

# POWER OF DREAMTECH

Book 3 of the Dreamtech Trilogy

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ISAAC PETROV

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## What happened in Books 1 and 2?

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Year 2515: Ximena Epullan is an eager PhD student from the *Goah's Imperia of the Americas*, and for the first time in her life, a history seminar is confronting her with conflicting narratives.

But this is no mere university seminar.

Professor Miyagi—a celebrity historian—has brought to life the *Global Program* in an attempt to begin remedying the geopolitical tensions that plague the worlds since the Dreamwars. And what better way than bringing together historians from both sides to explore the defining historical events of their age?

Using the latest dream sensorial technology, Ximena and her fellow history students are experiencing in full intimate immersion the deeds of Edda van Dolah a century ago in the remote colony of Lunteren.

Edda van Dolah.

*Juf* Edda.

Ximena is fiercely fascinated by this historical character. A hero and role model since her youth, who Ximena has secretly learned is her direct ancestor! As Professor Miyagi's seminar

began, Edda was a sixteen-year old schoolteacher, obsessed with saving her father from the *Joyousday*.

*But what is the Joyousday?* Ah, good question. A lot has happened since the Dreamwars, but before then, *every* human died upon reaching 27 years of age. No exceptions. And the tradition of the Joyousday was the humane way to go, before Dementia Furiosa—*Dem*—had time to kill.

*But what is Dem?* Ah, an even better question. Dem was the inescapable disease that killed *every* human before reaching 28 years of age. Period. The Dem-Pandemic caused the Second Collapse of the 22nd Century, and left humanity at the doors of extinction. The only survivors—those that miraculously adapted their societies to such short lifespans—spread across the world a simple, rural lifestyle dictated by the Head of Goah—*aws Head*—and *joyously* died when told to.

But Edda would not have any of it! She *knew* that Dem was no more. Goah's Mercy, nobody's seen a case for ages! She *knew* the horrifying truth beneath the myth of Dem: that *aws Head* *poisoned* everybody during the Joyousday rituals. With a perennially young and ignorant population, *aws Head* have kept their ironclad hold on society for almost three hundred years. A hold that Edda was hell-bent on breaking—together with whatever else would cross her path—to save her father.

And the world.

But how could a colonial schoolteacher hope to break the spine of the largest empire the world has ever seen?

Alien technology. That's how.

*Dreamtech*. Also known as the *Paths of the Mind Walkers*: the ability to manipulate and share dreams.

Ximena and her fellow students have already witnessed first hand, as if they had been physically there, how the marai—aliens of the mind that manifest in dreams—selected in the *Trials of Worth and Soul* a few promising humans to save humanity from itself. Edda and her best friend, Aline, were

among their best candidates. However, afraid of the risks, the marai prematurely canceled further transfer of dreamtech to humans, and then vanished from the historical landscape. At least for now.

Edda and Aline couldn't care less. Between both of them, they had acquired enough dreamtech to plant the seeds of a rebellion against the Joyousday and aws Head. And so they did when they unleashed the *Century Blasphemy* Imperium-wide!

Aws Head's reaction was swift, harsh and arrived with horses and machine guns. Grand Inquisitor Archer Rhodes and his White Guards of aws Fist ruthlessly occupied Lunteren and arrested Edda and Aline. As official blasphemers, their days are numbered.

Willem—a beloved Lunteren teacher and Edda's dad—didn't react kindly to his daughter's fate. Mad from grief, he slashed out publicly against aws Head and renounced his Joyousday. Many of his fellow colonists seemed to empathize, and now the promise of rebellion stirs the populace.

But Inquisitor Rhodes knows his business all too well...

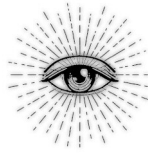




# Western Europe 2399 A.D.







## HARD POWER

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### Episode VII

The best bridge between despair and hope is a good night's sleep.

E. Joseph Cossman

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*Anemoon's lips curve into a smirk. "You live a precious life, spezzi. So comfortable in your sense of belonging. You'd never understand that dignity is worth dying for."*

*"Is it also worth killing for?"*

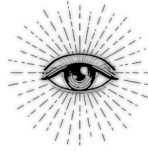
*Anemoon's smirk vanishes. Her voice turns solemn. "I'd rather kill for something than die for nothing."*







## ONE



### Permanent, Exemplary, Legitimate

“Thank you for letting me take over your office, Quaestor,” the Inquisitor says.

Ximena finds Marjolein’s office surprisingly small and functional, even spartan. A desk, a wooden chair, a cabinet filled with folders, a compact radio device hanging on the wall, and a bulky photocopy machine. No indulgences. No distractions. Grand Inquisitor Rhodes is sitting behind the desk, a pencil in his right hand, squinting at a notebook with scribbled notes. The electric light from the roof lamp is soft, but enough to cast away the shadows of the winter dusk that loom beyond the tiny window.

“Pleased to assist, Grand Inquisitor,” Marjolein says, her voice cool and professional. “I’m not much in, anyway, since your arrival. Circumstances are forcing me to be, uh, more *immediate* to my people. It will please you to know that the Forum has finally been vacated. The hospital was overwhelmed for a couple of hours—nothing serious, Goah be praised; just some bruises, concussions, and a few broken bones—but most are back in their homes by now.”

“So I’ve heard.” The Inquisitor raises his gaze to

Marjolein, who is standing in the space between the desk and the door. “You are a good Quaestor,” he says, nodding. “I respect that. In Worthing, and in the other primordial colonies on the shores of Britain, our Quaestors have too often been... lacking.”

“Thank you, Grand Inquisitor. I appreciate your kind words. Hmm,” she clears her throat and shifts her weight, “I hope you had the opportunity to put in a good word to aw’s Consul?”

“Well, after the Forum, er, *altercations* this afternoon, I had to call it in.” He gestures at the radio device attached to the wall nearby, wires crawling crudely up and through the roof. “After my preliminary report, she personally got on the radio.” He shakes his head once. “It wasn’t pretty. And I must admit that I see where she’s coming from. There is something deeply rotten going on. And not just in Lunteren. Something is stirring the entire region. I don’t like what I see unfolding here, Quaestor. As Imperial Commander of aw’s Fist, my priority is naturally to stop the rot from spreading. As we speak, most of my forces are marching out of Oosterbeek on their way to the rest of Geldershire. Yes, I know,” he mutters to himself, a finger tapping his chin, “they’re spread too thin for my taste, but,” he turns his eyes back to Marjolein and smiles, “this is hardly a military emergency, just a matter of public order. I trust their presence will suffice to remind our esteemed colonists that aw’s Head is watching closely.”

“Sounds like a wise precaution, Grand Inquisitor. And you said you spoke with Consul Levinsohn about my, uh, *efforts*?”

“Oh, I got sidetracked there, didn’t I?” He chuckles and holds her anxious gaze for a moment. “I owe you the truth, Quaestor. Your professional reputation is in tatters.”

Marjolein blinks and stares at him in silence, her features set in stone.

“I’m truly sorry, Quaestor. I did remind Consul Levinsohn



that it was you personally who requested my presence here. Way I see it, you did what you had to do to fix the problem at hand. Unfortunately, aws Head needs to make an example of Lunteren. And as far as aws Head is concerned, you *are* Lunteren, a convenient scapegoat. The Century Blasphemy was too public an affair, Quaestor, so this is not just soul-saving duty I'm doing here. This is also *politics*." He speaks the word like it is a curse.

"I appreciate your transparency, Grand Inquisitor," Marjolein says with a sad, but surprisingly calm voice. "I have some affinity for politics myself, so I already saw this coming." Much to her own astonishment, Ximena can't repress a pinch of admiration for how the woman takes notice of her shattered future. Ximena doubts she herself would react so graciously were she expelled from Townsend. *Am I empathizing with Mathus?* Marjolein clears her throat and says without a hint of distress, "But there are more urgent matters now. You were not there before, in the Forum—and I'm sorry I asked you to stay away. I thought it would ease the mood, but I was wrong. It was... *madness!* I'm very afraid for Lunteren, Grand Inquisitor. Terrified. And I don't know what to do anymore. So, I put myself and my office—as long as it remains mine—in your hands."

"I appreciate your support, Quaestor." He smiles at her, almost warmly. "But there's nothing to worry about. At least, not regarding the colony. Lunteren is just going through the obligatory episode of hysteria. I know, I know." He holds up his hand as she is about to say something. "I wasn't there, but I've been briefed in detail about the events in the Forum. Who did what," he taps with his finger the hand-annotated papers on the desk, "and who said what. I can assure you everything is under control. This heresy is still in its embryonic phase, Goah be praised. Your trust in me is not misplaced, Quaestor. I'm good at this. I've handled much worse in Britain and

always came out on top. Now, let's get the ball rolling, shall we?"

"Of course, Grand Inquisitor. How can I be of service?" Marjolein asks, her voice firm and confident, her hands trembling behind her back.

"Hmm, let's see." He picks up the hand-written paper on the top of the pile with his left hand and takes a long look at it. "Politics is not my forte, so I requested advise from Emperor Cisek."

Marjolein's lips part. "You spoke with the Emperor?!"

"The fist needs instructions from the head." He chuckles. "On the odd occasion. And Castimer is good with politics." *Look at him*, Ximena thinks. *Grand Inquisitor Rhodes is not above bragging*. "He suggested that I engineer a solution that is, first," he pulls out his right thumb, "*permanent*, of course." He throws Marjolein a glance and keeps reading. "Second, *exemplary*," he says as he pulls out his right index, "and third, *legitimate*," his middle finger joins the count. "Okay. Yes. That's the tricky one. *Legitimate*. Hmm." He stares at the page with the practiced look of a surgeon about to slice open a swollen belly, unconsciously moving his lips. "Hmm."

After a long while, he looks over at her. "Okay, I've got a concept. But we'll need your Colony Elders to cover our legitimate asses. Please Quaestor, send for them. Just tell them it's a matter of urgency, blah, blah." He waves his hand, as if no further explanation was required. "Oh! And send for that reporter as well. What was her name?" He snaps his fingers. "Uh—"

"Elder de Vroome?"

"That one. No legitimacy without transparency, right?" he says with a smirk. "And while we wait, I would appreciate some help to copy some documents." He glowers at the photocopy machine in the corner like it were a spawn of hell. "Oh, and I also need to address the colony. Would you be so kind to

explain how to activate the, uh, *Public Address* mode on this... *thing?*” He taps the small radio device on the wall.

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“ATTENTION, COLONISTS OF LUNTEREN. THIS IS GRAND INQUISITOR ARCHER RHODES. ATTENTION, COLONISTS OF LUNTEREN. PLEASE DROP EVERYTHING, STAND AND LISTEN CAREFULLY. THIS ANNOUNCEMENT AFFECTS YOU PROFOUNDLY AND DIRECTLY. I REPEAT, DROP EVERYTHING, STAND AND LISTEN. IF YOU ARE BREATHING, THIS MESSAGE IS FOR YOU.

“BY THE POWERS BESTOWED UPON THE OFFICE OF THE INQUISITION BY THE HEAD OF GOAH, AND EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY—SEVENTEEN HOURS OF THE THIRTIETH OF JANUARY TWENTY-FOUR HUNDRED—I, INQUISITOR RHODES, HEREBY WITHDRAW THE GIFT OF GOAH FROM LUNTEREN. I REPEAT, I WITHDRAW THE GIFT OF GOAH FROM LUNTEREN. EFFECTIVE NOW.

“ATTENTION, DEPENDENTS OF LUNTEREN. YOUR COLONIAL STATUS HAS BEEN REVOKED. YOUR SACRED RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES AS PRESCRIBED BY THE COMPACTS OF GOAH HAVE BEEN REVOKED. THE DEPENDENCY OF LUNTEREN IS NOW IN DEMONIC QUARANTINE.

“I, GRAND INQUISITOR ARCHER RHODES, BY THE POWER BESTOWED UPON ME BY THE HEAD OF GOAH, HEREBY TAKE DOMINION OVER THE AFFAIRS AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE DEPENDENCY OF LUNTEREN, AND THUS DECREE AS FOLLOWS:

“FIRST, THAT COLONY ELDERS STAY IN CHARGE

OF THEIR RESPECTIVE OFFICES FOR THE TIME BEING, BUT REPORT DIRECTLY TO ME.

“SECOND, THAT DEPENDENTS ARE FORBIDDEN FROM ROAMING PUBLIC SPACES BETWEEN SUNSET AND SUNRISE.

“THIRD, THAT DEPENDENTS ARE FORBIDDEN FROM GATHERING IN NUMBERS OF THREE OR MORE, EXCEPT WITH FAMILY MEMBERS IN THE HOME SPACE, OR WORK COLLEAGUES IN THE WORKPLACE.

“FOURTH, THAT DEPENDENTS ARE FORBIDDEN FROM LEAVING THE DEPENDENCY OF LUNTEREN. ROADS AND HARBOR ARE STRICTLY OFF LIMITS.

“EXCEPTIONAL DISPENSATION FOR CURFEW, GATHERING OR QUARANTINE MAY BE REQUESTED IN THE OFFICE OF YOUR QUAESTOR. WITHOUT VALID DISPENSATION, ANY VIOLATION SHALL BE DEEMED IRREFUTABLE PROOF OF DEMONIC POSSESSION.

“STRICT ENFORCEMENT BEGINS IN THIRTY MINUTES. DEPENDENTS OF LUNTEREN, YOU HAVE NOW THIRTY MINUTES TO MOVE TO YOUR QUARTERS.

“I THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION.”

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The Inquisitor calmly hangs the transmitter piece on the wall-nailed radio device, and turns to the seven horrified figures—Marjolein, the five Colony Elders, and the reporter wielding a microphone in her hand—standing elbow to elbow in the small office.

“Elder de Vroome,” the Inquisitor says to the reporter.

“You may keep recording. Germania might want to know what really happens here today, and there’s nothing to hide.”

“Germania, yes,” she says, her expression lit up in excitement, “and the rest of the Hanseatic Imperium, I can guarantee you! A Withdrawal in modern times is major news! What did your investigation uncover to justify such a drastic measure, Grand Inquisitor Rhodes?”

“Nothing extraordinary. A simple case of heresy contagion triggered by demonic influence. It’s rare, but it happens. No big deal.”

“No big deal?!” a male Colony Elder asks, voice shrill with indignation. Ximena notices a strong resemblance to Rutger. His father, perhaps? “This is... a catastrophe! With no trade... What are we going to do?! I’ll have to close my factory!”

“And our crops, our fishing!” a tall, female Colony Elder joins the fray. “Our industry, Goah’s Mercy! How can we possibly attend to our livelihoods if we can’t even step out of the colony?”

“Not *colony*, Colder Beulens,” the Inquisitor says. “*Dependency*. And yes, it will undoubtedly be painful. Of course, aw’s Head is not without compassion.” He gives the reporter a complicit nod. “All families still keep most of this year’s allotted karma, and I’ll of course allow the entry of a few selected merchants with basic supplies.”

“But the prices—they’ll sky-rocket!” another Colder says, a woman with East Asian features. “This will attract all sorts of profiteers, vultures—”

“Painful indeed, Colder de Ridder,” the Inquisitor says, nodding to her with sympathetic eyes. “In extreme, justified cases—life-or-death situations—it’s still possible to request a dispensation. But for the rest...” he shrugs. “This is a quarantine after all.”

“How long?” Colder van Althuis asks. “This is temporary, isn’t it? You’ve already locked up the demons, Goah’s Mercy!”

“Just the low-hanging fruit, Colder van Althuis. But the heresy is spreading, as was painfully obvious two hours ago in your Forum. Fortunately, demons in this early stage of infection are very, uh, outgoing, and are still easy to identify. I hope this,” the Inquisitor waves his hand in the air, “*episode* is more like Lunteren caught a bad flu, and just needs to spend a few days of high fever in bed. But Goah knows I might be mistaken, and it might resemble more the onset of Dem, and the beginning of Lunteren’s irreversible end.”

“Surely not—!” Colder van Althuis begins, but the Inquisitor keeps talking, adding more emphasis to every word.

“I’ve seen it before many times—in my homeland. When demons spread out of control—unconstrained by even the most strictly enforced quarantine—in the end, only fire and ashes can cleanse the land. I answer a sacred call, Colony Elders. I save souls. No matter how.”

Colder de Ridder gasps as Colder Beulens covers her mouth and shakes her head in dismay. The rest stare with blank eyes, lips almost invisible. Only the reporter—holding her open microphone in the air—flashes the shadow of a smile.

