



Ain't nothing certain in the world, except taxes and tourists.

Men, women, and screaming kids crowded the sidewalks like cats all trying to catch the same mouse. Each person speckled with half-rubbed-in sunscreen, bedecked with fanny packs, backpacks, lunch sacks, and cameras—so many freakin' cameras—they could never blend in, even if they were trying.

And there wasn't even anything to see in this part of San Francisco. Maybe the tourist horde was just migrating from one point in the city to the next. With a huff, Ronnie Akkard dropped a box of crepe paper streamers into the car's open trunk.

There'd been tourists in New York too. He hadn't liked them then, either. Fortunately, the average tourist didn't go wandering into the darker neighborhoods of the Bronx, so he'd only had to avoid them when they wanted pizza or directions or a stooge to take a family photo for them.

"Excuse me, sir."

He froze as a hand tapped his shoulder.

Ronnie rolled his eyes behind his sunglasses and turned to glare at the middle-aged man standing behind him in Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian shirt.

Pizza or directions?

The man beamed from a sun-burned face and gestured to a woman and three young children standing on the sidewalk. "Would you take a picture of us?"

Ronnie scowled.

A stooge.

"Need a photo?" Uly Davalos shouldered in front of Ronnie, elbowing him in the ribs, and shot the man a cheerful grin.

"Please!" The man offered his camera to Uly, and the teenager took it as he shoved a box of electric lights into Ronnie's arms. Ronnie snorted and put the box in the trunk. They weren't even good tourists. Who wanted a family photo outside a wedding supply shop?

There were more interesting things to see in San Francisco. Why not a sourdough bread shop? Or one of the passing trolley cars?

Tourists.

He bent down and picked up one last box of wedding supplies, wedging it inside the car between the streamers and the lights.

“Whenever you’re ready, Uly.” The avocado green Dodge Dart shook as Ronnie slammed the trunk shut.

The boy waved acknowledgement, chatting with the dad-figure of the tourist group like they were old buddies.

Where are they even from? Norway? He narrowed his gaze at the greasy splotches of sunscreen spattered across the man’s pale face. *It’s like he ain’t never used sunscreen before.*

Ronnie walked to the driver’s side door and opened it. He settled in the seat, buckling his belt, and waited for the young Davalos to catch up. Crazy kid. Too nice.

Just like his sister.

Even crusty old Dr. Davalos had a kind streak a mile wide, or he wouldn’t have opened his doors to five orphan boys who needed a home.

And a secret lair.

Ronnie pulled his sunglasses off and scrubbed his tired eyes with the back of his hand, throwing his gaze out the back window to see what was keeping Uly. Mia, the boy’s older sister, had them on a tight schedule.

Audio and visual supplies first. Non-perishable decorations next, which meant two different stops since their suppliers didn’t all carry the same stuff. Then back to the estate to unload before they’d be off to pick up the flowers. They’d have to take the big brown van, since the Doc’s little Dart couldn’t hold the number of flowers ordered for the Yashimura-Jones wedding.

Ugh. Weddings. Almost as bad as tourists.

It was only one of the many ironies in his life that he’d ended up the tech guy for an event center that hosted weddings.

The passenger side door opened, and Uly slipped into the car.

“Sorry about that.” The boy grinned as he buckled his belt. “Those were nice folks.”

Ronnie started the engine. “Norwegians are nice.”

“They weren’t Norwegian.”

“North Dakotan then.”

“Yeah.” Uly scowled. “How’d you guess?”

“Sunscreen never lies.”

“Oh, stop.” Uly rolled his eyes. “Just because you’re grouchy, doesn’t mean everybody else has to be.” The dark-haired teen cranked his window down and propped his elbow on the door. “Why are you grouchy anyway? It’s a beautiful day.”

Ronnie snorted and shifted the car in gear. “Don’t like tourists.”

“Nobody likes tourists.” Uly picked at the compression bandage around his right wrist.

Ronnie arched an eyebrow at his young friend and turned back to the road as he wove the rumbling old car through traffic.

“Wrist bothering you?”

Uly stopped fidgeting with the bandage. “No.”

