

I only see a void before me as I can feel the train cabin go up and down and hear a faint voice calling out "H-- A--H----".

Trying to make sense of the words, the voice beckoned me again: "HE--O, W---, ALM---".

A sudden stomp on my foot awakens me from my slumber, "Ow, The fuck?" I mutter, looking up as I blink my eyes a couple of times to see Hamino looking at me, his newspaper on the table, and the aroma of his coffee filling the train cabin.

"Great idea to fall asleep when we were like fifteen minutes away from Rotterdam." He glares at the seat opposite me and looks back at his newspaper.

"Could have wakened me when we were there..." I groan, trying to rub the sleep out of my eyes as I drag my slumped-down body from my seat.

"And have you sleep drunk when meeting the Chief there?" He says, not even batting an eye off his newspaper.

"They already think lowly of three-letter organizations, Vincent; the last thing we need is that they think you are a "Sleeper agent," he chuckles.

Rolling my eyes, I look out the window to see ruined, water-damaged buildings, primarily covered in this strange, thick crimson mass eating away at it. What didn't get eaten away by it was covered in barnacles and rotten pieces of seaweed.

I'm sure he had reasons to do so in the grand scheme of things; when does he not?

Looking back, Hamino looks at me and sighs, "What are you thinking of?"

"Nothing special, just thinking how, despite everything, this country had it the worst of us all," I respond, looking down.

"Well, They should have seen the signs instead of suppressing them, would have spared the hardships." He retorts, taking a sip of his coffee cup

"Yeah, yeah, we're not here to argue about that." I mutter, waving my hand around, "It's just a thought I had."

"Well, don't have them. Were paid to question people, not our own beliefs," he replies, flipping a page of his newspaper.

I'm about to respond when I hear the conductor announcing from its intercom, "Attention all passengers, we're going to arrive in Rotterdam in a few minutes; please remain seated as we stop by the station," and afterward, he repeats it some strange gobblygook language I can only assume is Dutch.

"You know what we agreed upon: I carry the bags in America; you carry the bags here," Hamino folds his newspaper up as I grab the luggage from the shelf above us.

I nod and carry the two bags with our belongings as the train screeches to a halt.

"Station Rotterdam, Please watch your step when exiting the train; thank you for using the RET." The intercom buzzes.

Hamino pulls the lever at the Cabin door; nobody but us in the Officials Cabin, To be expected; who the hell would go here of all places?

He turns to me "I know I'm harsh on you, but trust me, just follow my lead, and before you know it, you can be as clever as me." He winks at me, not knowing what to say; I nervously smile at him and chuckle slightly.

Slowly walking to the exit, we could finally step outside, and the culture shock hit me further. It was something to see the ruined buildings from afar, yet from inside the station, you almost think it's bizarre the Dutch survived.

The station's once glass dome is now broken, and the parts of the heavily damaged frame have been filled up with coral of all kinds of colors, almost like some sort of twisted prism.

Despite its ruined and dilapidated appearance, the rest of the building was kept clean, and the once-broken windows on the side of the building were fixed with plastic bottles burned together or metal plates.

"I know it's a marvel to behold, but try to keep focus!" He pats my shoulder, snapping me out of my daze, and I nod "Y-Yeah, Right."

Hamino started walking, and I followed him, trying not to stare at the brightly colored ceiling.

"Were heading downstairs; our hotel should be near the station; try not to make any eye contact with the "Common folk" here." He says as we walk down the stairs, which were once made of marble but now covered in barnacles and have a light brown layer of rust.

The downstairs area of the station was almost like a market of sorts, with shoddy stands selling all kinds of fruits and veggies for ridiculous prices, Street entertainers juggling and showing illusions, and... People who I can only assume are witch doctors with crowds of people around them, either selling talismans or doing some kind of ceremonial dances on their small blankets; even if you're not in the expertise, not even a close glimpse of is needed to point out the flaws in their body markings and masks.

While we pushed through the crowd, my eyes kept wandering to the one selling the talismans, and before I knew it... I lost sight of my colleague.

"Hamino? Where are- Did you hear? - How much? - What a ripoff! -" My voice won't even reach over the massive crowd. Hell, I can't even see where he went at this point.

I try to move, yet every step I take it seems like somebody is right in front of me, stopping my way forward.

