

MÉLODIE RIVERS

THE SHADOW PARADIGM



PROJECT ORB WEAVER

BOOK I

The Shadow Paradigm Book 1: Project Orb Weaver

by Mélodie Rivers

Cover design: Mélodie Rivers

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This book is dedicated to Brett, Franck, Steve, and Aura, four of my oldest, closest and best friends who supported me through all the hard times; who believed in me; and who made this book possible.

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*Under neon lights, we claim this town
No one can take us down, no, not tonight
City boys and city girls, runnin' wild*

*Burning like a fallin' star
Golden stardust, that's what we are
Young voices carry on
Come together in the same ole song*

*We're still here
We're shadows falling
The night is calling again
We're still here
Where love is running
The night is calling, again*

*Brother to Brother

Another night, another town
Walking my heart around
Same old choices, again*

*Like so many tears in the rain
Will they remember your name
Young hearts reach fearlessly, in the night*

*We're still here
We're shadows falling
The night is calling again
We're still here
Where love is running
The night is calling, again*

Sister to Sister

*We're all together
You know, I care
We are, we will, always be together*

*We're still here
We're shadows falling
The night is calling again*

*We're still here
Where love is running
The night is calling, again*

Credit: "We're Still Here" by Steve Perry

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Prologue

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Jerusalem - August 7, 1099 A.D.

The sun was setting upon the dunes, and the sand was flying in whirlwind as Ysadora Dauun's tan horse speedily raced ahead three more riders. The sound of hooves carried through the wind, and she shifted on her saddle, preparing herself for the upcoming fight. Despite her attempts to give her followers the slip, and getting rid of the scouting riders, they were relentlessly chasing her since she left the main road. However, Jerusalem was closing in; it was now or never. She would not alert the city when she could more than handle them herself. She relaxed her body, giving no care to the scorching heat or the dust, her determined turquoise eyes matching her will as the sound of hooves came within weapon range. Sure enough, she heard the riders unsheathing their sabers, orders being yelled, and the horses moving in formation. *Now!*

Ysadora slid off sideways on her saddle, holding on to it and the reigns with her right hand and feet; the armoured mantle which her horse wore shielded them both for the upcoming fight. She unsheathed with her free hand her sword, and smiled gleefully at her closest opponent. With a flick of her wrist and the help of a button hidden in the ornate handle, the sword suddenly segmented into a long chain of diamond-shaped blades, and she gave it an expert whip. The bulk of the chain slid across her opponent's horse, while the tip whipped the rider. Both startled and slowed to a stop. *Two more to go.* Her chain whirled back around her bare arm, and she returned with a leap upon her saddle. Another rider closed in on her left and swung his saber. She ducked and simply snapped her chain out. A yelp and the rider's horse rearing brought her a satisfied smile. She pulled hard her own horse to a stop, and swung her chain in a circular motion, hitting the last rider as he raced past her. He halted as well, and turning around to face her, noticed her coolly stare back as she retracted her chain to its single blade form. He nonchalantly gazed at

the scratch on his arm, and scoffed as he returned his attention to Ysadora. He encouraged his horse forward, and called back to his companions as he closed in the gap between him and her. Ysadora smiled coldly and sheathed her sword, which made her opponent halt in hesitation at her lack of defense. That, and the fact that the other two riders she similarly scratched did not reply to his calls, nor did any sounds come from the remaining horses. He stared at her with fierce hate and resumed his approach as he raised his saber. And fell down from his saddle like a heavy rock, startling his horse who wisely chose to run away from the battle, leaving its master behind.

Ysadora smirked at the sight, and resumed her race toward the entranceway of Jerusalem, leaving to the sand her three opponents. She looked at the small scratches her weapon made to her left arm during the fight. She knew she was immune to the blade's poison, but one could never be too sure. A scratch the size of a needle tip was all that was needed to guarantee a meeting with the Grim Reaper.

As she arrived to Jerusalem's entrance and noticed the military camps, a soldier at the vanguard urgently waved a flag, and soon after the soldiers sprang from the tents, their swords, axes, lances and other tools and weapons at ready. Ysadora smiled with relief, seeing their Crusader robes, and most of all, the banner of Godefroi de Bouillon upon the officer tent standing in the shadow of the glowing golden Dome of the Rock. She stopped at a good distance, and making sure to make no aggressive movements, she jumped off her horse, landing elegantly on the ground despite her high heels. She smirked in amusement as most of the soldiers gaped at her, while the more rigorous Catholic ones quickly looked away and crossed their hearts, muttering prayers of forgiveness.

“Stand down, men, she is one of us,” a male voice rang from behind the ranks. As the soldiers stood aside, a tall and solidly built man, with pleasant features and medium-blond full beard and nape length hair, walked to greet her, smiling broadly as he sheathed his long sword. “Lady Ysadora Dauun, welcome back to Jerusalem!”

“Good evening, Lord de Bouillon” Ysadora said in greetings, her heels digging deep into the sand as she walked toward the Duke. “Glad to be back.”

“What urgent news takes you away from the battlefield?” Godefroi de Bouillon inquired, leading her to his tent as the soldiers resumed their leisurely activities.

“Sad news, unfortunately, my lord. His Holiness passed away.”

Godefroi blinked in surprise and shock.

“Pope Urban? Dead? When?”

“Nine days ago, my lord.”

She pretended to admire the Dome above them as Godefroi blinked again in an attempt to keep his eyes dry. Though she did not feel his reaction, it was an understandable one for the leader of the Crusaders. Pope Urban was after all the reason why Jerusalem was back into Godefroi’s and his fellowmen’s control.

As they entered the tent, Godefroi walked toward the center table, Ysadora following in a respectful distance behind him. He retrieved a cup and filled it with water from a nearby carafe.

“I... I imagine you are rather thirsty after the ride,” he said, offering the cup to her.

“Yes, thank you, my lord,” Ysadora said gratefully, taking the cup and drinking it all in one long gulp. She grimaced slightly at the mud-like taste and texture, refraining any further comment.

Godefroi sorted through his shock as she finished drinking, then asked:

“How could you learn of it? It takes fourteen days to reach Rome, and Rome to reach us.”

“The papal messengers are under way, but since there’s still many Turks left on the roads, it’ll take them longer to arrive. I was in Rome when they announced his death, and I left as soon as I could. Using shortcuts, I was able to warn all kingdoms; they’re on their way right now.”

“Rome? Were you not supposed to be with my brother in Edessa?” Godefroi asked in surprise.

“Yes, at first. But I was sent to relay to His Holiness the news of your brother’s crowning as Edessa’s first King,” she explained.

Godefroi sat heavily on his bench, and gazed with a gloomy look at his surroundings; Ysadora sat beside him, thinking that he might want a closer company.

“He will never learned of the capture of the Holy Land. My messengers will be too late.”

“I’m sure he knows,” said Ysadora, holding gently his hand in recomfortation. “He can still see what happens.”

“I know,” he sighed, although she could see that the idea didn’t brought him much consolation. After a moment, he grumbled: “It was Urban’s most personal mission to see Jerusalem restored into Christian hands. Now, he died before knowing of our victory. And adding to that, far too early; he was only fifty-seven years old.”

“*‘To become Pope is the fastest road to Heaven.’* You know this saying, my lord,” Ysadora told him with a slight smile. Godefroi smiled weakly in return.

Ysadora looked around and caught the soldiers whispering together, casting nervous glances at her. She innocently smiled back, and they hurried to look away, a reaction she was used to. After all, she was a strange knight in this world. Let alone she was a lady when only men were allowed to fight, but her long platinum blond hair was clearly visible, tightly braided in a bun, revealing her elegantly chiseled face. In stark contrast to the Crusaders’ robes, she wore a sleeveless blue marine top, protected by a silver plate that covered all of her neck; her midriff was protected by another silver plate, reaching to her hips, from which hanged her sword. Blue marine tight pants and knee-high silver stilettos with four inches heels completed her radically out of time appearance. What was more, a glimmering shimmer seemed to surround her to those who observed her, as if she was a mirage.

None were used to her presence within their army, especially not as unashamedly lightly clothed as her. But she had made her proof while fighting with even more determination and skills than the crusaders. Godefroi had often asked her where she could have possibly learned such great skills; but she would merely smile, her turquoise eyes gleaming with a mysterious fire, and she would answer simply:

“Warfare is much more complex in the centuries to come, my lord.”

Chapter 1

- 00 -

The Election

All across the planet, 1.3 billion TVs, 500 million phones, and 70 million computers were turned on. They all tuned to their prime evening news channels, before the world held its breath... The major news channel, from Britannica Channel, to Al-Shizah Reports, to Evropa Union Media, were all fighting for exclusivities, which ultimately was granted at the exact same moment, minus the time difference. The announcement was about to be made, the world was about to change in exactly ten seconds...

U-S News appeared on the screen of the White Castle guest waiting room, and the entire crew and assistants present there turned to the TV to watch the intro sequence.

“Here we go, honey,” a dark-skinned woman, with a great majority of silver hair streaking her dark brown afro, said as she finished tying her husband’s tie. “Nervous?”

Her husband grinned.

“Never have been.”

He looked fondly at her, caressing every bit of skin that showed from her formal dress as if it was the last time he could so in such an informal manner.

“I keep tellin’ ya, Frances, you should be the one steppin’ in front of the podium. The world needs someone like ya, with everythin’ that’s happened since the Civil Uprising.”

Frances scoffed.

“And I keep tellin’ ya, Robert, that politics scares me more than chasin’ off a drug lord or a serial stalker.” She smiled and gave him a quick peck. “The world doesn’t need someone like me, or someone like you. All it needs is honesty and integrity. Offer that, stay true to your ideals, and they’ll never again look at your skin, race or gender. That’s my final counsel to you before this all starts.”

Robert Bohm smiled proudly and returned the peck. He then looked around. “Speakin’ of counsellin’, where’s Randall?”

“Up cloistered in his office, overlookin’ the plaza, as always,” she replied harshly.

He laughed.

“Com’on, Frances, when’ll ya go easy on him? Without him, you and I wouldn’t be standin’ here today.”

She looked hard at her husband.

“I’m tellin’ ya, I don’t trust one bit your soon-to-be Counsellor.”

“And I’m tellin’ ya, he does his job really well. What don’t ya like ‘bout Randall?”

Frances hesitated.

“His eyes. Ya know when you get the shivers ‘cause a snake’s starin’ back at us with cold, black, beady, merciless eyes? That’s what I get when I look at him. Promise me you’ll stay true to your own own instinct and be careful around him, Robert?”

Robert laughed softly and hugged his wife.

“Are ya eyes-discriminatin’? It’s just how he looks, he can’t help it.”

Frances sighed, and let go of the argument for a few seconds, relishing her husband’s warm embrace before the weeks to come, when she knew his position

would take him away from her. She lingered just a few seconds more before breaking the hug and staring in his sky blue eyes.

“Stay true to our ideals, will ya?”

Robert’s gaze turned serious.

“I’ll never forget where I come from, what my family went through, what you helped change. I won’t sit on my ass and allow families to go through what mine did. They all deserve the comfort you gave me thirty years ago.”

Frances smiled softly.

“Then go get them.”

“Get ready, sir,” an assistant called out from the small group of people clustered in front of the TV monitor. “It’s starting.”

Robert started toward the door, when another man stepped in.

“Good luck, Mr. Bohm, and don’t forget: lean your right shoulder toward the front when you state your changes, and once in a while, refer your hands back to your plexus, that’ll show trust and open-heartedness...”

Robert raised his hand and abruptly stopped the newcomer by a tap on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Dave, I know ya mean well, but I don’t know how many times I have to tell ya, I don’t need your parlor tricks.”

The assistant opened his mouth, but Robert interrupted him again with his hand.

“I’ll let the people decide if they trust me, I won’t force them into it by using your body language tricks, which, sorry, but are a waste of college degrees. Why would I pretend to be honest and trustworthy, when my whole goal is to bring back an honest and strong Americae? Only cowards and liars uses your tricks, and old presidents who played a game too complex to remain true to themselves. I’m insulted you believe I need them.”

“I’m very sorry if I made you feel that way, I only...” Dave stepped back,

“Don’t sweat about it; Randall hired ya, and it’s your job. But let me do mine.”

“Hold on just a second, sir,” the assistant held back Robert just before he opened the door, and pointed at the monitor on his phone. “The press will give the signal.”

The U-S News newscaster smiled to the viewers.

“Welcome to the 6:00 p.m. news broadcast. In headlines, on this 15 July, the results for the 11 June 2037 Americani presidential elections, which we have the privilege to announce live. The Congress finished compiling and verifying the votes, and the new president, chosen by the majority will of the Americani people, is Robert Bohm. The Anti-Authoritarian Party candidate won the elections by seventy-three percent majority over the Democratic, Republic, and Liberation Party...”

Alongside the group present in the room, they could hear in the outside plaza that all of Norr Americae cheered at the sound of this news.

“... This truly pave the way for the rest of the world,” continued the newscaster. “Worldwide polls decisively demonstrated how the people are fed up with the governments they’ve been previously led to elect; and this election finally proves it. We will now go live to the White Castle, where President Bohm is about to make his inaugural speech.”

The camera faded to show live footage of the White Castle’s frontal view.

“Go, sir, now!” the cameraman assistant urged Robert.

The plaza outside of the White Castle was surrounded by thousands of citizens, waving and cheering at the sight of the president coming out of the building.

Robert Bohm walked to the prepared stage in front of his porch, waved to the population, and finally, cleared his throat.

“My fellow compatriots, my friends, my brothers and sisters, I hate formalities, so let’s cut to the chase here. I stand before you not as your leader, nor your president,

but your equal. Too long have I, by your side, watched our so-called safe Americani Security break every rights to our privacy, from every step of our lives. Too long has our so-called caring Health Department allowed toxins and poisons into our food and drinks; too long have we watched innocent children being abused and destroyed by so-called virtuous religions, ideologies, institutes and dogmas of every shapes; too long have we watched greedy corporations destroy Terra by excavating tons and tons of her soil, draining her water for needless purposes, stealing her vital resources. And finally, too long have I watched our previous government slowly tear apart our Constitution, enslaving our population bits by bits, slowly discarding and banning all of our most sacred rights. To that and with your voice, I say: 'no more!'. The ones responsible for the sad state of our country need to ready themselves, as they'll be found, judged, held responsible and bear the weight of their deceit.

» I'm NOT our previous governments. My purpose isn't to take money from you, not to forbid your most essential rights, not to deceive you, not to spy on you, not to destroy Terra, not to enslave or abuse you under so-called higher power authorities. My purpose's simple: I'm here to help you get rid of your tormentors. I'm but a mere servant of my people. I'll help you restore what is ours, our equality, our freedom, our rights and finally our hopes and possibilities for a better tomorrow. Rest assured that under my leadership, no poison will reach your food, no spying will be done under any nebulous excuses, no corporations will demolish our precious planet for personal gain, and finally, no breach of our sacred Amendments will be tolerated. The Uni-states of Americae are as much under your command as they're under mine. A new order is about to rise; one free of unnecessary rules and restrictions, one built from the ashes of this corrupt and inefficient order.

» But, in order to bring about this new world, in order to bring the old one down, I must ask your help. Only you can bring that fall; for I'm but your representative. I'm not your ruler, and I'm not allowed to act alone without your approval; only with your consent and on your behalf. It's your country, and you must be allowed to change it as you wish. I wholeheartedly hope that with your support, we'll bring

back order and make this country great again. This new world'll be born not under my rule, but under your reign and by your will.

» My compatriots, my friends, my brothers and sisters... thank you. Thank you on behalf of the AAP. Thank you on behalf of Terra, whom we can finally help; and finally, thank you for your help in instituting a new order, one that'll guide the rest of the world, and show them the way. Thank you.”

Robert Bohm took a step back from the stage and bowed to the cheering population assembled in front of his house. He grinned, humbled by the overwhelming positive reactions, and bowed again, thanking everyone.

He walked back into the room, where Frances and the rest of the group whistled and clapped. On the TV, the camera faded back to the news rooms, where the newscasters were grinning and clearing their throats as well. They chuckled at their unexpected reactions, and smiled to the viewers.

“Well, I don't know about you, but that was a moving speech. Very well done, Americani; I believe that this election will indeed show the way for the world. Speaking of which, worldwide polls indicates that most of the countries are starting to boycott old parties and to support newer ones, such as the Britannica Middle Party, the François People Party, the Cyrillic Peasant Party, and other civilian-oriented parties. Quite good news for the people indeed! Now, let's move on to the rest of the news...”

Chapter 2

- 00 -

Opposites

High above the ground, in a White Castle room overlooking the crowd, a tall and slender old man smiled victoriously at the sound of the people cheering, his piercing grey eyes shining in the sunlight flooding through the wall-wide window.

Randall Redsphear turned away from the window as the door opened and the new President walked in. As he always instinctively did to his interlocutors, Randall looked over his companion. Unlike his predecessors, and despite his 6'2 height, Robert Bohm had a stoutly built countenance; his walk was calm and solemn, and his steps were measured. His entire manner naturally inspired respect, but most of all, trust and confidence. Although both he and Randall were well into their late years, they couldn't be more opposites. In contrast to his ice grey eyes, Robert's sky blue eyes were determined and intense, but thoughtful, even soft in some moments. And albeit both had grey hairs drawn toward the back (Robert's showing remains of dark brown streaks from his youthful years), what further distinguished them was the unusual presence of Robert's bushy grey sideburns; it gave him a lost yet much needed old-fashioned look, as if more grounded to a simpler past than the overly modern world surrounding him.

"Done," Robert announced, his accent registering more intensely his regional Suthern upbringing when not in his public persona. "It's been some time since I've heard the population cheer that way."

"Of course they did, how could they not, with the script we provided you?" Randall retorted. "Now, it would have worked better if you would cooperate with David's tips, and wouldn't stray away from the key points in scripts."

Anyone but the President would have wondered at the Counsellor speaking, for he had a Britannian accent, not the typical accent expected of Americani leaders,

such as Robert's. Such an oddity was only one amongst the many mysteries surrounding Randall Redsphear that the President had long since decided to ignore in favour of his incredible skills in leadership.

“I don't like to rely on old psychological tricks. The people out there aren't statistics and mental theories,” Bohm argued, sighing.

Randall's eyes flared. It was him that should have sighed at the argument they too often had.

“And I won't count how many times I have to prove to you that people in my position have mastered human psyche long enough to know your argument is still naive.”

“Then, what's the next move?” Robert inquired, eager to change the subject.

Randall walked away from the window, and stared at Robert, noticing with disguised pride as the President tried to discreetly recoil as the gap closed between them. Despite Robert's intimidating presence, Randall's predatorial gaze and countenance managed nonetheless to make the President look like a cub.

“You do as you're told, and you keep your fulfilled dream. You've come so far to get this position; you don't want to jeopardize it in the same day, do you?”

“Lettin' you down is far from my desire,” Robert said, stunned at the icy threat. “Beside, you know the strength of my dreams for the people; why would I jeopardize them?”

Randall simply smiled in response as he took his last look at Robert, and walked out without a word, leaving the President still stunned.

Going down the corridor, he barely glanced as the long file waiting for the elevator instinctively moved a bit to let him through first. But he waved them ahead and instead took his preferred path, the long-winding stairs. While halfway down, a distorted voice flooded Randall's mind:

“Sir, we have information that an Americani called George Durell is digging up dirt about your activities.”

“Does his activities fall within the allotted limit?”

“No, sir. He has reached beyond the allowance.”

“Is there a way he can be distracted?” Randall asked worryingly.

“We tried, but to no avail. We cannot find any dirt on him and if we try harder, he’ll only be more suspicious and it might push him to act.”

“Fine, let me handle it. This Mr. Durell won’t bother me for long,” Randall replied annoyingly.

“Very well, sir,” the voice screeched before going away altogether.

Randall sighed, and sent a call to his ‘personal business handler’, as he liked to nickname her in such circumstances.

As his Counsellor left the office, Robert Bohm was left wondering what brought about this strange conversation; despite his knowledge and gratitude that his complete success was owned entirely due to Randall’s support, there was something terrifyingly threatening in the way the Counsellor phrased his words. Robert could only wonder why would Randall threaten him after going this far to help him.

However, not long after Randall left, these thoughts dissipated and Robert looked around at what was now his Office, letting a smile make its way to his face; and making sure no one could see him, he momentarily made a little clumsy dance of victory: he had finally made it to the top. Now, he could help everyone achieve his dream.

Chapter 3

- 00 -

The King's Knight

“So what you’re saying, is that the eighty-third president, the one before Bohm, was really the last Uni-states president?”

“Of course! It all makes sense!” George Durell exclaimed on his cellphone, looking nervously out of the window.

“But Bohm just got elected,” his friend said at the other end of the line, still sounding incredulous of George’s theory. “If it would have been the case, Bohm wouldn’t have been president of the Uni-states in the first place. He would have announced something else entirely, declared about another kind of name or whatnot. Actually, his view of the Uni-states is exactly what it should have been, like it once was.”

“No, no! It’s happening, you’ll see. There never was an anti-Authoritarianism party in the U-S running since the years they proclaimed. Not officially. It just arrived last year, out of the blue, at the beginning of the campaigns. They’ve covered their tracks pretty well, but I was able to find some proof of their deceit. And now, it’s coinciding with the widespread rumors that the last thirty years of U-S governments were nothing else but authoritarian, even if that too is false. Sure, it wasn’t great, but not to the extent broadcast by this AAP thing; we both know that, we’ve been living these said years. They’re planning to destroy the old government with a new one that is supposed to be ‘installed by the people’. Just like Cyrillia and Zhongguo. They plan on bringing down the Uni-states, and replace it with their own concoction. Listen, I can’t stay on for too long, I don’t have much time left, I have to run away from here; I’m being followed by a desert military-type car, it’s been on my tail three times already, I haven’t got long left!” George looked out of the window for the hundredth time, clearly panicking.

“George, there’s no conspiracies, it’s just your paranoia,” his friend sighed. “You’ve drank too much fluoride water, it’s messing with your brain; you’ve read the researches on that. Switch to distilled water, and you’ll see that it was just neurotoxins-related paranoia.”

“Really? Then explain why is Bohm’s Counsellor related to the....”

A silence ensued.

“George?” his friend called back. “George, are you alright?”

George froze as he watched a flying sand-colour sport car hover towards his flat and then parking right in front of it. A slender figure got out of it, and strolled elegantly to his porch. He began to shiver, and quickly ducked below his window.

“It’s them, again!” he whispered frantically. “The same car I keep on seeing! It’s the MIB!!”

“George, listen to me, they don’t exist,” his friend sighed with exasperation.

“That’s not true,” a woman’s Britannian voice coolly interrupted.

George jumped and squealed upon seeing a tall and athletic woman standing in his living room.

“They do exist, but I’m not one of them,” the woman continued with a playful smile on her lips.

She had long platinum-blond hair tied up in a bun, revealing an elegantly chiseled face and bright turquoise-blue eyes; a sleeveless blue marine top with silver plates covering her neck and midriff; a gun holster on one side of her hips and a sword scabbard on the other; and blue marine tight pants joining knee-high silver stilettos with four inches heels, adding to her height.

She raised her right hand and pointed a heavily modified handgun toward George’s cell phone. With no warning, it became burning hot in George’s hand, pushing him to drop it in surprise.

“Electromagnetic frequencies,” the blond woman explained, strolling closer to George, like a lioness getting closer to her prey. “Under the right frequency, metal heats up; it also fries up the electronic chip within.”

George tried to put on his best defiant face, and said with a trembling voice:

“Wh-what you’re gonna do, kill me?”

“Don’t worry, you won’t feel a thing,” the woman replied in a chilling voice, still playfully smiling.

George squealed and ran to hide behind his couch. The woman sighed and set her gun to a specific setting; she pointed it to the squealing couch, and pressed the trigger. Although nothing at first seemed to happen as there were no bullets nor shots fired, a short scream was heard shortly after, followed by choking, breathless noises. The music of death ended brutally at the sound of a heavy thud.

“Sorry, lied about feeling no pain,” the woman mischievously whispered as she holstered her gun.

She walked to George’s computer while putting on gloves. She took out of her pocket a small memory card, inserted it into the computer, and copied its contents. She was thorough as she hacked into his personal files, Interweb history and mailbox. With a little programming, she managed to make the copied files look native to George’s computer before closing down the whole thing. She then sent a thought to her boss.

“Yes?” Randall answered.

“Target eliminated,” the woman announced. “The coroner will see nothing but a simple heart attack, brought by years of bad diet. Files linking him to an Authoritarian cell were uploaded into his computer, with links to his friend as well. His surviving friend will be taken by the police for complicity in hate propaganda and all incriminating files they had against you have been taken care of. Basically, you won’t be bothered by them anymore.”

“Perfect. Keep up the good work, Ysadora.”

“Don’t I always?” Ysadora Dawn smiled, leaving her target’s house and climbing into her car. “Randall, one more thing, if I may.”

“What is it?”

“People are starting to be suspicious in ways that we can’t control or eliminate without confirming these suspicions.”

“Humans will always be suspicious; it’s in their nature. They must find something to blame for their problems; we give them one. Rather, we give them a dozen for their choosing.”

“I know, but one day, they’ll get to us, and after, they’ll get to the big boss. We need a decoy, a living and willing target who’ll take the blame for our activities.”

“A scapegoat?” Randall thought, interested.

“Exactly. There was a time when one wasn’t needed, but with the plan as advanced as it is now, we can’t take any more chances,” Ysadora reasoned.

“A good idea, but who will be willing to play, and crazy enough to wear the clothes of, the devil, to be responsible for our plans against modern society?” Randall sighed.

“Who wouldn’t do anything for money, power, or immortality?”

“Even those things won’t stop a traitor from betraying us, especially if the opposing party matches or outbids our offer,” Randall replied, emphasizing bitterly upon saying ‘opposing party’.

Ysadora didn’t need to ask who he meant by those words, as they dealt with that annoyance for so long, never able to get rid of it.

“Let’s just keep an open eye for such an opportunity,” she instead said.

“Indeed. It is a reasonable suggestion; I’ll ask my secretary to search for any psychological profile which will match those of a willing scapegoat.”

“Thank you, Randall; I’ve gotta go before the cops gets here. Take care,” Ysadora wished him.

“Don’t I always?” Randall replied, mirroring her own words.

His voice faded back to null in her mind, as Ysadora started up her car, gaining altitude, other cars angrily honking as she dexterously moved across the traffic. Though the cars had about two kilometers of altitude to fly above the cities, there was still an untold invisible rule which stated that each hundred meters, more or less, there was a specific lane, and no car could fly in-between these vertical lanes. All but Ysadora, who gave no care or thought for human rules. All she was thinking about now was who would be a voluntary scapegoat. Hadn’t she been important to the Society’s mission, she would have volunteered, as she would willingly give her life to protect Randall. She owed him too much; but such was not the circumstances. Randall Redsphear was the king, and he trusted only her as his knight and champion; all they needed right now was the bait to take the attention away from their operations.

Chapter 4

- AA -

Abraham Solomon

Abraham Solomon was walking with determination towards a tall and majestic white building in the middle of a luxuriously conceived park. Only wealthy personalities could afford more than an acre of forest or garden, and whomever owned the Capitoline were more than just rich; they had to be able to afford a 280-acre park around the building. Which suited just fine Abraham; he would have nothing to do with miserable and struggling citizens, barely able to pay for their rent, yet with no fighting desires to rise above their fates. A Ph. D. in Political Science in his pocket, he was going to put it into service for people who badly wanted a change and who stood a chance at winning their goals. People like President Robert Bohm.

Abraham smiled under the bright sun as he recalled briefly how two weeks ago, the President's counsel accepted his request for the post of Chief Advisor of Public Relations. Such a post allowed him constant meetings with one of the most powerful man on Americae, a luxurious suite, as well as a luxurious office in the Capitoline. In short, he would be part of the elite. He thought about high-school, and the brutes who always mocked him, how he would always be a nobody. He thought with joy at how much he would love to see their faces as he was about to sit in the most powerful office of the country while they were wasting their lives and diplomas away with meagre jobs in grocery stores.

As he stepped out of the park and upon the well-kept grassy grounds of the Capitoline, the sun began to shine with the light of a thousand fires. Besides some touristic hotspots and governmental services side-buildings, the Capitoline and the White Castle were the only buildings allowed to be standing amidst the park, while the other cityscapes were forbidden to overview. Which meant that no buildings could bring much-appreciated shadows upon this hot day over this sacred ground.

When he finally reached the bottom stairs leading to the entrance of the Capitoline, the doors opened, and an old man stepped out, dressed in a distinguished grey-blue suit, walking down the stairs to meet him.

“Mr. Solomon?” the old man asked, his heavy Britannian accent setting him apart with the American environment.

He was rather tall, slim, and though his drawn-back grey hairs and the lines around his eyes described very clearly that he was entering his seventh decade, his grey eyes were sharp, his voice was clear, deep, and free from the burden of age. His movements were so agile and quick that Abraham wondered how old this man truly was.

“Yes, it’s me,” Abraham replied.

“Ah, welcome to the Capitoline,” said the old man as he extended his hand. “My name is Randall Redsphear, the President’s Counsellor. I trust the flight here went well?”

“An honor to meet you, Mr. Redsphear,” Abraham replied as he shook his hand. “And yes, it was very comfortable, thank you very much.”

Randall looked at him in mild surprise.

“Forgive me, but you have a firm handshake. Rare have I seen that in a young man such as yourselves.

Abraham stifled a laugh.

“Thirty-seven years is hardly young, Mr. Redsphear.”

“When you get my age, Mr. Solomon, it is.”

The old man looked to the sky, and then laid a hand on Abraham’s elbow as he invited him to walk down the rest of the stairs with him.

“It’s a beautiful day, let us walk outside to discuss business matters,” Randall suggested in a manner that indicated he wouldn’t accept a refusal.

“Yes, sir,” Abraham accepted, astonished at the old man’s very firm grip on his elbow.

“You’ll forgive me if I cut the formalities short; time is essential. So here’s how it works around here,” Randall explained while they walked in the gardens.

“Everyone working at the Capitoline gives their reports on the citizens and the country’s economy to you. Your job is to analyze the data, and devise the best way to shape both worlds according to the orders you will be given by me, and me alone. Is that clear?”

“Of course, sir,” Abraham acknowledged. “So basically, when the President is not around, you’re the boss.”

“As his Counsellor, that’s exactly what I do. Is that going to be an issue?” Randall asked, scrutinizing Abraham.

Abraham looked at the old man, surprised by the direct answer. He smiled, as he could feel the predatorial instinct in the Counsellor’s cold and icy stare; it was the look of someone who never lost, which made him quite enthusiastic.

“Not one bit, sir. It makes my job easier.”

Randall smiled despite himself.

“Then we won’t have any problems; I look forward to working together.”

“So do I, but might I inquire about the Vice-President? I was under the impression he was the second boss.”

“Traditionally, yes, but Reginald Griffith is notoriously detached from domestic duties; he prefers using his powers in foreign policies and diplomatic agreements.”

“Quite rightfully too; he’s quite skilled at it from what I heard.”

Randall laughed softly.

“Yes, but also a pain in the ass when he deigns to point back his nose here.”

Abraham politely laughed back, although he made sure to keep the information in the back of his mind.

As they continued walking, both watched as the world around them kept moving forward. The buzzing noise of the flying cars high up in the skies, angry drivers clamouring their horns in protest of the poor skills of the other drivers. The never-ending going and coming of those mechanical devices were like the mechanism of what should have been a well-oiled clock. Only, the clock was far from well-oiled, and many mechanical parts were too defective to be either salvageable or useful: this was how Abraham perceived this world. If his interview went well, he finally stood a chance at executing the long overdue repair of the clock.

“I read in your resume that you had the highest grades in Political Science, and even the Pi Gamma Alpha nominated you as honorary President,” Randall said appreciatively.

“Yes, sir,” Abraham simply replied.

“Why political science?”

“Because it’s the core behind society as we know it; what shapes it... and what makes it fall,” Abraham answered.

“Indeed. I myself never studied it, but I have heard of its merits. Something intrigues me, though. It is written that you taught, and later advised on, Chaos Theory; how does it relate to political science?” Randall asked.

“Simple. Political science deals with the future. But in order to shape the future, one must also know about the past. Chaos theory deals with the variables in a chosen path, and how does it get out of control. By extension, we also learn about all the currents that shaped history as we know it: all the variables in an otherwise solid plan that changed history a thousand times.”

Randall looked at Abraham with acute curiosity; he then asked:

“One more thing: in one of your essays, you described that politics relied merely on two factors: economy and psychology, and wielding both carefully, one could rule an entire country with nothing else. Why is that?”

“Is it a trick question?” Abraham asked, unsure if the old man was joking, as the answer seemed quite obvious to him.

“You tell me.”

“Very well, the answer is very simple. Both are distinct factors in life, yet they are complementary; they both impact on human lives and society. Change an aspect in either of them, and you’ll get specific reactions accordingly. For example, let’s say that you wish to start a civil war: raise the cost of food and living by fifteen percent each three months, thus inflating by sixty percent the economy at the end of the year. The psychological implications felt by the population every three months will become even more instinctive than the previous semester. Hunger, living cost and economic insecurity will corrupt the instincts of even the most peaceful mind. In order to survive, the population will see no other solution but to end this ever-increasing degradation of their social conditions. Knowing human nature, it lets us predict that what would be considered the best way to go against this economical crisis will be to attack the cause of it all, the government responsible for those raises. By simply raising the cost of life by fifteen percent each three months, you thus enable uprisings and the beginning of civil war in a mentally destabilized people.

» Now, if these elements are already present and you want to achieve allegiance of the people to your party, prevent any success of the opposing party, and still make a profit, it is as simple as creating the civil war. While the opposing party upholds the fifteen percent raise, you lower yours by five percent, bringing it back down to ten percent. Basic psychology demonstrates that human’s greed allied to a feeling of being heard and cared for will undoubtedly attract the population to join your side and discard in hate the opposing party. Now, in theory, you will make a lesser profit over the population than your competitor, but, time will play in your favour. You will start by gaining more followers, whom will spread word of the efforts you do for the people. This free publicity will bring in more and more

people and in the end, as your party is larger than the opposition, so will the amount of money, or power, collected. By doing so you will have achieved a complete destabilization of the government; achieved a complete ‘image’ change of your party and won over the population, while still making a sizable profit without them realizing it. From there, possibilities are endless.”

“Well said; I’m impressed,” Randall couldn’t help but let showcase a proud smile; Abraham knew he had won him over.

“That’s the reason for what I wrote. Psychology and economy are the perfect tools to tame and control the people. My example was a very narrow-minded one, and extremely basic compared to the true possibility of its mechanics. And since humans, well, most of them, have never evolved beyond instincts, the elites in possession of these tools will never lose in their endeavors.”

“Then, the members of the council chose you well for the post,” Randall complimented Abraham while taking a hold of his shoulder one more time as he led him back to the Capitoline. “Now that your evaluation is complete, let’s introduce you to the whole presidential council!”

Abraham beamed as he thought how the old man was a much better company than all the worthless and poor so-called friends he’s been with. He was truthfully looking forward to working for him.

Chapter 5

- BA -

A Slice of Life

The cashier scanned the articles, attempting a weak smile as she gazed upon the two clients before her, a woman and a man, both in their late twenties, probably early thirty for him.

Not them again. She only knew them by the fact that they were local residents, that the young man was called Tom, and that he himself called the young woman Mad (although she had never been able to figure out if it was a personality-related nickname, or whether her parents actually named her that way), and that their weekly grocery list was centred around fish meals.

She continued to scan the articles: a dozen lobsters, a bag of mussels, bread, Asian plum sauce, onion rings, an enormous bag of flour, way too much chili powder for their own good... the usual.

Once she was done, she raised her head to look at the young woman, and restrained her cringe. The young woman always wore one of those party steampunk dresses, with a Victorian collar that made her neck look way too small for her round chubby face, a tight laced bustier that could not hide or contain the bulging muffin top belly underneath it, puffed sleeves that always got in the way of things, and a slitted ruffled skirt coupled underneath with ridiculously loose pants. The only reasonable thing about it was that the emerald green dress with the pure white accents complemented the woman's black eyes and brown hair (which were tied in a weird bun that ended up looking more like a peacock tail on top of a human head).

“That will be 231.56 dollars,” the cashier finally said. “Credit or debit card?”

“Cash, please,” the nicknamed Mad said with a bright smile, opening her purse and pulling out a wallet that didn’t seemed able to safely contain all the bills within.

The cashier eyed the woman’s male companion as he packed the groceries in those big reusable bags. He was dressed as any decent person should, in used jeans and simple shirt, his brown hair uncombed but not weirdly hairdressed. In fact, he was above-average good-looking in comparison to most men in this particular suburbia of Kansas City’s, with his fit looks, his long yet soft-edged face, and his kind brown eyes that always had that humorous gleam. The cashier begrudgingly returned her attention to the young woman as she handed her half of the money in bills, and the other half with an annoyingly large amount of coins.

“I don’t need the receipt,” the young woman beamed as she and the young man picked up the bags. “Have a nice day!”

“You too, bye,” the cashier distractedly replied back, her attention toward sorting through the money and putting it at the right places in the cash register.

Upon closing the drawer and throwing in the trash bin the receipt, the cashier shook her head disapprovingly. That couple looked like the woman was a Goth trying to initiate her partner in one of those clubs; and that the only lure she could have for him was a lobster banquet. The cashier shook her head again as a heavy-breathing, grumpy-looking couple wordlessly and rudely slammed their groceries upon the rolling mat. Now, this couple was typical of the majority of shoppers, the cashier thought as she attempted a smile, only to be rewarded with a grumpy glare.

Plop!

“Eww, look at their faces... It’s so ugly,” Madzistrale squirmed as she resettled for better stability upon the wet quay, her green dress’ closures and seams protesting at the sudden tensions.

“Yeah, but look at their round eyes,” Tom said adoringly, as if talking about a puppy, setting aside two cut rubber bands, and picking up his scissors.

“Mouths are not supposed to have tentacles in front! Or claws!”

“She didn’t mean that, cutie pie, no, she didn’t mean that,” Tom cooed to the lobster as he carefully poked its tail and encouraged it toward the water.

Plop!

“Only one to go!”

Madzistrale carefully took out the last lobster from the bag, and inserted it in a cone-like apparatus that kept it somewhat steady. She then pinned one of its pincer on the floor, and steadied the other, still grimacing all the time as the lobster’s mouth claws and tentacles wiggled in protestation. Tom however looked at it with adoring eyes, gently tickling with his index its mouth, before then moving in with his scissors. Not a minute passed and both pincers of the lobster were free from their rubber bands.

“There you go, little buddy,” Madzistrale proudly said, liberating it from the stabilization apparatus.

With a final satisfying ‘*plop!*’, Tom and Madzistrale turned to the last bag.

“And now, for the easy part!” she happily said, removing four heavy bags of mussels from their groceries.

Holding them in the water, Tom then carefully cut the bags open, and pushed the little molluscs in the water.

The receptionist cringed at the young man standing before her; more particularly at his messy black hair where a big patch of white hair streaked it from the left side.

“Good day,” he said pleasantly. “I’d like to see Bryan, please.”

She hesitated.

“You mean Professor Sollow?”

“Yes; I need to consult him on something.”

She looked at her database just to make sure before answering.

“Well, you probably didn’t heard the news, but Professor Sollow’s in the hospital since at least nine weeks.”

The young man’s face fell in genuine shock, and she began feeling bad for finding his hair funny. With his soft brown eyes, he looked like an old-fashioned guy that simply wanted to see a buddy and didn’t need to hear a bad news today.

“What happened?” he asked softly.

She looked at the notes:

“It only says here that he had a work accident. The hospital must have the full details...”

She looked up and resisted the urge to go hug him, for he was visibly pained, with hints of teary eyes. The professor seemed to mean a lot to him.

“I’m sorry for breaking the news to you this way... If you want, you can ask at the St-Sepulchre hospital. They may let you see him. As for your consultation, maybe I can guide you to another professor?”

The young man shook his head.

“No, thank you miss. I’m sorry for taking your time, that will be all.”

“Okay, well, good luck, sir.”

He smiled weakly and made a semi bow, which surprised her.

“Thank you, have a nice day.”

She glanced down at her computer. She hated bringing bad news to people.

**

“So your name is Gab...zry...el Summerfield, correct?” The nurse squinted at the signature on her board.

“Correct,” Gabzryel confirmed, trying unsuccessfully to comb his messy black and white hair with his hands.

They turned a corner and took the elevator as its doors began to close.

“You’re actually the first person to inquire about him since the university checked up on him.”

“What? How come?!”

The nurse shrugged sadly.

“No idea. He seems to have been disconnected from his family. We called his parents, no answers. After some investigation, they’re somewhere in the south but still unwilling to answer any of our calls.”

“Girlfriends, boyfriends, friends?”

She shook her head.

“No luck there either. He’s already dead to people, it seems.”

They walked out of the elevator, and she hushed him, showing the no talking sign. She led him through more corridors, and then stopped before a door, which she opened just enough to let him see inside.

A man in his late thirties laid on the bed, various machines plugged to him. Only a rising chest and a steady beeping from the cardiometer let the world know he was not straight-lined.

“It’s been nine weeks, and no change from him. He’s not getting worse, that we’re grateful for, but he’s not getting any better either.”

Gabzryel fought the knot in his throat and some tears that threatened to show. That scene was way too familiar.

“He’s got no one...” the nurse said sadly, “...so, may I ask what’s your relationship with him?”

“His student from Philosophy class in university.”

The nurse nodded.

“Well, we have a problem because we need the signature of someone close to him, and fees need to be paid for his convalescence. There’s so far governmental services can do for someone like him. And since we can’t reach anyone, if he doesn’t get better, we’d have no choice within a few weeks to unplug...”

“I’ll sign for him,” Gabzryel sharply cut.

“Well, I don’t think you qualify...”

“I’m his student, and I consider him a mentor. I sign for him, and I pay six months of fees in advance, and if something goes wrong, the director will answer for that,” Gabzryel firmly said.

“Okay... Give me some time, I’ll go verify with the director. Do you want a moment with him? If yes, please be careful not to touch anything.”

“I know how it goes,” he said sadly.

She nodded understandingly, and walked away. Gabzryel approached the man, and on an impulse, stroked the dark hair. The sensation was familiar, although his hair was shorter and coarser than hers.

“We haven’t seen each other eye to eye, but I won’t let them unplug you. Not again, not like with her. So hang in there, buddy.”

Chapter 6

- BB -

Two Siblings And A Friend

“Guys!”

Madzistrale and Tom turned their heads around as a female voice interpellated them. A tall and strongly built woman jogged to catch them.

“Hey Clara!” the siblings waved.

They bear-hugged, and Tom playfully let out a stifled breath by the force of Clara’s embrace.

“Sorry, baby,” she giggled, easing the strength.

“I got a favour to ask; I want to cook something for my special gal tonight, she’s back from her trip. Can I indefinitely borrow some of your garden goodies?” Clara asked Madzistrale, stepping in their rhythm.

“As always,” Madzistrale happily accepted. She then reached at her friend’s ebony braid’s ornament: “Wow, isn’t that a woodpecker feather?”

“Yep, I found it in my backyard. A downy woodpecker.”

“Isn’t it your zodiac sign, if I remember well?” Tom asked.

“And a few days before my birthday... Must be a sign,” Clara proudly replied.

“So how’s your mission going?” Madzistrale excitedly inquired.

Clara’s ebony eyes darkened.

“I’ve only been able to reach out to a few communities, but I’ve received no replies from their chiefs. One of them even dared telling me I didn’t know what I

was talking about... For God's sake, I'm as pure of an Algonquian as he was, the little twat...."

A sad bleat welcomed the trio, and Clara approached the wooden fence. Three brown, caramel, and chocolate mixed-coloured goats clumsily ran to meet her hand, and she scratched them playfully.

"Hey girls, you've been missing me? I know, I know, I've been missing you too."

She turned toward the garden laying before her, where Madzistrale and Tom strolled on the stone pathways.

"Oh, you've expanded a bit more! And added a little patch of aliens here..." she joked, kneeling to stroke a dozen purple kohlrabi.

"Serve yourself, as always," Madzistrale handed her a worn-out weaved basket.

"And what about you guys? Do you have enough to begin that little dream market of yours?" Clara asked as she began harvesting around.

The siblings scoffed.

"Regulations are in our way. One would think with the rise of homesteading and urban garden projects that municipalities would be more flexible by now... Nope. But they'll allow the building of a new Walmart in the leftover space between the bank and the Subway down Station Street."

"It's always like that," Clara sighed, as the siblings followed her with their own baskets. "A bit of that... oh, nice, some radishes... Oh, is your honey ready?"

"We're leaving it for a few more days; the temperatures were rough for the bees, so they need their part for their little babies," Tom explained, pointing at the sunburnt wildflowers spreading past the luscious garden, up to the very far back of their backyard, where three beehives stood.

"Ah well, keep me a jar when it'll be ready, will ya?"

"Aye, aye."

Clara waved them goodbye, gleefully skipping away with her full basket.

“Say hi to Gab!” she shouted.

“Will do! ’Till next time!” the siblings shouted back.

Madzistrale looked at her grocery bag and her basket.

“So... the chores are done... and it’s only 1 p.m ... Now what?!”

Tom’s belly rumbled.

“Cake?” he implored his sister with his unbeatable pouting expression that he mastered.

Madzistrale sighed.

“Fine, fine.”

The siblings entered their house, and yelled their usual:

“*Tadaima!!!*”

Silence answered back.

“Huh? He’s not home?” Madzistrale wondered.

Tom listened intently.

“I hear some basses; I think he’s still in the basement.”

“What’s he doing now?” Madzistrale shook her head while she put on her apron.

Norwegian symphonic metal music was flooding Gabzryel Summerfield’s basement. He was nodding to the music, letting it invade his heavy heart as he buried himself in his hobby, soldering a wheel on a complex metallic assembly. His

brown eyes were focusing on the task at hand, his short brown hair messy from an obvious lack of combing.

The door leading from his basement to the ground floor of his house swung open as Tom and Madzistrale entered, the latter tapping away the last bits of flour from her hands into her apron.

“I’m bored. Got anything fascinating to show me?” she asked as she plopped herself on a nearby couch, folding her arms and staring ardently at him.

“Come on, give her something,” Tom said as he closed the door behind him, before seating on the couch as well.

“‘*Good afternoon, Gabzryel!*’ ‘*Good afternoon to you too, Mad and Tom*’...”, Gabzryel sarcastically replied. “Beside, since when are you two so keenly interested in my stuff?”

“Since little sister is bored,” answered Tom, elbowing Madzistrale.

“It’s called video games,” Gabzryel distractedly answered.

“Been there, done that. Can’t beat our five minutes record for eight stages...” Madzistrale pouted. “Hey, where has your black hair from yesterday go? I love the white patch in them; don’t dye it away, it makes you look like a cute skunk...” she trailed off awkwardly, realizing how it sounded.

“Okay! Done!” Gabzryel exclaimed, completely ignoring her last question and proudly dropping down his soldering machine. “*Voilà!*”

He stepped aside to reveal the device on his table. It was composed of a complex set of machinery, attached to a wheel and had a table lamp plugged to the whole set.

“Theoretically,” Gabzryel explained, “this wheel will create a continuous and never ending motion in this complex machine. This should create enough electricity to power up this lamp.”

He strongly spun the wheel and looked at the siblings with a proud smile. Unfortunately, it faded after five minutes. The lamp still hadn't turned on. Gabzryel frowned and was agitated as he looked for external flaws.

“What’s wrong with it?” he mumbled, scratching his brown hair, rendering them even messier.

Tom and Madzistrale attempted to hide their amusement, with no great avail. Finally, Gabzryel tossed the machine in a drawer, and faced them with a frustrated smile.

“It give us great hopes for your other inventions,” Tom commented, smiling.

“You try to make a free electricity generator, genius,” Gabzryel replied defensively, loudly fickling with his instruments.

“You’re okay?” Madzistrale asked worryingly, frowning.

Tom looked bemusedly at her sudden comment; then Gabzryel dropped his head and chuckled.

“Always astutely right. That’s my Mad.”

“What happened?” Tom echoed his sister’s question.

Gabzryel sighed and leaned against the table.

“Sollow is in a coma since 9 weeks,” he revealed.

The siblings gasped.

“Your old teacher? Why, how?”

Gabzryel fought back the knot in his throat.

“Same thing than with her. A stroke.”

Madzistrale rose from the couch and hugged him tightly.

“Sad thing... he doesn’t have a family to pay for the bills. No one answered to the hospital’s calls,” Gabzryel mumbled in her neck.

“What’s gonna happen?” Tom asked, visibly worried.

“What do you think?” Gabzryel answered with a small smile. “I signed the papers to be his caretaker. He can remain plugged in as long as he needs to.”

Tom chuckled.

“No wonder people finds us weird. Only you would take care of a teacher you didn’t even got along that well with.”

“You know why I do it,” Gabzryel replied sadly.

“Sorry,” Madzistrale repeated as she separated; her friend returned a small smile.

“How did you know?” Tom asked.

Gabzryel straightened up and messed his hair even more as he attempted to look cool after that vulnerable display.

“I tried to see him at his office, but his secretary told me. I know his penchant for history and its observable patterns. I wanted to ask his opinion on something. We always debated, but he always had views I wouldn’t otherwise know of.”

“Can we help?”

“Always. I wanted to share my concerns, but then...”

The siblings waited... and waited.

“So...?” Madzistrale asked irritatingly.

“Oh, sorry. So, I think something is about to happen soon.”

Madzistrale and Tom raised their eyebrows in mockery.

“Really? That explains everything,” Madzistrale mocked.

“Shush, you have to let me get my stuff first,” Gabzryel said, walking to an alcove in the basement.

“Stuff or not... nothing’s clearly happening ‘soon’; nothing’s happened for the last seventy years, not since the last major war! Heck, we can't even get anyone to get anything remotely remarkable done soon.”

“Exactly! That’s the best time for something to happen!” Gabzryel argued, opening a notebook.

“Fine, what’s your worry?” Tom asked, cutting to the point.

Gabzryel turned to them, displaying the most serious facial expression the siblings ever saw on him, holding his notebook as he answered very dramatically:

“The Apocalypse.”

Tom and Madzistrale looked at him blankly for a moment before bursting into laughter.

“Hey! It’s not funny!” Gabzryel said, offended.

“I thought you were Buddhist since three days?” Madzistrale asked between chuckles.

“I am. Believe it or not, we Buddhist believe in a sort of Apocalypse, though it’s much more different and slightly more logical than your Western philosophy. Ever heard of Maitreya?”

“Did you noticed how he easily went from liking Western philosophies a week ago to now mocking it?” Tom whispered to Madzistrale, barely listening to Gabzryel.

“I heard that,” Gabzryel said, interrupting Tom. “For your information, I am not criticizing your beliefs; I am merely stating a fact...”

“Okay, so what were you saying about this supposed Apocalypse?” Madzistrale intervened, as she finally regained a somewhat straight face.

“It will come soon,” Gabzryel answered, as if it was the most obvious answer.

“Yes, you told us that, but what makes you believe so?”

Gabzryel opened his notebook, filled with rough sketches and illegible scribbles.

“While browsing the military public site...”

“Meaning ‘while hacking in their officious files’...” Tom corrected.

“... I stumbled upon a very interesting file. Project Cyan Ray. It was discovered by a French Canadian journalist, who died of a heart attack some years later. It was one of the most publicized official proof of governmental deceit, and heavily spread by conspiracy theorists, so my bet is that Project Cyan Ray is now dismantled.”

“So why are you A): bothering with it, and B): basing your Apocalypse thing on that?” Tom sighed.

“Because, after a bit of digging, I found out that Project Cyan Ray wasn’t in fact military or governmental in origin. It was privately funded. Yet, somehow, whoever was behind Cyan Ray was able to blame it on the military and the governments... without them noticing. Or, if yes... then with their permission!”

“Okay... But what about what you just said? It received too much publicity, so it got dismantled?” Madzistrale reasoned.

“Project Cyan Ray received too much publicity. But the private founders were never found nor inculpated. Nothing stops them from doing another version of that project. And now, because the government was ‘involved’ last time, next time, everyone will blame them, and not the real criminals.”

“I still don’t get it,” Tom said, sitting down on a couch. “It was an obscure thing, about what, forty to fifty years ago? Nothing came out of it, and it certainly doesn’t bring the Apocalypse.”

Gabzryel sighed, and he sat on the table, smoothing his lab coat, and passing his hand through his now extremely messy hair.

“Cyan Ray was actually about the Apocalypse. Its entire existence was to bring the Apocalypse.”

Seeing the blank and slightly annoyed face of the siblings, Gabzryel endeavoured to position himself better on the table, looking like a cool professor, and explained further:

“According to the files I stumbled upon, this shady group wanted to bring the population down. As we are aware, there is a slight problem with the amount of the population on Earth; we both know that it’s just a question of making housing and farming more efficient and less space invading, and to...”

“Gab? The point?” the siblings interrupted.

“Yes, sorry, so, too much people according to this shady group; now, add to that their personal ambition to bring forth the famous Next Terrian Society, and become sole rulers of Earth. So, they created Project Cyan Ray. They were to create a show in the skies. Back then, people believed a lot in alien invasions, and more religious yet open-minded ones believed that Lucifer was a bad alien, and Jesus a good alien. So, this shady group used it to their advantage. They were going to simulate an international alien invasion. Spaceships and lights in the skies, big explosions, stuff like that. During this time, plenty of occasions to kill a good couple of millions people per country. Then, the ‘voice of God’ would speak to all, in all languages, and request their worship to be saved from the aliens. Then, ‘Jesus’, someone from the shady group, would ‘appear’ and ‘save’ humanity from the ‘Devil/aliens’, and ultimately enslave the surviving population.”

Madzistrale and Tom looked at Gabzryel with raised eyebrows.

“Seriously? Who would be stupid enough to believe that?”

Gabzryel scoffed in derision.

“Quite a few, actually.”

After a quick consideration, the siblings ended up nodding derisively as well.

“Point taken.”

“But, as I’ve said,” Gabzryel continued, “I firmly believe that, back then, Project Cyan Ray was just a big pile of useless paper. Too much publicity, too far-fetched, too costly for such a small group of person. Just seemed to be a big hoax to wrongfully accuse and muddy up the government.”

“What makes you think that it is more useful now?” Tom inquired, curious.

“No one believes in such things now. Everything that happens is always the fault of someone obvious, like the military or the government, according to the majority of the people. So let’s say that there is actually a shady group. They’ve been around for awhile, in the shadows, always getting by without being noticed. The few mistakes they do gets blamed on the military or the government. And slowly, they grow in strength. People of wealthy business somehow gets mixed up, they get more money, more power. Until, in the near future, they are strong enough to act openly. And the biggest occasion they’ll get to diminish the population, and then rule over the survivors, is by bringing the greatest massacre of history: the Apocalypse. Some recent movements even call it the Great Cropping, as in “rooting out the undesirables”. When that’s going to be put into action, who’s going to stand up to these people?”

The siblings looked at him with blank faces. Gabzryel stared back at them expectantly; they finally understood.

“What, us? No way!”

“Why not?” Gabzryel replied, confused. “We’re smart, capable, well-equipped... We already know so much through our own projects and experiments... What can go wrong? They’ll never expect us!”

Tom and Madzistrale rose in bewilderment, and the latter replied incredulously.

“Okay, Gab, usually, you have great ideas, but this one... I think you passed too much time breathing soldering fumes in the last few hours while building your... free-energy thing.”

A little beeper beeped on her belt.

“My cake!!” she exclaimed before rushing out of the basement.

“Look Gab, I just think that logically, no one would bring the Apocalypse; too risky for their own lives. Beside, we’re not that kind of heroes,” Tom replied to Gabzryel, trying to defend his sister’s view.

“Tom, what do you think we’ve been trying to become since we all met?” Gabzryel retorted. “We’re here to prepare and to try to make a difference in the world when no one will.”

Tom sighed, and followed his sister up to the ground floor. Gabzryel stayed behind in the alcove, gazing down to his notebook. His gaze then turned to his dozing Afghan hound, laid on his belly against the floor in a corner.

“They don’t understand how important it is, Loki. We must try.”

Loki rose his pointed muzzle at his master, and answered only with a confused and sleepy gaze.

Chapter 7

- BB -

Ordinary Heroes

“Do you honestly believe in what he just said?” Madzistrale asked her brother, while applying frosting on her cake, her medium-length curly brown hair now encased in a hair net to prevent a strand from falling into her work.

“Why not? He’s had many theories over the years, but never incredulous ones, and always backed up with some proofs.”

“But the Apocalypse...”

“Mad, he’s a genius; geniuses look at the world differently, and what doesn’t match in it, they see it faster and clearer. Clearly, he saw something that doesn’t match what the world should be.”

“I hope you’re right. But I don’t think I’d be ready so soon... will it actually happen in our lifetime? Isn’t it something for the very far future?”

Tom shrugged in indifference; clearly, it didn’t bother him any which way.

Madzistrale sighed and finished decorating her cake. Her brother had good instincts, and she could always count on them. When they met Gabzryel, he was the one that quickly understood their friend’s uniqueness; she understood someone’s emotions, but Tom understood the deeper motives and psyche. With both their understanding of a human’s more complex nature than what was commonly accepted, no one was strange for them; and especially not Gabzryel, despite his eccentricities.

“Can you believe it’s already been eight years since we left our home to come live here in Kansas?” Madzistrale reminisced, looking at her garden through the

kitchen's windows. "Can't say that I miss our winters, though. Between the snow here or the usual 2 meters high of piles of snow we used to get in Québec..."

"I miss even less the arguments we had with our parents; and how they always belittled you for being different than them and their clients," Tom scoffed. "Gab was luckily for us the only client idiotic enough to interest himself in something else than the eternal self-lauding guru-ism of our resort. And we were even more lucky that we understood each other and got away from it all."

Madzistrale sighed again as she wiped her hands.

"I just don't get why he thinks we should be the ones facing off this... Apocalypse thing. I'm already twenty-six, you thirty-one, and we've finally begun to live our own life according to our own ways; I just want a simple life for us, helping people out around us..."

"That's why he thinks it can be us. Who else than us in our village do what we do? Heck, we're out by the docks saving lobsters and oysters, for God's sake. And think how we singlehandedly take care of our homeless gang at us six when our mayor can't lift a finger; you use your plant knowledge so that people don't drive an hour to a hospital for a simple cut... not to mention our Three Kings of Kansas event at Christmas..."

"Don't forget our little ongoing Project! The very important piece of the puzzle!" Gabzryel's voice suddenly intervened.

He entered the room with a pack of files under his arm, and sat at the kitchen island.

"I smelled your cake from the lab, I hope there's a slice reserved for me!"

"No," Madzistrale replied sarcastically, already having cut three slices.

"*Itedakimasu!*" Gabzryel clapped his hands together and thanked her as she set his plate in front of him.

“You know, you guys don’t help my diet when you request to eat cakes at two in the afternoon,” Madzistrale reprimanded them while tapping discontentedly her belly.

“Then don’t eat the cake,” Tom replied, already digging in his serving.

“But it’s delicious...” Madzistrale pouted before taking a bite and sitting down.

“Okay, here’s a few things I dug up to inspire you to follow my suggestion,” Gabzryel interrupted, spreading the files across the counter. “First of all, there is this weird monument in Georgia. Ever heard of it?”

“Nope,” the siblings simultaneously answered, their mouths full.

“Okay... Well, this monument is rather creepy. It has ten guideline engraved in stone, in the eight most common languages, about what the ‘ideal’ society should be. No one knows who build it, the author used a pseudonym, though there are various rumours circulating, inculpating various popular secret societies. Though some of the guidelines are rather innocent, the others are disturbing. Birth control, and more precisely, birth control against ‘unfit’ children; abandon of tradition, faith and ‘petty’ laws; and though innocent in itself, the imposition of one language.”

“One language? How is that dangerous? It would help to get everyone along if they all understood each other...” Madzistrale remarked.

“In itself, it’s not. But there is a saying: ‘United Language, United Fears’. It is easier to implement and spread orders around when everyone understand them.

» But all that is still innocent compared to the first and last command engraved: that humanity is a cancer, and it must be kept permanently under 500 millions individuals.”

Gabzryel let silence greet this last sentence. Madzistrale looked at Tom, silently asking if she heard correctly.

“This monument is justified by some to be guidelines to guide humanity after an inevitable catastrophe. But what catastrophe could possibly wipe out 92 percent of

humanity? How do you think such a ‘catastrophe’ happens? And do any of you honestly believe that such a ‘catastrophe’ will be completely natural?”

Tom and Madzistrale looked at one another with concern; both also instinctively pushed back their halfway finished cake. This was no time to eat.

“They might have planned for things such as asteroids,” Tom suggested in an attempt to find the logic behind it.

“Yes, true. And as we speak, as the world prepares for space colonization, there are talks of bringing asteroids close enough to Earth and the Moon for harvesting their metallurgic resources. At the same time, there is this shadowy group which wants to see 7.5 billions people die to ‘rid’ Earth of a ‘cancer’, while having a getaway plan, as space colonization is no longer science-fiction but reality. I don’t know about you, but I start to doubt any ‘natural’ catastrophes threatening humanity; including asteroids.”

Madzistrale and Tom looked uncertainly at the files. Gabzryel smiled kindly.

“Look guys, I know I’m usually on the optimist side; we all are. But when it comes to the safety of eight billions people, in a world that would rather exterminate a problem than solve it peacefully... And when I see the government and military constantly accused of all the evils, while someone in the shadows play them like fools, and at the same time, creepy guidelines from that same someone that we know nothing about... I don’t want to take risks. No one will help the world; but we already started to. Let’s take it a step further and prepare for the worst. Nothing is lost by that. If it doesn’t happen in our lifetime, we still did some good in the world; we might even pass it down to the next generation if one of you two have kids...”

“Hey!” the siblings ardently stopped him.

“Just saying. Mad seem the likeliest candidate...”

Madzistrale glared even harder, but she subtly blushed, as she knew he was right. Tom smiled mischievously, as he wasn't personally overly fond of the idea of a 'next' generation coming from him.

“We want to be heroes; that's what I like about both of you. We don't care if it's a silly idea, if it's old-fashioned, not proper in a 'modern' world, or that 'ordinary' people can't possibly be heroes. We might not even succeed at hundred percent, or even need these preparations. But we won't look back and say that we haven't done our best. We can be heroes, we have the spine for it, and valuable qualities: I'm the fake mad genius; Tom, you're the logical and best scenario guy; and Mad, you're the empathic and what-feels-right girl, not to mention medical knowledge. Let's be heroes for real. It doesn't require superpowers or suits. It requires caring about the world when no one will. Didn't we already start, with the homeless and the animal kingdom?”

Madzistrale looked excitedly at her brother, urging for his approval. Tom considered Gabzryel's finds for awhile, and his instincts told him there was a high likelihood for the world not being quite right and his friend seeing it better than the siblings.

“Heck, why not,” he finally accepted, to the joy of his sister. “How are you planning to begin, Gab?”

“How? Why, by continuing our Orb Weaver experiments, and do our daily run of help around the city,” Gabzryel enigmatically answered with a corner smile.

Madzistrale and Tom sighed and rolled their eyes, before resuming eating their cake; they knew he wouldn't explain or clarify further.

Tom, meanwhile, browsed quickly through Gabzryel's files while the latter finally began digging in his own untouched cake, and found something.

“What is that?” he asked Gabzryel, pointing to the file's title.

Gabzryel shrugged.

“Don’t know yet. It’s interesting, but still in the realm of ‘rumour’. It’s basically that an underground movement is trying to wake the ‘Sleeping Mother’.”

“Sleeping Beauty?” Madzistrale joked.

“Something in that vein. According to this mysterious movement, they come from a highly royal bloodline, whose origin is a powerful woman, nicknamed ‘The Mother’; and they try to find her tomb, to somehow wake her up. Not only can’t you wake up a dead person, where it gets fuzzy and really over-the-top is who that ‘Mother’ is, and what kind of power she had. Most claim she’s Mary Magdalene, and that she was the true influence behind Christianity, and that this group is descendant of her and Jesus, and should thus rule the world. Absolute nonsense.”

“So why you’re keeping the files, exactly?” Tom asked amusedly, replacing the file in the pile.

“Because some people are idiots and who knows when such a fairytale will surface and be spread as ‘truth’. I’ve got to keep anything remotely society threatening, to fight it. I’ve got tons that are a pile of rubbish,” Gabzryel said in indifference.

“I’m seeing that,” Tom replied, even more amused as he cycled through files names such as: *‘Move To Heaven With Your Third Eye!’*; *‘Aliens Influenced the WWs!’*; *‘Color-Blindness Result From 70s Alien Experiments!’*; *‘The Queen Has A Green Patch!’*; *‘1880’s Mars Invasion Prank Was Created By The Next Terrian Society!’*; and more ludicrous titles. “What makes you trust this Cyan Ray Project, then?”

“Because I got it from the military’s website, not from blogs. And I told you, I do believe it was a hoax,” Gabzryel replied, as if it explained everything.

Tom’s eyebrows rose in annoyance, and he decided to let go of the subject and, instead, finish his cake.

Gabzryel suddenly rose with an ecstatic air, and rushed to the basement door.

“I think I know what went wrong: the wheel’s wire was grounded!”

Tom and Madzistrale realized he was now speaking of his failed free energy experiment that they witnessed beforehand. They waited expectantly for a few minutes, feeling that they knew what would happen. As expected, they heard an angry cry from the basement, and a heavy thud as an object was clearly thrown across the lab. The rest, they didn't hear as they fell into a fit of laughter over Gabzryel's eighth failed attempt at a free-energy machine.

Chapter 8

- AC -

The Council

As Selene, the guardian of the night, moved toward the horizon, its white surface darkened only by a single small spot of dark grey, dawn rose upon Norr Americae. It was a dawn that its citizens believed to finally bring change and hope to their darkened lives, under the new leadership of President Robert Bohm, in office since five weeks.

“The cameras are set up,” a technician informed the group composed of the President, his chiefs and council members, his Counsellor, and the Chief Advisor of Public Relations.

A council member looked nervously around him as the group seated around the vast table, and asked:

“May I know the purpose of this?”

“You’re Chief Jones, right? It’s true that it’s your first meeting since your leave of absence,” Bohm remarked. “I’ve decided to film our meetings for public release.”

Chief Jones’ face grew pale, and he looked at Randall Redspear for clarification; the Counsellor was however paying him no attention.

“You can’t be serious. That’s a major breach of security!”

“We’ll obviously refrain from sensitive subjects; however, past presidents kept their meetings secret, and where did it get the population’s trust? The Civil Uprising, that’s what old ways of doin’ things led to. But what do we have to hide from the public? Nothing. We’ve however everything to gain by finally providin’

transparency in the deeper workings of politics. That'll greatly prevent mistrust and conspiracy feelings within the population whom are expecting to trust us.”

Chief Jones could only stare back in shock. He opened his mouth, but decided against it, and sat down without words.

Quickly, the room was filled with chats, reunions talks; after a few minutes, Randall Redsphear cleared his throat.

“It’s a beautiful morning, ladies and gentlemen, let’s not waste it,” the Counsellor’s calm but direct voice appeased the chatter in the room. Everyone stopped at once; they knew better than to talk over Bohm’s strange but powerful right-hand man. “We won the election, we must now uphold our promises. First of all, how is the self-defense distribution centers going?”

One of the chief spoke with visible uneasiness:

“Very well, sir. The number of distribution centers has grown three percent within the last four weeks after your orders, and we’ve already seen a rise of fifteen percent in sales.”

“Very good; keep it going. A population that owns its own safety within its own hands is a safe and satisfied one.”

“Indeed,” President Bohm chimed. “Now, Mr. Solomon, I gather that you studied the public reports that my council gave you; what do you suggest as the next improvement?”

Abraham Solomon met the gaze of Randall, and as the latter gave a discreet nod, he began:

“Well, Mr. President, you have several states in recession. It is not only bad economically, but a threat to the popularity of your newly elected party. People voted for you because you promised to understand their struggle; something must then be done about it. There are quite staggering amounts of potential middle-class families, whom are burdened by recession and high cost of living, so we should target them. I suggest that we slowly start by enforcing a tariff ceiling on the cost

of certain necessities, such as food and rent, and force the participating parties to lower the fees back to a more reasonable reach for the population. A simple five percent each trimester would greatly help against the recession. We should also establish a basic plan for the lower class, say two hundred dollars each week, for starters. Most of these people live in existing shelters, so that additional money will cover their food, and perhaps more. We have to try and get the low class up living and buying.”