“You said it wasn’t hurting.”

“It’s not.”

Ronnie chuckled and shook his head. “You suck at lying, kid.”

Uly smiled. “Isn’t that good?”

“Yeah.” Ronnie stopped the car at a light and turned toward him, allowing his glasses to slip down his nose so he could lock eyes with the boy. “Unless you’re trying to fool somebody.”

The boy’s smile became a grin. “I guess so.”

Ronnie accelerated as the light turned green. “Next stop, you let me carry stuff. Stupid drapery is heavier than you’d think.”

“I’m fine.”

“What about your tournament? It’s coming up pretty quick.”

Uly shrugged. “I’m not going to qualify, Ronnie.”

Ronnie scowled at him.

“All the other contestants are way more advanced.” Uly returned to picking at his bandage. “I’m lucky to have even gotten this far. They’re all so much older.”

Ronnie heaved a sigh and turned another corner, pulling the car up to the curb and parking it outside the next shop on their list. He shut the ignition off and turned in his seat, pulling his glasses off.

“Look, kid.”

Uly stared at him with those big, dark blue Davalos eyes. Real eye contact. The kid didn't shudder and look away, like so many others. Ronnie's eyes had always bothered people—silver, like liquid mercury, shimmering in the darkness like an animal's eyes. And that's how he'd been treated as a child—like an animal.

“Don't bury yourself before you're dead.” He pushed the brim of his yellow bucket hat further back on his head, strands of sky blue hair tumbling out. “You worked hard at this fencing thing, and you're good at it.” He rolled his eyes and shoved his glasses back on as he yanked the keys out of the ignition. “You taught Ryan how to fight, didn't you?”

Uly shrugged.

“You're the only reason that dumb lumberjack didn't get himself skewered in the first two weeks he lived with you guys.” Ronnie snickered. “The point is, kid, you know what you're doing. So, don't let anyone boss you around. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Ronnie climbed out of the car, slammed the door, and leaned back in through the open window, pointing the keys at the boy's face. “Now wait here.”

Uly scowled. “No.”

Ronnie glared at him.

“You just said not to let anybody boss me around.” Uly grinned. “That includes you.”

“Doesn't include me.” Ronnie lifted an eyebrow. “Because I don't need a sword to kick your skinny butt.”

“You'll just shoot me in the knee from a mile away, right?”

“Stay.” Ronnie patted him on the head.

Uly snorted and crossed his arms, but the side of his mouth twitched with a smile he couldn't hide.

Ronnie shoved the car keys in his pocket as he headed for the glass doors of the Connoisseur Event Supplies building. This was it. Last stop of the morning. Three boxes of stupid drapes, and he and Uly could go back and get some lunch. They'd had corned beef for dinner last night, and the new fresh round of rye bread in the pantry was calling for him. Hopefully Mia had stocked up on Russian dressing.

His fingers itched for one of the cigarettes in his jacket pocket, but the last time the Doc caught him smoking he gave him a week of debugging duty on the Davalos Institute's security systems. Ronnie was supposed to be quitting.

So, he let his fingers itch as he grabbed the door handle. He'd sneak off and smoke after they got back, when the breeze off the bay could carry the scent away.

He'd quit tomorrow.

An electric shiver tickled the back of his neck. A dark sense of dread crept across his mind, goosebumps breaking out up and down his arms, nausea twisting in the pit of his stomach.

Ronnie exhaled shakily, the knotting fist of anxiety in his belly not releasing.

Crap.

Invaders from Thallia's dimension.

I don't have time to be a superhero today. Mia would kill him if they didn't return with the decorations in time.

He let go of the door and spun, casting his gaze to the tops of the storefronts. The street wasn't more crowded than normal, but it was San Francisco. There were shoppers. Tourists. Locals. Kids. Cars buzzed up and down the street. Bicycles chimed and trolleys clanged, perfect targets for a dynasty soldier to attack.

And nowhere to call his armor.

Not even a phone booth. Superman had it easy.

Ronnie pulled his glasses off and marched back to the Dart. Uly lounged outside, resting against the ugly green skin of the car, face to the sun, breeze ruffling his dark hair. The boy opened his eyes and raised his eyebrows, yelping when Ronnie seized his elbow.

