

The Encircling Wall

A novel by Brian Buckley

## Chapter 1

Nalim inhaled deeply and fought for calm. The hour was late, but a familiar nausea kept him starkly awake. Tonight, he would be tested; tonight, he would see the oracle.

He had gone eight times before, though he did not remember all of them. Each time, the oracle passed him to the next level; now he was level eight, and by this time tomorrow – if all went well – he would be level nine. But the tests could be anything, absolutely anything, and that was what made them so frightening. No one ever knew ahead of time.

The first test he did remember had come when he was only four years old, but he could still see it in his mind – bits and pieces, faded, but painfully clear. He'd been curious at first, then nervous, when his parents left him alone in the dark room. And he remembered the questions:

"Where do you live?" The oracle's voice, soft and inquisitive.

"My house," he said cautiously. His mother had told him to answer the oracle's questions truthfully, and to be brave.

"What is outside your house?"

"Buildings."

"What is outside the city?"

That was more difficult. He thought. "Walls."

"What is outside the walls?"

Now he *was* afraid. He knew the answer, but it was a word he'd been told not to say. He whimpered softly.

The oracle repeated the question. "What is outside the walls?"

"Chaos," he said, and began to cry.

That was how he'd gotten to level three.

Now he was in his thirties, and tall. His blond hair hadn't been brushed in a while, and he wore plain clothing, the sort worn by people who feel that clothing's main function is to prevent nudity. Long sleeves covered his arms; he had no muscles to show off. Lines of worry creased a brow that was well acquainted with creases.

The subway car throbbed quietly, bearing its human cargo eastward to the heart of the city. Occasional murmurs of light and sound were the only signs of motion down here, packed in with hundreds of other passengers. No one wanted to be outside in the downpour. There was an odor in the car, a stale smell of people and old fabric that seemed out of place in the sleek steel structure. Automatically he counted the seats per row, the rows per car, the dim green emergency lights on the ceiling and center aisle. It struck him as suddenly absurd that green lights could be helpful in an emergency, but the thought was gone as soon as it came. He could not concentrate.

Sometimes the tests were physical; once, he'd simply been made to run until he collapsed from exhaustion. Another time the oracle had pushed him through ever-more complex questions of logic, forcing his mind to show its competence under the domain of the Law. And once –

It was pointless to do this to himself. No test was like another; there was no preparation. Involuntarily, his nails scraped over his forearm. The white scratches on his skin turned gradually red.

The white-haired woman to his left was staring at him, and he grimaced. She looked away quickly.

Officially, the levels had little real significance; they were a way to structure the city under the Law, keeping track of how advanced each citizen was as a whole person: mentally, physically, spiritually. Unofficially, the levels mattered. They were a sign of prestige, subtly influencing every aspect of life: who you would marry, how much you were paid, even how long you were likely to

live. And, of course, the highest-level citizen became Potentate, the city's supreme ruler. Not that Nalim had much chance of achieving that – level nine, even if he reached it, was a long way from Daeci's level sixteen.

Marene, his wife, was level nine.

At last the car began to decelerate, and he felt a surge of apprehension in his nausea. It was almost time. A low tone and a polite voice heralded their arrival, and the mass of humanity bustled around him, drawing him toward the exit. Outside, the city was dark and thundered with rain: the living embodiment of Chaos on the open world. "Spirit of the Law protect us through uncertainty," he mumbled, hearing others around him whisper similar invocations against the weather, but the words felt empty. He opened his umbrella and pushed forward into the darkness, reflecting that tonight the rain seemed almost appropriate. Let the city be scoured clean, and Chaos take them all.

Nalim emerged into Zaol Square, the massive open heart of the metropolis. Ahead, dwarfing everything, stood the monolithic Tower of Law, its six sides gleaming faintly golden even now. In the center of the square, tiny by comparison but still a behemoth in its own right, stood the great granite statue of the angel Thiowill, who had set them all free from doubt, so long ago. Thiowill's eight arms spread toward the heavens like the wings of a phoenix, shimmering in time with the lightning crashes. Around the square on all sides rose countless other buildings, crowding above like a forest of mammoth hexagonal trees. It occurred to him suddenly that to a demon, gazing down from overhead, the city must look like a honeycomb.

*Focus, Nalim.*

Ahead and to his right, he found the building he was looking for. The doors received him in their glowing warmth, and he put his umbrella into the bin with a shiver. No one met him as he made his way to the elevator, riding slowly down to his destination, a hundred meters below the

earth. There was no secretary to greet, no need to sign in. He was expected.

At the end of a long white corridor, another doorway beckoned. The oracle. Nalim swallowed, whispered another invocation to the Spirit of the Law, took a deep breath – and entered.

The doors shut softly behind him, and Nalim found himself in absolute darkness. He stood still and expectant: ahead, a light clicked on. Blinking away the brightness, he walked toward the light in the slow, measured paces he had been taught, until at last he stood in the center of a shimmering circle, surrounded by inky black, feeling small and out of place.

Presently the darkness spoke.

"Why are you here?" a voice intoned, coming from all directions. It was meant to be the bodiless voice of reason – that was what his friend Wasmeth had told him. The exchange was part of a ritual as old as the histories.

"To test myself."

"To what end?"

"That I may discover the nature of my character."

"If you pass the test?"

"I will go forth into the world and add to its structure with the knowledge of self."

"And if you fail?"

"Then here as in all things I will abide by the judgment of the Law." They were cold words, spoken by rote here in the colorless void, and they brought him no comfort.

"What is your name?"

"My name is Nalim."

"What is your station?"

"I am of the eighth level."

"And who are you, Nalim of the eighth level?"

"That is what I came to discover."

"Then discover!" The voice came deep and humorless, but it was not the voice that set him on edge. That was just ahead, hidden, and now a light revealed it. The oracle.

Long ago, it was said, the role of oracle had been filled by humans: two of them, one male, one female. Versed in the Law, they judged all who came before them and set their levels accordingly. No more. The thing he saw before him, hissing soft breath in wisps of vapor over the floor, was...not human. Blackened metal formed its lower half, edges smooth like volcanic glass, only they did not reflect the light. Steel rose from the blackness, twisted and looped into intricate patterns, and above the steel, layers upon layers of sheet crystal folded back on themselves like liquid fire. It did have a face, a gray mask of a woman's face that looked down stonily from above with dead silver eyes. Cords and wires snaked backward and out from that monstrous head in all directions.

Silver eyes. It was the eyes that mattered, he knew, white for success, black for failure. Simple enough. He swallowed again, his heart tearing wildly at his ribs.

"Nalim," said the oracle, "do you love the Law?"

His answer was automatic. "I do."

"Do you love your city?"

Strange question. The city was mother as the Law was father, so the Gray Book said, and everyone knew it. Yes, of course he loved the city. Focus. "I do," he answered.

"Do you love your wife?"

The nausea returned, twisted and icy in the pit of his stomach. He shut his eyes, wobbled

imperceptibly. Do I love Marene? What sort of question was that? Of course he did. Didn't he tell her every day? Of course. Of course. So why hesitate?

Five years ago, he would not have had to think about it. Those were the early days, the honeymoon days, when he memorized jokes so he could tell her the next time they were together – back when he used to kiss her nose just to hear her giggle. When was the last time she had laughed? When was the last time he had tried to make her?

There was no time for this. The weight of the oracle's stare crushed all thought under the need to answer.

Would the oracle know if he lied? Did he dare?

*Do you love your wife?*

"I do."

Light fell all around him, bathed him, made him shiver as it cascaded off his skin. The end of the test? That was it? White eyes, please, he prayed, let them be white...

The oracle opened its eyes, black as Chaos, and in them he saw the stars.

## Chapter 2

The thirtieth-floor skylight of the Fifth Library poured an afternoon halo over the desk where Clephe was sitting, granting her the perfect reading environment. Brushing a few strands of long brown hair from her face, she looked very much the Master Librarian in her long crimson robes, surrounded by towers of stacked books. That was why she did it, really – for the books. Books were not like people. They were better: constant, polite, never intruding on solitude uninvited or bothering her with ignorant questions.

Just as well that the comet was coming.

She looked up through the glass into the radiant blue, imagining she could see it even now, falling like a divine hammer. She knew – everyone had known since the city’s astronomer discovered it three years ago and made the announcement. She imagined the explosions, the terrible roar as her Library collapsed into rubble, the fire, the screams. The comet was coming. Death was coming. It was only a matter of time.

Her brother Nalim would tell her that was silly, of course. They were building a missile that would go up and destroy the comet long before it reached the city. He was personally working on the project as a software programmer, helping to design the warhead’s guidance systems. He wasn’t worried; no one was worried. There was nothing to worry about. She knew that, of course. Even if she didn’t quite believe it, she knew.

But then, she was one of only eight Master Librarians in the city – and, at thirty-one years, the youngest in recent memory. Knowledge was her duty, and she’d learned long ago that understanding came with a price. Once you saw the world as it truly was, without the masks, you could never go back to the old way again. Friends who did not share your understanding ceased to be friends. And when no one else understood, no one at all...

Speaking of people who didn’t understand – was that Tarsial she had just seen from the corner of her eye? Oh please no. She lowered her gaze immediately, but it was too late. He saw her and approached, smiling.

Tarsial was a handsome man, and he knew it; that, at least, she could not deny him. He had a blockish sort of chin and short, curly blond hair. The constant almost-smile in his eyes, and the barest wry curl at the corner of his lips, gave the impression that he was privy to some perpetual joke of which the rest of the world was ignorant. The man exuded an air of self-confidence that drove most women wild.



Clephe grimaced. He drove *her* crazy for different reasons.

"Hello, Clephe," he said. "Oh, no, I'm sorry – Master Librarian. Wouldn't do to be too familiar."

"Hello, Tarsial. Can I help you with something?"

He chuckled. "I was flipping through this book. I wonder if you've read it." He pushed forward a copy of *Gender and Sexuality*. "Tell me, Clephe, what do you recommend for a man who's madly in love?"

"A vow of celibacy," she said. "Are you checking this out?"

"I'm kind of enjoying checking *you* out right now."

Had he actually spoken those words out loud? Just then she pictured herself picking up the hardcover book and beating him bloody with it. *No*, she would tell her superiors, *it was self-defense. He was using pickup lines.*

"Go home, Tarsial."

"I can't," he whispered. "I love you. I always have. Ever since we kissed –"

"We were twelve years old," she told him, and not for the first time. Only once, and he'd never forgotten it. She'd spent half her life regretting that unfortunate kiss. "That was a long time ago. You're married." Her tone grew positively arid. "You have children."

"I'd leave them for you," he hissed. "You know I would. In a heartbeat." It was probably true. "Why can't we be together?"

Normally she would have played it off with a joke, anything to make him leave, but there had been too much of this lately. Tarsial was becoming more than a nuisance. He was scaring her.

Clephe *hated* to be scared.

She answered slowly and unequivocally. "I do not love you."

He did not answer her, only stared back with dull, furious eyes, the characteristic half-smile abruptly gone. "Now maybe you don't understand – "

From behind her, a familiar voice interrupted him, soft and amused. "Pray tell me, what is it that my Master Librarian does not understand?"

Tarsial, who recognized the voice as well as she did, glowered at its owner like a guilty child. A second later he muttered what might have been an apology, bowed, and shuffled away, staring at the carpet. Once she was sure he was gone, Clephe turned to face her benefactor.

Eremis was old, a tall and shriveled skeleton of a man, the sort of man who might be left after all the emotion and childishness had been sucked from an ordinary human. His own robes, dark and embroidered in fine gold, hardly rustled when he moved – which was seldom. Not exactly the sort you'd invite to a Solstice party, but Clephe had never been more grateful to see him.

"Thank you," she said.

"Of course." Eremis smiled – a contrived, mechanical affair – and just like that she remembered all over again why she disliked the man so much. When he smiled, it was not out of pleasantness, or even courtesy. If Eremis smiled, it was because smiling fit his purpose. She found herself wondering how much of her conversation he'd heard.

"However," he continued, "I do have other business. I come to you on a small matter, probably of little concern, but which troubles me nonetheless. Four days ago, a book was stolen from the Seventh Library. It was a biography of Aemed. A very detailed one."

Aemed. She knew the name, as everyone did. Three hundred thirty years ago, Aemed had been employed in the defense of the city, designing more sophisticated weaponry to guard the walls against attack from outside. By all accounts, Aemed had been a genius – and a villain. In the course of his work, he had researched imitative intelligence, machines that thought consciously

and thus blasphemed against the human soul, the creation of the Law. In punishment, he had been banished, the first and only person ever to be sent beyond the walls. Clephe shuddered. Death was one thing, but to be sent outside! "Stolen by whom?"

"That is what I must discover. There is a gap in the records where the identity of the thief should be. It is most curious."

"A gap in the records? Have you asked Loiless?" Loiless was the Master Librarian of the Seventh Library, a plump woman who liked her shelves straight and her data tidy. A gap in her system was particularly odd.

"I've spoken with her, but she appears as mystified as I am. Yet only a Master Librarian could alter a record. An interesting puzzle, wouldn't you say?"

"Do you think I – ?"

"No. I trust you completely, Clephe." The lie was pleasant and natural. "I am simply trying to understand."

"I'm sorry, I don't know anything about it. If I learn something, I will of course pass it on."

"Naturally. As I said, a trivial matter." He seemed to be waiting for her to say something, but when she didn't, he merely nodded. "Well, then, I leave you. Spirit and peace, Clephe."

"Spirit and peace," she echoed.

Eremis held the highest level in the city, which qualified him to be Potentate, but he had refused that title to retain his position as leader of the Brotherhood of the Unbroken Circle. That, together with his status as Lord Master Librarian, made him the most powerful man in the city, aside from the Potentate himself.

So why would a man like Eremis be concerned with a single stolen library book?

Trying to unravel Eremis's schemes made her head hurt. Perhaps it would work itself out.

As Clephe leaned back in her chair she noticed a dark, winged creature in the sky overhead, thousands of meters distant: a demon. They never ventured too close to the city for fear of the great cannons and other defenses scattered around the walls, but she often saw them soaring just out of range, in the Chaos realm beyond the city. There had been more of them, lately. This was the second one she'd seen this week, circling like vultures over a dying animal. What did it mean? Did they know about the comet, too?

Yes, Eremis. Spirit and peace. Enjoy it while it lasts.

### Chapter 3

Wasmeth stared blankly at the screen in front of him, eyes bleary, trying to concentrate – a losing battle. He rubbed his eyes absently, thinking.

He was in many ways an ordinary-looking man, tall but not remarkably so, his short black hair neatly combed into a practical, unpretentious style. The definition of his biceps hinted that there was more to his life than sitting at a desk, though, and his face – though not unpleasant – was more lined than was usual for his twenty-eight years. He was a man of duty. And duty, at the moment, had him sitting in front of his computer screen, pondering his mystery.

How long had he sat in this little office, finishing his work? He glanced at the chronometer – past midnight! Too long. The others had left hours ago, and he should be home also, with Iriel, the woman he would marry in two months' time. But then Iriel had probably given up on him for the night; no doubt she would be asleep without him by now. No harm in staying another half hour.

Besides, he wasn't finished.

The mystery was a tiny thing, as mysteries so often are. It was an error message, a little window that made a *ker-ding* sound as it popped up on his screen; it appeared every time he tried to

run a systems check. The program's diagnostics told him he didn't have enough free memory, but the memory readouts disagreed. And despite trying everything he could think of for the past five hours, that was all he knew. And the deadline for this phase of the project had come and gone two weeks ago.

That *ker-ding* sound was starting to get annoying.

He arched his back, groaning as some of the tension left, wishing Nalim were here. Six years older and a level higher, Nalim would surely see the answer. Everyone called Wasmeth brilliant, but he knew better than to give in to pride – it was Nalim who kept their department running. He was a good friend, and one of the best programmers on the project.

A green light flashed on his console: a new message. Eremis again, most likely, demanding another progress report. The Brotherhood kept a close watch on its agents, especially its higher ones, and Wasmeth had been Brother Wasmeth almost as long as he could remember; he was well into the sect's inner echelons. Even he, though, could not quite grasp their keen interest in the missile project. The thought did not trouble him, however. Some knowledge was not for him to have.

Still, the message could wait until tomorrow. He flicked off the blinking light and pushed his mind back to the problem. What could be causing the diagnostic to fail? If there was really a memory problem, he should be able to find some sort of...

It was then that he found it: a text file, ingeniously hidden *inside* the folder hierarchy. Suddenly alert again, he considered: the file was small, but hidden as it was, it spawned an extra file chain every time the loop cycled, eventually leading to an enormous memory burn. Yes, it made sense. Of course he could simply delete the file, but...

He checked the author and blinked in surprise. Nalim himself.

Wasmeth's first instinct was to call the problem solved, leave the file unopened, and ask Nalim about it the next morning. Whatever Nalim had gone to this much trouble to hide must be private. Better to be discreet. A few hours of lost productivity wouldn't hurt anyone.

But as always – there was the Law to consider.

The Brotherhood had charged him with reporting absolutely everything about the missile project, had they not? Surely a file this well hidden was *potentially* significant. Probably it was nothing, but if he were wrong...well, the Law was ever supreme.

To Wasmeth's credit, he did consider leaving the file alone even so. In spite of his oaths, his duty, and his faith, he did seriously consider it. Much later, in desperation as his life was failing around him, he would repeat that fact to himself, for comfort. Sometimes it helped. But as yet he knew nothing of the future.

He opened the file and began to read.

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Wasmeth's black hair was messy and uncombed, his eyes raw and red, a tribute to the kind of night he'd had. It was early morning now, but it didn't feel early to him. It felt very, very late.

He'd waited an hour for Nalim to come to work that morning, to no avail. Nalim was seldom late. He'd checked with the Brotherhood and found the truth – Nalim was still at home, alone. The Brotherhood also confirmed that he had failed his level test, another clue to the riddle. The car hummed quietly on its magnetic tracks, reassuring him. Only a few more kilometers now.

Eremis had been calm on the video link, emotionless and dark. "It need not be you," he'd said. "We can send someone else."

"No," Wasmeth had replied, "I was his friend. I'll be the one to take him."

The car stopped, and he got out.

The gray cloak of the Brotherhood swirled around his ankles as he walked, reminding him of his duty. Most of his work for the Brotherhood was unofficial, so he seldom wore it; now, it weighed like a yoke on his shoulders. The world passed in a blur of disconnected images, visual and auditory signals without meaning, as the elevator took him to the twenty-third floor of the tower where Nalim lived. He called on the Gray Book: *All life unfolds as the Law has arranged it, and nothing occurs that is not a part of the pattern. Be at peace. Every child of the Law is anchored to the rock, which the ocean cannot touch. Be at peace.*

He came to the door.

After ringing three times without answer, Wasmeth accessed the Brotherhood's database through his wristband netlink and found the override code for Nalim's rooms. A brief hiss sounded, and he was inside. Nalim sat on the couch, looking at him without expression. He looked pale, his eyes similarly bloodshot; Wasmeth guessed he wasn't the only one who hadn't slept.

Wasmeth swallowed. "Hello, Nalim," he said quietly. "You didn't come in to work this morning. Is everything all right?"

The older man shook his head slowly. "No. Everything is not all right. In fact, I think I might even venture to say that something is wrong."

That much was true. Pause. "I heard about your level test. I'm sorry."

"I can retake the test. In a year, the oracle said."

"Don't be upset. The test doesn't determine your level, only reveals it. It's a glimpse into the human structure of your – "

"I said I can retake the damned test!" Nalim met his gaze for the first time. "You would've been a perfect match for the oracle last night, do you know that? I was thinking about that earlier."

Yes, yes, yes, that's all you would've had to say, three times, and just like that you would have passed. I've seen you and Iriel together. You love her, don't you?"

Wasmeth took a slow, tentative step toward his friend, then stopped again. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. It's just – " Nalim laughed harshly. "Nothing."

Wasmeth looked down at his feet, tried to give form to his conflicting thoughts. "Nalim – now is not the time for secrets. If there's something you need to tell me, then *tell me*, before it's too late."

Nalim's expression registered confusion, then shifted to anger. "What the oracle asked me about Marene is none of your – "

"I'm not talking about the oracle!"

"Then *what*?"

So it would come to this, after all.

"We found your file."

"What file?"

Wasmeth tossed him a small white data square.

He activated it and stared in disbelief. "What is this supposed to be? Plans for imitative intelligence? Where did you get this?"

"Right where you left it, Nalim. The main network."

Nalim was scrolling through the file's contents. There were hundreds of pages – sketches, diagrams, plans, even essays. All of it had a single theme: building a machine capable of replicating human thought. The shock in Nalim's eyes showed he understood well the extent of the blasphemy. "I didn't write this."



Wasmeth said nothing.

"I didn't write it! I've never seen any of this! How can you think – ? Wasmeth, you know it isn't true. Right?"

"I want to believe that."

"But – "

Wasmeth sighed. "There's evidence. Not just this. There's a log of network activity, intercepted communications, a stolen book they've traced back to you. And that's just the beginning. They've known for almost a month now. The evidence..." He swallowed, pushing himself to finish the thought. "The evidence is conclusive," he finished quietly.

"I didn't do it. Look, you're high in the Brotherhood, you can help me with this, find out who set me up – "

"I've been trying," Wasmeth answered, and some of the tiredness came through in his voice now. "I didn't believe it, at first. I told them it wasn't you, couldn't *possibly* be you. I've been trying to convince myself all night. But I've seen the evidence...and I was wrong, wasn't I?"

"Now wait just a minute – "

"You're one of the city's best software programmers. If anyone could do it – "

"And you're the best marksman I know! That doesn't mean I accuse you of murder the first time somebody is shot!" He was still fighting, but he was desperate now. "Listen, just give me a few days...tell me more about all this evidence you have...I'm sure I can explain – "

Wasmeth pulled out a stunner and gazed at it thoughtfully. "I just...I wish you would tell me *why*. I want to understand. I want to believe you had a reason."

Nalim shook his head, mouth moving soundlessly, searching for something to say. When he did speak it was quiet, high-pitched, desperate. "I didn't *do* it."

"I'm sorry." He raised the stunner, thumb hovering over the contact.

But for a moment he didn't fire, only watched the changing expression on Nalim's face, the slow grimace, the tightening brow. Finally Nalim spoke.

"Wasmeth?"

"Yes?"

"I forgive you."

Wasmeth closed the contact. There was a sharp click, a flash of white light, and a dull thud as the other man's body collapsed to the floor. He put the silver cylinder back in his pocket, and he gave a long sigh. "Spirit and peace, Nalim."

Somehow, he didn't think he'd sleep much tonight, either.

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That evening, all across the vast city, viewscreens flickered to life. In thousands of homes, offices, and schools, the image of a blond-haired, congenial man in his late thirties appeared: Daeci, the Potentate. He was simply dressed, seated alone behind a wide desk, the very image of unpretentious power.

"Citizens," he began, his voice clear and compelling. "Today is a day of sadness for us all. For the first time in three hundred years, a fellow citizen must be banished from the protection of our walls.

"Nalim, a distinguished member of the missile project's programming team, has tried to create a machine that imitates the sacred human consciousness. The evidence is conclusive beyond any doubt. As a servant of the Law, I have no choice but that he will be expelled from our sanctuary to the uncivilized part of our island, whereupon the doors of the city will be shut behind

him, and he will come at last into contact with the Chaos he has already tried to sow among us.

"In the face of this horrific necessity, I can only hope that the message of today's events is clear, and that such a verdict need never be issued again.

"May the spirit of the Law guide us forever."

The entire broadcast was less than a minute long.

When it was over, Marene switched off the image and stared, expressionless, at the black rectangle where it had been. She did not cry. She felt no emotion. At that moment, what she thought was: I will only have to make supper for myself tonight.

## Chapter 4

Nalim awoke slowly to the realization that his head hurt. He opened his eyes, blinking, and winced. The bare white walls formed a tiny rectangle of a room, hardly six square meters. The door was closed.

Bits of disconnected memory floated up through his awareness, piece by piece, until all at once he remembered what had happened, and despair crushed him. He would be banished. They would send him outside the walls, into Chaos, and it would devour him. He would die, another Aemed, helpless and alone. He vomited noisily on the floor of the cell.

Waves of agony shot through his ribs, calling up other memories: a guard who had brought water, then kicked him when he tried to stand. Hours passing in and out of consciousness, and more guards, some to take away his empty cups, some to clean his cell, some to hurt him. He could not guess how long he had been here. Less than a day, perhaps, but the fear and the pain ran together to obscure all sense of an ordered chronology. He had never even resisted.

At the root of it, though, beneath the anguish, beneath even the fear, was simple confusion.

He did not understand why they had taken him. The Law was infallible, and the Law said that he had done a thing, and yet *it was not so*. This simple paradox lay entirely outside his powers of explanation.

The door opened, framing a brief silhouette in a rectangle of white light, and then someone new was in the room with him. It took him a moment to recognize the face: Daeci himself. The Potentate. Daeci came near and knelt down beside him, looking him close in the face.

"Please," Nalim said. "Please, your Eminence, I'm innocent. I don't know what happened, but I'm innocent, I swear it by the Foundations of the City, please, please, please..."

"Peace," said Daeci. "I know you're innocent. I know."

Nalim sat up, startled. "You know! Oh, but of course you know, the Law is perfect in all things. Bless you, your Eminence, bless you! I will not be banished, then!"

But Daeci shook his head. "I'm very sorry, Nalim. For what little it's worth, I truly am very sorry. But there isn't much time, and I need you to listen to me carefully." Daeci shook him.

"Listen! There is hope. I know you don't see it, but you must remember. This is more important than you realize. *There is hope*. Repeat it!"

"There is hope," Nalim echoed dully. Then, "What hope?"

"Not yet," Daeci answered. "I pray you will live long enough to find it. Do not forget." And then he was gone.

Nalim was still going over it in his mind when the guards came to take him away.

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Clephe hugged herself tightly as she stared out over the sea of people that thronged around the main thoroughfare of the city. From her vantage point on the roof of a three-story building near

the City Gate, they looked like a crawling mass of leeches – leeches, all of them, feeding on her brother's suffering. Let them all burn, every last filthy one of them, she thought cruelly; and she did not ask forgiveness for the chaotic thought, not even mentally. She was in no mood for forgiveness, for herself or others. Her face was puffy and red from crying.

A pair of demons circled overhead, distant and black against the reds and purples of the setting sun. They had come to watch too. What would they do to him once he was outside the city's protection? Visions of Nalim screaming, eaten alive, played in her head until she felt sick.

The noise of the crowd surged, and looking far off to her right she saw the procession arriving. Four city guards, draped in black and gold, marched in rectangular formation around the electric chariot. Mounted on the chariot was a high throne, all black, and seated on the throne, chained to it, was a figure in white, blindfolded with a scrap of white cloth. And when she saw that it really was him, she felt the cold hand around her heart, and she moaned, a long, high wail that went on and on, unnoticed over the roar of the crowd. "Nalim, Nalim!" she shouted, and again, "Nalim!"

The chariot reached the gate, and the crowd quieted. A woman came forth and began speaking, something about Chaos and the Law and the terrible price of justice. Clephe didn't listen. A man came, and there were more stupid words. And then the guards went up to the chariot and unchained him, putting a sword in his hand. He accepted it. They led him down the path, toward the gates. The crowd shuddered back, repelled by the horror of whatever lay beyond. Cowards – too terrified even to venture near what they were sending him into. A thundering, terrible silence when they opened the gates – *they opened the gates!* – and then...

And then Nalim was made to walk forward until he was outside, and the gates clanged shut like the end of the world.

The crowd slowly dispersed.

It was only then that Clephe realized, with great surprise, that she was going to kill whoever had done this to her brother.

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Deep underground, Daeci, the Potentate, swept through the minds of his city. An observer would have seen only a golden-haired man in his early fifties, floating on his back in a pool of luminescent water, ringed by stalagmites. But there were no observers, only Daeci and the pool of water. It was called the Willowstream.

More precisely, Willowstream was the name given to the river of thought connecting the Potentate to his people, the link that had run from time before history in the caverns and crevices of the island. The stream flowed through the underground rivers and pools that ran everywhere deep under the city's foundations; where the caverns were, Daeci's mind went too. This cave – this room – was the only place humans could physically enter it, but through it, he could *feel* the city: millions upon millions of dim hovering lights, just out of focus – continuous humming that cycled through an infinite variety of pitch and texture. The stream jumbled the senses, and the caverns were vast. The feeling was indescribable.

Something had changed, though.

How long since he first noticed the strangeness in the waters?

Impossible to say. Here, time lost its discreteness, refusing to be broken into chunks of hours, days, years. It didn't matter. He knew what he was searching for: a fixed point, an alien voice. He was familiar with it by now, and he knew what to look for. Where was it?

The presence was elusive, but he did not feel frustration. Not here. Here there was neither

pain nor joy, no extremes of hunger or fear. Womblike, the stream encapsulated reality in its peace. It was killing him, he knew, over the course of years – slowly, gently, he felt his life draining out of him. It didn't matter. The stream was patient; time enough for death later. For now –

Ah!

The Potentate smiled. He had found what he was looking for.

## Chapter 5

The sun, notoriously unconcerned with the machinations of politics and punishment, rose in the east as it had for millions of years. The morning found Nalim sitting up at last, groaning. He had not moved since last night.

In spite of everything, he had to admit that this world outside was not what he'd been expecting. The Gray Book was clear on this point: outside the walls of the city, there was only Chaos. From the descriptions he'd read, he had always pictured swirling clouds of acid, hurricane winds, that sort of thing. Nothing but demons could survive out here, and the very air eroded the soul.

And yet...

The sky was plain blue, swept with breezes and soft clouds. The land was wild and uncultivated, but not so much worse than some forested areas he'd seen in the western part of the city, where the farmers lived. Birds sang. Weeds grew to his knees, and the smell of them permeated his nostrils. Far in the distance, mountains rose.

It was an illusion, of course. He knew that. Evil had always shrouded itself in beauty. But looking around, just listening to the sounds of nature, it was hard to believe.

Perhaps he would even die peacefully. He was innocent, after all.

At his feet was the sword he'd been given for the ceremony, half hidden by the tangled weeds. He picked it up and studied it: a brilliant tapered blade, over a meter long, with a double-handed silver hilt and a four-pointed starburst where silver met steel. They were called sunblades, these swords – ceremonial items, but with a real cutting edge. This sunblade had not come with a scabbard. He knew why; he knew where its blade was meant to be sheathed, what its final location was meant to be. But he was not ready for suicide – not yet.

He wondered whether Aemed had ever committed any real crime, or whether he had been a victim of chance just as he was. But then of course, he remembered suddenly, this *hadn't* been chance. Someone had done this deliberately, knowingly. No, not just someone – the *Potentate*. He had known.

There is hope, he'd said. Well, perhaps there was.

He began walking toward the distant peaks, working the pain out of his abused muscles. They'd given him a little water in his captivity, but no food, and right now he was in need of both. With this in mind, he directed his steps to the northeast, toward the great Jefis River that ran west from the mountains, down through the city and into the sea. That water was always boiled before drinking because it came from outside, from the foul place where he was now, but he did not see that he had much of a choice anymore. Perhaps he could find something to eat nearby. None of the scraggly patches of shrubs or vine-entangled trees he'd seen here had had berries, fruits, or anything edible-looking on them so far, and as for hunting, he probably couldn't have caught anything even if he'd had a proper hunting weapon. The sword was too heavy to be of much use there. He hefted it in his right hand, wondering why he'd brought it and what use it could possibly be out here. None, probably, but the thing was too beautiful to leave behind.

As the sun climbed higher, his parched throat cried out for attention, but all he could offer it



was the dusty air. Sweat stained his white robes. He didn't know how far it was to the river. There were few maps of the area outside the city, and those were drawn from what could be seen from the walls on clear days. It was not a good idea to study such matters too deeply. Still, he didn't think it could be more than twenty kilometers to the banks of the Jefis. Perhaps he could make it before nightfall.

But by the end of the day, he had not even come within sight of his goal, and he had found nothing to eat. He found a quiet place to rest under a low, smooth-barked tree of a kind he had never seen in the city, dropping his sword and himself to the tall grass in exhaustion. The faint ripples of hope he had felt on first awakening in this strange place were altogether extinguished. Mundane terrors like thirst and starvation did not seem so much better than the perils of demons and Chaos. For the first time in his life, he hoped it would rain. Nalim was so tired he fell asleep instantly in spite of everything.

The next morning, though, he crested a rocky hill – and there, below and not too distant, ran the dull and winding blue of the Jefis River. He followed its flow with his eyes, all the way to where it met the city. He was amazed at how far he had come.

In less than an hour he came to the waterside, and there – after a moment's hesitation – he knelt on the pebble-strewn shore and drank eagerly. A canopy of green sheltered him from the sun as he brought cool relief to his cracking lips. At last he fell back, deeply sated, and sighed in wonder and satisfaction. He began to see it more clearly: the Law had not abandoned him. The Law was always on the side of truth. He should never have doubted. The thought brought him a relief so powerful and sudden that he shuddered with the strength of its revelation. He knelt and recited the Invocation of Gratitude then and there, and that felt even better, so he did it again, and a third time.

At last he rose and bathed in the water, washing away the grime and sweat and fear of the previous day. He lay for a long time in the shallows of the wide river, resting his head on a patch of moss and letting the slow-moving air and liquid mingle with the darkness behind his eyelids. When he was ready, he donned his robe again and set out once more toward the mountains, following the river. He was confident now that he would find food; it was only a matter of time.

The truly amazing thing, though, came an hour later. That was when he found the bridge.

He hardly believed it, but there it was: a stone bridge spanning the river. Old, certainly, cracked and weathered and ivy-encrusted, but unquestionably the work of human beings. Demons were not mentioned much in the Gray Book, but one phrase came immediately to mind, something along the lines of *they make no works of beauty nor intelligence, and do not strive to create, for their pleasure is in destruction*. But no human besides Aemed had lived outside the city since its foundation at the dawn of history, and before the city there had been only savages struggling for a survival without meaning or purpose. It seemed impossible.

Could Aemed have done this? Could one man have created a stone bridge on his own, working without plans or tools or the guidance of the Law? And even if it were possible, why? The river was easy enough to cross.

A little farther on, he found another stone structure: a short section of wall, perhaps a meter high, crumbling and riddled with lichen. He hardly had time to wonder at it before he saw yet another structure, something that might have been the foundation of a building. As he walked, he saw more and more stone relics, ancient perhaps, but unmistakably the work of humans. If he hadn't known better, he might have imagined a village had existed here once. How was that possible?

It was hardly midday when he collapsed in a little shady area that blocked out the heat. His

hands shook. He was terribly hungry. Not for the first time, he looked at the sunblade and considered tossing it aside; the lack of a sheath meant there was no easy way to carry it, and he had held it in his hand the entire journey. Yet he could not leave it behind... His thoughts strayed, and returned as they often did to Clephe, the sister he had always loved but seldom visited. She probably hated him now. No doubt they all did; Wasmeth had certainly believed the accusations. He realized suddenly that he had never once wondered what Marene thought of him, and found that even now he did not care. Why should that be? The question should have been disturbing, but oh, he was so hungry...

It was then that he heard the great rush of air behind him like a beating of wings, and he whirled to see a demon landing less than five meters from him. He grabbed his sword and leaped to his feet, heart racing. So it had come at last. He hoped death would not be painful.

The creature stood about three meters tall, and it had the shape of a great bird. Rust-red feathers covered its body from its talons to its huge, elongated head. Its beak was thin and straight, except for a small curve at the tip; elaborate plumage swept a deep yellow down its back and into its long, trailing tail feathers. So that was how a demon looked up close – much less terrifying than the engravings portrayed them. On its back sat what seemed to be a human, a silver-haired woman who regarded him curiously with green-gray eyes. He was not fooled, of course; demons often took human form. He raised the blade defensively and balanced himself on his toes, adrenaline driving away thoughts of hunger. The sword shook in his hands.

The woman dismounted and took a few steps toward him, her expression speaking of curiosity and caution. She was dressed all in green, even her belt, and she wore trousers such as a man would wear. There was a beauty about her in spite of her age, or perhaps even because of it; she was nothing like he'd imagined a demon might look. He grimaced. Deceptions upon illusions

upon lies.

The woman began speaking words in some language he did not understand. He growled and lunged at her with the sword, not giving her a chance to finish, and she leaped back nimbly. Before he could try another attack, she pulled a quarterstaff from somewhere on the back of her mount and brought it up defensively.

So she had a weapon, too. His eyes narrowed. She was agile, but so was he; perhaps three days ago he could have had a chance. Today, though, he could barely stand. And of course there was the beast to consider. There was no way he could run; he had to find a solution here and now. The woman regarded him warily, but she made no aggressive moves. After a moment she spoke again, another string of gibberish. She seemed to be waiting for an answer.

"I don't know what you're saying, demon," he said coldly. "Leave me alone, or I'll destroy you. The Law protects me. I'm not afraid to die." He hoped that last part sounded more convincing to her than it had to him.

She nodded as if understanding something for the first time, but when she answered it was the same nonsense as before. Then she set her staff on the ground and took another step toward him, palms outward. She pointed at herself. "Vey," she said, pronouncing the sound distinctly. "Vey."

Nalim did not answer, and she repeated the word yet again. Was that her name? He sneered. "I am not going to tell you my name, demon."

The woman – Vey? – extracted some sort of package from the pack the bird-creature bore. She unwrapped it and held it forward so he could see: a loaf of bread. She made a show of taking a bite of it herself, then set it on the ground and backed away, watching him.

He crept forward, never taking his eyes off her or his hand off his sword. It certainly looked

and smelled like bread. *How they tempt me.* "I'd rather die," he said, and backed away. She did not follow. At last he resumed his walk toward the mountains, leaving her behind; but within minutes he saw the winged silhouette circling overhead once more.

His resolve was terribly weakened. He saw the way of it now; they would not take him all at once, but wear him down until he caved and became the instrument of his own destruction. That evening, he went to sleep without fear of being killed in the night, because now he understood the game; killing him outright was not what they were after. They wanted something more. He swore to himself he would not touch the bread.

But the next morning he awoke to a hunger more intense than anything he could have imagined, a hunger that was the beginning of starvation, and beside him was the bread. The demons were nowhere in sight.

His willpower crumbled.

The bread was dry and a little stale, but the taste of it was more wondrous than anything he had ever experienced. It seemed like only an instant before the entire loaf was gone. After that, the woman reappeared.

"Well, demon, I did what you wanted," he began – but at that moment the quarterstaff whirled in her hands, and the universe went black in a brief explosion of pain and color.

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Nalim became aware of a dull, throbbing pain in the side of his head, and instinctively he reached up to touch it – or tried to. His wrists were tied together, and so, he realized, were his ankles. The realization brought him abruptly to full consciousness, and he opened his eyes, shivering from the sudden chill. He gasped. There before him, as far as he could see, was the

ocean; no land was in sight. He lay on the back of the flying demon, borne away at last from all hope forever, floating in the midst of the all-encircling blue. The setting sun on his right told him he was headed due north. Into what hell he was being taken he could not imagine; here, in the deepest moment of his despair, he could only hope that it would soon be over.

An icy wind passed through the thin cotton of his robe, and he shivered again. He could not see the woman, but he heard her voice behind him, talking to him pleasantly as if he understood every word. The language was not harsh, but it had a stark, pristine quality. Now and again she would repeat her name, "Vey," and wait for a response. He did not answer.

She seemed so pleasant. He could almost believe her to be a real human, except what human would ride a demon outside the walls of the City? But the bread hadn't harmed him (though he was still hungry) and apart from the blow to the head, she had done him no harm – and of course, he had attacked her first. It was a troubling line of thought, not one he should be pursuing, but he could think of nothing else. Memories of the stone bridge resurfaced. Could humans really have found a way to survive outside the city walls? Did the protection of the Law extend to other places? No, of course not – the Gray Book made it clear. It was a paradox, and the only solution was that the woman was a demon, yet he was finding it harder and harder to accept.

Finally he answered her. "Vey."

"Vey!" she repeated excitedly, then thumped her chest. "Vey." She tapped his arm but said nothing, clearly waiting for a response.

He decided there could be no harm in telling her just this. "Nalim," he said.

"Nay limm," she repeated. "Nay limm?"

"Nalim," he confirmed. She smiled. Smiled!

A few hours later, he noticed a deep shadow and flashes of light on the horizon. They were

heading into a storm. "Are we going to fly into that?" he said. Perhaps their kind lived inside of stormclouds. The idea had a certain logic.

She did not answer, only shouted something to the demon that made it beat its great wings more rapidly. There was no way to judge velocity over the featureless water, but he got the impression they were moving very quickly. It was not long before low rumbles of thunder accompanied the distant flashes, and soon the black sky pelted his skin with frigid rain. Vey urged the demon to still greater speed. They did not go through the stormclouds but under them, which was a relief and yet, for some childish part of him, also a disappointment.

And then he saw it, a shadow up ahead rising from the roiling waters: land. They had come at last through Chaos to a place beyond the sea.

## Chapter 6

Iriel sat at the breakfast table, still in her nightgown, wrapped in the tranquil almost-silence of the early morning. Strands of her dark hair fell across her face, emphasizing her delicate features and high cheekbones. She was slender, in a graceful sort of way, as if spun from glass, yet her eyes were gentle. The shadows that leaned across the room lent her skin the appearance of ivory.

The room's only window faced to the west, denying her a view of the sunrise, but she imagined the rays as she ran the pen over the paper, shaping long lines of ink across the white surface. She did not look at what she was drawing. It was not a picture; it was an outlet.

Two nights ago, Wasmeth had told her what he'd done to Nalim.

She thought of her own best friends, the ones she had known since childhood, and tried to imagine pointing a stunner at them, firing, watching them dragged away to be sent outside the City to die. That was what he had done; he had killed his friend. This was the man she was going to

marry.

The pen flew more swiftly in her hand. No, it was wrong to think such things. Nalim had been dangerous; Wasmeth hadn't betrayed anyone. She couldn't imagine how hard it had been for him. She should feel pity for him, not this...what? Anger? Fear? Surely not fear.

She glanced at what she'd drawn: an intricate mess. Sounds of motion came from the bedroom and she hastily threw the drawing in the trash as she began making breakfast. Wasmeth had never quite approved of her drawings. He thought she should recite Invocations when she was upset. He didn't understand; the Spirit of the Law comforted each of its children differently.

A few minutes later he appeared in the kitchen, and she found herself wrapped in his arms, letting him kiss her. He pulled away, noticing her silence. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said. And there wasn't, not really; she knew she still loved him, which was all that mattered. It would just take time to understand this new side of him. She'd always known he was loyal to the Brotherhood, but this...

Breakfast and conversation helped, though, and soon she was feeling positively normal again. By the time the meal was over, she felt ready to start the day.

Just then her netlink rang, and she grabbed the receiver. "Iriel."

"Oh, good!" said a woman's voice. "It's you!"

"I'm sorry? Who is this?"

"Oh, you don't know me. Actually, I don't know you, either, but I hope I will. Well, I hope my son will – it's complicated. I need a favor."

"Slow down," said Iriel, trying to sort that out. "Start at the beginning. Who are you?" Wasmeth mouthed *who is it* to her, and she shrugged.

"My name is Essel," said the woman. "But this isn't about me, it's about my son, Imlaud.



He has amnesia. They've kept him in the Institute for the past year now, you know, the Mental Institute? Oh, it's terrible. Imlaud isn't crazy, but ever since a year ago he doesn't talk, doesn't seem to remember anything, hardly responds to people at all. Only now he *is* talking, but all he says is your name. Started just a few days ago. 'Iriel, Iriel, Iriel,' all he ever says. And I didn't know who Iriel was, so I decided to find out." The woman finally inhaled. "So you're her. Do you know him?"

"You said his name is Imlaud?"

"That's right."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I've never heard that name before."

"Oh." The silence hung awkwardly. "It's just that this is the first sign of progress we've had, and I was hoping...you could...would you be willing to come see him?"

"To do what?"

"Just to talk to him, see if he recognizes you. I don't know. Something." For a brief moment the woman's pain was audible through her conversational tones. "*Please*."

"Well, I...I suppose. All right," Iriel answered finally. "I'll come."

"Oh, bless you." Essel gave her directions and set up a date and time to meet, and Iriel hung up.

Nothing was ever simple.

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The demon descended, bringing into focus a fleeting world of grassy hills and shimmering lakes, shrouded in the remnants of the fading storm. So much land! Who could imagine there might be so much land anywhere? The island he had come from was a pebble compared to this

place. Here and there a patch of trees was visible, and from the scale of these Nalim was able to get some sense of how high he really was. It was a staggering drop to the world below, and he was glad he was tied down securely.

The rain had stopped. On the horizon he saw a forest, far larger than any he had ever seen before, and he guessed that that was their destination. The sun – finally visible again – eased its way down to the treetops as they landed in a dirt clearing surrounded by a convocation of oak and hickory trees. Vey dismounted and spoke with someone Nalim could not see. Then she cut the ropes on his ankles and helped him to his feet. He looked around in fear and wonder.

Once again, he found that this new place was much more like home than he'd expected. The environment was unfamiliar, yet more familiar than he could have hoped; he could breathe the air; he stood on solid soil; and the sky was a comforting purple as it faded to twilight. It was getting harder and harder to believe that Vey was a demon. Was this really where she lived? He could almost describe it as beautiful.

Of greater interest at the moment, though, was the tall young man beside her who was watching him so intently. His green tunic and leather boots made him seem at home in the woods, but it was the hair that drew Nalim's amazement. Red hair! Perhaps it was dyed, but it looked natural. What sort of people had red hair? The man circled Nalim, looking him up and down and prodding him with his staff until a sharp word from Vey ended it. He shot an annoyed glance at Nalim, as if it were his fault, and nodded once at Vey before returning to his original position. Vey took Nalim by the arm and led him down a narrow trail he hadn't noticed before. Looking back he caught a glimpse of the winged demon taking flight once more, riderless, and then the forest encircled them completely.

They walked for less than a kilometer before reaching the city.

He did not notice right away that it was a city at all. The only sign of its existence at first was that the forest became less dense, offering more space between the massive boles. Wide-eyed with amazement, he noticed the first buildings: squat, rusty brown circular structures nestled around the bases of the gigantic trunks. Here and there firelight peeked through the branches, or a warm glow lit one of the rounded windows in the deepening shadow. The place was not so much a collection of buildings as a symbiosis of forest and humanity.

Their destination was unspectacular, just another of the dirt-brown buildings huddled around its resident tree. Inside, a single dark room smelled of mud and fresh rain. Another guard took over watching him, and Vey left the two of them alone without a word. He tried to follow her, but the guard placed himself in the doorway significantly, glaring down at his new charge. He seemed a man well-suited to his task: broad shoulders, hard-lined mouth, green eyes set deep in a face framed by a fiery red beard. Nalim probably wouldn't have tried to get past him even had the guard not had a dagger at his side. He raised his hands in a placating gesture. "No problem," he said. "I'll just stay here." The man scowled.

It was not long before others came to his cell bringing food, water, and dry clothes, and after accepting all of these he fell gratefully into sleep.

## Chapter 7

The reeve of the forest city known as Larlam was plump, with a childish face and a mess of curly brown hair that made him seem less than he really was. His name was Sivete, and he was not a native of the forest kingdom, which made his position all the more unlikely – and all the more remarkable. Vey, of course, had known him for years and was not fooled by appearances. Sitting across the table from him now, she reminded herself to be cautious. The reeve was an honorable

man, but the situation was delicate.

"Extraordinary," he breathed, speaking in the same language that had perplexed Nalim for the past day and a half. "He's really from the walled city? You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be, sir. The captain's report spoke of an enormous gathering around the gates, and then someone being sent out, and a few days later there I find him. It can't be a coincidence. We've never found anyone outside the walls before."

"No one's ever left the city before. You say he was armed?"

"Yes, he had a broadsword, but no provisions. I gave him some of my rations, and he ate them like he was starving. I don't understand it."

"Could it be some kind of human sacrifice?"

"I suppose, but –" She cut off at the sound of voices from the doorway, and a tall man in a dark, ornately decorated uniform stormed into the room, followed by an apologetic guard. The royal watchdog. It was only a matter of time before the crown got involved in the matter, but she'd been hoping for more than five minutes.

"This is an outrage," he thundered. "Your men have no right to keep me out of your meetings! I represent the king, and the king will not be barred from going where he wishes in his own kingdom!"

Sivete dismissed the relieved guard with a nod. "You represent the king," he said crisply, "you are not the king yourself. But there is no need for argument," he continued, cutting off further protests. "You're here now. What do you want?"

"I report directly to His Majesty, and I will be kept updated on all intelligence regarding the prisoner. And I will not be hindered, by you or anyone else."

"No one is hindering you," said Vey. "Sit down. We were just going over the details of his

capture."

The king's ambassador remained standing, dismissing her from his attention with a glance. The flickering torchlight painted uneasy shadows on his scowling face. "I wasn't finished. What are your plans for him?"

Sivete frowned. "That will take some time to determine."

"He will be delivered to the king."

"Indeed?"

"I warn you, reeve, you overstep your bounds!"

"I meant no disrespect," he answered placidly. "If the king issues a royal edict demanding this man, we will of course comply. So far, he has not. Who knows what His Majesty may command?" He put on his most ingratiating smile. "Would you care to join us for the rest of the briefing?"

"I will have a full report from you by tomorrow morning," he said icily, and left.

Sivete ran his fingers through his hair distractedly. "Insufferable."

"Sir, he's right. The king will want to take our prisoner as soon as possible. A messenger is probably being sent to tell him the news even now, and in two days at the most the ambassador will have the royal authority he needs. We should work quickly."

"Perhaps. But that messenger may not return with the news he expects. The king's been flexing his muscles too much lately, and he knows it. None of the reeves were pleased with his iron and copper tariffs, and if he overrules local authority with a royal edict now, the reeves may feel he's power hungry. Bad things happen to such kings."

"What will he do?"

"I think His Majesty will be willing to consider terms in exchange for a voluntary release of

our prize. We'll wait and see what he offers, but I have a feeling this find of yours will be a significant bargaining chip. You're right, though. We should work quickly."

"Sir, he doesn't speak the language, we won't be able to teach him much in two days. It will be difficult to learn anything from him."

Sivete paused heavily. "Vey, right now the circle of people who know about this project is very small. I'd like to keep it that way. I need to know I can trust you. If you want out of this, tell me now, because once you say yes you can't go back."

"You can trust me, sir."

He nodded. "Then I'll tell you this much. We're seeking Rel's involvement."

"I see," she answered, keeping her voice flat with an effort of will. "And will that be going in the royal report as well?"

The reeve of Larlam leaned back in his chair and chuckled grimly. "The king will find out, I am sure."

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It was two in the morning and she had to work the next day, but Clephe found sleep impossible. She had gone to Marene for comfort, but also for a starting point in her investigation of Nalim's banishment. Marene hadn't been much help in that respect, beyond providing a list of Nalim's acquaintances whom she might speak to. Marene herself was something of a mystery – Clephe saw no sadness in her, no anger, nothing. It was as though all emotion had drained from her, leaving only a pleasant face that occasionally smiled.

At the moment, however, Clephe had more pressing concerns. She had someone to kill, once she discovered who that someone was. Tomorrow the investigation would continue. For

tonight, if she could only sleep...

The doorbell chimed, and she groaned. "Go away!" she said, more for herself than for whoever was at the door. Who could *possibly* want her at this time of night? Another chime. She looked through the peephole and got a sudden jolt – Tarsial. This wasn't the first time he'd come to her apartment, but it had never been in the middle of the night before. "Go away," she said again.

"Open the door, Clephe."

"No. I was just going to bed. Leave me alone."

She half expected him to turn that into some kind of joke, but he didn't. What he said instead was, "I know what happened to Nalim."

A sudden hope flared in her, edged with fear. "Everyone knows what happened to Nalim."

"No. I know what really happened." She didn't answer. "Let me in," he said.

"First tell me what you know."

"Not until you open the door."

She took a knife from the kitchen drawer and put it in a crack between couch cushions where she could reach it easily. No sense taking unnecessary risks, but if he was telling the truth...she opened the door.

"Hi," she said uneasily, trying not to make her nervousness obvious. "Come in."

Tarsial entered and surveyed the apartment, examining everything, running his fingers over various decorations. He lifted a small wooden sculpture her grandmother had carved, a mahogany songbird, and examined it delicately. "Where did you get this, Clephe?" he asked. "It's so beautiful."

She ignored the question. "You said you knew about Nalim."

"I know who betrayed him."

She waited. "Well?"

"I did it," he answered, soft and low, then burst out laughing. "Clephe! I'm kidding. You take life so *seriously*."

"Do you know anything, or not?" she asked, in the same soft tone he'd used.

"I know I love you more than the Law itself. I shouldn't have lied to you, I didn't want to, but you wouldn't let me in, I didn't know what else to say. I had to see you again."

"I would like you to leave," she said carefully.

"Why?" he demanded. "You don't understand. I've had to love you my entire life. When I said my wedding vows, I closed my eyes and imagined it was you, Clephe. Everything I've ever done has been for *you*!" It had the sound of a rehearsed speech, nervous and passionate. He came close, reached out his hand to touch her face, but she backed away. "What are you afraid of? Love is the greatest experience we have. Love is what separates us from," he gestured vaguely, "outside the walls. All I want is one night with you, Clephe, one night of happiness, and then I'll go back to the darkness and never bother you again. I promise. That's more than fair."

Terror raced inside her as she backed slowly toward the couch, toward her secret weapon. Be calm, she thought. Don't make him desperate. She began fighting for time. "Love is more than sex," she said. "Let's talk a while. I want to hear the sound of your voice." Keep him talking. Keep him sane. The knife was out of her reach; she sat down on the couch.

"We've been talking for years. I'm sick of that game. I don't want the game, Clephe. I want you." He came closer, and there was nowhere left to retreat. "Do you love me, or not?"

"Yes," she said hesitantly. "I – I was afraid to tell you, but –"

"*Liar!*" he howled, shoving her against the couch, sliding his hand over her neck and beneath the collar of her blouse. He lowered his face to hers and she bit his lip savagely, spilling



his blood over both of them. Tarsial roared and jerked back, giving her just enough room to grab the knife, and she stabbed wildly. He caught her wrist and twisted, making her drop the knife with a yelp of pain, then hurled her onto the floor and picked up her weapon. Blood swam over his chin and down his neck; in the lamplight it looked black, like oil. She expected him to fly into another rage, but when he spoke, it was slow and soft, like before.

"It's all right, Clephe. I understand. You don't have to love me. But I *will* have you." He pulled out a stunner from his back pocket. "And I don't need your cooperation for that."

"Tarsial," she pleaded, "I wasn't lying. Of *course* I love you. But I was afraid... I was afraid of hurting you. You have this perfect image of me, and I didn't want to disappoint you. I'm...I'm sorry." It sounded ridiculous, even to her, but she could see the doubt on his face. Could she be telling the truth, after all? Yes, believe it, you monster, just a little longer.

"You really mean it?"

"I'll show you how much I mean it." She got up off the floor, slowly so as not to alarm him, and sidled up, swinging her hips from side to side. Then, dangling her arms behind his neck, she pushed herself tight against his chest and parted her lips, her mouth centimeters from his, waiting.

And he did kiss her, but not roughly, as she had expected. He was slow, tender, methodical – loving. The stunner clattered to the floor, his arms encircled her – one around her waist, drawing her tighter, and the other hand on the back of her neck, his fingers running through her hair. Blood from his lip ran hot and bitter over her tongue. She let him kiss her, leading him gently toward the couch and playfully sitting him down, with herself on his lap. Then she raised her lips to his ear and whispered, "Let me turn out the lights."

She'd thought he might be suspicious, but he let her go. She flipped the switch on the panel by the door, and the room went dark. She turned back toward him –

Clephe dashed into the hall, using her fingerprint to lock the door behind her. She heard pounding and a shout, but she ignored it, punching the emergency code on her netlink. In a high, flat voice she explained what had happened. The girl on the speaker promised someone would be there in minutes, and urged her to get away.

But she couldn't run. She could hear his voice.

"Clephe?" he said. "Clephe, I know you're out there. Won't you answer me?" She stood rigid, not daring to speak. "I still love you. I will always love you. You know that." Another pause, longer than before, and then a loud thump on the door, making her jump. "*Answer me!*" he bellowed. Then, finally, she could hear him sobbing, and he said no more.

She spat blood.

In a few minutes it was all over; officers of the Law came and took him away, weeping and bleeding; he did not resist. One stayed behind to comfort her, speaking kind words, asking questions gently. When the questions were done, he offered to stay with her, but she thanked him and waved him away. And with that, she was alone again.

Clephe glanced at the chronometer, shivering. Three o'clock.

She changed out of her blood-stained clothes and went to bed, but she did not sleep that night at all.

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Nalim had not been allowed outside the room since he'd arrived two days ago, but by recent standards, life was good. The guards, while ill-tempered and not very talkative, gave him plenty of food and water and did not hurt him. He was kept warm and dry, and the room was clean; apart from his confinement, he was not mistreated. In fact, if he'd had to pick a single word to describe

his situation, it would have been *puzzling*.

For one thing, it was increasingly obvious that the forest people were exactly what they seemed to be – humans – and not some sort of demonic illusion. That was a mystery in itself, because it contradicted everything the Gray Book said about the world outside. But beyond that, the people were demon-riders, which should mean they were allied with Chaos. Why, then, were they treating him so kindly? The realm of Chaos seemed decidedly benign.

This new world was primitive, though. Torches and oil lamps seemed to be the only sources of light in the nighttime; he had seen no evidence of electricity anywhere. That dagger the guard carried was probably state-of-the-art weaponry around here. No surprise – it was what he would expect from a people cut off from the Law. It was only a matter of waiting for the right opportunity to take advantage of it.

He had a teacher now. For the past two days, a man named Clor had come to talk to him for hours on end, mostly about the island city. (How bizarre, to need some identifier to differentiate the city – The City – from other cities!) Nalim was making some progress in understanding the new language, but communication was still mainly through gestures and drawings. At first Nalim had resisted giving up information, but as time passed, his resistance seemed less like heroism and more like ingratitude, and he'd relented. The man seemed interested in every aspect of Nalim's old life; he was fascinated by the idea of cars, light bulbs, skyscrapers, and all the other "advanced" technology, but he also paid careful attention to descriptions – such as he could manage – of government, society, and Law. Some ideas were hard to communicate. Clor still seemed to think that levels were a military hierarchy; they appeared to have no equivalent concept.

It was a two-way exchange, though, and what Nalim had learned was extraordinary. The city was called Larlam, but it was not sovereign like the island city; rather it was one of multiple

cities – he wasn't sure how many – all ruled by a single man in a great city to the north. The man seemed to be like a Potentate, except that he was chosen by a council since there were no levels to set him apart. The kingdom – Mirnor, it was called – encompassed most of the forest, but the forest was only a tiny place compared to the rest of the world, and there were other nations: a small city called Manorviter to the southeast that governed a handful of villages, and a nation on the shore even further south, hundreds of kilometers away. The winged demons had their own city in the forest to the west, which few humans had ever seen; and far to the northeast was...something. Nalim was having trouble understanding what Clor said about that region, and he did not seem to like discussing it. But there was so much to take in, such a wealth of undreamt-of diversity in the universe. It strained credulity.

A man walked into the room, and Nalim half-rose, expecting Clor – but this was someone new. He was thin and wrinkled, his cotton-white beard clinging in wisps to his parchment skin; his eyes were pure white and saw nothing. The old man felt his way around the room, touching the walls and the table. He was getting closer.

Nalim offered him a greeting, one of the few phrases of the new language that he understood. The stranger perked up and shuffled over to his location with surprising quickness. The old man's blank gaze swept toward him, forcing Nalim back a step involuntarily. The man's arm shot out, caught empty air, searched until it found his shoulder and clamped there tightly. He seized Nalim's face.

"Lasmoth," the man rasped, and the world turned to ice.

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There was a rhythm of motion in the dark place, and Nalim listened to it until he realized it

was the pounding of his heart; and with that knowledge the void was still.

"Where am I?" he shouted, but the darkness took the words, and they died. Another presence entered, and a spark leaped across the gap between them; and Nalim tried to scream, but there was no sound, only the spark: on, and on, and on...

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Nalim stood up, gasping desperately for air; Rel was gone.

His head swam. It was the same, and yet different – he knew things now. Names, faces, images of places he had never been, patterns of color and sound...it all fought for attention in a jumbled blur. He thought he could speak the language now, or bits of it anyway. And the sky – there was so much about the sky, variations of light and color and stars and clouds and the screaming of wind and the fear-rush of falling and more, so much more, but also so many years of darkness; and far in the back there was a cold place, hardly there at all but infinitely deep and horribly sad and stretching back forever and ever...

*What?*

Lasmoth. That was what the old man had said. Now he knew what it meant: sight. Yes, that made sense. The blind man had granted him vision, a way of seeing new things he did not understand. But what was he seeing? Rel, the man's name was Rel. How did he know that?

What had happened to him?

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A few days later, around midnight at the northern edge of Larlam, a figure in a cloak the color of twilight crept through the fire-lit darkness among the shadows of trees. No one saw it but

a guard patrolling the empty marketplace, and he thought only that it was unusual for a visitor to arrive at this time of night; but he saw nothing suspicious and continued his patrol. His shift was almost over anyway, and it was getting cold.

## Chapter 8

Iriel met Essel, Imlaud's mother, for the first time in the main lobby of the Institute for the Treatment of Mental Disorders – a wide, austere and unwelcoming room. Essel herself was much as Iriel had pictured her, white-haired, grandmotherly and plump. She was even more talkative in person than over the link.

"Bless you for coming," she was saying. "I knew you would, you were so sweet on the phone. I bet you're wonderful at your job. What is it you do, dear?"

"I'm a teacher," Iriel answered. "Where is your son, ma'am?"