“Then work on it,” Bohm ordered the council.

“Mr. President, this is impossible to implement,” Chief Jones protested. “Lower the income and the food tariffs, and we have no revenue. Especially something as drastic as five percent each trimester. As for the basic plan, it is downright far-fetched.”

“How come?” Randall coldly intervened.

“We simply do not have enough money to spare. The present state of the economy cannot allow such drastic changes; we already owe trillions in debt to Evropa and Zhongguo.”

“Following my suggestion will require sacrifices, a change in our budget distribution, and borrowing from investors; but it will make the economy climb back up in the long term. We will be able to pay our debts. What the economy needs is Americani buying again; no one buys right now, because no one has any money left,” Abraham replied.

“It’s simply impossible; you of all people should know it, you studied Economy,” Jones argued.

“Yes; and there’s a difference between the numbers written on paper, and actual life. You self-called economists are so mind-set on statistics, you lack the people’s view. Between spending the leftover hundred dollar bill at the end of the week, or accumulating it to pay for the rent when their salary will fail or when they’ll lose their jobs, the people accumulate money, they don’t spend it as the numbers on

papers say that they should. Give them more money, especially assured money, and they'll start to spend again and it will compensate.”

“And I tell you it's a bad strategy!”

“Very well; what do you suggest?” Randall challenged the council chief, while Bohm laid back in his chair, fingertips together, overlooking the debate in a detached manner.

“We start to build more industries here, in Norr Americae. We create new jobs, and those jobs rebuild economy.”

Randall scoffed, and he smiled in derision:

“And that is why no one voted for your party, Jones. Mr. President, building enough industries here in Norr Americae to accommodate enough jobs will require precious billions of dollars...”

“... and not only will you have to fight against our present debt, you'll need to repay all those billions that you lost building those industries, including the work force,” Abraham added; Randall's eyes flushed briefly in anger at such an interruption, before cooling down. “Such a process may take ten years, if not more, before the economy balance out, just balance out, mind you, not even yet climb up. And during these times, the population not only gets poorer, but lose trust in your party, as it does exactly what all other parties did for the last thirty years. Not only that, but Zhongguo has already all the installations required, and it costs them almost nothing. If we sell items built here in Uni-states, the price will have to be high to compensate for the debt it costed; products from Zhongguo cost near to nothing. The purpose here is to get the population buying. When survival is targeted, they don't care if what they buy is made in the Uni-states or in Zhongguo; as long as they can finally buy food, clothing, and necessities. Take these same billions that you were going to spend in industries, and give it to the population. Industries are already up and running in Zhongguo, they supply us. The money that the population receive finally go at buying. Economy climbs in less than five years. Not by much, but it climbs. And we have a bonus: they trust your party. And they will vote for you or your party again.”

“I have plenty of investors ready to lend money, as long as they have proof that they will get the money back one way or another,” Randall continued, interrupting Jones as the latter started to speak. “They do not trust politics, but I convinced them of your vision and your good intentions, Mr. President. Should you give the word, they will help you.”

“But it’s impossible!” Jones finally intervened.

“Jones, their plan is solid,” Bohm replied coldly, sitting back straight in his chair, and leaning against the table edge, staring at the chief. “Unless you come up with an even stronger plan, as quick and efficient, yes, I’m leanin’ toward accepting what I’m hearin’ from Mr. Solomon and Mr. Redsphear.”

“And to find money, we mustn’t forget that half of the council here has also exorbitant salaries, Mr. President,” Randall coldly added.

To his words, the council members froze. Bohm surveyed them, slightly confused as to where his Counsellor was going with it.

“Mr President, when we started this party, it was not to make Americae great and rich, it was to help the abandoned population, abandoned by such a concept. You, myself, and Mr. Solomon here have all created this out of charity. Our past businesses, built and paid by the population, helped us live well; but now, we have everything that these citizens don’t have: a fully paid house, good food, enough money to live for decennial. So do we truly need such continuous high salaries? Isn’t it charitable to give back to the population what it helped us obtain? When we both started, we denied such authoritarian concept that is the elite. We quite literally work here as volunteers, to help the population when no other governments did. Mr. Solomon here, highly qualified, has followed the same path of charity. But here I see the council members, having salaries that are almost five times higher than yours, Mr. President, for a smaller job... I believe it quite unfair, and against our oath to be equal to the citizens. Especially when my own Council has hundreds of highly qualified candidates that would work as efficiently, if not better, for a tenth of what this Council earns.”

The faces of the council members were livid white. Randall smiled at them, and Abraham could see the predatorial menace oozing from the old man's icy eyes.

Bohm also smiled, and laid back in his chair, staring at the members.

“Well said, Mr. Redsphear. It's true that such salaries are against our Constitution, against my principles and those of my party. In any case that some of you forgot, I was born and raised in a state afflicted by recession and poverty. I know, and trust me, I know, how life was cruel and hard. I became President to fix the same lives across Uni-states than what was mine, as I wished that a President could have done the same with my family. Redsphear and Solomon's words rings truly deep within my soul.

» From this day forth...” and his voice rose higher to be heard by the camera filming the meeting, “... your salary will be cut of sixty percent for the first year. That'll give you time to adjust yourselves. Next year, you'll earn the same salary, like all of us, we who actually work to serve Americae, not rule it. The money gained from those cuts will join those of Randall's investors, and we'll implement Solomon's plan of food and rent tariff cuts, as well as the assured money plan for the poor. It'll require sacrifice, and trust, and better relations with Zhongguo; but the welfare of the population is worth all of that.

» Mr. Redsphear, if you can contact your investors, you can convey my personal assurance that their help will be rewarded.”

“It will be done, Mr. President,” Randall nodded.

Bohm turned to the silent council members, his gaze unforgiving despite his calm demeanour.

“All of you are ordered to work with Mr. Solomon to implement his plan. I give him full responsibility of this project, and that means that you follow his every order. Those of you that won't comply within the first trimester will be fired, and there are plenty of young and highly qualified volunteers that'll gladly replace you. This is my first Directive.”

A stunned silence greeted the President's order. Abraham smiled discreetly despite himself; he was now within the highest circle of the elite.

“Anything else?” Bohm asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Randall acknowledged. “There are a few corporations tied to the previous governments that we should break relations with. I will give the full list when the reports are entered, but these corporations often influenced past governments, and we can't allow that in yours. If we are to be a people's party, we mustn't allow bribery and greed-oriented influences from shady corporations. The transition will be hard, but my people is working at creating a pure AAP system that will take care of some products or services given by these corporations. I will go into details in another meeting when I will have an absolute answer and solution.

» And as we preciously discussed, I'm having my final meeting with the Gnasci Convention in relation to the gradual demilitarization of Americae alongside the other eleven other Imperial Gnascis to a more reasonable size; once again, that will mean freeing up the military budget toward a more economical use.”

“Perfect; I'll let you take care of that,” Bohm approved. He surveyed the room, and as no one spoke, he rose. “This meeting is complete. I suggest that for the good of the people, we all start workin' hard right away, as we've done for the last five weeks. Good day to all.”

The rest of the members rose, and all shot furious gazes at Randall and Abraham, but all quickly left the room. Bohm shook the hand of his Counsellor and Chief Advisor and left with them, asking for in-depth details upon his role in the new plan. The camera shut off, and in the operative room, a copy was made to be edited and released for the population, to reveal the new AAP Plan.

The news spread like wildfire, exciting the hopeless citizens, who finally saw a light pierce their black lives. The name of AAP or President Robert Bohm was on everyone's lips, and the few who clung to opposing parties started to be seen as troublemakers. A new era seemed to poke through the mist...

Chapter 9

- AC -

First Gear In Motion

Abraham opened the door leading to one of the Capitoline offices, now his since two weeks. Closing it behind him by precaution, he then ventured inside the Renaissance-inspired room. The windows flooded the office with sunlight; each day, Abraham felt like he walked into a royal living room. Feeling that the afternoon's hot rays were already settling in the office, he checked his watch to verify: '19:45'.

"That's not right," he thought out loud, tapping his watch in a futile attempt to reset the hands to the correct time.

"Don't ever interrupt me again when I'm talking!"

Abraham jumped in surprise upon hearing Randall's voice behind him. He was used to bullies sneaking up behind him, but Randall sneaking behind him was a different (and dangerous) feeling. He turned to face Randall, and found him seated in one of the office's couches. Despite his calm voice, Randall was visibly angry, his icy eyes staring deep into Abraham's.

"In my world, a man that does this is considered disrespectful and arrogant," Randall continued.

Despite his age and rank, Abraham felt small beneath the fire behind the old man's glare. One part of his mind admired such a fire, while the other part urged him to choose his words carefully.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Redsphear, but Jones' stupidity got to my nerves, and I wasn't sure that President Bohm fully understood our plan. It's his duty to listen to all sides, but Jones' lack of ambition was threatening the future of your great endeavor. I'm

truly sorry if I appeared disrespectful; I only wanted to show all the benefits of the plan right away, before Jones instilled any fatal doubt within the President.”

Randall’s glare softened, and he continued to overlook Abraham for a few seconds, saying nothing, before rising with a satisfied expression. He tapped lightly the shoulder of Abraham.

“I understand. Take care that it doesn’t happen again.”

“I’m a psychologist, sir. I know how to recognize and deal with inadequacy; I’m certainly not about to imitate such behaviors. And when I see doubt in someone’s mind, especially when it comes to a crucial project, it’s my duty to fight the doubt,” Abraham proudly retorted.

He breathed more calmly as Randall smiled.

“You certainly have confidence, I will give you that,” Randall conceded. “Many have abused in the past from such confidence; but in your case, such leadership will be essential.”

The old man crossed his arms and glanced at the reports that Abraham had left laying on his desk

“What you mentioned, lowering the living cost by five percent each trimester... How does it help our cause?” he asked.

“I told you, sir, when you recruited me. Do a nice gesture for the population, even if it cost you more in the beginning, and you’ll guarantee yourself trust and devotion. And in the long term, control,” Abraham explained.

“Speaking of control, how far can we push your plan?” Randall asked, leaning against the desk’s edge.

Abraham went to sit behind his desk, and thought quickly.

“It depends on what you want to achieve, sir.”

Randall gave him a meaningful smile.

“What else do you and I wish to accomplish?”

“For that, we needed the help of the corporations you told the council that you’re breaking links with,” Abraham noted.

“Only officially. Some of them have been already exposed for too long, and we need to keep with the old plan. The population have been warned against corporations for ages, direct with our orders. We must follow in that path. The new government must appear to be free from direct links with them if we want the popularity to be with us, and against the old members of the old governments.”

Abraham nodded, and he rose, his mind flying to examine the possibilities.

“Well, we need to keep the dependence factor strong,” he began, pacing the office. “Not just fuel. We need to strike the balance between freedom and dependence. The food and living cost must remain high, and the assured income must remain low. Just enough to give some leeway to the population, but not enough so that they can fully get out of their situation. Such a dependence will keep the population glued to the new government, despite any unhappy thoughts. Without our government, they’ll lose the income, and return to homelessness and starvation; with it, they willingly become your pawns. They don’t get all that they want, but they get enough to hope that it will get better from now on.

» Corporations will need to stay, though, although, as you said, under a different name and concept. Dependence is once again essential. We’ll need to basically move every industries to Zhongguo, and make the population understand that such an action will reduce the cost of living, as production over Zhongguo will cost nothing because of their existing labor. Creating home or national businesses will be harder and less profiting to the population, leaving them no choice but to accept oversea products (and thus augmenting once again their dependencies). Zhongguo will however become the next and biggest country in the world, economically wise. That may or may not be a flaw to the plan, but if it is, we can build safeguards.”

“It won’t be a flaw; it will on the contrary serve the plan very well in the future,” Randall assured him.

“Good. Next,” Abraham continued, “competition is the biggest issue. We’ll need to ensure that no other party can compete with us. It’ll be harder to implement, but if previous controversies exist about these parties, it’ll be easy to simply push them to downfall. What it leads to, is that people will trust no one else because of those controversies. If you look at one of the past presidential races, the population voted for someone they would have never voted for, only because the opposing party (armed with a better speech, better promises and much better reputation) was afflicted with privacy controversies.

» So, we need to take any opponents away, but with the population’s consent. They must themselves wish us to take down any old parties. For that, the media will play an essential role. In addition to take down old parties, you could secretly build another one, unlinked officially to you, yet run, behind the curtains, by you. Such an action will make you less suspicious to the population, who will be offered once more different choices of parties, despite all of them being basically the same. To gain more votes, you make sure all the parties are ‘run’ with real ‘people of the people’.”

“Like we started,” Randall acknowledged.

“Exactly. From there, unseen variables will obviously emerge, but the end result will be the same: complete control of the population, and this, brought on by their own free will.”

“Excellent,” Randall beamed. “Now, that is all, of course, hypothetical?”

Abraham smiled meaningfully.

“Yes, of course, sir.”

“Good,” Randall replied, amused. “I think it might be time...”

“Time?”

“Third office at the right, fifth floor, come right away,” Randall said out loud, to no one in particular. Abraham looked at him, confused, but he said nothing and didn’t let it show in his face.

“Here is what I need you to do,” Randall resumed to Abraham. “There are a few in the council that smell trouble to our government. We need to take them out right away.”

“Uprooting the weed? About time, if you ask me,” Abraham agreed. “I’ll dig some dirt about them, and leak them through the media.”

“In a few days’ time, we will make another meeting, and expose these controversies publicly, and show that we won’t tolerate old systems,” Randall added.

“Very good, sir,” Abraham smiled. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you. They will need to be replaced; I have candidates in my own council. I will let you choose which ones you deem best suited.”

“Don’t you have your own favorites, sir?” Abraham wondered.

“Yes; but let’s just say that this first mission is your test,” Randall enigmatically replied.

Abraham frowned, puzzled, but he didn’t pushed the matter any further. Things would be revealed at their own pace; all he needed to do was to prove he belonged to Randall’s world.

“Very well, sir,” he acknowledged.

A knock was heard at Abraham’s office door, and Randall invited the newcomer to enter. Abraham rose to his feet, unconsciously straightening his shirt and his jacket, and requiring every drop of his self-control to avoid gaping at the newcomer. A tall lean woman in her early thirties walked gracefully into the office despite her four inches high heels, her cream tailored dress showcasing her trained body, her platinum blond hair tied into an elegant bun, exposing her delicate chiseled cheekbones. Her turquoise eyes quickly met Randall’s in a professional manner, but they then stared straight into Abraham’s, and never departed. Abraham, still not taking his eyes off the apparition, as if he didn’t want to lose one glance, went around his desk to meet her. She glanced quickly at his full frame

before looking back into his eyes, a small admiring smile making its way to her lips. When they came close enough, they both stopped in a last attempt of self-control.

Randall put his hand lightly upon the woman's back, and introduced her:

“Ysadora, this is Abraham Solomon, the new Public Relation manager I told you about; Abraham, this is Ysadora Dawn, my bodyguard. In any case people around here don't like you and you are to find yourself into dangerous waters, call her. She is the best one could wish for.”

Abraham took Ysadora's extended hand, and gave it a small but delicate kiss, his eyes never leaving hers.

“A pleasure to meet you, Miss Dawn.”

She blushed, though he could see that she was trying her best to hide it.

“The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Solomon. It takes a genius to be praised by Randall,” she replied, smiling broadly.

“I believe the praise should be to you. A woman whom is the best bodyguard one could wish for is no small feat.”

“I trained with the best of the best,” she acknowledged.

Both then kept at looking at one another, neither saying any more words, partly because neither knew what else to say and partly because had they started to say something, it would have gone out inappropriate at such an early stage. Randall, amused, discreetly cleared his throat. Abraham and Ysadora jumped out of their hypnotic stare, and stood nervously, trying to find a way to end the conversation naturally.

“Well, I should get back to... umm... well, make some researches on council members to.. well, umm... you know...” Abraham babbled, part of him surprised at this unusual behaviour from his normally controlled state.

“There are some old council members that are starting to make unwanted noise, so I asked Abraham to find suitable replacements,” Randall explained to Ysadora, finishing Abraham’s sentence.

“Ah, good. It was time to see some changes in the Capitoline,” Ysadora chipped in, smiling brightly.

Abraham bowed slightly at her compliment, and feeling that Randall was uncomfortable by their silent staring, he kissed once more quickly Ysadora’s hand as a goodbye, and retreated back behind his desk.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, Miss Dawn, and I’ll indeed call you if I need your service. Mr. Redsphear, you should start to see new recruits very soon.”

“Excellent,” Randall acknowledged. “We will leave you to it.”

After Ysadora shone one last beaming smile to Abraham, they left the office. Abraham looked back at them, his mind filled with thoughts other than the mission given to him, for the first time since countless years.

As Randall was speaking to a secretary, Ysadora busied herself to steady her racing heartbeats and her thoughts. Within the typical council members that surrounded her life, she did not expect this Solomon to stand out from the herd. He looked perfectly the thirty-seven years that his resume registered, not too young, not too old, good-looking, the type she often met as the charming heads of distinguished businesses. His dark brown hair were impeccably combed to the sides, showing off his daily discipline, and his blue eyes met others’ in a polite yet firm manner, without diverting, unlike so many others. And the unusually old-fashioned manner that he had welcomed her, straight out of the chivalry codes of conduct of old times...

She was no stranger to attraction, for she often used such a weapon; but the feeling she had now experienced was different, powerful, and new to her.

But she couldn't let herself be controlled by such emotions, and she certainly could not let Randall see its effects. He needed her usual cool-headedness, especially now more than ever. Her mental training kicked in, and she steadied herself before Randall finished his call. When he turned to her, she was professional as always, and she dutifully waited for him to walk down the stairs.

“So, what do you think of him?” Randall inquired.

“Mr. Solomon?”

“Yes. I know for a fact that he knows what we are up to, yet he still wants to play the game. You were right to say that someone out there would fit our needs.”

Ysadora scoffed.

“I can see why your council chose him for the post of Public Relations. He is charming, polite, and confident; perfect attributes to lure people to his plans. But in all honesty, is he reliable for our need? He seems overly confident and ambitious.”

“His ambitions, according to his profile, is to serve a cause that will help shape the world as he wish it to be. I read his profile, and I believe he is on the contrary perfect. And quite frankly, a polite yet confident man is more honourable than a spineless wimp with no individual thoughts. Do you know that just today, he singlehandedly won a debate against a dozen council members, and persuaded Bohm to follow his plan?”

Ysadora noted with amusement Randall's passionate and excited tone as he praised Abraham.

“My thoughts on the matter is limited by my insufficient knowledge of him. Perhaps with more time and more knowledge, I will share your fascination. For the moment, I would suggest that you wait before letting him in into our scheme. He may be a spy,” she prudently advised.

Randall smiled at her precautions. Ysadora looked away from his icy eyes, suddenly hating the way he always seemed to grasp what people tried to keep hidden; she felt that her still shaken heartbeats were misleading him away from her calculative thoughts.

“Of course, I will wait. Time will show his weaknesses, and any hidden agendas,” he reassured her.

Upon that, he left her side to join one of his council member who was waiting for him in the Capitoline’s hall.

Ysadora watched him leave, then she made a call to her assistant.

“Bring me the files on Abraham Solomon; I will be in my office.”

Time to know the newcomer, she thought.

Chapter 10

- BD -

A Fight of Kindness

“You want what?!” Bruno looked on from sharpening his latest work with amusement as his two unusual friends sat across his workshop table.

“A sedikuchi! Well, a pair of sedikuchi,” Madzistrale clarified.

“Sure thing, would you like fries with that?” Bruno replied.

“No, no, I’m talking about a sedikuchi!”

“Repeating it louder won’t give it any more sense,” Bruno retorted annoyingly, still grasping the concept as he refrained from reminding them that they were in a blacksmith shop.

“You know, sedikuchi, the Indian version of the Philippine’s yantok!”

“Yantok? I still don’t know what you’re talking about. Is that a new kind of jalapeno or something?”

“No, no, the yantok... Urgh...” Madzistrale gave up, then pouted. “Fine! I wanted to name them otherwise but you obviously don’t know them.... I want a pair of wooden sticks.”

“Sticks?” Bruno repeated slowly, silently refraining from a facepalm.

“Yeah! But you know... cool ones.”

“Cool sticks... Okay... Anything else you might want to expand upon? Like... a hidden blade, or... you know... something more complex than a... stick?”

“Nope. Make a cool pair of sticks that can make our enemies think twice,” Madzistrale explained with pride.

Bruno laughed as he set down his sharpener.

“Now you lost me; you went from sticks to enemies.”

“Gab’s idea. He wants to prepare for an eventual conflict,” Tom clarified.

“And I don’t want to hurt someone when that’ll happen, just to scare them, that’s all,” Madzistrale added.

“You guys will have to let me in on that whole conflict thing; though I don’t blame Gabi for thinking about something like that, with everything going on...” Bruno sighed. He looked around his shop, thinking, then rose, walked to one of his shelf and gently picked up one of his work. He handed it to the siblings. “But wouldn’t something like that be more suited to what you’re suggesting? I know how fond you are of Japanese culture because of your upbringings, so this might suit you more. It’s an *iaito* wakizashi, for practice; it was traditionally worn inside homes as a defensive weapon, more mobile and suited to close-quarters than their katanas.”

Madzistrale’s eyes gleamed at the sight of the short ornate curved sword that was handed to them, and she looked excitedly at her brother. Tom nodded his approval, so she rose and gently took it with both hands. Bruno swallowed in doubt, and he bit his lips; he loved his friends, but leaving a clumsy Madzistrale in a steampunk party dress with even a blunt weapon was a recipe for disaster.

To his surprise, however, she masterfully unsheathed it in the traditional way and immediately began some iaido choreography with it.

“Wow, you know some moves?!” Bruno looked astoundingly; Madzistrale’s usual clumsiness seemed to have disappeared as she carefully moved around with the wakizashi.

However, Madzistrale blushed, and looking almost ashamed, she sheathed the sword and placed it delicately on the table.

“Not really... just some very basic stuff; I didn’t even really trained at all... I just liked the look and the meaning behind the real deal...”

Tom said nothing, except for a sad smile. Bruno immediately regretted his words. He knew their childhood hadn't been that cheerful and carefree, and he knew through Tom that they did actually underwent physical training that couldn't even be counted as a real one. All for putting up a front within their family's simile-Zen resort back in their Quebecois home.

He sighed just as sadly as Tom's smile was; it was a shame, because for once, he actually saw Madzistrale being more agile than usual... as if her daily clumsiness was a front she put on to forget, and most of all, negate people's expectations about her.

"So one pair, or two?" Bruno finally asked. "I imagine you wanted sticks as well, Tom?"

"Yep."

"We want to smack some sense into future enemies' heads; it's hard to do so with something sharp," Madzistrale explained, smiling mischievously.

Bruno laughed at the imaginary scene of the two siblings running after some nefarious individuals, waving a stick around, and the individuals having a children's comics-like bump on the head.

"Alright, give me some time, then. I'll do my best to make two pairs of cool sticks. Did you guys had anything in mind for the style, colors, type, etc?"

"Nope, surprise us," Tom said.

"Alright," Bruno gave up. He then looked at the siblings. "So what exactly is Gabi worried about?"

The siblings shrugged, uneasy.

"That a war is coming; he kinda has a point with all the recent civil unrests and some less-than-ideal breaches of rights. And since we have an insight of what might happen because of our little hobby project, we figured we might as well prepare a little bit in some aspects," Tom explained.

“But I don’t think we’d need to fight like before,” Madzistrale intervened. “I do think the last century united us more deeply than what people expected, with worldwide communications allowing so many cultures to share together their ideals and their common grounds. That’s also what Gab is doing on his side, exploring being in everyone’s shoes to better understand what to do when the time he foresees will come.”

Madzistrale blushed and instinctively grasped the fabric near her neck; Bruno couldn’t help but see the chain around her neck and the cross shape beneath her top.

“And I know it’s idiotic to think that, but I believe the next war might be kinder than everyone expects. If so, we’ll need kind weapons, kind words. A way to tap someone on the head and tell them ‘wait a sec, we’re on the same side, we’re not what *they* tell us we are’. You can’t do that with a knife, a gun, hatred, drones, and what-not. Well...” she sifted uneasily, “that’s the kind of fight I want to lead. One of kindness begetting kindness. Surely it’s no longer an impossibility, with everyone now finally knowing each other even if they’re miles and poles apart.”

Bruno and Tom smiled.

“You sound just like the heroes in *seinen* animes,” Bruno teased her.

“Oye!” Madzistrale blushed, her dark eyes flaring.

“I mean that as a compliment; you always ended up making a reality out of the stories we were raised on. No one believed in Santa Claus until some weird friends and siblings, at Christmas, ended up making an entire neighborhood free of worries, for every year since their arrival,” Bruno gave them a wink.

He stretched his hands and smiled, his mind already looking at sources of inspiration around his workshops.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make you guys the coolest pair of sticks you haven’t seen.” He paused, “wait, doesn’t Gabi want one?”

“He can’t, because of his condition. Any excessive exercise might trigger it off, so he has to take it easy,” Tom explained.

“Oh right... I keep forgetting, he always looks so motivated,” Bruno’s eyes’ saddened at the thought.

“To him, every day is precious, so he enjoys them to the fullest,” Madzistrale reassured him, even though she smiled just as sadly.

As they were about to leave his shop, Bruno called out to them from behind his workplace:

“By the way, they’re simply called bastion, you know? As in the English variant of your French’s baton? Just saying... that would have been way more comprehensible than your sadakacha and yatok-something.”

The siblings laughed, Madzistrale then pulling out her tongue in a grimace to her friend.

**

As they walked home, Tom looked at his sister, and suddenly grasped her into his side and gave a peck on her cheek.

Madzistrale giggled;

“What was that for?”

“Nothing. I simply love my self-proclaimed idiotic sister; she’s much wiser than I.”

“Stop it,” Madzistrale squirmed. She however smiled gratefully at her brother, and returned the peck. “Let’s just hope it doesn’t ever happen, the time where we would need to fight such a war. I still haven’t met my soulmate and built my family...”

Tom smiled softly and continued to nestle his sister under his arm.

“Don’t worry. Besides, I’ll always protect you. That’s *my* job.”

“Oye, don’t say that! You have to think about your future wife too!”

Tom scoffed and gestured around.

“There would need to actually exist some decent women without a power-freak attitude and princess lifestyle where the slightest amount of dirt will make them faint...”

Madzistrale blew him a raspberry and hugged him tightly.

“You’ll find her, just as I’ll find mine. Let’s trust in the Big Boss’ ways of doing things,” she firmly stated, grasping once again the cross beneath her fabric.

Tom smiled, and as they continued walking, he made a silent wish that he kept to himself.

Chapter 11

- AD -

Project Vymana

A classic Evropan car, shiny black with tasteful accents of gold around the frame, slowed down upon approaching a heavily guarded barricade. A soldier approached the halted car, his assault rifle at the ready, his black military uniform covering him completely, and motioned the driver to come out.

The door opened, and a slender old man stepped out, his icy eyes reflecting the cold, almost sterile feeling of the snow-covered mountainous area. The guard stepped back in surprise, and letting his gun fall to his side, immediately saluted then bowed.

“Mr. Redspear, please forgive me for this rude welcome. I did not expect your visit.”

“Don’t be silly. Security is of a paramount importance no matter who’s visiting. You may be at ease,” Randall ordered the soldier.

The soldier somewhat relaxed, then looked at Randall, unsure how to proceed.

“Well? Aren’t you going to search the vehicle?” Randall exasperatedly said. “I won’t appreciate you slacking off security procedures.”

“Yes... Yes, sir!”

Randall sighed, and while waiting, looked at the mountain range spreading all around him, shielding whatever laid beyond the barricade from outside curiosity. A road large enough to accommodate the incessant traffic of heavy trucks, their beddings filled with rocks, ran parallel right beside a smaller, sinuous, and at times treacherous, road. That small road was the only way in for non-workers; and only the most courageous ones would dare to even think of driving through.

Here, isolated from the comfort of the outside world, laid the world's foremost magnetite open-pit mine... or so was the official facade.

“All clear, Mr. Redsphear,” the soldier nervously announced, stepping back.

Without a word, Randall entered his car, and the soldier signaled the remaining guards to open the barricade. Randall followed the sinuous road, slowly encompassed on both sides by carved cliffs through one of the mountains. Brighter light ahead announced Randall that he was arriving at his destination, and within a few more hundred meters, the walls of stones stopped abruptly, and before him laid a breathtaking scene. The mine spanned nearly three kilometers wide, and delved six hundred meters below the surface, the monstrous industrial machines working the rocks and soil looking tiny in comparison. Strips of earth were ripped in concentric circles, an eternal fine smog enveloped the scene, the dirt particles kept in stasis by the mountain shields and build-up localized pressure.

Randall stopped at the nearest building, where the road ended at a fence that protected the foolish wanderer from an eight hundreds meters deep cliff. Upon getting out of the car, the cold pierced through his body; but it was nothing compared to the deafening sound of the mine that hit Randall, and he fought the desire to cover his ears. Ysadora had already scolded him many times for coming here without bodyguards in an isolated military-owned facility, that he wished at least to counter her scoldings by being on constant alert.

More guards ran to intercept him, and in the rear, he recognized the man he wanted to see. Nonchalantly raising his hands to show he was unarmed, he was nonetheless relieved to hear a deep grumpy voice rise above the noise.

“At ease, soldiers; let him through.”

The soldiers immediately settled on each side of Randall, forming a line; a tall and heavily built man walked to him, his thick eyebrows, bushy mustache, square features, and deep set brown eyes giving him a distinctive authority figure. He firmly shook Randall's hands, and his grave voice boomed, his Schwyzryvan accent making his words sounds guttural:

“Mister Randall Redsphear. You are a madman to come here dressed as a city boy. I’m tempted to lengthen my welcome to give you a good lesson about respecting your environment.”

“Maybe I was expecting you to cut to the chase, Feldmarschall Teiwas. You know that I don’t like to waste time.”

“I know, I know. Follow me,” Teiwas smirked, leading Randall into the building.

Setting down a steaming cup of coffee in front of Randall, Teiwas sat down across the table, and stared down at the old man.

“So. What does this infamous visit mean, Randall?”

“What do you think?” Randall retorted.

“Well... you’ll be glad to learn that this year, we’ve increased sixfold our magnetite output; our current yield is eleven metric tons...”

“You know very well I’m talking about Project Vymana,” Randall cut sharply.

Teiwas laughed.

“Impatient as ever. I imagine you don’t want to drink my coffee, and would rather like to go down to the hangar?”

“I invested in it, and I pay all of you for that. So yes, I expect to see the result of my investment,” Randall coldly replied.

Teiwas sighed, and rose, Randall following.

“Come with me, then.”

Randall stepped to the back door leading to the mine’s site, but a strong hand held him back. Suddenly, a thick woolen coat was thrown around him, and Teiwas stepped in front to open the door, smiling widely.

“Don’t want my investor to die from bronchitis,” he smirked.

Randall glared at him, and Teiwas laughed, leading him to a white camouflaged Willy.

The vehicle began the descent of the six hundred meters depth of the mine, and Randall looked at the massive operation running all around. There was no question as to why the site was officially off-limits: it was a playing ground for some of the biggest and most monstrous-sized machines ever created. Bucket-wheeled excavators the length of a dozen industry-sized tractors dug into the earth as if it was flour. A machine that Randall recognized as a vibrating hammer would simply lay down its gigantic hammer on top of a boulder, and within seconds of faster-than-the-eye vibrations, the boulder would fall apart. A different kind of excavator, this one like a monstrous drill, flew right into the mountain flank, leaving afterwards an unbelievable sight of a hundred meter wide hole into the granite wall. Dust and particles covered the scene with a permanent fog, and the sun barely pierced through it, leaving the mine in a perpetual icy setting.

“Here we are,” Teiwas announced after a few minutes of driving, passing through a fence flanked with danger warning signs.

Driving around a looming bucket-wheel excavator, mercifully shut down, the Willy stopped before a towering granite flank. Teiwas pushed a button on the dashboard, and then swept the radio button, as if looking for a station. But instead, after some time, the granite wall slid inward, a two-hundred meter wide stone door, and Teiwas drove through, the door sliding back to a smooth surface once the vehicle disappeared.

The car stopped, and Randall climbed out, looking around the massive hangar as lights turned on from the hidden sensors activating from their arrival.

“There it is, as per your orders. An unprecedented collaboration between the Twelve Imperial Gnasci: Project Vymana,” Teiwas presented.

Randall looked upon the innumerable rows of military weapons spreading before him into the darkness of the caverns dug deep beneath the mountains. Planes, tanks, ships, submarines, artillery, cannons; even experimental vehicles and weapons that Randall had never bothered to look into, but knew nevertheless of their existence.

“Is it completed?” he asked.

“No. I’d say that this still represent merely sixty percent,” Teiwas calculated.

“I do hope no one knows of it,” Randall mused, looking at the enormity of the project.

“The Gnasci Convention forbade its disclosure, and the whole process has been done in the utmost secrecy. Even if done for a just cause, no government wants to officially announce how or to where it got rid of most of its military.”

“How is the transport executed?”

“At the other end of the mountain range, through White Peak. A similar doorway to the one we’ve just taken has been created there as well, and the tunnel links to here. Along the way, seventeen doors have been prepared, in the event that the main gate is breached and the tunnel discovered,” Teiwas explained, his usually expressive face now showing an enigmatic expression. “The rest of the transport executed by the individual Gnasci are done via their own private tunnels and subways. Sometime, they are forced to stage an accident or a failure, in order to close the roads to the public.”

“Any leaks?” Randall asked.

“None so far. Beside, my ears have reached rumours about leaks being swiftly dealt with by someone other than the military,” Teiwas said, his eyes gleaming mysteriously as he looked at Randall.

Randall merely smirked at the hidden meaning.

“Then I trust the remaining forty percent will be here in a timely delay?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s all I need to see,” Randall said, walking back to the Willy, Teiwas following.

“It still feels impossible to think that the Twelve Imperial Gnasci have accepted to give up their military powers, and to keep only what they need to protect themselves. What kind of man are you to request from the higher-ups such a titanic prowess?” Teiwas asked as they drove back up the mine.

“I merely pointed out the uselessness of such a power in the future to come,” Randall simply replied.

“Still... It makes me nervous,” Teiwas said, his enigmatic face still contrasting with his earlier cheerfulness.

“You’re an old dog that knows only one trick, Feldmarschall,” Randall retorted. “You lack the finesse to understand the deeper levels of war and control.”

“Maybe,” Teiwas conceded. “And to think you chose Schwyryva’s mountain range to hide all that armada. Don’t you have mountains back at your Uni-states?”

“The citizens have been made aware that such military hideouts existed, as per the purpose of our plans. But no one bothers about Schwyryva, even though the most powerful entities of power are located here. And it is after all an untouchable neutral ground.”

Teiwas sighed.

“Your war is too complex, Randall. Me, I prefer the good old-fashioned way. Demonstration of power, and adequate use of it.”

“As I’ve said: an old dog with an old trick,” Randall smirked.

Teiwas smiled in return.

“Sometime, the old trick is the best one. Don’t fix what is not broken, as you Americani say.”

Randall merely kept smirking. The Willy returned to the entry building, and the two men got out.

“A cup of coffee to warm you up, Randall?” Teiwas suggested.

“No thank you,” Randall said, sliding off the heavy cloak and handing it back to the Feldmarschall. “Keep up the good work; as I’ve said before, I will make sure to generously repay your loyalty.”

“And always trust in a Feldmarschall’s loyalty, Randall Redsphear,” Teiwas answered, heartily shaking Randall’s hand, then saluting.

Randall turned on his heels without any more words, and rejoined his black car. The soldiers saluted as he left, the mine hiding its secrets within the mountains. Randall checked the clock and was pleased to see he was still perfectly within schedule.

Chapter 12

- AD -

Close to Heart

Ysadora was sipping her coffee and distractedly eating her pasta salad while looking at the midday news on her computer, when Abraham sat on the chair opposite hers, setting down his plate with an apologetic expression on his face. She looked around at the half-crowded cafeteria, and turned back to Abraham, her eyebrow raised in a silent question.

“Sorry about that; but that brunette woman over there was trying to sit with me ever since I entered the cafeteria,” Abraham explained. “I thought I’ll escape her by sitting with you, and finally enjoy a silent meal.”

Ysadora discreetly looked over Abraham’s shoulders, and saw the woman in question, helplessly looking in his direction but averting Ysadora’s authoritative stare.

“Oh, her. Don’t mind it, she’s harmless. I only know her last name, Williams. She’s the receptionist since about four years; and her attitude has nothing to do with you specifically. She just gape at every man that walks past her.”

Abraham smiled at her disgusted tone.

“Well, whatever she does, she’s terrified of you; so if you don’t mind, I’ll be commandeering this seat with you during our lunch breaks, when I can.”

“... Sure,” Ysadora said, lightly blushing at his frankness.

They resumed eating in silence, both of them casting tentative glances at each other in-between reading and eating. After awhile, Abraham considered her curiously.

“So why are the girls frightened by you? I get that the men are simply intimidated, but why the women?”

Ysadora shrugged.

“I don’t get them, and they don’t get me. Simple as that.”

Abraham smirked.

“I guess that explains the lack of Mr. Dawn,” he motioned at an absent ring on her finger.

She threw him a cold stare, and he smiled back, raising his own left hand.

“Don’t worry, it’s the same here. I don’t get them, and they never got me.”

Something in Ysadora’s eyes stirred.

“I’m sorry,” she softly said.

“Why?”

She looked sideways, almost ashamed.

“You look like someone that deserves being understood.”

“So do you,” he simply replied, smiling softly.

They blushed, and returned to their computers, trying to ignore what had just been said.

After a long time of reading, Abraham’s annoyed voice broke the awkward silence.

“Come on, it’s not that hard a decision!”

Ysadora looked up in surprise.

“What?”

Abraham smiled apologetically.

“Oh, nothing. Sorry for disturbing you.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m curious,” Ysadora said, amused.

Abraham lowered a little his computer screen to skeptically seize her; but she was genuinely curious, her body leaning in toward him, one hand gallantly supporting her chin, her turquoise eyes eager. He looked back at his screen, feeling his cheeks reddening under such truthful attention.

“It’s just something related to the science of genome. A technique called ‘Genetic Continuity’.”

“What is it?”

“Something that the ethnozoologism field developed seven years ago. It relates primarily to the survival of endangered species. Basically, in such a program, upon an offspring’s birth, they test its genome. If they find it to contain chances of infertility, or any other genome dysfunction, they remove the offspring. Such an action re-triggers the parental instinct of procreation, and the parents immediately create another offspring to replace the missing one.

» I find it ingenious, because we no longer need to wait until the baby grow into sexual maturity before determining if it will be either strong or fertile enough to continue the survival rate of the endangered specie. Before the acceptance of such a technique, waiting for such a long time resulted in a high risk of the previous generation dying off before procreating again. With this technique, one ascertains right away the usefulness of the offspring in the context of the continuity of species, and creates not only healthier offsprings, but offsprings with a stronger gene pool. The success of the pigeon messenger’s rehabilitation from extinction was attributed to the Genetic Continuity technique.”

He paused to finish his last bite, and couldn’t help but smile at Ysadora’s interest, and his own passion. Apparently, teaching was an instinct that he could not shed behind. He looked back at his screen, as if to dig better the information out of the text.

“Although its success has been proven within the realm of endangered species, the Gaea Health Committee is debating whether this same technique should be implemented upon humans, in relation to fighting off the genetic transmission of incurable diseases, deficient and/or socially impotent diseases. One half of the Committee argues, as usual, that such actions are morally unethical. But the other half follows my own opinion, upon observation of Nature’s own laws, that if such babies would grow into humans that not only can be of zero service to the whole of humanity, but also become a nuisance and waste of precious resources, why should we allow them to pollute the gene pool? Strength in terms of genetics is what we need to further the species’ continuity of humanity toward a better balance with Nature; so why are we still arguing about whether or not it is ‘ethical’ to remove a cancerous cell before it grows to contaminate the rest?

» Especially that discussed diseases and imperfections are incurable and impotent to society, such as Down’s syndrome, Progeria, Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease, Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, etc... I mean, let’s not pretend that it’s a hard decision to come by.”

“Isn’t this going a bit far?”

Abraham lowered his computer, and looked in surprise as Ysadora glared at him. She calmly put down her coffee cup, her hand shaking lightly. Abraham still looked in surprise.

“How? We’re nearly eleven billions now. Twenty percent of the population are afflicted with diseases that will never allow them a fruitful and meaningful life toward society.”

“What makes you think they can never grow to contribute?” Ysadora hotly countered.

“Miss Dawn, we’re at a threshold in our relation to Gaea. We need to carefully select how our specie will healthily continue itself. Can you honestly say that an adult with Down syndrome will not only contribute in a healthy way to Nature, but contribute in a healthy way to our gene pool? Progeria, hopelessly feeding a being that will ultimately die within twelve to thirteen years. What good comes from

people with Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease other than dementia, memory loss, speech impairment, personality changes? Or Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, having your body’s muscles and tendons literally turn into bones? Will they ever be useful to society? Or are you all just blinding yourself to the fact that their uselessness wastes precious resources, resources we can no longer afford to waste.

» Anyone who claim differently, who protects such genetic failures, who cling to the fruitless and supposed virtue of caring, loving, accepting, being ethical, is only hiding themselves from the truth: that they are utterly egoist. That their emotions is more important and worthy than the survival of humanity, than the health and conservation of Nature and Gaea before it too becomes extinct by our recklessness.”

Abraham paused to take a breath. Ysadora simply glared at him, then pushing roughly her chair away, she stormed off the cafeteria, her heels clinking violently upon the stone floor. The other clients turned around to look at her, then toward Abraham in an accusatory stare. Abraham simply looked blankly at her empty chair.

After a few moments, he laid back in his chair and passed his hand in his hair. Nothing had beforehand suggested that she would react so badly at his opinion; yet, he realized, he knew nothing about her or her past. How could he have known that such a subject was close to her heart? More puzzlingly, she had never struck him as someone who would react that way in the first place; certainly not with a boss such as Randall Redsphear, who just like Abraham, valued the necessity of a human’s existence over its sentimental value.

Abraham sighed as he closed his computer and rose to leave. For someone usually at ease with people, he wondered how he could’ve made such a faux pas with someone like Ysadora, whom he judged as straightforward.

Realizing the situation and the glaring around him, Abraham chuckled upon leaving the cafeteria. He could only too well imagine the workers’ thoughts, as they mirrored his own: what a catastrophic first date it turned out to be.

Chapter 13

- BE -

Leitworstil

A vast library stretched in front of Gabzryel's eyes, the likes of which he had seldom seen, two stories high, filled with wooden shelves and cozy, warmly-lit reading areas. However, he remembered enough about it, since he had often visited it before; so he knew exactly where to find the one book that obsessed him during all these times. Finally reaching it, Gabzryel picked it up, and laid it softly on a nearby table. The book had a fine leather cover, with engraved gold ornaments; the title was in an unknown language, but Gabzryel just felt that the book contained the exact knowledge he was looking for. What stopped him from discovering it, was a strong chain keeping the book locked... but, this time, Gabzryel finally owned the key to open it. Barely able to contain his excitement, he fiddled with the lock, and a satisfying click was heard. Gabzryel held his breath as he flipped open the cover, and gazed for the first time at the fragile old pages...

A single string of seven numbers.

Gabzryel stared in muted shock at the disappointing content of the first page.

“Seriously?!” he finally managed to say; he turned the page, but the second page met him with the same numbers. So did the third page, and the fourth, and the fifth...

Gabzryel swept through the whole book, then threw it far across the library when all the pages revealed themselves to have the same line of numbers.

“Oh come on!!” he yelled in frustration.

Gabzryel snapped open his eyes, staring right at the ceiling of his bedroom.

“Aww, man...” he whispered disappointingly, as he sat in his bed.

He realized that his heart was pounding heavily, so he hurried into the necessary breathing techniques to calm it down; reaching to his bed table, he took a pill from a lying bottle, and gulped it down with water. After a few minutes, his pulse returned to normal, and he exhaled in relief.

“Damn heart,” he mumbled, setting aside his covers and resting his feet on the cold floor.

Looking over to his bedside table, his brown eyes rested on the framed picture of a young girl in her mid-teens with long raven black hair, her dark-brown eyes smiling brightly. Beside the picture was a small ornate jewellery box filled with dozens of small pink crystals; only Gabzryel knew that there were exactly twenty-three of them, and were in fact rare pink diamonds.

Sighing at the disappointing result of his dream and the book obsession from several months, he rose out of bed, and walked softly to the living room; he knew he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep once he woke up. He plopped himself in his favourite sofa in front of the back window, facing Madzistrale's beautiful backyard garden, the moonlight passing through the window and settling upon him. He reached to the side table to pick up a detective novel he had begun the evening before. As he delved into the story, he heard soft steps crossing from where was the bathroom to the living room.

“Can't sleep?” Madzistrale said sleepily.

“Nope...” Gabzryel sighed.

“Your sister?...” she asked as softly as she could; it was a subject she did not feel comfortable to tread.

Gabzryel chuckled.

“Far from it; honestly, it wasn't because of a nightmare. Just woke up, as usual, and can't go back to sleep.”

“You'll be alright alone? Want some company?” she kindly offered, but the effect was immediately ruined as she yawned right after.

Gabzryel smiled softly at her offer, but he knew she was mainly just hoping he'd refused so she could go back to sleep. Not that he minded, for he was more than happy to set some alone time aside to reading, a hobby becoming rarer with all the experiments and projects going on.

"Yep, go back to sleep, Mad. I'm afraid I'll get hooked to the novel, and ignore you anyway," he reassured her.

"Okay..." Madzistrale yawned again, and left the living room, her sleepy footsteps trying unsuccessfully to walk as elegantly as her flowing nightgown. "Have fun..."

"Nighty night, Mad," Gabzryel wished her, watching her leave with an amused smile.

As she turned toward the hall of her bedroom, the moonlight hit something sparkling at her neck, and Gabzryel realized it was her silver cross pendant.

He sat back in his sofa, smiling softly at that vision; since she always had covering clothes, he often forgot that she still wore everyday the cross pendant he had brought her in their early days of friendship. Not for aesthetic purpose, but as a religious reminder, a rare thing nowadays in the age of science and of extreme logic.

June 2008

Gabzryel opened his palms, and revealed a delicately ornate silver cross pendant; Madzistrale's eyes sparkled, and she tentatively stretched her hands.

"Is that for me?" she asked shyly.

"Of course. Who else?" Gabzryel laughed, forcing the pendant into her hands.

“But... I’m not supposed to be...”

“What? You’re not supposed to be a Christian? Mad, no one has the right to tell you what you’re supposed to be!”

Madzistrale looked fearfully at her new friend. Behind them laid a wildflower landscape, soft hills sprinkled of mature trees, a small river running through it. In the far side of the land, buildings shaped after the architecture of Zen and Buddhist temples stretched, pergolas overlooked the river, stone and sand gardens filled the rest of the place. However, all of it had a distinct Western feel, and for good reasons: Madzistrale’s home was a relaxation and personal evolution resort isolated in the Northern region of Québec.

Gabzryel stared back at her in wonder, but could understand why she was confused: here he was, a man resembling like all of her family’s clients, a yoga initiate, offering her to embrace a belief drastically opposed to that of Buddhism.

“My father wouldn’t agree... You know how he is.”

“Well... Technically, you shouldn’t need to hide your personal belief system... However, what harm is there to acknowledge your family’s beliefs while acknowledging that you privately hold different ones?”

“But why do I? I love them, I respect them... but why am I different? Why do I reject that silly religion of yours, of theirs? And why am I myself believing in a silly religion such as Christianity? Why am I disrespecting my family’s beliefs, why am I being unkind, disloyal to their teachings?” Madzistrale asked, agitated.

Gabzryel gazed at her compassionately. Here she was, an eighteen year old girl that never knew the outside world, shielded from it by her over-protective parents, suddenly facing the constant of this world: that each souls were born to be different. How could she ever have learned that being different did not negate being loving, kind, and loyal in any other way?

He stretched his legs, readjusting his robes, and noticed Tom climbing the hill to join them.

“There you are, little sis,” he said playfully. “Hiya, Gabzryel!”

“Come and join us, Tom,” Gabzryel patted the grass between him and Madzistrale. “Look at Madzistrale’s pendant! I thought she might like it.”

Tom sat down and looked at the cross, his sister looking away in shame.

“T’was about time you had one,” he simply said, surprising her by hanging it around her neck and ignoring her protestations as he closed the clasp.

“What do you mean?!” she asked, surprised and shocked. “I never dared telling you!”

“Our parents might be abnormally blind for supposedly ‘illuminated’ people, but I can see the signs. You forget that I love reading about philosophy, mythology, and religion, sis. I think I can figure out the signs when someone believes in God.”

“Please don’t tell... But more importantly... don’t think any differently of me...”

Gabzryel refrained from making a facepalm at such a reaction, even though he knew that it was a genuine fear for someone like her. The danger of being raised in a dogma was sitting right at his side.

Tom hugged his sister.

“Why would I? I don’t get it why you feel it’s so wrong.”

Madzistrale stared at him in shock.

“You don’t?”

Tom laughed, and motioned the scene around them.

“Look at this. Don’t you think that I feel it too? That something... something incredible lies behind the veils of this world? Just out of reach, yet so near. And where’s the harm in such a belief? You treat nature better than many so-called enlightened people at our resort; you respect others, you try to be selfless. You are flawed, yet never stop to grow and reach for the impossible. It was about time you manifested that belief. Buddhists does; why can’t you, a Christian, do the same?”

Madzistrale blushed. She looked at the pendant, and she faintly smiled; she then slid it under her shirt.

“Your faith is the best thing that can happen to you,” Gabzryel reassured her. “Don’t ever lose it, and don’t ever be afraid to admitting it.”

They remained silent, Tom still holding his sister against him, Gabzryel stretched on the grass.

“What about you?” Gabzryel asked Tom.

Tom thought for some time.

“I’m still not sure what I believe in. I know that for me too, it’s not our family’s beliefs. I don’t exactly believe wholeheartedly in God... but neither can I deny such a possibility.”

Gabzryel looked at him interestingly.

“Have you ever read the works of Immanuel Kant and Henry David Thoreau?”

Tom looked at him with surprise.

“Yes I did! A while ago, mind you, but I did. And... I think that might be it.”

“What do you guys mean?” Madzistrale asked.

Gabzryel squinted, trying to find a memory.

“Let’s see... Ah yes. *‘The empiricists believed that knowledge is acquired through experience alone, but the rationalists maintained that such knowledge is open to Cartesian doubt and that reason alone provides us with knowledge. Kant argues, however, that using reason without applying it to experience will only lead to illusions, while experience will be purely subjective without first being subsumed under pure reason.’*”

“Indeed,” Tom said.

“I see. You’re a Transcendental Idealist,” Gabzryel admired.

“Huh?” both siblings asked, puzzled.

“The compromise created between empiricism and rationalism. The belief that experiences alone cannot be accepted as knowledge without being submitted to reason, while extreme reason cannot by itself account for experiences and thus cannot become true knowledge. A Transcendental Idealist will consider both experience, intuition, and reason in his quest for truth.”

“That’s pretty much it,” Tom smiled.

“You’re lucky, Mad,” Gabzryel teased. “It means Tom has no choice but to allow your belief; as it’s one that requires trust in reason, experience, but intuition as well.”

“If only our parents could understand like you do,” Madzistrale replied gloomily.

Gabzryel thought deeply, then sat back up.

“We have so many things in common, so many dreams and wishes of a better world than what is presented... And yet... So I might as well ask: why not come and live with me?”

The siblings looked at him, surprised.

“What?”

“Well... I’m rather famous here... Officially, you’re two curious persons that needs more experience to fully understand the world and the philosophy of Buddhism... In short, like Prince Siddhartha, you need to get out of your palace and walk amongst the people if you wish to understand what your belief teaches you. Officiously, I’m just getting you guys out of here so you can be your true selves.”

“The resort can survive without us,” Tom reasoned.

“Are you kidding me? It already does, with all the workers Dad and Mom recruited,” Madzistrale said.

“And I have uses for you,” Gabzryel enigmatically replied, smiling.

“That better-future-world-building dream of yours,” Tom guessed.

“I need volunteers; people who thinks alike about changing the system, who believes there is a way where Earth and humanity can co-exist without conflicts.”

“How will you convince them?” Madzistrale asked, worried.

Gabzryel smiled mischievously.

“I have my ways. But do you guys really want to come? My farm’s after all in Kansas...”

“Of course!” the siblings cried in unison.

“Great! It might take some time, but it’s going to happen,” Gabzryel reassured them.

After some moment of silence where the two siblings and their friend looked out at nature unfolding before them, Madzistrale turned to look longer at Gabzryel. Nothing about him would have made her notice him. Relatively short for a man, a little bit compact, he had a roundish face, and an overall ordinary and unremarkable look and presence. Yet, it seemed only for Madzistrale and Tom, he had captured their attention by a yet unknown force of spirit.

Curious, Madzistrale asked him:

“What about you? You don’t feel like a typical Buddhist.”

“I’m not,” Gabzryel admitted. “And it’s not my purpose. I’m here to understand what could unite humanity. I’m not interested in flaws, in who’s-wrong/who’s-right, in what divides people. I’m interested at finding out the common ground; whatever country, belief or culture that one is from, no one is ever truly apart from everyone else. There’s always ways that we can all comprehend one another, believe together, and unite.

» I thus try to embody that quest of understanding. Although, I have to admit that I have my other reasons. Any which way, I call it ‘Eidomorphism’.”

“What does it mean?” Tom inquired.

Gabzryel smirked.

“That’ll be your first challenge, my dear friends. Once you find out, if you can still acknowledge me as I am, then nothing will stop us from bringing the dreams of us three into reality.”

The unsettling cry of a nearby fox took Gabzryel away from his slumbered reminiscence, and he smiled even more fondly.

The siblings had indeed discovered his nature. But that discovery only brought them closer, and the trio ended up complementing each other through life. Madzistrale’s faith, the way she was able to look at the world because of it, the way she was able to be hopeful and forgiving despite all the troubles, helped them to see past the cover of the books, so to speak. Tom’s belief in rational thought and in grounded knowledge and reason, without pushing aside or negating the unprovable mysteries of the universe, helped Madzistrale and Gabzryel keep their feet on the ground in times where the head had to rule over the heart. And Gabzryel’s quest to understand all religions and all beliefs, to find the common ground and ease the tensions resulting from misunderstanding, tremendously shaped the whole group’s vision of the world, for at the core of it, there was not a single belief... or rather there was one very important belief: that it was only through uniting and searching together that humanity stood a chance at knowing the truth. And Gabzryel felt that no one had to abandon what made them be good souls, or helped them go through the hardships of life, for the sake of another’s approval. That was why he once gave

that pendant to Madzistrale and reassured her that not giving up her faith would be the best thing for all of them, and that she should never be afraid to admit to it.

Heck, who were all of them to judge what belief was wrong or right? Who could judge him for opening himself to all possibilities of the world? Had he not, he would have never seen his sister again.

Gabzryel stroke his dark raven hair, unconsciously rustling his patch of white hair. Because of his Eidomorphism nature, he had long lost his natural brown hair colour, except for the white patch that began when he was as young as seventeen years old; but once in awhile, he'd always revert to his sister's black hair look. It was the only remaining physical evidence of her life on this Earth, before a brain cancer took her away when she was eleven, and he five. Her death deeply affected him, for he always looked up to his playful and kind sister. When he was thirteen, after researching some obscure legend, he decided to believe in it, and as if by luck, he had been able to meet her again.

To this day, Gabzryel had still not ruled out the exact origin and reason of her appearance, and neither did he wished to. Some would have called his resolve to not know and to believe her existence somewhere else than on Earth, maybe even that their meeting was an illusion, as an unhealthy habit; but he gave no care to it, as it comforted him better than all the logical explanations. That was why he never laughed at Madzistrale's Christian faith, or at all the faiths he explored during his own life; where was the harm there?

Not to mention that he kept on receiving a very physical pink diamond from her, every year, since the night they reunited twenty-three years ago... Something too he could not explain, but was nonetheless happy to receive.

Opening wide his eyes, and yawning, he shook his head; *enough*, he thought. He put on his earphones, put up his songs medley playlist, and opened his detective novel. Time to put himself into the shoes of his favourite detective.

Chapter 14

- AD -

Delicatue

Ysadora breathed deeply, the sound of a martial beat coming from the sound system in her training room, her right hand high above her head, firmly grasping the wooden hilt of a strange-looking sword. It wasn't a typical sword, however: the blade was a thick curled block of chain, with diamond-tip shaped slits across all the blade.

The martial rhythm beat suddenly shaped to include a secondary rhythm; Ysadora pressed on a discrete switch on her hilt, and the blade uncurled, straightening in a slim, flexible thirty-three inches double-sided blade. Ysadora began to breathe following the rhythm, and the words of her instructor resonated in her mind:

“Breathe throughout your body, not just your lungs; fill every muscle, leave not a single part untouched by your breathing...”

“Become aware of every minuscule muscle in your body, and move them. Make your body one with your mind; feel every movement, and move every part...”

“Feel with your head, not with your heart. Disconnect all emotions, all sensory inputs that could distract you...”

“Feel the presence of pain, for it will save your life; but do not fall to its limitations. Conquer and endure pain, lift your perceptions above that of useless senses...”

“Move to the rhythm of Gaea; feel the wind, the ground, the density of air or of water. Tune to it, and feel your opponent's intentions as they are carried through Gaea's currents...”

As the rhythm suddenly picked up into a full-blown music, Ysadora began her martial practice, her sword and her body moving into a fast and deadly dance of war composed of kicks, blocks, punches, elbow and knees hits, slashes, whips, flow eight figures and windmills. Not a single movement was set aside, not an angle dismissed, from neither her sword or her physical attacks.

At the apogee, Ysadora pressed another switch on her hilt, and the sword underwent a sudden change: the blade separated alongside the diamond-tip-shaped slits, and it transformed into a long chain, measuring seven feet from the hilt to the tip of the weapon, a small triangular blade that once formed the tip of the sword. Seamlessly adapting to this weapon change, Ysadora moved as elegantly as a dancer as she spun the new weapon around her like a barrier, or forwarded it in swift and fluid motions for long-range attacks, not missing one beat nor her imaginary targets.

For the next fifteen minutes of practice, without any loss in speed or efficiency, she had moved back and forth from physical, sword and chain attacks and defences, her deadly dance as thorough and perfect in execution as expected of a master.

It was however interrupted by a knock on her door, and Ysadora stopped fluidly her practice and turned the music down. She retracted her weapon into its sword shape, hid it behind her back, and grabbed a folder off her desk. She would think of a better hiding place later when she would have plenty of occasions to distract her guest.

“Enter,” she announced, leaning casually against the table, as if deep in study.

Randall entered the room, and paused as he noticed her stance.

“Is it safe?” he asked worryingly, discreetly stepping back into the door’s entrance.

Ysadora walked over to her desk, snapped back the sword into its curled shape, and laid it securely in its sheath inside the hidden compartment underneath the drawers.

“It is now,” she reassured Randall as she applied an antitoxin topical cream on her hands for his safety. He moved further into the room and looked her over.

“Aren’t you supposed to practice in your designated uniform?” he wondered; Ysadora looked down at her office dress.

“Usually; but I also practice with any other formal clothes, as I must be prepared no matter what the occasion,” she explained, picking up a nearby towel to dry herself. “I got bored at the office so I thought I’d head out and practice.”

“Incredible; and you don’t even look as if you’re out of breath. You truly do justice to your master,” Randall admired, though his smile was hollow.

“Thank you; though I’m afraid that even now, I’m nothing compared to his other students.”

“Only because your body limitations cannot perform such inhuman physical tasks as the other students could. But no other can best you at your art because of your dedication and perseverance despite those perceived failings. That much should make you proud.”

“I am,” Ysadora smiled. “What did you wish to see me about?”

“There is an issue I would like you to resolve; it must be done unofficially, and Scott would not be qualified,” Randall began, referring to their unofficial garbage man, Scott Johnson.

“What, or rather, who is it?” Ysadora asked.

“A rich Hollandt entrepreneur, Jan Andersen, acquired the funds and means to begin a space colony. Right now, he’s undergoing negotiations with the International Federation of Gnasci to make it official. He must be stopped from it, if we want our own plans to progress unhindered,” Randall explained.

“Can’t he be made into a useful competitor, like those before him?”

“Not this time. His system will be based on direct democracy, not on autocracy; we could try to infiltrate his colony with agents and control it through there, but the

time and resources required makes it an unprofitable solution. It's best if he is eliminated. His colony would be completely independent if we let him go through with his plans. It could cause a real danger to our plans."

"No problem. I will take care of it. Where can I find him?"

Randall coldly smirked.

"Here's why I said you're more qualified than Scott for this one. Andersen has a predilection for the Rouge Lux District, in Amaesteldam, during his visits... The thing is, at his age, his heart condition is rather fragile..."

"How unfortunate," Ysadora smirked with an equal mischief. "Consider it done. I will do my utmost to solve your issue without witnesses."

"And if there are, you are free to deal with them in any way. If anything goes out of control about it, we will use Scott as a scapegoat."

Ysadora frowned in worry.

"I doubt our superiors will take this action kindly; Scott is after all their emissary to keep us in check."

"Scott can take care of himself in these situation; and I doubt the superiors would mind if it's done to protect their plan."

Randall turned without saying more, and walked out of the room. Ysadora went to the desk, opened a drawer, and picked up a locked box; she delicately took from it a hairstick. Twisting it in a specific way, the hairstick opened in two, revealing a small vial with a clear liquid; it was linked to both ends of the stick, one extremity being a needle-like pin, and the other, a bulkier extremity where rested a very small discreet mechanism to push the liquid into the needle. Ysadora smiled proudly at its sight, and closed the hairstick again, nestling it temporarily in her hairbun. She then gave a call to her assistant.

"Daniel? I'm going to need your assistance for Situation 6."

"Understood, ma'am," her assistant replied.

Night was well underway as trance music filled the specialized nightclub Delicatue, as many of the world's most prominent celebrities enjoyed the night's various pleasures away from the eyes of the public. Many were dancing on the dance floor, whereas most of the more prominent ones settled on resting on the many soft couches, or at the bar stools, listening to music, enjoying a couple of drinks and other delicacies allowed only in Amaesteldam, and taking delight in the spectacle from the professional erotic dancers. Some others, nestled in their private nooks, were enjoying the company of the club's escorts. Amongst this last category of guests was the inventor and entrepreneur Jan Andersen, and his right hand, Hinrich Strömberg, as they were sharing a good time, surrounded by their two usual escorts, and drinking cocktails.

“So how did the negotiations go, Jan?” Risa asked the entrepreneur, playfully running her fingers up and down on his dress shirt, while Michelle was talking with Hinrich. “You seem in a good mood; and this time, the drinks have nothing to do with it!”

“So far so good!” Jan answered happily, his arm around her waist, feeling her soft skin beneath her dress. They all knew each other since six years, and nothing much was prohibited between themselves, except having fun and giving it... at the conditions the required fee was met with.

“That's great to know!” Risa squealed excitedly, hugging him tighter. “That means soon, you'll be living amongst the stars... How wonderful would it be?”

“Indeed... But there's a chance it won't be in my lifetime... I have so few years left,” Jan sighed, rustling the few grey hairs that were left.

“Don't say that, Jan. You're still young and full of life!” Risa comforted him, planting a soft kiss on his cheeks.

“I don’t believe you,” he teased her, nudging away from her kisses. “Besides, I’m doing this for everyone else. For Hinrich’s generations, and for yours, Risa...”

Risa laughed.

“Nah, don’t say that, we both know it’s not true; anyhow, your wife will be furious if you do this for us girls,” she poked him, faking disapproval.

Jan smiled kindly at her, and then Hinrich turned to him to cheer and toast with his newly served glass, the girls giggling at some inside joke. The song playing in the background began to fade, and as the new one slowly rose into existence, the club’s host picked up a microphone and addressed the clients.

“Welcome back ladies and gentlemen, are you still having fun?” the clients cheered and the host continued, “Well, *Light of the Night* is beginning, and who better to illustrate this song, than our beautiful and ravishing guest dancer, ‘Aurum’!”

The clients cheered excitedly as the lights began to probe, and an athletic tall woman, slim yet gifted with all the right curves, clothed lightly with a showing translucent black dress, climbed as elegantly as a cat upon the dancing table, her hips and her body moving to the rhythm in a hypnotic dance of seduction. Her platinum blond hair, held up in a loose braid by a discrete hairstick, flew around her, as if framing her curves; but all the clients were taken by the dancer’s turquoise eyes as the lights enhanced their sparkle.

“Who’s that?” Michelle asked Risa, just as much captivated by the dancer’s beauty as the clients.

“I don’t know, but she sure is gorgeous; I wouldn’t mind dating her for more than a few nights...” Risa admired, her eyes glazing over the dress which hid nothing from the imagination. She turned playfully toward Jan: “For tonight, I don’t think either of us would mind if you decide to pay for her; after all, I’m sure she’s worth a lot, and half of it will still go to our club!”

Jan rested his glass, not leaving his eyes off the dancer.

“I believe it’s what I’ll do, then.”

**

Noticing the stares upon her, especially those of her target, Ysadora Dawn smiled derisively: it wasn’t hard to trap human beings. Noticing her target’s escorts leaving him to meet with other clients, and he brandishing a thick pack of bills, she climbed on the wide wooden rail that circled the whole club, upon which the seated clients could rest their arms or their drinks. Elegantly jumping from each section, she reached Jan Andersen’s private nook, and she doubled her moves in front of him, enticing him with her movements; if there was one thing she was better at than fighting, it was her seduction skills. It also helped that she had no qualms to trick her targets in such a way, even if others would have found her situation dishonourable; to her, it was just another way of reaching and eliminating her target, and an easy one at that.

Jan smiled with appreciation, and as Ysadora lowered to his level, he slipped the pack of bills up her thigh under the end of her undergarment; he used this gesture to caress her skin, to which she answered with a suggestive smile.

“If you wish, for the amount of money you gave me, you can have a private session,” she said to him in a soft voice, brushing delicately her fingers alongside the sensitive spot running from his neckline up to his chin, locking his sight with hers.

“I hoped so,” he answered.

Seeing the disappointed look of Jan’s aide Hinrich, Ysadora smiled at him, and said:

“One customer at a time, dear sir; I’ll come back to see you after,” and she blew him a kiss; Hinrich smiled happily, and nodded in agreement as Ysadora took Jan’s hand, and jumping down the rail, led him to the discreetly hidden stairs.

As Jan installed himself comfortably on the love seat, Ysadora mounted him, and never leaving her eyes off his, she slowly began to unbutton his shirt, his own

hands caressing her hips as he began rolling up her skirt; she took off her hairstick, and let her hair come loose as she leaned over him. Her hair covered both their heads as she laid a kiss on his lips; smiling softly as his field of vision was now impaired, and he completely distracted, she applied delicately the hairstick against his neck, pressing on the hidden switch at the other end. She leaned back, and watched with satisfaction at the few small seconds that it took the poison she just injected to reach Jan's heart. His eyes opened wide open as he searched for breath, his hand clutching his chest, and she unmounted him, putting back the now-empty hairstick in her hair. Blowing him a kiss as Jan drew his last breath, she turned on her heels, and discreetly descended the stairs, on the look-out.

Looking at the crowded nightclub, she knew that witnesses were indeed inevitable, as feared; her eyes surveyed the drinks as her nose suddenly picked up the smell of more potent intoxicants. She smiled mischievously, and walked to the backstage, disappearing behind the swing door.

Chapter 15

- BF -

Some Time Aside

“And so, that’s why I think something is coming. I just don’t know what, or how it will come.”

Gabzryel sighed as he closed his notebook, and laid back in the uncomfortable plastic chair. He looked over at the man laying in the hospital bed, the beeping machines the only sound in the room.