"Ronnie! What?"

"Get in the car."

"What is it?"

"Get in the car, Uly." Ronnie wrenched the door open and pushed Uly inside.

"Is it the warlord again? Or just soldiers?" Uly's voice shook.

"I don't know."

Uly twisted in his seat to look at the building rooftops.

"You can't fight here, Ronnie. There are too many people, and you know the rules." Uly grabbed his arm. "You can't fight alone."

Ronnie pulled out of his hold. “Stay here. I’m going check it out.”

“Promise you’ll call for help.” Uly scowled. “Stan got in so much trouble last week when he didn’t.”

“Stan was fine. I’ll be fine too.” Ronnie stood. *I better be fine. If a wuss like Stan can handle himself on the street when I can’t, I should retire and stick to playing darts.*

“You’re already on Ryan’s naughty list for the thing in Texas.” Uly crossed his arms, glaring. “If you break the rules again, it’ll just get worse.”

“Kid, back off.”

“Ronnie. Please.”

Ronnie glanced at the teenager in the passenger seat, the boy’s big eyes wider than normal, his face pale and scared. Ronnie sighed.

“Fine. I promise. Now stay put.” He slammed the door and turned on his heel.

The supply shop was in a strip of renovated buildings on a populated street outside SoMa. A few taquerias and Indian food joints lived on the street corners, and every other building had a coffee shop in it somewhere.

Ronnie scanned the street for any sign of the gray-armored samurai soldiers who had begun infiltrating the city more and more frequently over the last year. He could feel them close, like a splinter just beneath his skin. Wrong. Painful.

A loud buzzing filled his ears. His heart raced, hands sweating, senses on high alert. The nickel-sized charm in his pocket burned against his leg.

He spotted an alley and ducked into it, pressing his back against the cool bricks and digging the charm out of his pocket. Silver, shaped like a dragon, the *menuki* charm glittered in the sunlight like stardust.

Ronnie closed his fist around it.

“*Sen hifu no Sora. Zen’i.*”

The *menuki* pulsed, sparkling with blue electricity as it formed the shape of a sheathed dagger in his hand. A second blast of power washed up his arm, across his chest and the rest of his body, fading to leave him in a thin skin of white and blue armor.

Instantly, the sense of danger around him heightened. The nausea he’d felt before roared into full-body shivers, heart throbbing in his chest, adrenaline spiking.

Definitely soldiers. More than one.

He pulled off his bucket hat and threw it to the ground.

“*Reishosan Sora, Ozora no Senshi.*” The dagger flared in his fingers. “*Yonaga-yoroi. Zen’i.*”

The dagger erupted in stream of blue lightning, lengthening to form a short sword—a *wakizashi*. Another blast of power rippled across his body. Cool air like a winter breeze breathed across his face, and the Sora armor formed around him with the force of a blizzard, scattering the trash in the alleyway.

Never not awesome.

When the sparkling energy around him faded, Ronnie touched the side of his helmet. The familiar shape, sleek and styled with dragon horns, thrummed beneath his armored fingers. He tucked the *wakizashi* into his belt and held out his right palm. An orb of light formed, flashing to reveal a silver bow taller than his shoulders.

Ronnie shut his eyes and breathed slowly.

Now the hard part.

He could find the soldiers. He could probably fight them too. But he had made a promise to Uly.

Ronnie chewed his lower lip. From above, he could get a better idea of how many soldiers were in the area. Down in the alley, he was blind.

He gathered his legs and leaped. Sora surged around him, and Ronnie landed on the roof with a clank. He crouched, scanning the area. The less attention he drew, the better. Running around in the open wearing magic samurai armor from another dimension was just asking for Dateline to do an exposé on terrorist cosplayers. The nerd community would never live it down.

Ronnie waited.

Nobody was screaming. Always a good sign.

He straightened in the sunlight, his armor tingling in the wide, blue expanse of the sky like the soft touch of a breeze. Sora hummed around him—almost, well, happily.

