

REISHOSAN: SAMURAI DEFENDERS

KARL GOODSON AND THE  
**FOODTRUCK**  
 **FIASCO**



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**SANDWICHES WERE GOD’S GIFT TO HUMANITY.** Thick, hefty slices of meat and cheese clapped together with crusty sourdough, slathered with mayo. Or shaved corned beef and piles of sauerkraut dripping with thousand island dressing between two slices of study dark rye. Even cheap, gummy white bread loaded with peanut butter and jelly could make a terrible day better.

But nothing—absolutely nothing—could beat crusty homemade bread spread with a indecent amount of pimento cheese spread.

Sandwiches may have been God’s gift to humanity, but pimento cheese spread was God’s gift to Karl Goodson.

Except—

Karl scowled at the shelves in the refrigerator. He moved jars of pickles and jam and condiments to the side. He poked through the crisper drawers. He looked inside all the Tupperware containers too, even the one with Stan’s nasty mushed-up peas.

It couldn’t be.

The pimento cheese spread was gone.

Karl straightened, his hand gripping the refrigerator door until his knuckles went white. It was a tragedy of epic proportions. They hadn’t run out of pimento cheese spread since his first week living with the Davalos family.

He’d have to go to the store immediately. He couldn’t live in a house where there was no pimento cheese. That was where he drew the line.

Karl turned a circle in Mia’s kitchen, chewing on his bottom lip. Whenever Mia realized they were out of something, she always made a list.

Should he do that too? That sounded like an adultish thing to do. After all, Mia was an adult. Sort of. More adult than he was, though that wasn’t saying much. Sam would say a rock was more adulty than Karl was.

But Sam was a jerk, and nobody cared what he had to say.



Well, smart people cared what Sam had to say, but Karl suspected they only cared because Sam had nice hair. It was a conspiracy, you see.

“Focus.” Karl slapped the sides of his head with his palms. “Pimento cheese spread. Grocery list.”

But what did Mia use to make her grocery lists? Did she write them down? Did she just remember? Mia was smart, so she could probably just remember.

Karl frowned.

Mia was smart.

And she had nice hair.

But she didn’t always care what Sam said. So that meant his conspiracy theory might have some holes in it.

Holes. Like cheese.

Pimento cheese. Grocery list.

“I’ll just write it down.” Karl dug through the drawers until he found a pen. He braced his hand on the counter and carefully pressed the tip of the pen to his palm.

“There you are.”

Karl didn’t look up. “Don’t bother me, old man. I’m busy.”

“Right.” Ryan passed behind him to open the refrigerator. “I need a favor.”

“How do you spell pimento?”

Ryan blinked at him.

The old man was slow sometimes.

He wasn’t smart, and his hair was just okay. It definitely had some gray in it, no matter what Ryan thought about it. And he definitely didn’t care what Sam thought. So, one point for the conspiracy there.

“What?” Ryan’s eyebrows bunched together the way they did when he had a headache—or he’d been talking to Karl for longer than twenty minutes.

“Pimento. How do you spell it?”

“Karl.” Ryan pulled the pitcher of cold water out of the fridge and poured himself a glass. “I need your help with something.”

“I need your help too. How do you spell pimento?” Karl waved the pen at him.

Ryan sighed.



He did that a lot.

“Sound it out, Karl.”

“Dude, just tell me.” Karl stuck out his tongue.

Ryan eyed the pen Karl held and his stance against the counter. “What are you doing?”

“I’m making a grocery list.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re out of pimento cheese, old man. I gotta have a sandwich.”

“And you can’t remember one thing?” Ryan grimaced.

Karl shrugged. “Well. It’s me.”

“Good point.” Ryan drank his water.

“Do you know how to spell it?”

That would be hysterical. If Ryan didn’t know how to spell it, Karl would just have to guess. Stan was at some music thing at the school, and Mia was meeting with some wedding people. Nobody else who lived in the Davalos Estate would tell him how to spell it.

“And you can’t sound it out?” Ryan sank his face into his hand.

“Why would I do that when you can just tell me?”

“Maybe so you can learn how to spell it? So you won’t have to ask again?”

“That sounds like school.”

“P.”

“P what?”

Ryan sagged. “Karl.”

“Oh, it starts with a P!”

“Yes, Karl.”

“Okay. P!” Karl carefully drew the letter on his palm. “Next?”

“I.”

Karl wrote an I.

“M. E. N. T. O.” Ryan recited slowly enough that Karl would write them each down.

“Pimento.” Karl read the word on his palm. “Sweet. Thanks, old man.” Karl ducked around the corner of the kitchen island and headed for the door.

“Hang on, Karl.”

Karl paused and glanced back at him. “What?”



“I helped you. Now you have to help me.”

Karl whined. “Can’t I just owe you?”

“No. I need your help now.” Ryan leaned on the counter. “Today. God help me.”

Karl wrinkled his nose and folded his arms. The last time Ryan asked for his help it was in emptying the trash bins around the Davalos property. Another time it was taking the recycling out. The worst time had been when Ryan had needed help with a load of manure to spread around some of the Docs flower beds.

That had been a nightmare.

“I need you to go downtown.” Ryan was writing something on a piece of paper. “Here’s the address. It’s a jewelry shop that cleans rings.”

“I need my pimento cheese, old man.”

“Whatever, Karl. Just do this too.” Ryan handed him the piece of paper, which Karl took and shoved in his pocket.

*I could go to the store first and then go do his thing.* Karl chewed his bottom lip. *Or maybe I should get the old man’s thing done first, just to get it out of the way.*

“Hey, are you listening?” Ryan snapped his fingers in front of Karl’s face. “It’s really important.”

“I’m listening.” Karl flapped his hand.

“If you lose it, the Doc will kill me.” Ryan arched an eyebrow. “And I’ll tell him it was your fault, and he’ll make you plant petunias for the rest of your life.”

“I’ll run away.”

“He’ll find you.” Ryan raised the other eyebrow. “And so will I.”

“You just said you’ll be dead.”

“I’ll haunt you, Karl. Don’t screw this up.”

Karl punched his older friend in the arm. “Lighten up, old man. I’ll take care of it.”

Ryan’s eyebrows were still bunched up over his nose. That was his worried face, although since he was always worried about something it was probably better to call it his normal face.

“Just.” Ryan blew out his breath. “Go to the shop. Give them my name. And bring the ring back here.”

“A ring?”



Ryan's face went slack. "Yes, Karl. A ring. Weren't you listening?"

Karl blew a raspberry. "Of course, I was listening, old man. I'm a great listener. I just wanted to make sure you were paying attention!"

"Right."

Karl patted Ryan's elbow, snatched the van keys off the nail by the door, and marched toward the garage.

Had Ryan said something about a ring? If he had, Karl had missed it. But it seemed like a small detail. Ryan needed him to go downtown to some place and get something from some shop.

Karl patted the piece of paper with the address in his pocket.

He had the location.

He just had to what—give them Ryan's name? Was that what Ryan had said?

He could do that.

*I'll do that first. Then I'll get my pimento cheese.* He pointed his feet toward the old brown van they used for trips into San Francisco. *The old man is going to owe me big time for this.*





**KARL EYED THE MAN’S FANCY SUIT WITH A NARROWED GAZE.** He didn’t trust fancy people on the whole. Anybody who willingly tied a noose around their necks as part of their business-appropriate attire had a screw loose as far as Karl was concerned.

But this dude?

This guy could have passed as Alfred Pennyworth. That meant he might be trustworthy, because legitimately the only person who was cooler than Batman was Alfred.

Karl carefully folded his hands on the glass countertop near the register and chewed on his bottom lip. This shop made him nervous. Everything was made of glass, except for the jewelry which only looked like it was.

Why had Ryan sent him here? Sure, to get a ring, but why did Ryan need a ring? Maybe it was because he was from Colorado. Karl had heard Colorado people did weird things sometimes.

Karl rolled his head on his shoulders.

This was taking *forever*. Why couldn’t Ryan have asked someone else to do this? Mia would have been so much better at something like this. She could fit in with snooty fancy people, even if she wasn’t snooty or fancy. That was one of Mia’s gifts. She looked like a highfalutin sort of gal, but she was actually pretty normal.

She liked gardening in freshly tilled dirt. She baked the best cookies on the planet. She even knew how to fix the holes in Karl’s trousers when he ripped them.

Fancy Man regarded Karl with a sneer.

Karl flashed back a big grin. No need to hold the attitude against the guy. If Karl had to wear a tie and a suit every day for work, he’d be grouchy too.

“Your order is ready.” Fancy Man slid a small, velvet box across the counter to him.

“Well, it ain’t my order.” Karl took the box and cracked it open. “I’m just picking it up.”

“Very good, sir.”

Such an Alfred thing to say.



Karl blinked at the ring inside the box. It was pretty, as rings go. Not that he knew a lot about such things. But it was silver and studded with tiny little diamonds that circled a large milky white stone that flared in the overhead lights.

“What’s that?” he muttered.

“It’s an opal, sir.” Fancy Man rolled his eyes. “A fire opal, to be precise.” He took a deep breath. “It’s a very rare and unique piece, sir. Whoever she is, she is very fortunate.”

Karl blinked at the ring and then at Fancy Man. “Sure.”

That wasn’t a very Alfred thing to say, but the guy wasn’t actually Alfred. He was just a wrinkled old dude in a fancy suit pretending to be Alfred. So he couldn’t say Alfredy stuff all the time.

Karl plucked the ring out of the box and dropped it in his pants pocket. “Thanks for your help, Mister.”

Fancy Man’s eyes were bulging in horror. It was the sort of expression Karl had always longed to put on Sam’s smug face.

Fancy people just didn’t make sense. Karl had even thanked him. What was there to get upset about?

Weirdo.

Karl pushed the shop door open, and the bells twinkled cheerily overhead as he stepped into the bright San Francisco sunshine. The jewelry shop was nestled in a tiny space on Sutter Street, at the corner of Banana Republic and Ria Shoes down in Belden Place.

He whistled to himself as he darted to the other side of Sutter Street and hung a left on Grant.

Why were there so many coffee shops on Grant Avenue? That was the real question. It was like coffee shop heaven. Local shops, national chains, and even a few roasters—whatever that meant. Did Sam know about this?

Sam was the family’s coffee snob. Well, truth be told, he was just a snob who really liked coffee, but Karl didn’t hold that against him. The guy was from Washington, D.C. so he had to have a few quirks that were just plain unlikeable, didn’t he?

Come to think of it, Sam didn’t leave the Davalos Estate for coffee very often. He always made it himself.





Was that odd? Didn't snobby people hang out with other snobby people to drink their super snobby coffee that only had a little bit of actual coffee in it?

But then, what did Karl know about it? Coffee wasn't his thing. Even if you loaded it full of sugary flavored creamer—bleck. Now, Mountain Dew. That was the ticket. Or Red Bull. Even better. All the caffeine, none of that gross bitter coffee taste—plus all the chemicals a body needed.

He checked both ways before he crossed Pine Street and hung a right. The entrance to St. Mary's Parking Garage was just down the way. It was one of the places Doc always had them park since he had a monthly arrangement with the managers.

Karl slowed his pace, though, as he walked down Pine Street. St. Mary's Square was one of the rare green spaces in downtown San Francisco. It was usually full of kids playing basketball or children screaming down slides, but not today.

Karl froze on the sidewalk and stared.

Today, St. Mary's Square was full of food trucks.

Food trucks! All sorts of food trucks!

There had to be twelve of them, all lining the main plaza with their colorful awnings and vibrantly styled motifs. And the smell. Karl sniffed the air with joy.

He smelled baking bread and pastries. Sausages with sauerkraut. Corndogs and battered onion rings. The earthy, spicy scent of Greek food, which he'd come to call homey after two years of living with the Davalos family. Burgers and sandwiches and—tacos. There was a taco truck. An entire van dedicated to nothing but tacos.

Grinning broadly, Karl detoured into the park. The first food truck he reached was Hawaiian. The sides of the van boasted life-size decals of dancing girls in grass skirts, and the speakers on either side of the van blasted hula music. The whole place smelled like fried ham and pineapple.

Karl joined the line, grinning eagerly. He didn't get his pimento cheese this morning, but that was okay. He'd load up on food truck food. It was meant to be. He'd heard about the food truck festivals that would pop up across the city, and he'd been looking for an excuse to stop in. But he was never downtown at the right time.

Lucky for him!



He'd been downtown for—something Ryan needed. And it had to do with Batman, didn't it? Oh well. Ryan would remind him when he got home—after he ate everything in St. Mary's Square.

He reached the counter and grinned at the pretty girl behind the register. "Hi!"

The girl blushed slightly and leaned toward him. "Hi!"

"What's good?"

"Have you ever tried Hawaiian food before?" The girl pushed back a lock of dark hair.

"Not even once."

"Then you should start with Spam Musubi." She tapped something on her register.

"I can't pronounce that."

"You don't have to pronounce it to eat it." She winked at him.

"Good point. I like you." Karl dug into his pocket for the cash he always carried. "How much do I owe you?"





**APPARENTLY SPAM MUSUBI WAS LIKE SUSHI WITH SPAM.** Rice bundled up with fried Spam and eggs wrapped in dried seaweed, and it was heavenly. Salty and a little bit sweet. It was Karl's new favorite.

Well, until Karl found the crepes. An entire food truck with nothing but crepes. Giant soft pastry full of chocolate hazelnut spread, studded with bananas, gooshy with whipped cream and strawberries, and crunchy rice stuff.

*That was heaven.*

But then, so were the New York style hot dogs. And the bratwurst. And the pizza. But that taco truck? It had some of the best dang taquitos he'd ever tasted, and he ate a lot of taquitos. Just mostly from gas stations. These were amazing.

The one downside of the taco truck had been the grouchy butt chihuahua inside who'd decided Karl was some kind of threat and tried to take a bite out of his ankle while he was ordering.

Stupid rat dog.

Karl sighed happily as he pulled the old brown van back into its place at the Davalos Estate. What a great day!

Any day that he got to eat for several hours was a great day.

He slid out of the van, stretching his arms over his head, and kicked the door shut behind him.

The Davalos Estate stretched for acres and acres across the Marin Headlands across the bay from San Francisco. It was hilly, beautiful country, and the Davalos Castle sat atop one of the forward hills, looking down at the waters of the bay. You could see the whole city from the terrace, even the Golden Gate Bridge.

The place was a little bit different than Oklahoma.

Oklahoma had some hills, but—not like this. When it came to hills, San Francisco was in a class all its own.



Karl pointed his feet toward the back of the castle to the less intimidating residential portion of the massive building.

The castle was actually a legit castle, not like the fancy houses in the city that just had turrets attached to them for show. Karl remembered seeing it for the first time two years earlier after he'd accepted his armor from Korin. He was going to get to live in a legit castle. He'd spent his first few months with the Davalos family searching the spare rooms for Dracula, because he'd been certain that every castle had to have a hidden vampire in it somewhere.

He'd called off the search once the Doc got wind of it, but one day he'd start looking again. He was still certain some vampire was hanging out in a coffin just waiting for the right time to bite them all.

Knowing the Doc, it would be an artifact he picked up on one of his archaeological digs. Some super important and historical doo-dad with special triangular scribbles pounded into it. Uber-important blah-blah-blah thingamajigs. But on the inside—it has a vampire!

The back door swung open before he could touch it.

A vampire?

“Karl?”

Nope. A British teenager.

Same difference.

“Hey, Fish Face.” Karl grinned at the youngest member of the household and seized his neck, ruffling his hair.

“Ow!” Stan flailed, trying to escape his older, bigger friend’s grip. “Give over, you numpty!”

Karl laughed and let him go, brushing past him into the kitchen.

