everyone together isn't gonna be enough. that no matter how hard I try, someone's still gonna get hurt, and it'll be because I wasn't fast enough, or strong enough, or just — not enough, period. and that everyone will still say it's not my fault, because you're all too kind to actually blame me, and that'll be worse than if you did."

The air folded a third time, a third Block stepping out, quieter than the other two, less combative, more tired-looking.

Block #4: "...that one's heavier than the others."

Block #2: "yeah. I felt that one differently."

Block #3: "same."

Kai, careful: "Block. that's basically the same fear you named on your first night. the freezing one."

Block: "yeah. I know. it's not new. I guess I just — I don't actually have that many separate fears. mostly just variations on the same one."

Block: "which feels pathetic to admit out loud."

V: "it's not pathetic."

Block: "feels pathetic."

Q, for once completely serious: "dude, my whole thing is I'm scared of literally disappearing into pieces of myself. that's not exactly a diverse portfolio of fears either. we're not winning any originality awards over here."

That got the faintest huff of a laugh out of Block, some of the tension easing slightly.

Block: "...fair point."

They held the three clones for as long as they could, watching the clock, watching Block's own energy visibly drain the longer it went. At the eighteen-minute mark, sweat beading on his forehead, he finally waved a hand.

Block: "okay — okay that's enough, bring them in."

The clones flickered and folded back into him, and he sank down onto the dirt immediately after, breathing hard, more drained than his two-clone tests had ever left him.

Block: "...eighteen minutes. three clones. that's apparently my ceiling for now."

Kai: "that's good information. genuinely."

Block: "doesn't feel good. feels like I just found out exactly how replaceable I am if I push too far."

Spade sat down across from him, hood tilted slightly like he was studying Block properly.

Spade: "that's not what this means."

Block: "isn't it though? my whole power is literally 'how many versions of yourself can you split off before you run out.' that's not exactly subtle."

Spade: "no. it's about how much of yourself you're willing to actually share instead of holding alone. that's different from being replaceable. that's the opposite of replaceable, actually."

Block: "...that's a generous read."

Spade: "maybe. still think it's the right one."

Q flopped down next to them both, uncharacteristically gentle for once.

Q: "for what it's worth. the clones bicker with me. they have opinions. that's not 'nothing left,' that's just... more of you existing at once. which, honestly, more Block existing at once is a win for the team, you're the only one who remembers to buy groceries."

Block: "that's the nicest and dumbest compliment anyone's ever given me."

Q: "I contain multitudes, we've established this."

V, still sitting nearby from her own session the day before, added quietly: "yesterday you told me nobody here is asking how much of me is worth something. same rule applies to you, Pablo."

Block, quiet for a second, something in his shoulders finally loosening: "...yeah. okay. fair."

Kai crouched down near him, the way he had with V the day before.

Kai: "so. eighteen minutes, three clones is the ceiling. in the field, we don't push past that unless it's genuinely life or death, team decision, same rule as V."

Block: "that's fair."

Kai: "and Block — for what it's worth. you being scared of not being enough doesn't match anything I've actually seen from you. not once."

Block: "you have to say that, you're the leader."

Kai: "I don't have to say anything. I'm saying it because it's true."

Block let out a long breath, something settling in his chest that had been sitting there since long before this training week even started.

Block: "...thanks. all of you."

Q: "group hug?"

Block: "absolutely not."

Q: "worth asking."

They spent the rest of the day on lighter combined drills, Block's clones working fluidly alongside V's ribbons and Q's duplicates, the coordination between all of them noticeably sharper than it had been even a few days before.

By evening, exhausted in the familiar way now, sprawled across the lot in a loose half-circle, Block looked around at the four of them — soon to be six, once

Chapter 24 the winged one and the strongest one

Spade's day came, once Black Vein's day came — and felt, for the first time in longer than he could remember, like maybe he didn't have to be the only one holding everything together after all.

It wasn't much.

But it was enough for today.

Chapter twenty-four: The winged one and the strongest one

Spade's day arrived, and predictably, he tried to get out of it before anyone even brought it up officially.

Spade: "I don't think I need one."

Kai: "we haven't even said anything yet."

Spade: "you were about to."

Kai: "...okay, fair, I was about to."

Spade: "see. I don't need one."

Block: "that's not how any of this has worked so far."

Spade: "maybe I'll be the exception."

V: "you weren't the exception when Kai tried that same argument on his own day, and you weren't gonna let him get away with it either."

Spade went quiet at that, mostly because it was true, and he knew it was true, and there wasn't really a way to argue his way out of his own logic being used against him.

Spade: "...that's annoying."

Q: "welcome to the club, population: everyone who's tried to dodge their turn."

They gathered in the lot same as every morning, except this time there was someone new standing at the edge of it, arms crossed, looking mildly amused by the whole scene.

Black Vein: "so this is the big training week everyone keeps mentioning."

Kai: "you're just now showing up for it?"

Black Vein: "figured I'd let you all handle the emotional stuff without an audience. seemed like a private thing."

Q: "oh it is VERY private, we've all cried at least once."

Block: "Q."

Q: "WHAT, it's true, don't lie to the new guy."

Black Vein glanced at Spade, who'd gone noticeably quieter the moment Black Vein appeared, hood tilted slightly downward.

Black Vein: "you good?"

Spade: "fine."

Black Vein: "you say that the way people say it when they're not."

Spade: "everyone in this group has apparently made a hobby out of pointing that out to me lately."

Black Vein: "yeah well. it's kind of obvious."

Kai clapped his hands together, cutting through the moment before it could get heavier than the group was ready for this early in the day.

Kai: "alright. Spade, you're up. Black Vein, since you're here, you're up too. figured it made sense to do you both together, given—"

He gestured vaguely between the two of them.

Kai: "—whatever this dynamic is."

Black Vein: "what dynamic."

Spade: "there's no dynamic."

V, unconvinced: "you two have barely left each other's side since the jujutsu realm."

Spade: "we made a deal. that's it."

Black Vein: "yeah, what she said. deal. nothing more."

Q, under his breath but not quiet enough: "suuuuure."

Block elbowed him before it could turn into a whole thing, and Kai, wisely, moved the conversation along.

Kai: "regardless. we don't actually know much about either of your limits in a real fight. Spade, we've seen the fire, but not what triggers it or how far it goes. Black Vein, we've seen you win a tournament fight, but nothing since. so today's about both of you, together, since you already work as a pair anyway whether you admit it or not."

Spade: "we don't—"

Kai: "together, Spade."

Spade sighed, hood shifting slightly as he finally stepped fully into the lot, Black Vein following a beat behind him, more relaxed about the whole thing than Spade seemed to be.

Kai: "alright. Spade first. show us what actually calls the fire."

Spade hesitated, hands curling slightly at his sides.

Spade: "it's not something I can just, turn on for a demonstration. it's not like Block's clones or V's blood. it only really comes out when I mean it. when it matters."

Black Vein, arms still crossed, spoke up without much ceremony.

Black Vein: "then let it matter."

Spade: "what?"

Black Vein: "you heard me. stop treating this like a party trick for an audience and actually feel something. same rule as everyone else this week, right?"

Spade: "that's rich coming from you. you haven't done your turn either."

Black Vein: "I will. after you. that's the deal, remember?"

Spade stared at him for a second, something unreadable behind the hood, before finally letting out a slow breath.

Spade: "...fine."

He closed his eyes, and for a while nothing happened, the group watching in silence, giving him the same space they'd given Block and V and Q before him.

Spade: "the volcano's the easiest thing to think about. it always is. the heat, the fall, the way he smiled right before he pushed me."

His hands trembled slightly.

Spade: "but that's not actually what gets it going anymore. it used to be. now it's — it's the fear that it'll happen again. not to me. to one of you. that I'll be too slow, or too scared, or too much of a coward to actually stop it next time, and I'll have to watch someone I actually care about go through what I went through."

A faint heat shimmered around his hands, small at first, then building, orange light flickering at his fingertips like the beginning of something much larger held carefully in check.

Kai, quiet: "Spade..."

Spade: "I'm fine. this is the controlled version. you wanted to see it, this is it."

The flames grew steadily, wrapping up his forearms in slow, deliberate spirals, heat radiating outward enough that everyone instinctively stepped back half a pace, except Black Vein, who stayed exactly where he was.

Black Vein: "there it is."

Spade: "yeah."

Black Vein: "you always undersell how strong that actually looks."

Spade: “it doesn’t feel strong. it feels like carrying the worst day of my life around, just, useful now instead of just painful.”

Black Vein: “sounds like most good things people find out about themselves, honestly.”

The fire held steady for almost a full minute before Spade let it fade, breathing a little harder than before, shoulders dropping like something heavy had been set down, at least temporarily.

V, gently: “how’d that feel? compared to real fights.”

Spade: “controlled like that, it’s manageable. in real combat, when it’s not on purpose, when it’s reflexive — that’s when it gets dangerous. that’s what happened with the commander the first time. I didn’t choose it, it just happened, and it almost cost me more than my face.”

Block: “so the goal is control, not size.”

Spade: “yeah. exactly. bigger isn’t better with this. controlled is better.”

Kai: “that’s actually really useful to know before the pillar fight. means we don’t need you going nuclear, we need you steady.”

Spade: “steady I can do. probably.”

Black Vein, stepping forward now, rolling his shoulders: “alright. my turn, since apparently that’s how this works.”

Q: “FINALLY, the mystery man himself.”

Black Vein: “there’s no mystery, you’ve literally seen me fight.”

