

The sharp, cold winds hit Lina as she rushed out of the parking lot toward her headquarters. She hurried partly because of the cold and the important meeting she was late for. She cursed under her breath, thinking of the blizzard that was supposed to hit tomorrow. She had lived in Arcadia all her life but still couldn't bear the cold. Her mind swirled with all sorts of regrets. She thought I should have relocated down south to the other branch when I had the chance. Despite her complaints, she knew she had her little brother to think of. She approached her job and walked past the heating vents that were barely warming the city's streets. The illuminated letters of her workplace came into view. The word "Arsenal" was lit above the entrance to the building.

She pushed through the revolving doors fiercely, sighing in relief as the warm air from the heated building enveloped her.

"Card?"

She was jolted out of her momentary relief as she looked up at the guard in front of her. His voice was like sandstone, and his glare always caused her to freeze. His eyes gleamed a sapphire color from his cybernetic implant, which consistently spooked her every morning. Lina smiled at him before reaching into her handbag. Rummaging through her bag, she searched for that distinct card, one of the few she carried.

"Shit," she muttered before looking back up at the guard, managing to shine a smile of reassurance.

He remained expressionless. Filled with worry, her hand finally brushed against something with a hard edge. She quickly pulled out her card, a hint of victory in her gesture. She

placed her card above the scanner, feeling as if she had proven the guard wrong. To her disappointment, he simply turned away from her to resume guarding the door.

"Okay," he exclaimed.

A camera emerged from the security desk in front of her and scanned her eyes.

"Lina Howard. Entry Level Revenue Agent."

She hurried through the metal detection scanner toward the elevator, where two other individuals waited. Nearly six people were assembled, all of whom Lina scanned with her optics to determine what section they belonged to.

"We need to sway the government to our favor. We don't want the workers getting the idea to strike," a male voice from the group stated.

"The government is on our side. We have dirt on several officials. And even if another strike occurs, we just purge the site and workers," a feminine voice responded.

Knowing very well what "purge" meant, Lina's eyes lit up, but she maintained her composure. Judging from their conversation, she suspected they were Intelligence Officers before her scan confirmed her assumption.

Another co-worker to her right sighed. "Things were much easier in the early 2000s. All we had to do was bribe officials to sweep all the dirty stuff under the rug."

Lina watched the numbers indicating that the elevator was descending from the 50th floor. She smiled at the middle-aged man and woman to her right while fixing her blonde hair.

"Just hurry up and wait, then..."

The two individuals glanced at her, exchanged an extremely forced smile, and the man cleared his throat. By the time the elevator doors opened, they had already stepped inside. The intelligence workers scanned their cards, and she did the same. The 20th floor was for Revenue

Agents, and the 48th floor was for Intelligence Workers. The elevator ride was uncomfortable, and she felt unwanted eyes on her from the two others in the elevator. She wasn't surprised when they paused their conversation. Intelligence operatives were always smug. Lina always tried her best to initiate conversations with her coworkers, with whom she didn't share much in common. She grew up and attended school in the most impoverished corner of Arcadia. She was surrounded by people whom others assumed were destined to fail.

The elevator doors opened, and she hurried out before spotting Gideon. She paused and looked toward her coworker before rolling her eyes. Gideon was already wearing a black suit, with his black hair and beard perfectly styled, as always.

"You're late," he said, grinning at her.

She looked at him disapprovingly. "And you're always on time..."

He just gazed at her before nodding cheekily.

"You know how it is. Can't beat the rush hour; highways are always clogged coming downtown."

"I doubt Adams cares for excuses. You really should have taken the apartment that came with your promotion... You could have moved Uptown."

Lina sighed as they began walking toward the administrator's office. "You know why I couldn't."

"Unfortunately. You know how I feel about that," Gideon responded.

Lina rolled her eyes. She didn't expect him to understand. In the neighborhood where she grew up, family was an important bond that shouldn't be broken. Knowing the right people was sometimes the deciding factor between being targeted or being ignored.

They navigated past the other workers, who were all rushing around to complete their tasks anxiously. The morning was always chaotic, with people hurrying to deliver whatever they needed to their bosses at the last minute.

"Revenue workers retrieving debts on time. Just so they can get them to their bosses on time. If they don't meet the deadline, they either risk being fired or having an Arsenal hit squad sent to their front door because of an anxious, drug-raddled boss," Lina commented in response to the chaos surrounding her.

