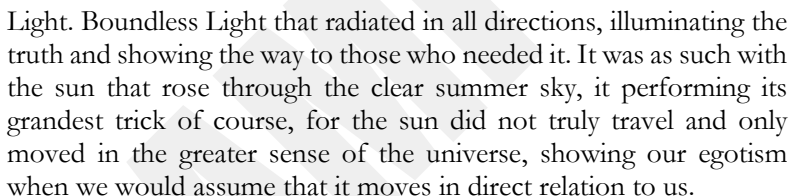




Chapter One

SUNRISE

[illegible]

“Oh, please, someone answer that blasted door!”

The metallic yet vibrantly red double doors opened to a blue morning sky, and a middle-age man standing ready. He was long, lanky, and plain, with modestly trimmed brown hair and similarly coloured eyes, all the while having a reinforced smile plastered on his face as he laid in wait to face whoever greeted him. He wore a flowing

robe of white silk adorned with a thick grey mantle that gave him pointed shoulders, all edged with gold, while a shining pendant with an oddly detailed engraving kept the mantle bound at his chest.

Coming from inside was a woman, her staring back at him with groggy yet rich sky-blue eyes, as she forced the doors open with an impatient and sluggish push from her slumped six-foot form. The morning brought her all-natural amethyst purple hair into sharp relief, showing off her baggy maroon leggings and her lone bikini brassiere, while the latter bore a half-red, half-blue flame design and a red spikey symbol awkwardly sewn over the left breast.

However, the top was delicately small, it barely hiding the sizable chest beneath, as it showed off her dark caramel coloured skin laden with bulging muscles and well-defined abs. Well, it was still hard to truly see them anyway, because her body was covered from neck to toe in tattoos, tribal marking designs of spirals, curves, and circles in no distinct pattern, made in interweaving colours of black, blue, and red, while all shown off brazenly and without care.

“What do you want?” July asked rudely, showing her hair in slight disarray as she winced to the bright light.

“Good morning,” the man said cheerily, ignoring the tone. “I have come to speak to you of the Exalted Elagabalus, One True Being of the Sun.”

July blinked; she would usually be wearing makeup, but it was seriously too early for this bullshit.

“...We don’t want any Elaga-hoobadie-hoo.”

“Please, I must speak with *the man* of the house,” the monk told her with earnest insistence.

“Well, *excuse* me,” the woman said politely, coughing and pulling herself together, before she distinctly yelled; “FUUUUUCCKKKK OOOFFFFF!”

She then abruptly slammed the door in his face, before storming back down the entrance corridor.

The place was in truth; a bowling alley – it refurbished now and in far much better shape than it had been – as July stomped down the dark, wooden-walled corridor that separated the lanes from the entrance, and came to the main hall with a muttering of curses under her breath.

The mostly open forum could have held a child's party or two in its day, but the place had been torn apart at the seams, removing it of any flooring or wall tiles and replacing them with a smooth metal that didn't exactly match across the room. It was purely patching at the moment, especially as the ceiling above was still sparse and void of any covering, showing the long industrial pipes threaded throughout the place, amongst the circuitry of the harsh – but not as harsh as it used to be – neon lighting.

An extensive glass table was stuck in the exact centre of the room, it set up under a complicated four-directional computer display, as mismatched garden furniture sat in place around it. The only exception was the head of the table, where the bosses chair sat, showing an awful pieced-together and imposing monstrosity, puzzled together from the dark wood and stained green foam of former bar booths. In truth, it was super comfortable to sit on, especially with the foam arms, but it was still an assault on the eyes.

This all sat as the nexus of the base, with the lanes and central corridor at the front of it, with the former serving area to its left, with the storage area and public toilets at the back, while the reception with the mid-height wooden walls lay to its right. The serving area was now a fully stocked kitchen, the storage area was now guarded by an almost bank-vault-like door, and the public toilets had now been simply renovated into a mixed bathroom for the inhabitants.