“I’m sure it’s just an insignificant flu, Grand Inquisitor!” Colder van Althuis says, eager to fill the lingering silence. “We all trust your instincts. Your investigative skills have been nothing short of outstanding. Please tell us how we can, er, *expedite* the cure?”

The Inquisitor smiles, takes a pile of five folders on the desk and hands one to each Colony Elder. “A report of my investigation,” he says as they hungrily open the folder. “Three pages, as you can see. The first one is a list of all my findings so far. I trust my writing is legible enough, and the photocopies not too blurry?”

The Colony Elders do not reply, eyes scanning down the

long list of bullet-pointed facts. Some of them nod casually, others unconsciously mumble some of the written words.

“The *second* page,” the Inquisitor says a notch louder, prompting them to raise their heads at him, “is my humble recommendation. Namely, to judge the suspects all together in a single trial. An impartial, public trial, presided by the full panel of Colony Elders,” he points his finger at them, “with all legal guarantees, and following all due traditions of a Court of aws Compacts under aws Eye. Broadcasted live, of course,” he smiles at the eager reporter, “so that colonists throughout the whole Imperium can bear witness to the Justice of Goah.” He pauses and meets the gaze of each of the Colony Elders’ eyes in sequence. “Justice delivered from right here, by the pious people of Lunteren *themselves*, for everybody to see.”

The two men and three women of the Elder Council nod at each other with conviction, and the reporter looks like she’s about to cheer. Only Marjolein keeps a blank expression, her eyes turned to the wall.

The Inquisitor waves a hand, and says: “After the public cleansing—also to be broadcasted Imperium-wide, of course—aws Head will no doubt restitute the Gift of Goah to the dependency of Lunteren.”

“You *are* truly touched by Goah, Grand Inquisitor,” Colder van Althuis says. “How long do you need to set up a Court of aws Compacts?”

“You tell me,” the Inquisitor says. “I have suspended none of your office prerogatives, Colony Elders. You are still the maximum authority on judicial matters in the dependency of Lunteren.”

“How about tomorrow?” Colder van Althuis says, exchanging a glance with his other four colleagues, and then turning to Marjolein. “Quaestor Mathus, how much time does your staff requires to adapt aws Eye for a public Court of aws Compacts?”

“Not long. But surely the suspect’s legal counselors will require time to—”

“And what about you, Elder de Vroome?” Colder van Althuis asks the reporter. “How long to set up your equipment inside aw’s Eye? Can you be ready for, say, tomorrow afternoon?”

“Sure, but that’s not the problem,” she says, her voice shrill with excitement. “I first need to buzz all the networks, so that they fill some air on the news slips with the upcoming event. You know, a hype campaign—excite public expectations and all that. It would be unforgivable if, after you’re done here, everybody’s missed it, wouldn’t it?”

“Hmm, okay, how long then? The bare minimum, please.”

“The longer you give me, the larger the audience. I dunno, a few days, at the very least. What about next Sunday? That gives the networks the whole week to pump it up, and then on Sunday—with all hands and minds off work—we’ll get every ear in the Imperium hanging from their radios. Lunteren will be big news! Again!”

“Yes.” Colder van Althuis nods. “Okay, I propose a motion. Next Sunday. Your votes, please.” He raises his hand and turns to the other four Colony Elders, all of whom raise their palms as one.

“Then it is agreed,” the Inquisitor says. “The Court of aw’s Compacts will convene in the Eye of Goah next, er,” he leans and scans with a finger the papers on the desk, “Sunday, 6th of February. At ten hours. Cleansing will be carried out on the Forum right afterward, around noon.” He smiles, visibly satisfied. “Now, with my thanks to you all, you’re dismissed.”

“And the third page?” Colder Beulers asks, eyeing the paper in her hand.

“Ah, yes,” the Inquisitor says, waving a finger at the document the five Colders hold in their hands, “a takeaway for



your information. It is the list—as of today—of all suspects of demon possession.”

They eagerly turn the page.

Eyes widen at once.

“What’s the meaning of this?!” Colder Siever is the first to react, his voice slashing like a whip that makes Ximena jolt in her seat.

“Marcellus?” Colder de Ridder says, eyes blinking at the list, a crease in her brow.

“This is my son here!” Colder van Kley says, eyes locked on the Inquisitor’s, a finger crumpling the page.

Colder van Althuis turns hastily to the Inquisitor and, casting his best apologetic smile, says, “With all due respect, Grand Inquisitor. I... I suspect there must be a misunderstanding. You see, three of the names here are, er,” his eyes twitch towards the three terrified parents, “family members of Lunteren’s Elder Council.”

“Oh!” The Inquisitor seems honestly baffled, first at the reaction of the three affected Colders, then at the explanation. He turns his gaze at the horrified Colders, and bursts into laughter.

“What’s so funny?!” Colder Siever asks, stepping to the edge of the table, his usually pale face redder than Ximena has ever seen before on a human.

Colder de Ridder’s eyes glaze over as her hands begin to shake.

Colder van Kley hurries to her side. “It’s okay, Stella.” She takes her in her arms. “It’s okay.”

“Wow! Wow! Wow!” The Inquisitor, still laughing, wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. “Your kids have been *very* naughty, my esteemed Colony Elders. Hmm,” his expression sobers at once, “but I admit that’s a problem. With the Court and all. We cannot afford a *distracted* tribunal, can we? How to fix this?”

“Yes, how?!” Colder Siever asks, eyes as red as his skin.

“Ah,” the Inquisitor snaps his fingers. “I know!” He turns to the three distraught parents. “Colder Siever, Colder de Ridder, Colder van Kley, you are hereby relieved of your Colony Elder duties. John!”

Before they can even react, the door opens and Noseless enters the room. “Arch?”

“Please escort these three dependents,” he waves a casual hand at the gaping figures, eyes frozen in disbelief, “out of the building. And don’t be too rough, all right?”

“Aye.”

In a matter of seconds, albeit filled with loud, outraged complaints, the small office is once again quiet. Colder Beulen and Colder van Althuis keep their heads down in respectful silence and Marjolein has not moved a muscle.

“Oh, thank Goah for your arrival, Grand Inquisitor,” the journalist says, microphone still aimed at the just shut door.

The Inquisitor ignores her. “Colder van Althuis, if you please. I want three names on my desk by the end of the day. Three people of your trust to serve as caretaker Colony Elders.”

“Certainly, Grand Inquisitor.”

“Don’t fail me.” He shoots a pointed glance at the balding man.

“I won’t, Grand Inquisitor.”

“Good. Then, I thank you all for a productive meeting. If there’s nothing else...” He gestures at the door.

As they all turn to leave, the Inquisitor raises a hand at Marjolein. “Quaestor, care to stay a minute? We need to coordinate the logistics of the quarantine. And please ask John back here.”

As Noseless enters and shuts the door, Marjolein turns to the Inquisitor, her silent glare louder than Noseless’ boorish snort.

“You don’t approve, Quaestor?” The Inquisitor spreads his arms and smiles at her. “Isn’t a broadcasted trial-cum-cleansing the best solution for Lunteren?” He raises a thumb, “Permanent,” then his index, “exemplary,” then his middle finger, “legitimate.”

“*Legitimate?*” She scoffs. “A truly legitimate Court of aws Compacts can only condemn when the tribunal—the five Colders—act freely and unanimously. Any lingering doubt—a single voice of dissent—and everybody goes home, no barbaric cleansing show in the Forum. And yet, you just made sure that they will all fall in line, for the sake of Lunteren. They’re not free! They have no alternative, Goah’s Mercy. Not while you hold Lunteren for ransom. That’s not a trial, it’s a fucking farce!”

Ximena finds herself awkwardly agreeing with Mathus. This is *corruption*, pure and simple. And if this scene is to be taken at face value, Mathus has no part in it. This corruption seems *systemic*, so spread, that it is not perceived as such, not even by the Inquisitor, who wields it with the casual ease of a feudal lord. Did this corruption reach the Americas? Did it *originate* from the Americas? Oh, if only she could take a peek into the historical records... *Damn you, Censor Smith!*

“Oh, it’s a trial, all right,” the Inquisitor says. “Only the trial already happened. Here,” he taps his shaved head with a finger. “But we’re not in the frontier, are we? This is the continent—the old core of the Hanseatic Imperium—and we need to act with a little more *finesse*. With *legitimacy*. A Court of aws Compacts is an elegant solution.”

“I see.” Marjolein purses her lips and shifts her weight. “Is there anything else, Inquisitor?”

“Yes, there was...” He looks up his notes on the desk. “Ah, yes. There is the question of administering the Joyousday rites without a functioning Joyousday House.”

“I arranged it all moved to an annex of aws Eye. Not ideal,

but there has been no time to even consider the reconstruction of the House.”

“Good. That will spare some unnecessary suffering. Did you know that in the frontier, until the introduction of the rites, they would just let the old die naturally of Dem?” His eyes twitch for a moment. “My father, an Inquisitor himself, lost his mind in a fortnight. Not a pretty sight. I won’t allow any of that barbaric nonsense under my watch.”

“Of course not, Grand Inquisitor. Joyousday House or not, I assure you that every colonist of Lunteren has guaranteed access to the sacred rites.”

“Good. One last thing. While the quarantine remains in force, we must upgrade administrative security, and ban access to the most sensitive areas. From now on, anybody—you included, Quaestor—must be accompanied by a member of my White Guard when entering the barracks, the colony vault, the emergency grain supply, or the detention cells. Would you be so kind to hand over all necessary keys to John?”

“Uh, naturally. My staff holds all the keys, but I’ll ask them to hand them over to Elder, uh...”

“John,” Noseless says, the accent even thicker than the Inquisitor’s. “Or I won’t know you wan’ me, ma’am.” He chuckles loudly, mouth missing a few teeth.

“One last request, Quaestor,” the Inquisitor says. “We need you to escort John and my White Guards to the homes of the remaining dozen, er, *suspects*.” He hands Marjolein a photocopy with the list of names. “John, arrest them. Incommunicado.”

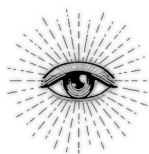
“Aye, Arch. But there ain’t no ’nough cells for that many demons. Two cells ’ready taken.”

“Oh, yes. Fine. Just do what you can, all right?”

Marjolein scans the names on the list.

And gasps in horror.

## TWO



### Adult

---

Gotthard is working alone in his lab in the tower of the old church. He is bent under the long wooden bench, attaching some cables into the holes of a large device.

“So this is what you were doing with my supplies.” Aline walks closer behind him, eyes scanning the spread-out devices with professional curiosity.

Gotthard turns, mildly surprised. “Speese! Since you’re here, can you pass me more solder wire?”

She does so and nods with appreciation. “A radio telescope?”

“Perhaps one day, but today this is a deep space radio communicator. Today, I’ll finally talk with New Alexandria!”

“New Alexandria, okay.”

“We have to stop Babi. We need the world to see.”

“The world, sure.”

“You look pretty today, Speese. Well, you always do, don’t you?” he chuckles.

“Listen, Gotthard. I’m sorry for the intrusion. But you’re dreaming.”

He gapes at her, and then looks around with raised

eyebrows, as though he is seeing his lab for the first time. He opens his mouth as if to say something, but doesn't.

"Your training is kicking in," Aline says. "Good. You remember. You're sharing a cell with Elder van Dolah. I'm in a neighboring cell. Alone. Listen, Gotthard, remember this number: forty-two, okay? Remember it well. Which number?"

"Uh, forty... two?"

"Forty-two, correct. Memorize it, for the Love of Goah. When you wake up, you will talk with Elder van Dolah about the marai, the Trials, and the Paths, all right? But first, you will tell him this number. Forty-two. Which number?"

"Forty-two. What—?!"

Aline vanishes.

Edda is sitting on one of the two chairs on the porch of her house. She's rocking herself gently, smiling mildly at the two toddlers playing on the lawn of the front yard, grass impossibly green, even for such a sunny day. Two teenagers—a girl and a boy dressed in light summer tunics—sit next to the toddlers on a rug. The boy is around eleven or twelve years old, his skin pale white, his hair brown and long. The girl is not older than Edda now, and her skin as dark; her curly hair flows around her shoulders like a fountain of exuberance. They both supervise the children closely, and laugh at their every clumsy move.

"There she is," Aline says to Willem, both standing on the sidewalk behind the tiny hedge of Edda's yard. "She's been like this since they threw us all in jail." Aline is staring at Edda with a deep frown, her voice tainted with disapproval.

Willem doesn't reply. He is looking at the scene on the lawn with absorbed fascination.

"Elder van Dolah!" Aline pushes him lightly.

Willem jumps in place and blinks at Aline. “Sorry. I’m still getting used to the idea of this being a dream.” He turns his gaze back to the two toddlers playing over each other. The fragrance of freshly mowed lawn engulfs Ximena like a soothing balm. “Uh, no, that’s not it. I can see that this is a dream. More vivid,” he stares at the lively black woman cheering the youngest toddler to stand, “than reality. What is really hard to believe is that this is not *my* dream.”

“That’s you, isn’t it?” Aline asks, pointing at the happy boy. “And your sister?”

“Long time ago.” He speaks between his teeth. “Goah, I miss Anika. And I miss them too.”

“Bram and Edda? They still—”

“I miss them like that. When everything was new—and not just for them.” He turns to Aline. “This is absurd. This is *my* dream. Not Edda’s. I’m dreaming that I’m shared-dreaming!” he says in wonder.

“Okay, okay,” she sighs. “You’re a rational man, I get it. I am too. So let’s speak rational, all right? There are *two* possible outcomes. Number one, when you wake up you will exchange the number *forty-two* with Gotthard as I asked you to, and you’ll know I’m not lying.”

“Why forty—?”

“*Or,*” Aline interrupts, raising her tone, “number two, this is all a freak dream, and when you talk with Gotthard, you will feel like a fool for a second.”

“That’s way more likely, but it would be pretty embarrassing to—”

“Goah’s fucking Mercy!” Aline shakes her head. “Your skull is really as thick as hers. Are you sure she’s not from your seed?”

“She’s from Anika’s ovum,” Willem points at the black girl in the yard, “and the sperm of a dowry merchant. Aws Womb

brought a few in that year to spice up Lunteren's genetic diversity."

"I don't care, goahdammit!" She takes a deep breath. "Please listen to me, Elder van Dolah. Let me rephrase my point: best case, you help Edda, and the rest of us—you included!—not getting ourselves cleansed. Worst case," she shrugs, "*nothing*, really. You just had a dream, and an awkward moment with Gotthard. So tell me, oh so rational Elder van Dolah, what's the right course of action? To ignore me, dooming us all to a sure cleansing in a week? Or to suspend your disbelief until you confirm with Gotthard—*just in fucking case?*"

Willem taps his chin with a finger, nodding slowly. "You're good, Aline. Or *I* am." He chuckles. "All right, I'll put my skepticism aside for a little while. What I still don't get, I mean, already assuming you're not *me* dreaming—"

"I'm *not*, Goah's Mercy!" She folds her arms and shifts her weight.

"Okay, then explain to me, please. How in Goah's Name can Edda get us out of, uh, jail?"

"I never said she could. Not directly. But... Elder Rew began with her for a reason. She can sure as Dem spread the word. You know how good she is at that, spreading the word," she frowns, "and she knows more about the Paths than anybody else, including me. We need her, Elder van Dolah. Trust me on this."

"Elder Rew was that juf that taught you all this," he gestures at the surrounding scenery, "wasn't she? Where is she?"

"Dead, I think," Aline says, her expression darkening. "Doesn't matter now. Now, go talk to her." She points up the porch, where Edda placidly rocks the chair. "The bitch better fix this."

"Whoa, whoa! What's going on?"



“She got us into this!” Her angry eyes stare squarely at Edda. “It’s all her fault!”

He nods slowly, then he says, “You mean, she *forced* you all this time, right? She took you by the neck and twisted until you had no alternative but to engineer the Century Blasphemy?”

Aline scoffs. “You didn’t hear her *pleads*—her *promises*.” Her face contracts like she is tasting poison. “Now, go all daddy on her and wake her up, Goah’s Mercy, or we’re all fucking toast in a week!”

Willem glares at Aline in silence for a few seconds, shaking her head, his pose exuding adult disapproval. Then, without a word, he opens his home’s yard door and strides towards the porch. As he passes by, Willem gives a sidelong glance at the four young figures leisurely enjoying each other’s company on the lawn.