Q: “yeah but not the EMOTIONAL context, that’s the whole bit this week.”

Black Vein: “...right.”

He stood in the center of the lot, considerably less hesitant than Spade had been, though something in his posture shifted slightly, less casual than his usual demeanor.

Black Vein: “my power’s not complicated. it’s strength, pure and simple, amplified by conviction. the more I actually believe in what I’m fighting for, the stronger I get. that’s it. that’s the whole thing.”

V: “that sounds simple on paper but probably isn’t in practice.”

Black Vein: “no. it’s not.”

He paused, jaw tightening slightly.

Black Vein: “in the jujutsu realm, I fight because it’s just what I do there. it’s home turf, doesn’t require much conviction, just instinct. out here, in the real fight coming up, against TFM — that’s different. that requires actually believing in something worth fighting for, not just habit.”

Kai: “and do you? believe in it?”

Black Vein was quiet for a moment, glancing toward Spade almost involuntarily before catching himself and looking back at the group.

Black Vein: "...I didn't, at first. figured I'd help because I said I would, and that'd be enough. deals matter to me, that's just how I am."

Black Vein: "but somewhere along the way it stopped being just a deal."

Spade, watching him carefully, said nothing, but something in his posture had gone very still.

Black Vein: "TFM's the kind of thing that ruins people quietly. covers up loose ends, like they did to him—" he nodded slightly toward Spade "—and calls it business. I've seen that kind of thing before, where I'm from. didn't like it then, don't like it now."

He rolled his shoulders, and for a brief moment the air around him seemed to thicken, some invisible weight pressing outward, the ground beneath his feet cracking faintly under pressure that hadn't been there a second before.

Black Vein: "so yeah. I believe in it now. which apparently makes me stronger, so. bonus, I guess."

Block, staring at the small cracks spreading through the dirt: "...that's a lot of strength for 'bonus, I guess.'"

Black Vein: "yeah well. don't get used to it. conviction's a finicky thing, it's not always there on command."

Kai: "so what triggers it, specifically, if not just general belief?"

Black Vein hesitated, glancing at Spade again, longer this time.

Black Vein: "protecting people I've actually decided are worth protecting. that's the honest answer. general belief gets me maybe half this. someone I care about being in danger gets me the rest."

The lot went quiet at that, the implication sitting there plainly enough that nobody needed to point it out directly.

Q, uncharacteristically soft: "...so basically you get strongest when it's personal."

Black Vein: "basically, yeah."

Spade cleared his throat, hood tilting slightly away like he was suddenly very interested in the dirt near his feet.

Spade: "that's — good to know. tactically."

Black Vein: "tactically. right."

V, biting back a smile: "sure. tactically."

Kai, mercifully moving things along before either of them could get more visibly uncomfortable: "alright. so we've got Spade's fire — controlled over powerful — and Black Vein's strength, tied to conviction, strongest when it's personal. that's a lot of good information for one day."

Block: “and apparently a lot of other information too, but nobody’s gonna say it out loud.”

Q: “I’ll say it out loud.”

Spade: “Q, don’t.”

Q: “wasn’t gonna! ...much.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon running combined drills, Spade’s fire and Black Vein’s strength working in tandem more naturally than either of them probably expected, falling into a rhythm that looked less like two people who’d made a deal a few weeks ago and more like people who’d been fighting alongside each other far longer than that.

By evening, sprawled in the shade with the rest of the group, Spade sat slightly apart as usual, hood still up, still hiding whatever his eyes might have given away. Black Vein sat down next to him without asking, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched.

Black Vein: “good day.”

Spade: “yeah.”

Black Vein: “you gonna keep pretending there’s no dynamic?”

Spade: “..probably.”

Black Vein: “figured.”

Spade: “doesn’t mean there isn’t one.”

Black Vein, quiet, almost amused: “yeah. figured that too.”

They sat there together, watching the sky start to shift colors, saying nothing else for a while, which somehow said more than either of them seemed ready to put into actual words.

Across the lot, Q whispered something to V that made her elbow him hard enough to make him yelp, and Block just shook his head, and Kai watched all of it with the quiet, tired satisfaction of someone slowly, carefully, watching his found family become something sturdier than it had been a week ago.

One more day of training left before Kai’s own turn — the biggest one, the one everyone had been quietly dreading and quietly waiting for in equal measure.

But tonight, at least, there was this. Six people, finally becoming something that looked a lot like a team.

Chapter twenty-five: Kai’s turn

Kai woke up the morning of his own training day feeling more nervous than he had for any fight since the jujutsu realm, which felt, objectively, like an insane thing to be nervous about.

Q, eating cereal across from him: “you look like you’re about to throw up.”

Kai: "I might."

Q: "over TRAINING? you've fought actual gods dude."

Kai: "training implies I have to actually go inside my own head and talk to her. voluntarily. on purpose."

Q: "oh. yeah. that's worse actually."

Kai: "thank you for confirming that."

The whole group gathered in the lot same as every morning, though this time Kai lingered by the doorway longer than usual, like his feet had personally decided this was a bad idea.

Block: "you good?"

Kai: "no."

Block: "you wanna talk about it before we start?"

Kai: "not really, but I'm gonna have to anyway so let's just get it over with."

He walked to the center of the lot, closed his eyes, and let his mind drift inward, past the noise of the group, past the sound of the city, down into the quiet place where the entity had always waited for him.

The space inside his head looked the way it always did — dim, endless, red light pulsing faintly somewhere he could never quite locate.

Entity: "well well. training week finally reaches me."

Kai: "yeah. everyone else went first."

Entity: "smart. save the scary part for last."

Kai: "you're not scary."

Entity: "darling, I'm the reason you destroyed a realm before you turned eighteen. I'm plenty scary."

Kai: "...fair."

Entity: "so. what exactly do you want from me today?"

Kai: "I need to actually understand my power. really understand it. not just 'chaos magic goes boom,' actual control."

Entity: "you already know the answer to this. I told you back before the concert planning even started."

Kai: "the singing thing."

Entity: "the singing thing, yes."

Kai: "I was kind of hoping you'd forgotten about that."

Entity: "I don't forget things, darling. I'm quite literally made of your bloodline's worst decisions. very good memory."

Kai sighed, opening his eyes back in the real world, the others watching him carefully.

Kai: "okay. apparently we're doing the singing thing."

V: "the singing thing?"

Kai: "my power's tied to music. specifically songs I actually connect with, not just noise. she wants me training with real songs, ones with actual weight to them, not just scales or whatever."

Q: "wait, THAT'S your training? that's so much cooler than ours."

Block: "you almost destroyed a town screaming, Q, I don't think 'cool' is the word."

Kai: "she picked out specific songs. Arabic ones, since that's what we spoke back in Scarlet Aethel. Apparently the language itself carries something my magic responds to — more rhythm, more weight to it than English has for me."

Spade: "so you already understand them, then. it's just performing them that's the hard part."

Kai: "yeah. understanding was never the issue. it's actually being able to sing them without my hands shaking that's the problem."

He closed his eyes again, dipping back down into that same quiet, endless space.

Kai: "so how does this actually work? I just — sing, and something happens?"

Entity: "something happens when you mean it. same rule as always. you can hum along to anything and nothing will happen. but the second you actually let the words mean something, actually feel the weight of what you're singing instead of just performing it —"

Kai: "then what?"

Entity: "then you'll see."

Kai: "that's not an answer."

Entity: "it's the only one that matters, darling. now go. your little friends are waiting."

He opened his eyes again, and something in the air around him shifted subtly, a faint pressure settling behind his sternum that hadn't been there a moment before.

Kai: "okay. she's not exactly big on specifics. apparently I just have to actually mean it when I sing, and something will happen."

V: "helpful."

Kai: "very."

He picked the first song without much ceremony, one he'd known since he was young, one that used to play through the halls back home before any of this — before Amy, before the realm, before any of it. He didn't say the title out loud. He just closed his eyes, planted his feet, and began.

The first attempt came out thin, hesitant, more like someone reciting words than actually singing them. Nothing happened. No shimmer in the air, no response from the ground beneath his feet, nothing.

Q, gently: "that was actually pretty good though?"

Kai: "it wasn't right. I could feel it wasn't right."

Block: "how do you mean?"

Kai: "it felt like performing instead of feeling. she said that's the difference."

He tried again, closing his eyes tighter this time, trying to actually sit inside the words instead of just saying them, letting himself think about what the song was actually about instead of just the melody of it.

Halfway through, his voice cracked, just slightly, an old memory surfacing unbidden — the oak tree, Amy's laugh, the moment right before everything fell apart.

This time, something responded. A faint golden shimmer traced along his arms, subtle, barely visible in the morning light, gone again the moment he stopped.

Spade, quiet: "there it is."

Kai, breathing a little harder: "...yeah. felt that one."

V: "what did it feel like?"

Kai: "like the song actually meant something instead of just being pretty. like it was pulling something out of me instead of me just pushing air through my throat."

Block: "that's basically the same thing that happens with my clones. or V's blood. or Q's — whatever Q's thing is."

Q: "MY thing has a name, it's called being iconic."

Block: "sure."

Kai let out a short laugh, some of the tension in his shoulders easing slightly.

Kai: "guess we all just run on the same fuel, different engines."

They spent the next hour working through a handful of songs Kai had picked, each one drawing something different out of him — some quiet and aching, some sharper, angrier, closer to the surface than he usually let himself get. With each one that actually landed, that same golden shimmer traced further up his arms, lingering a little longer each time before fading.