However, in all of this, the staff office behind the reception had now become July's personal room, which – much to her annoyance and displeasure – had conveniently designated her as the building's chief door-answerer.

"Was it those bastards again?" A rough and sleepy voice asked as she passed by.

The former lanes hid behind the wall alongside the entrance, the machinery of it long since destroyed and the wooden panelling of the floor now disastrously worn away, as a moderately-sized blue nylon tent now lay on top to function as a makeshift room. It belonged to the curious boy who seemingly rolled along the floor and popped his head out of the bottom, revealing his long, greasy, and bed-tussled royal-blue hair, with the large metallic section embedded into it.

He blinked into awareness as he stared up at July. Well, it was

possibly “stared” and “blinked”, but she couldn’t really tell much with his eyes were securely wrapped in bandages.

“They’ve knocked here every day for the past few weeks!”

“Rehehe, answer it nude. They sent a new guy the day after I did that, and they’ll run out of people eventually.”

“Both of you, please *shut up*,” snapped another overly intelligent voice. “I am trying to finalise my REM sleep pattern.”

“Piss off, Mera.”

“*You* may not need sleep, you mechanical cretin,” said a blonde head that poked out of the green tent besides Rec’s. “But *I* am at least still biological, and I need to maintain my energy levels.”

The head was weird; it showed droopy blonde hair with small white horns poking out the top, as it lay limply along the long canine-like ears poking out the sides of his head. Open slits on his neck showed off his gills, the brief yawn showed off his spikey teeth, and despite his tired state, his human eyes noticeably contained rich feline irises.

“*Both* of you, *shut up*. Go back to sleep.”

Rec and Mera just growled at each other with July’s order, but as their heads swiftly disappeared back inside their tents, it left her ignoring them and stumbling back to her own room.

Well, she was about to, until she heard a quiet grumbling noise and the rustle of paper come from further down the corridor, in someplace just past the pair of tent rooms. It wasn’t coming from the end of the corridor, not from the metal slate of a door with the precariously placed handle, but from the loosely open double doors opposite Mera’s tent. They were wooden doors with the blacked-out windows, surrounded one each side by even more blacked-out windows, as they obscured the former bar area of the alley from all vision.

With her curiosity and annoyance mounting, she stomped over and pushed open the doors with a slight creak, bringing her before mounds upon mounds of paper stacked around a desk, while the deep grumbly growl came from within it. The woman approached cautiously, her unable to see what she was looking for, but as she stepped closer and close, there came a sudden *WHAM*, as a hand shot out, gripped her by the trouser leg, and caused her to let out an

immodest scream.

The hand held her tight and used her to pull itself out, bringing into view the piercing crimson eyes staring at her, while a small black monstrosity from the pits of hell emerged from out of the paper pile.

Wait, it was just Zed.

He was a very striking five-foot guy, him built solid and having sharp features on someone relatively young, but with the most notable sight being the sizable and veiny crescent moon scar across the left side of his pale face.

“Stop screaming... I have one *whopper* of a headache.”

At the moment though, he looked beyond tired and seemed like a shell of a man. He wore a pair of ripe dark slacks and was buried in a matching dirty hoodie, having his shoulder-length black hair limp and sticking to his skin with its red edges, while he had even grown a bit of stubble that clearly didn't suit him.

“Have... have you been up all night?”

“Please heelp,” he groaned and moaned, crawling across the ground like a zombie. “The paper is talking to me. It wants to kill meeeeee.”

“How?” July wondered pointedly, picking him up by the armpits. “We're Villains, we don't get paperwork.”

“WE DON'T GET PAPERWORK?!” The man's deep voice gasped viciously into her face, before he gestured forcefully to the paper covering his desk. “*What* do you call *this* then?”

“You have a proxy for this stuff. Mister... Bly, right?”