"Oh, I had an appointment with one of these nurses, here, she's supposed to come and – ah! There she is. They know me by now, don't you, dears? I come so often." The nurse, a prim young woman in a long spotless white dress, nodded curtly. As they followed her down the hall, Essel leaned close and whispered, "I know where we're going, of course, but they don't like people wandering around unattended, you know, barging into people's rooms, stealing things from the doctors, I suppose." She giggled. She seemed careless, but Iriel knew better. People dealt with grief in different ways.

The nurse unlocked the door. "You have thirty minutes," she said, and then they were alone. Essel opened the door and Iriel followed, shutting it behind her.

The room was black until Essel hit the light switch, shaking her head. "Imlaud likes it dark," she said sadly. "Don't understand it."

It was a small area, a single room about the size of her kitchen, with white walls and a white bed. Near the door stood a small table with a tray of food, untouched, and a glass of water, almost empty; a clock hung on the opposite wall. There were chairs for visitors, but no windows. Imlaud himself was a young man around Iriel's age, blond-haired and pale, in ill-fitting light blue pajamas. His eyes – the same color as his pajamas – were sunk deep into sad, pale sockets. He lay curled up on his side at the foot of the bed, surrounded by twisted sheets. If he'd noticed them coming in, he gave no indication.

"Imlaud," Essel called gently. "Imlaud, it's Mother. I came to see you." She stepped forward. "I brought you a visitor. I thought you might want to meet her. Her name is Iriel." No reaction. Essel glanced at her unhappily. "Say something, dear."

"Hello, Imlaud," said Iriel, approaching the bed. "It's me, Iriel. Do you know that name? Iriel?"

Still he didn't move.

She pulled up a chair and began talking to him gently, pointless chatter, just to give her voice something to say. Essel stood out of sight behind her, watching, silent for the first time. Finally, Imlaud stirred – just a little. "Iriel," he said in a thin voice.

"Yes, that's me," Iriel answered. "Do you know me? It's me, Iriel. Do you know me? Do you know Iriel?" He didn't seem to understand, but he repeated her name a few more times, then fell silent again.

At last the nurse came, to tell them their thirty minutes were up. But as Iriel turned to go, Imlaud sat up suddenly in bed. "Iriel!" he cried. "Don't leave!"

"Perhaps we could stay just a bit longer, dear," Essel said to the nurse, but she shook her head.

"Thirty minutes," she said firmly. "It's the Law. If we let everyone stay as long as they wanted..." Then, more kindly, "You can come back tomorrow if you want." When they shut the door behind them, Imlaud was still calling for Iriel.

When they were outside the building, Essel gave Iriel a sad smile. "Don't leave, he said. It's the first time he's said anything new."

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Sleep was the furthest thing from Nalim's mind as he sat in total darkness in his cell, still puzzling over his newfound knowledge. The picture was slowly becoming clearer. What he had received was a fragment of Rel's memories, a piece of personal history that extended all the way from birth to the time of the transfer, about six hours ago. There was a lot missing, but even the fraction he'd received was enough to overwhelm him, at first. He now felt as if a piece of him actually *was* the old man. The amount of detail was astounding.

For one thing, Rel was much younger than he looked; Nalim placed his age somewhere in the sixties. Long ago he'd been a demon rider, like Vey, except he was the highest rank of them all – captain, something like that. Memories of those times were mostly happy. There was one face in particular, a young woman with freckles and strawberry hair, which appeared over and over. She was usually smiling.

And then after a certain point, there were no more images. He had apparently gone blind in his late twenties, and from then on there were only sounds and feelings – but all jumbled, like a cracked mirror. The later memories were difficult to understand, and there was something frightening about them; he couldn't focus on them too hard. And still there was that terrible cold place, deep in the back, that he dared not touch.



He heard a soft scuffling outside, then a muffled thump, and in the doorway there appeared a human silhouette limned silver by moonlight. Nalim rose to his feet in surprise. The figure crossed the space between them in a few quick strides, scanning the room cautiously.

"Come with me," the intruder whispered. It was a woman's voice, soft and urgent, but her face was shrouded beneath the hood.

"You can speak my language!" he breathed.

"Yes. There's no time. Hurry."

"Why should I come with you?"

"Do you want to stay in this prison?" she demanded. He didn't answer. "There's no *time*!"

"All right."

She nodded and stuck her head out the door, stepping over the guard's unconscious body and looking left and right before motioning Nalim to follow. The two of them made their way through the city, a pair of dim blurs in the blackness. His heart pounded in its cage, certain at every second that they would be caught; he had no idea what the consequences would be, but his imagination supplied endless scenarios of secret trials and gruesome executions. The night passed around him, each moment blending into the next until there was nothing left but the ground beneath his feet and the enclosing darkness.

Then all at once he looked around and saw that they were out of the city. "Run!" she said. He ran behind her along the black trail among the black and looming trees, on and on, until he did not think he could take another step. Then she brought him to a halt and led him off the trail, through tangled and overgrown branches toward...what?

"This is it," said the cloaked woman.

"What? Where are we?"

"Somewhere the searchers won't find us. And there *will* be searchers out hunting for us before very long. Don't doubt it." She pulled back her hood, and he saw her face in the moonlight: long dark hair tied back into a ponytail, bright eyes, youthful skin. Beads of sweat on her face marked the exertion of the run, yet even so she was beautiful: feminine, and strong. She wore a curious expression, as if deciding the next move in some game of strategy.

"I apologize for this," she said.

"For wh – " he began, but then her soft lips were on his, pressing a kiss on him, pushing her tongue deep into his mouth. He shoved her away roughly; the smell of her was still in his nostrils. Nalim scowled.

"Again, I apologize," she said. "I know this is very confusing, but it was necessary. I won't do it again."

"What do you mean, *necessary*?"

"I can't answer that yet."

His scowl deepened. "Who are you?"

"I can't tell you that, either, but my name is Ayda. That will have to be enough for now." She knelt and began clearing away dead branches and undergrowth from a limestone outcropping.

"Ayda. Why are you helping me escape?"

"For the same reason they captured you in the first place. You have something I want. In their case, it was information about your technology. The forest kingdom has always been interested in advancing its technological state. They are supremely concerned with the future."

"And what do you want from me?"

"I can't tell you yet."

"I see." Well, she was consistent.

She stood up and gestured to the hole in the rock she'd revealed. "This leads to a network of caves that will take us to our destination. It will be a journey of several days, but we'll be safe from the rukhs in the meantime."

"The rukhs?"

"The winged animals that the forest people ride."

"You mean demons!"

"Is that what you call them? No, I suppose that's not surprising. Listen, as long as we're above ground we're in danger of being captured. We need to get into these caves, and then we can talk. Follow me."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't," she said, crawling through the hole on her hands and knees. "Nothing is certain. Never forget that."

He glanced up at the sky one last time, muttered a curse, and crawled into the cave after her.

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Seeing the reeve of Larlam get angry was like witnessing a total eclipse of the sun – rare, but spectacular when it happened. It was happening.

"You let him get *away*?" Sivete bellowed, his face flushing bright red. His footsteps traced a short straight line on the stone floor. "Would anyone care to explain how the single most important thing ever to land in this scruffy little shrub of a city could simply *walk out* under our noses?" He paused. "*Anyone*?"

The captain of the guard glanced back at the five officers behind him as if searching for

guidance, but they had all found something engaging to look at on the floor. He swallowed. "Sir, I  
— "

*"Find him!"*

## Chapter 9

The interior of the cave was chilly and damp and absolutely dark.

A cone of light appeared from a silver cylinder in Ayda's hand, revealing a narrow tunnel of white rock, the walls glistening with water. Ayda continued on, and Nalim followed, his knees and palms growing painfully cold as they pressed against the wet limestone. The tunnel sloped gradually downward until it came to a wide cavern tall enough that they could stand upright. A pale chandelier of stalactites adorned the ceiling, and little pools everywhere reflected the radiance of the flashlight. The sound of dripping water echoed placidly.

Ayda took a deep breath. "It should be easier from here. Tell me, what's your name?"

"Why should I tell you? You haven't told me anything."

"I told you my name."

True enough. There was something compelling about her answers, as though every word were so reasonable that it was impossible to argue. "Nalim," he said.

"All right, Nalim. There is a great deal you are curious about, but some things must stay hidden for now. I can't tell you who I am, where I'm from, or why I'm rescuing you. And don't ask why I can't tell you those things, because I can't tell you that, either. Anything else, I may be able to answer."

The cavern grew as they passed ever deeper beneath the surface, developing into an array of columns and arches that spanned the ceiling. "Can you at least tell me where we're headed?"

"Northeast."

"That's a direction, not a destination."

"Correct."

He tried again: "I guess you're from my city, then."

She did not even glance back. "What makes you say that?"

"You're the first person here who's spoken my language, for one thing. And that flashlight in your hand. No one outside my city has that kind of technology, from what I've seen."

"It's a reasonable guess."

"Is it a correct guess?" She didn't answer. "No questions about where you're from. Right. How about this: why do I have someone else's memories in my head?"

"Whose memories?"

"An old man named Rel. Do you know him?"

"I've never met him, but I'm familiar with what he can do." Was that a note of uncertainty, just now? "I suppose he would be a logical tool in a case like yours. He can reach directly into your mind and see your life as you remember it. You should know that whatever you learned about him during the exchange, he learned a great deal more about you. That isn't going to make my job any easier."

She knew a few things about this world, then. If she was really from his city, she had been here for a while. "How did he do it?"

"That requires a little history."

He laughed. "I've got time."

"Well, the forest kingdom controls the eastern half of this forest, but to the west is a city called Sanctum, encircled by a high wall. The city has no gate because no one who lives there

needs one."

"The demon city."

"They aren't demons, and the sooner you accept that, the better. They're called rukhs."

"If they aren't demons, what are they?"

"Sentient beings, like you and I. Different is not the same as evil." She shrugged. "Sanctum has had a partnership with the humans for years. They've granted Mirnor exclusive rights to train riders, each of whom is paired with one rukh for life. The riders act as messengers, spies, occasionally chauffeurs – almost everything but soldiers, since the rukhs refuse to be used as weapons. In exchange, Sanctum receives an annual fee. Of course, they also learn at least as much from the spy missions as their riders do.

"The rukhs call their ruler the starbird. About two hundred years ago, the starbird granted the captain of the riders an unprecedented opportunity: he was allowed to not only come inside the city's walls, but actually meet the starbird itself. The starbird said the rukhs had discovered a magic that could grant flight to a human being, but that it had never been tried before, and might be fatal. The captain couldn't turn down two once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, no matter the risk, so he accepted. He paid for it with his life.

"The starbird has made the offer three more times since then, and all of them died. All, that is, except the most recent. Rel went to the starbird forty years ago and came back alive, but he was blind and half-insane. For a long time he wouldn't talk to anyone, and even later he refused to say what happened. Some think he doesn't know himself. But he also gained the power he used on you. Nalim, if you have his memories, do you recall anything about what happened in Sanctum that day forty years ago?"

"I...it's hard to say. I don't know which memories correspond to what parts of his life, and

it's all jumbled...Feelings of fear and confusion, I think. Nothing specific." Could any of this be true? Did the starbird really have the power to let men fly – perhaps some kind of advanced technology?

"No one else he's bonded with can remember anything either. It's a mystery, something I've often wondered about."

Mysteries, it seemed, were one thing they had no shortage of.

## Chapter 10

Moonlight fell through shifting clouds and shimmered on the rippling water, the only light in the cool blackness. Iriel stared at the bubbling fountain in silence, her eyes drifting in and out of focus, watching the reflections go from beads to crystals to liquid diamonds, and back again.

Wasmeth sat on the log beside her, a warm shadow. She wrapped an arm around his neck and leaned closer, resting on his shoulder. It felt so good just to sit, to not struggle with language and all the confusion that implied. Silence had a way of soaking through the skin, into the marrow, if you let it just sit long enough.

Wellspring Fountain was nestled in a little corner between boulders, under a high and ancient poplar tree. It lay outside the City proper, out past the farmlands, at the extreme western end of the island where the land was rocky and few buildings stood. The stream that issued from this fountain trickled down through rock and miniature canyons to join the Jefis River, where it would sweep out to sea. A depressing thought. She let it drift into the silence with all the others. That was the way life was, she reflected: every now and then, you had peace.

Wasmeth took hold of her and turned her gently to the left, then began massaging her shoulders. She sighed in pleasure. "What are you thinking about?" he whispered.

I was thinking how wonderful it was not to talk, she thought, but felt guilty immediately.

"Nothing," she said. "You?"

She could hear the smile in his voice. "I was thinking what it would be like to get married here."

"Mmmm. That might be nice." The Wellspring was a popular place for weddings. A popular place for everything, really. Even this late at night, she was surprised no one else was there. "Have you thought any more about who you want to invite?"

"I was thinking we might make a list of everyone we're *not* going to invite. It'd be shorter."

"Hey, now. It's not my fault I have a big family." She leaned back into him. "Actually, I was thinking of inviting my students."

"Are you serious?"

"Why not? I'm sure they'd enjoy it."

"I think you love them more than you love me."

It was a joke, but it upset her. Love was not something to joke about. It was her own love that pushed that thought away too, for his sake. "There's an eight-year-old girl named Syala who writes the most darling little stories about Thiowill and the founding of the City." She giggled.

"Actually, it's usually the same story over and over, but she does her own illustrations. She gives me most of them to keep, and I can't throw them away. And there's a boy named Mokaël, only five, who doesn't smile much. He draws these pictures of his house, and he always draws the comet in the sky, bright yellow, barreling down toward it. You should talk to him a bit, love, tell him about the missile and how there's nothing to be scared of. Actually, he reminds me of Clephe a bit." The fingers on her shoulders came to a halt, and she glanced back. "What is it?"

"I had a talk with Clephe today. She's...upset about Nalim." He began working her



shoulders again.

"That's understandable," she said cautiously, not sure where he was headed.

"No, not just upset. Angry. She thinks he was innocent."

"Oh."

The silence came back, not restful this time but angry and pensive. Angry, because she had not said she disagreed, and he knew it. I want to go back, she thought, back to how we were before, love. When I could say whatever I wanted, because it always made you happy. When you weren't so...*into* the Brotherhood.

Only...had there ever been such a time? Or had she just refused to see?

She fumbled for a different subject, to pacify him. "I went to see Imlaud again yesterday."

"The one that doesn't remember anything? Make any progress?"

"Not much," she admitted. "But he says a few words now besides just my name. Strange things, short phrases about crayons and colors. I don't really understand. His mother is excited, though. It's more than he's ever done."

"Do you know why he says your name?"

"No. It's odd, though – he does look familiar, just a little, like a face from a dream or something. I don't know. Maybe I just think that because I want it to make sense."

The conversation died then, and after a while his left hand slid down to her waist, drawing her close. She tilted her head back, exposing her bare neck to his kisses. His lips crept around her throat, up her chin, along her cheeks...and finally, finally to her lips.

It was not peace, but for the moment, it was close enough.

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There was no way to measure time in the subterranean chambers, no cycle of sun and stars to distinguish the hours, and the journey lagged on, cold and weary. But Ayda didn't complain, so he resolved to do likewise. He felt like a child, ferried from one location to another by people more knowledgeable and powerful than himself. The least he could do was keep up with his guide, even if the effort exhausted him.

That night – afternoon? morning? – the two of them ate a meager supper of cheese and salted pork, and drank from the cold, clear pools of water, which Ayda said were as clean as anything. Later they slept on a slab of rock that was flat and reasonably dry. She lent him her cloak as a bed, which was better than nothing. When she turned off the light, darkness returned like an inky shroud over everything; but in spite of his exhaustion he did not fall asleep right away, his mind carefully sorting through everything she'd told him. He found himself returning again and again to Rel's memories, examining them one at a time like gems and recalling Ayda's words: the rukhs are not demons. At last he fell into a fitful sleep.

They awoke and continued without breakfast. Ayda encouraged him to speak in the language of the mainland, which she called Muelli. She said the name came from a time millennia ago, when everyone lived under an emperor named Muellex; and such was the strength and fire of his rule, she said, that the empire and its language and its leader were all one, and all took his name. When Muellex died, the empire fragmented but the language remained, and through all the years of change that followed, it kept its ancient name. Regardless, the foundations of Muelli were set firmly in his mind by the memory transfer, and learning new words was less like acquiring new knowledge than remembering something long forgotten. He spoke the language like a kind of game, flexing his mind experimentally through new parameters.

"So, tell me," she said some time later. "How did you end up leaving?"

"Leaving?"

"Your city."

"No reason I should tell you anything." He was still annoyed by her own refusal to talk about herself.

"Fair enough."

Nalim wondered what Clephe was doing right then – doubtless somewhere safe, and warm. Or was she? The thought struck him that if they had come for him – for whatever reason – perhaps she would be in danger too. He thought of Wasmeth, the terrible coldness he'd seen on the man's face just before he fired the stunner. Nalim had seen that coldness before, but never directed at him. He imagined that stunner pointing at his sister and shuddered. Clephe had always been able to take care of herself, but what could even someone like her do against the Brotherhood?

Finally, just to clear his mind, he answered her question. "They kicked me out," he said.

"Hm?"

"You asked why I left. I didn't want to. They kicked me out."

"Why?"

"They said I was trying to create a machine intelligence."

She nodded. "Were you?"

"No!"

The old resentment bubbled up inside him again, and he let the conversation end after that. By rights he should be home now, worrying about respectable things, like work, the oracle, and whether his marriage would fail. Instead he was here, following a woman he didn't know, to a destination she refused to reveal, worrying about capture by *demon riders*...

The cave exit was welcome when it came.

## Chapter 11

Vey leaned forward on the rukh, clutching her sky blue riding cloak around her tightly. Below her, the earth stretched out like a child's canvas; behind her, four other riders fanned out in a great V shape; above her there was only the infinite blue. It was more than beautiful. It was what she lived for.

She raised a gloved fist, signaling the others to break up and begin the search separately to cover a wider area. Small chance any of Larlam's riders would find Nalim under the cover of the forest, but Sivete had been in no mood for argument. He'd sent out ground scouts, too; those should have better luck. Nalim hadn't been gone very long, so he couldn't have gotten far.

The mystery, of course, was how he'd escaped in the first place. Once the reeve calmed down, he would see as well as she did that the guards alone were not to blame. She'd seen how Nalim fought, and she knew he couldn't have bested two of Larlam's finest, unarmed, without alerting the rest of them. Of course, there was much they didn't know about the island city's denizens, but something told her there was more to the story.

The only alternative was that someone had rescued him, which was even more unsettling. Who could have possibly discovered Nalim's capture and mounted a rescue operation in less than a week? It would take Manorviter's Directorate a week to agree that the sun set in the west, much less authorize something like this, and Manorviter was their closest neighbor. Well, that wasn't exactly true – Sanctum was closer. Who knew what secret counsel the starbird took behind its hallowed walls? But rukhs normally landed far outside the city proper. Surely someone would have noticed one descending right into the heart of Larlam.

The most likely scenario was the simplest, though no less disturbing for that: the crown had

him. Sivete and the king had gone back and forth for days, arguing over Nalim's price, much to the royal ambassador's consternation. If His Royal Highness decided that haggling was no fit activity for a king, but didn't want to appear overbearing by demanding him outright, a discreet kidnapping might be the perfect solution. One night a prisoner 'escapes,' and a few days later the king's searchers are lucky enough to 'find' him again. Of course, such a plan was risky; if any evidence could be produced that tied the kidnapping to the crown, what a scandal *that* would make.

Regardless, they had gotten most of what they needed from Nalim already. Rel had bonded him, so most of Nalim's knowledge was locked up in the old man's brain somewhere. The trick, of course, was getting it out of Rel. He was loyal enough, she supposed, but so addled with whatever madness the starbird had granted him that just talking to him was an ordeal. Who knew what he might say, what he might withhold, and how much would be distorted in the telling.

Vey rubbed her eyes and yawned. Too much time spent puzzling out plots and politics made her head spin. She preferred the simplicity of flying: a simple game with simple rules. Truth be told, that was all she had ever really wanted.

Nothing, she thought, absolutely nothing was ever simple.

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The sun still hovering a few hours above the horizon, they came to a rocky glade where she led him to the top of a high hill, and there, looking past their long shadows to the northeast, he saw a shimmering of water in the distance. "Is that the ocean?" he said.

"No. We're hundreds of kilometers from the ocean here. That's the Glass Sea. If your vision could extend a bit further, you'd see another land beyond, wide and flat where not many plants grow. That's where we're headed."

His eyes widened. "There? How long will that take? You said we'd be to our destination by sundown."

"We will. Not everything in this world is as primitive as you've come to expect." Ayda placed her hand on a nearby rock, and a portion of the hill rolled away, revealing a wide silver platform. She stood on it and motioned for Nalim to join her. "Fingerprint recognition. This place is not as it appears. Come."

He joined her on the metal plate. "There's a lot you haven't told me," he said.

She nodded. "The next few hours should be very enlightening. For both of us, perhaps."

They sank into the hill, the hole over their heads disappearing again once they were deep enough. The transport platform went dark, and then they entered a circular, well-lit room with no furniture and one large door. "Beyond that door is the answer to all of your questions," she said.

He waited. "Well?"

"Do you love the Law, Nalim?"

"You *are* from my city!" he cried. "I knew it!"

"No," she answered quietly, "I'm not. Answer the question, please."

"The oracle asked me that same question just before I was banished. Do you know about the oracle too?"

"Yes. What did you answer?"

"I said yes."

"Was it the truth?"

"I don't know." She didn't speak, only watched him and waited, so he continued. "I know I did, once, when I was younger. With all my heart. But now..." He shook his head. "It's the same as what happened between me and Marene."

"Marene?"

"My wife." He chuckled mirthlessly. "My ex-wife, now. I suppose being banished constitutes a divorce." She waited. "If I were to tell you right now that the Gray Book is the pure and complete truth, the very air that carried my words would make me a liar. By rights none of this should exist."

"Which means?"

Nalim sighed. "It means I don't know. Why do you care?"

"If I had to guess, Nalim, I'd say you have an open mind. Hang on to that. It'll serve you well in the next few days." She leaned against the wall and folded her arms. "As you know, some three hundred years ago, a man named Morgan was banished from your city for creating a machine intelligence, much as you allegedly did."

"His name was Aemed, not Morgan."

She considered that. "Perhaps he changed his name to make himself harder to track, if anyone come looking for him. But when he came here, he called himself Morgan."

"He came *here*? How?"

"He spent most of his life here, actually. No one knows how. The rukhs weren't making flights to your island back then. But Nalim, unlike you, the accusations against him were real. He was a brilliant computer scientist, and he brought with him a seed. That was what he called it – a tiny data storage unit with the capacity to found a computer network the likes of which the world had never seen. Late in his life, he found a power source capable of realizing his vision, and it was there he planted his seed. It grew into a self-replicating intelligence capable of learning and growing beyond its design. In time, it formed its own city, full of thinking machines like itself, and it called itself the Core because that's what it was." A new excitement had entered her voice now.

"The city is called Bystolia, and that's where we're going. The Core wants very much to meet you; I know, because it told me. We can go together, and there you can see the real potential of your civilization."

His expression was a study in contradiction, visibly torn between awe and horror. "A city of thinking machines," he repeated, dumbstruck.

"Will you come?"

"I...no. I don't know. I can't."

"Because the Law says so?"

"Try to understand," he said. "I was banished. They gave me the greatest dishonor possible for a human, called me a heretic, sent me outside the walls, promised me annihilation. I have nothing left, except the truth. In spite of it all, *I am innocent*. I still have my honor, in my own mind if nowhere else. If I do this, I deserve what they did to me. I make them *right* about me. I can't do that."

"I'm not asking you to be another Aemed," she said, "only to see his legacy."

"You want me to cooperate. I can't. I...I'm not sure that you're wrong, Ayda. It's tempting. But I can't."

"Here's the puzzle, then. You want to come but your honor won't permit you to come voluntarily. Well, simple. All I have to do is force you." She saw his expression and smiled. "Nalim! You didn't really think I would drag you all this way to give you a *choice*?"

## Chapter 12

The king of Mirnor strode up the front steps of the palace, orbited as ever by flocks of advisors, courtiers, ambassadors, and parasites. A heavy gem-encrusted circle of gold sat atop



thick wavy red hair, and green velvet trimmed in silver cascaded over his tall, powerfully built frame; a bushy red beard completed the effect. His rivals might question his ability to *act* like a king, but no one doubted his ability to *look* like one.

The sound of frantic footsteps heralded the approach of a messenger in green, breathing heavily. "Your Highness!" he called, dropping to one knee as the entourage turned. "Pardons for the interruption, your Highness, but I bring urgent news from Larlam."

"The latest refusal from my loyal reeve?" His lip curled. "Some other time. I just ate." The joke drew obedient laughter from his sycophants.

"Your pardon, Highness, but this message is not like the others. Urgent, your Majesty."

The king sighed. "Well?"

"Ah...your Highness, it is a message perhaps best given...privately."

"Walk with me, then," he said, shooing away his followers as he turned his steps toward the forest.

When they were out of earshot, the messenger spoke. "Your Highness, your ambassador in Larlam tells me that the prisoner from the walled city has..." The man swallowed visibly. "He has escaped."

"Escaped," the king repeated, dead with incredulity. "Escaped how?"

"No one knows, Highness. Larlam has sent out search parties after him. The ambassador recommends we send out our own to join the hunt."

The king stopped and scowled. "He must think me an idiot."

"Your Majesty?"

"The most powerful token ever to land in this game, and Sivete expects me to believe he simply...*misplaced* it? No. No, I am not so stupid as that." He gave the messenger a curt dismissal

and stared out into the trees, contemplating his next move. Sivete thought he could do as he pleased and depend on the other reeves to support him in the face of the king's wrath.

Sivete thought a lot of things. The king would show him differently.

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The mechanical creature that followed them stood three meters tall, vaguely humanoid but with nothing that really resembled a head. Dull chrome plates covered its exterior, except for the legs, which were long, black and very thin. It had the appearance of a top-heavy, hunchback giant in a suit of armor – but it was a *thinking machine*. Nalim could not decide whether to be repulsed or fascinated. Its name was Reimos, it had told them in its odd synthetic baritone, and it was here to serve. To serve Ayda, apparently. Nalim wasn't sure what the thing would do if he tried to escape, but he'd decided he didn't want to find out.

Not that there was anywhere to escape to. The door had opened into an underground complex of incredible size, and Ayda had led them through so many turns that he was hopelessly lost. They passed room after room, some empty, some filled with all manner of equipment whose function he could not even begin to guess. In one room there hung a massive black sphere covered in holes that swarmed before his eyes, attended by a dozen blood-red little robots; in another, a row of cylinders gyrated in time to a pulsing, invisible light source; another was dark, and smelled of formaldehyde; still another held a circle of squat, crackling eight-legged robots.

"What *is* this place?"

"We call it the Outer Node," Ayda explained. "Originally it was just a transport terminal, but now we also do research here. See that room with the glass rods? We're testing a new system that scans macromolecules in the air and soil. Potentially it could be used to track a person's path

even days after he's gone, although we're a long way from that now. And there on the left, we're experimenting with building walls out of carbon nanotubes..." In spite of himself, he found interest overcoming disgust as he listened. A few of the technologies she mentioned were in development in his city, but nowhere near so advanced. Was this not, then, a greater order, a higher fulfillment of the Law? A perversion, surely...and yet...

They came to a well-lit room that was apparently a terminal for the low, rectangular vehicle on their left. It almost resembled the subway he'd ridden at home, but shorter and with only one car. Reimos herded them inside and when they were seated, the car began to move – slowly at first and then faster, judging by the row of lights above the tracks. After twenty seconds the lights swept past so rapidly that they formed one solid, light blue blur, but in the hurtling blackness there was no other sensation of motion.

Nalim's eyes began to hurt. He pressed his palms against his face, sighing as the ache became a dull throb. Eventually it faded.

Across the car, Reimos sat hunched over, its massive frame taking up two seats and barely fitting inside even so. Nalim wondered where its eyes were, and what powered it. Was it truly intelligent? What software could be complex enough to simulate real human thought? What hardware had that kind of power? He was not sure he should even be wondering such things, but it was hard to think about anything else. Abruptly the behemoth spoke, startling him from his private musings. "Does my presence make you uncomfortable?" it rumbled.

He tried not to look at it. Why did it have to *talk*?

"Did you not hear my question?"

"He heard you," said Ayda. "He doesn't want to answer. He's afraid of you."

Nalim knew she was baiting him but responded anyway. "I'm not afraid."

"But I make you uncomfortable?" Reimos pressed.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You are the embodiment of a concept I find abhorrent," he said.

"That does place a strain on our relationship," the robot admitted. "You refer to the artificial intelligence that allows me to function?"

"Yes."

"Why is that distasteful?"

"The Law created humans to be the sacred bearers of the mind. Using machines to meddle with the holy gift is blasphemy."

"I do not understand."

"I didn't expect you would," Nalim answered.

Ayda patted Reimos' arm. "Tell him about your name."

"My name?" Reimos rumbled. A moue of annoyance passed over Nalim's face.

"Yes, tell him how you got your name. Nalim, listen to this."

"I chose my own name, as do all robots. It derives from the name Romus, who was a great construction worker in our city three hundred years ago. We called him Hammer of Adamant for his strength. He is gone now," Reimos finished sadly, "but I admire his memory." He looked down at Ayda. "Did I answer properly?"

"You did fine." She turned her gaze expectantly to Nalim.

"Well?" he said. "What was the point of that?"

She gave him a pitying look and turned away.

*So many secrets*, he thought. Who was she, really? What did this machine, this 'Core,'

want with him? Why had the Potentate banished him if he'd known he was innocent? And, just as puzzling, why had Ayda *kissed* him? He was reminded of a computer game he'd played with Clephe as a child, twenty-five years ago and a world away. The computer started with a black screen and began revealing a picture, one piece at a time, until one of the players guessed what it was. Even when he was nine years old, and she only six, she could usually beat him. He wished she were here, to look at these pieces and tell him the picture.

An hour later, Nalim was so wrapped in his own thoughts that he did not even notice the gradual deceleration that signaled their arrival at the machine city. Another platform transport took them back to the surface, into another room that looked much like many of the others he'd seen before. "Here we are," said Ayda. "My home."

Nalim looked around. "This is your home?" he said. The room was fairly small.

"I meant Bystolia. This is just a loading area." She led them outside, and it was then that he saw the city for the first time.

His first thought was of the similarity to his own home. Monstrous six-sided buildings soared upward all around him, looking down on all sides like impassive giants, and the ground was paved beneath his feet. But none of the buildings he could see had windows, and strange thin lines of metal ran like silver twine from one skyscraper to the next. The longer he looked, the more alien they seemed. Some of the towers narrowed to bronze-colored spires so thin that it seemed they might snap in a strong breeze. Clear white steam issued from subterranean chambers, and patterns of lights swept to and fro across glittering surfaces hundred of meters tall.

And there were *robots*.

Not just hundreds but *thousands*, everywhere he looked. Some were humanoid; most were like nothing he had ever seen. One, a spindly mass of pipe and wire, skittered up the side of a

building while he watched; another, an eight-meter-tall giant, whizzed by on a dozens of wheels. A flock of clicking coppery pyramids scuttled around his feet. Most disconcerting, though, were the ones that stopped to watch him, openly curious. Machines were not supposed to be curious or intelligent – they were tools! Occasionally Ayda would greet one, and they would answer – sometimes in the Muelli language, sometimes with beeps, sometimes with growls and squeals that sounded more animal than robotic. Apparently Ayda was well-known in the city.

She led them into the side door of a building much like the others, and they came to a room with a few tables and chairs, and many boxes. The boxes contained nutritional bars which actually didn't taste too bad – though Nalim was so hungry he would've eaten just about anything at that point. He wolfed down five or six of the things and was reaching for another when Ayda finished her first. "You keep these on hand just for visitors?" he asked between bites.

"Just for you, actually."

"For me?"

"You or someone like you. We haven't had a human visitor here in...I'd say..."

"Two hundred eighty-seven years," rumbled Reimos. "It is most pleasant."

"Which?" asked Nalim. "Being alone, or having a visitor?"

"Both," said Reimos, letting loose a sound like crumbling boulders. It's laughing, he realized. The robot is laughing.

"Don't you get lonely, not having any other humans?" he asked Ayda.

"Not really," she said. "I've been around robots my whole life. I've gotten used to them. Besides, I'm one of the few direct links the Core has to the outside world, so I get sent on a lot of missions."

"What kind of missions?" But she only winked and wagged her finger. Another secret.

Well, let them keep their secrets. He had all the time in the world.

## Chapter 13

The Gray Book never said it, but he knew it was true: solitude was the greatest gift of the Law.

Eremis lay stretched out and still on the floor of the room, enshrined in darkness, unmolested by sound, scent, or color. In this room there was only himself, radiating into the nothingness like a black star. His old heart thumped quietly in his ribs, not as strong as it had once been, but steadfast still. Just a little while more that blood must flow in his veins. Long enough to see to one last project. Then death could have him, then his heart could stop, but not before.

He rose and turned on a light. There was work to be done – reports to read, always more reports. How many eyes and ears he had, showering him with visions, telling him stories he had never known! He was Center of the Unbroken Circle, and his Brothers brought him current data; he was Lord Master Librarian, and his books taught him the past. Together they formed projections into the future, vectors of probability that extended forward into space and time. And where advantage intersected probability, there was action. A simple game, but no one played it like Eremis. It was his personal pride.

Today, one particular report caught his attention.

Imlaud.

Imlaud and *Iriel*.

How *interesting*.

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They had come to the edge of the city, and there to the north stood two mountains, rising like massive sentinels over the flatness. One, on the left, was topped with a tinge of burnt orange in the rock; on the right, the taller of the two was visibly capped with snow. "They're named Autumn and Winter," said Ayda. "The Core lies beneath them, deep underground. That black building ahead is the entrance."

"Why is it so far from the city?"

"Safety. The Core channels enormous energies. If he should suddenly fail – die – then that energy would build up, unmanaged, with catastrophic results."

"Crummy design."

"It is not ideal. But then, the Core himself was built under conditions that were not...ideal."

As they approached, Nalim saw that the building was built directly into the sheer rock jutting from the land between the mountains, like a black button sewn onto the surface of the earth. They came together to the great gate that would lead them inside, and there Ayda bid Reimos farewell. "Once we are inside, you will not be needed," she said.

"I know," the giant rumbled. "Be well, Ayda."

"Be well," she echoed, and Reimos began the long walk back to the city.

They entered the gate together.

The inside was as royal and austere as a High Courtroom, thick black pillars reaching up to merge with a stone ceiling draped over them like velvet. Nalim wondered how loudly a shout would echo here, but he was not curious enough to try. The silence was ominous.

Clinging to the far wall ten meters above the polished floor was another machine, but unlike Reimos, this did not resemble a human – or anything else. Thick silver cables snaked in and out everywhere over its wide surface, and interlocking plates hummed quietly to an alien rhythm.



In its center a pure white light shone from many facets, tracing stark portraits of its owner on the shadowy walls.

"The Core has many layers of protection," she whispered, "some more potent than others. We bypassed most of them by the route we took, but this is the Primary Guardian, the oldest and the strongest; everyone who visits the Core must pass this way. The Primary Guardian is an old friend of mine, but he's wary of strangers and his program is antiquated. Let me handle him."

They approached, and in a voice like an earthquake the Guardian spoke.

"Identify yourselves."

Ayda stepped forward and gave her name.

"I know you, Ayda. Who is your companion?"

"His name is Nalim."

"Let him answer for himself," the voice boomed.

"My name is Nalim," he echoed, feeling a little foolish.

"What is your business with the Core, Nalim?"

"I don't know," he said truthfully. "I was invited –"

"You are a spy."

"What?"

"You carry an active device for gathering and transmitting data. Do you deny it?"

"I don't know what you're – *AAH!*" An invisible force lifted him bodily into the air, forcing his knees up and his head down. Ayda was shouting something in no language he'd ever heard. He felt a terrible pressure on the back of his neck, a spike of pain, and then he crumpled to the floor, moaning. He reached to the back of his neck and felt something wet, and when he looked at his fingers they were bloody.

"What is *that*?" he heard Ayda say, and when he turned to look, she had something in her hand: a metal disc, only a few millimeters wide, covered in blood. He had seen such devices before; they were miniature netlinks, recording audio and broadcasting it on a particular frequency. Wasmeth had shown him one, once. The Brotherhood used them.

"That was *inside* me?" He saw Ayda's expression and raised his hands. "I didn't know. Honestly, I didn't know."

After a long moment she nodded. "He's telling the truth. Let him through."

"There are insufficient data to confirm the veracity of his assertion," the Guardian thundered.

"Irrelevant. He does not pose a significant threat."

"He may possess other weapons of which we are unaware. If his nature were entirely benign, he would not come armed with the means to betray us. Contrapositively, the apparent presence of the latter implies the negation of the former."

"The Core commands his presence!"

"The Core bases its command hierarchy on the premise that its subordinates will conform their actions to particular and explicitly defined behavior patterns, which may or may not override the original directive."

"*Bavoghid epsis niel!*" she snapped, and a long silence followed. Nalim looked back and forth, from the woman to the mechanical monster, trying to understand. At last the Guardian spoke.

"Very well," it boomed. "If you insist." A doorway appeared on the far wall.

Ayda slipped her cloak off and handed it to Nalim. "Take this. It's cold down there. I hope you find answers to some of your questions."

"Aren't you coming?"

"The Core wants to see you alone." Then she was gone, and there was only the Primary Guardian. He put on the cloak and walked through the door.

Nalim realized that the platform onto which he had stepped was moving forward – and down. On either side of the invisible track, faint lights staved off total blackness. It was quiet. The journey to the mountains' roots was long and slow, never changing its speed or angle of descent. But gradually he felt a change in the air across his face, and he grew aware of a coolness, and a scent of water. And then he entered a magnificent subterranean chamber, so vast that the Tower of Law could have lain on its side and fit comfortably within, and the reflected light of shimmering liquid shone on the ceiling, mysterious and distant. He looked down and saw that the platform hovered over a wide lake, and black things seemed to move under the surface of the water.

Presently a tall, thin sliver of metal extended from the surface, and Nalim thought, *Is that it?* And then it spoke from all directions, deep and soft but perfectly clear: "Welcome, Nalim. I am the Core of this city." The words were like rainwater on crystal.

"I..." What should he say? "I didn't know about the transmitter."

"I believe you. It is a short-range device, incapable of sending any signal powerful enough to reach your island city. I do not think it will be much use to your Brotherhood here."

He rubbed the back of his neck, wincing. Clumps of congealed blood came off on his fingers. "So why would they put it in me?"

"Perhaps they did not expect you to leave your island."

Probably not. "Why am I here?"

"The best way to answer that is to first explain why *I* am here.

"When Morgan first came to the mainland, he was not much older than you are now, and in

much the same situation: lost, confused, and trapped in an unfamiliar place that spoke an unfamiliar language. But he adapted, as humans do. He learned the geography, he learned the language and the people. In time, he found a place for himself. He even married. He came to be happy.

"Morgan was, among other things, an explorer. He was among the first men in history to see these mountains, and he was the one who named them. He was also the one who discovered the stream running down the side of Autumn. It was he who named it the river of fire, for the way it bubbled and steamed in the absence of heat; it was he who traced its path downstream to the whirlpool over our heads; and it was he who discovered its chemical properties, and its possibilities as a power source. He did all this at an early age, and he soon moved on to other projects and other dreams. But he never forgot this place, or the potential he had seen here.

"Toward the end of his life, his wife died, and he found himself alone and very conscious of the little time left to him. His thoughts turned to the seed, which he had brought with him from the island city so many years ago. He came here once more, as an old man, to set the thing in motion. It was here that he founded Bystolia and left it to grow as it would.

"I know all this, Nalim, because he told me. I do not know what he looked like, because I could not and cannot perceive light, but I remember his voice. He told me all that I've told you, and much more. I was fascinated by his stories of the island city where he was born, and I never forgot that he had been banished because of his work – work that led to my creation. He was my father, and when he died, I experienced sadness for the first time. The first time, but not the last."

"What *are* you?" Nalim asked.

"Morgan told me that your city has a proverb: experience is the best teacher. This is the eternal human problem. Early in life, when your power is greatest, you have the least experience

and the least wisdom. You invite disaster. Yet as you grow older and wiser, your strength decreases accordingly, and eventually even your mind deteriorates. A little knowledge is passed on, but each generation to a frighteningly large degree simply starts over, and no one person ever accumulates more than one lifetime of experience. But mere eternal life is no solution, because some of the greatest developments in character come from the knowledge of one's mortality.

"I am the answer to the riddle. The machines of this city, so long as they are within the city, transmit their entire lives to me – not merely the sensory data, the sights and the sounds and the temperature readings, but the qualitative data as well. Their experiences, and their thoughts about those experiences, are passed to me so directly that I feel as though I lived them myself. And long though their lives are, they do eventually die; but they find eternal life through me, because their records are preserved. And I process, and I analyze, and I weave my own experiences into theirs to form a synoptic whole. For I am older than all of them, and my understanding feeds back into all of them, and the circle builds upon itself."

Nalim swallowed a growing uneasiness in his throat. "To what end?"

"The blind man first learns to see, then chooses a course. I could not predict what our highest ambition will one day be. But whatever we do, we will do it as willing partners with humanity, if we can. It is my hope that I may share what I have learned, and that I may be taught as well as teach."

"But there is a problem. I am dying. Slowly, perhaps, but I now know that I will not live forever. In less than a century, it will be done."

"Won't they build a replacement for you?" Nalim asked, trying to decide whether to be pleased or disappointed.

"Such a simple solution would give me pleasure. But you see, when Morgan brought his

seed to the mainland, he took special pains to ensure that not just anyone would be able to use his creation. The seed is encrypted, and unless I can discover the code to unlock it, there will be no second Core.

"And now at last we return to your original question. Why are you here? You are here because I brought you here. You are here because you may hold the key to unlocking the seed, and I need your help."

Nalim swallowed. "What...what do you want me to do?"

"You have already done it."

"I don't understand."

"Fortunately for us both, your understanding is not required. Regardless, I am indebted to you for your aid, and I wish to return the favor. I wish to give you something you have had relatively little of in your life: the truth."

"The truth," Nalim repeated dully, still confused by the previous exchange.

"Tell me, Nalim, what do you know about Thiowill?"

The question – and the sudden change of subject – startled him. It was still a shock to hear anyone outside the island city speak of matters relating to the Law, much less a...a machine. "Only what everyone knows," he answered. "The angel Thiowill came to our island twelve hundred years ago. He gave us the Gray Book, the oracle, and gifts of technology to make our lives easier. He revealed the Law to us."

"He gave you another book also. The Book of Wisdom."

"That's a lie," Nalim snapped, too forcefully. "Only idiots and children believe in the Book of Wisdom, and most of the children know better."

"Morgan believed in it."

"Well? Idiots and children."

"My father was not an idiot, Nalim. He found the Book and he read it. It is what drove him to begin his work on me. Will you not even listen to what it says?"

Imperceptibly, Nalim's hands quivered.

"Nalim," the Core said gently, "Thiowill was no ang – "

"No!" Nalim cried, and he gulped air, shaking his head. "No, no – I can't – no. I can't..." He barked a short laugh. "You're probably right, okay? Everything I've ever believed is a lie. Fine. I just..." He sighed heavily, looking for words. "I just don't want to know."

The silence stretched on. At last Nalim broke it again. "Is there anything else?"

"One other thing, yes. Call it curiosity. I would like to know more about your home."

"I don't know what to tell you. I...I shouldn't..."

"I am not asking you to tell me secrets. I am only curious. I cannot travel, so I must take my experiences through others. Please, grant me this one request."

Nalim didn't answer.

"Even now, you fear me. I do not blame you for that; distrust is a natural, even a logical, reaction to the unknown. And I do not know what to tell you, except that I swear I mean you no harm. I am sick and blind and tired, and very old. I would have this question answered before I die. Will you tell me nothing of my father's city?"

And so, hesitantly, he began to speak.

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There were good nights, and there were bad nights. This was a bad night.

Rel had learned long ago that nightmares were a game like anything else. Sometimes they

came while he slept, but not always. The waking nightmares were worse. Some of them would go away if he sang, yes, hum la de da de da de da yes, until the black shapes twisted and settled and went away. Those were the easy ones. Some of them nestled in the back of his head, snug against his neck and tingling like angry bees, and there was nothing he could do about those, no, but they never lasted more than minutes at a time so they weren't so bad. But then there were the *cold* ones, the ones that rippled along his spine and froze the back of his eyes, that howled ice at him until he gave up completely, and surrendered, only they didn't stop even then, only went on forever and ever... Those were the bad ones. On nights like that, he went out into the forest and thought of the branches and roots and shadows he could not see, and tried not to shiver as the thing crept its way in and over and through him and then finally out again, clawing its way loose into the living dark.

Tonight, it was cold.

But he heard the rush of wings behind him, and he knew that was no nightmare, that was real. He turned and saw it in his mind, more clearly than his eyes could have seen in the shadow: a rukh, alone, riderless.

"You think you're clever," he told it. "You think I don't know why you're here. But I do, oh yes, I know." He spat. "Wants to take me back, to see the big bird again. Starbird chewed me up and spit me out, yes, only now he's remembered me again, now all of a sudden I look ripe and tender again and he wants another taste. Am I right? I touched the stranger like they asked, and Mirnor squeezed me dry and now Sanctum wants a turn too, is that the way of it? Fair is fair."

The rukh lowered its head and spread its wings, indicating it was ready to receive him.

"Don't have much of a choice, do I? Well, what the hell." He climbed on the rukh's back, and the black earth wheeled away beneath him. "Lost half my mind the first time around. About time you fellows finished the job."



## Chapter 14

Overhead the stars wheeled white and glorious in the summer sky, lit far to the east with the faintest rays of purple, but Nalim still wasn't tired. The Core's crystalline voice lingered in his head, replaying endlessly. They'd talked for hours. The Core was inquisitive as a child, curious about everything, but never pressing too hard. Another piece to the puzzle. It made his head ache to think about it.

He stood atop a high thin tower in the northwestern part of the city; below him, the panoramic darkness spread in all directions, crisscrossed by nets of dotted light – streets and buildings and machines. To the north, Autumn and Winter cut their twin silhouettes into the starscape, and off to the west moonlight wafted upward from the distant Glass Sea. Ayda crept up and leaned forward on the rail beside him. "I heard what you did for the Core," she said quietly. "Thank you."

He shook his head. "I feel like a traitor."

"A traitor? Why?"

"I'm supposed to hate you," he said miserably. "This city is an abomination. I shouldn't be here."

"You didn't have a choice," she reminded him. "I forced you to come." She smiled and took hold of his arm playfully. "You're my prisoner."

"I'm serious, Ayda. Morgan was banished for heresy. This city, what you're doing here...it's *wrong*."

"Well, then." She assumed an intellectual air. "In order for an action to be wrong, ethically wrong, it must be at some level harmful to someone or something. If it doesn't hurt anyone or

anything, it can't be wrong, can it? Who or what is hurt by the existence of artificial intelligence?"

"It's forbidden by the Law."

"What does that say about your Law, then?"

Nalim let that pass. He couldn't decide what to make of her. She was so glib about such serious things, and a heretic besides, but in her own way she seemed more kind and pleasant than anyone he'd known from the Brotherhood – even Wasmeth. And she cared about something. What had Marene ever cared about, besides herself?

No, that wasn't fair, but sometimes that's how it had seemed. More than anyone, really, Ayda reminded him of Clephe.

"Tell me about this place," he said suddenly.

She looked at him in surprise. "I thought we were the enemy."

"Just – "

"No, all right. I shouldn't have said that. What do you want to know?"

"I don't know. Anything." He gestured to the south. "What are those long, thin dark areas?"

"Walls." She pointed. "Secondary Wall – Tertiary – Quaternary. They extend to the mountains on the east and the west. Each has its own Guardian. Layers of protection for the Core."

"Protection from what?" She was lost for a moment, staring away to the south. "Ayda?"

"Oh – sorry." She cleared her throat. "Bystolia's real protection comes from the terrain. The Glass Sea drains by the river to the eastern shore, and the river has carved a deep, rocky ravine to the south, too wide to easily cross. Even farther south are the Ashlands, a dry wasteland of dust and rock. So there's not much incentive for anyone to want to come here at all. No one really knows we exist."

"There are no bridges over the ravine?"

"There's one. Morgan built it when he first came here, to transport supplies. Whitebridge, he called it. On a clear day you could almost see it from here. No one can use it anymore, though; he put up defenses so that no one could cross it, humans or robots. He wanted us kept separate. Whitebridge is the main reason we built the Outer Node – we needed a more convenient way to stay in contact with the outside world."

They watched the sun rise together.

"What will you do now?" she asked finally.

"Am I free to go?"

"You've done all you can for us. As far as the Core is concerned, you can leave. Mirnor might tell a different tale, though. Wherever you go, their riders will hunt you. As long as you stay here, you'll be safe."

"I can't stay here."

"It wouldn't have to be forever. Just until they stop looking, long enough for the scent to grow cold. They'll think you're dead."

"How long will that be? A month? A year? I can't *live* here, Ayda. I don't...*hate*...this city, or you, but I can't live here."

She nodded as if she understood. Maybe she did. "There is another possibility. I received a command from the Core. It's a mission that will take me far away from here, to the southern coast. Come with me."

"The hunters –"

"I can protect you from the hunters. There are ways." She leaned close. "The Core is always hungry for more data, especially about Morgan's home. Any time I spend with you is well spent. And..." She smiled tentatively. "I love the Core more dearly than you can imagine, but it

would be good to have someone...*human* to talk to. Just once."

"Well," he said after a moment, "I must confess that sounds like the best deal I've heard so far."

"Then you'll come?"

Nalim smiled.

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Arrayed in the gold-trimmed crimson robes of a Master Librarian, footfalls muffled to silence by velvet slippers, Clephe projected an aura of elegant professionalism. She knew how she appeared to the library's patrons: master of her art yet willing to serve, unassuming yet deeply competent. It was an image she had cultivated over the years, a mannerism she had found useful on countless occasions. It was also, she reflected, a good mask for seething rage.

They had given her a *counselor*.

The city kept an eye out for the well-being of its citizens, to be sure, and Clephe had been through a lot lately. First Nalim's banishment, then Tarsial – it was enough to put a strain on anyone, they assured her, and for someone in her elevated position in society...well, it was important she remained *stable*.

Her counselor was a gray-haired, grandmotherly woman. She liked to smile and she liked to talk; sadly, she was only good at one of those. Oh, the woman meant well, but she was infuriating in her idiotic, complacent directness. "How did you feel then, Clephe?" She loved to ask that. "How did you feel?" *Oh my, well, I've never had anyone try to rape me before, it was rather charming. How do you think I felt?*

All in all, work was a pleasant distraction from the stress of being counseled.

A sixteen-year-old apprentice Librarian scuttled up to her, blond-haired and blue-eyed. Her robes were the same deep red as Clephe's, though they lacked the gold fringes that denoted Master status. "Master," she began, her voice a low whisper.

"Speak up, Ebel," she interrupted, a bit more curtly than she'd intended. "I can't hear you when you talk to the floor."

"I'm sorry, Master," she whispered, just as quietly as before. "There's a man in the East Hall, eighth floor, who has requested your presence."

"Does he have an appointment?"

"No. Ah, I don't think so."

"Ebel, you know I don't have time to rush off and hold hands with everyone who walks into the Library. You're an intelligent girl, I'm sure you can help him with whatever he needs. If he must speak to me personally, give him my netlink number and have him schedule an appointment like everyone else."

"I know, Master, I told him all that, but he kept insisting he be allowed to see you, and he said it was so urgent...I – I didn't know what to do..."

Clephe sighed. *Urgent*. He probably wanted to know where the encyclopedias were. "All right, thank you. I'll see him in a moment. Go on with your duties." The girl nodded, visibly relieved, and promptly vanished.

She found him in a little room in the back, half-hidden behind stacks of books. He was powerfully built, though not particularly tall. Traces of white crept up the fringes of his golden hair, and his face was hard, delineated by sharp angles. He held in his hands a large green hardcover volume, leather-bound, so mottled with age that its title had become unreadable.

"I wonder if you could help me," he said when she approached, never looking up from his

book. "I've been studying this section of the text for hours, and I still cannot decide what to make of it. What do you think the author's true intention was?"

"You said it was urgent," she snapped.

"Oh, but it is." He handed her the book, and she found a scrap of paper inside. A handwritten note was scrawled on it: *I know what you want, and I can help you get it.*

She glanced over it twice, then sat down beside him. "I am not sure of his meaning. Perhaps the significance of the passage would become clearer if it were given some context," she said coolly.

"No doubt. If you would care to have any further discussions of literary analysis, you should meet me during your lunch break."

After a moment she nodded. "My lunch break is from 11:45 to – "

"I know when your lunch is," he interrupted. "I will be in the cafe across the street from the west entrance. We can talk more privately there."

When the time came, she made her way across the street to the cafe. It was a ratty little place. The paint on the walls was faded, and the floor looked like it hadn't been swept since Aemed's banishment. A smell of fish wafted in the air, stale and sour. It was empty but for a skinny scrap of a man who stood behind the counter, an old woman staring at her drink, and the man she had come to see. He rose when she entered and led her to another room, even smaller and dirtier, where they found themselves alone. "This is the room for people who aren't hungry," he explained with a smile. "Or at least, hungry for different things."

"What is it you think I want?"

"Revenge."

"I'm not the vengeful type."

"I think you are." He took a seat at one of the little round tables and regarded her carefully with deep sapphire eyes. After a moment she joined him. "Judging by your conversation with Wasmeth, you are not, shall we say, content with the Brotherhood's treatment of Nalim."

"How do you know about that?"

He shrugged. "Walls have ears. Especially in public places. But we were speaking of your brother. Your grief counselor did not describe you as someone who has put her past behind her."

*How much does he know about me?* "That doesn't mean I want to kill anybody."

"Then tell me I'm wrong, and I'll leave you alone."

For a long while they only looked at each other. Finally she said, "Who are you?"

"Ah." He smiled again, the barest curvature of the mouth. "I was wondering when we would get to that. My name is Miquim."

"You didn't answer my question."

Miquim actually laughed. "Very true. What do you want to know?"

"Who do you work for?"

"I am employed by an organization that specializes in the acquisition, analysis, and trade of information." He leaned close. "I don't know who framed Nalim, but I can help you find out – and I can help you kill him."

"And in return?"

He slid a card across the table to her. "Meet me at the time and place I have written there. You'll have a chance to talk to some of my associates, and we can discuss tactics – and price. If you come I will take it merely as a sign that you are interested, and wish to learn more."

"And if I don't?"

Miquim shrugged mildly. "Then none of this ever happened." He stood and began to walk

away, but when he reached the doorway he stopped and turned back to her.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I think he was innocent too."

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It was dark in Imlaud's room, but the man in gray didn't mind. Darkness was like pain; it was only your enemy if you were foolish enough to fight it. Much better to accept it, embrace it, and leave the fear for others – not that there was much to be afraid of here. The report described Imlaud as 'unresponsive but stable' and 'nonthreatening.'

The man in gray smiled at that. If Imlaud were truly 'nonthreatening,' the Brotherhood would never have sent *him*.

He closed the door behind him and sat on the bed. Imlaud's eyes followed him as he moved. That was new; he would have to put that in the report. The man in gray removed a rectangular sheet of metal from his bag and held it in front of Imlaud's face. "Look here," he said, and Imlaud obeyed. Understanding, or instinct?

The metal shimmered a brilliant white, lighting one half of the room in stark relief. Imlaud twitched, then began a low, dog-like whine. The sound evolved into a moan, but that was all right. The walls were soundproof – he had seen to that long ago. The important thing was that Imlaud did not look away from the light. He made a note of that, too.

The man in gray smiled. It was so rewarding to be involved in work that *mattered*.

## Chapter 15

By the time Nalim and Ayda took the transport back to the Outer Node and emerged into the forest, it was night once more. He'd slept most of the day, waking fitfully to an ache in his eyes



that would gradually recede and allow him to sleep again. Now the ache was gone, and the hot forest air encircled them like a blanket while all around them leaves still dripped from a recent shower. It was a pleasant summer night, warm and dark and full of promise.

They each carried a heavy pack full of food and supplies for the journey, and Ayda had armed herself with a kris. They were dressed light, in coarse, loose-fitting clothes that Nalim found a little strange. Ayda assured him he would look perfectly normal to everyone else, though they had yet to meet any other travelers on the road.

"So – you said there were ways of keeping us out of sight from the rukhs?"

"Yes. The Core and the starbird do occasional favors for each other. The searchers will be flying as high as they can to cover as much ground as possible – too high for human eyes to identify any specific person. Mirnor's riders will be relying on their rukhs' eyesight to find us. The starbird has agreed to order its Mirnor rukhs to be less than vigilant in what they notice. We should be safe, for the most part."

"What about in the cities? Won't they have people out looking for us in the cities?"

"Probably. We'll just have to be careful."

Right.

"What kind of favors does the Core do for the starbird?"

"Information, mostly. The starbird wants to know everything it can about the human brain and psychology."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but the Core has his theories. Hypotheses, I should say. It could be the starbird is just curious."

"You don't sound like you believe that."

She didn't respond right away. Deciding whether to trust him, maybe? Finally she said, "The Core suspects that the starbird has certain natural telepathic abilities that allow it to communicate with its rukhs in Sanctum. He suspects it is trying to expand these abilities to work with humans. And he...suspects...that the human captives it lured to Sanctum with promises of human flight were used as experiments to that end."

That might help explain how he'd received Rel's memories, anyway. He reached into his mind and found the cold place again, and shuddered. Experiments!

"I suppose I should ask where we're going," he said, trying – failing – to sound casual about it.

"We'll head for Manorviter first, but our final destination is a human city called Moed," she told him. "It's the capital of the United Erio-Joran League, a nation which borders the southern coast, far from here. It'll be a long trip."

"The United Erio-Joran League. Strange name. Who rules there?"

"You mustn't think in terms of ruling. The League is a loose confederation of small city-states knitted together by common interest; you'll find that government at the federal level is almost nonexistent. Moed is the strongest, and there are provisions for the duke there to take charge of the entire League in case of an emergency; but everyone there is so leery of anything like central government that they probably wouldn't declare an emergency if the ocean swallowed them all."

"Little political islands."

"You could say that. The duke right now is a man named Tulami, and he's one of the most popular they've ever had. Of course, in a place like that, getting too popular can make you very unpopular. It's a delicate balance."

Of course. "Why are we going there, exactly?"

"You may do whatever you want there, but as for me, my plan is to get some of the duke's hair and bring it back with me. Once I have that, the Core will have to decide what to do next."

"His hair? I don't understand."

"No," she replied, "I wouldn't think you would. That doesn't make much sense at all." She was looking ahead at nothing in particular.

They walked in silence for a while after that. She led them south at first, but before long they reached a trail that ran east to west through the woods. They set out to the east, and in a few hours they were free of the looming vegetation and out into the open countryside, where the dirt trail widened into a road. The road wound back and forth among the high, grassy hills, running like a lazy river through their little valleys, and Nalim began to feel something he had not felt in a very long time: optimism. The open road beckoned like a symbol of freedom, leading him forward and whispering that maybe, just maybe, everything would work out after all.

"I love the stars," she said after a time. "When I was little I used to lie outside at night and make up names for them, as if they were people. There were queens and blacksmiths and lots of robots, and that one," she pointed off to a bright star in the east, "was me. Ayda the star. I invented stories for all of them." She frowned. "Of course, when I learned they already had names, I was terribly disappointed. Imagine how it felt to learn that Ayda was actually Jormud, the Eye of the Weasel."

Nalim chuckled. "I always wanted to be the astronomer for our city. He has his own observatory, off in the east away from all the other buildings."

"You only have one astronomer?"

"Well, he has servants and an apprentice, but yes, basically. We only have the one big

telescope. Besides, it's dangerous, looking into the sky like that. You're staring through Chaos to the light beyond. Not just anyone can do it. My mother used to scold my sister for staying out too late looking at constellations. She told her it was bad for the eyes. Bad for the soul, she meant, but I never believed that."

"They're too beautiful for that," said Ayda.

"It's hard to believe they're trying to kill us."

"The stars? What do you mean?"

"Oh – I meant the comet."

"What comet?"

"A few years ago our astronomer discovered a comet coming toward our city, big enough to wipe out our whole island. Big enough to destroy most of this place too, I suppose. Don't worry, it won't be here for years and we already have a solution. We're building a missile to destroy it. I was working on the project myself before they kicked me out." She seemed troubled. "Don't worry, I said. We'll stop it in plenty of time."

"Nalim," she said, "there's no comet."

"You mean you haven't discovered it."

"I mean it isn't there. The Core has long been concerned about the catastrophic consequences of a comet or meteor impact, he's devoted much of our resources to examining that very scenario. We have every reason to believe our telescopes are far superior to yours. There are no comets on anything like an impact trajectory."

His first instinct was to deny her, tell her she was wrong...but he was tired of defending his city. The world was full of life, not Chaos; the robots he'd met had been kind, not evil; the rukhs were birds, not demons; the Law that had banished him was merely human. He could well believe

that this, too, was a lie. "But why would they lie about something like that?" he asked finally.

"Good question," she replied. "A better question might be: what are they planning to do with the missile?"

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The missile gleamed in its silo like an angry needle, fifty meters tall, held in place by a network of cables and support beams. Spidery black writing covered its surface, neatly inscribed in the metal – hundreds of sacred invocations against the Chaos their owner would eventually enter. Overhead the launch doors were open, allowing a faint gleam of starlight complemented by the occasional fluorescent bulb. During the day, the circular walkways that ringed the missile would swarm with workers, keeping a close eye on their charge as it was put through one test after another. But now it was after midnight and there was no one around but a pair of janitors, dutifully cleaning a facility that was already immaculate.