“You know, you could just say hello, like a normal person.” Stan fussed over his messed up hair.

“I’m not a normal person.” Karl opened the refrigerator and grabbed the apple juice, pouring himself a big glass. “Where are you headed?”

“Was going out to put down some mulching around the tulips.” Stan arched an eyebrow at him. “Where have you been?”

“Food truck festival, man.” Karl gulped the apple juice. “It was the best thing ever.”

“Really?”



“Totally.” Karl clapped his hands. “I have discovered creepies.”

“Creepies?”

“Dude, you need to try to make them. It’s probably something British that you’d be good at making.”

Stan drew himself up and shuddered in the way he did when he was processing too much information at once. It always gave him an expression like he’d smelled something awful. Like Ronnie had farted or something.

“Karl, what is a creepy?”

“It’s a creepy, Fish Face.” Karl rolled his eyes and poured himself more juice. “Like a super skinny pancake stuffed with peanut butter and whipped cream and bananas and nuts.”

Stan raised the other eyebrow. “A crepe?”

Karl drank the juice. “I don’t know. Is that how you say it?”

“It’s a crepe, Karl. Not a creepy.”

“Spelled like creepy.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It is too. You just think that because you ain’t American.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “You’re such a delight, my friend.”

“I know, right?” Karl grinned. “I like you too, Fish Face.”

Stan was a good kid. A bit weird. But Karl chalked that up to the Britishness. He often said things that didn’t make a lick of sense, but he was always nice, he laughed at Karl’s jokes, and—well—dang, the kid was just cute.

Karl didn’t say that out loud ever because he’d never live it down. But Stan was a cute kid. He was man enough to admit it to himself. And, let’s be honest, when you hang out with cute kids, you attract cute girls. Though that strategy hadn’t really worked for him.

True, girls flocked around Stan, but a lot of that was because he was really good at doing girly things like baking and cooking and playing musical instruments. But no matter how much Karl hung out with him, girls didn’t flock around him once Stan left.

Which could only mean that those particular girls had no sense of taste or style. They probably were only into guys who wore skinny jeans and had man-buns.

“So what were you doing downtown?” Stan leaned on the counter and watched him down another glass of apple juice.



Karl blinked.

“I was—at some fancy shop.” He scowled.

Why had he been downtown? It had been important.

“Oh, Ryan sent me to a jewelry shop.”

Stan wrinkled his nose.

“Yeah. That face.”

Stan shook his head. “Why would Ryan send you to a jewelry shop?”

“No clue.” Karl shrugged and put the apple juice back in the refrigerator. “But he did. And I met this guy who was just like Alfred, Fish Face. Seriously. I almost asked him for a crumpet.”

“Crumpets aren’t a thing, Karl.”

“They are too.”

“Take it from someone who’s actually British, mate.” Stan smirked. “So Ryan sent you to a jewelry shop, and you met a superhero’s butler?”

Karl snapped his fingers. “No, that’s right. I got a ring.”

Stan’s expression went blank. “You got a ring.”

“Yeah. Some fancy-schmancy ring for the old man.” Karl dug his fingers into his pocket. “Don’t know why he needs a ring, but I figured it’s a mountain man thing.”

A look of horror dawned on Stan’s face as he stared at Karl.

Karl searched in his pocket for the ring, but it wasn’t there. He switched to the other pocket. No luck.

Well, he was wearing cargo pants. So maybe he’d put them in one of the other pockets.

He unhooked the pockets on his legs. No ring there. Not in the back pockets either.

“Huh.”

“Huh, what?” Stan’s voice had increased slightly in pitch.

“It ain’t there.”

“What isn’t there?”

“The ring.”

Stan’s face was paler than it usually was. “You lost it?”

“No, I didn’t lose it,” Karl spat. “I just can’t find it.”

Stan slumped forward, his face in his hands.



“Why are you getting all freaked out, Fish Face.” Karl snickered. “It’s not a big deal. We’ll just get the old man a different ring.”

“Karl.” Stan moaned between his fingers. “You don’t understand.”

“I usually don’t.”

“That ring belonged to Dr. Davalos’s wife.”

Karl froze. “Say what?”

Stan sagged against the counter. “That ring was Mia’s grandmother’s engagement ring. And Ryan was going to use it to propose to Mia this week. He was going to have it cleaned.”

Karl grimaced. “Whoops.”

Stan face planted on the countertop.

Well. That was an unexpected turn of events. But, on the bright side, maybe they’d get to go back downtown for more crepes.





# CHAPTER 4 RONNIE

**RONNIE MUTTERED UNDER HIS BREATH AS HE SQUEEZED INTO THE TOO-SMALL SPACE** beneath his office desk, fumbling with the cables plugged into the back of his computer tower. Someday, the Doc would let him rebuild all the Institute's desktops, and on that glorious day he'd finally have enough USB ports to do his job.

He gnawed on the ballpoint pen in his mouth, the plastic casing already rough and split against his tongue. He really wanted a cigarette, but there'd be hell to pay if the Doc caught him smoking inside again.

Besides. He was trying to quit.

Really, he was.

Wasn't his fault the people he lived with made it impossible. If they'd all chill out and be normal, it would be easier. But no. He had to live in a giant mansion with four dummies who kept doing stupid stuff all the time.

He jabbed the printer connector into the parallel port and began turning the screws to secure it. Once it was back in place, he could start moving USB plugs around.

A wave of anxiety washed over him with a suddenness that took his breath away. But it was anxiety that didn't belong to him, the emotion resonating in the back of his mind like a clanging bell. He froze under the desk, fingers clenching the printer cable.

*That came from Stan.*

He hadn't yet mastered the psychic connection that linked their five samurai armors together, but he'd learned enough over the last few years to recognize who was talking. Each of his fellow Reishosan had a distinct psychic fingerprint.

Once he'd realized it, he could tell who was feeling what almost every time. The blast of nervous energy felt like the crisp wind that blew in off the ocean, somehow cold and warm at the same time, scented like salt.

Stan.





It wasn't a whole message, more just a feeling that prodded at his mind. If it had been a real emergency, Stan would have connected fully and spoken real words in Ronnie's brain. The kid had figured out how to do that almost instinctively, while the rest of them were still learning how it worked.

Grumbling under his breath, Ronnie squirmed out from under his desk and sat up, shutting his eyes and concentrating on the mental thread that linked him to the British teenager.

He didn't send words. Just a general sense of questioning. Stan was the only one of their little tribe perceptive enough to respond only to feelings and senses.

The foggy sense of connection solidified in Ronnie's mind, pulsing through his body so fiercely he felt it in his fingertips. Stan's voice rang across the psychic link.

*<Meeting in the tower. Now, lads.>*

Ronnie rolled his eyes and groaned.

So much for it not being an emergency.

Ronnie climbed to his feet and snatched his sunglasses off the top of his work desk, shoving them over his mercury-colored eyes.

A sense of extreme irritation resonated over the armor link, a vague rumbling like a thunderhead, rippling with fingers of lightning.

That was Sam.

Sam had the least control over his armor, which meant he was the least capable of using the armor link to communicate intentionally. But his unintentional communication was effective enough.

Ronnie chewed on the pen harder.

With Sam in a mood like that, meeting was a very bad idea.

But Stan had called them. And Stan never called unless it was important. So Ronnie jogged up the stairs that led to the top floor of the Davalos Castle turret. It was the only turret, and they'd converted it to a headquarters of sorts for their little vigilante family.

Ronnie pushed the stairwell door open and stepped into the turret room. A commercial shower took up a good chunk of floor space along the far curve of the room, and across from it were a set of wrestling mats and a few racks of weights. Several punching bags were stacked in the corner. Across from there, a large table sat at the center of the room, and several wide-screen monitors were mounted on the wall, all tuned to local news channels with the sound muted.



Stan paced the length of the table, his reddish-brown hair mussed and eyes wide. Karl lounged in one of the chairs, stuffing pretzels in his mouth.

“Hey, Blue Jay!” He waved a fistful of pretzels at him.

Ronnie ignored him and moved to sit at the table. “What’s up?”

“Lurch ain’t here yet.” Karl chewed with his mouth open.

Ronnie kept ignoring him.

Of the many irritating things about Karl Goodson, his dumb nicknames ranked toward the top of the list.

Ronnie had spent a lifetime trying to blend in with normal people, desperately seeking acceptance in spite of his metallic-looking eyes and natural blue hair. He’d achieved some success with hiding in plain sight, putting on the punk routine, so it probably shouldn’t have bothered him that Karl insisted on calling him something that drew attention to his hair.

But it did.

That being said, the more of a fuss he made about it, the more frequently Karl used the hated nickname. So his best course of action was to ignore it.

He chewed the pen.

*I need a cigarette.*

The door swung open with a violent grace, and giant Sam Logan strode into view, his sandy-blond hair perfect and his one visible mossy-green eye shimmering with anger.

*I really need a cigarette.*

“What?” Sam crossed his arms and snarled.

Stan fluttered around him and shut the door. “Good, we’re all here.”

“Ryan ain’t here.” Ronnie pointed out with a scowl.

“Ryan can’t know.” Stan wailed and collapsed at the table next to Karl.

Sam drew himself up to his full, towering height. “Stan, what are you talking about?”

Karl munched loudly on his pretzels.

“What did Ryan do?” Sam spread his dinner-plate sized hands on the table and braced his arms as he leaned over. “Has he finally screwed up bad enough that you idiots will acknowledge he shouldn’t be leading us?”

Stan blinked up at him like an owl—a fluffy baby one.



“What are you talking about, Sam? Of course, not!” Stan groaned. “We’ve got a real problem here.”

“Well, it had better be important. I’m in the middle of writing a grant proposal for Doc’s—”

“Karl lost Dr. Davalos’s ring!” Stan cried.

Ronnie leaned back in his chair. “The Doc has a ring?”

“If the Doc had a ring, why would he give it to Karl?” Sam scowled.

Karl set his pretzels down. “Doc didn’t give it to me. The old Alfred dude did.”

“Alfred?” Ronnie screwed up his face.

“Yeah, he had a bowtie on.”

“Karl.” Stan face planted on the table. “Focus.”

Sam set his hands on his hips. “So Doc had a ring. He did a stupid thing and gave it to Karl, and Karl lost it.”

“I didn’t lose it, Lurch, I just can’t find it.”

“Why is this important enough to interrupt my grant writing?”

Karl threw a pretzel in his mouth and chomped on it. “I guess the old man was finally going to ask Mia to marry him with it.”

Sam went rigid, and Ronnie scrubbed his hand down his face.

Great.

That was just great.

“You’re really selling this, Karl.” Sam sneered. “Just so you know.”

“Ryan was going to propose to Mia with the ring,” Stan stood up and raised his hands. “It belonged to Dr. Davalos’s wife.”

Ronnie heaved a huge sigh. Well, that explained why the ring mattered.

“Ryan had it cleaned, and Karl was the only one able to pick it up.”

“Apparently not.” Ronnie shook his head.

Sam turned. “I fail to see what any of this has to do with me.”

“Sam, wait.” Stan came around the table and reached for his arm.

“Ryan did something stupid, imagine that.” Sam gripped the doorknob. “How about we let him clean up his own mess for once?”

Sam ripped the door open.



On the other side, Dr. Davalos himself stood with a file folder in hand and an eyebrow arched.

“Sir.” Sam took a step back.

“Going somewhere, Sam?” Dr. Davalos stepped into the room and shut the door behind him.

“Heading back to work on the grant for the Imahara Project.”

“Is that so?” Dr. Davalos brushed past him and put the folder on the table.

Sam bristled.

Ronnie hid a smirk under his hand. Dr. Davalos was the only living soul who could put Sam Logan in his place. At least, if there were someone else who could do it, Ronnie hadn't met them.

“Stan asked me to bring up some photos of the ring,” Dr. Davalos said quietly, opening the folder and spreading the papers inside around. “It's gold with a few diamonds and an opal.”

“An opal?” Ronnie grunted, taking one of the papers with the ring on it.

“My wife's birthstone.” Dr. Davalos used a tone that indicated he wouldn't be giving them any more detail than that.

“Why isn't Ryan here?” Sam grumbled and pulled out a chair at the table before he sat in it. “This is his problem.”

“Ryan's updating the artifact inventory in advance of the gala event next week.” Dr. Davalos shoved a photograph of the ring under Sam's nose. “Do you want to help him?”

“No, that's grunt work.” Sam snatched the photo away. “My grant is more important than that.”

“Your grant?” Dr. Davalos arched the eyebrow at him.

“Your grant, sir.” Sam muttered.

“That's right, Sam. My grant.” Dr. Davalos scoffed. “And this ring is more important than my grant. So the four of you are going to go find it, or I'll cancel the landscapers who are coming in on Friday and you'll be out planting petunias with Ryan.”

“We'll find it, Doc.” Stan nodded, smiling brightly.

Because, of course, the kid would be smiling. He was always positive, even when the situation was entirely hopeless.



Dr. Davalos turned on his heel and marched out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Stan gazed at the photo of the ring. “All right. I think we should go back over Karl’s steps, and maybe we’ll find it.”

Sam snorted, and Stan stuck out his lower lip.

“What? You have a better idea?”

“I do.” Sam nodded. “We forget this whole thing. Ryan keeps his paws off Mia. Karl pays the Doc back for losing the ring—”

“I didn’t lose it, man, I just can’t find it.” Karl threw his hands in the air, showering the carpet with pretzels.

“And I go back to work, doing something that actually matters instead of wasting time with you losers.” Sam leaned back in his chair and huffed.

“Well, that’s not very helpful, Sam,” Stan said plaintively.

“You think?” Ronnie spat.

Enough of this.

He dug in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette, jabbing it between his lips and reaching for his lighter.

Stan plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and threw it away. “Uh, uh, uh. You’re quitting, remember?”

Ronnie let his glasses slide down his nose so he could glare at Stan with his metallic irises on full display.

Stan grinned at him and handed him a fresh ballpoint pen.

“Chew on this, mate. Not that plastic is good for you, but it’s bound to be better than nicotine.”

Ronnie grouchyly snatched the pen out of the boy’s hand and jabbed it in his mouth.

If he made it through this day without killing one of them, it would be a freakin’ miracle.





WITHOUT THE FOOD TRUCKS, THE PLAZA AT ST. MARY’S SQUARE WAS JUST PLAIN boring. Nothing but an empty section of sidewalks surrounded by shops. Not that Karl had expected it to be better. But he’d hoped that at least one of the food trucks from the previous day would still be around.

Like the crepes.

The crepes had been awesome.

“What did you do next?” Stan poked him in his ribs.

Karl glanced at his younger friend. “Huh?”

Stan took a slow, deep breath and blew it out, pressing his knuckles into the sides of his head. “Karl, you’re meant to be walking us through your day. Can you please try to focus?”

“Oh, right.”

Sam muttered something under his breath, but Karl didn’t catch it. Knowing Sam it probably wasn’t very nice, but that was part of the giant’s charm. The angrier he got, the funnier it was, at least as far as Karl was concerned. Maybe one day Karl would push the grouchy know-it-all over the edge, but until then he’d keep pushing buttons. Nobody else could. Stan was too nice. Ronnie was too smart. And Ryan was too scared. So that left Karl to keep Sam on his toes. It was a tough job, but someone had to do it.

“Well?” Ronnie paused by his elbow, one eyebrow cocked over the edge of his sunglasses.

“I went to the shop and met Alfred.” Karl pointed back up the street where they’d just come from.

“We already did that.” Stan patted his arm. “Walked here. You said you were sure you had the ring when you left the shop.”

“Yeah, I had it.”

“And you got to St. Mary’s Square.” Stan gestured to the plaza in front of them.