Which didn’t make any freakin’ sense, but then, none of it did. Not Korin, the old man in the weird hat who’d given him the armor in the first place. Or having to learn how to use an elemental samurai armor with no instruction manual. Or being forced to relocate to the hippy capital of the planet to team up with a misfit un-family to save the world.

So, why not? Sure. Sora could be happy. Sora could do whatever the heck it wanted.

“Talking about my armor like it’s a person,” he muttered to the sky. “Losing it.”

Stan Hawthorne, the youngest member of their team, insisted that his armor communicated with him. He claimed the Kagami armor was always polite and willing to help—but that might be because Stan was always polite and willing to help.

It would figure that Sora would be easily bored and generally unhelpful, with a not-so-subtle air of sarcasm.

Below, the street still buzzed with activity, shoppers and shopkeepers alike completely unaware of the danger crawling around them, invisible and menacing. He backed into the concealing darkness of an alcove on the roof.

The soldiers were close. Ronnie could feel it. But where were they?

You know they’re here. Stop waiting. Call now.

He blew out his breath and forced his armor-plated shoulders to relax. He silenced his mind and waited for the tingling sensation that always came with opening the armorlink.

It felt like a sparkler in his brain, the joyful bubbling feeling of light spilling into darkness. Like drinking the fizz off an icy-cold root beer.

The shadows in the alcove shivered with blue light as the Sora armor’s kanji—*zen’i*, an old Japanese word for *goodness*—flared on Ronnie’s brow. Even if the others weren’t wearing their armors, they would hear him.

<Guys, could use some help here.>

He dropped the connection, and the blue glow faded. The sensation of so much power sparkling around in his brain kept him off balance.

A shriek caught his attention.

Ronnie tensed and peered at the building across the street. Five gray-armored samurai soldiers drew glinting swords, red eyes flashing like something demonic, in full view of the frightened people on the street.

Cars honked and swerved, and the people on the street scattered like frightened mice.

Ronnie muttered a curse. How long was he supposed to wait for the others to answer?

What are they even doing? Painting their nails? He scoffed. *Well, Sam might be.*

The soldiers leaped down from the roof and landed on the sidewalk hard enough to crack the concrete. Thallia’s mechanical minions stood around seven feet tall, mostly gray, only prettied up with a few flashy samurai accessories.

One of them had a blue sash, though. *That's new. They in a beauty pageant or something? How would they do a swimsuit competition?*

Ronnie rested his bow against the ledge. Normally, the others would have answered his message by now. Well, Sam hadn't figured out how to use the link yet. It only worked half the time for Karl. And Ryan, although he could use the link, usually didn't realize what was happening until he'd missed the message.

But Stan always responded.

Except for today.

Figures. The day I decide to follow the rules, they've all got better things to do.

Ronnie shut his eyes and reached out again, searching for the beacon of Stan's presence.

<Come on, guys. I need help.>

Connecting over the armorlink was like wandering a dark maze with blurry walls. Familiar, even though you'd never been there before. You couldn't see. You just *felt*, which never seemed natural to Ronnie anyway.

Stan always stood out like a lighthouse, shining bright and pure and obnoxiously happy.

Even now, Ronnie could sense the boy in the darkness of the telepathic world connecting them, but for some reason, Stan couldn't feel him. Or maybe he was choosing not to.

Ronnie opened his eyes and scoffed. "Yay, team."

Hey, at least he could tell Uly he'd tried. Not that he'd expected anyone to answer. No one had ever been willing to help him. He just wasn't that sort of person.

Ronnie reached over his shoulder to the quiver on his back, and a silver arrow materialized in his hand. He nocked the arrow in place on the bow and took aim.

"Hero time."



CHAPTER

2

The arrow left his armored fingers with a hiss and a twang and streaked through the air like a bolt of silver lightning, leaving a brief, sparkling trail of freezing fog in its wake.

The arrow lodged in the nearest soldier's shoulder plate with a pulse of energy that sent the soldier stumbling back, a crust of ice spreading from the wound like blood spatter. Ronnie drew again, aimed, and released, the second arrow striking another soldier.

People fled in all directions on the street below, emptying out of the shops and screaming.