I move where I can, trying to reach an empty space or maybe an elevated space to have a clearer view.

Trying not to bump into people while keeping a close eye on my luggage, I finally found an empty spot, yet It seemed like I wasn't alone.

Next to me, a small crowd was gathered in front of a shirtless talisman merchant; the only thing he was wearing was some worn pants, a necklace made out of strange crystals, and his bone mask, which he dyed blue.

He sits with his legs crossed, sometimes grabbing one of the trinkets created from small bones and thick black hair and chanting... Whatever gibberish he's spouting at it.

"Ah, Man! We have a new face over here! You! Bagged one!" The man speaks deeply with a fake African accent and waves his hand at me.

The small crowd that is gathered around him turns to me with curiosity.

"M-me?" I point at myself and gulp; what does he want?

"Yes! You, the one with the bags, come forward!" He beckons me, and I walk closer, the crowd separating themselves.

"You must be a tourist, and if anyone would need protecting, Especially here, it would be people like you!" He says as he grabs a talisman from his blanket, showing it to me, and I lean closer to inspect it.

It is made out of small bones, with a high probability that it's from some kind of small critter, bound with hair and Barnacle, An absolutely useless trinket, yet for some reason, the people around me are captivated by it as if they are looking at an expensive gem.

"Humor me, what is this supposed to protect me from?" I ask, furrowing my brow as I move my head to look at every aspect of it.

The man chuckles and puts the talisman back on the blanket, "Why, from the second flood, of course, I thought you tourists were supposed to be educated about the country you are visiting!" He mocks, and the crowd follows.

I glare at his comment and look at what I think are the eyeholes of his mask, "Yeah right, Good luck, snake oiler..." I wanted to catch up to my friend, but hearing the laughs from the crowd somehow reeled me to focus my attention again on the fraud.

"You are doing it wrong, by the way, but best of luck to you and your hassle." I try to end the conversation there, I got to find Hamino.

The man looks at me, taken aback, and leans forward, "I'm sorry? What are you talking about, man?" He asks, confused.

"Your body marking. They're not correctly done, and you got your inspiration from some old-world movie." I sneer, looking him up and down.

The people behind me start murmuring amongst each other, and the man leans back, crossing his arms, "Is that so?"

"Yeah, That is so. Your talisman doesn't even have sigils on it; you used your hair for them, and that mask of yours, even if it's well made and out of real bone, is being ruined by the fact that you fucking dyed it blue; what fucking witch doctor would dye his fucking mask from all colors blue?" I exploded in a rage, The crowd looking at me as if I was mad man.

The man just sat there, silent, as his array of fools was getting tenser by the second, and I was breathing heavily, almost feeling the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

"Vincent, The hell you fucking doing there?" I hear Hamino in the distance; of course, he's going to bother me now of all times; I'm not going to cave in now.

I ignore him, and the man chuckles, "You think you know more about our ways; how about you ask the fine people from the crowd what these Talismen did for them?"

"One of the Talismans cured my trench foot while working in the plains. It took a bit, But I swear it healed faster!" One of the men in the crowd shouted, and the people erupted in laughter and cheers.

"Dammit, Don't fucking ignore me, asshole!" Hamino's voice closed in more as he pushed the people from the crowd away.

I fiddle with the pendant in my pocket. It would blow these absolute Neanderthals away, yet before I could present it all to them, Hamino finally caught up and grabbed my wrist.

"Don't even think about it," He whispered, his eyes widened with rage.

I turn to him, glaring, and the man in the bone mask laughs, "You see? The tourists think they know better than us, but ultimately, we're still helping our people get saved. I'm sorry I'm not what you expected, like what you've seen in the movies, Foreigner, but this is real life!"

He raises his hands and looks at the people around us, who cheer him on.

Hamino attention turns to the witch doctor's smug behavior, rolls his eyes, and points at one of the talismans.

"Let me guess, Protects against the flood?" The doctor tilts his head back and crosses his arms, "Oh, Do we now have a smart foreigner in our midst?" He chuckled.

Hamino takes a seat before the blanket, mimicking his body language and sitting crosslegged in front of him as he puts his cup of coffee in the middle of the man's useless trinkets.

"I see; you want to take a closer gander at the product?" The witch doctor questioned, raising an eyebrow.