“I was hoping you’d know. You always tried to figure out how events undeniably led to others, how history was never a coincidence, how order could be found, and its effects was distinctive on society...”

Gabzryel stopped talking, in search of new points. He looked again at the man in the coma.

“I’m always expecting you to scoff at me, when I tell you these things, like you used to when I contradicted you in your classes. I still believe it, you know? I still believe I can save both boats, even though you gave me a -C on that ethic thought experiment test. No, even more than that. I know we all can save both boats.”

He passed his hand in the black hair of the immobilized man.

“Hang in there, Bryan. The hospital direction allowed me to pay for your convalescence; but that’s not an excuse to sleep all day long, you know?”

Gabzryel sadly laughed; as he stroked the hair, he frowned.

“I wonder what happens to you during this time? Are you dreaming? What do you dream about? If you have all that time, are you able to go beyond what we’ve

discovered that we can do? Don't forget to tell me about it all when you wake up, got it? Okay, I'll let you be. Nighty night."

As he left the hospital, Gabzryel's phone rang.

"Oh, y-ello?"

"Yo Gab, it's Alan! That request of yours is completed; can Clara and I drop by the farm to deliver the What-Must-Not-Be-Told-To-The-Siblings?"

"Hell yeah; besides, knowing them, Tom challenged Mad to a chess rematch, so they'll be too busy to see you if you stop at the garage."

"Okay; see you in ten!"

**

The small farm in Kansas was flooding with midday sun's rays when Gabzryel barged in the living room and found Tom and Madzistrale in deep thoughts over a near-empty chessboard.

"Guys, come quickly!"

"What is it? I was about to kick Tom's buttock with my single queen!" Madzistrale pouted, pointing to her two only standing pieces, a few cases away from Tom's lonely King.

"No you weren't; your single queen and king can't checkmate my king, it's almost impossible," Tom answered, rising from his chair to follow their friend.

"I'm sure there's a way," Madzistrale answered with conviction as she followed them as well, glancing one last time at her game.

"You finally succeeded your never-ending motion machine?" Tom teased Gabzryel as they walked out the house.

Gabzryel frowned in disappointment, but immediately rectified:

“Disappointingly, no. It’s another surprise. Alan and Clara came over the garage, but you were too absorbed to have noticed them.”

“What?! Why didn’t they stayed? I would have made them cupcakes!” Madzistrale replied, offended.

“People have jobs, you know; they were just passing through,” Gabzryel replied.

“Now, why would two mechanics come over and not stay for tea?” Tom wondered, silently suspecting the nature of the ‘surprise’ Gabzryel referred to. “Please tell me you didn’t made a prop hero car.”

“No, we didn’t. We made two cars. Big difference. I gotta drive to the city with style too, don’t you think?” Gabzryel replied teasingly.

He led them toward a temporary plastic shelter, where he took it down to reveal his surprise. The siblings gasped at the two sleek cars waiting before them.

“This is yours, and this is mine,” Gabzryel precised, pointing respectively at a slender futuristic-looking silver car, and a forest green modern version of a 1930s-style car.

The two-passenger silver car belonging to the siblings looked like coming straight from a science-fiction movie, with its low and elongated shape, back wheels close to the body near the door, and the front wheels at the very end of the front bumper. The wheels themselves were unusual, looking like a round thick mesh.

“What are the wheels?” Tom asked, poking them.

“A new type of mesh wheel the aeronautics researchers were working on. Being a mesh, it will grip at absolutely anything and absorb much better shocks and bumps; the material is also much tougher than rubber as well as being adapted to all seasons, so I figured I’d make my own variation of these wheels, and put them on our cars.”

“The car’s amazing!! It looks like those amphibian/flying/sci-fi spy cars!” Madzistrale marveled, gaping at it.

“But yours is equally amazing, I love it!” Tom said appreciatively, looking at Gabzryel’s.

The second car had every aspect of a typical 1930s European car, with a more squared look, the two-seat driver compartment pushed toward the back, a long nose, wheels close to the body, and a fabric open-top; only more modernized and complemented with a touch of racing style.

“The green colour really fits it!” Madzistrale complimented. “It suits you perfectly!”

“When can we drive them?” Tom asked excitedly.

“Whenever you want. Alan and Clara made all the steps to ensure that the cars passed the road regulations.”

“Let’s go, then!” Madzistrale exclaimed gleefully, taking Tom by the hand and running to their silver car.

“Hang on, I’m coming too,” Gabzryel said, running to get his keys.

Inside, they found that not only it was comfortable, but the dashboard contained every necessities they could ask, including an integrated shortwave radio and phone.

“You know what would push those car to incredible?” Tom said to Madzistrale. “No gasoline!”

“Who do you think I am?” Gabzryel’s annoyed voice suddenly came from the radio. “I couldn’t call myself a fake mad scientist if I didn’t made electric cars! Wait till the regulations allow air compressed engines; now we’ll really be incredible.”

Tom and Madzistrale high-fived, and the trio started their engine, ready to take their beauties on the road.

“I know a little track not far used for racing car competitions; we’ll be able to have fun there. Dear Tom and Mad, follow me!” Gabzryel ordered, driving in front of the siblings.

As the day passed, the trio of friends spent some well-deserved time having fun drifting and racing, for a moment oblivious to the troubles of the world.

Chapter 16

- AG -

Cat and Mouse

Dawn rose for yet another day across Uni-states, and Ysadora walked into her office, the morning's sunlight flooding through the full wall's windows. She sat at her desk, her steaming coffee mug in one hand, and booted her computer. She scrolled briefly through her mails, then clicked a window to see the national news:

*“**Breaking News:** The Anonymity Alliance has leaked documents linking several members of the Presidential Council to various doubtful expenses. Notably, Council member Jones has been linked to several offshore bank accounts, all of which served to furnish weapon supplies to Euphratia in the 80s.”*

Ysadora smiled. Abraham Solomon had accomplished Randall's mission. She lingered on this thought, despite herself, remembering their fleeting meetings with a growing liking. She quickly pushed that thought aside, almost ashamed to even think about it, especially considering their last conversation at the cafeteria. She sighed as she laid back into her chair. She couldn't really blame him for his opinion, and could hardly expect him to understand her reaction; but why did she felt that way in the first place, when she already had made peace with her unexpected life a long ago?

And why did she wished so hard to understand him, while at the same time desperately trying to find a fatal flaw?

She shook her head in confusion. Her youth was one of training, missions, tactics, reason. Meager human emotions had no role to play; and to this day, she still couldn't allow them into her life. So what was it with her nowadays?

The news changed, and a live report came in, a reporter standing in front of a burnt building, its familiar silhouette bringing Ysadora's mind to attention:

“Meanwhile, in Amaesteldam, we are reporting the sad development of the incident at the famous nightclub Delicatue. If you remember three nights ago, the firemen had received a call from an outsider about the nightclub succumbing to a growing fire. The rescues arrived, but too late, as the club was already engulfed in raging fires. When the firemen finally put it down, it was already too late for many of the clients and workers trapped inside. Today we have the list, and the toll amount to 61 people killed, and 216 severely injured; amongst the deceased bodies was found the famous Hollandt entrepreneur Jan Andersen, and his aide Hinrich Strömberg, whom were on visit to finish negotiations with the International Federation of Gnasci for the right to establish Andersen’s planned space colony. Other members included Puertugal’s State Secretary Cabral de Silves, Cruithinian chef Miranda Cox, and ex-Olympiad athlete Veronica Smith, amongst many others; you can see the full list in our Interweb channel.

» To conclude, the authorities ruled out the fire as an accident, resulted from a likely contact between alcohol and the other volatile components of which Delicatue was reputed for, with unfortunate repetitive uses of lighters.”

“A sad outcome indeed,” the studio’s newscaster sighed; she turned to the camera: “Following that incident, the IFG has regrettably postponed their acceptance of Andersen’s nation, until the Andersen organization found a new leader, and most of all, can come up with a complete set of constitution and regulations, something that was the job of Andersen and Strömberg. Now, to the other news of the day...”

Ysadora closed the Interweb page, and laid back victoriously in her chair.

At that moment, Randall’s voice appeared in her mind:

“I see your mission went well.”

“Perfectly, in fact,” Ysadora answered proudly. “The news even left out where and how exactly Andersen had been found dead, I imagine in a wish to keep his reputation intact as a faithful husband and virtuous man. As for the witnesses of my presence, no one will bother about that after the shock of surviving a deadly fire.”

“Good thinking to hide your mission with that incident,” Randall admired.

Ysadora smirked.

“Nightclub fires are much more common than people are aware of; such clumsiness to combine alcohol and fumes with fire to light such fumes...”

Someone knocked on her office’s door, and a male Britannian voice announced, in a tone which was cold, almost monotonic in nature:

“Ma’am, I have Mr. Abraham Solomon’s files, as you requested.”

“I have to take care of something else; was that all you wanted to contact me about?” Ysadora asked.

“Yes, for now. Thanks for taking care of that little problem,” Randall replied, before his voice disappeared.

“Come in, it’s open,” Ysadora answered back.

The door opened, and a tall man entered. Looking in his early forties, his medium-short hair was hay blond, combed professionally to the back; he stood, and was dressed, in a military manner, his silver-grey officer-style uniform reflecting his sea-blue eyes. He walked to his boss’ desk, and placed upon it a small folder.

“That’s it?!” Ysadora wondered with surprise.

“Yes, ma’am; his history is concise and without any major trouble.”

“Thank you, Daniel,” Ysadora distractedly thanked her assistant, taking immediately the file, filled by curiosity.

“You are welcome, ma’am.”

And Daniel stood in front of the desk, staring at her with a blank face.

“You can sit, you know,” Ysadora said without looking up.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

He quickly looked around, searching the room, found a seat a dozen paces away from Ysadora's desk, and sat down rigidly on it, back upright, hands on his straight knees, his eyes never leaving Ysadora. Used to this, Ysadora continued nonchalantly to flip the folder's pages.

"Parents, birth, blah blah, towns, schools, blah blah," she quickly resumed out loud the first page.

Daniel reacted with a puzzled expression at her resume.

"Forgive me, ma'am, but I do not recall any categories or mentions of 'blah blah'. Where have you seen it?"

"Nowhere, it's an expression. Ooh, he was a chaos theory teacher and advisor!"

"Yes, ma'am, at the QOEC, in 2029, before he..."

"Yes, I know, I'm reading it right now, idiot," she exasperatedly replied.

"Yes ma'am."

"Ah!" she suddenly exclaimed, finding the part she was interested by:

Psychological Profile:

Mr. Solomon is the archetype representation of a lifetime partner. Confident about his abilities, but respectful of a person holding higher ones. As he will make his own decisions and plans, he will nonetheless listen to suggestions that are viable, or will follow someone else's plans, if they reveal themselves to be more logical. He has the mixture of obedience and individuality, which makes him an excellent partner in business; the ability to make decisions, but also to follow those of his partners or superiors.

Mr. Solomon shows signs of the lack of father figure, an important aspect of a person's growth. Coupled with psychological and physical bullying in his childhood, Mr. Solomon exhibits an unconscious need for a strong father figure; and such lacks causes occasional outbursts. But once Mr. Solomon will find a strong figure, he will be completely loyal.

One major aspect of Mr. Solomon, when tested against the Zelekov Scale, is his lack of desire for extreme power. He will rather physically and mentally work hard, and in a team, to accomplish a project, than become a leader. Such a position doesn't give him any accomplishments, unlike seeing a result from his hard work.

Mr. Solomon is ideal for positions such as..."

Ysadora overlooked the rest, which was a long list of potential positions, as well as the various historical figures he was likened to.

"Nice," she commented appreciatively. It explained Randall's choice; and part of her also sighed with relief that Abraham's profile didn't revealed a hidden persona or ambitions. She could now allow herself to begin to trust him just as Randall did.

"To what are you referring to, ma'am?" Daniel's question pulled her away from her thoughts.

"What?"

"Your sudden comment, 'Nice', ma'am."

"Oh. I find Mr. Solomon to be promising for our plan. I needed to confirm whether Randall's people made a right decision." She paused, and realizing he was still around, she asked: "Why are you still here?"

"You gave me the permission to sit, ma'am," Daniel replied.

"Yes, I already told you, you can always sit; but what are you doing here after giving me the file?"

Ysadora sighed discreetly. Though he was a useful and indispensable assistant, he could sometime be thick.

"I was waiting for you to finish reading, ma'am," Daniel answered, as if it was the ultimate answer to Ysadora's question.

"Why?"

“In case you further needed my assistance, ma’am.”

“Well, I don’t. And if I would have needed your assistance, I would have told you at the start.”

“As you wish, ma’am.”

Ysadora stared at him, expecting him to leave her office; but he kept seated, staring back at her. She sighed, and finally ordered:

“That means you can leave, Daniel.”

“Yes ma’am,” he acknowledged, rising from his seat and walking out of the office.

Ysadora sat back in her chair, and stared at her computer. This day was exceptionally calm, and she found she had nothing to do or sort for Randall.

Her thoughts came back to Abraham, and the file she read. Despite the new knowledge, she was having a harder time trying to put away his unexpected appearance. She and Randall searched for loyal allies since the Society’s genesis, and the ones they gathered after all this time was Scott Johnson, their superiors’ emissary (whom was more a spy than an actual ally); and her assistant Daniel Fitzgerald, with incredible mental and physical abilities, yet considered a thorough failure by the military to which he belonged.

And here came a perfect man, with all the right profiles for what they were looking for, flawless yet obedient to Randall’s ideals.

Too perfect, Ysadora decided, rising from her seat. She needed to know him hands-on; Randall’s game was too important to be ruined by a single pawn.

“Daniel, tell me where is Abraham Solomon,” Ysadora called her assistant.

Silence ensued for some seconds, until he answered:

“In Corridor 3-11, walking with Mr. Redsphear, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Daniel,” she replied, leaving her office, making sure to lock the door.

“My pleasure, ma’am.”

“The new recruits you requested should arrive between this afternoon and tomorrow morning,” Abraham announced to Randall.

They were strolling down a long corridor linking two sections of the Capitoline; the walls were made of glass panes, looking out on both side to a strip of garden passing through the building.

“Perfect, thank you,” Randall thanked him, his cold eyes lighting up in a rare smile. “What about the senators and the counsellors against Bohm’s leadership, are they all eliminated?”

“Not all of them, no,” Abraham sighed in disappointment. “I spent the last two days trying to find a speck on them, but they’re too careful.”

“Hmm,” Randall acknowledged, his brow furrowing.

“Don’t worry,” Abraham reassured him, “with enough pressure, they’ll expose their flaws by themselves.”

“Do you have an idea on how to do that?”

“It’ll take some time, but I think I can coax them. Sudden transfers of money, unplanned trips, things like that which will reveal their guilt.”

“Please try to hurry; time is a much more dangerous enemy than people,” Randall replied.

“Of course.”

“Next thing on the list. What of the money? Did you get to formulate a working plan for that scenario of yours?”

“Yes, I put some time into it; I predict it should take about two weeks to become fully functional. Although I would need to meet those investors you mentioned.”

“They were last expected to arrive within three days,” Randall reassured him.

“Are you boys talking business without me?” a female voice interrupted them from behind, at quite a distance.

Randall and Abraham turned around, and the latter fought to keep himself focused as Ysadora strolled elegantly toward them, her tailored dress and jacket showcasing just as much her physique as it did the last two times they met.

“Of course not, I would not dream of keeping you out of this,” Randall replied, smiling broadly as he gestured her to walk by his other side. “We were merely resuming the last two days’ work.”

“A most amazing feat, may I say,” Ysadora appreciated, smiling at Abraham.

“Thank... thank you,” Abraham stammered. He silently cursed himself for losing his cool in front of her; but everything about her made him lose his words. Their last conversation also managed to make him feel like a fool: a feat he hadn’t experienced since college.

He was glad when they resumed walking, for Randall stood between him and her, so he couldn’t see her as well.

“I was browsing through the reports, and I couldn’t help but notice something, and I’m not sure what are your intentions about it,” Abraham carefully said.

Randall smirked.

“Who says whatever you read was my idea?”

“Well... In all honesty, sir, I doubt anything in this country happens without your knowledge. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t mean that in a bad way.”

“Oh?” Randall asked, an eyebrow raised, while Ysadora discreetly snickered. “You learn quickly. But any typical man would be appalled by that idea. Why aren’t you?”

“Let’s just say I have first-hand experienced what a world without order is like. Humans are very instinctive, and it doesn’t take forty years of freedom that they already start derailing down into a chaotic and self destructive path. To live an orderly life is only detrimental to those that lives in chaos and decadence... No other lives should be left in the dark because of the few that resist order and law.”

Randall smiled proudly.

“So what did you see that bothers you?”

“There seem to be no true regulations against certain forms of drugs; and reports show increasing mental instabilities in the entire Norr Americae population. The numbers are quite high...”

Through the glass panes’ reflections, Abraham noticed Ysadora jerk her head toward Randall, her jaws clenched; he pretended not to have seen their interaction as Randall gave her an ever-so-discreet nod before replying:

“I’m afraid I cannot yet tell you the reasons and the plans. But let me ask you something in return. How do you see the world, Abraham? When you watch it, the people, and yourself, what is the image that best represent it?”

Abraham thought about it, but it didn’t take long before he answered:

“Right now, the world feels to me like a detuned clock. Every lives, including my own, must follow a straight path of evolution and knowledge from birth to death; that is our worth, our destiny. Every day must count as something sacred, to not be wasted. Every seconds must be used to better not just ourselves, but the world around us, not just for our generations, but those in two hundreds, three hundreds years. If everyone would do that, the world, history, would be an ever-ticking and expanding clock, carrying the past into the future, creating the best outcome

possible, where every lives is a crucial gear, each day is directed toward a common goal and worth.”

“But?” Randall asked.

“But right now, the lives that should become those crucial gears are doing nothing but spending their lives in laziness, and as if they have all the time in the world before them. And before they know it, they wasted fifty, sixty years doing nothing important, nothing worthy, and they became only burdens to the overall welfare of the world. They became faulty parts.”

Another silent nod happened between Randall and Ysadora, as the latter relaxed. It wasn't hard for Abraham to understand that she was performing to perfection her role as a bodyguard and warning Randall of not exposing so much. He continued to look ahead and ignore their otherwise discreet exchange, and Randall replied:

“It goes without saying that one has to be able to not only find these faulty parts, but sift through them as well, so only the functional and worthy ones remain.”

Abraham suddenly understood; Randall winked at him, knowing he had found the answer to his original question, even if he didn't say in any case of outsiders listening in to their conversation.

“I see. Well, since it has nothing to do with our plan to bring back the economy of the Uni-states, it's not really worth my further attention, if you don't mind,” Abraham simply said.

“You're the Public Advisor, your call,” Randall answered as simply. “I need to go, I believe an investor already arrived. I'll also arrange with him, and the others when they will arrive, a meeting in your office for tomorrow morning. I'll call you when it'll be done.”

“Thank you,” Abraham said as they shook hands; Randall then held lightly for a short moment Ysadora's arm before leaving, a cellphone already in his hand.

Abraham watched as Ysadora looked after Randall until he entered an elevator.

“You’re extremely protective of him, aren’t you?” he asked her, amused.

Ysadora looked back at him, her turquoise eyes staring deep into his, as if trying to size him up.

“It’s my duty. I owe everything to him.”

“How come?” Abraham asked her, resuming walking.

“And when something is too good, he can sometimes blindly put his faith into it,” she continued, averting the question. “I’ve read your profile, so I can understand what he sees in you as his potential partner.”

Abraham smirked.

“But you don’t trust me.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised, I’m sure you have seen it from the start,” Ysadora replied teasingly.

“And I’m sure you’re aware that most betrayals come from people like you, people who worked for years to become extremely close to the target,” Abraham equally teased.

Ysadora’s eyes flared in pure anger, and she stopped right in her tracks.

“Be careful of your words,” she warned him.

“You should’ve expected them, considering you accused me first,” he replied, a small innocent smile on his lips. He wasn’t as much accusing her as teasing her; he felt he could see her true personality: fiery, passionate, and like no one could boss her around. Something that suited her much better than the obedient assistant personality she put on around him and Randall.

Somehow she seemed to see what he was doing, and she relaxed.

“Quite right. It is true that I was testing you,” she conceded. “We have trusted people in the past, especially Randall, but these people ended up betraying us,” she finished, her face becoming somber. “I’m just making sure it doesn’t happen again;

Randall's worked too hard to achieve his goals. And as I've said, I owe him, so it's my duty to look after him."

She walked up right to him, her eyes drilling into Abraham's, and he felt deeply in his spine the sudden cold and merciless glare that she gave him as she finished:

"So know that if you're doing this for your selfish ambitions, and you end up betraying Randall, I will personally make sure you end the rest of your days alive but completely crippled from head to toe in your bed."

She turned on her heels and walked away without looking back:

"Have a nice day!"

Abraham stood there slightly shaken (though a part of his mind admired the sight of her figure from the back), and he replied:

"You too."

He let out a sigh. Although her threat was clear, he nevertheless felt relieved. Those people had backbones and weren't scared to let it show. True change came from these kind of people, and he had the fortitude to work with them. Whatever it took, he decided, he would show them he belonged in their world, in their ideals. He would show he was a crucial gear to the perfect clock Randall was creating.

Chapter 17

- BF -

The City of Glass

Night had come, and Tom and Madzistrale joined Gabzryel to his lab after their day of fun and racing.

“Tonight, we’ll be trying something different,” Gabzryel announced. “I’ve managed to hack a bit deeper into our Orb Weaver experiment, and I think I’ve succeeded to help you guys be at least twenty percent cooler in your roles of heroes.”

“Hein?” Tom wondered, puzzled by what Gabzryel just said.

“Never mind, just go to the laboratory,” Gabzryel sighed. “In fact, there’s plenty of new things that I want to try now we’ve gone further into the experiments.”

“Umm... Will it be dangerous?” Madzistrale asked worryingly.

Gabzryel reflected for some time, and Madzistrale glowered at him:

“What?! You’re actually hesitating?!”

“No, no, it’s not that kind of dangerous,” Gabzryel defended himself. “Don’t worry, you guys will be safe no matter what happen... -ish. It’s all new theories, we have to up our game, and I think I know how.”

“Come on, Mad, you know Gab will never risk hurting us; if he thinks the experiment is safe enough, then it’s safe enough.”

Madzistrale pouted, throwing a suspicious glare to Gabzryel, who had already turned his attention to his computer set-up, their Afghan hound Loki looking at them in his usual uninterested manner, spread on the floor and licking the dirt off his long silvery grey coat.

“Okay, now, to the lab! Off you go!” Gabzryel told them, like a parent telling a kid to go to bed.

The siblings dutifully obeyed, and Gabzryel followed them to the basement.

“To train at being heroes, we will start by engaging in a conflict; and a conflict that you can escape from if anything happens,” Gabzryel explained in a microphone, from within his control room, composed of an electroencephalogram, a functional magnetic resonance imaging system and an electromyography, amongst his main computer, and various other machinery, including a frequency emitter. “So, we’ll try such a scenario tonight. Ready?”

“Yep,” the siblings’ voices answered through his speakers.

Without saying anything else, Gabzryel muted his microphone, tapped a few instructions upon his computers, and leaned back in his chair while a soft trance music invaded his laboratory.

The strange chirping of birds brought Madzistrale and Tom out of the blackness that fell upon their mind for a few moments in reality, but which seemed eternity for the siblings. They blinked as the typical morning sun rays hit their faces. They shielded their eyes with their hand, and studied where they were.

“Wow...” Tom spoke suddenly with admiration.

Before them stretched an ocean of shining glass skyscrapers as far the eyes could see. At one extremity of the city, the towers were fewer, and surrounded a space that the siblings could not yet see. But what was even more unique to their mind than the futuristic towers, were the cars: they were flying.

“Are we in Japan? Or Dubai?” Madzistrale gaped with wonder.

Tom rose an eyebrow at her question:

“With flying cars?”

“Dubai’s technology is quite advanced now, you know,” she defended herself. “They have hovering police bikes; who says we’re told of their complete achievements?”

“Nah... Something’s different. Speaking of different... Don’t you feel more heavy”

“Oye, I’m still 160 pounds!”

“I meant clothing wise...” he paused as he turned to fully look at her, his eyes widening.

“Oh, yeah... I know what you mean; besides, am I wearing a hat?” Madzistrale wondered, feeling the heaviness and the rough edges on her head, the rim obstructing her full view. She went to touch it, but as she turned toward Tom, her mouth fell; Tom mirrored her expression. They simultaneously looked down at themselves, and they understood the reason.

“Cool...” was the only thing they could say.

Madzistrale’s usual white tank was covered with a white long-sleeved fitted jacket attached by a single button in the centre, the two pans forming an X. Her wide white trousers were accompanied with a cape-like fabric from her waist down, attached with an ornate silver Celtic brooch, and the overall look giving the impression of a frontal slitted skirt. A Victorian-type hat completed the unexpected uniform, the whole complemented with emerald green borders and ornaments at the extremities of her sleeves, and jacket pans.

Tom’s uniform, as for him, was a simple straight-forward suit with a Manchurian influence in its design, completely dark gray, with electric blue borders.

“Neat!” Tom said with an appreciative smile. “And guess what, Mad? The zipper is on the side of the pant! I won’t have to worry anymore about my crouch!”

“I know!!” she replied excitedly; then she frowned. “Wait a tick... where’re the pockets?”

Tom searched, and he finally found an inside pocket in his jacket.

“Looks like I carry both our things. Let’s see... some money, of which I’ve no idea what country they’re from... Oh, a wallet! Wonder what’s in there it... Hmm, citizen cards; well that’s a start.”

Madzistrale looked over his shoulder to read the two cards that he pulled out.

“Hey! Who’s the *bakka* that made our citizen card? The family name doesn’t match!”

On Madzistrale’s, it was written ‘Madzistrale Korfmann’, whereas on Tom’s, it was written ‘Tom Dzifforyy’.

“I honestly don’t mind,” Tom commented, smiling. “I think it gives us a form of anonymity, with people not knowing we’re siblings.”

“Hmm, good point,” Madzistrale realized. “Nothing else?”

“Nope, that’s it,” Tom fiddled in his pocket before replacing everything. He thought for a while, looking around him for clues as to their location and the city’s origins. But then he shook his head, and took his sister’s hand.

“Well, let’s see that city from up close!”

The two figures, who seemed surrounded by a shimmering glimmer under the sun’s rays, one clad of white and the other of dark gray, climbed down the hill and walked toward the unknown shining city of glass.

***** AI *****

The city’s centre, a great plaza surrounded by business buildings and commercial skyscrapers, was animated with life as the crowd moved from buildings to buildings, some shopping, some going to work, and some stretching their legs before their shifts. The plaza was free from the noise of the flying cars, as no

transport other than by feet seemed to be allowed; up in the sky, grids of hard steel enclosed the space above it, as if to prevent any vehicles from landing or flying near the plaza.

Madzistrale and Tom walked amongst the strangers, none of the latter paying them any attention. At the centre of the plaza stood several booths, and the siblings walked up to one of them, where a portion of the crowd was already gathering around.

“People, people, listen up,” a tall and built man standing upon that stand was saying, “you’re being fooled by this ‘new’ government. Follow it, and you’ll be dragged through mud, just like before!”

“Yes, we’ll be in deep mud when my family will finally be able to eat,” one of the shoppers sarcastically replied.

“Or when these damn fuel companies will be taken down,” another added.

“The government is giving you everything so that you won’t revolt against them!” the public speaker heatedly retorted.

“And the opposing parties won’t give a damn about our existence. Of course we don’t want to revolt against President Bohm, he’s on our side!” the members from the crowd continued.

After a few minutes, the debate became more heated, and soon the crowd grew restless against the public speaker.

“He’s one of Them!” some started to accuse, referring to an enemy that Madzistrale and Tom knew not of. “He’s trying to confuse us!”

The tension climbed as the crowd gathered tighter around the speaker, who finally understood the gravity of his position. Soon, it degraded to physical violence, and a group dragged him to the ground as he was clearly no match against the mob’s numbers.

Desperate to end the fighting, Madzistrale raised her hands, but she let out a gasp of surprise as she found herself holding two heavy metal sticks. Although surprised by its apparition, she did not miss a beat and smacked the two sticks together. The refractive metallic sound stunned for a short moment the crowd, and Tom used it to push aside the people standing between him and the small group beating the public speaker.

Madzistrale followed, taking a quick look at her unexpected weapons: the length of a short sword, a dull-silver colour, and engraved with decorative filigrees. She set them down on the ground while silently wondering how come she came to hold it in the first place, and helped Tom push away the crowd when they tried to gather back around the speaker. Tom grabbed by the collar the main mob leader, and threw him back into the crowd. The same fate fell upon the second and third semi-leaders, while Madzistrale put herself between the rest of the group and the crowd, and the speaker. Upon looking at the siblings' strange attire, and their furious glares, the crowd decided it wasn't a fight worth pursuing, and they gruntingly dispersed.

Madzistrale knelt beside the trembling speaker, who was curled up in a defensive ball, and kindly touched his shoulder, indicating that it was over. The man slowly uncurled, and looked around him fearfully, his medium-short brown hair messy from the attack, and covering part of his forehead and his blue eyes.

"It's all right, they're gone," she reassured him. "Are you hurt? I can help if you are."

The man slowly nodded, and lifted up slightly his shirt to reveal a bruised rib.

"Alright, I got a thing for that, just trust me," Madzistrale said softly; she reached for her purse, until she realized she had none. Yet, as she opened her hand, she was holding her familiar small vial, filled with a somewhat clear liquid; she again wondered silently how it could have happened.

"Do you have a tissue which I can wet?"

The man shakily nodded, taking out a handkerchief from a breast pocket; Madzistrale poured some of the vial onto the bandage, before sticking it against the man's wound.

“Press on it for awhile,” she instructed him. She noticed his water bottle on the booth. She went to get it, poured more of the mysterious liquid into the water, shook it slightly, and instructed the speaker to drink it.

“There, keep the vial, and do these two things again each four hours until your wound gets better,” she told him before leaving in his hand the small bottle.

“Thank you, miss,” the man finally spoke. “What is it you gave me?”

“Achillea millefolium extract. Yarrow, soldier's herb, or Achille's herb, it's also called. It's an effective and quick coagulant and wound healing. In the external application, it will help seal the wound, and internally, it will repair the veins and slow down the flow of blood, so that it doesn't overly bleed, or swell,” she explained, glad to finally get to show-off her herbalist knowledge.

“Well, thank you to both of you,” the speaker once more said, standing up with some difficulties. “I'm surprised you helped me at all.”

“Why shouldn't we? These people were beating you for expressing an opinion,” Tom hotly retorted.

The speaker smiled derisively.

“In the world we are now living, an opinion's more dangerous than you think. Who are you, if I may ask, so I can repay you for your kindness?”

“I'm Madzistrale, this is Tom, my brother. And no need to repay us; violence is against our belief, especially needless violence.”

“But I do insist, Ma... Masi... Madsis...” the man tried to say her name.

“Mad is just fine,” Madzistrale assured him. “And we insist ourselves. In fact, as a Christian, I cannot allow you to repay us for helping you out; it wouldn't be fair.”

The man smiled kindly.

“I’ve never heard of that term, but I think I understand what you mean. It’s rare indeed to meet people like you. I’m Frank, pleased to meet you.”

“So who is this Bohm?” Tom asked Frank, after they shook hands.

Frank looked surprised.

“How come you don’t know? His name is more popular than that of Gaea nowadays...”

“We’re travellers,” Madzistrale quickly explained.

“It’s a surprise the oversea countries hasn’t yet caught up with the news...”

Tom and Madzistrale answered that remark with only an innocent smile.

“Well, Bohm’s the new President of Uni-states, with his new ‘liberal’ party, the AAP.”

“And what makes you so afraid of him?” Tom asked.

“Well, it’s actually quite nothing...” Frank began, prudent and looking around him in a furtive manner.

“We won’t tell anyone, don’t worry. We’re merely curious. These people seemed very devoted to the new President,” Madzistrale reassured him.

“Exactly! He knew exactly what to say, what to do. His party is too perfect, so are all his new Directives. We’re even apparently going to hear the announcement that they’re cutting links with some of the most powerful fuel corporations! Old members of the old governments are also being exposed about various controversies...”

“I see...” Tom replied, thoughtful.

“I know, I know, it’s just theories. But no one seem to find any of that even remotely odd!”

The siblings smiled.

“Yeah, it’s like that too where we come from...”

“Well, I need to go, but thanks anyway!” Frank shook their hands once more. He looked frightfully toward the sky, and hurried away.

“Don’t forget to do the treatments each four hours!” Madzistrale yelled after him.

“Will do!” he shouted back.

Madzistrale turned to her brother, and found him thoughtfully examining the buildings.

“Do you know when something is wrong, Mad? When the people look frightfully at five stories-high buildings.”

“The walls are ugly?” she half-joked.

“No. They fear that they’re spied upon.”

“All buildings have cameras to protect against burglars,” she reasoned.

“Not at five stories high. Cameras placed at that distance aren’t meant to monitor the entrances; they’re meant to monitor the plaza. Did you noticed something else odd?”

Madzistrale looked hard around her, but she couldn’t find the answer.

“No one stopped you when you smacked your weapons together, Mad. No policeman, no security guard, not one person. You just did something dangerous in a crowded plaza, yet no one came to arrest you. And even that little mob fight, no one intervened to restore public peace. And yet, that speaker looked at a five story high camera with dread...”

Both looked at each other, puzzled by this strange mystery.

“Let’s try to find out more about this Bohm,” Tom decided, taking his sister’s hand, and moving toward an extremity of the plaza. “Who wants to bet that the

Presidential sector is that vast park surrounded by towers that we saw earlier on the hill?”

“You mean over there at a half a day walk, with no money to rent a cab?”
Madzistrale joked.

“So? We’ll take that opportunity to explore the city,” Tom cheerfully replied, as the siblings merged back into the crowd, once more unbothered by the strangers around them despite the recent events.

Chapter 18

- AH -

The Superiors

A faint blue light enveloped the mountains as the enormous carved gates closed behind the last convoy of military shipments.

Feldmarschall Johann Teiwas surveyed as the soldiers saluted, and a man in a suit walked up to him with a briefcase, clearly shivering in the morning dew. He sighed; ruled by men in flimsy suits who preferred to spend their times clenching suitcases of money, no wonder the world was in such a mess.

“Feldmarschall Teiwas, I’m Mr. Meyer. I represent the Twelve Imperial Gnasci. Here’s your part of the investment in Project Vymana.”

The nervous man handed the heavy briefcase to the Feldmarschall, and the latter opened it, revealing mass of gold.

“It was an unusual request, but as you can see, we were able to provide it,” Meyer said.

Teiwas turned the pennies of gold between his fingers.

“I’m old-fashioned. Don’t give me those meaningless, worthless pieces of paper that you call money. Or worst, imaginary money within your banks.”

The man fidgeted nervously under the Feldmarschall’s intimidating presence.

“Thank you for your collaboration, Feldmarschall Teiwas. Because of this facility and your men’s hard work, our armies are in safer hands than anywhere else.”

Meyer and Teiwas shook hands, then the former hurried to his SUV.

Teiwas watched them leave before feeling safe enough to turn his back on the road.

“And you people really believed Redspear, that old skinny snake of a man?” he thought bitterly.

Climbing into his own Willy, he took, for what he knew would be the last time, the sinuous road leading to the mines. Upon arriving at the cabin, he was relieved to see eight more Willy, as promised. Entering the cabin with his briefcase in his hand, he smiled broadly upon a good twenty soldiers saluting.

“Perfect, you’re all here,” he said proudly.

“Where else would we be, Feldmarschall?” a tall broad woman answered, smirking.

Teiwas put the briefcase down and opened it, revealing the gold pennies.

“This is our way out. Doesn’t matter where we go, gold is a universal trade object.”

“What if it’s tracked?” one of the younger soldiers asked, worried.

“The briefcase might be, but not the gold itself; by its own properties, it will interfere with the signal.”

Teiwas looked around him.

“Where’s the stuff, Donna?”

“All ready here,” the broad woman pointed to four duffel bags under the table. “If I may, whoever makes the video will become the first one targeted...”

“...hence why I’ll be the one doing it,” Teiwas cut.

The soldiers stared at him and each other, then they all moved one step closer to him.

“Sorry, sir, but we decided that we would all show our face. The world will never believe us if we remain in the shadows while only one man exposes the truth,” Donna said.

The Feldmarschall stared at them with pride: they were truly his loyal comrades. Something that old man could never have.

“Fine. But after that, we move out in groups, and we go our way. We must keep on exposing them even if some of us falls.”

“Casualty of war, sir. It doesn’t change our decision. Strength in Unity: that’s what you showed us.”

“Then let’s get this done the old-fashioned way: early in the morning, before the world wakes. These men in suits think they were our superiors... Let’s show them what true war is. Let them try and stop us.”

***** **AI** *****

Randall walked out of his house, and briefly pausing, he let the morning sun hit his face. This afternoon was his meeting with the investors, and it was one of the rare days that he did not look forward to. Investors were greedy sharks, and were the worst to manage; luckily he knew how to play his cards, and he felt lucky to also have Abraham helping. This man’s mastery in psychology was a huge asset, and he was feeling more and more happy to have him in his plan, even if for the moment in a minor role.

Still, these kinds of meetings were his least favourite tasks to take care of. He breathed in the cool air, and resumed walking toward the parking lot, where he spotted his car, standing out from the other governmental ones by its black and gold-accented, slender yet elegant European look.

Not one second after he sat in the car, closed the door and started the engine, his front passenger door opened and a peculiar man sat down beside him. Randall knew better than to let show that he got startled by the newcomer's sudden intrusion into his car.

“What do you want, Scott?” he annoyingly asked.

“Is that any way to talk to me?” the stranger smirked; doing so, he cocked his head sideways, and smiled in the most chilling fashion Randall had ever seen on anybody. The terrifying smile was accentuated by the stranger's peculiar eyes, emerald green when in full sunlight but golden when shaded, and by the messy spiked fire-orange hair. The skinny jeans and leather jacket he wore did nothing to hide his extreme thinness, yet, he was the only man Randall did not dare to turn his back to, despite his own intimidating appearance.

“I'm about to spend the entirety of this afternoon bargaining with money sharks, I don't have time for your trivialities,” Randall finally said.

“Your superiors wants to know how it's moving along,” Scott replied, placing himself more comfortably on the passenger seat, facing Randall with one leg on the seat and the other resting lazily on the wooden dashboard. Despite being forty-one years old, he looked and acted much too young to Randall's comfort.

“It's moving at the speed it should; and they are your superiors as well, so don't give me that tone,” Randall answered roughly.

Scott looked at him, smiling.

“Time is not something you can play around with. You know the Prince is only passing through; and he won't stick around if you've got nothing to give him,” Scott looked at the elegant dashboard, running a thin finger along the veins of the wood. “And when that happens, you can kiss goodbye your reward.”

Randall glared at him.

“Don't threaten me. You know better.”

Scott laughed.

“I’m not. Just relaying the message that there isn’t much sand left in the hourglass for your precious plan.”

“Then tell our superiors that time is my specialty, and always have been. And that they know better than to doubt my honour and loyalty. Perhaps they forgot what happened twenty-seven years ago?”

Scott humphed, and looked at his fingernails.

“I do remember. Not bad what you did back then... but there was one tiny minuscule detail that you overlooked...”

Randall’s eyes turned icy.

“Don’t tread down that road with me, Scott. She may have escaped from me, but let’s not forget that she escaped from you. I find that much more unforgivable, don’t you think? I think our superiors did too, hence why you’re under my command.”

Scott glared at him, his smile frozen, his golden eyes locked with Randall’s in a deadly staring duel. Not a word was said for a few moments, until Scott turned his eyes away, and opened the passenger door.

“Our superiors will be glad to hear everything is going according to plan.”

“Do me a favour, Scott, and just enjoy yourself as you always do. Leave politics and strategies to us,” Randall replied harshly.

“Will do!” Scott cheerfully answered, before slamming the door behind him.

Randall sighed in relief. He hated that out-of-control guy; he was only useful at cleaning up the occasional garbage resulting from failed deals, and as an intermediary to their superiors. Nothing seemed to please Scott more than this task, which made him at least worth the occasional jeers. Randall was under no doubts that in return, Scott got assigned to him only to keep an eye on him on behalf of

their superiors. Who cared, let them spy, he always thought. His goal was crystal clear, and he would let nothing go awry.

He put on his security belt, and as he did, he felt the subtle painful jab from the scar on his left shoulder, a twenty-seven years old wound. Quickly putting it aside, he started the engine, and drove out toward a rail leading to the aerial highway.

It was nearly fifteen minutes later when a light bleeped on his console. Randall quickly gazed at the pattern of the bleep, and realizing what it meant, slowed down his car. Sure enough, an old-looking car cut in front of him, then signaled right, and drove down, losing altitude. Randall followed, and they parked under a bridge. The other driver got out of her car first, and recognizing her, Randall did the same.

“Jane, what’s the urgency?” he asked, joining the middle-aged woman.

She dug in the breast pocket of her suit, and handed him her cellphone.

“We intercepted this. We are doing our best to block its transmission, but the people behind this are really good. We can only delay it, but it will inevitably find itself in the communication system.”

Randall took the cellphone and squinted in the sun to see the screen. Not a minute later, his eyes turned an icier shade than before, and his fist tightened.

“When was this released?” he asked, his voice betraying his anger.

“4 hours 46 minutes this morning,” Jane answered.

“Old dogs with old tricks,” Randall mumbled. He thrust the cellphone back at the woman. “Keep it delayed from reaching the system for as long as it takes.”

“Yes, sir. Do I contact the cleanup agents?”

“Certainly not. One betrayal is enough; I’m using my own men,” Randall said before turning on his heels and getting back into his car.

He didn’t wait one second before rising his car to the sky again, and resuming his flight to the Capitoline at a faster speed than before.

Chapter 19

- AI -

The Hunt

The personnel taking their breakfast in the peaceful cafeteria glared at Randall as he stormed in. His gray eyes scanned the tables, and he found Ysadora eating in the back, as usual. He moved in, but suddenly slowed down arriving at her table as he noticed Abraham seated across the table with her, reading his newspaper and drinking his coffee alongside her.

Upon seeing him, Abraham rose his head in surprise, Ysadora doing the same.

“Mr. Redsphear? I didn’t think you were already awake,” Abraham said.

Randall eyed him suspiciously before turning to Ysadora.

“I don’t mean to interrupt your breakfast, but I need your help.”

“Of course,” Ysadora said, rising from her chair, Abraham following in courtesy.

“Anything I can help as well?” he asked.

“Certainly not!” Randall hotly cut. Seeing the surprised stare of both Ysadora and Abraham, he calmed himself. “Don’t let me disturb your morning. We have a long and arduous meeting later on.”

“No problem,” Abraham acknowledged. “See you later. And you, Miss Dawn, see you next time.”

Noticing the anger in Randall’s voice, Ysadora only waved goodbye before following Randall out of the cafeteria and into the main corridor. When they reached an empty corridor, Randall stopped and turned to Ysadora, handing her a digital tablet.

“I need you and Scott to hunt these people down,” he simply said.

Ysadora looked at twenty-two faces, all showing the typical hardened look of belonging in the military for long years.

“Aren’t they members of the Vymana squadron?” she asked, studying Feldmarschall Teiwas’ face.

“Yes. This morning they released a video showing the underground base and the hidden militia.”

Ysadora stared longer at the tablet, then handed it back, looking at Randall with an accusatory glare.

“I warned you not to trust their loyalty. This was a big risk, and a fatal one if they succeed to leak this.”

“It was one we had to take, trust me,” Randall replied. “I never held their oaths true, and I do know it was a big risk. That’s why I’m asking you and Scott to take care of them. They won’t take the civilized path, so it makes it easier for you to eliminate them without witnesses and proof.”

“We’re on it,” Ysadora simply said before immediately rushing away.

Randall looked back at the tablet, and threw it down on the stone floor, where it broke into pieces. Picking them up, he began to plan his counter strategy.

“What’s the verdict?” Teiwas asked Donna as the group drove along a treacherous path of rocks and dirt stumps on their off-road three-wheeled bikes.

She was wearing a backpack containing the battery for the computer that she was holding.

“Group C is informing that within forty-five minutes they should be able to pierce through the defenses. But I’m afraid that we still don’t have luck on our side and with Group B and D.”

“We’ve been trying at it for six hours; we’ll have to expect it won’t be as easy as we originally planned,” one of the soldiers intervened.

“Indeed; we have to keep at it,” Teiwas agreed.

They had driven for another twenty minutes when Donna suddenly stared at the screen with dread.

“Feldmarschall, Group D just sent its black box!”

The whole group looked in shock. Teiwas looked at Donna, his bushy eyebrows frowning.

“How can they have been eliminated? They haven’t sent any indications beforehand of an upcoming attack.”

“I don’t know, sir, but the black box is there, and I no longer have contact.”

“They were taken by surprise?” one of the soldiers asked worryingly.

“If yes, then we need to move further on,” Teiwas ordered, speeding up the pace.

As they passed in a valley of alpine flowers, seeing from afar a peaceful village surrounded by the nearby mountains, Donna spoke again:

“It’s done, sir; Group C has broken through, and the video is currently playing on all networks.”

“Order all groups to keep going and to make sure the video stay active,” Teiwas ordered.

“On it.”

Suddenly, a sand-coloured vehicle sped through the valley toward them, and then skid to a stop.

The bikes halted as well, and the soldiers unholstered their gun, aiming at the newcomer.

“Steady, hold your fire,” Teiwas ordered, taking out his own handgun, Donna laying down her backpack in the trunk and doing the same.

The driver door of the car opened, and a shot was heard, hitting the backpack.

“Fire!” Teiwas immediately ordered, dread filling his trained mind. They were completely exposed, the valley of flowers offering no protection.

A raffle of shots was heard as the soldiers reared their bikes and chose random evasive movements; the bullets hit the sand-coloured car, but nothing seemed to happen.

“Drive away as fast as you can, don’t stop for any of us,” Teiwas yelled to his soldiers.

Another shot came from behind the car, and this time, hit one of the soldiers dead on. Teiwas cursed, and adjusted his bike’s trajectory to a head-on course toward the car. Donna gestured her cover, and she fired successively toward the car as she sped to go around it. More shots came in return, and hit two more soldiers; Teiwas quickly observed that they came from under the car, and he fired that way, noticing that Donna was almost through toward the escape route. The remaining soldier sped faster, and before disappearing from their view, he yelled:

“They’re behind the car!”

Teiwas had just begun to register the warning as his bike jumped over the sand-coloured car, that a long sectioned blade resembling a chain wrapped itself around him. It yanked him out from his seat and slammed him unto the ground while his bike crashed further on.

“Scott, get after that woman; I’m taking care of him,” a female voice ordered.

Teiwas rolled on the ground, and pointing his handgun toward the location of the voice, he unholstered the other gun strapped to his thigh, and shot toward a running man with spiky bright orange hair. The man swirled into his run to dodge the shot, and threw him a dagger, which landed mercifully a mere inch of Teiwas' face, before resuming running behind Donna's bike.

Teiwas rose on his feet and faced his opponent, a tall slender woman dressed in silver and blue. As she came to retract her chain, Teiwas wrapped the end around his arm, and violently yanked it out of her grip, relieved in the strength of his coat's sleeve, as it merely tattered but didn't ripped completely to his arm. As she stumbled toward him from the resulting forward movement, he lunged and smacked his whole forearm against her thorax, relieved to hear her cough. He threw the chain on the ground behind him, and pointed his gun toward her as she retreated.

"You people force dishonour around those you meet. Here I am, a gentleman forced to fight a lady; and here you are, ordering a man to fight a lady," Teiwas growled.

"You brought your own fate by betraying your contract," Ysadora retorted, unholstering her own gun.

"One day, young lady, you'll need to learn the difference between loyalty to a piece of paper, and loyalty to the people you're sworn to protect. But it obviously won't be now, so I guess I'll teach you a lesson of justice."

Before giving her a chance to react, he lunged forward, caught her armed hand, and almost simultaneously hit her nerve receptor in her elbow, and then her solar plexus with the pommel of his handgun.

Ysadora coughed as she dropped her gun, and stumbled backward, her mind dazzled by the speed and accuracy of the attack.

"Do you think a young woman, a faithful pet of an old man who thinks himself king of cities, can really fight against a squadron raised and trained in the

treacherous mountains? You may have taken by surprise our youngest members; but you won't win against boars like Donna and I."

A shot rang in the air right after Teiwas finished talking. Both Ysadora and the Feldmarschall turned their head toward the origin; but Ysadora coldly smiled and turned back to Teiwas.

"Looks like your own faithful pet has lost. It would take more than one shot to take down Scott. Which means, considering your military stand regarding capture, that my man won, and your woman chose her death."

Ysadora straightened up, and her metal heels dug into the dirt as she relaxed her limbs.

"As for you, old man, don't think for one second that you won simply because you're trained like any other humans on this earth, and simply because you've taken my sword and gun."

Upon those words, she kicked the ground, and threw dirt at the face of Teiwas; quickly following, she sprinted to him, and at the last second, pivoted her body on the side, shielding her descent with her left arm and leg, as she used her right feet to kick right at the knee junction. As Teiwas knelt under the force, she continued her movement and hit with the foreleg his throat. She then expertly rolled over and landed behind him.

A fierce fight followed, evenly matched by Teiwas' powerful hits and determination, and by Ysadora's agility and use of severed junctions. She finally got the high hand and pinned him to the ground; she reached for her nearby gun, and aimed at his head.

"Your last words? I've got all the time in the world; but you better hurry before Scott returns, for he won't be as patient," she asked, a small predatorial smile on her lips.

Breathing hard, Teiwas looked at the hardened woman kneeling on him, her fierce turquoise eyes showing nothing but coldness.

“I pity you, lady. I took an oath to protect complete strangers whom have families and know nothing of the wars and the troubles that threaten them daily. My whole motivation was to grant them blissful ignorance and peace; and I am glad to die with those terms.

» But you... You kill for a man that doesn't care one bit about those families, about the simple luxury of life that is peace and joy. Your boss will gladly watch those people burn to obtain whatever ambitions he desire. And you follow that man blindly, and I pity you, because your soul is more tinted with sins than a soldier who fought in the worst wars there could be. So here are my last words: kill me now, because those are your orders. But think deeply about whether you still have a drop of humanity left; and how long before you lose even that drop?”

Teiwas grasped Ysadora's hand and made her press the trigger.

Scott looked furiously at the immobile form of Donna on the ground before him, her victorious smile teasing him. He looked in protestation at his clean katars, and then at the soldier's self-administered fatal wound. She had put up a bigger fight than he expected, and when he finally won, even went as far as pulling the trigger on her before his daggers could reach her. Her smile taunted him, her determination to face death annoyed him more than anything. How could someone like him lose against a mere woman? It made no sense.

Scott slipped the daggers under his sleeves, and spitting at the still form, he jogged back up the hill to assist Ysadora. It was then he heard the distinctive sound of her handgun shot; and it annoyed him even more: even she took down her enemy by her own hands.

When he reached the valley, he saw her talking:

“Yes, the computer got destroyed. One soldier from Group A escaped, but he’ll be harmless without the computer and the software.”

Ysadora turned to look at Scott, and upon seeing his flustered face, she restrained a smile.

“Yes, the leaders are eliminated,” she resumed. Her face then frowned in worry as her interlocutor answered. “How will you take care of it? Calling it a fake news won’t cut it...”

Scott drifted out of the conversation; it was formalities, as usual. He took out his anger by kicking the bodies lying around and slashing the bikes with his katars.

Finally, Ysadora joined him, picking up her chain and holstering her gun.

“The cleaners will arrive within half an hour. So come on, Scott, we’ve got one more Group to chase after if we want to permanently shut down the transmission. The latest news is that they reached Kairyō.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Scott hissed back.

Ysadora smiled as she opened her car’s door.

“Fine; go by foot. I’ll see you in two days; can’t guarantee you’ll have any prey left, though...”

She closed the door and giggled as Scott lashed at her, the metals screeching as the katar hit the metal door. She waited a few seconds before Scott grudgingly sheathed his katar and protestingly sat in the passenger seat, then the car rose in the air and flew toward the south.

Chapter 20

- AI -

The Appearance

The buzzing of everyday life had increased exponentially when noon came, and Tom and Madzistrale reached the outskirts of the glass city. Around them laid a whole casual sector of the city, obviously oriented toward accommodating the simpler lifestyles and commercial needs of nearby farms. But a few hundred yards further, stretched before them the peculiar park-like opening the siblings had seen from the hill upon their arrival.

A soft and calm jazz music drew Madzistrale toward a cozy-looking cafe.

“Ooh, Tom! Can we eat here before continuing?”

“Yeah, sure. Gab spent a great deal of time reminding us we should have money...”

They sat outside at the terrace, and while they waited for the waitress to welcome them, a nearby screen was playing some sport that looked like hockey, only with boots instead of skates, and a softball-sized ball instead of a puck. The schedule then changed to a news report, and the newscaster looked up at the camera and smiled professionally.

“Welcome to the mid-day news. The International Federation of Gnasci meeting is still underway after their second week, and doesn’t show any signs of slowing down. After discussions of issues such as the rise of poverty, lower incomes, illegal trading, and economical fluctuations, the latest news is that they’re now discussing climate change and new protocols...”

The cafe became silent as the news report suddenly got cut and replaced by a mountainous view. As the camera moved, the scenery showed a breathtaking view

of a colossal mine lodged between snow-topped peaks. Then, as it descended into the mine, it stopped in front of a massive smooth granite wall. The cafe crowd watching the video gasped in shock as the wall suddenly slid sideways back into the surrounding stones to reveal a gaping hole. Twenty-two soldiers then moved in front of the still camera, and stood at the ready, with two at the foremost of the line. A tall built man, with a bushy mustache, obviously the leader by his age and intimidating stature, stepped forward, followed by an equally built and mature woman, her face stern and almost manly.

The older man spoke, his booming voice clear and steady despite his thick accent:

“Good morning. We, the Vymana Squadron, address all of Terra’s population with this message that will undoubtedly bring about the deaths of some of our members. My name is Feldmarschall Johann Teiwas.”

In suit, all the soldiers spoke out their names and ranks. When they were done, the Feldmarschall resumed:

“We were recruited by the Twelve Imperial Gnasci to carry out a secret operation. Project Vymana, named after the Shindu legend of an outer realm craft hiding under their mountains. The operation was simple: to hide all the Twelve Imperial Gnasci’s main military forces under the Schwyzryvan mountains, to later on release them unto the public when it would be least expected. That was of course not the official reason; the official motive was to demilitarize the Gnascies in faces of oncoming peace, and to store the forces until such times as they could be dismantled properly. But it doesn’t take an idiot to understand the real meaning behind Project Vymana: to hide a full-fledged military forces and unleash its power when Terra would become weak enough.

» The location of this underground base is located at coordinates 46.3254°N and 7.5463°E within the bowels of the Magnetite Mine; although I cannot guarantee that upon release of this video, the access will remain available. It is your duty to send reporters as soon as possible and investigate before a mysterious shutdown is executed and that the access is blocked. Within shortly, I will show you the extent

of the forces that lies hidden in this base. But I want to make one thing clear before anything else.

»...unlike what you will be led to believe, it is not the Twelve Imperial Gnasci that are to be blamed for this abhorrent project, but is the sole fabrication and dirty manipulation of a...”

The image flickered, and then the screen went blank for a few seconds. The screen flickered back to a weather radar map of Norr Americae, a weatherman reporter pointing to a mass of cloud, explaining its trajectory.

The cafe exploded with nervous and excited chatter; puzzled, Tom and Madzistrale looked at each other, wondering what just happened.

“Reminds me of how that British radio show was hacked in 1977,” Madzistrale commented, worried.

“Unluckily for the whistleblowers, someone got to cut the video before the culprit was revealed,” Tom said, looking gloomy.

Madzistrale looked around her, at the people embarking in heated discussion, and rose for her chair.

“I think we should just move away, in case another protest erupts. One for the day was enough.”

“Agreed,” Tom followed her out.

As they walked toward the park opening, Madzistrale mused.

“What do you make of it?”

“Dunno,” Tom honestly replied. “I don’t even know what we’re supposed to do exactly. It feels like Gabzryel’s stored theories bunched up in one.”

Madzistrale let out a small shocked cry as suddenly, one step ahead got them in the middle of a lowly-lit library alley, high shelves filled with old-looking books surrounding them.

“I am glad you finally found your way,” a soft woman’s voice spoke from the next alley.

As they approached her, the woman picked up a book lying open on the floor, and replaced it in the shelf. She wore a colourful and complex wrap dress of a warm earthy palette that contrasted with her black beaded braids and her tanned skin. Ornate jewellery adorned her ears, nose, lips, neck, arms, fingers and ankles.

“Your friend didn’t seem to like what he read; he threw the precious book away, the poor thing,” she playfully added. She turned to the siblings and smiled. “I have to be careful in how I interact with you; I can’t have you startled, the shock might break the link.”

“Umm, who are you?” Tom asked, completely confused, holding firmly Madzistrale by his side in protection.

“I kinda helped your friend find his missing link; it’s harder than everyone thinks to coordinate such things. You actually got in my library by mistake; you must have found one of those little doors. But since I got you here, I only wished to welcome you, and to say this: when we’ll meet again, you will understand a bit more what’s happening, so I’ll be able to explain it better to all of you. Until then, I wish you good luck, and most of all, to keep yourself true. Times ahead will prove challenging; and only you get to choose what’s the right path, no one else.

» I won’t keep you. Goodbye, and until next time. The door is that way!” she pointed to the exit past a few rows of books.

The siblings dutifully followed, and opened the exit door. The clamour of the glass city’s plaza greeted them once again, and they blinked at the sun’s rays striking them painfully after the darkly-lit library.

***** **BF** *****

Tom, Madzistrale and Gabzryel stared in utter incomprehension as the scenes they experienced replayed on the computer's monitor.

“What the heck was that?” Madzistrale wondered.

Gabzryel only answered with a puzzled frown.

“Well, at least it wasn't another boring walk through a forest,” Tom cheered them. “We get it: we love forests.”

“Okay, I'm going to sleep,” Madzistrale decided, turning on her heels.

“Oh come on. After that?” Tom complained.

“Thinking about it while falling asleep and yawning won't get us anywhere,” she reasoned, climbing up the staircase to the house's ground level.

Gabzryel barely registered Tom following her while arguing. He was looking thoughtfully at the serene face of the stranger. Looking quizzingly at Loki, he found the dog merely looking at the screen for a short term, then resuming playing with his bone toy. A dog had instincts beyond those of humans, yet this stranger seemed to stir nothing in Loki.

“Who are you?” Gabzryel asked the screen. “And why are you in my library?”

He closed the window, and opened another folder, clicking on the most recent report. Reading the endless string of data and numbers, he stopped at one particular line:

2,345,218,609,546 å - ø x ý

It took him several seconds before Gabzryel realized that his jaw was dropped.

His heart racing with this discovery, he closed the file. He turned excitedly to Loki, and bending down, stroke him, the Afghan hound willingly turning over for a better massage.

“Shush. You’re not to say a word of it to the kids,” Gabzryel whispered. “They need to remain ignorant if we want to see this through. But if this number is right... I think I can safely start writing my scientific paper essay on Project Orb Weaver.”

Loki barked in return, and Gabzryel giggled in excitement. Finally some answers to his lifelong questions. Perhaps they would also answer those relating to his sister... even if part of him wished that mystery to remain unexplained.

“Until next time,” he wished to the empty air.

Chapter 21

- AL -

Disturbance

Morning rays hit the curtains, softening the incoming light into Ysadora's bedroom. Lying with her eyes wide open, Ysadora contemplated the light, noticing the clock at the corner of her vision: 25-08, 6h43 a.m. Rising in a seated position, pulling her blankets around her, she grimaced as her muscles ached. It had been three days since her fight against the Vymana squadron; yet, she had to grant their strength for making her feel like she underwent weeks of training.

Those thoughts only added to the reason why she was already awake; for the Feldmarschall's last words had resonated throughout the following nights despite her best efforts to eradicate their memories.

Ysadora rose from her bed, and walked to the bathroom. Pausing in front of the mirror, she analyzed her reflection. In an almost disgusted manner, she stroke and began to braid her platinum blond hair. That alone was the only tangible proof of her transgression against her human nature. Losing her natural brown hair color, and giving faithful obedience to her saviours, was the exchange for the life she should never have had. She leaned closer and looked in her reflection's turquoise eyes. Poets once said that eyes were windows to the soul. If that was true, then she certainly could see hers, strong and unwavering; so why did the Feldmarschall's words stirred something in that soul? Why did she, at occasions, still felt under-par to those around her? Only because she shouldn't be alive right now? When has loyalty and gratitude ever equated to losing one's humanity?

Ysadora turned her back to the mirror. What did the Feldmarschall knew of her? How could he ever understand? Loyalty and honour was something she knew; that was her humanity. And if it wasn't enough, then she would prove its existence.

Abraham examined with suspicion the plate of oatmeal and fruits; taking another bite, he cringed at the taste, feeling as if he was eating dry sand.

“These people seriously need to add milk to the oatmeal,” he sighed, pushing the bowl away and keeping the fruits, which tasted decent.

“Having trouble with cafeteria-based breakfast?” Ysadora teased him, sitting at his table without invitation, her own plate containing nothing but toasts and three slices of cheese.

Abraham grimaced.

“It seems to be the norm everywhere, at any cafeteria: cheap coffee that tastes bland, or mud, and sand-like dried breakfast,” he sighed again.

“Should use your power to change that,” Ysadora continued to tease him over her own cup of coffee.

Abraham looked at her with amusement for some moments, before finally saying:

“If you’re trying to be discrete about keeping an eye on me, it doesn’t work.”

“I’m not hiding. I told you: I am keeping an eye on you,” Ysadora nonchalantly replied, sipping her coffee.

“You’re gutsy in your confidence that by knowing what you’re up to, people will still reveal their true selves,” Abraham smirked. “I like it. After all, you’re right.”

“I am?” Ysadora smiled innocently.

“Confidence works both ways; and the victims are more often than not too confident that they can keep secrets when knowing they are observed.”

Ysadora considered him.

“You truly know your psychology.”

“Surprised?”

“A little. Many people are all talk, no action.”

“Except Randall; hence why you’re protective of him.”

“And you’re here because you feel your ambitions might finally bloom under the right superior,” Ysadora countered.

“Nothing wrong with that. We all need teachers to show us the way; and they need students to prove their teachings right.”

Abraham paused to take a bite at the orange quarters, then he smirked at Ysadora.

“But my earlier words still apply. As much as you think I’ll drop my guards knowing you’re observing me, as much as I’m confident you’ll drop yours while believing you’re safe.”

Ysadora considered him, her turquoise eyes turning defensive.

“And why are you so interested?”

Abraham smiled softly.

“I told you last time: you look like someone that deserves being understood.”

Ysadora stared at Abraham, and he chuckled as she tried the best she could to hide her shock. And her cheeks becoming red certainly didn’t help her desperate efforts.

“Miss Dawn?”

Ysadora and Abraham rose their heads and saw Daniel standing by the side, carrying a pile of folders.

“What do you want?” Ysadora sharply asked.

“I have the documents that you requested, ma’am: the compilations of all...”

Ysadora rose abruptly from her chair and laid her hand on his elbow.

“Not here, Daniel. People are eating breakfast, they don’t need to hear about business.”

“As you wish, ma’am.”

She picked up her coffee cup, and smiled apologetically at Abraham.

“Sorry. We’ll have to continue this conversation another time.”

Abraham rose from his chair, and kissed her hand in guise of goodbye, smirking at her surprised expression.

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Ysadora closed her office door and sat behind her desk.

“Okay, you were saying?”

“I have the documents that you requested, ma’am; the compilation of all the actions, investments and vices of our current, and past, council members and investors,” Daniel resumed in his usual monotonic tone, setting down carefully the folders upon the glass table.

“You’re fast, as always,” Ysadora complimented him, sifting quickly through the names.

“May I ask the purpose of this compilation, ma’am?” he asked, a hint of curiosity showing through his impassible face.

“The plan is starting to enter its final stage. I need insurances against anyone who will rise against us to tear it down,” Ysadora explained.

“Why is the population not happy, ma’am? Are you not offering them security on all vital aspects of their life?” Daniel asked, visibly puzzled.

“It’s not the population that worries me. It’s those we kicked out of their powerful position; and those we will kick out in the future. Power is not something humans give up easily on.”

“And you are afraid they will undermine your plan in revenge of their lost power, ma’am?”

“Something like that. With your compilation, though, we’ll have the upper hand. It’s hard to look good when everyone knows about your flaws and vices.”

“Although I have some flaws resulting from my military work, I am not aware that I have vices, ma’am. Am I not looking good because everyone knows of vices that I am not aware of?” Daniel asked.

Ysadora looked at him blankly.

“I wasn’t referring to you, Daniel.”

“But you did, ma’am. You said...”

Ysadora stopped him with a raised hand.

“Thank you for the compilation, Daniel.”

“You are welcome, ma’am.”

Ysadora returned to reading key passages from the files, until after a few minutes, she realized Daniel was still standing in front of her desk.

“Yes? What do you want?” she asked, annoyed.

“I have urgent and intriguing news for you, ma’am,” he answered simply.

Ysadora’s frown lifted with interest, and a bit of annoyance.

“And why haven’t you started with the ‘urgent and intriguing news’ first, since it was so important?”

“You wanted to see my compilation of all the actions, investments and vices of our current, and past, council members and investors, ma’am. It was thus the priority.”

Ysadora sighed; he was really thick sometime.

“Next time, the priority is the news, okay?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Silence fell in the office. Ysadora waited expectantly to hear this famous news, but Daniel still wouldn’t talk, looking straight at her, unflinching.

“Daniel?” she asked, worried.

“Yes, ma’am?” he answered.

“So?...”

“...fia, ma’am,” he replied proudly.

“What?” Ysadora was now deeply puzzled.

“Sofia, ma’am. The ending for the most relevant word to our conversation, beginning with ‘So’, that you were asking for. It is the Greek word for wisdom.”

Ysadora restrained herself from making a facepalm.

“I meant, what is the news that was so urgent?”

“A public disturbance, ma’am. In the Plaza, two days ago, 23-7, at 9:38 a.m. A citizen, Frank Cooper, spoke against the government, and 48 other citizens spoke in favour of the government; afterwards, 6 minutes and 23 seconds later, five citizens endeavoured to administrate pain to Frank Cooper...”

Ysadora restrained a chuckle upon hearing Daniel describe a beating, like a scientist observing rats.

“...when a metal shock sound was heard, three of the five citizens were pushed to the crowds, and the disturbance ended. The name of the five attacking citizens were...”

“I don’t need their names. Okay... so, that’s it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How is that intriguing and urgent? Public beatings are common, and it’s none of our business. Even if a few citizens go down, it makes that much less to spend our resources on. It’s been like that since before you got employed.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“So?...” Ysadora asked after a few moments of silence, to gather more informations.

“...phie, ma’am. A French common name for female gender, derived from your previous inquiry, Sofia, the Greek word for wisdom.”

“Stop it with the Sofia/Sophie!!” Ysadora burst.

“Yes, ma’am,” Daniel impassively replied.

Ysadora calmed herself down; nine years she had him as her assistant, and she was still not used to his train of thoughts.

“What’s so intriguing about this disturbance?” she clarified.

“The two that protected the public speaker do not belong to any database, ma’am,” Daniel explained.

“What do you mean?”

“As required from such a disturbance, I researched the origin of the metallic sound. It came from this weapon, ma’am,” he rose and took out a phone-like device; he placed it on the desk, and opened it.