By the fourth song, sweat beading at his temples despite the mild morning, Kai finally sat down heavily in the dirt, more emotionally drained than physically.

Kai: "okay. that's — that's a lot."

Block: "you good?"

Kai: "yeah. just. didn't expect singing to feel like ripping a bandage off, repeatedly, on purpose."

V: "welcome to the club. we've all had our own version of that this week."

Kai: "yeah. guess it's only fair mine's the weirdest one."

Spade, sitting nearby, tilted his head slightly.

Spade: "it's not weird. music's just another language for the same thing everyone else has been doing all week. saying the true thing out loud instead of hiding it."

Kai: "you and Black Vein really did turn into a two-person wisdom council this week, huh."

Spade: "don't tell him that, his ego's bad enough."

Black Vein, from a few feet away where he'd been quietly watching the whole thing: "I heard that."

Spade: "good."

Kai managed a real laugh at that, something loosening further in his chest.

They broke briefly for water, the late morning sun climbing higher, before Kai closed his eyes once more, dipping back into that same internal space, the entity waiting exactly where he'd left her.

Kai: "that's four. how many more do I need before this actually does something useful for the concert?"

Entity: "depends on you, not the number. some people need one song to break themselves open. some need fifty and still won't get there. you're somewhere in between, historically."

Kai: "comforting."

Entity: "I never claimed to be comforting, darling. I claimed to be honest. those aren't the same thing."

Kai: "fair enough."

Entity: "there is one more thing, while you're here."

Kai: "what."

Entity: "the concert isn't just going to be you protecting civilians and buffing your little friends. if you actually let yourself feel what these songs are asking you to feel, in front of that many people, at that scale — it's going to draw attention. TFM's kind of attention."

Kai: "great."

Entity: “so choose carefully which songs you let yourself really feel in front of a crowd that large. control is not the same thing as suppression. you’re good at suppression. you are not, historically, very good at control.”

Kai: “...noted. unhelpfully, but noted.”

Entity: “you’re welcome, darling.”

He opened his eyes again, the group watching him carefully, clearly aware something heavier had passed in that internal conversation than the previous ones.

Kai: “she says the concert’s gonna draw TFM’s attention if I actually let myself feel the songs at full scale. which, apparently, was already the plan, so — mixed news, I guess.”

Block: “mixed how?”

Kai: “well, the good news is it confirms the plan should actually work the way we hoped. the bad news is doing it right means being genuinely, publicly vulnerable in front of thousands of people, which is somehow worse than fighting TFM directly.”

Q: “you say that like fighting TFM directly isn’t also terrifying.”

Kai: “it’s a different kind of terrifying. that one I know how to do. this one I don’t.”

V: “well. that’s kind of the whole point of this week, right? doing the ones we don’t know how to do.”

Kai: “yeah. guess it is.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon running through the songs again, this time with the whole group actively involved — Block and V standing close enough to feel the shift in the air each time it happened, Q trying, and mostly failing, to harmonize along despite absolutely nobody asking him to, Spade and Black Vein sitting a little apart, listening more than participating, the way they usually did.

By the fifth full run-through, the golden shimmer along Kai’s arms had started staying longer between songs instead of fading immediately, a faint warmth radiating outward that everyone standing close enough to him could actually feel, gentle and steady, nothing like the destructive bursts of his earlier days.

Block, quietly: “that’s different from before. from the town, I mean.”

Kai: “yeah. this doesn’t feel like it’s trying to get out of me. it feels like it’s just... here. staying, instead of exploding.”

Spade: “control instead of suppression. she was right about that part, at least.”

Kai: “don’t tell her that, her ego’s worse than Black Vein’s.”

Black Vein: “I heard that too.”

Kai: “good.”

By early evening, exhausted in a way that had nothing to do with physical exertion, Kai finally sat down in the dirt for good, the golden shimmer fading slowly, gently, instead of snapping off all at once like it usually did.

Q: “so? verdict? are we concert ready?”

Kai: “getting there. not fully there. but getting there.”

V: “that’s more than we had this morning.”

Kai: “yeah. it is.”

He looked around at all of them — Block, quieter and steadier than he’d been at the start of the week; V, a little less braced, a little more willing to let people in; Q, still chaotic but with something more grounded underneath it now; Spade and Black Vein sitting close together, whatever unspoken thing between them settling further into something neither of them wanted to name yet.

Kai: “hey. thank you. for this week. all of it.”

Block: “you don’t have to thank us for training, Kai.”

Kai: “I’m not thanking you for the training. I’m thanking you for actually caring enough to make me do it, even when I really, really didn’t want to.”

Q: “that’s basically our whole brand at this point.”

Kai: “yeah. guess it is.”

The sky shifted slowly into evening above them, the same sky that, in just a matter of chapters now, would be filled with music and light and the beginning of everything they’d spent this entire week preparing for.

None of them said it out loud, but all of them felt it settling in anyway — training was almost over.

The real thing was coming.

The concert was three days away, and the apartment had officially become a disaster zone.

Q: “WHY do we need a stage THIS big, we’re not Coachella.”

Block: “because if it’s too small, people crowd in closer, and if people crowd in closer, Kai can’t actually see who’s civilian and who’s TFM.”

Q: “so we’re building a stage for SECURITY reasons. incredible. very rock and roll.”

V, buried in a stack of papers that used to be a clean coffee table: “can everyone stop arguing about the stage and help me with the perimeter map, please, some of us are trying to keep everyone alive.”

Kai sat a little apart from the chaos, running through the setlist in his head for what felt like the hundredth time that morning. Five songs. Sarah had helped narrow it down from the dozen he’d trained with, said something about needing a shape to the night — a beginning, a middle, an ending — rather than just five random points of feeling.

Sarah, visiting for the planning session, sprawled sideways across the armchair like she owned it: “you want it to build. start soft, let people ease into it, then really go for it in the middle, then bring it back down so nobody spirals into full meltdown before the actual danger part starts.”

Kai: “you say that like this is a normal setlist problem and not ‘contain a stadium of feelings without destroying a city.’”

Sarah: “same thing, different scale, darling.”

Kai: “please don’t ‘darling’ me, I get enough of that from the voice in my head.”

Sarah: “rude. I invented darling.”

Block, overhearing from across the room: “you did not invent an entire word.”

Sarah: “prove I didn’t.”

Nobody could, so the argument ended there.

They’d spent the last two days finalizing logistics that had nothing to do with music at all — crowd routes, exit points, where Block’s clones would be stationed, where V would hold her ribbon-blades in reserve, where Q would circle the perimeter fast enough to catch anything suspicious before it got close to the stage. It felt less like planning a concert and more like planning a siege they were hoping wouldn’t happen, dressed up with better lighting.

Kai: “okay, walk me through it again. worst case scenario.”

V: “worst case, TFM shows up in force during the performance, tries to either grab civilians as leverage or come straight for you while you’re exposed on stage.”

Kai: “and best case?”

Block: “best case, nobody notices anything’s wrong until the pillar’s already gone.”

Kai: “so basically, the plan only works if either everything goes right, or everything goes catastrophically wrong and we’re ready for it.”

Q: “yep! very reassuring odds.”

Kai: “thanks, Q.”

Q: “anytime.”

Spade and Black Vein were mostly kept out of the concert logistics entirely — their part of the plan didn't start until the concert was already underway, when the noise and crowd and chaos would give them cover to slip toward the pillar itself while everyone's attention, TFM's included, was locked on the stage. Still, they hovered at the edges of the planning sessions most days, close enough to listen, quiet enough not to interrupt.

Spade, watching Kai run through vocal warmups for the third time that hour: "you've done this song forty times already today."

Kai: "forty-one. and it still doesn't feel right."

Spade: "it's not supposed to feel right. it's supposed to feel true. those aren't the same thing."

Kai: "when did you get so good at that distinction?"

Spade: "had a lot of time to think about the difference between performing okay and actually being okay. still working on the second part."

Kai managed a tired smile at that.

Kai: "yeah. me too."

Black Vein, leaning against the wall nearby, arms crossed: "you nervous?"

Kai: "terrified."

Black Vein: "good. means you're taking it seriously."

Kai: "that's such a Black Vein thing to say."

Black Vein: "I'll take that as a compliment."

Kai: "wasn't sure it was one."

Black Vein: "neither was I, honestly."

By the second night, exhaustion had settled fully over the group, the kind that came less from physical effort and more from the accumulated weight of everything riding on the next few days. They'd gathered on the roof again, same spot as always, the city lights spread out below them like something fragile.

Block: "so once the concert starts, that's it. no more planning. just doing."

V: "terrifying thought."

Q: "I think it's kind of exciting honestly."

Block: "of course you do."

Q: "what! we've been training for WEEKS. I wanna see it actually WORK."

Kai: "I just want everyone to come out the other side of this okay. that's the only part I actually care about."

The rooftop went quiet at that, nobody rushing to fill the silence, letting the honesty of it sit there instead.

Spade, after a while: "we will."

Kai: "you don't know that."

Spade: "no. but saying it anyway feels better than not saying it."

Kai: "...yeah. fair."

Sarah dropped by unannounced the next morning, catching Kai alone on the balcony before the others were even awake, running through the opening lines of the first song under his breath, quiet enough that only the empty street below could hear.

Sarah: "you're overthinking the first one."

Kai, startled: "how long have you been standing there."

Sarah: "long enough. you're treating it like a performance. it's not a performance, remember? it's a confession, you're just doing it out loud in front of thousands of people instead of one entity in your own head."

Kai: "that's supposed to make me feel better?"