Hamino grabbed one of them, closed one eye, and inspected the small trinket from top to bottom.

"It's clear that they are ribs, but from what animal?" Hamino asks, looking up from the talisman, now rubbing his fingers on it, probably noticing there aren't even the smallest sigils on it.

The doctor was quiet for a moment and then began to speak, "They are from zebra, of course, from our native land!"

"Bit small, don't you think? Also, why would zebra bones protect me from a trillion gallons of water?" Hamino asks, leaning forward, and the crowd becomes silent, looking at the doctor, waiting for a response.

The witch doctor leans back, his confidence slowly turning into nervousness as his shoulders slump down, yet Hamino keeps his mimicked confident body language.

"Well, Let me explain to you, F-Foreigner, Because- You know what I think? that these are bones of rats; if you want, we can test it out right now." He talks over the witch doctor as he looks at the bag I am holding.

"Wait, Wait, Wait, Let me explain, man!" The doctor shouts, shaking his head and hands.

"No, No, no, Hold on..." Hamino beckons to me to give him his bag, and he grabs a sizable wooden box out of it.

Curious, the crowd looks at him as he opens the box with small liquid vials. Hamino looks at the labels for a second as he grabs the one marked "Lye."

He pulls off the lid of his coffee, pours the liquid from the vial in, then drops the talisman in it."

"Hey, The hell do you think you are doing!" The doctor yells, his accent dropping in the progress.

Hamino ignores him as he puts on the lid again and shakes the cup for a few seconds.

"Should be done now..." He pulls off the lid and pours the contents on his blanket, leaving only the barnacle, tiny bits of hair, and a massive stain.

The crowd looks at the witch doctor in anticipation of his response, yet he just sits there, motionless.

"Zebra bones are denser; they take a bit to dissolve under sodium hydroxide. bones of a small critter, however, dissolve almost instantly." Hamino points out, a grin slowly forming on his face as if he is trying to hold in his laughter.

He turns around, looks at the crowd, and smiles, "Don't get tricked by people like him. There is no such thing as talisman protection, and there sure isn't a second flood coming; I think Nyarlotothep knows too that you people have suffered enough." He returns the now empty vial in the box and stores it away again in his bag.

He stands up and looks at me dead in the eye. "You are done with your temper tantrum now?" he says, pointing his finger at me, more disappointed than angry now.

"Look, I'm sorry- Fucking save it, your lucky I bribed the people in charge of assignments to be here with you If it were anyone else, you'd be going back on that train." He points at the exit gate of the station, "Move it."

I stay silent, not knowing what to say, and he sighs, "Just follow me and try not to cause a scene."

I give a silent nod, and he starts walking; I follow him, looking back at the doctor.

The mass around him slowly started to disperse, yet some of them were now going to the ceremony dancer.

Hamino looks at them as well, sighs, shakes his head with a pained expression on his face, and continues to move on without saying a word.

Once outside, the unnatural green sky of this city is almost covered up by its massive skyscrapers, connected by bridges in between them housing many shops and houses.

Notably, the higher I look, the fancier the buildings become, and vice versa, as the lower part looks decrepit and old.

"We going up there?" I ask, trying to see if I'm able to see the top floor from here.

"The F.I.A. has the cash, but not to give for us investigating this soaked land," He grumbles, taking a smoke out of his breast pocket and lighting it as well as a small note with some directions on it.

"Just beyond the towers, there's a hotel we're staying at; the police chief's friend runs the place."

He gestures to me to follow, and we slowly walk along the sidewalk next to the giant towers until we can see the sky again, the path littered with beggars and small renovated buildings, or at least they tried to renovate it by filling up the holes with random junk.

Hamino looks closely at his note with directions, then at the buildings. He turns to his left, and we stand in front of a five-story building; its fine black brick structure almost feels like finding an oasis in the desert due to it being surrounded by ruin.

Above the front of the door is a neon sign with a name written on it: "The Ward Eye", and a large blue Matiasma eye on it made out of glass staring down at us.

"... And I thought we were done with exploitative superstition..." Hamino stamps his cigarette on the ground as he glares at the glass sculpture.

"That's just a sculpture- I know it is Smartass." Hamino snorts, his eyes narrowed, and his teeth clenched as he pushes open the door just like the outside; the inside was impressive as well; the walls were painted a dark blueish tint, and the chevron carpet on the floor was in pristine condition.