“Hey, what’s itching, girl?” he cheerfully asks, slamming into the empty rocking chair beside Edda.

She looks at him casually, without changing her placid expression. “Blessings, Dad,” she says calmly, and turns back her attention to the yard.

“Nice dream.” He gestures at their young selves on the grass. “I like it.”

Edda smiles, nodding. “Me too. Memories. Our memories. Dad, I love you.” *Oh, she does!* Ximena exhales at the sheer power of the emotions pumping through the psych-link. *Oh, she does!*

“Whoa, I love you too, girl, but you’re not well. What’s wrong with you?”

She doesn’t reply, just keeps staring at the yard like he’s not even there. Ximena feels her soul hollowed out by despair. By guilt. By the deep sadness of a world left shattered in her brief passage through this world. Too short. Too shattered.

“You know this is just a dream, don’t you?” Willem says. “We have some, uh, *real-world* problems we need to discuss.”

She gives him a long look, her expression unchanging. “I can sense you, Dad. You are *you*. Aline brought you here, didn’t she?”

“She says you can help,” Willem says with a nod. “She’s not happy.”

“I know. And I’m sorry.” She smiles sadly at him. “So, so sorry. I fucked it up, Dad. *Bad* fuck up.”

“Well, well, language. And what happened, happened, girl. Nothing we can do about it anymore. Now, as always, only the future matters.”

“Which future?” Edda seems to react. “Aws Embrace, yeah? There’s no future, Dad. Not for me. Not for Aline. And not for you nor those other stupid mensas shouting blasphemies in front of a crowd.” She rolls her eyes. “Testosterone melts the brain, obviously.”

“You’ve heard about it.” He gives her a sad smile. “But how? You are kept isolated.”

“I was there.” She shakes her head slowly and shrugs. “Doesn’t matter.”

“You were, uh, transpiring? Doing the ghost thing?”

“*Traversing*,” she says, nodding with the hint of a frown. “And very much transpiring at the sight of your public performance. Nice show. And you ruined a perfectly good tunic.”

He chuckles. “Ah, your sense of humor is still there somewhere beneath the surface. There’s hope.”

She shakes her head. “You’re so stupid, Dad. So, so stupid. And it’s all my fault. You went mad because of my failure. And now Bram will have to raise Hans alone. Imagine, the new Elder of the tiny, heretic Van Dolah family. Won’t be easy, Dad. The new, pious, post-quarantine Lunteren will swallow them whole.”

He stares silently at the floor and says nothing.

The giggle of baby Bram from the lawn breaks the silence,

as toddler Edda tickles him with her small fingers. Anika and the young Willem are laughing wholeheartedly, as if they and the two children were alone in the universe.

Willem raises his head to look at his young family, a deep crease of sadness on his brow. Then he looks up, towards the fence, and there—beyond the hedge—Aline’s head is glaring at him, her fixed stare like the lash of a whip.

Willem clears his throat. “Won’t be easy, no,” he says, his voice a notch tougher. “Unless you do something about it, Edda.”

She turns to him, her eyes narrowing slightly. “I’ve done enough already. I was too...” She pauses, at a loss for words, and then shakes her head. “Bah.”

“Selfish?” he asks. “Shortsighted? Ruthless?” *Ouch!* Ximena thinks.

Edda’s stare turns to a glare, lips pressed together. But she doesn’t reply.

Willem continues, a notch louder, “A blind zealot, acting like what you want, is the only thing that *matters* in the universe? No, like only *you* matter in the universe, and if anybody else gets in your way... well, their own fucking problem, right? They deserve it.”

Edda’s look softens as tears well in her eyes.

“*He* deserves it, doesn’t he?” Willem says, stretching his arm and pointing at the yard. Edda turns her head to follow his finger. There, clumsy and proud, toddler Bram is trying to stand on his own. Then, as he takes a careful first step, baby Edda pushes him with a careless jerk. He gasps, falls on his face, and begins to cry. “Does he deserve it?”

Edda turns her head away from her father and shuts her eyes, pushing a tear down her cheek. Ximena exhales as she feels the inexorable pull of Edda’s grief. She wets her lips and throws Mark a glimpse, like that could dispel the utter lack of future—of power—that clutches her soul, but the psych-link

pulls mercilessly, sucking her whole, leaving but an empty carcass of self-hatred behind.

“No, Edda. No.” Willem’s voice is stern and calm, but bubbling with emotion. The type of compelling tone that a parent needs to apply to a child only once or twice in their lifetime. Almost religious. And *irresistible*. “That’s not how it works anymore for you.” He reaches out and strokes her short, curly hair gently. Edda jumps at the contact, but says nothing. “You’ll always be my little girl, and that’s why it’s so, uh, unnatural for me to tell you this. But you are an adult now. A redeemed, Goah’s Mercy. And it is high time you started acting like one. You must *think* before you act. Think about *consequences*. And if shit happens—*when* shit happens—you own it, and face it head-on. Like an adult. That’s life, girl—in all the time since mammals were a thing.”

Edda turns to him, eyes wet, and says in a shivering voice: “I’m sorry... Oh, what have I done, Dad?!”

Willem’s frown deepens. “This is not who you are, goahdammit! You are strong, not this sorry pile of self-pity! People depend on you, Edda. This is not about you anymore. There’s Aline,” he gestures with the finger at her, staring from the sidewalk, “and all the rest that have been put in jail because of something *you* started. You own this, girl. Be an adult.”

Edda begins to cry, the rocking chair shaking with every sob.

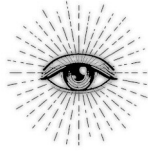
“Edda, fucking react now! Your family needs you. Bram and Hans need you. *I* need you! That’s it—enough said. You are an adult, Edda, and you are going to stand this moment from that fucking chair and move the Earth until the people that count on you are safe. Or are you going to stay there whining like—?”

Ximena gasps, and sits bolt upright, like an electric shock had just shortcircuited the psych-link into pieces. Edda has stood and is turning her reddened eyes to her father, lips

parted. She approaches him and—still weeping—sits on his lap. With a loud sob, she puts her arms around his neck and leans slowly on his chest.

“That’s my girl,” Willem says soothingly, caressing the back of her head. “Yes, yes. That’s my girl. Welcome back. Now, I hear you can kick some serious dream ass?”

## THREE



### Dreamtech

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I *think he is waking up*, Ximena thinks, in awe of how it feels through the psych-link: the waning darkness, the mind aching for order, fighting through a jungle of chaos, the titanic effort to open the eyes, as if she were a teenager again, always awakening way too early.

“Hey, are you awake?” an anxious voice says. And Ximena feels a sudden shake of her shoulders. Well, not hers literally. She is sitting on the bench of the Auditorium, next to Mark and Cody, watching the swirling gusts of the wake twirling across the amphitheater. But the shoulders of the man she is psych-linked to are being shaken rather insistently.

“Hey, Gotthard,” the voice says. *Willem van Dolah*, Ximena recognizes immediately. The shaking resumes. “Are you awake?”

“Hmm.” As Gotthard opens his eyes, the scene begins to materialize into a claustrophobic cell and the contours of a man with glasses bent over his bunk. “Uh, Elder van Dolah?” With a gauze covering his broken nose, Gotthard’s voice sounds nasal. “Where are—?”

“In jail.” Willem keeps shaking. “It’s Monday morning. Six days to go.”

“Uh, six... uh—”

“For cleansing, Goah’s Mercy. For aw’s Embrace. Wake up!”

“Elder van Dolah...”

“Tell me about your dreams!” Willem says, his voice imperative and loud, like thunder rolling over a sleepy meadow.

“My dreams, uh. Why—?”

“What did you dream, Gotthard? Tell me!”

“Uh, hmm.” Gotthard rubs his eyes as he sits on the bunk, his eyes still not fully open. “Speese... She was, uh... Aline Speese. She—”

“Yes! Aline, exactly!” Willem grabs Gotthard’s arms. “What did she say?!”

“Speese. Uh...” Gotthard frowns. “She... She said...”

“Come on, remember! Did she say a number?”

Gotthard’s eyes widen. Ximena feels his last threads of confusion clear away with a sudden shot of adrenaline. He turns to Willem, gaping.

“The *number*, Man Kraker. Tell me the number!”

“Forty-two,” Gotthard mutters.

Willem gasps. He stands, blinks, and bursts out laughing.

*He is mad.* Gotthard’s thoughts flow through the psych-link, mixed with concern. “Elder van Dolah,” Gotthard stands and puts a hand on Willem’s arm, “are you okay?”

“It’s true, Goah’s Mercy! It’s all true!”

“What—?”

“The dream, it really happened! I mean, it wasn’t just a dream, was it? I really spoke to Edda, and to Aline!” He exhales loudly and wets his lips. “In their own dreams!”

Gotthard nods slowly. His mood is dark, Ximena feels. Or rather, sad.

Willem grabs Gotthard's shoulders, wide eyes locked on his. "Incredible! Gotthard, this is..."

Gotthard shrugs and sits on the bunk. "Dreamtech."

"Dream... tech... Is that what all that's called?"

"Oh," Gotthard waves a hand dismissively. "It has many names: the Path of Light, the Path in the Shadow, Mind-Walking... Call it whatever you prefer."

"But this new technology, this... *dreamtech*, it is a revolution! Did you know that time flows slower in dreams? That you can control it at will and simulate reality there? That you can go into others' minds? Get people together?"

Gotthard smiles weakly and spreads his hands. "I know. I myself am a Walker of the Light." He lets out a humorless chuckle. "Certified and all—by a fucking alien, no less."

"Aliens..." Willem pronounces slowly, like he doesn't quite trust his own words. "Yes, Aline mentioned them. How they came into contact with you in your dreams... Gotthard, this changes everything! We are not alone. And they are sharing their technology with us. This will change the way we live forever!"

"Whose lives?" Gotthard's voice spikes sharply. "Aren't you forgetting something, Elder van Dolah?" He points at the four bricked walls surrounding them tightly. "In six days, we're being killed. All of us! All because we couldn't hold our temper in the Forum, Goah's fucking Mercy. What a stupid mistake, raising our voices without hard power." He scoffs, shaking his head. "It's not us with the fists. Or the guns."

"Oh, come on. You don't believe that. There's power in dreamtech! Aline and Edda said that—"

"It doesn't matter what they say! They are fooling themselves! They think that dreamtech is stronger than fucking weapons and blind fanaticism? You don't know shit. Sorry, Elder van Dolah, but it's the truth. Dreamtech is just a... technology; like, say, telecommunications. Imagine aliens



had taught us telecommunications. Yeah, that's a good analogy; a technology that can change the world, right? How in Goah's Name could we use telecommunications to save our sorry asses? No, Elder van Dolah. Dreamtech is dying with us."

"But it's not just dreamtech, Gotthard. It is Edda!"

Gotthard raises his eyes to Willem. "What can Edda possibly do?"

"I don't know!" Willem laughs. "But you should see her commanding armies on the field. No matter how desperate her situation, she always comes on top."

"This is not one of your toy soldier games, Elder van Dolah."

"Wargames aren't games. They are *simulations*. Come on, Gotthard. You know your dowry sister. She is resourceful. And strong-willed like no other."

"That, she is," Gotthard admits. His breathing eases a notch. "Do you really believe she can get us out of here?" Ximena feels the candle of hope lighting up deep inside Gotthard's mind, a dot of light in an ocean of darkness. "Can she really save us?"

"I don't know if she can. But what I know for sure is that she will move mountains trying. She will sure as Dem use and abuse every last drop of resources at her disposal. And that includes us, Gotthard. We are Edda's army now. And war is coming."

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"S

ilence!" Edda's professional shout makes the excited adults in the classroom jump and face her. Standing by a dusty blackboard, she is waving both hands in a calming gesture. Even Mark has straightened next to her, Ximena notices with

amusement. He certainly looks like the type that, as a kid, required too many calls to attention.

“Thank you,” Edda says. “Sit down, please. Each take a desk, yeah?”

She looks good, Ximena thinks. Full of energy and self-confidence. Ximena notices how her thick, curly hair barely covers the scar where her left ear used to be. She doesn’t even feel the need to render her dream body whole anymore. She is who she is, and it shows; if anything, her imperfection enhances the natural radiance of her presence.

But it is not just her external aspect that impresses Ximena. The psych-link lets her feel Edda’s inner drive firsthand. Ximena can feel Edda’s excitement pumping its way up her own trunk in waves of certainty. What a change since Willem brought her back from the abyss of self-pity. And Aline. And...

Isn’t it interesting, Ximena muses, how history, left unattended, turns its main characters into superheroes? But not here in the Global Program, with Professor Miyagi in charge. She throws an involuntary smile of gratitude at the man standing down there, alone in the middle of the stage. His seminar is demystifying Edda the hero, *humanizing* her, bringing into sharp focus another of her superpowers: all the people in her life that support her unconditionally. What would Edda’s role in history have been without her parents? Without Aline? Even Gotthard, Janson and Pieter have been there for her at the most crucial of times. Unconditional support: a human superpower that Ximena also possesses.

Even here.

Ximena turns her deep-blue eyes at Mark. And keeps them there.

He notices. “What?” he asks, blinking at her.

She leans in, gives him a peck on his cheek, and whispers, “Thank you.”

Mark's lips part in surprise, but he doesn't reply. He just places a hand where Ximena touched his skin.

It feels good to make him blush for a change, she thinks. And then, very slowly, she whispers into his now satisfactorily crimson ear, "For sitting by my side. For being with me."

"Uh... Hmm... S- Sure. Uh," he mutters, and then a notch louder, "I wasn't thinking with my head. At least not with the one over my shoulders."

Ximena, pleased with herself, ignores his pathetic attempt at regaining the upper hand and returns her attention back to Edda, who is pointing in quick succession at the frightened-looking people now neatly sitting behind wooden school desks.

"Eleven. Is everybody here?" Edda asks Willem, who has taken place at the closest desk in the first row.

Willem turns his gaze back and nods. "Everybody in jail is here. Except—"

Aline, Pieter and Janson appear out of thin air next to Edda, attracting gasps and the immediate attention of the back rows.

"Fourteen," Edda says, and shakes her head. "Still too few."

"It will have to do," Aline says. "A quarter of an hour per wake minute."

"We can do better," Edda says. "We need more people."

"There is no time to go about recruiting people, sister. We need to begin with what we've got. Right away."

"With enough people, we can stretch every wake minute to at least half an hour."

Aline frowns, creases of frustration in her brow. "It's Monday night, Edda. We've only got, what, six more sessions left before we are cleansed live on imperial radio? We can't afford to waste a single one of them!"

"We can. Especially if it is the first one."

"What?"

“You’re good with math, sister. Think. We sacrifice one of our six days, but in exchange we stretch the remaining five two-fold.” Edda stretches her hands in a practiced gesture of obviousness.

Aline purses her lips. “That’s if we recruit anybody.” Aline takes a step towards Edda. “How are we going to do it, huh? How, in just one night? And who in their right mind would want to risk their lives for...?” She waves a rash hand at their audience, who is following their exchange with the intensity of a death-row inmate clinging to the words of a priest.

Edda exchanges a glance with her father, who nods supportively. She says, “The *how* is obvious. You and I will take our few Walkers into the dreams of our candidates, and,” she shrugs, “convince them.”

“*Convince* them?” Aline takes another step forward, and says, a notch louder, “And how in Goah’s Name are we going to do that? It would be hard enough for me! And I’m already walking in the Shadow. Our *Walkers*,” she says the word with intense irony, “can barely walk the Light.”

“Speak for yourself, Speese,” Gotthard says from the second row, his nose straight and gauze-free in the dreamscape. “I’m in, Edda. I can do it. *We* can do it,” he puts his hand on Rutger’s shoulder, who is sitting beside him, nodding with pressed lips.

Pieter takes Aline’s hand from behind her, and says, “I can do it too, love.” He exchanges a glance with Janson, who sinks his head in silence.

Aline turns around, her glowering eyes pushing Pieter one step back. “*You* can do it? And what about you, Valentijn?” She points at the tall teenager with curled hair sitting left of Gotthard. “You were also on the Trials, with your sister. Can you do it?”

Valentijn, his expression grave, lifts his chin and says, “If Juf Edda shows me how, I will.”

Aline purses her lips, turns her glare back to Edda, and says, “Well, if it’s so easy, what are we waiting for? Please, *Juf Edda*.” She takes place behind a vacant desk in the front row. “Illuminate us with your wisdom.”