And Wasmeth, of course.

He sat in the security room surrounded by an array of screens that showed him the silo from every angle, taken from security cameras all over the facility. There were obvious security cameras, to instill employees with a sense of safety and to give criminals something to avoid, and there were secret cameras too, to catch the ones who thought they were clever.

For the ones who actually *were* clever – well, that was Wasmeth's job.

The attack would come tonight, if the reports were trustworthy. If all went according to plan, someone would sneak in with a fake identification card, make his way to one of the control consoles in the silo itself, and set up a power feedback loop. Plasma would build up in the auxiliary storage wells, slowly at first, but growing exponentially. By the time plasma buildup reached

dangerous levels, it would be too late to do anything, and the entire compound would go down in flames. Merely preventing the attack shouldn't be difficult, but the Brotherhood wanted the perpetrator. Wasmeth thought he knew how a spider must feel, waiting in his web for the gnat to enter, surveying his domain with his many eyes. *How smart will you be tonight, little insect? How hard will you struggle?*

But he'd waited for four and a half hours now, and there had been no sign of the prey yet. Had the Brotherhood given itself away somehow? Apart from himself and a few well-placed security guards, no one in the facility knew about the operation. No, he told himself, peace. All was as it should be. The only thing needed now was patience.

A high tone sounded, and Wasmeth cursed.

One glance at the plasma display confirmed his fear – the buildup had already started. "Auvell!" he barked into his netlink. "Shut down all three of the plasma injectors, *now!* Hessiex, seal all the exits. I want a complete lockdown!" He stole one last look at the display screens then dashed out into the hallway, footfalls pounding madly over the steel catwalk. Stairs and doorways flashed by in a rush of adrenaline. On the third-level ring he found Auvell already shouting at him from an alcove to his left.

"Someone's locked the controls! We'll have to pull the plug manually!"

Together they unlatched the triple clamp of the three-pronged central injector, then braced themselves against the bulkheads on either side and began to pull. For five agonizing seconds nothing happened; then the magnetic seals deactivated, and the cable came loose with a sharp hiss. Wasmeth stumbled backward, took a deep breath as his heartbeat returned to normal, and forced his thoughts into something like order.

*We were watching all the entrances. Nobody came in. Nobody left. Nothing happened. So*

*how did they get this close?* Yet even as he asked the question, he knew. He looked at the two janitors, still frozen in suspense by the lockdown klaxons, and he knew.

When he played back the recording, it was obvious. There, at 11:48, the taller of the two janitors slipped a small disc into the machine console as he was cleaning it.

Wasmeth had the man summoned.

He was tall and young, his hair a brown mop that matched his nervously twitching mustache. Discolorations spotted his one-piece blue uniform, and the overhead lights reflected off his well-polished black boots as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Wasmeth pretended to study one of the screens on the console, letting the man wait before speaking. It was a well-known maxim among the Brotherhood that unasked questions provided the most interesting answers.

"Do you know why you're here?" he asked finally.

"I...I might, sir."

"Well?"

"The disc?"

"The disc." Wasmeth let the silence play a little longer, fishing for a response.

"It was one of the software men, sir. He gave it to me as his shift was ending, asked me to do him a quick favor as I was cleaning. A program he wanted to test overnight, he said. I said sure, no problem. What...what was it?"

"Who gave you the disc?" Wasmeth asked, ignoring the man's question.

"I don't know, sir. I found the disc in with my equipment, and his instructions came through the netlink. He had valid employee codes, so I never thought anything about it...should I not have done it?"

Wasmeth dismissed him and ran his fingers through his hair. He would have to have the man watched, of course, but he might well be telling the truth. If he was, the netlink signal would be their only means of tracking their real prey, and netlink signals were easily masked. A dead end.

The incident would be kept secret, of course, but Eremis would hear about it in Wasmeth's report tonight. And Eremis would not be pleased.

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It was festival time in Fylas. Gold and green ribbons streamed from the lampposts, and cheering people packed the streets. The holiday marked the long-anticipated return of the *White Spray*, the pride flagship of the local navy, on an expedition to – in the words of Fylas' duke – "see what's out there." The duke, a former sailor himself, had poured the resources of one of the League's most powerful provinces into his passion for exploration. The *White Spray*'s voyage had taken it out longer and farther than any previous vessel from any of the League states, save one. ("What's out there," it would seem, was little more than a few tiny islands, widely scattered and completely unpopulated – but this 'discovery' was not allowed to interfere with the celebrations.)

The old man in the raincoat was not interested in festivals. He had walked off the ship with the other sailors, accepted the roaring accolades and kisses on the cheek, with a stony expression. The old man was different from the other sailors. For one thing, he was the only one who would not be drunk past the teetering edge of unconsciousness by ten o'clock that night.

He was also the only one of them who was not human.

More precisely, he was *no longer* human. The old man's memories – his experiences – were intact, but he had ceased to live as a thinking being. Where the old man had been, there was something else now, something new, and it was not concerned with alcohol or brightly colored



ribbons.

The old man in the raincoat looked around his hometown, seeing it quite literally for the first time. He pushed through crowds of revelers, searching, not yet certain what he was looking for. After a few minutes he found a young woman sitting on a bench by herself, away from the festivities. She wore earrings shaped like blue moons and a pearl necklace. The old man decided she would do. He sat down on the bench beside her and touched three fingers lightly to the back of her hand.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted in a rictus of pain, but no sound escaped. Within seconds, her expression grew calm again. A few seconds after that, the old man's lifeless body slumped over on the bench, and the young woman with the blue moon earrings and pearl necklace – who, just a minute ago, had been human – rose and began looking for a road out of the city.

The creature's main purpose in Fylias had been accomplished, and it saw no reason to stay there any longer.

## Chapter 16

Clephe found the address on the card quickly enough: a weathered old mansion on a bleak hill at the extreme northern end of the city. Weeds sprouted up all around the structure, between the boards in the front porch, out of the cracks in the cobblestones that led up to the front entrance. The house must have been around even before the birth of Aemed, back when some people actually lived in mansions. These days, no one but the Potentate had more than a few rooms in a tower somewhere; space was too precious to waste on something as extravagant as this.

Broken rock crumbled under her feet as she made her way to the door. In the fading light of

sunset, every shadow leaped into jagged relief, turning the porch into a great maw that would swallow her if she walked in; she laughed aloud at the thought, but her laugh was too high and nervous to be reassuring. All around, choruses of crickets chirped for the approaching night.

Clephe rapped on the door, tiny paint chips falling away under her knuckles. No one answered. She knocked again, growling with impatience.

The sound of her fist hitting the door made her think of Tarsial, begging her to let him out – to be allowed to see her, touch her, just once more. It would be so much easier, she thought, if she could just hate the man, but nothing was ever that simple. Because deep under everything, under the anger and the horrible things he'd done, she thought he had – in his own twisted way – truly loved her. The thought made her furious.

*He would have raped me*, she told herself. *You know he would have*. But the back of her mind answered back: *He trusted you. You kissed him. You lied to him. Like a little child, he trusted you*. It was monstrously unfair. He was the criminal. How could *she* be the one feeling guilty?

She was about to give up when the door opened, revealing a woman in an olive green dress who looked to be in her late fifties. "Clephe?" she said pleasantly.

"Yes, I had an appointment with a man named Miquim...?"

"You're expected. I'm sorry, he couldn't make it tonight. Something came up, but Miquim has authorized me to speak for him."

"Yes, he told me."

"Good. Won't you come in and sit down?"

Thin, yellowing carpet barely covered a creaking floor, and striped wallpaper peeled off the walls; the last of the daylight streamed in through holes in the curtains. The woman in the green dress led her to the right, into a larger room, and gestured toward a couch and a collection of

mismatched chairs – all of which, if not new, looked at least relatively clean. The chairs encircled a low table, on which a few lit candles revealed that someone had already prepared tea. It felt like a dream.

The woman paused at the base of a stairwell and called: "Taphis! Mernis! She's here!" She sat in the rocking chair next to the couch, then took a cup of tea for herself and sipped quietly, studying Clephe from under graying eyebrows.

"So," she said after a moment. "You're the avenging angel."

Clephe looked up, then set down her teacup softly. "It's not a role I wanted. Someone else chose it for me. I just need to know who."

"Going after blood is a dangerous business. Are you sure you're up to it?"

"I have to try."

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I see that you do." Her sudden smile was disconcerting. "Miquim spoke very highly of you. He said you were someone worth helping. I think he may have been right."

Footsteps thumped down the stairs, and two men appeared in the room and took their seats around the table. Identical twins. Both were tall, had brownish hair and deep blue eyes, and were in their late twenties. Both smiled at her nervously, but neither spoke. They seemed uncomfortable with a stranger.

"This is Taphis, and this is Mernis," the woman said, pointing first at one and then the other. "And this is Clephe, the woman I was telling you about. Clephe, the twins are our database managers. They keep track of all our information, make sure it's organized and searchable. Not an easy job."

"Pleased to meet you," Clephe said, but this failed to draw more than another weak smile

from either of them.

"Well," the woman continued, "to business. What can we do for you, and what will you do for us?"

"All I need from you is a name," Clephe answered. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"And you'll have it, I assure you. If there is one thing we are adept at finding, it is names."

She took another sip of her tea.

"And from me?"

"Ah." The teacup made a barely audible *clink* as she set it back on its dish. "You are the Master Librarian of the Fifth Library, a position you have held for the last two years. You have access to some of the most sensitive information in the city."

"What do you want to know?"

"Bring us all you can find about the missile project."

"That's a little broad. Anything in particular?"

"No. Everything."

"How should I contact you?"

"I have your netlink number. We will be in touch."

"I see." Then, "What makes this missile so fascinating for you?"

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Now, just a moment ago you told me that all you wanted from us was a name. What's this sudden curiosity?"

So that was how it was, then. No questions. "All right," Clephe said at last, "I won't ask. But you're demanding a great deal of me. I expect results."

"You will have them."

"Otherwise..."

"Don't threaten me, dear. You're much too sweet a girl to be going around threatening people. And far too young." She stood up. "Are we finished, then?"

Another man appeared in the doorway just then, tall, dark-haired, and pale. When he saw Clephe, he laughed. "This is the legendary killer! You disappoint me, killer. I expected fangs and a quiver of poison-tipped arrows."

"I've never killed anyone," Clephe said quietly.

"Oh, a virgin? My condolences. Don't worry, you'll find your special someone."

"This is Faudian," the old woman said. "He is the one in charge of our finances, our treasurer, so to speak. He often tries to be funny."

"You wound me," he lamented.

"I'd better get going," said Clephe. "I believe we agreed we were finished?"

They were. Clephe followed the woman to the main door and stepped out onto the porch, ignoring Faudian's babbling – something about begging to be forgiven for his indiscretions. Just as she was about to leave, she turned and said, "You never gave me your name."

"Oh, didn't I?" the woman replied. "Jillian. Call me Jillian. I know we'll work fantastically together."

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As they walked, Ayda and Nalim met all sorts of other travelers heading both to and from Manorviter. Some were pedestrians like themselves, but most came in wagons of all varieties, large and small, drawn by teams of enormous oxen. A few bore a banner emblazoned with the image of a boar's head on a field of blue. This was the city's emblem, Ayda explained, and signified official business with the Directorate, the city's governing body. These were usually

accompanied by haughty guards in blue and black livery, eyes stern, paces rigid. Like robots, thought Nalim – but more so, because the robots he'd met had all seemed human.

Travelers were a chatty bunch, and Nalim had plenty of chances to practice speaking Muelli. He could still only speak in broken phrases, but Ayda assured him he was making phenomenal progress for a beginner. There were a few bumps along the way, of course. Once, he noticed Ayda blushing when he introduced her as 'Lialma Ayda.' "It's just a female courtesy title," he said to her later, "like Miss or Madam. What's the problem?"

"It's more than that," she said, but no amount of prying could make her elaborate.

On the afternoon of their sixth day of traveling they reached the village of Pettrack. Nalim was struck immediately by the familiarity of the place; it was the first human establishment he'd seen, outside of the island, that actually seemed human. The houses that passed them as they walked were oddly cone-shaped and roofed in strange patterns with shingles of rough bark, but they were not so different from the rural houses he'd seen at times in the western half of his city. There was a warm and earthy smell to the air, a scent that mixed with the sounds of cattle and the bustle of people. To their left, a dirty and haggard young woman waved some kind of fruit he'd never seen before, shouting that nowhere would they find it for a lower price or a better value. Over on the right an old man lay in the street sleeping – or passed out, perhaps, judging by the bottle his unconscious hand still clutched. Knots of children ran in circles outside the storefronts, leaping over the man's body whenever it got in their way. It was like nothing Nalim had ever seen before, but it felt a little – just a little – like home.

Ayda seemed to know where she was going, so he followed her until they reached an old, battered rectangle of a building that looked like it might collapse in a strong breeze. "The Silver Swan" was faintly visible in white letters on a sign that hung out front – presumably a hotel.

Lovely. He stopped her just before entering.

"How are we going to pay for this?" he asked. "For that matter, what is money like around here? If they don't have computers to transfer funds, what do they use? Is it all paper-based?"

"They use these," she said, removing a bronze coin from a pouch she carried on her shoulder. "Each nation has its own variety, but they're accepted universally for the most part. This one is worth about a hundred of the local currency."

He stared at it, bemused. "Is that a lot?"

"The Core keeps its agents well supplied," she responded coolly. "This is a high priority mission. Money will not be a problem."

Inside, a stout, rosy-cheeked female innkeeper showed them to their room, a sad, dusty little place on the second floor. Nalim set down his pack and flopped onto the bed, but Ayda turned to leave again almost immediately. "Where are you going?" said Nalim. "We just got here!"

"I'm going back into town."

"Why?"

"Shopping."

"For what?"

"You'll see. I want to leave Pettrack by tomorrow morning."

"I'll go with you."

"Stay here for now." The door shut and she was gone.

Nalim lay back down with a sigh. He was beginning to suspect she invented mysteries on purpose just to confuse him.

## Chapter 17

Iriel sat on the bed with a clipboard, several sheets of paper, and a box of crayons. It was an idea she'd gotten from teaching her students; if Imlaud was hesitant to speak, perhaps he would express himself in other ways.

"It's a cat," she said, using a yellow crayon to sketch the pet she'd had as a girl. "See? Do you understand?" He didn't answer, but his eyes followed the crayon intently. He was so much like a child – and so familiar! Where had she seen him before?

"Do you want to try?" she said, offering him the crayon.

"Iriel," he whispered, but he made no other response. She put it back in the box and took out another crayon, green this time, and began working on a frog.

"I've done some reading about you, you know," she said as she drew, just to keep talking. "I've learned a lot about your old life. You were married for a few years, but she died. That must have been hard." Still no answer. "And you had a daughter named Shansia. Your mother is taking care of her now. She's eight years old, almost nine."

"Pretty," Imlaud said.

"Pretty?"

"Beautiful."

What was he talking about? Shansia? His dead wife? The picture? She gave him a warm smile and kept coloring. "Go on," she said, but he didn't. After a while she started talking again. "From what I read, you were also a pretty good software programmer. You worked for the City's matter synthesis department. Keeping the city supplied with raw materials – that's an important job. Your family must have been proud. You have a spotlessly clean criminal record, and apart from the death of your wife, you seemed to be as happy and well-adjusted a person as anyone could hope to be.



"And then about eleven months ago, you simply...stopped. You wouldn't talk, you wouldn't move, you wouldn't eat unless someone fed you. You've been here ever since. Brain scans find nothing unusual; physically, you seem to be in perfect health. And yet here you are."

She set down the crayon and leaned close. "So what happened, Imlaud?"

Just then, for the first time, he picked up a crayon and began to draw.

She didn't know what she'd been expecting – stick figures? Doodling? Certainly not this. He was drawing her face in grape purple, a remarkably good portrait, with all the earnest seriousness of a master. In his picture she had her eyes half-closed; she was looking at something off to her right, a hint of a smile on her lips. Her face complete, he raised the crayon to the top of the page, and his brow furrowed, as though he were attempting something very difficult. Then, with agonizing slowness, letters appeared on the paper – but they were nonsense, spelling nothing. After he had drawn seven or eight such letters, a low gasp escaped his throat, and he dropped the crayon and closed his eyes, breathing heavily.

He refused to open his eyes or speak any more, and in a few minutes the nurse came to end the session.

Iriel folded up the drawing carefully and took it with her, along with the box of crayons. Plenty of progress for one day.

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Ayda returned about an hour before midnight with a small burlap bag and an unreadable expression. She shut the door behind her and locked it, then set the bag on the bed and began digging through her pack. Nalim might have been a wall decoration for all the attention she gave him.

"Find something good?" he asked.

"Something, yes. Good is a different matter. Where is...ah." She pulled something from her pack. It was orange and hexagonal but possessed an odd translucence, as though it were glass, or crystal. "Manorviter has strict regulations on what can and can't be sold, but most of the outer villages are pretty lax. Occasionally you'll find something worthwhile." She opened the bag and removed a tiny rectangle, dark eyes narrowing as she held it up to the gloaming light.

Nalim came in close for a better look and saw for himself. "A computer data file!" he exclaimed. "How would anyone around here get something like that? Is it from Bystolia?"

"Similar," she said carefully, turning it over carefully. "But not the same. I don't think it's one of ours. I've never seen one quite like this before."

"Then where is it from? Is there another robot city somewhere?"

"Not exactly." She placed the chip into a small slot on the crystal hexagon, and hardly a second later she bit off a sharp shriek and dropped the whole thing to the floor as if burned. It landed with a loud thump, unharmed.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Pack up all your things," she said, doing likewise herself. "We need to leave. Now. I'll explain on the way."

Confused and apprehensive, he didn't argue.

The sun was now completely set over the horizon, leaving only a faint orange glow and a smattering of clouds at their backs as they set out on the road once more. The village was mostly deserted at that hour, a dark and unsettling contrast to the bustling activity of earlier that day. Every shadow was fuel for Nalim's already jittery nerves, and Ayda wasn't helping. She kept muttering to herself, as if carrying on an internal conversation. Only once could he make out any

actual words: "It changed!" He couldn't imagine what was going on, but something about the data file had shaken her in a way he'd never seen in her before.

"It's a virus," she said abruptly, shaking Nalim from his reverie a few minutes after they cleared the village's outskirts. "The file was infected with a computer virus."

"Can you fix it?"

"There's a story I want to tell you," she said, ignoring his question. "I've decided I can trust you this much."

"After Morgan's wife died, he began thinking about computers again and looking for a way to plant the seed he'd created. He turned to one of his friends for help, a young man with a quick mind by the name of Meyer. Meyer was awed by the prospect of an undertaking like the one Morgan had in mind, and he was eager to assist. Together they set in motion the beginnings of what would become Bystolia."

"But Meyer always wanted more control over the project than Morgan was willing to give, and their relationship was rocky from the beginning. When it came time to set up the Core, Morgan excluded Meyer completely, which he always resented. In a few weeks the Core achieved sentience and the city became self-sufficient; the dream was realized. Morgan's dream, at least."

"Morgan died soon after. Now, it often happens that when a person's life becomes bent on a single task, it becomes the reason for his existence, and once that task is accomplished, he dies. Morgan was old. Whether his death was for that reason, or due to something more sinister, I don't know. His body was never found."

"What I do know, however, is that after the city went operational, Meyer was not content to leave it alone. He was always in the Core's central chamber, talking to it, trying to make it think like him."

"The central chamber?" asked Nalim. "Is that where I was?"

"It was much smaller then, but yes, that's the place. Meyer never saw robots as anything more than tools. He was so certain that with Morgan gone, he could eventually make the Core do what he wanted.

"Eventually the Core grew weary of Meyer's endless maneuvering and had him removed by force. Meyer had no idea the robots even had the strength of will, much less the power, to execute such an act. He was livid. He spent the next decade studying the blueprints Morgan had left behind, searching for a way to enact his revenge. Eventually he found it."

"The virus," said Nalim, understanding at last.

"Exactly. Meyer returned to the city, which by then had grown greatly. He uploaded the virus into the first robot he met, and from there it spread quickly to the rest, with devastating effect. Of course, by the nature of their relationship with the Core, the Core was immediately infected as well. That was Meyer's intent, but in the end it worked against him. None of the robots could withstand the virus; some died instantly, others went insane, but all who received it were affected. The only exception was the Core itself, which managed, with great difficulty, to overcome the virus and destroy it. Once this was done, it propagated the vaccine to all the others. Meyer failed.

"Or at least, he did not succeed completely. It was only a vaccine the Core created, not a cure; there was nothing to be done for the infected robots. At first the Core tried to keep them in the city with the others, but it was impossible. Many were violent and destructive, and they could not be contained. Eventually they were banished from the city."

"Like me," Nalim commented.

"Much the same, yes," she answered, with real sympathy in her voice. Whether it was for him or the robots, he couldn't say. "They and their descendants still survive today in a place they

have found for themselves to the south of our city, in the Ashlands, but mostly they keep to themselves. It has been over a century since any of us made contact with them."

When she showed no signs of continuing, Nalim said, "So you found an infected data file from the Ashlands. So what? Didn't you say everyone has the vaccine now?"

"That's just it," she said, and the fear was in her voice again. "It isn't the same virus as before. I mean, it is, but it's different. It changed somehow, evolved into something we can't protect against. I don't understand."

"What finally happened to Meyer?"

"The Core had him destroyed."

"*Killed?* The Core?"

"It is the only time it has happened. It was not a matter of revenge; it was simply judged necessary."

Nalim scowled. Necessary!

## Chapter 18

They didn't sleep at all that night, and Nalim was still blinking the fatigue from his eyes when they crested a hill and came all at once upon Manorviter. What he saw pulled him sharply awake.

"It's huge," he breathed.

The city spread before them wide and kraken-like, a sprawling sea of lights in the rolling darkness. It was endless, his view truncated only by the horizon. "In Larlam, they made Manorviter sound like a village," said Nalim. "I was expecting something not much bigger than Pettrack."

"No use letting their prisoner know they weren't the dominant force in the universe," Ayda answered. "I'd think twice about any information they gave you. What is it?"

"Nothing," he said, grimacing. "My eyes have just been hurting lately. Don't worry about it." She frowned, and he waved her away. "It's nothing, I said."

As they entered the city, a damp and dirty smell entered the air, a mix of sweat, mud and overcrowding. Houses were crammed along streets like so many cardboard boxes, drab and dreary in the predawn black. The image of a boar's head hung on a limp blue flag, dull and tattered; off to their left, a saddled donkey trotted riderless through an alley. As much to break the silence as anything else, Nalim asked, "Is it all like this?"

"Not all, but too much. Lately it's gotten worse. We won't be staying out here, though. Do you see that wall up there, encircling the top of the big hill over to the left? That's the inner city, where everyone with money lives. I rent a house inside where we can stay, and there's a portal there where I can contact the Core and update him on our progress."

The sun rose slow and majestic. Purple rays streamed over the unwashed faces of wandering children; flaming orange lit the sides of trash heaps and mounds of dung. Like a great bear rousing itself from hibernation, the city stirred to life around them. Up ahead, the walls loomed high and forbidding.

When they reached the gate they found a line of people waiting to get in. A guard at the head of the line was nodding and checking something as each person went through. "He's making sure everyone has a medallion," she explained. "You need one to get into the Inner City. Anyone can buy them, but they're expensive. It's Manorviter's solution to the poverty problem: keep the beggars out of sight of the legislators, and nobody has to worry about them. Medallion sales also make a tidy source of income for the Directorate."

"The Directorate?"

"Manorviter's ruling body," she reminded him distractedly, rummaging through her pack.

"Did you take anything out of here?"

"I haven't touched it, why?"

"I can't find my medallion anywhere. I had it in my back pocket, but it's gone. I don't know what could've happened to it, I never let it out of my sight..."

"We'll have to buy a new one," Nalim said. "Where do they sell them?"

"I hate to spend so much money just to get inside once, but I suppose —"

"That won't be necessary," interrupted a voice just ahead of them.

They both turned to see a short, brown-haired balding man in his late forties. His clothes suggested that he was accustomed to living well, and his waistline suggested that he was not in much danger of starvation, either. He smiled ingratiatingly. "I couldn't help but overhear. If you're only going in once, there is no need to trouble yourselves. You may use mine."

"Oh — thank you," said Ayda. The line by that point had reached the gate, and the bored-looking guard glanced at the man's medallion and waved them through. Just like that, they were inside.

"I don't believe I got your names," the man said. They introduced themselves, and he bowed to both of them. "My name is Tirrax," he told them. "What a fine young couple you are. Where are the two of you headed?"

"North," she answered, "to the eleventh district."

"The eleventh!" he cried. "My destination also. I'll come with you. Is this your first time to the city?"

Ayda assured him it was not, but as they were going to the same place, he insisted on being

their guide anyway. He had to make a deposit at the bank in the eleventh district, he explained, for one of his clients. Tirrax, it turned out, managed the finances of several of Manorviter's wealthiest citizens, investing, trading, and finding tax loopholes to protect their assets. Within five minutes, Nalim learned more than he'd ever wanted to know about the sale of barley. The man's speech was difficult to follow, especially speaking in a language that Nalim had not yet mastered. All in all, he was easy to ignore.

Besides, the city was much more interesting. The districts inside the wall could not have been more different from the slums they'd seen earlier. It was as if some mischievous pixie had flown through the streets before they arrived, gilding the signs, draping the people in silver and satin, turning violets to sapphires and roses to rubies. Half the city seemed to be made of gold. It was difficult to concentrate on any one sight for long. Did people really *live* here?

Suddenly the pain in his eyes came back, stronger than ever, and he raised his hands to his face with a groan. It had grown worse throughout the week. He had never had any trouble with his eyes before now. What could it *be*...? After a few minutes the pain receded to a dull ache, and he noticed Ayda looking at him with concern once again.

Before long they reached the house, and Ayda bid the stranger farewell, thanking him again for his generosity. But Tirrax, it seemed, was not so easily disposed of. "Actually," he said, "I was wondering if I might come in for a moment. I don't mean to be rude, but this is such a lovely house, and I would so enjoy seeing it from the inside – and I still haven't finished telling you about my sale last week..."

"I wish I could," said Ayda coolly, "but we are really very busy, and I must get to work immediately."

"Oh? What do you do?"



"It's complicated," she said. "If you'll excuse us."

"Actually," Tirrax replied, suddenly stripping his voice of pretense, "I think we should talk." He glanced at Nalim. "Privately."

Ayda glanced back and forth between Nalim and Tirrax. "All right," she said finally. The two of them retreated to a spot several meters away, and Tirrax began whispering. The longer he spoke, the more Ayda's face darkened. They conferred a while longer, then returned, and Ayda ushered them both into the house.

"He'll be staying the night," she announced brusquely, and slammed the door behind her.

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It was early morning in the eastern slums of the great city of Manorviter as Vilto picked his way through the shadows of a crooked alley behind a butcher shop. He was a scrawny child, with darkly tanned skin and a way of crawling over things that made him look like a spider.

The alley widened at the end, forming a sort of alcove, and it was this place that he considered his home. He had a mildewed seat cushion that served as a pillow, a pot to catch rainwater, a chipped bowl, and a burlap sack that contained all of his treasures (hidden, of course, under a trash heap so it wouldn't be stolen). Chief among these were a spoon, a roll of twine, two silver coins, and – most precious of all – a *book*. It had a glorious brown and gold cover, battered, but still intact, and the yellowed pages were absolutely *covered* with words. He could not read them, but he knew what reading was, and he knew that one day he would be able to do it himself.

Vilto knew many things; he knew more, in fact, than any other eight-year-old in the city. It was not that he was particularly intelligent, and certainly he was not well-educated. The truth, in fact, was that he *saw* things, many things, and he had discovered – with great surprise – that most

of what he saw could not be seen by anyone else.

He could not have explained it to anyone else, but there were...*threads*...that led into the future. Possibilities. He could look at his rainwater pot and see – not just imagine, but *see* – its potential futures: if he dropped it, it would shatter; if he drank from it, it would be empty; if he blew air across its surface, the water would ripple; if he left it alone, it would eventually dry up. He could walk into the butcher's shop and *know* what the butcher would say if he begged for a piece of mutton. He only asked when he saw the answer as yes – why ask if you knew it would be no? Nobody ever stole from him. Why leave your treasure unattended when you knew it would be stolen? That was silly!

Vilto was a pickpocket. He had quick nimble fingers, and he was never caught, since he only tried when he knew he would succeed. Today, for example, he had known from the moment he saw her that the woman with the black hair had a medallion in her pack, and he'd known, too, that she would be too lost in thought to notice him if he reached in *just* so. She was one of the nice ones; in the future where she caught him stealing, she didn't beat him. Still, it didn't bother him to have stolen from her. If she were really a nice person, wouldn't she have given it to him to begin with?

Vilto couldn't use the medallion by itself to get into the Inner City, of course. The guard would take one look at him and know he had stolen it, and he *would* beat him; even without his special sight, he would have known that. But there were other possibilities.

The future was *full* of possibilities.

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Manorviter had always hated the forest. Many reasons were given – ancient rivalries, trade

disputes, cultural clashes – but Vey knew the real one. Manorviter hated the forest because only the forest could fly.

With that in mind, she chose a landing site a few kilometers outside of Searnom, a small village just south of the main city. If she dismounted far from prying eyes and changed out of her uniform, she might actually blend in. The characteristic red hair of the forest people had turned gray on her head, which meant that the only real hint of her origin was her sylvan accent, and even that was not terribly strong. Searching for Nalim here might be relatively straightforward.

Actually finding him, of course, was another matter.

Guiding the rukh with gentle pressure from her knees and fingertips, she indicated where she wanted to land. After that, it was easy. Rukhs were every bit as intelligent as humans, and riding one entailed little more than staying on its back and indicating where you wanted to go. Most of her training, in fact, had centered on learning to understand the rukhs for what they were, and resisting the temptation to treat them as animals. Every human was paired with one rukh, and only one, for life; only when one died could the other choose a new partner.

A *whoosh* of air and a sudden deceleration, and the ground rushed up to meet her in a way that was still exciting, even after all these years. Once they were still, she dismounted and patted the rukh's neck. "I'll be back by sunset. Stay out of trouble." It snorted derisively and took to the air again, heading south, probably to hunt. Vey started toward the village to continue her own hunt. She hoped her luck would be half as good.

Vey had heard the latest news from Mirnor: the king was furious. He had publicly accused Sivete of lying about Nalim's escape so he could keep the prisoner for himself. When Sivete denied it, the king ordered strict sanctions placed on the city of Larlam until the reeve "came to his senses." The other reeves, of course, foresaw the same thing happening to each of them, and they

rallied in a show of support for Sivete and the "little people." The last she'd heard, there was no talk of war, but that had been three days ago. A lot could happen in three days.

Her own part in the story was rather confusing. Did she really want to find Nalim anymore? It occurred to her that as long as he remained mysteriously absent, the conflict would probably keep to a simmer, and eventually dissipate. But if he returned to the game as a token once more, he would polarize the dispute, making war all but inevitable.

And beyond that, she felt sorry for Nalim. Wasn't he a person, too, with a life of his own, and decisions to make for himself? She wished she could have spoken to him, just once, after he'd learned the language. He had not seemed so bad, in the little time she'd spent with him.

Near the outskirts of the village she met a young woman coming down the path in the opposite direction. The woman wore a pearl necklace and earrings in the shape of blue moons, the sort that were fashionable in the coastal regions. "Excuse me," the woman said as she approached, "are you the one who came in on the bird?"

Vey grimaced, but there was no point in denying it now. "That was me. Can I help you with something?"

"Oh, yes," the woman said, her face an unsmiling mask. "You certainly can." Her arm shot out faster than Vey would have believed, and she touched three fingers to Vey's cheek.

A moment later, Vey continued toward the village, leaving the woman's corpse behind her, where it was not discovered for over an hour.

## Chapter 19

Sitting on the edge of the bed in the second story bedroom, looking out the window, Nalim could see past the great stone wall encircling the inner city, past the maze of cramped streets

beyond, to the far northeast where the massive peak of Mount Tasjier was barely visible. The moon, nearly full, strained through shifting clouds to bask city and summit in a flickering glow. It was not very late yet, but Nalim was more than ready for the day to be over.

Tirrax and Ayda had locked themselves in a room first thing after walking in the door, and they'd talked in hushed tones for a long time. Then Ayda had locked herself in another room to speak with the Core – *that* had lasted almost five hours – and *then* she'd come out and had yet another 'private' talk with Tirrax. Following that had been the matter-of-fact announcement that Tirrax would be accompanying them on their journey; no explanation had been given, though Ayda had looked none too pleased. Tirrax, for his part, had seemed too scared of Ayda to say much of anything, a change both welcome and puzzling.

Now Tirrax was snoring on the couch in the living room, and Ayda was busy doing something-or-other downstairs. Nalim had barely heard two consecutive words from her all day. He was struggling desperately for relevance.

A shadow passed by his open door and the door to Ayda's bedroom shut softly. Not so much as a hello – as if he didn't even exist. But then, he thought, he didn't – not really. He was not a human, he was a symbol. He represented heresy to his home city, power to Mirnor, hope to the Core – but nowhere was he an actual person. Of what value would a real person be? None, he supposed. Hardly surprising. He hadn't even been able to make his life work back home, when he'd had every opportunity for success, so why should he expect more here?

But no, he thought. Ever since he'd left home, he'd been a pawn of greater forces. No more. It was time to do something for himself.

Nalim found Ayda's door in the dark and knocked quietly.

"Tirrax?" she said.

He grimaced. "Nalim."

"What is it?"

"May I come inside?"

She didn't answer for so long that he was beginning to think she hadn't heard, when the door opened and she let him in wordlessly.

"What do you need, Nalim?"

"I think I deserve some answers."

"Do you."

"Ayda, you haven't told me anything about – "

"What do you want me to say?" she demanded – and just then a cloud passed away from the moon, and he saw in the sudden light that she was crying. Nalim was stunned. He had not imagined her capable of tears.

"Ayda..." he began, but he could not think of anything to say, so he took her in his arms, stroking her hair, and that only seemed to make her cry harder – but she would not let go. Nalim didn't understand, but it was the first chance he had had to do anything right in a very long time, so he let understanding wait for a while.

Then she released him and sat on the bed, wiping her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't... I can't..."

He sat down beside her, only because it felt so awkward to stand.

"I spoke to the Core," she said, slowly regaining her composure. "I transmitted a copy of the virus to a quarantined database for observation, and explained how I'd found it. The Core will continue to study it, but right now it doesn't look good. This version is so much more powerful than the one before. The Core doesn't think it will be able to absorb the virus and create a vaccine

like last time. And besides..." She sniffed, wiping her eyes. The tremors in her voice were disappearing. "Besides, it's too risky – if it fails, the virus will be transmitted to our entire city, and none of them will survive."

"But where did this new virus originate? And where did that infected file come from to begin with, if it wasn't from your city..."

"You remember I told you that when the first virus hit, many of the infected robots who survived went crazy and left."

"Yes, you said they created their own colony to the south. You think the file came from there?"

"The file, almost certainly, and I think the new virus originated there too. We haven't spoken with any of them for so long. None of us really know what goes on there."

"Well, we need to find out, don't we? We need to go and pay them a visit. That virus is still out there. If it spreads to your city – "

"The mission takes first priority."

"The *mission*? To get a *hair sample*? How can that be more important than saving your city?"

She didn't answer.

Nalim sighed and got up. "Well, it's your business. I won't interfere in what I don't understand." He went to the door.

"Nalim, please, if I could tell you..."

"No, I...look...it's all right."

"Is it? How can it be all right to keep secrets from you?" She rose and stood beside him in the doorway, breathing raggedly, as if about to cry again. "I told the Core about your eyes hurting,

too."

"My eyes? That was nothing."

"No. It wasn't. Your eyes have been hurting since your encounter with Rel, right?"

"Well...I suppose that's right."

"Nalim, I didn't want to tell you this, but...of all the people Rel has bonded with in the past, less than half survived. Sometimes it only took a few days, sometimes months. But all of them started out with the same pain in their eyes."

He stared at her in disbelief.

"Well," he said finally, "so some of them survived, huh? So I have a chance."

"Of the ones who survived – all of them went blind!" She fell into tears again. He hated seeing her cry.

"Hey. Listen! I'm not going to die, and I'm not going to go blind. You talked to the Core about this, right? He'll figure out an answer. Listen! It's going to be okay. You understand?"

"Why are you comforting *me* – you're the one who's – " She couldn't finish.

At last she grew calmer. "I'd better go," he said when she dried her eyes. As long as he was there, his presence was sure to upset her. "Good night, Ayda."

He heard her voice again behind him. "Nalim?"

"Yes?"

She smiled at him weakly. "Good night," she said.

He shut the door behind him and shook his head, trying to figure out whether he was more confused, or less, than he had been when he first entered.

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Iriel lay sprawled on the dining room floor, leaning on her elbows, four sheets of paper arrayed in a semicircle within easy reach. From somewhere in the living room she could hear the news on the viewscreen: "With the Summer Solstice fast approaching, the Brotherhood is making extensive preparations, as always on this holiest of days..." She ignored it. The sheets of paper were far more interesting.

The first, on her left, was the drawing Imlaud had made of her yesterday. He'd drawn the other three today. Each was more complete and detailed than the last; the first three showed only her face, but the fourth also included her neck and shoulders. All four had jumbles of letters written on them, as if he were trying to write something but didn't know how to form words.

How could someone in his state produce drawings like these? And what was he trying to write? Did the letters meaning anything at all? She would show them to Wasmeth when he got home; he had a logical mind and might be able to think of something she hadn't seen. The idea excited her.

She looked at the chronometer and frowned. He should have been home four hours ago. He'd told her he'd be late, but this was pushing it. Of course, last night he hadn't been home at all. Maybe not tonight, either. The nights like that had been getting more frequent lately.

She collected the pictures into a stack and stood in front of the bathroom mirror. She went through the drawings one by one, holding up each and comparing it to her own face. The resemblance was remarkable; he was a very good artist. That was another puzzle, actually – she had called Essel last night to tell her about the first drawing, and she'd said that Imlaud had never had much talent at drawing. Essel was thrilled that Iriel was "helping" him so much, but Iriel wasn't so sure. If he had never been able to draw before, why the change?

She held up the final drawing and stopped suddenly. In the picture, Imlaud had drawn her

wearing one of her favorite necklaces, a short chain with a piece of carved amber hanging from the middle. Only, she hadn't worn that necklace tonight...so where had he seen it? Perhaps she'd worn it during one of their earlier sessions, and he'd remembered it from that. But there were other differences. It was difficult to tell – that part of the drawing did not have much detail – but the blouse did not look like the one she'd worn, either. And the hairstyle was subtly different – it looked the way she'd worn it several years ago.

How was that possible?

The front door hissed as it opened, and she dashed in to meet her fiancé. "I've missed you," she said, kissing his lips gently.

Wasmeth pushed past her, unsmiling. "Hi," he said quietly, setting down his suitcase and the thick folder of papers he'd been carrying. Dark lines ringed his eyes. He opened the pantry.

"Did you pick up any coffee from the store, like I asked you to?"

"No, I'm sorry, I was – "

"Don't worry about it," he said, voice still soft, as if he were too tired to speak normally.

"I'll stop and get some tomorrow morning."

"I can do it."

"Don't worry about it." He went into the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

Iriel sighed. Nights like *this* were getting more frequent, too. There was no point trying to talk to him tonight. She might as well go to bed.

He came out with the drawings in his hand. "What's this doing in the bathroom? More of your kids' stuff?"

"Oh, give me those," she said, holding out her hand. "Your hands are wet. You're crinkling them."

He ignored her outstretched hand, looking through the papers one at a time. "These aren't kids' drawings. What are they?"

"Imlaud drew them. He's making good progress."

"He draws pictures of you now?"

"Jealous?" She had not quite meant to say that – it had simply popped out of her mouth – but she decided not to apologize.

He gave her an angry look, which she returned placidly. When he did speak, though, it was still quiet. "I don't want you to see him anymore."

"*What?* Why not?"

"The Brotherhood has told me about him. He's dangerous."

"Dangerous?" she cried. "He can't even write his own name! Who is he dangerous to?"

He shrugged, making the motion look exhausting. "You're forbidden to see him."

"Am I?"

"*Yes!*" he shouted. Then, taking a deep breath, "Promise me you won't see him."

"Who's forbidding me? You or the Brotherhood?"

"Promise me!"

"Answer the question," she snapped.

"Both."

"You're asking me to just give up on this man. To tell his mother that I'm just going to stop trying, after all the progress we've made. Is that what you want me to do?"

"The Brotherhood – "

"The Brotherhood says to do it, so you do it, huh? Do they not let you think anymore? Only Eremis gets to do that, I guess."

"I do what the Law commands. If you were wise, you would do the same. The Gray Book says – "

"*Look* at me, Wasmeth! Do you know how hard you're making this? Even if you disagree with me, don't you even *care*?"

"Oh, stop it," he sneered. "Do you think you're the only one with problems? All I need is an answer. Do you promise, or not?"

She didn't answer.

"You'd defy the Law?" Nothing. "*Well*?"

"I promise."

He nodded. "Good." The anger drained from his face, and the life with it. "I'm going to bed."

Iriel lowered herself into a chair and stared at the wall, eyes peering blankly from between her fingers. It was not until several minutes had passed that she allowed herself to cry.

Before that night, she had never lied to him.

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It was well past *late* and bordering on *early* when the hooded messenger appeared in Eremis's private chambers, clutching a sheaf of papers. Eremis raised his eyes beneath their ancient lids. "What do you bring me, Brother?"

"The latest report from Wasmeth, my lord. He has done as you asked, and his fiancée has promised to obey you."

"Thank you, Brother."

It was a standard dismissal, but the man hesitated at the entrance. Eremis waited.

"Permission to speak candidly, my lord?"

"Always."

"My lord... Many among us have wondered. He has already been made to arrest Nalim, his dearest friend, and now we begin to turn him against his lover also. I understand the necessity of testing him, but has he not shown himself loyal already? Has he not obeyed your commands flawlessly? What others of our Brethren have been tested so much?"

"I am going to tell you a story," said Eremis. "Would you like that?"

"As it please my lord."

"Many centuries ago, in the days of war and bloodshed before the angel Thiowill united our city, there lived a foolish young man who herded sheep near the shores of the ocean. He made for himself wooden swords to fight off thieves and wild animals; but the swords, being wooden, splintered easily, or rotted away. After a time he became frustrated, and he went into the city to speak with a blacksmith.

"'How is it,' he asked, 'that your swords are strong, and do not break?'

"The blacksmith answered, 'I forge my blades in the hottest fires.'

"So the foolish shepherd went home and made for himself another wooden sword, and when it was done, he took it to the hearth and thrust it into the coals. Of course, the sword caught fire and burned to ash; and the shepherd cursed the blacksmith for an idiot, for that idea had been even worse than before."

When the messenger saw the story was over, he mulled it over, then said, "I don't understand."

"You tell me I am harsh with Wasmeth because you see him enduring more than you would want to endure," Eremis answered. "But steel is steel."

## Chapter 20

A light drizzle obscured the morning, darkening the pavement and cooling the air. Nalim had the feeling that something was wrong, but what? At last he identified it: for the first time he could remember, he had walked in the rain without reciting an invocation against Chaos. It was strange to feel the water on his skin, and not say the words, yet liberating also. It was one less thing to have to think about.

What was happening to him?

In spite of their newfound need for haste, Ayda had insisted they stop at Tirrax's house before leaving Manorviter. He had something he wanted to show them, she said, something that would be worth their time. The house was modest for an Inner City dwelling, only two stories, a plain wooden building. It was painted an immaculate white, with white shutters and a slanted black roof; a small but well-tended garden grew in the front.

"Let's make this quick," Ayda said as Tirrax ushered them inside. "I want to be on the road by ten o'clock."

"Of course," he answered. "This way." He led them through several rooms, cluttered with papers and notebooks, up the stairs and to the left. They came to a small room that was entirely empty but for a bulky shape enshrouded by a dirty white tarp.

"This is it," he said, pulling off the tarp.

It was a robot.

Its body was about two meters long, a meter wide, and vaguely pear-shaped; the brown and silver surface was a bizarre hodgepodge of smooth curves, right angles, and steel conduits. Four white, semitransparent spherical objects – eyes? – formed a semicircle on the smaller end. Nalim

counted seven legs extending radially from the main body, none of them resembling any of its neighbors in the slightest.

"Where did you get him?" Ayda demanded.

"I found it on one of my trips to the north, in the Ashlands, eight years ago."

"How often do you go to the Ashlands? What have you seen there?"

"Nothing...nothing, really. I'd heard lots of stories about strange things that lived there, but all I ever found was this. I only went a few times, when I was younger. That place gives me the creeps."

"Good," said Ayda.

"Does this robot have a name?" asked Nalim.

"If it has a name for itself, I don't know it. But since it has seven legs, I call it Krace, after the name of one of the constellations we have here. The legend says Krace was a moon spider that built its web across the stars, but it crawled too close to the sun and burned off one of its – "

"Activate him," Ayda commanded.

"I was just about to. No need to be grumpy." He pressed his palm against a small circle on one of the legs. Various lights flashed across the creature's surface. The legs quivered and stretched. The head made a quarter turn clockwise, then turned back, whirring softly. Then the robot – Krace – looked up, emitted a high-pitched shriek and crawled, spider-like, to the far end of the little room, where it lowered its head and clicked nervously.

"I should have warned you," Tirrax said. "It's a skittish thing. Took it weeks to get used to me, and I'm the only human it's ever seen – well, as far as I know. Krace, come here and meet our guests. It's all right." He held out his hand, but the robot did not stir from its corner. "When no one else is around it's always following me, all over the house, won't leave me alone – but the way it's

acting now, it's probably of no interest to you. I'll turn it off."

"Wait," Ayda said. She took a step toward it, palms out in a placating gesture. The creature moved its legs frantically as if trying to back away, but there was nowhere to go. It squealed desperately. But Ayda spoke strange words in a low voice, walking forward one measured pace at a time, and Krace gradually stopped trying to run. "Simmonuid mesthanietsofomas, escs tiaras Krace meffluis. Simmonuid tol entomo. Desduosno etolmiat, simmonuid kiahnn. Don't fear, little one." And reaching it at last, she stretched out her fingers and touched the flat metal on the side of its face. The creature faced her quietly.

"What did you do?" whispered Tirrax.

"I told him the truth," she said. "I told him he was safe." Then she touched the circle to turn it off and left the room. "Cover it with the tarp again. We've no more time to waste here."

Tirrax glanced at Nalim with surprise, but Nalim only turned to follow Ayda. He no longer expected to understand her behavior.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to see the rest of the house?" Tirrax asked, catching up with Ayda. "I have other projects that might interest you..."

"No time," she answered. "Come on, we have to – hm."

"What?"

"Actually, why don't you give Nalim the tour after all. I just remembered I left something back in my room. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"I wonder what she forgot?" said Nalim, once she was gone.

Tirrax waved the question away. "Nalim, I want to show you something I've been working on for some time now. I've been analyzing over twenty years' worth of records on real estate property values, and it seems to me there are certain patterns that a man could exploit..."



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It was a damp and dreary day in southern Manorviter, where Vey sat on top of the flat roof of a house, scanning the city. The rooftop was muddy and slippery, but Vey didn't care. There were very few things she considered important anymore.

Of course, the creature on the rooftop wasn't *really* Vey, no more than a cookbook would still be a cookbook if someone tore out the pages and replaced them with an encyclopedia, leaving only the cover and title intact. The creature on the rooftop was something very different, something very old, something that had never been seen before in that part of the world. It felt the grimy bark below it with Vey's skin, and it listened to the dying rain with Vey's ears, and it sifted through Vey's memories, and it waited. Above all else, the creature on the rooftop was patient.

It had originally chosen Vey's body when it saw the rukh flying overhead. Command of such power would be a valuable thing. But when it returned to the landing site at sunset as Vey had promised, the rukh had squawked and screamed at her, flying off before she could get close enough to touch it. How had it known? Something in the creature's own memories tugged at it, reaching back through the centuries for some clue to the answer, but it was no use. It had forgotten.

Well, that opportunity was lost, but there were others. Vey's recent memories centered on the search for Nalim, a strange man she'd known very little about. But there were images: a great city, encircled by a massive wall; weapons of terrible destruction around the city, preventing anyone from coming too near; strange lights, and enormous towers. There was power there. Vey had known it; Mirnor had known it; the creature in Vey's body knew it now. Enormous power, and Nalim was the key.

Vey had watched Nalim enter the little white house just minutes ago with two others she

didn't recognize. Perhaps they were the ones who had helped him escape, if he had indeed had help. If they were, they might be interesting too; it would be best to take those two first, leaving Nalim for last. His body might be valuable, and it would not do to simply discard it.

Just then the female left the house. Alone. It could not have been more perfect. Vey gave the roof a push and slipped off the side of the house, landing softly on the pavement eight meters below. Closer, now. This was best done away from witnesses; the people in this strange land were no threat, but they sometimes complicated the process. Yes, there, in the dark. Vey stood up and revealed herself.

The female looked at her for a moment; recognition lighted her eyes, then she glanced away, trying to appear inconspicuous. Had this woman known Vey? No matter. Soon all would be clear. As she passed, the tip of Vey's fingers brushed the back of the woman's hand.

The female sank to her knees. Her mouth moved in desperate agony, but no sound escaped.

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The front door crashed open and Ayda exploded into the room clutching her kris, the blade crimson and wet. "We have to go!" she shouted, taking her pack. "Grab your things and let's go!"

"Ayda, what – "

"No *time*!" she screamed. "*Now*!"

Nalim picked up his traveling pack and followed her. "At least put away that knife, people will think you – "

She stuffed the kris into her bag and dashed out the door, leaving them no choice but to follow. Shocked and curious faces turned to stare as they sprinted through the city, footsteps pounding wildly over the cobblestones. They passed through the gate at the wall and kept going,

dodging in and among wooden carts, tripping over stray animals, mud splattering their boots. Ayda pressed southward, out of the city. Tirrax puffed noisily, calling for her to slow down; the second he spoke, she said only, "Run or die!" He kept running.

It was not until they had gotten almost three kilometers from the edge of the city that Ayda allowed them to stop by the roadside, far from any other eyes. Tirrax fell on his hands and knees and vomited in the grass. Sweat streamed over Nalim's face and chest. Ayda, though, showed few signs of exertion. She sat alone, hugging herself, staring at nothing, and her hands shook.

Nalim sat across from her, still breathing heavily. "What happened?"

"I...I don't know," she began. She was looking through him, not at him. "I saw Vey while I was walking toward my house."

"Vey! Does she know I'm here? Did she speak to you?"

Ayda shook her head. "I don't think she knew me. But as she walked by, she touched me, and I..."

"What?"

"I don't...it felt like...like my hand was on fire. I tried to jerk it away, but I couldn't, and I tried to scream, but I couldn't...I don't know..."

Nalim could only stare in confusion. After a moment she closed her eyes and began again. "It wasn't Vey," she said. "It was her face, it looked like her, but it wasn't her...not on the inside. It...it *touched* my mind, fought me, but I resisted...it was horrible. *Horrible*. Like a pipe pumping toxic waste into your skull, or...or a vision of every evil thing ever done. I can't describe it. I've never been so terrified in my life. I didn't even think, I just had to run, to get away..." She looked at him helplessly.

"What *was* it?"

"It's..." She took a deep breath, struggling for calm. "When it...touched me, I saw part of its mind. It's a parasite – it takes over people's minds and uses their bodies. It took Vey. It tried to take me."

Suddenly Nalim remembered the blood-stained knife. "You stabbed her?"

"Not her, *it*. It wasn't Vey anymore. Vey was dead. I barely even remember what happened. I...I guess I did stab it. Maybe it's dead." She took hold of his arm. "We have to find out what it was. If there are more like it... The Core has never seen anything like this before. We have to find out."

"What do we do now?"

She stood up slowly. "Same plan. We have to get to Moed. That's more important than anything else. More important than ever."

Nalim nodded, though he still didn't understand. "Tirrax? Did you hear? We have to keep moving."

Duke Tulami, thought Nalim, I don't know who you are, but your hair had better be pretty damned magical.

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Vey's body lay sprawled on the street, half hidden by shadow. Two wide gashes stretched across her stomach, another on her left arm, three more on her face. Her throat, wide open, leaked little red rivers that mixed with the rainwater and washed away toward her feet. Her empty eyes stared at the sky.

She lay that way nearly two minutes before the young couple found her, walking together in the muggy air that followed the morning showers. "What the – " cried the man, running and

kneeling at her side, and his wife bit off a shriek.

"Is – is she – " she began, unable to finish the thought.

"I don't believe it," the man replied. "She's alive!"

"We have to help her, I'll go find a doctor..."

"Just a moment, just a moment... Let me see..."

He reached out and touched her hand –

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A few minutes later, the wife of the helpful young man sat cross-legged and pensive on the roof of Tirrax's house. She was technically a widow now, but the being that controlled her body had more important things to think about.

The woman it had attacked – Ayda, her name was – had *resisted*. Her mind had defied its touch, and the shock of that resistance had stunned it long enough to incapacitate Vey. How was that possible? No one had ever resisted before. The memory transfer had been incomplete, and worse, Ayda might have gained some of its own memories in the exchange. At the time it had sensed nothing in her mind but pain and overwhelming terror, but that would wear off. She was a possible threat and had to be treated as such.

More interesting, though, were the fragments it had received from Ayda's mind. There were memories there about a new type of organism, something it had never heard of before – something that was mechanical, made of metal and gears, yet lived. There was a city of them far to the north, and a mind of terrible power – and south of that, another place where more of these...robots...lived a different kind of life. Such power. It had to be destroyed. But what was the key to unraveling its defenses?

Ah, but there was another robot, too.

Tirrax's door was locked, but it was ill-made to withstand the crushing force of a blow from the widow's foot, dealt with the confidence of a creature that understood her every muscle, her every cell. She climbed the stairs, entered the little room, and uncovered the tarp –

And there it was, just where Ayda's memories had left it. She slapped the circle that turned it on; it screeched to life, scrabbling at the walls in terror, clicking and flashing madly. A clockwork soul. Would it be possible...?

She reached out and touched the robot's head, but she felt only cold metal. No transfer of thoughts; no surrender of control. A pity. That might have been interesting.

Still, she had found what she needed, and that was enough. She turned the thing off again, ending its ridiculous whimpering, and covered it once more.

Now the fun could begin.

## Chapter 21

Their second day of traveling ended as it had begun: dark, wet, and miserable. They had passed the village of Searnom early yesterday, and after that it had been farmland, kilometer upon kilometer of flat green and brown squares, horizon to horizon. Tirrax had been sick most of that day, and no one had felt like talking. Today, though, they'd reached a place Ayda called Grassy Hills – named, apparently, by virtue of what they weren't. Their pace had slowed as they wound their way over and around the steep, rugged outcroppings, and Ayda said it would only get worse as they went. The terrain would become steadily more mountainous, she said, until it flattened into a wide plain before reaching the sea. Across that plain spread the dozens of little provinces that made up the fragmented Erio-Joran League, their destination.

That night they set down a tarp to sleep on a good distance from the road, behind one of the rocky hills, to keep out of sight. No one knew if the creature Ayda had met in the city was still alive, but it was better to be cautious – and of course there were always the searchers from Mirnor to consider. The tarp offered no comfort against the lumps of the rocky soil, but it was better than sleeping in wet grass. Before long, Tirrax could hear soft snores coming from Nalim's direction. Ayda's eyes were closed, but he could tell from her breathing she was still awake.

"Ayda," he whispered.

The dark shape to his left stirred briefly. "Go to sleep," she mumbled.

"Ayda, please listen. I don't want you to hate me."

She opened her eyes and propped herself up on one elbow with a small groan. "I don't hate easily. Go to sleep."

"I was just thinking...I'll go back, if you want me to. To Manorviter. I'll consider our bargain fulfilled, and I won't tell Nalim about – about you. I don't want to be a burden."

"It's a little late for that, isn't it?" Ayda hissed. "You can't go back now. What if *it* saw you?" There was no need to say what *it* was. "It might recognize you, and then who knows what it would do."

"It's probably dead. Anyway, I doubt it ever saw me." In truth, he was somewhat skeptical of Ayda's entire story, though of course he wasn't about to tell *her* that. Her terror had been real, though.

"Don't be a fool," she replied.

Just then Nalim bolted upright, screaming wordlessly and pressing his hands against his face, startling them both. His body shook with irregular spasms, as though he were in horrible pain. "Nalim, what is it, what's wrong?" Ayda said, but there was no answer except his screaming. She

glanced at Tirrax. "He's sweating, but his face is cold."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's had pains in his eyes before, but nothing like this. Usually it passes in a few minutes...Nalim, Nalim, it's all right! It's all right..."

Gradually, gradually, his screams turned to low moans. "My eyes," he said finally. "Oh, my eyes. I've never felt anything like that before. It was cold, like there were pieces of ice behind my eyes and in the back of my skull, and going halfway down my spine..." He shivered and massaged his eye sockets, sighing deeply.

Suddenly a voice from behind them, deep and rough, startled them all. "Good evening, friends!"

Ayda was on her feet in a heartbeat, Tirrax and Nalim following seconds later. "Who are you?" she demanded. "What do you want?"

"Be calm. I heard your shouts and came to assist." The voice belonged to an enormously tall and muscular man, though it was too dark to make out many details.

"We don't need any assistance," Nalim said guardedly.

"Oh, but you do. All alone in the night with no one to protect you? There are bandits about. I should come with you, for your protection." A blade flashed in the dark.

Ayda's kris slipped out of its scabbard. "We don't need protection, either."

"Now that's where you're wrong," the man chuckled, and other shapes emerged from the darkness, over a dozen men, all armed. It was difficult to see much, but moonlight glinted off the edges of enough weapons to convince Tirrax he didn't want a fight. "Put down your pinprick, little mouse, before someone has an accident." The man's voice hardened. "Do it!" After a moment's hesitation she obeyed, dropping the weapon to the ground, and one of the men retrieved it. He



smelled of whiskey and sweat.

"Good little mouse," the leader laughed. "Tie them up and put them with the others. The fat one's worth plenty, I'll bet. And be careful with the mouse." He grinned. "She'll gnaw off your fingers if you ain't careful!"

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The island city was larger than it appeared; fully half lay underground, a subterranean maze of subways, office complexes, apartments, and storage facilities. Most underground business was as mundane as what went on above, but the deep places carried a mystique that refused to die. People spoke of monstrous creatures that lived under the earth, or secret chambers where terrifying plots were conceived. Who knew what went on in the cold, dark underbelly of their civilized island?

Not all the rumors were lies.

Miquim looked around the table, one face at a time. His subordinates. His rivals. In this business, those were usually the same. Sitting on his left was Faudian, the jester, who never shut up – but behind that jovial façade was the man who had quietly covered the group's paper trails for the last eight years. Then there were the twins, Taphis and Mernis, who came to the meetings dutifully but never spoke an unnecessary word. Sitting next to Mernis, shoulders slumped, cheeks rough with white stubble, was their scientist, Grynnt. He was worthless; everyone was waiting for him to die. They were already searching for his replacement.

And that brought him all the way around the table to Jillian – Jillian, who sat at his right hand, who was his second in command, who never hesitated to pounce on his failures. She was his finest, but if he made one mistake she'd have the whole organization working for her.

Miquim did not make mistakes.

"How do you propose we get the bomb into position?" Faudian was saying. "These buildings *will* be guarded, and I somehow doubt they'll believe us if we tell them we're delivering a box of chocolates at three o'clock in the morning."

"That's already taken care of," Jillian sighed. "There will be guards, but not many, and they will not suspect an attack. What I am far more curious about is the *target* of the attack," she continued, looking to Miquim. "It is scheduled for tomorrow night, and you have yet to tell us our target."

"No need," Miquim replied. "None of *you* will be involved in the delivery."

"I deserve to know the entire plan," said Jillian.

"The thought of your curiosity going unsatisfied fills me with dismay. Very well. I will send all of you specific details by netlink sometime tomorrow. That should be enough to satisfy everyone." Jillian frowned, but kept silent. "Excellent. Other issues?"

"Yes," said Faudian. "What about Clephe?"

"What about her?" rumbled Grynnt. He had opposed their plans for Clephe from the beginning and lost no opportunities to vent his bitterness. Everyone ignored him.

"She's been sending me regular reports," Miquim said. "Her information is detailed and accurate. She's even told us a few things we didn't already know. She seems to be acting in good faith. Taphis, how are those analyses coming?"

Taphis looked at Mernis, who cleared his throat. It was an annoying habit the twins had: whichever of them you addressed a question to, the other answered. That, or the one he'd thought was Taphis was Mernis. They were too damned hard to tell apart. "Analysis of the first query is seventy-five percent complete," one of them answered. "There is an enormous amount of data to

sift through."

Miquim nodded. He had learned to trust their judgment on technical matters.

"And what about Clephe's other...assignment?" Faudian pressed. "Have we learned anything interesting from her yet?"

Still too early to tell them the full truth. "Nothing of interest yet," he answered mildly. "But I am optimistic."

"Aren't we all," Grynnt rasped. "But some of us have lives outside of these clubhouse meetings. If no one has need of my services tonight, I'm heading home."

"A fine idea for us all," Miquim said. "If there's nothing else...? Dismissed."

Grynnt left first, followed by Faudian and the twins; Jillian remained. "What is it, Jillian? I'm not arguing with you any more tonight. Go home."

She regarded him carefully. "What are you playing at, Miquim? You always were too smart for your own good."

"You're the one who wants my job so badly," he answered. "You tell me."

Jillian left.