“Yeah, and it was loaded with food trucks, Fish Face. You should have seen it.”



“I’m certain it was delightful.” Stan rolled his eyes. “But you went to a food truck, and—?”

“Naw, Fish Face, I went to all of them.” Karl beamed.

It was quite an accomplishment. There had been a dozen food trucks in the plaza, and he’d eaten at every one of them.

Ronnie groaned like he’d been asked to go to the grocery store for Mia’s nail polish.

Stan’s eyebrows bunched together over the bridge of his nose. The kid only got that look when he found out the carton of eggs in the fridge had gone bad or when Mia ran out of his favorite tea bags.

“Can we hurry this up?” Sam snapped. “Some of us have real work to do.”

“All right.” Stan ran his hands through his hair. “Let’s look around the plaza. Maybe it fell out while he was wandering around eating.”

“We should check the lost and founds in the shops.” Ronnie shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Yes, good.” Stan nodded. “Ronnie, mate, you look around for the ring. You’ve got better eyesight than all of us.” Stan dug in the canvas tote bag hanging off his arm. “Sam, how about you and me go check the lost and found.”

“Nobody will have turned it in.” Sam rolled his visible eye. “This is a waste of time.” But he took the photograph of the ring anyway and stormed off toward the nearest shop.

“What am I doing, Fish Face?” Karl rested his elbow on Stan’s shoulder.

Stan brushed him off. “You help Ronnie look for the ring.”

“Aw, that’s boring.”

Stan flashed a smirk at him. “You’d rather pay the Doc back in petunias?”

Karl wrinkled his nose. “No way, man.”

Stan nodded toward Ronnie who was already walking cautiously up and down the brick sidewalks in St. Mary’s Square. “Then get to searching. If we’re lucky, it’s still here.”

“We ain’t lucky at all, Fish Face.”

Stan sighed. “Aye. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Stan rushed off to the other side of the street, and Karl turned his attention to the ground.

The bricks were uneven and dirty. Some were more worn than others, the grout between them gray and smooth. The small pockets of grass were neatly shorn.



Had they been cut when he'd been there before? He hadn't really paid attention. The only landscaping he really cared about was the Doc's, and well—maybe saying he cared about it was an exaggeration.

Up ahead, Ronnie toed a tuft of grass with his shoe and then continued walking, head down, eyes scanning the ground.

If anybody could spot the ring, it would be him.

Stan was right. Ronnie's eyesight was freakishly good. Probably because Ronnie was kind of a freak. Not in a bad way. But, hey, Karl told it like it was. Normal people didn't have blue hair and silver eyes.

Karl thought it was cool. He'd never met anyone like Ronnie. Heck, he'd never met anyone from New York before, so that in itself was pretty neat. New York City felt like some distant foreign country where everyone ate pizza all the time and talked like mobsters.

And, let's face it, people from New York City didn't often visit Oklahoma. So Karl had never expected to meet anyone from the Big Apple. Ironic that they'd both ended up in San Francisco, which was another place Karl had never planned to go.

Not that Karl planned much of anything in the first place.

If it had been up to him, he'd still be in Enid. Life there made more sense than it did here. Not that he minded the chaos. It was exciting to be a superhero, and living with the Davalos family was fun. Saving the world was a hoot. Getting to punch Dynasty soldiers in their ugly face plates was the best job ever.

But there were times he missed the simplicity of the Midwest, where the most complicated problem he faced was the rising cost of eggs at the foodliner.

Even problems like that had a simple solution in Enid. If eggs got too expensive at the store, you just got your own chickens. Easy peasy.

Life in San Francisco rarely had answers that straightforward.

Something sparkled in the corner of Karl's eye.

"Dude."

The flash of light glittered beneath a flowering shrub near the center of the park. How had Ronnie missed it?

"Dude!"





Karl lunged for the shrub, diving for the sparkling item under the vibrant red flowers. Sharp thorns scratched his face and his forearms, but his fingers closed around the ring. He crawled backward out of the shrub, wincing as the thorns took more skin with them, and he settled on his backside, opening his palm.

“Check it out, Blue Jay!” He waved at his blue-haired friend.

And scowled at the item in his palm.

Oh. It wasn’t a ring. It was a bottle cap.

Ronnie lowered his sunglasses to smirk. “Nice work, Karl.”

“Hey, it’s sparkly.” Karl held it up so it caught the light.

“I can see that. But it ain’t a ring.”

“It’s round.”

Ronnie kept smirking. “Good. You know your shapes. So that’s what you learn at private school, huh?”

“Did you find it?” Stan bounded up behind them, face eager.

Karl held up his bottle cap. “It sparkles.”

Stan’s face fell. “Oh. Well. That’s not helpful, Karl.”

“But it is shiny.”

Stan looked to Ronnie. “Any luck?”

“Naw.” Ronnie shook his head. “It ain’t here.”

“Well, it wasn’t turned into the lost and found anywhere I asked.” Stan glanced over his shoulder to where Sam approached.

“No luck.” Sam handed Stan the photograph of the ring. “Can we go back now?”

Stan bit his lip. “Maybe someone turned it in to the food trucks.”

Sam groaned. “And how are we going to check that out?”

“Hey.” Karl got to his feet and brushed his knees off. “Maybe we should track the trucks down and ask them.”

“Karl.” Ronnie pinched the bridge of his nose. “How many food trucks were here?”

“Lots.”

“And do you remember their names?”

“Not all of them.” Karl shrugged.

Ronnie and Stan traded a look.



“Well, maybe it’s worth tracking down the ones he does remember.” Stan shook his head. “We can’t just give up.”

“Why not?” Sam scoffed.

Stan gave him a side-eye. “Petunias, Sam.”

Sam cursed under his breath.

“Which trucks do you remember eating at, Karl?” Stan turned to him. “I remember you mentioning the crepes. Do you remember what it was called?”

“No, but it was tasty.”

Ronnie grunted something and pulled his smartphone out of his pocket, sliding the keyboard out as he looked at the screen.

“There’s only one crepe food truck in the city,” Ronnie said quietly. “And it’s on Twitter.”

Stan blinked at him. “Really?”

“Uh-huh.” Ronnie typed on his phone for a moment more. “Okay. The crepe truck is at the Main Parade Lawn today.”

“Where the heck is that?” Karl snorted.

“Presidio.” Sam threw a glance northeast even though the tall buildings of downtown prevented seeing toward that part of the city. “I’ll go.”

“Oh, he’s volunteering?” Ronnie arched an eyebrow at him. “Have anything to do with the fact that it’s on the way back to the Institute?”

“Shut up, Ronnie.”

“Okay, that’s one.” Stan moved closer to Ronnie. “Karl, what’s another truck.”

“There was a Hawaiian one.” Karl said. “They had lots of spam.”

“Oh, surely there can’t be very many Hawaiian food trucks.” Stan glanced at Ronnie, who focused on his phone again.

“Nope. Only one.” Ronnie cast a smirk at Karl. “At least you found the weird ones.”

“Are they on Twitter as well?” Stan held his breath.

“Yup.” Ronnie nodded. “They’re live tweeting from—Levi’s Plaza.”

“Oh, bother. I don’t know where that is.”

Sam sighed. “Embarcadero.”

“Yeah.” Ronnie lowered his phone. “Close to Pier 19.”



Karl scratched the back of his head. “How the heck do you guys know where all this stuff is?”

“It’s something to do with having a functional brain.” Sam sneered.

“What else?” Stan grabbed Karl’s arm. “What other one did you eat at?”

Karl chewed the inside of his cheek. “I know there was a taco truck.”

“Yeah, there’s a million of those.” Ronnie grunted.

“There was a sausage truck.” Karl strained. “I think it was German. They had—I don’t know what they were. Like German ravioli.”

“What are you babbling about?” Sam snarled.

“German ravioli, man. It was great.” Karl threw his hands in the air. “Pasta pockets jammed full of potatoes and cheese.”

Sam blinked at him. “Pierogi?”

Ronnie wrinkled his lip. “Say what?”

Sam released an angry sigh. “Pasta stuffed with mashed potatoes and cheese?”

Karl nodded.

Sam glared at Ronnie. “Look up Polish trucks.”

“Polish.” Ronnie muttered. “Polish.” He typed on his phone and pulled up a photograph of a food truck emblazoned with a hot dog logo. “Kay’s Authentic Polish Cuisine?”

“That’s it.” Karl snapped his fingers.

Stan studied Sam with a curious look. “What’s a pierogi, and how did you know what it was?”

Sam didn’t answer. “Can you figure out where they are?”

“Yup.” Ronnie nodded. “They are—also live tweeting. They are at the UN Plaza today.”

Stan turned away from Sam and focused on Karl again. “All right, mate. What else?”

Karl straightened. “Oh and there was the one with the heroes.”

Stan eyed him. “The heroes?”

“Like—sandwiches?” Sam growled.

“Yeah but fancy.” Karl nodded. “With the big chunk of meat they sawed off onto the flatbread stuff.”

“Gyros.” Ronnie muttered.

“That’s what I said.”



Sam cursed again, and Ronnie mumbled something about a cigarette.

Ronnie had to type on his phone longer than normal. “Looks like they’re over in the Mission District today. Down at KQED’s office.”

Sam shook his head. “They’re scattered all over the city. We can’t get them all in one day.”

“We can if we split up.” Ronnie tucked his phone back into his pants pocket.

“It’ll take hours.” Sam spat.

“Not if we go in armor.” Karl offered.

Sam, Ronnie, and Stan gawked at him like he’d sprouted another head. Karl shrugged.

“What?” he grinned. “It’s important, right?”

“It ain’t Thallia important,” Ronnie snorted. “The dimension ain’t gonna fall if we don’t find the ring.”

“I’m not saying we attack them.” Karl rolled his eyes. “But can’t we just armor up to get where we need to go and then poke around in our civvies once we get there?”

Sam scratched his chin. “I hate to say this, but the idiot has a point. It would save time.”

Ronnie sagged. “It’s a bad idea.”

“Yes, probably.” Stan smiled. “But he is right. We need to split up anyway.”

Ronnie groaned and pulled his phone out again. “All right. Fine. Stan, you take the crepe truck in the Presidio. Sam, you get the pierogi truck at UN Plaza. I’ll take the Greek truck at KQED. Karl, that leaves you with the Hawaiian truck in the Embarcadero.”

Karl cheered.

Food trucks.

They had a mission involving food trucks.

Maybe that cute Hawaiian girl would still be there.

He loved his life.

“Once we get there, check in after you ask about the ring,” Ronnie said. “If nobody has any luck, we’ll meet up somewhere and go again.”

“This is ridiculous,” Sam muttered.

“Come on, Lurch.” Karl laughed. “What are you so sour about?”

“We get there. Get out of armor. Ask about the ring and leave.” Sam pinned Karl with a glare. “This is a job, idiot. Don’t get distracted.”



“I’m always distracted.”

“Petunias, Karl.” Stan clutched his arm. “Think about petunias.”

Karl saluted. “Spam, Fish Face. I’m thinking about Spam.”

Ronnie hissed as he turned on his heel, muttering something about a cigarette again. Karl ignored him. This was perfect timing. He really was starving.





# CHAPTER 6

# RONNIE



**THE SORA ARMOR CREAKED AROUND RONNIE’S KNEES AS HE LANDED ON A ROOFTOP** of a building. He rolled to absorb some of the impact and vaulted forward, still running.

The further away from the skyscrapers he ran, the faster he’d have to move. One of the benefits of a bustling downtown area was the distractedness quotient of the people.

Sure, the businesses that followed Market Street were tall enough to keep him out of the sight of the people on the sidewalks. But the closer he was to the ground, the much higher probability of being spotted.

And the last thing any of them needed was to be spotted.

The city didn’t really believe they existed, and that was exactly the way it needed to be. Only a handful of crazies and some of the street-smart police officers had seen some of the Reishosan’s late night exploits, even if they didn’t understand them.

So far, no one had really made a huge fuss, even if the news agencies loved reporting every sighting, whether it was real or not. And since Jinsoku had caused so much trouble out in the Marin Headlands last month, things had been mercifully quiet.

Quiet was good.

Quiet was safe. At least it was safe from the prying eyes of the Terran Dimension’s authorities. It was hard enough to protect the world from Thallia and his psychotic warlord without the press and the FBI breathing down their necks.

Ronnie leaped from the roof to the roof of another building some distance off, Sora putting more spring in his leaps than he could naturally. Hopefully nobody walking around underneath would look up.

The clear blue visor over his eyes showed him a digital map of where he was going. It also helpfully showed him a second map that pointed out the location of the other currently armored Reishosan, each one heading a different direction in the city.

This had to be the most ridiculous mission they’d gone on.

Chasing food trucks across the city to find an engagement ring.



Absurd.

Ronnie angled himself carefully as he leaped to the next rooftop. Fortunately the buildings in this part of the city were laid out in a way that he could scale several buildings at a time with each jump.

The height of the Aida Plaza Hotel at 7th and Market gave him enough of a boost to get across the street and to the edge of the peculiar red building just beside one of the taller structures.

He was passing the UN Plaza area, so Sam would be behind him somewhere, but Sam hadn't yet figured out the best way to get from building to building without being seen. But then, it would probably be difficult for Sam to do much of anything invisibly. He was just so tall, it had to be a challenge to blend in, even without his vibrant green samurai armor on.

Building to building, brick wall to brick wall, unit to unit, Ronnie kept moving down Market until he had to shift diagonally to get to Tenth Street. Several of the apartment buildings had rooftop garden areas with pools and game facilities, and the last thing they needed was for a little samurai guy to come barreling through.

The other readout on his screen gave him heat signatures for the populated areas he was passing through. The fewer people around, the less of a chance he'd be seen.

As with everything else Sora could do, the maps and the displays were gadgets the armor had shown him without his asking. Sora just seemed to intuitively understand what Ronnie needed when he needed it and simply presented it to him.

He bounded across the Costco roof and leaped over the Central Freeway. Bryant Street would take him down to the Municipal Transportation Agency where he could ditch Sora and walk up to the KQED building without seeming out of place.

Once he hit Franklin Park, he crossed to the building on the other side of the street so that he could jump down into the bus depot where hundreds of city vehicles were lined up in neat rows.

Ronnie crouched between two buses and drew a calming breath.

"*Kieru so,*" he whispered.

Sora burst into a shroud of shimmering blue light and vanished, leaving him in his street clothes.



Slowly, Ronnie poked his head out from behind the bus and walked to the fence line. He crawled up one side of it and swung himself over the top.

His sneakers hit the sidewalk, and he shoved his hands into his pockets casually as he started walking.

No one had noticed.

At least, not that he could tell. Nobody was shouting or pointing or shooting at him, so he'd call that a win.

The KQED office building towered in front of him, but a middling crowd of people had gathered near the corner where loud music wailed from a set of giant speakers.

The people milled around an aquamarine van covered in pink and yellow daisies, and the closer Ronnie came to it, the louder the music got.

The logo on the side of the van read "Greek Me!" in balloon-shaped letters, and the air around it smelled like savory roasting meats and fresh baked pita breads and tangy vinegars.

Sighing, Ronnie approached the side of the van rather than the front where people had formed a long line down the sidewalk. He poked his head into the van where an older couple waltzed around each other, chopping vegetables, assembling sandwiches, and drizzling tzatziki sauce over salads.

Ronnie cleared his throat.

The woman looked up and offered him a smile, while the man kept working. He had a straight nose and a balding head and reminded Ronnie somewhat of Dr. Davalos in his build.

"Line starts over there, son," the woman said.

Ronnie cleared his throat again.

This was the hard part.

People.

People were hard.

"You got a lost and found?"

