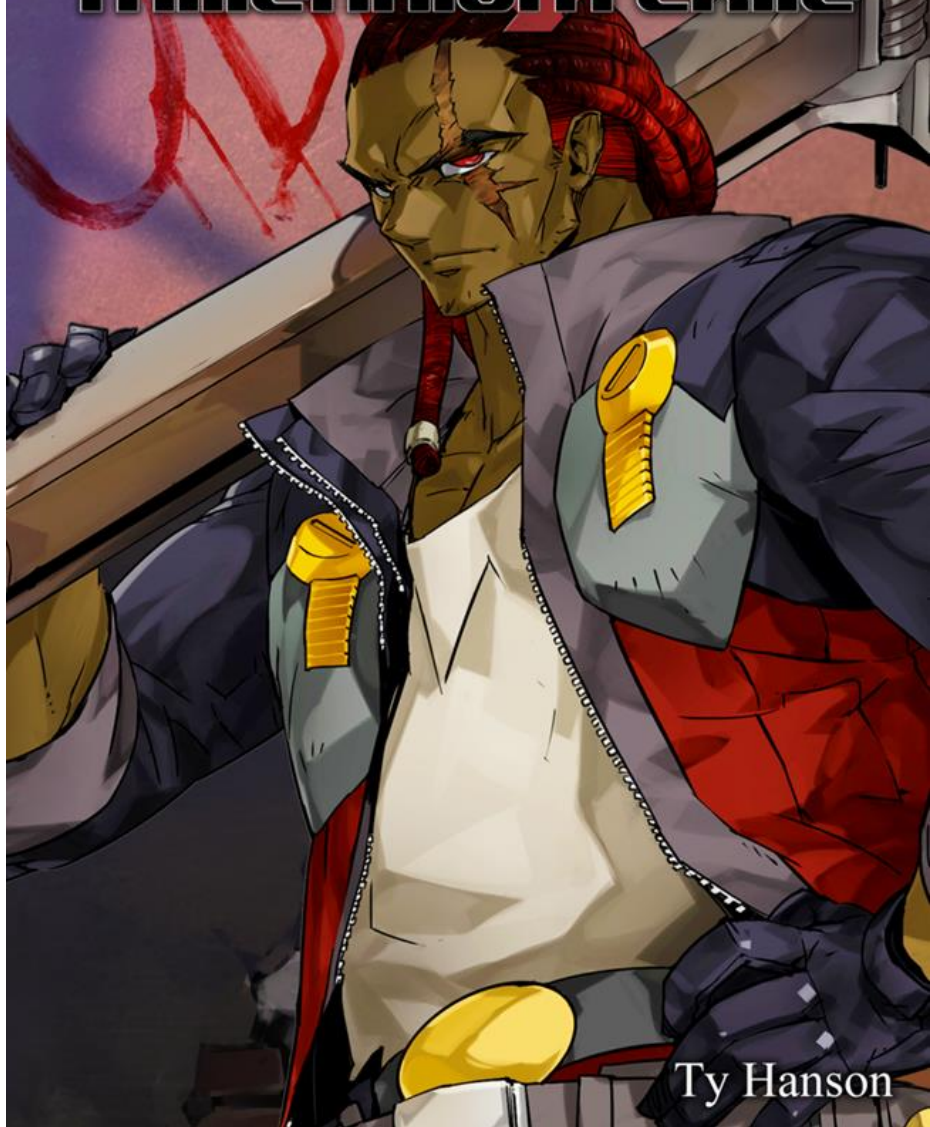


ミレニアム追放

Millennium Exile

2



Ty Hanson

## **Chapter One**

*Surrounded by nothingness, he floated in familiar crimson waters. His thumping heartbeat echoed through his skull. Then, from the mysterious fathoms below, a strange black mist snaked out and engulfed him.*

*He struggled wildly, blindly fighting to get to the surface. The water pressed in around him, overwhelming him—suffocating him. He clawed at his throat, his lungs burning, as he sank further and further into the darkness.*

*Somewhere deep in the depths, he felt another heartbeat.*

\*\*\*

Vincent's head burst through the ocean's surface.

Breathless and still in shock from the very real sensation of drowning, he looked up to find Zero sitting on the side of their boat, laughing. Agito shook his head while Kira just sat back, watching them, always silent.