“Aline.” Willem turns to her. “Drop it, please. Edda is right. If there is a decent chance of stretching time with your...” He waves a hand. “... *dreamtech*, then we must grab it.”

“Thanks, Dad. Aline, at least let’s try. I think we might be better than you give us credit for. And without you and your traversing magic, we wouldn’t even be here, sister. I know I couldn’t have melded us all into this permascape on my own.”

Aline crosses her arms over her chest and squints in silence, but gives Edda the slightest of nods.

“Okay, mensas. We begin. Listen up!” Edda claps, and meets every single gaze with a wide grin. *Juf Edda in charge*. “Yes, you are dreaming. Yes, you *know* you’re dreaming. And yes, this is De Bron, my usual morning classroom, to be precise.” She spreads her arms demonstratively. “We needed a place to gather, and I must explain to some of you a couple of new concepts. So... why not?”

A few hands raise in the air, Ximena observes with amusement. Funny how the classroom setting brings out ingrained protocols. Ximena wonders how intentional Edda was when crafting this permascape. A smart move, in any case. With such angst, confusion and, yes, desperation, any other place would have probably devolved into loud, endless arguments. But every school emanates that inexplicable but powerful magic that creates order from the wildest form of chaos.

“No questions yet, sorry. First I talk, then you ask.” The hands sink, but not the engrossed eyes. “Good. First, the good news: if you behave, we might avoid meeting awa Embrace on Sunday, after all. More on that in tomorrow’s session. No time today; we have other urgent priorities and I need your

collaboration.” Her eyes twitch at Aline for an instant. “But before that, a bit of the basics, yeah? *This...*” She waves a finger around the classroom, and as she does, the walls shine for an instant with a soft, inner light; some heads jerk around in awe. “... is a permascape. *Per-mas-cape*,” she pronounces slowly. “A shared dream. Yes, you heard that correctly: a *shared* dream. Everybody you see here is a *real* person, and we are all dreaming the exact same dream as you; together with you. I know how it sounds. But to confirm it you will now memorize a number—a secret—that you will share with your cell companions in the morning, alright?”

Her expectant eyes meet a wall of blank expressions in the back rows.

“I know this is going way too quickly for you, *mensas*, but there’s no fucking time. You’ll have to take my word for now. Tomorrow we can dig deeper, I promise, but now repeat with me. Aloud please.” She raises both hands, like an orchestra director. “*Forty-two.*” Her hands sink.

“Forty-two,” a few voices say, timidly.

“Again, please. Now everybody, yeah? Forty-two!”

“Forty-two,” everybody shouts simultaneously.

“Good. Remember: forty-two. When you wake up, share it, so you’ll know this is no horseshit, yeah?”

Some of them nod.

“Yeah?!” she asks, louder.

“Yeah!” all of them reply, nodding obediently.

“Forty-two. Good. And now, we move to our more pressing problem. You see how this classroom is still half-empty? We must fill it. Tonight. We are too few, *mensas*. Good news is there’s obviously plenty of people who share our views, judging from the Forum unrest yesterday. Most kept it relatively civilized, happy to simply spit curses on each other’s faces, which I guess is what kept them out of jail. Not like you stupid lot.” Edda slides an accusing finger across her sitting listeners.

“Talking about stupid.” She meets Aline’s stare with a smile. “Did you notice we’re the only two females here?”

“I guess girls are too smart to cry out heresies in public,” Aline says, pulling a chuckle out of Ximena. She notices that even Mark and Cody are curving their lips.

Willem scoffs, shaking his head. “We need more people, you were saying?” he says, voice stern.

“Yeah. Each of you, please give me the names of people that would risk their lives to save yours. We will then try to recruit them.”

“Recruit how?” A redhead man sitting in the back row asks.

“Don’t worry about that for now, Elder Rijnder. *We* know how,” she gestures at Aline and the other Walkers. “If we are successful, tomorrow we’ll meet again, this classroom will be full, and then, I promise, I’ll give you hope. But today, we really need those names.” She walks to the blackboard, raises her right arm, and chalk materializes between her thumb and index with a flash of white light. “Well? You better start spitting some names, yeah? Family, friends, lovers, whatever. People ready to risk it all to save us from our, uh, *precarious* situation.”

Willem stands and turns to the rest of the class. “Feel free to add people that might want to save their dear ones—or even themselves—from the Joyousday, okay?” His voice embodies the same authority as his daughter’s. “I’m sure we can all think about at least one.”

“Thanks, Dad. Good call. We need about fifteen more, yeah? No more, or the risk would begin to erode the gain. If anybody speaks and the Inquisitor finds out what we’re doing here...” She shudders visibly. “So only name people you are really, *really* certain about.”

A few raise their hands hesitantly.

“One last thing,” Edda says, holding her hand up. “When

you give me a name, don't think only about the person's immediate motivation, how much they love you, or whatever. Think *beyond* that, yeah? What if, Goah forbid, all goes to hell and that person ends up cleansed with our sorry asses? What would become of their families, people that depend on them?" She purses her lips for a moment. "Think hard. Be *very* mindful about who you nominate."

The few raised hands drop after a few seconds.

Aline chuckles humorlessly. "Wow, that's low, Edda. I see where this is going. You say that just to keep your own brother out of harm's way. And we're supposed to put our loved ones on the line?"

Edda glares at Aline and shakes her head slowly. Aline raises her chin in an unconscious gesture of defiance. The entire class seems to hold their breath.

"I think you would agree, Aline," Willem says in an admonishing tone, interrupting the awkward silence, "that we, Van Dolahs, have already put enough meat on the grill. And Edda brings up a great point. In war you plan for success, but prepare for failure."

"Thanks, Dad." She presses her lips and raises her look at the expectant faces. "So, names, please. Bring them on. Actually, I will begin. I nominate my future dowry sister," she writes a name, *Isabella Zegers*, on the blackboard.

Willem stirs uncomfortably in place, but says nothing.

"I nominate my sister," Valentijn says.

Edda nods and writes, *Louisa van Kley*. "Good call."

"My son," Elder Rijnder says.

Aline gasps and turns to look at him. "He is only eleven, Goah's Mercy!"

"He is more man than I ever was at his age," Elder Rijnder says, pride in his voice. "I raised him to work hard and not to be afraid to take what he needs. And," he sinks his head, "I'm all he's got."



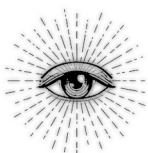
Edda takes a deep breath, and then writes on the blackboard, *Marten Rijnder*. She then turns in sober silence.

Nobody meets her eyes. Ximena feels the weight of the mood hanging in the classroom, like a blanket too light to keep the chill away.

A green-eyed teenager in the second row clears his throat and raises his hand slowly.

Edda points the chalk at him. “Yeah, Ambroos?”

## FOUR



### Fifteen Names

“**A**ws Blessings to you, Elder Abspoel,” Marjolein says, impeccably dressed in her official purple robes, and as beautiful as ever, Ximena must admit, her golden braids resting with such casual perfection over her chest. “Thank you for coming.”

“Blessings, Quaestor,” the stocky woman takes off the broad, white hat with her left hand and moves her pale face around, scanning the Quaestor’s small office, never meeting Marjolein’s gaze. She seems uncomfortable, or nervous, Ximena thinks. Without the psych-link, she can’t really tell, but there’s definitely something stirring behind those large, brown eyes.

“Your twenty-seventh birthday is,” Marjolein moves a finger tentatively over a scribbled paper, one of many scattered over her desk, “when exactly?”

“Tenth of February.”

Marjolein looks up at the woman, nodding, and says. “You will agree that it is high time to make arrangements for your Joyousday, right?”

The woman presses her thick lips together and sinks her head until her untidy, blond hair covers her eyes.

“Elder Abspoel—Elvira—” Marjolein says, her smile warmly professional. “I’m so happy for you. Ten more days and you will be standing in the presence of Goah, ecstatic, and proud of a life well lived under aw’s Gift.”

Marjolein keeps her gaze locked on Elvira Abspoel for a while, as if waiting for her to reply.

But she doesn’t.

“We’ll sure as Dem miss your *stamppots*. And I personally don’t know how I’ll make it through without your pea soups. Am I being too selfish?” Marjolein says with a good-humored chuckle.

Elvira doesn’t react, eyes still hidden behind thick strands of pale hair.

“Which brings us to the reason for this meeting,” Marjolein continues, her voice taking a cooler, business-like tone. “You’ll need to name a successor. The Eye of Goah complex needs a new chief cook. And then there are your earthly matters. The Abspoel family will have a new Elder to—”

“A new Elder!” Elvira barks more than speaks, so loud and sudden as to make Ximena jump in place. “A new Elder!” She steps forward and slams her right palm on the desk, causing some papers to fly about.

Marjolein gapes at the violent reaction in astonished silence.

“There would be *two* Elders. Two! But you are killing my Ambroos, you evil fuck!”

Marjolein raises her hand in an involuntary protective gesture against Elvira’s rage, “I didn’t, er, the trial—”

“There’ll be no Joyousday.” Elvira steps back and raises her brow, her voice deep and final. “You’ll have to cleanse me with my son.”

She turns and leaves the Quaestor’s office.

The scene shakes and twists, Marjolein's office dissolving in air like black smoke. The details of Edda's classroom in De Bron slowly take its place, revealing the same twelve men behind the same school desks. Some of them are still gaping in wonder at what they have just witnessed.

Aline appears in mid-air, and drifts down next to Edda. "I just released Elder Abspoel back to her own dreams." She says, and shakes her head in astonished disbelief. "I can't believe how well that went."

"She's in," Edda says with a wide smile. "Our first external recruit. Thank you, Ambroos."

The young man nods shyly. "No, Juf Edda. It's me who's grateful. It was... awesome to see her again. I never thought I would. And..." He smiles. "I've never seen my mother like that. Talking to the Quaestor like that, I mean. She is always so gentle, you know? Always serving others. Goah, it was incredible!"

Gotthard seems as impressed as his friend. "I can't believe Elder Abspoel couldn't see us!"

"Third step of the Light," Edda says, "Will-control. You are also a Light Walker, Gotthard. You can also do it."

"Hmm... I'm not so sure. It would never have occurred to me, to make us," he waves a hand, "invisible. That was... impressive, dowry sister."

"You can also go old school and hide behind an object," Edda says, "or transform your appearance, or... I don't know, *mensas*." Edda spreads her hands at the rest of the class. "Just be creative, yeah?"

Ximena agrees with Gotthard. That was a very impressive manipulation of the dreamscape. And the way Edda put a semitransparent wall between her classroom and the dramatic scene... That was almost like—

“The first dreamsense,” Mark says softly, his eyes following Edda with an intensity bordering on adoration.

“Inside Professor Miyagi’s dream sensorial,” Cody replies with a chuckle.

“Inside our dreams,” Ximena mutters.

Gotthard keeps talking. “I still can’t believe she couldn’t *perceive* so many of us, so close to her...”

“Elder Abspoel is untrained,” Edda says. “Without the dream sense—the first step in the Path in the Shadow—we are blind.”

“And your *acting*... Wow. That was very convincing!”

“Acting?”

“Yes.” Gotthard gestures at the wall through which they’ve just watched the scene. “Quaestor Mathus. You were *controlling* her like a doll, right? Making her say and do all that?”

Edda shakes her head. “That wouldn’t have fooled her. Elder Abspoel has worked in aw’s Eye’s kitchens her entire life. She knows the Quaestor intimately: how she speaks, every inflection of her voice, every detail in her office.”

“Oh.” Gotthard looks puzzled. “Then how—?”

“Yeah, okay. Hmm... The trick is... And listen up, Walkers,” she says, pointing a finger at Aline, Pieter, Janson, Rutger and Valentijn. “This is hot new dream stuff you never got to see in the Trials. Not even Elder Rew taught me any of this.”

Aline frowns. “Then where did you—?”

Edda gestures impatiently with her hand, like she is waving a bug off. “I’ve been doing some experimentation on my own. Jail’s so boring!” She chuckles. “Anyway, it’s like this. When you *wish* a scene into existence, be very lazy about it, yeah? *Smart* lazy. Just create the bare bones, the skeleton. It’s more like,” she twists her hand and bites her lip, “you *hint*. You, er, *suggest*. Then what happens is, wow... amazing... you’ll see! The dreamer’s mind starts filling in the blanks with its own

subconscious expectations, like flesh and guts and tendons and blood in all their glorious gory detail, filling in your hinted skeleton with life, yeah?”

Ambroos clears his throat. “And what did you, er, *suggest* to my mother, Juf Edda?”

“Er, it was quite simple, actually. I began by making the contour of the Quaestor’s office, you know, very generally. Just walls, door, the window, a hint of Marjolein sitting at her desk, and... Bang! Well, you saw it. Office rendered in perfect detail, down to the last dusty nail. Then I suggested Marjolein’s words, you know, just the general direction, like, uh, *pushing*, if that makes sense? Joyousday arriving and all that. And now,” she claps, happy, “we know sure as Dem that your mother is firmly on our side. And that’s how we must vet each of our other candidates in our list. Got it? That’s our main task tonight,” Edda knocks on the blackboard, next to fifteen names written in white chalk, “to test each of the candidates in their own dreams and make sure that they won’t betray us; and then, if they pass the test, to activate them.”

“Activate?” Gotthard asks.

“Yeah, you know: explaining to them how it is all a shared dream, forty-two, that we really are who we say we are—the whole shebang! Ah, which reminds me,” Edda points a finger at Pieter and Janson, “since for the time being you are still our only, er, *external* assets, it falls on you to visit each one of our vetted recruits tomorrow to forty-two them up, yeah?”

“Gotcha,” Pieter says with a firm nod.

“Good, good. Hmm...” Edda rubs the back of her neck. “But first visit Isabella Zegers. And get her to discreetly begin preparing a *ton* of her pretty-goodnight herbal potion, yeah?”

Pieter nods. “I’ll explain everything to her. Where should I bring the brew?”

“Hmm...” Edda wets her lips, and then smiles suddenly, throwing a glance at Ambroos. “Take it to Elder Abspoel! Ask

her to mix it into our own prisoner's rations. We'll need as much shuteye time as we can get."

"Gotcha," Pieter says. "I'll also distribute some outside, to whomever else we recruit tonight."

"Good call."

"And what if Woman Zegers doesn't cooperate?" Aline asks.

"She will," Edda says.

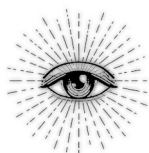
"And if she doesn't?" Aline raises her voice.

Willem turns to her. "Isabella is family, Aline. She will."

"But I see your point, sister," Edda says. "We do need Isabella; perhaps more than anybody else. It's stressful enough to be locked in isolation, just waiting for..." She bites her lower lips. "Without training, most of you will have a hard time falling asleep; and even more *staying* asleep. We *need* her potion. We need *dream time*. And we cannot take any risks. She is my name and I will recruit her myself, but for good measure, Dad, you're coming with me."

"Two Van Dolahs," Gotthard says with a loud chuckle. "That's what I call pulling out the big guns."

## FIVE



### Fight or Flight

**D**e Bron's dreamscape classroom is full: Twenty-five adults mixing, talking, gossiping, embracing. Some speak heatedly. Some listen attentively. And a few sit silently, simply staring at nothing in particular with blank expressions. The dream air is thick with tension. Even Ximena feels the anxiety—the eagerness.

Edda and Willem are standing next to the teacher's desk, the blackboard and a man-sized hourglass that drops grains of sand idly. She is nodding at something he just said when Aline's body materializes next to them. Edda reacts like a spring and puts a finger on the hourglass surface, reads the fine marker beside her finger, and turns to Aline. "Reaching two hundred sixty."

Aline's eyes widen. "Incredible, it's still growing linearly!" Her eyes beam with hope. "Ten seconds in the wake, two hundred sixty seconds here."

"So sexy!" Edda says, grinning. With a casual flick of her finger, the hourglass vanishes.

The conversations inside the groups of people die out. Everybody seems to have turned their attention to the three



figures at the front of the class.

Edda claps once, loudly, and smiles broadly. “Okay, mensas. Sit down. You too, Aline, Dad. Let’s begin.”

She smiles patiently as each adult claims a school desk in the packed classroom. Five young men under fifteen years of age stand around the last two empty desks at the back. One of them looks up at Edda and shrugs. Edda winks at him, and the classroom grows longer. A new row of school desks pops into existence, filling the additional space, their old wood as scarred by the bored drilling of generations of children as the rest.