The woman blinked. "Not really." She wiped her hands and came to the door, looking down at him with a soft expression. The sun shone in her graying hair. "Did you lose something?"

Ronnie shook his head. "A friend ate from your truck at a festival yesterday."

"At St. Mary's?"





“Yeah.” Ronnie grunted. “He had a ring in his pocket, and he lost it.”

The woman glanced over her shoulder. “We didn’t have anything turned in. I’m sorry.”

Ronnie sighed. “Naw. It was a long shot.”

The woman regarded him with a smile, tilting her head. “Have you eaten?”

Ronnie drew back a step. “I’m fine, ma’am.”

“You should eat something. You’re too skinny.”

Ronnie fought the urge to roll his eyes. He had a distinct feeling that Mia would be just like this woman in about twenty years. Heck, she already told him the same things now. Maybe it was a Greek thing.

“I’ve heard that.” Ronnie turned around. “Thanks anyway.”

The woman nodded and went back to work.

Ronnie hurried down the sidewalk and ducked into an alleyway. He shut his eyes and felt the familiar burn of Sora’s *kanji* glowing on his forehead as he opened the armor link.

*<No luck with the Greek truck. I’ll start tracking down more.>*

He felt vague reactions to his call from the other three ring seekers. All disappointed, although Sam felt more angry than disappointed. But that wasn’t anything new.

Ronnie dug out his phone and started researching the food truck festival at St. Mary’s. If he could get a list of all the vendors who had been present, maybe he could narrow down which trucks Karl had actually been to.

“One down,” he muttered, “probably two hundred to go.”

He’d picked a heck of a day to quit smoking.





**THE HERRINGBONE PATTERN IN THE RED BRICKS OF THE UNITED NATIONS PLAZA** made Sam’s eyes cross. He pinched the bridge of his nose and grumbled as he opened his wallet and thumbed several bills out. He exchanged them for a large recycled paper cup.

He pumped his own steaming black coffee from the large carafes lined up along the counter of the United Nations Cafe. The family owned convenience store was tucked into a tiny space toward the back of an office building on Market Street.

Getting to the plaza hadn’t been difficult while he was wearing the Hinode Armor. Staying out of sight? That was always the hard part. But he must have managed pretty well since there were no blaring sirens or helicopters circling.

Yet.

Ronnie had been the one to discover that jumping from tall building to tall building downtown seemed to be the best way to avoid being noticed. It didn’t make much sense to Sam, but then, he made a habit of being aware of everything. Maybe people in California just didn’t care about their surroundings.

That would be just like the West Coast.

He hated this state.

Ridiculous what they charged for plain coffee. But he was having a horrible day, and this was an emergency.

He blew gently on his coffee as he stood in the plaza, glaring at the half dozen food trucks parked strategically between the buildings.

Spotting the lone Polish food truck wasn’t a challenge. The van was big, brightly painted red and white, and had a speaker on the side that blasted polka music.

Huge letters on the side screamed “Polish Kitchen!” as though the entire world hadn’t realized what nationality they were.



A vague sense of disappointment tingled at the back of his mind, and he scoffed and took a sip of his coffee. It had come from one of the others. Either Stan or Ronnie, if he had to guess. Any time Karl projected some feeling into their telepathic link, it was rarely vague.

Of course, it would be easier if the stupid armor worked.

But that wasn't the lot Sam had drawn. No, he had to get landed with a magical super-duper armor that malfunctioned all the time. That was the only explanation for why it wouldn't do what it was supposed to.

Grumbling under his breath, he approached the food truck with its blaring rhythmic tuba sounds, twitching as the volume rattled his ear drums.

The old woman inside cast a look at him, scowling and unfriendly. "What'll you have?"

Sam pasted a fake smile on and pretended that he cared about what she thought. "I just have a question."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "Everybody has questions, son. I haven't got time for yours. Either buy something or leave."

Sam dropped the fake smile and glared at her. "I'm not hungry."

The woman leaned down to breathe garlic breath into his face. "Then you must not want your questions answered that badly, huh?"

I hate stupid people.

His fingers twitched around his paper cup. If he didn't need the coffee inside so badly, he'd throw it in her smug face.

He could break her nose. She was far enough into his personal space that he wouldn't even have to strain. Then she'd be stupid and ugly.

Of course, then he'd be arrested for assault. A woman this ugly and rude wouldn't hesitate to press charges even if she deserved a broken nose.

Did he hate planting petunias so much that he'd stoop to bribery just to get out of it?

Heck yes.

It wasn't the work he hated. It was who he'd have to do the work with. A whole day of landscaping with Ryan Lewis? Just shoot him and be done with it.

Sam plastered the fake smile on his face again, turning on the charm as high as it would go. "Well, then, I'd better order some pierogi."



The woman sneered at him and rang up his order. He handed her the absurd number of bills, and she reached to take them out of his hand. But he held tight to the money.

“My question?” He arched his visible eyebrow.

She flared her uneven nostrils. “What?”

“Anyone turned in an engagement ring?” Sam held her gaze without blinking or loosening his hold on the cash.

“An engagement ring?” The woman barked a laugh. “Are you loony? If someone left an engagement ring here, I wouldn’t be slinging sausages, you idiot. I’d sell this awful truck and buy a Buick.”

She yanked the cash out of his hand and slid a paper container of steaming pastries at him.

“Have a nice day.” She wrinkled her warty nose. “Next!”

I hope you get food poisoning, you old hag. Sam snatched the paper container off the counter and stepped out of the line.

He sat on one of the stone ledges that lined the plaza and eyed the other food trucks.

Whoever came up with the idea of selling food from inside dirty vans needed to be hit with a brick. It was entirely unsanitary. Who knew where the food had come from? Who knew how it was actually prepared? Certifications of cleanliness meant zip to him.

He glared at the paper tray of pierogi, steaming in the air.

When was the last time he’d even had pierogi?

“This seat taken?”

Sam went rigid as the voice intruded on his brooding, and he looked up into the face of a woman about his age. She had her own tray of pierogi and smiled at him with a friendly sparkle in her eyes.

Great.

He glanced down the plaza. There were plenty of other places to sit. Why did she have to sit next to him?

“I don’t like eating alone.” The girl smiled as though she could read his mind and flopped on the ledge next to him. “I’m Annie.”

“Uh-huh.”



“I’ve never had these before.” She settled the paper tray in her lap and breathed in their scent. “I can’t remember what the lady said they were called, but they sounded delicious.”

“Pierogi,” Sam said before he could stop himself.

“Pierogi!” Annie nodded. “That’s right.” She sliced one open and revealed its soft potato filling to the air. “Who would think to stuff pasta with mashed potatoes?”

“It’s Polish,” Sam grumbled. “They do stupid things.”

Annie giggled and blew on the pasta to cool it.

Why was he still sitting here? He had other food truck vendors to bother.

Annie took a bite of the pastry and hummed happily. “That’s really tasty. Have you tried yours yet?”

“No.”

“They’re getting cold.”

Sam glared at her.

He had no interest in eating them. Why would he? “You want them?” He held the tray out to her.

“You don’t?” Annie stuck out her bottom lip. “But you bought them. I assumed—”

“That’s a bad idea.” Sam stood and left the tray of pierogi on the ledge. He took his coffee. “Bon appetit.”

“Oh. Well. Thank you.” Annie called after him, but he didn’t turn.

He plunged into the maze of food trucks and eyeballed the vendors, looking for one that seemed less likely to make him pay before talking to him. The last thing he needed was to spend all his money on food he didn’t want just to answer questions he didn’t care about.

What a waste of a day.

He scoffed and drank his coffee, marching past the Polish food truck without looking at it or its rude owner.

A line had formed at the truck, which was ironic. Because her pierogi weren’t any good. He hadn’t needed to eat one to know. She didn’t cook them long enough. The pasta was too thick. And the filling was the wrong color.

They could barely pass as pierogi as far as Sam was concerned.

But then, his mother had made them the best.



That was the last time he'd eaten pierogi. She'd made them to celebrate some test score he'd gotten. She'd even invited old Gideon over to eat with them.

That had been a wonderful night. One of the few.

So there was no point in eating pierogi again. Nobody could make them like his mother had, and she—Well, it didn't matter anyway.

He took a scalding gulp of his coffee and cast an angry glare around the plaza.

As much as he hated the idea of helping, there was a good chance that they had been at St. Mary's Square yesterday. Maybe he should ask just in case.

He told himself he wasn't helping Karl. Or Ryan. He was helping himself. If he asked now, he wouldn't have to track them down and ask later.

Sam pointed his feet toward a Halal food truck and plastered another friendly smile on his face.

"Hi," he said as he approached the vendor inside the truck. "Can I ask you a question?"





**THE THIN BATTER SIZZLED AS IT STRUCK THE GRIDDLE AND CRAWLED ACROSS THE** hot-oiled surface like fog off the bay. Stan bit his lower lip in concentration as he spun the crepe spreader in a broad circle.

He kept it even, the same width and smiled as the thin batter firmed up and began to hiss. “There you go,” Henrietta said, patting his shoulder with a grin. “Boy, you’re a natural at this!”

Henrietta was such a gracious lass.

Lass. Hardly. Henrietta had grandchildren as old as he was, but she had a youthful soul.

“Now turn it.” Henrietta handed him a wooden spatula, and Stan carefully pried the cooked crepe off the griddle.

He flipped it with a dramatic flourish, and Henrietta applauded, laughing.

“Young man, do you need a job?” She squeezed his arm. “You should come work for me.”

“Aw, thanks, ma’am, but I’ve already got a job.” Stan chuckled, slathering nutella and sliced bananas over the top of the hot crepe and folding it with the spatula.

He slid it off onto a paper plate and handed it out the truck window. “There you are, love.”

The girl on the outside tittered as she accepted the plate from him. “Thank you, it looks perfect!”

“Hope it brightens your day.”

Henrietta shook her head and snatched the next order sheet. “Looks like we need a caramel apple one next.”

Stan poured the next round of batter on the griddle.

He hadn’t intended to learn how to make crepes. He’d just walked up to the food truck here in the Presidio and watched in awe as Henrietta wielded the spreader and spatula like an artist. Before he knew what was happening, he was inside learning.



“You sure you don’t need a job?” Henrietta asked again as she watched him assemble the crepe.

Stan laughed. “No, love.”

“Please tell me you have a job in food service somewhere.” She took down another nutella and banana order.

“I actually do landscaping.” Stan chuckled.

“Landscaping?” Henrietta gasped. “Boy, you’re wasted at manual labor. You’ve got a gift in the kitchen.”

Stan smiled. “Oh, I still cook. For my family.” His heart twisted slightly as the words left his mouth. *Yes, I cook for my family.*

He blinked the sudden heat out of his eyes.

“Actually, that’s why I’m here.” He flipped the crepe he was working on.

“Because you cook for your family?”

Stan laughed. “No, one of them lost an engagement ring. He was at St. Mary’s Square yesterday and got a crepe from here.”

“Oh, and you were wondering if it was turned in.”

“Aye.”

Henrietta shook her head. “No, Stan, I’m sorry. Nothing was turned in.” She peered across the lawn. “Mateo was out at St. Mary’s yesterday.” She pointed to the chimichanga truck on the other side of the grass. “You ought to check with him.”

Her eyes twinkled.

“Maybe you can get a chimichanga making lesson.”

Stan laughed and finished the crepe, folding it and handing it out the window to the next person in line. “Well, I know now that I can make crepes, I’ll have all sorts of influence at home.”

Henrietta hugged him gently. “You don’t be stranger.” She nodded. “And if you ever get tired of landscaping, you come find me.”

“I will. Thank you.” Stan backed away and walked down the steps to the grass. He waved at Henrietta and started toward the chimichanga food truck.

The bright salty air blowing in off the bay felt cool against his bare arms, especially after the heat of the kitchen in Henrietta’s truck.





What a special woman.

Henrietta had started her crepe making truck when her husband of forty years had passed away. Her kids had tried to convince her to stay retired, but she hadn't wanted to lounge around the house with all her memories. She wanted to stay busy.

So now she ran the best crepe food truck in the Bay Area. She was even in talks to start a brick-and-mortar store in SoMa.

Henrietta was the sort of person Stan wanted to be like. Old and wise, but young and brave. Willing to try new things, even if they weren't the sort of things you were supposed to do at that age. He wanted to keep everyone guessing when he was Henrietta's age.

So that meant he should start planning a tea and scones food truck for his retirement. If nothing else, it would thrill the British population of the city.

*Blimey, how old would I have to be to retire?*

He blinked.

Could he even retire from landscaping?

The entire idea of retirement hadn't ever occurred to him. Being a pensioner had always seemed so very far away. It still did to be honest.

He paused in the line outside the chimichanga truck.

If he were being truly honest, retiring wasn't something guaranteed for him. For any of them.

The longer he served as a Reishosan, the more certain he'd become that living to a ripe old age might not be in the cards for him. Not that he wanted to die, but going out and facing Dynasty warlords and soldiers would be a silly thing to do without considering the negatives.

He could die at any time.

Any of them could.

The slip of a sword. One moment of lost concentration. The Warlord Jinsoku wouldn't hesitate to run any of them through given half a chance.

*Well, that took a dark turn, didn't it?* He shook himself.

He looked back at the crepe truck where Henrietta was cheerfully serving the customers standing in line.

*Let's not think that way, shall we, Stan?* He smiled. *Let's just plan to live until we die, right? We'll not be murdered by warlords or soldiers. We'll live to see our teeth fall out.*



A gentle buzz warmed the back of his mind. A soft tingling sensation, like the bells of a wind chime on a breezy day. Or the brush of butterfly wings.

Kagami.

His armor was laughing.

Well, not laughing. Laughing was far too human, and Kagami wasn't human. But every now and then, Stan got the sense the armor thought he was funny. The armor would give him that tingling sensation with a rush of welcoming warmth, and it certainly felt like laughter sounded.

Stan smiled again and allowed his mind to be silent.

*What's so funny, mate?*

Kagami didn't speak in words. The armor only seemed to communicate in feelings and emotions, which made precious little sense. How a samurai armor could have feelings let alone communicate them was beyond Stan. He just knew what he felt.

An image formed in the back of his mind. An image of himself with no teeth.

More twinkling laughter.

*Oh, you think that's funny, do you?*

Stan couldn't help but chuckle. At least his armor had a sense of humor. He got the feeling from Ronnie that Sora was dry and sarcastic, probably just as acerbic as Ronnie himself was. And who knew about Kazan, Shiren, or Hinode? Ryan, Karl, and Sam didn't know their armors well enough to talk to them.

The line moved forward a bit, and Stan frowned as Kagami's laughter faded slightly. A gentle surge of irritation resonated in the back of Stan's mind.

Heat raced up the back of his spine, and he looked down, covering his forehead with his hand just as the armor's link activated and the blue kanji glowed between his eyebrows.

*<No luck with the Greek truck. I'll start tracking down more.>*

Ronnie's voice was tinny and distant sounding as it echoed in Stan's mind. He smiled, though. Ronnie had come so far in learning how to use the armors' telepathic link. Ryan and Karl hadn't quite gotten it sorted yet, and Sam certainly didn't.

The others chimed in across the link. Karl sounded distracted. Sam sounded angry. So— everything was normal.



Stan sighed and moved forward in the line, dropping his hand from his forehead. He needed to be more on his toes if Ronnie was going to connect like that out of the blue.

Granted, if he hadn't accepted the connection, his kanji wouldn't have shown. But refusing to allow Kagami and Sora to connect just seemed wrong. So Stan always allowed it.

Maybe someday Ryan and Karl and Sam would be comfortable enough with their armors that they could too. As it stood now, Ryan and Karl could only manage it accidentally.