“What the hell?!” Vincent demanded, wheezing as he pulled himself back onboard. Saltwater ran down his face and between his lips as he coughed and spluttered at the disgusting salty taste on his tongue.

“It's morning, moron!” Zero scoffed. “Not sure how much longer you expected us to wait for you to wake from your little nap, but we're here.”

Vincent knew Zero enjoyed riling him up, but he couldn't hold back his rising anger. “One of these days, I'mma knock your ass out!” he muttered, sneering as he wrung out his clothes.

Vincent looked up. His eyes caught on the telltale shimmering blue light of cloaking technology like a dome over the water ahead, a sight he'd become familiar with during their journey. Just as the sun breached the horizon, the illusionary veil seemed to melt before his eyes, revealing the remnants of a large, ancient wreckage imbedded into a vast

tropical island. The form of hulking, metal frame was unfamiliar to him—he'd never seen anything like it.

It appeared to be some sort of dilapidated ship that had crashed into the island some time ago, much of it reclaimed by nature—consumed by vines and moss. The hull seemed mostly intact, however, a few areas that had sustained damage looked as if someone had tried to repair them, though their efforts were a hodgepodge mess compared to the ship's original construction.

“What is this place?” Vincent asked.

Agito smiled. “This is Pulse, the base of our operations...and your new home, should you choose to stay.”

Their boat's engine roared to life, racing forward, toward the island. Navigating through a small ravine they approached a large set of looming metal doors imbedded into the side of the island itself—the doors slid open as the boat drew closer, revealing a massive cavern with a dock floating inside.

Light penetrated the space from a gaping rectangular hole above the docks and Vincent blinked rapidly, waiting for his eyes to adjust. Zero maneuvered the boat into the cavern, expertly guiding it to the dock's berths. Once the boat had been moored, Vincent watched Zero climb the metal rungs of a ladder leading up and into the light of what he assumed was

the ancient, battered vessel he'd seen from offshore. It was as if the island and wreckage were now as one—seamlessly intertwining technology and nature.

Kira and Agito followed with Vincent trailing behind, and when he reached the top, pulling himself over the lip of the subterranean dock, he took in the spacious chamber. Vincent stared at all the strange contraptions, equipment, and machines scattered around what appeared to be a workshop. A few people yawned and roamed about, despite the early hour.

Surveying the room, he noticed a hangar door stretched wide open with a concrete runway leading out onto the island—a steep plunging sea cliff at its end exposed a breathtaking view of the ocean.

“Well then, it looks like we have a visitor!” a voice suddenly called out.

Vincent tensed, scanning for the owner of the disembodied voice. His eyes landed on a metal catwalk spread far above his head, then shifted to a strange man clad in an eccentric purple cloak. His emerald eyes peered out from beneath his purple top hat, adorned with decorative armor-plating. Next to him stood a beautiful woman.

“Welcome to GRAVE,” she called, looking sternly down at Vincent over the rims of her light-green glasses. Her dark

curls cascaded down her back, and the tight button-up shirt and dark-blue pencil skirt she wore accentuated her feminine physique.

“GRAVE, huh?” Vincent asked. “I’m guessing that’s the name of your organization?”

“I guess he’s not a total moron after all, boss,” Zero scoffed, making his way toward a flight of stairs that led up to the catwalk that was the workshop’s second level.

Zero’s jabs were becoming pretty predictable. In lieu of shooting back a response, he took a deep breath and turned his attention back to the strange man with the top hat and cloak.

“That’s right, Vincent,” the man confirmed with a lopsided grin. “We are GRAVE.”

He took a sip of red wine, then straightened his posture with a flourish – revealing his full, rather impressive, height. Even from far below, Vincent could feel the man’s imposing dominance and authority.

“I’m Vaan, the Director of GRAVE,” the man continued. “The beautiful firecracker next to me is Mai. She’s my second in command.” Leaning over the railing, he placed the back of his gloved hand to the opposite side of his mouth as though sharing a secret.

“And the scariest woman you’ll ever meet.” He whispered

---

loud enough for Vincent to hear below.