“Thank you, Juf Edda,” he says.

“You’re welcome, Marcellus. Now, if you’re all set, I would like to begin by welcoming you back to our very special—and very exclusive—evening class in permascaped De Bron’s. For some of you—sleeping free on your own beds at home—this is the first time. Welcome. Yes, you’re dreaming, and yet this is not your dream. Well, not fully. We are all in this together, yeah? I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m sure Pieter has been convincing enough, because we can’t waste any more sessions.”

“Everybody is on board,” Pieter says. “But Woman Zegers was a particularly tough shell to crack. Even after the combined dream visit of you and your father.”

“I’ve never heard such a sorry excuse to get drugs from me,” a woman around sixteen with broad South-East Asian features says, “and surely not in such quantities!”

“All of us present thank you for your goodnight potion, Isabella.” Edda places her right hand on her chest and then gestures around. “Dreams might be the fuel of revolutions, but your potion sure as Dem is the fuel of dreams, so...” She begins clapping for Isabella. Everybody joins in, until a blushing Isabella stands, raises a hand and then sits.

“Our gratitude goes as well to Elder Abspoel.” Edda waves her hand at the corpulent, blonde lady holding the hand of a pale-looking Ambroos sitting next to her. “And to her *spiced up*

dinner for us inmates.” Another round of applause until Elvira reluctantly stands, salutes and sits, a shy smile on her face. Ambroos takes her hand anew and squeezes with pride.

“Okay,” Edda says, professionally capturing everybody’s attention with a powerful clap. “Let’s focus on why we’ve gathered you here, yeah? Situational awareness. It’s Tuesday night. Next Sunday, half of us are due to be...” She waves absentmindedly, like she was scaring off a fly. “So, not much time left. Just five sessions, including tonight. But you’ve all just heard the good news.” She gestures at Aline. “As long as we remain here—together—we stretch every wake minute to over twenty-five dream minutes. Not bad. Not bad at all. That’s some serious time dilation, mensas. And together with the extended sleep kindly provided by my dowry sister to be,” she nods at Isabella, “should give us enough time. I hope.”

“Time for what?” Isabella asks. “A rebellion? Because that would be absurd. Look at us!”

“Why absurd?” Gotthard asks, his tone acrid. “Absurd is doing nothing!”

“Okay, girls and boys.” Edda gives another round of loud claps. “What to do next is precisely what we are going to discuss now. And then,” she steps forward and extends her arms, palms out, “we take a vote.”

“A vote?” Gotthard drags the question to make his skepticism obvious.

“Yeah, a vote, Gotthard. A democratic vote, aws Compacts style, like when we choose our Colony Elders, yeah?”

“But... *all* of us?” Gotthard says, gesturing at himself, Rutger and the other younger men on the Inquisitor’s list. “We’re the ones that are going to be cleansed, Goah’s Mercy! Why should *they* vote?” He points at Isabella, Elvira and the rest of the newcomers safely sleeping in their own homes.

“Who do you—?!” Aline shouts at him.

“I’m disappointed, Gotthard,” Edda interjects loudly

enough to squash the wave of protests that begins to fill the classroom. “We are *all* in this together. We are *all* risking our lives here. Do you know what they would do to Elder Abspool if they catch her mixing Isabella’s herbs into our meals? Our *external* comrades are *heroes*! They’re not only risking their lives, same as you. But they *chose* to do it! Did you choose, Gotthard?” She raises a finger at him. “Given the chance, what would you have chosen?”

Gotthard meets her eyes for a second, and then sinks his head.

“We are suffering in our own flesh,” she continues, “the consequences of fanatical tyrants stripping us of our sacred rights. And voting is perhaps the most sacred of all, the shield that *guarantees* the others. If we don’t govern ourselves by taking a vote, if we don’t uncompromisingly guarantee that *everybody* has one, if we don’t make sure that everybody makes use of it in good conscience, then we are not better than aw’s Head.”

A sea of nods and assenting mutters fills the classroom.

“Good. With that duly clarified, the question now is: what can we do? Or even: what *should* we do? I remember something that my father used to tell me when we were wargaming.” She looks at him and smiles at the memory. “First comes the objective, then comes the plan.”

“I meant *military* plan,” Willem says. “In the understanding that no plan survives contact with the enemy, as Von Moltke—”

“Exactly,” she interrupts with a dismissive wave of her hand. “So, to get the ball rolling, I would like to suggest a vote on *two* separate objectives. I call them: *Water*...” She turns her head right, and there, beside her, a tall, beautiful woman appears out of thin air, made of liquid water instead of flesh and cloth, like a perfect Greek sculpture of translucent, blue marble. “... and *Fire*.” She turns left, and there, air sets on fire with a *whoosh*, taking the shape of a tall, beautiful man, made

of flame. Ximena, who is sitting not far off from that particular area of the floating scene, feels a wave of sudden warmth on her face. Edda's entire audience—not only those sitting behind a De Bron school desk, but also those filling the benches of the amphitheater—gape at both apparitions with unreserved fascination.

“Water is generous,” Edda continues, extending her right hand to the woman, who puts a hand on her liquid hip, “accommodating, and predictable. Fire is selfish,” Edda extends her left hand to the man, who flexes his impressive pectorals and then bounces them alternatively in an ostentatious dance of fire, “moody, and destructive.”

“Tough choice,” Gotthard says, his eyes scanning the perfection of both elemental bodies with appreciative eyes.

“Wait, let me explain,” Edda says. “These two objectives are independent from each other. We can pursue both, or only one, or even neither of them.”

“Neither?! We are not giving up!” he says, as other voices behind him also join in protest.

“Mensas, patience. Let me explain. The generous objective,” Edda points at the beautiful woman made of translucent, blue water, “is to spark a revolution like the world has not seen in centuries.”

She pauses to let that sink in, but even Ximena sees more fear than hope in her audience.

“I want our deaths to *matter*,” she continues. “So that even if we meet Goah's Embrace in five days, we'll begin a movement that will save lives. *Uncountable* lives. Millions upon millions!”

“Five days to save the world,” Gotthard says, his voice tinted in sarcasm. “Sure.”

“Oh, shut up already!” Aline says to Gotthard. “Let Edda speak.”

Edda gives her a thankful nod. “We can *demolish* the

Joyousday once and for all, mensas. We'll free humankind from superstition. Elders will get to see their grandchildren grow!"

"I would like that," Willem says. "Very much." Edda's eldest audience members whisper and mutter in agreement.

"It gets better! Think about the possibilities, the knowledge we would accumulate after long lifespans..." Edda continues, her eyes wide open with contagious enthusiasm, lost somewhere in the future. "We would reach—or even surpass!—the glory of the golden age."

"A grandiose vision!" the sumptuous water woman says from up in the air, her voice crystalline and deep. "Vote for me."

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute!" Aline says. "I don't know if the Earth can handle another round of golden-aging!" Pieter and Janson nod in silent support.

"No, no, this time is different, mensas," Edda says. "We have aws Gift! And aws Balance. And the bitter lessons of history."

"With your permission, Edda," Willem says as he stands and turns to face the class. "If we do this right, our deaths may turn out to be a powerful catalyst for a revolutionary movement." He waves a hand at Isabella, Elvira, and the others dreaming in the safety of their own beds. "You will use our names, and the story of our demise, for *propaganda*. We shall be your saints—your *martyrs*."

"Martyrs?!" Gotthard shakes his head. "No, no, Elder van Dolah. No."

"Martyrdom is a fearsome force," Willem says. "Inspirational, truly transformative. There is a very notorious historical precedent: the man who founded one of the largest religions of old was tortured to death in public."

"Lovely," Gotthard says. "Edda, please. Can we move on to the fire mensa? He doesn't look like the sacrificial type."

"You're right, he is not." Edda turns her gaze at the

beautiful man made of flames, who smirks back at her and then flexes both arms in an impressive muscular demonstration. “As an alternative objective, we can pursue *hard power*. And take Lunteren by force.”

Gotthard grins. “Now you’re talking.”

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A line is standing, staring at the entire class with defiant eyes, pale face still lightly tinted by the passionate exchange.

“Aline’s got a point, Gotthard,” Willem says. “Fleeing would definitely be easier. The risk of fighting—”

“The risk!” Gotthard scoffs. He is also standing, glaring at Willem and Aline with a mix of disgust and fear. “Risk is not a thing to avoid, but to *manage*. Risk is just an engineering constraint. You should know this better than most, Aline.”

“Engineering our exile would already be *tough* enough,” Aline says, glaring back at him, cheeks blushing with rage. “We are facing an armed platoon of fanatical warriors, Goah’s Mercy! On the other hand, we could make it out of Lunteren unnoticed. That is doable. Some traversing here, some external support there,” she glances down at Pieter, sitting beside her, “and we’d all be on our way in the woods before anybody is the wiser.”

“Exile is *not* good enough!” Gotthard says. “A life of fleeing and hiding? Or, if we are lucky, somehow survive in barbarian lands? No, Aline. No way. I need resources! I need communication, technology. I need...” He shakes his head firmly.

“Anything else that Pontifex Kraker wishes?” Aline mocks a curtsy. “May I suggest a virgin every night?”

Gotthard says nothing, he just stares back at Aline, eyes half-open, as if tired—as if sad.

Rutger noisily stands beside Gotthard, drawing the looks of everybody else in the dream classroom. He puts a sure hand on Gotthard's shoulder, pushes his glasses up his nose and then calmly returns everybody's gaze.

"Redeemed Siever?" Willem asks, politely. "You would also like to share your perspective?"

Even the water woman and the fire man turn their heads towards the tall, thin man.

"Respectfully," Rutger says, pulling back his long, brown hair, voice confident, "you don't understand what is at stake here. You wouldn't believe us if we told you, so I will not even make the attempt. But to those of you who truly know me and Man Kraker, I ask you to trust us now. This rebellion, the *hard* version of it," he points at the beautiful man made of flames, who nods back at him in acknowledgment, "is *necessary*. Believe us when we say that it is much bigger than *us*; much bigger than the Joyousday, Juf Edda; much bigger than the lives you hope to transform. Trust us, I beg you, when I say that we need *hard power* to survive."

He sits, pulling Gotthard down with him. "We vote *no* to exile."

Silence floats in the dream classroom, as everybody mulls over Rutger's words. Ximena looks about, observing the intense feelings crossing each colonist's face. Some shift their weight, like their dream bodies were trying to find some sense of comfort; others mutter unintelligible words, perhaps loud thoughts, perhaps anguished prayers, perhaps just curses.

"Thank you, Redeemed Siever," Willem finally says, as he stands. "After the vote, I'd love to listen to your point of view in more detail, if you please."

"Gladly, Meester van Dolah. I just beg you to keep an open mind."

"Always do," Willem says with a reassuring nod, then he turns to face all his fellow conspirators. "As colorful as

Redeemed Siever's and Man Kraker's motivations might be, I tend to concur with them. I also vote *no* to exile."

Edda's brows raise in mild surprise.

"I'm sorry, Aline," Willem continues, turning to meet her glare. "But if we escape, we make ourselves weak. And our families, the people we leave behind," he exchanges a glance with Edda, "vulnerable to the whims of aw's Head. They might need scapegoats to blame... No, sorry, Aline. There is only safety in power. I say we stay and resist."

"Resist *how*?" Aline asks, spreading her hands, her voice as exasperated as her scowl. "It's madness!"

"Juf Edda, please." Elvira—round face wrinkled with worry—pulls her hand out of her son's anxious grip and stands. "I'd be happy to... I'd do anything," she glances at her son, "but how can we hope to, uh..." She hesitates, words failing her.

Edda nods slowly, walks off to the side of the classroom, and then turns around. "Meet the Walker," she says, extending her right hand to the now vacant teacher desk, which disappears at once. In its place, a tall, thin, elongated humanoid *alien* pops into sudden existence, drawing the horrified gasps of the audience, eyes wide open in xenophobic fascination. A *mare*, standing at rest between the watery woman and the fiery man, its skin leathery white, hairless, featureless except for the intensely white eyes and the tight, moist black mouth.

"The Walker grants us *power*," Edda says, and turns her face to the mare, who begins to grow in size, turning larger, and larger: a giant. The ceiling moves upwards to make space, the walls extending up, brick after layer of red brick, windowless, giving to the classroom the solemn feeling of an ancient Romanesque church. "Power to achieve our *objectives*." The gigantic mare, as tall as a tree, extends both jointless arms to the side, and picks the water woman and the fire man



effortlessly up in the air, like a child holding a doll in each hand.

“Metaphors are good pedagogic tools, Edda,” Willem says, “But I wonder if you’re overdoing it?”

“Sorry. Yeah. Let me explain.” Edda gets closer to the immense mare and gestures up at the two human forms—water and fire—hanging in the air, legs jiggling idly, bored expressions in their faces. “These are our objectives: the generous lady and the selfish stud. But both are held firmly by the Walker.” She points at the mare. “Both require us to *be* the Walker. To learn the skills of a Walker, yeah?”

“The, uh, *Walker*,” Isabella asks, “is *us*, with your dream powers?”

“Yes. With the powers of the Walker,” she gestures again at the gigantic mare, “we can take on any of these two objectives—or both!—head on, yeah?” She returns her gaze to her captive audience, expertly scanning their level of understanding in their expressions. “I am asking you to embrace the Walker. I am asking you to spend every single dream minute from this moment until cleansing Sunday in a very special new class with your favorite Juf.” She smiles with broad confidence. “If you give me your undivided time and dedication—and I mean *all* of it—I will instruct you in the Paths of the Mind-Walkers.”

Many hands and voices raise at once.

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“**B**ut those, uh, capabilities you say you can teach us,” Elvira Abspoel says. “That’s all just dreams, aren’t they? Not *real*?”

“Just because something happens inside our heads, doesn’t make it less real,” Edda explains with a practiced, patient voice. “Your every thought happens inside your head.”

“Sorry, Juf Edda, but my mother has a point,” says Ambroos next to her, still holding her hand like he is afraid of drowning. “We can’t fight aw’s Fist. They are professional warriors, trained killers, armed to the teeth. All we’ve got is our almost forgotten military month. And kitchen knives.”

“Edda, if I may?” Willem holds up his hand.

“Sure, Dad.”

Willem stands and turns to face the rest of the class. “We are not weak,” he begins. “Don’t let appearances fool you. These dream capabilities can give us the hard power we need.”

His audience stares at him, a mix of skepticism and hope written on every face.

“Look,” Willem continues, “I’m the oldest colonist present—oh, excuse me, Elder Abspoel, *almost* the oldest. I’ve read books all my life. All sorts of books: from the golden age, from the antique, you name it. My daughter,” he gestures at Edda, “is also well read. Together we possess knowledge from humanity’s most patient teacher: history. We know how revolutions that work, do work. We know war. Oh, yes, we do indeed. Since I was a child,” he smiles at the memory, “I shared my mother’s obsession with painstakingly realistic war simulations. Wars and battles from all ages. And Edda has also been wargaming since... forever?”

“Yeah...” Edda says, an unsure frown on her face. “But those are just games, Dad. And games have rules. In the real world, there are none.”

“Which is precisely what makes you even scarier, girl. You wouldn’t catch me dead fighting against you without rules! I can guarantee you,” he takes his time to make eye contact with all his audience, “that, together, Edda and I know more strategy and tactics than the Inquisitor and all his aw’s Fist combined.”

“And yet,” Aline interrupts in a bitter tone, “here we are. In jail. Just... waiting for aw’s Embrace. And they didn’t even

break a sweat!” A commotion of concern—of fear—crosses the classroom.

“But, Aline, you’re smarter than that,” Willem says. “This... *dreamtech*,” he gestures up at the giant mare, still holding the water woman and fire man in the air, “changes *everything!* These... *Paths*—the capabilities of the Walker—are incredibly powerful assets! *Military* assets! For us to take and use as we please.” Willem smiles at his fellow colonists like what he is saying should be obvious to everybody.

They stare back at him like they want to believe, but can’t.

“Come on!” he continues. “Look at us here, for example, meeting in a safety and secrecy that would be the envy of any resistance movement anytime in history!”

Gotthard and Rutger nod, their incipient hope almost tangible. Elvira and Ambroos tighten the mutual grip, and some of the others begin to smile openly at each other.

“Look at Aline, Goah’s Mercy!” Willem continues, his voice raised a notch. “Flying around in the real world like a ghost. Unseen by any guard. Unimpeded by any wall. No army has ever had a better scout. Nor intelligence agency a better spy.”