The line moved again, and Stan focused on the attractive woman behind the counter of the chimichanga truck.

*All right, Stan. Stay focused.*

Stan was next. He moved up to the counter and smiled.

"Good afternoon," the woman beamed at him with dark eyes and flashing white teeth. "How can I help you?"

"Actually, I have a question about the festival you all were at in St. Mary's Square yesterday."

The woman blinked. "Yes?"

"Did anyone turn in an engagement ring?" Stan held his breath.

The woman frowned sadly. "No, I'm sorry. Nothing like that was turned in."

Stan deflated. "Oh. Thank you anyway."

"Is there anything you'd like to order?" She gestured to the menu board behind her.

"No, I need to keep searching. But thank you."

"I saw you making crepes with Henrietta." The woman nodded toward the crepe truck. "Are you working for her?"

"No." Stan shook his head. "I had just never made a crepe before." He shrugged. "Never made chimichangas either."

The woman blinked. "Want to learn?" She leaned forward. "I would love to teach you. And if you can make crepes, you can definitely make chimichangas."

"Well," Stan straightened, "it might be good to know."

"Really?"

"Aye, why not?" Stan shrugged. "Always looking for new recipes, I am."

The twinkling sound chimed at the back of his brain. Kagami was laughing at him again.

*Oh, shut it, you great lump.*





A TREMBLING WHINY MELODY REVERBERATED FROM THE SPEAKERS WELDED ON THE side of the Hawaiian food truck. Karl's stomach rumbled as he approached the van, digging out his wallet as he walked.

Food truck food was the best food.

He joined the line, swaying slightly to the music, and glanced around Levi's Plaza. Several other food trucks were lined up along the curbs and some across the street in the grass.

Oh, wow. A pizza truck? He hadn't seen a pizza truck in St. Mary's Square yesterday.

*Wait.*

Karl frowned.

*Oh, that's right.*

He wasn't here to eat. Well, no, he wasn't here just to eat. Of course, he would eat. That's what he did.

He had a question to ask the people who ran the food trucks he'd eaten at yesterday.

Yes, he had a question.

*What was the question again?*

The line moved forward.

*Rats. It was important too.*

He scratched the back of his head. He'd screwed something up, which wasn't unusual. And because he'd eaten at a bunch of food trucks yesterday, he had to come back and find all the food trucks again and ask them about—something. Not their menus. That would be too good to be true. Not their specials.

Which was a shame.

Levi's Plaza smelled awesome. Grease and meat and spices and that tacky joyous scent he always associated with state fairs--fried bread and powdered sugar. Heaven.



Did Hawaiian food include fried bread? Like did they have funnel cakes? Was that why the air smelled like funnel cakes here, or was there a funnel cake truck somewhere that he just hadn't found yet?

Yet being the operative word.

If funnel cakes existed here, he would find them.

The line moved forward again, and his mouth watered as he scanned the menu board. Did they have any more of that spam stuff he had tried yesterday? That had been super good.

He dug in his other pocket for any spare change and paused, his fingers brushing up against a small golden figurine. He held it in his palm and smiled at it, its awkward shaped legs and funky mane.

His *menuki*. It was something called a lion-dog apparently, which sounded like the coolest animal ever.

Karl folded his fingers around the figurine and frowned thoughtfully.

"That's right," he muttered.

He'd come here in armor.

It wasn't that he'd forgotten. It was just that the prospect of eating food truck food was so exciting, he just hadn't kept thinking about getting to wear Shiren on the way here.

Shiren was the coolest thing ever, and it wasn't every day he got to chase food trucks around the city wearing full armor.

He scowled.

Because that's what he got to do today. Why was that again?

Armor. Food trucks. St. Mary's Square.

*Oh*. He grimaced. *Ryan's ring*.

Well, not Ryan's ring. Dr. Davalos's ring that he'd given to Ryan to give to Mia.

Karl shoved his *menuki* back into his pocket.

He was on a mission. He had to ask people if they found the Doc's ring.

The line moved again. Now there was only one person between him and spam musubi—uh—asking about Ryan's ring.

No, the Doc's-Ryan's-Mia's ring.

Gah, why was this so complicated?

Finally. It was his turn.



“Hi!” The dark-haired girl behind the counter beamed at him. “I remember you from yesterday!”

Karl blinked at her.

“Oh, yeah!” He waved. “I remember you too.”

“You liked the musubi?” She rested on her elbows and leaned closer down to him.

“I sure did. It was amazing.” Karl grinned. “I’d like some more!”

“You should try it with sriracha.” She nodded toward the back of the truck where a table of condiments were laid out. “That is, if you like spicy things.”

“I like spicy things.”

Karl bounced on his feet, pulling cash out of his wallet, his stomach growling in anticipation.

*You’re forgetting something.*

Karl glanced at the menu board. He didn’t have enough to get all the food he wanted to try, and the spam musubi yesterday had been phenomenal.

The pretty girl handed him the paper tray of spam musubi.

“I’m glad you like it,” she said.

Karl handed her the bills.

No, he really was forgetting something.

As he passed the bills to her, he noticed the flash of a silver ring on her right hand. It had a dolphin on it. A dolphin ring. That was cute.

Mia liked dolphins. Maybe he could get her a dolphin ring for Christmas.

“Sriracha.” The girl pointed to the condiment table. You won’t be sorry.”

Karl saluted. “Yes, ma’am.”

He started to turn away, and a tingling sensation encircled his neck. Heat rushed across his scalp, like a whole colony of ants had decided to do the macarena on his head.

He knew that feeling. The armors were talking to each other. He hadn’t quite figured out how to consistently tap into what they were saying, and that was okay. Whenever he did, his forehead would light up like a Christmas tree.

The question was, why were the armors talking? He shouldn’t try to connect right now because his head going light bulb mode might raise some questions. But was there an attack? Or was Sam just whining about something?



Wait.

No, that wasn't the question.

Karl groaned.

How many times could he forget the same thing? He had to be setting a record here.

He hadn't quite left the line yet, so he swung around again. "Hey."

The girl looked at him. "Did you think of something else you wanted to order?"

*Focus. Focus. Focus.* "No, actually I had a question about a ring."

"A ring?" The girl tilted her head.

"Yeah, a fancy one."

She frowned at him. "What's—your question?"

"Did you find one?"

She blinked.

And blinked some more.

"Oh," she shook herself. "You mean, you lost a ring and you're looking for it?"

"Yeah." He nodded.

Dude, he was really good at this investigating stuff. Maybe he could be a detective.

"No." The girl shook her head. "I'm sorry, we didn't find any rings."

Karl shrugged. "Oh well. Thanks anyway."

She smiled. "You're welcome."

Karl meandered across the street to the grass where he found a shady spot to enjoy his spam musubi. He checked the area quickly, and since he was alone he figured tapping into the armor link might be a good idea.

Just in case there really had been a warlord attack.

He chewed on his musubi happily and tried to focus his mind. Focus was hard for him. He'd figured out a while back that focus wasn't really what Shiren needed from him, though, which was pretty awesome.

It certainly saved time.

*Okay, buddy. Could use a bit of a hand.*

Stan had told him that talking to the armor like it was alive was the first step to building a relationship with it. That didn't make a lot of sense to Karl, but then he didn't know much about relationships either. And Stan did. So the kid was probably right.



Whenever Shiren woke up, it felt like gears clicking into place at the back of his brain. Maybe not gears. But like the adjuster on a wrench or a perfectly shaped rock settling into a hole you'd dug for it. It just felt—*right*.

*The others are all chatty about something. Can you get me into the call?*

A yes from Shiren felt like a lazy yawn. Karl appreciated that. Except it always made him feel like yawning along.

So he did. He let loose a gigantic yawn and covered his forehead as it started to burn, casting vague orange light across his paper tray of musubi.

*<—waste of a perfectly good day. I have a security system to update, Stan.>*

Oh, that sounded like Ronnie, and he was angry about something.

Well. As angry as Ronnie ever got.

*<Guess you didn't find it either.>* Karl projected the thought into the armor link and waited for the surprised ripples he always felt when the others realized it was him.

*<This is all your fault.>* Ronnie really did sound mad.

*<So you haven't found it yet?>* Stan's weary mental voice was just as hard to understand as his actual voice. Did all British people talk so weird?

*<Nope. But the food's good.>*

A rumble of irritation echoed in his mind like a peal of distant thunder. Aha, there was Sam. At least he was listening, even if he hadn't figured out how to talk back.

*<This was the worst day to quit smoking ever.>* Ronnie's mental voice was also hard to understand. Apparently British people and punks from the Bronx were equally mush-mouthed when it came to talking in each others' brains.

*<Ronnie, you put that cigarette down.>* Stan spoke sharply.

Ronnie fired an intense emotion like cold fury over the telepathic link, and Karl snickered.

He popped a piece of musubi into his mouth and chewed happily. Well, the mission had been a bust. The ring was gone. Someone had probably run off with it.

Part of him did feel bad about it, but he hadn't done it on purpose. And it was just a ring. If Ryan wanted to ask Mia to marry him, he could use a pipe cleaner twisted into a circle. She would still say yes. Mia was head-over-heels in love with the old man and had been for years. Ryan didn't need some fancy ring to convince her to marry him.





So, no harm done.

Karl paused in his chewing as a food truck drove down the street in front of him.

Tia Maria's Taco Emporium.

Disgruntled surprise echoed in the back of his mind.

<Karl, what are you on about now?> Stan sighed.

Oh. He hadn't meant to project that.

He gathered himself. <I just spotted another food truck that was at the square yesterday. I know I ate there.>

<I think you ate everywhere, you idiot.> Ronnie was definitely grouchier than normal, and that was really saying something. Poor blue-haired guy just needed a cigarette.

Karl could feel the weight of Stan's sigh from across the city.

<All right. Karl, armor up and follow the tacos. Let us know where you stop, and we'll regroup there.>

Karl downed the last piece of spam musubi. <I will always follow the tacos, Fish Face.>

He shut the link down and stood up, dashing behind one of the large trees in the park. He checked the area again quickly to make sure no one was watching.

This was the cool part.

He grabbed the menuki from his pocket and clutched it. "*Sen hifu no Shiren, nintai.*"

A burst of power shook his arm and traveled up to his shoulders, chest, and down his body. As the shockwave faded, it left behind orange and white armor.

Battle gear. At least, that's what they called it. It probably had a different unpronounceable name, but Karl thought battle gear was a pretty sweet word for it.

He opened his armored hand, and the figurine flashed with orange light, growing and expanding into the shape of a small dagger. The light faded and left the tanto in his palm.

"All right, buddy. Let's do this quick before someone crashes the party." He clutched the dagger with the menuki shimmering in the hilt wrappings. "*Reishosan Shiren, chikara no senshi, Oshiro-yoroi, nintai.*"

The blast from within the dagger shook him and the leaves of the tree he hid behind, chunky ribbons of blinding orange energy erupting out of the dagger to wrap around him. The battle gear glowed beneath the energy, pieces of heavy spike-covered armor forming around his arms, legs, shoulders, and waist.



The dagger grew again, longer but still glowing with the menuki in its hilt. Karl jabbed it into the belt that had formed around his waist and held out his hands where his helmet materialized.

Orange with two short white horns on the sides and a crown of orange spikes on the top. He pulled it over his curly black hair.

He stepped back, Shiren clanking around him, and he eyed the nearest tall building.

Without the roar of the energy surrounding him, he could hear shouts coming from elsewhere in the park. Someone was talking about an earthquake? Huh. Had there been one? He hadn't been paying attention.

He ran and leaped to the nearest building roof and scanned the road for the taco truck.

There it was. Red and green and white with bright splashes of yellow. It was making its way down the street, and Karl pursued, leaping from rooftop to rooftop.

“Tacos, here I come!”





**KARL KNELT ON THE ROOFTOP OF 2250 HYDE, SOME FANCY-SCHMANCY APARTMENT** building off Lombard Street. The sun was just beginning to sink in the western sky, casting orange-red light over the sprawling cityscape. Hyde Street was surprisingly quiet at the moment.

Well, quiet for San Francisco.

So many people lived in such a small area, Karl often wondered how they didn't spend their entire lives bumping into each other.

A fresh breeze that smelled of salt washed over him, and he rocked back on his heels, breathing it deeply.

The air at home only ever smelled like dirt, until it rained. Then it smelled like wet dirt. Maybe there was a corner of Oklahoma that smelled like something different, but Karl hadn't found it.

All the same, he missed that old dusty scent. San Francisco wasn't a bad place to live. Outside of the fact that it was in California, and California was just weird.

He smirked.

Of course, California people probably thought Oklahoma was weird. They were wrong. But that wasn't their fault.

He bit into one of the powdered sugar covered donuts he'd snagged off a street kiosk, ignoring the snowfall of sugar that sprinkled down his chestplate. He'd stopped a mugger with a carefully thrown trashcan lid last week, so he figured the vendor owed him. Donuts were the least they could do.

Below, backed into the driveway of the apartment building, the taco truck lurked, stuffed to the brim with tasty Tex-Mex delights. And maybe—one troublesome engagement ring.

Karl heard the impact on the roof behind him and closed the paper donut box. "Took you long enough, Fish Face."



With a muted clanking sound, Stan knelt next to him and peered over the edge of the apartment building. The blue Kagami Armor was sleek and shining in the setting sunlight, the only ornament on its helmet a single swooping horn.

Stan glanced at him, face shield lifting. “Are you still eating?”

“I’m a growing boy.”

“Growing from side to side you mean.” Stan snatched the donuts away. “Gimme.”

“I saved some for you.”

“What a bother this day has been.”

Karl blinked at him. “Dude, this was the best day ever. We got to armor up and chase food trucks around the city. How is that bad?”

Stan bit into one of the mini-donuts and carefully brushed the powdered sugar off his chestplate like it mattered. “There’s a lot at stake here, Karl.”

“It’s just a ring.” Karl rolled his eyes and gazed down at the taco truck. “It ain’t gonna make Mia love him less if he gives her a bolt.”

“Well, that’s not the point.”

A hard bang shook the roof under them, and Stan spun around in a defensive posture.

“It’s just Lurch, Fish Face.” Karl didn’t turn.

That unhappy thundering sensation at the back of Karl’s mind rumbled like bursts static electricity.

Yup. Definitely Sam.

Stan relaxed beside him. “How did you know it was him?”

“He can’t stick a landing. Haven’t you noticed?”

Stan blinked.

Huh. Guess he hadn’t noticed. Score one for me.

Someday, Sam would figure his armor out. Karl had no doubt. Sam could figure anything out. Dude was a genius. He was just a little slow on the uptake when it came to the armors for whatever reason. For all the years he’d been master of the Hinode Armor, he still hadn’t learned how to use it.

It was a constant sore spot that Karl never hesitated to poke.

“How many dead people you wake up on the way over here, Lurch?”

Sam ignored him.



That meant he was pissed off.

Score two for me.

Of all the joys in life, pushing Sam Logan's buttons ranked almost as high as spam musubi.

"Is that it?" Sam towered over Karl and Stan and sneered at the taco truck parked in the driveway of the apartment building.

"Yup."

"Why are you just sitting here? Go get the stupid ring, and we can all go back."

"Well." Karl looked over the ledge again. "Whoever owns the thing was carrying food into the apartment building for a while."

"What? Are they catering a party?" Stan straightened and took another bite of donut. "That's good luck. They'll be busy."

"So why are you still here?" Sam nudged Karl's leg with his foot.

"I was eating my donuts."

Sam glared at him, nostrils flaring.

A soft clank sounded behind them, and Ronnie skidded to a stop, dark blue Sora Armor twinkling in the rapidly approaching twilight.