“Mr. Bly does all the day-to-day stuff in Hallowville... and being as I haven't installed him in Devilsnight yet, I get all their work. And that's not the worst of it.”

“It's not?” July wondered curiously, putting Zed under her arm so she could pick up an errant piece of paper.

“It's the other *cursed* Dominions.”

Okay, first, some explaining to do. In this World, people existed in places called Dominions, them all varying greatly in size, with some being no bigger than towns and some being possibly the size of continents. They essentially acted as entire countries to themselves, varying widely in structure and culture, to the point of where each Dominion could exist as neighbours and yet still barely resemble each

other.

Then, there existed the Heroes and the Villains, the entitled beings that would fight and clash over the right to Dominate these places, for it afforded them the choice to rule over people as they wished. Of course, there were also Independent territories run by corporations and ideologies that functioned similarly, with this all working under the purview of the G.P.D. (the Global Police Department).

Zed here, was one of the Villains, someone who took over Dominions illegally, while being one with defiant dreams of taking over the entire World. However, he just currently sulked and pouted, as July carried him under her arm like a medium-sized teddy bear.

"I've got friggin' requests from every Dominion on the continent!" He finally exclaimed, thrashing around in minor tantrum, as the woman struggled to hold on to him. "All trying to find out what my intentions are. Do you know how hard it is to be both clear *and* vague, at the same time?!"

"De parte de Señora-de-la-Vida'. 'Estimado Overlord Zed, como vecinos'—"

"Gimme that!" The man himself barked, instantly swiping away the piece she was reading. "That one's important."

"Can't you just like... ask Onzera to send out a mass email or something?"

"Go ahead. Ask her."

"Hey Onzera..."

"*I am not your secretary, Zed. I am not your secretary, Zed.*" Came a very soft and toneless voice on repeat. "*I am not your secretary, Zed. I am not your secretary, Zed...*"

"She put on the recording after I threatened her life. Big baby."

"She's probably asleep, as you should be."

"I can't!" The man frustratedly barked, as he jumped down from her and back into the pile. "I've got to deal with this *Wizard* from Flickum. While... the Free Peoples are wondering if some of their people can seek asylum here, the people from both Michstein *and* Ohiros aren't answering my replies, and I've gotten three *different* death threats from three *different* leaders of Fawkland in the last twelve hours."

"And the arrival of the Neutrals you told us about."

“RAAAGH!” He furiously rubbed his red and black hair, making him jostle the pile. “*Curse* the Villain Rule about always being punctual with correspondence, it can go to hell!”

July in turn rummaged her hands through the pile and pulled him out again, leaving dark form hurriedly writing a signature on a piece of paper, while he remained unaware of that he’d been caught.

“Come on, mister. Time for bed. It’s nearly seven.”

“SEVEN?! IN THE MORNING?!” Zed promptly jumped in alarm, causing him to drop his paper and pen. “Crap-crap-crap-crap! I’m supposed to see Penny off today!”

He then dove back into the pile, leaving the paper rustling and fluttering for a long moment, as he squirmed and groaned frantically. Then, almost as if it was a magic trick, he jumped back out of the pile soon after and showed himself wearing a totally different outfit.

This was his proper attire, showing fresh black jeans and a matching shirt, each edged with red fire to match his hair and the pair of reinforced trainers he wore. With those came the black plate goggles that he wore on his forehead, it glowing with digital white eyes, while at his waist was his metallic belt with the round belt buckle that was badly decorated with a poorly painted on evil grin.

However, the most noticeable piece of all, was his armour, it being a metallic grey piece made with layered plates thin enough to never limit his movements, even if they were still strong enough to stop a bullet at close range. The giant spikes of the pauldrons made it imposing, and the striking spiral-like symbol across its body was a proud showing of the Red Hand’s symbol.