Mai's piercing eyes seemed to glow slightly with annoyance as she stepped forward. "We're an anti-terrorist organization whose sole purpose is the eradication of a syndicate known as Nexus. On the surface, they run a prestigious school known as Kou Meister Academy, but the operation is just a front for them to collect data and experiment on the world's most promising Meisters. From the shadows, Nexus influences the highest powers of our world, all the while, corrupting the inner workings of society through human trafficking and the distribution of illegal weapons and drugs. They're the absolute scum of the world, consuming and reveling in sowing chaos."







Vincent took a moment to take in all this new information. His world had expanded so much in such a short time. Ryuuga felt like a completely different world than where he found himself now. But he couldn't help but wonder: *What does me being a melee Meister, and how exactly is Zero going to fulfill his promise to show me what true strength is?*

Regardless of the answers, Vincent had his own mission to think about—promises he meant to keep for those he'd left behind.

“So, what do I have to do with all this?” Vincent finally asked, his tone weary. “Is this about the weapons back in Ryuuga?”

Zero smirked. “Those small fry in the ghetto were nothing compared to what we deal with!”

Vaan shot Zero an amused glance, “Actually, those weapons *are* contraband, so technically it's possible they're a byproduct of Nexus activity, though it isn't certain they are related. That said, they have enough pull with Kou's military, politicians, and the leaders of surrounding nations and territories, to facilitate and encourage gang activity all around our nation. The more unrest ensues, the more money ends up lining their pockets.”

None of this meant anything to Vincent. Gang violence,

---

corruption, and other depravities were a regular occurrence back home. Clearly the outside world was no different.

Vincent crossed his arms. “Again, what’s this got to do with *me*?”

“What do *you* think?” Mai barked. “Why *would* we go to all the effort of bringing you here?”

Without even having to think about the question, Vincent responded, “How the hell should I know?” The words came out louder and more aggressive than he’d intended. “I just came here to get stronger. All I want is to fight more powerful opponents, and to knock *his* ass out!”

Vincent pointed to Zero. Everything about the guy made Vincent’s blood boil—there was just something about his face, his attitude, and that dumb condescending smirk. Vincent had never wanted to hit someone so badly.

A strong sea breeze blew in from the hangar doors as they began to shut. Vaan’s extravagant purple cape flared out behind him as he approached the railing.

“Why are you so hostile?” he asked curiously. “We’ve been watching you for some time, and—”

“Yeah, watching seems to be what you people do best!” Vincent interrupted.

“*Hey!*” Zero growled, but Vincent ignored him. “Nah, to

---

hell with this,” he snapped. “You guys spied on me, sent that one-eyed *freak* into my home to presumably beat the snot outta me, before sending me on some bullshit hike to a place I never even heard of! That was my first time leaving Ryuuga, mind you! And that’s *not even mentioning* how I was almost killed in the forest by some pack of demon-dogs on the way!”

Vincent’s chest heaved in frustration as he pointed a finger at Zero again.

“And this jackass? He just hid and watched the whole damn time! But don’t worry—some random-ass jungle hermit ended up rescuing me and showed me the way.”

He shot a deadly glare in Zero’s direction. “Good job keeping an eye on me asshole!” Vincent’s attention shifted back to Vaan and Mai.

“What else? Oh yeah, I then get healed by some weird cat-ninja whose buddy is a guy that shoots fire from his damn fingertips! Then it’s just like ‘*Jump on this boat, Vincent. Don’t worry about it being invisible a minute ago*’. I get hauled all the way out here, to a place that looks like the set of a disaster movie, I’m dumped in the freaking ocean as a substitute for an alarm clock, and now you’re telling me all this shit about some evil organization trying to take over the world?”

The more Vincent spoke, the angrier he became. His whole body had begun shaking from adrenaline and rage.

“You think I’ve got the attention span to listen to you after going through all that!?! I’m hungry and exhausted...all I’m asking is to know why the hell I’m here, and that *bitch* with the glasses thinks she can start throwing shade for asking?!” Vincent laughed coldly. “I mean, *come on*. Of course I’m hostile. In what freaking world would *my* reaction to all this be deemed *abnormal*?”

Vincent’s eyes snapped to Zero, before glaring back up at the other man with a fearsome expression. “You have a problem with anything I just said? Well then, I suggest you come down here and do something about it.”

“Zero, what’s this about a ‘jungle hermit’?” Vaan asked, ignoring most of Vincent’s long-winded rant.