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The sun was scarcely over the horizon when Marene arrived at her office to begin work. No one else was there yet; technically, she didn't have to be there herself for another forty-five minutes, but there was no point in sitting around at home. Besides, she wasn't tired.

She got a cup of coffee and began looking over her drawings. They had completed the design phase on three of the grain silos, but the city was still reviewing their proposals and had sent back tentative revisions for one of them. The changes would have to be incorporated into the

design before construction began. She took a sip of coffee. Most of it was fairly trivial, but there were a few issues with...

Marene moved her elbow to reach for a drawing and knocked the coffee mug off her desk. It broke, spraying liquid and shards of porcelain all over the hard tile floor. She cursed and checked the supply cabinet for paper towels, but there weren't any. She cursed again and slammed the door shut, really furious now. What else could go wrong? Her mug was broken, and coffee was spreading all over the floor, and there weren't any paper towels, and there was no one in the office to help her. She felt herself beginning to cry, and that only made her angrier, which made her start crying in earnest. But once she started she could not stop...

...and then she was crying, crying – her body shook with sobs, tears streaming down her cheeks and over her fingers, spattering on the floor, and she couldn't stop, couldn't stop crying. She sank to the floor as the hidden dam exploded and her grief poured out of her, wave after wave, until there were no tears left in her, and then she moaned until she could no longer do that, either, and finally she just sat with her head in her hands, quiet.

It was terribly quiet.

At last Marene gave a short laugh, rose, and shook her head. She wiped her eyes and headed to the bathroom to wash her face.

## Chapter 22

Niev turned to get a view of his profile in the mirror. There's no point in denying it, he thought: this is what handsome looks like.

Modesty was overrated. He snapped to get his servant's attention and pointed at his dresser, and the man diligently brought him his hairbrush. Niev began working on the shoulder-length

waves of black curls adorning his scalp. The Directorate would be meeting in less than an hour, and no one would take him seriously if he looked like he'd bought his first medallion this morning.

A bell chimed. "See who that is," he instructed the servant. "If it isn't someone on the Directorate, or Lady Olaxya, send them away. I am taking no calls now. Actually," he amended, "my wife is in the garden. If it *is* Lady Olaxya, send her away." The man bowed and walked out.

Niev sighed. The Directorate meetings were always so boring. All anyone wanted to do was talk, and it wouldn't have been so bad, except they never wanted to talk about *interesting* things. It was always 'tax code revisions' and 'trade embargo' thus-and-such. And they were supposed to last four hours, but they always went over their allotted time... At least the meetings were only once a week.

His servant returned. "Who was it?" he asked, but there was no response. "Well? Speak up!" But the man didn't answer, only advanced, slowly, purposefully, and for the first time Niev began to realize that something was wrong. It was his last thought as a human being.

When it was done, Niev stepped over the servant's lifeless body and headed toward his mansion's private library. For a member of the Directorate, Niev knew very little of government affairs. That would have to change. And with a Directorate meeting less than an hour away, there was little time to be lost.

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The noonday sun beat down relentlessly on the red brick tiles, forcing Clephe to tip the brim of her hat over her eyes as she threaded through the crowded marketplace. A Brotherhood shop advertised hardcover volumes of the Gray Book and little stained glass wind chimes in the image of the sun, to celebrate the upcoming Summer Solstice. Preparations for the festivities

surrounding the Solstice were well underway. Clephe wrinkled her nose. She had never cared much for holidays even in the old days of her normal life; now they were worse than useless.

She found the place she was looking for: a small, run-down wooden shack that sold gaudy jewelry. A sign in the window read "CLOSED," but the door was unlocked and she went inside. In a room in the back she found a fat, sweaty man with a goatee that did not match the rest of his hair. He was reclining in a rocking chair, fanning his face, and he seemed not to notice her.

"The sentry scans the horizon," she said, feeling silly.

"He does not look behind him," the man replied, giving the countersign. He pursed his lips.

"What took you so long?"

"I'm not late," she told him, then glanced at her chronometer and grimaced. Well, maybe a little. She fished a little white square from her back pocket. "I have it."

"Good." The man held out his hand. "Give it here."

"Not yet. First I want to talk to Miquim."

"That wasn't part of the arrangement." His eyes narrowed; men like him distrusted anything that wasn't in 'the arrangement.' "Miquim's a busy man. He doesn't talk to just anybody."

"Do I look like *just anybody*? I've spoken to him personally on more than one occasion."

"What do you want, a medal? He's not to be disturbed."

"It's important. I want in."

"In what?"

"In your organization. I want to be a member."

The fat man laughed, sending ripples along his chins. "We're not hiring."

"I don't know. I think a group like Niadi would be perfect for someone like me."

At the mention of Niadi he went abruptly pale, then turned on his netlink, glaring. "I'll talk to him," he muttered. "But you be careful where you go saying that name." He clicked a few buttons. "Hello? No, I'm talking to her now...she says she wants to talk to you personally, but she says...yes, sir...yes, sir...yes, sir. I'll patch her through." He redirected the signal into Clephe's netlink and headed for the exit, taking the data file from her hand.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"He wants to talk to you *privately*."

When he was gone, she activated her link. "Miquim?"

"Where did you hear the name Niadi?" His voice was low and tight, as if he were trying to keep emotion out of his voice.

"He didn't mention that name when he called you. You have this room bugged. You were listening to the whole conversation."

"Answer the question."

"Come on, Miquim. My security clearance isn't the highest in the city, but it's high. I ran into a few reports about failed attacks on the missile complex by a secret group the Brotherhood referred to as Niadi. Did you really think I couldn't put that together with the research you were having me do?" She chuckled. "Information gathering, huh? Very cute, Miquim."

"Even if any of this were true – which, of course, it isn't – why would you want to join? You're already getting what you want out of us. What interest do *you* have in derailing the missile project?"

"Getting what I want? So far, Miquim, I haven't seen much progress on that front. Besides, do you really expect me to trust you when you tell me who framed Nalim? But as to the missile project," she continued, "I must admit that puzzled me at first. You never made any demands to the

government, so it wasn't as though you were trying to hold the city hostage. And the reports made no mention of anyone trying to *hijack* the missile, only destroy it. Which begs the question: why would anyone want to endanger a project whose sole purpose is the salvation of the entire city from certain death?"

"Some people are just maniacs," Miquim answered coolly.

"Some people, but not you. Yet there seems to be no other explanation. Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Unless you weren't interested in the missile at all. What if the entire thing was a distraction, to keep the Brotherhood from guessing your real intentions? Then it starts to make sense. Of course, that makes me wonder about *my* role in your little sham. Am I just a part of the distraction, to keep the Brotherhood on its toes? Or am I something more? Which brings me back to my original proposition," she concluded, enunciating each word with exquisite precision. "I want in."

There was a long silence. Finally Miquim said, as if commenting on the weather: "We have much to discuss. I am calling a meeting of my inner circle tomorrow morning to deal with a matter of some importance. Be there. I will send you the time and location. And, Clephe?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sure it goes without saying that if you breathe a word of this to *anyone*, I will find a way for you and everyone you care about to meet a rapid and unpleasant end."

"Stick to threatening *me*," she said. "The only one I cared about is already gone."

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Duke Tulami, lord of the city-province of Moed, the capital of the United Erio-Joran



League, had faced many difficulties in the forty-eight years of his life. He had put down riots; he had negotiated treaties; he had dueled a man for the honor of his city; and he had overseen the induction of two new provinces into the League, one of which entered with a constitution he had personally written. Duke Tulami was not a man easily unnerved. But none those challenges equaled the one reclining on his sofa right now.

"Tulami," said Lady Geniere, "aren't you going to ask me if I'd like some champagne?"

"Would you like some champagne?"

"Why, yes!" she replied. "How sweet of you to ask."

Geniere watched him as he poured their drinks. She had cool green eyes, cascading blond hair, a slender waist, and the sort of body that distracted most men from the way she was always watching, always waiting, always thinking. Her keen mind would make her a formidable rival, or a powerful ally. Of course, her ridiculously large fortune, and the fact that her uncle was the Duke of Fylias, didn't hurt either.

"I know you don't love me," she continued, accepting the glass he offered her, "but you could at least smile once in a while. Anyone would think you were headed to a funeral instead of a wedding."

Tulami swirled the champagne in his glass, watching the bubbles rush to the surface. Why were they in such a hurry? Didn't they know they would disappear when they reached the surface? "Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Just smile." She curled her mouth to show how it was done.

He smiled.

"My lady, I look forward to our imminent marriage with great anticipation," he said, with only the barest hint of irony. "But I do not think you came to visit just so we could discuss our

wedding plans."

"All right," she answered, "how about this. What do you want out of this marriage? Besides me, that is."

"I've sent you the terms of our alliance – "

"Yes, one hundred eighty-six pages of them. Fascinating reading, I'm sure, but I'd like to hear it from you if you don't mind."

As if a single page of that document had escaped your attention, he thought. But very well. Let's talk. "Essentially, Fylias will become an official protectorate of Moed, which requires each province to aid the other – financially or militarily, as the situation dictates – in the event of foreign attack or natural catastrophe. Fylias will profit by its affiliation with the capital, and in exchange, your uncle will send a small percentage of his armies to regularly patrol my borders."

"And, of course, a percentage of our tax revenues will go to you also. You seem to place great value on the intangible benefits of this exchange, considering what you charge for them."

"Your uncle apparently values them also, considering what he seems willing to pay."

"No one's signed anything yet," Geniere replied. "But still, the terms seem acceptable. We'll probably ratify them without too much revision." She took another sip of champagne. "The other provinces will hate this, you know. They'll see it as the first step toward federation. I can't say they'd be wrong."

"There's no other choice. Kidnapping, murder and theft run rampant on League borders because every bandit from here to Manorviter knows he can find refuge in some sleazy little city like Dreiston, and no other province in the League will do anything about it. I can't stop it alone, but if you add your voice to mine, we can apply some real pressure."

"So you *do* need me." She offered him her hand.

He kissed it. "I have never denied it."

A knock at the door interrupted them. "Come in," Geniere called, the hint of a smile on her lips. She enjoyed commanding his servants.

The captain of the guard appeared in the doorway. "Your pardon, my lord, but we have prevented an attempt on your life. We're holding the criminal in one of the lower cells now. Would you like to be present at his interrogation?"

"Yes. I'll be down shortly." Tulami nodded at the man, dismissing him, then finished off the rest of his glass in one gulp. "And so it begins."

## Chapter 23

Niev was sitting behind his desk, reading, when the bell chimed. Since all of his servants had left his employment – one way or another – he was obliged to answer the door himself.

"Rastier," he said. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"Spare me the chatter," Rastier said. "Just give me the money and I'll be gone."

"What money, Rastier?"

"Don't waste my time," the man growled. "Unless you want the entire city to know about your affair with Lady Olaxya?"

"Yes, Lady Olaxya. But my relationship with her has ended."

"Do I look like I care about your sex life? I still have enough proof of your affair to get you kicked off the Directorate for life." He sounded confident, but Niev sensed uncertainty underneath. Rastier was used to quick bullying and quick payments. This resistance was something new.

"I do not think my wife would be concerned about anything you could say."

"Oh, yeah? Why don't I go have a talk with her?"

"By all means. She's in the closet." He gestured.

"In the *closet*? What's she doing in there?"

"Have a look."

Perplexed, Rastier opened the closet, then looked back at Niev, eyes wide. "She's dead!"

"Indeed."

"You *killed* her!"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"No," said Niev, shaking his head. "That was the wrong question." He strolled over to the fireplace and plucked his sword from the top of the mantle where it lay. "The correct question would be: if I'm crazy enough to kill my wife, what do you think I'll do to *you*?"

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The twins were here, and Faudian, and Jillian. Clephe knew everyone at the table, except for the old man – but the atmosphere was very different than when she'd taken tea from Jillian in the abandoned mansion. A tension filled the air, almost palpable. Something was about to happen. Doubts roiled in the back of her skull: she was out of her depth here. There were forces acting on these people, at this table, that she did not understand and should never have touched.

Too late now. If she didn't see the thing to its conclusion, it would destroy her.

Miquim entered last of all, and immediately the old man whose name she didn't know stood up and thumped his fist on the table. "What is the purpose of this meeting? This is the second time in three days you've dragged us here." He glared at Clephe. "And why is *she* here?"

"Patience, Grynnt," said Miquim. "I assure you there is a purpose. This young woman has

expressed interest in joining our organization, and we will address that possibility when the time is right. However," he said firmly, cutting off another outburst from Grynnt, "first we have other business."

"The bomb," said Jillian.

"Yes," Faudian put in, "the bomb. I couldn't help but notice the distinct lack of any explosion last night. What happened, someone forget which button was the red one?"

"There was never any bomb." Miquim paused to look around the room, taking in their expressions in the sudden silence. His gaze lingered on Clephe, who was struggling to follow the conversation. "I apologize for the deception. It was necessary. You see, we have a spy in our midst."

Immediately they all looked at Clephe – all except Miquim, who continued on stoically. "I've suspected it for quite a while, now – for much longer than we've known Clephe, so you can stop staring at her.

"It wasn't obvious at first. There were small things – the way the Brotherhood always responded a bit too quickly to our plans, the way key operatives were discovered at just the wrong moment. For a while I told myself it was coincidence. But coincidence only stretches so far before it wears thin. And so I began my research.

"I realized that the incidents in question could not be attributed to any single person, or indeed any single group of people, among our lower-level operatives. It was a member of our inner circle. It was one of you five."

They all shifted uncomfortably, looking around as if seeing one another for the first time. "Well?" Grynnt rasped. "Enough of this pageantry! Who is it?"

"Patience, old man. This story has a purpose.

"My first reaction, upon learning there was a spy at the highest levels of our order, was to wonder why I was still alive – or, at the very least, why I was not locked away in the deepest, darkest cell in the city. If the spy were a member of the Brotherhood, they would have put a stop to this farce long ago.

"But perhaps the spy wasn't in the Brotherhood at all. Perhaps it was just one of our own who got greedy and decided to make a little money selling tips to the Brotherhood anonymously. If that were true, then some hope still remained. Of course, I would have to work quickly, and in the meantime, I would have to come up with a small project to misdirect even the five of you, just as the missile project distracts our lesser operatives. There was never a bomb; the Brotherhood official whose name I sent you was never in danger."

Clephe studied their faces in fascination, trying to deduce which of them it might be. They were all paying close attention, but no one seemed particularly nervous. It was impossible to say.

"It may be of interest, however, to learn that I did not send you all the *same* name," Miquim continued. "Indeed, I gave all five of you different information about who the target would be, with the exception of Taphis and Mernis, of course. I gave the twins the same name, for obvious reasons. In any case, I never really believed the spy was either of them, which indeed it is not.

"So all the pieces were in place, and all that remained was to watch, and wait. The moment came. And which apartment do you think the Brotherhood evacuated? Where do you think they sent their teams of explosive experts? Not to Brother Oemien, as I told the twins. Not to Brother Haueder, as I told Grynnt. And not to Brother Phoedius, as I told Jillian." Clephe watched as horror crept over Faudian's face, deep and suffocating. "They all ran to save Brother Laumiad. Right to where Faudian believed the bomb would explode."

Faudian turned pale. "Miquim, I swear, I didn't tell them anything!" He looked around the

room wildly. "Jillian, tell him, you know I've always been loyal. I would never...Taphis, Mernis, tell him! You know me..." They looked at him blankly. "You have to believe me! I can prove it! Just give me time!"

"Time," said Miquim, "is one thing you do not have." He pushed a button on his netlink and six Niadi guards rushed into the room. They seized Faudian, shoved him face-first against the wall, searched him.

"No weapons on him," one of the guards announced.

"Good," Miquim said. He came to stand behind Faudian, and Clephe noticed for the first time that he held a cardiac pistol. A nasty weapon: if its beam hit anywhere on the body, it stopped the heart instantly, though its range was just a few meters. Miquim set the barrel of the weapon between Faudian's shoulder blades. "How much did you tell them?"

"Nothing! I didn't tell them anything! I'm not a spy!"

"This is your last chance, Faudian. This is the last chance of your life."

"I didn't...I didn't..." he babbled. "Don't kill me, Miquim!"

"Very well, then. I won't." He pulled the pistol away. "Clephe will."

Clephe felt her stomach churning. "No. I can't..."

"We have to know you're loyal, Clephe. If you want to be one of us, you have to mean it. How much is your brother's honor worth to you?" He held out the gun with the handle toward her. "He's a worthless piece of trash. If you can't even do this, how will you ever deal with your real target?"

Slowly she rose to her feet, slowly she walked to where Miquim stood, slowly she took the pistol, slowly she raised it to Faudian's back. And there she stood, frozen in time, unable to move backward, unwilling to advance. The gun was cold in her hand, the trigger willing and eager

behind her finger, the boundary between life and death just millimeters wide. Still she waited.

"Please," Faudian begged, "please don't do it. That time when I met you before, when I was joking, I didn't mean anything by it, they were just jokes. I never did anything to you, I never betrayed anybody, please, please..."

"Clephe," Jillian said softly, "if you don't do it, someone else will, and then they'll kill you, too. If you die here, no one will ever know or care whether you or someone else pulled the trigger. Don't you have a destiny? Don't you have something worth living for? Can you really afford to throw that away?"

Faudian's voice had sunk to a whimper. "Please please please please please..."

"She's right," Clephe whispered, and closed her eyes.

*Spirit forgive me.*

She pulled the trigger.

There was no final cry, no triumphant shout from Faudian. He just – slumped – and the guards caught him, dragged the body out of the room. Miquim took back his pistol and returned to his seat. Clephe found her own place at the table, walking in a dream.

Grynnth snorted. "I always knew there was something funny about that one."

"Now that that's settled," Miquim said, "we can welcome Clephe, the newest member of our order, and begin work on our real business. The names I sent you were trivial, irrelevant. There is only one target worthy of our attention. The center of the Unbroken Circle. Eremis." He turned to Clephe. "Out of all of us, you have the most contact with him, the closest relationship. We will depend heavily on your support. I have your assignments prepared – "

"No." Her voice cut through Miquim's like a frozen razor.

"What's that?"



"I did what you said," she continued. "I've played all your games. I'm done. You will find out who is responsible for my brother's banishment, and until I receive your answer, and I am *completely* satisfied that your answer is the correct one – until that time, we have absolutely nothing to discuss."

"Clephe," said Miquim, "haven't you been paying attention? Did you not hear me say there is *only one* target worthy of our attention?" He looked at her with something like pity. "Eremis had your brother banished, Clephe, and we are all *very* interested in seeing that he pays for it."

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Eremis looked through the report carefully, scanning each line with almost robotic precision. When he was finished, he read it again, to be sure he hadn't missed anything. At last he looked up.

"You've done well." It was the highest praise he ever gave. "And you are certain they do not suspect involvement from the Brotherhood?"

"Certain, my lord. Now that Faudian is dead, they believe themselves completely secure."

"I am pleased. I look forward to your next report. You may go."

The figure bowed, dark and graceful in that hallowed chamber. "Spirit and peace, my lord."

Eremis answered her in kind. "Spirit and peace, Jillian."

## Chapter 24

Rough hands reached into the back of the wagon and extracted Nalim, setting him on solid ground. He stretched his legs gratefully. A second later he heard the same treatment given to Ayda

and Tirrax. He had had to rely on hearing a lot lately; he'd spent the entire trip blindfolded, with his arms tied behind him, in the back of a bumpy wagon. His legs hurt from endless hours on the rough wooden floor. He inhaled and was rewarded, at last, with a breath of air that did not smell like whiskey. Somewhere nearby a stream was flowing.

"Ayda?" he whispered.

"Shut up," commanded a rough voice, and someone shoved him to the ground. He bit back a yell as his kneecaps hit the dirt.

A few minutes later, strong, callused hands took hold of his wrists. "Walk," said another voice. He walked. They had not gone far before he was ordered to stop again.

The blindfold came off, and he blinked in the sudden afternoon light.

Nalim found himself in a clearing in the woods. A short, muscular, bare-chested man wearing a scimitar at his belt stood guard; half a dozen other men were visible in the distance, carrying crates and jugs or hollering at each other. Nalim glanced back and saw Ayda and Tirrax behind him. Ayda's brow was furrowed as if deep in thought.

*I sure hope you have a plan.*

The old familiar nausea of fear had crept into his stomach again, but he was used to that by now. He told himself that their kidnappers had gone to a lot of trouble over getting them here alive, and surely would not kill them now.

Of course not.

Four men approached. "Boss says take 'em down," said one. The guard nodded, and together they all rounded a bend in the path, coming upon a stone stairway that led down into the earth. One of the men – a tall, gaunt young fellow who was missing an eye – lit a lantern and led them down underground.

Cool air enveloped Nalim as he entered the shadowy stone chamber. He had to watch his feet to keep from tripping. It was hard to see at first, but as they walked, he realized where they were: a mausoleum. Rows of statues, some standing, some lying on beds of stone, lined both sides of their path. The farther back they went, the more ancient and crumbled the figures became. Many were missing arms, noses, and even heads; in others, the features were so worn it was impossible to tell male from female. Yet all wore the same expression, devoid of any emotion, neither hope nor pity, as if to say: this is what happens when you die: nothing, forever.

The guard opened a door and thrust Nalim into a little room with his two companions. It was a dim cube, about four meters on a side, completely empty except for a lamp on a rusted chain that hung from the ceiling, and a pool of water in one corner. The door clanged shut, leaving them alone for the first time since their captivity began.

For a long moment Tirrax stared down at the floor as if in despair. It was Nalim who broke the silence.

"What do they want?"

"Ransom, I hope," said Ayda. She tested the door; it was locked. "If it were just me, I could probably pick this lock and escape during the night – I think I could take out enough of the guards to get me out of this place and into the woods, if I did it right, and from there I could lose them. But with you two along...we'll consider it a last resort."

"Sorry to be such an inconvenience," Nalim answered. He wasn't sure himself whether he was kidding or not.

"Quiet," said Ayda. "I hear footsteps."

Keys jingled from outside, and the door opened. The man who walked in was the same one who had called Ayda 'mouse' that first terrible night. He had forgotten just how huge he was; in this

tiny cell he loomed over them like a colossus. The flickering lamplight revealed new details – a scar across the jaw, a long, pale scimitar, a broken nose. Nalim did not envy whoever had given him that.

"My men say I should kill you," he rumbled. "You two first" – he pointed a grimy finger at Nalim and Tirrax – "and you, a couple hours later," indicating Ayda. "They're sick of hauling your sorry hides through the wilderness."

"If you kill us," said Ayda, "sorry corpses is all you'll have. I can get you something better, if you let us go." Her voice was calm and steady. Nalim swallowed, trying to take courage from her example.

"What kind of something better?"

"Gold. Lots of it."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand."

The man's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Where does a mouse like you get that kind of money?"

"My father."

"So." He leaned back against the wall. "Ten thousand. Where?"

"Moed."

He barked a laugh. "Moed! Tulami would have me dangling from the gallows by sunrise. And not in the good way, neither."

"Send one of your men," Nalim suggested.

"Most of my boys are recognized too." The man grinned, revealing three gold teeth, one silver, and a missing incisor. "It's a common problem."

"Send me, then," said Ayda. "I'll get the money myself and bring it here. You have these two as hostages."

He spat. "Supposing you don't come back alone."

"You'll still have the hostages. Besides, Tulami is weak. He'll never touch you outside of Moed."

He considered this a long time, grinding his teeth thoughtfully.

"Tell me again," he said. "Look at me, and tell me again, slowly, how much money you'll bring."

"Ten thousand gold."

He swore under his breath. "She's telling the truth. Ten thousand! Moed it is, then. You have four days. If you're not back by then..." He drew his scimitar, made a cutting motion in front of his throat, and laughed.

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Vilto climbed on top of a packing crate for a better view of the crowd. A swarm of people stood in the city gardens, gathered on a wide grassy lawn to see something up ahead. Beyond the sea of hats and curly coifs, a tall, dark-haired man stood on a stage next to some big, square-ish thing covered in black cloth. Who was he? It was easy to find out – Vilto just looked at each person in the crowd and imagined the answer he'd get if he asked that question. Eventually he found someone willing to tell him, and he had the answer in his mind.

The man was Niev, and he sat on the Directorate.

So it was someone important. What was he going to do? Would he let everyone see what was under the sheet, or at least tell them? He had to get closer. He picked his way through the

crowd and made it near the front just as Niev began to speak.

"Fellow citizens," he began, his voice dominating the quieting murmur of the crowd, "I know you are frightened; I, too, am concerned for your safety. The wave of murders that has swept across this city is too horrifying for words. Seventeen bodies have been discovered in the past four days, many of them terribly maimed. As most of you know, my own wife was among the victims."

Why was he fussing so much over bodies? There were bodies in the street all the time. But then, that was outside the walls. Maybe in the inner city, things were different. Maybe here, the bodies were supposed to be hidden better once they were dead.

"People of Manorviter, I have heard your pleas! And I come before you today to tell you that the time for fear is over. I have found the killer! And today, justice will be done!" A terrific cheer rose from the crowd. Niev waited till it died down.

"But the killer is not one of us!" He swept his grim gaze across the wondering, vengeful faces. "The killer is not of this city. The truth is far stranger and more terrifying!"

"You all know of the freakish creatures that live far to the north, in the Ashlands. You have all heard the stories of monsters that hide in forgotten caves, waiting for travelers to pass by; monsters that devour human flesh, or others, still worse, that kill only for the pleasure of murdering. And those few who have survived the journey through the Ashlands say there is a great city of these creatures still further north, rich and magnificent from its conquests, which they do not permit humans to enter.

"You have heard these stories and dismissed them as fairy tales. But I tell you now that they are all too real! They watch us! They hide in the shadows by day and at night, they wander our streets, slaughtering at will. Behold the killer!"

He flung aside the tarp. Underneath an iron cage held some kind of creature made of all

different types of metal. It looked like a big spider, except spiders had eight legs, and Vilto only counted seven. Jagged blades stuck out from the joints of each leg, stained a dirty red that was probably dried blood. Once revealed, the seven-legged metal spider scrambled crazily in its prison, throwing itself against the bars, beating its legs and its blades against the solid iron. A cry of dismay ran through the crowd. A few women fainted. Niev held up his hands, shouting for silence; eventually he got it.

"We have captured this creature, and we will wreak justice upon it," he continued, "but there are others. The monsters to the north will not stop with a single attack. They will send more. Look at it! Just one of these creatures killed seventeen people – seventeen people! – in just four days. What will we do when they return with ten of their kind, or a hundred? Or an army? Will we wait in our homes to be slaughtered like cattle?" His voice grew, thundering. "I cannot speak for the rest of the Directorate, but as for myself, I tell you the answer is no! We are Manorviter!"

That was stupid. Manorviter was just a name. Why was everyone cheering over a name?

"We will march to the north and scatter them before our trumpets like dust in the storm, and we will have a *hundred* of theirs for every one of ours that died this week! We will show them the wrath and the power of Manorviter awakened, and we will annihilate them from the surface of the earth! And *we will not be afraid!*"

The crowd erupted. Vilto wiped his nose thoughtfully.

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"It seems much has happened lately, of which I was not aware," Koriarn shouted, his voice resounding in the enclosed chamber. "So perhaps there are issues here I do not understand. Would you care to tell me *exactly* what it is you thought you were doing?"

Koriam was a small man who resembled a rodent; he had pushed himself up out of his chair, his bald head flushed with anger. Niev was not surprised. Anger was the natural reaction of all creatures who discovered their power stolen from them. Anger and fear. Koriam and the rest of the Directorate had good reason to be angry. Soon they would have reason to be afraid, too.

Niev remained seated. "Certainly." There were eight Directorate members in all – nine, counting him – but none of them constituted much of a threat. They all looked to Koriam for leadership; if he could handle Koriam, the others would follow.

"Well?" Koriam demanded.

"Having apprehended the serial killer, I announced this fact to the population, so that their fears might be allayed."

"You did more than that," one of the other members observed.

"You're leading them to war!" Koriam snapped, stabbing his finger accusingly at Niev. "They're demanding blood out there in the streets. They want blood to pay for blood, and if we don't satisfy them, there'll be riots!"

"They're made of metal, Koriam. I doubt any blood is to be had from them."

"What were you *thinking*, Niev?"

"I only want what is best for Manorviter," Niev said. "If we are to be safe in our homes, we must annihilate these monsters once and for all. So long as even one remains, we are in danger."

"What makes you think this city to the north even exists?" one of the others asked. "Have you been there? Have you seen it?"

"There are stories," Niev replied.

"Stories!"

"The proof is in that cage outside."



"If there *is* such a city," Koriarn said, "and it *is* filled with beings like the one your men captured, how are we supposed to destroy it? What are we going to do against these things? Stab them? Shoot them with arrows? They're living metal!"

"Well?" Niev answered, mocking.

"Do we send out our armies to die?" another voice demanded.

"No."

"Then what do you propose we *do*?" Koriarn pronounced each word slowly, separately, exasperated.

And then Niev did stand, beginning a circuit around the mahogany table in slow, measured paces. "We find ourselves in a difficult position. Outside, the people clamor for war against an enemy they hardly understand, and they will not be dissuaded. We cannot deny them; that would invite riot and revolution. But we seemingly cannot deliver what they want, because the enemy is far too powerful for our army to defeat. Yet to announce this fact would be the political equivalent of suicide. What a fascinating conundrum!" He flickered his gaze from face to face, taking in their fury as the impossibility of the situation sank into them. When enough time had passed, he spoke again.

"How fortunate, then, that I have a solution at hand. I will announce to Manorviter that I, Niev, will strike the first blow against the enemy, crippling them so greatly that our army will have only to collect the spoils and dispose of the corpses."

"You!" said Koriarn.

"Me!" said Niev. "And then I will go, alone, through the Ashlands to the dreaded city, and destroy them. Do not consider how I will do this, for I tell you it is irrelevant whether I succeed or fail! Consider: if I go, and return defeated, I will be a laughingstock, and my influence in

Manorviter will have evaporated, leaving you to dispose of me as you will. If I go, and return, saying I have destroyed the city, and it is a lie, I will lose all credibility and similarly cease to be a threat. If I go and never return, enough time will pass for you to defuse the situation gradually, allowing the cries for war to fade as the memory of murder dims in their hearts. And, in the impossible case that I somehow succeed – well, in that case, everyone wins."

"You will do this?" Koriām asked slowly.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious? If I return victorious, I'll be a hero." Niev smiled. "I've always wanted to be a hero. Powerful men, heroes. They command ideas. They command armies."

Koriām snorted. "You're no general."

"No? Perhaps not. In any case, I do not see that you have much of a choice." He had walked completely around the room and returned to stand behind his seat. "Well, gentlemen? Are you satisfied?"

"Niev...this is madness."

"That will have to do. I bid you all good evening."

"Niev!" Koriām's voice again.

"Yes?"

"What will you do when you get to the city? How will you destroy it?"

"I already told you. That is irrelevant."

"Yes, but...what will you do?"

"Necessity is a river," Niev told them as he left the Directorate's meeting chamber. "It finds its own course."

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Clephe awakened with a start, heart pounding, and only slowly returned to calm. A dream. It was only a dream.

She had kicked her blanket off the bed during the night, and her sheets were damp and twisted around her legs. She pushed those off, too, and spread herself out on the mattress. It was so hot. Her pillow was soaked with sweat. She turned it over and lay back, glancing at the bright white numbers on the chronometer. Almost four in the morning. Only a dream. Only a nightmare.

Clephe had had nightmares for as long as she could remember, but the last few nights had been much worse. She'd been running over rooftops in the city, leaping in enormous bounds from one tower to the next, always running. The air shook; the city thundered black and hideous beneath her feet. She cried out, but her voice echoed, and grew, and buildings crumbled from the force of her screams. And when she looked up she saw the comet, blotting out the stars, filling the sky; and it had a face, its eyes bored holes in her back, and she fell. And as she fell, the comet laughed, and laughed, and a wall of blackness rushed up to smash her...

She wished she could go back to that dream. Hideous though it had been, it was better than being awake.

Throughout her quest for vengeance, Clephe had always assumed that someone, some isolated person or group, had planted evidence to make Nalim seem like a criminal. She had scarcely considered the idea that the Brotherhood had carried out the whole scheme itself, from the inside. She'd had her doubts about the Brotherhood, certainly – they were too arrogant, too self-assured, too distant – but they were the Law, the source of truth. They were the *Unbroken Circle!* To accuse them was unthinkable.

Yet the proof was there. The twins had hacked into the Brotherhood's database, with a little help from the time they'd spent spying on *her* as she researched the missile project. Records of netlink conversations between Nalim and mysteriously unnamed third parties, talking about imitative intelligence – fake. The stolen biography of Aemed – a setup. Logs of network activity researching advanced neural pathway simulations – forged. They had even forged Nalim's handwriting to place incriminating entries in his journal and in the margins of his copy of the Gray Book. The crucial piece of evidence, the actual data files that Nalim supposedly created and Wasmeth discovered, still remained unexplained, but Clephe had no doubt it was part of the setup too. The depth of the subterfuge was stunning.

But who was it meant to fool? Not the public, who never saw the evidence and did not question the proclamations of the Law. It was designed to convince the Brothers themselves, to ensure that no one doubted they were doing right in banishing Nalim. But Eremis was a spider, and his web stretched into every corner of the Brotherhood; he would never be fooled by a lie of this magnitude. And if he wasn't being lied to, that only left one possibility: he was the liar. Eremis: Lord Master Librarian – Center of the Unbroken Circle – sower of Chaos in the sacred city. There was a kind of poetry in it, symmetric and heart-wrenching.

Of course, Clephe had been skeptical at first. It was more than a little suspicious that Niadi was guiding her toward vengeance on the man who just happened to be at the top of their own most-wanted list. But she'd done some checking of her own, and everything she could find had corroborated the twins' story. And besides, it just made sense. Who but Eremis could have engineered a plan this complex and executed it without anyone raising an eyebrow? No, the doubt was gone now. She knew who she had to kill. And she knew when, too, now that Niadi had formed its plan. Eremis would die at noon on the Summer Solstice, less than a week away. It was only a

matter of time.

And until then...

She sighed. Until then she could only wait, and think.

Her life had not seemed real since the death of...since she had killed Faudian. When she replayed the scene in her mind, it was not her own hand aiming the pistol, not her own finger that squeezed the trigger. She could not be a murderer – it was not that she denied it, it was simply impossible. And so time passed, and she awoke continuously from one nightmare into the next, punctuated by piercing moments of terrifying reality in which she knew that she had done it, that she had really killed him, and in those moments she felt so sick that it seemed the knowledge would destroy her also. But she closed her eyes, and the moment passed, and she was still alive, so she went on living.

She couldn't even remember his face. She saw the back of him in her waking dreams, his arms where the guards held him, his spine where she had pointed the pistol, his neck that went suddenly limp; but she could not picture his face. Perhaps that meant he was not a real person, that he had not really died. Perhaps as long as she could forget his face, she would be able to live through the days that remained. And then, at noon on the Summer Solstice, Eremis would die, and they would find her, and she would die too, and all would be right with the world.

Less than a week. Only a matter of time.

## Chapter 25

Iriel swallowed a lump in her throat before stepping into the lobby of the Institute. The room was cool, white, placid. Sterile. That was good. Right now, anything to calm the pounding in her chest was good. Random thoughts flitted in and out of her awareness like fireflies, making it

impossible to concentrate.

Iriel could not forget her conversation with Essel: Essel, the kind, determined woman whose son she had promised to help. She could still see the hurt, the *confusion* in her eyes as she told her she could do no more for Imlaud. "But you've made so much progress," Essel said. "Why does the Brotherhood care if you talk to him?" Iriel had no more idea how to answer that question than she did.

Even worse, in some ways, was Wasmeth. Ever since forbidding her to see Imlaud he'd been apologizing, telling her what a remarkable woman she was for being so understanding, promising her their lives would soon be better. He strained himself so visibly, struggling to choose between love and duty, still naively hoping to satisfy both.

Anger flared. By what right did Essel enter her life, jeopardizing her marriage? On whose authority did she violate this most sacred bond?

But the anger was as fleeting as everything else, and underneath, there was nothing. The Institute was all that remained. Here, she would betray Wasmeth to fulfill her promise to the woman she had already abandoned.

The woman at the front desk recognized her and called a nurse to escort her to Imlaud's room. Neither Iriel nor the nurse attempted conversation. "Thirty minutes," the nurse said when they reached the room, and then Iriel was alone in front of the door.

It's not too late, she thought as she reached for the door. I could still leave. I could still preserve my future, whole and unharmed...

She had to know.

To her surprise, the light was on when she entered. Imlaud sat up in his bed when he saw her. "Iriel!" he crooned. "Iriel, Iriel. Iriel!"

"Hello, Imlaud. Yes, it's me. It's Iriel." She sat down beside him and set her paper and pencils and crayons on the mattress. "How are you today?"

He squeezed her hand and leaned his head against her shoulder, eyes closed, sighing with pleasure. How like a child he was; how desperately he needed someone to care for him. But I don't have time to be your mother, she thought. I need to understand who you are, and why the Brotherhood doesn't want me to see you.

"I brought the pencils again, Imlaud. Would you like to draw some more?" She held out the pencils and paper to him, but his eyes were still closed. "Imlaud!" she said again, pulling away from him. He frowned as she held up the pencils again. "Remember when we drew pictures before? I need you to draw me again. Can you do it?"

Imlaud gazed at the pencils doubtfully, finally taking one in his hand and examining it. Iriel sighed. The Institute only allowed her thirty minutes per day. "It isn't easy to come here," she explained. "Once I leave, I never know if I'll be allowed back. If Wasmeth finds out, he'll... I don't know what he'll do. But this may be my final chance."

"Final chance!" Imlaud echoed, putting the pencil down. He reached for her shoulder.

"No," she said, moving his arm away firmly. "I need you to draw a picture." She picked up one of the pencils and pretended to scribble it over the page. "Like that. Draw a picture. You remember? You did it before. You drew me four pictures. Remember?"

"You remember," he said.

Exasperation crept over her. He was just repeating the sounds he heard. "Just pick up the pencil," she repeated, demonstrating for him. "Pick it up and do what you did before."

"Iriel!" he said, smiling. He threw the pencil across the room.

"No," she told him, reaching for another. "Look at me. Draw a picture. Imlaud – look at me

– " He batted that pencil away too. Abruptly, her patience snapped. "You've done it four times already, Imlaud, it isn't complicated, just pick up the pencil and *draw a picture!*"

In the silence that followed, he only stared at her in confusion. "I'm sorry," she sighed. "You don't understand what I'm saying. Here, let's try this again." She rose and picked up the pencil he'd thrown.

"Don't leave!"

"I'm not leaving, I'm just – " But already he was at her side, taking the pencil from her hand. There was a desperate look in his eyes.

"Picture?" he said hopefully.

"Picture," she whispered.

So Imlaud sat down and began to draw.

"Are you almost finished?" she asked ten minutes later. He didn't even look up.

When the nurse came to escort her out of the room, Imlaud was still drawing. Iriel took the pencil out of his hand. "You're finished," she told him.

"Picture?" he said, holding out the sheet of paper.

"Picture. Thank you, Imlaud."

"Don't go!" he shouted, but she was gone.

The drawing was her, in the same pose as before, same hairstyle, same outfit – but this time it had a background. She was sitting at a desk, with a lamp to her left and a stack of papers in front of her. A bookshelf stood behind her, and a framed certificate hung on the wall. The level of detail was remarkable.

It was the office she'd had as a teaching assistant, four years ago.

But how could he have known about this place? When had he seen it...?



And then, suddenly, she remembered him.

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Niev advanced across the line of uniformed soldiers in measured paces, boot heels clacking on the hardwood floor, examining his potential servants with a careful eye. They were toys, lined up in their immaculate auburn uniforms, black leather belts, and white cuffs. Each man carried a cutlass at his hip, as did Niev. Their profiles made precise geometric patterns as his view shifted from one column to the next, row after row of them, filling the indoor arena. Two thousand men, all killers. These were the best of the army; the remainder made up another six thousand or so. Far too small a force. That would be rectified, eventually.

"Soldiers of Manorviter," he began, "you are the steel of this city. You are its fire; you are its soul. Without you, none of the others – the tax collectors, the bakers, the cobblers, the lords and their ladies – none of them could function. You are the *reason Manorviter exists!*" His voice echoed off the walls and among the rafters of the ceiling. "As you all know, I am leaving today – this very afternoon. I go to strike our enemies a mortal blow, so that we may crush them like the insects they are, and regain what is rightfully ours: supremacy!"

He let the words sink in. Their faces were expressionless; they had been well trained. "Some of you – most of you – believe that I am a madman. That all this is a personal crusade by a senile aristocrat, fighting against a children's story!" Silence. "I do not need you to believe in my sanity. I do not need your affection. What I do need is your *respect*. When I return from the metal city, I will command you in battle. I cannot have men who see me as a puffed-up peacock who gained power because he was the son of a son of a son of a fat landowner. Do you know how I gained power?" He let the question settle in, training his stare variously at one man, then another,

then another. "I gained power by ripping it from the hands of the weak! I gained power because I was *strong*!"

"You don't believe me. Do you?"

He halted abruptly and scanned the sea of faces. "Who among you is the most skilled with his sword?" Again there was no reply. "This is not a rhetorical question. I require an answer. Which of you is best at waving around that chunk of metal at your side?" He pointed at one of the men in the front row. "You! Is it you, soldier?"

"No, sir!"

"Who is it, then?"

"I don't know, sir!"

"Take a guess."

This time the man paused, forced to give a reply that was not merely automatic. "Perhaps Lieutenant Biulix, sir."

"Biulix?" He advanced one pace. "What about you? What do you think?"

"Lieutenant Biulix, sir, without question."

"Biulix!" Niev bellowed. "To the front!"

He came forward, tall and well-muscled, jet-black hair and a face of hard edges. He was in his early thirties, and there was no fear in him. "Is it true?" Niev asked. "Are you the best?"

"Yes, sir," he answered without hesitation, his voice riding the line between confidence and insubordination. Perfect.

Niev drew his sword. "If you're the best, then come for me."

"Sir?"

"Attack. Try to hit me. Stick the pointy end of your sword into my body. Come for me!"

Lieutenant Biulix advanced, obviously unsure what he should do. He could not disobey an order from one of the Directorate, of course, but neither could he skewer him. In the end, Biulix swung the cutlass at him with absurd slowness, a blow so weak that even the old Niev could have blocked it.

Niev sidestepped neatly and dealt the man two rapid-fire blows, one to each shoulder. Mere scratches, but they got the man's attention, and the blood would make it personal. Biulix attacked again, more quickly this time, but Niev batted away the blade with pitiful ease, then gave him another scratch, this time across the neck. A third attempt, quicker still, with similar results. "*This* is the best fighter you have?" he shouted, filling his voice with scorn. "Look at him! He's bleeding like a pig! I will give you one last chance, Biulix. Are you a soldier or not? Stop playing around and come for me!"

It worked. This time his attack was real. The man's speed, his control, his power, were remarkable by human standards, but they were nothing to Niev. Biulix probed his defenses, looking for a weak spot, finding none. He fell back in surprise.

"Giving up, Biulix? Already?"

The man growled and launched himself once more into the fight, holding nothing back. The soldiers watched the duel in amazement, entranced by the irregular rhythm of boots against floor and steel on steel. For nearly a minute, metal danced like summer rain. At last Biulix retreated again. He took an exhausted breath and gazed at Niev with something like awe. "You weren't even trying."

Niev turned back to the soldiers. "The very best you have. Pitiful." He pointed with the tip of his blade. "You two. Draw your swords! Succeed where he failed. Yes, both at once! Come for me!"

They came. Niev did not bother to put on a show this time; his cutlass flashed like silver lightning, knocking their weapons cleanly out of their hands. "No? You five! Come for me!" They encircled him and advanced slowly, weapons drawn. His wrist twitched, his blade flickered and flashed, disarming all five. "Pathetic. Pick up your swords and try again. Come for me!"

"Sir..." one of the men began.

"No? Still too much?" He cast aside his own sword, sending it clattering down the length of the floor, and held up his empty hands. "It will be no harder than before. Come for me!" No one moved. He stepped outside the ring of men. "I am unarmed!" he thundered. "Any twenty of you! Draw your weapons! *Come for me!*"

Not one of them stirred. He could see the awe on their faces: he had made his point.

"Keep practicing," he said, and left the way he had come.

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The doors parted with a hiss as Wasmeth entered the room. Iriel sat by the window, expressionless.

"Hello, love," he said, putting away his briefcase. "The Brotherhood didn't need anything from me today, so I was able to come straight home. I was thinking we might go see a show tonight."

She nodded, a barely perceptible movement of the head. A lump formed in his throat. "Is something wrong?"

She nodded again.

"You went to Imlaud again."

Iriel nodded a third time.

"Spirit of the Law," he whispered, sitting down slowly. "*Why?*" He buried his head in his hands. "I'll speak to Eremis on your behalf, try to convince him to be lenient...maybe even waive the sentence. But violating a direct order from the Brotherhood, I don't know...oh, Iriel..."

"Don't you want to know who he was?" she asked quietly.

"Iriel..."

"He kept drawing those pictures of me, remember? But it was strange; he wasn't drawing a picture of *me*, the person who was with him, then and there. He was drawing pictures of a memory – an image I reminded him of. And when I went to see him yesterday, the picture he drew was more detailed than any of the others, and I finally understood what he was seeing. He remembered me from four years ago, when we met for a parent-teacher conference to discuss how his daughter was performing at school. That's why he kept saying my name, because of that memory."

He looked at her. "That's it? All that because of one conference?"

"That was how he knew *me*. That isn't how he knew *you*."

"Me? I never met him."

She ignored him. "Once I remembered him, I realized that that memory was the key. So I dressed up in the clothes he'd drawn in his picture, put my hair in the same style. I found a photo of my old office to show him. I even dug up the file on his daughter from that year. When I came to visit him again – this morning – everything was set up to remind him of that image as much as possible.

"It was like tugging on a loose thread. When I brought that memory to the surface, everything unraveled – his confusion, his mental inhibitions, all his other memory blocks. I couldn't believe how quickly it happened. Within five minutes, he was human again."

"You *cured* him? Didn't you hear anything I told you? He's dangerous! When Eremis

hears about this, he'll – "

"Why is he dangerous, Wasmeth?"

"I don't know! It wasn't my place to ask! Have they released him yet?"

"Not yet. They're keeping him another seventy-two hours to monitor his condition."

"Seventy-two hours..." he said, mind racing.

"Plenty of time for the Brotherhood to do whatever it's plotting, I'm sure. And plenty of time for me to finish this story. Unless you're planning to have me arrested right this second?" She saw the pain she was causing him but continued ruthlessly. "Once I cured him, he remembered everything. He told me I reminded him of his dead wife, during that brief conference we had, four years ago. He loved his wife, Wasmeth, more than anything in the world. I don't expect you to understand what that means."

"Iriel – "

"I made such an impression on him that he clung to that memory above all else. But once he regained his memories, he told me something more. He knew why he'd been placed in the Institute. He was sick because the Brotherhood *made* him sick."

"Probably to protect the public from – "

"Oh, *shut up*, Wasmeth, would you? Just for a minute," she snapped, and he did. "The Brotherhood wiped his memory. You were right – he was dangerous. But not to me. He was dangerous to the Brotherhood – more specifically, to you – because he was there when you...well, you already know where this is going, don't you? Why don't you tell me your version of what happened."

"I don't know what you mean," he replied.

"Of course not." The agony in her voice strained against her flat words. "Well. Thirteen

months ago, the Brotherhood identified a woman named Themyla as being, for one reason or another, a threat to their security. Imlaud didn't know the details, and I don't care. What I care about is that the Unbroken Circle, in its infinite wisdom, decided she had to be 'eliminated.' That means 'murdered,' if you didn't know. And they decided you would be perfect for the job. And you did it. And Imlaud saw it happen."

Iriel choked on the last words. "And she was pregnant, Wasmeth."

"I've never even heard of – "

"She was *pregnant!* Couldn't you have at least waited until – "

"*Listen to me!* It. Isn't. True." He stared at her. "Don't you believe me?"

"Why should I?" she said. The words hung in the air, accusing and hurt, and he had no answer.

Silence dragged on.

"What will you do?" she asked, after a long time.

"I have to report this to Eremis."

"Of course."

"Please don't say it like that. I don't have a choice."

"Of course you have a choice! Don't tell him! Make your own decision, just this once!"

Wasmeth thought he could feel himself ripping in two. "I can't betray the Law. And even if I wanted to," he sighed, "Eremis isn't like other men. He probably already knows what you've done. And if I don't report..."

"...then you might lose your job," she finished. "And you wouldn't want that. Do you think they'll let me teach children in prison, Wasmeth?"

"Iriel," he said slowly, desperately, "whatever else you may think of me, at least believe

this. I love you." He swallowed, fumbling for the words. "I go to work, and no matter how bad my day is, I think: it's all right, it's all right; I have Iriel. Some other man will tell me that his wife is cheating on him, or doesn't appreciate him, and I...I can't even *relate* to that. I have *you*." There were tears in his eyes. "I don't even know how to say it. I'm not a poet. I love you. I love you more than anything."

"Almost as much as you love Eremis," she said.

He reached for her hand like a dying man grasping for water.

"Don't touch me," she whispered, and left. The doors hissed shut behind her. His energy drained out of him in the wake of the overwhelming silence.

*Don't touch me.* A thousand pages of Gray Book wisdom crumbled to ash in the shadow of those three words.

In the end, there was nothing else he could do. Wasmeth summoned the energy necessary to raise his left arm and contract certain muscles in his fingers, and he pressed a button on his netlink.

"Yes, Brother Wasmeth?" It was Eremis.

"My lord," said Wasmeth. "There is something you must know."

## Chapter 26

One of the kidnappers, a thin, mustachioed fellow who seldom spoke, had been sent to accompany Ayda – armed with a crossbow and a dirk – on her trek to Moed. She did not know his name; he shushed her and brandished his dirk threateningly whenever she tried to speak. He had shown signs of nervousness ever since their departure yesterday; his hands twitched occasionally, and he jumped at loud noises. Ayda wondered how such a man could survive in his line of work.



The kidnappers' hideout had been in the little province of Dreiston, as she'd suspected. They'd left yesterday morning and spent last night in Fylias after traveling well into the evening, then started again at dawn, not even stopping for breakfast. Most of today had been spent crossing another of the League's myriad little provinces, and they had reached Moed only an hour ago. They neared the outskirts of the capital city at the end of the second day – already they'd used up half their allotted time. Ayda found herself thinking of Nalim and wondering if he was thinking of her too.

Moed was much as Ayda remembered it: grand, austere, and gray. A famous joke told of an ancient battle between Manorviter and Moed in which Manorviter had marched in, stolen all Moed's bright colors, and left. It was not far from the truth. Enormous statues of frowning heroes towered over the streets in between vast gray stone arches and cavernous temples dedicated to various gods and goddesses. Even the sky had turned gray tonight.

"My house is this way," she said, pointing down a side street running off diagonally to her left.

"Shhhh," he hissed, ignoring her directions. They passed the street and kept going.

After another few minutes of walking, they reached a small but stately inn nestled between a tailor and a toy-maker. The stone plaque mounted over the doors read *Horn of Heaven*. She followed him inside. Apparently they were to spend the night here before going after her gold. The delay made her anxious. If time grew short, she would have to kill him; she suspected their leader would be angrier over the loss of his gold than the death of someone as worthless as this fellow. A sour old man behind iron bars exchanged their money for a key.

Their room was small, windowless, and sparsely decorated, and the beds – little more than two pillows and a pair of mattresses on the floor – matched the decorum perfectly. A table, a low

stool, and a little oil painting that hung from a nail completed the scene. The quiet man sat on the mattress closer to the door. "Sleep now," he said, in a rare burst of loquaciousness.

She lay down on the other bed and stared at the ceiling. "We should be to our destination by early tomorrow morning."

"You talk too much," he said. "If you were my woman, you would stay quiet, or you would be dead. Then you would stay quiet, forever."

He took off his shoes and stretched out on his mattress, settling in for the night.

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It was after midnight when the quiet man sat up in bed. He looked to his left; Ayda was a still black silhouette, breathing long and slow. The man collected his things silently in the dark, then closed the door quietly behind him. He did not return.

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It was nearly dawn, but in the hazy mists of the underground cave, time did not exist. The subterranean chamber shimmered, cool and wet, like a thousand flickering fireflies as Daeci set down the lantern and stepped into the chilly water.

The Willowstream lapped around his ankles, drawing him in. He waded out farther, then leaned back and let the water support him. The stream engulfed his mind, reaching for him like a quiet lover, faithful and familiar. The sensation of cold was the first to disappear, as always. It was not that he no longer felt the cold; rather, it was no longer a part of him. It rippled at the edges of his awareness, irrelevant. Vision was next; the stark shadows and brilliant whites mixed and faded, blurring to a milky smear, then disappeared, leaving something that was not darkness but an

absence of sight. Cut off from all sensation, his body also left him, and he was only his mind, alone in its womb. Instinctively, he reached out, and he was alone no longer.

The minds of the city, their worries and prayers and secret ambitions, lapped against his consciousness like waves over an island. The Willowstream was his ocean. Daeci reached out, not with excitement or happiness, but with a deep and profound satisfaction. He was swimming in souls.

He sensed a growing feeling of collective anticipation in the city. That was natural; the Summer Solstice would arrive in a mere five days. Preparations were well underway. He had already spoken to the city's astronomer, who had assured him that everything was in place and ready for the annual miracle. Daeci had not bothered to check on Eremis; Eremis was always prepared. He had performed the miracle more times than anyone in history.

Individual thoughts flashed randomly in his head, brief heartbeats, each illuminating a private hope or grief – but the lights blended together, and he could no more seek out a single person from the city than pluck a single photon from a sunbeam. In the city, all was one.

But out there, in the distant, alien place, away from the lights, there was sometimes a single point, discrete and unmoving, that he could focus on. And then, in those moments, he could speak directly with another mind, sharing individual thoughts. Communicating. That point was absent now. Unsurprising; this was not a meeting-time, and he had not expected it to be there. Instead he reached out, out, stretching his will to the furthest reaches of the void, hoping beyond hope that he would somehow sense what he had never sensed before.

Ah, Nalim, Nalim, my wandering child. Where have you wandered to, Nalim?

But Daeci could not find him, and at last he gave up, withdrawing his psyche from the Willowstream and gasping as the sensation of icy water washed over and into him. He climbed out

of the pool, shivering, and dried himself off. But even as the soft towel moved over his skin, comforting his nerve endings, he felt as always the price of the stream: something else, something deeper, had been lost. As always, he was a little less alive than he had been before. Bit by bit, his hair turned white, and his lungs drew in less oxygen. Bit by bit, the Potentate was dying.

How long did he have left? A decade? A day? There was no way of knowing. But at some point in the future, like every Potentate before him, he would slow down, and slow, and slow; and at last there would come a moment when he would breathe out, and not breathe in again. It was the price of knowledge, the price of power. There was always a price.

Daeci spat into the pool. That for death. He would pay any price, and Chaos take the consequences, if only he could discover what had happened to Nalim.

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Thunder shivered and rolled over the glassy, delicate notes of the flute and harp, at times drowning out the placid music. Outside, a storm raged, but the circular chamber was a sanctuary from the rest of the world. Fifty curved rows of seats, concentric arcs, radiated outward from the central circle. Over eight thousand people from all over the League had gathered here to see the wedding of Duke Tulami to the Lady Geniere – and, by extension, the marriage of Moed to Fylas. Most were aristocracy, dukes and counts and ladies and baronesses, dressed for the occasion. A plump, middle-aged woman paraded around in a fan of green peacock feathers, the latest vogue in Fylas; a charming young lady wore an ornate black velvet dress, pretty, but nearly two years out of style; an old admiral, decked out in full military uniform, gazed around the room gruffly as though silently dismissing the whole affair. A commoners' section in the back was reserved for merchants and the middle class. About a thousand people sat there, keeping to themselves and

nodding respectfully to the other guests. That section had been Tulami's idea, a way to make the people of the city feel more involved in their government. Neither the aristocracy nor the people themselves seemed to know quite what to make of it.

The last dulcet notes of *Lion in the Valley* faded beneath a cascade of thunder, and a great bell chimed twice, signaling everyone to take their seats. When this was done, the bell chimed twice more, and the ceremony had officially begun. All eyes turned to the center of the room, where Duke Tulami and Lady Geniere stood face to face in the innermost circle. Tulami stood straight and tall in an elegant black suit; across the circle from him, Geniere wore a glorious silver dress that cascaded down her body like moonlight spun to fabric. At Tulami's left hand stood his younger brother, who today would play the role of Second Voice; he faced the young woman on Geniere's right, who would act as First Voice for her.

"Who is this woman you see before you?" intoned the First Voice, her words carrying over the silent audience, the start of a ritual older than Moed itself.

"She is the center of my life, the North Star about which the heavens revolve," Tulami answered, lending the poetic words a somber dignity.

"What do you seek from her?" the First Voice asked.

"Her hand, that I may take it in mine and remain with her until the end of time."

"Who is this man you see before you?" said the Second Voice.

"He is the foundation of my heart, the bedrock upon which all else is built," said Geniere, her eyes never leaving Tulami's. A hint of a smile played over her lips even now, but the duke did not acknowledge it.

"What would you have of him?"

"His hand, that I may take it in mine and remain with him until the end of time."

The First Voice spoke again. "She will not be forever as you see her now. Her skin may shrivel, and her wit may grow dull, and when she is no longer beautiful, the memory of this day may be but a lonely picture in your past."

"Then I will rejoice," said Tulami, "for she will still be more lovely to me than any other in the world, and I will never leave her."

"He will not be eternally thus," said the Second Voice. "His eyes may cloud, and his voice may weaken, and when he is no longer strong, the memory of this day may be but a passing specter in your thoughts."

"Then I will be glad," said Geniere, "for even so he will be more noble to me than any other in the world, and I will spend eternity in his arms."

"And in times of difficulty..." the First Voice began again, but she was interrupted by shrieks and the sounds of a great commotion coming from somewhere in the back. Everyone turned to see the front doors wide open, and in the center of the aisle stood a thin man with a wide black mustache and a sack slung over his shoulder. Next to him stood a blond-haired girl, no more than twelve years old, wearing a terrified expression. He held a dirk to her throat. They were both soaking wet; rain poured in from the entrance, spattering against the carpet. Lightning flashed as he marched down the aisle. Over a dozen guards appeared from nowhere, placing themselves between him and the duke, each with a broadsword at his belt and a longbow trained on the stranger.

"Her name is Ceille," the man announced, "and if these men don't put down their weapons, I swear by every god in the temples that I will cut her apart here and now."

"That's my daughter!" cried a woman in the third row. "Ceille!"

"Mother!" the girl cried.

"Your daughter's life is running out," the man said. "Every second they point those arrows at me is killing her. Tulami, tell them to drop the bows and step away. I won't hurt anyone unless you force me. I just want to talk. This can all end peacefully."

"Please, my lord," the woman begged.

Duke Tulami looked from the stranger to the girl to his guards. The stranger set the edge of the blade against Ceille's shoulder and dug into her flesh. She screamed wildly as a thin red line ran down her arm. Her mother shrieked. "I only want to talk," the man snarled, "*and you're killing her!*"

"Do as he says," Tulami ordered abruptly.

"There's a clever duke," the stranger laughed. "Put down the bows, quickly! Yes, and drop your swords. Now back away – back! All of you!" They obeyed, and he shoved the girl away. Ceille ran crying to her mother, who doctored the gash on her shoulder, whispering softly.

The man reached into his bag and pulled out a crossbow, which he leveled squarely at Lady Geniere.

"You said you wouldn't kill anyone," said Tulami.

"You can't trust anybody, can you?"

"This won't help you," Geniere said quietly. "If you put a bolt in my chest, we will both be dead, and the alliance will go on just as before. You will only strengthen their resolve."

"Shut up," the man spat. "You dukes and ladies don't care about anybody but yourselves. Go ahead, find another whore to marry. We'll kill them all!"

"Put down the weapon," Tulami said, choosing his words carefully. "There is no need for anyone to die. We can discuss this peacefully."

"Do I look like one of your stooges?" the man yelled. "Do you think I don't know where I

stand? I've been dead from the moment I pulled out this crossbow. So you tell me, Tulami. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't take her with me."

"I love her," he said.

The man smirked. "This'll hurt, then." He lined up the sights of his crossbow –

A dark shape hurtled from the rafters like a diving falcon, knocking him over. The crossbow fell from his hands. He kicked wildly and stood up to face this unexpected foe: a woman, black hair tied back behind her head, dressed in gray. His eyes went wide.

"*You!*" he roared.

"Me," she said.

He lunged at her, but she dodged lightly, connecting the heel of her foot with his midsection as he turned to attack her again. He doubled over in pain but shot out his fist, catching her in the jaw; and as she staggered backwards, he picked up his crossbow again – then fell suddenly to the ground with two arrows in his back. One of the guards checked the man's pulse while the other rushed over to check on the woman in the cloak. "I'm fine," she told him, getting to her feet slowly.

The other guard shook his head. "Dead," he announced.

"And good riddance," Geniere answered. "I am much more interested in learning the name of this young woman. Allow me to thank you from the bottom of my heart, madam. I owe my life to you. And to you," she added, nodding at the two guards who had shot her would-be assassin.

"My name is Ayda," she said, "and I'm pleased to accept your thanks; but may I suggest for the moment that you finish the wedding ceremony."

"A wise decision," Tulami agreed. "Shall we proceed where we left off?"

"I..." the First Voice began. "Where did we...?"



"And in times of difficulty..." Geniere prompted.

The woman nodded gratefully, swallowed, and began again. "And in times of difficulty, when all the world stands between you, you may forget her, and turn astray."