“Yeah!” some shout, hope blossoming with every word.

“And don’t get me started with time dilation!”

They chuckle, exchanging upbeat glances, and stare back at him with palpable glee, eagerly waiting for him to, indeed, get started.

“We’ll spend *every* dream minute of the next five days learning the Paths of the Mind,” Willem says, voice comforting, calm, reassuring. “That’s like the equivalent of... Uh, how long, Aline?”

“About two months,” Aline replies. “If we get around twelve hours of sleep a day.”

“Not a problem, thanks to the potion of my future dowry daughter,” Willem gives Isabella a curt nod. “As slow wake minutes pass by in the real world, we can take our sweet time

to gather intelligence, digest it, and then make plans, counterplans, war game alternatives...”

“Think about it, mensas,” Edda says, her voice filled with contagious enthusiasm. “That’s two months without fatigue, without sleep, twenty-four hours a day of focused instruction.” With a wide grin on her face, Edda spreads her arms in a gesture of inclusion. “Enough to turn most of you into Walkers of the Light. And perhaps even enough to get your toes wet in the shallows of the Shadow.”

*That is some sweet-talking action right there, Ximena thinks. The Van Dolahs sure know how to give a pep talk.* She lets her gaze float across the dream classroom. Edda’s audience is hanging onto her words like a castaway to a floating plank. The apprehension—the fear—has been wiped away from their faces. There is determination there now. A fierce drive to act. *What a difference hope makes!*

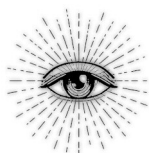
“And wondrous alien technology aside, let’s not forget about our most important asset.” Willem extends a hand at his daughter. “The best tactician I’ve ever lost against.” His voice brims with pride. “And the best teacher in the world, to personally mold us all into perfect dream soldiers.”

The classroom seems to shake as the conspirators burst into boisterous applause and spontaneous cheers. *Yeah! Dream Soldiers! Juf Edda!*

“Thank you, Dad,” she says, her voice loud and controlled, not letting the engulfing devotion divert her from her immediate goal, which the psych-link hammers into Ximena’s mind with the clarity of those sentenced to death. Her willpower, her control over her emotional reactions, her *focus*, as sharp as a warrior’s blade, never cease to amaze Ximena. “Thank you, mensas. Quiet. No time for this, yeah? Thank you. Now, prepare to cast your votes. On the *generous* objective,” she points a steady finger at the beautiful water woman smiling gracefully down at them, still held in the air by the colossal

mare, “do you vote to start a revolution to recover the golden age under Goah’s Gift? Or would you rather die in your Joyousday?” She slides her finger at the mare’s other arm, where the fiery man stares down with a glower of flames. “On the *selfish* objective, do you vote to start a rebellion, here in Lunteren, to take power for ourselves? Or would you rather flee to the woods? Your votes, please.”

## SIX



### Anemoon

---

The gusts of a dying storm keep throwing naked winter branches against each other in noisy clashes, allowing the brown-cloaked group to dash across the woods without lifting stealth.

“Today is the 4th of February,” Professor Miyagi says from below the rapidly developing scene. “Friday morning. Two days to cleansing.”

*Fire Friday!* Ximena thinks, as she and the rest of her fellow students follow with engrossed fascination the five shrouded figures scurrying in loose formation from tree to tree with the sure and practiced gait of a pack of wolves. The air, whistling and wailing through the maze of branches, pushes thick whiffs of mist across the irregular terrain. Ximena can feel the saturated humidity on her skin, as salty particles of foam from a battered sea upwind fill her nostrils.

“I’ve spared you the boring bits of the last few days,” Miyagi continues, “or rather, months, in *dream* time. Suffice to say that Edda’s gang has been very, very busy with preparations, planning, training, recruiting, conspiring... Well, you get the idea. Boring. If you are into that sort of thing, feel

free to browse the reference material. Laghari's *The Advent of Dreamtech* is particularly, hmm, *detailed*."

The leading cloaked figure raises a hand and the pack stops running at once, throwing themselves prone behind the cover of the nearest trunk or scrub. A few yards away, barely visible between the moving clouds of mist, an empty road cuts through the woods.

"For the sake of those of us with human-level attention spans," Miyagi continues, "I decided to jump straight to the action. *Historical* action, of course. This is where we begin our careful study of the events that inexorably lead to the Leap-Day Reformation. The 29th of February 2400 is mere weeks away now. And it is today that it becomes apparent to the outer world."

The casual clapping of iron-clad hooves against the asphalt arrives first, followed by the squeak of heavily loaded wagons and dozens of boots marching at a leisurely pace.

"I chose this scene because it is illustrative of the furious recruiting activity of our Lunteren prisoners. These are the forests of eastern Geldershire, near the colony of Ugchelen. And these people," Miyagi gestures at the hidden figures, who are peeking out through the bushes at the road beyond in utter silence, "are fresh members of the revolution, recruited in dreams in the last few wake days. Of course, it has been weeks from their perspective; weeks of intense dreamtech training, further recruitment and anti-Goahn indoctrination. While awake, like now, they keep an eye on things. And, people, you are in for a treat, because this is the morning of what will be commonly known in history as *Fire Friday*. Enjoy!"

*Fire Friday, Sooty Saturday, Cleansing Sunday*, Ximena recites with increasing anticipation of the famous triad that changed the course of history. *Goah, this is going to be sooo good!*

The leading cloaked figure pulls back the brown hood and carefully tilts her head behind the oak trunk. Her short, blond

hair is dirty and cluttered, her pretty face covered in mud. Her gaze pierces the mist towards the passing party with calculating, blue eyes. Ximena inhales sharply as she recognizes the brown militia leader who almost got Janson killed in Oosterbeek. *What was her name again?*

“Moon!” A cloaked man whispers behind her. “Can you see them?”

*Anemoon* raises a finger, gesturing for silence.

As the traveling party approaches their position, their chatter and laughs become even louder than the wind-shaken forest. Ximena can see them clearly now: warriors of aw's Fist, about two dozen of them, fire weapons on their shoulders, guns on their belts, and heavy-looking bags on their backs. A horse-drawn wagon accompanies them, loaded with bulky crates and baskets.

Ximena feels a sudden surge of adrenaline pouring into her guts. Her senses are heightened, her attention focused sharply on the passing soldiers. She realizes that the psych-link has just kicked in, and these are *Anemoon's* anxieties.

Her finger stays raised, and her fear sharp, for what feels like an eternity; until the sound of the marching warriors finally passes entirely and wanes in the distance. *Westwards*, comes her thought. She finally turns to the whispering man, and says, “You were right, Quint. Goah bless your eyes.”

“It wasn't me. It was one of my men, Nico. He sneaked into Ugchelen after his guard duty to visit a lover of his, and he spotted them next to aw's Eye, loading boxes, and getting ready to fuck off.”

“Goah bless Nico's cock. They really left Ugchelen. All of them.”

“Where are they going?”

“That's the question, ain't it?” *Anemoon* rises slowly, as do the rest of the figures. She begins walking back in the direction they came. “We need to report this immediately.”



“That ain’t happening, Moon,” the man says. “Not until sunset. Everybody’s awake now.”

Anemoon purses her lips, but says nothing, because he’s right. Their camp is just a few miles away, hidden in the edge of the ruined maze that is Old Apeldoorn today. They will be there in an hour or two. That’s not the problem. The fucking problem is *time*. There’s plenty of it at night, with that fucked up spezzi sleep magic, but in the morning... Even if they’d guzzle down that *goodnight* potion they learned to brew from that Lunteren witch; even if they’d stare at a candle and do that meditation horseshit those Lunteren spezzies taught them, nothing would help. Yeah, they would join the—how did they call it?—*permascape* place. Problem is, nobody would be there. Nobody to report to. Not until sunset, when everybody falls back asleep to join in. In the meantime they’ll have to wait, thumbs up their asses, while aws Fist keeps marching across Geldershire.

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**A**nemoon materializes behind one of the classroom desks; or rather, a cleaned-up version of herself. Even her hair and brown cloak appear immaculate in the dreamscape.

*Finally!* The thought comes to Ximena with an intense sense of relief. *Goah, it’s been tough to focus on that fucking candle!* It’s usually simple, but tonight she just couldn’t focus. She would repeat the mantra—*I’m dreaming, I’m dreaming*—just a handful of times before her eagerness would push her attention off course. And then she’d have to start all over again. *I’m dreaming, I’m dreaming, goahdammit!*

Ximena sympathizes. There isn’t a more potent stimulant than the urge to fall asleep. She has also *passed the candle*, as the bedtime ritual is known nowadays, when most people learn the self-suggesting trick before they even turn ten. After the first

few times you don't even need a candle, just running the mantra in your head before falling asleep snaps your mind back into your active permascape like a charm, without the need to hire a Walker every time, thank Goah.

Anemoon is not alone. A man watches with a patient expression next to the blackboard, as more and more people keep popping up behind desks in a slow, hypnotic cadence. *This is a De Bron classroom*, Ximena thinks. It's almost a twin of the one where Edda wrote those first fifteen names. A glimpse reveals, indeed, a list of names on the blackboard. Different names—for a different place. Surely by now, each Geldershire colony has its own dedicated classroom in the De Bron permascape.

"Ah, welcome, Woman Roskamp," the man says, as he notices Anemoon. "Are you and your... *people*," he gestures casually at the few other brown-cloaked figures present, "staying with us tonight?"

"Sorry, Rikkert, but there's a development. Aws Fist left Ugchelen."

"We noticed, thank Goah. Good riddance, but we really need more names and addresses." The man points a finger at the blackboard. "Woman Speese or Man Kraker always come through Ugchelen early in the night."

Ximena feels Anemoon's instinctive aversion at the mention of the two names. The *thread-makers*. The *only* thread-makers. Without them, they'd be nothing more than a bunch of isolated commoners, hunted by Aws Fist like goahdamn rabbits. But it is not gratitude she feels, Ximena notices. It is spite. *Even in dreams, there are specialists*.

She walks hastily towards the classroom door, followed by the rest of the militia.

"Woman Roskamp, please!" The man says.

As Anemoon reaches the door, she turns. "When Quint shows up, he'll give you today's list of sympathizers. You better

get that blackboard enlarged, Rikkert. Aws Fist's brief visit has sure as Dem left many sore asses in Ugchelen."

"Thank you, Woman Roskamp."

The auditorium scene follows Anemoon closely behind as she exits to a wide school hallway. It is already teeming with people out here, moving up and down the unnaturally long corridor with determined expressions, entering rooms, exiting others, chatting idly in small groups. Each door is adorned with a sign or a picture. The one Anemoon and her followers just exited is simply labeled *Ugchelen*, but the one they finally enter is painted in plain brown, and it's wide open, as brown-cloaked people keep walking in.

When Anemoon enters the classroom, dozens of faces turn her way, and every conversation dies out at once.

"I wanna know," she shouts, as she approaches the wall with the Geldershire map, "every fucking troop movement."

Ximena takes a closer look at the map. There are two pushpins on every one of the ten colonies across the peninsula, except on the southernmost, Oosterbeek, where there are five.

Anemoon takes a marker from the base of the map stand, uncaps it, and places its tip on one of the eastern colonies. *Ugchelen*. She then draws a thick arrow *westward* with three sure strokes, turns her head and waits in demanding silence.

"Uh, same in De Haere, Moon," a woman finally says. "They all took the Harskamp road."

Anemoon turns to the map and draws another westward arrow from a colony north of Ugchelen.

"They left Garderen this morning too. All of them. They took the road south."

As they speak, Anemoon keeps drawing arrows. One by one. Until a pattern slowly begins to emerge, triggering excited chatter among those present.

"Silence!" Anemoon shouts. "We ain't done yet. I want a

complete picture. What about Ermelo?" She gestures with the marker at a tall man.

"South, Moon. None left behind."

More reports, more markings on the map. The pattern solidifies, screaming in the face of any watcher. Anemoon stares at the result for a long while with pressed lips. Her fellow brown militia exchange tense glances in silence.

"Fuck," Anemoon finally says.

Anemoon and a dozen of her brown militia storm through the door at the end of the De Bron corridor, the only door left unmarked. Ximena recognizes the classroom at once, with the elevated ceiling and the enormous mare still holding in the air a watery woman and a fiery man.

A man about to write something on the blackboard—what was his name? Elder Rijnder?—turns his eyes at them and frowns upon recognition. "You are not allowed here."

Anemoon ignores him. She walks towards a mirrored door that looks strangely out of place. Ximena doesn't remember it being there before.

The man steps in her way. "Eh!" He stretches both arms at her. "Where do you think you're going?!"

Anemoon shoots him an impatient glare. "We need to report troop movements. It's urgent."

"You can't go in, brownny." Elder Rijnder's frown deepens. "Nobody's to disturb them. They've got more important things to deal with in there than your whim of the day."

"We have no time for this." Anemoon pulls a knife out of her cloak and drives it into Elder Rijnder's guts.

Horrified gasps fill the classroom. Many colonists stand in reflex. Some begin to advance, but they stop as the brown-

cloaked men form a disciplined line at the front of the class, knives in their hands, warnings in their eyes.

With agony on his face, and a gurgle from his lips, Elder Rijnder falls to his knees.

“Wake off!” Anemoon says, and cuts his throat.

Elder Rijnder vanishes.

Without losing a beat, Anemoon reaches for the door, and pushes. But it doesn’t move, like it was made of solid rock. “Fuck!” She notices a small opening on the otherwise smooth, mirrored surface. “It’s locked!” She looks around, searchingly. “Anybody know where the fucking keys are?”

“With Elder Rijnder,” a girl in her early teen years says, pointing at the place where he dropped to his knees.

“Fuck!” Anemoon turns her glare at the mirrored surface. “Fuck!” She shakes her head in frustrated disbelief.

“You can try calling in,” the girl says, pointing at the radio device hanging on the wall next to the door.

Anemoon stares at the device with an incredulous frown. She puts a careful finger on its surface. “This... *thing* works down here?”

The girl nods. “Just like in the wake.”

“You know how it works?”

“Yes, Elder. You take that long piece... The wired cylinder. Yes, and now press the trigger. You can talk now.”

“Hello?!”

“No, Elder. You keep the trigger pressed while you speak.”

“Uh, hello?”

“And to listen, you release the trigger.”

A sudden burst of static makes Anemoon almost drop the microphone.

“Elder Rijnder?” A female voice bursts out of the speakers. “Is it you? Over.”

The girl says, “That is Elder Abspoel. She is in charge of, uh...” She doesn’t seem to find the words.

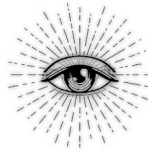
“Everything that happens outside of Lunteren,” a man sitting in the first row says, shooting a nod up at the hanging water woman, who winks at him and throws him a kiss.

Anemoon hastily raises the microphone to her mouth and shouts. “Aws greetings to you, Elder Abspoel. I need to speak with Juf Edda.”

For a few seconds, only white noise escapes the device. Then, finally, “Who are you? Over.”

“Tell her this is Woman Anemoon Roskamp. Tell her we met in Oosterbeek. Tell her every fucking aws Fist warrior in Geldershire is marching towards Lunteren as we speak.”

## SEVEN



### The Right Side of History

---

Edda, Aline and Elvira Abspoel study with horrified eyes the marker arrows stroked across the Geldershire wall map. Anemoon and at least two dozen of her fellow brown militia stand a few steps behind in respectful silence.

Edda shakes her head slowly and covers her mouth. *No! Goah, no!* The thought slips through the psych-link, mixed with a hope-shattering dread that Ximena feels creeping along her own bones.

“They know,” Aline finally says, dismay drenching her words. “Somehow, they know. All our plans... our training... for nothing.”

“They can’t possibly know,” Elvira says with apparent conviction, but a subtle wavering in her voice makes Edda’s hair stand on end like an icy breeze grazing the back of her neck. Since the revolution began, Elvira has proved to be a natural leader, and she is *never* unsure of anything. Or at least, she never shows it.

Aline raises a hand at the map, as if no further explanation was needed. “A spy, maybe?”

“No,” Elvira says, not a shadow of doubt in her voice this time. “We’ve been very selective. Every candidate has been personally proposed by one of my people, and then scrupulously tested in dreams.”