"What'd I miss?" His face shield lifted to reveal his silver eyes and constant smug expression. "You find it yet?"

"No, Karl was eating a donut."

Ronnie scowled. "You what?"

"I was hungry."

Stan heaved a sigh that sounded a lot like one of Ryan's. The kid had been spending way too much time with the old man.

"Would you go look in the taco truck, you dummy?" Ronnie pointed. "We been out here all day, and I ran outta nicotine gum two hours ago."

"But you're doing brilliantly!" Stan beamed at him.

"Shut up, Stan."

Karl stood up and narrowed his eyes at the taco truck. "Suppose folks'll see us?"

"Only if they're looking," Sam spat.



Green Hinode almost glowed in the fading sunlight, the detailed edges of his shoulder plates almost incandescent.

“Well.” Karl turned back to his friends. “How do I get in?”

“Know what that sounds like?” Sam pointed to the street. “Not our problem.”

“Karl, would you just go?” Ronnie groaned, slumping his face into his armored hands.

Karl grunted. “I bet the doors are locked.”

“That’s a good guess,” Stan said.

“Still not our problem.” Sam shook his head.

Karl brightened. “Hey!”

“Oh, look. His brain had a thought.” Sam snorted.

“Hey, Blue Jay, you can break into cars, right?” Karl turned to face his shorter friend.

Ronnie glared at him, silver eyes glowing like an animal’s in the street lights. “What does that mean?”

“You were in a gang.” Karl urged.

Ronnie blinked at him while Stan choked on his donut.

“All gang members know how to break into cars.”

Ronnie’s expression turned stony, and Sam snickered.

“Sam, shut up.” Ronnie pointed at him.

“Well, the moron has a point. All gang members have certain skills.” Sam sneered.

“See, Sam agrees. I’m right.” Karl beamed.

“I didn’t say I agree, and I didn’t say you were right.”

Stan was still choking on his donut.

“Breathe, Fish Face.”

“Not all gang members go around breaking into cars,” Ronnie snapped. “You shouldn’t assume stuff like that. It’s—it’s—it’s—”

“Reductive?” Sam arched an eyebrow.

Ronnie and Karl looked at him.

Sam rolled his eyes. “An oversimplification?”

“Is that what that means?” Karl wrinkled his lip.

“It’s flippin’ rude.” Ronnie shoved Karl with a huff. “That’s what it is.”

Stan finally got himself under control. “Come on, lads. This isn’t helping.”



“No, but it’s finally entertaining.” Sam smirked.

“I’m gonna’ stab both of you.” Ronnie reached for an arrow.

Stan jumped in and grabbed Ronnie’s arm, patting it absently. “I know they’re both awful, aren’t they?”

“Hey!” Karl whined.

“But Karl is actually right on this.”

“Ha! See!” Karl went to punch Sam in the shoulder, and Sam sidestepped him. Karl tumbled sideways, off balance.

“So what?” Ronnie spat.

“Can you break into the food truck or not?” Sam shouted.

“Of course, I can break into it, Sam!” Ronnie whirled on him. “Where do you think I grew up? Kansas?”

“Well then what’s the problem?”

“It’s the principle of the thing!”

“Fight, fight, fight!” Karl jumped up and down.

Stan flapped his arms in near-panic. “No, fighting! Tacos! Food truck! Ring!”

Karl laughed and put Stan in a headlock. “Remember that camping trip the Old Man made us go on? This is way more fun.”

Stan clutched the sides of his helmet in his hands. “Lads, come on. It’s been a long day. Can’t we just do this and go home?”

“Fine.” Ronnie hissed. “Come on, Karl.”

“Field trip with Blue Jay!”

Ronnie shoved him. “I will put an arrow through your eye socket, you dumb hick.”

“No you won’t. You like me.”

Karl leaped off the roof and tumbled toward the sidewalk. Someone had planted a tree between the driveway and the street, which didn’t make much sense to Karl, but it was a convenient place to land. One of the thick branches shook under his weight, and he bounded off to roll into the dense row of flowering shrubs next to the taco truck.

Ronnie landed on top of the van with barely a sound.

See, that’s how you stuck a landing.



Ronnie had figured that out ages back. But it also had something to do with him being more than a foot shorter than Sam. With Stan's latest growth spurt last week, Ronnie was officially the shortest member of their team.

Not that it made him any less scary.

Sam was fun to piss off. He was a good fighter, sure, but his bark was way worse than his bite.

If Ronnie ever got serious about wanting to hurt somebody? Whew boy. Karl had seen the dude fight, and if he wanted to, Ronnie could thrash their whole team even without his armor's help. Probably even Sam couldn't stop him.

Sam was a great fighter. Ronnie was a survivor. Karl had seen the difference back when he'd been in Oklahoma on his own. Fighters you could bother and pester and irritate from dawn 'til dusk, and they usually wouldn't do anything except bicker and whine. But with survivors, there was a line. You could only poke a survivor so long before they snapped, and you didn't want to be around when that happened. No sirree.

Ronnie jumped down to the driveway. "Watch for people, will you?"

"Sure, sure." Karl stood beside him. "How you gonna do it? Do you carry a lock picking kit?"

"Go away."

Ronnie held his hand over the end of Sora's quiver. Sora generated its own arrows, so that was probably a good idea. Maybe Ronnie could use the arrow to bust into the food truck.

A shimmering silver arrow formed in the quiver, and Ronnie pulled it out.

Karl blinked. "Hey."

Ronnie flashed a smirk at him. "It worked." He held the arrow out for Karl to see.

The silver shaft of the arrow glimmered in the streetlights, and the fletching at its base sparkled like it was made of frost. But the arrow was missing its normal head.

"How'd you do that?"

Ronnie shrugged. "Asked Sora to give me an arrow without a head."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Cool."

Ronnie shoved it at him. "Bend that."





“Huh?”

“Bend it. Like a hook.”

“Oh.” Karl took the arrow and twisted the end of the shaft around one of his fingers.

Shiren surged around him, sending a pulse of strength to his hand and fingers. Shiren liked to break stuff, which was handy because Karl liked to break stuff too. The silver arrow bent without any trouble.

“Like that?” Karl handed it back.

“Yup.” Ronnie took it and slipped the hook in between the seal and the glass of the passenger side door.

“See. You totally know how to break into cars.”

“Shut up and watch for people.”

Karl peered around the front of the van. Surprisingly there was no one on the sidewalks or on the street. Maybe a car drove past every few minutes. But it was unusually calm for this time of night, especially near a tourist trap like Lombard Street.

Ronnie muttered under his breath and shifted the arrow around between the glass and the seal.

Karl slid past him and checked the back of the food truck. The rear doors were chained with a padlock. Surely it would be easier just to rip the padlock open. It wouldn't do that much damage, would it? And that way Ronnie wouldn't have to keep muttering like an idling engine at a stoplight.

Karl grabbed the padlock and glanced around the van at Ronnie.

“Hey, Blue Jay. I can just break the padlock back here.”

“Shut up, Karl. Lemme focus.”

Karl started to respond and stepped on a rock that had fallen out of the gravel bed under the flowering shrub. He tumbled sideways. Shiren sent a surge of power to his hand again, and the padlock and chain ripped off the doors.

Karl face planted on the driveway and cackled when he saw the crushed padlock in his hand.

“Oops. My bad.”

Ronnie froze with the arrow still stabbed into the door.

“Did you just—?”



“It was an accident!”

“You’re like a bull in a china shop—without the china!”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Ronnie ripped the arrow out of the door. “Just—go get the ring, you dummy.” He took point at the hood of the van, still muttering.

Karl shrugged and stood up. He waved at the roof where Sam and Stan were undoubtedly still watching, and he opened the rear door of the food truck.

He’d get in. Get the ring. Maybe snag a taco if they had one laying around. And then they’d all go back to the estate for dinner.

This was a good plan.





**THE INSIDE OF TIA MARIA’S TACO EMPORIUM SMELLED LIKE GREASE AND CHILIES** and fried dough. In other words: Heaven.

Shiren was almost too bulky to fit in the narrow walkway between the counter and the giant flat-top stove. The grease-laden air smelled of carnitas and salsa and elote, cream and spices and cheese. Oh, so much cheese.

How was he going to focus on finding a ring when he really just wanted dinner?

He opened the nearest cabinet. Inside were stacks of taco shells, bags of tortillas, chips, and more spices than he had names for. A few bags of rice. Lots of beans. Canned peppers. Mesh sacks of onions and chilies.

He shut the door and stopped as the spikes on his armored hand caught in the bag of garlic hanging from the cabinet wall. He disentangled his hand and sidestepped to the stove. He opened the overhead cabinets.

Paper plates, cups, napkins, plastic flatware. No ring.

A mini fridge had been set into the wall on the other side of the stove. He opened it and looked inside. Cheese, cheese, and more cheese. Fragrant pastes. Beers. Cream. Sour cream.

No ring.

Karl turned around to face the sales counter where the cash register sat next to a window that opened. He slid the window open and peeked out at Ronnie.

“Hey, Blue Jay! What’ll you have?”

Ronnie’s glare could have boiled the grease scum off the ceiling.

“Check the cash register,” Ronnie said. “They might’ve put it in there.”

Karl stared hard at the register.

“How do I do that?” He tilted his head and eyed Ronnie with a smirk. “Do you know how to bust into cash registers too?”

“You are the most obnoxious jerk I’ve ever met in my life.”

“Dude, I really doubt that.” Karl snorted with laughter.



He pressed a few buttons on the register, and the drawer popped open eventually. Bundles of bills and stacks of change greeted him. He dug through the quarters and looked under the main drawer.

No ring.

“Suppose it’s in the front?” Karl eyed the door that led to the cabin.

“Maybe.”

“Did you get the door open?”

Ronnie threw his hands in the air. “You’re inside!”

“I gotta do everything, Blue Jay?”

“I hate you.”

Karl snickered and stood up. He grasped the pocket door that blocked the truck cabin from the kitchen area and slid it open. He squeezed into the front of the van.

Shiren’s spikes and horns stabbed into the upholstery and caught on the twinkle lights suspended on the roof. He opened the glove compartment and started shifting through papers.

A low-pitched rumbling started somewhere close.

Probably a motorcycle coming down Hyde.

He finished with the glove box and opened the central compartment on the dashboard. Where was that stupid ring?

The rumbling didn’t go away. It got louder and louder. And it didn’t sound like a motorcycle anymore. It sounded more like a cross between a wheeze and a growl, and it was coming from under the passenger seat.

“Weird.”

“Karl!” Ronnie hissed from the back of the truck.

Karl glanced over his shoulder. Ronnie stood at the back of the van, holding one door open while he placed one foot on the bumper.

“Would you hurry it up?”

Karl started to respond when the growling, whining, wheezing noise reached a level he couldn’t ignore.

“Hang on, Blue Jay. There’s something making a loud racket in here.” Karl stood up and bent over the passenger seat.



He yanked on the seat belt. It wasn't that. He shook the seat in place, and the growling sound only got worse. He twisted and shoved his head down into the area between the seat and the dashboard, carefully trying to keep the spikes on his helmet from gashing the upholstery.

There.

Under the seat.

A pair of eyes glared at him. Round. Beady. Flashing with deadly intent. Enough light from the street shone on in a wrinkled snout pulled back over barred teeth like needles.

"Awww," Karl cackled. "It's a dog!"

"Karl, what?" Ronnie shouted.

"Hi there, puppy!" Karl grinned. "Aren't you just the cutest—?"

In an explosion of sound and fur, the animal lunged at Karl's unprotected face. He screamed in shock and surprise and flailed as the dog bit and scratched at his nose and eyes.

He punched the floor trying to get the dog to run, but it didn't work. And something gave way under the power of his strike.

The food truck jolted to the side and rocked back and forth as he struggled to get out from under the seat and away from the vicious animal.

Ronnie yelped in shock and horror somewhere behind him.

The van surged forward and thump-bump-bumped over the curb.

Karl swatted the dog away and collapsed into the driver's seat, scrambling for something to hold on to. He clutched the wheel and gasped as the wheel spun.

The food truck spun with it.

They were moving?

"We're moving!"

Karl choked on his breath and scrambled for the gear shift on the floor, only to find a hole in the paneling the size of his fist.

He'd punched the gear shift through the floor along with the emergency brake. The food truck shot forward down Hyde, crooked and off center just enough to send them toward the outrageously twisting corners of Lombard Street.

Karl gawked in horror at the curving road ahead outside the food truck windshield. He grabbed the wheel and started to jerk it away from the curving road, but he shouted in alarm as the rabid chihuahua jumped at his face again.



He flapped his hands at the beast, but he let go of the wheel. It rocked sideways and hit the apex of the hill with just enough force to send them tumbling forward down the iconic twisting turns of Lombard Street.




 The graphic for Chapter 12 features a black chalkboard on the left with the word 'CHAPTER' in small white letters above the number '12' in large white letters. To the right of the chalkboard, the word 'RONNIE' is written in large, bold, blue, hand-painted letters with a yellow outline. Further to the right is a colorful illustration of a taco truck. The truck is yellow with red and green stripes along the bottom. It has a large yellow taco with a black mustache on its front. The truck is decorated with colorful streamers and has a small flag on top.
 

# CHAPTER 12 RONNIE

**IT REALLY WAS THE WORST DAY POSSIBLE TO GIVE UP SMOKING.**

Ronnie clutched his bleeding nose and ran after the out-of-control taco truck. He'd been standing on the bumper when it jolted forward, and he'd slammed his face into the floor when it shot out from under him.

I'm gonna kill that dumb hick.

The van lurched sideways, jerking sharply and veering past the intersection of Hyde and Lombard.

"Lombard Street." He slapped his hand against his helmet. "Don't go down Lombard Street, you idiot!"

Ronnie vaguely heard Sam and Stan shouting somewhere behind him, but he tuned them out and bolted after the runaway van just as it hopped a curb and slid wildly down the first leg of the iconic switchback.

He lunged and grabbed hold of the van's bumper.

"Oh, this ain't a good idea."

His body jerked forward, and he hit his knees. The van dragged him over the pavement and veered wildly around the first corner. Ronnie yelped as his right foot caught on a root and ripped out a chunk of the carefully manicured shrubbery that lined the street.

Grunting, he kicked the clinging fragments of the shrub off his boot and redoubled his grip on the bumper. He'd just gotten his feet under him when the van hit the next corner and knocked his legs out from under him again.

"Get it off! Get it off!" Karl shrieked from inside the van.

The van swung to the side and bumped over the curb, scraping along the cement wall that followed the narrow street. The trimmed shrubs exploded as the van tires shredded through them. Sharp bits of branch and needle-leaves filled the air in stinging clouds and rained down on Ronnie like he had a bull's eye on his face.

"Karl, pull this van over, or I'm going to stab you!"



“It’s gonna kill me!” Karl screamed.

“Idiot, I’m gonna kill you!”

The van swung around the next corner, harder and sharper than the last. Ronnie gasped as his body struck the bumper so hard that he nearly lost his grip. It forced the air out of his lungs, and the world spun for a moment before the van ran away again.

“How many curves does this stupid street have?”

It didn’t matter. They’d reached a worst-case scenario. If Karl could have stopped the van, he would have. But from his panicked screaming echoing inside the van, something was attacking him.

A dynasty soldier? A warlord? It had to be big and scary to get Karl wound up like that.

Didn’t matter.

Stop the van.

Help Karl.

Ronnie took a steadying breath and gripped the bumper again, this time with one hand, while he reached over his quiver. He visualized what he wanted. It had worked before. Hopefully it would work again.

Instantly, Sora clicked and hummed in his mind, and, out of thin air, two silver arrows formed in his hand. One head was thicker than the other, and a long silver cord connected them.