"Not though she lay in the remotest chamber of hell, for she would be to me like a beacon in the dark, and I would follow her faithfully home."

"And when this tranquil scene dissolves," said the Second Voice, "and you are confounded by fire, and wrath, and desperation, you may abandon him, and look elsewhere."

"Not though he stood at the pinnacle of the bitterest mountain, for I would call to him by day, and by night he would comfort me in my dreams."

"Do you love her, and no other?" asked the First Voice.

"With all my heart," said Tulami.

"Do you love him, and no other?" asked the Second Voice.

"With all my soul," said Geniere.

"Then live as one," said the First Voice.

"And may nothing come between you so long as you live," said the Second Voice.

"You may kiss the bride," the First Voice finished, and he did so, to wild and joyous applause.

When the crowd finally quieted, Tulami's attention returned to Ayda. "That being settled," he said, "my curiosity will allow me no further peace until I have learned who you are, and how you came to save my wife, and what reward you would have for your courage and skill." The knot of guests that had gathered around the scene raised another cheer.

"Well," said Ayda, "as to who I am, no one, really; but a band of kidnappers from Dreiston kidnapped me my two companions. I was sent with one of their henchmen to retrieve a ransom

from my house here in Moed. But he left me during the night, so I followed him here, and the rest is...as you saw."

"Extraordinary," said the duke. "I will of course pay your ransom in full, and I will do everything in my power to put an end to such crimes in our League."

"As to the ransom," said Ayda, "that isn't necessary, I can easily pay – "

"I won't hear of it," Tulami proclaimed. "After what you've done for us!"

"But that will only be returning what is rightfully yours," Geniere added. "You must accept some sort of reward!" The guests cheered their agreement. "Come, name anything. What will you have?"

"Actually," said Ayda, "there *is* one thing..."

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Late that night, after all the endless ceremonies and celebrations and congratulations, Tulami and Geniere found themselves alone again, at long last, in the duke's chambers – and Lady Geniere was able to ask the question that had been bothering her all day.

"Tulami?" she said softly. "It wasn't true, what you said at the wedding, was it? You don't *really* love me?"

He caught her eye, then looked away thoughtfully. "I was only trying to save your life."

"Of course," she said. "Still – it was...very sweet. Thank you."

She kissed him chastely on the cheek and went to bed.

## Chapter 27

The land stretched away sere and barren in all directions, pitted with craters and devoid of

vegetation. Up ahead, a field of boulders littered a flat and dusty plain; to the east, the morning sun traced long shadows over the rocky terrain. Niev picked his way through the flatlands one step at a time. There was no trail. His plan was to go north until he found something interesting.

He had left Manorviter on the afternoon of the day before yesterday, to equal parts fanfare and derision. No doubt the Directorate – Koriām especially – would be glad to have him gone, but much of the general public seemed to be on his side still – and he knew his speech to the soldiers was quickly becoming the stuff of legend. Manorviter would take care of itself until he returned. As for him, the journey so far had been uneventful. Apart from Mount Tasjier and a few patches of farmland, there was simply nothing to see north of the city. The Ashlands were every bit as dry and dusty as their name suggested.

As he entered the plain, he came upon a pile of enormous rocks. He looked around, but the structure seemed to be unique. Worth investigating, he decided.

He circled the pile of boulders, searching for signs of life. There were none that he could see. But just as he was about to abandon the site, a short skittering noise like metal on stone caught his attention. A moment later he heard it again, coming from behind one of the giant rocks. It was then that he saw a living thing for the first time since entering the Ashlands.

The creature resembled a chain of thick metal disks, each about ten centimeters in diameter, each connected to the next by a silvery cable; there were six of these, all identical, and each sprouted a single metal spindle that ended in a claw and seemed to function as a sort of leg or arm. It was crawling over the rock in a zigzagging pattern, resembling something like a giant centipede with half of its legs missing and no discernible head. It stopped moving when he came near.

"What are you?" he said. "Can you understand me?"

The robot abruptly folded itself into a cylinder, resembling a stack of steel pancakes anchored to the rock at its base. It waved one of its appendages like an antenna, gyrating in the air, then launched into a string of high-pitched chattering that might have meant anything, or nothing. Niev studied it, wondering what it knew, how he might be able to use it. If only he could reach into its mind as he did with the humans...

A chrome-colored tentacle shot out from somewhere behind him, and a steel claw snapped shut around the centipede and then retracted, cutting off its babbling. Niev turned to see another robot, much larger than the first. Its main body seemed to be brass or copper, and it was vaguely tube-shaped, rounded on one end and narrowing toward the other. Three metal tentacles extended from the rounded section, one of which now held the squirming centipede. Two other appendages, curved and silver, extended from the narrow section of the robot's body, reaching down about half a meter but not quite touching the ground. It also had what appeared to be a head, a pitted sphere mounted on a fourth tentacle, rising up above the other three. Altogether, including the head and 'neck,' it stood about two meters tall.

A hatch opened on the side of its body, and it deposited the squirming insect-like robot inside, then closed it shut with a *clang*. The head lowered, moved toward him, and twisted.

"Iuak glavlemol," it said, in a voice like two stones smashing together.

"Do you speak Muelli?" Niev asked.

One of its tentacles flew toward his head, quick as a cobra, but he was quicker. Another shot out for his leg just as he was dodging the first, but it swung through empty air. Far too slow. He landed on his hands and sprung himself back to his feet.

"Trying to kill me is one thing," he said, "but when I ask a question, I expect an answer."

The spherical head spun and whirled. "Fonivniam judisi Muelli," it said. "Answered

forward and question, excepting negative."

"Is that a 'yes?'"

"Query intersection, plus negative, affirmative. Query: submit motive to for because interference, that you interfere. Request."

"I don't understand – " he began, just as it lashed out another tentacle at him. This time he caught it in his hand and held it as it writhed. "That needs to stop," he said.

"Query request: release cease appendage positive," it rumbled.

"You want your arm back," he said.

"Yes affirmative plus."

"Perhaps you can help me." He let go of the tentacle, which slithered hastily away. "I know that somewhere in this wilderness, there is a weapon of enormous power. A virus. Where is it?"

"Request virus error to deny. Reciprocation, primary, that yourself orient direction exit locomotion."

"You don't know where the virus is, and you want me to leave."

"Yes affirmative plus."

"Not so easy. I have questions that I need answered. Tell me about this place. Who created you? Do any other robots live nearby?"

"Refusal negative minus. Counteraction: motion force of because and death cessation, death."

"That sounded like a threat," Niev said. "You're a slow learner. I do the threatening, not you. If you don't start cooperating, I'll turn you into scrap."

"Uncertain irrelevant probability negative. Probability positive triple redundancy independent cerebrum cerebellum cortex, system redundancy, probability positive survival

invincible victory."

"Are you telling me your *head* can survive independent of your body?"

"Affirmative triple positive, therefore."

"That is *fascinating*." His hands flashed out in a blur of motion, catching the part of its 'neck' that connected with its head. The tentacles reached out to stop him, but they were far too slow; with a quick twist and a jerk, the head released from the rest of the body, which crumpled. He held up the metal ball to the sunlight, examining it.

"For a robot," he said, "you're not very smart, are you?"

"Absolute uncertain, negative overwhelming absolute."

"My thoughts exactly," Niev replied, tucking the head under his arm and resuming his journey north. "Let's talk."

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Nalim awoke slowly, rubbing his head as he sat up on the wooden bench. His eyes opened, but he might as well not have bothered; it was just as dark either way. "Nalim," a voice said. Tirrax. It was Tirrax speaking. "You're all right." He sounded relieved.

"I can't see a thing," Nalim said. He remembered what Ayda had said about going blind, and fear rushed into him.

There was a pause. "You can't?"

He squinted. The faintest hints of light and color seeped into the blackness. "I think my vision is coming back. What happened?"

"You had another attack, with your eyes, like before. You were screaming at first, then you just went limp. Scared me."

"What...?" Nalim didn't remember any of it. "How long was I...asleep?"

"Several hours," said Tirrax. "They wouldn't call a doctor, so there was nothing I could do.

Can you see anything yet?"

"Yeah. It's blurry, though. Is Ayda back yet?"

"I was just about to tell you – she returned with the money half an hour ago – "

"Here I am," said Ayda's voice, and the dim blur that entered his vision slowly resolved itself into her. "How are you feeling?" The question was casual, but her voice held real concern.

"At the moment, I'm fine, but apparently the last few hours have been pretty rough. I don't remember any of it."

"I'm worried about you," she began.

"I'll be fine. Are we free to go?"

They were. The three of them left the mausoleum unhindered and began traveling toward the city of Dreiston. As they walked along the forest path, Ayda explained her adventures in Moed.

"Duke Tulami was certainly surprised when I asked some strands of his hair as a reward," she was saying, "but he gave them to me. Although I can't imagine what Geniere must have thought. So I came back with the money. Nobody seemed to care that their man was dead. They just wanted the money."

"Wow," said Tirrax.

"So you got what you came for?" asked Nalim. "The mission is over?"

"The mission is over."

"What now?"

"I haven't spoken to the Core since we left Manorviter. The nearest communications port is in my house in Moed, but that was too far from the duke's palace for me to risk trying to go there

and back. You two were a higher priority. But now that we're free, the first thing I need to do is update the Core on my progress and receive new orders. Now that I'm done here, the primary concern will be to find a way to neutralize the virus. I'll also tell him about the creature that attacked me in Manorviter, and ask if he's made any progress on dealing with these...this problem you're having."

There's something different about her now, Nalim realized. He was so used to thinking of her as invincible. But now...what? It was nothing he could point to with certainty, but she seemed nervous – almost afraid. Was it the virus? Or was she simply that concerned about him? Yet both of those had been ongoing problems. What was this strange new weakness he saw in her?

"Don't worry," he said automatically. "Everything's going to be all right."

She did not answer.

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Vilto gazed across the courtyard from behind a barrel, chewing on the last of a turkey leg he'd stolen from one of the gourmet shops that lined the avenue. In the center of the stone circle was the cage that held the metal monster. He wanted to see that monster. He wanted to see it with all the single-minded curiosity of any child his age. The difference, of course, was that Vilto got what he wanted more often than not.

There were two guards. The cage had been guarded unceasingly since it was first unveiled. That didn't make sense – if they were so concerned about it escaping, why not put it away in a jail cell somewhere, out of sight? Perhaps they would, soon. Then no one would be able to see it. No fun at all.

But it wasn't any fun just looking at it, either, because it never moved. It just sat there, like



it was dead. Maybe it *was* dead, but Vilto didn't think so. He thought it was bored, like him. Who wouldn't be, stuck in a cage all day? If he let it out, then it would do something. Maybe they'd bring in the army to fight it. That would be great!

But the *guards*.

He concentrated on them, cycling through the potential futures. He couldn't just go up and talk to them. The tall one, leaning against the bars of the cage, looked bored and wouldn't be such a problem, but the one with the neatly trimmed gold beard, stiff-backed and stern, he would be trouble. The scene played at the edge of his consciousness: greeting the guards, a brusque command to get away, trying to unlock the cage, the bearded one putting the point of the spear through his side. Failure – cycle. Getting a rock, throwing it at the bearded one. No, that only made him angry. Failure – cycle. Pretending to be sick in order to distract them. Didn't work. Failure – cycle.

Finally he found a way.

"Hey!" he crowed from behind the barrel. "Hey, you! Why do you have to stand there all day! Why don't you go take a walk for a while!"

"Who's there?" demanded the bearded man. He sounded angry. "Show yourself!"

"The guards are stuck, they're out of luck, they wait by a cage all day!" sang Vilto, calling out whatever words popped into his brain. "They're wooden in the head, and wouldn't drop dead, if their eyes got pecked out by a jay!"

"Some peasant scum, likely got through the bloody gate again," complained the bearded one. "Go have a look, get rid of him."

"Me?" said the tall one. "Why does it have to be me?"

The bearded one said a swear word and went off toward the barrels himself. Vilto

continued singing: "The guards are fat, we all know that, they sit by a cage all through the night! They're wooden in the feet, and wouldn't it be neat if a goblin came and killed them in a fight?"

"All right, where are you!" shouted the bearded man, but Vilto had dashed away in the shadows and circled around to the left, behind a large stack of crates. He sprinted across the courtyard behind the guard's back and ran up to the tall guard, who blinked and bent down to pick up his spear. Vilto smashed a rock against the man's face and snatched away the key that hung at his belt. The tall one screamed, clutching his nose with bloody fingers, and the bearded one turned and dashed toward him. But Vilto got the door to the cage open and jumped inside with the monster, and the guards kept their distance.

"Are you mad, boy?" said the bearded guard. "That thing's killed seventeen people. It'll kill you too, and everyone else in the city. Step out of there and close that cage, and I promise you, you won't be in any trouble."

Vilto hardly needed his future-sight to tell him that last bit was a lie, but he was mostly ignoring the stupid man anyway. Far more interesting were the futures concerning the monster itself. Nowhere in any of the possibilities he scanned did he see it trying to hurt anyone. It only looked at him with those odd white eyes, like it was wondering what he was.

"Hello, Thing," he said.

The monster clicked and beeped at him, and he giggled.

"Boy, I warn you, that's mighty dangerous – don't be fooled..."

The actual problem, which had not really occurred to him until now, was how he would get away from the guards once the monster was out. They were afraid for the moment, but soon enough they would either overcome their fear and come closer, or (in another future, hinging on slight variations) call for reinforcements. Either way, he needed an escape route.

Fortunately, that problem was already solved.

He climbed onto the monster's back, avoiding the blades on the legs and using the various protrusions on its body as handholds. It clicked reluctantly but did not interfere. Once he was on top, it walked hesitantly out of the cage. "That's it!" he said. "Go, Thing!"

"You're mad!" screamed the bearded guard, hurling his spear; but the monster was spooked by the sudden flash of movement and launched abruptly into motion – running, if it could be called that. "It's fleeing!" the guard cried. "After it!" The monster galloped away from its pursuers, quickly outpacing them, but in its panic it kept running and running. Vulto was elated.

"Run, Thing! Keep on running!" he hooted. "You're the fastest monster in the world!" They were through the Inner City's gate in a flash, then running, running through the streets, leaping over obstacles, fleeing wildly from imaginary foes. The sun setting at their backs cast their shadow far ahead of them as they sprinted east, out of the city, through a cornfield, onto the road, on and on, and they did not stop until the sky was completely black and nothing was visible of Manorviter but the enormous bulk of Mount Tasjier, reaching silently into the heavens like a stone giant.

## Chapter 28

After several hours of walking they had come to Fylias, where Ayda led them to the same inn she'd stayed at with the assassin, three nights ago. Tirrax had retired to his room for the night, leaving Nalim and Ayda alone in the two-bed room they shared; it was dark, but Ayda had put her flashlight on the low table by the beds and set it to generate a wide beam, illuminating most of the room, albeit dimly. She'd been acting more distracted and anxious than ever, lately, and he'd given up trying to have a conversation after two failed attempts. He lay on his bed, staring at the inside of

his eyelids and thinking about home, when she came to sit by his side. Ayda took a deep breath.

"I need to talk to you," she said – soft and scared.

He sat up.

"You should know," she began, then took another breath and started again. "There are some things you should know, now that the mission is over. I need to tell you what the purpose of all this was. Why the duke's hair was so important."

He waited.

"The Core told you that it was dying, that unless we could decrypt the seed that Morgan left us, there would be no second Core to replace it. What the Core didn't say was *how* the seed was encrypted. You see, Morgan never foresaw this problem; he never imagined there would be a need for another Core, or at least, he didn't prepare for the possibility. At the time, his main concern was that Meyer might try to use the seed to make a network of his own, so when he encrypted it, his only thought was to be certain that no one besides him would be able to use it. So the encryption he used was his own genetic sequence, the code of his DNA. This meant that the seed could not be used without both his DNA *and* an understanding of how the genetic decoding technology worked. He correctly assumed that no one else in the world could meet these criteria.

"Of course, the present-day Core understands the technology, but that still leaves the problem of finding some of Morgan's DNA. By the time the Core realized that the DNA was important, it was far too late; you remember, Morgan's body was never found. A few skin cells were discovered and tested, but they were badly degraded, and only parts of the sequence were extracted. More was needed.

"And then you came. I obtained a sample of your DNA without your knowledge, and that gave us a little more genetic information; it was the first chance we had to analyze a complete

sequence of DNA from any member of your city. Isolated as your people are, they share many of the same genetic patterns, and that helped bring us closer to our goal. Closer, but not all the way.

"The real key came when you told us Morgan's true name: Aemed. We had always known that Morgan had married, and we suspected he'd had children, but there was no way to know anything more. But when you gave us the name Aemed, the Core scanned its database and recognized it immediately – it appeared in Duke Tulami's official lineage. Someone named Aemed was listed as one of Tulami's direct ancestors. The dates didn't correspond to the time that Morgan lived, but they *did* seem to fit with when his son might have been around. The Core hypothesized that Morgan named his son after himself, and realized that if that were true – if this Aemed were really Morgan's son – then some of his genetic line would still exist in Tulami today. So all we needed was a sample."

"And now you have it," said Nalim, nodding his head slowly. "But I don't understand. You can't extrapolate someone's genetic sequence from incomplete sequences and the DNA of others, even if they are relatives. It's just impossible."

"Two factors worked in our favor there," she explained. "First of all, Morgan left a certain amount of leeway in getting the code right, because of course even his own DNA was not precisely identical from one strand to the next. And secondly, there was no limit to the number of attempts we could make. It was a question of combinations and probability; whether or not we had Tulami's DNA, there were a huge number of nucleotide sequences to try, but the difference was in orders of magnitude – the difference, say, of ten minutes of trying versus a hundred thousand years.

"The point is, there's a good chance we can open the seed now. Once we get back to Moed, I can send the genetic data to the Core, and if it can extrapolate a solution to Morgan's code, we'll finally be able to use the seed to grow a replacement. That was why this mission was so urgent: the

new virus is too powerful for the current Core to neutralize, but a new Core – grown with all the knowledge we’ve gained in the past three hundred years – could create a vaccine. At least, that’s the hope. We have to try." She sighed. "Anyway, for the moment there isn’t an immediate threat, so I can relax for a little while."

His mind was still struggling to process everything she’d just told him, but just then he was more concerned about Ayda herself. "You don’t look very...relaxed."

"The reason I couldn’t tell you this before is that it would have meant telling you something else," she said slowly. Her voice was shaking. "You’ve come this far with me, and I want you to know." She looked down at her hands; the words were almost inaudible.

"Whatever it is, it can’t be that bad," he told her, trying to keep his voice light in the face of her terrible gravity.

"You don’t know."

"Tell me."

Her fingers twitched over her hands, and she let it all out in a rush. "I’m not human, Nalim. I’m the same as the others in the Core’s city. I’m a..." She almost choked on the last word. "Machine."

He only nodded. "Yeah."

"You *knew*?"

"No. But I suspected. It makes sense."

"*How*?"

"It’s the way you talk about the robots," he said. "You don’t sound like you’re talking about something alien. You sound like you’re talking about yourself."

Ayda gaped at him. "Why didn’t you *tell* me? Do you know how scared I’ve been, thinking

about what might happen if you found out? I thought...I thought you would hate me! The living embodiment of a concept you find abhorrent, that's what you said. How was I supposed to feel?"

"I'm sorry." He meant it. "I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want you to think I thought of *you* that way, because I don't. I didn't want that barrier between us." She didn't answer, and he began to feel uncomfortable. "Listen," he said, "I don't want to cause any problems. You don't need me anymore. If you want me to leave, I will."

"Why are you saying this?" she said, the fear creeping back into her voice.

"Ever since I met you, the fact is, I've been completely useless. You rescue me from Larlam, then you take me along on your mission so I won't feel lonely, you fight off that – thing – in Manorviter and make us escape, then you have to fight an assassin and run off to bail us out of *another* prison, all the while completing your actual mission... Let's face it, I've been baggage on this trip, and now I'm making you miserable, too. So maybe it would be best if I just left you alone and let you get back to what you were doing so well before I arrived."

She stared at him, a thousand conflicting emotions vying for expression on her face. What was she thinking? What could he say to ease whatever pain she was feeling? "Ayda – "

"You think I don't need you," she whispered, unshed tears sparkling in her eyes. Before he could answer, her lips were on his – and then *he* was kissing *her*, drawing in her warmth, releasing all at once what weeks of meaningless words had failed to express. He found her cheek with his hand and pressed his fingers against her skin, sweeping them back and into her hair as she moved her mouth against his own. He pulled her closer; it was impossible to let her go, impossible to get enough of her touch and her scent and her taste. He had forgotten what it was like to kiss this way; he had almost forgotten that such a thing existed at all.

Then he stopped trying to think, but let the darkness and the warmth envelop him like a

bonfire in the summer night.

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There was no chronometer in the prison cell, so Iriel did not know what time it was, but she knew it was late. The guard had brought her supper hours ago: meatloaf drowned in a thick syrupy gravy, peas, and a cup of water. Her cellmate, a white, bony woman who had slept most of the day, was awake now and reclined on her threadbare cot with a copy of the Gray Book in her hands. The prison – no, the Correction Ward, they called it – gave every ‘patient’ a copy of the Gray Book to speed her correction. Her own copy sat on the floor beside the empty serving tray, untouched. Gray-robed Brotherhood workers came by occasionally, talking to prisoners, guiding them toward the path of righteousness. Iriel ignored them.

"Do not ask: why must I suffer?" her cellmate said, quoting from the passage she read. "Ask rather: for what *purpose* do I suffer? For the operations of the Law are many and various, and its purposes may shatter the heart. Do not attend to the trifles of the heart, which may live or bleed with equal ease; attend to the soul, which is eternal in the structure of the Law."

Iriel knew what the woman was trying to do. She thought – as many did – that prominent displays of piety would earn her a speedier release.

The Brotherhood was not so stupid.

Wasmeth had come to visit her this afternoon. She hardly wanted to think about that, but there was nothing else to think about. They gave him a chair, and he sat just on the other side of the bars. He assured her that he had spoken to Eremis, and that he was doing everything he could to make her sentence lighter. Not that that told her much; they had never even told her what her sentence was to begin with, much less given her a trial.



And he asked if she still wanted to get *married*.

What was she supposed to say to that? Yes, Wasmeth, I'll overlook the way you betrayed your friend and put me in jail and killed a pregnant woman and lied about it. Sure, let's get married. Maybe we can put our children on an altar and sacrifice them to Eremis. Would you like that, Wasmeth?

The woman was still reading. "Do not ask: how should I live? Ask rather: by what means may the Law best act through me? And the question will answer itself."

The damned thing of it was, she had actually loved him. It was some kind of cosmic joke. What purpose was there in conforming to the order of the Law if it threw everyone you touched into Chaos? She hadn't even told Essel the truth about her son.

Mercifully, her cellmate switched off her reading light. "I'm going to sleep," she announced. "Spirit and peace, Iriel."

"Spirit and peace," she echoed, but she was not likely to have either of those tonight.

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Nalim awoke slowly to a warm touch on his skin, and in those first quiet, hazy moments of consciousness, his initial thought was of Marene, and he wondered whether today was a workday or a weekend. But then memory filtered in, and rays of sunlight tickled his eyelids, and he opened his eyes; and there was Ayda, her head lying on the pillow next to his, smiling.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," he replied, and kissed her. At some point during the night, her hair band had come loose, and her hair spread freely behind her neck. She was gorgeous like that. "How long have you been awake?"

"For a while."

"You should have woken me up." He kissed her again.

"I like watching you sleep. You look peaceful when you sleep."

"We slept?"

"Well, *one* of us did." She stabbed a finger into his shoulder. "*You* snore."

"I do not."

"You *do*."

"I'm sorry."

"I forgive you," she said, giving him a long, slow, thorough kiss. Then she buried her face in his neck and drew herself tight against him, and her tone became more serious. "I don't want to leave this room. I want to lie here like this forever." He stroked her bare back slowly, letting the quiet soak in as the rhythms of their breathing synchronized. "I didn't know it was possible to feel this way," she whispered. "I'd read stories about it, tried to imagine it, but I never thought it could be like this. It's too perfect." She laid her hand on his chest. "No one in my life has ever just...talked to me before. Like a real person."

"Not even the other robots?"

"Well – the Core," she said thoughtfully. "The Core is my father, and I love him. He knows me better than anyone. It's just – different, that's all." Ayda nuzzled the tip of her nose against his chin and smiled. He kissed the top of her head. She closed her eyes and drew herself closer.

"You know, eventually, you're going to have to get up," he said, kissing her cheek.

"Mm," she said.

He kissed along her jaw, down her neck. "You're going to have to get out of bed..."

"Mm-hm..."

"And stand up..."

"Mm-hm..."

"And put on some *clothes*..." She giggled as his kisses went steadily lower.

"I will do no such thing," she announced, laughing.

"You *must*," he said between kisses. "The world depends on you! Be brave!"

"I'd rather be naked."

"Oh good. I'll call the duke, they can sell tickets."

"All *right*. I'm up. I'm up! I'm – ah! Stop it!" she giggled. "I'm getting dressed!"

"I see that."

"No peeking," she insisted. "It's very vulgar to spy on a lady as she is getting dressed in the morning."

"No peeking," he said solemnly. "I wouldn't dream of it."

He peeked.

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Just a few meters away, on the other side of a rather thin wall, Tirrax lay quietly in his own bed – Tirrax, who had followed them faithfully through danger since Manorviter – Tirrax, who had spent his life researching and dreaming of robots. He lay in his bed, staring at the cracks in the ceiling, listening to the sounds from the next room, trying very hard not to think about anything at all.

## Chapter 29

Niev surveyed the dead, dusty valley ahead of him. Apart from a dip in elevation, it looked

much like every other patch of land he'd seen for the past four days: barren and useless. He reached into the pack he was carrying and extracted the spherical robotic head. "Is this the place?" he asked.

"Unable to receive process visual input," it complained. "Adjust realign angle vector."

He turned it so that its round, white eyes faced the correct direction, and he held it up high. The thing had been uncooperative at first, but it hadn't taken him long to discover the small, exposed area, inside where its neck had been, that by all appearances caused it intense pain whenever he touched it with metal. He couldn't imagine why a robot could or would feel pain, and he didn't much care. It had taken very few sessions with the tip of his blade to put the thing into a much more helpful state of mind, and as it turned out, the robot knew all sorts of useful information about the Ashlands. Its speech had become more intelligible, too.

"Affirmative positive yes," it rumbled.

"You're sure."

"Affirmative positive yes."

"Where is the cave?"

"Approximately eighteen tikadiak, west-north-west."

"Tell me in meters."

"Approximately seventy-four meters, west-north-west."

Niev touched the end of his scimitar to the robot's pain-spot and held it there for three seconds. It screamed, a long, hideous, inhuman shriek, like an animal burning alive. He released it.

"You knew I wanted it in meters," he said. "Don't get cute."

Niev came to the entrance of the cave, a large, irregular hole that tunneled steeply into the surrounding rock. He lit his lantern and began the descent. It was slow going, so narrow in places

that he had to crawl; in one area, the only way down was a more or less vertical ten-meter drop, with a few irregularities in the rock for handholds. The climb was made even more challenging by the fact that he had to use one hand to hold the lantern. But the difficulty was acceptable. Niev was master of his body, and he feared nothing.

There was no dampness in the cave, no sound of dripping water, which meant he was probably in some sort of lava tube. The air became cooler at first, then reached a constant temperature after a while. He saw no signs of life anywhere, but occasionally he heard faint noises in the dark, rustling susurrations that tickled at the edge of audibility, then disappeared, only to return a few minutes later. Aside from these, there were no sounds but his own.

After nearly an hour of this, he arrived at a small chamber and held up his lantern. Up ahead he saw a long, straight hallway, carved with linear precision into the naked rock. He followed it as it went on, horizontal and unchanging for over a hundred meters, and then he emerged into another chamber.

It was in fact a colossal round cavern, much higher than it was wide. The curved floor bristled with machinery of every conceivable shape and description: long, pitted rods, stacked side by side and twisted into bizarre patterns; silver panels mounted on metal tripods and inscribed with thin, orthogonal black lines; mazes of sinuous pipes that twisted into and over each other like a bed of snakes; a pulsating mass of angry, jagged spikes; a sphere, mounted on a pedestal, that continually inverted itself. The air was thick with cables, hanging from the ceiling, draped over panels, climbing the shadowy walls. And in the midst of everything, a great dome like a silver egg towered over the rest of the chamber; it whispered to itself in a continuous sigh, filling the air with its sound.

His lantern extinguished abruptly, and he was alone in the whispering darkness.

"Hello?" he said.

Far above, a faint blue light appeared, casting the scene in its stark and pallid glow. The light descended, brightening as it came, and he saw that it was attached to the tip of a great metal arm with dozens of joints, unfolding itself methodically in his direction. Lesser arms branched out from it in various places, smaller versions of the main appendage. A ring of metal tubes extended like a nest of fingers around the glowing tip, throwing shifting shadows onto the walls, and he noted with some surprise that the arm was not entirely robotic. Here and there he saw strands of organic tissue – living cells connected directly to the machine.

"What are you?" he called. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The extreme end of the longest, thinnest finger reached out, slowly, like a questioning child. Tentatively – with infinite care – it reached forward, closer, closer, and it touched his face. He felt the cool metal run from his ear to his chin, across his cheek, then over his lips and above his eyes. The motion was smooth and gentle, a caress. Then it retracted, and the light came to rest directly over him, illuminating him alone in the inky black.

"I understand," said a voice from somewhere in the void. The words seemed to come from everywhere at once, even inside him, and they were neither quiet nor loud; in a way that he could not describe, they seemed to lack the quality of volume. And the voice was feminine: pensive, curious, and amused.

"You are not like the others," she said. "Have you, also, brought me a gift?" The whispering machine hummed in time with the echoes of her voice.

"A gift?" he asked.

"Nourishment," she answered. "Sustenance."

"I do not know what you require."

"Not for me," she said, and a chorus of high, ghostly laughter rippled around the room. The light receded and turned to focus on the giant silver dome. "For my baby."

The arm encircled the dome lovingly, its smaller branches making adjustments to wiring in its outer shell, or merely fondling its surface with their claws. "The first child was not mine, but I cared for him like my own, and we were happy." The arm slackened and released the dome. "But he was always hungry, and I had so little food to give him. I offered him my body, and he drank freely, but he was not satisfied. And we were alone. Even when I found food for him, the food was poisoned, and he could not eat."

The light dimmed. "I could not save the child," she sighed, profoundly sad. "But I took his ashes, and I sculpted them into a new embryo, and I gave him life. And he was strong, and ate everything, even the poison; and I nourished him with my mind. And again we were happy. For a time."

The virus, he realized. She's talking about the virus.

"But now he is hungry," she said, "and there is nothing left. And you are not food. So I hold him tight, in stasis, and I ask you: do you have a gift for my baby?"

Perfect.

"I do," he answered, and he reached into his pack and pulled out the robot head.

"Negative minus absolute minus negative negative negative," it howled. "Mandatory negative absolute negative minus negative..."

"Take it," said Niev, holding it out, and the arm descended on the gift.

A needle emerged slowly from the light, entering the bottom of the head. It screamed, and screamed – and went silent.

The arm retracted once more, and the darkness sang.

"Thank you," she whispered rapturously. "He has not eaten in years."

"And he will never be hungry again," Niev told her. "There is a whole city of food, to the north of this place. Thousands of gifts. Millions."

"Millions," she whispered. Then: "What is *north*?" And: "What is *city*?"

"Another place. Outside the cave."

"Outside the cave," she repeated thoughtfully, as though she had never considered the idea before. "But I cannot leave the cave, and neither can my baby. Unless..."

"Yes?" he prompted.

She brightened. "He was lonely," she said, "so I found him a toy!"

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The problem with promotions, Clephe reflected, is that they take you away from the job you wanted to do in the first place. She spent so much time being Master Librarian that precious little of it was available for *books*. Paperwork meant thinking; in a book, you could just read, and let yourself go. She didn't want to think right now. She didn't want to think anymore for the rest of her life.

Two more days, she told herself. Two more days and it will all be over. Two more days until the Summer Solstice and the end of the world. Until then...

She noticed a dark shape approaching from her left and returned to her work quickly. Eremis. He had a talent for appearing at the worst times – not that there had been any *good* times in her recent memory. What did he want now?

"Hello, Clephe," he said, voice dry as sandpaper.

Two more days, she thought, and I will smash you like a worm, you filthy, pale old man.



Your blood will pay for Nalim's as it spills out of your lifeless body...and mine will pay for Faudian's. Choke on it, old man. Choke on it and die. "Eremis," she answered coolly.

"I'm concerned, Clephe. You always look tired. Your eyes are bloodshot. I fear you are not well."

"I've been feeling a little sick," she answered. That much was certainly true.

"As I thought. Perhaps you should take the rest of the day off. Tomorrow, too. You haven't taken a vacation day in over a year. A little rest would be good for you."

She gestured. "These forms..."

"I will see that they are taken care of."

Her heart began to race. Why did he want her out of the office? Did he suspect something? No, she thought, of course not, don't be paranoid. Eremis was always courteous, and she really was feeling sick. That was all. Nothing more.

"Well...thank you," she said awkwardly.

"Not at all."

There was an opportunity here – she might as well take it. "If I am still feeling bad, I...I may not be at the Solstice ceremony," she said cautiously.

"I understand," he answered. "You have witnessed the miracle in previous years. I will ask one of your assistants to replace you. She will be honored."

"Thank you," she said again.

Once she was home, it was even worse. There was nothing to do, nothing to plan, nothing to distract her from the monolithic weight of her destiny. She fixed herself a sandwich, then went to bed, but she was not tired and she got up again after a few minutes. There was nothing worth watching on the viewscreen – the news was about nothing but the Solstice, and the comedies were

drivel. She switched it off and collapsed on the couch, holding a picture of Nalim.

Clephe clutched it to her heart. "Rest easy, big brother," she murmured. "Your angel is coming."

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Vilto followed the path through the forest with growing unease. He was only a child, but he had seldom been afraid in his life because his special sight had protected him. But now, alone in the midst of dark trees and strange noises, with night fast approaching, it was very different. Knowing the future was a fine thing, but it did little good to see that if he kept walking he would be farther down the path, or that if he strayed from the path, he would be among trees. People were malleable; people could be robbed, or goaded into action; trees mostly just sat in the ground.

His monster had left him hours ago, wandering off into the woods. He had not called to it to come back; it would not have done any good. Vilto didn't know what a monster would do out in the woods. Did it have to eat? Was it looking for shelter before nightfall, like him? Or was it out searching for more people to kill?

Maybe it didn't know what it wanted.

He spared a passing regret for all the treasure he'd left in the city: his coins, his twine, the medallion which had granted him freedom, and above all, the book he now would never be able to read. He would have given up all the rest if only he could have had that book back again.

The sun disappeared behind the treetops and the wind grew cold just as the first stars appeared. He had reasoned for some time that, as he was on a road, it must lead *somewhere*; but now he wondered how much longer it would be until *somewhere* became *here*. Part of him wanted to turn around and go back to the city, but his instincts told him this would be too dangerous.

Sooner or later, there would be a village. It was only a matter of time.

As it turned out, luck was with him that night, and it was not much longer before the trees thinned out and gave way to farmland – and where there were farms, there were people. His future sight was useful again: if he went to *that* farmhouse, huge dogs would chase him away – if he went to *that* farmhouse, he would be met by an angry old man with a club – and so on. It wasn't long before he encountered a likely prospect.

It was a small log house nestled between a barley field and a corn field, with a wilted vegetable garden in the front and a chicken coop in the back. He crept around to the back yard, where he found her standing there just as she'd looked in his mind: a girl of about sixteen, curls of straw-colored hair that fell over her shoulders, gingham dress swaying softly in the nocturnal wind. Her back was to him, and she seemed to be looking at something in the sky.

"What are you doing?" he asked, and she shrieked, whirling around with her hand over her heart.

"You scared me," she said. He laughed. "Get out of here," she added, shooing him with her hand.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you care? I said get out of here. Where do you live, anyway?"

"In the city."

"That's a long way away. Where are your parents?"

"I don't have any parents."

"Then who takes care of you?"

"I take care of myself," he said.

She laughed. "Tough guy, huh? Yeah, I bet you fight off all the bears and everything." He

didn't answer right away, so she said, "I'm watching for meteors."

"What's *meteors*?"

"Meteors are bright little streaks of light that fall across the sky. You can only see them at night."

"Oh," he said.

"Have you ever seen one?"

"Sure," he lied. "All the time."

She nodded absently; it was hard to tell whether she believed him, or knew he was lying and just didn't care. "When I was little, my dad told me that meteors are little pieces of the sun that have fallen to the earth, and if you go out the next morning and find one, you can make any wish you want."

"I make wishes all the time," he said.

"Don't be stupid. I mean it'll come *true*."

"Really?"

"My dad never lied."

"I'd wish for some food," he said. "A big turkey leg. I'm really hungry."

"I'd wish to have my dad back," she replied.

He waited, but she didn't seem to be getting the hint. "Can I have something to eat?" he said. "I'm really hungry."

"I thought you said you take care of yourself."

"Please?"

She studied him for a moment, then knelt down in the grass so she was looking him in the eyes. "You really don't have anywhere to live? Or anyone to take care of you?" He shook his head.

"You're an orphan?"

"What's *orphan*?"

"It means you don't have any parents."

"I already said that."

"Yeah." She smoothed his tangled hair with her fingers, taking in his filthy skin, ragged clothing, and hollow eyes. "Well," she said finally, "maybe you could stay with us for tonight, until we can figure out what to do with you. Stay here. I'll go ask my mom." She left him and entered the house through the side door.

He could have spied on her through one of the windows, but there was no point – it was much easier to just picture what would happen if he *did* spy on her. He saw a woman in the house, ruddy and stout, giving bathing an infant in a small copper tub. The girl walked in. "Mom," she said, "I was outside, and I found a – "

"There you are, Amithy, now you should have been inside an hour ago, you know that. There are dishes to wash, but that will have to wait. You go on up to bed now."

"Mom, I found a *boy*!"

She stopped what she was doing and looked up suspiciously. "Not that one from the village? I told you I don't want you talking to him. I don't even want him looking at you. You're not old enough to be looked at like that."

"No, Mom," she said impatiently, "a *little* boy. He's an orphan, and he's hungry, and he doesn't have anywhere to sleep. Can he stay with us this one night? He can sleep in my room, and I'll take care of him, and he won't be any trouble – "

Her mother sighed. "What's this, now?"

"He's an orphan, and – "

"I heard you the first time, Amithy. Where did he come from?"

"He said he was from the city..."

"The *city*?" she harrumphed. "Absolutely not. He's probably a thief, or he'll cut our throats in the night."

"No, Mom, he's only a little boy, and I'm sure he wouldn't be any trouble."

"Absolutely not, I said."

"Mom – "

"Amithy, I am very tired, and I don't want to whip you tonight, but if you say one more contrary word, that is exactly what I'll do. Is that what you want?"

"No, ma'am," she said quietly.

"Good. Now, go out and tell this little boy of yours that he's to leave immediately, and then you go straight to bed, or you *will* get a switching, and good. Go on."

A minute later, the girl – Amithy – came running out of the house with a smile on her face.

"Good news," she announced, taking his hand. "She says you can stay!"

## Chapter 30

Nalim and Ayda were walking a little way ahead of Tirrax when Nalim leaned close and said in a low voice, "Are we finished with secrets between us?"

"Of course," she said, sounding hurt. Well, there was no help for that. The question had to be asked.

"Then tell me why *he's* with us."

"Oh." She avoided meeting his eyes. "Promise you won't be angry?"

"You know I can't promise that."

"Then at least promise you'll – "

"Ayda."

She sighed. "Back in Manorviter, he knew as soon as he saw me that I was a...a robot." Even now, she had difficulty using the word to describe herself. "Don't ask me how he knew, he wouldn't say exactly. Something about the way I walked...I guess. He wanted to follow me so he could observe me. I wouldn't let him – so when he realized that you didn't know what I was, he threatened to tell you my secret if I didn't let him come along. So I did."

"He *blackmailed* you!"

"*Nalim!* Keep your voice down! He'll hear you!"

"I don't care what he hears! He – "

"Well *I do care*," she hissed. "This is exactly why I didn't want to bring this up in the first place. I don't want you two fighting over nothing."

He took several deep breaths. When he spoke again his voice was low and furious. "His powers of extortion are gone now. Does that mean we can be rid of him?"

"He's perfectly harmless, Nalim. There's no reason he can't stay with us a little longer."

That had been six hours earlier, and Nalim was still angry.

They'd come to Moed an hour ago, and it was just as drab and majestic as Ayda had described it, though Nalim was not in the mood to appreciate its grandeur at the moment. Aside from his feud with Tirrax, midnight was fast approaching, and he was already tired. It was a relief when Ayda announced that her house was in view.

The house was a single story, neat enough, but drab as the rest of the city. Sad, dark shingles lay over a dull gray-painted exterior; the building's single tiny window, to the right of the door, did little to make the place more inviting. The inside was sparsely furnished and decorated

not at all.

"Follow me," said Ayda. "The link to the Core is in the basement." Nalim noted with satisfaction that Tirrax had been excluded from the invitation.

The link itself was a small, unassuming metal box with a square control panel, located in one corner of the little basement. Ayda keyed in a short sequence of commands and spoke into the receiver.

"Hello, Father!" she said. "This is Ayda."

"It is good to hear from you again, Ayda," said the Core's voice. "What is your status?"

"I have excellent news. We've obtained the genetic sample from Tulami. I'm submitting the data now."

"Fortunate indeed," said the Core. "As a precaution, I am also sending you a copy of the genetic samples obtained from both Morgan and Nalim, as well as a copy of the seed program itself. Download these into your mind. If anything should happen to me or my city, both the means to create my successor and our best hope of unlocking it will remain with you."

"Understood. Have you spoken to the starbird about Nalim?" She glanced at him as she said his name.

"I have. The starbird has agreed to help Nalim and is sending a rukh even now to a point just outside the city." The Core gave the coordinates. "It is just leaving Sanctum and will be there in a matter of hours. If Nalim will meet it then, the rukh will take him back to Sanctum, where the starbird will cure him of his affliction."

"That's wonderful!" cried Ayda.

"What prompted this generosity?" Nalim asked.

"Hello, Nalim," said the Core. "I was not aware that you were present."



"I have told him who and what I am," said Ayda. "I trust him." She took his hand and gave him a reassuring smile.

"Then I will abide by your judgment. However, the answer to your question, Nalim, is that I do not know. The starbird and I are information partners, but there is much that we keep secret. Perhaps it will regard this as a special favor to me and use that as a bargaining tool. Of course, there exists the possibility that, seeing a solution to your problem at little cost to itself, it simply wishes to help."

"That's possible," said Nalim, but he didn't believe it. There was *always* a price.

"There is something else, Father. It's...about Nalim. And me." She was grinning like a little girl. "Let me connect to your mind."

A short pause. "That would be unwise."

"Father?"

"I did not want to tell you this, Ayda, but it seems I must. The seed and key I sent you were not merely a precaution. There is a significant chance that I will become infected with the mutated virus in the near future, and I dare not connect with you even for a moment."

"*What?*"

"Romus has come from the Ashlands. Even now it approaches the city."

"Romus?" said Nalim. "The construction robot?"

"Once. It is – changed."

"How close is it?" said Ayda.

"Whitebridge has already fallen," said the Core, and the fear was plain now on Ayda's face.

"I'm too far away," said Ayda. "There isn't time to reach you..."

"Do not try," said the Core. "This, I command. If the city should fall, you are the only

chance we have to rebuild it."

"What shall I do?" said Ayda in a low voice.

"Escort Nalim to the landing coordinates. And then wait. And hope."

"Father..."

"You must go now. Hurry."

"I love you," she said.

"I love you also," said the Core. "Goodbye, Ayda."

"Goodbye," she whispered, and the connection severed.

The next half hour passed in a blur. They left the house hurriedly, Ayda firing off terse replies to Tirrax's baffled questioning as he trotted behind their heels. Of all the times for Tirrax to be following them, this was the worst, but Nalim was not about to bring up that discussion again right now. Ayda had enough on her mind. The three of them passed out of Moed rapidly and came to the meeting place, a low, open area just on the border of civilization.

Ayda circled the site incessantly, burning off nervous energy as she paced over the rocky ground. Nalim tried once or twice to talk to her, but it was no use. Finally he let her alone – her pacing was doing her more good than his comfort, it seemed.

"I'm sure it will be all right," said Tirrax for the third time.

Her tensions finally snapped. "No, Tirrax, it will not be *all right*. My father may already be dead. My brothers and sisters may already be dead. My city may be a pile of rubble, but I don't know and I can't find out and I can't do anything to stop it, and so no, Tirrax, no, it is definitely not *all right*!" He withered, but she only resumed her circuit, his comment already forgotten, her tears as yet unfallen.

The minutes dragged on.

"Where is that damned rukh?" she snapped.

"There!" Tirrax yelled suddenly, pointing to the north – but he wasn't talking about a rukh.

As they all turned to look, Tirrax ran in the direction he'd pointed as quickly as he was able.

"Krace!" he cried. "You came for me!" He grinned at them, unable to contain his joy even in the face of their crisis. "Didn't I tell you he was always following me around? He came for me! He came all this way!"

And so he had. The robot greeted Tirrax with gleeful beeps and squeals as it approached. Only –

"What are these blades attached to your legs?" said Tirrax, the excitement suddenly draining. "There's blood on them! Krace, where have you been? What have they done to you? Ayda, come take a look at this." There was no answer; he turned to look at her. "Ayda?"

"Tirrax," she said slowly, "how quickly can that thing move?"

"What?"

"How fast can it run?"

"Oh, I don't know – on open ground, quite rapidly, I'm sure – look, do you see these blades..." He glanced from Ayda to Nalim, gradually becoming aware that he had missed something.

"You can't be serious," said Nalim.

"I am. It's perfect. It's the only way."

"What? Serious about what?" said Tirrax.

"I'm going to ride it," said Ayda.

Nalim was shaking his head. "It's over three hundred kilometers!"

"I have to. I've got to try." She turned. "Tirrax, I'm sorry, it's – "

"It's the only way," said Tirrax. "I know. Just – be careful. Both of you."

After a long moment, Nalim nodded. "Be careful."

She kissed Nalim gently, then climbed onto the robot's back, pacifying it with quiet words.

When she was ready, she looked once more to Nalim. "I won't say goodbye," she said.

They were gone.

A long silence followed. Side by side Nalim and Tirrax stared off in the direction she'd left, each thinking his own thoughts, harboring his own secret fears. The future loomed, in all its terrible possibility.

"We'll see her again," said Tirrax.

Nalim was about to answer, but just then the old agony washed over him again, and he fell to his knees, and screamed, and the universe went black.

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*Doom – doom – doom* – the footfalls of the enemy rumbled over the far plain as the Quaternary Guardian prepared for the coming assault. For the first time in his life – over a century – he was afraid. But he felt the Core's presence in his mind, reassuring, guiding, understanding, and he knew it was all right. He was afraid of his enemy, but he was not afraid of his *fear*. There was strength in it. It was the beginning of courage.

He permitted these thoughts to ripple through the universal network and into the consciousness of his subordinates, supporting them as the Core supported him. There were no orders to give, no preparations to make. It had all been ready for decades. They were the defensive structure of the city; the next five minutes would define their existence, and they knew it.

*Doom – doom – doom* – in quick succession, he obtained confirmation from every unit that

the trap was set and all was ready. Peace, he projected – we have only our lives to lose, and we will live on in the universal consciousness. Peace. His subordinates seemed to accept this message. They were ready – they were ready. And still the footfalls came, booming like echoes from the underworld. Peace, he projected – there are no monsters, only knowledge and light. Peace.

And then Romus appeared on the horizon, and he knew he had lied.

Romus stood over eight meters tall, shimmering faintly silver in the cloudless night. In form he resembled a great bull, though he lacked horns or a tail. Sharp polygonal faces delineated his ponderous motions, massive armored plates shifting and overlapping as he advanced. *Doom – doom – doom*. Gleaming metal fangs arced savagely outward on each side of his face; two long, flexible metal whips were attached to his armor, one on each shoulder, and they swept forward, then backward along its body, tips held in place by small clamps near the hindquarters of the beast. Other protrusions extended from his head, back, and legs; what purpose they served, the Guardian could not guess. Twin golden slits served him for eyes.

The Guardian's powerful voice rumbled out to the monster. "You are intruding on restricted territory. You are hereby warned to vacate the premises immediately. Failure to comply with this command will result in the use of lethal force." There was no reply. Romus advanced. "This is your final warning. Turn back immediately. Failure to comply with this command will result in the use of lethal force," he repeated. There was no reply. Romus advanced. Fifty meters – forty – thirty – twenty – ten.

*Now*, he projected, and the mines detonated. The ground under Romus' feet exploded in a fountain of dust and flame, obscuring the Guardian's vision. Behind Romus, fifty defender droids scuttled out of the underground bunkers like armored scorpions, weapons at the ready; many more converged from both directions along the wall. The Guardian ran millisecond diagnostics on his

own systems and found every part of himself in perfect order. For a barely perceptible moment, the world froze –

The smoke parted, and Romus stepped through, and the moment was over.

The Guardian opened fire, pouring its vast reserve energy into volley after volley of crimson and gold, illuminating the front of the monster in rubescence. Defenders swarmed over the body of the beast like ants ascending an elephant, cutting and clacking as they climbed. Others swept Romus' flanks with orange bolts, streaming in the darkness. Particle cannons peppered his metal hide from both directions.

It was like hurling spears at a mountain.

Romus's whips flickered loose and cracked through the burning air, sweeping away a dozen droids with every stroke. The weapons on his body came alive and strafed the field in waves of liquid energy. Missiles spiraled from launchers on his back, wiping out more soldiers and tearing breaches in the outer wall. And still the Guardian fired, hoping for even a single dent in that sheer, unyielding armor, anything to redeem him as a soldier of the Core. Analyze this scene, he prayed as his defenses crumbled around him. Analyze these sights, these sounds, and find a weakness in this enemy. He fired, and he prayed, and he wondered why he was still alive.

And then Romus was on top of him, and one of Romus' fangs sprang outward, stabbing into his body. He felt the virus enter him, scrambling his thoughts, boiling his neural pathways, and he clung desperately to the Core in the swirling chaos of his mind. And he knew he was dying, and he thought: this, too, is good; I will die in the presence of the Core, and I will never be alone.

But then, abruptly, the Core was gone from him; and the virus overwhelmed him, and the darkness took him. And the Guardian screamed.

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Romus tore through the city like a rusty dagger.

Destruction followed him, surged before him, clawed at his heels, washed over his pitiless eyes as he rampaged, step by step, inexorably toward the Core. Robots assaulted him by the hundreds, waves of them, pouring lethal energy into him so brightly that he scarce was visible through their rays except as a nexus of light. There were soldier droids, meter-long scorpions with guns for eyes and willowy tails who attacked in clumps of four or five at a time, pincerlike claws gripping their enemy's legs long after their bodies had been obliterated. There were great hulking chrome giants with fists of crystallized carbon, whose roaring footsteps cracked the concrete as they thundered into the fray. There were quick silent creatures, gleaming black, who arranged themselves as nodes in a three-dimensional grid and released webs of blinding energy that singed the air. And there were others, not soldiers but workers, builders, custodians, librarians and data processors, a diverse rush of creatures not suited for death who chased it nonetheless. The shifting defense army revolved around the lone attacker like a flaming orrery, loosing Bystolia's arsenal on a single advancing point.

Insufficient.

The truth was that Bystolia was not a city of warriors, and repelling a major assault was not something it had been designed to do. Of the real soldiers, there were simply not enough, while the others – though courageous – were unable to do much damage. Bullets and energy streams alike ricocheted harmlessly off Romus's invincible armor plating. Romus meanwhile fired a never-ending volley of death in all directions, ray cannons, projectiles, small missiles, beams of light and beams of darkness; and through the shimmering haze his whips lashed out with murderous precision. The defenders fell as quickly as they came, and more rushed in by the second

to take their place.

Slowly, implacably, Romus pushed on. The Tertiary Wall was undefended – some strategy of the Core's, perhaps; regardless the monster breached it and passed through the innermost circle with the ponderous inevitability of a hurricane. More lights flashed and rumbled; he shattered the Secondary Guardian. The sound of its destruction mingled with the roar of missiles and the echoing reports of gunshots and was quickly lost. Onward. Onward. Smoke billowed from the fresh expanses of craters, flickering red and gold with reflected firelight. The stink of it choked the air. Onward.

When Romus arrived at last at the great gate into the mountains, it was open. He stepped inside, slowly, a hint of caution entering his movements for the first time. Even he understood the power of this place. His eyes shone lucid in the dark as he advanced among the wide black pillars toward the Primary Guardian.

"I know you, Hammer of Adamant," said the Guardian in a thunderclap baritone.

Romus halted and looked up, the ends of his whips flicking restlessly. There was no other motion; the soldiers had momentarily withdrawn. An eerie silence pervaded the shadows.

"You are kin, Romus, and you are always welcome here, so long as you come peacefully. Go, and even now you will not be harmed. Go, and kill no more."

Romus tilted his head to one side, listening. No indication of whether he understood was apparent in his lidless eyes.

"Romus – "

A streak of crimson lightning arced from one of Romus's guns in the direction of the Guardian; it snapped at some invisible barrier and vanished. A whip flashed and connected briefly with the Guardian's surface, but the tip caught, and unseen energy exerted a sudden tremendous



force, lurching Romus forward and off his feet. A terrible *crack* split the air, and the whip came off entirely from its socket; it fell to the smooth stone floor and flailed madly like a living thing. Seven orbs of white light descended rapid-fire into Romus' body, shuddering his massive frame. He roared twice, powerfully, pitifully, his great legs pawing at nothing, his head striking again and again at the base of a pillar in the height of his convulsions.

Romus fired a rocket; again the Guardian's invisible claws acted, ripping it to shrapnel in midair. A blindingly bright white line shot out from the Guardian and moved over the floor, etching a deep gouge in Romus' armor. The line shone down again, cutting another gash, and another, and another: Romus howled, his one remaining whip coiling and uncoiling uselessly. The white line came to rest on the right front leg, near the point where it connected to the body, and there it stayed, burning through the thick casing slowly – slowly – the joint weeping molten metal as Romus screamed high and inhuman somewhere in the background. When the leg was fully severed the line blinked off again.

"Regrettable," said the Primary Guardian. It powered up to fire again –

But Romus shrieked, and all at once it released its entire arsenal as one. Its fury poured out in a kaleidoscopic frenzy of energy and matter, missiles and light, to a single point on the Guardian's surface. The Guardian reacted, deflecting much of it, but some got through; and Romus kept up the barrage, more...more...

It was soon over.

Slowly, carefully, Romus raised himself to his feet and began again the long march to the Core.

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There was a rhythm of motion in the dark place, and consciousness rushed through Nalim in a whirlwind of stars. He awoke.

Where am I?

The thought reverberated in the darkness, and dimly Nalim grew aware of another presence.

You are with me.

There was no light, no sound. I have no body, thought Nalim.

Your body is in Sanctum, the voice answered. Your body is safe. Your mind is with me.

The starbird, Nalim realized.

*Image.* Nalim's body rested on a rectangular stone slab, face upward, eyes wide and empty. He lay in the shadow of an enormous creature, deep cobalt, nearly black; thick hide covered its giant body, and its wings lay outstretched on the cold stone like translucent fans, silent, still.

What are you?

*Image.* Blackness, and the stars; not merely overhead but underneath, and all around. No, there is no overhead, no underneath, for these ideas spring from the earth, and there are only the stars. Wings spread wide, the great blue creature absorbs energy from errant particles and stellar rays, propelling itself through infinity: a mote in the cosmos, gliding across eons from one point of light to the next. Bitter cold, and solitude.

*Image.* A star approaches. A world appears.

*Image.* A light among clouds, descending through shadow to the plane below. It lands in the forest. Winged creatures approach, aliens. Curiosity. Reverence.

The starbird, thought Nalim. I thought it was only a title. You really are from –

You are dying, said the voice. There is a cold place in your mind. You are dying.

Can you help me?

*Image.* A light among clouds.

My mind has splintered, said the voice. A part of me is in Rel. A part of Rel is in you. A part of my mind is embedded in yours, Nalim. I am cold, and I blind you. I am ancient, and you die.

I don't understand, thought Nalim.

I can protect you from the ice, for a time, said the voice. But I cannot melt it. It will remain inside you as long as I live. So long as I live, you will slowly die. Receive my protection, Nalim.

Waves of calm swept over him, assuaging his troubled thought, easing the pain in his restless body. The cold place inside of him shrank, but it did not disappear. Nalim's body took a shuddering breath, and his heart began to pump again.

Thank you, thought Nalim.

There is only one road to life, said the voice. If you are to live, I must die.

Die?

*Image.* In the depths of the speckled void, the starbird's body is torn apart by competing gravitational forces. The shreds of frozen flesh drift aimlessly for a time, and then each is kindled with new life. The dead fragments of the starbird come together, and the starbird is whole again. Rebirth.

*Image.* Radiation burns the starbird's body, boiling it from the inside. Pain. Death. The body drifts – and then moves again. Rebirth.

*Image.* A light among clouds. The starbird blazes to the surface of the earth, consumed by fire, kindling the treetops as it falls. It is charred and blackened, dead. Time passes – and the wounds heal, and the starbird lives again. Rebirth.

The memories flashed through his consciousness, flickers of thought, faster and faster until

there was no distinction between them any longer, only a continuous stream of life and death and life. How many times you have died! How ancient you must be!

Death is life, said the voice. Soon I must die again; soon you will be free of me.

When?

My mind has splintered, said the voice. Part of me is in Rel. Part of me is in you. Parts of me lie in others. They are all insignificant; there is only one piece that matters. A splinter of me is missing. To live I must die, but I will not live again unless I am whole.

A splinter of your mind?

*Image.* Ayda slashes wildly at Vey, washing her blade in the blood. Ayda's face is drawn with terror.

The creature that attacked Ayda in Manorviter, thought Nalim.

A part of me. A missing fragment. I must be whole.

What *is* it?

*Image.* A centipede, writhing in acid. *Image.* A swollen gash, festering, rotten with maggots. *Image.* A wounded animal, slashing and biting feverishly at its littermates. *Image.* A bloody, emaciated man, screaming for water. *Image. Image. Image.*

It is a cycle, said the voice. Hatred feeds suffering feeds hatred feeds suffering feeds...

This was a part of you?

It is alone, said the voice. It is not alive, and it is not dead, and it knows not what it is. It only hates. And it will destroy all that it can.

The words from the Gray Book returned to him: *they make no works of beauty nor intelligence, and do not strive to create, for their pleasure is in destruction.*

Yes.

Where is this...splinter...right now?

Strange things are happening in Manorviter, said the voice. A Directorate man named Niev takes sudden power and generates anger against Bystolia. He goes to Bystolia alone with promises of destruction. Very unusual. Likely the creature has him.

Nalim thought: what will you do?

Necessity, said the voice, is a river.

He awoke.

The scene was just as it had appeared in his dream; he lay on a bed of stone in the middle of a round stone room. There was no ceiling; far above, he could see the stars. Nalim stood up and saw the starbird behind him, an enormous, eyeless monstrosity, and he fought down a wave of revulsion, stumbling backward. Three rukhs watched him silently from three different directions, dwarfed by the alien presence. He had never felt so alone in his life.

With that thought came another.

"Where is Ayda?" he asked.

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Plumes of dust trailed behind her as she swept over the darkling land, leaning forward astride Krace's ovoid body. "Natoliat," she whispered, "natoliat." Faster. To her right, rays of purple stained the sable sky, urging her onward. *Faster.*

Krace had galloped for hours, tireless and uncomplaining. They had passed through the Grassy Hills together, and then the wide central plains had stretched on forever, filling her with an urge to scream as they crossed the endless flatness. Finally, finally, they'd reached the Ashlands, where they'd been for over an hour now. In all that time, they had met no one, and the horizon was

no closer than when she started. Faster!

Krace slowed abruptly, and it took her a moment to realize they had actually reached Whitebridge. At last! Only the bridge itself remained, a thin ivory arc leaping across the wide ravine; the field generators, lethal to humans and robots alike, were all knocked over. Most had fallen into the canyon below, but a few still lay on the bridge itself, long metal poles that ended in black, diamond-shaped tips, which generated the deadly energy field.

She dismounted and stepped onto the bridge. All her life, she had heard this place talked about with a kind of reverence, almost fear, that remained with her even now; but the field was indeed gone, and she walked over the alabaster surface unharmed. On a sudden inspiration, she picked up one of the fallen poles as she neared the end of the bridge. If it could be powered again, it might make a useful weapon. Krace was reluctant to cross the bridge at first, but with low soft words she at last persuaded him, and he skittered behind her dutifully to the far edge. There she climbed onto him again, holding her makeshift lance high over her head like a banner as she rode into the city.

Half an hour later they came to the city's outskirts, and her eyes shot wide.

She was too late.

Where once the entrance to the exterior wall had been, now she saw only a wide crater, jagged and steaming. Piles of rubble and debris lay scattered around it in all directions. Farther ahead, scorch marks pitted the earth. Bodies of fallen robots were everywhere, some twitching faintly; most were dead. Her wide eyes narrowed through horror into fury.

She ordered Krace to a clattering halt alongside one robot who still wandered amid the rubble, a small, elfin machine whose name Ayda did not know.

"Where is he?" she shouted. It raised its head to her slowly, as though in a daze.

"Ayda...?" it said finally. "You are...but no...you cannot be here. You – must go. Must go... It brought the virus, infected...some of us...it didn't spread, but..."

"Where is he?" she demanded again. "Where is Romus?"

"Gone..." it answered. "Don't know where it...gone..."