"Us, you mean," Gideon replied.

Lina simply nodded, letting out an unsteady breath as they neared the administrator's office. She was about to open the door when Gideon stopped her. Instead, he knocked on the door a few times. A small circular camera on the side of the door lit up.

"Ah... Ms. Howard and Mr. De Luca. Come in."

They promptly entered his office. Lina's eyes lit up, as always, at the interior of his office. The black and gold walls complemented the orange neon lines that ran across them horizontally. An amazing view of Arcadia's skyline was visible behind her boss's mahogany oak desk. She always hoped that one day she'd have an office like this; however, over the years, she had learned it comes at a mental cost.

"You're both late," Adam stated, bringing her out of her dreams. "Sit down."

Lina sat in the left chair as calmly as possible, though she began to feel a little anxious. Her first day as a Revenue Agent was not starting well. She looked to her right to see her friend sitting down, relaxed with his legs folded. His relaxed posture always made her envious of his laid-back persona.

"I'm sure you got my email. I'm the head of the Revenue Collection department and have been for the last decade." Adam stood up from his desk, placing both hands behind his back before turning to stare out at the skyline.

"Throughout those years, one thing always remains... Arsenal always collects its debts. Whether they are our debts or our clients."

Adam turned to stare specifically at Lina. His gaze pierced her soul as she let out a calming breath.

"That won't change today or in the future."

Adam sat down at his desk and snapped his fingers. A light blue holographic screen appeared in his view.

"Now," he looked at his holographic computer screen, "your target today is Ariel Ramirez."

Lina looked up at the face displayed on the screen. The woman looked familiar. Her skin color was tan, she had curly hair, and she appeared to be about Lina's age. The description came up on the right, confirming Lina's thoughts. The woman was 28; they were almost the same age. Most unfortunate was the 6-year-old child noted in the description. Her mind scrambled as she tried to remember the woman who was fleeting in her memory.

"Ramirez took out a loan from one of our clients, Eporian Imperial Bank. About \$5000, to be exact. She didn't pay it back."

Adam turned off the screens.

"Since we don't have time to review protocol, I'm sending you her location and several guidelines we must follow. You know how it is... retrieve the money by any means."

Lina felt a pit forming in her stomach. She knew that this was the job, but a job like this already. She looked at Gideon, hoping he was as uncomfortable with it as she was. His demeanor remained the same, and she wasn't surprised.

"Usually, you'd have until lunch, but since this is your first, you have until the end of the day. Now, dismissed," Adam stated before he started swiping at his phone.

The two friends exited the office; one was already uncomfortable about the mission, while the other wasn't. It showed on Lina's face as they closed the door behind them.

"God... Did this have to be our first job? Collecting a debt from a single mom living where exactly?"

Gideon checked his phone as it vibrated with a message from Adam.

"672 Wilson Ave."

"The hills by the outskirts of town," Lina said before placing her hands on her hips, stress forming in her chest.

"That's gang territory. Not far from where I grew up. Is Adam trying to get us killed on our first retrieval?"

"It'll be fine. If anything, we can call in backup," Gideon responded with a smile.

Lina raised her eyebrow. "Yeah, I don't think we have that kind of clearance yet."

"Shit... Yeah ... Well, they didn't send us our standard-issued protection for no reason."

Lina folded her arms and twisted her lips as they approached the elevator. The doors promptly opened, and they entered the empty elevator. She moved to the back and leaned on the wall, remaining calm. Memories of the dangers she faced when growing up in such neighborhoods flooded her mind. She tried to hide her worried expression, but Gideon caught on. He stared at her, worry for once showing on his face.

“You did bring you’re standard-issued protection, right?”

Lina leaned back into the leather seats of the company's automated car. She looked out the window to her left and saw small flurries of snowflakes hitting the glass. She tapped her foot on the vehicle's floor, feeling nervous and unsettled. She didn't know what it was. Her worrying almost distracted her from the fact that they had just entered the infamous bad part of Arcadia.

"Just entered South Side Hills. We're about a mile away," Gideon stated.

"This should be easy. Let's get this job done as quickly as possible. I'm hoping for some free time. I want to hit up Starbucks before lunch."

Lina turned around, mouth agape at her friend's casualness. "Gideon, we're going to a house to reclaim a debt from a single mom who I'm pretty sure I went to school with. 'Easy' is the wrong word for it."