“This is probably a bad idea.”

He reached up and stabbed the thick arrow through the back of the van door, hard enough that it thrust through the other side. And with a grunt of effort he pulled himself into the back end of the food truck.

The van rocked again as it rounded another corner, and a stack of pots and pans toppled off a counter top and bashed into his helmet and back.

The moment the vehicle straightened out again, he braced his feet against the interior and extended his hands. A bright glow formed in his palms, and his giant silver bow materialized. He nocked the second arrow into it and scanned the street behind them for something to shoot.

The Russian Hill neighborhood was beautiful, but none of the buildings were substantial enough to halt the van’s out-of-control race down Lombard Street.

What was he going to shoot? Would any of those buildings work as an anchor?

The van swung again.





Karl was still shouting and babbling like a panic-stricken toddler who'd lost its parent. But there was also—a dog barking? Was it a dog? It didn't sound like a dog, at least not a dog that would be a threat.

Maybe it wasn't in the van. Maybe it was somewhere else.

Focus.

Shoot something.

The food truck whipped around one of the curbs, and the sound of honking horns blared all around them.

No, this was worst-case scenario.

The only thing at the end of the Lombard Street switchbacks was a straight hill that pitched downward for multiple blocks. If he didn't get the van stopped now, they wouldn't stop until they ran off the cliff at Pioneer Park.

Ronnie cursed under his breath and clenched as the food truck sailed through the first intersection at the bottom of the switchbacks.

“Karl!” Ronnie screamed.

“I can't stop it!” Karl shouted back.

Yeah, like Ronnie hadn't already figured that out.

“Hit the brakes!”

“There aren't any brakes!”

The food truck picked up speed as it tilted down the straight hill.

*Oh, God, give us green lights.*

He'd missed his chance to anchor the rampaging taco truck to a building on Russian hill. None of the businesses along the Lombard Street straightaways were tall enough.

A flash of green and blue overhead drew his gaze upward.

Sam and Stan.

They were racing from rooftop to rooftop after them.

*Oh, that's an idea.*

More horns blared as they blasted through the next intersection, past a fenced-in school yard. Trees zipped past, but none of them were big enough to use as an anchor.

Ronnie focused on Stan as the boy in light blue armor leaped to another building. He shut his eyes and focused, and Sora hummed around him again.



<Stan!> he called over the armor link.

Overhead, Stan stumbled in his run. Even from this distance, Ronnie could see the faint glow of the armor's link on Stan's helmet.

<Ronnie, why can't he stop the van?> Stan's thought-voice was full of panic.

<He's an idiot. I'm going to shoot you an arrow. You two anchor it somewhere.>

<Hurry, Columbus Street is coming, and I doubt the light will cooperate for you!>

Stan turned to Sam and pointed, and the two of them increased their speed, running out ahead of the van. Hopefully they would scout ahead and find something that would work to anchor the out-of-control vehicle.

Sora ticked and hummed in his ear in advance of Stan's voice. <Found a telephone pole. It'll have to do.>

Ronnie groaned. <That don't inspire confidence, Stan.>

<It's all we've got. You can't hit Columbus Street. There's too much traffic.>

The van bumped over something, its reckless speed gaining even more momentum as it blurred through another intersection. Apartments with bay windows reflected the streetlights.

The angle of the hill decreased, but it wouldn't be enough. The van surged down the street, and Ronnie spotted Sam and Stan on top of a blonde brick building. Next to a telephone pole.

"Here goes."

He took aim at Sam and loosed the arrow.

The arrow and cord zipped out of his finger, streaking through the night sky. Sam caught it, snatching it out of the air and leaped off the building to wrap it around the telephone pole.

The cord snapped tight.

The telephone pole jarred forward.

The door of the van ripped off.

Ronnie barked in shock as his momentum sent him sliding backward down the aisle between the sink and the cabinets. The doors flew open, and canned goods and a huge bag of black beans tumbled out on top of him. Karl hollered in alarm as the van jerked, throwing him forward. The van jolted wildly to the right.

A loud crunching crashing sound echoed all around him, followed by a wailing alarm and the concerning chime of falling broken glass.



Ronnie paused, breathing in and out carefully as he lay in the spilled contents of the food truck cabinets.

The van had stopped.

That was good.

Mission accomplished.

He didn't smell blood, which was also positive. So most likely Karl was still alive, although at this point he wasn't sure whether to be glad about that fact or not.

He blinked.

And there was a chihuahua on his chest plate, muzzle pulled back over sharp little teeth, growling at him like it was the most fearsome beast in the county. It sounded like somebody feeding a rat to a lawn mower.

"Karl?" Ronnie groaned.

Karl answered with a loud moan.

"Why's there a chihuahua in here?"

"It's the spawn of Satan, man."

Ronnie shut his eyes. "I hate you."

"Really?" Karl sounded like he was rolling his eyes.

"Yes."

"Aw, Blue Jay, I bet you say that to all your friends."

The rat-dog kept growling.

"I picked a heck of a day to quit smoking."





**KARL GRUMBLED IN PAIN AS HE UNFOLDED OUT OF THE DRIVER’S SEAT OF THE TACO truck. The whole front of the vehicle had smashed through the storefront of some shop on Lombard.**

It was a good thing Ronnie had come along. Without his fast thinking, they might have gotten smashed by all the traffic on Columbus Street.

Ronnie laid on his back in the rear of the van, and Satan’s Chihuahua was still having a conniption.

Karl pressed his armored fingers against the scratches on his nose and neck where the dog had tried to tear his face off.

Ronnie sat up and brushed the dog off his chest. “Please tell me you found the ring.”

“How could I look for the ring, Blue Jay? The stupid rat-dog was trying to gut me!”

Ronnie gaped at him.

Probably in horror at the struggles Karl had to face inside the van. It would give him nightmares for the rest of his life.

“It’s a chihuahua, you idiot!”

Oh, well maybe Ronnie wasn’t in awe of Karl’s bravery.

“It’s evil!” Karl pointed.

“It’s a rat!”

“Rats have teeth!”

Ronnie swore. “How are you still alive when you’re this stupid?”

“Shouldn’t cuss, Blue Jay. Stan doesn’t know those words.”

Ronnie made some incoherent noise that was somewhere between a growl and a roar, all mixed in with bizarre Bronx-isms that Karl probably didn’t want translated.

Clanking footsteps approached, and Stan and Sam appeared in the back of the van.

“You two all right?” Stan panted.

“Watch out!” Karl yelled as the chihuahua charged at them, yapping its ugly face off.



Stan yelped and hopped backward on one foot as the rat-dog sank its teeth into his armored boot.

“Blimey, what is that?”

“It’s a chihuahua, Stan,” Sam spat.

“Satan’s chihuahua,” Karl whispered.

Ronnie snarled. “Will somebody get him away from me, because I am going to stab him in the face if he says one more word.”

A loud siren echoed down the street.

“Police are coming. We got to go.”

Stan unhooked the chihuahua from his boot and held it out like a squalling infant, grimacing at the noise.

“Did you find the ring at least?” Stan asked.

“Oh, he didn’t even look.” Ronnie clambered to his feet.

“I didn’t say that.” Karl rolled his eyes.

“We went through all that, and he didn’t even look for the stupid ring.”

“Blue Jay, I didn’t say that!”

Ronnie stormed to where Stan held the dog and grabbed the animal by the scruff of its neck. He tossed it into the front of the van, where it landed with a squeak and proceeded to keep growling like something possessed.

“Ronnie, what—” Stan started.

Ronnie put his finger in Stan’s face.

“When we get back, I’m going to smoke a cigarette.”

“But—”

“Ah!” Ronnie interrupted him. “I’m smoking. And if you try to stop me, I’ll stab you too.”

Stan blinked and gulped.

“Good on you, mate.”

Ronnie flared his nostrils and stomped out of the van. Stan turned a wide-eyed stare at Karl.

“He’s having a bad day.” Karl shrugged.

“You really couldn’t find the ring?” Stan sagged.



“Nope.”

“Come on, boys, let’s go!” Sam shouted from somewhere outside the van.

“We’re going to be planting petunias until we’re gray.” Stan wailed and jumped down to the street.

Karl followed him and glanced around the side of the van. The whole front of the vehicle had crashed into the glass storefront of Lombard French Cleaners. Half the van hung out into the street. Pedestrians were beginning to gather.

“Oops,” Karl said.

“Yeah, mate. Big oops.” Stan punched his arm. “Let’s go.”

Karl followed Stan to the top of the van and jumped onto the nearest building’s roof.

“Think we ought to carry it back up the hill at least?” Karl looked back as he followed the other three to the next rooftop.

“Right now we need to get out of sight.” Sam called back. “Fast.” He pointed to the horizon where a helicopter was already heading their way.

“Crap.” Karl grumbled. “We are so dead.”

Karl blew out his breath and ignored the throbbing in his left ankle. It had gotten crunched up when the front of the van went through the storefront.

“Suppose those folks have insurance?” Stan’s voice echoed on the wind in front of him.

“Which ones? The food truck people or the shopkeepers?” Sam snorted.

“Both.”

“For their sakes, I hope so.”

Karl winced.

Well, so that little mission hadn’t gone super well. Not only had they not found the ring, but they’d made enough of a mess that the city would probably be talking about it for a while.

Which wasn’t a bad thing, really. The city always needed something better to talk about. It just might make patrolling a bit more complicated for a month. Or two.

At least this was different than the last time the city had been talking about them. The Warlord Jinsoku had made a pretty big scene the last time, and that had been super scary.

This was just—a mess.

Messes weren’t that hard to clean up.



And it wasn't like it was his fault that the truck went out of control. Who kept a demonic chihuahua as a guard dog anyway? And what kind of van was so flimsy that one punch could put the gear shift and parking brake through the floor?

The van was obviously in bad shape to begin with.

And the cleaners shop? Well, they were cleaners. They probably had what they needed to get their little building ship-shape again. So that was nothing he needed to worry about.

And Ryan could use a washer or a pipe cleaner to ask Mia to marry him. No big deal.

Sure, the day could have gone smoother, but in the end, it's not like anybody died. The world was still spinning. The Terran Dimension hadn't been conquered. And they all still had each other.

Yeah.

That was a good way to look at it. Focus on the good stuff.

They ran for a long time, leaping from roof to roof, bounding in and out of alleys along the way as randomly as they could. Somewhere in there, the helicopter veered a different direction, and the sound of police sirens faded into the distance.

Sam made one final leap onto a large grocery store in the Marina District before he skidded to a stop. Stan, Ronnie, and Karl gathered around him, and they all caught their breaths.

"Think we're clear?" Ronnie asked.

"Yeah." Sam straightened and lifted his head. "Kieru so."

In a burst of green light, the Hinode Armor around him faded away. Ronnie followed suit, as did Stan. Karl did the same. As the transformation fell away from him, the ache in his ankle got worse.

Probably just a sprain. He turned it carefully and winced at the dull throb. Definitely a sprain. That would be a pain in the neck.

Sam rubbed the back of his neck and led them to the far end of the roof where a pair of semi-trucks had parked in the loading dock.

It was a short jump to the top of the semi-trucks and a little bit longer jump to the parking lot surface.

Lights and sound echoed out of the Moscone Softball Fields as they stood on the corner across the street. People filled the stands, cheering at someone who was running from plate to plate.



“We need to find a bus,” Sam muttered, looking up and down the street.

“We could call the Doc.” Ronnie shrugged.

“How about you call him?” Sam sneered, glancing at street signs. “I’m not doing it. I’m staying out of this whole mess. Come on.”

He started walking toward the softball field.

Ronnie fell into step behind him, and Stan and Karl brought up the rear. Karl craned his neck to see who was winning the game.

“Hey,” he grinned, “I have an idea.”

“This’ll be great,” Ronnie spat.

“Suppose there are any food trucks at that baseball game?” Karl snickered.

Sam stopped walking.

Karl waited for the others to snap at him, to get angry, to fire back an insult.

But they didn’t.

Sam turned back to him, a strange expression on his face. It wasn’t a normal Sam face. Normal Sam face was always angry or jeering, usually he was making fun of everything Karl said and did. It was part of Sam’s charm, Karl had decided. But this face—it was almost neutral.

Ronnie just scoffed and brushed past Sam, continuing to walk ahead. He must really need a smoke.

Stan—he just sighed.

Slowly a cold smile tugged at the corners of Sam’s face. “You really don’t get it, do you, Karl?” The smile didn’t move, and Sam turned and kept walking.

Karl frowned.

Stan started walking again too, and Karl hurried to catch up to him.

Karl started to say something, but he thought better of it. Something wasn’t sitting right. Stan walked with shoulders sagging and his head hanging.

Sam should have yelled at him. So should Ronnie have. That’s how they talked to him when everything was okay.

Oh.

So maybe that meant things weren’t okay at all.

Karl cleared his throat. “Are they—like—actually mad at me?”

Stan didn’t look at him.





“Are you? Mad at me?”

Stan sighed again. “Karl, what do you think happened tonight?”

“You were there.”

“Losing the ring was one thing.”

“That wasn’t my fault.”

“What happened tonight was completely bad, Karl.” Stan stopped and took his arm. “You get that, don’t you?”

Karl chewed his lip and glanced away. “It was just a food truck.”

“Just a food truck?” Stan arched his eyebrows. “Karl, what if that was that family’s only way to make a living? What if we just destroyed their only way to survive? We wrecked their van. We destroyed that laundry shop.”

“Technically, we didn’t—”

“Stop.” Stan held up his hand. “Stop making jokes. It’s not funny, mate.”

Karl fell silent.

He looked back toward the city. “No, I guess it’s not.”

Stan shook his head.

“But we can’t do anything about it. So there’s no reason to be all mopey.”

Stan took a step back from him. “Karl, we’re supposed to be the good guys. Not the ones who go about wrecking peoples’ livelihoods.”

“That wasn’t our—”

“Yes, it really was, Karl.” Stan thumped him on his arm. “It really was our fault.”

Karl scowled.

Stan wasn’t helping. Stan was supposed to make him feel better about this stuff.

“But we can’t fix it,” Karl said.

“Sometimes we break things we can’t fix, mate.” Stan shrugged, turning away. “But that doesn’t take away the responsibility of it.”

Karl scowled at the twisty, achy feeling in his stomach. That wasn’t a good feeling. Maybe something he’d eaten had been bad?

He swallowed hard and followed Stan to where Sam and Ronnie were headed down the sidewalk toward the nearest bus stop.



Sure, he'd started this whole mess by losing the ring. He hadn't meant to lose it. He just lost stuff sometimes. And he hadn't meant to make a mess of the taco truck. Or the laundry shop. It just happened. It was an accident. So how did that make it his fault?

His stomach twisted again.

But Stan was right.

There were a lot of things he'd broken in his life that he couldn't fix, but he'd still been the one to break them. Those broken things had been his responsibility. Just like Ryan's ring.

It was my fault.

He clenched his fists and sighed.

This wasn't a good feeling.

He didn't like this feeling at all.

Karl lifted his head as they approached the bus stop. So losing the ring and wrecking the taco truck had been his fault. Stan was right. That was true. He might as well get over it.

Done.

But that left a gaping hole of a question sort of like the taco-truck-sized hole in the Lombard French Cleaners.

How did he make it not his fault anymore?





**KARL DRAGGED HIS FEET AS HE FOLLOWED THE OTHERS UP THE LONG DRIVEWAY** toward the Davalos Estate and Institute. The carefully manicured lawn that Karl himself spent so much time maintaining crunched under his feet.

The closer they got to home, the worse the feeling in his stomach became.