Sarah: "no. it's supposed to make you sing it right. those are different goals, darling."

Kai: "everyone keeps saying that phrase to me this week like it's supposed to help."

Sarah: "does it?"

Kai considered that for a second.

Kai: "...kind of, actually. annoyingly."

Sarah: "there it is."

She sat on the railing, entirely unbothered by the height, watching him with an expression more serious than her usual chaos allowed for.

Sarah: "you know what happens if you hold back tonight, right? if you sing it safe, sing it pretty, keep it performance instead of confession?"

Kai: "the magic doesn't respond the same way."

Sarah: "worse than that. it responds wrong. half-measures with power like yours don't just do less. they do less and unpredictable, which is worse than doing nothing at all."

Kai: "so no safety net."

Sarah: “no safety net. not tonight.”

Kai let out a slow breath, staring out at the street below, the city that in less than forty-eight hours would be packed with people trusting him, without even knowing it, to hold something together that had once, not that long ago, torn an entire realm apart.

Kai: “what if I get it wrong.”

Sarah: “then you get it wrong in front of a lot of people, and you deal with it, same as anyone. you’re not the first person to be scared of a stage, Kai. you’re just the first person I know whose stage fright comes with apocalyptic side effects.”

Kai: “that’s not comforting.”

Sarah: “still true though.”

He managed a small laugh despite himself, some of the tension in his shoulders easing slightly.

Kai: “thanks, Sarah. for real.”

Sarah: “don’t thank me yet. thank me after, once I’ve seen if this actually works.”

Kai: “so reassuring.”

Sarah: “I contain multitudes, darling. reassurance was never one of them.”

She left the way she usually did, without much ceremony, leaving Kai alone on the balcony with the quiet weight of everything still ahead of him.

By the final evening before the concert, the group had gathered in the living room one last time, the plan fully mapped out, nothing left to prepare except themselves.

Block: “okay. run it one more time. just to make sure everyone’s clear.”

V: “Kai’s on stage, singing, buffing us and shielding civilians simultaneously. Block’s clones handle crowd control and perimeter defense. I’m mobile support, covering wherever the crowd gets thin enough for trouble to slip in.”

Q: “and I’m doing laps around the whole perimeter, fast enough to spot anything before it gets close.”

Block: “and once the concert’s in full swing, loud enough, chaotic enough that nobody’s watching the edges of the crowd too closely—”

Spade: “—me and Black Vein slip out, head for the pillar.”

Black Vein: “get in, plant what we need to plant, get out before anyone notices we’re gone.”

Kai: “and if something goes wrong on either end?”

V: “we improvise. same as always.”

Kai: “comforting.”

V: “you’re the one who said that first, don’t act surprised it came back around.”

Despite the tension, that got a real laugh out of the room, brief but genuine, cutting through some of the heaviness that had settled over the last few days.

Kai looked around at all of them — Block steady and grounded in a way he hadn’t been at the start of this whole training stretch, V trusting the group with her limits instead of hiding them, Q quieter but not smaller, still fundamentally himself just with something more solid underneath the chaos now, Spade and Black Vein sitting close together the way they always did now, whatever unspoken thing between them fully settled into something neither needed to explain anymore.

Kai: “tomorrow, then.”

Block: “tomorrow.”

Q: “tomorrow we either save the world a little, or die trying, but honestly at this point I’d settle for either as long as there’s donuts after.”

Block: “there will not be donuts immediately after a concert-slash-covert-infiltration-mission, Q.”

Q: “we’ll see.”

They stayed up a while longer, not talking about the plan anymore, just being together, the same easy comfort that had built slowly over weeks of training and honesty and hard mornings in that same empty lot. Nobody said it directly, but everyone felt it anyway — whatever happened tomorrow, they weren’t walking into it as five separate people anymore. Six, counting Black Vein now fully one of them in every way that mattered.

That, more than any amount of training, felt like the actual preparation that counted.

Kai lay awake long after the others had gone to bed, staring at the ceiling, running through the first song one more time in his head, quiet, private, just for himself this time.

Somewhere distant and dark, he knew, the entity was listening too, the way she always was.

Entity, faint, almost gentle: “...ready, darling?”

Kai, out loud, to the empty room: “no. but I’m doing it anyway.”

Entity: “that’s usually how the important things go.”

He closed his eyes, and for the first time in days, actually managed to fall asleep before he meant to, the city outside quiet, unaware of what tomorrow would bring.

Chapter twenty-seven: The concert

By sundown, the lot behind the apartment building — the same one they'd trained in for weeks — had transformed into something none of them quite recognized anymore. A full stage stood where they'd once sparred until collapsing in the dirt, lights strung overhead, a crowd already gathering in numbers that made Kai's stomach twist with every passing minute.

Backstage, hidden behind a curtain that did very little to actually muffle the noise of the growing audience, Kai paced in tight circles while the others watched.

Q: "if you wear a groove into the floor before we even start, I'm gonna consider that a personal win."

Kai: "not helping, Q."

Q: "I never claimed to be helpful, I claimed to be present."

Block, checking a comm device clipped to his collar: "clones are in position around the perimeter. crowd control's ready."

V, doing the same: "mobile support's set. I've got eyes on every thin patch in the crowd where someone could slip through."

Kai: "and Spade, Black Vein?"

Spade, hood up as always, voice steady: "waiting for the signal. once you're deep into the set, once the crowd's loud enough, we move."

Black Vein: "pillar's not going anywhere. we've got time."

Kai nodded, though his hands hadn't stopped shaking since he'd walked backstage an hour ago.

Sarah appeared beside him without any of the usual ceremony, leaning against a stack of speaker equipment like she'd been there the whole time.

Sarah: "you look like you're about to throw up."

Kai: "I might."

Sarah: "good. means you're taking it seriously."

Kai: "Black Vein said the exact same thing to me yesterday."

Sarah: "smart man. terrible personality, but smart."

Black Vein, from across the room: "I can hear you."

Sarah: "I know."

Despite everything, that got a small, tired laugh out of Kai, some of the tension bleeding out of his shoulders just slightly.

Kai: “okay. okay. I can do this.”

Sarah: “you can. now get out there before the crowd starts a riot from impatience.”

He walked toward the stage entrance, the noise of the audience swelling louder with every step, thousands of voices blending into a single restless hum that felt, for a moment, like standing at the edge of something enormous and only partly understood.

The lights hit him the second he stepped out, and the crowd’s noise spiked into something closer to a roar.

Block, watching from the wings, murmured to V: “here we go.”

V: “here we go.”

[SONG ONE]—

Kai’s voice came out shakier than he wanted, thin at first, the opening lines drifting out over a crowd that had gone unexpectedly quiet, caught off guard by how raw it sounded compared to whatever polished performance they’d expected.

Backstage, Spade tensed, listening carefully.

Spade: “he’s holding back.”

Black Vein: “give him a second. first song’s always the hardest.”

Sure enough, by the second verse, something in Kai’s posture shifted — shoulders dropping, eyes closing, the performance sliding away from careful precision into something closer to what Sarah had told him to aim for. Confession, not performance.

A faint golden shimmer traced along his arms, barely visible under the stage lights at first, then unmistakable, spreading outward in slow, gentle waves that washed over the closest rows of the crowd like warmth radiating from a fire.

In the audience, people who’d been anxious, restless, checking their phones just moments before, went still, faces softening, some visibly fighting back tears they didn’t fully understand the source of.

Q, watching from his post at the perimeter, murmured into his comm: “...okay that’s actually working. people are just, like, calming down. is that supposed to happen?”

Kai, mid-song, unable to answer directly, let the music speak for him instead.

By the final chorus of the first song, the golden light had settled into a steady glow around him, not overwhelming, not dangerous, just present — steady, warm, controlled in exactly the way the entity had told him to aim for.

The crowd's applause when it ended came slower than usual, almost reverent, like they weren't entirely sure what they'd just witnessed but knew it had mattered.

[SONG TWO — a fiercer, more accusatory song, about realizing someone stole far more from you than they ever gave]

The second song came out stronger, angrier, Kai's voice sharpening into something with real edge to it. The golden light responded in kind, brightening, arcing outward in visible pulses that synced with the rhythm of the song itself.

Backstage, Block felt it first — a subtle surge of strength through his limbs, sharper reflexes, muscles humming with borrowed energy he hadn't asked for and didn't need to.

Block, quietly, to V: "you feel that?"

V, flexing her fingers, watching a faint golden tint ripple briefly along her skin: "yeah. that's the buff."

Out in the crowd, the golden light pulsed further still, and for the first time, something in the atmosphere shifted — not just calm, not just warmth, but a kind of charged, electric energy building steadily beneath the music.

Somewhere at the edge of the crowd, hidden among the swaying bodies, a man in TFM colors went rigid, quickly murmuring into a hidden comm device of his own.

TFM scout, quiet, urgent: "...something's happening here. this isn't just a concert."

[SONG THREE — the emotional peak, a longing, aching song about wishing things had gone differently, about a version of the story where the person never left]

This was the one Kai had struggled with most in training. He closed his eyes before starting, taking a long breath, thinking not about the crowd, not about TFM, not about anything except the honest ache underneath the words.

The golden light surged brighter than it ever had before, arcing high above the stage in slow, deliberate waves, the crowd below gasping collectively at the sight of it, phones raised, capturing something none of them would ever be able to properly explain to anyone who wasn't there.

Backstage, Spade felt the shift most of all — a warmth spreading through his chest, steady and grounding, the anxious tightness he usually carried easing for the first time in longer than he could remember.