"Come on. I told you. The sooner you cut off that emotional part of yourself **while** on the job, the easier things become," Gideon argued.

She simply sighed before sitting up. Reaching into her handbag, she pulled out her company-issued tablet. Tapping the screen on, she pressed the info category for the target. Ariel Ramirez, what the hell happened? You were doing fine in your senior year.

The car began to slow down as the house of their target came into view. Lina put the tablet back in her handbag before glaring at her friend. "Let me just try to talk this through, alright? There's no reason for us to go in all aggressive," she told him.

"Yeah, sure. Just remember protocol, Lina," Gideon responded, a hint of disapproval in his tone.

Lina zipped up her jacket before exiting the vehicle. The cold still cut through her suit pants. She stared up at the house Ariel was said to be in. The two-story house was dilapidated

and in need of repair. The street was calm, aside from the sound of a distinct police chopper that flew past. Snow fell, but three guys still loitered in front of a yard next to Ariel's. The music they were playing on their Bluetooth speaker echoed throughout the quiet neighborhood. They laughed and smiled until they noticed Lina's presence. They scowled at the company car and Gideon, who was just now stepping out. Gideon glanced at them, then back at her. He let out an annoyed sigh.

"I'll be in the car. You just do the talking. Let me know if anything happens."

Reaching into her handbag, she pulled out a tablet before walking into the front yard. As she approached the front door, she heard what sounded like a baby crying. That doesn't sound like a six-year-old child. Lina gave the door a couple of loud knocks while waiting with the tablet in hand. She cleared her throat, stopped her leg, which was nervously shaking, and fixed her posture.

The door opened, and the lady she was looking for stepped through. Ariel's face was immediately familiar to Lina. Now twenty-eight years old, as the dossier stated, she still looked like she did in high school. Her white t-shirt and slightly torn jeans made Lina somewhat envious. She felt like she had been wearing her black suit for a century. Her curly hair was disheveled, her eyes screamed exhaustion, and she wore a resting frown.

"What?"

She halted her observations before putting on a glaring smile.

"Hello, I'm with the"

"Wait, wait... Lina. Lina Howard," Ariel said before breaking into a happy glow.

"Uh... Yes!"

"Oh my God ... You haven't changed a bit," she remarked before opening her door wider.



"Come in. Come in. It's cold out." Ariel gestured with her arm, inviting her to step inside.

Lina's eyebrows shot up. "Oh... okay!"

Stepping in, she entered the dimly lit living room. She found the source of the baby crying when she looked down to the center of the room. Ariel's child was playing a game on her handheld console. On the rug was the six-year-old girl she had heard about. She had lighter brown curly hair and a lighter skin tone than Ariel, but her mother's features were still present.

"Oh, that's my daughter, Isabel," Ariel said from behind her.

"How old is she?" Lina asked, knowing the answer but trying to strike up a conversation.

"Six." Silence filled the room as they both stared down at the little girl.

"Don't even bother asking about the father... Hey, Isabel."

"Yes," the little girl replied, eyes still glued to her screen.

"Head upstairs while I speak to our guest."

Isabel looked up at her mother and then at Lina. All Lina could muster was a small grin toward the girl. Afterwards, she immediately got up and walked to the stairs behind them.

"You know, I ran into your brother the other day," Ariel mentioned, walking past Lina toward the kitchen at the end of the room. Lina smiled to herself, recalling memories from school.

"Hope he doesn't still have a crush on you."

Ariel opened a cupboard and pulled out a bottle of liquor.

"Eh... didn't seem like it. He seemed more..."

"Focused," Lina interjected, her eyebrows rising at the sight of the liquor bottle.

"Yes, actually," Ariel said as she grabbed two small shot glasses from another cupboard.

Lina sat down, a frown on her face as she leaned against the wall.

"Yeah. We both went through a lot after high school... Let's just say he's doing better now."

"Good. I'm surprised you guys still live at your parents' house. I thought you would have moved by now."

Lina sighed before folding her arms.

"Yeah, well, the job doesn't pay that much, and my brother is still paying it off slowly but steadily."

"Ah... the job didn't offer you much in benefits, huh?" Ariel said before holding up the two shot glasses to Lina.

Lina smiled and shook her head.

"I'm good. I stopped drinking like that after college."

Ariel raised an eyebrow at her before sitting down at her table on the right side of the room. She placed both shot glasses down and proceeded to pour liquor into one of them.