“You’ve been perhaps too successful in your recruiting efforts, Elder Abspoel,” Aline says, and waves a demonstrative hand at the mass of people watching their exchange. “There are at least a dozen rooms like this one in De Bron by now, each filled with dozens of fresh recruits.”

“Not recruits, Woman Speese,” Elvira says. “*Believers*. None of them would ever betray our cause, Goah be my witness.”

“If I may,” Anemoon says, taking a step forward. The three other women turn their attention to her. “Even if somebody’d rat on us, who would believe them? I thought it was all a pile of bull myself when I was recruited, and, let me tell you, when you’re being hunted like a dog, you’re of the believer type.”

*Yeah*. Edda nods slowly. Anemoon’s words feel good, like a warm balm on her crumbling hopes. *She must be right. She’s got to be.*

“I think the explanation is way simpler,” Anemoon continues. “Everybody’s heard by now what’s happening in Lunteren the day after tomorrow. The *great trial of the great blasphemers*,” she pronounces the words as if she were imitating somebody else’s, “as they call it on the radio. They’re bombarding the whole goahdamn Imperium with the announcements. You can’t tune into a program without hearing about it. *The first public cleansing in decades*,” she imitates again. “Juf Edda, I think aw’s Fist is just being cautious. They sure as Dem want no problems in Lunteren on Sunday, with all the attention, the people coming to watch, the... *emotions* that could explode after hearing the verdict or watching the cleansing. I think aw’s Fist is just moving like a brainless moth to the shiniest place in the neighborhood—simple as that.”



“Yeah,” Edda says, aloud this time. She exchanges a glance with Aline and Elvira, who also appear swayed by Anemoon’s logic. Edda turns to the map and points a finger at the western coast of the Geldershire peninsula. “When will they arrive?”

“Tomorrow,” Anemoon says. “In time for Sunday’s shitstorm. We estimate that the first troops will begin arriving by noon.”

Aline sighs. “That’s it. All our plans, down the drain.”

“No,” Edda says. “No.”

“Yes!” Aline says, and throws an appalled hand at the wall map. “Pure sin, we are fucked! Now all we can do is use the time we got left to plan an escape.”

“No,” Edda shakes her head with a determination she isn’t feeling. “There must be another way.”

“There’s no other way, Edda. This changes everything!”

“We voted,” Edda says, lifting her chin. “Hard power. We will take over Lunteren.”

“Against a goahdamn *army*?! What are you talking about? No, Edda. It’s over. We are out of options. Either we escape, or we die.”

Edda blinks, but says nothing. *Options...* her thoughts begin to twist with the practiced discipline of the strategist, a vertiginous chaos, too quickly for Ximena to follow. *Options...* Like a tornado, like the mother of all brainstorms, Edda’s mind disassembles the situation in its component pieces, only to reassemble them, over and over again, in a myriad of different combinations. It is dizzying.

“Edda?” Aline takes a step forward and puts a hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Edda turns her attention to Anemoon. “We never got the chance to talk. *Moon*, was it?”

Anemoon raises her eyebrows in surprised acknowledgment, and nods. “So they call me. If you mean our

little, uh, *incident* in Oosterbeek, well..." She shrugs. "I cannot say I'm sorry. Those were different times, even if it was just a few days ago."

Edda smiles. "I totally get it, Moon. We all have to do what we have to do, yeah? And your work since the... *new* times, has been," she looks at the arrow-marked map, "fantastic. Congratulations." Edda bows her head slightly. "And thank you."

Anemoon shrugs again, and then gestures at Quint and the rest of the brown militia. "It was *all* of us, Juf Edda. Anything for the cause."

"The cause, yeah..." Edda takes a step forward, her smile widening. "What do *you* want?"

"Freedom." Anemoon exchanges a glance with her people, who nod in agreement. "Life. Dignity."

"Revolution," Quint says.

"Revolution!" Anemoon repeats louder, and raises her fist.

"Revolution!" her fellow brown-cloaked comrades shout as one, fists in the air.

Edda slides a glance across the dozens of fiercely beaming eyes, holding her smile. "Revolution," she says, and squints at Anemoon. "Can you really deliver?"

"Just say the word, Juf Edda."

"I don't like where this is going," Aline says, exchanging a worried glance with Elvira. "What in Goah's Name are you thinking about?"

"I know how to keep our original plan in one piece, sister."

Aline shakes her head, an expression of disbelief in her eyes. "You are delusional, Edda. We cannot fight against an army of trained warriors."

"You are right—we can't." Edda raises a finger at the map. "But we *can* stop them from reaching Lunteren in the first place."

“People might get hurt, Goah’s Mercy!” Aline says to Edda, her voice drenched in dismay. She turns her pleading eyes to Anemoon and her militia. “This can easily spiral out of control!”

“Believe it or not, spezzi, we can be careful when we need to.” Anemoon’s eyes shine with purpose. “We’ll stick to our targets and get people out beforehand.”

“Believe it or not, *Woman Roskamp*, it’s not you that worries me the most, and that’s saying a lot.” Aline gestures with frenzied hands at the pushpins on the map. “Am I the only one wondering how aws Fist might react to your *careful* actions?”

Anemoon’s lips curve into a smirk. “You live a precious life, spezzi. So comfortable in your sense of *belonging*. You’d never understand that dignity is worth dying for.”

“Is it also worth *killing* for?”

Anemoon’s smirk vanishes. Her voice turns solemn. “I’d rather kill for something than die for nothing.”

“Yeah, boss!” Quint says, among murmurs of assent across their brown-cloaked comrades.

“Juf Edda.” Elvira takes a step forward, a vague expression of concern in her round face. “You made me responsible for spreading the word across Geldershire.”

Edda smiles and gestures at the dozens of brown militia faces. “And you’ve done better than anybody could have imagined.”

“Thank you, but... Sorry, Juf Edda, I know it is not my department, but Woman Speese has a point. If you carry out this plan, we can expect a harsh reaction from aws Fist. Repression and fear will, er, severely handicap my recruiting efforts.”

“On the contrary, Elder Abspoel. According to history, nothing fans the flames of revolution like harsh repression.”

“I see.” Elvira clears her throat. “Juf Edda, our growing network of sympathizers,” she gives Anemoon an acknowledging nod, “provide us with fresh options that we didn’t have when we voted for hard power. If you would decide to escape Lunteren, like Woman Speese suggests, there would be no need to go to exile anymore. We could easily keep you safe, hidden among our people.”

Edda frowns. “What type of life is that?”

“A secret life,” Aline says. “A *safe* life. Way better than exile in barbarian land.”

“This option could still come in handy on Sunday, Juf Edda,” Elvira says. “In case, Goah forbid, something goes wrong.” A shadow crosses her eyes. “But if you go ahead tonight with...” She gestures at the map on the wall. “If aws Fist reacts *badly*... We cannot trust anybody when the lives of their loved ones are in the enemy’s hands. If you go ahead with this, Juf Edda, the only option you’ll have left if something goes sideways, is exile.”

“We won’t fail on Sunday. Our plan is watertight.” She shoots a glare at the arrow-marked map. “At least as long as we keep the rest of aws Fist away. And we will.” Edda turns her face towards the stout woman and gives her a warm smile. “Don’t worry, Elder Abspoel. I promise that you will soon have Ambroos in your arms. And Lunteren is only the beginning. Once we take power for ourselves,” Edda clenches a fist, eyes lost on the map, “we will be safe forever!”

Aline, blinking, leans in and whispers in Edda’s only ear, “I need to tell you something important. In private.” Then she turns to the rest. “Please excuse us a sec.”

Edda rolls her eyes, but she lets Aline take her arm and lead her across the classroom between the desks. “What?”

Aline keeps her voice lowered. “I didn’t have the chance to report this yet, but Gotthard and I...” She wets her lips. “Uh...”

Edda's lips stretch into a mischievous smile. "You are having dream sex."

Aline's eyes widen. "No, Goah's Mercy!"

"*Traverse* sex? Goah, is that even possible?"

"Edda, I'm serious!"

"Sorry, sorry," she says, but she is not. "Tell me."

Aline blinks and sighs. "Gotthard and I, we've been all over the place, melding minds into De Bron for Elder Abspoel's revolution, night after night, without end."

"I know you're overstretched, sister. And I'm sorry. But you mensas are our only two traversers, other than me. And let's be honest. My traversing sucks."

"We are coping; that is not the problem. You see, while traversing over colonies, we began noticing something weird, at the edge of our perception."

Edda's eyes widen with growing interest. "In the Second Wake?"

Aline nods. "You know how everything looks kind of colorless there? Gray? With touches of green? Except halos, of course."

Edda nods. "Blue."

"And red."

Edda gasps. "Have you seen marai in the traverse?!"

Aline shrugs. "We've seen red spots. Always too far away to make out clearly. But, er, I think so."

"Elder Rew?!"

Aline shrugs anew. "I don't know. I don't think so; she wouldn't stay out of the way, would she?"

"But then, what were they doing?"

"I don't know, sister. Perhaps keeping an eye on us? But the point I'm trying to push through your thick skull is that you are not just sending your," she throws a side glance at Anemoon and her brown comrades, "*warriors* against aw's Fist."

Edda frowns, eyes locked on Aline's, but does not reply.

Aline takes a step forward, urgency in her eyes, and grabs Edda's hands. "Aws Head—aws Fist—are just doing the marai's bidding, Goah's Mercy. They are just... marionettes! If you unleash your militia, they won't just be fighting humans!"

Edda blinks, doubt slipping into her thoughts like a black goo diluting slowly in the most pristine of convictions.

Aline points a finger at the other end of the classroom. "If you're sending them to war, they deserve to know who they are really fighting against. They deserve to know the truth."

"The truth..." Edda whispers slowly. Ximena feels her thoughts darkening with every breath. "They would never believe the truth."

"They would believe anything you say, Edda. They would believe that you are Goah awsself incarnated, if you just say the words."

Edda takes a deep breath. Ximena can feel her confusion and, yes, even doubt. But she doesn't let it show. "Alien manipulation... Alien agendas... Goah, the truth is too tough a nut to chew! And they need a clear head, sister. They cannot afford distractions. Not tonight."

Aline gapes at Edda in disbelief. "Are you seriously considering not telling them?"

"You've got to understand, Aline. The truth might shake their conviction. It might even *paralyze* them. We need them to function to the best of their abilities, for all our sake."

"Edda!" Aline's voice wavers, as if imploring for her life. "What's happening to you? If we hide the truth, we are no better than aws Head!"

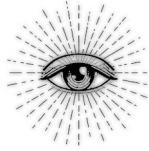
Edda gasps, but replies almost immediately, "We are better! And we will always be, because we are not lying, yeah?"

"Hiding critical facts *is* lying!" Aline exhales, shaking her head. "This is so wrong."

"No." Ximena is amazed at how quickly Edda's conviction

—her willpower—drowns the last lingering traces of doubt.  
“This is *right*, sister. *We* are right. We are better than aw’s Head,  
because we are on the right side of history.”

## EIGHT



### Fire Friday

“**F**ire Friday,” Miyagi says, pacing with his hands on his back across the stage. Ximena and every other soul in the amphitheater follow his every word with excited anticipation. He turns to face his audience, and pulls back his long, white air. “What a misnomer, isn’t it?”

He gives Ank a curt nod and the auditorium darkens as a new scene materializes in midair, attracting every eye at once: a bird’s-eye view of a Goahn colony Ximena has never seen before, right by the coast. It is a *Second Wake* bird’s-eye view, a landscape of gray beauty, sharp and shadowless, where nature meets civilization. The sea, fiercely awakened by heavy winds, embraces the colonial Forum from two sides. *Breathtaking*, Ximena thinks.

“Because by now, it is already Saturday.” Miyagi’s voice emerges from below the floating scene. “The very early hours. But hey, who can resist a catchy name?” He chuckles. “*Fire Saturday* doesn’t quite have the same ring, does it? Without the alliteration, I’m already forgetting it.” He chuckles again. “Besides, the events that happen later throughout this eventful Saturday merit a name of their own, with its own alliteration!



But whatever name we give to this moment in history, here you have it, people.”

The scene camera raises slowly, bringing into view the small harbor next to the Forum, where a few fishing boats tilt back and forth lazily with the wind. And then, a sudden midair flash of radiant blue makes Ximena jolt in her seat. Two figures have just popped up into existence: Aline and Gotthard, floating above the colony beside each other, their semi-transparent blue halos in stark contrast to the grayish landscape below. By now, Ximena has grown used to the hairless, nude bodies of the Traverse.

Aline covers her mouth with her hand, widening eyes locked on the Forum below. Gotthard follows her gaze and clenches his jaws at once.

*What are they looking at?* Ximena squints, but for all the wondrous clarity of vision of the Second Wake, the lack of colorful contrast keeps some elements initially hidden from plain view.

“Aws Eye,” Mark whispers in her ears. And then points with a finger at the structure right at the far end of the Forum, where land meets ocean.

Ximena leans forward, squinting at the tall, oval building—the Eye of Goah—and the rest of the annexed administrative premises, not unlike Lunteren’s Eye, or any other colonial Eye for that matter. She notices a flurry of activity, unnatural at this time of night: tiny, blue-haloed figures running out of every access like ants out of an attacked nest. In the wind it is hard to hear, but are those screams? Then, her eyes are drawn by the building itself when the windows crack. *What?* And then—*Huh?*—the crystal Eye of Goah, proudly covering the wide oval expanse of the central structure, gazing at the heavens with architectural magnificence, shatters into a myriad of pieces. *Whoa!* The sound reaches her ears like thunder, a second after the shards collapse into the holy space below. *What*

*is going on?! The entire complex appears to be fading, losing color, its vivid gray presence slowly washing away, waning into the lifeless blackness of the sky.*

Ximena gives Mark a puzzled look. He smiles, lifts a finger at the crumbling structure, and whispers, “Fire.”

*Fire. Ximena returns her eyes to the scene. Of course. Fire is invisible in the traverse. For all its lively beauty, fire is dead. And it kills everything that it touches, even the smallest microorganisms that otherwise cover the planet in a layer of life, providing the Second Wake with its all-engulfing, pristine shine. But, as blind to fire as she might be, its consequences are all too clear now. And her soul aches.*

*Goah be Merciful!*

Horrified murmurs surround her side of the amphitheater, aghast at the sight of the Eye of Goah complex crumbling and slowly fading away into death.

*Pure Sin! Literally. Ximena is a historian, true, but it is hard to look at an attack on her own faith—on her own soul—and remain as unperturbed as those goahdamn Hansasian assholes. She shifts her weight in her seat, moving a tad away from Mark. Her incensed thoughts are spinning with the implications. The perpetrators were not disbelievers, nor heathens. No matter how fanatic the brown militia were in their fight for dignity and freedom, they were still siblings of the faith, colonists of Goah. How could they?*

And then it hits her. As painfully as a hammer on a thumb. A loud gasp escapes her lips.

“What?” Mark asks.

“Edda!”

“Edda what?”

“Edda... ordered this. Edda *did* this!”

“And?”

*He can't understand, Goah's Mercy. His Hansasian perspective is too narrow.*

Even Cody seems paler than usual. “This can’t be right,” he mutters, and turns to Ximena and Mark. “Can it?”

Mark’s blue eyes, widened in puzzlement, alternate between her and Cody. “What’s up with you, mensas?”

But the sad voice of Aline interrupts their exchange. “They also hit Ermelo,” she says, eyes locked on the panicking colony below. She is floating a mere few yards in front of them, in the middle of the auditorium, in refulgent blue.

Gotthard nods. “Those brown bumpkins are everywhere.” His halo does not shine with the same intensity as Aline’s next to him, but is equally fuzzy across his naked skin. Ximena realizes that Gotthard, like Aline, is probably one of those rare mensas with the talent to traverse the Second Wake. That would explain their working together. “Even here, in the ass of Geldershire.”

“It’s windy,” Aline says. “I hope the fire doesn’t spread.”

“It won’t.” Gotthard extends a finger downwards. “The Forum is too wide. Flames cannot make it across.”

Aline raises her eyes, a trace of tears welling up in them. “What are we doing, Gotthard?”

He takes a few moments to reply. “What needs to be done.”

“Oh, Goah be Merciful. I think this is a mistake. A big mistake.”

“This is *necessary*. And as bad as it looks down there, it is a small price to pay.”

“You call that *small*?”

“Yes! That’s just... fucking stone and glass, that’s all.”

“Bricks and...” She lets her gaze fall on the destruction of the temple, and takes her hand to her chest in reflex. “May Goah have Mercy on our souls...”