The reception was large, with many chess tables, Multiple colored televisions surrounded by people watching football games, and a small coffee machine to the side of the room that accepts guilder coins.

"The... Contrast is quite notable." I say as Hamino seems to be on edge about something, which I can't really blame due to what we have seen of this country so far.

The receptionist seems to be nowhere; Hamino looks at the two connecting hallways to see if somebody is around and then hits the bell.

"S-Sorry, I'll be right there!" A young woman's voice yelled in response, accompanied by metal clattering against each other and the word "Shit!"

We hear rapid footsteps coming from the left hallway as a shadowy figure comes from the left corridor and turns around.

Hamino and I cringe as we see a fishlike monstrosity run through the hallway, fins on its limbs and head and gills on its neck.

Its skin looked scaled and slimy, and the giant blue eyes almost looked like they would bulge out of its skull.

I clench the pendant in my pocket once more, yet before I can pull it out, the creature stops right in front of us, panting and resting one of her arms on the counter and the other to wipe away the sweat on her forehead with the sleeve of her blue chef's uniform.

"I-I'm sorry, did you wait long?" The woman's voice... Came from her?

"O-oh... W-we..." I stammer, unable to formulate words as she tilts her head and blinks a few times.

Hamino gathers himself a bit, yet still shaking, he speaks, "Yeah... We had an appointment with the police chief, were with the- Oh, You're from the Americas, right?!"

She interrupts excitedly, her massive eyes sparkling as she gathers herself almost instantly when hearing our purpose.

"Y-yeah... I'm Vincent, and this is my senior, Hamino." I try to mutter; her eyes are fucking creeping me the hell out; it's like two gigantic pulsating olives.

She looks at me and Hamino, smiling wide, revealing her razor-sharp teeth.

"My name is Kelpy. Nice to meet real Americans!" She says as she offers her webbed hand, which Hamino and I hesitantly accept.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't keep you waiting; Chief Gerard is already waiting for you at the restaurant!"

Hamino nods and looks at me, a bit of sweat on his brow, and his eyes still widen a bit; he looks at me and then at Kelpy, and he mouths the words "What the fuck?"

I nod back, and we slowly follow the fish woman along the hallway she came from to a gigantic wooden door with the sign "Restaurant Atlantia."

It is quite a large room, the walls lined with paintings and the ceiling filled with small chandeliers.

The dining tables were empty due to it still being early in the evening, yet the bar on the other side of the restaurant had just one person sitting there.

"Gerard, They are here!" Kelpy shouts, and the man sitting there turns around and nods at her, smiling, yet when his attention shifted to us, his smile quickly turned.

His face looks like it has seen better days; his brown skin is wrinkled, and he is starting to bald, yet the thing that caught my attention was the five metal prosthetic fingers at his right hand.

"Take a seat." He slurs as he gestures to us to sit at the bar stools.

As I place our bags on the ground, we reluctantly take a seat at the clearly intoxicated man, dictating from the reeking smell of alcohol coming from him that this wasn't his first drink.

He grabs a bottle of wine and pours himself another glass, "Want some?" he nudges the bottle towards us; I nod; Hamino notices this and swiftly slaps me on the back of the head.

"No, We're fine." He replies, glaring at me, and I rub where he hit me, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Gerard shrugs and drinks his glass, "Your loss," He puts the glass down and stares at us, looking us up and down, inspecting every little bit of us.

"Assuming you are the oldest, you must be Hamino, right?" Gerard slurs, pointing his prosthetic index at Hamino.

"It's... Hamino," He responds, Gerard's eyes are fixated on his face as if he is looking for a certain reaction from him, yet he just remains neutral.

Hamino grabs his wallet from his breast pocket and unfolds it, showing his ID to present it to the drunken slob, "Hamino Corendal, Federation of Infernal Affairs."

Gerard takes a moment to look at the ID, his eyes darting around as if he tries to take in every aspect of it; eventually, his attention turns to me.

"And this guy? Didn't know your pedophile organization allowed you to bring a boy slave." He spits out his question, making me cringe.

I'm about to retort when Hamino intervenes, "Vincent is a fellow investigator and has been with us for a year. I requested that we have him on our team; besides, I don't have to worry about him getting drunk on the job," Hamino says, his expression not changing, and I smile nervously, trying to suppress the urge to punch this asshole.