"Come on, Lina, we both know why you're here..."

Lina's eyes grew wider at the insinuation. She knew it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why a company limo was in her front yard and why a brief high school friend would randomly visit.

"I don't have the money you're looking for. Tear up the house or whatever. It's not here."

Ariel turned to Lina and eyed her shaking leg.

"Come on. Just one. It'll help you get that shaking under control."

She let out a sigh before walking over and sitting at the table. She rested her tablet on the surface and hung her handbag on the back of the chair. She grabbed the shot glass while Ariel grinned at her. They clinked their glasses together before downing them. Lina tensed up in her

chair as the liquor burned the whole way down her throat. Ariel let out a small chuckle at her old friend's expense.

"So, do you like your job?"

Lina blinked a couple of times, taken aback by the question.

"Do I like my job?" she repeated.

"Yeah, do you enjoy collecting from us peasants?"

Lina shook her head and chuckled a bit as Ariel poured them both another glass. "Hey, this is my first day doing this."

"Oh, so I'm the first peasant you'll collect from, huh?" Ariel asked with a frown.

"Wait, I didn't mean it like-"

Ariel broke out into a laugh.

"I'm only joking, girl."

She handed her the refilled shot glass. Lina chuckled a bit at her teasing before taking the other shot glass.

"Plus, you can't take the peasant out of a peasant."

"Agreed," Lina responded, taking another shot.

Lina felt her tablet vibrate. She used her eye optics to bring up the text she had just received on a holographic screen in front of her. A screen only...

She could see it was almost finished in there. We're drawing attention out here, the text read. Whether she had the debt or not, it didn't matter. Ariel's smile dissipated, and her face quickly grew worried.

"Now, Lina..." Lina also felt the small bit of joy fade away. Back to the matter at hand, she thought.

"Listen... I don't have the money. Things have been worse than bad around here."

"I know, Ariel, but I-"

"Look, I have a family out of the country. Almost off the grid. I've been saving up for months," Ariel added before sitting up.

She stared at Lina desperately.

"I can pay for a flight out for me and Isabel. We'll leave. Go off the grid."

Lina sighed before leaning back in her chair, feeling the strong liquor slightly kicking in.

"You'll just end up putting yourself and your daughter in danger. Arsenal would be on your tail and send someone much worse than me to get you."

"And the alternative... have Arsenal rob me of everything I have! Kick me and my daughter to the streets... Have them send me to jail for however long, leaving my daughter behind, or worse, they could make me disappear. I know what you guys get up to."

Lina looked away as she tried to deny all the things she had ignored or overheard while walking through the steel corridors of her workplace. Ariel clasped both her hands together.

"Please, Lina... For old times' sake, just tell them I'm gone. Tell them I ran away and you don't know where."

Lina leaned forward and placed both her hands on her forehead. She hid her face, trying to give herself air to think. Her leg began to shake again as she contemplated her company's position on this. She ran her hands through her hair as she stared down at the wooden table, lost in thought. A wave of thoughts flooded her mind. She had taken this job to pay off the house for her brother's sake. A promise she had made to her late parents shifted back into her head again, just like it did when she denied the company apartment. She could have easily sold out a long time ago and simply become another corporate hound. If she ratted Ariel out, she knew this

would likely haunt her for the rest of her life. I should just give her a chance. She debated whether or not she should lie. Lina knew she could spin this to corporate, but the small risk of it coming back to bite her scared the hell out of her. Not only would she have to worry about losing her job and not being able to pay off the house, but a hit squad would soon follow her termination. A part of her knew Arsenal didn't like to leave loose ends to a scandal. She had managed to turn off her morals for other situations, but this time proved challenging. Gideon was right; I should've turned my damn brain off for this. Her tablet vibrated again, and she looked down to see a text from Gideon.

"Lina, what the hell are you doing in there?"

"Lina, please," Ariel pleaded again.

She felt her legs shaking like crazy before they hit the bottom of the table at one point. This anxiety had been following her around since she joined the company years ago.

"Dammit," she uttered, reaching for her friend's liquor bottle.

"You have until midnight to go. By then, Arsenal will have already sent a cleaning team to seize your assets by force if necessary," Lina continued, pouring more of the drink into her shot glass.

"They usually don't like messes. They'll make everything look like an accident. Including your possible death."

Ariel shuddered in her seat, but her fear soon turned into a smirk filled with hope.