Spade, quiet, mostly to himself: "...that's what she meant. positive energy. this is what that feels like."

Black Vein, standing close beside him, noticed the change immediately.

Black Vein: "you good?"

Spade: "yeah. actually, genuinely, yeah."

The song built toward its climax, Kai's voice cracking slightly on the highest notes, not from lack of control but from the sheer weight of meaning every word he sang, the golden light around him swelling into something vast enough that even people standing far at the back of the crowd could feel its warmth pressing gently against them.

Then, just as the song reached its peak, the air near the edge of the crowd rippled wrong — not gold, not warm, but a thin, cold distortion pushing in against the golden glow like ice creeping across glass.

V, immediately alert: “we’ve got company.”

[SONG FOUR — steadier, more resolved, a song about choosing to move forward despite regret, about turning pain into something survivable]

Kai kept singing, forcing himself not to break focus, trusting the others to handle whatever had just appeared at the crowd's edge. His voice steadied, the golden light around him hardening slightly, less like warmth now and more like a shield actively pushing back against the cold distortion trying to creep inward.

Block's clones moved fast, converging on the disturbance before it could fully manifest, boxing in a lone TFM operative who'd clearly been trying to slip closer to the stage under cover of the crowd.

Block #2, grabbing the operative by the arm: “nice try.”

The operative struggled, but the golden light pulsing from the stage seemed to actively resist him, weakening his movements just enough for Block's clones to hold him steady.

V moved fast, ribbon-blade forming instantly, cutting off any chance of escape.

V: “don't even think about it.”

Q, circling the perimeter at full speed, spotted a second operative attempting the same thing on the opposite side of the crowd, and closed the distance in a blink, charge crackling faintly at his fingertips.

Q: “hey buddy, wrong concert to crash.”

Onstage, Kai pushed through the final chorus, sweat beading at his temples, the golden light around him now a steady, unwavering barrier extending out over the nearest sections of the crowd, protecting them without most of them even realizing there'd been any danger at all.

[SONG FIVE — the closer, softer again, a song of gratitude, about being thankful for having loved someone at all, regret and warmth intertwined]

The final song came quieter, gentler, the golden light easing back down into something closer to its opening warmth, the crowd swaying now, some crying openly, moved by something they couldn't fully articulate even to themselves.

Backstage, with the two TFM operatives restrained and the perimeter secure, Spade caught Black Vein's eye.

Spade: “that’s our cue.”

Black Vein: “let’s move.”

They slipped away from the backstage area unnoticed, the roar of the crowd and the glow of the stage lights providing exactly the cover they needed, heading toward the looming shape of the first pillar visible just beyond the concert grounds, dark and imposing against the night sky.

Onstage, Kai finished the final notes of the last song, the golden light fading slowly, gently, instead of snapping away all at once, leaving the crowd in a hush before erupting into applause loud enough to shake the ground.

Kai stood there for a moment, breathing hard, drained in a way that had nothing to do with physical exhaustion, watching the crowd’s faces — calmer, warmer, safer than they’d been just an hour before — and felt, despite everything still ahead of them, that maybe this part, at least, had actually worked.

Block’s voice came through his earpiece, quiet, steady.

Block: “two operatives contained. perimeter’s clear. crowd’s untouched.”

Kai, breathless, relieved: “and Spade, Black Vein?”

V’s voice, just as steady: “already moving toward the pillar. no one saw them go.”

Kai closed his eyes for just a moment, letting the applause wash over him, letting himself feel — just briefly — like maybe this impossible plan actually stood a chance.

Then he opened his eyes again, waved to the crowd one last time, and stepped offstage, because the concert, as it turned out, had only ever been the beginning of the night.

Spade and Black Vein moved fast through the dark, the concert's noise and light fading behind them the further they got, replaced slowly by a heavier, colder silence that seemed to thicken the closer they came to the pillar itself.

Black Vein: "you feel that?"

Spade: "yeah. it's not just quiet. it's wrong-quiet."

The pillar rose ahead of them, tall and black against the night sky, no windows, no visible entrance, just smooth unbroken stone that seemed to actively discourage anyone from looking at it too long.

Black Vein: "so how exactly are we supposed to get in?"

Spade: "Dennis mentioned a maintenance entrance around the east side, back when we caught him. figured it might still be worth checking."

Black Vein: "you remembered that?"

Spade: "I remember most things people say around me. helps to actually listen."

They circled the base carefully, staying low, sticking to shadow, until they found it — a narrow service door tucked behind an overgrown stretch of wall, easy to miss if you didn't already know to look for it.

Black Vein: "guess Dennis was good for something after all."

Spade: "don't let Q hear you say that, he'll want to adopt him."

Before Black Vein could pick the lock, two familiar shapes dropped down from the rooftop above, landing softly beside them.

Q: "miss us?"

Spade, whirling around: "...what are you two doing here?"

Block: "perimeter's secure. concert's fine. figured you could use backup for the actual break-in part."

Q: "also I really wanted to see the inside of a creepy evil pillar, sue me."

Spade: "Kai know you left?"

Block: "V's covering both our posts with clones and her own perimeter work. Kai's still onstage, doesn't know yet."

Spade: "he's gonna be furious."

Q: "he's gonna be furious AFTER we succeed, which means it doesn't count."

Black Vein: "that's not how consequences work, Q."

Q: "it is tonight."

Spade sighed, but didn't argue further, mostly because there wasn't time to.

Spade: "fine. everyone stays close. this place isn't built for civilians or comfort, and we don't know what's actually guarding it inside."

Black Vein made quick work of the lock, and the door creaked open onto a narrow stairwell descending into darkness thick enough that even the faint light from outside barely reached past the first few steps.

Q, peering down: "...nope. hard pass. anyone else wanna go first."

Block: "you literally just said you wanted to see the inside."

Q: "wanting to SEE it and wanting to WALK INTO IT FIRST are very different things."

Block sighed and stepped past him, clones flickering into existence on either side, casting faint shifting light against the walls as they began the descent.

The stairwell wound down further than any of them expected, the air growing colder with every step, the same wrongness Black Vein had noticed outside pressing in heavier the deeper they went.

Spade, quiet: "this feels like the realm of depression. remember that place?"

Q: "don't remind me, V almost left me tied to a car roof over that trip."

Block: "focus, guys."

They reached the bottom eventually, the stairwell opening into a wide, dim chamber, the air humming faintly with a low, constant vibration that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. At the center of the room stood a massive column of pulsing dark energy, thick veins of black light threading upward through it like something alive, feeding whatever sat above them in the pillar's higher levels.

Q, quieter than usual: "...okay that's actually really creepy."

Black Vein: "that's the source. that's what's feeding the whole pillar."

Spade: "Sarah said destroying the pillars breaks TFM's power distribution. this has to be it."

Block: "how do we destroy something like that without bringing the whole building down on top of us?"

Before anyone could answer, a voice echoed through the chamber, calm, unbothered, entirely too amused.

Voice: "oh, please. do go ahead and try."

They spun around, weapons and powers readying instantly, as a figure stepped out from the shadows near the far wall — young-looking, sharp-eyed, dressed in TFM colors, watching them with the kind of patient, unhurried interest of someone who'd been expecting them for a while.

Spade went rigid immediately.

Spade: “..you’re not the second commander.”

Figure: “no. I’m not important enough for that title yet. but I do work for him. and I have to say, I really did not expect four of you to just wander right into the one place we were specifically warned to watch closest.”

Block: “warned by who?”

Figure: “does it matter? you’re here now. that’s really the only part that concerns me.”

Q, charge already crackling faintly at his fingertips: “so are we fighting, or are you gonna keep monologuing?”

Figure, smiling faintly: “oh, a bit of both, I think.”

The vibration in the chamber intensified, the black veins of energy pulsing faster, and the figure’s silhouette seemed to blur slightly at the edges, power gathering visibly around him.

Black Vein, stepping forward, voice low: “you really don’t wanna do this.”

Figure: “funny. I was about to say the exact same thing to you.”

He lunged first, faster than expected, closing the distance in a blink, and the fight that had been building since the moment they walked into the pillar finally, violently, began.

Here’s chapter twenty-nine:

Chapter twenty-nine: The pillar guardian

The figure moved like smoke, closing the gap between himself and Black Vein in an instant, a fist crackling with the same black energy pulsing through the column behind them.

Black Vein caught the punch on his forearm, the impact sending a shockwave through the chamber that cracked the stone floor beneath them both.

Black Vein, grunting: “...okay. that one hurt.”

Figure: “good. wouldn’t want you underestimating me.”

Q darted in from the side, quick bursts of charge snapping off his fists, forcing the figure to break off from Black Vein and pivot to block.

Q: “hey, focus on ME for a second, tall dark and creepy.”

Figure: “so eager.”

He caught Q’s wrist mid-strike, twisting hard, and for a moment it looked like it might go badly — until Block’s clones converged from both sides, one grabbing the figure’s other arm, the other sweeping low at his legs.

Figure, breaking free with a sharp burst of energy that threw both clones back: “persistent, aren’t you.”

Block, watching his clones flicker back into him, absorbing the impact: “that’s kind of our whole thing.”

Spade hung back for a moment, watching the fight unfold, hood tight around his face, hands trembling slightly at his sides.

Black Vein noticed.

Black Vein, low, just to him: “hey. you don’t have to hold back because you’re scared of what happens if you don’t.”

Spade: “it’s not that simple.”

Black Vein: “it kind of is, actually. remember training. controlled, not suppressed.”

Spade took a slow breath, closing his eyes for half a second, and when he opened them, faint orange light had already begun curling at his fingertips.