The Red Hand was the name of the organisation this Overlord had taken, in a proud choice of his conviction to take over the World. The symbol was red of course, a large circle at the centre which was common for Dominion symbols, while being surrounded by two stylized curved pieces. The smaller spikey piece was the thumb and the larger curved piece was noticeably the fingers, as the latter encompassed the circle and displayed the four shark-fin shapes coming off it. It was clearly a hand, despite what the others would say, and regardless, the boss had requested them all to wear it about their person, just like the one July was showing awkwardly sewn into her brassiere.

Zed then finished adjusting his wrists and snapping tight the red bands on them, as he felt out his deadly gloves of dark sharp metal and flexed the precise talons of silver that were his main source of weaponry.

“Well, I’m off. Hey, Rec! I want that hole inspected and fixed by the end of the day!”

“Huhna rama dah zzzzzz,” the cyborg said deliriously from his room, before falling back to sleep.

“Well, *I* might as well stay up now too,” July decided reluctantly, with her leaping over to the bar to the side and entering the kitchen between. “Here, take this, you idiot. Get your energy up.”

He peeled open and ravenously scarfed down the cereal bar that she then threw his way, him possibly even downing the wrapper, as the bags under his eyes disappeared in an instant and he seemed to ping with alertness.

“I was *going* to do that.”

“Yeah-yeah. Yaaaah-don’t let the door hit you on the ass on the way out.”

The moment after, Zed quickly zipped out of his room in a run, taking him through the bowling alley and out onto the driveway coated in gravel, before he took into a flying leap. Using it, he rocketed off the towering hill and soared into the bright blue summer sky, letting him float through the air for a long second and look out into the kingdom he owned.

However, once the gravity took him back, he immediately kicked off the grass incline, whereupon he shuddered into a blur with a flickering noise and entirely disappeared.



The sun was bright in the morning, making it difficult for Zed to dash with it shining directly in his face, but as he felt somehow burnt and freezing at the same, he knew for sure that the month had passed, and the Dominion of Hallowville had moved into the next season with the growing chilly breeze.

The Dominion itself was built of red brick, having tall buildings separated by tight and darkened alleys in almost maze-like patterns, and leaving people often lost if they were new to the domain. Zed

had already memorised these paths as a point of pride, but still, it was still just easier for our Villains to get around by dashing across the flat rooftops. Indeed, he continuously disappeared and reappeared across the houses, in what was called a shundō, it being a common skill found in this World amongst the physically gifted like Zed and July, for it allowed them the ability to jump at least for a short distance and move fast enough to become imperceptible during that time.

Using it, he had travelled the length of the main maze of houses and was now on the complete opposite side to his base, whereupon he shundōed to the ground to find two girls and an old man talking jovially as they packed stuff into a foggy blue car. The grey and stony street they were on was barely wide enough to fit the car through, while the vehicle itself was not at all big enough to hold the essentials that had been visibly jammed into the back seat.

“Oh, Zed! You’re finally here,” noticed Penny, the imposing brunette with fierce brown eyes, who wore her well-known wine-red beret and black leather jacket. “You can help us get the printer in the car.”

“Hi... Mr. Vampire,” came Frankie, the shy and softly-spoken black-haired girl with a fondness for gothic clothes. “Long time no see.”

“My boy!” Ed voiced boisterously, showing a large, greying, and jolly man who came over and thoroughly shook Zed’s metal hand, before sharply pulling him into a conspiratorial whisper. “*You’re lucky no one’s around to see you arrive.*”

“I scouted the area before I touched down. I’m glad to see you’ve healed completely, Mr. Bly.”

“Bah, I had worse when the hooligans walked this town. Now come on, we better get these girls packed.”

Penny was an aspiring journalist, Frankie was an aspiring camerawoman, and as they had both been dealing with the former gangs that roamed Hallowville, they had reported it to the nearest media outlet in the time before Zed arrived. With the gang’s leader now dead, the report had at least allowed Penny to get her foot in the door, and because the girl was notorious for her stubbornness and persistence, she got them both offered an internship in the News Dominion Diurma, several continents away.