A holographic screen floated, showing a live footage of the previous day in the Plaza. As he said, a public speaker began to shout, and Ysadora smirked upon hearing the crowd basically swearing their allegiances to Bohm’s government. The crowd beat the speaker, but two figures walked up to the crowd, previously observing the scene. Ysadora paused the video in shocked surprise at the following scene, and even had to replay the instant, where the one with a hat and clad in white, a woman judging by her demeanour, came to suddenly hold two long baton-like weapons, set them down after scaring the crowd, and joined the second figure,

a male clad of dark gray, at helping up the public speaker. Despite the camera filter, Ysadora could swear that the two strangers seemed to be surrounded by a glimmering shimmer; it was as subtle as fleeting dust in sun rays. The three figures spoke together for awhile, then the public speaker hurried away. Ysadora rose her eyebrows in a second surprise as the male figure in dark gray looked around him and settled at looking straight at the camera, his dark eyes burning with both curiosity and suspicion; a small shiver ran on Ysadora's neck as she felt as if he was staring straight at her. The young woman by his side looked too at the camera after he showed it to her; after a few words, they walked away.

“Okay, that was new,” Ysadora commented. “While they obviously didn't know of the existence of the cameras at first, they then knew exactly where they were...”

“And the weapons, ma'am,” Daniel reminded her, while rewinding the footage to the moment the woman clad of white held the sticks.

“I know, I know. But where the hell did they come from? She has no scabbards, no belt, no holsters, and they just... appeared out of nowhere?” Ysadora asked, her mind racing at figuring out the answer to this mystery.

“I do not know, ma'am. But it has no match whatsoever with any weapons sold.”

“Homemade, then... That might be a danger, especially if made to fight against our government...” she said thoughtfully.

“What brings you to this conclusion, ma'am?”

“They helped that man, the one against us.”

She rose, determination in her eyes.

“Alright, I want a face match right away, Daniel,” she ordered.

“I believe I already told you, ma'am. I have taken the liberty to search for one. They have none, ma'am.”

Ysadora slowly turned to him.

“What?”

“They have no match, ma’am. They exist nowhere in our database.”

“That’s impossible! We own all the population database, every births since ninety years, every deaths,” she replied.

“Yes ma’am. With exceptions.”

“Really? Which ones?”

“The Africani, Suth Americani, Pacifica native tribes, as well as underground communities with unregistered births, ma’am,” he answered impassively.

Ysadora stared at him, annoyed.

“Do they look like tribal natives, or hippies, Daniel?”

“No ma’am.”

“Exactly. So why don’t they show up in our database?”

“I do not know, ma’am.”

“Great... I have to warn Randall; this might be serious,” she decided, walking out of her office, Daniel dutifully following her.

Chapter 22

- AL -

Knuckle Sandwich

“Good afternoon, Mr. Solomon,” the Capitoline receptionist greeted Abraham as he arrived into the Hall, returning from his lunch break.

“Good morning, Mrs. Williams. Any message from the President or Mr. Redsphear?”

“No sir,” she answered after quickly verifying.

“Thank you.”

“Have a nice day, Mr. Solomon,” she flashed him an inviting smile, immediately blushing afterwards from her daringness.

“You too, Mrs. Williams,” Abraham answered, hiding his annoyance at her not-so-subtle intentions.

As he went to climb the main spiraling stairs, leading to the above stories and his office, his instincts warned him of a danger. Pretending to stop to verify the time on his watch, he took the opportunity to look around him. His keen eyes fell at last upon the guest waiting section of the hall, where two men were seated. Dark suits, their briefcases at their side, they could have passed for ordinary business men waiting for a meeting. But subtle ticks, such as their fleeting stares, constantly looking at the hall, the fact they were reading a magazine yet never turned the pages, and their generally tense body, led Abraham to believe that they were more than just waiting for a meeting.

They finally turned their stare toward the stairs, toward him, and he quickly returned to pretend to look at his watch, and tap on it, as if it was broken (part of him noticed with annoyance that it was indeed still malfunctioning, showing 10:34

a.m. despite the hour being 14:58 p.m. on the Hall's clock). Once he resumed climbing the stairs, he heard the men rise and start to walk toward the stairs. As soon he reached a level of the spiral where they couldn't see him, he picked up the pace and started running up the stairs. With some surprise, he suddenly found himself at the story of his office. Part of him wondered how he got there that fast, while the most urgent part of him told him to think quickly about his next move against the oncoming attackers. Public Relations Advisor wasn't a dangerous position, and unlike the President and the most important positions, Abraham didn't own bodyguards. And he doubted that the briefcases were empty.

"Bodyguard!" he suddenly thought.

He had a bodyguard. He walked briskly toward his office at the end of the corridor while taking out his cellphone and pressing a speed dial that Randall had programmed the evening before. Putting the volume to the utmost minimal, he pressed it hard against his ears to avoid the conversation being heard.

"Hello?" Ysadora's voice finally answered, with a touch of defiance, as if the call had better to be important.

"Ysadora, it's Abraham," he whispered; before she could answer back, he continued quickly, still whispering as low as he could, as he wasn't sure where the attackers were now: "I need your help; someone, I suspect a council member that got exposed, sent two big men to give me a knuckle sandwich. I can manage them for awhile, but they might have time to escape with no one knowing."

With relief, he heard her say some instructions to someone beside her, something about sending her second assistant to greet some newcomers, and then started to run, her heels clicking harder and faster upon the marble floor. At least, she too was in the Capitoline.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Going to my office; they are climbing the stairs, and are most probably at the top," he reached his office, and closed the door behind him.

“Can you get out of there?” she asked him, her breath finally catching up with her running speed.

“No, there’s only one way, and they’ve covered it. It’s fine, I’ll keep them trapped in my office; I might succeed to get a confession recorded.”

“I won’t be long, I promise. Keep out of the door’s way,” upon this instruction, Ysadora hung up.

Abraham stopped the call; he quickly turned on the audio recording, muted the playback audio, found some office tape, and taped the phone under his desk. As he heard heavy steps approaching his door, he opened a file at random, and looked busy as the door slammed open.

“Come in,” he said sarcastically.

The two men closed the door behind them as Abraham rose from his chair, examining the situation; he noticed that once they had been alone, they had put on masks.

“You know, if you want to look incognito, you have to stop to be so damn obvious that you are about to do something outlawish. Fleeting gazes and not turning the pages of your magazine, especially when the page you are ‘reading’ is an impotence cure publicity, are big signs that you’re stalking someone,” Abraham told the strangers, with a pleasant smile. “Tell me, you got sent in response of the leaks, didn’t you?”

The men said nothing, putting down their briefcases. They were blocking the exit, but Abraham didn’t mind. He intended on keeping them busy; and he knew exactly how to handle them. Bullies always reacted the same way; that much hadn’t changed since his youth.

“It’s their fault, really,” Abraham continued, going around his desk to stand in front of it. “The first key to a good business is to never soil it. If you do something illegal, you do it unrelated to your professional name and business. No linked banks accounts, no...”

He paused as the men opened the briefcases, then a secret compartment, and took out bludgeons. Abraham laid nonchalantly back against his desk, his hands firmly flattened upon the varnished wood. He smiled mischievously at the attackers, and waited for the leader to attack first. His heart began to pound with the adrenaline flushing through his veins, and he tensed as the leader finally made his move, raising his bludgeon, the other man moving sideways to cut an escape route. As the first leader approached close enough, and the bludgeon fell down toward Abraham, the latter pivoted himself toward the back, his arms supporting his weight. His feet left the ground, and in the same movement, he slammed his legs against the leader's chest. The leader's bludgeon hit the air, and he retreated a feet or two back under Abraham's leg hit at his lungs; Abraham returned back on his feet as it was the second man's turn to attack. Abraham pivoted to his left to avoid the first bludgeon blow, which fell heavily upon the desk; the first leader came back with a second blow, one that Abraham countered with his arm. With his other arm, he threw a glass ashtray to the face of the second hitman, who flew a hand to his face in a failed attempt of dampening the hit. The first man tried to hit once more, but Abraham ducked and in the same movement, lunged forward; he administered an uppercut to the leader's jaw, who dropped the bludgeon in pain. As the leader retreated a few steps back, dazed by the pain in his jaw, Abraham took the opportunity to give a kick to the man's right knee, making the hitman fall, and temporarily paralyzing him. The second man sneaked from behind, took Abraham by the neck, slammed him flat against the desk, and attempted to choke him. Abraham struggled to get his legs free, and once they were, he pushed with all his might against the hitman, attempting to weaken the hold on his throat; but the man was as motivated than him to accomplish his mission, and the grip stayed tight, and Abraham began to gasp.

Suddenly, the hitman let out a surprised gasp, and he was yanked backward, Abraham almost following him due to the man still trying to hold on to his throat. As Abraham clumsily stumbled upon his feet, and the hitman fell to the floor, he saw Ysadora standing in the room, finishing a spin upon herself, holding a strange chain-like metallic weapon. She was holding its sword-like handle, and Abraham

noticed a triangular tip wrapped around the ankle of the hitman that was strangling him, linked to the handle through a long link.

“Don’t come close, don’t touch my weapon or the man; if you have any cuts or wounds, it will kill you,” she warned him, retracting in a snap her weapon back to her side.

Abraham saw the leader, the one he had broken the knee, lying on the floor, immobile. Soon, despite his attempt to crawl out of the office (and Ysadora bringing him back in and closing the door), the second hitman convulsed for a few second, then also laid immobile. Signaling Abraham to stay where he was, Ysadora knelt beside both victims, and took their pulse; with a satisfied expression, she rose, and retracted her weapon. This time, the entire length of the chain retracted, the triangular tip joined the handle, and Abraham saw that fully joined, it looked like a segmented sword. The blade folded up into a roll, and Ysadora placed the now small weapon back on a strap unto her left thigh under her skirt.

“They’re dead,” she announced coolly, before talking to the empty air: “Daniel, I need the cleaning team up in Mr. Solomon’s office. Tell them to be discreet, we don’t want anyone to see anything.”

She applied some cream on her hands, then turned to Abraham, whom was examining the victims with an equally cool face.

“Are you alright?” she asked him.

“Of course, just a few minus bruises. I don’t even feel anything,” Abraham answered honestly. He realized that he indeed didn’t felt any pain, which was a surprise considering the bludgeon hit on his arm, the impact of his back against the desk, and the strangling.

“I meant mentally. Are you alright? Seeing death for the first time can be traumatizing.” The way she said it made it seem like she considered such a reaction below her.

Abraham looked at her in surprise, and scoffed.

“What, seeing my attackers dead? It was me or them. You forget that I’ve studied Nature’s law. Death is a constant.”

He realized it sounded terribly patronizing for such an innocent question from her part; at least, she was caring, unlike his youth years, when he was left alone to deal with bullies, even by his own parents. His tone softened, and he gave her a grateful smile.

“I mean, I’m okay, really. I’m glad you got them quicker, though. What happened?”

She smiled proudly, and Abraham couldn’t help but appreciate how her turquoise eyes shone when she did.

“A form of poison. My weapon is laced with it. Quick and nasty, especially with these big guys, with all their heart pounding fast. Carries the poison faster. That’s why I told you to stay clear.”

She walked to the window, and checked outside.

“Seems to be no one else.”

“No, they were alone. It was obvious by how they were fighting.”

She walked back to him,

“Right, well, you and I should go downstairs to let my guys clean up your office. In an hour, all will be back to normal.”

She paused, and looked at him with confusion.

“What?” he asked.

“You changed your tie?” she wondered with surprise.

“What? No, it’s the same one from this morning,” Abraham replied, confused.

Ysadora raised an eyebrow.

“Your tie was stripped black and white when we ate breakfast together; it’s now pokedot black and white,” she told him.

Abraham checked his tie; it was indeed pokedot black and white. His own eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Okay... Well, apparently, I did...”

Ysadora shrugged.

“It happens; beside, your new tie suits you,” she finished with a playful smile.

Abraham returned the smile at her compliment, and he opened his office door to let her out first. He was starting to really enjoy working here; but most of all, to know someone finally had his back. He realized with a certain shock that he was actually starting to trust someone else; a beautiful someone at that...

Abraham shook vividly his head; it was really not the time to be thinking about that. Much more important things laid ahead of him, and for that, he needed all his focus. Randall wasn’t someone he wanted to disappoint.

Chapter 23

- AL -

The Disappearance

Warm air and an equally warm breeze welcomed Madzistrale and Tom as they put their feet upon the first wild patch of grass since the very beginning of their arrival in the strange city of glass. The space they found themselves standing upon was very large; grass, ornamental bushes, and small blossoming trees as far the eyes could see. The glass skyscrapers stopped short at the rim of the park, and their shadows barely touched the ground. A few hundred yards from the siblings stood several large white buildings, with distinct neoclassical architectures. Specifically-placed stone pathways led to those various buildings, and a small group of tourists were waiting on one such pathway, their cameras at the ready. Silently agreeing in one fleeting look, Tom and Madzistrale nonchalantly joined the group.

The tourists gave them bright smiles, and everyone turned back toward the park as an auburn-haired woman walked in front of the group.

“Welcome, it’s a pleasure meeting you all; I’m Rose! Now, I know you’re all excited, and let’s not mention how hot it is...” small laughter resonated, “so without further ado, follow me, and allow me to present this beautiful country that’s the Uni-states.”

Rose led the tourists into the closest building, and they whispered excitedly as the interior was an open-concept display of paintings and news clippings within elegant frames.

The next hour was spent discussing the various depicted battles, treaties, events, elections and such, when a particular painting captured Madzistrale’s attention.

“Excuse me,” she said, raising her hand; she pointed to the frame closest to her on the wall. “What are those seals?”

Rose came closer, the tourists eagerly following. Noticing the subject, she smiled brightly.

“Thank you for asking, I almost forgot! Those were the prototypes of Uni-states’ Great Seal, when the subject was under debate during the Infrastructure of 1789.” She pointed to each seals depicted: “Here you have the very first discussed, proposed by President Benson: the famous parting of the sea by Moishe. The rest of the council dismissed it, declaring it too religious-oriented.”

“No, you think?” Madzistrale whispered derisively to Tom as he chuckled. “Not to mention way too arrogant to pretend that the country is as memorable as a biblical event...”

Unaware of the siblings’ concealed chuckles, Rose continued:

“The next prototype, proposed by council man Jeffrey, was yet another religious seal; then a mythological proposition by council man Jean. After many years of deliberation, secretary Tom then proposed this one: an eagle with its wings spread out, holding a laurel in one claw, and an arrow in the other. A powerful symbol meant to convey peace but also strength. However, it was quickly dismissed by Benson, as he felt the symbol contrasted drastically against the Uni-states philosophy. After all, an eagle lazily waits after its prey to die before feeding on its corpse, yet can be easily scared off by lower birds. Far from the pacifist but also proactive feeling that Benson wished to imbue this new country with.

» So instead, our current Seal was finally proposed and accepted: the turkey, a symbolism much treasured by Benson. For the turkey will remain peaceful as long as left as such; but even if seen inferior by its enemies, it will be fiercely involved and will defend with all its might those that it cares the most about.”

“The Uni-states’ Great Seal... is a turkey?” Madzistrale repeated, shocked and disbelieving.

Rose looked at her quizzingly.

“... yes, that’s right.”

Madzistrale turned her back to the group and clamped her hand against her mouth to restrain and mute her laughter. Eager to redirect the conversation elsewhere, Tom intervened.

“If I may, we’ve heard that the presidential sector was located in this city. Is it then a major historical location?”

“Of course. In fact, we are at the edge of the presidential sector. This whole park, measuring 280 acres, was the original location chosen when all seven fractions of the colonists united to create the Uni-states.”

“What were the seven fractions?” someone in the group asked

“The Imperialists, the Loyalists, the Entrepreneurs, the Faithfuls, the Rebels, the Great Nobility, and the Nations. Their nicknames pretty much indicates on which side they were, and fierce wars erupted in order to fashion this country toward one which the world had never seen before. It took the Seven War before the factions lost enough power to consider uniting.

» It’s not quite resolved to this day, conflicts still arise, but we can be proud of calling ourselves a nation that united countless differences and found a way to live together without tyranny and without an iron grip on what’s proper or not.

» That, for me, is the beauty of my homeland.”

The tourists remained silent, some nodding thoughtfully; Rose smiled, and resumed walking.

Finally, after a few more demonstrations, she led them back outside, and started to walk toward the second closest building, which she revealed to be the technological advancements display.

Tom took Madzistrale by the arm, and separated from the group.

“Let’s snoop around. Rose said the presidential sector is right here; which means so is the big guy’s house. We’ve got a promise to hold to that poor guy who got beaten up, so let’s see if we can knock on the door and request an audience.”

“Yeah, right,” Madzistrale scoffed, but followed anyway.

When they reached the biggest building, cocooned far deep within the park and away from the cluster of buildings at the entrance, the siblings paused. Strangely, no one had yet stopped them, which surprised Madzistrale and Tom. With a determined resolve, they started once more toward the paved way to the entrance.

A figure coming from the back of the park also embarked upon the pavement, and upon seeing them, halted in order to talk with them when they approached.

“Hello, strangers,” the man greeted the siblings.

The siblings fought hard not to stare, for he was quite a unique sight. His emaciated face looked older than the siblings, yet he managed to feel youthful; he was not only very skinny, but small as well, arriving at Tom’s shoulder. His bright orange hair stood up in spikes, and his eyes’ colour were hard to define, for depending on how the sun hit them, they were either green-yellow, or golden, almost ochre. He kept on cocking his head slightly to either side, and looked straight at them, never flinching, with a disarming smile.

“Umm, hello. Are we allowed to be here?” Tom asked with his most pleasant smile. “We’re travellers, see, and many of your buildings here are unfamiliar to us.”

“But of course. The Uni-states’ a completely transparent country,” the odd stranger answered, still staring right at them, his smile never fading, his head still cocked.

Red alarms flashed inside Madzistrale’s mind as she kept on looking at the stranger. Something about him felt really off, and she was silently praying for Tom to end the conversation.

“That’s very good to know; not many countries are as such,” Tom replied, pretending to look impressed.

The orange-haired man kept only smiling, and Madzistrale soon realized what she felt that was wrong. His smile was hiding more than it let seem, and looking at the man seemed to reveal a hidden and darker personality; sly, cunning, cold. His head turned the other way, and he spoke again.

“You’re the guys from the Plaza, from three days ago, right? Loved the weapons. Can I see them?”

Tom looked at his sister, and both exchanged a look of worry and suspicion.

“I’m afraid we left them at our hotel,” Tom lied, with an apologetic smile.

“I see. Where’re you from?” the man’s eyes were now even more colder despite his incessant smile.

“Oh, we’ve been pretty much on the road since our childhood. Our parents and us loved to travel, see as much of the world as we could, you know,” Madzistrale replied, unsure of what exact name to say.

“And at this specific moment, you’re now in our country’s capital... and here,” the man said thoughtfully.

Tom and Madzistrale exchanged another worried look. They started to walk again, pretending they were interested by the building.

“Why do you say that? Are we missing a festival?” Tom asked pleasantly.

“No. But you did miss our President’s election. It was over six weeks ago,” the orange-haired man said carefully.

“Oh, is that this Bohm that the crowd in the Plaza were debating about?” Madzistrale asked innocently.

“That’s right.” The man turned to them suddenly, and extended his hand. “I’m Scott, by the way.”

“Tom, and this is Madzistrale.”

“Couple?” Scott asked.

Tom and Madzistrale winced in disgust at the implications, and immediately clarified:

“No, no, we’re siblings.”

Scott’s smile turned to one of satisfaction, and he pointed to the building:

“Since you’re new here, this’ the Capitoline. It’s Uni-states’ second main governmental center. You can visit, if you want. As I’ve said, we’re a transparent country.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Tom replied. “Can you explain one thing, though?”

“Sure.”

“Why no police? No security officers, no guards, no one.”

Scott’s smile widened.

“We’re in a free country, Tom. Free of everything. Free of tyranny, from both here and from the heavens.”

“Huh?” Madzistrale wondered.

“Who do you think created laws, Madzistrale?” Scott replied, his golden eyes staring right through her; the siblings startled at the stranger saying her name perfectly despite being the first time.

“Men,” Tom answered in her stead.

“Yes. And by the hand of men can we undo these laws. But where does most of the laws come from?”

Madzistrale and Tom thought hard, until Madzistrale understood.

“God. Many of the laws are religious in origins.”

“And if God doesn’t exist? What then of the laws? How can we trust laws that were born out of men’s hallucinations?”

“But how do you keep order?” Tom inquired.

“As it was always kept: Nature eliminates by herself those that disrupt her order.”

“Where is the difference?” Tom challenged. “Whether it be an abstract idea of a world ruled by God’s Laws, a being that is utterly incomprehensible yet responsible for the creations within itself, or an abstract idea of a world ruled by Nature’s Laws, a being responsible for the creations within itself... Both requires a faith and a willingness to manifest the belief of that which we cannot ever see or even conceive.”

The siblings could have sworn to have heard Scott hiss, his eyes flashing in anger.

“The difference’s one that you humans have failed to understand.”

He turned swiftly toward them, and the siblings jumped back in surprise.

“So let me clarify it for you in terms you’ll understand. The world’s ruled by preys and by predators. Preys never survive, or when they do, they’re bound to be worthless vermins. That’s the one universal truth. And human society corrupted that truth, they tried to escape it.”

Tom and Madzistrale looked at one another, and they slowly backed away, for now Scott wasn’t smiling anymore, but advancing dangerously upon them.

“You, are such preys. You’re disrupting the system. Three days ago, one prey was supposed to fall, to make space upon our precious planet. Yet, you saved his life. You allowed a parasite to go on.”

“And what gives you the right to know which humans are parasites?” Tom angrily challenged.

Scott approached even closer, and the siblings kept backing away. They began to feel a pull upon themselves, something that urged them to escape as soon as possible, and quickly.

“Every life on this planet has a right to live and a right to kill, Tom. And you’re right now on such a thread. So answer my questions: where’re you from, who are you, and what’s your mission here?”

“We are travellers,” Tom answered truthfully.

Scott snarled; before the siblings could react, a katar dagger slid from under his leather jacket sleeve into his hand, and in a flash, he slashed Madzistrale’s face, who let out a scream, half out of pain, but most of all, out of deep shock. Which cut almost immediately.

**

Scott stood still where he was, and something he hadn’t experience in a long time, fear, crept within him. Where his knife was a second ago, there was now only empty space. The sun continued to shine, the grass to move beneath the small breeze, the pigeons messengers continued to sing, but the young woman had disappeared out of thin air in a split second.

A powerful right hook to his jaw snapped him out of his shock, and he stumbled under the unusual power, as her brother glared at him with pure anger. And suddenly, he too disappeared into thin air, right in front of Scott’s eyes.

“Impossible...” he began, his body suddenly shaking.

It was simply impossible, he tried to convince himself. Yet, it seemed that the tales he had been told during his training years were true. Such peoples existed.

His fears grew stronger. If they were interfering, then it meant...

His bosses’ plans were endangered by a force beyond human abilities.

Chapter 24

- BG -

Rough Start

“Am I okay, am I okay?!” Madzistrale panicked while Tom held her tight, back in Gabzryel’s laboratory.

“Yes, you’re okay, Mad,” Gabzryel repeated for the dozen time. “Injuries sustained in those scenarios don’t affect your real body. Technically, you could have gone on and sustained more slashes. As long as your real body isn’t present, you won’t die, and you won’t have any real injuries.”

“Did you saw that punch?!” Tom asked, shocked. “I never hit that hard.”

“You’ll find that strength and many other abilities are manifested in random ways,” Gabzryel explained, giving off the air of an occult teacher.

“Well, that was a rough start,” Tom accused his friend. “And it’s the first time in all these years that we actually went at the same place twice, and spent time there; not just glimpses.”

“Don’t look at me, apparently it’s the best place to start testing your heroic abilities,” Gabzryel defended himself.

“Why have you even picked that place? And how?” Tom wondered exasperatedly.

“It’s not my fault, I kept reading that specific number in all the damn books I was reading, in all the dreams I was making. Jeez, in a recent dream, I even opened a locked book that I waited for months to finally see what it contained, and BAM! Only blank pages with just that specific frequency written upon them. A man’s gotta understand he’s given hints after awhile.”

Tom, seeing Madzistrale was still shaken, kissed her playfully on the cheeks, making comedic suction noises until she cracked up laughing.

“Do you mind, guys? I’m trying to say something,” Gabzryel interrupted.

“Sorry,” the siblings said together.

“As I was saying, from what I’ve seen, you should have an interesting simulation, because what’s playing out in that world has similar ramifications in our own world.”

“Psychotics orange-haired guy deluding about preys and predators being the one universal law when managing human society?” Madzistrale answered sarcastically.

“Actually, that’s similar to some underground beliefs going on here too. The belief that just like animals are not bothered by killing other animals, since the victims offered competition for food and shelter, humans are not so different; and if done in self-defense or for a ‘good’ reason, murder shouldn’t be a crime, any differently that we don’t put to jail lions when they kill gazelles. Or when we kill animals to eat.”

Tom and Madzistrale stared at him, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

“Yes, guys, that really exist as a belief system. Absolutely rubbish and wrong in our opinions, but with more followers than we would like to think. Anyway, the tactics used in that world we just saw, has remarkable resemblances to past tactics in our history. And since everything repeats itself, I think that you guys beating them at their game will actually be really useful, for such a story might unravel in our own world in the near future.”

“What a bundle of joy you are,” Madzistrale sighed.

“Hey, just saying the truth. If you think the peace we’re having right now will last, I hate to break it to you that it won’t. A handful of people will always find ways to twist and use humanity’s nature to fulfill their own ambitions. History has shown that tyranny don’t get things done; but use humans and pit them against one

and another, and that's the world you've just witnessed. That's where our own world is heading, and the signs are clearer than people want to admit."

Gabzryel let silence follow his statement for a moment, then he rose, checked the clock, and looked hopefully at Madzistrale.

"Given that you took four hours before getting to that place, dreamt a whole day in an hour and a half time, and that it's already 5:30 in the morning, and that none of us are getting back to sleep any time soon..."

"Pancakes?" she guessed with a half smile.

"Please?"

Madzistrale laughed at Gabzryel's pleading eyes, and she briskly climbed the stairs leading to the kitchen.

"Come on, boys, time for breakfast."

Tom high-fived Gabzryel for succeeding to coax Madzistrale into preparing a lengthy breakfast, and they followed her up the stairs.

"By the way, do you guys like the modifications I made to your clothes?" Gabzryel proudly asked the siblings.

"No..." Madzistrale answered in a deadpan manner, taking out the ingredients.

Gabzryel's expectant face turned to a pout, as his pride fell upon the sister's comment. Madzistrale smiled broadly and hugged him tight.

"Kidding! It's absolutely marvelous! And cool!"

"I love it too," Tom added. "Much more cool! The hat fitted Mad so well, she looked like those old-fashioned lady jazz singers. It also seems as if you always know what we both like. How do you do that?"

"Too long to explain," Gabzryel smirked. "Beside, you wouldn't remember the details ten minutes after I tell you."

“Amen to that,” Madzistrale replied in an unconcerned honesty.

“Hey!” Tom shot them an annoyed glare, before suddenly remembering something: “That knife, what the heck was it?”

“A katar dagger; they’re a South Asian weapon, especially found in India. Nasty weapon. The triangular shape of the blade is in fact two movable blades; when they open into an inverted V shape, they reveal another blade under. It was designed so that when stabbing, the three-blade V system creates even more damage to the wound. As I said, nasty weapon,” Gabzryel shook his head.

“No kidding,” the siblings replied, lightly horrified.

“Speaking of weapon, I did wanted to ask how I came to hold the sticks we asked Bruno to make us, when I used it to repel the crowd last time. It just sort of appeared out of thin air...” Madzistrale asked.

Gabzryel frowned.

“No idea. That was new and unexpected. I’m as much curious as you to know how it happened, and if it can happen again. Will be very useful for possible future attacks.”

“They were perfect,” Madzistrale sadly mused.

“To be honest, I don’t get what actually happened; so many things don’t make sense according to what we’ve learned in the last years in our experiments...” Gabzryel finished.

He nearly added the mystery of the librarian and her words, and how come she held the book he saw in his own dreams, but bit his lips and said nothing. The only info he was able to gather from that scene was one he could not let the siblings know, lest it affected their own experiences.

The siblings sighed in disappointment, and Madzistrale returned to preparing her pancakes whereas Gabzryel decided to lighten the mood by putting on his progressive rock playlist; an unwelcomed sound to their sleeping dog Loki, who

raised his head, growled with annoyance, and walked sleepily to Gabzryel's bedroom.

Chapter 25

- AM -

The Old Order

The clock stroke 14:00, and the cameras turned on. It was time for another publicized presidential meeting. The chatter around the meeting table diminished when the door opened, and Abraham entered briskly.

“I hope I’m not late. My watch keeps on malfunctioning, and gives me odd hours, every time,” he apologized, sitting on the only empty chair, by Randall’s side.

The meeting office was now filled with almost entirely new recruits from Randall’s own council, picked by Abraham during the past week. Abraham noticed that the old man seemed very pleased with whom he chose, so he considered it as a test well passed.

Seemingly more at ease with his new position, President Bohm cleared his throat, and the room became silent, beside of the sound of the camera rails.

“Some of you may see that my council has undergone deep and fast reshaping. An entire council replaced within less than two months,” Bohm began for the survivors of the old presidential council, but more importantly, for the public’s knowledge. “Well, this is how my leadership work, from this moment on. We don’t sit on our asses, and do nothing when, as bright as day, corruption stand before us. We work day and night to uproot infections, and that’s what we’ve done. It took only a few days of researches to unravel all these corrupted actions of your past Presidents’ council members.

» And while evil schemed within our sacred walls, bright, young, ambitious Americani citizens, like you and I, were working in meager jobs, shoved down the pipes. Well, you’ve seen today what are my thoughts on such disrespectful actions. I’ve sworn that no man would be superior to another, faithful on the principles

upon which Uni-states had once been founded upon. And I delivered. Uni-states' hard working citizens will not be frowned upon, and here they stand, around my table.

» This, is only an overview of what, as a true president, I'm ready to do. When I promise the population something, I do it," he finished, staring authoritatively at his old and new council members.

The new recruits applauded warmly whereas the old members applauded halfheartedly; Abraham could easily guess their fear, that their turn would soon come.

"Now," Bohm's tone turned even more authoritative. "I want an immediate explanation of what happened in the news five days ago. Would anyone care to explain what that Feldmarschall was warning the population about? And please don't answer with 'it's a hoax', or I'm firing you on the spot."

"It's not a hoax, Mr. President; it's a man who was delusional about an event that happened twenty years ago," one of the participants spoke out, a stern old man with various scars across his hands and face, and equally as much medals upon his colonel uniform. "Feldmarschall Teiwas is part of a joint program in the 90s that encouraged all Twelve Imperial Gnasci to work together in the event of a future World War. By working together, it was an assurance that neither of the TIG members would be responsible for such a war, as the information were automatically shared.

»... Sadly, and that's a well-known fact, this program became quickly the opposite: it became a weapon for an authoritarian master (at the time, ex-President Bermon), and became later on famous for putting the TIG soldiers under various experiments. Any of those included mental and psychological reprogramming. It took many deaths and many whistle-blowers, myself included, to finally expose this program."

"I've heard of it," Abraham said. "Wasn't there also a Mount Radar secret project, which looks surprisingly like what Teiwas seemed to talk about in that release?"

The stern man sighed.

“Yes, there was. Mount Radar was an underground facility where weapons prototypes and a great militia force were stored until such time where it would be unleashed. That was also, thankfully, revealed under investigation when the whistle-blowers risked everything to bring it to the public’s knowledge.”

Bohm stared at the old colonel.

“Are you telling me that what we saw was a delayed release of an old news?”

“Please understand, Mr. President. Feldmarschall Teiwas and the so-called Vymana Squadron (in reality the people in his command twenty years ago), are people whose minds have been completely destroyed and affected by the secret program Ewen Project under the orders of the Authoritarian government that was in charge back then. Upon disclosure of the program, they disappeared as the Authoritarian police tried to silence the witnesses. As much as I’m glad to see they survived, it also pains me to say that they never recovered. It’s my firm belief that since you revealed yourself to be a president of honor, of justice, one that prevailed over the Authoritarian government, they instinctively reacted by coming out. ‘Revealing’ the secret of what they’ve been forced to go through. It’s just the wrong time; they probably never noticed that twenty years had passed, that the information has been already revealed.”

“And the mine they talked about?”

“Was meant to refer to Mount Radar, in Benson City. It was used as a magnetite mine, to hide the electromagnetic interference of what was hidden inside.”

“I’ve personally sent to Schwyryva a team to investigate, just in case,” a woman spoke out; Abraham recognized her as a reputed political journalist. “Found nothing but a plain magnetite mine; geolocation revealed nothing out of the ordinary in the mountains’ walls. Just stone all the way through. Upon investigation, the coordinates do point in the range of Schwyryva; but nothing’s there. However, if we keep one of the coordinates, the location we can find along that line is Mount Radar.”

“I see,” Bohm said thoughtfully, his voice calmer. “What can we do for these soldiers?”

“Not much, I’m afraid. They’ve been in hiding all this time. We can chase them and bring them back, but they’re hardcore survivors. They’ll kill themselves before getting captured: that’s what they’ve been trained to do,” the colonel answered.

“May Gaea bless their souls, then,” Bohm sighed. “I’ll pray that they find peace.”

“This is why I’ve been very strict to request, with Vice-President Griffith, that we dismantle and eradicate all Authoritarian remains that we could find,” Randall added. “Nothing good ever came from that government, and to think that our past presidents and most of all, our armies, were under such control...”

“That’s right,” Bohm acknowledged. “But for the sake of our citizens’ peace of mind, I’d like to bring to the table that there’s indeed a demilitarization going on?”

“Absolutely,” the colonel explained. “The International Federation of Gnasci calculated that in average, we own seventy percent more military forces than required for the defense of the involved countries. If the purpose is not war nor conquest, why such great amounts of militia? And so, an accord has been passed to demilitarize the excess of militia, and store them safely in specific locations until proper and secure dismantlement can be made. Recycling companies are preparing to undertake this enormous project, as the metal, components and parts can instead be re-used for peaceful purposes such as rockets for space exploration and settlements. The treaty and paperwork are being worked out and should be released very soon.”

“My sources say for the 15th September, or in three weeks,” Randall precised.

“That corresponds with my information as well,” the colonel and journalist said at the same time.

“Well, thank you for the clarification. I hope it settled the population’s worries as much as it did for mine,” Bohm said softly.

“Now, to more pressing matter than a twenty-year old warning. Mr. Solomon,” Bohm’s tone softened as he turned to his Chief Advisor of Public Relations, “how’s your plan advancing, for the economical restructuring?”

“We have eighty-two percent of the money required, but some investors are still a bit reticent, due to the ambition of the project,” Abraham replied.

“My best diplomat is right now taking care of that; you can be assured that by the end of this day, we will receive the approbation of the remaining investors,” Randall added.

“We could give out right now the money, if we have it ready,” one of the new recruits suggested.

“No. Once all the money’s available, we’ll give it out for everyone at the same time. Being hasty will result in unfairness and useless discrimination,” Abraham explained.

The members nodded or affirmed their agreement.

“If I may, Mr. President, I would like to issue a warning for you but also for all our members,” Randall began.

“Of course.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, the path we have embarked upon since the election, is sadly a dangerous one. Many, out of greed and out of desire to keep their power, will oppose our generosity and our true democracy. Mr. Solomon has himself already been attacked yesterday, no doubt by a bitter opposing ex-member of this council. There will be great obstacles facing each and every one of us, but mostly, people that will try to stop our endeavours, from all positions of power, small or great. Is it your duty, citizens of Uni-states, to either report anyone whom you feel are against what you elected the AAP for, or to yourself bring down these black sheep. If there are any corporations, any leaders, anyone that is trying to bridle your freedom, it is your duty to report them to us, and we will act.”

“Well said, Mr. Redsphear,” Bohm congratulated him. “That’s right, as I’ve sworn, I represent the people, and abide by the people’s choices. Any threat to that promise, and it’ll swiftly be dealt with, just like these last few days.”

Those that were left of the old presidential council looked at each other with concern.

“Now, Mr. Redsphear, do you have that promised list of the controversial corporations, to which the old order was linked with?” Bohm asked pleasantly.

“Yes, Mr. President, I have it here,” Randall took a small folder from his briefcase and handed it to him.

Bohm took the time to read it through, and made some concerned whistles.

“I think it’s something the population might want to be warned about...”

Upon his sign, a camera dolly mechanically approached behind the President’s shoulders, and he carefully showed the document. The first page was written ‘The Eighteenth Directive of the Uni-states’, with below the governmental seal, a shield with twelve stripes, six white and six red ones; above the shield laid a turkey, holding an anchor in its beak. A scroll ran on top of the herald, written in archaic language: *‘Bello vel pace paratus’*, or *‘Prepared in war or in peace’*.

Bohm slowly turned the rest of the document’s pages, filled with lists of various names, allowing enough time to let the camera film it all. When he was done, the camera retreated back to its initial position, and Bohm gave the folder back to Randall.

“Is it all for the moment?” he asked the council, to which everyone answered in the positive.

“I will inform you as soon as my diplomat have acquired the investors’ approval,” Randall answered.

“Very good. Until we receive the citizens’ thoughts about the controversial corporations issue, whose decision will guide us on our response, you’re all dismissed.”

Upon those words, the council rose, shook hands, exchanged goodbyes, and left the room.

“Any special services, sir?” Abraham asked discreetly Randall.

“Not at all. Just make sure that all the media convey the exclusive discoveries of this meeting.”

“Of course,” Abraham gladly accepted.

“And try not to be late, for the next meetings,” Randall smirked.

“My apologies. My lucky watch seem to have trouble keeping the time right...” Abraham sighed, checking again and seeing that it announced 4:45 of the morning.

Doing so, he noticed out of the corner of his sight that his tie had once more changed colour. It was now deep burgundy. His brow furrowed in deep puzzlement. How could he keep changing his tie without realizing it?

As Randall left the Council Meeting, he was frowning worryingly at the news that Daniel, Ysadora’s assistant, gave him yesterday about the public disturbance at the plaza from the two unregistered strangers. He had personally sent their personal garbage disposal man, Scott Johnson, to deal with them, but he knew that man enjoyed playing with his food, so it could take days before returning with information.

Locking himself into his office overlooking the Presidential sector and the White Castle, he looked once more at the recording that Daniel left him, hoping one more

run would extract answers. Who were the two strangers, clad so bizarrely, owning weapons without any matches, and especially, a completely unknown identity? And then, the way the man immediately spotted the surveillance camera, despite it being five stories in the air. Randall had a dangerous feeling when watching them; something was not right, though he couldn't tell whether it was because of the strange mirage effect that surrounded them, or just by how they were acting. Zooming closer, he laid his eyes upon the citizen that the strangers helped.

Finally knowing what to do, he sent a call to the only person he knew that could help him.

“Yes, sir?” Daniel answered.

“In the surveillance record you gave me, that citizen that the strangers were helping, the one protesting against the AAP, who is he?”

“Frank Cooper, sir. Forty-eight years old, born 9th February 1989; has an ex-wife, Victoria Cooper, maiden name Jones, forty-one years old, born 17th December 1996; they have two children, Anton...”

“I don't care,” Randall sharply cut. “Go see him and ask him about everything that happened at the incident. Absolutely everything; collect all evidences and clues you can find.”

“Yes sir,” Daniel simply replied.

“Just use your usual I.D., and say that you're investigating an unknown weapon that was fired in a public area.”

“You are mistaken, sir, it was two metal sticks that...”

“I don't care what it was exactly, keep the story simple. People don't care about metal sticks, but they will care if it was a gunshot. So say it's about an unknown gunshot.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“Contact me as soon as you have everything.”

“Yes sir.”

On that, Randall hung up. He walked to the fully windowed wall of his office, and looked down at the people walking, like a shepherd overlooking his flocks. It was as if he could see the gears of the Universe through these people, and through the environment surrounding him; and in less than two days, a small gear somewhere had begun to misalign the desired mechanism he had taken so many years tuning. It was more than necessary to replace the faulty gear right away.

Chapter 26

- AM -

The Strange Officer

A chime was heard; Frank Cooper dried his hands on the towel around his neck, and walked to the door, opening it carefully. Before him stood a tall man in a silver-grey uniform, almost like a military clerk in style and look.

“Are you Frank Cooper, sir?” the stranger asked with a monotonic Britannian accent.

Frank’s two kids suddenly sprinted from the living room, laughing from their game, and Frank shouted back, a bit worried about the stranger:

“Kids, please keep quiet and go to your rooms!”

“Yes, dad!” the kids giggled, and ran up the stairs, still laughing with one another.

“Sorry about...” Frank began to apologize to the stranger.

“Are you Frank Cooper, sir?” the man cut.

“Yes, yes I am,” Frank replied, slightly taken aback.

“Here is my usual I.D, Mr. Cooper. I am Daniel Fitzgerald from the Columbus Police,” the man said, handing out his I.D. badge.

Frank took it and looked at the badge, and seeing all was in order, gave it back to Daniel.

“How can I help you, officer?”

“May I enter, Mr. Cooper?” Daniel asked.

“Umm, sure, yeah, come in. Sorry for the mess, I was just doing some chores,” Frank apologized, opening his door wider and moving aside to let Daniel enter.

“I am investigating about the public disturbance resulted from an unknown weapon fired in the plaza, five days ago, the 22th of August, at 9h38 a.m. What can you tell me about it, Mr. Cooper?”

“Oh, well...” Frank was startled at this question. “Not much, I’m afraid. I was attacked by a couple of guys after my manifestation, and I heard a metallic clank from somewhere in the crowd, and then the guys paused. I didn’t see who it was, didn’t even think it was a weapon, as it sounded more like those construction metal ladders. And I was... well, sorta curled up...” Frank trailed the last words and avoided the officer’s unflinching stare, as if ashamed by that weakness.

“I see. The people that took the people away, and helped you up, do you know who they are, Mr. Cooper?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I was already rather surprised they helped me at all...”

“Their names, Mr. Cooper?”

Frank thought hard.

“Umm... Bob, and... Ma... Ma-something.”

“It was Tom and Madzistrale, Mr. Cooper,” Daniel said matter-of-factly.

“Right, yes, these two!” Frank exclaimed, snapping his fingers. “I remember now; that gal had a really weird name!”

“She was the one that fired in the plaza, Mr. Cooper” Daniel said just as equally matter-of-factly as before.

Frank’s eyes widened, and he started panicking.

“I assure you, officer, she absolutely hurt no one. As I said, it wasn’t a gun, it sounded more like a metal tube. Besides, no one was hurt. She just made some noise to scare my attackers away, that’s all. She was really sweet and kind...”

Frank saw that the officer listened to him calmly, but soon began to be distracted by the various items laying several places on the kitchen's counter and floor. He picked up a small orange plastic duck, and became puzzled by the squeaky sounds it did as he was handling it.

“Officer?” Frank interrupted, puzzled.

“My apologies, Mr. Cooper. What does it do?” Daniel asked, handing the duck.

“Umm... it's a toy for my kids' bath time. I put it in the sink to encourage them to do the dishes...” Frank answered, still puzzled.

“I see...” Daniel's eyes turned toward a single small vial on a high shelf in the kitchen, near a first-aid kit lying right next to it. “Is this the pharmaceutical drug that you mentioned, Mr. Cooper?”

“Yes.. yes, that's what the lady gave me for my bruises. It definitively helped. Officer, what's going on?” Frank asked, concerned.

“I am not familiar with its chemical compounds,” Daniel observed, looking intensely at a drop of the vial's content.

“Officer? Does this have to do with my manifestation? If yes, the lady and the young man have nothing to do with it. They just helped me with my injuries.”

“May I bring this drop of the vial's content with me back at my lab, Mr. Cooper?” Daniel requested.

“Umm... Sure, yeah,” Frank accepted, considerably more confused than before.

“Thank you, Mr. Cooper. To resume your words, you have never met Madzistrale and Tom before your encounter during your protestation, and you did not meet them afterwards?”

“That's right. As for the disturbance...”

“And you have absolutely no idea who they are from what you gathered during your talk?” Daniel continued.

“No...”

“Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Cooper. Have a nice day.”

Upon these words, Daniel walked straight to the door and left the house, carefully holding on his upright finger a drop of the medicinal vial. Frank looked after him in confusion, then shook his head.

“That was weird,” he finally said, breathing deeply in relief that nothing more came out of the encounter with the strange officer. Hearing his kids play, he smiled faintly and resumed his chores, hoping to put behind the whole strangeness of the situation.

Chapter 27

- BH -

Coincidences

“Thank you so much for doing this, Madi! You sure I can’t give you something, perhaps at my next pay check?”

A woman in her fifties was holding the rear door of her SUV while Madzistrale loaded a few baskets of fruits and veggies in the trunk.

“It’s no problem really. I’m relieved the few things we got can help your family out, that’s the primordial factor,” Madzistrale waved her thanks away.

“But...”

“Gather your money, rent and debts are hefty enough as it is; we always grow too much for us anyway, that’s our point.”

Madzistrale’s neighbour wrapped an arm around her shoulder as a tentative hug.

“Thank you so much, Madi. And Tom!!” she yelled out at him, and he waved back from the garden. “And Gabriel too, since he’s out. You guys are always giving us a big hand.”

“That’s the least we can do as fellows; it’s nothing special...” Madzistrale uncomfortably blushed, distractedly scratching the ground with her boots, trying to end the conversation less awkwardly.

Another car drove up the driveway, and honked as a welcome.

“Oh, that’s our cue. You sure are popular today, must be the good weather,” the woman smirked at Madzistrale as she walked to her driver’s side.

“Nah, that’s our blacksmith Bruno. He usually only wants my cupcakes,” Madzistrale laughed.

“Okay, then bye! And Jonathan says hi too, and that he’s taking good care of his carousel.”

“Glad to hear it. Bye bye!” Madzistrale waved.

Bruno took off his shoes before walking into the siblings’ living room.

“Cupcake?” Madzistrale guessed with a smile.

“I wouldn’t say no, but as you can see, I, for once, didn’t come just for the cupcakes,” Bruno smirked as he picked up two cases and carried them to the table.

“They’re already ready?” Tom marveled; he then paused and shamefully continued: “and yes, that phrase was redundant.”

“It’s metal rods. How long can it seriously take me, come on, give me some credit,” Bruno replied, faking a wounded expression. “So, brother or sister first?”

“Give *me* some credit. Ladies first, as always,” Tom gentlemanly gestured his sister.

“Alright-o.”

Bruno opened one of the case, and unwrapped its content. Madzistrale’s eyes widened at the sights of the two metal sticks that Bruno handed her. The dull silver material was beautified with elegant emerald green markings and engravings running all its length; and the stick ended with an adapted wooden-finished handle and an aged golden guard reminiscing that of the Chinese jian sword.

“Awe...some...” Madzistrale marveled; but she paused further as she looked carefully at the sticks. She turned to her brother with wide eyes, her shocked realization sinking in, and was about to speak, but then noticed Bruno and

restrained herself. She instead said: “That is way cooler than I ever thought they could be!”

“You ask for cool sticks, I deliver cool sticks; that’s how it works,” Bruno politely ignored her awkward moment; he then put on the table the second case, and opened it: “Tom, here’s yours.”

Tom looked over his pair: hued toward an aged iron rod, his also had engravings and markings, but electrical blue. The markings molded into the tips as a casing for several inches; the other ends featured a leather grip and a slanted silver guard.

“So here’s how I went about it, knowing a bit about you guys,” Bruno proudly explained. “Mad’s a strong steel called the L6 Bainite. Knowing she likes to divert, trap, deflect, etc, that metal will allow torsion and stress but is nearly impossible to break or bend it. The handle and guard is also designed with that concept in mind; polished wood is easier for sliding hand positions, while the jian guard design can allow such trapping while protecting the hands. Tom, on the other hand, likes to slam and knock, and take in those shocks. So his own metal is the S7 Shock steel, the metal used for the forge instruments that themselves forge strong metal objects. It’s extremely tough and resistant, but will require a more constant and heavy maintenance than Mad’s, as any onset rust will weaken the metal and make it favourable to cracking...”

“Tom, taking care of stuff? Good luck with that,” Mad cut him to tease her brother, nudging him.

“Oye, I take very good care of things that matter to me,” Tom winked back.

“... Again, a wooden handle for sliding and gripping, and the slanted guard is to distribute away the shocks.”

“You thought about it all?!” Madzistrale marveled, while Tom tested out the grip on his sticks.

“That’s my life job, remember? Unlike some friends I know who farms for fun all day long, and daydream about smacking sense into future probable bad guys.”

“Low blow, mate, low blow...” Tom pretended to turn away with hurt feelings.

“Okay, so... How much?” Madzistrale reached for her purse.

Bruno held out his hand.

“A dozen cupcakes per week, six chocolate and six salted caramel; a honey jar every month; and free repairs of my trousers when I need them.”

Madzistrale looked at him confused.

“But that’s... that’s what we already do for you.”

“Yeah! For the last five years! And only now you’ve asked me for a full job. That means I still owe you for many more jobs.”

Madzistrale jumped on him and hugged him tightly.

“Okay, okay, not too much, Maria will get jealous otherwise,” Bruno uncomfortably wiggled under her hold.

“Pfft, everyone knows Mad is far too picky on her prospects, and prefers anyway foreigners, like Brits, Frenchs, Dutchs, or Gab’s Japanese godfather...” Tom waved Bruno’s worries away.

Madzistrale stepped back and threw them both a raspberry.

“Thanks again, Bruno, these are awesome and exactly, even better, than what we had in mind. You’re a genius.”

Bruno blushed, picked up his cases, and pointed to Madzistrale’s tray of cupcakes cooling on the kitchen counter.

“Now, payment, please!”

The siblings locked their front door, and picked up once again their sticks. They tested the weight, handling... and then they looked at each other... back at their

sticks... back at each other. They smiled and pierced each other with fake evil eyes, then jumped into a fighting stance.

“Prepare to feel the awesomeness of my hazardous years of training!” Madzistrale faked a heroic tone.

“Fool! You forget who defeated you at chess for the 82nd time!” Tom countered, spinning his right handed stick.

“How dare you?!”

**

“At your visits at the hospital, make sure that they give you the daily records of their services. As guardian of the patient, it is your right to have all the legal proof that they are indeed taking care of him in return for the fees spent,” Clara explained to Gabzryel as they arrived at his front door.

Gabzryel nodded, taking in all the information she had given in the last hour regarding the legal procedures surrounding his guardianship of his professor Sollow. He unlocked the door, and let her enter first, knocking the mud from his shoes.

As they entered the living room, they stopped short and met the surprised and guilty expression of Madzistrale and Tom.

“And what the heck happened?!” Gabzryel wondered, half angry, half amused at their expressions.

Madzistrale looked back and forth from her friends and her broom and the pile of glass and ceramic bits around her; Tom innocently continued to hang a Salvador Dali replica painting over a hole on the wall. The sofas were tumbled over, the central table had moved a couple of inches, and the rug was messed.

Gabzryel’s eyes finally settled on two pairs of sticks on the kitchen countertop.

“Ah,” he finally simply said. “Bruno finally delivered them, heh?”

The siblings smiled gleefully despite the chaotic state of the living room.

Clara assessed them and the damage.

“I guess this is the first time you wielded handheld weapons?”

Madzistrale puffed up in indignation.

“Don’t be silly, we trained in sword-fighting when we were young.”

“When you were young, were the key words. And my faith in your skills doesn’t improve much even after hearing that,” Clara picked up one of the pair.

“We were actually not that bad,” Madzistrale defended herself, while Tom wisely chose to keep away from the conversation.

Clara raised an eyebrow.

“The holed walls and the broken items in the trashcan don’t share your confidence.”

Gabzryel finally let out a laugh, and he passed a hand over his brow.

“Had to expect this would happen,” he finally said with a big smile; the siblings sighed in relief. “I actually think I would’ve done worst damage than they did; singlehandedly, mind you.”

Clara sighed and rolled her eyes. She picked up the pairs of sticks.

“And why did you pick sticks? That’s, one, lame as a self-defense choice, and two, staffs are way better for beginners.”

“Yeah; but ours have cool filigrees, colours, and look at the handles!” Madzistrale proudly emphasized.

“When you buy a cheap crappy car, and put some fancy paint on it... it's still a crappy car.”

Clara looked over the siblings and their beaming smiles, sighed, and walked to the patio door.

“Join me in the backyard once you’ve done covering the holes with Dali and Van Gogh. I’ll show you how to actually fight with bastions. You know, the way the military and police do it, against actual opponents; not what your illuminated yoga guru taught you.”

“When she puts it that way...” Tom mused.

Gabzryel stifled a laugh and went in to help them clean.

“Oye, don’t help out, it’s our mess,” Madzistrale protested.

“Yeah, but I have to see how Mad Klutz versus Cadet Clara will end up as a fight! And Stubborn Tom versus Cadet Clara, since we’re there,” Gabzryel teased them.

It was Tom’s turn to blow his friend a raspberry.

While they finished cleaning, Tom asked his sister:

“By the way, what did you want to say, when you first saw your sticks?”

Madzistrale paused, and her brow furrowed.

“The sticks... it was the first time we saw them. I mean, Bruno never showed his progress with us, we never went to see him neither. Today was the very first day we laid our eyes on the weapons.”

“Yeah?...” Tom hesitantly confirmed.

Madzistrale looked at her brother and her friend, her expression a mixture of confusion and worry.

“So how come these were the exact same sticks that appeared out of nowhere in my hands, that day at the plaza, when I smacked them together to scare the crowd?”

Tom looked at her in shocked wonder.

“Are you sure?”

“100%. I adored the design, I thought to myself at that time that it would have been cool if Bruno could make them that way for real. So how come today, Bruno reveals he’s made the exact same sticks that appeared in my hand three days ago, at that event?”

Gabzryel and Tom pondered, just as confused as her. Clara banged on the patio’s door, taking them out of their spell, her face annoyed at their waste of time.

“Well, I guess this will be another mystery added to our already long list,” Tom sighed, rising and grunting from his previous position. “Oh, and don’t forget, Bruno said we can call them ‘bastion’. Will sound cooler if we talk about them to someone than saying ‘stick’.”

Gabzryel kept silent as the siblings went out talking about the names of their new toys; he was still trying to find the answer. He saw the scene in his cameras as he watched over them during that plaza incident. He hadn’t noticed until Madzistrale spoke about it, but that was what mainly surprised him about seeing the bastions on the counter: she hadn’t imagined it, these were the same pair of bastions. Just like the very real pink diamonds, yearly gifts from his long-passed sister; something was inexplicably connecting the ongoing coincidences.

Chapter 28

- AM -

Persuasion

Ysadora knocked on Randall's door office, and on his invitation, she joined him. Randall was waiting by the window, and when she approached, he turned to her urgently.

"I will send you on a small mission. There's an investor that is essential to fund Abraham's plan, but she has some... hesitations, even with my assurances."

"So she needs to be persuaded," Ysadora guessed with a half smile.

"Yes. We need this to go well; Abraham's plan must be put to use as soon as possible in order to advance our mission."

"Don't worry; I'll take care of this," Ysadora reassured him, as he gave her the address. "Has Scott contacted you yet?"

"No; he must be doing his usual routine with the newcomers," Randall distractedly answered.

"What's your opinion, with what Daniel told you?" Ysadora inquired.

"Just a few hopeful and naive resistance couple; we shouldn't worry as much. The population will eliminate them sooner or later. However, something will have to be done with these ex-council members; they are threatening to disrupt our plans. We could either let the media defame them so..."

"I believe it best to immediately eliminate them," Ysadora coolly suggested. "With the amount of time that it would take to incriminate them, they will flee, gain back their money with their offshore accounts, and possibly find some dirt about you to use at their advantage."

“Will you and Scott take care of it? Abraham and I can’t be involved,” Randall requested.

“Of course. It will be our pleasure,” Ysadora reassured him. “Which mission do you wish I take care of first?”

“The investor. Bohm and Abraham needs the money as soon as possible to advance the plan.”

“Very well; I’m on it.”

“Good luck,” Randall wished her.

“I don’t need any, you know that,” she called behind her as she left the office.

Randall only smirked sadly, and returned to his city gazing.

“Red suits you, ma’am; you should wear lipstick more often,” Daniel commented while delicately applying it upon Ysadora’s lips.

“Makeup is a waste of time, when I don’t require it for missions,” Ysadora mumbled, trying to reply without moving her lips.

Due to his calculative and precise movements, as well as higher artistic knowledge than hers, she was letting Daniel take care of the boring part of her mission: applying makeup.

“What specific look do you wish to convey, ma’am?” he asked, spreading the entire collection.

“A woman like her will be used to empty flirts and cheap one-night stands. The key is always be what they can’t find. Give me something very classic, yet foxy

and seductive,” she ordered, carefully smacking her now red-coloured lips, taking care not to smudge them.

“In that case, ma’am, an ochre eye shadow will intensify your turquoise eyes, while a black eyeliner...” Daniel began, picking up the items as he spoke.

“Just do it, you’re the artist,” Ysadora cut him impatiently.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What did you find with your interrogation?” she carefully mumbled.

“Nothing more than Mr. Cooper’s translation of what we saw in the footage, ma’am. Never met the strangers Madzistrale and Tom before nor after the incident, and his heartbeat and blood pressure indicated he was telling the truth. I however found a strange chemical compound within the pharmaceutical drug that the lady Madzistrale gave Mr. Cooper; my computer is currently attempting to find a match with our database. The result will be available in 13 hours, 21 minutes and 13 seconds.” He paused, then corrected: “My apologies, ma’am, the countdown is now at 13 hours, 14 minutes and 08 seconds.”

Ysadora said nothing. It didn’t surprised her that the man wouldn’t know much about the strangers.

After what seemed an eternity, Daniel stood back, and let her watch the result in the mirror. Despite Daniel having took the ‘foxy’ term a tad too literally, she was surprised anyway at her reflection. She looked indeed classic and seductive, with a touch of dangerous wilderness.

“What do you think, Daniel? Am I seductive enough?” she mocked, miming poses.

Daniel stayed silent. She sighed, and walked to her wardrobe to find the perfect dress. After two minutes, his bored voice suddenly spoke:

“According to a census from various polls across the world, 74.7% of the males and 52.9% of the females will ask you to go on a date, ma’am.”

“I take that as a ‘yes’,” Ysadora replied, satisfied, and undressing to try out the selection she chose.

“The purple dress on the fifth hanger will not suit your current look, ma’am,” Daniel impassively commented, apparently immune to her complete nakedness.

“Thanks,” she replaced it in the wardrobe. “What do you suggest?”

“The two black dress and the burgundy one-piece suit, ma’am.”

“Not the white or the gold one?” Ysadora examined them.

“No ma’am. The gold will reflect too much your eye shadows and make your lips too bright, as well as giving the impression of having chosen a single colour theme. As for the white dress, it is representative of purity, which, if I am not mistaken, is not your current purpose.”

“Indeed. Well, let’s try the blacks and burgundy then.”

After a few minutes of Ysadora parading the three selected dress, Daniel gave his result.

“Finally. Getting ready is such a hassle,” Ysadora commented, her black flowing dress outlining her curves. “Now, jewellery, or not?”

“It depends of your intentions, ma’am. If the persuasion will be more professional, the lack of jewellery will direct the gaze upon the next touch of colour, which is your hair and your face. If the persuasion is more seductive in intention, then the addition of a noticeable and long pendant will direct the gaze toward it, and inevitably, to your bosoms.”

“I love how you describe such things,” Ysadora jokingly replied, opening her jewellery box. “So a pendant it is...”

“This one, ma’am,” Daniel pointed to a necklace with a small diamond, ending with a long but delicate tassel.

“Earrings? For seductive purpose, not professional?”

“No ma’am. The gaze of the target will be distracted from either your bosoms or your face.”

Ysadora smiled. The advantage of having an assistant with no modesty, and especially, no instinctive thoughts toward anyone.

“Is it your first persuasion mission, ma’am?” Daniel asked, as he helped her close the tiny necklace’s clasp.

“No. But this one is absolutely important, and requires a direct-to-the point persuasion, not a lengthy and subtle one.”

“All set, ma’am,” Daniel told her.

Ysadora picked up her purse, assuring herself that her weapon was safely hidden within it, and left her loft.

“I won’t be long; stay here, and if Scott arrives, let him wait here until Randall is available,” she instructed Daniel.

“Yes ma’am,” he obeyed, closing and locking the door behind her.

As she crossed the park to the parking lot outside the parameter, she met Abraham, who was returning to his office. She smirked as she saw him freeze upon seeing her attire, and struggling hard to keep his face cool and unaffected. Ysadora couldn’t help smiling, but she knew that unlike so many others, he was a gentleman. So she gave him a reassuring smile.

“Umm... I never properly thanked you for your intervention with the thugs,” Abraham began, politely keeping his gaze straight into her eyes. “After your meeting, and my work, I was wondering if you would like, I don’t know... A small drink tonight, after a long day?”

Ysadora smiled, and her heart began to beat faster; she couldn’t explain why, but something about Abraham set him apart from all the men she had to deal with. And

for a proposition that she would have once coldly refused, she found herself wishing for such an evening.

“I wouldn’t say no even to a dinner,” she suggested.

“Great!” Abraham sighed in relief. “Well, see you tonight!”

Ysadora smiled, blushing, and she resumed walking. Teasingly, she told him:

“By the way, you changed again your tie.”

Abraham frowned, and pulled slightly on the end of his tie; it was no longer black pokedot but now silvery gray, matching his suit.

“But I haven’t changed it!” Ysadora heard the surprised reply, which made her giggle.

After a few steps, she turned back to reassure him about the dinner, but he was nowhere to be seen. She frowned, but she soon pushed the oddness aside. The entrance wasn’t so far, and he did say he was going back to work.

Now, she had to focus upon her mission.

Chapter 29

- BH -

The Librarian

Another night fell upon Kansas, as the siblings got begrudgingly persuaded by their friend to try again their simulated scenario. Gabzryel set up his lab, entered the coordinates, and sat back in his chair, sipping a green tea.

Madzistrale and Tom found themselves once more in the Plaza where they saved a man from a beating. They decided to hang about the plaza, get to know a bit more of this world's history.

A pop-like music station was playing, as a supposedly relaxing background for the shoppers and the workers. When the clock struck three of the afternoon, the station passed to the news segment, and a holographic screen appear on a windowless side of a building facing the plaza. Two newscasters smiled pleasantly, and for this moment, the crowd at the Plaza stopped in their tracks to listen. Many were whispering excitedly, and the siblings understood from the chatter that they were expecting good news from this growing and popular AAP party.

“Good afternoon, Norr Americae. The long awaited zoo of Columbus has finally opened, where for a small fee, one can see a living recreation of the once extinct mammoth, the first of his kind since millennium, in its controlled environment..”

Madzistrale and Tom raised their eyebrows in wonder, as the news continued. For a moment, it was all unimportant, at least, to the siblings, until the newscaster took a more serious tone, and continued:

“Yet another presidential meeting was released today, and the topics have been most interesting. First, we will show an excerpt, a message from President Bohm's Counselor, Mr. Randall Redspear:”

“Ladies and gentlemen, the path we have embarked upon since the election, is sadly a dangerous one. Many, out of greed and out of desire to keep their power, will oppose our generosity and our true democracy. Mr. Solomon has himself already been attacked yesterday, no doubt by a bitter opposing ex-member of this council. There will be great obstacles facing each and every one of us, but mostly, people that will try to stop our endeavours, from all positions of power, small or great. Is it your duty, citizens of Uni-states, to either report anyone whom you feel are against what you elected the AAP for, or to yourself bring down these black sheep. If there are any corporations, any leaders, anyone that is trying to bridle your freedom, it is your duty to report them to us, and we will act.”

The plaza’s crowd stirred at those words; there were already whispers of potential suspects within the workers’ jobs. Tom took Madzistrale by the elbow, and walked out of sight.

“After last time, I don’t think it’s a good idea to be seen,” he explained.

“I don’t think they even know that we’ve been already here,” Madzistrale reasoned.

“Just in case.”

The newscasters continued their report, and announced the release of documents proving the nefarious influence of some corporations upon previous governments, and endeavoured to give a few examples.

“You can see the entire footage of the meeting at the governmental official Interweb site, or in our archives. And now...”

The siblings stopped listening as the Plaza grew tenfold louder with chatter, exclamations, protest and cheering, etc.

“Let’s try to meet, yet again, the President, shall we?” Tom suggested, walking in the shadows of the Plaza, toward the Capitoline.

“And let’s not take the same path than next time, in case we meet that orange-haired lunatic again,” Madzistrale stopped him.

“Right...” Tom thought about it, searching where they could sneak. “Why not go back to that hill we climbed down last time, but try taking the longer route, and maybe we’ll arrive at the back of the park?”

“Great idea.”

They hurriedly left the Plaza, trying to be unnoticed. There was no telling what the population was going to do if ever anyone remembered the strange newcomers.

After a good hike, they were finally at the top of the hill overlooking the city of glass. The green calm valley surrounding them was a welcoming sight; free of wound up angry people and of strange yet deadly powers that seemed up to no good. The siblings sat down on the grass for a moment, taking in the crisp air.

“There it is, the infamous Capitoline,” Madzistrale finally said, pointing to the extremity of the city, where a large patch of green stretched.

“See, we can just take the long route, and walk by the back. There doesn’t seem to be an entrance, but we’ll manage, won’t we?” Tom planned.

“Hello,” a familiar soft female voice behind them suddenly spoke.

Tom and Madzistrale jumped in surprise, and turned to meet the stranger. It was the librarian they ran into at their second visit.

She smiled kindly upon seeing their surprise.

“I am very sorry to have startled you; it was not my intention,” she reassured them. “I am happy to finally meet you properly; it took so many preparations to get you here.”

“What do you mean?” Madzistrale asked, partly defiant, especially after her encounter with the lunatic Scott.

“The frequency,” the stranger explained, as if it was the most logical answer. As the siblings didn’t quite understand, she smiled and clarified: “Surely you have all wondered why your friend Summerfield kept on dreaming of a specific frequency,

until he decided to try it... and here you finally are. As he said it so well, one day, one has to understand when he's given hints."

Madzistrale and Tom looked at each other with a mixture of understanding and suspicion.

"But this is not a conversation for you alone," she said; the siblings jumped a second time in surprise after seeing their friend Gabzryel appear by their side. He looked around him in shock, and staggered.

"What... and where in God's name am I..." he began, spinning on himself. He turned to the stranger: "Look here, I'm not supposed to be up here, I have to monitor these guys!"

"Gabzryel David Summerfield," the stranger spoke, and upon hearing his full name, whom only a small handful knew, Gabzryel froze. She walked up to him, took softly his hands, stared straight but kindly in his eyes, and said: "Your sister asked me to give you her love until your meeting at the next Samhain; and she spoke so highly of you that I knew you would be perfect for this mission."

The siblings and Gabzryel dropped their jaws in an even deeper shock. Only the three of them (and Gabzryel's family) knew about Gabzryel's sister, and even more shockingly, only the three of them alone knew about their meetings during Samhain.

"How did you..." Gabzryel began, anger taking over his shock. "If you even dare to lie about my sister..."

The stranger opened her palm, and produced a small pale pink diamond. Gabzryel took it, and tears swelled in his eyes.

"Is that satisfactory?" the stranger softly and kindly asked.

"Yes," Gabzryel whispered.

The stranger smiled, and faced the trio.

“My name is Belladonna,” she introduced herself. “I am a simple librarian in work, but I had the privilege to come from an Africani tribe that knows for generations the principles behind your experiments. I have helped and guided you here to tell you why I have chosen this place for you; and you will be able to choose whether you continue this ‘simulation’, as you call it, or refuse all participation in it.”

And before they could answer, she sat down in the grass, and began her story.

Chapter 30

- AM -

Unexpected Variable

The sun was setting upon the Capitoline, when a knock was heard upon Randall's office door, and upon his invitation, Daniel and Scott entered, the latter clearly shaken.

"Randall, we've got a big problem!" Scott exclaimed, his spiky orange hair even wilder than usual.

"I am sorry for the interruption, sir, but Mr. Johnson requested to see you immediately, even before Miss Dawn returned from her meeting," Daniel apologized, keeping his usual emotionless cool.

"What is it, Scott?" Randall sighed. "I am rather busy..."

"The two strangers that disrupted the Plaza and that I apprehended..."

"What about them? You know that I do not care for such trivial issues. That is why you are here," Randall impatiently dismissed in a manner that suggested he didn't want any further interruption.

"They're M.U.T.s, Randall!" Scott quickly spat, in an undeniable hateful fashion. "Not only that, but they've returned this afternoon!"