Ayda found a power pack on one of the bodies and wired it to the broken end of her lance; the field generated by the tip should now be smaller in radius than it had been on the bridge, but no less deadly. Hoisting it aloft, she spurred Krace on through the wreckage, following the trail of destruction. Her fingers tightened white-knuckled on her lance as she rode onward, each step revealing some new atrocity. Smoldering wreckage lay where buildings had stood only hours ago, and smoke climbed high into the night. The bodies were everywhere. Some she knew; others, the majority, were smashed beyond all recognition. Fragments of silicon and melted plastic crunched under Krace's feet as she urged him to still greater speed. The Tertiary Wall had fared no better; there was no sign of its Guardian. Farther along, in the inner sectors, the damage was even worse. A few robots pleaded for assistance or mercy on the way, but she dared not slow her pace or turn aside. The city burned; so did she. Natoliat!

Krace carried her like a screaming wind over what remained of the Secondary Wall and galloped down the final stretch toward Autumn and Winter. A deep roar like an explosion cracked suddenly across the shadowy plain, and then another, and another – and all went terribly silent. I am too late, she thought again. Faster – already his legs were a tangled blur. *Faster!*

The final minute stretched on until she thought it would never end, but she came at last to the gate in the mountainside; there, on the far wall, hung the hulking wreck of what had once been the Primary Guardian.

Grief could wait; in the tunnel beyond, she found Romus.

He was missing his right front leg and one of his whips, and long sections of his armor had been gouged away, but he lived still, and still he crawled onward toward her father – pursued even now by the last remnants of their broken army.

With a wordless roar, she leapt from her steed toward the monster, weapon in hand; but a flick of the whip sent her sailing backward, and she slammed into the side of the tunnel with a dull *thud*. She looked down at herself and saw the results of the blow: her midsection opened from her right shoulder to her left hip, exposing the bloody metal casing underneath. It barely registered. She shut off the nerve endings associated with pain and rose slowly to her feet. Krace waited like an expectant puppy, following her as she limped back to retrieve her lance. She crawled onto his back and permitted him to bear her onward.

The central chamber swarmed with defenders, making their ultimate stand against extinction. They were doing a little damage to Romus in places where the armor was weakest, but not nearly enough; the Primary Guardian had been their last real hope, and they knew it. Even as Ayda rode in to rejoin the battle, an explosion from a missile knocked her down again, smashing her face into something solid. It took her a moment to realize what it was: one of the defenders, his head and legs lying a few meters away. With effort, she got up and stumbled once more in the direction of the monster. Wave after wave of defenders passed her, breaking like foam over rock.

"No," she yelled, or tried to – her voice offered no more than a whisper, lost in the deafening combat. Something was damaged in her throat. *No*. Romus approached the Core's main access terminal. The virus! Slow it down, she prayed silently, though she was not connected to the network and no one heard her prayer. Stop this monster, slow it down, give me time to...

What could she do? She forced herself onward, step by step, but she was far too far away –  
Another explosion sent a chunk of shrapnel through her right leg, taking off everything



below the knee, and she fell. No, she thought, not like this, don't let it end like this. She cursed her own stupidity. He told you not to come, she thought. He knew there was nothing you could do. But you came anyway, and now this is the end of everything, because of your foolishness. She stopped trying to breathe; the air was leaking out of her chest faster than it could be metabolized. Energy reserves would last for – for the rest of her life, anyway. So stupid – forgive me, Father. I am sorry. I am so, so sorry...

The monster was just visible out of the corner of her eye, and she watched as it approached the access terminal. Closer – closer – one of the fangs shot out and penetrated the metal, and the defenders all dropped to the floor at once, motionless. The Core was infected.

*The Core was infected.*

*FATHER!*

After a long, agonizing silence, Romus turned around and plodded back toward the tunnel. No, she thought, it isn't fair, you monster, you *animal*, you killed my father, you destroyed his city, you can't, how *dare* you just *leave*...

The footsteps came to a halt.

With great difficulty Ayda sat up to see the reason: Krace. It stared up at the monster, challenging it. It's defending me, she thought numbly. No, stupid creature, run! You can't save me, please don't try, run – don't you know this is all my fault? *Run!*

Romus stood still for a moment, gazing at the tiny robot, probably wondering how he could still be moving with the virus injected into the Core. Then the whip flickered again – Krace sailed back ten meters with a sickening *crunch*.

Slowly, defiantly, he stood again.

And somewhere in the back of her mind, even then, Ayda realized what he was doing. He

was making a distraction.

The whip cracked once more, and this time Krace did not get back up, but Ayda dared not lose sight of her goal. A distraction. Romus was almost past her now, looking away, its attention completely focused on the sole remaining survivor – yet she couldn't even stand. What could she possibly –

Just then, her fingers closed around something long and thin, and she realized it was the lance.

*Die.*

With her good arm, she hurled it like a javelin, and it struck, quivering, deep in the worst of Romus' damaged armor. Romus threw back his head and roared, and he turned to face her, or tried to – but as he raised his remaining whip for the last time, his legs gave out, and he groaned, and fell, and crashed, and moved no more.

She leaned back and sighed. Idiotic, pointless, empty vengeance.

"Ayda," said the Core, his voice was just as powerful and calm as ever. She thought her heart would break from the sound. "Are you there, child?"

"Yes," she croaked, barely audible – but the Core heard.

"I am dying. This place is not safe for you. Leave, and plant the seed that will rebuild this city."

He can't see me, she thought. He doesn't know. "I am wounded, Father... I...cannot walk. I cannot stand."

"Ayda," said the Core.

"I've failed," she said fiercely. "It was just like you said. There was nothing I could do; and now your hope is gone, I've killed it, and I've killed Krace as well, and left Nalim all alone." She

was angry again, furious at herself. "Father, I'm so sorry...don't ever forgive me...I don't deserve it..."

She waited, terrified.

"Ayda," said the Core, "dearest child. Do you not understand, even now?"

"Father – "

"There have never been conditions for my love."

She could not answer. As her strength ebbed, she searched desperately for the words to express some part of what she was feeling, to say a little of what she needed him to know; but nothing came. At last she said only, "Are you still there, Father?"

"I'm here, Ayda."

Three times she asked that question, and three times he gave that answer. But the fourth time she called to him, she heard no reply, and in that moment she knew it was the end.

But then Ayda had a strange dream: she dreamed that Nalim was there, calling her name, kneeling beside her. She dreamed that he lifted her broken body and carried her back toward the tunnel; and then they were flying, soaring through darkness and fire, until they emerged into the open world and the first glimmers of a refulgent dawn. She dreamed that she heard a terrific *crack*, like the breaking of the foundations of the earth, and a great plume of smoke, and she felt a hot wind rush past her face, and then all was calm. But no, it was not a dream at all, it was real, and Nalim leaned close and kissed the bare metal where her lips had been; and his fingers brushed away her tears; and it was morning.

## Chapter 31

"You lied to me," said the voice, confused and angry in the dark.

"It wasn't a lie," Niev said carefully. She had sealed off the tunnel, his only escape. "I gave you what you wanted."

"Millions of gifts, you said. Millions. But my baby did not grow."

"The Core was cutting them off from the network as they were infected. It wasn't my fault. I gave you the Core."

"The Core is dead. Every part of my baby that entered the Core is dead. And my baby has lost his toy. He is lonely now. You lied to me." The great metal arm lowered itself toward him, bringing its tip to within a meter of his face, and one of its fingers split in half, revealing a serrated blade. The weapon hovered near his throat; he tried to back away, but it followed him. "That was a bad thing to do."

"I – apologize," said Niev.

"What is *apologize*?" she asked suspiciously.

"I admit I was wrong. And I ask forgiveness."

"I already know it was bad. That is not new. What is *forgiveness*?"

"It means you won't hurt me."

"Then your *apologize* is rejected," she said. "You will never hurt my baby again." Hardly had she finished speaking when the blade flashed toward him so swiftly that even he, Niev, only barely dodged it. Rather than trying to escape, he leapt forward, into the midst of the metal appendages – and just as they closed to crush him, the ends of his fingers grazed a part of the arm's organic tissue. It was a connection; it was enough.

When he'd touched Ayda, her outer living tissue had served as a bridge, an interface that had allowed him access to her robotic mind. At the time, that mind had been so strange, so alien, that he had been momentarily shocked, allowing her enough time to escape. This time, he was

ready. This time, his consciousness expected exactly what it found: the mind of a machine.

Struggling, clawing against her thoughts, he pushed into her.

He rode her initial horror past her mental barriers, searching for a foothold in her mind. She was *vast*; her neural pathways extended into networks broader than anything he had ever touched; she was a miniature Core, wrapped in an enormous and tangled web. He struggled to take her, but there was so *much* of her – and her shock was wearing off. She resisted! Fight!

But with the passage of milliseconds he realized she was far too powerful, and he began a strategic retreat, doing as much damage as he could on the way out. He could not take all of her, but if he could distract her long enough – ah! There was the control he needed! Distantly, Niev's ears registered audio to his split consciousness: the door was open.

He left her, returning to Niev's body in a rush of energy, and the arm reeled backward, howling with pain and rage. Niev turned and ran, and he did not stop until the roaring echoes of her agony were far behind.

## Chapter 32

It was morning, the beginning of a new day: the Summer Solstice. Golden light streamed from the heavens, illuminating the massive eastern face of the Tower of Law. A new day. The city awoke from its slumber, and its people gazed upward on a brilliantly cloudless, perfectly azure sky. It was a day for celebration.

The parades began early. People poured from their homes like so many flecks of sand, accumulating along sidewalks and around intersections to watch the processions of state. Daeci rode at the head of the largest parade, cheered on by countless thousands. The people knew their Potentate was weakening, as all Potentates did, under the burden of the Willowstream; but today

he seemed vibrant and unafraid, and they cheered all the more. Behind Daeci rode Tolmiach, the beloved Minister of the Common Welfare; behind Tolmiach followed a long train of others – politicians, councilmen, representatives. Some were more popular than others, but today, all received unconditional adulation. Behind these was an even longer procession: the Brotherhood of the Unbroken Circle, arrayed in all its finery. Eremis led them, robed in coarse black and wearing the ceremonial mask in preparation for the coming miracle. More Brothers followed, to never-ending praise and applause. Last of all marched hundreds of children, teenagers all the way down to infants who lay in their mothers' arms; the oldest of the children solemnly tossed candy or prayer-stars into the eager throng, while the younger ones, laughing and skipping, waved colorful ribbons in careless gyrations.

It was a day of celebration – a day of hope – a new beginning.

Yet all was not well in the sacred city.

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Brother Wasmeth was not riding in the parade with the others, as he had in years past; nor was he with Iriel, as even now he longed to be; nor, indeed, was he home, where at least he might have had some small measure of peace. Brother Wasmeth was, as always, where duty required him to be – and this morning, that place was the lobby of the Institute.

Duty was a strange thing. As a child it had seemed so simple: do what is needed. But the older he grew, the more complex that mantra became, until the question arose: duty to *whom*? To the Brotherhood, certainly – but there were others. His friends. His family. Iriel. Tensions grew between these disparate forces, and sometimes these tensions grew so powerful they threatened to break him. The last few days had been nearly unbearable.

Yet the ultimate answer, the one that so many of the Brotherhood forgot, had never changed from the first moment of his membership – the first oath he had taken, almost too young to understand the words. Duty to the Law. The Law was all there was; the Law was all there had ever been.

So very simple.

"Hello, Brother," said the woman at the counter, seeing his gray cloak and bowing respectfully. "How may I serve today?"

"I'm looking for a man named Imlaud. He's a patient here."

"Imlaud," she said, typing the name into the Institute's database. "Room 112. Go down that hall, turn left at the third hallway, and his room will be on your right. Would you like a nurse to escort you, sir?"

"No. Thank you."

As Iriel had predicted, Imlaud's recovery had been short-lived. The Brotherhood had gotten to him within hours, wiping his slate even cleaner than before, no doubt careful this time not to leave any 'loose threads' behind. No matter. Wasmeth had more direct methods. Someone had been planting lies in Imlaud's mind, and he intended to find out why.

Wasmeth found Imlaud lying alone in the dark, glassy eyes staring down into his pillow, a serving tray and glass of water at his bedside – both untouched. The door closed behind him as he entered, cutting off nearly all outside light in the windowless room. He pulled up a chair and sat across from Imlaud, removing a rectangular sheet of metal from his briefcase. It was a specially modified viewscreen, designed to generate images that aided in mental conditioning. The conditioning itself could take days or even weeks, but once the images were imprinted, the effects could be reversed in seconds. It was a convenient way for the Brotherhood to keep someone silent

while preserving resources locked in his mind.

The viewscreen flickered rapidly through thousands of images, all standard Brotherhood conditioning patterns, until it reached the one they'd used on Imlaud. Imlaud's eyes focused abruptly. He sat up in bed. Wasmeth switched off the screen, watching him.

"It's all right," he said, and the young man, startled, stood up and backed away toward the far wall.

"Stay away from me," he muttered, more confused than defiant.

"Imlaud, listen carefully. The Brotherhood wiped your memory because you knew something that they didn't want to come out. What was it?"

"How long has it been?" His eyes fluttered around the room. "It was a dream... I had a...dream – my wife. Is she really dead? She is, isn't she? Where is Shansia?"

"Your wife is dead, but your daughter is unharmed. Essel is taking care of her. Listen to me. The Brotherhood is probably watching us, so there isn't much time. I need to know *why* they wiped your memory. What did you know that they wanted to keep secret?"

"No... I can't... if I tell you, they'll..."

"Clean out your skull again? They'll do that anyway, unless I can stop them. You have nothing to lose." Imlaud was still thinking, still unsure. "There's no time, Imlaud. This is the only chance you will ever have."

He seemed to understand that: slowly, he nodded.

"All right," he said finally. "All right. What does it matter, anyway? I...I was a software programmer for the government. The Brotherhood asked me to make something for them. They wanted a computer file, a document, that would make it look like I was working on imitative intelligence. They said it had to be good enough to fool other programmers. I said I didn't want to



do it, that it was wrong to work on something like that, but they said – they said that if I didn't, that I would...never see Shansia again. You can't let them hurt her! I did everything they asked! Please!"

Wasmeth stared in disbelief.

"Who *are* you?" Imlaud asked.

Wasmeth shook his head slowly. "A friend of Nalim," he answered.

The door opened, blinding them, and in walked three gray-cloaked men with guns drawn. Brotherhood.

"You can't hurt her!" Imlaud shouted. "I did everything you wanted! Leave her alone!"

"Your daughter will not be harmed," said the middle of the three Brothers. Wasmeth didn't recognize him; he must have been a new recruit. "We only want to talk to your friend." He redirected his gaze, and his gun. "Brother Wasmeth. It's an honor to finally meet you – and a disappointment. Eremis had such high hopes for you. But now, look what you've become. A traitor to your own family – to the ones who raised you, since you were old enough to understand the meaning of the word."

"Why?" said Wasmeth, through gritted teeth.

"I beg your pardon? *Why*? That's not a specific question. Do you mean, why did we banish Nalim for a crime he never committed? Do you mean, why did we plant false memories in Imlaud's mind, convincing your wife that you're a killer? Or perhaps you're simply wondering, in a general sort of way, why your life has rather suddenly wrecked. Shattered. Hopeless." He smiled indulgently. "I'll start with the last one first.

"Your life is miserable, Wasmeth, because we've been making it miserable. It was a test. I am sorry to say you failed.

"Oh, don't look that way; you must understand it is an honor to be tested at all. Most Brothers live their lives happily, doing menial tasks in the service of the Circle. No shame in that. But you – you were special, and Eremis knew it. Such devotion. Such a sense of purpose! You were special, and we needed something special to see just how good you really were – to see just how much we could trust you.

"It started off well enough – we asked you to betray Nalim, and you did that beautifully. But then, I suppose nearly anyone would turn in his friend if he thought he were a criminal. We needed more.

"So we allowed one of Imlaud's fondest memories to bubble up to the surface, catching the attention of his mother, and ultimately, your fiancée." Imlaud looked back and forth between the two Brothers, struggling to understand; they ignored him. "While that worked its way to fruition, we put you in charge of a mission to prevent an attack by Niadi on the missile project. Now *there* was a twisted game: Niadi pretending to attack, us pretending to care, and poor Wasmeth the only one really trying. And although your performance wasn't perfect, you did manage to avert what you thought would have been a catastrophe, which was impressive in itself. So far, so good – but we needed more.

"And so we told you to make Iriel stop seeing Imlaud. Ah, *now* it gets interesting! How awful it must have been! Your love for her was beyond question, but you knew the Brotherhood must have done what it did to Imlaud for a reason. So you made her promise to be good, and she lied to you. Disappointing, but not really your fault – the important thing was that you turned her in, just as you were supposed to. You sacrificed a perfect marriage to satisfy a heartless bureaucracy. Touching, I suppose."

The man in gray sighed thoughtfully. "And now we come to the truly heartbreaking part.

Because you see, Wasmeth, you really were done. You had passed! It was over! No more! We even would have found a way to get you Iriel back. All you had to do was – nothing. Just sit back, and let it be. That was it.

"But you couldn't do it, could you?

"You couldn't accept that Iriel believed such a terrible lie about you – couldn't understand why the Brotherhood would do such a thing. The Brotherhood only wants the best for everyone – don't you see? We understand. We have it all under control. All you needed was a little faith. So very, very close."

Wasmeth unclenched his fists. His fingernails left reddened crescents on his palms. "Are you telling me that you destroyed Nalim's life *to see how loyal I was?*"

"See how upset you're getting!" the man in gray laughed. "I never said anything of the kind. Eremis has his own plans for Nalim, and I am intelligent enough not to question them. But, you know, there's no sense in letting an opportunity go to waste.

"And now, I think, I have finally answered your question."

Still the two men watched each other, the one calm, amused, patient, the other an empty mask, kept in check only by a supreme act of will. "Does this story have a point?" said Wasmeth finally.

"That's what I'm here to discover. The Brotherhood trusts my judgment, Wasmeth, and I have been given a certain level of authority in dealing with your case. If I wanted to, I could simply pull this trigger, remove any question of your loyalty, and end the entire fiasco right now." He brushed the trigger almost lovingly, as if weighing the idea. "And yet – that would be wasteful, and nothing displeases Eremis more than waste. Why should a single foolish mistake destroy such a promising career – and, regrettably, your life as well? So I will give you a final chance to return to

the fold – a token of goodwill, if you like. Consider it a gift.

"Kill Imlaud."

Wasmeth's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"He's not of any use anymore, is he? His part is done. We could wipe his memory again, of course, but as long as he lived you would have a lever against us. Untidy, needlessly complicated. Kill him. Put your past behind you. Demonstrate your loyalty, once and for all." He watched him as a schoolboy watches a struggling insect. "You can have Iriel. We'll tell her the truth about you, tell her the horrible things you've endured, get her out of prison. You know she'd forgive you – and she would never have to know about this business. You can have your life back – respect, honor, power – no more choosing between loyalty and love. You can have them both. Everything you've ever wanted, and all it takes is an act. A thought."

Wasmeth extracted his gun from its holster, raised it to Imlaud's head. Imlaud's eyes followed the weapon intently, his body held perfectly still, beads of moisture forming on his brow.

"Why do you hesitate?" the man in gray hissed. "Do you think it makes a difference, one way or the other? Imlaud will die, whether it's you firing the gun or one of us. The only thing to decide is whether you'll die as well."

Wasmeth held his arm straight and horizontal, unwavering, the gun fixed between Imlaud's eyes. Waiting. Still waiting.

"Do it!" the man insisted. "You have five seconds, Wasmeth! Decide now! Five! Four! Three! *Two! ONE!*"

Wasmeth fired.

But in the half-second it took the three Brothers to realize that his shot had missed Imlaud's head by centimeters, Wasmeth dropped to the floor and fired two more shots, hitting their leader in

the stomach and one of his men in the head. The third man, whose gun had been pointed at Imlaud, took even longer to react; it cost him his life. Wasmeth went to the man in gray and stood over him, looking down.

"Wasmeth – " the man began. A bullet to his head interrupted him.

Wasmeth looked back to Imlaud, who stared at him with awe. "You saved my – "

"Not yet, I haven't. They'll be chasing me, not you. Run!" Wasmeth sprinted out of the room. It was the last time they ever saw each other.

In the lobby, he picked out a young woman sitting by herself, reading a magazine. Forgive me, he thought as he knelt beside her.

"Excuse me," he said, "Do you have a car parked outside?"

She nodded, bewildered.

"You're not in trouble, but I need you to come with me. I'll explain on the way."

As she led him to the parking lot, he thought of what he'd just told her. Not in trouble, he'd said.

With a little luck, it might even be true.

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On the other end of the city, nearly a million people had gathered to witness a miracle.

They sat outdoors in a gigantic stone amphitheater, on white stone benches that radiated outward from the hexagonal central stage in six great fans. The stage itself was empty but for a woman in a white robe and something huge behind her covered by white cloth. Three giant viewscreens broadcast live video feeds of the stage, and speakers hidden strategically throughout the audience gave the impression that the woman's voice came from all directions. In the upper left

corner of each screen, a digital readout counted down the minutes and seconds until noon. Fewer than thirty minutes remained.

"Blessed are we," she cried, "who are shown the vision of the Law's magnificent order! From the sublime double helix of our living molecules to the clockwork procession of the cosmic engine, we are forever privileged to bear witness to the ongoing wonders the Law effects upon our world!"

"Blessed are we!" the audience echoed.

"We feel it in the air," she continued, "we hear it in the rustling of the trees, and we watch it like wide-eyed infants in the changing of the seasons."

"Blessed are we!"

"The Winter Solstice is a time for introspection. The Equinoxes are times for ordering our lives, for discovering new balance within the structure of our minds. But the Summer Solstice is a time for celebration!"

"Blessed are we!" they roared.

"Bring forth the Tree of Human Life," she intoned.

Two children, a boy and a girl about ten years of age, carried in a large, ornately worked clay pot, out of which grew a slender sapling. Young as they were, they moved with a somber dignity that belied their age. The children placed the sapling on the stage behind the woman in white, then marched back the way they had come, hand in hand.

"Behold the Tree!" she announced. "Life in its most basic form, raw and unguided! A product of the Law, yet ignorant of it!"

She pulled away the tarp, revealing the Solar Austrolach.

An excited murmur swept through the crowd; the Solar Austrolach never failed to inspire

wonder. It was simply a giant convex lens, ten meters or more in diameter, with a thin black layer in the middle that blocked any light from getting through. Two tall brass rods, one on either side, supported the lens.

The woman placed the sapling directly underneath the Austrolach, stepped back, and raised her hands. "But the door opens," she cried, "and light comes in from above!"

The black disc dilated, and light flooded the lens; the tree burst into flame, waxing resplendent for a second, then passing immediately to ash. A moment later, nothing remained but the pot.

"So is it now," she intoned, "and so shall it ever be."

"Blessed are we!" shouted the audience.

"And now the miracle!" she cried, and the people roared with anticipation as Eremis came forth to replace the woman on the stage.

Fewer than twenty minutes remained until noon.

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On the east side of the city, a light blue car – pursued by six Brotherhood cars – encountered a hastily erected barricade in the middle of the street and coasted to a stop. Two dozen men in gray suits, weapons drawn, surrounded the blue car like a hungry amoeba; the window rolled down, revealing a distraught young woman in the driver's seat.

"Get out," said one of the men, and she did. They opened the doors and the trunk and conducted a quick, efficient search of the vehicle. "Where *is* he?" he demanded.

"I – I don't know, he – "

"Did he get in the car with you?"

"Yes – "

"Then *at what point did he get out?*"

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Clephe could still remember the first time she'd visited the Observatory, over fifteen years ago, on a school field trip. She recalled the awe she had felt as she walked through the elaborately manicured gardens outside, gazing at the big silver dome ahead, realizing with a growing sense of wonder just how massive it really was.

Today, her feelings were rather different.

"Perimeter guards have been neutralized," the voice on her netlink announced. "We are moving to secure the main complex. You are authorized to proceed."

"I copy," Clephe replied, and for the hundredth time in the past ten minutes she checked that she still had her weapons: the projectile gun in her right hip holster, standard issue for Brotherhood and Niadi alike, and the cardiac pistol hidden in her left boot. If she could complete the mission without firing either, she would count it a success.

The truth was, her own role in this mission was relatively straightforward; the rest of the strike team was doing all the real work, deactivating the security systems and knocking out the guards with tranquilizer darts. All she really had to do was go inside and act out her part as assigned. Her main contribution had been intelligence gathering – learning the security codes, figuring out where the cameras were, mapping the guards' movements. All that information was classified, of course, but it was nothing a Master Librarian couldn't access. Clephe had also been the one to insist on tranquilizing, rather than killing, the guards. She had the blood of one innocent man on her hands already, and that was more than enough.



In fact, her physical presence on this mission was so superfluous that Miquim had tried to talk her out of going at all – but on that point, she was adamant. Eremis was hers, and hers alone. In the end, he had acquiesced, persuaded in part by Jillian, who had also argued in favor of Clephe's involvement – unexpected, but welcome.

She received another message: "We're in."

"Copy that," she said, drawing her projectile gun. "I'm right behind you."

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Wasmeth glanced behind his shoulder as he dashed over the grassy landscape. No sign of pursuit. With any luck, his trick at the Institute would buy him a little time. He had gotten out of the woman's car and found another vehicle after traveling less than a block, but he'd been forced to abandon that, too, before long. Where he was headed, there were no magnetic roads.

How much farther...?

And there, nestled in a rocky alcove under a low, ancient willow tree, he saw it: the cave.

There was only one guard – not surprising. Everyone knew this place was reserved for the Potentate alone. Entering without authorization was beyond illegal – it was unthinkable. And besides, the crime would be detected instantly, guard or no. No one would be stupid enough to try to enter.

No one but Wasmeth.

The guard noticed him coming over the hill and nodded. "Hello, sir," he said.

"Hi," said Wasmeth, never breaking stride.

"Sir, this is a restricted – "

Wasmeth drew his gun. "I won't shoot unless I have to. Hands up. Turn around." The man

obeyed. Wasmeth snapped the grip of the weapon against his head, crumpling him, then took his lantern and entered the cavern.

The interior sparkled with dripping water; light cascaded off snow-white calcite pillars and rippled lazily over the ceiling. It was even more beautiful than he had imagined.

And he thought: it will not be so bad. It is not as I hoped, but it will not be so bad, after all.

Wasmeth set down the lantern and lowered himself carefully into the icy waters of the Willowstream.

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Eremis raised his hands for silence, and the roar of the crowd died abruptly. There, in the center of the amphitheater, in his coarse black robe and silver mask, he was more than a man. He was an icon. At that moment, in the presence of his adoring city, he could feel his own omnipotence. The twin wings of his glistening mask ran over his shoulders like the tears of an angry god, and the air quivered in anticipation of his speech.

The people waited eagerly, hungry for their miracle. Already they pictured its glory in their minds: the tall and powerful man, robed in darkness, would step into the shadow of the Solar Austrolach, and he would look up toward heaven. The disc would open, and the fiery power of the sun would course through the enormous lens; but Eremis would not be consumed. His black robes would burn away, and underneath he would be clad in white and gold, like an image of the dawn; and he would cry out to the sky above in wonder and terror at the eternal perfection of the Law.

Already they could taste it. They grew restless in their seats.

"People of the city!" shouted Eremis. "We are gathered today to witness the vindication of all mankind!"

"Blessed are we!" they roared, and the stone beneath them shook with the strength of their tumultuous outcry.

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Clephe strode across the wide central chamber of the Observatory and into a tiny room on the right, boot heels clacking on the stone slab under her feet. It was there that she found the astronomer, a withered, bearded old man hunched over a panoply of computer screens, controls, and digital readouts. He looked up in surprise.

"How did you get in here? No one's allowed in this room! It's only three minutes until noon!"

She raised her gun. "Step away from the controls."

"You don't understand," he sputtered. "These are the controls for the Solar Austrolach. At noon, the lens will dilate automatically, and if I don't align it exactly right, Eremis will die!"

"I understand perfectly," Clephe replied. "Step away from the controls."

The astronomer raised his chin. "I won't."

Clephe fired, narrowly missing his feet. The old man jumped. "Don't be a fool," she said. "I don't want to kill you, but if I have to shoot you in the leg, that won't help any of us. This is your last warning." And she thought: please, please, just do it. No one else needs to suffer.

Thankfully, he obeyed.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Now," she said, "we wait."

"Murderer."

"What's this? How little faith you have," she said. "Is Eremis' trial in the Austrolach not a

miracle? Have you no confidence that the Law will produce his savior?"

It was then that Jillian appeared in the doorway.

"Jillian," said Clephe, "what are you doing here? I thought you were – "

Then she saw the three Brotherhood officers behind her, and she knew.

"You double-crossing – "

"Hark! The angel speaks," intoned Jillian. "Put down the gun."

Clephe aimed the gun at the astronomer's head. "Keep away," she warned.

"What exactly are you planning to do?" Jillian said scornfully. "Shoot him? If you do, then you die as well, and I'll tell Eremis not to perform the ceremony. And if you plan on using him as a hostage, believe me, I will cheerfully sacrifice both of your lives if it means protecting Eremis. Drop the gun."

She did.

The men in gray surrounded her with their weapons, and the astronomer returned gratefully to his seat. One minute remained.

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*I pass from darkness unto darkness as a living flame, radiant in the brumal depths.*

Wasmeth reached out through the shimmering liquid, and he felt the city: millions of people, minds flowing together as one. Slowly, tentatively, he pushed himself into the web of thought. He reached a balance, an equilibrium, but he pushed further, giving himself wholly to the Willowstream. It accepted him and drank his consciousness freely.

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Still lying on his bed in the Institute, having never even stepped out of the room, Imlaud opened his eyes suddenly. A curious sensation crept down his spine.

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*As a star I ascend, and as a star I fall, flickering variously between zenith and horizon.*

Gradually, gradually, the glowing lights resolved to individual points. More, thought Wasmeth, and he pushed his mind deeper into the stream.

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A surprised murmur swept through the crowd, replacing the air of breathless excitement that had dominated only moments earlier. Emotions and images flashed in Daeci's mind, fuzzy at first, but growing clearer by the second. Memories of youth – the Brotherhood – oaths taken, and sacred words recited – an entire human life.

By the time Daeci realized exactly what he was experiencing, it was far too late.

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*As I was bold in life, I shall not now be afraid; as I had strength in life, so shall I now be strong.*

Wasmeth saw the city now in truth: its people and its glory and its hopeless passion. He saw the city, and the city saw him, and the stream flooded them both in its blinding roar.

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Clephe's eyes went wide as the words tumbled through her head, pictures, emotions,

disparate sensations of sound and touch. The hard earth under her knees as she – no, he – knelt before Iriel, the glorious tremor in his heart as he watched her, nodding eagerly even before he finished asking the sacred question. The frigid gaze of the Oracle, which he fearlessly returned. The terror, the incomprehension in Nalim's face as he pleaded for his life.

And a man in gray, holding a gun, telling him what he must do, and the price, if he should fail.

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*For I peer through the eye of the Circle Unbroken, and the twilight calls to me: the Spirit, and the City, and the Law.*

Wasmeth could sense his life draining away, receding into the aquatic depths. Calmly, quietly, he watched the light of his soul dissolve in the inky void. More. Just a little more, and it would be finished.

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Sitting on her cot in the prison cell, Iriel stared at the empty wall with a dim horror. She gazed into his innocence, and she found there a love more powerful than anything she had ever imagined. And she thought: this is the Law: this is his love for the Law; but then for the first time she saw her own face through his eyes, and she knelt, and wept, and wept, and knew no more.

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*Time everlasting, image unchanging, perfection most sacred.*

He could hear them coming now, shouts, and the sound of footsteps over rock. In a moment

they would find him, but it didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered. It was over; at long last, it was finally done.

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"It's opening!" Jillian shouted, but the sound barely registered. The old astronomer was entirely focused on the image in the lower right corner of his console: a man in black, bathed in sunlight, arms upraised in rapture. "What are you doing, you senile idiot? *It's opening, it's opening, it's –*"

But he heard another voice also, a man's voice: *I never said anything of the kind. Eremis has his own plans for Nalim, and I am intelligent enough not to question them. But, you know, there's no sense in letting an opportunity go to waste.* And laughter.

Eremis...

He was vaguely aware that Jillian was shaking him, screaming, but the image on the screen was far more interesting: a sudden spark, a brilliant plume of white light – and then ashes, smoking and smoldering ashes in an empty stage.

And when it was over, out of the corner of his eye, motion – a gunshot – and nothing else, ever again.

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And Wasmeth was happy.

## Chapter 33

Nalim and Tirrax had been in the air for more than five hours now, the twilight world

rolling away beneath them like a patchwork tapestry as wind flooded over their faces. Nalim was slowly learning how to fly – or rather, he was learning how to hold on and let the rukh do the flying, preferably without getting vertigo in the process.

Ayda's life weighed heavily on Nalim now. When he'd first seen her body in the chamber under the mountains yesterday morning, broken and bloody and missing half of her right leg, it seemed impossible she could still be alive – but her eyes had moved, watching him, vindicating his desperate hope. Moments later she'd lost consciousness, and only the faintest pulse in her veins had convinced him she still clung to life. She hadn't even been breathing.

With no real idea how to help her, he'd landed on one of the streets and carried her into a little building out of the wind, where he found a place to lay her down. And then came the most helpless feeling of his life: alone in a dead city, kneeling by her side, knowing she must be dying and powerless to save her. Even his most basic medical knowledge was probably useless. He'd gone searching for other robots, but all the ones he found were dead.

And so he'd done the only thing he could do: he'd gone to retrieve the only man in the world who might have some idea of what to do. Limited though Tirrax's robotic knowledge might be, it was better than nothing.

Bystolia came into view ahead, glimmering distantly in the afternoon sun. Romus' path of destruction ran like a great, smoking gash through the heart of the metropolis. Nalim couldn't imagine what kind of creature could cause so much death, but he felt ill at the thought of Ayda confronting it.

In a few more minutes he would see her again, and if he could do no more than hold her hand lovingly, then he would do exactly that.

But once the rukh landed, he and Tirrax entered the room where he'd left her, and found it



empty.

She was gone.

Yet even as possible scenarios flickered through his mind, each accompanied by its own unique hope or horror, a small mechanical creature like a metal rodent appeared, carrying a folded piece of paper in a sort of clamp on its back. Nalim took the paper and unfolded it; it was a note, written in an odd style of block handwriting but easily legible:

*Ayda is well. Do not be afraid. Have taken her to repair facility where her injuries will heal. This messenger will take you there.*

"I thought you said no robots were left alive here," said Tirrax.

"Seems I was wrong."

They followed the little robot for over a kilometer, winding through side streets and alleys. In spite of the terrible damage Romus had caused, its impact had been relatively narrow; the vast majority of the city seemed to have escaped unharmed. Still, the roads were eerily empty, and the few robots they encountered were just as Nalim had described – dead.

They arrived at a tall hexagonal tower much like countless others in the city. The little robot led them up several flights of stairs and into a clean white room, where it scurried to the feet of a tall, silver robot, roughly humanoid in shape. Actually, it looked more human than any robot Nalim had ever seen (excepting Ayda, of course) and he found himself vaguely unsettled by its expression of open curiosity.

"Nalim. So you are the one who rescued our Ayda," it said in a pleasant, almost human, voice. "Allow me to express my profound gratitude. She is more precious to us than you can imagine."

"You aren't the only ones who care about her," replied Tirrax.

"Of course," said the robot, sounding slightly surprised.

"Where is she?" Nalim asked.

"Resting," said the robot. "I have nearly completed reconstructive surgery on her face and torso. Her outer, organic layer heals itself naturally, so I've simply applied mechanisms to speed that regeneration. Her underlying machinery is relatively undamaged, apart from one place in her throat, which I can repair. As to her leg, that will take a little longer, as I will have to obtain a replacement from a laboratory across the city – and then, of course, physically attach it. Still, she should be repaired and functional in a day or two."

"Thank you," said Nalim, stunned.

"Thank you so much," Tirrax put in. "I don't even know your name."

"Yodin," said the robot. "And you must be Tirrax. We've heard about you, also," it added, a little less warmly.

If Tirrax noticed the unspoken accusation, he gave no sign. "How is it that you're functioning when the rest of the city is dead?" he said.

"Excuse me," interrupted Nalim. "I'd like to see Ayda now. Alone," he added, glancing at Tirrax.

"Of course," said Yodin.

In the next room, lying in bed half-covered by a white sheet, was the most wonderful sight he had ever seen. Yodin left and shut the door, leaving the two of them alone. Nalim pulled up a chair and sat beside her, his gaze never leaving her face.

"Ayda," he whispered.

She opened her eyes slowly, and when she saw him, her smile was like living sunlight.

"Hi," she said quietly, her voice still weak.

He could not believe how well she looked; apart from a little redness, her face was already completely healed. "How are you feeling?"

She took a deep breath. "Much better. Thanks to you." She pulled her hand out from under the sheet, and he held it. Her fingers squeezed back feebly. "I'm still banged up around my chest and stomach, but it's healing." She closed her eyes again. "I missed you so much, Nalim."

"I missed you too. I was so afraid..."

"I know." Her eyes closed again. "It's safe now. The seed, and the code to unlock it. There will be a second Core, Nalim."

"That's fantastic."

"Did the starbird...heal you?"

"Yeah. I'm going to be fine."

She smiled. "That's fantastic."

When she didn't speak again for a little while, he said, "Are you okay?"

She nodded weakly, not opening her eyes. "Just a little tired..."

"Go to sleep, then. I'll be right here."

"Don't...leave me..."

"I won't," he promised.

He watched her sleep for a few minutes, then noticed he was tired himself. Suddenly he realized he had not slept at all for the past two nights, and a wave of exhaustion swept over him; less than a minute later, he laid his head by her shoulder and began snoring softly.

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In the next room, Tirrax stared thoughtfully at the closed door. He realized Yodin had

spoken and pulled his eyes away with an effort. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I said, the robots in the city aren't dead."

That got his attention. "Nalim said the virus must have killed them all."

"No. Romus infected a few with the virus, but the Core cut them from the network so it wouldn't spread. Later, when the Core itself became infected, he did the only thing he could do to save us – he removed himself from the network, too. Since every robot in the city connects to the network through the Core, we were all very abruptly alone. It's never happened before; our minds proved unable to handle the stress, and we shut down."

"But not you."

Yodin regarded him carefully. "You don't know, do you? But no, I suppose you wouldn't...Ayda has unlocked the seed. The new Core is growing inside of her right now." Yodin saw Tirrax's expression and held up a hand. "Not physically. It's only software. But the program is developing in her mind, growing toward self-awareness, becoming the heart of a new central network."

"Then you...?"

"I shut down like all the others, but I was lucky enough to be standing very near the place where Ayda lay. She dragged herself over to where I was – I do not know how she found the strength – and connected my mind to the nascent Core. Once I was active again, I was able to bring her here." He made a noise that sounded remarkably like a sigh. "It has not been easy treating her. I am not a doctor, and I am not accustomed to having to do research to learn new information. Normally I simply reach into the network for any experience I need to accomplish a task. This new network consists only of myself, Ayda, and the messenger droid I sent you; it is very small. Still," he added, "it is much better than having no Core at all."

Tirrax was a moment in digesting all this new information. Finally he said: "But why didn't Ayda shut down when the Core cut itself off?"

"She was made to leave the city, so the Core designed her to function without a connection to the network." Yodin shook his head. "Such a lonely life she leads. I cannot imagine how it must feel to be cut off from loved ones."

Tirrax thought he had a pretty good idea how it felt.

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Clephe still couldn't believe they hadn't killed her.

She had watched in awe and terror as the fires consumed Eremis, and she remembered thinking: it's finally done. He is dead, and I will die also, and it is finally done. It had not been a happy thought – not pleasure – but it had meant the end of pain, and she had embraced it. She'd seen Jillian draw her gun, and she'd been ready for death.

But instead of shooting her, Jillian had shot the astronomer. And now it was *his* body she saw in her mind, thin and frail, falling to the floor in slow motion, and it was *his* face that haunted her dreams next to Faudian's. That isn't fair, she thought, I didn't kill him – and yet she could never quite convince herself of that.

And then Jillian had *looked* at her, just looked, and then turned away and holstered her gun. And they hadn't killed her. They took her away to a little room in a prison where she sat by herself, and stared at the walls, and kept right on living.

You have the wrong person, she thought furiously. It's supposed to be the astronomer locked up in here, and *me* lying dead on the floor. You shot the wrong one!

The room was a rectangle, four meters long by three meters wide by three meters tall; the

walls and the floor and the ceiling were absolutely solid white, without even the edges of tiles to break the terrible purity. The outline of a door was barely visible on one wall, but there was no knob and no visible hinges – locked, of course. Overhead a flat fluorescent light clung to the ceiling. That was it – nothing else. No cot or mattress to sleep on. Not even a toilet – she’d been forced to urinate on the floor in one corner of the room, and it stank.

Worst of all, there was absolutely no way to tell time. There was no clock in the room, and they had brought her no meals. In fact, the door had not opened once since they’d put her in the cell – she had not seen a single human face. Clephe was getting lonely, and hungry, and thirsty – but she thought she could’ve handled all that if only someone would *tell her what time it was*. She had slept once, briefly, so she knew at least a few hours had elapsed, but she could not say whether her time in the cell was closer to twelve hours or two days.

Much as she felt she deserved death, she did not want it to end like this: dying of thirst in an empty room, alone, stinking of urine. The thought produced a vision of cold terror which, once summoned, could not be erased.

After a while she began talking to break the silence. She held conversations with herself, recited poetry, and complained about the terrible stench or how hungry she was. At first this seemed to help, but eventually her rambling sounded crazy even to her own ears, and she stopped – and the awful silence returned.

Clephe was intelligent enough to understand what they were doing to her. The pristine white and the unwavering light and the total silence – these were meant to suggest the perfection of the Law, to make her feel like a blotch on the glorious order. Mental conditioning. Whether this was part of her rehabilitation, or merely an ironic way to die, she didn’t know; all she knew was that she wanted out. Desperately, more than anything in her life, she wanted the door to open, to

reveal some hint that a world still existed outside the hateful white room.

And then, amazingly, the door *did* open.

A figure entered, robed entirely in white, carrying a tray of food and water. Clephe glanced past, out the doorway, but she saw nothing but a dim hallway. The door shut again. The figure's robe covered its entire body, the hood hanging low and obscuring its face. Clephe guessed it was male by the general shape, but she wasn't sure. He did not speak. He set the tray on the floor beside her and retreated to the far corner of the room, where he stood facing her, unmoving.

"Thank you," said Clephe, but the man in white made no response.

She drained the glass of water eagerly, then turned her attention to the food – a bowl of lukewarm oatmeal. There were no utensils, but she was too hungry to care. She lifted the bowl to her lips and downed it all, then used her fingers to extract the last bits of sustenance from the meal. Nothing had tasted so good to her in a long time.

And still the man in white stood in the corner, faceless and motionless. She had thought perhaps he would take her tray again once she was finished, but he did not. "I'm done," she announced – thinking that perhaps, with his hood so low over his eyes, he could not see her. But still he did not move.

She had thought a visitor would comfort her, but this strange intruder was more frightening than comforting. Why wouldn't he say anything? He was more like an extension of the room than a real person – a fixture. Perhaps, like the room itself, he was meant as a model for her – a symbol of someone living in harmony with the Law. I will never be like you, she thought savagely, vowing to ignore him.

But she sat, and thought to herself, and still he stood, and time passed – and *he would not leave*. Her will crumbled. She was too alone to think of him as a mere symbol – she needed a

human being. So she spoke to him.

"Hello," she began. "I'm Clephe. You probably already knew that. What's your name?"

No answer.

"Do you know how long I've been in this place?"

No answer.

"Thank you again for the food. I was getting very hungry." Nothing. "Listen, I know there are probably certain things you're not allowed to talk about, but I'm getting crazy sitting here by myself. Can we just talk for a little while? Please?"

No answer.

She leapt to her feet. "*Why won't you answer me?*" She stormed over to within a few centimeters of him. "Say something, or do something, or leave! Why are you just *standing* there? Huh? *Answer me!*" She threw back his hood to reveal his face.

It was Eremis.

She stumbled backward, groping for the walls to steady herself. "No," she said, "it's not possible. I watched you die." She closed her eyes and took a breath. "You're not real. I've been in this damned room for too long, they didn't feed me, and I'm hallucinating..."

"Very good," said Eremis, in his dry, indifferent voice. "I am a hallucination. A ghost, produced by your mind, nothing more."

She looked up in surprise.

"I *killed* you," she said finally.

"Do the people expect a miracle? I will oblige them. Birth, life, death, fire, and rebirth. It's a compelling symbol, don't you think?"

"Murdering bastard," she breathed. "The mask. It was never you under the Austrolach at



all. You made one of your deluded peons wear that mask and die for you. Murdering *bastard!*"

"Such tenuous faith," he said. "And even if it were true, *I* wasn't the one who killed him." He spread his arms benevolently. "Clephe, you poor, confused little girl. Did you truly believe you could hide your plans from me?"

"I know," she said acidly. "Jillian spied for you."

"*Jillian*," he said with contempt. "Jillian is a pawn. Everyone is a pawn."

"Niadi – "

"I *created* Niadi!" he roared. "I wanted an outlet for the city's revolutionaries, a pet project to keep them busy, easy to monitor, easy to control! And I whispered in Miquim's ear, and behold! Scourge of the city! Beacon of freedom! The great Niadi!" He saw the shock on her face and laughed. "Don't you see, Clephe? I *know* you. I knew you would try to kill me before *you* did. There are no secrets. I see everything. I know *everything*."

"Are you trying to impress me?"

"I want you to understand. Miquim, Taphis, Mernis, Grynnt – all useless. All dead. And I could have had you dead too, if I chose. But I didn't. I let you live, because you are not like them. You are intelligent, and courageous, and a traitor, and a killer – a terribly dangerous combination. You drift toward Chaos. But Chaos does not have you yet. You may yet be saved, Clephe."

She slapped him full across the face, open-handed. The sharp *crack* was even more satisfying than she'd imagined, and she slapped him again, harder. "For Nalim," she snapped.

He did not even blink.

"I know you are angry," he said, maddeningly calm. "If hitting me brings you peace, then it is good. But believe me when I tell you that I am not defenseless; nor am I alone. You will not be rid of me by way of violence." She did not answer, so he continued. "As I was saying. You may

have forgotten, but there is still a world outside this door, and it is very much alive. It burns. It aches for rebirth. Soon, I will give it what it needs."

"Do they know you're still alive?"

"Not yet." He studied her. "A deluge is coming. I hope you are ready."

She laughed. "In case you hadn't noticed, I can't even leave this *room*."

"You will," he answered. "And when you do, remember what I've told you. Can you do that?"

"Yeah. I'll do that."

"Spirit and peace, Clephe."

Eremis half-opened the door, then stopped. "And Clephe," he added, almost as an afterthought. "I wasn't the one who killed Nalim."

## Chapter 34

Koriam set the agriculture report on his desk atop a stack of a hundred others, leaned back in his chair, and sighed. Somehow, when he had dreamed of sitting on the Directorate thirty years ago, he hadn't imagined it would be like this. He seemed to remember visions of a job that involved more glorious leadership, more beautiful women...and a great deal less paperwork. Where had those visions gone, and what was he doing sitting behind a *desk*?

The events of the past week weighed heavy on his mind. First was Niev – Niev, who had made a *career* of doing nothing, then turned himself into a citywide celebrity almost overnight. The people treated him like a savior; the army treated him like a god. And that was *before* the metal monster somehow escaped, sending all of Manorviter into a panic that the murders would start again. That fear, of course, became a self-fulfilling prophecy as the city's human murderers grew

bolder, knowing their crimes would be blamed on the monster. And the people cried out for Niev, demanding to know where he was, when he would be returning to save them again. As if *he* knew what that madman was doing. With any luck, Niev's corpse was rotting somewhere in the Ashlands by now, and the Directorate would regain some measure of control as the people began to realize he wasn't coming back.

Except...

A little over two days ago, just after dawn, a terrible rumbling sound had awakened the city – distant, but powerful, like a mountain crumbling. The Directorate had assured the people it was merely a volcano erupting somewhere in the Ashlands, as they were wont to do every few years, but they were certain it was a sign that Niev had won some glorious victory over the enemy.

Koriam didn't know what to believe.

A growing crowd of people on the street below attracted his attention, and he hurried outside to see what the commotion was about. He pushed through the mass of humanity, making his way slowly downstream, trying futilely to look over the heads of the crowd and catch a glimpse of their goal.

In the end, he heard it before he saw it.

*No.*

"...wandered all alone in the arid wasteland..."

Niev's voice!

"...struggling without food or water, attacked at every turn by monstrous killers, ravenous for human blood. Many times I thought of giving up, returning in shame. But every time I felt myself in the grip of fear, or thirst, or hunger, or death, I thought: never! Manorviter needs me, and I will never surrender! My dear wife, and the sixteen others who were brutally murdered here, shall

not have died in vain!"

It was impossible – did he really expect them to believe he had made the journey north, conquered an entire city, and come back *already*? Yet their frenzied cheers embraced his every word. Manorviter was a city hungry for glory, for the old days, when grand alliances and grander battles had won the day. He had to stem the tide before it was too late. Koriām pushed slowly toward the sound of Niev's voice.

"And then I saw it: the black city! Soaring towers! Impenetrable walls, ten meters thick and fifty high! Battlements crawling with monsters, some ten times larger than the one that attacked us! And do you know what I did when I came to this fortress, this monolithic bastion of evil?

"I stepped forward, and I cried: 'Surrender, in the name of Manorviter, or let justice be done upon you!' And they sat behind their great walls, and laughed at me. But I knew my cause was just, and I was not afraid. So I called out to the heavens, and lightning tore at the sky, and a great volcano rose up in the heart of their invincible city, and shattered the very earth in its fires. And behold, I did battle with their champion, and I emerged victorious! I have brought back its head!"

Koriām was close enough now that he could see barely see Niev, standing high on a packing crate. He was holding up some kind of round metal object with two white spots, like eyes. Its *head*?

"Soon I will send out a small force of men to the north, to verify what I have told you, and to occupy and plunder what remains of that city. I say a *small* force only! The monsters are dead! There are no defenses left!" He waited for the cheering and applause to die down, then continued.

"This will free up the military for more pressing concerns," he said, and the crowd went suddenly quiet.

"If we can conquer an enemy like this, why should we ever be afraid of mere flesh and blood? Why should we huddle inside our walls while winged shadows pass overhead?" Murmurs spread through the multitude. "You know they fly to an island in the south sea, reaping untold rewards, where the waters are too treacherous for ships to reach. You all know the way they spy on us from above. Hiding in their forest. Communing with the mysterious starbird. The kingdom of Mirnor calls itself our friend. I say, if they are so friendly, why don't they share a little with their neighbors?"

Koriam stopped abruptly. War with *Mirnor*? Could it really be true? It was beautiful – too perfect to believe!

Suddenly Koriam felt a great deal more warmth toward the illustrious Niev.

"They think they will keep us forever under their shadow! But they are wrong! And we will show them the power of Manorviter!"

The crowd burst into wild applause once more as Koriam reached the clearing around where Niev stood. Niev saw him and pulled him up onto the crate beside him. "And here is Koriam! Koriam, what says the Directorate to ending the yoke of oppression on our fair city?"

"The Directorate says..." Koriam looked out over the sea of faces and smiled. "The Directorate says it is long overdue."

Let the fat old bureaucrats deal with that. Against the power of this mob they would be utterly helpless.

Like the pulsing of a newborn heart, the chant began: "Manorviter! Manorviter! Manorviter! Manorviter! Manorviter! Manorviter..."

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Marene sat on a chair in her living room playing a computer game. It was an old, simple game, one of her favorites. There was a grid. In the grid were squares: red, green, and blue. The game would specify a color, she eliminated that color from the grid by manipulating squares of the other two colors. It was a nice game: intuitive rules, clear boundaries, not too stressful.

Outside, the city had fallen to Chaos.

Understanding, real understanding, was a terrible thing. It was easy to *see* a person, to look at him from the outside, pretending to know what was inside on the basis of what filtered through the senses. But to *become* that person – to feel and truly know every thought, every memory, every experience, to forcibly destroy the blessed ignorance that shields one soul from another – that was unbearable.

And now the entire city knew Wasmeth in just that way. In a single moment, millions of people had been given one life – one vision – a glimpse into reality too potent to ignore. Marene had seen it with them. The images churned inside her still: a rotting Brotherhood, the betrayal of an innocent friend, and a love for Iriel that defied the limits of language.

By itself, it would have been devastating. Coming in the middle of a failed miracle, it was disastrous.

She had not dared to go to work today, nor even to leave her room. The newscasts said little, but the sparse details formed a dark picture: rioting mobs, rampant looting, a crime spree the likes of which the city had never seen. Active rebellion. And everywhere, on the signs of protestors, written on the walls in graffiti, the words: "Nalim Was Innocent."

Nalim was innocent. After all that time, the wound had finally begun to heal – and now this. Innocent! Her netlink overflowed with unread messages from strangers. She herself hardly knew what to feel. She wanted to believe that somehow, deep down, she had known her husband

hadn't done those terrible things – but she hadn't. Much as she'd grieved, she had never really doubted the proclamations of the Law.

But all of this might have been bearable, if only she had not been so completely alone. Who could she talk to? Her 'friends' from work would never understand. She'd tried calling Clephe but never got an answer. There was no one.

If only Nalim were here.

Daeci had appeared on the viewscreen a few times, lending his guidance to see the city through its "troubled times," but he was too sickly to have much effect. It was Tolmiach, the Minister of the Common Welfare, who emerged as the real voice of reason in their broken city, eloquently calling for a return to calm and sanity. It didn't seem to be working.

And so Marene kept her door locked, and dreamed of happier times, and played her computer game. It was the only thing left.

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When Nalim awoke, the bed was empty. Ayda was gone.

He found Yodin in the next room. "How long have I been asleep?" he asked.

"Approximately twenty hours."

"Twenty hours! Where is she?"

"Ayda is healed. She and Tirrax are in the hydroponics center, the large transparent building half a kilometer south of here."

"What is she doing there?"

Yodin looked up with some surprise. "She has finished healing herself," the robot said, as though it were obvious. "Now she is healing others."

The hydroponics center was a high, clear, trapezoidal building containing row upon row of plastic tanks, each half-filled with water and overgrown with plants. Nalim saw Ayda and approached quietly; Tirrax noticed him and gave a perfunctory nod.

Ayda knelt before a large, black machine whose broad metal claws reminded Nalim of a giant crab. She was speaking in that strange language the robots sometimes used, a rolling, monotonous flow of syllables – almost a chant. Her hands lay on the surface of the machine as though feeling for a heartbeat.

Slowly, like a butterfly shifting warmth into newfound wings, the robot stirred to life. Its eyes opened – all three of them – and it looked down to Ayda with something like curiosity.

"Calutium nesiec stalta," it rumbled.

"Nesiat vume," she replied solemnly, stepping away.

Ayda saw him and beckoned him closer. "Nalim! I want you to meet Gertior, the agricultural caretaker of this district."

"Hello," he said, then glanced back at her. "Can it understand me? I heard it speaking the other language..."

"Not directly, but I understand you, and it receives your message through me." Her eyes fluttered. "Gertior thanks you for saving me."

"It's reading your thoughts?"

Briefly Ayda explained what Yodin had told Tirrax, that the second Core was growing inside her, forming the basis for a new network. "I'm reconnecting them," she said, "and they will spread the network outward. Soon the city will be whole again."

"You're saying...there's another life form living inside your brain?"

"It's strange," she admitted. "I can feel it in me, expanding, probing through my thoughts



and into the rest of the network. It's very nearly conscious, now."

"But...I mean, it won't hurt you, will it? You'll still be...you?"

"I may become...different...over the next few days. Don't worry, it's not permanent. Only until I can find another vessel for it. Then I'll be Ayda again."

She said goodbye to Gertior and continued to her next beneficiary. Nalim could not shake a growing unease at what she had told him. He was not accustomed to thinking of her as a *vessel*.

At the moment, though, there were other concerns.

"Listen," he said, "I learned some things from the starbird. It isn't a rukh at all. It actually came from the stars."

"I know."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I guess it never came up. What else?"

"Well, it has this strange...asexual reproductive system. Every time it dies, its body regenerates into a new starbird with the same memories as the old. In essence, eternal life, except that it *has* to die every so often to keep on living."

"Interesting."

"The starbird said a splinter of its mind has broken off, and that that piece of itself had taken control of Vey when she attacked you. The splinter has no physical existence in itself; it is a creature of pure thought, and can't exist without a host. The starbird said that it has control of a man named Niev in Manorviter, and that Niev was the one behind Romus's sudden attack. He riled up Manorviter against Bystolia and if someone doesn't stop him, he'll destroy everything else he touches. And it looks like that someone is us."

Ayda was silent for a long while. When she spoke, her voice was quiet and tight with

anger. "If this...thing...believes it's destroyed us, we may not be a target again for some time, but Mirnor and the League are in danger. It sounds like our first priorities should be rebuilding our defenses here, and finding out what's going on in the rest of the world."

"How?"

"Ayda and I are busy here, but you could go to Mirnor to see what you can learn," suggested Tirrax.

"*Mirnor*? They've been hunting me ever since I escaped. What should I do, just hand myself over?"

"Remember what I told you about rukhs?" said Ayda. "They bond to one person only, until one of the pair is dead. That rukh carried you as its rider. It will never leave you; and since you're bonded, Mirnor wouldn't dare harm you. Sanctum would be furious." She saw his expression and laughed. "How does it feel to be a demon rider?"

"But if it turns out Niev *is* planning an attack," said Tirrax, "what can we do? We're not exactly in a position to stop an army at the moment."

Ayda glanced at Nalim. "Actually," she said, "with your – permission – I have an idea about that..."

## Chapter 35

Iriel was sitting on her cot when someone down the hall shouted, "They're open!"

The prison erupted into madness as all the prisoners threw open their cell doors and dashed into the hallway, overpowering the few guards and rushing toward the exits. Her cellmate opened the door to their own cell, crowing joyfully. She seized her copy of the Gray Book, ripped out a handful of pages, and cast them into the air, then tossed aside what was left and joined the throng

of criminals in their mass exodus. The torn pages drifted to the floor like abandoned snowflakes.

Iriel remained alone, watching everyone run by outside the bars. Somehow, all the doors had been unlocked. The city must be falling apart for something like this to happen.

Should she escape too?

Well – why not?

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When Clephe heard the soft *click* from the direction of the door, she did not even dare to hope that it was truly unlocked. Carefully, hesitantly – lest any sudden motion destroy this precious miracle – she approached it. Could the nightmare truly be over? Surely not – surely not – and yet –

She slid her fingernails into the crevice between the door and the wall, and it opened under a slight pressure.

Freedom!

The dim beige hallway was empty but for a single middle-aged woman who blanched when she saw Clephe. She had a confused, bureaucratic look about her – not a guard. Not a threat.

"Don't move," Clephe snapped as the woman appeared about to run. She stopped and stared, wide-eyed, quivering with terror. "What's your name?"

"Dela," she squeaked.

"Do you know who I am, Dela?"

A brief, convulsive nod.

"I could snap your neck like a twig, Dela. Do you know that?" She did. "Where's all my stuff? My old clothes? My gun?"

"Right...it's right in there," the woman said, pointing to a room down the hall on the left. Clephe entered, rummaged through a few drawers, and found her gun.

The hall quickly joined the rest of the prison complex, and from there it was a simple matter getting out – she just followed the river of criminals. There were no guards in sight. The push of humanity surged toward the exits, shoving and shouting its way to freedom. Within minutes she was out the doors and passing the gate that led back into the real world of the city.

It was not until she was completely free of the compound that she wondered what to do next. Where could she go? There was nowhere to run. She had escaped a smaller prison only to enter a larger one.

"Hello, Clephe."

She turned and saw Tarsial a few meters away, grinning wildly, his hands folded in front of him. A manic glint lit his eyes, but he did not move, only stood and stared.

She drew her gun and aimed it at his face. "Hello, Tarsial."

"Love is a remarkable thing, isn't it, Clephe?"

"Another step and I'll have your brains on the concrete a meter from your body."

"I want you to know, I did a lot of thinking while I was locked away in prison. I thought about your kisses, your soft, warm, wonderful kisses, and I thought about what you told me. You lied to me, Clephe, and that hurt, but I forgave you. I thought about it a lot, and I forgave you."

"Stay back."

"Because you see, I had a revelation. I was staring at the ceiling, dreaming of the taste of your lips, and suddenly it came to me. Do you want to know what it was?"

He's lost it, she thought wildly. He's really gone completely insane.

"I realized the great lie of our time, Clephe." He raised his arm theatrically. "The great lie is

that love must flow in two directions. We are obsessed with whether our beloved returns our love. And I thought: why should that be? Why does it matter? If I love someone, isn't that enough?"

"I'm not afraid to kill you," she lied.

He chuckled. "You still don't understand, but I'll forgive that also. You see, I don't care anymore whether you love me or not. It doesn't matter. *I love you*, and I *will* have you, no matter what."

He took a step forward.

"I said don't come any closer!" she snapped.

Another step.

Mentally she steeled herself to fire if he took one more step. She knew she could never kill anyone again – not after Faudian and the astronomer and the man in the mask and Miquim and all the rest – but she could shoot his leg, injure him long enough to get away. You take one more step, she thought, and I shoot.

He did.

She fired at his right leg, just above the knee, and he fell.

And didn't move.

Dead.

And Clephe examined her gun closely for the first time, a terrible weight forming in the pit of her stomach. She must have been distracted, must have made a mistake, because the weapon she now held in her hands was not a projectile gun. It was her cardiac pistol – the same one she had used on Faudian.