After a short and cheery while, they were all nearly done, having had a few heavy lifts made easier by the fact that Zed, in simple terms, had superstrength. He could knock a brick wall down without even trying and probably throw a car in each hand if he did put in some effort, so lifting something like a printer was like balancing a basketball on one finger.

"Hey, be careful with that!" Penny yelled at him, "I don't want to buy a new one."

"Oh, lighten up. I'm in control."

The spinning printer then took an immediate tumble from Zed's finger, leaving Penny, Frankie, and Mr. Bly all gasping in shock, until he caught it moments before the ground and looked at them with a wide gloating smirk.

"Mwaha! Made you look."

He then shoved the printer into the car without a care, letting him effortless force everything else aside, even if he possibly crushed some things beneath. The others then came up behind soon after, showing Penny and Ed rolling their eyes – Frankie's were unable to be seen behind her dark bangs – as they placed the final lot of bags on top of the placed printer.

"Why did we bring a *Villain* to help us pack?"

"Because I'm *absolutely* wonderful."

Penny just made a rougher sigh, despite Frankie's and Mr. Bly's chuckles, as she did have to admit that his tomfoolery did momentarily lighten the lingering regret she was ignoring in the pit of her stomach. In a similar vein, Zed continued to make more teases and jokes as they finished readying the car, his brazen attitude hassling and jeering them, at least until he purposefully dealt with the more struggling parts of packing.

"Well... we best be off. They're expecting us at Diurma by Monday. And the trip is... *long*."

Penny first went to her grandfather, them both taking into a deep and intense hug that lasted longer than your average one, as the old man probably indulged in the presence of his granddaughter one last time. They eventually broke, showing the hint of tears in Penny's eyes, before she then came to the small Villain and bent slightly down to give him his own powerful squeezing hug.

"Give me some luck."

"You don't need luck; you don't need me. You are you. Stronger than me. And I will see you again, when I march on Diurma as its conqueror."

Then, the most surprising thing happened, as Penny came out of the hug, gripped him by the face, and planted a smooth yet wanting kiss upon his lips. She seemed to linger on him for a long and indulging moment, but as she broke away quickly soon after, she ran back to the car and dove into the front seat without a word. Zed was left rather stunned at the suddenness of it all, as after all, he hadn't had a kiss like that in a long... long time.

Frankie did nothing, she barely spoke, she barely waved, she was almost entirely removed and distant from the situation, as she snuck into the passenger seat besides Penny soon after. From there, the doors slammed, the engine revved, and the thing kicked off into a smooth motion down the street ahead, continuing on and on for a long while, to never be seen in this part of the World ever again.

"Tell me honestly, boy," Mr. Bly said sombrely, continuing to wave for a long while afterwards, even with the car passing out of sight. "Did I... fail them?"

Zed took a long pause and stopped waving, leaving him holding his fist tight and mulling over his response for few seconds.

"Yes. Yes, you did."

"I... thought so. I was a coward, who let monsters ruin their lives, and they grew up without me."

"You *are* changing. You are working to rebuild what you lost, but you will never gain that time back."

"There are a lot of things I can't change, like losing my daughter and my step-son to them. Even Frankie's parents just ran away a few years after the blight infested this town."

"The small one? Her parents just... ran away?"

"Hmm, it was rather curious. We didn't even know until a few years after they left. The girl just stayed in her house and only talked to Penny. My girl... was always kind."

"How did she survive? She doesn't seem to have the constitution for most jobs."

"Hehe, she stole, from the thugs you ousted. She's the best thief

you'll ever see. She never drew attention to herself, and as she spied on them all, she firmly kept them both alive. She only cares about herself... and my granddaughter. I'm glad they have each other."

"A spy, huh? That's... an interesting thought, hmm."

"Come on, let's go inside," Mr. Bly said finally, after pulling himself together with a loud sniff. "I'm sure we have much to discuss, boss."

SAMPLE