Idiots. No, please, run around like crazy people. It ain't like I'm trying to aim or anything.

The soldiers blurred, grayish streaks in the air, their robotic legs propelling them upward. Ronnie leapt away from the ledge when all five soldiers landed in front of him, two with his arrows sticking out of them. He released another arrow, and this one struck a soldier's chest with a resounding thwack.

It shuddered with a mechanical groan and fell apart, its very seams ripping open as it crumbled into dust. He huffed a bit of imaginary ash off his armored shooting glove.

Being a real-life superhero never got old.

"Sure you want to do this?" He flashed a smirk. "You ain't going to win."

The other wounded soldier rushed him, and he released two arrows in quick succession. They completely pierced the oncoming soldier—one through the heart, the other through the faceplate. Groaning in mechanical distress, the soldier collapsed in a metallic heap and turned to ash.

"That's two for me, boys."

Thallia's soldiers weren't known for their brains. There was only so much artificial intelligence could do in a one-on-one battle, but this was just sad.

The third and fourth soldiers drew *katanas* and charged at him across the roof, polished blades reflecting the late morning sunlight.

Ronnie took aim.

None of the other Reishosan had long-distance weaponry. Heck, Sam was the only one who even knew how to fight for real.

“Did Thallia not put brains in those ugly helmets of yours?”

Ronnie’s silver arrow landed squarely in the neck guard of the nearest soldier, and it stumbled. The next arrows punched through the soldiers’ faceplates, and the soldiers turned to ash before they came within striking distance.

“You guys aren’t doing so hot.”

Ronnie drew a quick breath along with another arrow as he lined the soldier with the blue sash up in his sights. Unmoving, Blue Sash stood rigidly on the ledge of the roof, the sun overhead shining on its burnished armor plates.

What was it doing? Why was it just standing there?

The other four soldiers were down. The soldier had to have seen how easily its comrades fell to Sora’s power. Why wasn’t it taking cover? Or even attacking? What was it doing?

Panic trickled across his senses like a spider.

Blue sash.

Ronnie scowled.

Hadn’t Stan said something about a soldier with a blue sash last week? Hadn’t there been something about it being smarter, tougher than regular soldiers?

People on the ground were still screaming, but now sirens joined the chaotic symphony.

Great. Just what he needed. Cops.

Sora flared around him with panic, shooting alarm through his mind in a flash of fearful red. Blue Sash appeared in front of him, sword drawn, sparkling in the sunlight.

Ronnie barely blocked it with his bow, the force of the attack shaking his arms.

The soldier swung again. And again.

Dude hits like a battering ram. Maybe Stan ain’t a wuss after all.

Ronnie took a step back, but there was no more roof. He toppled off the building and tried to get his legs under him, but the ground reached him too fast. He landed in a pile of armored limbs and sword blades. His bow and the arrow clattered to the ground with a musical sound, silver chimes against the call of the approaching police sirens, and his back scraped

against the alley floor, metallic squealing like nails on slate. The back of his helmet bounced, and the sky spun overhead. The sun glinted off the *katana* aimed for his neck.

He blocked the lunge with his right arm, driving his elbow into the side of the soldier's head. He flipped over as the soldier fell sideways, sweeping the soldier's legs out from beneath it, but the soldier didn't fall back. It regained its footing and stabbed at him.

Ronnie dodged the sharp edge of the *katana*, though it left a long gash on the side armor of his chest plate.

Okay. Now I'm getting pissed.

He drove his foot into the soldier's chest, and it stumbled back, buying him time to snatch the *wakizashi* at his waist before the soldier fell on him again.

So much for long-distance combat.

Good thing his hand-to-hand skills were decent, too.

They stepped around each other, ducking and dodging, every wide swing leaving gashes like scars in the bricks and fire escapes. Blades clanged against each other in a rhythmic dance, the tone of steel against steel mesmerizing in its own way.

But *katana* versus *wakizashi* wasn't a fair match.

Ronnie blocked another powerful swing and side-stepped as Blue Sash brought its *katana* down toward his shoulder.

Finally. Wide open.