How did he fix the mess he'd made? Why hadn't he paid closer attention to what Ryan was asking him to do? Why hadn't he been more careful?

Sam led the way up the front steps of the residential side of the castle they all called home. The front door was always unlocked.

Together, the four of them trudged into the living room.

And Dr. Davalos was waiting on them.

Because of course he was.

Oh, he's going to skin me alive.

The older man stood in the doorway between the formal living room and the formal dining room with a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Well?" He lifted his eyebrows.

Sam shook his head. "Sorry, Doc."

"We searched everywhere," Stan wailed.

Dr. Davalos didn't react immediately. He sipped his coffee, nodded, and turned his back on them.

"Come tell me what happened." He called over his shoulder and disappeared around the corner.

Karl winced as Stan grabbed his arm and dragged him after the Doc. This wasn't going to be fun.

The family room was sort of a game room and a media center, full of couches and fluffy pillows and bookcases. It was where they set the Christmas tree up during the holidays. It was



where they hung out after school and church. It was also where they had family discussions, if that's what you wanted to call them.

Like it or not, Karl grimaced, they were a family. Sometimes he forgot that. Sometimes they didn't always act like it, and then there were times that they acted like they'd always been family.

He hadn't had a family—not a real one—since he'd been in grade school. Even though he'd been living with the Davaloses and his Reishosan brothers for two years now, he still hadn't gotten used to thinking that they'd be there for him.

And maybe they wouldn't now.

Maybe he'd finally pushed them just far enough that they wouldn't want him around anymore. It would be good to know where their limits were.

Karl flopped on the end of the sofa in the family room and snatched up his favorite worn pillow to clutch. It was soft and patched with multi-colored swatches of fabric.

“So?” Dr. Davalos asked.

Sam and Ronnie didn't sit down. Stan slid to the floor and slumped his chin into his hands.

“We checked every food truck he went to.” Ronnie shrugged. “Talked to every person he talked to. Nada.”

“Sorry to say, Doc, it's probably long gone.” Sam folded his arms. “Unless we want to start checking pawn shops, I'd suggest you cut your losses.”

Dr. Davalos sank into the leather recliner he favored and set his coffee cup on the table next to it.

“Do you know what that was?” He narrowed his gaze on Karl. “That ring belonged to my wife. It belonged to my mother before her and her mother and her mother and her mother.”

Karl's stomach twisted harder.

“It's been passed down our family line for generations, since before the first Davalos immigrated here.” He shifted his hard gaze to Sam. “I can't cut my losses, Sam. It was priceless.”

“Please say it was insured.” Ronnie groaned.



“Yes.” Dr. Davalos rolled his eyes. “I have insured everything in my life, especially since you five started living here. The point is, it was worth more than money to me. It was worth more than money to Mia.”

Grave silence fell over them all.

Karl hugged the pillow tighter.

It was one thing to disappoint Ryan. It was something else to disappoint the Doc. But Mia? Mia was the best person ever. Human beings weren't supposed to be perfect, but if a perfect person existed, Mia was it.

She made him sandwiches when he was hungry and cheered him up when he felt blue. She sewed up the holes in his work pants and did his laundry when it was dirty. And she never complained. Ever. She was his friend.

His stomach hurt.

No. Mia wasn't just his friend. Mia was like his sister. She was more of a sister to him than his real sister had ever been. And how did he thank her for everything she'd done for him?

I guess it wasn't just a ring.

“I'm sorry.”

The words came out his mouth before he thought about them.

Sam made a scoffing sound. “Oh, well that makes everything better, doesn't it?”

Karl bit his lip and found the Doc's face. “I'm sorry, Doc. I didn't know—how important it was.”

The back door to the kitchen banged open out of sight, and Stan sat up, eyes growing bigger than normal. He glanced up at Karl with an expression of dread.

“Hey, what's going on?” Ryan called out as he stepped into the family room, glancing around at them.

Doc picked his coffee up again.

Karl couldn't look at Ryan.

“Family meeting,” Ronnie sighed.

“What about?” Ryan sagged.

The silence that followed was too thick to bear. Karl gulped. Stan nudged his foot.

Karl still couldn't look at Ryan. “I lost the ring.”

Ryan went rigid. “You what?”



Karl sank further into the couch and hugged the pillow tighter. “I lost it, man. I didn’t mean to.”

Ryan turned to look at Dr. Davalos, and the Doc just kept sipping his coffee. Ryan opened and closed his mouth for a moment before he lowered himself to the couch next to Karl.

“What happened?”

Karl had thought telling the Doc was the hard part.

This was the hard part.

He hadn’t been able to look at Ryan yet, but he knew what he’d see. Ryan wouldn’t be angry. He didn’t get angry about stuff like this. But he’d be sad, and that was way worse.

That old pain fisted in Karl’s chest.

Worse yet? Ryan would have expected it. He hadn’t wanted to ask Karl to get the ring to begin with. He knew Karl couldn’t do it. He knew Karl would fail.

There was a reason Karl didn’t volunteer to do anything. Everybody always expected him to screw up, and it was easier to offer to do nothing than to get peoples’ hopes up.

“I got it,” Karl said. “Picked it up like you said. And I—got distracted.”

“How?” Ryan scowled. “Were you attacked? Was it Jinsoku?”

If only a warlord had attacked him. That would have been a much better story.

“No.” Karl shook his head. “It was—food trucks.”

“Food trucks?”

“Yeah.” Karl picked at the corner of the cushion. “The ring must have fallen out of my pocket when I was paying for food.”

“Where?”

“St. Mary’s Square,” Stan chimed in.

“Did you search—”

“Everywhere.” Ronnie interrupted. “Every food truck. Every shop. Every person he talked to. Everywhere.”

“It’s gone.” Sam said, lifting his nose slightly.

Ryan clenched for a moment.

Well, he didn’t usually get mad about stuff like this, but if Sam was going to rub it in, Ryan would definitely lose his cool.

Slowly, Ryan took a long breath.



Karl chewed the inside of his cheek. “I’m sorry, Ryan.”

Ryan glanced at him with eyebrows raised. The look in his eyes was still sad, but it warmed up a little. He gently patted Karl’s knee.

“I forgive you.”

Karl bit his lip. “You do?”

Ryan’s face softened just a little. “Of course I forgive you.”

Karl turned the pillow over. “Is this it?”

“Is this what?”

He forced a cocky grin that felt wrong on his face. “Should I pack my bags?”

Another moment of uncomfortable silence fell across the family room. Ryan shifted on the couch and narrowed his eyes.

“Do you want to?”

Karl blinked. “No. But this was—I screwed up bad this time.”

Ryan’s eyes smiled before his face did. “Yeah, Karl, you did. And it probably won’t be the last time either.” He set a hand on Karl’s shoulder. “But I’m okay with that if you are.”

Karl looked at Ryan’s hand on his shoulder and glanced toward Stan, who was staring at Ryan with admiration shining in his eyes.

“You don’t want me to leave?”

Ryan chuckled. “No, Karl. We’re a family. Family doesn’t kick each other out when they screw up. Otherwise you guys would have kicked me out ages ago.”

Ronnie snorted and crossed his arms.

“Yeah, yeah.” Ryan looked at him. “I heard you.”

Ronnie flashed a smirk at him. “I didn’t say nothing.”

Ryan grinned back.

Karl sat up. “You can still ask her, right?”

Ryan looked back to him.

“Even if you don’t have the ring, you can still ask her.” Karl sat forward. “Dude, you could give her a metal washer, and she’d say yes.”

Ryan’s smile warmed further.

“I know that’s not the point.” Karl crushed the pillow. “But you can still ask her.”

Ryan patted his knee again. “Yeah, Karl. I can still ask her.”



Karl nodded.

“I think, though, that you’ll need to apologize to her too,” Ryan said.

Karl shut his eyes. “Have I got to?”

Stan kicked his foot.

“Okay, okay. I will.”

He’d managed okay so far. He’d apologized to the Doc, and that had helped the feeling in his stomach a little. He’d apologized to Ryan, and that had made it feel even better. So maybe apologizing to Mia would make it go away altogether.

“Oh dear.” Mia’s voice drifted into the room.

Dr. Davalos went rigid, and Ryan sat up. Stan gasped as Mia stepped into the family room.

“Uh.” Karl gaped at her.

“Uh.” Ryan grimaced.

“Ugh.” Ronnie pressed his fingers into the sides of his head.

“Looks like a family meeting.” She stepped into the family room, laundry basket on her hip. “What did I miss?”







**RIPPING BAND-AIDS OFF WAS THE WORST FEELING IN THE WORLD. WHEN HE WAS** little, Karl left bandages on his knees until they disintegrated. He waited until their adhesive came apart before he pulled them off.

It was so much better that way.

Mia set her laundry basket down and came to stand behind Stan, a smile on her face.

“Uh.” Karl cleared his throat.

Ryan reclined against the coach. Sam sat on one of the chairs, watching with a smirk on his face.

Evil, puffy-haired giant.

“Well,” Karl started.

“Come on, Karl.” Mia set her hands on her hips, her long auburn hair swaying at her waist. “Out with it.”

“Well, it’s—it’s like this—see—”

“Yes?”

“I lost something.”

Mia raised her eyebrows. “You lost something?”

“Y—Yeah.” Karl squeezed the pillow. “Something important.”

“Sorry to interrupt.” Mia held up her hand. “But on that note.” She bent down and pulled a pair of pants out of her laundry basket. “Karl, I got into your laundry hamper and took your pants out to wash them, and they are covered in nacho cheese. What were you doing?”

“My—pants?” Karl wrinkled his nose.

She held up his work trousers.

“Oh.” Karl blinked. “My pants.”

“Karl,” Stan said from the floor.



“I’ve started searching your pockets because I’ve found enough change in the washing machine to open a bank.” Mia held something shining up for them all to see. “Karl, why was my grandmother’s ring in your nacho-cheese-covered pants pocket?”

Karl gawked at the shimmering opal ring Mia held.

“What do you mean it was in his pocket?” Sam spat.

“It was in his pocket?” Stan squeaked.

“Karl, you need to explain. Right now.” Dr. Davalos glared at him over his coffee. “What happened?”

Karl scrunched up his face as he thought back over the previous day. “I went to get the ring, and I got the ring. And I went and ate at all the food trucks. And I came back—” He paused. “Oh.”

“Oh, what?” Ronnie snarled.

“Oh, what?” Stan smacked his shin.

“I got me some nachos from Tia Maria’s Taco Emporium,” Karl said. “And I spilled them on me. So I—changed my pants.”

“You didn’t take the ring out.” Ryan chortled.

“Guess not.”

The outcry shook the walls.

Stan laughed like a hysterical hyena.

Ronnie’s face had turned into a furnace.

Sam boiled out of his chair like a thunderhead. “You mean to tell me that we searched the entire city all day long for a ring that you left in your pants?”

“Why was the ring in his pants?” Mia waved it.

Ryan heaved a sigh.

He really did do that a lot.

“No time like the present.” He pushed off the couch and took the ring out of Mia’s hand. “Mia, Karl had the ring in his pants pocket because I had him go pick it up from the cleaners.”

“And why was it at the cleaners?” Mia laughed.

“So I could do this.” Ryan dropped to one knee.

The whole room stopped.

Mia gasped softly as he took her hand.



“Mia, you are the most amazing woman I have ever known,” Ryan beamed up at her. “You’re kind and brave and patient, and you’ve made me a better person. You’ve made all of us better people.” Ryan’s eyes shone, growing wet. “I love you, and I want to spend my life with you.”

“Ryan,” Mia whispered.

“Will you marry me?”

Mia laughed with tears in her eyes. “Of course, I will, yes!”

Ryan grinned and slipped the ring on her hand as Stan clapped and Karl stomped his feet. See? He’d known Mia would say yes. Maybe having the ring helped a little, but Karl was convinced that Mia would have married the old man even if he’d given her a dirty sock.

Dr. Davalos was practically glowing as he sipped his coffee.

Mia threw her arms around Ryan’s neck, laughing with him. Naw, Mia was the one glowing. Her smile made the whole ordeal totally worth it.

Stan crawled off the floor and flopped on the couch next to Karl. “Feel better?”

“Man, I’m glad that’s over with.”

Stan punched him in the arm.

Still in Ryan’s arms, Mia looked down to Karl. “So you thought you’d lost it?”

“He ate at every food truck in the city, Mia.” Stan wailed. “I’ve had so many carbs today, I’m going to have to run laps.”

“Did you know?” Mia looked at Ryan.

“They just told me.”

Mia giggled and wiped the tears off her cheeks. “Oh, my day just got so much better. Thank you.” She kissed Ryan softly.

“Your day?” Ronnie spat.

“Yes, my day.” Mia leaned back against Ryan’s chest. “I lost one of my caterers for the corporate lunch here tomorrow. I was just trying to figure out how to fix it, and it was stressing me out. And now—oh well.” She gazed at Ryan. “It’ll work out.”

Corporate lunch.

Catering.

Karl blinked. “Hey.”

He sat up and looked at Mia with a grin.



“Oh, his brain just caught up,” Ryan muttered. “Look out.”

“I know a caterer.” Karl glanced at Stan.

“You do?” Mia sounded skeptical.

Stan brightened. “Aye. We do!”

“Would your lunch people like Tex-Mex food?” Karl cackled. “Because Tia Maria’s Taco Emporium has killer nachos and taquitos. And they could use a little extra work right now.”

Mia stammered. “Uh, well, sure. That should work.”

“Awesome!” Then Karl winced. “But just watch out for their dog.”

“Their dog?” Mia raised her eyebrows.

“Satan’s chihuahua.”

Ronnie let out a loud groan, and Sam flopped back in the armchair.

Thumping sounded down the hallway.

“Your brother is coming too.” Dr. Davalos rolled his eyes and reached for his newspaper.

“We just should have announced a family meeting to the whole world.”

Fourteen-year-old Uly Davalos came barreling into the room, breathing heavy. “Guys, you’re all over the news.”

“We’re what?” Ryan turned to him.

Ronnie uttered a curse and dug in his pockets for a bent cigarette, which he jammed between his lips.

Uly snatched it out of his mouth. “You’re quitting.”

Ronnie’s glare could have peeled paint, but Uly didn’t budge.

“Did you really pavement surf down Lombard Street?”

Ronnie blinked at him. “I’m gonna need that cigarette back, kid.”

“You did what?” Ryan yelped.

“And did you actually try to rob a laundromat with a food truck?” Uly laughed, looking at Karl.

Mia covered her mouth.

Ryan gaped with his mouth hanging open.

Karl cleared his throat and leaned back against the couch while Stan whir

“Mistakes were made,” Karl said. “Who wants tacos?”



## REISHOSAN: SAMURAI DEFENDERS

# AUTHOR'S NOTE



### Merry Christmas, Awesome Readers!

I am so grateful for each and every one of you. This year has been a true challenge in so many ways for all of us, and I just wanted to say thank you. This silly little story is honestly just intended to make you laugh, and I truly hope it did. I laughed a lot while I was writing it.

There are so many exciting things coming in 2022—or at least, I have planned some very exciting things! LOL! We'll see if they work out. If 2021 has taught me anything, it's to hold loosely to my own

plans and be willing to go with whatever the Lord throws at me.

Regardless, more stories will be happening. This story? *Karl Goodson and the Food Truck Fiasco*? It's going to get a bit of an upgrade. Maybe a bit of rewriting. Maybe a few surprise extra chapters. You never know what (or who) might turn up!

Be sure that you've joined my reader group on Facebook and watch my website's blog for updates on new stories, new flash fiction, and all the other awesome new stuff that (Lord willing) I'll be releasing next year.

Thank you again, my amazing friends. Have a blessed Christmas!

*Amy*



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