Spade: “...okay. controlled.”

He stepped forward, flames wrapping steadily up his forearms, and for the first time since they’d entered the chamber, the figure’s confident expression flickered into something closer to genuine caution.

Figure: “...fire. interesting. wasn’t expecting that from you specifically.”

Spade: “you’d be surprised what training does.”

The fight shifted after that, faster, sharper, all four of them finding a rhythm they’d only ever practiced in theory back in that empty lot behind the apartment. Block’s clones drew attacks, absorbing hits meant for the others. Q darted in and out at speeds the figure struggled to track. Black Vein’s strength, fueled by something he clearly meant every bit of, cracked the ground with every blocked strike. And Spade, steady now instead of hesitant, kept the flames controlled, precise, driving the figure steadily backward toward the pulsing black column at the center of the room.

Figure, breathing harder now, some of his earlier smugness fraying: “you’re better coordinated than I expected.”

Block: “we’ve been working on it.”

The figure lashed out with a wide burst of black energy, forcing all four of them to scatter, and in the brief opening it created, he lunged for the column itself, pressing his palm flat against it.

Q: “wait, what’s he—”

The column pulsed violently, black energy flooding outward through the figure’s arm, his whole body glowing faintly with borrowed power, strength surging visibly through him.

Figure, voice deeper now, distorted slightly: “you have no idea what you’re actually dealing with here.”

Black Vein: “...he’s drawing straight from the source.”

Spade: “then we don’t give him time to use it.”

They pressed the attack immediately, not giving the figure a chance to fully stabilize the surge of power now running through him. Q darted low, sweeping his legs. Block’s clones grabbed both arms, pinning him just long enough for Black Vein to land a heavy blow squarely into his chest, cracking the stone wall behind him on impact.

The figure staggered, the black glow around him flickering unstable now, sparking erratically.

Figure, coughing, forcing himself upright: “...this isn’t over.”

Spade stepped forward, flames burning steadier and brighter than before, close enough now that the heat radiated visibly off him.

Spade: “it kind of is, though.”

The figure’s eyes flicked toward the exit, calculating, and in one sudden burst of the unstable energy he’d pulled from the column, he vanished in a scatter of black light, retreating rather than risk continuing the fight.

The chamber went quiet, the pulsing column still humming steadily at its center, undisturbed despite everything that had just happened around it.

Q, breathing hard, dropping into a crouch: “...okay. that happened.”

Block: “he ran.”

Black Vein: “he ran because he knew he was losing. that’s not nothing.”

Spade let the flames fade slowly from his arms, some of the tension finally easing from his shoulders now that the fight had ended.

Spade: “we should move fast. now that he knows we’re here, they’re not gonna waste time sending more.”

Block: “agreed. let’s finish what we came here for.”

They turned toward the pulsing black column, still standing tall and undisturbed at the center of the chamber, humming with power that had, until moments ago, fed directly into the man who’d just fled from them.

Q, staring up at it: “...so, question. how exactly do we destroy that without dying.”

Spade: “carefully.”

Q: “great. love that. very specific.”

Black Vein stepped closer, studying the structure, the veins of black energy pulsing steadily upward toward the pillar's higher levels.

Black Vein: "if this feeds the whole pillar, there's probably a core somewhere inside it. cutting the surface probably won't be enough."

Block: "then we go deeper."

Spade glanced toward the stairwell leading further down, darker and colder than the one they'd already descended, the hum of the column growing steadily louder the longer they stood near it.

Spade: "then let's go deeper."

They moved forward together, further into the pillar, unaware that the second commander himself had already been alerted, and was, at that very moment, making his way toward them with considerably less patience than his subordinate had shown.

Chapter thirty: The commander

They found the core two levels down, a smaller chamber where the black column narrowed into a dense, pulsing sphere embedded in the floor, veins of dark energy radiating outward from it like roots threading through stone.

Q: "okay, that's gotta be it."

Block: "let's not touch it without a plan this time."

Q: "when have we EVER had a plan for the actual touching part."

Block: "fair. still. let's try."

Before anyone could formulate one, the temperature in the room dropped sharply, the air itself seeming to tighten, pressing inward like the chamber had suddenly noticed them.

Second commander, stepping out from the stairwell behind them, voice calm and cold: "well. you've made quite a mess of my intern's evening."

Spade froze instantly, every muscle in his body going rigid at the sound of that voice.

Spade: "..you."

Second commander: "me."

He looked almost bored, hands tucked casually behind his back, surveying the four of them with the kind of detached amusement that made the hair on the back of everyone's neck stand up. His eyes moved slowly over each of them in turn, cataloguing, assessing, lingering longest on Spade.

Second commander: "did you really think I wouldn't notice four of you slipping away from that little concert? did you think I wouldn't feel my own pillar's core being threatened? I may not predict the future like my colleague does, but I'm not blind either."

Block: “your colleague. the despair guy.”

Second commander: “mm. he sends his regards, I’m sure, in whatever way a man like that sends anything.”

Black Vein stepped forward, putting himself slightly between the commander and Spade without making it obvious that’s what he was doing.

Black Vein: “we’re not here to talk.”

Second commander: “no. I don’t suppose you are.”

His eyes flicked to Spade, lingering there, something almost fond in his expression that made the moment feel worse, not better.

Second commander: “look at you. all grown up. found yourself some new friends to hide behind.”

Spade: “I’m not hiding.”

Second commander: “aren’t you? last time we spoke, alone, you couldn’t even finish a sentence. you cried, if I recall. quite a lot, actually. now you’ve got an entourage standing between us like a shield.”

Spade’s hands trembled at his sides, flames flickering unsteadily at his fingertips, control slipping under the weight of old fear resurfacing all at once.

Block, noticing immediately: “Spade—”

Spade: “I’m fine.”

Q: “you are very clearly not fine, dude.”

The commander smiled, slow and satisfied, clearly enjoying the crack forming in front of him, savoring it the way someone might savor a familiar, favorite cruelty.

Second commander: “there it is. that’s the boy I remember. still so easy to unravel.”

Black Vein: “leave him alone.”

Second commander: “or what?”

Black Vein didn’t answer with words. He answered by closing the distance in a single heavy step, swinging hard enough to crack the floor where the commander had been standing a half-second earlier.

The commander dodged easily, almost lazily, countering with a strike of his own that sent Black Vein skidding backward into the chamber wall.

Second commander: “strength without conviction. disappointing. I expected more from someone who fought his way through an entire tournament realm.”

Black Vein, pushing himself back up, wiping blood from his lip: “who says I don’t have conviction.”

He surged forward again, and this time the ground actually buckled under the force of his next swing, the commander forced to properly block instead of dodge, sliding back several feet from the impact, boots carving lines through the stone floor.

Second commander, flexing his hand slightly, something sharper crossing his expression now: "...better. there it is. tell me, what exactly are you fighting for, hm? deals don't usually inspire this much force."

Black Vein: "not fighting for a deal anymore."

Second commander: "no?"

Black Vein: "no."

He didn't elaborate further, just attacked again, faster this time, forcing the commander to actually commit to defending instead of toying with him.

Block's clones moved in from either side while the commander was still recovering, but he spun fast, catching one clone by the throat and driving it into the ground hard enough to dissolve it back into Block instantly, the original wincing sharply at the sudden loss, staggering half a step.

Block: "okay, that one actually hurt."

Second commander: "clones. interesting trick. tell me, does it hurt more or less than losing a piece of yourself the normal way?"

Block: "shut up."

Second commander: "touched a nerve. how predictable."

Q darted in low, quick bursts of charge crackling off rapid strikes, forcing the commander to actually work to track him, his usual languid confidence fraying at the edges as Q's speed kept him constantly repositioning.

Second commander: "fast little thing, aren't you."

Q: "you have NO idea."

Q: "also, side note, your whole 'calm and menacing' thing is giving villain-from-a-kids-cartoon energy, not gonna lie."

Second commander, momentarily thrown by the sheer randomness of the insult: "...excuse me?"

Q: "you heard me!"

The distraction cost him half a second, and Q used it, landing a solid charged strike directly to the commander's ribs, sending a visible crack of energy rippling outward across his side.

He kept the commander on the defensive just long enough for Black Vein to land another heavy blow, this one square in the chest, sending the commander skidding back toward the pulsing core itself, breath knocked visibly out of him for the first time in the fight.

Spade still hadn't moved, flames flickering weakly at his hands, old fear locking his feet in place despite everything the others were doing around him. His breathing had gone shallow, quick, his eyes fixed on the commander with something between hatred and pure animal fear.

Black Vein, breathing hard, glancing back at him for just a second: "Spade. now would be a great time."

Spade: "I—"

Second commander, straightening up, wiping a thin line of blood from his mouth, voice sharpening as he looked directly at Spade again: "go on then. show them what you did last time. show them how well that turned out for you. show them the scars underneath that hood you never take off."

Something in Spade's chest twisted painfully at that, memory and present colliding all at once — the volcano, the heat, the fall, the moment of betrayal that had defined the worst day of his life playing out again behind his eyes like it was happening right now instead of years ago.

Block: "Spade, look at me. not him. me."

Spade's eyes flicked toward Block, something in the familiar, steady presence of him cutting slightly through the spiral.

Block: "you're not there anymore. you're here. with us. that's different."

Q: "yeah, seriously, we're right here, quit doubting yourself and set something on fire already, preferably him specifically."

Second commander: "how touching. a support group."

Black Vein: "shut up and fight instead of talking."