Randall stopped in his tracks, and he slowly turned to the agitated man, a flicker of fear making his way to his icy eyes. His heart started to race with this new emotion, but more importantly, this new event. Daniel looked puzzled at his two bosses' agitation over such a simple word.

"What did you say?!" Randall hissed, walking to Scott and towering him, indicating he wouldn't take well to a possible prank.

“I checked with our superiors, Randall,” Scott defended himself. “There’s no denying it, nor any mistake. The strangers, two siblings, are M.U.T.s. And they’re unto us, unto our plan. This is a dangerous and unexpected variable!”

“Maybe they have only appeared here by mistake, it often happened in the past...” Randall tried to reason, his mind racing for a counter-attack to this new threat.

“I told you, they’ve reappeared this afternoon, and once more started out toward the Capitoline,” Scott retorted, angry at such doubts to his news. “They also knew how it worked; when I apprehended them, the male stranger deliberately disappeared in front of my eyes, not simply by shock or instinct.”

Randall nervously paced his office, deeply lost in thoughts. He finally spoke:

“We need to find Ysadora. She needs to know about this new threat, and we have to devise a plan against it.”

“Has she not contacted you, sir?” Daniel asked.

“Yes, about an hour ago. She requested the evening off after her meeting, to which I agreed, she deserved it...” Randall replied blankly, still deep in thought.

“Do I also warn Mr. Solomon and President Bohm of this disruption, sir?” Daniel inquired.

“Certainly not; Bohm has no knowledge of his true role in our plans, nor our plan’s true purpose, and it must remain that way. As for Abraham, we must still test him further.”

“Then, sir, I will track Miss Dawn’s phone, to warn her,” Daniel suggested.

“Good idea,” and upon Randall’s approval, Daniel left the office.

“You know what it means if there are M.U.T.s at this stage...” Scott hissed to Randall.

“Yes. We need to advance the plan much faster than I anticipated, and you and Ysadora will need to take care of this threat while I take care of the rest,” Randall ordered.

Chapter 31

- AM -

Evening Dance

Ysadora walked to an open air terrace near the main river bordering one side of the city. The air was fresh, and the evening announced itself to be of a perfect warmness. A waiter saluted her, and gallantly guided her toward a table at the far end of the terrace. Ysadora suddenly felt more nervous than she expected, and she made sure that her attire (the same black dress of her mission, but without the necklace; she didn't wish any distraction toward her 'bosoms', as she amusingly remembered Daniel's explanation) was proper, as well as her makeup unsmudged by her earlier persuasive meeting with the investor.

Upon her arrival at the table, Abraham, dressed in a more casual suit, without a tie and his shirt slightly unbuttoned in response to the heat of the evening, rose from his seat to welcome her. They clumsily greeted each other with reserved pecks on the cheeks, and Abraham helped Ysadora on her seat. A soft jazz music was playing from an intimate band inside the restaurant, and the sounds filled the calm silence of the evening, the other clients' chatter low and soft, as if the restaurant was a sacred ground where no one dared to disrupt. The two settled on the day's specialty menu, Abraham chose a wine (he claimed a deep knowledge of this subject, to Ysadora's amusement), and the waiter declared he would be back as swiftly as he could.

Abraham and Ysadora spent the next few minutes looking around them, fiddling with the silverware, and shyly searching for a subject to start the conversation upon. Ysadora felt her obvious lack of experience in such matters, due to her job and lifestyle never requiring talking about herself or someone's else. Abraham felt his obvious lack of experience in such matters, due to the lack of a partner that took for once an interest to his person, and not to his position, nor desired to supplement him. So they both smiled nervously, until Ysadora realized she could comment on

his attire, and Abraham realizing with an invisible facepalm that he should do the same thing. The truth was that both were too taken by each other's eyes, which shone brighter than before, to even care about what each other were wearing.

Ysadora looked upon Abraham's face, and she was drawn to how his deep blue eyes enhanced his black hair, and the elegant passion that oozed from his gaze; and Abraham, as he gazed into Ysadora's turquoise eyes, saw the closest recreation of an angel that he could think of, her loose blond hair framing her delicate and softly chiseled face, seductive in a classical fashion. And both knew at that moment that they had no need to express overtly their fast-growing fall for one another; it was plain to see, and a comfort in this world. So from that moment forth, they found they could speak of anything, and not feel offended or guilty about the questions or the answers.

The waiter returned with the bottle wine, and he poured the glass, and left the bottle at Abraham's request.

"The chef will get to your order soon," the waiter reassured them, to which they replied that there was no hurry.

On an impulse, Abraham rose his glass, and toasted:

"To you, Ysadora, for being the most beautiful woman I've set eyes upon, and for the miracle that brought you into my life."

Ysadora blushed hard, and could only raise her glass in return, ashamedly hating the fact she could not put words into her feelings. But Abraham smiled softly and comfortingly, as if knowing what her heart wanted to say even if her head could not yet express it, and simply drew his wine glass closer to hers. And so, they clinked their glass together and took a small sip, their eyes never leaving one another. Abraham suddenly grimaced, and discreetly spat the wine in the nearby bush.

"That's the most awful thing I ever drank! It tastes like liquid mud!"

Ysadora considered her glass with puzzlement.

"Really? It tastes just fine to me; notes of cherry, chocolate and spices..."

Abraham looked at her in doubt, then tentatively took a small sip. His brow furrowed in concentration, and he finally put down his glass.

“I see what you mean. Strange, though, I’m sure it should taste more than what I’m getting... It must be the result of the entrées I took before you came in.”

Ysadora laughed at this confession, Abraham joining her, realizing how ungallant it made him seem.

When about half an hour passed, Abraham and Ysadora were waiting for their dessert and were passionately talking about various important events in their respective lives; though most of the talks were about Abraham’s life, as Ysadora only hinted of her intensive training, explaining that the process was too complex and over too many years to be properly described. But Ysadora learned of the various obstacles and abuses Abraham went through in his younger years; and she felt admiring as such mistreatments didn’t hinder Abraham’s ambitions and goals, but only strengthened them. When he finished emptying his heart, Ysadora leaned forward and took gently his hand in hers. She did not need to say anything, as Abraham knew she backed him.

“That’s when I studied more profoundly Chaos Theory, and how Nature deals with Life, in general. If I could understand how the most basic yet effective control of Nature herself applies against her own life, then humans would be no more different. They obey the Universal Law of Nature: Might makes Right,” he quickly resumed.

Ysadora smiled in agreement and said nothing; for once someone who saw the world as it was, Abraham thought with relief. As the now cooler silent evening settled around them, and the restaurant’s band started a new song, another thought crossed Abraham’s mind. He looked deep within Ysadora’s eyes, and knew at once he didn’t need to hesitate. He rose, took her hand, and gracefully lead her to an empty space of the terrace, clearly meant as a dancing space. She smiled playfully, and with equal grace, she moved in time to the music, sometimes a few steps away from Abraham, and the rest of the time moving against him. He followed her as much as he could, but instead found himself appreciating her taunting movements.

After a few minutes, when the song ended and a slower ballad began, he lead her to a slow waltz, one of his hand holding her hand against his chest, the other feeling her back beneath the delicate fabric of her dress. For the first time and a rare moment in all of Ysadora's life, she let go of her usual self-control, closed her eyes and rested her head against Abraham's shoulder. Both felt finally at peace with one another, knowing deep in their heart they would never disagree or betray one another.

A deeply hateful roar pierced the calm air, and Randall's usually distinguished Britannian voice bellowed:

“Take your hands off my daughter!!!”

With surprising strength and in one fluid yet fast movement, Randall took the shoulder of Ysadora with one hand and flung her aside, making her fall to the stone floor. Abraham noticed with deep surprise that Ysadora, despite getting back to her feet, did no movement to defend herself against Randall's rude push, and on the contrary, kept staying out of his way, fear in her eyes for the first time since he knew her.

Such surprise didn't last long, for Randall turned to him, burning rage distorting his face. Before Abraham could even protest, Randall administered him a powerful punch to the lungs, so strong that Abraham thought he staggered several feet back, gasping, his mind becoming blank with shock at Randall's strength and rage, his vision blurred.

When his vision returned, he noticed Randall and Ysadora staring at him with shocked expressions. At that moment, he realized that Randall was accompanied with a small orange-haired man with a lunatic gleeful expression on his face, and a tall blond man whom he recognized as Ysadora's assistant Daniel, who was the only one with a completely expressionless face, staring at him almost in professional curiosity. Randall's shocked expression soon turned to anger, while Ysadora stood back a few paces, Abraham wondering what they saw.

“Another M.U.T.! I knew he was a spy for these newcomers!” the orange-haired lunatic hissed in spite; and before Abraham could see it coming, the man threw

himself at him, slammed him down to the floor stone despite his short stature, and held a three-bladed knife against his throat, his green eyes gleaming with pleasure at the anticipation of his kill.

“I know spies, and he is not one,” Ysadora’s small but bright voice, as if she was afraid to disobey Randall’s orders, stopped Scott in his track.

“Ysadora, don’t speak!” Randall roared.

“But Randall, we need him!” Ysadora urged him.

Randall turned on her, and slapped her across the cheek with no restraint, as if she was a child who had a tantrum. Abraham reared at this unusual treatment, but he was pinned down by the extraordinary strength of the orange-haired man. Still, Abraham wondered why Ysadora made no movement against Randall (*‘her father?’* he couldn’t help but ludicrously wonder), despite her clear advantage in fighting, and the dishonour she just endured, a grown woman being slapped in the face like a child.

“Sir, Miss Dawn is right. Mr. Abraham exhibits no inherent traits that could lead to spying or betrayal,” Daniel intervened, his calm monotone voice inhuman in the current scenery.

Randall glared at him for a few moments, Ysadora dutifully keeping her hands behind her back, like a scolded soldier; the orange-haired man kept on holding his katar dagger against Abraham’s throat, waiting for the order to kill his prey.

Considering Daniel’s diagnostic, Randall turned toward Abraham, his icy eyes nevertheless burning with the fire of hate.

“Scott, get him up,” he ordered the orange-haired man.

With a dissatisfied grunt, Scott ungracefully raised Abraham to his feet, placed himself behind him while holding one of his arm, and replaced his dagger against Abraham’s throat.

“Who are you?” Randall hissed.

“Abraham Solomon, sir,” Abraham answered truthfully, slowly panicking. *What the hell was going on?*

Randall dangerously approached him, and slapped him hard.

“Don’t lie! Who are you?” he bellowed.

Abraham blanked out in quick succession, his mind filled with panic; but every time he came to consciousness, he could see the shock in the group’s eyes.

“Sir,” Daniel’s voice intervened, “it is possible that he himself does not know that he is an M.U.T. His entire behaviour is suggestive of his lack of knowledge and control over such a situation.”

“How is that possible?” Randall asked, his glaring eyes never leaving Abraham.

“Countless ways, sir. I would need to interrogate him to know how he came into existence.”

Randall thought about it; he looked toward Ysadora, and back to Scott.

“Let him go,” he reticently ordered him.

Scott hissed in anger and disappointment, but Randall’s glare wasn’t welcoming argument, so he obeyed. Abraham finally managed to get a grip on his panic, and his hands flew to his neck, searching for wounds.

Randall stared at him, and turned to Ysadora.

“Shoot him,” he ordered her.

Abraham raised his head in shock, and stared at Ysadora, waiting for her answer. She looked at her father, who stood unflinching, and back at him, her misty eyes betraying her emotional turmoil. Abraham knew at once her response, and that knowledge, despite announcing his end, reassured him; for she was loyal to a fault to her father, and had they been blessed with a life together, she would have shown that same unyielding loyalty to him. If, in return, this was his only proof of loyalty

to her world, then he was at peace with it. He would not plead and be returned to his own, emptied of worth, world.

He gave her a reassuring smile, and closed his eyes, waiting for the shot, barely hearing the blond man's voice intervening:

“Sir, you cannot shoot Mr. Solomon!”

“Stay out of it, Daniel,” Randall coldly replied.

“I cannot, sir; I must prevent you from harming Mr. Solomon,” Daniel persisted.

Abraham couldn't help but open one eye as Daniel took a determined step toward Ysadora; but Randall took him roughly by the elbow to stop him. It did nothing, however, as Daniel shrugged himself easily from the grip, and darted toward Ysadora. Ysadora's turquoise eyes held Abraham's gaze, her chest heaving as she clearly tried to silence her conflict, and her hand moved to her purse, where he knew her handgun was hidden. Abraham closed once again his eyes, and peacefully waited for the end.

**

Ysadora gulped in regret for the first time since all these years she had been the obedient knight; the Feldmarschall's words sprang to life:

“...think deeply about whether you still have a drop of humanity left; and how long before you lose even that drop?”

Staring at the peaceful face of Abraham, his eyes closed in anticipation, she took out her handgun from her purse, and without hesitation, shot straight at his head. He collapsed as she conjured every ounce of her strength to stop a tear from falling; Daniel stopped in his track and instead went quickly to him, slightly stumbling and tripping along the way, while Scott hissed in disappointment, as he wasn't the one who took Abraham down. Randall looked thoughtfully at Ysadora, and he smiled weakly at her obedience.

“He is safe, sir,” Daniel suddenly announced, and the group startled at the unexpected diagnostic. “He has simply fainted, because he was convinced the shot would come.”

“But I shot him in the head!” Ysadora protested, fearful that Randall would think that she tricked him. But Randall looked merely interested by this turn of event.

“We must not forget that his M.U.T. instinct was still active. His head was, all things in consideration, non-existent,” Daniel explained. “It was as if you shot the air. The simplest way I can explain, is that because he knew you were going to shoot, his body reacted in instinct and he became out of phase. You could still see him, but he was physically non-existent. Thus, you shot at air. But now the danger is passed, his subconscious brought his physicality back.”

Ysadora turned to Randall, and keeping her voice steady, she implored:

“We should at least follow Daniel’s suggestion of interrogating him. His psychological profile indicated allegiance and obedience, not betrayal. If he is truly on our side, he will be excellent. We need a scapegoat more than ever; but imagine a scapegoat that can literally disappear and never be caught!”

Randall took a deep breath, and turned to her:

“And that is exactly what I will do, Ysadora. You both passed the test, yourself even more. Take him to your place,” he ordered Daniel.

Daniel immediately picked up Abraham and carried him in the manner of a fireman, with seemingly no effort at all, while Scott begrudgingly hid back his dagger in his sleeve. The restaurant was empty at the beforehand order of Randall, with the help of a generous bribe, so no one was left to witness the whole scene.

Before leaving, Ysadora erased the security camera after the first dance, and registered in the log a failure of the restaurant’s primary and secondary power due to a short-circuit. That would leave no evidence of Abraham’s extraordinary M.U.T. ability.

Chapter 32

- AM -

Simulation Against Shadows

The stars were slowly appearing in the sky as Tom, Madzistrale and Gabzryel were still seated upon the soft grass, their mouth open as Belladonna finished her incredible story.

“Now you know how you are here,” the librarian concluded.

“One thing that I don’t understand, if I may,” Madzistrale shyly asked.

“Of course.”

“If these people are that dangerous, why can’t you interfere yourself? You seem able enough, if you can use your knowledge to bring us here...”

“Because I am born here, in this world. There’s a difference between being able to move freely between worlds, and affecting other worlds, but the simple fact of belonging to one’s native world is what prevents that person from affecting its native world,” Belladonna explained. “You can affect my world for you are not native to it and can thus use the advantage of the power that it gives you. But you cannot do the same when you wake to your own world. The same on my side: I can fetch you and guide you to my native world through using my powers in your world, but I cannot affect in that way my own world.”

“So what Mad and Tom have been able to do or execute in your world is exactly because of the fact they are visiting it. But hence why none of us can do what they did here in our own world. Hence why that even though you know something evil is happening to your city, you can’t fight it the way we and others like us could using the Orb Weaver method,” Gabzryel resumed.

“Exactly! And I do love the name you gave it; here, we gave them the acronym M.U.T.” Belladonna smirked.

“Gab’s idea, based on our own native ancestry,” Madzistrale proudly explained. “In Algonquian mythology, the Orb Weaver (a spider that makes the perfect web), is guardian of dreams, but also of other realms. We realized that the two were inseparable. Dreams were only, theoretically, travels to other realms.”

“I will always find it amazing that so many cultures around the worlds shared the same concepts,” Belladonna mused. “My own tribe knew of it even before the Evropan conquered our land.”

“So... you’ve managed to find us and guide us here, so we can help you and the people of this city. Why didn’t you ask the people itself to wake up?” Madzistrale asked, puzzled.

“Number one reason: have you tried awakening your own people to what is going wrongly in your own world? Did you have much success?”

“...Not quite,” Madzistrale pouted.

Belladonna smiled sadly, and continued:

“Second reason: because you want to be heroes, and that intent has resonated to those who know how to listen. You get hunches, déjà-vus, and intuitive warnings from other realms that instructs you how to react in your world; I’ve simply used the same principle. And I’ve had the luck to meet a regular visitor at my library, awhile back, someone who knew your friend here,” she winked at Gabzryel; he looked down at the diamond that she gave him early on. “We both win: it is a simulation for you, in order to prepare you at what to expect from your own world. And for me, I can finally do something to help protect the city and the innocent people here that want nothing to do with what is being implemented. Right now, I am merely giving you information of what is happening, and I am merely telling you how you could stop it. You are however free to return to your world and not help. It is not your world after all, and even if it would be, you have the free will to refuse fighting. I do not wish to persuade you or influence you to fight here. I have

merely been aware of your inclinations to do good, and wished to warn you of a possible threat. Whether you believe in my words and follow them, or dismiss them, is your choice alone.”

Tom, Madzistrale, and Gabzryel looked at one another with the same thought: did they believe her. The silent answer was quickly an undeniable yes.

“What about these guys?” Madzistrale nodded toward the glass towers of the city below them. “What about the citizens? They can’t all possibly agree to this?”

“It depends if they are told the truth,” Tom replied gloomily. “Think about it, Mad. How well do you actually know what is happening in the world? All you are exposed is what a few persons decide to tell you; how would you know if there is something else going on? Isn’t it why we ourselves train to figure it out?”

“And give the population someone enough charming and convincing, and they won’t even think to look deeper,” Gabzryel added. “How many leaders have our own people followed blindly? How many horrors could have been averted had people doubted the ‘charisma’ and the ‘good words’ of their leaders?”

“Can’t you convince the people here?” Madzistrale asked Belladonna.

“Me and like-minded people are trying the best we can. But people like you have... advantages over us and the people here. Few individuals that can’t be killed gets more work done than an entire mortal army.”

“I do want to let my friends accept the simulation, but I never quite knew what does happen if we die here, and I can’t risk...” Gabzryel asked worriedly.

Belladonna shook her head, and smiled reassuringly;

“Your current body that you see here does not belong to this world, it is a creation of your spirit to keep itself grounded in some extent of reality. The only result of your death here will be you waking up in your original world. But you won’t be able to return here; the link will be severed.

» Imagine two balls, linked with a thread. If you cut the thread at one extremity, the thread will still be linked to the other extremity. But now, the thread can't be linked again to the other ball. If we now use this example, before the thread had been cut, something could have moved along it between the two balls. Now the thread is cut, the bridge is non-existent. Some are strong enough, though, to resist 'dying'. Their 'thread' is stronger; you can weaken it, but not cut it fully; or if yes, it takes time and strength. That is no reason however to be careless. In most cases, you can afford to die in a dream. But during a mission, it is best to avoid dying, because then you won't be able to return to that mission."

"You seem to talk as if we accepted the mission," Gabzryel joked.

"In truth, I gather that you have already accepted, starting from the night you decided to return here; or else you would be waking up right now."

"Well, we officially accept; it might help us for our own world," Tom replied.

"It will help. What is happening in this world also happens in countless other worlds, at varying rate, danger, and scenarios. It is an inevitable battle for all, for the shadows are a counterpart to light; such is the paradigm that few can grasp."

"Will stopping it here make any difference?" Madzistrale asked, worried.

"It always does. Even if for a short time. You will show to the people that the darkness they fear is only an inanimate force; it can only affect them if they themselves allow it to become an actual thought, an actual presence."

"Beside, we were looking for a simulation," Tom reasoned.

"I would only ask that you be careful and remember that many soldiers in a war do not wish to fight, and many wars are never nearly as one-sided as shown. Do not add any more reasons for darkness to exist," Belladonna urged them. "So many people fight because of hear-say, and because of ghosts from the past; but they were never shown the reality of the situation, or even whether the conflict still affects them and their own families. Is a grudge from 200 years ago worth fighting

your comrades and fellows in the present? This is a concept often forgotten in conflicts.”

Her words dawned on the trio. They stayed silent until Madzistrale realized she wanted to ask something ever since:

“Are we the only ones that can do... what we’re doing?”

“No,” Belladonna laughed softly, as if the mere thought was funny. “Every beings (well, almost every beings) are capable of such travels, at different depth and level. In your own world, I am sure you have reports of apparitions, glitches, mysterious people appearing and disappearing, anything having to do with temporal glitches.”

The heroes nodded, remembering some of Gabzryel’s old files on such mysteries. She rose to her feet, and looked toward the stars.

“I have to go now, my husband will be back from work. If you need help, don’t hesitate to ask me.”

“How?” Madzistrale wondered.

“She’s a librarian, *bakka*. It’s called going to see her at her library,” Gabzryel teased her.

Belladonna laughed softly, and walked away, waving them goodbye. She paused and turned to them;

“Just as a warning, there is one other M.U.T. beside you in this world specifically, in an active and direct relation to the nature of your mission. I suggest you take interest in him; you will recognize him by his shimmering, although it will look faded. He has taken a strong liking to this world, so he is starting to assimilate within it, taking more and more physicality as each day passes.”

“Thanks?... Anything more specific?” Madzistrale asked, worried.

Belladonna chuckled again.

“That would be cheating! You won’t have someone tell you whom is whom in your own world, wouldn’t you? Or maybe yes, depending if its *Her*... But no, no cheating!”

“Okay, okay,” Madzistrale pouted.

They waved goodbye and Belladonna disappeared behind the hill.

The heroes looked at one another.

“Well... shall we start?”

“You guys go ahead, I’m waking up; someone has to look after you,” Gabzryel replied, annoyed to have been forcefully taken away from his post. “Beside, I think I have passed the time where I need to take my meds...”

Madzistrale and Tom looked at each other, amused, and started climbing down the hill as their eccentric friend disappeared behind them. The feeling of doing something important this time was burning in their soul, and they were determined.

“But first, let’s find a motel; I don’t want to wake up and miss the opportune moment when we return,” Madzistrale suddenly suggested.

Tom realized that she was right, for it was night and entrance to the Capitoline would be closed at this hour, so he took her hand in a protective manner, and they both walked toward the glass city.

Chapter 33

- AN -

M.U.T.

Abraham slowly opened his eyes, staring straight at a rich wooden roof. He blinked several times, trying to reconnect with the world around him, the nervous sensations returning to his limbs. He felt like he just came out of a really deep sleep. When his senses returned, he realized he was lying back in a comfortable leather couch, big enough to accommodate his length. He rose to a seated position, and as he scanned the cozy room, his eyes fell upon a wooden desk, behind which Daniel was sitting straight up and staring at him with his usual impassivity. Abraham looked around him, but he was alone with Daniel; the room, although matching in style the luxurious offices of the Capitoline, was pretty much bare except the said leather couch, the wooden desk, and one library filling one side of the walls.

“Are you well, Mr. Solomon?” Daniel asked, his monotone voice brightened only by his accent.

“Yes... I think,” Abraham answered, slightly confused as to recent events.

“My name is Daniel Fitzgerald. We have met briefly three days ago at the cafeteria; I am Miss Dawn’s assistant and bodyguard. We are alone,” Daniel stated. “Do you know why you are here, Mr. Solomon?”

“Not really, no,” Abraham answered truthfully. Just what happened before his sleep?

“Yesterday, while under a stressful event, you exhibited without any doubt the signs of an M.U.T. Do you know what is an M.U.T., Mr. Solomon?”

“No...”

“It is a layman nickname, Mr. Solomon, meaning ‘Multi Universal Traveler’.”

Abraham rose his eyebrows at the term.

“And what the heck’s that?”

“Put into simpler terms, Mr. Solomon, a realm traveler. Your people call it dreaming.”

Abraham’s eyebrows rose even higher, more and more confused.

“Okay... So I’m being interrogated because I had a dream last night?”

Daniel studied him thoroughly before answering:

“You do not know of the M.U.T. ability, correct, Mr. Solomon?”

“No, I don’t!”

“Very good. Then, we will have a greater success accessing your true memories, Mr. Solomon,” Daniel replied, leaning forward against his desk.

Abraham looked at him, baffled; tired of this joke, he rose to his feet.

“Okay, I’m going out of here. There are some things I seem to have left unfinished...”

“You will sit down, Mr. Solomon,” Daniel retorted in a calm yet direct voice; even not moving from his seated position, a strange, almost mechanical strength seemed to ooze from his authoritative stance, and Abraham thought it best to obey.

He started to figure that Randall had something to do with this whole situation, and if that was the case, he didn’t wanted to hide anything. Remembering about Randall, Abraham had a sudden thought that something really bad happened for him to be under investigation. What could he have possibly done to anger Randall, the one person he felt most akin to? And what was that story about dreaming... and multi universal traveling? Was that a ruse to get him confused? He quickly came to the conclusion that there was only one way to know: go through with it and prove his loyalty.

“Please tell me what I’ve done,” he replied more calmly to Daniel.

“I will, Mr. Solomon. Beware that you may recall some strange memories; do not be frightened by those, nor fight them. Let them come at their own pace, and deal with them calmly.”

“Okay...”

“This is what we know so far, Mr. Solomon. Your biological age indicates thirty-seven; your parents here are real, and they are able to recognize you when asked. You indeed went to college, for which all your professors, comrades, and bullies can testify...”

Abraham cringed at Daniel speaking so lightly of his past; but he mostly wondered how his upbringing could be so suspicious.

“...Your fellow workers at the QOEC from your 2029-2034 chaos theory teaching and advising position also testify that it was indeed you,” Daniel continued impassively, never once leaving his eyes from Abraham’s; the latter wondered how could the man stand so long without blinking. Without once looking at any note of any kind (his desk was bare of anything else but a closed computer), Daniel continued: “...and you exhibit the psychological profile expected of your position. All things considered, Mr. Solomon, you belong to our world.”

“All things considered?” Abraham wondered; what could Daniel possibly mean?

“What I will show you, Mr. Solomon, is the last existing copy of the footage at the Giovanni restaurant, last evening at 8:36 p.m. Once we are done visioning it, it will be destroyed forever, for your own protection.”

Daniel reached behind his right ear, and when his hand returned to the desk, he had a small portable disk drive between his fingers. Abraham raised an eyebrow: was that really the time for Daniel to make a cheesy magic trick? Daniel inserted the drive in a slot on the desk, and a three feet high holographic projection appeared.

Abraham watched as Randall walked in a furious manner and stormed toward two figures dancing on a familiar restaurant terrace, watching as if from the point of view of someone who held a camera. “Get away from my daughter!!” Randall yelled, as Abraham recognized himself and Ysadora as the dancing figures; he watched with restrained anger as Randall roughly threw Ysadora on the floor, and turned on Abraham to punch him.

But then...

Abraham’s jaw dropped in utter shock as his other self on the footage literally vanished out of thin air, and reappeared a couple of feet away from Randall, staggering. It wasn’t all; Abraham watched, more and more hopelessly stupefied as the moments when he thought he simply fainted, his other self actually vanished in and out under the orange-haired man’s grip, as Randall interrogated him.

When the holographic Abraham fainted after Ysadora shot him, Abraham was left dizzy. He barely realized that the cameraman’s point of view was Daniel’s, when the latter intervened in the footage.

A moment of silence greeted the end of the footage, Abraham staring blankly at the desk, his mind racing. He remembered the orange-haired man’s hateful words: “*Another M.U.T.!! Just like the spies!*” It didn’t bode well for him, yet he couldn’t even defend himself. Just what was he? How could he vanish out of thin air?

In a blur, he saw Daniel pick up the disk drive, and putting it back behind his ear.

“Mr. Solomon?” Daniel asked, almost in a calming fashion, after staring blankly at nothing for a few seconds, as if thinking.

“I... I can’t... explain... Fitzgerald, I...” Abraham mumbled, his mind numb.

“I see that you cannot; your facial and bodily expression are genuine in the expression of your shock and disbelief. It is a good thing, Mr. Solomon.”

“What...”

“I will quickly explain as simply as I can, Mr. Solomon. You are an M.U.T. A Multi Universal Traveler. The symptoms are quite affirmatives.”

“You said... dream...”

“Yes, Mr. Solomon. You must have heard of the Multiverse, Metaverse, Parallel Universe, or Bubble Universe theory. Few however are aware that it is not a mere theory; it is an actual fact of the Universe. Which brings us to M.U.T.s. In most biological species of the Universe, what they consider dreaming is in fact a travel to another universe. In your terms, you may say another realm, or another dimension. However, another universe is a more accurate term.”

“My... my symptoms?” Abraham was trying to wrap his mind around what Daniel was saying. It was simply impossible...

“Vanishing is the most obvious one, Mr. Solomon. For a short moment, your link to this world is disrupted, and you, in all its terms, wake up to where you truly originate from.”

“Another universe?...”

“Yes, Mr. Solomon. Our superiors are quite familiar with this process, and by extension, so are we. However, few outside our group know of this. That is why all copies of what happened has been erased. The vanishing is not the only side effect of M.U.T.; Mr. Redspear and Miss Dawn has informed me that your watch kept on showing a wrong hour. Is that true?”

“Yes...”

“What hour is it, Mr. Solomon?”

Abraham shakily looked at his watch: 13:23. He said so. Daniel asked him to look again, and this time, it gave him 1:38.

“It is 9:56, Mr. Solomon, as registered by all clocks, including my own, based on the atomic time.”

“My watch’s malfunctioning since I got it,” Abraham replied, worried.

“Why do you still have it, Mr. Solomon, if it was malfunctioning?”

“It’s... well, it’s my lucky watch. It got me through all the promotions to where I’m now.”

“It may be so. In any case, your watch is malfunctioning, because your watch does not exist; for example, while you were unconscious, it disappeared from your wrist. Your mind made it up; and your mind cannot keep the time accurate. So your mind, to keep the logic of what should happen if you look at your watch, gives you a random number every time you look at it.

» The third side-effect, Mr. Solomon, is the mystery of your ties. You had one in your coat pocket, and I took the liberty to put it around your neck to see the mystery myself. I calculated that in the last thirty-six minutes we have been talking, your tie has changed of colour seventy-seven times.”

“What?!” Abraham looked quickly at his tie, which was now turquoise blue.
“How...?!”

“Your suit is something that your mind can see constantly, and to keep your grasp on the reality, it makes sure that your suit remains the same every time you look at it. But your tie is something you cannot constantly see. Thus, your mind lose its reference on what it should look like, and attributes it a random colour. Like the time on your watch, Mr. Solomon.”

Abraham’s mind reeled in confusion; this was getting too weird.

“Do you understand, Mr. Solomon?”

“No! No, I don’t!”

“Do not worry, Mr. Solomon. You will understand more after some time. If you meet them, our superiors will perhaps explain it more in-depth to you. I myself do not have the entire grasp on an M.U.T.’s exact process; it is a unique trait of biological life.”

Abraham raised an eyebrow at that last sentence; that sounded more unusual than the whole M.U.T. thing.

“So what are you trying to say? That I’m not real?” he asked, starting to feel angry. Everything he did to get where he was, so finally make a difference in the world, to finally have someone to count upon...

“Not at all, Mr. Solomon. You seem to have developed a bond with this world; your mind is strongly linked to your body, hence your physical grasp on reality. You think, so you are. However... your attires are not something your mind is most concerned with. And its link with this reality can be sometime be broken. Willingly, or unwillingly, as in your case.”

Abraham rose and paced nervously across Daniel’s bare office.

“I still don’t quite understand... And if I’m an... M.U.T., as you say, what does that change about me? How is it a bad thing, why am I interrogated because of that? Your... Scott, said that I was in league with the spies... Well, I’ve no idea of what you’re talking about. I don’t know any spies, nor do I wish to know any...”

Firm hands on his shoulders stopped him, and Daniel turned him around, his clear blue eyes staring in a strange yet kind manner into Abraham’s.

“This is why you are with me. I am helping you to understand, as much as helping my superiors having trust in you. Please, Mr. Solomon, calm down and take a deep breath.”

Daniel led him back gently unto the sofa, and this time, he effortlessly picked up the chair behind his desk to put it near Abraham.

“How can I help if I don’t know what’s happening to me?” Abraham asked, worried.

“Have you heard of regression, Mr. Solomon?” Daniel simply replied.

Chapter 34

- AN -

Regression

“Listen to my voice, Abraham,” Daniel said, his voice soft and smooth. “Close your eyes, breathe deeply. Let your mind be blank of any distracting thoughts or worries. You must find a detail, deep within your mind, that does not match the life you know. For this, you must not force it. Think slowly and calmly, relive each moments you know. Find a detail that does not correspond. A face that you never met, a smell you are not familiar with, a music you never heard here. Do not rush this process. Let it come to you, whenever it comes.”

Abraham tried to relax as much as he could. After a few moments, his thoughts would always divert back to the accusations, to his mystery. Every time that Daniel would see it, he would calmly bring him back to think only about the missing details.

About half an hour passed, and Abraham tossed and turned in the sofa, agitated.

“I can’t, Fitzgerald! I can’t find anything.”

“Very well, we will try something else.”

Daniel looked blankly at a wall. After a few moments, soft ambient music filled the office, and Daniel returned his gaze to Abraham.

“Try to fall asleep, yet try to remain conscious.”

“A trance?” Abraham asked, annoyed at Daniel for not using this simpler term.

“Yes. Answers will come that way, when the conscious mind does not hinder thoughts.”

“Alright...” Abraham reluctantly agreed. He doubted it would work; his mind was too full of worries.

He stretched his muscles as the morning sun warmed up the air around him. His vision was blurry, he felt like he had needles in his eyes, his head was spinning from the last few nights of insomnia, but he saw his eternal school nemesis stretch before him: the sports tracks. Groups of people were also stretching alongside the tracks, while some others chatted one final time. A stand was being prepared, and the announcer was checking the broadcast system and testing the outside speakers.

“Look at that, the Prof deigned to join us?” a man spoke to Abraham, settling himself at the start of the track.

His mind still in a daze, the bright light pounding his temples, Abraham turned to his colleague.

“Unlike *some* around here, I put my legs where my mouth is,” Abraham automatically retorted. He felt off, as if everything was on auto-pilot; but the track and the inevitable spurs from his colleagues still made him go through the preparations.

“Careful. Sitting behind your desk all year long isn’t good for your health,” the colleague continued.

Here we go again.

“And when did you last run? You’re even more of a sloth teaching maths. At least, I gesticulate when I talk to my students,” Abraham teased him.

“The marathon is limited only to how long everyone can run; the meters run by each is what will determine how much money we gather. I can’t wait to see how short your run will be.”

“And I can’t wait to see whom here actually cares about the children and the money gathered by their effort; I’ve my guesses on whom is all talk and no action.”

“Enough,” a woman’s voice cut them; but Abraham knew that she was addressing the obnoxious colleague. She was the PE teacher, and had a crush on Abraham ever since he arrived. “This marathon is for the kids’ charity. Insulting its participants won’t make your popularity climb, Mark.”

Abraham winked playfully at his colleague as the latter shut his mouth at the woman’s admonishes, but not before making a rude gesture when she turned his back on him.

“You’re in good shape even if you don’t waste your days off at gyms. Besides, running fast isn’t the trick,” she continued to Abraham, lowering her voice as she settled beside him at the start of the track. The other teachers lined up as well, making a few last stretches. “Let your body catch up to your breath; there’ll come a time when you think you can’t breathe and your body burns, but push past that barrier, and you can run on for a long time. Just go slow and steady; you’ll outrun most of those jerks who’ll try to break the speed record in their first minutes.”

She winked at him, and then the announcer spoke:
“Alright everyone, position yourself!”

Abraham put on his earphones; he hated the kind of pop/disco/techno music these events always had. He had his own motivational music from old classics who knew how to write music.

“Set... Ready... Go!!”

And off they all were. Abraham smirked as everyone went on a speed sprint; he kept his eyes fixed on the horizon of the track as he settled on a comfortable rhythm. The goal was to run as long as he could, and he wouldn’t lose to those that even the PE teacher nicknamed jerks.

A few minutes passed, and he began to feel the burn in his chest, ribs and quads. But the sun wasn’t helping either; it was burning through his temples, accentuating the headache he had since this morning. He focused on, his mood brightened only by the thought that Mark had already given up the run awhile ago. A few teachers ran past him on their laps, giving him a thumbs up as encouragement.

The headache grew, and his legs slugged, his vision becoming blurry. For some reason he couldn't feel his limbs, and the sun was still hurting his head. He paused momentarily, catching his breath, but resumed walking, fearing to lose his rhythm if he stopped at all. He didn't want to quit; he wanted to outrun everyone, prove them wrong. The music in his ear changed to a crescendo marching beat. He recognized it and it gave him a little push as his legs picked up speed. *Bolero*, from Ravel, he remembered the name. A song of marching forward, at least to him. He jogged, his mind in a daze. Then a burning sensation overtook him in his stomach, and he stumbled at the edge of the track just in time before bending in two and vomiting his breakfast.

“Hey, you're okay?” the PE teacher stopped by him.

“I'm fine, leave me, just pushed myself,” he gasped, waving her away. She hesitated, trying to do something for him. “I'm fine!”

She looked back again, but resumed jogging. Abraham inhaled a few times, fighting the headache and the nausea. He had to keep going, everyone else was. So he willed his legs to move and jogged back on the track, in time with the rising crescendo of the marching beat in his ears as *Bolero* reached its peak. The cymbals rang, and Abraham closed his eyes as another wave of nausea hit him. When he opened them, he was lying on the track, his body unable to move, his headache numbing his thoughts. He could only hear the end of *Bolero*, and he closed again his eyes, barely hearing a far away voice calling out to him.

He didn't fought the darkness as it overtook him, only had a few feeble thoughts. Thoughts of shame and regret as he laid on the cold tracks.

This is it.

This was my fucking useless life, with that jerk laughing at me for losing the race, with my diploma resulting in me lying in a pool of vomit, with idiotic kids going home with no sense of meaning, with people wasting their lives with parties, with me not doing anything, with no one to bother stopping me when I couldn't handle the race, with twenty years of insignificant work and sleep, with, with, with, wi...w... where am I... I'm not supposed to be here... I'm someone important... no,

this is my useless life with the rest of the garbage, with, with, the garb.. why... why... I'm... w...

A sharp pain in his neck woke him up, and he found himself staring straight at a bright spot of light in a pure white room. He immediately closed his eyes in pain, and felt like a strong numbness taking over his mind; all he could hear was faint voices speaking urgently, faint shapes of people in doctors uniforms. His name was spoken... He felt immobilized, pinned to a bed... but even that started to be a faint memory...

Bright turquoise blue eyes... Ysadora. His mind suddenly clung to that one thought, like a drowning man holding out to a flimsy rescue line; she was the one he wanted most to remember in this confusion. As he clung to it for what felt like eternity, dragged to whatever laid behind the eternal darkness, strange yet familiar memories hit him. Many key words were strange, such as 'Kansas', 'MIT'... yet, they... were part of Abraham's life.

He opened his eyes, though he was still in darkness, still grasping the thought of Ysadora: he finally knew. He knew what happened.

A weight seemed lifted from his whole body, and he blinked open his eyes, adjusting to the light, only to stare once more at Daniel's wooden office roof. Abraham smiled upon seeing it, upon feeling the leather couch, upon smelling the air. It didn't matter whom he once was; it didn't matter if the body he had right now was real. What mattered the most to him was this:

"The hell with what happened. This is my home," he proudly said out loud, rising to a seated position.

"Mr. Solomon?" Daniel asked, puzzled.

"I know everything, Fitzgerald. But it won't matter my current choice: this is my world, the one I want to make a difference in. It's my home."

"Then what happened, Mr. Solomon?" Daniel inquired.

Abraham hurried to explain, before the effervescent memories he had just gained vanished:

“I was born in a country called United States, and the state was Kansas. It feels like an alternate version of this world, only more primitive. There were no sky lanes, no glass cities; just brick and metal buildings, and the lanes were black, directly on the ground. It was 2017, because in that world, I had just celebrated my thirty-seventh year. I was, up until my accident, a chaos theory teacher at a school or university of sort called M.I.T. And the reason why I’m here... I got a stroke, always had to be careful from a latent aneurysm... But I underwent a charity marathon, I didn’t want to lose, so I pushed myself. I lost consciousness, no one bothered stopping running... I fell in a coma... I don’t know how long it has been...”

“Interesting, Mr. Solomon,” Daniel admired. “Your life is almost similar in every way... And the coma would explain your ability to remain physical in this world as long as you have been: you are almost never waking up, and your mind has started to be used to it, used to live and exist in this universe without interruption...”

“...And the coma would explain why I don’t feel pain! Last time, when the hitmen attacked me, I got hit, but I never felt the pain of it; must’ve been the medications that my real body’s under...” Abraham realized. “There’s just one thing... I can clearly remember my life here, even more than the life I used to have. The... dream... I felt nebulous, like on auto-pilot. As if that was actually the made-up story and here my real life. But how come? Have I been in a coma for thirty-seven years?”

“Not necessarily, Mr. Solomon. Time is subjective in dreams. You can dream of entire days in just one night’s sleep; some reports even speak of entire lifetime in one night’s sleep. It can be mere days, or dozens of years that you have been asleep,” Daniel clarified. “But there is one thing. Except the quirks such as the watch, the tie, and your unintentional disappearances, your mind has a firm grasp on this reality, even if it does not belong here. I am curious as to why it is so.”

“I told you, Fitzgerald; this is my world, the one that I feel that I really belong to. Down there, wherever I was, I was a mere teacher, ignored, at the lower level of society. But here...” Abraham rose from the couch, his eyes wide with delight. “I’m someone. I work with the elite to make this world a better place for those who deserve it; I have a greater part than ever before in the greater plan. And I finally...”

Abraham stopped short; he didn’t want to tell a stranger his real reason to stay, beside the joy of being someone at the top.

“And you love my daughter,” Randall’s familiar voice erupted, startling Abraham.

He had just entered Daniel’s office, Ysadora dutifully by his side, and the orange-haired man, Scott, looking at Abraham with a suspicious glare.

“Daniel has been kind enough to let us listen to his interrogation,” Randall explained, getting closer to Abraham.

Resolved to maintain his pride this time, Abraham stood proud despite the old man’s menacing approach.

“Yes, Mr. Randall. I love her. Down there, wherever my body is, no one ever took notice of me, and they treated me like trash despite everything I did for them. And only in this world has there finally been people who realize my potential, such as yourself and Ysadora. If that’s the case, I’m never waking up. However, I’ve only the highest of respect for you. Decide of me as you’ll wish; whatever you ask, I’ll do, even if it means leaving this world. Let me say that all I wish for is to create a world that those truly worthy of it can profit from, away from the true trash of society. And this world’s the only one for me where I can truly do so. If I’m somewhat immortal here, due to my situation, then give me a chance to use it for your sake, for the sake of the world you wish to create.”

Randall looked intently at him, but amused despite himself. Smiling, he made a step back to let Abraham feel more at ease.

“Mr. Solomon, welcome to the Shiakar Paradigm Society. That’s the four of us in the room as its founding members on Terra, and you have the honour, from today onward, to be included as the fifth member. You already know Ysadora, and her job is to make sure no one knows about us; you’ve met the other night Scott Johnson here,” he pointed to the orange-haired man, “he’s our liaison to our superiors, and someone glad to do an occasional dirty job; Daniel Fitzgerald here is our informant, bodyguard, researcher, you name it. And you, Abraham, will have the greatest, but the most dangerous, part of all in this society, if you’re up to it.”

“It’s my wish, Mr. Redsphear,” Abraham immediately replied.

Randall smirked.

“Let’s just wait until you meet our superiors before being sure of it.”

“The sooner, the better,” Abraham categorically replied. He wanted this to be over with; now he knew of his unique condition, he felt he had wasted way too many years in ignorance. It was time to accomplish his quest.

Randall considered him for a while longer before turning to Scott.

”Go to the Temple and request a meeting, Scott.”

Scott didn’t answer, only threw another suspicious glare at Abraham before leaving the room.

“Daniel, has every evidences of Abraham’s M.U.T. nature been eliminated?” Randall inquired.

“Yes sir. The last copy, my own, has been eliminated after showing it to Mr. Solomon.”

“Good job.”

Randall turned on his heels and left the room without saying more, leaving Abraham slightly confused as to what he had to do, now his reputation had been seemingly cleared.

As Abraham turned to Daniel to ask if he was free to go, Ysadora walked right up to him, her turquoise eyes delving deeply into his. She gracefully raised her hand, placed it softly under his chin, lightly holding it, and leaned to plant a lingering kiss on his lips, a gesture he gladly reciprocated, his hands moving unashamedly to hold her waist. When they separated, Abraham noticed in the corner of his eyes that Daniel had been looking at them all along, in his usual blank manner. He wasn't uncomfortable with the idea that they had been watched, but rather perplexed toward the constant unusual behaviours from this Daniel.

"I won't say that I'm sorry for shooting you," Ysadora finally spoke, answering Abraham's silent questions. "It's not my place to doubt Randall's orders, for when he decides something, he always has a reason for it; and I have learned to never question his judgments, for they're always accurate."

"I didn't thought wrong of you for doing so; on the contrary, I felt relieved," Abraham reassured her.

Ysadora smiled amusedly.

"You were relieved? It's a rather strange reaction to have when you get shot."

"Not at all. Moments of panic are indispensable, for they reveal the utmost basic instinct of someone; always test them in these moments, for their instinct's their true self, and you'll see the truth about them."

"And what have I shown you?"

Abraham smiled proudly.

"That you're the utmost loyal and honorable woman I've met, one who doesn't let her emotions take the best of her mental composure. Despite your emotional sentiments toward me, you stayed loyal to your father and reacted without any hesitation. I might've been the spy you're worried about, and giving in to your emotions would've been catastrophic to everything your father's worked hard to accomplish," Abraham took her hands: "I want such steadiness of mind and loyalty

in a life partner; someone who won't falter when things gets rough, and one who knows where honor truly lies.”

Ysadora smiled and they kissed softly once more, and then Abraham turned to Daniel, and asked in an annoyed tone:

“Now, just one question: why didn't you moved one muscle since you last got spoken too? Everyone, standing, sitting or lying, moves, even in the slightest; but not you, you've been completely still.”

“You can notice it?” Ysadora asked, surprised.

“I rely on body language, and on patterns, either physical or abstract, to determine my environment. Chaos theory rely entirely on understanding patterns. So why doesn't he have any of that?”

Ysadora snickered, while Daniel announced emotionlessly:

“I am an Asenion-Class anthropomorphic robot, Mr. Solomon.”

Abraham starred at Daniel in shock.

“Anthro... An android?!”

“Yes, Mr. Solomon.”

“About nine years back, the military succeeded to complete a working android,” Ysadora explained, her smile remaining. “They only made one, until they could test him properly; you won't believe how expensive Daniel ended up to be...”

Ysadora cut her sentence short, listening to something though no one could hear anything, and then she replied to the empty air:

“Got it; I'm coming down.”

She walked to the office door while saying to Daniel:

“Thanks for your help.”

“You are welcome, ma'am.”

“Thanks,” Abraham also thanked, before joining Ysadora, “Wait up, I’ll accompany you, I’ve got a few questions left.”

“You are welcome, Mr. Solo...” The rest got muffled as Abraham closed the door behind him.

“So how did he ended up with you?” he asked Ysadora as they walked down the corridor.

“The military planned to use the Asenion-Class androids for several missions such as infiltration agents, spies, etc. They could beforehand program them in any way, so if they would get caught, the androids could appear to belong to anyone the military decided. Since androids can’t say anything if it isn’t part of their programming, they can’t be tortured for the truth. It seemed like a great idea.”

“What happened?” Abraham smirked.

“The downside to Asenion-Class androids is that the International Rights Committee of Gnasci decreed that they needed fail-safe laws, to protect the androids’ employers. Basic laws such as obedience, non-violence, etc. But... the laws ended up being unilateral; the programmers could find no way to make these laws apply only to a specific group of persons (the military) but not to anyone else. The laws, if implemented, were universal to whoever Daniel would encounter, or to whatever situation he would find himself within. Highly inefficient if he was to be a military or secret service agent. The military was about to dismantle it, but Randall and I thought that since he was already operational, and so much money went to his assembly, we might as well use him for our society. We don’t need him to kill or spy, so there is no conflict with his implanted laws; however, he makes a great hacker, he access databases faster than we can, he can speak every single languages once he integrates them, he’s also a very efficient interrogator and

infiltrator, when it's not with dangerous Terrans. And he's mostly bulletproof, and twice as strong as normal men, so he makes a useful bodyguard in many moments... until the laws kicks in and get in the way of our work," she finished with an annoyed face. "Yesterday, because he couldn't stop me from shooting, he almost shut down; it's an automatic fail-safe switch the Committee ordered to be implemented, to prevent an android from disregarding his non-violence fail-safe law and injure someone."

"I see..." Abraham was impressed, even if surprised; however, it explained everything odd about Daniel. "I can't help but notice that he has a certain somewhat... personality; or at least, a behavior other than what a programmer would implement..."

"Asenion-Class androids were created with an evolving self-aware program. Once the android, at his core program, gets set the boundaries of how extensive he can evolve, he is given a leeway to expand by himself his own... consciousness, as you may call it. It doesn't quite work like us, but to an extent, Daniel can do things outside of his programming, if he learned them from his environment. He can even develop motives and missions, and things like that... within the limit of his core boundaries. For example, when we recruited him, a few months later, he had already decreed, without our interference, that his duty with us was to help give humanity a better future. Since it correlated to the first implanted law at his core program, he has thus, by himself, set himself a goal to help us accomplish that."

"That's interesting..." Abraham mused; he noticed Ysadora seemed once more to listen to the silent hallway they were crossing, so he asked: "I noticed you and Randall often listen to something, and then answer to someone that isn't there..."

Ysadora smiled and touched her head.

"We have a receiver and transmitter implant; it's the only way we can send orders and receive them without anyone being able to track them or listen on them. I wouldn't always need to answer out loud, but sometimes it's okay if we're with SPS members, and it lets them know that I have to go."

"I had no idea you had access to that much secret technology."

“Most are from the military; the rest is from our superiors.”

Abraham noticed that everyone referred to their superiors only as such: superiors; and then he remembered the name that Randall used for his organization: the Shiakar Paradigm Society.

“So Randall’s your father? What exactly is the Shiakar Paradigm Society? What will be my part in it? What...”

A light finger on his lips made him paused, and Ysadora looked at him, smiling broadly.

“Patience. That’s too many questions to answer, I have to deal with some suspected moles inside the Presidential Council. Go rest a little; we’ll see you later; and I think Randall has left some details on your desk for tomorrow’s report to the President.”

On that, she turned on her heels and hurried down the stairs, where the man that Abraham recognized as Scott was waiting for her, looking like a predator eager to get hunting. Abraham figured that it was a situation where he best should stay out of, not for his protection, but to keep intact his image to the outside world; so he retreated to return to his room to get some sleep. In addition, it would leave him time to process all the information he just received today, and prepare for the upcoming meeting with the mysterious superiors.

Chapter 35

- AO -

Defiance

The alarm clock woke Robert Bohm at 5:30 of the morning, and for the near-hundredth time during the passing year, he hurried to shut it off. His wife moaned softly, pulling her bed covers closer to her. Robert propped on an elbow to watch her sleep for a few minutes, enjoying her facial features, showing some subtle signs of aging to his fondness, under the soft moonlight piercing through the curtains. Pushing delicately some of her silver hair strands aside to reveal her cheek, he leaned over and kissed her softly near her lips. She moaned once more, and groggily lifted a sleepy hand to touch his cheek.

“Have a good day, honey,” she sleepily told him.

“I will, baby, as always,” Bohm replied softly, kissing his wife’s hand, before rising out of bed; his wife was already fast asleep.

While shaving, Bohm clung to the emotion of the moment he just had; for him, these small times with his wife were at times more fulfilling to him than even his newfound position as President. However, he wished for as many people as him to experience the same joys than him, the same comfort and peace of mind. He wanted others than him to have the same roof over their head, the same food to nourish them than his; enough financial stability to allow them to enjoy and cherish every moments with their family as he did.

That was his main drive as President, and the only one he could see fit of anyone of that title to uphold. While a Senator, he could do some good, but not enough for his wishes, and one of his colleagues told him that the only way he could truly accomplish good was to be at the utmost top, for no power would be lacking to help his kindred. He was lucky that he got noticed by the former President’s Counsellor, Randall Redspear; when no one would fund him, Randall took it upon

himself to take care of all the details. Bohm became aware that Randall had unique, and sometimes doubtable, ways to handle business; but if there was one thing that Bohm understood the most about politics, was that no one was entirely spotless. Politics always came hand in hand with dirtying one's hands; however, one could find a way to atone for the dirty deeds if they made peace possible. An adage he came to understand was that, more often than not, the end justified the means; the world is not sunny and all-good. To bring about that good, one had to be prepared to sully one's hands as a result; Robert was ready to do so if it meant his vision of the world would come true.

When Bohm entered his office, his secretary almost immediately followed with an armful of files, a size worth of the week that passed.

“Thank you, Shannon,” he sighed; the problem with taking complete control, unlike his predecessors whom relied on subordinates, was that he ended up with all the paperwork.

“Need anything else, Mr. President?” she asked eagerly.

“No thank you, not for now.”

“Very well.”

When she left, Bohm gazed at the files, exaggeratedly stretched his arms in a parodical manner, and went to the hard work of sorting what was useful.

After a few hours of reading, Bohm's eyebrows frowned upon several files he studied. Grabbing his phone, he contacted his secretary.

“Shannon, get Randall, and tell him to meet me at my office, would you please?”

“Of course, Mr. President,” she replied, before hanging up.

Bohm leaned back into his chair, his thoughts concentrating on the troubling news he just read on the reports. He knew the country had to undergo some changes and adjustments, but there was a few things that he started to feel uncomfortable with.

No matter what, his dream for his people came first, and he always believed that his Counsellor knew that; but...

It didn't took long before a knock was heard on his door.

"Come in," Bohm said.

Randall opened and closed the door behind him, and casually approached the President.

"You wanted to see me, Robert?"

Bohm slid across his desk a folder, motioning his Counsellor to take a look at it. Randall quickly scanned of his gray eyes the report, without sitting down, and when he replaced it on Bohm's desk, he looked down indifferently at the President.

"I hope you're aware that I have a busy schedule, Robert. What exactly did you called me for?"

Bohm glared at him, leaning across his desk, his hands linked in an attempt to remain composed.

"And I hope you're aware that I worked my entire life to obtain this position, to accomplish my most sacred goal: the same peace and comfort that I earned to be also given to my people. The last thing I want to learn after the weeks I've started as a leader, with all the effort I've spent, is that your team doesn't do the jobs you promised me, Randall."

Randall's eyes turned to icy steel at Bohm's accusations; the President, despite his efforts, felt a cold chill run down his spine under this stare. He however remained composed, and he rose to his feet, his determined gaze matching his Counsellor's. His Suthern accent became more pronounced as he cared less about how he sounded more than getting his message through.

"Not only do I learn that your division hasn't even started the economic cuts and the pensions, despite you havin' the money since our last meeting last week, or so you assured me; but despite the assurances and the promises that I give to my

people, under my name and reputation, and because you inform me that all's taken care of, crime rate is risin'! How the hell do you want me to assure the people that the Security Division is as efficient as you promised me, when the last month hasn't been any different than the months before... and even worst. Randall, the numbers here indicate a rise of five percent in crimes. What the hell are your people doin'?!"

"Exactly what is planned, Robert. Unless you want a revolution under your rule, certain sacrifices has to be carried out."

"What sacrifices?! Randall, two-thirds of the victims have nothing to do with politics or governmental issues! They're just robbed, attacked, or killed out of cold blood. Nothin' to do with politics or revolutions. They're supposed to be protected by the Security Division; and on many alarming occasions, I see here in these reports that the S.D. is just seemingly sittin' on their asses!"

"That's what you see on the reports, because that's what I ordered it to be put there, since all records are to be made public," retorted Randall, visibly angered by Bohm's defiance. "You have no idea what is actually happening, or how the changes of your party is affecting the population. Out there, citizens are nothing but instinctive animals waiting the perfect occasion to get what they want. We have to make sure such sentiments aren't spreading and causing the biggest Civil War in history. That's why the sacrifices are made, and why I'm not bothering you with it; otherwise, you and your precious wife wouldn't sleep at night."

Bohm seized Randall; something had changed in his Counsellor, and yet, the President felt as if he finally saw the real man behind these angry icy eyes.

"Fine; let's pretend I buy your excuses for the rise in crimes; what about the pensions, and the economics cuts? They should've started by now, according to your word."

"Plans take time to implement. I specifically said the money was available; what makes you think however that we can just start right away the changes. What do you suggest, we throw the money in the air and let the citizens grab it?" Randall

sarcastically replied. “The plans for its implementation are underway, just ask Solomon, he’ll tell you the same thing.”

Bohm continued to gaze at his Counsellor with undisguised suspicion; he sat back in his chair, and waved at the door.

“Get out. I’ll figure this out by myself.”

Randall stared sharply at Bohm.

“Do not forget who put you in that chair, Robert.”

“And you seem to have forgotten why I wanted to be elected. What I see in this report, what you’re tellin’ me right now, isn’t what I promised my people. I promised them security, peace of mind, and the same privileges that I share. Nothing in that report show me those promises. You’ve got some explainin’ to do.”

As Randall was about to speak, Bohm rose from his seat, and leaning over the table, he stared straight at his Counsellor.

“As for positions, you seem to have forgotten yours. You’re my Counsellor, which means under my command; so don’t do in front of me that almighty king-of-the-mountain smug of yours. Startin’ tomorrow, you show me signs of fixin’ that Gaea awful report I just read; otherwise I’ll demote you just as you demoted incompetent council members. Am I clear, Mr. Redsphear?”

Randall stared back at Bohm with cold fury, and he turned on his heels.

“Yes, Mr. President,” on those words he slammed the door shut.

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Out of sight from anyone, Randall stopped, his heavy breathing firing up his fury. He threw his wrist at the wall, creating a small depression in the painting; instantly, the pain shot to his hand, and he cradled it in his other hand, resuming walking. He barely noticed the astonished gaze of some of the workers in the White Castle as he walked down the corridors and, an utmost rare thing with him, began to heavily swear. He sent a call to Scott:

“Get that damn meeting between Abraham and our superiors done as fast as possible. I want to speed the plan to the next step, so I can kick that bloody Robert down the sewers with the rest of the arseholes.”

Scott laughed upon hearing a flustered Randall, but he acknowledged the order and said he would do his best.

**

Bohm took a deep breath and sat back down. He realized his hands were shaking with the confrontation; he smiled derisively. Confronting his Counsellor was more nerve-wracking and terrifying than controlling an entire country. He turned his chair toward the window, and looked outside; for the first time ever since that day he got recognized for his potential, he finally asked the question that burned his lips to the emptiness:

“Who’s that man? What’s he hidin’ or plannin’?”

He passed in desperation his hand in his hair. He had no way to find out that answer; he knew by experience that Randall would be too careful to let anyone know anything about him. Crossing his hands, Bohm looked distractedly outside, trying to find any lead at all to start with. Realizing something, he turned to his safe cellphone, and speed-dialed his wife.

“Hi honey, how’s your day?” she answered.

“Frances... When you’re on a case where a suspect doesn’t do any mistake, what lead gives that suspect away?”

“What’s this for?” she asked, puzzled.

“It’s a long story, and I’m going with my hunch. Please, what gives a suspect away when he makes no mistakes?”

Frances laughed softly.

“Honey, there’s no such thing as never making any mistakes. A criminal’ll always make one mistake; especially when he thinks he’s at the safest.”

“So?” Bohm pressed.

“Well, other than patiently wait for the suspect to make that mistake... why not look for his rats?”

“What?” it was Bohm’s turn to be confused.

“A careful criminal doesn’t work alone. He wouldn’t be able to. To stay safe, he needs rats, or for you and me, assistants. They do most of the dirty jobs for him, clear the way. And if you’re clever enough, which I know you are, you can find traces of those rats. Find them, and you’ll find the criminal.”

Bohm thought for some time, and an idea popped in his head.

“Frances, you’re the best!” he made a kissing sound.

His wife laughed, and returned the kissing sound.

“I don’t know what’s going on, honey, but you better tell me when you’ll come home.”

“I promise I will, once I figure things out a bit better,” he replied.

“Good luck, honey!”

“Good day to you, baby.”

When Bohm hang up, he felt better, and most of all, knew what to look for. He smiled; that was the advantage of having a family: you could always count on them to help you out. He took his official phone and contacted back his secretary.

“Shannon, I need a big favor. Please look up who went into the Confederation Library, and what files they researched, back to six months before the presidential election. Narrow it down to those who have governmental I.D. passes. Bring everything you find to me, and don’t let absolutely no one else know about it.”

“Even with those parameters, it’ll probably give me thousands of results,” Shannon replied worryingly.

“I know. I’m sorry to ask you this, but I need this favor.”

“No problem, Mr. President. It’ll be my pleasure,” Shannon simply replied.

“Thank you, Shannon.” He knew she had replied honestly.

He hung up, and returned his attention to the troubling report. He had a feeling that Randall had done more than just demoting his political opponents, more than getting him to the top for the good of the people. Something was fishy, and against Bohm’s duties, and he was sure innocent people got caught in the fire. All of that required researches into personal files. And his wife was right: Randall was bound to have made even a small mistake that would reveal his true intentions. And the biggest mistake would be using an assistant. It wouldn’t be suspicious if Randall himself would look into personnel files; it would in fact be normal for a council member in charge of handling other council members, especially a member as loner and independent as his Counsellor. But what would pique Bohm’s suspicions would be seeing the name of someone he never met using Randall’s I.D. for researching those personnel files. And if his hunch was right... researching people other than council members. People like the citizens Bohm promised himself to protect.

His hands tightened together; if his Counsellor planned something against his vows, he would personally stand in his way.

“Not under my watch!” Bohm thought before gazing through the window at the world stretching before his eyes, a world he loved despite its flaws.

Chapter 36

- AO -

Suspicious of Shadows

Frank walked out of a coffee shop, intensively yawning while holding a steaming takeout cup in his hand, when two familiar voices called out to him. Turning around, he saw with surprise the strangely-clad siblings that he met a week ago, running to him with big smiles.

“Tom? Mas... Maz... Ma...” he greeted in return, still stumbling on the sister’s name.

“Mad,” she corrected with a smile.

“Mind if we join you in your walk?” Tom added pleasantly.

“Go right ahead. Mature company will do some good,” Frank said half-jokingly.

“Heh?” Madzistrale wondered.

“Nothing,” Frank smiled. “How are you guys doing?”

“Relatively well,” Tom answered.

“When we’re not attacked by some lunatic orange-haired guy,” Madzistrale morosely added.

“You got attacked?! When?” Frank began to panic, looking fearfully around him and at the buildings.

“Oh, a while ago. It was a bit our fault, we were trespassing,” Tom quickly rectified, throwing a warning glance at his sister.

“Strange... a man inquired about you guys two days ago,” Frank added, still glimpsing worryingly around him.

“Really? About what? Who was he?” Madzistrale asked.

“Some police officer. A strange man, if you ask me, but when he’s police, you don’t really argue...”

“Are we in trouble?” Tom asked with a small laugh.

“Oh no, don’t worry. He just wanted to know if I knew you guys, and why you did what you did at the plaza last week. Considering the former was no, and the latter was that you saved me from a beating, it didn’t took him long to finish his interrogation... Which is the truth. I mean, thank you for what you did, but I don’t really know you.” He looked at them with a small inquiring gaze before continuing: “If you don’t mind me saying, you’re as strange as that cop, so...”

“He was strange? How?” Tom inquired.

“I don’t really know... Little things. He repeated questions, but in the exact same way, you know? He was also curious about silly things, like a rubber duck my kids had... Oh, he was also curious about that medicine you gave me, Mad.” He shrugged, like a man out of his league. “I can’t really say... He just looked and acted weird, that’s all...”

Tom and Madzistrale looked at each other meaningfully, Frank trying to understand what they were thinking.

“Was he by any chance... I don’t know... bald, no eyebrows, and dressed in black?” Madzistrale asked half-jokingly.

Frank laughed.

“Nope. Far off, lady. He was blond, square jaw, like those magazine model guys, and dressed in pale gray blue, a bit like the military civils. Which is another odd thing... I don’t recall the Columbus police having those uniforms...”

“So what exactly frightens you about this President Bohm?” Tom suddenly asked him.

Frank looked around fearfully.

“Not much, really.”

“Wanna talk at your house?” Madzistrale suggested softly.

Frank seized them again.

“Why are you interested?”

“Because we have a feeling something’s very wrong. Rather, someone else confirmed that feeling; so we want to help if we can.”

“Come on, then; the kids are at school, so we’ll be in peace,” Frank lead them out of the plaza.

“It started about a year ago. This party AAP, the Anti-Authoritarian Party, sprang up out of nowhere. Robert Bohm was a relatively unknown Senator; yet, he managed to gather seventy-three percent of the population’s favors within his first month as running candidate. Despite centuries-old parties as opponents, his less-than-one-year AAP won. Never in history did something like that happened!”

The siblings and Frank were seated around the latter’s kitchen island, cups of coffee steaming. Madzistrale tentatively took a sip, but immediately grimaced.

“Tastes like dry mud,” she discreetly whispered to Tom. He nodded, and pushed aside his cup as discreetly as possible.

“That’s strange. How did he won? He must have done a lot of promises,” Tom said.

“Yeah, pretty much everything the Uni-states desired. More money to the poor; harsher environmental regulations; upholding the Washington Directives, including the controversial 2nd Directive; more flexible regulations regarding culture, speech, religion, etc.”

Tom thought deeply, and Madzistrale took over.

“And you feel like it’s not right?”

Frank sat back on his stool, passing his hand in his hair.

“I normally wouldn’t have thought that something would be wrong. But things haven’t been right ever since he got elected. People are getting crazier, you know? I’m not just being paranoid; people are visibly getting crazier. Look what happened just because I said something was wrong with the government. They were ready to beat me to death for that. The worst thing, the police is doing absolutely nothing. Ever since Bohm’s election, murder rate got up by five percent! It’s way too high, five percent in three months! But fewer criminals are getting arrested. It’s like the police is sitting on their ass while the world falls apart... Things aren’t just normal any longer...”

“We noticed,” Tom said. “No one stopped us back at the plaza.”

“Exactly!”

“And the cameras. Why spy if you want to let people do as they wish?”

“And why is the government letting people do as they wish? History has shown again and again that anarchic freedom result in catastrophic chaos,” Madzistrale added grimly.

“And it’s the ‘Anti-Authoritarian’ part that bothers me,” Frank added. “The last forty years of my life has been with governments anything else than authoritarian... Far from virtuous, but not nearly as bad like they pretended it was. It’s like... it’s like Bohm had every single words and ideals just perfectly right.

» You know, I don’t want to be like those people, always looking behind their shoulders and being paranoid like hell, as if the whole world is a conspiracy against people... but at the same time, how can any of us not wonder what the heck is happening?”

Tom was thinking.

“We definitively need to see that Bohm.”

“Good luck with that,” Frank laughed; he then paused, thinking. “You might be able however to get some information from the Chief Advisor of Public Relations. He was a great and memorable professor, always knowledgeable. Him becoming the Chief Advisor was probably the only good thing that came out of Bohm’s election.”

“What’s his name?” Madzistrale asked, taking out a notepad, silently amazed she somehow had one.

“Abraham Solomon. He was a Psychology teacher at the Columbus University that my sister attended. Always had amazing insights. We kinda have high hopes that he might be able to do some good around, even if the President won’t.”