“Apologies for not reporting it earlier,” Zero replied smoothly, “but I was...babysitting. We think the person Vincent’s referring to is the Nomad. I got a decent look at his face and witnessed him using his power—whoever he is, he’s definitely an elemental Arc.”

Vaan held his hand up, signaling for Zero to stop. “We’ll talk later,” he said quietly.

“‘Bitch’? Did that vermin scum seriously just call me a

*bitch?!*” Mai’s voice thundered in outrage. She stepped past Vaan toward the railing with fire burning in her eyes.

The room stilled, air thrumming and crackling. Everyone shifted nervously, but Vincent remained oblivious to the tension. He merely tilted his head and observed as all the members of GRAVE moved a few paces from Mai—even Zero crept imperceptibly to the side.

“Now, now...” Vaan soothed, his voice calm even as his eyes shifted around anxiously. “We all know he’s right.”

Mai’s head snapped sideways, her eyes locking onto Vaan as if possessed. She leaned in close, her face contorted with rage. “I’m sorry, what was that?” she crooned into Vaan’s ear, her voice sickly sweet. “Would you like to repeat yourself, honey?”

The room was frozen in an uncomfortable silence, as a bead of sweat slid down Vaan’s face. He closed his eyes, winced, then lifted his hands in surrender. “I wasn’t referring to the bitch part, of course,” he said quickly, correcting himself. “I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that Vincent’s clearly been through a lot. It was inconsiderate of us to bombard him with so much, so fast.”

Vaan opened one eye nervously and peered down at Vincent. “I’m sure he didn’t mean to call you such names,

---

dear. He was just emotional and caught up in the moment. Isn't that right, Vincent?"

Vincent blinked, lost as to why everyone was on edge. Then he saw Zero shaking his head, silently signaling Vincent to reply—carefully.

"Uh... that's right" Vincent agreed slowly. He studied the strange man and stern women above him. His face creased in confusion. "And... I'm sorry?"

Silence fell while Mai gave Vincent an appraising glare. He felt like her blazing, unblinking eyes were penetrating him straight down to his soul.

After a tense moment, which haltered the entire workshop, Mai raised her chin, her face softening. "That's better," she said evenly, unfolding her arms. "I'll forgive you this once, okay?"

She gave Vincent a sweet smile, and the room seemed to breathe a unified sigh of relief. "*But...call me that again, and I will come down and do something about it.*"

Vincent winced slightly at the threat. But before he could respond, Vaan clapped his hands—tearing his gaze from Mai.

"Let's move on, shall we?" Vaan suggested, the tension quickly receding. "I imagine these last few days have been...a little much, and I know Zero's methods can be a tad

---

unorthodox. Regardless, I assure you his reasons are sound.”

*Unorthodox? Yeah, that’s a massive understatement,* Vincent thought, inhaling sharply. He opened his mouth to let out a scathing retort, but Agito slapped a firm hand on his shoulder before he could reply.

“Shut up and don’t say whatever you’re about to,” he whispered. “Trust me, you’ll live longer.”

Vincent scowled, but then blew out an irritated breath as Agito loosened his grip and stepped forward, making his way to Zero’s side. Letting his snarky response die out before it left his lips, Vincent opted to study Vaan’s face instead.

Vincent always found that he could tell a lot about a person from their eyes. And while Vaan’s were outwardly pleasant and kind, they were also piercing—haunting, even.

“Do you know what a Meister is?” Vaan questioned.

Vincent sighed. “*Another* history lesson? I’m not trying to be rude here, but I’ve only taken like four steps off the boat!”

Mai tensed again, nostrils flaring, but Vaan only chuckled.

“You know, you’re absolutely right,” he agreed. “Agito, would you mind escorting our new friend around the base? Actually...” Vaan paused, giving Vincent a measured appraisal. “Never mind. Take him to the medbay for treatment and a check-up, then show him to his room and get a hot meal

---



into him. Oh, and he *absolutely* needs a shower.”

Vincent’s jaw dropped before he managed to control his expression. Once he clamped his mouth shut, his lips twisted into a scowl.

“Sorry, my friend, but I can smell you all the way up here!” Vaan joked with a mischievous grin.

“Why do you think I dumped him in the ocean?” Zero scoffed.