Second commander: "oh, I intend to. once he actually decides to participate."

Spade closed his eyes, just for a second, forcing himself to breathe the way he'd practiced all week, the way Sarah's warmth had felt at the concert just hours earlier, still lingering somewhere in his chest if he reached for it.

Spade, quiet, almost to himself: "...controlled. not suppressed."

The flames surged up his arms properly this time, bright and steady instead of flickering, and he stepped forward with a kind of certainty none of them had seen from him before, not even in training.

Second commander, watching this with the first flicker of genuine unease crossing his face: "...that's different from before."

Spade: "yeah. it is."

He moved fast, faster than the commander expected, closing the distance and driving a controlled burst of flame directly at him. The commander barely managed to block in time, the force of it scorching his sleeve, pushing him back another step toward the core.

Second commander, recovering, forcing his usual composure back into place: “impressive. truly. but fire alone won’t be enough.”

Spade: “who said I was alone.”

The four of them converged then, properly together for the first time in the fight — Block’s remaining clone and Q pressing from both sides, Black Vein driving forward with everything he had, Spade’s flames arcing overhead to cut off any retreat.

The commander, cornered now, glanced toward the pulsing core beside him, calculating, his earlier arrogance replaced with something more focused, more urgent.

Second commander: “...clever. very clever, actually. using the chamber’s layout against me.”

Black Vein: “give up.”

Second commander: “give up? no. I don’t think so.”

He pressed his palm flat against the core, the same way his subordinate had earlier, black energy flooding through him in a surge that cracked the floor beneath his feet, his entire frame glowing faintly with borrowed power, eyes darkening several shades.

Second commander, voice distorted now, deeper, layered with something that didn’t sound entirely human anymore: “you have no idea what you’re actually poking at here.”

Q: “yeah, we’ve heard that one already tonight, from your buddy upstairs.”

Second commander: “then you should have taken it seriously the first time.”

He surged forward with newfound speed, catching Q off guard, a heavy blow sending him skidding across the chamber floor. Block moved to intercept, his last clone splitting off just in time to catch the follow-up strike meant to finish Q off.

Block #2, absorbing the hit, flickering unsteadily: “that one’s gonna cost you extra energy, Block, just saying—”

The clone dissolved on the next hit, folding back into Block, who staggered, breathing hard, clearly nearing the edge of what he could sustain tonight.

Black Vein: “Block, you good?”

Block: “getting there. keep him busy.”

Spade stepped up without hesitation this time, flames wrapping fully up both arms now, driving forward with a precision and control that surprised even him. He and Black Vein fell into rhythm together, strikes overlapping, each covering the gaps the other left open, the kind of seamless

coordination that only came from weeks of training and — more than that — actually trusting each other.

The commander, pressed harder now, growled low, the black energy around him sparking erratically, unstable under the sustained assault.

Second commander: “you should know — there are seven more of these. destroy this one, and you’ve barely scratched what keeps us standing.”

Spade: “we know.”

Second commander: “then you know this isn’t over.”

Spade pressed forward anyway, flames roaring brighter, driving the commander back those final few steps until his back nearly touched the pulsing core itself, cornered fully now, nowhere left to retreat.

Second commander, breathing hard, blood at his lip, the borrowed power around him flickering unstable: “..you’ve gotten stronger. all of you. it’s almost admirable.”

Black Vein: “almost?”

Second commander: “don’t get used to it.”

With a final burst of the unstable energy surging through him, he vanished the same way the subordinate had earlier, black light scattering across the chamber before fading into nothing, leaving the four of them standing amid cracked stone and dying embers, breathing hard, exhausted, but alive.

Q, after a long beat of silence, dropping fully onto the floor: “..okay. we win?”

Block: “we win.”

Black Vein: “he ran though. same as the other one.”

Spade, staring at the spot where the commander had vanished, flames finally fading from his arms, voice quieter than usual: “he’ll keep running. as long as even one pillar’s still standing, none of them can actually die. that’s the whole point of the pillars, remember. that’s what Sarah said.”

Q: “so this was just, what, round one?”

Spade: “round one of eight, probably.”

Block let out a long breath, looking around at the cracked, scorched chamber, the pulsing core still humming steadily at its center, undisturbed despite everything that had just happened around it, waiting to be destroyed properly now that the fight was over.

Black Vein walked over to Spade slowly, studying him for a moment.

Black Vein: “you okay? actually okay, not the performance version.”

Spade was quiet for a second, testing the question honestly before answering.

Spade: “..yeah. actually. I think I am.”

Black Vein: “good.”

Spade: “I didn’t freeze.”

Black Vein: “no. you didn’t.”

Spade: “first time. since the volcano. first time I didn’t freeze when he brought it up.”

Black Vein: “that’s not nothing.”

Spade: “no. it’s not.”

Something passed between them in that moment, quiet and unspoken, neither of them needing to name it directly for it to be understood.

Block, watching from a few feet away, allowed himself the smallest smile despite the exhaustion weighing on all of them.

Block: “let’s finish what we came here for.”

They turned toward the core together, the four of them steadier now than they’d been walking in, the fight behind them having proven something none of them had fully believed until they’d lived through it — that whatever came next, seven more pillars, seven more commanders, whatever waited beyond tonight, they wouldn’t be facing it alone.

Spade stepped forward first, flames steady and controlled once more, ready to finish it.

Chapter thirty-one: What’s left standing

The core pulsed steadily in front of them, veins of black energy threading up through the ceiling toward the rest of the pillar above, patient, waiting, indifferent to the fight that had just happened around it.

Q: “okay so. actual question. how do we blow this thing up without also blowing US up.”

Block: “carefully, like I said before.”

Q: “you said that last time too and then a whole evil commander showed up, forgive me for wanting more specifics.”

Black Vein circled the core slowly, studying the way the black veins pulsed rhythmically, thick near the base, thinner as they stretched upward.

Black Vein: “it’s not a solid structure. it’s more like — a heartbeat. something alive, sort of.”

Spade: “Sarah did say influence, not just raw power. maybe it doesn’t need brute force. maybe it needs the opposite of whatever it’s feeding on.”

Block: “the opposite of despair and control, you mean.”

Spade: “yeah.”

Q: “so what, we just stand here and think happy thoughts at it?”

Spade: “..basically, yeah, actually.”

Q: “wait really?”

Black Vein: “worth a shot. we’re not exactly overflowing with better ideas.”

Spade stepped closer to the core, flames still faintly present along his fingertips, not aggressive now, just steady, warm. He thought of the concert, of the golden light spreading through the crowd, of Sarah’s voice telling him that was what real warmth felt like.

The core’s pulse stuttered, faint but unmistakable.

Block, noticing immediately: “...it reacted.”

Q: “okay THAT’S something.”

They gathered closer, instinctively, Block’s presence steady and grounding, Q’s hand briefly resting on Spade’s shoulder, Black Vein standing solidly at his other side. Spade closed his eyes, letting the warmth from the concert, the honesty from training, the last hour of finally not freezing when it mattered most, well up all at once.

The flames along his arms brightened, spreading outward, wrapping gently around the core instead of striking it, more embrace than attack.

The core’s pulse stuttered again, harder this time, cracks of golden light spiderwebbing across its dark surface.

Second commander’s voice, distant, distorted, echoing faintly from somewhere far above them, laced with real alarm for the first time all night: “—what are you doing down there—”

Spade: “ending this.”

The golden cracks spread rapidly now, consuming the black surface entirely, the chamber filling with light bright enough that all four of them had to shield their eyes. The pulse of the core spiked one final time, violent and desperate, before shattering entirely, the sound less like an explosion and more like something enormous finally exhaling.

Silence followed, heavy and complete, the oppressive cold that had filled the chamber since they arrived finally, fully lifting.

Q, blinking spots out of his vision: “...did we just win.”

Block: “...I think we just won.”

Black Vein let out a long breath, some tension he’d clearly been holding the entire fight finally draining out of his shoulders.

Black Vein: “one down.”

Spade stared at the empty space where the core had been, something settling in his chest that felt lighter than it had in longer than he could remember.

Spade: “seven to go.”

Q: “let’s not think about that part yet, I would like exactly one night of just feeling good about this before the next terrifying thing.”

Block: “fair enough.”

They made their way back up through the pillar, the stairwell somehow feeling shorter on the way out than it had on the way in, emerging finally into the cool night air, the distant sound of the concert crowd still faintly audible, cheering, unaware of everything that had just happened a few blocks away.

Back at the venue, Kai stood offstage, still catching his breath from the performance, when V’s voice came through his earpiece, sharp with urgency.

V: “Kai. Block and Q are gone.”

Kai: “...what?”

V: “they left during the third song. I thought they were covering perimeter but I just checked in and neither of them’s answering.”

Kai’s stomach dropped.

Kai: “they went after Spade and Black Vein.”

V: “that’s my guess too.”

Kai: “of course they did.”

He was already moving before he finished the sentence, weaving through the thinning crowd, V falling into step beside him, both of them heading toward the looming shape of the pillar visible over the rooftops.

They were halfway there when four familiar, exhausted shapes came into view, walking back toward the venue, scorched and tired but very clearly, very obviously, all still standing.

Kai broke into a run.

Kai: “you IDIOTS—”

Q: “we’re ALIVE, that’s the important part—”

Kai: “you left without telling me—”

Block: “there wasn’t exactly time to ask permission mid-concert, Kai—”

Kai: “I don’t care, you don’t just—”

He stopped mid-sentence, actually looking at them properly for the first time — the exhaustion, the scorch marks, Spade's flames long since faded but his posture different somehow, straighter, less braced than usual — and the anger drained out of him almost as fast as it had come, replaced by something closer to relief so overwhelming it nearly buckled his knees.