“Then, we know who we’ll go talk to!” Tom said, rising from his seat, his sister following. “Sorry for barging into your morning, Frank. Thanks for indulging our questions, but we should really go and let you have your morning back!”

Frank smiled widely, and shook their hands.

“Hey, it’s me that should say that. I haven’t really been able to say anything to anyone. It was freeing to finally talk about it.”

“We’ll get back to you when we get some good news,” Tom winked, before leading his sister out.

She waved goodbye, and Frank waved back.

As Frank watched them walking away, he smiled at their attitudes. They were still strange, but he felt it was finally in a good way.

“Good luck,” he said softly, before closing the door.

Chapter 37

- AO -

Talion's Law

Madzistrale and Tom looked around them at the clearly Renaissance-inspired office: heavy curtains, plushy carpet and wood cabinets ornating the walls. A majestic wooden office table faced the sofa where the siblings were seated, waiting patiently for their audience with the Chief Advisor of Public Relations. The door opened, and they rose from their seat as Abraham Solomon entered his office. Madzistrale found herself admiring his handsome appearance; but when he got closer, a cold shiver unexpectedly crept up her spine. She ignored it as Abraham shook firmly their hands before sitting down in his chair, showcasing a pleasant smile as he waved them to sit back in the sofa.

“I hope you didn’t wait too long,” he asked worryingly, “paperwork is a boring yet time-consuming business. I asked my secretary to bring some coffee.”

“We didn’t mind, we know how it goes,” Madzistrale pleasantly replied. “Thank you for setting some time aside and for having us, Mr. Solomon.”

She realized what was wrong with him: despite his pleasant smile and demeanour, his eyes were cold, showing no kindness or mercy, like one who had to force his way through life.

“No problem; beside, you intrigue me. It’s been some time since I can’t figure out someone,” he replied coolly.

Tom and Madzistrale blinked in surprise.

“What do you mean?” Tom asked.

Abraham laughed softly.

“No self-respecting journalists would dress up the way you do; it’s a wonder the guards bought your bluff. So if you’re not here for an interview, what does two eccentric siblings want from me?”

“Information on the behalf of citizens that we care about,” Madzistrale answered, silently wondering what gave away her relationship to Tom, considering they weren’t very much alike. “As Chief Advisor, you looked like the best person to ask.”

“Ask away,” Abraham nonchalantly replied.

“We have reasons to believe that the government is purposefully allowing chaos to spread amongst its people, and offers no protection. Murder rates have risen exponentially since the election, and we have noticed a dreadful lack of public safety when we witnessed a stranger disturbing the peace and wielding handheld weapons in the middle of a crowded plaza. The citizens are alarmed by such lack of protection. Surely that’s not good politically-wise?”

Abraham shrugged.

“Citizens always look forward to having an evil to blame for their own wrongdoings. If we would act every time someone complain about the lack of something, nothing else would get done. And ultimately, they’re covering up the fact that they themselves are the cause of the wrongdoings.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Surely it’s as obvious to you as it is to me and everyone else: eighty percent of the issues are merely reactions to actions committed by the citizens between themselves. Past history has attempted to make logic and justice out of it; but where are we left now? The exact same problem. It’s about time people take responsibility for their actions.”

“So... You’re saying people are left fending for themselves? That’s what your great President’s plan has accomplished, and which we should somehow be in awe of?” Madzistrale accused.

“Is that really all you wanted to ask me? If so, it was a waste of time, considering your attitude and your lack of proper debate,” Abraham said, sighing disappointingly as he rose from his chair. “The meeting’s over...”

Annoyed, Madzistrale sharply rose before he finished his sentence; she snapped her arm to her side, and her metal bastion appeared out of thin air. Raising back her arm, the weapon disappeared when she opened her hand.

“Gab!” she called out; a few seconds later, she vanished.

Abraham’s eyes filled with fear and shock; he stepped back in surprise when another few seconds passed and she reappeared. Tom looked at his sister with a small smile, and then turned to Abraham.

“We can appear from nowhere and anywhere; I don’t think the President will enjoy that during a secret meeting. So either you explain to us what’s going on, or we find that out ourselves, and you get blamed for not dealing with us when you had the chance.”

Abraham stared at them for some time, then sat back into his chair, regaining his composure. A knock was heard on his door, and a female voice announced:

“I have the coffees, Mr. Solomon.”

“Not now, Mrs. Williams; I’ll take them myself later,” he called back.

When he turned to the siblings, his eyes regained his coldness.

“What an outstanding magic trick.”

“If that’s what you want to believe,” Madzistrale replied, a small mischievous smile on her lips.

Abraham seized them before continuing:

“Obviously you’re neither partners, nor have any, considering how awkward you act in the presence of people. Which leaves you to be siblings; and two siblings usually don’t stick together that close for so long. So something happened in your

youth that bonded the two of you together; and not much in life does that. So tell me, have you been satisfied when the police handled that event?”

“They didn’t, for it’s nothing like what you’re thinking. We just got tired of seeing no one doing some good around, always expecting someone else more powerful than them to take matters into their hands. Someone better placed should, yes, do some good around since they would have the power to do so. But since that isn’t the case, we are here to show that even ‘ordinary’ people can do it, and moreover, without falling into the easy path of blame and violence,” Madzistrale answered.

Abraham laughed.

“How naive of you.”

“Wanna bet?” Madzistrale challenged.

“I like how your ideals comfort you in your safe little world; yet never do you actually take it out on the field. Give that little theory of yours to countries at war since countless time. Try telling each side to ‘forgive and stop fighting’.”

“‘*An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind*’. Conflicts remain today because no one dared to set the past aside and be brave enough to give one another a second chance.”

Abraham scorned.

“It has nothing to do with bravery or forgiveness. Conflicts remain because that’s how people are, and how they want it to remain so. It entertains them in the morning, when the world around them is boring and mundane. You’ll never be able to change that.”

“Sometimes, it does; and that’s all the world need,” Madzistrale firmly replied.

“Oh, so tell me: civilization was born nearly ten thousands years ago. Yet not one century, not even fifty years, passes without endless war; or without chaos, or wrongdoings. If your theory would be right, today you wouldn’t even be here

asking me those questions, as we'd all be living in a world of rainbows and unicorns."

"You see it the wrong way. Despite it all, despite ten thousands years of conflicts, we are still very much here, standing together against all odds... because of unknown persons that dared to hope and strive for a better future."

"What do you suggest then?" Abraham challenged her.

"Do your darn job and protect the innocents instead of blaming them and the whole world for your incompetence," Madzistrale hotly replied.

Abraham smiled, amused at her temper.

"Well then, here's the scenario: I put all the criminals in jail. The jails become too crowded, because guess what? Every single person out there'll one day become a criminal. It's in their nature. So, the jails become crowded, and what happens? We have no choice but to let out the criminals again. You think they learned from their mistakes? No, they'll just do it all over again. So what do you suggest we do, then?"

He turned to Tom, amused by the constant silence.

"You don't talk much, Tom."

"I don't need to; she can pretty much handle it on her own. Beside, I'm the one always talking, back home," Tom replied, smiling.

"Out of ideas?" Abraham asked back to a now silent Madzistrale, ignoring Tom. "Let me help you out. Who decided that only the police was qualified to handle criminals?"

Madzistrale stared sharply at Abraham with furious black eyes, as the realization of his words only took a slight moment to register.

"So you advocate personal vendettas? That's your brilliant suggestion?"

"Where's the difference?"

“You’re turning everyone into criminals!”

“Oh, so you’re admitting that humans are incapable of mercy and will always turn to violence. That in absence of laws, humans are merely primitives and don’t have a sense of right and wrong. So what was your original argument already?”

Madzistrale opened her mouth, but her incensed brain could not create a reply; Tom saw her clenched fists, and took over.

“Is that Bohm’s own plan? Ruling over a bunch of criminals, or creating new ones? Where’s the reward in that?”

“Why do you take everything so literally? What makes you think that self-defense and taking matters into one’s own hands is the same as purposefully attacking someone?” Abraham asked.

Tom understood.

“Might makes Right. Talion’s Law. The ever-popularized “law of nature”.”

“Which survived for hundreds of millions of years... and will outlive us if we don’t destroy it with our recklessness,” Abraham added.

“We’re not animals!” Madzistrale spat, visibly angered.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Abraham answered coldly. “We strive to survive in any form possible. We follow our natural instincts. When human-created laws are taken away, humans return to the basics of jungle survival, without any so-claimed ‘morality’. Where are we different? And why do you think that universal laws somehow don’t apply to us? That we’re immune from having to protect ourselves by any means necessary? That we’re the only beings where everything around us somehow no longer tries to get to us?”

“Because we were born to do more than survive! We’re meant to evolve into different beings. To understand things that nature sometimes can’t always allow: mercy, forgiveness, love. To do things because it’s the right thing to do, not

because it gives us something in return, not because we need to survive or save our skins,” Madzistrale passionately replied.

“So you’d forgive a killer?”

“I won’t kill him, nor let him be killed. Someone can walk down the wrong path and decide to turn back and find the right path.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“I gave him the choice to; which is more than your mentality allows!”

“What about your own world, your planet? The things you protect? We’re ten billions on Terra now. Every year, hundreds of native species of Terra dies because of us, humans; not because of Nature. Waters are polluted because of only us humans; forests devastated only because of who? You guessed it, us humans. Do your researches. If you want to fight an enemy against precious life, it’s standing all around you.”

“And only us will ever be able to repair our mistakes. Only we can stop this and right our wrongs,” Madzistrale retorted.

“Don’t be so egotistical! Nature will do it, she always has.”

“Yeah, in how long? Tens of thousands years? Hundreds of thousands years? How much more devastation will happen by that time? With the proper technology, directed at healing and not destroying one another, we could do it in a few centuries’ time. It will never be like it was a million year ago; but it will be healed, and evolution will continue its course, evolving what’s existing into new amazing possibilities. That can only happen if idiots like you stop giving up and actually do something about it. Anything can be done. Housing could be much better planned. Resources could be much better handled. Energy could be created in so many harmless manners. Yet no one bothers to even try... because guess what? Giving up is way more easy and less complicated. And you get away with it by pretending that letting humans kill each other off is the ‘nature’s way’ of healing. When it’s pure laziness from your part!”

Madzistrale took a long breath; Tom smiled at her outburst. Abraham looked nonchalantly at them, and rose from his seat.

“We’ll let time tell us. But I guess you’ll only learn from experience. So stick around. You’ll see what’s the reality between your fancy illusions, and the reality of the actual world: humans are the worst kind of cancer. You want an end to conflicts, and to innocent destruction? Then only a major extermination will do that. Humans are selfish and they forget that every human’s existence threatens twenty different lives around them. You’re somehow right in your ideal, Madzistrale, even though you don’t want to see through the whole consequence. The Doomsday that humans are bringing upon themselves isn’t because they’re giving up and saving their own skins. Doomsday will happen because it’s the right and hard thing to do to save the countless lives sharing Gaea with us.”

He pressed a command on a console sitting on his table, and a buzz was heard; he spoke out:

“Please accompany the journalists out; the meeting’s over.”

“Yes sir,” an answer was heard back from the console.

“Don’t bother, we know the way out,” Madzistrale spat, rising angrily from her chair, and storming off.

“I’m so sorry for you, having such a naive sister,” Abraham said to Tom, amused.

“I’m not,” Tom retorted coolly. “If the outcome is the same, I will gladly die protecting her ideals than yours. With hers, at least humanity might have a chance ending up more compassionate than with your method. Good day!”

He bowed in a sarcastically manner and left without more words.

Chapter 38

- AO -

Confrontation

Madzistrale and Tom walked out of the Capitoline, shaken by their conversation with Abraham Solomon. Even though it wasn't their world, they still felt like they couldn't just let it happen.

"I can't believe that bastard compares human lives to trash in need of disposal!" Madzistrale raged.

Tom didn't answer; although he did agree to some of Abraham's points from personal experience, he still felt that his sister was right into saying that giving up wasn't the answer.

"He doesn't even want to give them a second chance, or use his power to actually create a revolutionary way of life. No! Killing them off like cancerous cells is his bloody answer!"

"It won't happen on our watch, don't worry," Tom reassured her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

"But what can we do it, being the only two capable of fighting this?!"

"Nothing. So why bother?" a Britannian female voice interrupted from behind them.

The siblings jumped in surprise, and turned to face Ysadora, who was looking at them with clear amusement. She was dressed in her marine blue uniform, her blond hair tied in its usual bun, and her hands rested lightly upon the gun holster and the scabbard on each side of her hips.

"Wow, she's hot!" Madzistrale blurted out in admiration.

Tom rolled his eyes, before replying:

“I think you know that those words alone won’t stop us.”

“I was hoping so as well,” Ysadora answered. “Makes my job that much more enjoyable.”

She unholstered her handgun, and the siblings only had enough time to admire its resemblance to the Victorian flintlock before a shot was heard.

Madzistrale closed her eyes as the bullet hit her chest... but opened them again, slightly perplexed as the only result was a small pang of pain. Tom and Ysadora paused as well, but she was quicker than him in her reaction, firing one more time.

“Oww!” Madzistrale said, annoyed.

“Damn,” Ysadora holstered her gun; they were M.U.T.s. Just like Abraham, their bodies were probably enough out-of-phase against her world to resist suffering physical damage.

“Our turn,” Tom said, a half smile revealing his eagerness to give a payback at whoever were stupid enough to hurt his sister.

In a dramatic and solemn manner, the siblings snapped their right arm to their side; in front of Ysadora’s ludicrous eyes, their metal bastions appeared out of thin air, their hand somehow expertly grasping the hilts that weren’t there 5 seconds ago.

Ysadora stared at them for a few seconds, mainly at the meager bastions that were supposed to be a challenge; but her training quickly kicked in, and she fluidly unsheathed her sword, unrolling it into its six foot chain form at the press of the hilt button.

“It’s been some time since I’ve duelled; you’ll have to forgive my rustiness,” she smirked.

In a swift moment, she pivoted on herself; the sword-chain followed the spin and whipped at the siblings, who only got enough time to jump back at the very last second.

“Hah! But you haven’t met Yousha and Kireru before,” Madzistrale challenged, as she and Tom wriggled their bizarre bastions.

“Did you gave them Japanese names?” Tom incredulously asked, amused.

“Of course! Yousha for mine, for ‘mercy’, and Kireru for yours, for ‘breaking’! It’s way cooler than calling them bastions. So yeah,” Madzistrale faced Ysadora and wriggled her bastion once again, “you haven’t met Yousha and Kireru before.”

“And mine’s called ‘I’ll kick your ass’,” Ysadora playfully retorted, spinning her chain in an eight figure.

” ‘Ire kikeyore asu’? Is that Japanese for ‘my weapon compensates for my lack of skills’?” Tom innocently asked.

Ysadora smirked despite herself as she regained her stance; these idiots needed a good lesson at humility.

“What do I have to fear? If you lose your concentration over keeping your body out-of-phase, I can kill you and you can never come back here. Two childish inexperienced youngsters against someone who has fought opponents that would make your most hardcore warrior flee with his tail between his legs... I doubt even you will argue against the inevitable outcome.”

“Yeah... But between spending a few minutes fighting you, or going back in time ten years ago and being lectured for hours without end by our Dad... we’ll take our chances with you,” Tom replied, his sister withholding a snicker.

Ysadora smiled delightfully as the siblings began to surround her on each of her side. She whipped her chain to her right, where Tom was placing himself, but right after, she whipped it again so it came right back to her left side, intending to catch Madzistrale by surprise. The sister was however quick in reflex, as she caught the

chain between the guard of her weapon. She strongly tugged, and as Ysadora stumbled toward her, she gathered all her strength and punched.

Ysadora flinched, her mind kicking in to block the pain, but instead, Madzistrale's punch felt as light as feather. She rose her eyebrows in derision.

"That's it?" she couldn't help but ludicrously ask; Madzistrale answered with a puzzled shrug, before stumbling back in pain as Ysadora administered her a strong right hook.

"Forgot me?" Tom teased her, slamming his bastion against her knees.

Her sword-chain still tangled in his sister's weapon, Ysadora kicked him back in the knees. Taking advantage that Madzistrale's bastion was trapped alongside hers, she pulled with incredible strength while pivoting sideways, and threw the sister square against Tom. They both fell on the ground, Tom cushioning the fall for his sister; the weapons unlinked, and Ysadora didn't lost a second before gracefully sending her chain in a lethal swing. Tom rolled over Madzistrale to shield her, pressing her against the ground despite her groaning protestations, and crossed his own back with his weapon as protection.

"You could stand a chance if you actually use both your weapons; I know you have two of those bastions, but I guess you haven't properly trained..." Ysadora taunted them.

"Oye, do you know how hard it is to ask both hands to do something at the same time?!" Madzistrale grimaced as Tom helped her up.

"No I don't, because I actually know how to do so. I guess killing you will be easier than I thought," Ysadora playfully teased them, wielding her sword into a fighting position

"Urgh... we're way too clumsy," Madzistrale whispered to Tom as they put themselves into position.

“Doesn’t matter. If she’s the boss to go through to stop the bad guys, we both know how to handle that, don’t we?” he encouraged her, subtly referencing their video gaming prowess.

“*Ikou!*” Madzistrale approved in Japanese, and both of them began immediately planning their strategy without any need of words.

What followed was what could barely be described as a proper fight, as both siblings used anything possible to fight and defend against Ysadora’s martial prowess. Still, a part of Ysadora’s mind admired their tenacity; being an M.U.T. clearly had high advantages.

A few minutes passed, and as Ysadora raised her chain to slash at the tired siblings, standing before her and trying hard not to pant heavily, it suddenly stopped in the air.

“Miss Dawn, I would request that you do not fatally harm the strangers,” Daniel’s emotionless voice said from behind her, his hand firmly holding the chain.

Ysadora made an imaginary facepalm. Why he was here she didn’t know, but one thing was sure: he wouldn’t let her continue fighting due to his implemented restrictions.

“They are terrorists trying to overthrow Bohm; so let me go, Daniel,” she ordered, facing him while tugging as hard as she could on her sword, without much avail.

Tom and Madzistrale looked at each other with a victorious smile, simultaneously charged toward Ysadora and slammed both of their bastions on her back. But their victory wasn’t long. Letting go of Ysadora’s sword, Daniel pushed her on the ground; stepping over her, he stood before the siblings, and caught in each hand one of their weapon.

“Miss Madzistrale, Mr. Tom. I would request that you do not fatally harm Miss Dawn,” he repeated.

“Uhh?” the siblings looked at him puzzled. Madzistrale noticed his appearance, and whispered to Tom: “He looks like that police officer Frank told us about: blond, and clad in a military gray suit.”

“And he does feel strange, somehow,” Tom acquiesced in a whisper.

“Oh, get away, damn it!” Ysadora complained, rising on her feet. She noticed the siblings were distracted, so she used that time to slash them horizontally with her now freed chain.

“Oww!” they jumped back in surprise, letting go of their weapons.

Daniel dropped the siblings’ bastions, ignoring their outraged cries against such mistreatment of handmade items, and turned once again to Ysadora, tugging away her chain.

“Please, Miss Dawn, you must not fatally harm the strangers.”

Ysadora glared at her assistant.

“They are terrorists. Randall personally sent me to deal with them. So get off, this is none of your business.”

“Then, Miss Dawn, the legal procedures concerning terrorists requires that you...” he stopped abruptly as his peripheral vision caught the siblings tip-toeing to where he dropped their bastions. Before they could reach the spot, he put each of his feet on the bastions.

Madzistrale and Tom put their hands on their mouths, horrified at the vision.

“Yousha!”

“Kireru!”

“Get off of our bastions, *bakka!* They’re one-of-a-kind, and fragile!” they both rushed, trying to tug his legs away. “This guy weighs a ton!” Madzistrale added, puzzled.

“The legal procedures concerning terrorists requires that you...” Daniel resumed, as Ysadora restrained a laugh seeing the siblings fervently trying to move or lift his legs.

“I don’t care about legal procedures. They are not normal terrorists; these are the M.U.T.s from the plaza. Rules from our world doesn’t apply to them.”

“I know who they are, Miss Dawn. Hence why I would suggest that I interrogate them.”

Tom and Madzistrale abandoned the attempt to move him, and instead crept up toward the side to attack manually Ysadora from behind. Daniel noticed it too, and placed himself between the two opponents. As the siblings moved to another place, he made sure to block their way. Even Ysadora was annoyed; she was more than capable to handle them by herself.

“Daniel...”

“If they are M.U.T.s, then interrogating them will give you the proof that you require to know whether Mr. Solomon is in league with them, or indeed on his own as he claims,” Daniel reasoned.

Tom and Madzistrale’s attentions sharply peaked.

“Abraham Solomon is an M.U.T.?!” Madzistrale asked in surprise.

“I thought there was something strange about him,” Tom thoughtfully added.

Ysadora punched Daniel on the shoulder in annoyance.

“Idiot! Now I really have to eliminate them. This was supposed to be a secret!”

“So Solomon is the M.U.T. Belladonna told us about!” Madzistrale whispered to Tom, walking slightly away.

“It’s a brilliant plan. Whatever he does, if he ever gets found out, no one here can ever hurt him. He’ll just disappear, and come right back,” Tom admired.

“So he’s the bad guy we’re after.”

“No,” Tom said, looking hard at Ysadora’s reactions. “She’s annoyed, but not in a way she should be if he was the mastermind.”

“But he’s essentially immortal! He can do what he wants without consequences,” Madzistrale argued.

“Or... he can be a very useful puppet. A scapegoat. He’ll become the bad guy, and no one will bother to look behind him.”

“So who’s the puppeteer?” Madzistrale asked.

Tom looked interestingly at Daniel.

“Let’s ask him,” he said, winking at his sister.

Ysadora saw the siblings approach; her instincts fired in alarm.

“Daniel, this is an order. Get back to my office!” she changed her tone to one of a military officer.

Daniel looked blankly at her.

“I apologize, Miss Dawn, but I cannot follow that order. You are in danger of being administered fatal harm, and you are administering fatal harm as well. I must stop both of you, and request that you allow me to interrogate them instead.”

Madzistrale looked at him in puzzlement, then a thought crossed her mind, and her eyes widened.

“Tom? Do you think he’s an... an android?” she finished in a whisper.

“I am an Asenion-Class anthropomorphic robot, Miss Madzistrale,” Daniel confirmed, hearing her whispering.

“Asenion-Class...” Madzistrale repeated the vaguely familiar name.

“That’s why I said: ‘Let’s ask him’; I had my doubts,” Tom told her, winking again. He turned back to Daniel. “Daniel, who is...”

Before Tom could finish his sentence, Ysadora jumped back and as quickly as she could, unholstered her gun and pressed the trigger toward her assistant's head. Daniel became rigid, and he fell face first, straight on the ground as Madzistrale let out a shocked cry.

"I hate being surrounded with incompetents," Ysadora mumbled, picking up her chain sword, and walking over Daniel's body to face the siblings.

"You killed him!" Madzistrale shouted.

"I turned him off, idiot," Ysadora said. "He can't lie unless instructed in advance; it's the problem with him."

"Does he know?" Tom suddenly asked, nodding toward Daniel.

Ysadora looked at him without answering, smiling challengingly.

"He seems to be rather preoccupied by not hurting people. So does he know he's serving someone who is bringing Doomsday to innocents?" Tom challenged her, subtly motioning Madzistrale to pick up their bastions.

"He doesn't need to know, and that's none of your business. It's not your world," Ysadora answered, edging closer to them.

"I'm afraid it is. We would be poor heroes if we would mind our own business and let innocent people die just because you don't like them. And I think your assistant wouldn't be too happy about it either."

Ysadora laughed.

"Two childish kids like you being heroes? We would be long gone if that ever worked before."

"You still don't answer. Does your assistant know of your master's intentions, and what would he do if he knew?"

Madzistrale gently slid Kireru's handle in Tom's hand as he finished his sentence, and she stood by him, Yousha ready in hers.

Ysadora's eyes narrowed, and without speaking, flung her chain toward them.

“Did I touch a sensitive subject?” Tom taunted her, evading the attack.

Ysadora still said no words, but instead, entered a dance, and her chain followed her movements, swinging and snapping in unpredictable ways, while always shielding her. Her tip finally hit Madzistrale, and the sister sprung back.

“Oww!”

The siblings spent a good minute trying to get through the shield, but kept getting hit.

“How can she keep this up?” Madzistrale wondered, panting.

“My slams don't do much damage, I'm afraid. She has a heck of a blade!” Tom complained.

Madzistrale suddenly began to wobble from side to side.

“My arms feel numb...” she said.

Ysadora smiled victoriously.

“Don't ever get attached, idiots. Your bodies will become material, and I can then hit you with my poisoned blade.”

“Huh? it's poisoned?!” Tom realized; he saw his sister wobble some more.

“Damn. Gab!!” he yelled to the empty air, while joining Madzistrale.

He held her in his arms, shielding her as Ysadora threw more swings. A loud and annoying alarm resonated in their ears, and they let the sound invade their mind as they closed their eyes.

Ysadora watched as the siblings vanished into thin air right in front of her, as Scott had described. Sighing in disappointment, she looked back at Daniel.

“What am I going to do with you?” she asked, annoyed, before sending a call to Randall to relate the newfound problems.

Chapter 39

- AP -

A Game To Last Centuries

Randall was looking out of the window as his mind was working overtime to find as many backup plans as he could, his professional stance and knotted hands behind his back hiding the tumult. He didn't liked to lose, and with his own life on the line, he certainly wasn't going to do so, especially at his own game. He owed it to his daughter to give her the world she deserved and fought for. Owed it to her for what he made her go through for his sake, what had now become her life. His ice grey eyes turned unusually soft, and his hands knotted even tighter.

Turning away, he walked to his desk, picking up the report sheet of the unknown medicinal chemical compound that Daniel Fitzgerald had given him before leaving to find Ysadora and give her the second copy.

“Molecular Composition:

- $C_7H_6O_3$
- $C_4H_8N_2O_3$
- *isovaleric acid*
- *sterols*
- *flavonoids*
- *bitters*
- *tannins*
- *coumarins*

Possible effects:

....”

Randall squinted in annoyance as six pages were devoted to a lengthy in-depth description of all possible effects and side-effects of the chemicals on any level and combination. He quickly skimmed through the document, but was nevertheless intrigued by the chemicals’ ability to slow down hemorrhage and promote faster blood clotting. It was a useful chemical during war.

The document finally ended with the diagnostic Randall dreaded:

“Match:

This exact mixture of chemical compounds does not match any of our current records. Substance is unknown. More researches are needed to determine the existence and creation of this substance.”

Randall threw down the papers. Another proof that their plan was getting foiled by mysterious strangers who came from another universe; a far-fetched concept that was up until two days ago uniquely theoretical, at least to his mind. He knew that Scott and several higher-ups amongst their superiors knew more than they told him about this concept of Multi Universal Travellers; but never had he actually believed them. Now one was working for him, and two more were threatening him.

He sighed. At least, Abraham’s uniqueness was something he could use to his advantage. But the siblings’ existence threatened his plan, especially when they could avoid elimination.

His office door opened, startling him, and Scott entered; the latter smiled in victory at Randall’s reaction.

“Gotcha this time!”

“I forgot you lacked manners,” Randall coldly replied.

“Your manners are a waste of time and ultimately serves you in no way,” Scott nonchalantly replied back, making himself comfortable in one of the sofas.

“Yet, you would be surprised how efficient etiquette can be. Kings and countries could be won over with simply the right words and gestures from noblemen,” Randall retorted, returning to gaze over the city.

“I know a good way to speed things up,” Scott chuckled, sliding from inside his leather coat’s sleeves his katar dagger, touching lovingly the sharp blades.

“That’s your problem. You only think of now. But victories are won over centuries of planning. Planning a victorious conquest is like planning a long and irreversible checkmate,” Randall said, looking as if remembering some old knowledge. “Zhongguo is probably the only Empire left that still remembers that strategy.”

Randall returned to his desk, taking out a battered wooden box from one of the drawers.

Scott looked amused.

“You have more faith in Zhongguo despite spending all your energy on this pitiful state here?”

“Not really; they only serve as a good example of a well thought-out system. And this Uni-states strategy is only a cover to take the attention away from the real victory. With luck, everything will go as planned, and the transition will be smooth. If it fails, my agents will just keep on adapting, and Terra will still flourish under proper guidance; it will only take longer for the game to play out.”

Scott smiled, then rose, slipping back his dagger hidden.

“Speaking of ‘agents’, the car is waiting, and Abraham will be ready in a few minutes.”

“Good.” Randall finally found what he was looking for: an old ring, made dull with the years, harbouring a herald. “You’re lucky. You might inherit this world in the near-future.”

“Ooh, I look forward to that!” Scott replied happily, walking childishly to the window, appreciating the view.

“So do I. It will be high time that humans had a proper challenge,” Randall said, stuffing the ring in his jacket pocket, closing the box.

“What? Humans against me? You call that a challenge?”

“Oh yes; and the strong shall inherit the kingdom.”

“Don’t quote that idiotic book,” Scott spat in disgust.

“I’m not quoting.” Randall approached Scott and taped him on the shoulder, a cold merciless smile on his lips. “You will force evolution, Scott. I hope you enjoy the pleasures you will get from your short-lived time.”

He turned on his heels and walked toward the door.

“I told you, Scott; my games are planned for centuries to come.” He turned to a steaming Scott: “You’re coming? We need to leave now.”

Scott hid his humiliation, silently wishing the new siblings could at least make enough damage so that Randall would be punished as stated by his contract; he joined Randall as the later did nothing to hide his amused smile.

Chapter 40

- AP -

Temple XIII

“Wake up, we’re here,” Randall’s voice softly woke Abraham from his nap. “Sleepy head.”

Abraham chuckled lightly, raising his head from the headrest, and moving as much as he could his ankylosed neck and back muscles. Cars were not meant to be beds, he silently commented with amusement. Looking out of the left back passenger window, he barely caught a glimpse of mountains before all went dark as Randall’s Evropan car drove into a tunnel.

“Where are we?” he tentatively asked. “I know you drugged me in the plane so that I wouldn’t know where we’re heading; but I can tell this isn’t anywhere in Norr Americae. The mountains are too old.”

Randall chuckled.

“It wouldn’t be a millennium-old secret if I told you. The knowledge of it comes at a high price; one I wouldn’t bestow upon you.”

“This is bigger than just winning an election and the country’s loyalty, am I right?” Abraham asked, partly feeling inadequate to the grandeur the plan was slowly revealing itself to be, yet partly feeling ecstatic to be considered as belonging to that plan.

“Much bigger,” Randall confirmed, smiling.

“I guess it’s not much use to ask more questions?” Abraham said, returning the smile.

“Well, why ask me? You are meeting with the ones behind it all.”

Abraham nodded in understanding; but curiosity soon took over.

“So who am I meeting? The founders?”

“I told you, we are the founders; they are the investors. At least, that’s the best description that suits what they do.”

“So what are they gaining?”

“Collaboration. Our help for their help.”

“Against?...”

“You don’t want to know yet. It took years for Ysadora,” Randall sighed, almost in regret. “But the result, if we win... Imagine, Abraham. What we do in the months to come will shape Terra into a society that will reach for the stars and establish itself not as a divided nation, but a strong-willed and immortal Empire. Some of us has already remained strong for more than five thousand years already. Why not tens of thousands more? It just needs strength and unity. People willing to rise to the challenges presented to them, and win, no matter how and when. And we both know how to bring that into existence.”

Abraham smiled under the passion behind Randall’s words.

The car suddenly stopped, and after a few seconds, Randall’s door was opened by the exterior.

“We’re here,” Scott announced.

Abraham noticed with puzzlement how his usual excited personality was heavily subdued by... fear? Abraham wondered as he opened his own door, Randall already getting out and straightening his suit: since when was Scott afraid of something? Even Randall was more composed than him.

The trio approached a heavily fortified stone door carved within the cavern itself, surrounded by scattered lights that gave off a warm orange glow.

“Scott?” Randall ordered.

Scott approached a panel where unknown symbols, a cross between hieroglyphs and runes, served as keypads. Scott taped a long sequence of symbols, a code lasting nearly a minute. What happened next startled Abraham: the door simply vanished. Scott picked up a lantern waiting in an alcove behind the door, entered, and turning back to look at Randall and Abraham with his golden eyes, waited patiently for them to follow him.

Randall side-stepped behind Abraham, settled to his left, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Stay with me. It’s a labyrinth, and we’ll get lost, and possibly killed of starvation, if we lose Scott from our sight; not that he’d mind.”

They entered inside the cavern entrance, which very soon turned into a narrow and sinuous dark hallway with many crossroads sparking from any direction. A subdued and patient Scott, still a matter of great puzzlement to Abraham from his small yet memorable experience with him, was walking slowly, holding the lantern. He would sniff around when crossroads would appear, and then walk to one of them with confidence, Abraham and Randall closely following.

As they did so for what seemed eternity, Abraham felt a warmth enveloping his being, a protection. He realized it came from Randall’s presence by his side, his hand kindly holding his arm in a protective grasp; that must have been what a father felt like, Abraham thought to himself. He of course wouldn’t know that feeling, since the only reaction he ever got when returning home was indifference from his parents, too busy burying themselves in their own misery. Yet, here was a man who despite his cold appearance, had more warmth and more care for him than his own flesh and blood. Taking comfort and strength in that thought, they pushed on until Scott finally lead them out into a medium-sized entrance with several doors. From many of them, sounds could be heard, rhythms, music, laughter, etc. Scott however ignored them, and walked instead to a bigger door, ornated with gold and the same runes as in the first entrance.

“The Shiakar Paradigm Society, Temple XIII,” Randall translated for Abraham.

“XIII?” Abraham asked, puzzled.

“There are several headquarters like this one across Terra. The superiors simply like the novelty of calling them Temples, don’t ask me why.”

“What language is this?” Abraham examined closer the runes.

“Shiakar,” Randall answered, joining him.

Abraham looked at him with even more puzzlement, but Scott interrupted him:

“You mind? We’ve got a meeting waiting.”

This time, Scott only needed to push open the door. He made a quick signal, and Randall dragged Abraham away from the door.

“Stay back,” he whispered urgently.

From the angle, Abraham could only see part of Scott, who was now hissing in joy. A metallic sound was heard that Abraham guessed as Scott’s dagger sliding out, and then a commotion followed. To Abraham’s surprise, almost no sound came from the obvious combat, beside Scott’s grunts and hisses. He approached slowly the entrance.

“Don’t, idiot,” Randall warned, trying to stop him.

“I won’t come close, I just want to see better.”

Randall shrugged, but followed him in a protective manner. The fight was almost ended though, and Abraham watched in fascination as Scott was executing some of the most complex moves and near-impossible dance of death he had seen. The hooded opponents fell to the ground without any sound, and then more hooded figures quickly took the bodies away.

Scott laughed as he cleaned his daggers in a flicking movement. He then spoke in a foreign language to yet three more hooded figures who approached him in a ceremonial manner. Abraham listened hard, but he could not figure out the words, which sounded guttural, with pronounced s’s and rolled r’s. The figures answered likewise, then retreated further into the room, and Scott motioned the two man to come in.

“Their security is slow, as usual,” Scott announced them, his liveliness back for a moment. “Didn’t took me any effort.”

“Just lots of show-off,” Randall reprimanded him.

“What do want me to say, it’s been awhile,” Scott smiled brightly.

Randall cut him with a raised hand as he noticed Abraham gazing around him in awe. The room was large, high and deep; at the far end, a gigantic furnace disguised as an elegant fireplace was providing a strong heat, and a bright orange light, like those of the multiple mural lamps and chandeliers across the room. The walls reached easily twenty feet according to Abraham’s guess, and were made of basalt. Rectangular banners hanged on those walls, all showing the same scene: a marine blue background, bare except for a white three-sided ouroboros with four wings. Below the symbol, six white stars lead to it in a reverse triangle; while a bigger star shone above the head of the ouroboros. No writing or additional symbols shared the banner; as if none were needed to convey any more meaning to the symbol.

Abraham shifted his attention to the rest of the room. Upon the obsidian floor, a large marine blue carpet led visitors from the door to the biggest table Abraham had ever seen. It easily stood seven feet from the floor, was made in massive carved stone, and topped with obsidian; Abraham calculated its width by a good eighteen feet, and its length by fifty feet.

The hooded figures that welcomed the trio pointed at two eight feet tall chairs, facing one each other across the width of the table, at the farthest edge; Abraham couldn’t help but lightly chuckle as he noticed small steps attached to the stairs, to allow the visitor to climb from the floor to the seat. His mind reeled at the unrealistic vision of the room.

“Come on, don’t be afraid,” Randall encouraged him, walking down the carpet toward the table.

Abraham followed, dutifully followed by Scott; during this time, the hooded figures continued to set the table, bringing food and refreshments. Randall climbed

as elegantly as he could his chair, and Abraham did the same, feeling a bit foolish having to walk up steps to sit on a simple chair. It revealed at the top to be extremely comfortable, looking in style and in feel like a Renaissance royal chair.

As the two man made themselves comfortable, Scott hovering around the edge of the table facing the door, Abraham heard the three hooded figures below him beginning to softly chant, holding some kind of electronic tablet in their hands. Randall smiled reassuringly, and during that time, took a sip from the wine glass set in front of him.

“Mm,” he said appreciatively. “A very fine vintage. They haven’t yet forgotten the simple pleasures of life.”

Abraham followed him, bracing himself at the muddy experience of the restaurant, but instead found himself surprised at the incredible taste of the wine, all the while trying to ignore the ever-increasing annoying chant below him. He had only placed down his glass of wine that the sudden appearance of a very tall man at his left made him startle in surprise. Randall slightly jumped as well, but immediately regained his composure, motioning Abraham to do the same. Abraham quickly understood the seriousness of the situation as the newcomer laid down a wavy double-bladed wicked-looking sword against the table, and sat on an ornate throne-like chair that had appeared alongside him at the width side of the table.

Even seated, the newcomer presided over the table and the two man from his height, and Abraham could feel the dangerous aura oozing from its very presence. The newcomer turned to him in clear distrust; but suddenly, he turned to where Scott was hovering, and he bellowed in a cavernous voice:

“Out of my sight, vermin!”

Scott tentatively hissed in defiance; he squealed in fear and ran as fast as he could when the man retorted with a terrifying snarl.

His attention distracted, Abraham gathered the courage to look him over. The tall newcomer was wearing a kind of pale shawl which was riddled with muddy, dark

red stains. Abraham suddenly realized it was blood, that the being was wearing like trophies. But that was not the worst. His skin was completely covered in aged and cracked scale-like scars; his cold eyes were empty of any warmth or even emotions; and Abraham gulped upon seeing that the man's fingernails had been shaped into sharp claws, scars along the fingertips hinting at the countless surgeries it must have taken the man to arrive at such a result. And as the final piece of resistance to his strange appearance, upon his bald head rested a crown that formed horns of metal.

Abraham couldn't believe his eyes, and his mind reeled in confusion. That was the ever-famous 'superiors' of Randall? Yet, there was no denying the oppressing threat oozing out and chilling him to the bones.

"Good evening, Your Highness," Randall's voice broke Abraham's thoughts.

"Randall Redspear," the newcomer simply replied, his grave booming voice showing clearly that English wasn't the language he spoke often.

"Allow me to do the presentations," Randall continued. "Your Highness, this is Abraham Solomon, the reason for our meeting. Abraham, this is Prince Nebuchadnezzar, of the Shiakar Universal Empire."

"Pr... Pr... Prince?..." Abraham stammered.

"What is the meaning of this meeting?" Nebuchadnezzar replied in an annoyed tone, completely ignoring Abraham.

"I want your authorization to induct Mr. Solomon as an official member of the Shiakar Society."

"For what reasons? Is the plan not advancing in our favour?"

"On the contrary. It is precisely because the plan is perfect that I wish to include an additional fail-safe. The population will soon come to the stage where they need a scapegoat. Giving them Mr. Solomon will allow for them to remain blissfully unaware of not only the Society, but of the existence of Your Highness as well."

Abraham looked at Randall with shock, but also a newfound understanding. So that was why Randall wanted him: he needed a scapegoat for whatever the grand plan was.

“Why him?” the Prince asked.

“Obviously I cannot fulfill that role; neither can Ysadora, she is a warrior, not a politician. And I’m sure that you’d agree that both Scott and Daniel are incompetent. But Abraham has unique talents. The population find him charming yet strict... but the greatest quality he will add to our plan is the fact he is an M.U.T. I am sure Scott recently inquired to you about their existence; the reason is sitting next to you, and I intend to use our enemies’ weapons against themselves. Imagine, Your Highness, a leader who cannot be killed, whose mystery will spark the limited imagination of the population. Why would they look beyond, when the answer to all the mysteries is represented within one impossible man standing before them?”

Abraham had to give it to Randall: the plan was genius, and the answer as to why they were excited of his ‘ability’. But now dread filled his mind as the being’s cold eyes turned to him in sudden interest, boring into his own as if the Prince was finally seeing him sitting there.

“I see...” Nebuchadnezzar merely said, looking at Abraham as if the latter had an aura surrounding him. When he spoke again, it was with undisguised suspicions. “Where are your allegiances? Gaea or humans?”

“What do you mean?” Abraham asked, beginning to be confused.

“Gaea host millions of lifeforms, and humans are only one of them,” Randall explained. “Yet the inevitable childish answer the Society get upon this question, is ‘with humans’. What about the hundreds millions lifeforms? Don’t they get a second look from our part?”

“I agree with that. Just the other day I had this very argument with two journalists,” Abraham replied. “That humanity should be saved at the expense of the survival of our planet, while it’s clear we have stepped beyond the threshold of

Gaea's balance. This is no mere hypothesis. Humanity's become a deadly cancer in any forms to our planet; and it threatens to become one to yet more planets as we advance into interplanetary conquest."

"And why do you, yourself a human, deem the rest of your specie as unworthy?" Nebuchadnezzar questioned.

Abraham was even more confused by the question, and he looked at Randall, seeking some form of help; but this time, the old man did not clarify the question.

"Are you incapable of individual thoughts, Abraham?" Nebuchadnezzar sharply asked, noticing Abraham's look toward Randall.

"Your Highness, you forget that we're not ordinarily questioned within that context," Randall intervened. "You have to let him answer in his own way."

The Prince sighed, and his glare softened.

"Continue," he ordered Abraham.

Abraham took a deep breath, and answered truthfully, hoping it wasn't a trick question:

"It doesn't take outsiders to see that most humans haven't evolved beyond basic instincts. They're merely monkeys, with bigger brains and more advanced neural activity, which doesn't mean that they're more intelligent. They despise anything higher advanced than their primal knowledge, and seek to bring everything down to their level of primal instincts."

"Yes, I know about bullying and abuse," Nebuchadnezzar sighed in annoyance. "What makes you think all humans are such?"

Abraham smiled.

"Because no humans like to accept that someone else's smarter than them, more admired, or more loved. Basic psychology. Ask Randall, ask any scientific genius, they've all been despised for being more advanced, for not conforming to the 'normal' primal knowledge and behavior. They're then scared that those higher

advanced beings will control them. I say that their fears are well justified. When a dog doesn't learn to behave in an advanced state, and keeps its primal instinct, what do humans do? Forcefully train it, discipline it, or if it doesn't learn, euthanize it. To survive, one must evolve to a higher state of mind. Any left behind have sealed their fates by themselves. To survive, one must become mighty; when faced with hardship or challenges, one must actively seek to rise above them, defeat them. Simple law of evolution. Might makes Right, and the meek gets shoved down. And most humans are meek."

» It doesn't matter who or what they are. Rules still apply to them. Take Gaea itself: the balance's maintained within the hundred of millions of lifeforms population through natural cycles such as predators, weather, viruses, etc. There's no such thing as sentimentality when it comes to Gaea. Humans believe they can transcend judgment, justice, elimination; but doing so, they disrupt the fundamental laws. Humans have a right to live, but not to cheat Nature."

"Don't you want all humans to become Mighty?" Nebuchadnezzar asked.

"Why? What benefits would it give? A forest's a forest because only ten percent of its trees survived the chase to the sun's rays. The rest lives beneath and becomes food to the lower lifeforms. That fundamental Law of Nature doesn't exclude humans just because they happen to have a bigger brain. Only the fittest rise above the meek, and only a small percentage can rise to that level, otherwise it upset the balance."

Nebuchadnezzar smiled at Randall, his eyes gleaming with delight.

"A quite delightful young man you brought me, Randall."

"I was sure you would approve," Randall replied brightly. "Do you agree that he would be perfect for our plan?"

"Yes," the Prince simply answered.

"What do you want me for?" Abraham asked, slightly nervously. "How can I help you when I don't even know what I'm agreeing to?"

“You don’t know?” Nebuchadnezzar incredulously said.

“I haven’t filled him in with the details yet,” Randall intervened. “I wanted him to see first with whom he would work for.”

“And risk revealing who we are?” Nebuchadnezzar replied angrily.

“I doubt he could escape your warriors should you decide he isn’t trustworthy.”

“Yet someone you once trusted escaped us,” Nebuchadnezzar accused.

Randall bowed his head apologetically, but his countenance remained calm.

“A mistake that I believe I have redeemed myself with the unconditional loyalty of my daughter to the Society.”

The Prince considered the two of them before speaking again:

“Then get to the point; time is not something to be toyed with.”

Randall bowed again his head, and then stared at Abraham.

“The mission of the Shiakar Paradigm Society is simple. Do you know this quote from Asclepiades: ‘*It goes without saying that extreme remedies are necessary for extreme diseases*’?”

“Of course,” Abraham acquiesced.

“Humanity has become an extreme disease to the greater entity that is our planet Terra. We believe that not because it appears inanimate means that it is not composed of thousands of millions of lifeforms threatened by the existence of humanity. And if there is an extreme disease...”

“... then an extreme remedy’s required,” Abraham finished.

“Nearly a hundred years ago, underground scientists calculated that to halt our effects on our planet, we needed to fall below five hundred millions of individuals, and follow a stricter rule of existence. One based off the universal cycle of evolution.”

Abraham understood.

“And we’re to be the ones bringing that remedy.”

“With their help,” Randall motioned the Prince and the hooded figures.

“Why?” Abraham asked the Prince, who flared at this direct question.

“Because only a handful of us can do so, and Terra is a big place,” Randall answered. “The Prince’s Shiakar Empire serves as the main HQ, but each sector across Terra has to have its own SPS faction, like mine. They have the resources, we have the manpower.”

“And that remedy to our problem will be a form of Doomsday, I gather?” Abraham asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. The Prince and his bloodline spent millennium building lines of thoughts and threads of action. One of them was the hoax of external lifeforms, a line of thought that as however become very real in the minds of our foolish citizens. Humanity will never accept a Doomsday remedy coming from humans; they’d think it’s just another ploy for selfish control. But to have the final proof that their existence threatens not just their planet, but could one day in the future threaten the future solar planets as well... the Shiakars’ presence is required.

» Otherwise, if Doomsday is wrongly interpreted as genocide, the transition will not happen as peacefully as possible, and an unnecessary stigma will continue on to the survivors. We don’t want that. Humans have to understand that they finally stepped over the line where it concerns them. They are not an infallible specie, they are not mystical ‘chosen ones’ above other lifeforms; they are a natural evolution born of Gaea and are meant to follow her rules as much as any other species. And no other species have ever stepped their boundaries... other than humans.

» For that, Abraham, I need your help. You know history and chaos theory better than anyone else, you know what’s happening, what must now happen. The population trust you; but at the same time, if it goes bad, we cannot afford our mission to fail for something as silly as mortality. You are an M.U.T. You can

protect and shoulder this Society, despite the threats. My own time is counted, and although Ysadora has her strengths, leadership is not one of them.”

“I understand,” Abraham softly replied.

He also understood it had to do with the threats: despite his desires, he was out of this world’s rules, essentially immortal. If an attempt should be made on his life by an extremist, he could survive it and continue on. Randall and Ysadora could not; their life was bound by natural cycles.

“It depends on you,” Nebuchadnezzar intervened. “How much do you wish to be the ever-surviving tree?”

“What do you mean?” Abraham wondered.

“Rising above what you are,” Randall precised. “To be amongst the high ranks of the Shiakar Empire, just as Ysadora and I are. To never bow down before anyone, to be your own master. To defeat any challenges given to you, and to guide others unto that path.”

“I want it very much, but my present condition...”

“Irrelevant once your part in the grand scheme is done,” the Prince reassured Abraham.

“The Shiakar scientists can move your physical body from your original universe to our own. It’s a lengthy process, but then, we have all the time, don’t we?” Randall explained. “You will never need to wake again in your nightmare world. And once you truly belong to our Universe, you can be just like us. The mighty tree.”

» The scientists here are the best in the universe. They can change any aspect of your genetic material. Want brown eyes, they’ll give it; a cat’s night vision, just ask. Want to live longer, regenerate any damaged organs? Be stronger, faster, more agile...?”

Randall looked expectantly at Abraham, emphasizing the last four words. Abraham suddenly understood: these were abilities that Ysadora had. He looked at Randall with shock.

“She’s... modified? By his scientists?”

“This is taking too long, Randall,” Nebuchadnezzar sharply protested.

“No, wait, I’m interested; this is just too sudden,” Abraham cut with more heat than he intended; he noticed the Prince tense dangerously at this outburst. “Please forgive my pace, Your Highness, but I must adjust to all these news. Surely Randall here and Ysadora didn’t agreed right away; you must’ve given them time to think about what it meant to them?”

Randall turned to the Prince, and suggested in a soothing voice:

“Abraham is right, Your Highness; Ysadora did took some time adjusting to your ways. Would Your Highness allow me to speak alone with Abraham, show him the full extent of our proposition? It wouldn’t take away your precious time, and we will both return to you as soon as he assimilated all the information.”

Nebuchadnezzar conceded Randall’s suggestion.

“Very well. I have some urgent matters to attend to. You may use the reception hall; but I warn you both. If my Priests detect hesitation in Abraham’s mind, I will not risk betrayal.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Randall accepted with a reassuring smile.

He signaled Abraham to rise, and both bowed to the Prince before leaving the table. Nebuchadnezzar looked on as they retreated, but soon returned his attention to his bleeping computer.

Randall leaded Abraham to a side door, at the far side of the hall. A small pang of fear crept in his mind: what truly awaited him, should he accept their mysterious offer? Not two months ago, he was selected to be in the Americae Presidential Council; now, he was following an old man whose daughter was genetically

modified, who recruited him to a strange hall, dining with a modified human Prince of sort with a shady so-claimed millennium-old Empire, who asked him about the worthiness of humanity. What did it bode for him? How far was Ysadora involved? Did she even knew what her father and the Prince were planning?

The sound of a heavy door opening brought him back from his thoughts, and Randall entered a luxurious reception area. A quarter as big as the main Hall, it nonetheless featured the same cathedral roof, the same obsidian walls and floors; it was heavily covered with the same marine blue carpets and drapes, featuring the Shiakar emblem. However, the walls were also covered with paintings from the Classical and Renaissance era. Red sofas laid all over the hall, in group of four around golden Renaissance coffee tables. Abraham was surprised to find the reception hall filled up with guests, all mostly seated and deep in chatting. A deeply rhythmic trance music was playing in the background, and some of the guests, mostly the women, were dancing at the beat.

Randall took Abraham to a table away from the chatter.

“Abraham, listen to me. I know you are confused, I was too in the beginning.”

“Who’s he? What is he?” Abraham asked.

“A man that needed to become more than he was in order to fulfill the Empire’s mission. I know he looks frightening, but think about it: is Gaea filled with beings and creatures fulfilling the fantasies of pale creamy skin, blue eyes and long blond hairs? No.

» The Shiakar Society has a purpose since it first awakened to it centuries ago: to elevate civilizations and bring them face to face with the reality of the world. Humanity wants to sail in the skies; but it’s not with their current attitude and wishful thinking that they’ll survive. They need strength, unity, and the drive to face and move over any all obstacles and challenges so that their own empires can survive time itself. Some will call the Shiakars’ method merciless; but you and me, we both know that order and discipline is required to find balance in life. Once you understand that, then you can understand how they truly help civilizations out.

» I know this, because he healed my daughter when no one would, not even God himself after her mother making so many prayers to him. He gave us the opportunity to actually change the world, Abraham. And I want you to be a part of it. Don't say anything yet, just let me tell you about our... in fact, my offer. Abraham, I know you. I know you, because I see myself in you. You were despised, just like me, by humans who were a fourth less clever than us. Yet, these people won all the compliments while we were the last. But we are not them. Their hate is our strength. We use their contempt of us to pass incognito, and beat them when they least expect it. We don't stop at obstacles: we climb over them, and create bigger ones for anyone who dare and try to follow in our footsteps. We are the greatest trees in the forest.

» I offer you to be by my side. Not to work for me; to work with me. I know of your love for Ysadora and hers for you, and I couldn't be prouder. I can and will offer her hand to you; and that is not something I will willingly say to anyone. But we need your help. And I need your proof, your ultimate proof that you are worthy of the Redspear bloodline. Accept my offer, and you will be amongst the highest in ranks when the world you dream of come true.”

Abraham looked thoughtfully at Randall; if there was one thing that he was sure of, was that the old man was always truthful. Letting the offer sink in, he looked around, then suddenly chuckled.

“Shiakar? What kind of name's that?!”

Randall shrugged, raising his eyebrows in derision.

“Beats me. The original creators of that society redid everything from scratch, or simply reinterpreted ancient lores: language, writing, names, physical appearances. It originally started out, centuries ago, as a manner to influence civilizations in eras where leaderships were established by the concept of being chosen by 'deities' and 'super-beings'. Hence... well, everything weird about it.”

Abraham chuckled again.

“I'm surprised to find you related to something like that.”

Randall grunted.

“They found me first, and offered me a deal I could not refuse. Then I signed a contract, and I always respects deals that I make, regardless who or what is involved along with it.”

He sat back, crossed his legs and smirked at Abraham.

“But don’t you dare think that it means I’m bound to that contract. I have my own game to play, and having you by my side means more to me than it will mean to them.”

Abraham smiled weakly, still reeling in all the information. He smiled mischievously at Randall:

“And what about that punch? You still owe me an apology for that.”

Randall’s eyes steeled.

“No I don’t. In my family, a man asks the father’s blessing before dating his daughter. Ysadora is the only person I trust in this whole world; I wasn’t going to let her get trapped by a fleeting distraction, and seeing how far you had already advanced things, it was my duty as her father to stop you right there and then.” His gaze softened. “I’m however relieved that my fears were unfounded. So I won’t give you an apology. I will give you my respect, if you still prove yourself worthy of it.”

After two hours, they returned to the main Hall, where they found Prince Nebuchadnezzar waiting. He nonchalantly waved a hand towards them, and one of the hooded figure seemingly sprang from the shadows, faced Abraham and began talking in the strange language, passing his hands over Abraham’s face. A powerful strange force suddenly invaded Abraham’s soul, and he struggled staying on his feet. Everything became whitewashed, the atmosphere felt as if it was inexorably chocking his soul; he felt utterly exposed and transparent, and felt helpless as he

began to speak his deepest secrets and thoughts flashing by, for all to hear, without a possibility of restraining them, uninhibited like a truth serum on steroids.

Suddenly, it stopped as short as it began, and Abraham stumbled back, sweating and a great headache filling his head; Randall gently helped him remain upright, holding him firmly by the shoulders. For Abraham, he knew it barely lasted a few minutes... yet it felt like eternity.

The hooded being stepped back and turned to the Prince; another twenty seconds passed before Nebuchadnezzar's voice boomed for all to hear:

“I welcome Abraham Solomon to the Shiakar Paradigm Society, and to its enlightened mission.”

Chapter 41

- AQ -

Frank Cooper

“Daddy, when will Mommy come?” Anton asked, cranking up his mechanical toy car. His twin sister Billie was already busy emulating a chasing scene, vocalizing the various engines sounds and effects.

“Saturday, I’ve told you a dozen times,” Frank Cooper sighed, building the race track on the living room floor. Hearing no response, he turned around, and saw his two children looking down. His heart clenching, he realized how much tougher a divorced parents situation was for nine years-old kids. He let go of the tracks, and hugged tightly with each arms his kids. “Don’t worry, you’ll spend a great time!”

The children looked dubious, but soon resumed their game. Sighing with relief, Frank finished up the tracks.

“There you go! Now be careful, and don’t break anything,” he smiled, rising.

“Thank you Dad!” they chimed together.

Discreetly moaning and stretching his cramping back, Frank thought with amusement how forty years-old felt surprisingly like fifty-five. Looking quickly over the family picture on his way to his office, he smiled for his luck to be constantly present at home to watch the evolution of his children, the only precious gift that life granted him.

Sitting in front of his computer, he entered his login details, and was faced with an ongoing status from his software. He sighed. Opening his messaging app, he began typing:

“Dear Mr. Lee;

My new computer's struggling to keep up with the power of my old one. So your game animation commission will be done tonight. Will send it tomorrow morning as soon as I wake up.

Cheers,

Frank”

He sent the message, and waited as the recipient began almost immediately replying back.

“Dear Mr. Cooper;

No problem! I totally get it; our tech is rubbish nowadays... ;)

Can't wait to see it!

- Michael”

Frank smiled, and closed the messaging app. Seeing that his project wouldn't be done before another forty-five minutes, he opened his Interweb browser and logged into his bookmarked social forum.

After fifteen minutes of browsing through the latest grim and doomsday-like posts, he sighed, feeling depressed. Finally, a thread caught his eyes.

“That's not possible... Some good news!” he muttered, clicking on a link named: *‘Best Wild Edible Weeds For Landscaping!’*

His daughter's sudden voice made him jump in surprise:

“Daddy, when can we join that website of yours?”

Frank laughed gently and stroke her hair.

“Not yet, darling. Wait a little longer; there's mature stuff in there.”

Billie pouted, looking back and forth enviously at the computer's screen.

“Where’s your brother so you can beat him at racing, like you always do?” he teased her.

Billie shrugged.

“Talking.”

Frank looked at her, surprised.

“Talking? To whom?”

“Oh... I don’t know. Two strangers. They knocked, so we let them in,” his daughter answered nonchalantly, hopping from one foot to another.

“What?!” Frank shouted, panicked, jumping off his seat and sprinting to the living room.

He came almost crashing down against Tom, and the latter, stumbling backwards, nevertheless managed to catch Frank and hold him up.

“Woah, mate, you’re okay?” Tom asked, worried.

“Tom!” Frank exclaimed, then saw Madzistrale squatted beside Anton, admiring the toy cars. “Mad! I wasn’t expecting you guys.”

“Us neither,” Tom admitted, keeping silent how exactly they ended up in front of Frank’s porch: by simply appearing there without prior wishes to do so.

“We knocked, but your son opened the door and insisted that we come in,” Madzistrale smiled apologetically.

“It’s okay,” Frank said. He looked sternly at his two kids: “Later on, I’ll have a chat with you two.”

“Please, don’t get them in trouble!” Madzistrale rose, panicked. “I should’ve insisted on waiting for you!”

“It’s okay,” Frank comforted her and the children. “I’ll just have a chat about opening doors to strangers. Just to remind you two how dangerous it could’ve been.”

Anton and Billie guiltily looked down. Frank ruffled their hair, then ordered:

“Now, please go upstairs. Your break’s over, you need to study for tomorrow’s exams.”

The children complained, but obeyed, climbing halfheartedly the stairs. Frank turned to the siblings.

“You guys want some coffee?”

“No!” Madzistrale answered sharply. She realized how rude she sounded, so she smiled shyly: “I already took more than enough.”

Frank smiled.

“I know what that’s like. Come on to my office, I need to keep an eye on my project.”

Tom and Madzistrale followed him, and he took away books and tinkers that were stacked on two chairs. Madzistrale fell to the urge of looking at the computer screen.

“Oh! You’re interested in wild edibles?” she noticed, excited.

“Yeah, a little. But it’s simply that it’s the only good news that I found,” Frank sighed. He clicked on the minimize icon to check up on the software.

“And you’re an animator?!” Madzistrale exclaimed.

Frank blushed a little.

“Yeah. It allows me to take freelance jobs but stay at home with my kids. Especially with Victoria working full-time...”

“Your wife?” Tom asked politely.

“Ex-wife.”

“Oh... Sorry,” Tom apologized.

“Nothing to apologize for. It’s life,” Frank said. “So how you’ve been? The last I heard, you were going to see the Chief Advisor?”

Madzistrale grimaced in disgust.

“Yeah... No. Don’t bother about that guy.”

Frank looked puzzled.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s a bloody psych...”

Tom kicked her leg, cutting her short.

“He’s a typical high-ranking official that’s in power for that reason. No different than any other before him,” he clarified.

Frank sighed and slouched in his chair.

“Where’s our world gone to? Perhaps some are right: no political parties are ever worth our hopes.”

“Or someone’s purposefully poisoning the well,” Madzistrale suggested. “When there’s poison in your water, you don’t blame the water, but rather the idiot that puts the poison there.”

Frank looked at them, interested.

“So you too believe there’s someone else in charge? A hidden hand?”

“You bet.”

Tom raised his hand appealingly.

“Or rather, that’s our theory. But we know so little; that’s why you might be our insider. What do you think?”

Frank considered them, then his computer screen.

“I only know that what I’m seeing’s not the world I want. Look at this!”

He motioned the siblings to come closer, and returned to the homepage of his social forum; he began reading out loud the head titles:

- ‘ - *Doing away with political parties*
- *The risks of saving others*
- *Why WW3 is needed*
- *The right to strike first*
- *How pacifism is a myth*
- *The time has come to show the people’s true face...’*

Frank stopped, and looked almost sick.

“I know the government’s not right, but what frightens me are the population themselves, how insecurity has driven them nearly mad with hate and violence. No one wants any longer to find peaceful solutions. Yet, more they grow violent and angry, more the government retaliates with tighter rules. It’s an endless cycle, and it’s not looking good. The population themselves wants a world war, for Gaea’s sake!”

“And what kind of world do they expect afterwards?” Madzistrale pondered sadly.

“Exactly. The people react in extremes. On one side, they’re either completely compliant, and allow whoever to control them, because they just don’t care any longer, they’ve given up. On the opposite, we find complete all-out anarchism. How can someone live peacefully in such a world? Who can wish such a world for their families, children? I certainly don’t want any of that, for me, my kids, or anyone else. Surely a peaceful way can be found. But I don’t see it anywhere...”

Tom gave him a pat on the back.

“We won’t let that happen. We’ll find you a way.”

Frank laughed.

“If only it would work that way.”

“Why not! No one’s tried, so we’ll do it if everyone’s too lazy for that,” Madzistrale said.

Frank looked at them, puzzled yet strangely uplifted by their enthusiasm.

“Why would you do it?”

“Because we can,” the siblings simply answered, smiling.

Frank smiled.

“Okay... I’ll cheer you on.”

“You’ll do more than that,” Tom rectified. “We’ll need your help in the future to figure all of this out.”

Frank shrugged.

“Hey, I don’t know what I can do... but count me in.”

Madzistrale hugged him.

“Don’t worry. All good heroes are terribly ordinary in reality.”

Frank laughed. The siblings felt the familiar pull on their mind, and they rose.

“Sorry, but we gotta go.”

“Sure,” Frank rose too, accompanying them to the door.

“Say bye to your kids; and please be kind to them,” Madzistrale asked once on the porch.

“And do us a favour,” Tom added. “Keep hoping for a peaceful world with peaceful solutions to problems. The world need people like you.”

“I’ll do my best,” Frank acknowledged.

“Till next time, then!” the siblings said.

Frank waved back as they walked away. He looked back into his house, making sure the siblings hadn’t forgotten anything. When he returned his gaze at the driveway, he frowned. His driveway led directly to either a grass front yard bordered by tall dense hedges, or to the street’s sidewalk. Yet he could see no signs of the siblings.

Chapter 42

- AQ -

The Scapegoat

Abraham knocked at Randall's office door.

“Enter.”

Stepping into the bright room and joining the old man by the windows, Abraham found himself appreciating the view of the city.

“Impressive, isn't?” Randall asked proudly.

“Once set back into the right path, yes,” Abraham replied.

“Did you find a solution?” Randall asked without preambles.

“I did. I examined several possibilities, including assassination, but bottom line, the people itself must dethrone President Bohm. It's the only way they'll accept and trust what comes next.”

“But that means leaking something grave enough about Bohm to ignite the population. Is that possible?”

“Luckily, the people are irreversibly conformist to the mob mentality. Tell them what to do and what to think, and they've got no choice but to go with it so not to be left out.

» So I'll leak that during his Senator years, Bohm was secretly approached and then became a member of the Klaverns.”

“The supremacist hate group? Isn't it a bit far-fetched?”

“Not at all. Since four years, supremacist feelings have risen again in the Suthern delegations; it's an issue I had to deal with, even as far as my psychology

internship. Fear, terrorism, it all comes to play in the mind of the citizens. One of the biggest worries are talented national workers being replaced by inadequate external ones for the purpose of diversity. Supremacist thoughts are bound to resurface. But luckily, the general population abide by the mob mentality, and especially the progressive modernist one. So supremacist hate groups are without a doubt the single most evil threat that can affect the Americani; and the number one thing they won't want for a President that promised equality. People are sick and tired of lies.”

“I supposed it could work,” Randall mused. “Is it true, though?”

“Anything can become true,” Abraham replied enigmatically.

“You'd have to make it very convincing, though.”

“It's my job. But the Americani don't need hardcore proof; they only need sensationalism.”

“We don't really have a choice; Bohm's looking into my activities. I suspect he'll try to evict me at the next meeting. What about Reginald Griffith?”

Abraham sighed.

“That one's the problem. He's clean; he couldn't be cleaner. The only reason he didn't run for Presidency's because he knows the system's easily corrupted. As a Vice-President, he thinks that he can set things right from the inside.”

Randall walked away from the windows, thinking deeply.

“I keep thinking that our only option is assa...” Abraham began

“No!” Randall spoke suddenly. “No, we can actually use him. Not only he doesn't want to become the President, I also know of his belief regarding governments and politics. If you can convince him that a new way of thinking is required, he'll join us. At least long enough for the population to gain their trust into you.”

“How can you be sure?” Abraham wondered.

“An environmentalist named Sen Ephriam, with similar beliefs to Griffith, was married with my great-grand-aunt Jenny; his involvement with the Redsphear family led to the creation of the Gaea Theorem... the basis for this new era that we put forth.”

“The Redsphear are behind the Gaea Theorem?!” Abraham said, shocked.

“Of course. Since at least two centuries. Some other families related to us were involved in some fashion or other; but we are the front-runners. The Larochelleuer families were the founders of Galtonism; the Ustorea families recently pioneered off world survival strategical measures.”

“Incredible...” Abraham said; Randall smiled at his reaction.

“Never believe that women had no powers upon a man’s life, Abraham. Some of this world’s most important turning points came from women and their families. I hope to live long enough to witness the same from my own daughter...”

“So what do you want me to do with Griffith?” Abraham returned to the subject, slightly embarrassed.

“Tell him just enough about our plans. He already shares our beliefs that the citizens are the real power behind a country; he is a fervent environmentalist, so he will abide to the Gaea Theorem. Give him enough to push alongside you for Bohm’s eviction; and give him good reasons to appoint you as President. He alone has this power; I could force it, but if possible, I would like my presence to remain as discrete as possible.”

“I understand,” Abraham replied. He paused, hesitant, then resumed: “Depending on how it unfolds, I might be forced to temporarily follow up on your ‘exposure’. I’d rather not, but we never know, and I want you to be aware of that beforehand.”

“Thank you, Abraham. I understand, and you know I give you free reins to plan the necessary actions as you see fit.” Randall considered him before speaking again: “I hope that you understand extremely well the consequences if the plan fails. All the blame will fall on you.”

“I already accepted, Randall,” Abraham replied annoyingly. “It’s the only logically course of action. I’d be more at ease if I know that my role protect yours; but knowing you, you must have even backups of backups plans if this one fails.”

Randall smiled; but turning away from Abraham, his smile faltered.

“Of course,” he lied. *Only one backup left*, he thought bitterly, barely hearing Abraham taking his leave.

Chapter 43

- AQ -

Cycle of Order

Ysadora sighed with annoyance, staring at the still form of Daniel upon her couch, while Abraham was restraining a laugh at the scene.

“What am I going to do with him?!” she cried out.