He lunged for the soldier's hip, the blade of his shorter sword aimed for the top of its leg, but the soldier spun out of the way. Ronnie stabbed only air as Blue Sash pirouetted and slashed at chest level.

Ronnie blocked the hit just in time, the power of it driving him back. His arms quaked at the force, the shock of the impact shivering down his spine.

Never mind. Not open. Very not open.

The warrior stepped back into a defensive position, its armor still shining in the sunlight, the gentle sea breeze waving in the blue sash across its chest plate. And a matching belt?

Ain't he stylish. He pressed the palm of his hand against his aching chest wound. *What is this guy? Another warlord?*

The thought chilled him. But no. If it was a warlord, it'd have already started blathering about taking over the world, stealing candy from babies, using stupid words like *ergo*, blah, blah, blah. Still—

The soldier launched at him, and he blocked its lunges with ever-decreasing accuracy. It just kept charging, red eyes flashing faster and more intensely with every attack.

Was it learning? Did Thallia make a soldier capable of learning fighting styles?

“This ain't okay.”

He needed his bow.

Close combat he could do, but not with a *wakizashi*. His style of close combat was born on the streets with pocketknives and shivs. *Wakizashi* were too long and awkward, especially up against a *katana*-wielding samurai that seemed able to predict his moves.

Ronnie glanced to where he'd dropped his silver bow.

He should have waited.

Blue Sash's *katana* tore into his armor, searing pain like a vicious twisting of flesh flaring across his shoulders. Ronnie cursed, ducking and spinning to escape the second swing aimed for his neck.

Wakizashi in one hand, he clutched at the bleeding chest wound and gasped a breath of air, sending waves of agony across his chest.

“Not. Cool.” *Way to go, Akkard. Tell 'em what for. He'll be shaking in his ugly boots.*

He slammed the *wakizashi* back in the sheath at his hip and dove for his bow, leaving a trail of blood behind him. Ronnie pulled another arrow from the quiver and aimed, breathing out slowly before he loosed it.

The arrow struck Blue Sash low in the chest. It staggered, but it didn't fall.

“Aw, come on! What are you? Samurai Rambo?”

Grunting with the effort, Ronnie pulled another arrow and let it fly. This time it struck Blue Sash's neck guard, and the soldier sagged. A sigh of relief burst out of him as he let the bow fall to his side.

With the crunch of metal breaking and joints straining, Blue Sash straightened and ripped the arrows out of its armor.

Ronnie gawked. “Yeah. Samurai Rambo was pretty close.”

Its eyes flared red again, and it charged, *katana* ready.

“Really not cool.”

He shot it four more times before the soldier reached him. Direct hits, each one, but they made no difference.

Blue Sash hit him like a freight train, armored boots crashing against his chest wound hard enough to send blood spurting. Ronnie’s vision blurred. Blue Sash’s swings sounded foggy in the hollow, aching roar of blood loss.

Blue Sash kicked him through the alley wall, rubble hailing on his armor like wind chimes in a winter storm. More screams surrounded them as Ronnie tumbled backward into a steamy room full of laundry and plastic hanging bags. Men and women scurried in panicked mobs out of the front doors.

The soldier loomed over him. Ronnie kicked its legs out from under it and leaped to his feet, jumping up onto what remained of the wall. Bow drawn, arrow nocked, he took aim at the soldier.

Blue Sash glared at him in silence—cold, unyielding, and relentless.

Can’t keep this up. Ronnie sucked in heavy gasps, shallow and unsatisfying. Sweat and blood dripped down his cheeks and chin behind his face shield, the soldier’s outline cloudy.

Gotta end it. Whatever he’s made of is stronger than Karl’s skull.

The soldier leaped at him, and Ronnie winced, releasing the arrow. It pierced the soldier’s chest, but it tackled him, and they both crashed into a heavy iron boiler in the corner of the room.

Sora squealed in agony around him as his blue armor hit the hot skin of the boiler. Ronnie yelped as the sense of fire burned across his body, seizing his muscles and stabbing him with a million unseen needles. Blue Sash grabbed Ronnie’s chest plate and slammed him into the boiler over and over again. Ronnie smashed his elbow into Blue Sash’s faceplate, and they both fell to the broken tile floor.