Kai, quieter: "...you're okay."

Spade: "yeah. we're okay."

Kai: "the pillar?"

Black Vein: "gone. core's destroyed."

V, catching up, breathless: "the whole thing?"

Block: "the whole thing."

For a moment nobody said anything, the weight of it settling slowly over all of them — the first real victory since this entire nightmare with TFM began, small in the scope of everything still ahead, but real, undeniable, theirs.

Q, breaking the silence first, predictably: "so. can we PLEASE get donuts now. I feel like we've earned it."

Block: "...you know what. yeah. tonight, we've earned it."

Kai let out a laugh that came out shakier than he meant it to, equal parts exhaustion and disbelief and something warmer underneath both.

Kai: "yeah. tonight, we've earned it."

They walked back together, six of them now fully, unmistakably a team, the concert lights still glowing warm behind them, one pillar down, the weight of seven more still ahead — but for tonight, at least, allowed to simply be glad they'd all made it back to each other in one piece.

Chapter thirty-two: The morning after

Nobody woke up early this time. Not Kai, not Block, not even Q, which said more about the night before than anything else could have.

It was well past noon by the time the apartment showed any signs of life, and even then it was slow — Block shuffling into the kitchen first, moving like every muscle in his body had personally filed a complaint overnight.

Block: "...coffee. need coffee."

V, already up, already dressed, sitting at the table nursing her own cup: "there's a fresh pot. also there's donuts on the counter, before Q wakes up and you have to fight him for one."

Block: "how are you even functional right now?"

V: "I wasn't the one climbing down a stairwell into a cursed evil tower last night. some of us just did perimeter work."

Block: "perimeter work that included restraining two TFM operatives, don't undersell yourself."

V: "fair. still less exhausting than whatever you four did."

Block poured his coffee and sat down heavily across from her, the quiet of the apartment settling comfortably around them for a moment before the rest of the group started trickling in.

Q emerged next, hair a disaster, walking directly into the kitchen and straight for the donut box without a single word to anyone.

V: "good morning to you too."

Q, mouth already full: "mmph."

Block: "articulate as always."

Q swallowed, dropping into a chair with all the grace of a sack of flour.

Q: "we blew up an evil pillar last night. I'm allowed one morning of not being articulate."

Block: "that's fair, actually."

Kai came down next, looking better rested than he had in days despite everything, some of the tightness that had lived permanently in his shoulders for the past week finally, visibly gone.

Kai: "morning."

V: "morning. sleep okay?"

Kai: "better than I expected, honestly. guess almost losing four idiots to an evil commander really puts everything else in perspective."

Q: "we were FINE."

Kai: "you left without telling me, Q."

Q: "and we came back! full circle! no harm done!"

Kai: "I'm still mad about it."

Q: "you don't SOUND mad."

Kai: "I'm tired-mad. it's a different category."

Spade and Black Vein came down last, together as always lately, Spade's hood up same as ever but something looser in the way he carried himself, a kind of ease that hadn't been there even a few days ago.

Block, noticing immediately: "you look different."

Spade: “different how?”

Block: “I don’t know. lighter, maybe.”

Spade considered that for a moment, sitting down at the table, Black Vein settling in beside him without needing to be asked.

Spade: “..yeah. maybe. didn’t freeze last night. first time since the volcano I actually stood my ground when he brought it up.”

Kai: “that’s huge, Spade.”

Spade: “feels huge. still processing it, honestly.”

Black Vein: “he did good. better than good.”

Spade: “we all did good.”

Q, still working through his second donut: “we make an unstoppable evil-pillar-destroying squad, is what we are.”

Block: “let’s not get ahead of ourselves, there’s still seven left.”

Q: “I SAID let me have this.”

V, smiling faintly: “let him have it, Block. we earned a little bragging today.”

Block: “...fine. fine, we did earn that.”

They sat together for a while, the morning stretching lazily on, nobody in a particular hurry to talk about pillars two through eight just yet, content instead to simply exist in the quiet relief of having all made it through the night in one piece.

Kai eventually broke the comfortable silence, voice softer than usual.

Kai: “hey. for what it’s worth. last night, watching that crowd, feeling that light actually work the way it was supposed to — that was the first time since Amy that I actually felt like my power was something good instead of something I had to be afraid of.”

The table went quiet, the weight of that landing gently rather than heavily.

Spade: “that’s a big thing to say out loud.”

Kai: “yeah. guess I’ve been taking lessons from you and Black Vein on that front.”

Black Vein: “we should really stop being an accidental self-help duo, this wasn’t the plan.”

Q: “keep doing it, honestly, it’s working on all of us.”

Block raised his coffee mug slightly, an unspoken toast, and one by one the others followed, mugs and donuts alike raised in something halfway between a joke and a genuine moment.

Block: “to one pillar down.”

Q: “to unstoppable donut-fueled heroics.”

V: “to actually surviving the plan for once.”

Spade: “to not freezing.”

Black Vein: “to conviction.”

Kai, last, smiling properly for the first time in what felt like weeks: “to all of us. still here. still together.”

They clinked mugs, an absurd, mismatched little toast in a cluttered apartment kitchen, sunlight spilling in through the windows, the distant hum of the city outside carrying on completely unaware of how much had changed overnight.

For now, at least, that was enough.

Chapter thirty-three: The fallout

The scout who'd fled the pillar chamber first — the one Q had mocked mid-fight — stood at attention in a sparse, windowless room, still visibly shaken, a fresh burn mark scorched across one sleeve.

Second commander, pacing slowly, jaw tight: “walk me through it again. from the beginning.”

Scout: “sir, I already told you everything, they were coordinated, they trained for it, the winged one—”

Second commander: “Spade.”

Scout: “...Spade. he didn't freeze this time. that's — that's the part that matters, isn't it.”

The commander stopped pacing.

Second commander: “yes. that's the part that matters.”

He turned toward the room's only window, looking out over the city, expression unreadable, though his hands had curled into fists at his sides.

Second commander: “eight months I've been waiting for a chance to finish what should have ended on that volcano. eight months, and one night of teamwork undoes it.”

Scout: “sir, permission to speak freely?”

Second commander: “granted.”

Scout: “the whole plan hinged on him being alone. he's not alone anymore. that variable's gone. permanently, probably.”

The commander said nothing for a long moment, the silence stretching uncomfortably.

Second commander: “...noted.”

He dismissed the scout with a sharp gesture, and the young man fled the room without needing to be told twice.

Alone now, the commander pressed a hand flat against the cold window glass, staring out at the skyline, at the faint glow still visible where the concert had been the night before, now dark, empty, packed up and gone.

Second commander, quietly, to no one: "...one pillar. they only took one pillar."

He almost laughed, though there was no humor in it.

Second commander: "seven left. plenty of time to make this right."

Elsewhere, in the same cold, quiet room he always occupied, the first commander sat motionless, the destruction of the pillar already replayed behind his eyes more times than he cared to count, each replay sharper, clearer, more thoroughly understood than the last.

He hadn't needed anyone to report it to him. He'd known the outcome three days before it happened, the way he always did. What he hadn't known — what still needled at him, faint but persistent, like a splinter beneath skin too numb to properly feel it — was how thoroughly it had happened. Not just destroyed. Unmade gently, deliberately, with something closer to warmth than force.

First commander, quiet, almost to himself: "...interesting."

He closed his eyes, letting the vision stretch forward again, searching the branching paths ahead for the shape of what came next. Six of them now, fully united, no longer five plus a stray. That single variable rippled outward through nearly every future he could see, subtle at first, then vast, reshaping outcomes he'd considered settled months ago.

First commander: "recalculating."

He said it the same way he always did — flat, quiet, entirely without inflection — though something in the stillness of the room afterward felt different this time, heavier, less certain than it usually did.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, the future in front of him didn't feel fully written.

He didn't like that feeling. Not one bit.

Deeper still, in a chamber far removed from either commander, the leader of TFM sat at the head of a long table, seven remaining pillar cores each represented by a small pulsing orb suspended above the table's surface, one space now conspicuously, permanently dark.

Leader: "so. it begins."

An aide, standing nervously near the door, cleared his throat.

Aide: "sir, should we consider this a serious threat, or—"

Leader: "six children destroyed one of eight pillars in a single night, working together for the first time, against two of my strongest commanders."

Aide: "...yes sir. serious threat, understood."

Leader: "increase security on the remaining seven immediately. and get me everything we have on all six of them. names, powers, weaknesses, everything."

Aide: "already compiling, sir."

Leader: "good."

He stared at the dark, empty space where the first pillar's orb had once pulsed steadily, expression unreadable, calculating.

Leader: "let them enjoy their little victory. it won't matter, in the end."

Aide: "sir?"

Leader: "seven pillars left. seven commanders left to stand between them and the truth of what we're actually protecting up here."

He gestured vaguely upward, toward levels of the tower far above where any of them had ever set foot.

Leader: "let's see how well their teamwork holds up once they realize what's really waiting for them at the top."

The room fell quiet, the six remaining orbs pulsing steadily above the table, patient, waiting, indifferent to the small victory that had just cost their masters one piece of a much larger, much older design.

Back across the city, unaware of any of this, six friends slept soundly through the early afternoon, donut boxes empty on the counter, sunlight spilling warm across a living room that, for one quiet morning at least, held nothing but relief.

They had no way of knowing yet just how much bigger this fight was about to become.