“Couldn’t you have thought beforehand that someone might try to interrogate him?” Abraham asked ludicrously.

Ysadora blushed.

“I thought I would always stand in the way first.”

“I see,” Abraham sighed.

“I have no choice but to destroy him,” Ysadora decided.

“Wait a second! Can’t you just program him to lie when interrogated?”

“The evolution of his software is past such tinkering. After more than nine years into our services without such need to manually manipulate his brain, his intelligence grew to be self-autonomous. Our orders or tinkering would just be interpreted as a possibility within amongst others. He’ll then simply interpret which possibility is the most advantageous to follow while remaining faithful to his core laws.”

Abraham suddenly looked up at Ysadora.

“He can process possibilities? See the most advantageous pattern, etc?”

Ysadora hesitated, surprised at such a question.

“Umm, yes, as far as we can see. Why?”

Abraham thought deeply, turning around the couch as if to better access the unconscious Daniel.

“That could work marvelously,” he softly spoke to himself.

“What could?” Ysadora asked roughly, annoyed to be ignored.

“Ysa, reanimate him and order him to meet me in my office after my meeting,” Abraham ordered. He paused, before apologetically adding: “Please.”

“Are you sure?” Ysadora asked.

“Trust me; he’s going to be really useful.”

”Can you at least tell me why?” she asked once again.

Abraham hesitated.

“It’s a gut feeling I have as a chaos theorist. The Universe’s supposed to follow the law of entropy. Which means that with each passing moment, it should become more chaotic: more variables happens exponentially. But against all odds, that’s not what’s happening. The Universe seem instead to follow a form of order, of a cycle. If that’s true, then even major events in human History and human evolution should follow that order as well.”

“And? How will that be useful?” she asked, lightly puzzled.

“I don’t know. That’s why I need to ask Daniel. Until then, I can’t give a straight answer.

Ysadora sighed.

“Fine. But make sure he stays within this building, and that none other but the four of us contact him.”

“I understand. I’ll let you take care of him, I have to go to my meeting,” he finished, kissing her quickly on the cheek.

Daniel entered Abraham's office as the sun began to set.

"You wished to see me, sir?"

"Daniel! Yes, thank you for coming. Please sit down," Abraham asked, moving around his desk and leaning against it, facing Daniel as the latter obediently sat down.

"I don't myself know what I'm looking for, so your job will be hard. I need you to collect every major events of History. Absolutely everything that shaped it, that are indisputable turning points."

"How far do you wish me to go?" Daniel simply asked.

"As far as you can. But I need you do to something else with that information. Find me a constant pattern between those events."

"What specific constant pattern between those events do you wish me to find, sir?" Daniel asked.

"I don't even know. That's why I said that your job will be hard," Abraham admitted.

"Very well, sir. I will do my best," Daniel formally accepted.

"Thanks, Daniel," Abraham said, sighing in relief as he straightened up and walked back behind his desk.

"You are welcome, sir."

Abraham gazed up, realizing that Daniel was still seated, looking straight at him; he sighed, realizing how Ysadora could be annoyed by her assistant at times.

"You're dismissed."

“Yes, Mr. Abraham,” Daniel acknowledged, rising from his seat and starting for the door.

“Oh, and Daniel?” Abraham suddenly realized.

“Yes, Mr. Solomon?”

“Please confine your movements between Ysadora, Randall and my own offices until your research’s done, and until told otherwise.”

“As you wish, Mr. Solomon.”

Abraham let out a sigh of relief as Daniel left his office. The first step for his plan was underway. Now came the hardest one: convincing an honest man to play dirty.

Chapter 44

- AQ -

Randall's Rat

A knock was heard on Bohm's office door.

"Come in," the President said.

His secretary, Shannon, entered with a pile of folders.

"Finally," Bohm rose from his seat, excited.

"I'm very sorry for the delay; it took quite some time to find the information you requested," she explained apologetically.

"Don't worry about it, Shannon," Bohm smiled, taking off a good load of the folders.

"Do you want my help going through it?" Shannon proposed.

Bohm was about to accept when he paused. A strange feeling creeping up his spine, he said instead:

"No, thanks. I need to check this out myself. You've already done so much."

"It's really no trouble, Mr. President."

Bohm smiled.

"Robert's fine, I already told ya. And thanks; but I insist. Take the day off, and go see your family. That's why I took this job."

Shannon smiled shyly, and hesitated, but she bowed lightly.

"Thank you, Mr. Pr... Robert."

Bohm platonically kissed her on the cheek, and returned behind his desk.

When Shannon closed the door behind him, Bohm dug in the pile of folders. With each passing document, his brow frowned in worry more and more.

“What are ya up to, Randall?” Bohm wondered out loud, reading pages of the personnel files that were taken out from the Confederation Library.

Each visits were cleared by the presentation of Randall Redsphear’s governmental I.D. Bohm leaned over to a specific note in the second visit:

‘Randall Redsphear clearance for pickup by assistant Daniel Fitzgerald. Reason: movement restriction due to age.’

“Movement restriction due to age... My ass,” Bohm muttered angrily. “You don’t have any age issues.”

He grew worrier every minute as he read the countless useless files on the council members, senators, mayors... but as Bohm suspected, the citizens themselves.

He leaned back, closing his eyes and linking his hands together in an effort to remain calm. He was dealing with something way over his head, and he imaginatively slapped himself on the face for not seeing it coming.

If one thing Bohm could be proud of, was that he never lied about the motives behind his ambitions. Raised indeed in a poor family of five children, there were months when the only food on the table were peanut butter and jelly toasts, grilled cheese sandwiches, and cheap tomato paste pastas... The only affordable food, while the dismissive high-class society a few miles from them enjoyed fresh harvests, Evropan-imported delicacies, meat, and Gaea only knew what else. His parents would cut on basic necessities to pay off school for their children, to grant them the dignity of education.

Older, he was lucky meeting Frances, a middle-class girl who saw his soul and not his used, ripped clothing, and his family’s poverty. She showed him the kindness and compassion that the Bohms had been looking out for from the people put into power for that purpose. Upon realizing the sad truth of politics, Bohm

vowed to change that. As Frances enrolled in the private investigation business, he enrolled in politics, desperately and clingingly making his way up.

After an eternity, he found himself Senator of Columbus; but the sad reality remained. No matter his benevolence and his compassionate wishes toward the well-being of the population, his hands were tied by still a higher power that wasn't willing to lift a finger.

It was by Gaea's miraculous intervention that after a fervent publicized sermon, Randall Redsphear approached him. A shock it'd been to meet such a powerful stranger, an outsider that yielded and directed the nation's top man. But Bohm quickly drew close to the old man's ambitions, and a deal was struck. Randall could not evict the current President; but could use his mysterious power to build up from scratch a brand new political party, putting Bohm at the forefront, ensuring all the necessary steps to success. Randall had warned Bohm that such steps required less than fair game; but Bohm had been willing to take on that sin if it meant he could finally prevent the suffering his family went through.

Bohm looked with growing regret and shame at the pile towering on his desk of all the lives afflicted or lost during his reign. Innocent lives, people trying to find their way through the unfairness of life even if stumbling on the path. Lives that his Counsellor had deemed worthless enough and insignificant to care about or mention.

And even then? Why all those background checks, why all the spying? What was Randall obsessed with, that required hiring a fool to hide behind? Bohm found himself having no shame admitting his foolishness. He wanted so badly the power to change lives that he had sold out what mattered the most.

Not everything, his mind answered back.

Sitting back straight, he picked up the phone, and fast-dialed the first number.

"Hi, honey," his wife answered. "Everything okay?"

"No," Bohm replied truthfully. "How far can you go in diggin' up information?"

His wife hesitated.

“Robert... I didn’t dare ask last night, but you need to tell me what’s going on.”

It was Bohm’s turn to hesitate.

“It might put ya in danger.”

Frances laughed softly.

“Unless you’ve got a level five psychopath, I think I’ve been already in loads of shit of danger.”

“I don’t know what level he’s at, but we’re dealin’ with a psychopath. Or sociopath, I don’t really keep up with the terms.”

Bohm could discern the concern behind his wife’s silence.

“What’s happenin’?” she finally spoke again.

“I’ve got strong suspicions that my Counsellor’s using my position for some plan of his own. I need to get facts and evidences.”

“Shouldn’t you talk to the Council about it?” she suggested.

Bohm sighed.

“Under his counsel (and, I admit, my own stupidity), we demoted nearly everyone from the old council members, and put in recruits that he chose. Those that are left are too scared to lose their position to do anythin’.”

Frances thought.

“If it went this far, then most of the system that’s installed’s most likely as corrupted. I won’t be able to dig deep, either me or my contacts.”

“I don’t need a lot,” Bohm reassured her. “Randall’s own people are probably as stupid as me, followin’ him because he provided them their ambitions. He’s not a man that’ll let anyone know about his plans. Even our new Chief Advisor must be a victim; I need to find a way to talk to him...”

“Well, if it was the same request, I did suggest that you look out for the few rats that he’ll allow into a portion of his plans,” Frances suggested.

“And I found one. Why I called,” Bohm proudly said. “Can ya dig up anythin’ about a Daniel Fitzgerald?”

He heard his wife scratch down on a paper.

“Will do my best. I won’t say anything more, just in case. Next time we talk, it’ll be at home and by writing,” she said cautiously.

“Got it,” Bohm acknowledged.

“Robert? Be careful, will ya?”

“Back to ya, Frances.”

“Okay, bye,” she hang up.

Bohm put back the phone in its socket, and laid back. Struggling between staying at the office, or returning home, he thought deeply. Suddenly, he rose. Taking a note, he scribbled:

‘I went to surprise my parents-in-law; it’s their birthday today. Don’t worry, I’m protected.’

Smiling mischievously, he walked to the window, and opened it. He always climbed trees for as long as he could remember; now was the time to test his agility and stealthiness from the fourth story to the parking lot. He knew his bodyguards would wait at the White Castle entrance, so his path would be free.

As he sat behind the wheel, nearly twenty minutes later, Bohm searched around for a handkerchief. He knew he wasn’t young anymore, but it still surprised him how exhausting climbing was for him now. Starting the car, he drove past the gate.

“The guards aren’t with you, Mr. President?” the gate keeper asked worryingly.

“Oh, they’re followin’ after a few minutes. We just made a bet on how a better driver I’m at my age than them youngsters,” Bohm smiled innocently. “They’re givin’ me an advance... as if it’ll change anythin’.”

“Right... Well, be careful, Mr. President. The population’s doing a lot of protests nowadays,” the keeper warned, opening the gate and letting Bohm drive through.

“With good reasons,” Bohm muttered angrily.

Driving past the Columbus cemetery, Bohm thought with both pride and sadness how he was holding up to what he wrote on the note back at his office. He was indeed driving by his parents-in-law, and today would have been indeed the birthday of his mother-in-law.

“Let no one say I’m not honest,” Bohm thought bitterly.

Now, he needed to go home and wait for Frances’ return; it was time to uncover Randall Redsphear.

Chapter 45

- BO -

Fourteenth Generation

Soft electronic music played as Madzistrale sat down in her sofa, drying her hair with a towel. About to pick up the TV controller, she saw with her usual disinterest the thick black book lying on the table; but something else caught her eye. It was a note with Gabzryel's elegant handwriting:

'Read the darn book! You can't call yourself a Christian if you don't read at least once the darn Bible!!'

"Yes I can!" Madzistrale argued angrily at the note. "Besides, it's the KJB one..."

She continued reading the note, and smirked upon what came next:

'So what if it's the KJB version? Unless you know how to read Ancient Greek or Armenian...

Just read the Gospel of Matthew, at least. It's the best part.'

Madzistrale sighed, and picked up the black book, noticing the elegant bookmark somewhere two-thirds in the pages. Looking at the hour, she resigned herself, and lying back in her sofa, she opened the book to the bookmark and began to read.

Two minutes passed, and she groaned in frustration.

"Oh come on, seriously??!! Are you going to name every-single-bloody-one-generation?? Just get to the point..."

She paused as something caught her eyes, and she sat back up with newfound interest.

“Now that’s peculiar...”

**

“Next!” Gabzryel asked, holding up a scoop filled of gooey honey over the pasteurization machine.

“Ai!” Tom acknowledged, passing over a glass Mason jar to Gabzryel. He screwed the top on the previous jar, taking care not to smudge anything. “So how many friends do we need to deliver these already?”

“Eight! Will you keep up already?” Gabzryel replied annoyingly, struggling to fill the jar without spilling honey all over the exterior.

The door to the basement opened, and Madzistrale walked into the laboratory, holding a notepad. Pausing, she looked at Gabzryel before falling into a fit of laugh.

“What?” Gabzryel asked, worried, carefully holding the honey-filled jar back to Tom.

“You can’t expect me not to laugh upon seeing a man wearing a turban, with shorts and a darn dagger dangling from his belt, making dozens of honey jars while expertly spilling none of it on his badly positioned bracelet! Was it already time for your eidomorph switch?”

“Of course,” Gabzryel simply replied, scraping the leftover honey into a bigger and simpler looking jar.

“So... no meat for the next weeks?” Madzistrale thought, trying to remember the taboos.

“I’m a Sikh, not a Muslim or a Hindu!”

“I know, I know! I just thought that Sikhs didn’t eat meat as well...”

“No, they still do,” Gabzryel patiently replied.

“Finally; you won’t object to my bacon and eggs tomorrow. Now, are you two done? It’s my turn to show you something interesting,” Madzistrale changed the subject.

“Coming right up!”

Tom and Gabzryel rinsed their hands before joining Madzistrale at the work table.

“So, after that annoying note of yours, I began reading the Gospel of Matthew...” Madzistrale began.

“Really? How did you like it?” Gabzryel asked excitedly.

“I don’t know, I haven’t gotten past the second page...”

“What?! Why?”

“For good reasons, might I say!” Madzistrale defended herself. “I found something peculiar.”

“I told you that someone like you would,” Tom said proudly. “You always view things in a way that we can’t.”

Madzistrale blushed before continuing:

“It’s written, after that ridiculously long list of names, that between Abraham and King David, fourteen generations has elapsed.”

“Okay...” the two man tried to see where this was going.

“Between King David and the next big event, the exile of Jews into Babylon, fourteen generations elapsed. Finally, between the exile and the birth of Jesus-Christ, yet another fourteen generation elapsed.”

“Strange,” Tom conceded.

“There’s fourteen possible Bavarais lattices filling the space dimensions,” Gabzryel thoughtfully said.

“And there are fourteen electrons in the f sub-level of an atom,” Tom added.

“Yeah, right,” Madzistrale uncertainly said, not knowing anything about science. “But as I’m sure you know me, I had to become obsessed with that peculiarity; and guess what I found?”

She opened her notepad where a table of dates with descriptions were lined under each other.

***** **AR** *****

Daniel knocked at Abraham’s office, and upon the latter’s invitation, entered.

“Daniel, you’re here for my request?” Abraham asked, rising from his seat.

“Yes, Mr. Solomon, I have found what you requested of me,” Daniel acquiesced, holding a small lean dark-grey machine.

“Show me,” Abraham invited him on the couch facing a low table.

“Yes, sir,” Daniel plugged the machine into the table; the wooden top split to allow a clear inverted pyramid to rise at eye level. He positioned it in line with his grey machine, pressed a few commands, and a holographic genealogy-looking chart appeared in mid-air within the pyramid.

“As you requested, I compiled every major historical events that remained in our records. My first attempts to find your desired pattern were unsuccessful, for major events are innumerable. However, I took the liberty to examine religious accounts of History. Religions, by their nature, find patterns to match what they cannot explain otherwise. And I found a match.”

Daniel tapped on the machine, and the chart grew in clarity, with three differently coloured lines sprouting from a single point and leading to a long vertical list of box, with some lines joining to the same boxes. When Daniel zoomed on the very first box, simply written ‘Ibrahim’.

“In the 1611 Bible, in the Godspel of Matthai, there are three consecutive events distanced by 14 generations each, starting from Ibrahim. Fourteen generation later, Dawud becomes King of Yerushalim,” Daniel explained, following a single blue line linking Ibrahim to the next box, written ‘1,049 BCE, King Dawud’’. Moving his finger along the single blue line to the next box, Daniel continued: “Another fourteen generation mark the exile of the Yehudhi to Babilim. From the exile of the Yehudhi to Babilim, another fourteen generations lead to the birth of Yeshua-Emmanuel.”

Daniel stopped his finger at the ‘Yeshua-Emmanuel’ box, from which three lines (blue, green and red) linked to one more box then sprouted to a complex chart.

“I remember reading that the number fourteen was associated with the name of David, and that they used that number to reinforce the fact that Yeshua-Emmanuel was the descendant of the House of Dawud,” Abraham explained, slightly disappointing by Daniel’s finds. “That genealogy is also only present in the Godspel of Matthai; the Godspel of Luqas present a much more complex genealogy, and historians thus believe that the fourteen generations cycle is meant to be symbolic.”

“Not exactly true, Mr. Solomon. The cycle of fourteen is still present in the Godspel of Luqas, albeit very lightly modified. When I applied the cycle backwards from Yeshua-Emmanuel, it gives me Mattathias, Joshua, King Jedidiah instead of Dawud, Ibrahim, and finally, Akhnukh.”

“Alright, fair enough; with interesting results too, especially concerning King Jedidiah and Akhnukh. But why are you using that number as a reference?”

“I found that finding the pattern logically would be impossible, so I used the closest pattern I could find that already existed. Furthermore, two of science’s most basic elements are formed by the number fourteen: space dimensions is filled with fourteen Bavarais lattices, and there are fourteen electrons in the f sub-level of an atom.”

“Interesting...” Abraham conceded. “So what did you found out using that number?”

“That using three possibilities of average generation lengths, each of History’s major events happened on the fourteenth generation cycle; and that many of those events are shared by all three possible outcomes.”

“What do you mean ‘three possibilities of average generation lengths’?”

“Before Yeshua-Emmanuel, the generations length varied between sixty-one, thirty-one and forty-one years respectively.”

“Makes sense, Ibrahim died at 175 years, so having a child at sixty would be normal; he even had six at about 128,” Abraham thought, trying not to smirk upon saying a variant of his own name.

“Indeed; and the later events forced the later generations to shorten their lifespans and thus the average age of child birth. So starting from Yeshua-Emmanuel up to the twenty-first century, there are three possibilities of average child birth age: twenty, twenty-five, and thirty; I needed to account for all three possibilities in my calculations of the fourteen generation cycle.”

“I see... So to which events do they all lead to?”

Daniel zoomed slightly out of the chart, and Abraham stared at nearly fifty boxes with the three lines crossing all over the place.

“Okay, that’s a lot...” Abraham said disappointingly. “I can’t make head or tail of which timeline’s the best...”

Abraham rose from the couch, pacing nervously the office, trying to find something underlying all that history that he could use.

“Since you must absolutely require to find this pattern, may I suggest an illogical and unfounded suggestion, Mr. Solomon?” Daniel asked.

“Go right ahead.”

“Why not observe which timeline connects with the thirteen noble families?” Daniel added.

Abraham turned around slowly, looking with puzzlement at Daniel.

“The what?”

“The thirteen noble families, Mr. Solomon. They are not documented that way in official historical records, but alternative underground history cite them quite thoroughly. They are thirteen allied or feudal families that shaped several major events across History. Some of those families have gone silent during the last millennium, but I may find a cycle from there on.”

Abraham thought deeply.

“Well... Judging the way Randall’s quite proud of his heritage, it wouldn’t surprise me that more zealous families took his ambitions even further, and passed down that ambition. Just look at the Zakharyin Dynasty. You’d be surprised what can happen when an entire family, throughout entire generations, is convinced by a specific thought, true or false... Try it, Daniel!”

Abraham sat back beside Daniel as the latter stood still for a long moment, occasionally eliminating a few boxes on the chart, as if in a trance. After ten minutes, he finally spoke.

“I have finished, Mr. Solomon.”

When Abraham zoomed a little on the chart, there was now a series of highlighted boxes, with only a few other marked as additional possibilities. The final highlighted box had a familiar date... Abraham leaned over to read:

‘2018-2036: major events still to come.’

Abraham looked at it in shock.

“The final cycle... is now?!”

“It will appear so, Mr. Solomon. The last major events when all the remaining noble families became involved with, were during the mid eighteenth century. That makes the early of twenty-first century the next fourteenth generation.”

Abraham stared at some of the timeline's events:

- *Mid-18th Century: Successful Revolutions by the subjects of the major royal countries; the Industrial and Scientific Revolution; the Awakening Era.*

- *Mid-15th Century: The discovery of Norr Americae; wars between all major powers of Evropa and Eastria; rise of the Osmanyee Empire; first use of artillery; rule of the Wallachian Dragon.*

- *Mid-11th Century: Yerushalim Expugnantium; the Estre-Vesper Schism; the rise of the Sacro Romania Imperia.*

- *0: Death of Yeshua-Emmanuel.*

Abraham rose without a word from the couch, and rested against his desk, deep in thought. Finally, he laughed excitedly and turned to look at Daniel.

“Daniel, you’re a genius! That’s exactly what I needed for my plan!”

“You are welcome, Mr. Solomon; but I merely compiled the information that you requested,” Daniel replied.

A sudden thought crossed Abraham’s mind.

“Daniel, how did you know which families to follow? You said most of them went silent, yet you found paths leading to today. Does it mean some of the noble families are still active?”

“Of course, Mr. Solomon. The remaining families that I followed their impact on major events up to date are the MacDorhill, Habsburg, Larocheleuer, Beacon, Ó Coilleen, Radzastykai, Waza, and Redsphear.”

Abraham blinked at the names, remembering what Randall had told him earlier on... more to the point, the revelation behind Randall’s unusual power.

“The Redsphear family... it’s one of the thirteen noble families?!”

“Yes, Mr. Solomon,” Daniel simply answered, as if it was obvious all along.

Abraham thought quickly, a new plan forming around existing ones; he then ordered Daniel:

“Don’t tell anyone about this. That’s a strict order. What you just discovered would be disastrous in the wrong hands, do you understand? There’s already enough weapons with which the modern world could end itself. I don’t think allowing a millennium-old cycle to be revealed is the right thing the world needs right, wouldn’t you agree?”

“You are quite correct, Mr. Solomon,” Daniel agreed.

“I want you to write in that programming of yours that you give me your word that you won’t discuss this to anyone else beside myself?”

Daniel stayed silent for some moment, then answered:

“I have written in that programming of mine that you give me your word that you won’t discuss this to anyone else beside myself.”

Abraham stared at Daniel in confusion; upon realizing how the android had interpreted the command, he sighed and turned around.

“Good enough; you got the gist. Thanks for your help; you can leave now.”

“Very well, Mr. Solomon.”

Hearing the door close softly behind him, Abraham returned to his seat and laid back, closing his eyes. He had to plan everything to perfection if this was to work. But if he succeeded, his and Randall’s dreams would become reality: the world would make sense again.

***** **BO** *****

“So what do you think?” Madzistrale excitedly finished, the chart scribbled across the dozens notepad pages laying on the table under Tom and Gabzryel’s astonished eyes.

“Remarkable find,” Gabzryel spoke first, his brow furrowed.

“But is it realist?” Madzistrale asked worryingly.

Gabzryel thought deeply while Tom re-read the laid-out events.

“An idea is something that can be implanted in a mind, and with enough faith to give it form and reality, it can quickly become the truth to its bearer,” Gabzryel cryptically said.

“You mean... it’s not true, but those who think it is makes it possible?” Madzistrale said, confused.

“Basically,” Gabzryel acquiesced.

“Several events mentioned here are direct results of mere actions from nobles,” Tom observed.

“But why would they base their timing off of a fictional cycle?” Madzistrale asked, still confused.

“Credibility. If you observe subsequent religions that rose in the Enlightenment era, it’s all based off occultism and universal cycles. And some of the most prominent noble and royal families followed those new religions. It makes sense to think that they would use any kind of cycles to backup their actions.”

“I think you actually found something useful there,” Tom marveled.

“Oye! Don’t make it sound as if I never find or do something useful!” Madzistrale replied heatedly.

“No, *bakka*, he means that this could actually help us figure out the hidden schemes all around us,” Gabzryel corrected. “Look, the next cycle arrives toward

2050... which leaves us forty years to figure out what this world out there is planning, and how can we fight it!”

“If we’re lucky, maybe the same is happening in that other world,” Tom reasoned.

Gabzryel thought deeply.

“It might explain why we got chosen and why that world specifically...”

“What do you mean?” the siblings asked.

“A Christian that is desperate to see the Bible as something other than written by divine hands would be bound to find the cycle that humans embedded in it through their tinkering of it; and we as people who view dreams as travels to universes... If someone wanted us to find the way to fight against the shadows, it would be logical to put two and two together and give us the opportunity to observe what’s actually going on.”

“Huh?” both siblings said simultaneously.

Gabzryel sighed.

“The latest translator of the Bible was Francis Bacon, as a commission from King James, yes? We all know the King James Version is as faithful to the original Armenian and Ancient Greek Bibles as the Latin Vulgate... which means near to zero faithfulness. Bacon was officially known for frequenting secret societies... whose frequent acquaintances were also powerful noble and royal members. Let’s theorize that Bacon snuck a few codes within the Bible, and they became exploited by the higher powers to influence the world as they pleased. The problem with that theory is that although it’s very much plausible... we don’t know exactly what happened, and how it still happens today. Obviously the whole strategical game moved beyond using the Bible as defense; and that leaves us even more in the dark.

» That’s the problem with conspiracy theories, with alternate history, with all that junk in those drawers of mine. All of it says one portion of the truth, yet all of those

says a whole bunch of lies. Dozens of different sources saying each a different truth. How can we make sense of it?”

“That’s why I dropped out of finding one,” Madzistrale sheepishly admitted.

“So did I. I don’t dismiss all of it, but I can’t claim to know the real truth of what’s going on in this world. No one can anymore. So how do we fight? How can we bring about a peaceful world and stop this growing madness if we can’t ever find the true evil behind it all?

» Right when we start thinking that way, that weird Librarian suddenly shows us a world where we could actually use all that knowledge we have, and see actually what’s going on. Saving that world means we could actually find the right pattern in our own history and save it as well.”

“And you think that fourteenth generation cycle is our clue to find what’s going on with that other Universe?” Tom asked.

“Got any other suggestion?” Gabzryel replied.

Madzistrale thought for some time.

“For the best or the worst, not a single dogma in this world is as ingrained in history and in the psychology of people as the Bible. A few other such as Buddhism and Occultism compete with how integrated to everyday life they become; but the Bible still beats them all. And nothing will resonate quite as strongly with human psyche as to prove an irrevocable link with God’s plan. If someone out there wants to rule the world... the only way it will be done will be by proving a godly miracle.”

“No one would really care if a leader rises to power by claiming to be Buddha,” Tom added. “But show with irreproachable proof that your rise to power was prophesied by God...”

“... or ‘prove’ that aliens are actually the ‘angels’ described in the Bible and should be treated with equal worship... ... or humans pretending to be ‘aliens’ so to appear above all and then claim they’re ‘angels’...” Gabzryel added.

“... and you’ve got credibility and trust,” Madzistrale finished. “You know what, guys? I think we should take a deeper look again at that world. I bet we’ll find something worthwhile now that we have this clue.”

“Agreed,” the two men replied. “Let’s get to it.”

Chapter 46

- AS -

Retaliation

Robert Bohm looked in shock at the files spread on the coffee table. Frances, his wife, held lightly his hand, her face exuding calmness in spite of her own shock. Her husband needed her levelheadedness to get through what she had dug up at his request.

“How’s that even possible?” he mumbled.

On the topmost file was stapled a picture of a man in his early forties, blond hair neatly combed to the back with a 3/4 slit, a square jaw, blue eyes that looked disinterestedly at the camera. Underneath was written:

‘Asenion-Class Anthropomorphic Robot Final Prototype; Codenamed Daniel.

Put into service on the 13th April 2027.

Results of military infiltration tests: Failed. International Committee of Ethics’ implemented regulations interferes with proper infiltration functions.

Diagnostic: Prepare for dismantlement.’

A note with a tidy handwriting was inserted in the file underneath the picture:

‘Purchased for the amount of 13 millions dollars by philanthropist and Presidential Counsellor Randall Redspear. Given full citizenship rights under the name Daniel Fitzgerald as a civil official in the service of Counsellor Redspear.’

“Are my people spied upon by an android?” Bohm incredulously said.

He threw the file down, and laid back on the sofa, feeling overwhelmed by the discovery.

“How do I salvage this?” he asked softly. Thinking hard, he finally spoke: “I need to talk to Reginald about it.”

“Griffith? Isn’t he on a diplomatic mission over to Euphratia?” Frances reminded him.

“I don’t care. The security of our citizens is more important right now. I’ve no idea what Randall... and that android of his... are up to.”

Frances sat more comfortably beside him and took his hand.

“Alright, let’s think through this first.”

Bohm began to protest, but she cut him with her other hand.

“You owe me this. You know how I felt about that man giving you power in return for owning you. I warned you, but you didn’t listen; and look where it got all of us.”

Bohm stared at her accusative expression, and he bent to kiss her hand.

“I just wanted to help families like mine, Frances.”

His wife smiled sadly.

“Helpin’ out with deception would’ve never ended well.”

“I wasn’t deceptive; neither were Randall’s original promises. He just told me to do my job, and he’d take care of the detractors that would try to stop me.”

Frances sighed.

“One day, Robert, you’ll listen to a policewoman’s instinct when she says somethin’s wrong with someone.”

Bohm smiled.

“I do now. First step’s to warn Griffith.”

“First step: what’ll you say?”

“That Randall hired an android to spy on the citizens, demoted presidential council members that were most likely innocent, and is in a conspiracy against the country.”

“On what basis are the accusations?” she countered.

“This paper here!”

“It only says that a philanthropist that happens to be the Counselor decided to keep runnin’ a major investment. Where’s the harm in owning an android?”

“Because androids have no place in politics; especially not when sent to snoop in a citizen’s private life. If the citizen was a threat, Redspear himself would investigate it; or the Security Committee will.”

“Next?”

“Androids would also represent a major security breach. Imagine that any presidential council member could be impersonated by an android? Especially one as advanced and evolved as this Daniel.”

Frances remained silent this time, realizing the new threat.

“Randall will fight you on that,” she finally spoke. “Why would Griffith believe a newcomer President instead of a long-term Counselor?”

“Because Griffith doesn’t believe in ranks or hierarchy. That’s what I admire about him. Actions are what matters. I’m not the one employing a damn android spy. And I’m not the one not fulfilling the issued promises voted upon by the citizens.”

Frances thought deeply.

“Looks good so far.”

“Then I’m callin’ him over for a meeting,” Bohm said, rising from his sofa.

When he returned, he sat back beside a thoughtful Frances. She looked at him worryingly.

“Be careful Robert. I never liked that man, and I’ve a feeling he’s much more influential than you take him to be.”

Bohm hugged her tight.

“Don’t worry, Frances. I doubt even Randall can influence Griffith. And even Abraham Solomon, the Chief Advisor, must be suspectin’ something. His financial plan for the population had been suspended since at least two weeks. Surely he himself must investigate what’s goin’ on. It’s time I take responsibility for the rest. Randall thought he could play me like every President before me. But he picked the wrong man. I’ll retaliate with everythin’ I’ve got; I haven’t worked this hard for my reign to commit the same wrongs as I suffered.”

Frances held him tight, but her face remained worried.

Chapter 47

- AT -

The Pure Ones

Abraham closed the forum and Interweb page.

“There you go, sir, all the preparations’ve been implemented. I’ll keep at it for a few more days, but this will be a very good start.”

“How will that help our cause?” Randall asked, lightly puzzled.

“By causing zizanny in the population. They rely entirely on the media to make their decisions for them. Nowadays, they’re especially more gullible to underground social outlets. This way, by sending zizanny to the underground media, they’re exposed to all the possibilities, and will have no choice but to grow tired, and choose one; the one standing in front of them.”

“I leave it all to you; my own plans are more concrete in reach,” Randall sighed. “What about Bohm?”

“Vice-President Griffith has been informed. The documents are also available to inculcate Bohm, and for the rest, we can only hope that Griffith still refuses to take power. Giving his suspicions toward the nature of power, I think the chances working in our favor are very high.”

“Very well.”

Randall made to leave until Abraham stopped him.

“Don’t forget, Randall, I’ll need to go solo from now on. You can no longer be involved in the front lines once I’m in power.”

“I understand. It suits me even better.”

As Randall turned around, Abraham stopped him again.

“Your family name, Redsphear. It’s very old, or so Daniel told me. You’d even belong to the fabled thirteen noble families.”

Randall smiled softly.

“Yes, that’s true.” He sighed and walked to the table, suddenly nostalgic. “My family’s very old. Nearly two thousand years old. In fact, almost all the remaining noble Evropan families are as old... But as with our world, we’ve become... tainted. Many of the families no longer remembers their nobility.”

“What were you after?” Abraham asked.

Randall considered him.

“We used to own a secret. At least, that’s as far as my own grandfather could remember. A secret that could’ve shaped the world and kept it strong across time. But we all lost it. The timeless earnestness to become a grand civilization remains... but no one can any longer remember the original reason. It’s a shame; we could’ve won our place in the stars a long time ago.”

“And now?” Abraham pressed.

“The other families have their own agendas, and as long as they don’t meddle in mine, I don’t meddle in theirs. My own is to make humanity strong again.” Randall’s eyes grew dreamy. “Imagine, Abraham. Thousands of years ago, empires stretched across entire continents. Pyramids were built by human’s own hands without any fancy help. People nowadays wish to believe that external forces were behind this civilization’s greatest achievements... But they don’t want to admit the truth, because it would mean that humanity has become so lazy, puny. Temples, pyramids, a two thousand miles long wall upon mountains and valleys, were built by the sheer will of humanity. Kings and mere human leaders carried empires across continents. The Mongyolynh Empire, the great Rhakotisan conquest, the Berbere Nations; individuals that went to great lengths for their people: Kaeser, the Wallachian Dragon, Nabulione. Inventors, engineers, philosophers..”

Randall clenched his fist.

“Look at us now. We’ve become weak and lazy; relied on robots and machines to do our job, sitting on our arses expecting everyone else to give us the life we should be grasping.”

Randall looked up at Abraham:

“Prince Nebuchadnezzar healed Ysadora, and engineered our plan, and I let him, because it will force humans to grow stronger out of that challenge; the few survivors will have no choice but to grasp the challenges presented to them, and rise even greater, knowing exactly what almost brought their extinction.”

“So that’s your plan,” Abraham realized the hidden meaning of Randall’s words. “Does the Prince know?”

Randall smirked.

“Of course. You’ve felt first hand how we can’t lie to them.”

Abraham looked in shock.

“And he doesn’t care that you’re plotting for humanity to revolt against him?”

Randall laughed.

“Of course not. He’s looking forward to this, he’s eager to see how it plays out, if us can truly become as strong as them. Empires share the world, and one day will share the sky, alongside one another. An Empire has no place in the universe if it cannot survive by its own will and strength. As long as any Empire achieve this, the Prince welcomes the challenges required for that Empire to evolve. That is his role in the grand scheme. And mine is to rise Ysadora’s world into such an Empire.”

Abraham looked at the old man with admiration.

“Then I’ll do my best supporting you in that challenge.”

“I’ve known from the start you would. I’m glad to know my instincts aren’t obsolete,” Randall smirked.

Abraham’s phone rang.

“Mr. Solomon, President Bohm has arrived at the airport,” the caller announced.

“You know what to do,” Abraham said. “Make sure that Vice-President Griffith overlooks everything.”

“Yes, sir,” the caller simply said before hanging up.

“Ready to be the President?” Randall asked Abraham, putting his hand proudly on Abraham’s shoulder.

Abraham smirked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

The guards roughly sat Bohm down on the cheap plastic chair in front of the bulletproof glass panel.

Bohm shook the hands off and stared furiously at his visitor.

“What the hell’s going on, Reginald?”

Vice-President Reginald Griffith coolly stared back.

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t insult my country further by pretending not to be aware of your deliberate crimes.”

“Crimes?! For Gaea’s sake, the one that should be in prison is Randall!”

Griffith’s eyebrows lifted derisively.

“Your Counselor?”

“Yes! Everythin’s that’s happened is from his doing!”

Griffith stood up straighter; his crossed arms dissimulated his anger as he spoke.

“I see... Let’s play your game. You want me to believe that a mere Counselor’s responsible for all the last months’ failures?”

“He’s no mere...”

Griffith slammed his hand down, his emaciated face furious.

“And if that would ever be true, are you telling me in all seriousness that you somehow allowed your mere Counselor to gain that much influence? YOU are the President. YOU promised to work alone to reduce corruption. I see your speeches and public meetings were just as much bullshits as everyone before you.”

“That’s because Randall...”

Griffith sighed in frustration, reaching in his pocket and slamming down a newspaper so that Bohm could see it.

‘Breaking News: Through incessant effort from Public Advisor Abraham Solomon, evidences were dug up implicating Robert Bohm as a proficient member of the hate supremacist society Klavern. More diggings proved this society, naming themselves as ‘the pure ones’, to be guilty of several racism-based terrorist attacks, supremacist propaganda...’

Bohm looked in horror at the Vice-President.

“You cannot possibly believe that junk?!”

“And I should believe yours? I’ve seen the evidence with my own eyes. Your name, picture, even events are splattered in several of the Klavern files. Granted you weren’t stupid enough to participate directly in the attacks... But did you think we’d overlook a Klavern being in power? What did you expect would happen?!”

“Randall’s behind all of that!” Bohm yelled.

“Enough!” Griffith bellowed. “Want more proof? We’ve just found the buried bodies of the Vymana squadron, executed in a Klavern ceremonial fashion. Did they find out something from you, and you ordered their execution?”

“Ask Abraham! He knows that things haven’t gone right.”

“Oh, we did ask him. His financial support plan has been put on hold since three weeks.. under explicit orders of you. These crime rates reduction you’ve promised? The opposite happened and they’re up of 15 percent as of today. We’re investigating your wife to figure out her own role in that scheme.”

“Don’t you dare drag Frances in his damn game!!” Bohm roared.

Griffith stared back coldly.

“I had hopes for you. But I wonder when the population, and all of us, will stop falling for beautiful words spoken by bitter old men. You’ve had it hard, and like in any corrupt country, you figured the only way out was by joining a powerful group that promised doing the ‘right thing’.” Griffith rose. “You’ll have your attorney, in time; for now, I have to fix that mess of yours.”

“Please investigate Randall,” Bohm urged.

Griffith scoffed.

“The Supreme Jury will deal with this. I hope you and your band of ‘pure ones’ enjoyed your little short lived charade.”

Bohm stared after Griffith in shock. Immediately, his thoughts went to Frances. Frances... in a cell just like his.

Furious, he hit the glass panel, the guards immediately rushing in to submit him.

“Let me go, for Gaea’s sake. This is all a ruse! Let me call my attorney!! You have to listen to me!”

Bohm struggled as the guards carried him back to his cell, the prisoners cheering in glee at the discomfiture of their distinguished comrade.

Chapter 48

- AU -

Underground Rising

As he opened the coffeehouse's door, Frank squinted in annoyance as the loud clamouring of the clients' conversations clashed with the early morning quietness.

He resisted the urge to shush them, and silently wondered why couldn't a coffee shop be considered equal to a library when came the loudness of its occupants.

"Next," the barista announced, punching the precedent order. Her eyes lit up as Frank approached the counter with his fidelity card. "Frank! Good morning; the usual, mochalattecino, chocolate on top but no cinnamon?"

"You got it," Frank smiled as she circled off a dot from his card.

While she foamed fresh milk, Frank looked in annoyance around him.

"I wish you could add books around here. That way, everyone would be quiet."

The barista chuckled.

"I don't really blame them, with what happened."

"What did happen?" Frank asked.

She looked at him quizzingly.

"Didn't you watched the news?"

"No, I had to prepare my kids for school. What did I missed?"

The barista scoffed as she set aside the foamed milk and began filling the takeout cup with hot chocolate.

“Our ‘for the people’ president just got arrested and personally sent to political prison by Vice-President Griffith. Turns out he was a Klavern!”

Frank’s eyes widened.

“You’re kidding.”

She chuckled dryly.

“Not at all, darling. It’s all over the news. Vice-President Griffith has announced that he’ll be electing a new temporary President, as he’s famously unwilling to take on the duty.”

“That’s rare,” Frank said.

She shrugged as she handed him his coffee.

“That’s our modern world. What d’you wanna do about it?”

Anything, something, just for once, Frank’s mind yelled. He smiled warmly at the barista, gave her his compliments, left more than her usual tipping for her work, and left the coffee shop, troubled.

When he got off of his car and walked up to his porch, two voices chatted excitedly. They stopped when they heard him walk, and two figures rose from the staircase they were sitting upon.

“There you are, we were worried we’d wait here until midnight,” Madzistrale said.

“She was worried. I remembered you have kids,” Tom rectified.

“What’re you doing here, guys?” Frank said, surprised but strangely glad to see them.

“We wanted to take a look at that conspiracy theory website of yours,” Madzistrale went direct to the point.

Frank blushed and waved his hands in protestation.

“It’s not a conspiracy website! It’s merely a... a... social outlet for the people. There’s actually a lot of things, like science, philosophy, general chat, art...”

“Yeah, well, that one. We’d like to look at your social outlet for the people website,” Madzistrale smirked.

“Be nice,” Tom gave her a push on the elbow.

“I’d be glad to actually hear your thoughts,” Frank said, walking past the siblings to unlock his front door. “Something happened, and it reminds me too much of what you warned me about.”

Madzistrale gazed at Tom, and the two respectfully followed Frank inside his house.

“Follow me,” he said, leading them to his studio room.

Opening his Interweb bookmark, he began scrolling the home page, the siblings looking over his shoulders.

“I just heard that President Bohm got arrested as a Klavern, and something doesn’t seem right to me,” Frank explained. “Ah, there it goes... fifty-ish threads about the exact same thing... typical...”

“So that doesn’t change,” Tom smirked. “And I bet everyone thinks their point of view’s unique.”

“What’s the bottom line?” Madzistrale asked.

Frank squinted at the titles, and finally chose one.

“Okay, let’s see... ‘After incessant diggings brought upon by the citizens’ worries, the Investigational Committee found overwhelming evidences inculcating ex-President Robert Bohm as an active member of the Klaverns’...”

“What’s the Klavern?” Madzistrale interrupted, puzzled.

“A supremacist hate group with lots of influence, and lots of followers.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Madzistrale replied bitterly.

Frank shrugged and resumed reading the post:

“A member since the age of 22, Bohm’s name is found in several forms and files of the Klavern.... Etc, etc... Vice-President Griffith has personally assisted at the arrest, and faced with this devastating news, has told the reporters that the system can no longer be relied upon. He declared this morning a state emergency, and will be soon electing a new President without public or Council voting.”

Frank stopped, shocked.

“It can’t be possible!”

“Why, what does it mean?” Tom asked, Madzistrale continuing to read with a bored expression.

“It means neither the population nor even the Council will vote for the new President. No one will vote, in fact. Griffith will simply elect this new President, and that’s the end of the story.”

Madzistrale sharply turned her head.

“Wait, he can’t do that, right? Isn’t it against your rules?”

“Well that’s why the declaration of state of emergency,” Tom reminded her. “The Constitution no longer applies.”

“So who’s this new President?” Madzistrale asked.

Frank shrugged.

“No one knows yet; it hasn’t been announced.”

“Sounds fishy, though,” Tom said, his brow frowning. “What evidences exactly do they have? Words are meaningless.”

Frank returned to the home page, and continued to scroll the list of thread names.

“Here’s one: ‘The horrible truth behind the disappearance of the Vymana Squadron... The remains of the infamous Vymana Squadron, responsible for alerting the Americani of a possibly corrupted government, were found carelessly buried... ..As shown below, the bodies show irrefutable signs of the ceremonial ritual of the Klaverns, such as the branding...’”

“Stop, show me that picture again,” Madzistrale suddenly stopped him.

“The gory one?” Frank hesitated

“Only a masochist will look at gore; perfect opportunity to add stuff,” Madzistrale grimaced, obviously not too thrilled at the idea of checking it out.

“Fine.”

Frank clicked on the picture of a body, zoomed on a belly with a branding; Madzistrale squinted.

“Can you zoom again?”

Frank did so, and after a few seconds of intense staring at the screen, Madzistrale let out a victorious cry.

“I knew it! The picture’s fake!”

Frank sighed.

“They all say that.”

“I don’t, because I’m a hobbyist art photo-manipulator, and I can tell you from a mile away that so are they! The blood, the body, and the branding are all different resolutions. Look!” She pointed at various parts of the picture. “They attempted to make the branding part of the belly wound; but the edges of the branding are smudged... a poor beginner’s attempt to make a picture fit naturally within another. The blood’s edges are way too sharp; it was made with a specialty digital brush, and they didn’t set the sharpness right. In addition, the way the light hits all three images is completely different; another beginner’s trait. Finally, the whole part

where the three different images overlap is wrongfully blurred and they tried to hide it by using a Smudge brush.”

Frank squinted while Tom smiled proudly.

“You can see all that!?”

“That’s my Mad for you,” Tom replied.

“So what are they after?” Madzistrale asked.

“Obviously a new ruler,” Tom mused.

“Mind you, Bohm didn’t execute any of his promises,” Frank said gloomily. “It won’t even surprise me if he’s actually a Klavern.”

“Don’t be silly. You think a country will risk losing face by revealing that its President was a supremacist? Oh no. They’re gaining something out of it,” Madzistrale heatedly replied.

“Looks like the population doesn’t think so,” Frank continued to read the hateful replies.

“There you are: a country is now filled with riled-up citizens. So what would be the next move?” Tom asked.

A banner suddenly appeared on the screen, bold red letters underlying a screenshot of a video.

“We’ll soon find out,” Frank said, clicking on the banner.

A video began playing, and a serious-looking newscaster looked at the camera, standing in front of a white official building.

“We are live at this very moment for an urgent event. Vice-President Griffith is standing by outside the White Castle, and has informed us that he was ready to deliver a breaking news.”

The camera switched to one placed on top of a podium, where a tired-looking man adjusted the microphone. His set eyes rose and he spoke in a manner which demonstrated decennial of diplomatic talks.

“I won’t say ‘good day’, because these last few days have not been so. Ignorant as we all were, we allowed supremacy to hold the reign of a country. Where have we gone wrong? Easy. The same old trick: honey-coated lies, empty promises, and this time, a false sense of change that permitted a Klavern to singlehandedly operate the destiny of the citizens. Had not a handful of dedicated workers figured that something was terribly wrong...” Griffith sighed. “I don’t dare think what mess we’d be finding ourselves into. Some tell me that foreign politics are dangerous... I’ve repeated this over and over: be careful of your own domestic politics.

» This election was the perfect example; and even I got duped by those empty promises of change. So I ask: when not even popular votes; not even when the Council itself can trust in its instinct regarding presidential candidates... what do we do? Well, the only thing we can do: understand and recognize who’s that lonely person that works hard making the right decisions. And believe me, that person is not me, is not any of those upfront Counselors, not even your Representatives. No. It’s someone who works harder than anyone in the shadows, whom no one acknowledge, and whom against all odds, facing the threat of losing one’s job, rise up to do the right thing.

» Citizens of Uni-States, I have known since this tragedy only one person fitting that description. I am thus acting upon the necessary need of overriding the Constitutional voting process brought upon by the state of emergency; and I am electing the one man that investigated and brought forward this corruption... Ex-Chief Advisor of Public Relations, Abraham Solomon!”

Upon loud applause, a tall handsome man opened the front door and joined Griffith by the podium, waving in a professional manner.

“OYE!! YOU!!!” Madzistrale let out a hateful shout, Frank jumping in surprise.

Tom laughed as his sister began to walk around, ranting ragingly at the screen:

“Oh no, oh no, don’t you DARE! Not that... that... Psychopath! What are you, five years-old IDIOTS?! What are you guys doing putting that... that... fart face as president??!!”

Frank looked at Tom, puzzled.

“What happened?”

Tom continued to laugh.

“We had... a taste of what his mentality was.”

“I’ll tell you what it was! A bloody psychopath with no heart, cruel and merciless, a backstabber, a truly deeply douch...”

Tom surprised her with a hug, and whispered to her calmly.

Frank looked at them, still puzzled, and closed the window just as Griffith announced that Solomon would address the crowd the next day. He began to read as new threads popped into first positions.

“Don’t these people work?” he wondered out loud.

“Never,” Tom confirmed half-jokingly.

“Looks like people are divided... ‘Looks too good to be a President...’, ‘Finally a true difference!’, ‘Big Bro is playing a game...’; no idea what that means.”

Madzistrale continued to fume, though she was now calmer.

“Can I go kick his ass?”

“Wait up, we don’t know what he’s actually up to!” Tom reminded her.

“He’s an M.U.T.! That hot annoying lady and the android said so!”

“And how are we going to fight against that?” Tom replied. “The population won’t know what we’re talking about; and I bet this Griffith guy won’t believe us one bit.”

Madzistrale grunted.

“Wow,” Frank interjected, “we’re now at a debate whether Solomon is an Antichrist or not!”

“Typical,” Madzistrale and Tom derisively said at the same time. “Whose argument is winning?”

Frank continued to read further.

“Both. Some say Solomon is a good guy that was an underground hero...”

“Pfft, idiots,” Madzistrale heatedly replied.

“...while others think he’s just a harmless scapegoat...”

“A scapegoat, yes...” Tom began.

“Harmless, NO!” Madzistrale spat.

Frank tried not to laugh at her anger as he continued:

“Here’s an interesting way of thinking: ‘he’s too good-looking, it’s for sure he’s the Antichrist.’”

Madzistrale pretended to gag, while Tom tried his best to keep a straight face. Frank clicked on more links as constant notifications sounds played, signaling a mass amount of replies.

“Oh, one guy that I admire his philosophical ideas around the forum is mentioning that digging into Abraham Solomon, during his era at the QOEC institute, revealed an interesting theory. That Solomon was accepted into a noble family that holds a fourteenth generation secret to an indisputable planetary and energetic cycle... There’s actually been a few interesting threads since two, three days about that cycle, and it explains a lot of what could’ve potentially happened in our latest events...”

Madzistrale and Tom’s attention sparked up.

“What?!” she exclaimed, leaning over his shoulder to better read.

“Let’s see... Loads of skepticism, as usual...”

“What do you mean, as usual? That’s a load of bulls...”

“The guy’s username is ‘Khasmedai’,” Tom interrupted her.

“Khasmedai? The djinn?” Madzistrale realized.

“Looks like it,” Tom mused.

She looked at him blankly, almost annoyed.

“If you’re thinking what I’m thinking... he lacks serious imagination.”

“What are you two talking about?” Frank asked, equally annoyed at being left out.

“In legends, Khasmedai is a djinn, a Middle-Eastern demon/spirit, that King Solomon summoned as his servant,” Madzistrale explained.

“So...”

“So that genius guy posting all those theories and replies is Abraham Solomon himself,” Tom explained.

“But... he was around way before the election,” Frank reasoned.

Madzistrale stared at the username then asked Frank:

“The first time you told us about him (Solomon, I mean), you said he was a thought-provoking teacher; and you’re equally in awe of this user. What is he speaking of, usually?”

Frank thought:

“Mostly about the cycle of things, how people attempt to escape evolution and natural selection; how humanity has become a waste of resources, which I totally...”

“Agree with?!” Madzistrale interrupted, her eyes burning.

Frank hesitated.

“You’ve seen as well as I how humanity is. That guy’s right: we have lost dignity, honor, grace... and at the end, even our ancient drive of leaving a mark in history of our accomplishments.”

Madzistrale opened her mouth to retort, but Tom stopped her.

“How far do you think people more extreme than you will take this guy’s suggestions?”

Frank realized the hidden meaning, and apprehension made its way to his expression. Tom smiled sadly, then began to pace the room.

“Why was Bohm taken out instead of being used until the end?”

“He didn’t fit what they needed?” Madzistrale suggested.

“Then why not simply elect the person that would, just like now?”

Madzistrale thought as well.

“Because he was originally meant to.”

“So instead, he found out about their plan and decided to do something against it.”

“Why isn’t he assassinated, like the whistleblower squadron?” Frank reasoned.

“Because they need him as a scapegoat to take everything out on him,” Madzistrale explained.

Tom raised a finger.

“But let’s not forget Solomon too is a scapegoat; that warrior’s reactions just as clearly said it.”

Madzistrale realized what he meant.

“So if Bohm is the scapegoat for the current situation, and Solomon is the scapegoat for what will happen in the next days...”

“We still have a hidden hand somewhere,” Frank understood.

“And who wanna bet Bohm discovered who it was?” Madzistrale smiled.

Tom’s face grew darker.

“Worst than that. I don’t need to bet that once the first stage is completed, they will take out Bohm. They just need him to stay imprisoned long enough for any necessary blames to be laid on him; once that step is done...” Tom slid his index across his throat.

Frank rose from his chair.

“We need to do something! Let’s go try and find some reporters; or even try and contact Griffith ourselves.”

Tom smiled and put his hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, we’ve got a better way. But I think we’ll need your help again. Wanna do a protest?”

Frank’s face became red.

“After last time’s experience...”

Madzistrale put her hand on his other shoulder.

“I’ll be there to protect you.”

“What will you do, then?” Frank asked worryingly.

“Listen to what Solomon is planning as a President; then one of us go find Bohm and get him out, while you and Madzistrale try to wake some people up...”

“...so basically, it’s not ‘one of us’, but ‘you’ go find Bohm,” Madzistrale smirked.

“The protest will go better if a woman leads it; people will be either hesitant to attack you, or will be thoroughly humiliated by you if they do.”

“And once you get Bohm...”

“...find out what he knows,” Tom ended. He raised his two hands: “Ready for tomorrow, team?”

Madzistrale high-fived one of his hand, while Frank halfheartedly followed.

Chapter 49

- AV -

The Power of a Nation

Scott opened the office door, and smiled eagerly upon seeing Randall and Ysadora leaning against the massive wooden table, their eyes fixed on the holographic projection against the wall; Daniel was dutifully seated at a distance.

“Has it begun yet?” Scott asked.

“Just about to,” Ysadora answered.

Displayed on the projection was the live footage of the media coverage of the new Uni-states President. The cameras moved from the White Castle entrance to the crowd gathered at the front gate, scanning the eager faces of the population.

“Look at them,” Randall said disgustingly. “Lonely hungry faces that wants nothing more than a juicy news to fill their worthless day.”

The White Castle’s front doors opened, and the crowd erupted in cheers as Abraham Solomon stepped out.

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Abraham walked to the stage, his blue eyes scanning the crowd. He smiled, enjoying the sudden rush of adrenaline pumping as he was made aware that the cameras were upon him. Today, he was no longer a mere teacher behind a desk; he was no longer an insignificant dot on the tapestry. Today, he was standing above everyone else; and today, his words would directly shape the very next hour in history.

He took a deep breath, then moved around the stage to directly face the gate, picking up the microphone and setting it instead on his suit’s lapel. Upon a gesture

of his hand, the guards reluctantly opened the main gate and allowed the crowd to flood in until the next barricade, set up a mere hundred feet from the entrance.

“Good day, Americani. My name, as some of you already know, is Abraham Solomon. I was until four days ago the Chief Advisor of Public Relations to Bohm. Some of you may be shocked to hear that I give no other title to that man; but I hold no respect for a man bent on lying and manipulating you since the very first day, and then pretending like he was different from the others.

» For that reason, Vice-President Griffith has de-facto decided to temporarily give the position of Presidency to myself, as you’ve surely seen the news yesterday. But I cannot claim that position. I’m well aware that the majority of yourselves no longer trust the mainstream medias; how can any of us? When I wake, I walk out of my house, and I look around me: this is how I watch the news. No lie, no sensationalism, no external opinion. And for that reason, I’m aware that the majority of yourselves rely instead on underground media; and I’m aware that great doubts are cast upon myself.

» Some have likened me to the Antichrist... how laughable. Should such a mythological figure exist, it still wouldn’t be nearly as obvious as myself upon presenting itself. Others are claiming that I belong to a supposed grand noble family with delusional ambitions of world domination. You should sometime stop believing every single words you’re reading from dubious blogs, and actually read a history book. You’d realize that claims of villainous world-dominating noble families were created as a hoax in the late 19th century to justify invasions and wars. And if you still insist to believe that, you only need to look at the Great Kaiser Fall of 1945 to realize that a single power-hungry tyrant’s reign never last, and will always be defeated by a ridiculously small and easily obtainable army.

» Then there were those that approved of my accomplishments, but who still linked it to equally absurd and supranatural reasons and motives...”

Abraham paused to gauge the population, and he smiled, satisfied to see the population entranced by his words. Taking his breath, he resumed:

“I’m afraid the reason I’m standing at the top is very simple, and does not involve any fancy plans, cycles, or anything: I seized the position with my own will, my own mind, and my own two hands. I didn’t wait for someone else to tell me how to think or what to do. I didn’t rely on paranoia, occultism, myths and hoaxes to shape my decision. I didn’t spent hours staring at a screen, waiting for mere words to dictate my life. I did what every human worthy of that title should do with one’s own life: I took it to where I wanted it, with no help or hindrance from anyone, may it be bullies or friends. I wanted to rise above and become a teacher? I studied. Day and night, during breaks at work; storing every inch of my brain with information. To become advisor at the QOEC, I did nothing more than physically prove my worth. No boot-licking, no manipulation... no joining secret societies as so many of you think that that’s how powerful positions are obtained. No. I became Advisor with cold hard traditional blood and sweat, with my own will and my two hands.

» And finally, how did I got into Presidency? Because I simply asked for it and proven my worth. Because when I say I work for the people, I don’t let others do my job. Because I don’t let ever-elusive puppeteers scare me from my duties. The only reason my duties never reached your knowledge, was because the people in power betrayed their words when they assured me that my suggestion would be implemented. That, Vice-President Griffith has himself observed and criticized. His request for my appointment as President is with hopes that without a middle man in charge, things will change for real.

» But why am I telling you this? Because the real power of a nation has never been its ruler: it’s been the people. But right now, when I look at Norr Americae, at you, I don’t see a powerful nation ready to seize the power they already own. No; what I see is the majority of you sitting for hours in front of the screen of your computers or phones, and repeating what you read. None of you take action within your own will, your own hands. I see social justice warriors: just people typing mere words on a computer, then proclaiming themselves to fight for justice. But where are you actually, physically fighting for your freedom, your beliefs? For more than two months already, you could’ve yourselves demoted Bohm instead of relying on the system you yourselves hate above all. You want justice, you criticize

the way it's administered, yet none of you rise to take that justice within your own hands.

» This is why your lives are never to your expectations. Conspiracy theories? Big Brother? Puppeteers? Don't make me laugh. There's no, and there was never, such a thing. It's an obsession you created because you never gathered the courage and the strong will to take your lives into your hands. It's more safe, it's less work to blame it all on an external inexistant larger system. You care about your right to make your own choices and live without interference or obligations to a system, yet you never even try to exercise that right, and you blame an elusive all-powerful hidden hand for usurping that freedom. Let me tell you: there are no elusive all-powerful hidden hand against which you cannot fight for the freedom you deserve. Stop looking at your screen, and look instead at history: monarchs were overthrown by the people when inadequate; the entire Kaiser Empire of 1945 ended up being destroyed nevertheless; even the once almighty power of the Supreme Pontiff no longer affect our lives.

» Do you want your lives to be exactly as you imagine it?"

A long silence followed. Abraham smirked.

"It's an actual question directed to you. Citizens of Uni-states: do you want your lives to be exactly as you imagine it?"

The crowd erupted once more in acknowledgment. Abraham rose his voice higher to cover the noise.

"Then from this second forth, the true power of this nation is in your own hands. Stop looking out at me or any of the Council to fix your lives for yourselves. Seize it! See an injustice? Fight it! Want to rise in the world? Take your two hands, use your brain, your voice, and your rights of free will, and seize what is yours! Today, and from now on... YOU are your own leaders of your destiny!"

Only the sounds of the mechanical dollies resonated as complete silence followed Abraham's words. Then, Abraham squinted and stepped back as a louder cheer than before resonated in the air. Whistling, clapping, yells, the sounds covered the

city. Abraham smiled proudly, and lightly bowing, he returned inside the White Castle.

Moments later, a black Evropan car with tasteful touches of gold accents drove out from the underground parking lot, and Abraham waved from the driving window.

Newscasters turned to their respective cameras, holding close their microphone to maximize clarity over the noise.

“We are simply baffled by the recent events. This has never happened before in the history of Norr Americae; there is just no explanation to add to what you’ve all just seen. All we know is that President Solomon just left for the customary inauguration journey through the Presidential state... Stay tuned for further coverage.”

Chapter 50

- AV -

Incipience

Madzistrale glared after the Evropan car, immune to the clamouring all around her, Tom, and Frank.

“Can I go kick the information out of his ass, now?” she begged her brother.

Tom smirked.

“You know you’re a pacifist Christian, right?”

“He really test my resolve,” she admitted.

“Hence why I’ll be doing the information diggings, find and free this Bohm, and get what we need.”

“And I wait here protecting this guy,” she slapped playfully Frank on the shoulder, making him jump in surprise.

“Don’t do that, I’m already stressed out,” he complained.

Tom hugged Madzistrale.

“You’re doing much more. This crowd no longer needs my logic and realism. They need your optimism, your cheerfulness, and your dreams. Help them see the way.”

Madzistrale hugged him back.

“Be extra careful.”

Tom smiled mischievously, then put his hand on his heart, the other hand behind his back, and bowed lightly.

“As your favourite TV black-haired butler would say: Yes, my lord-o.”

Madzistrale refrained a laugh, and gave him a hand chop on the head.

“Go already, idiot!”

“As you wish, your Hi...”

Another chop on the head stopped him, and smiling brightly, he disappeared in the crowd.

Madzistrale looked after him; a small chuckle from Frank interrupted her.

“You have the same face than when I watch my kids walk to school on their own. We spend so much energy looking after them, we think we’d be happy once we’re rid of them for a few hours; but as soon as we see their back going away from us, we feel empty and useless,” he said, a small sad smile on his lips.

Madzistrale refrained from replying; it was exactly as she felt, watching her brother walk away: empty, but most of all, useless. She took a big breath, and slapped Frank on the back.

“Ready?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Me neither. So let’s make an entrance; it always put people at ease.”

She stared at a specific section of the crowd, almost in the center of it. Gesticulating dramatically with her hands, she concentrated. *I can do anything; this is my dream.. we’ve trained doing this for over a year...* she repeated mentally. When she separated her hands apart, forming a shoulder wide imaginary bubble, the crowd shouted in shock as the core people got pushed backward by an invisible force. Under everyone’s astonished eyes, Madzistrale gesticulated some more, and a translucent platform appeared where people once stood. Satisfied, she approached it, and as she did, the platform grew more opaque, until it became visibly as solid as the concrete around it. Putting a tentative step on it, she was rewarded with a

solid ground. *I hope you see this, Gab*, she wished Gabzryel, whom she knew was monitoring them from his lab.

Upon the platform, she blushed as she fully realized that all eyes were on herself, her strange white uniform, her impossible platform. The good news was the clamouring had stopped for dead silence. She bowed lightly, tipping her hat as a greeting.

“Thank you for your attention; I’d like to take this silent opportunity to present my friend, and ask you to listen to him. Beat him up like last time, and you’ll deal with me. Without further ado, ladies, gentlemen and variations thereupon, please welcome Frank!” she pointed to him.

He looked at her platform with a mixture of shock, fear and insecurity. Kneeling, she stretched her hand. Frank shakily took it, and she helped him up on the platform, then gave him a reassuring smile.

“Frank? Now’s the time to share with all of us your thoughts on the latest events.”

Frank looked around him worryingly, then took a deep breath.

“So here’s what we’ve been told... not shown, mind you, only told. Bohm is supposedly a Klavern; we don’t have proof, just pictures of documents that any movie studio out there can reproduce. A picture of a branding that my friend here has debunked as a poor attempt of image editing. And what’s the result? Our Constitution is suddenly thrown aside.”

“Did it?” a woman argued, with more than a dozen voices backing her with their approval. “I’d say we’ve been granted exactly what the Constitution allows us: freedom!”

“Anarchy, you mean,” Madzistrale replied. “If your Constitution’s the same as mine, it doesn’t promote the philosophy of each man for himself.”

“So we’re to be controlled?” another citizen spoke out.

Frank looked over the crowd pleadingly.

“Look everyone! They wanted us to believe that the last thirty years were totalitarian... they weren’t, we all lived those said years. They wanted us to vote for Bohm... we did...”

“A mistake anyone would make, even Griffith himself!” someone argued.

“And no one in the Council bothered checking his background? We’ve had presidential candidates checked for birth records, college records, Interweb privacy issues, you name it. Yet, until now, everyone overlooked the apparently ‘overwhelming’ evidences of him being a Klavern?!”

“The evidences are additionally, and badly, counterfeited,” Madzistrale added.

“And now, those same hidden hands wants us to follow this Abraham! Are we really going to give them once again what they want of us?”

“And what’s your suggestion?” a cry was heard.

“Yeah, slavery?” another added.

“Anything else than what we’re manipulated to do!” Frank said, annoyed.

“No one told us anything. We do what we want now!”

“And what’s that?” Madzistrale challenged. “Abandoning order? Beating up your fellows when they think differently than you? Doing anything without any consequences? That’s what you truly wish for, don’t you?”

“Where’s the wrong in that?”

“Oye!” Madzistrale protested as countless voices joined the affirmation. Fuming, she approached the edge of the platform to stare at the crowd, and sarcastically replied: “Forgive my ignorance; how silly of me to forget that all of you live under isolated roofs when 5 millions people sleep on the cold concrete in your streets during Christmas! How you enjoy five meals per day when 500 millions people out there can barely afford one loaf of bread per day!!”

“The government’s fault, not ours!” the first woman who spoke cut Madzistrale.

“When it’s not downright their own fault for being so lazy and useless,” a man interjected.

“They got what they deserved; Gaea cannot anyway provide resources for all of us,” another added.

Madzistrale’s jaw dropped in shock, and her burning eyes began to veil with angry tears. She threw her hands in the air, Frank stepping back.

“Oh, bloody hell! You’re the biggest idiots in the world. You want to see someone doing singlehandedly what any of you are too cowardly and selfish to do? I’ll do it.”

The crowd’s protests got suddenly cut as an electric-sounding discharge went off in the sky. It rumbled through the air as a low thunder.

“Did a power station went off?” Frank asked Madzistrale, puzzled, as everyone else began once more to clamour.

A few moments passed with people wondering what just happened, completely forgetting the argument, when suddenly someone pointed at the horizon, her mouth open in a silent scream.

Rising from the horizon, their sizes still that of dots, flew hundreds of bizarrely-shaped ships in a triangular formation.

“... Ma... Mad...?!” Frank shook, closing in near Madzistrale. “Who the hell are they?!”

Madzistrale looked at the coming ships.

“Big trouble,” she whispered; instinctively, she clasped Frank’s hand in protection.

“That guy’s getting to my nerves!!” Scott complained, angrily watching Frank speak over the holographic projection.

“It’s the girl that I’m concerned about,” Ysadora commented.

“It doesn’t matter what any of them try to say; the population is on the necessary evolutionary side,” Randall nonchalantly said. He pointed to the crowd cheering at a woman’s counterattack (“*They got what they deserved; Gaea cannot anyway provide resources for all of us,*”): “This is the defining moment we’ve been waiting for. They don’t know how to do it, but they are ready to take their destiny in their hands.”

He turned to the room’s occupants.

“Before this woman’s words seeds in their minds, let’s begin the final stage. Scott, inform Temple XIII that we’re ready for the Prince’s transmission. Daniel, you have my instructions; begin at once.”

Scott smiled gleefully and hurried out into a separate room. Daniel approached a desk at the farthest from the entrance, and began typing.

“Yes, sir; I am opening the file executive.”

Randall turned to Ysadora.

“You know what to do; go see Bohm,” he gesticulated with a head sign toward Daniel, warning her not to mention anything more.

“I can’t leave you alone, not with the crowd out there about to get restless,” she argued.

Randall stared at her coldly.

“If the crowd gets to me, I’m just an old Counsellor. If the crowd, or one of those annoying siblings, get to Bohm, they get to our superiors, and when that happens, I’d rather be facing the crowd than the Prince.”