The soldier scrambled to its feet, but Ronnie swayed, the world reeling. He pressed his back against the wall, blood seeping out of his chest plate, the soldier stalking him with *katana* drawn.

Okay. I’m in trouble.

He'd wanted to handle this fight on his own. He wanted to prove, if to no one but himself, that he could use his armor as well as Stan. Obviously, that wasn't the case. The tough little Brit had come up against a soldier in a blue sash, too, and hadn't had a problem.

This sucks.

The soldier closed in, the steam from the laundromat ghosting around it like a thundercloud. Ronnie forced his mind to stop churning. He needed help. He hadn't wanted it before, and maybe Sora had picked up on that. Maybe the others hadn't come because he hadn't really called them.

He grasped desperately for the mental burn of the armorlink.

<Guys, I need backup.>

The blue glow on his brow flared. He let the thought hang in his mind, hoping with every breath that they would hear him. And not just hear—but that they would come. That's what friends did, right? What family did? Wasn't that what they were supposed to be? A team?

No answering call.

No warm rush of familiarity or acknowledgment. He couldn't even sense Stan this time.

<Ryan, I need help, man. Where are you?>

Nothing.

His shallow breath hitched as a wave of pain washed over him. He lifted his bow again, the soldier clanking toward him. Ronnie winced.

“Can we talk about this?”

The soldier kicked him in the face before Sora could lower the shield. The snap of his nose echoed through his skull. He grunted in pain and scrambled sideways, bringing his bow up.

The soldier knocked it out of his hands, and the silver bow clanged to the tiles.

“So, obviously, you know what you're doing.” His voice sounded pinched and winded as he got to his feet. “That's good. Thallia needs somebody who knows a thing or two.”

The wail of emergency vehicles reached its peak with the screeching of brakes and the flashing of lights, as the street outside the laundromat filled up with police and firefighters and ambulances. Uniformed men and women spilled into the street with weapons drawn.

Just what he needed. More targets for the soldier to go after once he couldn't fight anymore.

How do I stop this guy?

The soldier swung, kneeling him in the stomach and throwing him against the wall. The pain in his chest flared, and Ronnie groaned.

How many stitches would that need?

The soldier stabbed for his face, and he dodged. The *katana* drove into the wall, but the soldier punched him again.

Maybe I should sing to it. That might kill it. Or at least hurt its ears.

Ronnie kicked the soldier off, but one hand closed around Ronnie's neck guard and lifted him off the tiled floor, pounding him against the wall like a hammer. Each blow jarred his senses, splattering his blood on the soldier's arm.

I can't do it. The panicked thought jolted through him. I'm not going to win.

He was alone, fighting an enemy he couldn't beat. Wounded badly. The others either couldn't or wouldn't respond to his calls for help.

Never figured I'd go out like this. Always thought some punk would knife me.

Cold fear settled in the pit of his stomach as he grappled with the soldier's arm, but the soldier didn't let go, just kept beating him against the wall. Ribbons of shredded laundry snowed down around them.

Sora creaked and groaned with every blow, the impact denting the scaled armor plating on his shoulders and hips.

He shut his eyes. *Sora, if you got any bright ideas, now's the time.*

Sora shuddered around him, and the glass over his eyes flared with blue light. A translucent visor dropped from the inside of his helmet, displaying a holographic structural readout of the building.

What?

The heads-up display emphasized the supports in the ceiling overhead, peering through the ceiling to another massive boiler on the floor above.

You can see through walls now?

The armor answered with a sassy-sounding chirp.

Well, stabbing the soldier didn't stop it. Neither did shooting it. So maybe he could crush it like a bug.

Ronnie shoved both his feet into the soldier's chest. It dropped him, and he rolled to the center of the tiled room, the scent of starch and bleach and fabric softener rising around him. He scooped up his bow, drew an arrow from the quiver on his back, and aimed for the ceiling.

The readout over his eyes flashed, indicator lights forming a glowing crosshair over the furthest support beam.

The soldier ran at him.

Ronnie released the arrow, and it drove itself into the ceiling sending a spiderweb of cracks that burst across the sheetrock. Ice crystals blossomed out of the cracks, and the ceiling groaned and shifted.