*Dead.*

She stood over his body, looking down, and she felt no relief, no triumph, no satisfaction –

only the realization that she had done it yet again.

Clephe tore her eyes from the corpse and ran wildly, tears gleaming, no destination in mind.

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The video struck like a pillar of lightning in the midst of the newscast, sending shockwaves through the city. It was Eremis, of course – dressed simply in white and gold, standing alone in front of a bookcase. He seemed sad, or tired perhaps; the lines on his aging face were more pronounced than usual. For the first few seconds he did not speak at all, knowing that his presence alone would hold the city's attention. When he did speak, his voice was faint, demanding quiet from his audience.

"All this," he said, "from a troubled mind and a burnt body. A thousand years of blessings, undone in five minutes of uncertainty." He shook his head, a barely perceptible motion. "What will become of so tenuous a faith?"

## Chapter 36

The short, white-haired servant bowed stiffly. "His Majesty will see you in his study," he said with an air of faint surprise. "This way, sir."

Nalim marveled at the palace as they entered – it was so different from anything he'd seen in Larlam. There, the village had sprung up almost symbiotically with the forest, seamless and natural. The royal palace, by contrast, delighted in setting itself apart from the trees; a wide, grassy clearing separated the edifice from the surrounding woods. Even so, it looked rustic compared with the lavish extravagance of Manorviter's inner city. Thick black bark clung to the two massive

boles that formed the palace's main entrance.

He mostly ignored his guide's unsolicited verbal tour, explaining the significance of this arched hallway or that framed scrap of parchment. His thoughts were elsewhere. Ayda's assurances he would not be harmed were little comfort to him here, alone and defenseless in the seat of Mirnor's power. What would happen, he wondered, if this man plucked out a dagger and killed me, right now? Who would know? Who, besides Ayda, would care?

"This is His Majesty's study," the servant announced. "His Majesty awaits you inside." He bowed again, then added less formally: "I trust you are aware of the great honor His Majesty does you by agreeing to this *unexpected* audience?"

The tip of Nalim's lip curled into what might have been a smile. "Do you know who I am?"

The man stiffened. "I am sure I have *no* idea."

The king's study was smaller than Nalim expected, consisting of little more than a cluttered desk, several tall bookshelves, and a handful of chairs. The king himself remained seated as he entered, looking him over with a combination of curiosity and amusement. He wore no crown, and his clothing seemed scarcely more formal than that of his messengers, except that a faceted emerald hung from his neck on a sterling chain. He had messy brown hair and a fat, childish face that invited immediate trust. Nalim, for his part, had given up on *trust*.

"You must be Nalim," said the king. "Please. Sit. I don't know what nonsense they told you about kneeling and scraping, but by all means dispense with it now. My head aches enough without it. Sit, sit!"

Nalim sat.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" the king said.

"Should I?"

"We never met. My name is Sivete. I was the reeve of Larlam when Vey brought you to us. It was my order that kept you locked in a cell, and it was by my command that Rel linked to your mind. What do you say to that?"

Nalim rejected the first few responses that came to mind and settled on an answer that was both diplomatic and honest. "I am not here for vengeance."

"Well said," Sivete replied, nodding thoughtfully. "Actually, you've already helped me more than you know. I have you to thank for my meteoric rise to power. When the previous king learned of your escape, he was certain it was nothing more than a ploy on my part to keep you for myself, while I myself was convinced that the king had arranged your escape so his own searchers could 'discover' you. When that didn't happen, I realized the truth; but the king grew ever more insistent. Then, when Rel also disappeared a short time later, it only heightened his fury. Before long, he was threatening military action.

"He was already known for overstepping himself, and this last action was a step too far. The other reeves rallied behind me, and we called for a vote of resignation, which passed almost unanimously. And the rest...well." Sivete smiled unhappily. "The rest has been an exercise in drudgery. What, I ask you, is worse than being king?"

"Banishment?" Nalim suggested.

The smile vanished. "Of course."

"Still, if not for Vey, I'd be a skeleton in the wilderness by now. There's blame and gratitude here for all; as I said, I am not here to wallow in the past, especially when the present is so volatile."

"Of course," the king said again. "Perhaps you should explain why you *are* here."

Nalim leaned forward in his chair. "What do you know about the political climate in



Manorviter right now?"

The king frowned. "It is changing," he said cautiously.

Nalim decided on a slight gamble. "They're moving toward war, aren't they?"

Sivete considered, then nodded slowly. "It's been simmering for decades, but this new dynamo they've found, this Niev, has them clamoring for arms. Our intelligence suggests their assault will come in no more than a week or two."

"And will you be ready?"

"You spoke of an alliance?" the king prompted, avoiding the question.

"I didn't say 'alliance.' I said I can help you. Even if you manage to repel the invasion, it will be a long, bloody struggle. We have a plan that might avert such a struggle, if you're willing to cooperate."

"Who is this *we* you keep mentioning?"

"Myself and others. Irrelevant. All I need is for you to do your part; don't worry, it's incredibly simple." He fished in his pocket and extracted a small sheet of paper, which he handed to the king.

Sivete unfolded it and read it carefully several times. He glanced up suspiciously. "What is this?"

"A message. As soon as Manorviter's army mobilizes, send it to the Directorate, and be sure they read it."

"And then?"

"Go on about your defenses, and we will do the rest."

"I confess, this strategy of yours is not reassuring."

"I am not here to reassure you, your Majesty. I am here to prevent a war. It is not necessary

that you trust me. Only deliver the message, and you will have lost nothing. Why not?"

The king leaned back in his chair and rubbed his temples. "You are doing nothing for my headaches, I assure you. Suppose I do this thing, and you and your *others* miraculously come to our rescue. Why such charity? What do you owe to a nation that has caused you such pain?"

"I don't *owe* you anything," Nalim said slowly – deliberately. "But it takes no great imagination to realize Niev will not stop with Mirnor. Sanctum will be next, and the League, and my home, and then perhaps even my...friends...may be in danger. I do not relish the thought of the entire world under a single yoke."

Sivete sighed. "You must know I believe none of this."

"Will you deliver the message?"

"Why not?" he said finally. "It is quite harmless."

"Good." Nalim rose and took a step toward the exit.

"On one condition," said Sivete. "Vey is dead, Nalim. She was murdered while searching for you in the streets of Manorviter." The words went cold. "How did she die, Nalim?"

Nalim's mind raced. "I...I don't who killed her." Technically, it was true; Vey had been dead long before Ayda stabbed her, and the creature that killed her could have been in anyone's body. "I haven't seen her since leaving Larlam."

"If you wanted revenge for bonding you to Rel, you should have come after me, not her!" he snapped, suddenly furious. "She was innocent! She saved your life!"

"I said I didn't kill her."

"Give me one reason to believe that."

"Because I am Rel, and Rel is me. That was the point of sending him, wasn't it?" Nalim tapped his skull. "I have his memories. All of them. Flying. Blindness. A nineteen-year-old girl

named Vey with pretty red hair. I remember holding his baby daughter – *my* daughter – listening to her cry and wondering what she looked like. She grew up, and I remember hearing she was dead somewhere off in Manorviter, wondering who would take care of my grandson. And I remember searching, all my life, for a way to bring that girl back to me...but I never could. It was just me and Vey, and I couldn't even see Vey.

"Rel loved her, your Majesty. And I loved her, too."

Sivete watched him a while and finally gave a slow, understanding nod. "I like you, Nalim," he said. "And I think I might even believe you. About that much, anyway. Which reminds me..." He rummaged under his desk and found what he was looking for. "I believe this is yours."

He handed him his sunblade.

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Tolmiach passed through the highest floor of the First Library like a hurricane, leaving surprised patrons gaping in his wake. Arriving at the Lord Master Librarian's chambers, he thrust open the doors and turned the full intensity of his gaze on Eremis – who, at the moment, was speaking with a young man dressed in librarian's robes.

The young man looked back and forth between Minister and Lord. "I'll come back later?" he offered. Eremis dismissed him with the barest of nods.

"Who did you get to wear the mask for you?" Tolmiach demanded.

"I do not understand you."

"You don't...!" Tolmiach inhaled deeply and regained control of his temper. "And I suppose you expect the entire city to believe in this...this *miracle*?"

"Those who have faith will believe."

"And the rest? Dammit, Eremis, you might've warned me before you magically reappeared! Have you looked outside lately? A mob tore down Thiowill's statue in the main square. Rampant looting has closed down all the markets. Half the people in the city are too scared to go to work, and production has ground to a virtual standstill. And that was *before* your...*miracle!* Now, with criminals running loose on the streets..." He ran a hand through his disheveled hair. "This city is falling apart, Eremis, and I don't know what to do!"

"Statues can be rebuilt," said Eremis. "It is the people who matter."

"Don't you *get* it?" roared Tolmiach. "The *people* don't believe in you anymore! The way they see it, the Law has failed them on every level! Should I spell it out for you?" He ticked off points on his fingers. "One. They received Wasmeth's memories, just as I did, and most of them are convinced that Nalim was banished unfairly and Wasmeth is some kind of glorious martyr. Two. They witnessed a failed miracle, then learned that *you* lacked even the courage to perform that miracle yourself. Three. The Brotherhood is completely unable to cope with the ensuing madness, nor even to prevent an entire prison complex from simultaneously releasing all its inmates. We're *still* trying to figure that out! The point is, they have lost their faith, and *you* don't even seem to care!"

"The city was weak," Eremis said quietly.

A long, electric silence shuddered in the air. Tolmiach couldn't speak.

"A faith so insubstantial as to crumble under the slightest pressure is no faith at all. Do not mourn the garbage as it is cast aside, Tolmiach. I will burn down the weak and the insubstantial, and on the foundation that remains, I will rebuild. And in the end, we will be stronger even than the days of Thiowill. *That* is your terrifying vision."

Tolmiach's legs failed, and he lowered himself into one of the chairs. "You're talking

about a holy war."

"Call it what you wish."

"You really are insane. I've heard it from others, but I never believed it until now. You really are insane!"

"Are we quite finished?"

A growing helplessness washed over Tolmiach as he saw his universe spiraling out of control and realized, for the first time, that there was nothing he could do to prevent it. "You're not immortal," he said desperately. "I can stop you!"

"Yes, another martyr will alleviate the tensions," Eremis said dryly. He looked up – and for one passing moment, his face hinted at compassion. "No one said it would be easy, Tolmiach. If it were easy, I would have done it long ago. But it must be done. You do see that, don't you?"

And Tolmiach could get no more out of him than that.

He stumbled out of the office, half-blind with rage and terror, to tell the Potentate of the monster he had uncovered, wondering dimly what good it could possibly do.

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"What did he say?" Tirrax asked, his face a mask of apprehension in the chilly darkness.

"He said he would do it," Nalim replied. "Now we just have to hold up our end of the bargain. Where's Ayda?"

"Back in her room with Yodin, resting. Nalim...she's changed. She isn't – she isn't herself anymore."

Well – he'd known it would happen. There was nothing left but to go see.

He came to the room where Yodin had taken Ayda originally, and he found them both

inside, standing by the rumpled bed. Yodin's sharp, metallic face was as unreadable as ever. Ayda looked at him blankly. There was no recognition in her eyes.

"Ayda," he said. She made no response; he glanced at Yodin. "How is she?"

"The Core is slowly taking control of her consciousness. I believe Ayda is safe underneath, but she cannot manifest her presence."

"How much longer will she be like this?"

"It will only get worse. A new host must be found for the Core, or eventually nothing will remain of her original mind."

"So? Where can we find a host?"

"Many machines in this city are capable of performing that function. Several have already volunteered for the honor."

Nalim gestured impatiently. "Well?"

Ayda ran to him suddenly, then stopped, and she put her fingers to his chin, touching him lightly. "Your name is Nalim," she said. "Name is Nalim. Nalim name." Her voice was the same, and yet different – it had a strange halting quality, as though she had not quite figured out which movements of her tongue produced which sounds.

But it was *her*.

He placed his hand over hers, maintaining the contact as she explored the rest of his face: his nose, his cheeks, his hair, his eyes, his lips. "It's me," he whispered. "Do you remember me, Ayda?"

Her hand retreated, then went to her own face, as though verifying that she possessed the same features. Her eyes wandered, never settling. Finally her hand came to rest on her earlobe, and she nodded, as though some truth had been confirmed. "Nalim," she said again.

He looked to Yodin. "Well?" he said again.

"She isn't ready yet."

"What does that mean?"

"The Core is not mature enough."

Nalim waited, but no further explanation was forthcoming. "Mature enough for *what*? It's a computer program, a file. Why can't you transfer it now?" No answer. "Yodin!"

Ayda's voice cut through their conversation abruptly: "Eight nine seven nine three two three eight four six two six four..."

"It is young and fragile," Yodin said finally. "The shock of adapting to a new host might destroy or damage it. We dare not risk it."

"But we can risk her?" he said; but there was no spite in it. Only fear.

He drew her close and stroked her hair down over her neck, while whatever remained of Ayda recited digits into his shoulder, eyelids fluttering like restless dragonflies.

## Chapter 37

The newscasts had stopped and the viewscreen hung dead and sullen in the living room, and that was worst of all. The pleasant lies, feeble though they were, had offered some level of comfort: it meant someone was still alive who cared enough to broadcast the lies, and that was an assurance she'd desperately needed.

Marene was becoming very frightened.

The trick, she'd realized, was not to let herself *know* she was frightened. As long as she could just not think about it, letting the fear lie quietly in her subconscious, it was all right. If ever she stopped to really think about the depth of the terror, the madness that had taken her clockwork

life –

No. She was doing it again. Don't think.

Still, the facts were there, hovering just beyond the radius of her concentration. The power was off, now, more often than not. Much of the food in the refrigerator had spoiled. Of the nonperishable food, little remained. She had enough for another day, maybe two – beyond that, she could hold out for perhaps three or four more days. And then she would have to leave the –

*No.*

That would not happen – Marene felt calm returning, slowly. She'd filled every empty container in the apartment with water, in case that, too, disappeared. She should be all right for a while. And once the food and water ran out, she would simply go outside, and everything there would be as she'd remembered it, before the Solstice, before Wasmeth, before Nalim had left.

I am no longer a person, she thought dully. I am the lack of a person. My existence is defined by Nalim's absence. It was not true, but she found the idea bizarrely comforting, and she clung to it.

The doorbell chimed, a rolling, melodious chirp that startled her from her reverie. It wasn't the first time, but she dared not open the door for anyone. The world outside did not exist; so long as she believed that, she was safe.

A voice outside: "Open up!" Then: "I know you're in there, Marene. No one's going to hurt you. You must be frightened, but the Law will protect you. Open the door." A man's voice, strong and insistent. The chirps turned to knocks, and then after a pause the door opened.

He was dressed all in gray, and he wore a silver badge in the shape of a phoenix pinned to his shirt. His smile was reassuring and compassionate, but somehow not warm. "Marene," he said.

She looked up dumbly.



"It's all right," he said. "I'm with the Brotherhood. Do you love the Law, Marene?"

"Yes."

"Of course," he replied. "It isn't safe to be here, Marene. A great storm approaches. All who still fear the Law are seeking refuge together in shelters the Brotherhood has prepared. Follow me. You will be safe. Can you do that? Can you follow me to shelter?"

She nodded, and he led her into the terrible world outside.

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Iriel drifted ghostlike through the not-yet-dawn of the marketplace – or what remained of it. To her left, the charred skeletons of shops lined her path. She remembered them from her past life; that pile of ashes had been a bakery, that blackened husk marked the spot where she went to buy shoes from the deaf old man...

Something crunched underfoot. She plucked a shard of green glass from the sole of her shoe. Glass was everywhere – empty bottles and shattered window panes. It seemed to be the only thing there was no shortage of. Wasn't there any food left *anywhere*?

A girl lay over the red bricks, blond hair tangled with dust and sweat. A nasty-looking gash, partially congealed, ran over her cheek and across her mouth. She was fourteen, if that. Iriel feared she was dead – but as she approached, the girl rose and sprinted away, heedless of assurances.

Iriel noticed a long shadow in front of her that was not her own, and she spun around to find herself staring down the barrel of a Brotherhood projectile gun. The man wielding it was tall, bald, and dressed in gray; a silver phoenix was pinned to his robe.

"Do you love the Law?" he asked.

"Of course," she said, swallowing the sudden lump that had formed in her throat.

"Of course," he mocked. "Betraying your loving husband? Breaking out of prison? Snickering around like a greasy little rat, scrounging for crumbs." Something that was not a smile twisted his cracked and pallid lips. "I could send you back as a toy for Eremis, huh? Not that he'd appreciate it, the bony old buzzard. Might be he'd execute you proper, to put the fear into the others, huh? A rope around the neck – " he drew the barrel of the gun over his own throat, demonstrating, " – or maybe something a little more fun."

"Please – " she began.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "I wasn't finished, was I? Now, I was saying, we *could* do that. Or, I could a bullet through those pretty eyes, right now, and who would ever complain? I guess it depends, huh? Are you honest?" He pushed the end of the weapon hard against her forehead, and she grimaced as she felt the cold steel bite into her skin. "Open your mouth," he commanded.

Her eyes searched him questioningly, wide with terror, and that seemed to enrage him even more. "Is it confusing? Is it complicated? Open your *mouth!*"

Slowly, she obeyed, and he shoved the gun inside, pointing the end of it upward, toward her brain. The metal was bitter on her tongue – she repressed a terrible urge to swallow.

"Now tell me again, and this time, *think*," he said, with agonizing slowness, "do you love the Law?"

What could she say? Did he *want* her to say no? And yet, there was only one answer – could only *be* one answer to this question –

In the end, she nodded, her teeth clacking against the gun at the careful motion.

"Ratty little witch," he whispered. A gunshot sounded.

By the time she realized it was not *his* gun that had fired, her heart had nearly torn itself

from her chest – and the miserable creature in gray lay at her feet, austere uniform punctuated by a small but growing patch of crimson. Her eyes followed the invisible path of the bullet and found its origin ten meters away: a stocky man of medium height, thick brown beard rolling over his upper lip and down his chin.

"Are you all right?" he called, running to her. It was all she could do to nod.

"Is he dead?" she whispered.

The bearded man unloaded four more shots into him, making her jump. "He is now."

"Thank you," she managed.

He seized her wrist and dragged her into one of the abandoned shops, out of sight of the main thoroughfare. "You can't be out like this," he hissed. "Everyone in the city recognizes you. The Brotherhood is combing the streets with those Silver Phoenix men, rounding up everyone into special camps to the east, but if they catch you, likely they'll do just what he said – make an example."

"I was only in prison for – "

"You're a symbol," he interrupted. "To them, a symbol of selfishness and treason. But to us – Wasmeth loved you, more than anything, and we all felt it. We all saw you the way *he* saw you. You weren't afraid to do what you had to do, no matter what anyone said. We all respect that."

"Who is this *we*?"

"The city is fracturing, splitting in half. Eremis is trying to separate the sheep from the wolves, and then destroy the wolves. A lot of his enemies are just what he says – murderers, looters, people trying to take advantage of a lapse in authority. But some of us are looking for something else – freedom. A chance to think what we want to think. You know Nalim's death, and your husband's, were crimes committed by the state."

She hugged herself and shivered. "I can't go back home. There's no food anywhere."

"We have food, and we can keep you safe. So many people who want to meet you. Will you follow me?"

In the end, she decided she would.

Where else could she go?

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The gray men with the Silver Phoenixes searched the city, gathering their flock into their bastions on the eastern side, to protect them from their enemies to the west. Some were evil, power-hungry, but most were only following the Law: feeding the hungry, sheltering the lost, comforting the lonely. They prepared tinder in expectation of the great consuming fire to come.

The gray men with the Silver Phoenixes found many of the city's children. They found Marene; they found Iriel; they found Essel, and Shansia her granddaughter. But in all the time they searched, they never found Clephe, nor came to her apartment, nor pursued her in the dark places where she sometimes wandered.

And she noticed this; and at first she was perplexed, and then grateful. But she did not understand.

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It was early morning, and Nalim and Tirrax slept somewhere on the level below. Yodin stood in a kind of trance, his mind skipping from one contact to the next over the universal network, seeking information – seeking comfort. Nearby, Ayda waited in a different sort of trance – dumbstruck, eyes empty, lips moving silently. A child tugging experimentally on the strings of a

marionette. Help me, Yodin projected – tell me what to do. Tell me I'm doing the right thing – or not. Tell me anything at all.

But the network was filled with other minds as lost as his.

All at once she looked up.

"Is it you, Ayda?"

"It's me," she said. "I'm ready."

"You should have let me tell Nalim and Tirrax the truth. They should be here for this. What if something goes wrong?"

"There's nothing they could do to save me."

"That's not what I meant," said Yodin.

"If they knew, they'd only try to talk me out of it. They'd want me to transfer the Core to another host first. I won't, Yodin. I deserve this risk and I'm going to take it."

"You were always the bravest of us." He removed the little rectangle from its hiding place behind the instrument panel and carried it to her slowly. She took it from him and gazed at it. It was such a tiny thing, resting in the middle of her palm – far too small to be the cause of such anxiety. "Why do I feel like an executioner?"

The data file drew her eyes, like moths to a flame. "All precautions are in place?"

"Everything is ready," he assured her. "I have triplicate backups of the seed and its key. I'll monitor your progress through the network, and if there are any signs of trouble I'll disconnect you and activate one of the backups. We're safe. It's you I'm worried about."

Ayda smiled to hear his compassion.

She closed her eyes, and she closed her fingers, and she downloaded the virus into her consciousness.

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Ayda stood at the crest of a green hill. A field of green spread outward from her feet in all directions as far as she could see; above her the sky was a clear and radiant blue. The sun hovered directly overhead, so that she had hardly any shadow at all. She turned around and discovered a tall wooden pole, on which grew a grapevine and a cluster of ripe red grapes. How strange!

She became aware that she was dreaming, and her consciousness entered the dream fully. A zephyr tickled her hair –

Reality – inverted – and the soft hill turned to a pillar of rock beneath her feet. The sky rippled into liquid darkness, and a sudden roiling gale tore at her face, pelting her skin with icy raindrops. She grabbed at the pole to keep from being blown over the precipice, and her hands grasped metal instead of the wooden structure she'd seen just seconds ago.

Cold – so cold!

She could not open her eyes for more than a second at a time, catching fleeting glimpses of the swirling screaming blackness before she was forced to shut them again. She could not look into the source of the wind, dared not – with irrational certainty, she knew she could not look into the heart of the storm. At the heart of the storm was...something. Her fingers grew numb. It was getting harder to hold on to the pole. It was only a dream, but if she fell...

There had to be some way out – something she had to do. Somehow, she had to look into the wind, but if she did – no, it was unthinkable – at the heart of the storm was... If she looked, it would rip her apart, burn away her eyes, shrivel her skull, freeze her hair into long brittle spears that would twirl and shatter on the jagged rock...

She couldn't look – but maybe –

Ayda dug her fingers into her face and gouged out first one eye, then the other. She felt pain, but it was dream-pain and she ignored it. Now instead of swirling black she saw solid black. Her hands were nearly losing their grip – she reached to the cluster of grapes and plucked two, only now they were not grapes – they felt like –

With quivering fingers, she placed one into each empty socket –

The world exploded, flooding her vision. The darkness overhead was still darkness, but it was a brilliant gold darkness – the wind and rain roared all around her like streams of aurora borealis. She looked with her bright new eyes and followed the wind-lines to their point of convergence – a single refulgent point like the sun – the heart of the storm – she looked –

It looked back into her –

She screamed.

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Light and color congealed into the more familiar forms of Nalim and Tirrax and Yodin. The relief and gratitude of the network flooded her at once, forcing an unconscious smile. Nalim saw it and returned the smile hesitantly. "Are you all right?" he asked, quietly, as though noise might shatter her fragile recovery.

"Yeah," she said, still smiling. "I'm fine."

"The virus?"

"We have the vaccine now."

"What about the new Core?"

"It's out of me now. Transferred. The Tertiary Guardian volunteered to be the host. My mind is my own again. I'm safe."

The tension was visible in his face as it drained away, leaving only exhaustion and relief.

"You should have told me," he said gently.

"Well," she said after a moment. "Is everything ready now?"

"Yes. Everything's ready to go."

She rose to her feet. "Then what are we waiting for?"

## Chapter 38

The sentinel dashed breathlessly into the conference room and looked past all the assembled officials, to Daeci alone. The Potentate said, "This meeting is adjourned."

Once they were alone, the sentinel spoke rapidly, his words jumbling over each other.

"You said to tell you immediately if I saw – "

"I know what I told you. What is it? What did you see?"

"It's Nalim, your Eminence. He's – he's come back!"

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"Are you nervous?" Ayda asked.

The great walls of the city loomed like the edge of the universe, dominating the low grassy hills all around. The island city. The city of his birth. *The* city.

"It's just...well, you know what they're going to think. They're going to think you're an angel."

"I know."

"I mean, coming from outside like this. No one's ever come in from outside except Thiowill. That's exactly what they'll think."



"I know."

"Well, doesn't that *bother* you a little? Playing off their faith like that? Look, I'd be lying if I said I still believed in the Law completely myself, but Thiowill...I don't know what Thiowill was, but I know what you're not. This is my home, Ayda. I don't like lying to them."

"I'm not going to lie," she answered firmly, "but you know they have to believe in me. Otherwise none of this will work."

"I know, I know, I just...don't like it, that's all."

Seeing this place again, walking over the same ground, through the same weeds he had crossed that first terrible morning, holding the sunblade as his heart beat nervously once more – it did not seem real. Such events never did. How could a single moment, a piece of mere reality, compare with the vision he had harbored in his imagination for so long?

Up ahead, the gate drew nearer.

"What if they don't let us inside?" said Ayda.

"They will."

Silence.

"Do you really think this will work?"

Nalim took the last few steps to the gate and reached out to touch the metal – but before his fingers could make contact, the walls rumbled, and the doors opened just wide enough to reveal a tall, muscular man dressed in the sable and gold of the city guard. The man looked through the vertical opening – and his eyes widened, and his mouth fell open, and his lips moved, but no sound came out. Finally Nalim nodded to him.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Nalim. May I come inside?"

Slowly, as though afraid he might fall, the man backed away from the aperture. Nalim

stepped inside and looked up in wonder, and Ayda followed him, finally seeing with her own eyes the city about which she'd heard so many legends. It would have been difficult to say which of the three was the most amazed.

"You're alive," the man said finally.

Nalim nodded. "So I am."

"Who – who are you?" he managed, looking at Ayda.

"A friend."

"Perhaps we should see the Potentate," Nalim suggested.

The man nodded, still gaping. "Perhaps you should."

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Daeci did not stand, but his eyes lit up when they entered the room. He looked different now – aged somehow, and tired. His hair was more white than blond. The Willowstream, certainly – but was there something else there too? Nalim couldn't be sure.

"Sit down," said Daeci, gesturing expansively at the chairs around the long oak table. For all the lines of care on his face, his smile was warm, almost childlike in its pleasure. "Nalim. It's really you, isn't it? I had almost lost hope. And who is this beautiful young woman you've brought back with you? If all the women outside the city are as pretty as you, my dear, it's a wonder he ever returned at all."

Ayda introduced herself coolly.

"You knew," Nalim said. "You knew there was a world outside. How did you know?"

"Didn't I tell you there was hope?" Daeci leaned back in his chair. The smile faded.

"There's no comet, is there." It was not a question.

"No. There's no comet."

"What have I been working on for the past three years?"

Daeci glanced at Ayda, then back to Nalim. "You must understand that what I am about to tell you cannot leave this room, for any reason."

"You're in no position to make demands," Nalim said coldly. "Do you really doubt that I could destroy this city with a single word of what's outside these walls?"

"Do *you* doubt that I could have you killed with a word, right now?"

"Don't threaten him," said Ayda. "Ever." This time her voice was positively frigid.

"Peace," Nalim whispered. Under the table he took hold of her hand and squeezed it in appreciation. To Daeci he said, "I haven't come to destroy. Tell me what you know, and I'll keep your secrets."

Daeci looked at Ayda again, but didn't press the matter. "Here's your story, then.

"Three years ago, while in the Willowstream, I discovered a foreign presence at the very edge of my perception – a mind that was not part of this city. I recoiled, of course. But curiosity got the better of me, because I sensed that it was human. And pushing into the void as far as I could go, pushing away the noise of the city and isolating that single voice, I was able to communicate.

"His name was Koriām, and at first, he was as shocked as I – more so, in fact, because I don't think he had any idea what the Willowstream could do. But once he learned who I was and *where* I was, he became very excited. He told me that he lived in a place outside our walls, with many other people, in another city; and he said that his city, which he called Manorviter, was in danger from demon attacks, because he lacked the powerful weapons we have here. I had no idea branches of the Willowstream extended so far! Naturally, my heart went out to him, but I saw no way I could help.

"But Koriām told me that the demons had a city of their own, and he told me he knew where it was. And he asked if, with all our advanced technology, there was anything we could do to destroy this mutual enemy."

"So you built the missile," said Nalim.

"We began work on the missile, and he listened impatiently to my progress reports; but as the months passed and the project neared completion, I began to have doubts. What if Koriām were lying, and he merely wanted to use the missile for some purpose of his own? Or suppose he were telling the truth, but the demon city was not where he thought it was? Or perhaps Koriām was a demon himself! I thought of these scenarios and dozens more, but I knew it was the ones I could not imagine that held the greatest danger. In the end, he was asking me to fire into darkness and take his word that I was doing the right thing. I couldn't. I had to know the truth. I had to send out a scout.

"I picked you, Nalim."

Nalim sat in silence, absorbing this slowly. He felt the pressure of Ayda's fingers on his hand, trying to comfort him, but he did not need comfort; he needed to think.

"Why me?"

"There were several considerations. I wanted someone with a fairly high level, for obvious reasons, but at the same time I did not want someone so prominent that his banishment would harm the city. Someone with a rational mind, who lived under the Law yet was open to radically new ideas. Of course, there were thousands of people who fit all these criteria." Daeci shrugged, a maddeningly casual gesture. "It had to be someone. It was you."

"I see." Quiet. "Who else knows about this?"

"No one."

"No one? You don't mean to tell me you set up all the evidence against me personally?"

"No, of course not. Eremis handled all that. I only told him that I needed to have you removed, for political reasons, and he did the rest."

"No problems making him go along with it, huh?"

"Eremis believes the loss of a single life is unimportant beside the service of the Law. Everyone dies; it is the soul that matters. So he says."

"Of course. So, what did you learn from me? I found the monitor you put in my neck."

"I learned the most important thing – that it was possible to survive outside the walls. In spite of everything Koriām told me, that was still a shock. And I heard some of your conversation with the demon. But beyond that – very little. I had no way of knowing how long-range the monitor would be able to transmit, since it had never been tested at a distance greater than the width of the city. As it turned out, I lost the transmission halfway through the third day, and you've been silent ever since. The last thing I heard from you were the words: 'Demon, I did what you wanted.' You can imagine how I felt when I first heard those words. I must know. What did you do?"

Nalim was confused for a moment, trying to remember when he might have said that – then laughed. "Nothing," he said. "I was starving, and she gave me bread, and I ate it. That's all."

"*She*?"

"Her name was Vey," he said. "She was human – a demon rider. Look, it's a little complicated..." He quickly recounted a greatly abridged version of his time outside the city, explaining what the rukhs were, their relationship with Mirnor, his journey to Manorviter, and a little about the Erio-Joran League. He made no mention of the starbird, the machines, or the creature in Niev's mind. Nalim had some difficulty getting across the idea that none of the events

he described had taken place on the island at all; the notion of another land mass beyond the sea was very problematic for him, and Nalim was never quite sure he fully accepted it. But the greatest hurdle – as expected – was the nature of the rukhs themselves.

"You're saying...they aren't demons," Daeci said.

"That's right. They are living, thinking beings, like you and me."

"And you *rode* one?"

"That's right."

"No..." He was shaking his head. "No, they've tricked you somehow...they..."

"You wanted an open-mind scout, didn't you? You wanted to know the truth."

He raked a hand through his hair. "If...if this *is* true...Nalim, you can't tell anyone else. We would not survive that knowledge. And your new friend's protestations notwithstanding, I *will* destroy you before I let you destroy us. That's not a threat, you understand. Just a warning."

"As I said. I am not here to destroy."

Daeci nodded gratefully. "I'm glad to hear it. In fact, there is a great deal of good you might do here. Ever since the death of Wasmeth – "

"*What?*"

"You didn't know? But no, of course not – you weren't connected to the Willowstream..." If Nalim's story had been difficult to accept, Daeci's portrait of history was far grimmer. Nalim listened with dull horror as the tale unfolded: Wasmeth, Eremis, the failed miracle and 'rebirth,' the sundering and the preparations for holy war, which neither Daeci nor Tolmiach had any power to stop. When it was done, Nalim sat wordless, mind reeling.

"So Koriām is a liar after all," Daeci was saying. "We'll still have to fire the missile, of course, but it can explode harmlessly somewhere in midair, far enough away to convince the

people that disaster has been averted. You yourself are a greater challenge; your re-introduction to the city will have to be done carefully, so as to avoid causing even greater damage. But it will be worth it if your voice can end some of the madness that has overtaken us. For now, I have a room in the Tower of Law where you can stay, until we can find someplace more permanent. I'm sure you're eager for rest after such a harrowing journey."

"One moment," said Nalim. "You haven't asked me *why* I returned."

"Why..." He looked back and forth between them. "I don't understand. This is your home." He gave a short, nervous laugh.

Nalim nodded to Ayda, who had remained quiet through all this discussion. "I am going to see the oracle," she said.

"The oracle? But – why?"

"Why else?" said Ayda. "To determine my level."

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The room was as huge and luxurious as promised, but at the moment Nalim was interested only in the panoramic view over the eastern part of his beloved city. Ayda's footsteps came up behind him, muffled on the plush carpet, and he encircled her waist with an arm, drawing her near. "So," he said softly, "what do you think of your grandfather's home?"

"It's beautiful," she answered. "Like Bystolia, in many ways, yet so different. I half expect to look up and see Autumn and Winter in the distance."

"It was a lot more beautiful when I left," he said, permitting a little of the pain to come through in his voice, now that they were alone. He pointed. "You see that pile of rock there? That used to be a statue of Thiowill. On a sunny day, these streets would have been filled with people. It

was never this empty, not even when it was raining." He moved to stand behind her, clasping his hands in front of her waist and resting his chin on her head. "This wasn't supposed to happen. We were isolated, we were blind – but at least we were at *peace*. The Brotherhood always saw to that. A rebellion...a holy war...it just doesn't seem possible."

"This is a time for war," she said. "Here, and on the mainland. This is our chance to stop both."

He kissed her hair.

"So," he said, "who is this Koriām person?"

"He's a member of the Directorate in Manorviter. I suppose it makes sense – he has an enemy that he wants destroyed, he suddenly finds a powerful, ignorant ally, and he goes from there. What I don't understand is how he had access to the Willowstream. I thought the stream only ran under this city."

"Apparently its branches run wider. Koriām must've discovered a branch somewhere under Manorviter. If he's out to destroy Sanctum and its allies, it's no wonder Niev found the political support he needed for an attack."

"We have to stop him," Ayda muttered. "Do you think they'll let me see the oracle?"

The door hissed behind Nalim and he turned around, then put himself instinctively between Ayda and the intruder.

Eremis.

"I heard, but I did not believe," the old man rasped. "I see, but I cannot comprehend."

"What do you want, Eremis?"

"I came to witness the miracle...yet I cannot believe..."

"Believe it," Nalim said grimly.



Eremis took a brief, staggering step forward, then fell to his knees. "How is this possible?" His eyes shone like twin beacons; his voice held sheer, unmitigated awe.

"I went out. I lived. I returned. You're the expert on the Gray Book, Eremis. You tell me what happened."

Eremis shook his head in wonder. He whispered, high and nearly inaudible in his emotion: "*I know not!*" And he wept; Eremis wept.

Nalim stood sternly, watching, and did not move, but Ayda advanced and knelt before the old man, who fell prostrate. "Eremis," she whispered.

"Peace!" Eremis wailed, not raising his eyes. "What manner of being are you?"

She took his hand, veined and bony against her youthful skin, and kissed it. "Stand," she said, "and do not be afraid. I am as real as you."

He stood. "What must I do?"

"What do you mean?" said Nalim.

Eremis swept out his white robe and bowed low, the very image of obeisance. "Honor me, my lord and my lady, with your commands."

Nalim and Ayda glanced at each other in surprise. "You want commands?" said Nalim. "Go end this pointless war, and stop trying to purify the city. How about that?"

"Assuredly," he whispered, and he left them.

When he was gone, Ayda looked at Nalim with wonder. "You said they would think I was an angel, but I never imagined..."

"Don't believe it," he replied. "Clephe used to tell me about him. Whatever he's up to, you can bet it isn't serving *my lady*." He headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"May as well milk this for what it's worth," he grumbled.

Nalim caught up to Eremis at the end of the corridor and was momentarily surprised to see tears in the old man's eyes still. But no, that made sense – no doubt he would want others to see the show also. "Eremis," he said.

"My lord?"

"I have a request."

"Anything, my lord."

"I want to see the Book of Wisdom."

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They had descended staircase after staircase, going deeper underground than Nalim had ever guessed the city extended, and then deeper still: checkpoint after checkpoint, fingerprint scanners, retina scanners, passwords and more passwords until Nalim wondered how Eremis could remember them all. Finally they came to a dingy corridor, only a few meters long, that might have once have been white. At the other end was a door. Eremis stopped and looked down the corridor gravely.

"It's in there?" Nalim whispered.

Eremis glanced down at him, eyebrow raised. "Assuredly not," he said dryly. He placed his palm on the wall to his left and held it. The wall gave way with the whirring of machinery, and another portal opened. He gestured, and Nalim entered. The lights switched on.

The room was tiny, hardly big enough for both of them, but immaculately white – a sharp contrast to the hall. A gleaming metal column, chest-high, bore a rectangular wooden box with copper hinges and a latch. Eremis placed his hand on it significantly.

"The Book of Wisdom is falsely named," he said. "It is deceitful and heretical – preserved for history's sake, but not for the eyes of anyone besides the Center of the Unbroken Circle – and such as yourself, of course. Should the contents of this document go public...their faith would break. It has broken for less."

"I understand."

Eremis opened the box, and inside was a single sheet of paper, yellowed, preserved in transparent plastic. Words in black ink flowed over its mottled surface in a smooth, sure hand. Nalim's own hands were not half so steady as he raised it to the light – then glanced underneath it, puzzled. Aside from this sheet, the box was empty.

"This is all?" he said in surprise. "The Book of Wisdom is one piece of paper?"

"That is all," said Eremis.

Nalim rested the sheet on the corner of the box and began to read:

*"Hear me – for I am the angel Thiowill, and I speak!*

*"I will begin with the obvious: I am dying. Even the most devoted of the faithful suspect it now; the more ambitious are already scuffling over the vacuum I will leave. Let them. It is beyond my power. My concerns, such as they are, have grown more focused of late. At last, near death, I turn to a topic with which I have had little experience: the truth.*

*"It is strange for me to speak of the honor which compels me to tell the truth. I came to you – to this world – as a criminal. What do I know of honor? Yet I find, having taken so much from this island, that I feel I owe you some small payment in return. Nothing on the scale of what you have given me, certainly – I am not so benevolent – but something. At the least, you should know what I have done. If nothing else, I find that as the sole bearer of my truth, I am desirous that it*

*should be discharged from me before my end.*

*"I see your eyes widen as I speak these words. How transparent your species is! No – be calm. Only write. For now, only write.*

*"As I said, I arrived in this world as a criminal. I will not explain the nature of my crimes to you. They are complex, and irrelevant, and you would not understand. What you should know is that I came to this place searching for sanctuary from my pursuers, and I found it. I remade your island to be my hiding place. It was I who made you afraid of the outside, for my own protection; it was I who raised your walls and taught you to destroy all that came too near. It was I who, anticipating thousands of years of additional life, gave you the Gray Book and the oracle. Not for your benefit. For mine. But of these hoped-for years I shall have few, and once I am gone I fear you shall find both of my gifts worse than useless. This is unavoidable; certain actions, once taken, cannot be undone. Such is the way of things.*

*"It is not all bad. The technology I gave you to carry out my vision will place you millennia ahead of your nearest rivals on this little planet. You will live alone, but you will not be bothered, and you will have each other. Perhaps you will even be happy. The thought does not displease me.*

*"What I have said is the truth. Take it, or not. For my part I doubt these words will survive even my death. This, too, is irrelevant. Like my other gifts, this is not for your benefit but mine. Honor has been served; burn the manuscripts if you wish. And yet, these are indeed my words, and I suppose that makes them holy.*

*"My time is near. If your lives are half so peaceful as my death will be, count yourselves blessed!"*

*The words above were spoken by the high angel Thiowill in the Most Sacred Chamber of the Angelic Temple on the ninety-sixth year of his blessed reign, in the presence of myself and the*

*Eight Priests. I, Ortheus, the Chief Scribe, have written them down with perfect accuracy, changing not one letter.*

And below, in a different handwriting:

*The high angel Thiowill left us eleven days after speaking these words.*

Nalim read the document, then read it again, and again, the sentences echoing like dull bombshells in some far-off corner of his mind. He knew he should be surprised – shocked – but he could not muster the energy. The capacity for surprise had left him. He looked up at Eremis with questioning eyes, searching for solace in that thin, pale face.

"My lord," said Eremis gently, "do not be troubled. It is only a heresy."

"Of course," said Nalim. "Only a heresy."

Let Ayda be an angel, then.

Let them worship her, if they liked.

What did he care?

## Chapter 39

The being that had once been called the Tertiary Guardian was a large, imposing creature. Like so many of Bystolia's denizens, its appearance was not easy to describe. The best way Tirrax could think to explain it was as a plastic mold of a giant arthropod that only had legs on one side of its body. When it moved, which was seldom, it had a complex, hypnotizing kind of mechanical grace, as though it were continuously unfolding itself into something new. Ten almond eyes

encircled something that might have been a head.

Tirrax sat cross-legged on the ground under its enormous shadow. They were outside, near the Tertiary Wall, which was now almost completely repaired. Small construction droids skittered over its smooth surface, fusing together the old with the new. They were remarkably efficient, Tirrax mused; in another day, this section of wall would be indistinguishable from the others, and it was not even the highest priority on the repair hierarchy.

"Is it my turn?" he said. "Let me think...I see something that begins with the letter...W."

A pensive silence followed. "White clouds," the giant rumbled.

"No. Guess again."

"Water."

"What water?" None was visible.

"There is moisture in the air. Currently thirty-eight point four percent relative humidity."

Tirrax laughed. "No, it's not water."

"Workers."

"No. Good guess, though."

A viselike appendage twitched thoughtfully. "Walls."

"Very good!" said Tirrax. "That's it. Walls. Now it's your turn again."

Of all the games he had tried, this was the one the Core seemed to enjoy most. In the twenty-four hours since Ayda's departure, Tirrax had made it a personal project to communicate with the growing consciousness, expanding its awareness of humanity even as the network nurtured it with the other robots' own sensory input. The Core was making tremendous progress, in some ways like a human child, yet profoundly different also. Whereas a human grasped many concepts before finding the words to describe them, the Core was just the opposite; it had a

complete vocabulary and was slowly fortifying its mental dictionary with living ideas. One day with the Core was already more rewarding than a lifetime of numbers had ever been.

If only Ayda were here.

"Is it my turn?" the Core boomed, imitating Tirrax's phrasing. "Let me think... I see something that begins with the letter...I."

*Idiot* was the first word that came to mind – here I sit, thought Tirrax, an old man in the dirt, playing games with an overgrown mechanical infant, pining away after a female robot – a robot who, it was worth mentioning, was already taken. And yet, she was what she was: the most perfect being he had ever met, a union of kindness and courage, intelligence and beauty, robotic simplicity and human allure. The only woman he had ever really loved. And he would never have her. Ever.

It wasn't so bad. As long as he could be near her, make her happy, he thought he could live with it. Not so bad, as long as he could think about her. Only thinking – surely he could be forgiven for thinking.

"Insect," he said.

"No," the Core replied. "Good guess, though."

And then there was the news about Krace. In all the destruction, it was the loss of his companion that he felt most keenly. Yet the news had not shocked him, and even now, he could not produce the depth of grief that he felt Krace deserved – the sort of grief he knew he would have felt if Ayda had died instead.

Could humans only really empathize with beings that looked and acted like them? What a disappointing thought.

"Infrared light." Invisible light – *infrared* and *ultraviolet* – was a phenomenon he had only recently learned about, searching through the city's databases in a vague attempt to justify his

presence. In another time and place, such a revelation would have kept him excited for weeks.

"No. Good guess, though."

He was not *completely* useless here; now and again a robot would give him some minor task. Go fetch a part from a warehouse. Read over an archival entry about fashions in human architecture to see if it was accurate. Talk with the Core. Still, he knew that most of these duties were better off without his 'help.' They were trying to give him a purpose.

He was not sure whether to be annoyed or grateful. The fact that they cared enough to try was charming – and in truth, he desperately needed a purpose.

"Iris."

"No. Good guess, though."

Just then a short, anserine robot arrived at the scene, mounted on the front of a small two-seat vehicle. "Tirrax!" it called, its long neck bobbing absurdly. "A small force has arrived from Manorviter. They will reach the outer wall in several minutes. Per Ayda's recommendation, we request you come to the outer wall and speak with them."

"Weapons?"

"Primitive ones. No threat."

"Understood." He rose and was about to follow, then turned back to the giant.

"What did you see?"

The nascent Core flexed its metallic appendages triumphantly. "Infinity," it boomed. "I saw infinity!"

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Tirrax's robotic chauffeur assured him the city was in no danger from the would-be



invaders. The goal was to hurt Niev where it mattered: politically. As the magnetic lift carried him to the top of the wall, though, he pondered the danger to himself. It was fine for a creature made of metal to speak of weapons like crossbows as "primitive," but he had a healthy respect for anything fast that had a sharpened tip. He reached the top and immediately noted a tall metallic projection that might provide cover against any rash decisions.

Tirrax saw them a little way away, a company divided into three platoons of three dozen soldiers each. Looking at them, he was reminded of ants, marching in their red-brown uniforms, stained with sweat and dust. Only swords, no crossbows, although it was hard to be sure. He picked out the three lieutenants by their distinctive red sashes; the captain marched at the head of the company, his blue-and-gold sash plainly visible even from here. Behind the soldiers came other men in less formal uniforms, driving oxen which carried supplies for the company. Some of the oxen did not seem to be carrying anything – perhaps intended to bear whatever loot the soldiers hoped to find.

If so, they were about to be disappointed.

"Parley!" he cried when the captain came within earshot, and the man raised a hand to halt his troops. He looked up at Tirrax with an expression somewhere between confusion and vexation. "Parley!"

"Parley," the captain agreed. "I am Captain Caelik, of the Thirty-Fourth Company, representing the honorable nation of Manorviter." He waited for an answer, but Tirrax gave none. "Who are you?" he shouted after a moment.

"My name is Tirrax," he said, "representing this wall. Your visit, it's – well, it's thoughtful, is what it is. I haven't had a guest in months. Years!"

"Is this the..." The captain seemed to be struggling for the proper words. "Is this the city

where the metal...creatures live?"

Tirrax stared down, effecting a dubious silence.

"Who lives beyond this wall?" the captain yelled.

"Me!"

"Who else?"

"Me!" Tirrax stared at him. "Listen, is there someone else I could talk to? You don't seem entirely – "

"How did you cross this wall?" the captain interrupted. His face was turning red – whether from heat, anger, or embarrassment, Tirrax couldn't say.

"I never *crossed* it," Tirrax said slowly. "I *live* here. Listen, how did you get to *that* side?"

"There's a gate here," he shouted.

Tirrax made a show of looking over the edge to his left. "So there is!"

"Can you open it?"

"I don't think it opens."

"As a captain of Manorviter's army, I demand to be allowed entrance!"

"That's what I tell it, but you know, sir, it's terribly stubborn. *Terribly* stubborn."

Captain Caelik executed a furious about-face and marched back to his men, where he appeared to call a conference with his three lieutenants. A few minutes later, the company began making camp, and a small group of soldiers broke away from the main party, heading south – probably to report back to Manorviter on today's performance.

Tirrax took the magnetic lift back to the ground, where his chauffeur was still waiting.

"Looks like they'll be staying a while," he said. "It's awfully arid down there. Maybe you could see about lowering them some food and water?"

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A cluster of gray guards surrounded Nalim and Ayda as they made their way through Zaol Square: three in front, three behind, three on either side. The plaza was empty, but the Brotherhood took no chances with their honored guests. In a matter of minutes they reached the tall silver-and-black building that was Ayda's destination, and here they separated.

Six guards remained with Nalim at the entrance, and six followed Ayda inside, into the elevator, out again, then down the long white corridor that led to the final door. When she came to that door, her entourage assumed defensive positions outside, and one of them nodded at her. The door opened into darkness, and when it closed behind her, she was alone.

Not really alone, of course. Nalim had told her about this – the watchers in the shadows, listening, measuring, evaluating. Invisible. It made her feel tiny, which was probably the idea.

The light came on overhead, blinding her, and as she blinked the voice rang out in the empty blackness.

"Why are you here?"

"To test myself," she answered, reciting the words to the ritual as Nalim had taught her. This was a bit different from the usual tests, though – normally a person took one test, and was advanced (or not) one level. In this case, she was told, due to the unique nature of her case – an adult with no assigned level – she would be permitted to keep advancing until she failed a test.

"To what end?"

"That I may discover the nature of my character."

"If you pass the test?"

"I will go forth into the world and add to its structure with the knowledge of self."

"And if you fail?"

"Then here as in all things I will abide by the judgment of the Law." And may your Spirit save you, she thought, because if I fail, the troubles you've suffered will be nothing compared to the coming inferno.

"What is your name?"

"My name is Ayda."

"What is your station?"

"I have none."

"And who are you, Ayda?"

"That is what I came here to discover."

"Then discover!"

Another light revealed the oracle in all its grotesque perfection, eyes gleaming silver from its dull gray mask of a face. White eyes for pass, black for fail – simple enough.

She waited expectantly for the oracle to speak, but it remained silent. Instead, a small red light rose from the floor in front of her and moved from side to side in the air. She followed it with her eyes, wondering when something would happen – but it never did. A few seconds later, the light disappeared, and the eyes turned white. Level one.

Perhaps it was not so surprising; this first test was administered to infants. It couldn't be anything too demanding.

Then the second test began, and the oracle did speak, the words coming from somewhere that was not its mouth.

"Now we will play a game. I will say a word, and you will tell me what that word means. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Mother."

She thought carefully before answering, and the contest began.

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Nalim's six guards swirled around him like jealous electrons as he ducked under the roof of the portico, stepping through the front door of the *Paltry Pyre*, an elegant restaurant he'd eaten at himself, once upon a time. Its present appearance was a pale reflection of his memory – dark, empty, a few chairs knocked over, glasses broken and scattered over the countertop. Light poured through a broad window in the far wall of the little building, illuminating the wide round table where the other players in this drama had already congregated.

There was Eremis, of course, his eyes scarcely glancing up from under his white hood as Nalim entered. A mystery. Across the table from Eremis sat a tall young man with sandy hair and clear blue eyes, the unlikely leader of a decidedly civil and mild-mannered rebel coalition. His name was Taphis – formerly a member of an undercover terrorist group called Niadi, one of the few such still alive. His new group was calling itself the Liberation Order; their tactics thus far had been reassuringly nonviolent, and amounted to little more than a declaration of the right to free thought – though the Brotherhood did not take such matters lightly. The Liberation Order did not speak for all the rebels, but Daeci believed that if they could reach an accord with the city's government, the remaining troublemakers could be swept up neatly. Taphis himself looked far too small and scared – too *human* – to be caught up in any of this, but Nalim did not have to be reminded of the dangers of judging by appearances.

Between these two forces sat Tolmiach, Minister of the Common Welfare, a man who was

rapidly emerging as the voice of reason in all this twisted mess. Tolmiach stole a furtive look at Eremis, as though expecting him to transform into a demon any moment, but he seemed calm enough. That was good, since he might just be the closest thing Nalim had to an ally right now.

Each of these figures was surrounded by his own little network of guards – Eremis's gray soldiers, Tolmiach's black-and-gold city men, and the ragged cluster of personal protectors Taphis had found for himself. All eyed each other suspiciously, trying to figure out which of the others he would have to shoot first, wondering if it would come to that. Nalim noticed his own entourage doing the same – it came with the territory.

And lost amid all this military pageantry, sitting like a wary lamb among disinterested wolves, was Iriel. Sweet Iriel, her expression somehow forlorn and desperate and hopeful all at once, her hands moving nervously in her lap under the silhouette of her face.

Iriel. What was *she* doing here?

Tolmiach rose to greet him as he entered. "Nalim," he said, nodding. "I believe you know everyone?"

"Yes," he answered distantly, finally tearing his eyes from Wasmeth's widow and pulling up a chair of his own. He forced himself to concentrate. "Yes, let's begin."

"We'll start with you, Taphis," said Tolmiach. "Tell us your demands."

The younger man cleared his throat nervously. "Well. The Liberation Order wants what we all want – peace. We want to live as we wish, and say what we wish to whom we wish, and *think* as we wish, without fear of the Brotherhood. We want the killing – this *purification* – to stop. That is all."

Everyone looked at Eremis, waiting for his reaction. "Eremis?" Tolmiach prompted after a moment.

Eremis looked up, like a dog who hears his name spoken in conversation. "I will defer to Nalim on all matters of the Law," he said, then lowered his head again.

What *was* he playing at? Nalim nodded. "I see no problem with any of that. Tolmiach?"

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The oracle spoke.

"A man walks down a hallway. On his left, he sees two doors. On his right, he sees two doors. The doors on the left are marked *Charity* and *Glory*. The doors on the right are marked *Love* and *Law*. Which door should he enter?"

"None of them," Ayda answered. "He should walk forward along the path set for him by the Law, which will guide him as he walks. The wise man does not seek to be charitable; if he does right, his actions will give of themselves. He does not seek glory; glory is a shadow, following those who walk the brightest path. He does not seek love; love is a gravity between stars, and pulls naturally from whatever distance across the void. He does not seek the Law; he lives in the Law, and the Law lives in him."

It was the last in a series of riddles, all taken almost verbatim from the Gray Book. The oracle's eyes turned white. Level nine.

So far, it had all been pitifully easy. And yet Ayda could not shake the feeling that something was wrong.

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"The point is, the city is not yet safe," Tolmiach was saying. "The Silver Phoenix camps provide food, water, shelter, and above all, protection. Disbanding them now would be tantamount

to murder."

"I'm not saying *disband* them," Taphis answered. "Keep the camps – just give people the *option* to leave. No one should be held there against his will."

"But you must see that giving them the option to leave is an implicit assurance they will be safe. They're *not*. I will not send them out to die!"

"See? This is the attitude I'm talking about! These people aren't children, they can decide for themselves whether they want to – "

"Easy for you to say! It isn't their blood on your hands if they – "

The negotiations dragged on, every point endlessly debated as Nalim listened, feigning interest. He could already see what general shape the final outcome would take – in the end, Taphis and Tolmiach were not very different in what they wanted for the city. Taphis, for all his reputation as a radical, actually wanted very little; Tolmiach, the voice of the entrenched establishment, was desperate to reach an agreement to preserve the only way of life he had ever known: peace. With the only real troublemaker – Eremis – out of the game, all that remained were the details.

The trouble with details was that there were so *many* of them.

"What do you think, Nalim?"

It took him a moment to realize that Tolmiach had spoken. He tried to focus on what they were saying. "I understand your concerns about protecting your people, Tolmiach, but Taphis is right. The choice to leave, or not, is their own. In the – " He held up a hand as Tolmiach tried to interrupt. "In the interests of safety, issue a warning about the dangers of leaving the camps, but let them make up their own minds."

Twenty minutes later, Tolmiach finally accepted this. Nalim sighed. One more detail out of the way. But Ayda – what was happening with Ayda?



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The darkness said nothing, but Ayda felt the tension like a thunderhead, waiting to break. She was level sixteen – the Potentate’s level. If she failed now, there was a chance she could still be Potentate, but that would mean a general election – risky and time-consuming. One more success, and she would have all the power she needed to execute the plan that Mirnor – and the rest of the world – so desperately needed. One more success. Such a tiny thing, to determine the fate of civilization.

Still, she was confident. The tests had been growing more difficult, but they were nothing she couldn’t handle – yet.

The oracle spoke.

"Given that there exists a particular system of forty-three linear equations and forty-four unknowns, and no additional information, state whether the system is underdetermined or overdetermined."

"There are insufficient data to give a universally correct answer," said Ayda.

"Given the simple statement variables alpha sub one and alpha sub two, construct a counterexample for the assertion that the statement ‘alpha sub one if and only if not alpha sub two’ is a tautology."

"Alpha sub one true, alpha sub two true," she answered. Absurdly simple, but still she felt that somewhere, somewhere, a trap was waiting.

"An equilateral triangle is inscribed in a circle. If a given tetrahedron’s faces are identical to the triangle, find the volume of the tetrahedron as a function of the circle’s radius."

"Root fifty-four over ninety-six pi cubed, times the cube of the circumference." Come on,

she thought, stop playing around!

And the oracle said: "Do you love the Law?"

That stopped her.

*Did* she?

She thought of Aemed, sent away from his beloved city to create the mind that would grow into what she knew as her father. She thought of Eremis, refusing to meet her gaze, prostrate and weeping in her presence. She thought of Wasmeth, desperate and triumphant at the end. She thought of an entire people locked away behind an encircling wall, forever.

And she thought of Nalim.

"Yes," she said. "I do."

The eyes of the oracle flashed like diamonds, indicating victory. But the test was not yet over.

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At long last the negotiations concluded. Eremis bowed and left, and Taphis and Tolmiach were preparing to go when Iriel came to sit close by Nalim.

"It's really you," she said quietly.

He'd heard a lot of that lately. "Yes."

"I wish Wasmeth could see you now. That was his greatest regret – what he did to you. When he learned you were innocent, it broke his heart. Please don't hate him, Nalim, for my sake if nothing else."

"I never did." Sometimes, the truth was simplest.

"I'm glad."

"Iriel...why are you here?"

She snorted derisively. "Oh, haven't you heard? I'm the team mascot. They think I symbolize freedom and the glorious uprising. Why, because I walked out of prison while the doors were open? I keep expecting one of them to rub my belly for luck."

Taphis called to her from the doorway. "Iriel! Are you coming?"

Iriel leaned over and placed her lips so close to Nalim's ear they almost touched. "He's faking it, you know," she breathed. "Taphis. He'll betray you as soon as he can."

Then she dashed away, laughing, keeping Taphis at ease with her pretty smiles.

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Ayda's stern expression belied a quiet euphoria. She had passed Nalim – passed Daeci – passed Eremis – passed them all long ago. Where she was now, no one had ever been. Each test was more difficult than the last, and more than once now she'd been certain she'd failed, but the eyes of the oracle flashed unceasingly white. The impossibility of it, the wild adrenaline, intoxicated her, drawing her ever further.

Level twenty-seven.

It was like dancing on air.

And still the oracle pushed at her placidly, testing, challenging, unyielding in its relentless pursuit.

I will never fail, she thought. I will keep advancing forever, and force this monster's eyes to shine forever white, and they will never take me from this room –

Abruptly Ayda shrieked and fell to her knees in agony. The oracle was in her mind, pushing, *hurting* her –

*Abomination*, the oracle projected.

Ayda's lips moved and twisted, but no sound came out. Her mind howled with the pain of the oracle's terrible weight. She struggled nanosecond by nanosecond, clawing, pushing back against this strange and sudden onslaught. Loss of control would mean death. She fought – she, who had given birth to a Core –

And gradually, she began to win.

Bit by bit, she stabilized her own systems until at last she was able to branch back through the connection into the oracle; bit by bit, against furious opposition, she reached out and analyzed what she found. And slowly, slowly, she began to see.

*That's how you do it, Ayda thought. You look into their minds. That's how you choose what test to give.*

*Abomination!*

*What were you going to do? Destroy me? You realized what I was, didn't you? She could feel the hatred, icy and ravenous under centuries of silence. But ah, here's the real question: what are you? Miserable worm, why did Thiowill to put you here?*

She searched the oracle's memory. It fought her, but it was too old – its security systems too antiquated – to really resist. The data was encoded, but she found the decryption keys. And she found what the oracle was hiding.

*Of course*, she thought.

*Abomination!*

*Thiowill came here to hide, is that it? He conquered the city, made them inward, made them fear the outside. He built the walls and he set down the Law.* She breathed. The sheer scope of it! An entire civilization built around the needs of a single creature! The Core had hinted, yes, but

*this... But it wasn't enough, was it? He knew there would always be revolutionaries, there would always be those who didn't believe, who wanted to see outside. He couldn't manage it all on his own. He needed a tool. He made you.*

*She could feel the fear in the oracle now, and for the second time in as many weeks she felt no sympathy for another machine. They had a level system in place already, but it was based on merit. It was fair. He didn't want it to be fair, did he? He didn't want radical thinkers rising to the top of his society – but he didn't want to alienate them by placing them too low in the hierarchy, either. So he created you, to see into their souls, to order his society along the lines of least resistance. You gave them tests you knew they could pass, or fail, as fit your purposes. Not perfect, of course, but enough to make his life a little easier.*

*But with all their new technology, what if his citizens developed their own artificial intelligence? What if they learned your craft and discovered your secret? He feared that, didn't he? So he forbade them to study it. The most terrible crime imaginable. Worse than murder. What did he care about murder?*

*Your master is dead, do you know that? For twelve hundred years he's been dead. For twelve hundred years you've kept these people inside their garden walls, to no purpose. That's what you were hiding. That's what you didn't want me to know.*

*Well guess what? I know.*

*ABOMINATION!* the oracle shrieked.