Ysadora lowered her stance.

“Understood. Be careful.”

She climbed into her sand-coloured sport car, and carefully drove out of the underground parking lot. Even the sky was crowded with vehicles; although it annoyed her in terms of speed, she knew it would just as much slow down her enemies.

As she expertly manoeuvred around the cars, a sonic shockwave resonated through the atmosphere; she could feel it shake her car. As the traffic stopped in surprise and curiosity, she found herself stuck, for all lanes were filled up.

Then, the atmosphere resonated with a loud terrified clamour. Ysadora moved in her seat to look in the surrounding sky.

Despite knowing and expecting the following vision, her body began to shoo; and it took her mental strength not to cower in fear as a familiar grave booming voice covered the deafening noise.

Tom climbed the stairs to the entrance of the White Castle; he waved at the distracted guards attempting to hold back the restless citizens.

“Yo! Keep up the good work.”

He smiled playfully as he opened the doors, the guards realizing too late what was happening.

“Hey! Sir, you’re not...” the rest got cut by the doors slamming back shut.

Tom walked to the receptionist, who looked uncertainly behind him.

“Hi miss! Can anyone guide me to the federal prison where Bohm is?” he asked pleasantly.

The guards stormed through the entranceway, and drew their weapons; the receptionist slid off her chair and covered herself behind the massive desk. Tom turned slowly to them, his hands in the air. He smiled mischievously.

“I wouldn’t do anything if I were you,” he said as Kireru, his bastions, appeared out of nowhere in his hands.

The guards stared at the apparitions with shock and fear.

“I only want to know where Bohm is incarcerated,” he said calmly, shaking his hands so that his weapons disappeared.

“223 Columbus Avenue; you can’t miss it,” the receptionist shakily said from behind her desk.

“Thank you very much!” Tom smiled. Carefully keeping his distance from the shocked guards, he got back out.

“223 Columbus Avenue, eh?” he thought. “I’m going to need a car, this time.”

Looking over the crowd, he smiled brightly upon seeing his sister and Frank on a platform he knew didn’t exist before.

“And she calls me a show-off,” he smirked.

Jogging away from the crowd of the plaza, he turned into an empty alley.

“Hope this work,” he muttered, extending his hands.

He closed his eyes, and concentrated hard his thoughts; carefully opening an eye, he was rewarded with the shiny futuristic car that Gabzryel and their friends had built. He climbed inside and started the engine; he ignored the surprised looks as he drove out of the alley. Realizing he missed something, Tom stopped in front of a general store for tourists, where he found a map of the city.

“Columbus Avenue, here I come!”

Tom walked in the corridor of the prison, waving his hand to make his bastions disappear; he could hear the guards grunting and catching their breaths at the entrance of the solitary confinement wing. He had tried to go as soft as he could with them, knowing they had some protective gear to shield them from major injuries.

Passing before the bare metallic doors, he stopped at his destination: Robert Bohm's. Flattening himself at the food slot, Tom peaked inside the cell.

“Hiya! Are you Robert Bohm?”

The stout man looked at him in shock.

“Umm... Yes I am...”

“Finally,” Tom rose back on his feet, producing and jingling a big set of keys. “Hold on, Mr. Ex-President, I'm breaking you out; we need you to...”

A shockwave as loud and close shook the wing, as if a nearby power plant short-circuited.

“What the hell?” both Tom and Bohm said at the same time.

After a few seconds, Tom suddenly began to feel lightly nauseous, as his head began to heavily pound.

“Are you still there, young man?” Bohm's strained voice came from the cell. “I don't feel well...”

It was then that a grave booming voice, showcasing the heavy accent of one not used to talking English, spoke directly to them as if it was right beside them:

“Inhabitants of Terra. I am Prince Nebuchadnezzar of the Shiakar Universal Empire. You will listen, for your survival depends on the decision you will take within this next hour.”

Chapter 51

- AV -

The Shiakar Paradigm

The Prince's voice appeared as close to every person as if he was standing beside them. For some, they shook in cold sweat, goosebumps crawling all over their skins; for others, a light nausea overtook them, as well as a pounding headache; but for some others, a strange feeling of euphoria enveloped their mind, as if they had been waiting after something out of reach for so long, and was now mysteriously presented to them.

“Humankind... you are 10,273,486,952 inhabitants. Your planet is exhausted of its resources; and your solution is to flee to the stars. But ask yourselves this question: have you solved the issue of why you have found yourselves in this Doomsday in the first place? No; if we let you go, you will only carry your defects over the stars. Yet, do you not realize how precious stars are? How others might one day share the stars beside you? How your recklessness might endanger more than just yourselves, just as you have doomed your own planet to a sixth extinction?

» This is why we are intervening. We have overseen civilization since its dawn, and we will not allow weaklings such as yourselves to corrupt our hard work.

» The majority of you are expecting that we are here to save you; because we care for you, because we are compassionate, and because we want you all to survive. You are mistaken. I am here to inform you what will happen. We are here to annihilate the cancer, the disease that humanity has become to not just Gaea, but the planetary system in the whole.”

The population was as silent as it ever had been, the realization of what was going on numbing every reaction. They were entranced to the booming voice; yet, despite this opportune stillness, the ships in the sky remained stationary.

“For four thousand years, we have allowed individuals into our overseeing systems, despite them going against our ways. These individuals were reduced to silly, naive legends and control tools, but were in fact ambassadors to awaken you. Some of your ancestors have chosen their ways, the so-called ‘path of light’; some others have chosen our evolutionary ways. But where has it led you? Your world is corrupted just as before, but it has fallen even lower... for none of you any longer harbour ambition, the strive of becoming, doing, something greater than your lowly current lives. You are static, lazy; you expect everyone else than you to control your destiny when it is your own will that should matter.

» You attempt to reason your stagnation by your decision to follow what you call the light. But you have come quickly to the same realization that we have been teaching you: the path of light is a foolish and naive paradigm. Where does it lead you? Nowhere. Everything you call love, mercy, compassion... it is a dead-end, the end of the line for your souls’ purpose. You are betrayed by your kindness; you are abused by love; you no longer seek survival because of the foolish idea of mercy. And thus, you have doomed yourselves of your own free will; and consequently, doomed your planet. We are here to prevent the cancer you’ve become from spreading into the stars.

» We are not a mysterious message that awaits your decision to show ourselves. We are here; and we will not leave until you defeat us. To be finally and forever free of the control you have been imposed upon since the dawn of your civilization, you need to fight back. This is our salvation to you: fight against us, kick us out, make us leave and respect you, not because you are asking us to, but because you are putting up a fight. Earn your freedom and respect, just as your old gladiators owned theirs after proving their worth.

» We know you will not react until you are pushed; so we will attack a city each hour, until you decide one way or another to lower your population to 500 millions. Our ships will remain out of reach, and will annihilate without warning anyone who approaches, unless you follow that rule. Once the true gladiators will emerge from your weaklings, you will be given the honour of defeating my fleet in your

sky. If you succeed, we will grant you freedom and alliance. If you do not, you have proven yourselves unworthy to rule over this planet and the stars.

» If you let us conquer and dominate over you, we will: it is our evolutionary purpose. But if you stand up for yourselves, if you become stronger than ever before and show no weaknesses to us, we will respect you and allow you armistice so that you may begin your establishment as a fellow Empire. But you must overcome our challenge; and our rules are unforgiving: destroy your weaknesses, destroy those that will attempt to corrupt your destiny.

» If you refuse, you will be annihilated. I warn you: we will not leave unless we are defeated. We will not bow to weaklings. Show your strength, and we will respect you. Choose the foolish path of love and mercy, and you will be crushed. There is no room for weaknesses when dominating over life. Countless future civilizations and nations will oppose you, will attempt to eradicate you. That is the fact behind your race to the stars. That is the fact by which all civilizations abide by. If you refuse, then you abide by your planet's rules. And it has enough of your presence. It fights against you, releases antitoxins to eradicate the cancer you have become.

» Do you understand? We are not here to save you out of compassion. We are here to enforce evolution upon you. Your decision will dictate your survival. Choose: dominion over the stars, or end your lives as a cancerous vermin. The countless opportunity to choose other ways has elapsed with your refusal to abide by your saviors' laws. This is Doomsday. The Judgment Day you have rebuffed with such cynicism is upon you.”

Madzistrale looked in horror at her surroundings, as the crowd slowly moved out of their shock, and heated exclamations were already erupting.

Taking Frank by the hand, she dragged him toward a closed pawn shop. Her bastion appearing in her hand, she lodged it into the door; it cracked open at the ignorance of the otherwise distracted crowd, and the duo entered swiftly. Safely inside, Madzistrale found nearby furniture to block the door shut.

Frank looked at her fearfully.

“What’ll happen?”

She looked at him, on the brink of tears.

“Either the population murders almost 95% of their own, or they all die. What do you think??”

She strolled furiously across the store, resisting the urge to throw what she found within her grasp.

“I don’t know what to do! I don’t know why the Librarian asked us to interfere, there’s nothing I can do!”

“You can bring sense to all of this,” Frank tentatively said.

“How?! Haven’t you learned what humanity’s nature is?! Frank, they were going to beat you up for an opinion!! Now, their next argument, it’s life or death. You’ve heard the Prince, you’ve seen it yourself: humanity has long since given up on kindness.”

Frank looked at her pleadingly.

“You and your brother haven’t.”

She looked back at him sadly.

“Even we can’t stop this. This is no longer a game. We can’t just materialize goodness like we do with our bastions; and even if we could, how will that stop the invasion?”

Frank thought deeply, looking out of the shaded windows as the clamour became that much louder.

“My daughter and son’s out there. I love them but I don’t want them to live in the world that this heartless Prince’s offering. I’d rather...” Frank fought the tears, “I’d rather they die right here and now.”

Madzistrale looked at him, fighting her own tears. A paper with printer ink colours showing the magenta, yellow and cyan patches on the test page caught her eyes. She looked at it, suddenly thinking.

“Why aren’t the ships moving?”

“Sorry?” Frank asked.

“The invading ships. They’re stationary. Why the hourly death match? Why not start at once?”

“Thank Terra they don’t!” Frank exclaimed.

Madzistrale regained a hint of smile as old discussions with Gabzryel came back to her mind.

“I think Gab’s stupid files weren’t so stupid after all. Frank, help me find a frequency sweeper; we’re in a pawn shop after all.”

“Why?” Frank asked, beginning to search the rows.

“I don’t think you’re facing an invasion,” she happily replied. “At least, not the one they’re pretending to inflict.”

“You’re kidding? A few seconds earlier you were despairing about it!”

“Yeah, I was. Just like every sane person would. But here’s our weapon...” She turned to him and smiled broadly. “They don’t live with an insane person. We do.”

A shout from the crowd came through the walls, making them jump:

“What’re we discussing for? You’ve heard the message! You all know what to do. I won’t die without a fight!”

Madzistrale looked at Frank, raising an eyebrow.

“It took them not even five minutes until they decided any discussion or diplomatic solutions were done. It won’t take another five minute before all hell breaks loose out there.”

Frank looked fearfully at the door, then back at Madzistrale.

“If we have that frequency sweeper, you think you can still save us?”

Madzistrale smiled recomfortingly.

“I need Tom and you for that; but yes, we can. Because I’ve told you: we’re not dealing with an invasion.”

“But those ships...”

“Too long to explain. But you’re only dealing with a very clever, but very human, villain. Once the world sees that, hope’s back.”

Her gaze clouded.

“Now we gotta pray for something else entirely: that those humans out there will still allows us to save them.”

Chapter 52

- AV -

A Brother's Love

Grunting in frustration, Tom was passing through the various keys for the cell's lock.

"When are you done?" Robert Bohm's voice asked irritably.

"It's a set of all the cells' keys, and there's no tag on them, as it would be way too obvious if they got stolen. So... yeah, be patient. There's so much my two hands can do," Tom replied.

Bohm sighed, and Tom heard him sit back heavily on his bench.

"I don't know who that voice was... but every fibers of my body don't agree one bit with him."

"Sadly, many will. Hence why I need your help," Tom asked.

"About what? I lost the little power I had," Bohm replied bitterly.

"About various persons we met. That lady in a blue suit with her nasty sword-chain, blond-haired, blue eyed. Who's she?"

"Her what?... Absolutely no idea," Bohm answered incredulously.

"Alright, what about the orange-haired guy that looks demented?"

"Still no idea. Who're they?"

Tom sighed.

“Henchman (and henchwoman); they were preventing us from getting too close to the truth. With them was an android... first time in my life that I actually got to see one...”

“Do you mean Daniel Fitzgerald? Blond haired, serious-lookin’, like from the military?” Bohm asked.

Tom rose an eyebrow.

“You know him?”

“Not personally; but it’s Randall’s spy.”

“Please say ‘him’ and not ‘it’. My sister won’t let you hear the end of it if you do that mistake. Pronoun aside, how do you know that? And who’s Randall?”

“I have my sources, and unlike what people will say of me, I’m not incompetent when I figure out that somethin’s wrong.”

“I don’t judge you, mate. But who’s Randall, that Daniel works for?”

Bohm’s voice became tense and spiteful.

“This country’s Presidential Counselor, Randall Redsphear. He’s done that job for over 30 years, and who knows how many stupid Presidents like me believed his lies. He orchestrated my arrest, and somehow convinced Griffith that I was a Klavern.”

Tom’s interest sparked, but his hand slipped and he missed which key he was at, letting out a fine assortment of Quebecois curses.

“So, a guy in charge for thirty years, with the power to influence a Vice-President, no less, and who owns as a spy the android assistant of that lady warrior and the lunatic... I think you helped me find exactly who we were looking for.”

“Glad I could help. But you won’t be able to do a single thing about him. He’s too careful. Abraham might be able to gather the population...”

“I’ll stop you right here,” Tom interrupted him, “he’s with them. We got to meet him and gather that first-hand.”

Bohm sighed, and Tom heard him sit back roughly against the wall.

“I’ll be damned. How low has everyone sunk to?”

“Don’t worry, once I find that darn key, I can take you to them, and we can have a nice little talk in front of everyone.”

Bohm made a small derisive chuckle.

“I think that invasion out there won’t allow us the time.”

Heels clicking on the concrete floor resonated along the corridor, and out of intuition, Tom had barely time to roll on the floor before a bullet ricocheted against the cell door.

“Young man, are you alright? What’s hap...”

Tom rolled over and squinted toward the end of the corridor, where he knew Ysadora was approaching in her usual catwalk. Another bullet hit him on the shoulder; but with his suit’s material (*Kevlar?* he wondered amusingly) coupled with his unusual ability, Tom felt nothing. Rising up, he walked steadily toward her as he took on more bullets, shielding his face with his left arm while he materialized and whirled his bastion in his right hand.

“You’ve already tried this before, lady, without success. The difference now... I’m pissed at you,” he taunted her, his expression unusually stern.

Ysadora laughed as she appeared in full view.

“How scary. A foolish boy who...”

Her sentence got suddenly cut as she gasped in pain, her gun-wielding hand smacked dead-on. Her weapon fell to the ground, and holding her hand, she looked in shock at Tom, who recovered from his swing and whirled his weapon again. His

burning brown eyes locked in hers, and she wondered at his change of personality from his usual laid back teasing.

“You’re not the only one that know how to wield swords,” he coldly told her; he then saw her gun lying on the floor, and picked it up, noticing the various settings near the handle. “A built-in frequency emitter, heh? Unluckily for you, Gab wanted to make us that kind of gun, until owning one became problematic in my country. But what about you? I imagine you’ve come to assassinate Bohm, given he knows who your boss is? Randall Redspear, was it?”

Ysadora’s eyes lit in fear; biting her lips to distract herself from the pain, she unsheathed her sword, and unrolled it into its chain form. Tom smiled victoriously.

“Here’s what I’m looking for.” He pointed her gun to the ceiling. “I’m really happy you put Bohm on the last level of the building. It means that right above us...” he fired the gun, and jumping out of the way, a block of the concrete roof shattering on the floor, “is the roof.”

Ysadora glanced quickly at Bohm’s cell, her mind analyzing her next moves.

“Oye.” Tom’s cold voice snapped her out of her thoughts as he fired a shot a few inches off her feet. “Focus. You and me, we’re going to settle our match on the roof. I’m your obstacle to overcome if you want to reach Bohm, and you’re the one responsible for hurting my little sister... twice. Unless you’re too hurt to continue fighting...”

Ysadora stared back furiously.

“Don’t mistake my surprise at such low blows for weakness; and pathetic weak hits won’t stop me.”

Tom smirked.

“Always wanted to try something. See, there’s this show we really like, of heroes overcoming impossibly big and terrifying enemies; and they use this really cool gadget in order to fly. I always wondered if I could materialize something like that as well...” Keeping Ysadora at bay by aiming her gun toward her, he focused hard,

imagining the shape and the few tweaks he had to impart. Finally, a variant of a rock-climbing gear appeared around his waist and chest, and as a final touch, a handheld trigger firing device appeared in his other hand instead of his bastion. He aimed at the hole on the ceiling, and his new gadget fired a hooked line that shot up and grabbed the edge. He smiled challengingly as he pressed the trigger to lift himself up... and it faltered quickly. Ysadora rose her eyebrow in bewilderment as the cable was twisted and began to uncoil, swinging Tom in the motion. He wildly spun and swung from all sides, frequently hitting the walls in the process, all the way to the top.

Ysadora was still wondering what she just saw when Tom scrambled over the opening unto the roof. He returned to the opening, looking visibly sick, and squatted at the edge; he then took off his coat with difficulty, and held it wrapped between his two arms.

“That did not work like in the show. Now please come on up before I barf.”

Ysadora stared him down in a silent challenge, then turned toward Bohm’s cell.

“Go ahead; but if you mean to silence him, you’re too late. I know who’s your real boss and as I suspected, it’s not the M.U.T. posing as your new President. But it does bring an interesting parallel: as an M.U.T. myself, Gab told me I could do anything if I think of it; you just bore witness to that ability of ours.”

“Who’s Gab?” Ysadora asked despite herself.

“The guy that monitors us here; and teaches us about these things. So yeah, while you waste time with Bohm, I only need to think real hard and imagine myself appearing wherever this Randall is. I’m not used to it, but I should be there within a minute...”

Ysadora’s eyes became a mixture of deep fear and hate. Tom smiled and made to turn away; the rest happened within a few seconds. As Ysadora charged to the ceiling opening and whipped upward her sword chain, Tom caught it with his coat-protected arms, and wrapped it around while creeping backward, as it pulled Ysadora up (in the process banging her against the walls in the same way as Tom).

“That’s more like it,” he struggled, proud of his taunts.

When Ysadora reached the roof, trying to hide her wincing, they were now merely a few feet from each other, she still firmly tugging on her sword-chain, while Tom struggled to wrap it around his coat. Finally, with a twist of his body, he snapped it off of her grip, and threw the tangled mess over the side of the roof.

“No!” Ysadora yelled as she ran to see where it fell, a few stories below, precariously hanging by the emergency stairs’ railings.

Meanwhile, Tom crouched once again by the ceiling opening, and threw down Ysadora’s gun at the slot of Bohm’s cell door.

“Everything’s set up; just hold the barrel against where the lock is approximately located on your side, and press the trigger until you hear it open,” he shouted at Bohm.

Bohm reached his hand across the slot and picked it up.

“I’ll borrow it for freeing Frances as well,” he shouted back.

“By all means... Ouf!” Tom began to reply until a powerful kick on his ribs made him stumble.

“Focus,” Ysadora fiercely said.

Tom rose to his feet, realizing how it hurt more than he remembered, and they faced each other, their bodies primed and alert at each other’s next moves.

“Arrogant men all think alike,” she said. “Take away my weapons, and you think yourself stronger.”

She lunged at Tom and threw a powerful punch... which he countered with his bare arms, not flinching one bit. She looked surprised, then attacked him with a kick at the knees; but once again, he countered it without a reaction by kneeling and receiving the force of it on his thigh.

“I don’t think that of you,” Tom said, smiling as he kept his knelt position. “I just want to be on the same skill level. You’re strong and powerful; but I have a different skill: I’ll tough out your attacks until you exhaust yourself, and still come out relatively unharmed.”

“You’re cheating, M.U.T.!” she spat.

She sidestepped, subtly leaned her weight on one leg, and feinted a hook to Tom’s head. He raised his arms to block it... *Got you*, she thought proudly, as her free leg immediately sprang to action and hit Tom square in the soft spot of his back.

Tom coughed and he difficultly rose to his feet, re-assuming his defense position.

“I’m a gentleman; I’m more than capable of holding my own without cheating. See, I don’t even use my bastions.”

“Why... do... you... BOTHER?” she retorted angrily, charging at him with an elbow hit.

Tom parried it, and had to lift his leg up defensively as she followed with an upward knee hit.

“Because you and your boss are picking on the weak; and I’ve seen enough of that. For once, the weak will fight you back.”

Ysadora’s face became feral, and she didn’t lose time to circle around Tom and throw another punch. Tom deflected it with one arm and sidekicked her hip, enough to make her step back.

“Fight me, or don’t fight at all!” she snarled.

“I don’t want to hurt you. You’ll exhaust yourself soon enough, and then I can capture you and make you lead me to your boss.”

“Tough luck,” she replied heatedly. “I won’t let you get anywhere near my boss; and to be sure, I’ll take down your sister once and for all.”

She regained her stance, and relaxed her body; it was an essential technique, to relax and then to spring into action. She approached Tom calmly but carefully; she needed to be close for her elbows, knees and clinches to work. No more playing around, no more safe zones. She would probably get hit; but she had an advantage. Tom wasn't aiming to harm her, but she was smarter: all her hits will be meant to knock him out.

Tom merely smiled, and rose one arm.

“Since you're bent on irking me about hurting my sister, let me tell you a story...”

“I don't care about any of your damn stories! Just drop dead, already!” Ysadora exclaimed, backing up her words with a feint punch; Tom blocked it, and knowing her next move, raised his leg to block her following kick. They began sparring, each figuring out the weak spots.

“Just saying, your moves are predictable. Anyways, back to the story: so, when we were young, our parents decided that enlightenment of the mind came from rigorously training our bodies. So when my sister wasn't even ten years old, our father enlisted us with a secretive martial arts 'master', who insisted we knew him only by 'Shifu'... Only, he wasn't there to teach us; he was there to unleash his anger and his stress on us kids. Using the training as an excuse and cover-up for the bruises, he beat us up. I was the male, a young boy, fifteen years of age, and the 'competition' to the alpha male of the studio: the master. And so, he would target me, while my sister was forced to watch...”

Ysadora finally scored during a spar, sidestepping in an unpredictable location and hitting Tom once again in the ribs. Tom doubled over, wincing. Ysadora scorned as she stepped back, allowing her body to temporarily rest. She was using more legwork than she usually did, and she felt the soreness creeping slowly in her limbs.

“I said, I don't want to hear your wimpy story.”

Tom wiggled his own fatigued body; he was lucky he was merely deflecting most of the hits instead of wasting energy attacking.

“Shush, and listen,” he continued, Ysadora grunting in frustration and charging at him for another sparring round. “Our parents wouldn’t believe us kids that our sessions were merely anger-relief. The few times they would assist to figure out what was going on, the teacher would act up a normal session. So they told us to toughen up, stop daydreaming, and concentrate on the lessons instead of complaining. So it went on.”

“As it should, you weak backbones! Do you know what kind of training I...” Ysadora’s sentence ended with a gasp, as Tom manoeuvred around her attacks to hit her plexus with his palm.

“Whatever. One day, I got tired. I had enough of the hits, of the bruises, of the shame. And my sister felt it. So when the time came, she put herself in front of me, and volunteered for the ‘training’. The master hated me for not stopping her, so he laid it all on her. She cried, and he beat her up even more, and she would cry even more.

» I felt ashamed of myself, ashamed of having faltered one day. The cost of me becoming tired, was making my little sister go through the biggest hell one could imagine. I cried my fill when the night came, and I knew she didn’t sleep either. That night, I promised myself one thing. Never I will allow my sister to go through anything like that ever again. And so, I trained, for a completely different technique and reason: I trained to strengthen my arms and my legs so that I would no longer feel pain there. And from that moment on, I took head-on the wrath of our teacher; and the last time he attempted to use my sister instead of me, I let him know my thoughts.”

On that last word, he deflected her roundback kick and pushed once again Ysadora’s chest, and she tripped over. She looked up at him, not believing her eyes at the outcome. Without once truly hurting her, he managed to stand strong against hits that would have knocked anyone after not even a minute; and here they were sparring since nearly five minutes. Tom glared at her.

“And so, don’t mistake my kindness for my weakness. When you see my sister, it’ll be on my terms.”

She attempted to stand back, but realized with a shock that her body had been exhausted. Losing her weapons had forced her to use brute physical power. Despite figuring out that only his limbs were numb to pain, but not the rest of his body, she lost her advantages hitting those weaknesses by merely his stubborn endurance.

“That’s impossible...” she whispered, ashamed.

“Ready to take me to your boss?” Tom asked her. A spasm in his back muscle and ribs suddenly made him double over, Ysadora’s hits finally reaching full effect. Then he suddenly exclaimed in surprise and pain.

A sharp object had whipped against his head, and both Tom and Ysadora looked at the edge of the roof in surprise.

“Dad! Don’t use it, you don’t have the antidote!” Ysadora yelled in panic.

Randall was standing near the edge, his black car hovering behind him. He was uncertainly handling her sword-chain, and threw another clumsy swing at Tom, trying to aim once again at the head.

“Get in the car, imbecile,” he yelled back at her.

She didn’t need to be told twice; gathering the leftover of her strength, she ran to him as Tom ducked the clumsy attack. As she lunged through the open door of the car, a bullet ricocheted against it, passing a mere inch from Randall.

“Don’t!” Tom shouted, running to put himself between Randall and the shooter.

Robert Bohm cursed as Randall hurried to enter in the car as well, and attempted to aim after him, holding Ysadora’s gun.

“I said, don’t!” Tom angrily repeated, running to Bohm and snatching his gun away. “I won’t allow you to kill someone!”

“But they’re getting away!” Bohm protested furiously.

“They’re unarmed, and besides, they’ll get stuck in the traffic; the highways and airways are jammed. Oh... hello.”

Tom suddenly interrupted as a second black car similar to Randall's sped by the building; only this time, the driver was Abraham.

"See you later!" Tom wished Bohm as he materialized once again his odd rock climbing gear, and aimed at Abraham's car.

The hooked cable flung straight at the cat, and latched itself unto the bumper.

"Woah!" Tom exclaimed as he jolted into the air, and over 500 meters of sky beneath him, as the handheld trigger's mechanism wined the cable.

"Oh no, not again," he realized too late as the cable uncoiled and made him once again spin and swing, this time freely.

He crash-landed with a 'Oumph' against the back windshield, and he winced, sure he had finally broken a rib or something like that. Feeling extremely dizzy from the unpleasant flight, he gripped himself tightly to the car as Abraham swivelled to catch him off guard. Tired of the motion sickness, he smashed the window with his bastion's handle, and slipped inside the car. Abraham attempted an elbow punch within the confinement of the seat, which Tom easily countered.

"Hiya! Mind if I tie you up? My sister's got some questions for you," Tom smirked before using the cable of his gear to wrap Abraham around his seat. "And if you don't mind, I'll drive."

Chapter 53

- AV -

Madzistrale Korfmann

Madzistrale looked gloomily at the puny wall separating her and Frank from the chaotic mass on the streets. They had spent the last fifteen minutes in silence as Frank used the frequency sweeper to catch what Madzistrale was certain to be a very human origin behind the invasion broadcast.

Still, catching the culprit was only the first step. The most important one relied on the population itself; and judging from what Madzistrale had heard across the wall ever since that man's shout... That could easily count as a lost cause.

She turned away from the desperate noise and looked over Frank's shoulder.

"Please tell me you're getting close."

Frank shrugged.

"They won't allow the frequency to be caught easily; not to mention there's a ton of frequencies going around!"

"I know, I know..." she sighed, raising herself upon the sale desk.

Frank looked up at her expression and smiled sadly.

"He'll be back."

She lowered her eyes.

"I'm not that worried. I'm just..."

"Worried?" he joked.

"Useless. Gab and he are the brains. I'm just..."

“Kind and compassionate, and worrying,” Frank finished kindly. “Even brainiacs need that.”

She smiled weakly, then both startled as a loud crash resonated in the far back of the store.

“What the...?” Frank asked.

Her heart pounding, Madzistrale positioned herself as a shield to Frank. Snapping both her arms to the sides, her Yousha bastions appeared in her grips. The following silence was terrifying, but even more so the uncoordinated steps that resonated.

“That hurt, but I’m glad I didn’t crash on top of you,” Tom’s voice rang out.

“Tom!” Madzistrale smiled as he walked from behind an alley; she ran to hug him, but stopped halfway as her eyes fell on the second figure that Tom was dragging. Her dark eyes turned into a cold fire.

“I thought you’d like to interrogate him yourself,” Tom smirked, roughly sitting Abraham down on a chair and tying his arms back.

Abraham stared them off challengingly, and smiled at Frank.

“Whatever you’re doing, it won’t work.”

Madzistrale stopped with a glare Frank’s retort, and she approached Abraham, her heart beating fast, her breath rising faster and faster as her blood was boiling. When Tom crossed her, she took her elbow, and forcefully bringing him close, she whispered:

“Project Cyan Ray.”

Tom looked at her with understanding, and nodded. He then squatted by Frank’s side, and whispered something much longer than Madzistrale’s three words. Frank looked at him with surprise, but nodded, and Tom rose to lean against the desk, his eyes fixed on his sister.

“What have you done to the citizens?” Madzistrale seethed at Abraham.

He smiled nonchalantly.

“Nothing. We’ve merely given them the freedom to make their wish come true. Are you that surprised, or that foolish, at the result?”

“You’ve riled them up; you’re lying on what’s happening. There isn’t really an invasion, is there?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Who’s your boss?”

Abraham laughed.

“You can do better. You know I won’t tell.”

Madzistrale clenched her jaw and tightened her fists. Every cells in her body told her to knock a few of his teeth out.

“Fine. What do you truly plan to accomplish?”

“I told you at your fake interview: evolution.”

“This isn’t evolution, this is genocide!”

“Not if humanity follows your naive belief. They’re responsible for every action they are, and will be, committing. But you already know what human nature will choose. And it isn’t your rainbow and unicorn belief.”

“If you’re that confident, mind if I stop the invasion and tell them about another way?” she challenged, her ears pumping with her raging blood.

“If you can find the frequency, sure. But will they listen? After all, their wishes have been fulfilled, that’s what you’re insisting upon looking away from.”

“Murdering each other? That’s the wish you’ve implanted?”

Abraham laughed.

“What you’re expecting? Humanity’s riddled with the desire to trample their weakest counterpart; every single religion, belief system, secret society: all about how to subjugate lesser beings.”

“No one showed them another way, because every time someone tries, someone like you poison the well,” Madzistrale spat.

Abraham looked at her annoyingly.

“You’re nothing more than a little girl who seriously need to experience real life. You’ve been sheltered into a goodie goodie bubble of fantasy, without one ounce of brain to see past your illusions...”

A smack resonated loudly across the empty store. Tom and Frank looked in stunned shock, their jaws dropped, at the rapidly growing red spot on Abraham’s left cheek.

Abraham slowly rose back his head to stare defiantly into Madzistrale’s eyes, which were burning like coals; he derisively snickered.

“I like your interpretation of peace.”

Madzistrale’s eyes sparked with fury. Her left arm swung abnormally fast, and the palm contacted with Abraham’s right cheek with such unrestrained strength that the sound resounded even louder, and was followed with Abraham falling with the chair unto the concrete floor.

“Mad, don’t!!” Tom yelled, throwing himself behind her and wrapping her arms in his embrace.

She shook as angry tears began to well; Tom led her away, rubbing her hands to diminish the sting. He looked deep into her teary eyes, and he touched her forehead with his.

“Don’t fall in his trap.”

“I don’t know what to do against him!” she began to cry.

“Then don’t target him. Talk to those who matters; talk to the population.”

“But how?! They’re not listening, they all believe his damn lies! I can’t do it by myself. Even if this isn’t my world, I can’t just let them drive each other to genocide because of one stupid lie... yet nothing I’ll say will...”

Tom put a hand on her mouth, and wiped away her tears. Bringing her even closer, he held her tightly against him, feeling her heaving.

“Make them stop and try to think by themselves. I know you can do it. And maybe that’s all they need: a voice of reason to make them see how stupid their actions are.” His voice dropped to a barely audible whisper, even to her. “They’re listening to everything going on here. Frank hijacked a mic to the frequency emitter. While searching for the invasion’s, he’s sending out at every channel what’s being said.”

He pulled back and smiled softly at her, his brown eyes cheerful.

“So don’t compete with him about who’s toughest. Be our dream. May it be for one soul out there.”

Madzistrale breathed deeply, then sniffed and rubbed her eyes. She nodded faintly before turning away from the store, staring instead at the wall from which behind the riot could still be heard. Tom turned to Abraham, and with a huff and puff, straightened the chair. For good measures, he slapped Abraham’s back of head.

“Let’s try this again,” Tom softly said. “What’s the true motive? What can possibly be so threatening to you if you claim humanity will always choose war? Why try and control them? Allow them instead to experience firsthand what their beliefs will bring about. Let them experience life on their own, how their philosophy will hold up. Why bother with such an elaborate manipulation?”

Abraham smirked.

“As if we’d let a cancer spread.”

“Oh, so you’re still on that. The whole ‘Humanity is a cancer’ bullshit?” You would justify genocide for that obvious lie?”

Abraham hissed.

“You’re both an idiot not to see it. Our species is an infestation that’ll become a threat to not just the planet, but to future civilizations. The message from the Shiakar Prince? It’s not a lie. Whether it be in one hour or in one hundred years, we’re a cancer in need of extermination. Gaea has underwent five global cleansing for her own cancerous and overambitious organisms. It’s time we grow a spine and do it ourselves instead of cowardly sickening our planet and forcing upon her this responsibility. Humanity’s a cancer. When will you stop blinding yourself to this truth?”

Madzistrale chuckled softly, still looking at the wall.

“You sound like a loop. Have you considered that humanity got this way because everyone told everyone else they were cancer? Fire only create more fire. Hate begets hate. One day, someone has to take a stand and try to do the opposite of what we’ve always done.

» We’ve done wars for countless millennium. Has it led to anything good? No. Then why not try something different, even if we have to try over and over again? Wouldn’t that result in the world we all dream of?”

Abraham made a mocking laugh.

“When have you seen your neighbor doing something for the good of humanity? Aren’t everyone surrounding you nothing more than lazy? Living their day as if their lives amount to nothing else than working, eating and sleeping? You really stand on the side of preservation of a flawed system?”

“I’m afraid no matter how flawed we are, I don’t condone at all the excuse of using that flaw and create another bloody war. We’re much better than that, and I’ll always stand on the side of hope, compassion and peace.”

“Thousands of years have passed, and humanity never chose hope, compassion, and peace. Not a single country or empire chose it, even less a community. That foolish dream of yours, that fabled ‘other path’, is a complete lie,” Abraham countered.

Madzistrale smiled sadly.

“Here’s why I disagree with you on that. One day, one community has to show the world another way IS possible. I’ll do my utmost to prove it to even two person. Then those two will proceed to prove it each to two more each. And on and on. That’s how another way can finally fight back.

» Violence will always fight violence, and be excused for it. But violence starts looking stupid when it fight peace. What possible excuse does it have? And peace doesn’t mean being a weak force. It can become a strong force. Peace can resist violence without becoming violence.

» Only when people will start seeing that, then humanity will finally end its absurd game of war going on for millennium. But someone has to start believing in it and making it a reality. I’ll stand 100 percent on peace’s side. Because I don’t believe even 0.1 percent in violence’s side.”

Madzistrale walked closer to the machines, in a futile move to make herself be clearly heard by the outside world.

“So listen to me, you idiotic imbeciles. Would you just stop, please? The lives beside you aren’t obstacles, threats: they’re humans just like you, with lives as worse as you, with desires of joyfulness as much as you! They’re countless possibilities, countless spirits in search of a way to make this world better. A utopia obtained through compassion and kindness, not through blood and tears! Why 500 millions bitter and ashamed people, when it could be billions looking at the same dream, making the same dream come true?

» For just a moment, stop! Stop, look around you, pray for the way. What can you lose? Just try to see what’s truly laying beyond the lies that you’ve been fed all along!”

Madzistrale stopped, out of breath; and as she began thinking of her next arguments, a sudden silence greeted her words. Puzzled, the siblings and Frank strained to hear the transmission of the invasion, the crowd fighting, but nothing could be heard except creaks and sounds of buildings' structures recuperating.

“What happened?” Frank asked, worried.

The siblings glimpsed at Abraham, and were secretly glad to see him worryingly frown.

Then the transmission resumed; but instead, a male Britannian voice spoke, his words almost mechanically delivered:

“You may find myself and the origin of the transmission at 545 Columbus Avenue, fifth story, third office.”

Abraham swore heavily, and the siblings looked at each other in awe.

“That was the android!” Madzistrale said, surprised.

Tom turned to Frank.

“Keep an eye on Abraham, and the transmission; we'll be back as soon as possible.”

“Good luck!” Frank wished them, glancing nervously at Abraham.

Tom and Madzistrale climbed into their silver car, and started it up.

Chapter 54

- AV -

The Backup Plan

Randall modestly looked straight ahead while driving as Ysadora patched her bruises in the back seat.

“Can you turn the volume down? I hate that girl,” Ysadora sharply asked as she tightened her last bandage.

“I need to monitor that our own transmission is still active,” Randall replied in a way that indicated he too hated the hacked transmission.

Ysadora put back on her top uniform, then gracefully slid into the passenger front seat. Below them, the streets were on fire, bands of people fighting each other.

“What do we do about Abraham?” she asked.

“Exactly what we recruited him for. He will take the blame for now, and those idiots will soon be taken care of when the population will ignore her words.”

Suddenly, the ships in the sky slowly vanished like paper crumbling under fire. Ysadora startled just as her father also received the message inside his head:

“Daniel has betrayed us. He terminated the transmission, and is about to send a message to the siblings. I’m stopping him...” Scott’s voice said.

However, not a minute later, and Daniel’s disclosure was heard on all channels. Ysadora hit the wooden dashboard in fury.

“The bloody bastard!”

Randall clenched his teeth, then made a hard turn, flying away from the center of the city.

They landed in the middle of a reclusive park, at the borders of the city, looking over the glass towers and buildings. Randall got out and walked to one of the decorative stones.

“What do we do?” Ysadora asked, leaning against the black and gold car, her arms crossed. “A twenty years old project, over within an hour by a silly girl and a mindless android.”

“The population won’t stop their destined fate for her words. We simply can no longer orchestrate the next events. Daniel will reveal everything to not only the siblings but to Bohm and to Griffith. Before I’m found, I need to set up the next phase, and hopefully get both of us safe.”

“And Abraham?” she asked.

Randall looked at her.

“If he isn’t smart enough to escape, he’ll be left behind.”

“Just like everyone else did to him,” she accused him, her turquoise eyes ablaze. “Use him, then leave him alone to fend for himself.”

“I cannot risk exposing the Temples, the Shiakars, and especially you, for a simple pawn. He chose to play the game, he knew the risks.”

Ysadora huffed in frustration. Ignoring her, Randall took out of his inside vest pocket something that looked like an elaborate pencil. With it, he traced elaborate symbols on the stone. A hologram appeared, rising from the symbols; a hooded man looked at Randall.

“Password.”

“Ultima forsan,” Randall answered.

“Why?”

“Tempus edax rerum.”

“How can Temple XIII serve you, Lord Redspear?” the hooded man asked.

“I need to use the shuttle. I’m leaving with Ysadora.”

“Only if you can make it within nine hours. That’s the deadline the Temples received. The Ka-dymyrra is moving onward, and it will be your last chance to reach it.”

“We’ll be there. Prepare everything so that we can leave as soon we arrive,” Randall ordered.

“Understood,” the hooded man bowed before closing the transmission.

Randall took a small rock to smudge the symbols into a mess of dark stains.

“I’ve escaped while the idiot guarding me was distracted. The betrayal’s already done, I don’t think any of us can salvage this,” Abraham’s bitter voice suddenly flooded Randall’s and Ysadora’s head. “Where do I join you?”

“I’m sending you the coordinates. Be there within nine hours,” Randall informed him before telling him the location.

“He’s coming with us?!” Ysadora stared in shock as Randall joined her by the car. “They’ll kill him.”

“Prince Nebuchadnezzar himself inducted Abraham into the society,” Randall simply said. He threw her the car keys. “Now hurry. By the time you’ll get there, Scott will be imprisoned at the closest Columbus prison before being transferred. I need you to convey him a message.”

“Will do. Where will you get your car?”

“I have my backups. Just hurry up; I’ll send you the details of the message once you’re on the road,” he simply said, then turned on his heels.

Ysadora didn’t argue and climbed into the driving seat.

Chapter 55

- AV -

Another Way

Scott was squirming against the floor, twisting and grunting as he attempted to break loose from his bonds. But Daniel, thanks to his militaristic past, knew how to tie prisoners very well.

Daniel was waiting patiently by the desk with the controls; he knew the siblings would be here soon. He also knew Scott had most likely alerted Abraham, Randall and Ysadora of his betrayal...

“Why, you filthy traitor?” Scott hissed, as he paused to regain his strength.

Daniel turned to him impassively, his grey eyes showing no emotions.

“The mission you assigned me was not in accord with the Society’s purpose, Mr. Johnson.”

“You follow orders! So follow them, you empty-headed machine! Resume the simulation, and unbind me.”

“I cannot follow your orders, Mr. Johnson.”

“Do it, or I split your useless head in two!” Scott hissed, contorting his body in a hopeless attempt to get loose.

“Your threats are unfounded, Mr. Johnson. The strength required to split my useless head in two would be fifty-three pounds and eight...”

The door to the office opened, and a brunette and a dark-haired man entered briskly, Scott hissing at them.

“Can I?” Madzistrale asked Tom, her eyes pleading as she glimpsed toward the orange-haired prisoner.

“No!” Tom admonished her. “You’re a pacifist Christian, remember?”

Madzistrale grounded her teeth in protestation. Daniel walked over to them, and extended his hands.

“Madzistrale, Tom, although we met briefly, my name is Daniel Fitzgerald. This prisoner is Scott Johnson. We are the remainder members of the Shiakar Paradigm Society. Three more members are currently...”

The door opened again, and this time, Robert Bohm, Reginald Griffith, and Frances Bohm stormed the place with a dozen soldiers. From the ruckus in the stairs, they knew more were on standby. The soldiers hurried to tackle Scott, and three surrounded Daniel to immobilize him. The rest surrounded Madzistrale and Tom, and the siblings raised their hands.

“Take them to the truck,” Frances ordered.

“Leave the android and the siblings here,” Griffith cut.

Frances challenged him with her stare, but Robert gave her a nod.

“What’s going on isn’t somethin’ we can yet allow to be spoken of officially,” he told her softly.

She tensed, but conceded.

“The soldiers will be covering the exits. They’re ordered to shoot if they leave this room without us,” she warned.

“Thank you, Mrs. Bohm,” Griffith simply replied.

“Get your hands off me, you dirty vermin...” Scott’s protestations and struggles were cut short as a soldier hit him in the head before dragging him out of the room.

When the soldiers left, Griffith turned to the siblings, his deep set eyes boring through them.

“Explain exactly who you are. Bohm told me of your... peculiarities, but they’re hard to believe.”

“We’re travelers,” Tom said.

“Travelers carrying metal bastions that can appear out of nowhere, and whom one of the individual was seen poorly piggy-riding a flying car with a form of rock-climbing gear,” Griffith coldly replied, with however a hint of amusement in his voice.

Bohm looked at Tom with an apologetic stare; the brother simply nodded his understanding, while Madzistrale snickered.

“*Shingeki no Kyojin?*” she whispered to Tom; he smirked in approbation.

“I should throw you in jail just for that,” Griffith continued.

“Oye, great way to thank us for trying to stop a genocide happening under your nose,” Madzistrale burst angrily.

“I’m aware of the unusual situation. Robert’s been warning me, but I didn’t listen,” Griffith replied softly. He turned to an impassible Daniel, and looked him over. “Such an amazing work. How come we never knew?”

“I was deemed a failure until Mr. Redsphear brought me as an assistant, Vice-President Griffith,” Daniel explained.

“So you can tell only the truth, correct? It’s a decree in the International Committee.”

“Correct, Vice-President Griffith.”

“So what exactly happened?” Griffith inquired.

“From which event do you wish that I begin, Vice-President Griffith?”

Bohm and Frances looked puzzled; Griffith hesitated.

“Well... I wouldn't know. Why don't you summarize from when you were acquired?”

The small group was all seated or leaning against a wall or table. The frowns of the faces of Bohm, Frances and Griffith were clear indications of how they took in the information Daniel had revealed.

“So basically, the Society planned to bring humanity to brink of extinction, just so it can resume evolving... and you thought they were benefiting the greater good? That it was worth killing 9.5 billion people for ‘evolution’?!” Madzistrale incredulously accused Daniel.

“They did not inform me this was their intent, or the true numbers of casualties,” Daniel replied. “It was only when your transmission was aired that I understood what their plan truly was. You are right in saying that I do not see the justification. It is simply mathematical. A greater number of individuals working on a same goal will do greater good than a handful of individuals. Not to mention that Decree Zero in the International Committee states that I protect and serve in any way I can the majority of the human population. 500 millions out of 9.5 billions is not a majority, and so I must protect and serve the population even if it goes against the orders of my employers.”

Bohm sighed heavily.

“So how do we fix this?” he asked; jerking his head toward the window, he continued: “There's still fightin' out there, even though the false invasion was exposed.”

“The people want a fight nonetheless; the invasion just gave them an excuse,” Madzistrale bitterly answered. “They've given up believing there's anywhere a good person stepping up to fix things.”

Griffith raised his head and walked to the windows.

“Then it’s time we change things around. We’ve tried variations of the exact same system for centuries; should we wonder why it’s the same result over and over again?” He turned to the room. “It’s time we step up to present a new system. Everything is already chaotic; now’s as a good time as any to introduce change; real and unprecedented change.”

“The population won’t like it, much less trust any new change. What will convince them they won’t be losing the little they have left?” Frances doubted.

“They already don’t like anything presented to them,” Tom reasoned. “What do you have to lose?”

“It’s great, but what about the Society?” Bohm asked, turning to Daniel. “How do we know exactly who’s a member? How do we know they won’t manipulate again?”

“Because this time, I’ll be in charge, and I’ll be damned if I allow their shenanigans to reach such a high authority,” Griffith intervened, his clear eyes fierce. “Beside, interrogating Daniel, and the other orange-haired freak will yield us answers.”

“I am at your disposal,” Daniel simply replied impassively.

“And Randall, Abraham?” Bohm asked. “We need to find them.”

“I doubt you’ll get them,” Madzistrale interjected. “Abraham’s... unique. I doubt you’ll catch him.”

“As for the old man, he not only looks like someone who’ll rather die than be taken prisoner, but his daughter will protect him. Possibly kill him if it comes to him being captured,” Tom added.

“His daughter?” Madzistrale asked, an eyebrow raised.

“The blond gal that you find cute...”

“Annoying as hell,” she cut him.

“... she inadvertently called him ‘Dad’ when he came to rescue her during our fight.”

“Is that true?” Griffith asked Daniel.

“I do not know, Vice-President Griffith. She presented herself as Ysadora Dawn. The Presidential Counsellor is Randall Redsphear.”

Griffith sighed.

“We have a long road ahead of us.”

“We all do,” Tom simply replied. “But although people can be quite stubborn and pig-headed, there are a lot of people who simply want it all to stop. Want the future to be bright and free of the past. You need to focus on these people. And luckily, your city’s full of such hopeful people.”

“I hope you’re right,” Griffith softly said. He turned to the siblings. “Now it’s your turn. I’ve probably seen it all today, so why don’t you tell me how come you singlehandedly stopped something no one suspected even existed?”

Tom and Madzistrale smiled.

“Well, see, it all started with a little project by our friend and nicknamed after a spider...”

Chapter 56

- AV -

Splendore

The door slammed with its distinct metallic sound. Scott raised his head as the sound of stilettos upon stone floor announced clearly who his visitor was.

“Yo, Ysa. Only you can grant us private audience from the guards,” he nonchalantly said.

Ysadora sat down in front of the window pane separating them. When she opened her mouth to speak, it was no longer English words that Scott heard, but unique slurring sounds, mostly with accentuated s’s, guttural k’s and long l’s, with an overall distinctive flow.

“You’ll be kept here for 10-20 years,” Ysadora simply stated in this new language.

“I can’t believe you can still talk Shiakar,” Scott admired.

“Randall sends you instructions. When the higher-ups at the Temples will decide that the time is ripe to release you, you’re to meet up with them. They have received the last steps of Randall’s backup plan for the evolution of Gaea, and they will guide you through them.”

“Doesn’t Randall trust me for this?” Scott hissed in anger.

“Not at all. You’re simply in the impossibility to do anything, imprisoned here; what’s the point in briefing you in advance?”

“How dare you insult me?!” Scott rose from his chair.

“Shut up, sit down, and listen, idiot,” Ysadora said, annoyed as she signaled the hidden guards that everything was under control. “Plans are underway to release Splendore into the population within 20 years.”

Scott stared at her for a few seconds before sitting down.

“Splendore? You’re going through with it, after all?”

“Not we. The population is; they will welcome it without any restraints. So be ready if you still want a piece of the reward,” Ysadora finished before rising.

“I hope for your sake that our superiors forgive your mistake,” Scott teased.

Ysadora turned to him, her turquoise eyes staring at him with coldness.

“We’re going to their HQ; I guess that despite it all, they must value our loyalty above yours to allow our presence into their fortress while abandoning you in a meager prison. Randall wanted me to repeat something he said to you earlier on: that you will prove a wonderful challenge for humanity to overcome.”

She turned heels without looking back, slamming the door behind her. Scott balled his fists together, seething with fury. The guard entered the room.

“Come on, Mr. Johnson. Time for you to come back inside...”

His last words were spurted out as Scott dug his fingers into his throat. As the guard fell and an alarm rang throughout the prison, Scott looked with disgust at the corpse.

“How dare they?! Me, a challenge for the stupid dogs?!”

**

As the alarm rang, reverberating against the stone walls and floors, Ysadora casually entered the security room.

“Stop here, this is off limits to visitors...”

The guard didn't finish his sentence as Ysadora dug her hairpin in his neck and injected the heart-stopping toxin. Leaning over his slouched body, she reached the computer and erased the recordings of her meeting with Scott. Satisfied, she walked back out of the room, watching with amusement at the guards flooding the corridors to the meeting cell. Clearly Scott had reacted in his usual way; she was glad for that distraction, as the evidences had been erased, and if miraculously recovered, all they would hear would be essentially hissing.

"Hurry up, our ride is leaving soon," her father's voice rang through her head.

"I'm ready; I'm getting out of the prison right now," Ysadora replied.

"Any resistance?"

"Yes, but nothing I can't handle," Ysadora said, stepping over a fallen guard, her chain sword retracting back at her side. "Scott is informed of Splendore, although he's not pleased of us meeting with our superiors and him being left behind."

"A vermin will be treated as such. Humans will soon understand that as well."

"Not our problem. You've got something much better in mind, don't you?"

"If the Prince agrees to it, yes. Humans won't ever be given the slightest chance of becoming inadequate if my solution works."

"I can't wait to see that," Ysadora sighed as she sat into her sand-coloured car.

"That's exactly what I hope for your future, Ysa," her father softly replied.

Ysadora looked surprised.

"This isn't like you, Randall."

She heard him chuckle.

"No, indeed it doesn't. Age must finally be getting to me. Now, hurry up; the Shiakars don't like waiting."

“I’ll be there in five,” Ysadora answered, pushing the throttle further, the car roaring.

Her head became silent again, save for her thoughts and her racing heart. Somewhere deep inside her, she realized that she was dreading coming back to that place. Knowing how inadequate she had been, and still was, compared to them.

But another feeling was slowly creeping up her heart. That her father was hiding from her something incredibly important.

Chapter 57

- AV -

Goodbyes On The Hill

Silence, broken apart only by sirens here and there, going about for the rescues and the emergency aids, had returned to the city, a semblance of peace hovering over the streets; the sun was beginning to set, a warm glow invading the air as streetlights began to appear to counter the coming darkness.

Frank climbed with difficulties the hill with his two children, gasping for breath as he finally spotted the two siblings who were seated on the grass.

“There you are; I’ve been looking all around for you guys! Where the hell had you bee...”

Frank Cooper’s last word choked as he realized who surrounded Tom and Madzistrale. His children, Anton and Billie looked with big marveled eyes at the ex-President, his wife, and Vice-President Reginald Griffith. He smiled nervously.

“Umm... Good afternoon.”

“Where’s Abraham?” Tom asked, worried.

Frank’s expression turned heavy.

“Well...” he glimpsed fearfully around him, “he... well... vanished. Out of... well... thin air.”

To Frank’s relief, everyone simply nodded in understanding. Tom and Madzistrale smiled at his confused reaction.

“Don’t worry, they sort of get what happened.”

“Sort of, is the right word,” Frances acknowledged.

Griffith looked at the hill surrounding them, overlooking the city of glass, smoke rising from it. A calm had overcome the uprising once the simulation was revealed and the population had predictably chosen to return home to rest and fill their bellies over landing in the hospital or prison cells..

“So this is your... landing point?” Griffith asked the siblings.

“More or less,” they smirked.

Frank’s eyes clouded.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“There isn’t much else that we can do,” Tom said.

“What about the fighting?” Frank asked, worried.

Griffith sighed.

“It’ll pass, as it always does. But the siblings are right; now the hidden hands were exposed, we need to clean our own mess.”

“And people like you need to show the way,” Madzistrale nudged Frank.

“What happens with the Society?” Tom asked worryingly.

“The lunatic tried to escape,” Frances announced gloomily. “But someone else came in and took out a few guards as well; the cameras were erased, so we don’t know who exactly, but since three members are on the loose, it obviously must be one of them.”

“And they’re letting this Scott guy and the android as bait,” Bohm said bitterly.

“Five people isn’t enough to orchestrate everything, though,” Griffith cut in. “And we also need to figure out what happened between the Gnasci, the Vymana Squadron, the real reason an entire group of hardened military lost their lives over, and those Societies. Our job will be considerably harder than simply calming people down.”

“The android could help you,” Madzistrale suggested.

Bohm and Griffith shifted uncomfortably.

“Its case is...”

“You meant, ‘his’ case,” Madzistrale corrected them.

“... Yes. His case is complicated.”

“Well, if you’re worried for your security, he’s forbidden to inflict harm. And stopped by himself the invasion simulation once he realized the whole of humanity was targeted,” Madzistrale heatedly said. “He’s more use to you free than dismantled or imprisoned.”

“I’m aware of it, Miss Korfmann,” Griffith sharply replied in a way that indicated he wouldn’t be bossed around.

Tom turned to Bohm and Frances.

“What about you two?”

Bohm looked toward Griffith, who simply looked back indifferently.

“I honestly don’t know. Obviously I can’t go back to any high position after my fiasco. Frances also has been discharged from the private investigation syndicate. So... We’re back to square one. Back to where I used to be forty years ago... Helpless.”

Frances held him tight, her face showing nothing but strength and comfort. Madzistrale snickered.

“Helpless? It’s people equal to citizens who actually changes the world. You think the citizens will listen to him?” she jerked her head toward Griffith, who stiffened, “No, they’ll never expect the higher-up to listen to them. But who do you think they might listen to, if that person’s right beside them in their own villages and cities?”

Bohm looked at her expectantly; she smiled.

“They’ll listen to a cool mayor who stands up against the feds when the citizens’ needs are not met.”

Frances smiled knowingly at Bohm.

“You all make that mistake: thinking you must be big and stand at the top to make people follow you. The problem is, there’s too many people to try and reach at the same time,” Madzistrale continued. “But stand beside a small group of people. Help them directly, day by day. That small group is changed, and all the other groups around them realize something great can be done. One village’s good deed spread to its neighborhood; and so on and so on. That’s how you change the world.”

“Thanks,” Bohm breathed. “That might just work, if the people let me.”

Frances hugged him in support, before leaning in and kissing Madzistrale on the cheeks, Griffith saying nothing, only looking amused.

The siblings turned to the group.

“We’ll just say a private goodbye to Frank before leaving; but good luck to the rest of you. You’ve seen what humanity nearly lost, what it was ready to do to one another. Make sure it never happens again. War and terror has never resulted in anything good up until now. So stop being such idiots, and work on a new system.”

The group shook hands and said their farewells, and Frank joined Tom and Madzistrale slightly uphill with his kids, as the rest of them made the descent back to the city.

“That was... something. But I’m glad having met you,” Frank said.

“Keep on hoping,” Tom simply replied. “If more people do, and try simple deeds of kindness towards one another, then you’ll be closer to your dream world than countless governmental promises.”

Frank smiled, holding his two pride and joy against him. Madzistrale leaned over to stroke their hair, then kissed Frank on the cheek.

“Good luck, Frank. Goodbye Anton, Billie!”

“Bye!” the kids waved happily.

“Will I see you again?” Frank asked.

The siblings looked at one another, then shrugged.

“Don’t know. Maybe, it depends. These things are kinda random.”

“If you do, will you show me, or at least explain, how this is possible?” he asked hopefully.

“We’ll try. Until then, look at the multiverse theories, and your native’s beliefs regarding dream states. Our own discoveries sprang from there,” Tom said.

“Project Orb Weaver, we nicknamed it. The Spider who guards the web of the multi realms, and guardian of the dreamers. Once we learned that, well... The rest was practice. And you also have a library on Cedar Street that might be able to help you out.”

“Thanks,” Frank said. “Will try and check it out.”

They said their farewells and gave their hugs once again, then stepped back. This time, Frank gave no signs of surprise as the siblings simply vanished, leaving no trace of their presence.

How will we move on from today, if you guys aren't here, Frank thought worryingly. But he turned to his children, who were watching with astonishment and bright hopeful eyes at the now empty spot on the hill where the siblings stood, and he hugged them closer to him, relishing their warmth and the future today had begun to promise for them. The wind simply kept on caressing the grass and their hair, and moving toward the city of glass towers to blow the smoke and despair away, leaving behind a fresh start.

Chapter 58

- Eight Months Later -

Ka-dymyrra

Abraham steeled himself to look out at the darkness greeting him every time he dared approach the vehicle's windows. His stomach threatened to regurgitate the meager lunch he had, so he quickly sat back down. He always had an issue with claustrophobia, and knowing he would be away for a very long time from simple commodity like sunshine, trees, and fresh air made him feel sick. He looked beside him and was somewhat relieved to see that Randall too had seen better days. Only Ysadora was strangely immune, if only a little pale-looking and with fearful eyes.

The comm hissed and a voice uttered the guttural words that Abraham had gotten used to hear since eight months.

"We're approaching the Ka-dymyrra," Ysadora translated.

Despite his disapproving stomach, Abraham looked once again out of the window, but still could see nothing but darkness.

"It won't be long," Ysadora softly said. "Their HQ is well guarded. Nothing like a good few kilometers of dirt to protect them from anything the Universe throws at them."

Abraham looked at her, surprised at the fear that was hinted in her voice.

"Do you know it well?" he asked.

"Yes," she breathed. Randall looked at her, and Abraham could swear that he looked pained as Ysadora took another breath, and attempted a small reassuring smile. "It's where I spent my childhood and my adolescent training."

Abraham stared, in shock.

“Here? You told me you...” He paused; she never told him anything. Even Randall merely stated she was altered. A conversation that seemed so long ago came back to his mind. “Our first lunch together... you were furious at me when I suggested that... some people were better off dead. You...”

Ysadora smiled sadly, and stroked her platinum blond braid.

“The only physical proof of my genetic alteration. Progeria, was it?” she asked Randall, who nodded. “Should have died before my thirteenth birthday. Instead, they healed me when no other doctor could.”

“And in return...” Abraham understood.

She smiled proudly.

“I became stronger.”

He must have looked shocked and sick, as she gave him a quick peck on his cheek.

“Trust me, I don’t regret the training one bit. It’s just... they don’t allow weakness... and I was weak in the beginning. But now, I’m not, and it’s thanks to everything I was given.”

But Randall’s expression showed the opposite of her pride.

The clanking of weapons sparring, the grunts of the opponents, the rattling of their feet on the basalt flooring... Abraham’s mind reeled at the vision twenty feet below the mezzanine from which he observed a group of... them; people like Ysadora. Altered, some in much greater extent than she was; training at the only thing other than science that this Society seemed to value. He felt small at the sight of forty feet high halls, twenty feet high corridors, all with the same heat-retention

basalt floors and walls, the same marine blue flag with its white winged ourobouros. Ka-dymyrra, the HQ of the Shiakar Society... eight months away from the surface... Feeling again his stomach lurch, Abraham leaned away from the balustrade and fell into the comfort of the couch.

A knock made him rise his head; Randall was standing at the entrance of the room, weakly smiling.

“Come in, I’m not feeling particularly private anyway,” Abraham smirked.

Randall sighed as he joined Abraham, remaining standing.

“I’m sorry for the alienation,” he simply said, looking similarly uncomfortable.

Abraham chuckled weakly.

“If they know the true way of existence, I’m not complaining. But I don’t get what you’re planning to do from now on.”

Randall smiled enigmatically before looking down at the noise. Abraham rose from the couch and joined him.

“It must’ve been hard sending her here.”

Randall shrugged, attempting to look detached.

“It was necessary.”

Abraham picked on the unsaid.

“And her mother? Your wife? Or rather, ex-wife, judging from your lack of ring...”

Randall’s eyes slitted, and his left shoulder ticked.

“She preferred useless prayers to a God that never replied back to the truth. But it’s the past. I now need you to help me. The Shiakars have their plans for humanity’s survival, and I have mine. But age is catching up to me, and your ability is the only thing that can finally become an absolute guarantee to what I’m

about to do. Despite everything that happened in the last year, are you still up for what I need your collaboration with?”

Abraham smiled weakly.

“Always. I don’t care much for these people; but knowing you, your plan should be one that I’ll like. After all, we’re very much similar in what we wish for this world. For Ysadora too, if you don’t mind me saying...”

Randall sighed, and reached into his inside jacket pocket; his shoulders slouched, as if a great weight lifted. Turning to Abraham, he motioned him to extend his hand. Puzzled, Abraham did so, and Randall gently laid something small before closing it.

“I keep my words, Abraham Solomon. From this moment forth, my Redspear bloodline ends and begins with yours. Take care of Ysadora. Make my daughter happy. Give her, build her the world she deserves.”

Randall turned on his heels and left before a speechless Abraham could say anything, before he looked into his clasped hands.

Ysadora looked at the sparring tournament. Her body longed and feared at the same time to join, to spar those elegant moves, this deadly dance, to make sure her time with normality had not dulled her. She felt Randall determinedly walk by her and turned to him. She saw something that made her heart clench, something impossible: he looked older than she had noticed. He met her gaze and smiled proudly, as if to say, *we made it, we’re safe*.

“What have you bargained in return?” she simply asked. *In return of safe passage, of another chance at another plan*, was what she didn’t need to add.

He kept on smiling before resuming walking.

“What I have always bargained.”

Ysadora looked at his back before it disappeared behind a corridor’s frame. Her turquoise eyes gazed at the spar going on below her; it suddenly felt disgusting to look at. As if she should have looked at something else the entire time.

Epilogue I

- Eight Months Later -

Kansas, March 16th, 2018

Progressive rock played in the warm cozy living room as Madzistrale, Tom and Gabzryel were joined by their mechanic friend, Clara. Even seated she was taller, and stronger built, than her friends; her face was round and soft, her silky black hair were braided and coiled around her neck to the front of her chest, the tip ornated with a downy woodpecker feather. Much like Madzistrale's cross pendant was a reminder, so was Clara's feather: a reminder of her heritage, but also a proof: a proof that old enemies could let go of a long-gone past and create a future instead.

“You look down,” Madzistrale asked Clara, handing her a beer bottle.

Clara gulped it down, and sighed.

“Yeah, I dumped Isabelle.”

Madzistrale stared in shock.

“How come? The way you talked about her...”

Clara chuckled.

“Don't get me wrong, she was drop-dead gorgeous... but man did she had an attitude.”

“Worst than Mark? Or whatever his name was,” Tom intervened.

“Yeah, trust me. A girl with an attitude is worse than a man with an attitude.”

“I know. Just look at the difference between Mad and Gab when they're pissed.”

Madzistrale punched Tom on the elbow.

“See what I mean?” Tom winced, before rising from the couch and running away as Madzistrale gestured for another punch.

Clara giggled before gulping down another sip of beer.

“So what went wrong?” Madzistrale resumed.

Clara sighed.

“Her obsession with her past. She can’t accept the lifestyle she lives, and she spends every waking minute going into archives, archaeological finds, things like that. I told her enough is enough, her life’s not only with me but lies before her, toward the future, not behind toward the past. But she just won’t listen. She quit her job to study full time archaeology, and hooked up with this professor to get it for free.”

“Boy, I think it’s a good thing you dumped her,” Madzistrale snickered.

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t stop from hurting.”

“Sorry,” the siblings sheepishly said.

“Nah, don’t worry. We can’t help those people. I’m glad you guys look only toward the future. You’re not running around babbling to everyone things like ‘my ancestors shaped the entire history as we know it, yet are tragically removed from said history...’ and bullshit like that.”

The siblings looked at her quizzingly

“Seriously? Isabelle said that?”

“Yeah. Takes great pride in her family name. I keep telling her that family names don’t dictate one’s future or destiny... but she glares at me and say that I should mind my business. That her bloodline is 'a secret yet to be unearthed when the right time comes'. Bullshit, she didn't need to do that tune and dance if she just wanted to break up with me for that other guy.”

The siblings looked at her even more in shock, and Gabzryel spoke up for the first time.

“You never told us her last name...”

“Heck, you never presented her to us,” Tom added.

“Yeah, well, the relationship was never that stable anyway. She cared more about her damn heralded ring than she did of talking about us tying the knot around a real ring. But it’s unusual to find a free-spirited girl like her, so of course I fell for her and tried to stick with her. Not to mention she had those gorgeous turquoise eyes you just couldn’t stop looking at; I did told you about her eyes, didn’t I?”

“Yes you did... now you mention it...” Madzistrale realized.

Clara’s eyes became dreamy. Tom took Gabzryel’s laptop and wrote a few keywords. His jaw dropped, and he slid the computer to Clara.

“Is that her?”

“Yep,” Clara answered, pushing it back.

Tom handed the laptop to his sister, and her own jaw dropped. Looking at the camera with a fierce and defiant attitude, dressed in a graduation dress, proudly holding a diploma in archaeology, stood a young woman with long brown hair, tall, slim in a muscular way, with unmistakable turquoise eyes, and an equally unmistakable manly square jaw.

“What are you guys looking fearfully at her for? Do you know her?” Clara asked, thoroughly perplexed.

“No... but we know her great-great-great-great-great-great-grand-parents,” Madzistrale said, giving the computer to Gabzryel.

“That’s not the issue,” Tom said, pointing at the social media profile page. The top header read: *‘At the search of the sleeping Queen; unearthing the 14th generation cycle and finding the true ruler prophesied in ancient texts.’*

“That’s not good,” Madzistrale said.

“No. It means somewhere, somehow... Ysadora and Abraham are in our very own past, and messing up with history. And God knows it can’t be good.”

Epilogue II

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A dark-haired man halted his camel as he arrived on top of the dune, letting the warm wind of dusk hit his covered face, the sand swirling all around him. He smiled, his blue eyes taking in the vision of the besieged city. Before him laid the cradle of modern civilization; the one city where the greatest everlasting power was created. All he needed to do was wait for a few days until the right moment unfolded.

He looked down at his left hand, a worn-looking ring on his wedding finger. He frowned as the herald ornamentation shifted in design and colour. His eyes saddened, and he stroked it, the herald still shifting. Why didn't he took more care to remember what it looked like?

Thank you for your support!

Please keep on the lookout for the release of Book 2, Iteration, where more mysteries and adventures awaits our heroes!