The soldier stopped, its eyes flashing red.

Ronnie sagged with a heavy smirk. "You know, we could just call this a day."

Blue Sash raised its sword and charged.

"Yeah, this is going to hurt."

The ceiling collapsed.

Tin and steel and sheetrock and concrete tumbled from the ceiling along with a giant steel boiler. The boiler struck the soldier on the back of its shoulders and crushed it with a horrible shrieking of metal against metal.

Ronnie raised his arms over his head as he limped for the door, but the debris hailed from above like someone pelting him with baseballs.

Sora's going to look like a golf ball when this is over.

Screams and shouts echoed from the street.

He bent over and clutched his aching chest, stumbling for the alley, gasping for breath and clutching at his chestplate. Sora vibrated around him, reverberating with power.

Stan insisted there was more to the armors than what they assumed. Ronnie had mostly written it off as the boy's overactive imagination.

Maybe Stan was right.

Ronnie straightened and stared at the debris in the laundromat. No motion. No movement. The soldier in the blue sash was down for the count.

"Whoopee."

An incoherent shriek above drew his attention to the mouth of the alley, where a police officer was taking aim at him. He snarled and backed up a step, the hollow throbbing of the hemorrhaging chest wound rattling his lungs with every breath.

Time to go.

With a gasp, he leaped for the roof. He barely made it, bouncing off the opposite alley wall and rolling onto the roof as bullets pinged off his armor.

He couldn't stay here. The last thing he needed was to be arrested. Or worse, caught on film fighting law enforcement. The city was already scared enough of them.

Ronnie lurched to his feet, clutching the wound in his armor's chest, and limped toward the other side of the roof. Squealing tires drew his gaze down to the street, where the Doc's Dodge Dart wheeled around a corner and screeched to a halt.

Uly.

Ronnie glanced up the street. The police hadn't flooded this one yet, but it was only a matter of time. Hissing, Ronnie took a deep breath.

"*Kieru so.*" Sora flared around him, vanishing in a glittering pulse of light, leaving him in the first layer of his armor.

He leaped off the roof and landed clumsily beside the Dart.

"Get in!" Uly stuck his head out the driver's window and waved.

Ronnie flung the passenger door open and jumped inside as Uly floored the accelerator. He sank back in the seat, gasping and clutching his chest.

"Uly, what are you doing?"

"Driving."

"You're fourteen!"

"I still drive better than Karl." Uly took a corner almost on two wheels.

Ronnie yelped and clung to the seat.

"You're gonna get us killed!"

"You're welcome."

"Pull over." Ronnie groaned.

"But—"

"Pull over!" Ronnie sagged in the seat. "Cops will see you, and you'll get a ticket, and I'll have to answer questions I don't want to answer. So, pull over now!"

Uly grunted and obediently pointed the Dart to a parking lot beneath a nearby overpass. Once the car was shut off, Ronnie took a moment to breathe. He'd switch with Uly in a moment.

"Can you take your sub-armor off?" Uly asked in a quiet voice.

"I got hit pretty bad." Ronnie leaned his head back. "Armor stitched itself up on the outside. Underneath, I'm still hurt."

"Grandpa probably wouldn't like bloodstains in his car."

"You think?"

Uly bit his lip, turning glassy eyes on him. "Why didn't you call for help? You promised."

Ronnie calmed his racing heart and took a long, deep breath, even though it stung and burned. "I did. Nobody came."

Slowly, Uly's expression turned from hurt to terror. Ronnie scowled at him. What was that look for? The fight was over. What did he have to be worried about?

"What if they were attacked too?" Uly whispered.

Ronnie blinked at him.

His stomach turned over.

That would explain it.

If Ryan and the others back at the estate were under attack at the same time, they wouldn't have been able to answer. Here he'd been getting angry at them for ignoring him—what if he had been the one missing their calls for help?

"Switch. Now." Ronnie threw his door open and jumped out.

He and Uly traded places, and he gunned the engine, pointing the old Dart toward the Marin Headlands on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge.

I just hope we aren't too late.

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