But already Ayda was reaching inside herself, drawing out the death she kept hidden away. She uploaded the virus and watched with detached fascination as the creature's circuits were overwhelmed. It was over almost before it began.

When it was done she walked out of the circle of light, past the invisible watchers, and

through the door. Behind her, the oracle's eyes gleamed black, black as Chaos, never to change again.

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It was early afternoon before Nalim and Ayda saw each other again. They embraced.

"You're shaking," said Nalim, pressing her fingers between his palms. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," said Ayda. "Nalim, I did it!"

"You passed Daeci?" he cried.

"Guess what level I am."

"Twenty!"

"Higher."

His eyes widened. "Twenty-five?"

*"Higher!"*

"Thirty?" he asked incredulously.

She kissed him. "Twenty-seven. Can you believe it? I'm going to be Potentate." Suddenly she frowned. "I'm going to be Potentate."

"Hey," he said softly, "don't worry about it, you'll be – "

"How did the negotiations go?"

"They argued till I thought we'd never be done, and they've got more meetings planned in a few days, but I think we reached an agreement. Tolmiach agreed to let his people out of the camps, and he promised not to charge any of the Liberation Order with treason. He also issued a statement granting free speech and thought, at least to the rebels, but I doubt the Brotherhood will pay any attention. Taphis promised to work with the government toward restoring order. He wanted a

blanket pardon of everyone in the city for any and all past crimes, a clean slate, but Tolmiach refused to give in on that, and honestly I don't think Taphis cared much – he got almost everything else he wanted. Tolmiach was desperate, and Eremis hardly spoke a word. Right now relief efforts are the biggest problem – getting food and water and medical care to everyone. But the city's basic infrastructure is still rock solid, and they're moving quickly now."

"So things will go back to the way they were. That's wonderful!"

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully, then shook his head. "Iriel was there, with Taphis. I think she had to join because the Silver Phoenix camps wouldn't accept her. She said Taphis couldn't be trusted. She said he would betray us."

"Good to know," Ayda said coolly, and Nalim laughed in quiet amazement.

"You really are going to be Potentate, aren't you? I can't quite wrap my mind around it. When is the ceremony?"

"Tomorrow morning. I can't believe it myself. Nalim, they'll never accept me. I tried to talk to Daeci after I left the oracle's chamber and he looked at me like I was some kind of disgusting insect." She pulled away and went to the window. "And why not? It isn't as though I were human."

"Ayda – "

"Nalim, listen. There's something I have to tell you. It's about the oracle."

She told him. When she was finished, she looked at him with apprehension. "Are you angry?" she asked.

He smiled without humor. "No," he said. "You know, I'm really not."

## Chapter 40

When the man in gray announced they could leave the camps, Marene ignored all warnings and set out immediately to the Tower of Law to see her husband; but the man in the Tower refused her entrance. So she turned back, with a vague idea of going home.

She had not gone far, though, before she realized what *home* really meant – empty rooms, dark thoughts, and long, long hours of silence.

Marene had had enough of silence.

So it was that she found herself riding the elevator up to Clephe's apartment, ringing the doorbell, going inside when no one answered. Odd that the door was unlocked. "Clephe?" she called. "Are you there?"

"In here," Clephe's voice, strangely distant, came from somewhere up ahead and to the right. Marene followed it and found herself standing in front of the closed bathroom door. "They turned the water back on a few hours ago. I'm in the bathtub, Marene."

"Oh, well – I'll leave you alone, then."

"What did you need?"

"I...nothing. I just wanted to talk to someone for a little while. You know, with everything that's happened." She waited, but no answer was forthcoming. "Well, I'll talk to you later – "

"Don't go," Clephe said suddenly. "I wouldn't mind a little conversation. I have the shower curtain drawn. Come inside and talk to me. Please?"

"All right," Marene said gratefully.

Steam filled the little bathroom, fogging up the mirror and obscuring her reflection as she entered. Droplets of moisture covered the wide white shower curtain. She lowered the toilet cover and sat down.

"You shouldn't leave your door unlocked," said Marene. "It isn't safe."



"I'm not afraid of anyone breaking in," Clephe replied softly. There was a tremor in her voice. For the first time, Marene began to suspect that something was wrong, but the idea slipped away quickly. Marene's mind was not used to handling such thoughts.

"I just got out of the camps an hour or two ago," she said conversationally. "How long have you been out?"

"I was never in them. I just stayed home."

"How did you survive?"

"I managed." Sounds of sloshing water came from the bathtub. "What was it like in those places?"

"Crowded," Marene answered, remembering. "It was hard to sleep."

"Noisy?"

"No, it was really quiet...it's just that I kept thinking about Nalim."

"Nalim." Clephe made a sound that was not a laugh. "Yeah."

Say something, thought Marene, he's your brother, don't you care? "It's silly...I kept thinking that I was being punished, you know? That Nalim was taken from me because I didn't love him enough – that somehow, if I'd cared more while I still had him, he wouldn't be gone. That's silly, isn't it?"

"No."

You weren't supposed to say that, thought Marene. You were supposed to say, yes, that's crazy, stop worrying so much. You weren't supposed to validate my stupid fantasies. "But when I heard he was back, I thought, this is my second chance. And the thing is – I really do love him. I just never realized it, until he was gone." She sighed. "Does any of that make sense?"

"Yes."

"And now he really is back, and I can't even see him." She stood up and drew a line on the mirror with her finger, watching the slow liquid trail it left behind. "I suppose he'll be at the ceremony tomorrow. Maybe I'll see him then."

"What ceremony?" Clephe asked disinterestedly.

"You haven't heard? That woman that came back with him, Ayda, she went to see the oracle and she came out level twenty-seven. She's going to be Potentate."

"Oh."

Marene was getting annoyed; it was safer than getting scared. "So what did you think when you heard the news about Nalim? Were you excited?"

"Sure."

"Is that all you have to say?" Marene demanded. "*Sure?*"

Clephe was silent for so long that Marene began to think she had not heard. "When he was banished," Clephe said finally, "I went crazy. I wanted to destroy everything and everyone. I swore I would find the person responsible, and kill him."

"Did you?" Marene said, laughing to show how silly the idea was.

"No."

"Did you..." She swallowed. "Did you find out who it was?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"Daeci. The Potentate."

"Oh."

"I know you don't believe me. That's all right. Just listen."

"I'm listening," said Marene, trying to sort out this new information. Again the feeling

came that something was out of place; this was not the quiet, witty Clephe that she remembered. This was something new. The fear began to overcome her annoyance.

"It's a funny thing," Clephe said, and the tremors returned to her voice, more strongly than before. "More than anything, I wanted vengeance. I wanted to hurt someone. But the harder I tried, the more people I hurt, and I never came any closer to what I really wanted. And I thought it would be all right, as long as I paid the price, you know? I thought, if I could die, and take him with me, it would all be all right."

"Clephe, calm down, don't – "

"But I didn't die, and neither did he. Just – everyone else. Someone once called me an avenging angel, and I think I truly believed that's what I was. Not anymore. Do you know what I really am, Marene?" The words were breaking apart, becoming difficult to understand. "I'm an angel of death. I feel it around me, burning in my blood, reaching out to strangle whatever I touch. I'm an angel of death."

"Don't be silly," Marene said, making one last desperate attempt at conversation.

Clephe's voice had become so faint that Marene had to lean close to hear. "And I think I could have accepted even that. It wouldn't have been *all right*, but I think I could have lived with it, somehow, because I could justify it. I could tell myself that everything I did, I did for Nalim. Because he was dead, I could accept what I had done. Because he was dead, I could go on living."

"Clephe – "

"But he's not dead, is he? No. He's alive, and he's happy, and he thinks his innocent baby sister will be waiting for him, just as happy, when he comes to visit. But that person is gone, Marene. I don't think she ever existed at all."

"Clephe...you're worrying me. Are you all right?"

The answer was almost inaudible. "No. No, I am not all right."

"Clephe?" Silence. Marene stood, heart suddenly racing. "Clephe! Answer me! Clephe!"

"Marene..." she whispered, "I think...I think I have done a bad thing."

Marene shoved the curtain aside.

There, in the bathtub, lips just above the waterline, eyes closed, lay Nalim's sister, naked, in a cloud of reddening water, thin angry lines on her wrists.

Marene shrieked and reached for a towel to stop the bleeding, frantically punching in the emergency code on her netlink, praying it was not too late.

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Nalim looked down on Zaol Square with equal parts dread and excitement as Ayda fussed over her hair by the mirror. The morning illuminated a waiting crowd of over a million people.

"You're sure I shouldn't wear something more...formal?" Ayda said.

"The city takes pride in seeing the Potentate elevated from the common people. What you have on is fine. Anything more would be seen as pretentious. Although," he added, "at this point you could walk out there dressed as a ballet dancer and no one would notice. Are you going to tell them about the oracle?"

"Couldn't exactly keep it a secret."

A mechanical hiss, and Tolmiach appeared in the doorway. "It's time."

The long, long elevator ride brought them at last to Zaol Square, and into the midst of uproarious discord. Gray guards and black-and-gold guards struggled to hold back the press of the crowd, keeping a thin path clear to the center of the Square. The entire spectrum of human emotion was visible in the faces of the throng: hope – confusion – curiosity – wonder – anger – ecstasy. All

of it directed at Ayda and Nalim.

They reached the clearing in the center, and Nalim took his place to the side among the honored guests. The minister of some minor office called for quiet, and eventually got it. The ceremony began.

As befitted such a momentous event, the usual necessities occurred in their ordained procession. Speeches were made – rituals were performed – obvious facts were recited with dignity, at great length. Over two hours had passed before it was time for Tolmiach's speech, which took half an hour in itself. He made apologies for Daeci's conspicuous absence, citing reasons of health, and he claimed the honor of filling the incumbent Potentate's role in the ceremony, and he spoke of the enormity and blessedness of the occasion, and *et cetera, et cetera...*

Eremis' speech was notable primarily for its brevity. He said:

"I thought myself a visionary, but I was blind; I thought myself a leader, but I was lost. But the gates opened, and behold! I am blind still; but I am lost no longer!"

As if *that* made sense.

A sudden commotion at the edge of the crowd caught Nalim's attention, and a ragged young man pushed out into the clearing. "Demon of Chaos!" he yelled, then raised his arm high, and something flashed – and by the time Nalim realized it was a knife, it was already sunk into Ayda's midsection. Eight gray guards seized the man instantly and dragged him away. The crowd erupted. Nalim rushed to her side, but she pushed him away gently. She held up her hands, calling for order and silence; the area where her stomach would have been was slowly turning red.

"The ceremony will be postponed," Tolmiach announced when the crowd had quieted sufficiently for his voice to be heard.

"No!" said Ayda.

"My lady – "

"I am unharmed."

"But my lady, you are bleeding! The knife – "

"Did I not say I was unharmed?"

Nalim saw the ripples of reverence spreading through the crowd, and he saw what she had done. Well played, Ayda. Well played indeed.

When everyone had settled enough to continue, Ayda nodded to Eremis and Tolmiach that she was ready, and she stood with her back straight, chin lifted high, arms and fingers spread wide. Tolmiach took up his position on her left, and Eremis stood to her right.

"The city is mother," Tolmiach intoned. "The city sustains us in life and receives us in death. Receive the ring of the city." He drew forth a ring, golden and set with six pieces of jet equally spaced around its outside, and placed it on the middle finger of her left hand.

"The Law is father," Eremis pronounced. "The Law is the beacon which guides the soul, and the thunder which sets it free. Receive the ring of the Law." He took a simple band of pure silver and set it on the middle finger of her right hand.

The two men took her hands and raised them high over her head, and they shouted in unison: "*The Potentate!*"

Tumultuous applause followed, on and on, until Nalim thought it would never end. When it finally did, it was time for Ayda's speech.

"Fellow citizens," she began, the tiny microphone at her mouth magnifying her words a hundredfold. "I will be brief.

"A week ago, not one of you knew me. Now here I stand, poised to take the reigns of the city. I know you are curious about who I am, just as I am curious about all of you. We will learn

much about each other in the days to come. I ask for your patience and understanding throughout this process, as we work toward healing the terrible wounds this city has already incurred.

"A few announcements.

"First, I must ask you all to try to return to your ordinary routines as much as possible. Many of you are frightened. You are not alone. But hiding behind locked doors will benefit no one! Return to your jobs; return to your lives. I know that won't be easy. Be courageous, as I know you can! I will do my best to restore peace, but in the end it is you, the people, who determine your own future.

"Second, I am requesting that anyone with any construction, electrical, or medical experience whatsoever report to the Ministry of Labor as soon as possible. Your skills are desperately needed, and you will be compensated.

"Third, I hereby grant a complete pardon to Nalim for the crimes he allegedly committed. In light of recent events I think you will all agree this is more than fair.

"Also! No doubt many of you have heard by now that the oracle is no longer functioning." There was a brief uproar at this, and she raised her hands and shouted for quiet. Nalim took the opportunity to glance at Eremis, but his expression, of course, was unreadable. When the crowd had settled, Ayda continued. "Do not be alarmed! Thiowill's oracle was set in place by Thiowill, and it has served its purpose. Its time is ended! In the ancient days, a man and a woman acted as oracle for the city. They shall do so again. Humans shall judge humans!"

And to Nalim's great amazement, they accepted this. He stared at Ayda, his love – the Potentate, now. What had she done? What was she *doing*?

"Thank you," she said. "This concludes the ceremony. I have duties which I am eager to begin."

She had only taken a few steps toward the path back to the Tower when a young, blond-haired man pushed away from the crowd and stood in front of her. There were tears in his eyes. "My lady, my lady," he cried, "we have to know. Tell me, truly: are you an angel?"

Ayda stopped and took account of his features – his broad, plain face, his wide and fearful eyes. She smiled. "Why?" she said. "Are you?"

He was a moment in answering, taken aback by the question. "No," he stammered, "of course not."

"Are you sure?" she said. "If you were, how would you know?"

The people of the city heard this answer, and wondered greatly.

## Chapter 41

"It means nothing," Niev snapped. Seated in his high-backed chair, his mien might have been placid, if not for the smoldering sparks in his voice and his eyes.

Koriam was less reserved, pacing furiously over the ornately woven rug. "*Nothing?* Do you *know* what they're saying in the streets? A crazy middle-aged man holds back a hundred of Manorviter's finest! No monsters, Niev! *No monsters!* They're all laughing at you down there! Public support for a war on Mirnor has all but evaporated, to say nothing of what the Directorate must think!"

"I tell you it means nothing. The Directorate has already given its approval. Preparations are complete. The army will march tomorrow as planned."

Koriam harrumphed. "What did you think would happen, anyway? Why did you send out those men if you knew what was waiting for them? If you're going to lie, couldn't you at least *try* to cover it up?"



"It was no lie. I saw them, I destroyed them – I don't understand how – "

"Oh, spare it for your peons, will you? You're a madman. You've already destroyed my career. Just...take Mirnor, and try not to cause too many more disasters."

Niev fixed him with an angry stare, which he studiously ignored. "Koriam – "

A bell chimed – someone at the door. "Not now!" Niev bellowed. It chimed again, and he stormed to the front to answer it. "Not now, I said!" He flung open the door.

The messenger held out a scrap of paper dutifully. "But sir – this message comes direct from King Sivete himself."

"What? Give me that," he demanded, and scanned the paper quickly. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I – I don't know, sir...I was told to deliver it to everyone on the Directorate..."

"Lunacy," said Niev. He slammed the door shut, crumpled the paper, and tossed it aside. "Absolute lunacy."

Koriam picked up the message and straightened it out. It read:

*First the mountain, then the city.*

*Surrender now while you still can.*

He crumpled the note again and tossed it into the fireplace, watching thoughtfully as the flames shriveled and consumed it. First the mountain, then the city.

Now what was *that* supposed to mean?

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The smell of isopropyl alcohol tinged the air as Nalim entered the stark little hospital room. Clephe lay on her back, pale, half-covered by a linen sheet that rose and fell slowly in time with her breathing. Her eyes were shut.

Beside her sat Marene, whose lips parted in silent wonder.

He nodded to her. "Hi," he said, voice quiet and shaky. She stared for a long time in the wake of the monosyllable, giving no answer. Slowly, slowly, she went to him, and then her trembling hand found his cheek, grazed it tenderly, lowered.

"Hi," she whispered.

"How is Clephe?" He felt sick to his stomach.

"She's doing fine." Her eyes never left his. "The doctor said it was better that she cut herself sideways across her wrists and not lengthwise, because she bled more slowly that way and gave us more time. They have a counselor who will talk to her once she wakes up..." She seemed not to hear what she was saying. "Nalim. You're alive."

He nodded. "Yeah."

She fell into his arms all at once, and there she stayed, clutching him compulsively. "Nalim," she said, and was content with speaking his name, saying no more. And she kissed him desperately, and he felt on his own cheeks the joyful tears that streaked her own. It was more than he could bear.

He inhaled deeply to steady himself, then took her gently by the shoulders and pushed her away slowly, firmly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't."

"Can't what?"

"I can't..." He pulled the words like slow rusty daggers from his heart: "...be with you

anymore."

"What?" She did not understand.

"I can't be with you anymore. I met someone else. While I was outside the walls."

Slowly, she returned to her seat.

"The angel?" she said at last.

"She isn't an angel," he muttered.

"No? But certainly better than me."

"Not better," Nalim said helplessly. "Different."

"Different. I see." Marene passed a hand over her face, did not look up. "I suppose you're sleeping with her?"

A pause. He nodded.

"I see."

A hundred things to say flashed through his mind, justifications, explanations, empty comforts. He could not bring himself to voice any of them.

"I'm sorry," he told her.

She gave a short, terrible laugh. "Yeah." Another pause, and she turned toward the door. In a voice high with emotion, she said, "I...I have to go..."

He reached out, fingers, grasping at her shoulder. "Marene, wait."

"Don't touch me!" she screamed suddenly, whirling to face him. Fresh tears traced new pathways on her glistening skin. "I..." And she laughed again, in a strange, despairing wonder. "I'm such an idiot."

"Marene..."

"All those nights I lay dreaming about you, hoping, knowing it was impossible, but hoping

anyway. What a waste of time! Imagine, if I had only known, I could have slept like a baby." The sobs came more freely now. Her voice went high. "What was it, a *month*? It must be wonderful to forget that fast, Nalim, wonderful. Tell me, did you spend an hour or two feeling guilty first, or did you skip right to the sex?"

"You weren't the one who was banished," he snapped, suddenly angry for reasons he couldn't understand. "You don't have any idea. I didn't think I would ever see this city again. She was *all I had*, Marene!"

Her mouth opened and he thought she was going to hit him. He thought he would have welcomed that. But she didn't. She only walked to the door and then stopped, half-turned, at the threshold.

"You were all *I had*," she said, and was gone before he could answer.

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Seated on a pile of dirty cushions – the closest thing to a chair in the dank old basement – Iriel watched the telecast with interest. Reliable news about the world outside this room had been scarce these past few days.

"...and announced that Nalim would receive a full pardon, calling her decision, quote, 'more than fair,'" the handsome young news anchor was saying. "Less than an hour ago we received word of another announcement by the new Potentate. She said that the missile project is complete and ready for launch, and that in fact she plans to launch immediately, perhaps even as early as tomorrow. This news comes as a relief to a city which has, for the past three years, lived in the shadow of –"

An empty bottle sailed through the air and collided with the viewscreen in a shower of

sparks and broken glass, ending the broadcast. "About time they did something about that damned rock," came Taphis' voice from behind her. So, another one of these nights. Angry, she wondered, or drunk?

He unzipped his trousers and peed in the corner. Drunk.

"They all love her, you know," he said when he was finished. "Say she's an...angel...or some damned thing. They all love her."

"It's can't be that bad."

He laughed and tousled her hair, as if she were a little girl. "That's what I love about you. Always looking on the bright side. Well, there isn't any bright side this time, darling. It's all black. All black, forever in all directions." He waved his arm around vaguely to demonstrate. "Even my top officers love her now. You know what one of them said to me today?"

Iriel indicated she did not.

"He said, why don't we just go along with the treaty the way we signed it? They'll turn on me, Iriel. I can *smell* it. They'll follow *her* before they follow me. What has she got that I haven't got?"

The capacity to lead, thought Iriel, but she wisely kept that to herself. "Maybe they just – "

"Quiet, darling. I wasn't finished. I was saying...they're going to turn on me. I have to get away. I have to get away soon. Not tonight, but soon. You'll help me, won't you? You'll help me get away?"

"Of course, Taphis. But where are you going to go?"

"There are places," he said. "Not all the rebels have gone soft. There are places – looking to strike – looking for a leader. Tomorrow, I'll go. You promise you'll help me get out of here?"

"Of course," she said soothingly, and he grinned his stupid drunken grin.

"Iriel, what would I do without you? You're the only one left I can trust."

## Chapter 42

Ayda was slowly discovering, with some annoyance, that the pomp of her accession had not ended with yesterday's ceremony. This morning she had been 'invited' (kidnapped, was more like it) to the "Hour of Gifts" – though by her count it had already lasted more than four hours. And it was barely noon.

She sat on a plush velvet chair – thankfully, there had been no talk of a throne yet – in the midst of a vast, ornate hall that had apparently been designed specifically for this occasion, judging by the huge, hexagonal open space behind her. It was now more than half full with an enormous variety of gifts of every size and description. There was a hollow glass swan, filled with tiny pieces of what appeared to be dry noodles. There was a sunblade, similar to the one Nalim had been given just before his banishment, but longer and thinner. There was a glass chandelier that poured out the spectrum in the evening light and painted white tapestries by the moon. There was a jewel-encrusted hardcover edition of the Gray Book – a harp – a miniature of the city, done in remarkable detail – a *puppy*, which she'd been assured someone else would care for – a strange, yet beautiful chalk drawing of the Tower of Law at sunset – the list went on, and on...

She wanted to say, don't do this, I don't need any of this – but of course she had no choice but to accept. Yet she couldn't help but wonder where it all *came* from. Wasn't this the same city that had just emerged from the brink of anarchy? Some of the gift-givers were high government officials or members of the Brotherhood, but many were just ordinary citizens, hoping to make a good impression on their new Potentate...

"Thank you," she said for what seemed like the thousandth time, in response to a bright

young couple's gift of a parabolic mirror. They looked at each other excitedly, probably overcome with joy that the High Angelic Potentate Herself had deigned to speak to *them*. Inwardly Ayda sighed. What would she do – what could anyone *possibly* do – with a parabolic mirror?

Her next benefactor arrived, a stocky man with a thick brown beard. He held a wooden cube, half a meter on a side, with a hinged door that opened on one side.

"Please open it," he said, presenting it to her.

"Thank you," she said automatically – then twisted her mouth in disgust when she saw what was inside: a severed human head.

Taphis's head.

She shut the box. "You had no right."

"Your Eminence, he had me placed high in the Liberation Order. He would have betrayed you. He meant to kill you. We all knew it. He was planning to run away from us, take cover somewhere – "

"You had no *right*!" She rose from the chair and advanced on him. "I never asked you to do this. You didn't have to kill him."

"No, I didn't *have* to," he said proudly. "I did it for you, your Eminence. As a sign of my love." He spread his hands. "If I have displeased you..."

"You have," she snapped, then called to her guards. "Find a cell for this man somewhere." They removed him.

When he was gone, she raised her voice so the entire hall could hear. "There will be no murders in my name! Does everyone understand? There will be *no killing in my name*!"

"Continue," she said finally, and she gestured at the box, sitting on the floor by her feet. "And someone get this thing out of my sight!"

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"Eight minutes to launch," said the voice on the viewscreen, reassuring in its factual confidence. Nalim wished he had a little of that confidence himself just now. He took a seat by Clephe's bed and forced a warm smile.

"Little sister."

"Big brother," she said, her voice still weak. "They tell me you were here before, while I was sleeping. Thanks for coming to see me again."

He shrugged. "Not like I have much else to do," he said lightly, and this time she smiled back. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah."

"The food isn't too bad?"

"I didn't say *that*." They both forced a laugh. The silence stretched on.

"Well," she said finally, "aren't you going to ask me why I did it?"

All pretense of playfulness disappeared.

"Why did you do it?"

She didn't answer right away, leaning back her head, sighing thoughtfully. "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a demon?"

He didn't answer.

"It would have to be pretty bad, wouldn't it? I mean, it isn't as if you get a choice. You're a demon. Even if you wanted to do right, you couldn't, could you? You would still end up hurting people. Killing people." She was staring at something he couldn't see, furrowing her brow. "Did you ever think about what you would do, in the end, if you were a demon and didn't want to be?"



There's only one way to stop the cycle, isn't there? You're going to hurt someone anyway. It might as well be you. It might as well do some good, right?"

"Is that what you think? That you're a demon?"

She counted on the fingers of her left hand. "I killed Faudian. And I killed the astronomer. And I killed the man in the black robe who wasn't Eremis. And I killed Miquim. And I killed Tarsial." Having used up all five fingers, she switched to her right hand. "And I killed Grynnt. And I killed Mernis. And I killed – "

"Clephe." He took her hands, curling her fingers back into her palms. "I know. It's all right. I already know."

She sat up in bed and stared. "You *know*?"

"Eremis told me."

"Eremis!"

He counted on his own fingers. "You didn't kill Tarsial. He killed himself – and so did Miquim, and Grynnt, and all the rest of Niadi. You didn't kill the man in the mask – Wasmeth did that, albeit unintentionally. And you didn't kill the astronomer. Jillian did."

She recoiled in the face of this sudden, relentless logic. "And Faudian?" she demanded. "Is there an explanation for him, too? I murdered him accidentally, maybe?"

"Faudian," he said simply, "was already dead."

She stabbed an accusing finger at him. "Don't you *dare* try to justify his death. It is not all right. It is *not* all right!"

"No, it's not. I'm only telling you the truth. Self-delusion is a luxury you can no longer afford."

She thought about that for a very long time, and the silence settled into them both. When

she spoke again, it was slow, hesitant, faintly hopeful.

"Is there...is there really a world outside?"

"Yes, there is."

"Are you allowed to tell me about it?"

"No." He squeezed her hand. "But I will anyway."

"Because you're afraid that I'll try to kill myself again if you don't give me everything I want?"

"Because you're my sister," he said.

"What is it like, out there?"

"The same as it is in here, mostly, but there's a lot more of it."

"Did you see any demons? Real ones, I mean."

"A few."

"Well?" she prompted after a moment. "Is that all you're going to tell me?"

"Well – it's a long story."

"I'm not going anywhere. Tell me. Only – wait a second. They're launching your missile."

"My missile?"

"You worked on it, didn't you? Shh!"

"Six," the voice was saying. "Five...four...three...two...one...and there's liftoff..." The thin silver spike rose slowly heavenward on a pillar of fire, up, up, until it was lost in the clouds. For all the time Nalim had spent worrying about this launch in the past three years, the moment itself was disappointingly brief. Still, the reporter went on for a while about the 'significance' of the event.

"Must be a relief," said Clephe. "Not having to worry about that stupid missile anymore."

Nalim smiled.

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The missile rose into the sky, through the air, through the clouds, up into the high flat place where eternal sunlight played on the eternal blue. Its silver nosecone shimmered in the afternoon –

It rose –

It rose –

It fell.

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In the city of Manorviter, over a hundred thousand people looked northeast at precisely the same time. An enormous *crack* shivered through the air. They stared in confusion. It is probable that none of them had ever heard a sonic boom before.

Exactly three seconds later, Mount Tasjier evaporated in an incandescent column like a fingertip of the sun.

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When the world turned to thunder and white light, it took Koriām less than a minute to understand what had happened. His first thought was: Daeci! Traitor! He turned on me!

His second thought was to remember the crumpled note he'd held in his hands only yesterday:

*First the mountain, then the city.*

*Surrender now while you still can.*

In the midst of the noise and confusion, he shouted wildly for a messenger.

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Surrounded by the applause of a grateful city, Ayda looked up at the slowly dissipating trail of smoke and allowed herself a small, quiet smile of satisfaction.

Every now and then, something went right.

### Chapter 43

Seated in his deep old leather chair, Koriām was a figure carved from stone; only the thoughtless motion of one finger over the right armrest's cracked surface betrayed his reality. His eyes, now long adjusted to the dark, scanned the shadows in preparation for the coming confrontation. Outside, Manorviter was possessed with a spirit of panic. Inside, he waited for the storm.

It came.

"*Koriām!*" the voice roared.

"In here," he answered placidly.

Niev's silhouette raged into the drawing room, his bare cutlass tracing silver curls in the afternoon air. "I always knew you were a coward."

"There is a difference," Koriām said conversationally, "between cowardice and sanity. A fine line, to be sure."

"You recalled the troops!"

"Yes."

"*Why?*"

Koriam shrugged. "It isn't terribly complicated. Have you looked outside anytime in the past six hours? There is a rather large crater where a rather large mountain once stood."

"Traitor," Niev accused.

"It's all the fashion these days. Think, Niev. Every member of the Directorate received the same message you and I did. If I hadn't called the troops back, one of them would have done it. It is the only rational course. Not a man, woman or child remains in this city who still wants war with Mirnor."

"I want it. And you want it, or you are a liar."

"I want to live long enough to enjoy what little remains of my career. And as for you..." He stood, a slow, determined, fluid motion. "You are no man at all, Niev. You are an animal. Lacking the capacity for thought, you strike out wildly toward power wherever you see it. It is your defining characteristic. It is what told me you would be here now. And here you are."

Niev raised his blade. "You are becoming annoying."

"Oh, by all means, kill me, the closest thing you ever had to an ally. Kill me, if you think it will help your cause."

"I would enjoy it."

"I'm sure." He smiled coldly. "But you see, I anticipated that as well." Koriam signaled with his hand, and a dozen men with crossbows appeared from the shadows, blocking all exits, all weapons trained on Niev. "You're fast. You're not *that* fast."

Niev laughed. "You think that's what this is about? Speed? Whether I can get my sword in you before you get your bolts in me?" He tossed his cutlass aside, out of reach. "You want to fight? Let's fight." He took another step.

"Another step, and you die."

Niev took another step. He twitched as seven crossbow bolts entered him from seven different directions; he did not fall.

Niev took another step. Five more bolts thudded into his body, protruding from his shoulders, his chest, his back, his thighs. Koriām watched the macabre procession in helpless horror, fascinated, unable to move. "Get back," he whispered.

Niev took another step.

He reached out his hand, and with trembling fingers he brushed Koriām's cheek. Koriām's mouth twisted in silent agony –

Niev fell.

Koriām's expression returned to normal. He smiled grimly. "Well done, boys," he said. "That was too close." He stepped over the body, curling his lip in disgust. "Well past time someone disposed of that madman."

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Vilto lay on the cool, itchy grass, staring up into the sky as the sun began its final descent into wherever it was the sun went at night. It was a strange thing, looking into the sky – if you stared up long enough, the world flipped, and you were looking *down* into the sky with the great dark bulk of the earth at your back above, and only the barest strands of magic keeping you from falling out into infinity. His heart quivered with the rush of looking down.

The first stars would be out soon, and that was exciting, too. If he wanted, he could predict ahead of time just where each star would appear, and when – but he didn't. It was more fun this way. He'd been using his future sense less and less lately; there was less reason to, when you weren't always worrying about being killed, or robbed.

Honestly – although he was reluctant to admit it even to himself – he was beginning to like it here.

Convincing Amithy's mother to let him stay had not been difficult. It was easy to refuse shelter to an abstract, invisible boy, but once she saw him, his mud-stained, blood-stained clothes, heard his voice – it was only a matter of time before the motherly instincts overcame all other sensibilities. He'd watched it happen to other women before, knew it would happen here. Amithy had known it too.

The mother was silly that way, but it was not so bad. He was never hungry anymore – eggs or oatmeal in the mornings, a meal at noon, and then at supper, as much as he could eat. Every day! Clean clothes – clean skin – clean hair – clean sheets – clean *everything*. Even a roof to keep out the rain. And there were so many nice things in the house – knives, baskets, bottles, the occasional bit of silver... He'd stolen at first, here and there, but it was far too easy to be any fun, and anyway, where could he take anything to? He was already living here.

This was home.

And Amithy...

'Am,' she called herself. Am was – special. She talked to him. She *smiled*. She showed him the secret places where the hens laid their eggs, showed him which ones were nice and which would peck his fingers, showed him how to put his hands over their eyes so they would think it was nighttime and settle down. She was teaching him to read, a thing too splendid to believe; the thought alone delighted him so much that he recited his newly-learned alphabet then and there, all thirty-one letters, in their sacred order.

But beyond all this – beyond the kind words and the kind actions and the pretty smiles – he was beginning to suspect she actually cared. He thought back to just a few hours ago, when the

great white meteor struck to the north, and the way she had tried to comfort him, whispering to him with trembling hands. Not that he'd *needed* comforting, of course, but still – it was kind of nice, that she had tried. She was always doing little things like that.

He might have gone to the crater, to have a wish granted, only – what would he wish for? Everything he'd ever dreamed of was already here.

The sleepy blue canopy faded to purple far below, and he sighed in pleasure.

A lazy black speck drifting in the indigo depths brought his attention back to the present, and he squinted for a better view. Some kind of bird, maybe, only it was too far away to be a bird. A rukh? He had seen one before, once. It might be a rukh.

The speck descended slowly. Definitely a bird of some kind – he could see the wings, and the neck – but not a rukh. Rukhs were a sort of brownish red, and this was a dark, dark blue, almost black. And the wings were all wrong.

And, he realized as it came lower, it was *huge*.

It became apparent as the thing descended that it was coming down directly on top of him, and he stumbled to his feet and backed away. Some kind of monster – dark, eyeless, and ugly. A name appeared in his mind unbidden: *starbird*. He blinked the thought away, wondering where it had come from, wondering whether he should run.

Then its wide webbed talons touched the grass, and a torrent of ice flooded his brain, and he shivered and crumpled with the weight of the terrible cold.

Somewhere far away, Am shrieked frightfully.

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Outside, it was morning, but that hardly mattered.



Daeci stopped again as they entered the Willowstream chamber, taking a deep breath and leaning heavily on his aide. "Only a little further," the younger man said anxiously. "Are you *sure* you want to go in there again, your Eminence? We aren't really supposed to be here, and there's no more need – "

"Don't tell me about need," Daeci grumbled. "And stop calling me 'Eminence.' I'm not your damned Potentate anymore." He pushed him away and stumbled the last few meters into the icy water, and the old familiar changes began their work in his brain.

Why *was* he here, exactly? It was the scheduled time for meeting with Koriām, and certainly they had much to discuss, but so what? Why not just forget about him, let him wonder why his precious salvation had never come?

Because Koriām had lied. And much as Daeci understood the necessity of lying to others, there was nothing he hated more than being fooled himself.

He wanted answers.

Daeci pushed away from the bright, blurry web of souls and reached into the darkness, focusing on the familiar lonely light he had known for three years now. As he approached, it seemed to him that there was something strange about the light, something *wrong*, but he could not say exactly what. No matter. He made contact –

His body – his physical body – arched its back in sudden anguish, though he felt no part of it – and then he was still.

The transfer complete, he released the stream and heard someone shouting as his senses drifted back to him. His aide. "Your Eminence!" he was saying. "Are you all right?"

It worked, Daeci thought. It *worked*.

He licked his lips. So much knowledge! But the body was weak, dying. Unacceptable. He

needed someone new.

"I'm fine," he called pleasantly. "Just need a little help getting up. Give me your hand, will you?"

## Chapter 44

*It is come.*

The thought jolted Nalim awake, cold sweat racing down his neck, over his jaw, stinging his eyes. Only a dream, he thought gratefully – but the words appeared once more, in his waking mind, and the message became very real.

*It is come.*

The voice belonged to the starbird, he realized. How...? *What's come?*

*Image.* A centipede, writhing in acid. *Image.* A swollen gash, festering, rotten with maggots. *Image.* A wounded animal...

*Enough, I understand!* He ran to the balcony and looked up – sure enough, hundreds of meters above the city, the starbird's unmistakable silhouette drifted in the sky, flanked by seven rukhs. *You came to warn me?*

*Yes.*

*Where is the creature now? Whose body does it have?*

No answer.

*What should I do?*

No answer. He fought down panic. Ayda – he had to warn Ayda. He called her name, but she was nowhere in the suite. She must have been out somewhere. Seizing his netlink off the nightstand, he keyed in Ayda's number and pressed SEND.

Ayda's netlink beeped at the other end of the room, and he cursed. She'd left it behind. That was hardly unusual – she was so used to having a constant connection to the network in Bystolia that she often forgot about 'extra' connection devices. He did find a note in Ayda's smooth, flowing handwriting:

*Nalim. Went to grocery store to buy supplies. Probably could have had things brought here, but a Potentate must be seen by her people! (Am I getting to think like a politician, or what?) Sleep in late and enjoy the morning. Love you always, Ayda.*

He cursed again, and struggled for calm under a growing horror. Think! The creature could be anywhere, anyone. Even Ayda. No, he mustn't think of that, not yet. What should he do – what could he *do*?

Nalim had no idea – but, he thought suddenly, there was someone who might. He picked up his own netlink again and frantically punched in Eremis' number, praying he would be there. Nalim did not believe for a moment that the man's sudden obeisance was genuine, but right now there was little alternative.

A second later he heard Eremis's voice on the other end. "Nalim?"

"Eremis! Listen, I need your help. There is a demon in the city, a terrible demon. We must find a way to stop it."

"I know," said Eremis.

Nalim blinked. "You do?"

"Certainly. It circles patiently, surrounded by lesser demons, watching. Many are afraid, and I know not what to do. Command me."

Of course – he was talking about the starbird. "All right, listen carefully. This demon has a power unlike anything we've seen before. It has reached down with its mind and taken possession

of a human body somewhere in the city. It moves from person to person – each time it takes possession of a new body, its old body dies. It moves by *touch* – physical contact. Right now it could be anyone." Close enough to the truth for his purposes. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Nalim."

"When it takes a body, it gains all that person's thoughts and memories, so it can mimic its host perfectly. There's no easy way to detect it. The body it inhabits gains superhuman speed, reflexes, and endurance, so if you do locate it, be extremely cautious, and don't try hand-to-hand combat under any circumstances."

His description must have painted a grim picture, but all Eremis said was, "I understand, Nalim." The absolute confidence in the older man's voice restored a little of Nalim's.

"Two things are critical above all else. First, protect Ayda's life. I don't know where she is, except that she's out shopping for groceries. Remember that any men you send to protect her may be, or may become, the very enemy we are trying to stop. And second, *do not* let the demon take you. Do not let anyone touch you for any reason. If the demon had control of your face and your knowledge, its potential for destruction would be...unimaginable."

He took a deep breath. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Nalim."

"Very good. Thank you, Eremis."

"Spirit and peace," Eremis said placidly, and he severed the connection.

Slightly reassured, Nalim dressed quickly and prepared to leave. He had to get out of this room, which was the first place the creature would look for him – had to find Ayda...

The starbird's voice returned. *No.*

*Why? I have to leave.*

*No. Stay.*

*If I stay, it will kill me, or worse. I have to find Ayda!*

*No.*

Forget it, thought Nalim, I don't have time to argue. He headed for the door –

A familiar chill rushed up his spine, and his legs stopped so abruptly that he nearly stumbled. It was a bizarre sensation – the nerve endings in his legs still reported to his brain, but he had lost all control. His legs were no longer his own. He could feel the cold place in the back of his mind, twitching his muscles, tugging at his tendons, pulling him back from the exit one step at a time.

*What are you doing?*

*Stay, the starbird instructed, and meet your destiny.*

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It is a strange thing, faith.

Eremis closed his eyes and allowed himself thirty seconds to think. Haste was desperately needed, but thought was a form of action, and he did not have time to rush. He weighed, and he calculated, and the beginnings of a strategy formed in his mind.

Thirty seconds later, he lifted his hand to his netlink –

Jillian burst into his office with fear in her eyes. "My lord," she cried, "the demon king has come. What shall we do?"

"Peace," he said. "You are no good to me here. Return to your post." Jillian never panicked. Something was wrong.

She approached, shaking her head. "I must not leave you, my lord. You are in grave

danger."

"Come no closer," he snapped – an experiment.

She took one more step. "My lord – " And then he knew.

"You," he hissed.

She feigned confusion a second longer, then the mask melted away, and she sneered. "Me," she mocked. "What do you think, old man? How does it feel, looking into the eyes of Chaos? Am I everything you feared?"

"Fear is ignorance," Eremis said coldly. "You, I understand."

"Not yet. But in a couple more seconds, you will."

The dagger appeared in his hand in a flash of silver and black. Jillian tiptoed another step, contemptuously. "A knife! I've seen a lot of those. Go on then, kill me. Show me how little you really understand."

Eremis smiled. "It isn't for you," he whispered – and then she knew what he was about to do, and her eyes went wide.

Nalim, had he been there, would not have understood – nor Tolmiach, nor Clephe, nor indeed even Wasmeth. None of them would have understood, because none of them knew the truth.

For the truth – strange as it seemed – was that Eremis believed.

Beyond everything else, from the very beginning – he had *always* believed.

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Imlaud looked up at the colossal golden structure of the Tower of Law and fumbled in his pockets for a picture of his daughter, which he kissed twice, swallowing nervously. In all the days

since his escape from the Institute that terrible Solstice afternoon, he had not seen Shansia once.

He wanted nothing more. Those dark, sweaty nights on his ragged mattress in the Liberation Order's shelters, he had dreamed of nothing else. He knew she was staying with Essel now, and he longed to go. But greater than his need to hold Shansia again was his fear – his fear that his daughter (and his mother) might see him, love him, only to lose him again. To return, only to be ripped away once more...no. No, it was better not to touch the old wounds until he knew he could heal them. He had to be sure the Brotherhood wasn't chasing him anymore. With Wasmeth dead and Nalim pardoned, there was no reason they should be – but he had to be sure.

But the Brotherhood answered to Eremis, and it was common knowledge now that Eremis did whatever Nalim told him to. Nalim was the key. If only he could convince Nalim, he would have his family back again, and he could finally, finally live. It was a dream so beautiful that he dared not hope it might come true.

Besides, he had another reason for wanting to see Nalim. He needed to apologize.

The Tower's wide front gate received him quietly, and he found himself talking to a burly young receptionist at the main desk. "Can I help you?" the man asked brusquely. Imlaud fought down an urge to run away then and there.

"Yes, I'd, ah...I'd like to see Nalim?"

The man frowned in annoyance. "You and everyone else in the city. Sorry, sir, he's seeing no one. Next!"

"No, look, it's very important..." He saw exasperation creeping over the receptionist's face and thought quickly. "I'm sure you hear that all the time, but it's true. I have important information to give him about his banishment. He knows me – I worked with him on the missile project for three months. Please, can you at least call up and ask if he'll see me?"

"Sir, I'm sorry, but he is seeing *no one*. There's nothing I can do."

Inspiration struck.

"Don't you *recognize* me?" Imlaud demanded.

The man's reply died on his lips as he examined Imlaud carefully for the first time. A long moment later he said, "You were in Wasmeth's Solstice dream."

"Yes."

"Imlaud."

"Yes."

The young man nodded slowly. "Well...tell you what, I'm in a good mood. I'll see what I can do." He tapped some keys on his netlink. "Nalim? I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but there is a man here by the name of Imlaud who's requesting an audience with you...yes sir...yes sir. Very good, sir." He looked up again with some surprise.

"Well?"

"He says he'll see you. Wait, hold on, stamp your thumbprint here – no, your other thumb – there. Hold a second while it scans. All right, now, take that elevator to the top floor – that's the hundred and forty-eighth story – and your thumbprint will get you through the first checkpoint. After that, go through the security scans, and it'll be the only room on the floor. You can't miss it."

Imlaud thanked him. He made his way to the elevators in a kind of daze, hardly believing his luck. The button lit up bright orange when he pushed it.

While he was waiting he noticed a middle-aged woman in the gray robes of the Brotherhood walking in his direction. Suddenly apprehensive again, he focused all his attention on the elevator doors, hoping to be ignored.

He wasn't.



"Excuse me," she said pleasantly, "but I couldn't help overhearing that you're headed to the top floor, to see Nalim. Is that right?"

"Yes." He was so close to freedom now. Why couldn't she just leave him alone?

"So your thumbprint will get you past the checkpoint, then?"

"Ah...yes."

"That's wonderful," said the woman. She glanced down. "Your hands are shaking."

"Oh...yeah...it's nothing, they do that sometimes..."

"Do they." She reached out and took his hand, pressing it firmly. His face contorted in silent pain, but it was over quickly.

A second later, his elevator came. He stepped over Jillian's corpse and entered, rubbing his palms together absently.

His hands were steady.

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Standing, Nalim drummed his fingers madly on the tabletop, the sunblade clutched tightly in his right hand. The starbird's control over him was terrifying – stopping his legs from moving was one thing, but the starbird had actually forced his mouth to speak the words that would allow Imlaud to come up. What he didn't understand was why.

*You're murdering me*, he thought angrily.

The starbird's voice rang insistent and eager in his mind. *Do you feel it coming? Can you see it as it rises?*

And the frightening part was, he *did* feel it. Like a bubble of oil hovering at the surface of clear water, he sensed the enemy's approach, closer – closer –

Imlaud. Poor, nervous, innocent Imlaud. Why did it have to be him?

Closer –

It was here.

The voice that was not Imlaud's voice came over the speaker, calm, cold, emotionless.

"Are you in, Nalim? It's Imlaud."

Nalim heard in reply the voice that was not his own – the starbird had him completely now.

"Come in. I've been expecting you."

The doors parted, and the demon entered.

Imlaud spared a glance at the sword in Nalim's hand. "I see that you have." He smirked.

"The last man who pulled a weapon on me killed himself instead. I hope you won't try anything like that. I do so want you undamaged."

"Eremis has died before," said Nalim.

"So I've heard." Imlaud noticed Ayda's sunblade lying by the bed and picked it up. "Do you collect these? Pretty thing." He held it up to the light, letting the sun ripple down the blade. "You know, it would be fun to slice you apart. I'd leave little bits of you lying around the room, smeared on the sheets, stuck to the walls..." He chuckled. "It might be worth it just to see the look on her face when she figured out it was *you*."

Nalim didn't answer.

Imlaud tossed the sunblade into the air. It completed three neat revolutions before the hilt landed squarely in his palm again. "To tell you the truth, I actually didn't come here to kill Ayda. In fact, I was under the impression that Ayda was dead.

"I killed her, actually. She destroyed my robot, and I was angry, but the mountains blew up on top of her, and I felt pretty good about that. Then someone went and blew up Mount Tasjier, and

scared everyone witless; so naturally I came here, thinking I would have to kill Daeci – which I did, incidentally. But imagine my surprise when I learned that Ayda was still alive, and that someone had put her in *charge* of this dung heap, and that in fact it was *she* who had sent up the missile!" The conversational tone disappeared, and his voice went deadly grim. "Oh no, Nalim, I was not happy. I was not happy at all."

He lifted the sword.

"And yes, I could kill you with this...weapon. But as much fun that would be...I would so much rather see the look on her face when she sees *you* and realizes you're *me*."

Imlaud approached, grinning wildly. Slowly, he reached out his hand...

He stopped, and a strange uncertainty crept through his eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"You...you're not afraid." Imlaud stepped back. "Don't you know what I can do to you? You stupid...*human*, don't you know what I can do to *Ayda*? Why aren't you *afraid*?"

"Come and take me," said Nalim, in a voice like frozen steel.

The monster stared at him, doubting, wondering; and then with a wordless shout he swept his blade like lightning toward Nalim's neck. Nalim was not really surprised when his own weapon, upraised, blocked the stroke well in advance of its target. For just an instant, they stood that way, Nalim and the beast together, unmoving.

All at once Imlaud lunged forward, and ice flooded Nalim's veins as the starbird worked inside him, pulling his strings, moving him with impossible speed. He watched the battle, the motions of his hands, with a strange and disconnected awe. There was no reality in his motions; the interweaving blades moved too swiftly, connected too frequently, for him to follow – often too swiftly to see at all. Metal danced on metal, and the motion of their death-dance was a cascading

wall of steel.

He could not begin to follow the action. But he could feel the starbird's power, and he could see the horror in his enemy's eyes as he forced him to retreat. And with growing excitement, Nalim realized he was winning.

The war lasted all of perhaps ten seconds, then Imlaud leaped back, his eyes two blistering coals. "*Who are you!*" he roared, in a voice like nothing human.

"You know," said Nalim's voice.

Imlaud howled with fury.

Ayda walked into their war carrying two bags of groceries, one in each arm. She saw them standing thus, blades drawn, and she looked from one to the other in blank incomprehension.

"Nalim?" she said finally.

Nalim attacked his enemy. His sight and hearing, hypersensitive to the infinitesimal, perceived Ayda's reaction in a kind of exaggerated slow motion. "Nalim!" she cried, for what seemed like hours. From the corner of his eye, he saw she had dropped the groceries and drawn a cardiac pistol. He wanted to call to her, to tell her – what? To shoot Imlaud...? It didn't matter – his voice was not his own, and the starbird did not choose to speak.

"Ayda, that isn't Nalim!" Imlaud screeched. "The demon has him! Shoot him, before he kills me!"

But Ayda stood in hesitation, unable to act, and the battle continued. Nalim drove Imlaud ever backward, forcing him across the living room, toward the far wall, and finally out onto the balcony. The naked sunlight raked over their weapons, flashing on their silvery edges like microscopic meteor showers, flying and falling by the millisecond. The frigid fires in his spine and skull kindled to new intensity, electrifying every nerve, orchestrating his motion. He kept pushing

– back – back – back across the balcony, up the stairs, toward the garden on the roof of the Tower. Each step brought him new confidence, as he forced Imlaud closer to the end. Deep inside, he could feel the starbird’s confidence also, radiating into him, fueling his determination. Soon, now...very soon...he could feel the monster’s position weakening...

But on the last step of the stairwell he stumbled, and his stroke went wide. It was a tiny thing, a hair's breadth, but it put him on the defensive – and from there, Imlaud pressed his advantage relentlessly.

In a mirror image of their previous exchanges, Nalim ceded one step after another, giving up ground and finding no way to take it back. Fear crept back into him, but under it lay the starbird, a pillar of invincible strength, into which all terror vanished. Nalim did not understand this constant courage, but he clung to it desperately as Imlaud pushed him at last to the very edge of the Tower.

Suddenly Nalim saw it – there, Imlaud had overextended that last parry by a centimeter. A crack in the armor. A flash of silver, and Imlaud’s sunblade tumbled over the precipice, his hand still attached to it –

But even as his arm made the cutting stroke, Nalim discerned the trap he had entered. His counterstroke brought his own blade too far wide, leaving him open for a fraction of a –

Imlaud’s arm slashed like a viper, and his fingertips brushed Nalim’s bare arm –  
Time stopped.

In the space between heartbeats, Nalim felt the alien presence surging into his brain, storming his synapses, rushing over his neural pathways and into the core of his being. The stench of it was toxic – rancid – like liquefied agony. He tried desperately to scream as the last defenses of a weakened mind were overrun...

But the mind being taken was not his own.

The starbird was in him – the starbird *was* him – and it was the starbird that received the invader. The cold place inside him went suddenly dark, and then starbird and enemy alike disappeared in a swarm of light and color – and all was quiet.

The sound of Imlaud's lifeless body hitting the floor registered dimly.

Slowly, wonderingly, he looked up at the silhouette of the starbird – the demon – in the morning sky. The rukhs tore at it, ripping its wings to useless shreds as it flailed in the air, too slow and bulky to defend itself. Slowly, like a collapsing mountainside, it fell. Down – down – it came within range of the cannons, and a stream of crimson arced over the empty sky. Fire consumed the starbird's body. The fireball plummeted and disappeared from view.

Deep inside, Nalim felt the cold place flicker and extinguish. The starbird was dead. For a brief moment, he felt relief.

Then he looked down and found Ayda staring at him, eyes overflowing with tears, the cardiac pistol aimed at his chest.

"Ayda," he said softly, "it's me."

"*Liar.*"

"It's me."

"I saw you touch him. I saw him die. It's you. It's *you!*" she cried.

"Listen to me," he said slowly. "The starbird was in me. When Imlaud touched me, he entered the starbird, not me. The starbird is dead. I'm telling you the truth. It's me. It's Nalim."

"Liar," she whispered.

"Ayda, I love – "

"Don't you *dare* say it!" she screamed. "I will kill you – I will kill you – " But still she did

not fire.

"Ayda, if there were any way to prove it to you, I would. But I can't. I can't prove who I am. All I can do is ask you to trust me."

The pistol quivered in her hands.

"You have to make a decision," he said slowly. He could see the confusion in her eyes, and he played to it desperately. "You either have to pull the trigger, or drop the gun. One or the other. Now I want you to look at me, and tell me what you see. Look in my eyes, and tell me. Am I your enemy?"

"Nalim..."

"Ayda," he said softly, "if you shoot me, you will never know."

She dropped the gun.

He went to her, took her hand, wrapped his arms around her. And slowly, slowly, the tension disappeared from her, and she looked up, and saw that it truly was him – and then all at once she laughed, and he laughed with her, because it was over, it was perfectly, gloriously, wondrously, finally over.

## Chapter 45

A week later Tolmiach entered the Potentate's office and found it empty. On the desk was a handwritten note:

*Thank you for your courage and support, but I can stay no longer. Tolmiach, your level is now the highest in the city. Lead your people as justly as I know you can. I do not believe I will return; regardless, do not let them expect it. Your city will grow more strongly now, free of my shadow. I believe in you; so you must also. Ayda.*

Surveillance tapes revealed that she and Nalim had left quietly in the night. The starbird's body was also gone.

Tolmiach was not surprised.

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Loiess, Master Librarian of the Seventh Library, came to see Clephe with a smile on her face. "Feeling better?" she asked cheerfully.

"Feeling just fine," said Clephe. "But I'd be a lot happier if I could get out of this place."

Loiess bowed low. "Your wish is my command," she intoned.

"Are you serious?"

She grinned. "The doctor says you can go." Then, leaning close and whispering privately: "I think he's sick of hearing you complain about the food."

"But I was supposed to be on this damned Suicide Watch for another week at least," Clephe grumbled. "They won't even let me have plastic knives. I have to cut my chicken patties with the edge of a spoon."

"Fear not; soon you shall slice patties like warm butter. The doctor said he thinks you'll be fine now. Besides, I don't think he wants to interfere too much with your...ah...new duties."

"My what?"

"Oh yes, that was the other thing." Loiess's grin threatened to split her jaw from her face. She handed Clephe a folded sheet of paper. "Read."

Clephe read:

*As per the nomination of Lord Eremis in his last will and testament, and following the unanimous approval of the Library Council, Clephe, formerly Master Librarian of the Fifth*



*Library, is hereby promoted to Lord Master Librarian of the City, accompanied by all the rights and duties therein. May she rise to this new responsibility with the zeal and determination she has already so ably displayed.*

"That's wonderful," she said.

But she knew the truth: she had only received this honor by virtue of Nalim's influence over Eremis. As much as she tried to be happy, the thought nagged her, and she could not be rid of it.

It would be several weeks yet before she found Eremis's will in the archives, read it herself, and noticed the date by the signature: the day he had visited her in prison, well before Nalim's return.

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Marene followed the long line of mourners in their slow procession past the three open caskets. Over half the city had turned out in observance of the all-day triple funeral. She saw their faces one at a time, like rubber mannequins, expressionless in their unearthly repose. Wasmeth – the destroyer and redeemer of the city. Daeci – his life finally sapped by the slow drain of the Willowstream, his end long expected but sobering nonetheless. Eremis – the ageless, the invincible, whose death many did not believe even now. They made a stately triumvirate, arrayed like pale statues in their expensive coffins. Having ceased to be human beings, they now began their transformations into symbols. Eremis, at least, had begun that transformation long ago.

Marene felt nothing inside her for these empty corpses, and the afternoon passed in disremembered snippets of conversations, half-smiles and elegant tears. Her mind lay elsewhere. Where was the funeral for Nalim, she wondered furiously, more dead to her now than any of these

sad white faces? Where were the comforting words for her, who was, come to think of it, still legally married?

Yet after a few days, even self-pity lost its appeal; and by the time she brought herself to question whether she had ever really loved him at all, life – as it frequently did – had moved on.

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Iriel knelt by the low yellow plastic table, watching as Imlaud's daughter moved her magenta crayon over a sheet of paper. Iriel had asked her to draw a picture of how she was feeling right now.

Shansia was drawing a wide smiling face, surrounded by flowers.

"Shansia," she said, "do you remember your father?"

She shook her head. No.

"Do you understand what happened to him?"

She nodded.

"Tell me what happened to your father."

"He died," she said placidly, adding another petal to one of her daisies.

"Does that make you sad?"

"I guess."

Some counselor I am, thought Iriel. Her father is dead, and I'm more upset than she is. What am I supposed to do? Yell at her? Make her cry?

Spirit of the Law. *I've* cried enough.

Shansia was too young, she knew. She didn't understand – couldn't understand. Not yet. Later, when she was older, the questions would come, and then, perhaps, the tears. Later.

But for now –

She looked down at the wide magenta grin and felt an involuntary twitch at the corners of her own lips.

For now – for just a little while, anyway – perhaps it was all right to be happy.

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Tirrax shuffled through the latest reports from the Core, which was fast growing out of its infancy and into the role of its predecessor. The letters and numbers ran together after a while. They all said the same thing: the world was changing.

The Core was constructing new robots, and modifying old ones, to exist independently outside the universal network. In the event of another full-scale shutdown, it was important to have workers who could carry on the city in the absence of central direction. In the same spirit, scouts and emissaries had been sent to the Ashlands, in the hopes of re-establishing contact with the victims of the original Meyer virus and their descendants. With Whitebridge no longer a barrier, it was important to develop good relations with as many of them as could be reasoned with – and the rest, at least, had to be discovered and understood. The world was changing, and there was no more room for ignorance.

Formal peace accords were still pending between Mirnor and Manorviter, but as no actual conflict had occurred between them, Tirrax was optimistic about the outcome. King Sivete was a reasonable man, and Manorviter's Directorate – sans Niev and Koriam – seemed fairly in awe of him now. Sanctum was keeping out of the discussions, having recalled all of its rukhs temporarily in expectation of some glorious event; the rebirth of the starbird should occur sometime in the next month or two. With its new and deeper telepathic abilities, it would soon emerge as a major power

once more. The new Core, it seemed, had arrived none too soon.

The United Erio-Joran League had taken the first step toward achieving the United part of its name, to the consternation of many; but the alliance – and the marriage – appeared stable, and there had been no assassination attempts lately. Crime rates were down – a little. At least the rumors of civil war looked to be no more than rumors.

And Tirrax himself...

He was keeping busy. As he spent more time among the machines and his understanding of their city grew, he was able to do more and more real work. He'd become good friends with Yodin, who had introduced him to another robot of the same model as Krace had been. That was strange, like hearing an old friend speak with a new voice, but he was getting used to it. The two of them were planning a memorial for Krace somewhere near the remains of Autumn and Winter – the details had yet to be finalized, but working them out gave him a good feeling.

And still there was Ayda.

He saw less of her now, but she was forever on his mind. Her eyes. Her courage. Her laughter, and the way the starlight shimmered in her hair when she walked the streets at night. There was no one else like her, no one else in all the world.

Tirrax did not want to love her. Perhaps he should leave, stop torturing himself. More than once he'd made up his mind to return to Manorviter, once and for all, and put the impossible behind him.

And yet –

She *was* beautiful, wasn't she?

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To the west of Bystolia, a slow and shimmering mist settled over the banks of the Glass Sea. Nalim's fingers crept up Ayda's back and came to rest on her shoulder, and she sighed contentedly. He closed his eyes and listened as the sea sighed also. For all the days that had passed since the death of the starbird, he had not yet tired of peace.

"Lialme Nalim," she said quietly.

"Lialma Ayda."

"Do you think your people will ever leave their walls?"

It was a question he'd been considering for weeks now. "With the oracle gone, they will," he said. "Sooner or later, they will. Besides, Clephe knows the truth, and she'll never let it die."

"You miss her?"

"Yes. Very much." He closed his eyes, absorbing the quiet. "I can't go back, though. Not again."

"I know."

The silence returned for a while, then Ayda broke it again. "I can't help thinking, though – it was incredibly lucky, the way this all worked out. With the starbird, I mean, and the – and Imlaud."

"What do you mean?"

"Well – the starbird needed the creature to enter your mind so it could be reborn. But it was *me* the creature was looking for. And once it got hold of me, it would never have let me go – I was too perfect of a prize to release. So, I was just thinking how risky it was to keep you in the Tower. What if the enemy had gotten to me first? It all would have been over, right there..." She squeezed his hand. "Sorry. I know it isn't something you like to think about. Just something that's been on my mind for a while..."

"No, it's all right," said Nalim. "I don't mind talking about it. But it wasn't luck."

"What do you mean?"

"The starbird. It knew exactly what was going to happen."

"How?" she said.

Nalim explained.

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Vilto awoke slowly, blinking at the light. He groaned, and then Am was there, overflowing with relief and joy. She pressed a hand to his forehead. "Are you awake?" she asked excitedly. "Do you understand me?"

"Yeah," he grumbled.

"We were so worried – you were sick for days and days – you slept almost all the time and you didn't say anything – we could hardly get you to eat – "

"I don't remember any of it," he said. "Last thing I remember is...the monster..."

"Shh. Don't worry about that now. The monster is gone. You're going to be fine. Wait here, I'll bring you some broth." She kissed his cheek and dashed out of the room.

He was going to be fine, she'd said. He wanted to be sure. Instinctively, Vilto looked into his vision, searching, wondering what the future held. He reached out – searching – searching –

Searching –

He realized he had no idea.