Gerard stares at me, looking me up and down, and grumbles, "Whatever." He stands up, gets a small torn piece of paper from his pocket, and shoves it into Hamino's chest, nearly knocking him from his seat, "Everyday on 10 AM, Don't be late."

Hamino almost raised his fist, yet... He stopped mid-way, maintaining his composure "Meet you at the station, Hopefully sober, Chief Gerard,"

Gerard waves his hand and walks toward the hallway, meets Kelpy along the way, and whispers something to her, making her look shocked as he stumbles away.

She comes into the room with a gloomy face as she grabs the bottle and glass he was drinking from.

"Don't worry; he's always like this when he drinks a bit too much..." She says with a pained smile as she puts it behind the counter.

"How bad does he get when he's drunk?" Hamino asks, folding his hands, and Kelpy sighs, "He's... Different when he's sober. He'd probably apologize to you tomorrow, so don't worry too much."

Hamino nods, and I look at Kelpy, "Different, how?"

Kelpy is silent for a moment and then looks down, "As in... More... S-stable." her fins look like they are going limp as she gulps and adverts my gaze.

"I mean... He kind of gave us already a pretty fancy hotel," I chuckle to lighten the mood, making her fins raise a bit as she looks at me and smiles.

Hamino scratches his chin, "Let's hope our fishy friend is right..."

He turns to her, "Anyways, could you take us to our rooms? We had quite a long flight."

Kelpy looks surprised, "Oh Right, Follow me." She tries to reach out for the bags I put on the ground, "Stop, No need for that; We can carry our own." Hamino Sternly says, startling Kelpy to back off.

"I-I'm sorry; let me just show you to your rooms then..." She quickly walks to the door as we both grab our own belongings.

I glare at Hamino, and he just shrugs, confused, as we walk behind Kelpy toward the elevator, dead silent.

We enter the small carpet-layered, rusted cabin as she presses the button for the fifth and final floor of the establishment, and it starts to shake.

"The elevator... Is it a bit of a contrast to the rest of the Hotel? Is it a design choice?" I ask her, making her jump a bit.

"I can't get anyone here to fix the interior without stripping it apart..." She mutters, refraining from making eye contact with me.

The doors open again, and with that, we are back at the fancy hotel; we step out to a corridor with many doors.

Kelpy leads us all the way to the back and grabs two keys from her pocket.

"Room 501 and 502." Her hands shake as she hands us both a key to our room, Mine having a small keychain saying 501.

"We have breakfast around 7, A-And dinner around 6..." She mutters; it's like her once excited attitude suddenly shifted, and she has to muster up the courage to speak with us.

"Thanks, Kelpy, you've been a great hostess so far." I smile and nod as my colleague just rolls his eyes.

"Right... I'll see you." She walks toward the elevator once more and disappears into the metal cabin.

Hamino yawns, "Thought that never was going to end, I'm beat." he turns to his door and puts the key in.

"Not really sleepy myself; Guess I'll better unpack." I do the same as my colleague, and I hear his voice behind me before I can turn the key.

"Hey, Vincent?" I turn around, His eyes still fixated on the door, "Yeah?"

"I don't want you to rely on that silver junk you carry around; you're an agent, and I firmly believe you can do without." He sighs disappointed, enters his room, and slams it behind him before I can say anything in response.

With his attitude, No wonder she's afraid of him; I just hope he acts more decent tomorrow.

I open the door to my room, It's sizable, Big kingsize bed, Bathroom, No TV, But I guess having a phone on the nightstand makes up for that.

Throwing my bag on the table and getting ready to unpack, I see a note on the other nightstand.

"Welcome to the Wilhelm suite; I hope the historical view will be to your liking!"

Historical view...?

I open the blue curtains and see a massive destroyed bridge covered in the same red mass I saw before from the train.

Below the bridge, it's just littered with metal scrap, cars, and boats, barely submerged in the waters below.

Quickly I close the curtains, It makes me fucking sick to my stomach even looking at it, and subconsciously I noticed I grabbed the silver rosemary cross out of my pocket.

It's not like I believe in Old Faith anymore... Yet, for some reason, there is a comfort to it.

Is he right?

Do I not need it anymore?

... Maybe I should go to bed, too.