"Does this mean?"

Lina took a shot before nodding in confirmation. She finally rested her gaze on her old schoolmate.

"Go now, Ariel. Go out the back door and head straight to the airport. Avoid purchasing things digitally."

Ariel's eyes widened, and she immediately shot up from her chair.

"O-okay, let me-let me pack. Thank you, Lina!"

"Yeah... just please hurry up," Lina responded, feeling her stomach also fill up with fear and anxiety.

*What the hell are you doing, Lina?*

Bringing up her tablet, she saw many more texts from Gideon. Luckily, her co-worker was laid back enough not to come charging in. She racked her brain, trying to come up with a good lie. The target isn't here. A lot of things would suggest she left a couple of days ago in a hurry.

It took a minute, but Gideon eventually got back to her. Damn. Adam won't be pleased, but at least we have a factual conclusion. The Special Tactics Division can handle this from here. Lina felt herself smile slightly at the response. If Ariel followed her instructions correctly, they would have a hard time finding her. Lina heard footsteps rushing down the stairs. Ariel, with her daughter now in hand, rushed past her toward the back door. She stopped by the back door before turning around to face Lina. She smiled a smile that made Lina's chest heat up. She hadn't felt a feeling like that in a long while.

"Thank you, Lina," she uttered before opening the back door.

Lina met Isabel's gaze. The little girl looked at her curiously, lost in what was going on. All Lina could do was give her a smile and a wave. Lina rushed through her front door, her blonde hair a sweaty mess. It had been thirty minutes since she got off and a couple of hours since her meeting with Adam. Since then, her Pulse has been skyrocketing all day. Adam

exhibited a passive aggressiveness that was reminiscent of how he was before the job. Most worrying was his reminder of the consequences for workers who are found to be accomplices. She wondered whether that was a subtle warning or just Adam following protocol. However, she knew the company's protocols and how they dealt with their targets. She wasn't going to get caught off guard like many others. She walked into the living room, where her brother had his feet kicked up on the table, playing video games. She looked at him, his light brunette hair still ruffled and the clothes he slept in still on.

He looked at her and smiled before tossing his controller to the side.

"How was work today?"

Lina immediately tossed her bag onto the couch. She rubbed her temple, thinking of a good way to explain her worries to him.

"Not good."

"Why, what happ-"

"Listen, Vince, I need..." She paused before walking over to the window and peeking out to look at her front yard. Everything was normal, nothing unusual. That didn't deter her, however, as she quickly took off her heels.

"I need you to head to your friends upstate," Lina continued, taking off her jacket and tossing it onto the couch as well.

Her brother stared at her, simply lost. His eyes followed her as she moved around the room quickly. After unbuttoning her suit vest, she ran up the stairs to her room. Pushing open the door, Lina crouched in front of her desk, hoping her pistol was where she had left it.

"Lina, what's going on? Tell me."

She turned around after hearing her brother's voice by the door.

"Dammit, Vince, just do what I said! Go to your friends up north!"

Vince tightened his features, growing annoyed by her vagueness.

"I don't understand..."

Lina sensed the hint of worry still present on his face.

"You protected me when I was bullied in school by Ariel and her friends," she said, opening her desk.

"You were there for me when I had that... odd boyfriend in college. You helped me when I was depressed after I first got hired at Arsenal years ago."

Grabbing the pistol from the desk, Lina checked the safety before placing it between her pants.

"Now let me protect you sometimes, little brother," she concluded.

He just stared at her, at a loss for words.

Lina smiled and steadied her breathing.

"I'll be alright. It's just some work stuff that needs sorting. I'll call you in a few days."

"I can help you, you know," Vince said, folding his arms.

"Nah, I think I've got to deal with this myself. You know what my job is. You'd just get in the way," she joked, chuckling lightly.

"Yeah, whatever. I'll call you," he replied, giving her one last glance before he went to pack his things.

After her little brother left the doorway, Lina let out a deep sigh. She began to plan her defenses for the next few days. She'd quit Arsenal with no notice. Along with the possibility that they were sending someone after her, she was done working at that company. She knew her brother would understand. Her goal was to get promoted to a more relaxed position with enough



pay to open up more opportunities for herself and her brother. However, today, she just could not pursue that goal. Holstering her pistol, she walked out of her room, knowing that the corporations, despite controlling everything, could not control her anymore.