Ximena feels a sudden link with Aline, an intense feeling of belonging—of home. She is a sister of the faith. And at this moment, she feels more connected to her than to Gotthard, her direct ancestor. Perhaps faith is heavier than blood.

“You are being hypocritical, Speese,” Gotthard says. “This will save our lives—*your* life. And let’s face it, our scouting and coordination makes us—makes *you*—a more important part of this operation than any of those brown hicks carrying torches down there.”

“Fuck you, Gotthard!”

*Fuck you, indeed, granddad.*

“Cursing doesn’t suit you, Speese. So much brain in that pretty head of yours, but you still don’t get it, do you? You are thinking too small. You think this is just about us? About surviving Sunday?” He points a finger southward. “About Lunteren, or even Geldershire? No, Speese. This is so much bigger. This is about the entire world. And we need hard power to save the future.”

“You and Edda are delusional, growing god complexes with every bit of power you extract. But the end never justifies the means. This,” she gestures at the fading Eye of Goah, “makes us worse than aw’s Head!”

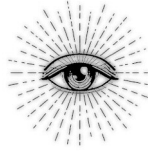
“Better, or worse—they’re just meaningless words, Speese. They don’t matter. We are beyond words now. We must survive. *This* needs to be done, for the world’s sake.”

“Oh, Goah. You are so stupid. So naive. You really believe that, don’t you? No, Gotthard. The truth is *so* much simpler than that. This is not about saving the world. This is about saving Edda’s fucking father!”

But Gotthard does not reply. Something has caught his eye. Ximena turns her head and sees it as well, high over the crop fields at the other side of the colony. Something out of place, too far away to discern. Something bright, like a spark.

Something red.

## NINE



### Lies, Damn Lies and History

The little boy walks along the haunted shores of Old London. Alone. Tears on his face, dread in his soul. “Mom?” he keeps calling out. “Uncle? John?” But his voice is weak, as if, deep inside, he knows it is futile.

Ximena can feel the icy despair of his loneliness slipping in through the psych-link, shrinking her own guts. It is so all-encompassing, so overwhelming... Worse than physical pain. Such loss of meaning, such lack of purpose. Ximena has felt nothing similar in her life, thank Goah. She takes a deep breath, trying to shake it off, but true solitude cannot be simply wished away.

The wet sand feels cold and coarse under the boy’s bare feet, but he keeps walking, dead buildings from a lost age looming in the darkness like ghosts of glass and stone.

Ximena gasps as a floating eye—the Eye of Goah—appears in midair, hovering with golden refulgence so close to the boy that she feels on *her* face the radiant warmth of aw’s Light. And, oh, what a *relief*. It feels *good*, as aw’s Eye begins to send waves of pure delight that splash his loneliness away like the ocean clearing a sandcastle.

The boy falls on his knees, shaking in awe, and drops his head in submission.

The Eye begins to speak, “My enemies roam your land, human.” The voice is feminine and demanding, reverberating across the broken ruins in chilling echoes. With every spoken syllable, the golden symbol seems to pulse indignantly, shimmering in the boy’s terrified eyes. “They do resist my will. They do destroy my rule.”

The boy raises his eyes in fear at the fiercely bright symbol and speaks with an adult’s voice. “Please, forgive me, Oh Goah! Please, I implore aw’s Mercy. I will cleanse our land from demonfolk. I will bend our land to aw’s Will.”

“My enemies are everywhere, human. They do hide in the shadows of your world. But I do *see* them.”

“Demons, oh Goah! Demons everywhere! Rabid dogs biting their master’s hand.” Ximena can feel his indignant passion bubbling inside her, yearning to burst into action. “There’s only one way to deal with rabid dogs, oh Goah. I will rid aw’s Kingdom of that blasphemous filth!” The man-boy doesn’t speak like it is a promise, but like it is a fact.

“My enemies grow strong,” the Eye says, its voice slow and commanding. “You shall not underestimate them.”

“No, oh Goah, never! Demons can be cunning.” Ximena exhales as a surge of raw hate flows through the psych-link. “But I can see through them, the shrewd little bastards. I won’t fail you, I swear. I won’t fail you again.”

“You are *my* weapon, human, and I shall yield you to slay my enemies.”

“Yes, oh Goah! I am aw’s Servant. I am aw’s Fist. Until my last breath.”

“Do terminate my enemies. Do restore my rule.”

“Yes. Yes, oh Goah!” Ximena feels his conviction pouring out of every pore of her skin, like a fountain of *meaning*, like a waterfall of *purpose*.

“Do terminate my enemies,” the Eye repeats. “Do restore my rule.”

The man-boy begins to weep in the certainty of his calling. “Yes, yes, yes, my Goah!” The feeling has intensified to almost ecstatic levels, drowning his mind, frightening off every other thought away.

A lonely tear runs down Ximena’s cheek.

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“People, please, calm down.” Not even Professor Miyagi’s soothing words can keep the excited tumult from slowly engulfing Ximena’s side of the amphitheater.

Ank has paused the scene at the sudden commotion. The little barbarian boy appears now frozen in midair, the anguish on his expression still echoing through the psych-link. And he is kneeling before the blazing Eye.

The blazing Eye.

Ximena lets her gaze skim the godly image. She has unconsciously been avoiding looking at it directly. *Oh, Goah.* So splendid, so powerful... so *deceiving*. *Pure sin!* She can understand all too well her fellow GIA students’ repulsion at the sight of the false god; such forgery, a *sacrilege* of the worst type; a subversion of her faith, built to manipulate into submission. And yet, she must admit, sacrilege and desecration are an integral part of history, ever-present when civilizations rub against each other.

Heated discussions across the benches around Ximena are quickly drowning her own thoughts, a furious sea of white-and-blue indignation.

“We can talk about this!” Professor Miyagi says, his voice barely able to compete with the roaring outrage, and those words that make it through are summarily ignored.

Some, like Mallory down on the first bench, are throwing

accusing fingers at him and at the other side of the auditorium, at the Lundev crowd, who stare back at them with baffled looks. Some over there, like that bitch, Sky, even seem to be enjoying herself.

“What’s this all about?” Mark asks in her ear, but before Ximena can reply, a tenuous silence falls over the amphitheater.

When she looks up, she finds that Censor Smith has stood up, and is pacing quietly towards Professor Miyagi in the center of the stone stage. Every eye in the auditorium has locked on his calm gait, some with hope, others with suspicion. “I am afraid that I must intervene.”

“Thank you,” Professor Miyagi says, relief distending his expression at the sight of the students finally reverting to their default sit-and-watch stance.

“You are very welcome. You must excuse my students, Professor Miyagi. This entire scene is, sorry to put it so bluntly, an abomination. And it must go.”

Miyagi frowns slightly, all too conscious of the many eyes on him, but does not reply.

“I am very sorry, my dear professor, but there is no place for such... *filth* in the Goah’s Imperia of the Americas.”

“Filth,” Miyagi says softly, his expression exquisitely modulated to reflect patience and reason. “If you refer to the impersonation of Goah, then—”

“Oh, no, no, that’s not it. Well, certainly that... *detail* is enough to block the publishing of your commercial dream sensorial in the GIA, at least of the affected scenes. We have young, tender souls to consider, after all.”

“Aha.” Professor Miyagi pulls back his long, white hair. “At this rate, the GIA version is going to be rather short.”

“We are historians, are we not, my dear professor? We are masters of the truth, as you so keenly say. It is up to you to adapt your production to the truth.”



“The truth.” Professor Miyagi nods slowly, lips pressed into a thin line. Ximena notices his usually pale cheeks coloring noticeably. “Which is?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? You are showing us here the beginning of the revolution that leads in a few weeks to Mathus’ heretical Reformation. *Mathus’* Reformation, not Van Dolah’s, not the mares’. Mathus’.”

“Marjolein Mathus was never involved in these—”

“And right there lies the problem, Professor. In this... *contrived* narrative,” Censor Smith gestures dismissively at the floating scene, “the troubles are triggered by Edda van Dolah on the one side, stoking those sacrilegious fires, and the marai on the other, manipulating Inquisitor Rhodes into a violent response. And, just like that,” he snaps his fingers, “Mathus is off the hook.”

Miyagi is frowning. “Sorry, I’m not sure I’m following...”

“We brought our very best students to your Global Program, Professor.” Censor Smith gestures back at the benches of blue and white. “You cannot seriously expect us not to see through your transparent revisionist attempts.”

“Hansasian propaganda!” Mallory shouts from the front bench below Ximena. “Whitewashing the heresy of demon Mathus.”

Censor Smith smiles magnanimously at his pupil and begins to walk back to his seat.

“But,” Miyagi alternates looking between the retreating Censor and the fuming Mallory, “That’s absurd! How would you expect Marjolein Mathus to be involved in any of these?”

Mallory spits more than speaks, her long, brown hair falling over her shoulders in aggrieved disarray, her black eyes glimmering with outraged passion. “Manipulation, lies, deception, sex, warmongering. The Inquisitor was Mathus’ puppet all along!”

“Her little *puppy*,” says a man sitting somewhere left of Cody, catching the laughs of many around them.

Mallory’s words resound deeply inside her. *This* is the history she has always heard and read, the so intimately comforting history of the Leap-Day Heresy, where demon Mathus’ machinations bring the world into a deadly conflict of good versus evil, truth versus lies, Goah versus Heresy, America versus Hansasia. In the meantime, as everybody knows, Edda—her ancestor, she thinks with sudden fondness—was spreading the new art of dreams among the faithful, from within the shadows of society. This is history. *Their* history. *Her* history.

And utter bullshit, she now realizes, thanks to Professor Miyagi, who is staring back at the GIA benches with baffled incomprehension. Ximena doesn’t want to trust this man. She wants to believe that the professor is shrewdly manipulating them to fulfill some hidden Hansasian agenda. But she is a scientist too—a woman of intellect—and she knows that what she wants reality to be, is completely irrelevant to reality. As a historian, she knows that her own values—her desires—are often the toughest veil to shred before uncovering the truth.

Let’s take Marjolein Mathus, for instance. How much sense does it really make, as the GIA orthodoxy claims, that a Quaestor of a remote colony could bear so much power over a Grand Inquisitor? The history texts she has read portray Mathus as a modern, murderous Cleopatra, that forced the Inquisitor’s hand to such level of oppression that the people had no other choice but to rebel against Goah’s representatives on Earth. She was an evil, greedy Quaestor—a demon—the perfect villain. So simple. But Ximena knows all too well that history doesn’t like simple. History is dirty, messy, complicated—*human*. Goah, she is even starting to sound like the professor.

Ximena looks at Mallory, and at her fellow GIA students

with contempt, as they laugh and sweep away Miyagi's history like dirt off an old, trusty table.

"I believe I might have been too tolerant," Professor Miyagi says with such an unusually stern voice that all talking in the auditorium dies in an instant. "You decline access to the evidence. You dismiss my conclusions without providing a crumb of your own evidence." He raises his eyes at the now silent white-and-blue benches. "And then, you call my science *propaganda*?"

*Spot on!* At the end of the day, who is Ximena to believe, the side that is eager to share all available evidence, or the side that waves a thorny stick and yells at her to shut up and fall in line?

Censor Smith, who was about to sit down, turns hastily, obviously surprised at Professor Miyagi's words. "Please measure your words, Professor."

Miyagi takes a step forward, a lone finger sweeping across the rows of flabbergasted GIA students. "You don't even know how to begin to spell *scientific method*. And you expect my respect?!"

"Pro- Professor...!" Censor Smith doesn't seem to know how to react.

A few isolated hands begin to clap from the Lundev side of the amphitheater.

"This is a seminar for historians, Censor Smith. *Historians*." He sweeps an accusing finger across the GIA benches. "Who the fuck are these people you brought to my seminar?"

*Whoa, touché!* Ximena thinks with discreet amusement. A sidelong glance at Cody's almost-imperceptibly curved lips confirms that she is not the only one discretely cheering for Professor Miyagi from inside the GIA section; not counting, of course, Mark, whose stupid wild smile is as out of place as a dirty joke at a funeral.

Miyagi takes another step forward, finger still raised at Ximena's gaping fellow students. "What happened to the

eminent University of Townsend? Is *this* really all it can squeeze nowadays?"

The few heavy gasps around her are quickly drowned by the intensifying clapping behind Professor Miyagi. Somebody even dares a cheer. Ximena would gladly trade a pinky finger for a peek at Censor Smith's expression, but, sadly, he is facing away.

Professor Miyagi brusquely gestures for silence at the Lundev ranks, his face so unnaturally serious that the noise ceases at once. He glares back at the GIA section and stretches a hand in an inviting gesture towards the doors standing on their own at the edge of the amphitheater. "If you are here just to confirm your flock biases, you are most welcome to leave."

"Please, please, Professor!" Censor Smith raises both hands, palms facing Miyagi. "Please! There is no need for such childish hyperbole. No need at all." He chuckles affably. "I respect your passion, my dear professor, so Hansasian, but you are blowing things out of proportion. We are here to exchange perspectives, aren't we?" He waves a stretched hand across the entire auditorium. "To bridge our differences. To bring us together. Your Global Program is worth navigating a few small misunderstandings, isn't it? What we are doing here is bigger than any of us. Besides, since when do historians shy away from a good, old, hearty discussion?" He chuckles again. "Certainly we don't in the Goah's Imperia of the Americas! And if in our love for debate we have crossed a cultural line, please accept our most sincere apologies."

"Actually, Censor Smith," Mallory stands, chin raised. "With your permission, I would like to leave."

He turns and points a finger at the bench where she was sitting. "Sit down this instant." His voice is slow and commanding. "Everybody is staying."

From her place up behind her, Ximena cannot see

Mallory's face. All she sees is that, without a word, without even hesitation, she sits back and sinks her head.

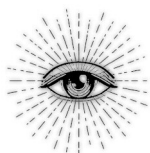
"Thank you, Woman Pardee," Censor Smith continues. "You are seeing this through to the end. You are a historian of the Goah's Imperia of the Americas, and it is your duty to observe, to learn if you can, or, at the very least, to learn what others *believe*. How can you expect to serve the Imperia if you don't even understand the world we are living in?"

"Know your enemy," Cody whispers to Ximena. "That's why Censor Smith wants us here."

"Hansasia is not our enemy!" Ximena replies, and throws a subtle glance at Mark, who keeps that stupid grin on his face while watching the drama still unfolding on stage. Oh, it's all so easy for him—enjoying a fight he has no stake in, while waiting for the dust to settle and the professor to get on with the show.

She raises her gaze at the little boy kneeling in midair, his pale blue eyes frozen in godly fear. And, to her own surprise, she must admit to also be quite eager to find out how the Grand Inquisitor will finally react to *Fire Friday*.

TEN



## Sooty Saturday

The Inquisitor wakes up, startled by the blaring wail blasting out of the walkie-talkie. With a disoriented frown, he reaches to the bedside and takes the device to his mouth. “Hmm... What?!”

“Arch, you need’a come. Over.”

“John?” The Inquisitor rubs his eyes and lets them wander across the bedroom, dimly lit by a handlamp lying on the floor. It is still pitch black out the window. “What happened? What time is it? Over.”

“Does it fuckin’ matter? Get your ass ove’ here, you gotta hear this! Over.”

The Inquisitor hastily pulls on a thick, pale robe, takes the handlamp, and rushes downstairs and out the door. Ignoring the sudden icy humidity on his exposed scalp, he hurries to the end of the street and across the empty Forum, until, almost out of breath, he finally reaches the first of the building of aw’s Eye complex: an elongated structure with a single door, which he enters at once.

About a dozen faces greet him in grim silence. They are standing around a large rectangular table set next to a lit

hearth. The rest of the spacious room is filled with rows of bunks and littered with bags and pieces of armor and clothing.

“Report!” The Inquisitor says, reaching the table. A wrinkled paper map of Geldershire takes most of its surface.

“They’re settin’ aws Eyes on fire, Arch!” the enormous man without a nose says, pale blue eyes flinching between the Inquisitor and the map.

“What?”

“Got’t confirmed by Intel, Inquisita,” another man says. “It’s fuckin’ true. They’re burnin’ Aws Eyes ta the ground!”

The Inquisitor clenches his teeth, waves of rage blushing his face. Ximena can feel the heat of his wrath on her own cheeks, and it is unpleasant; filled with fierceness, hatred and fear. Fear of Goah.

“Inquisita?” the man asks, squinting at him.

The Inquisitor wets his lips.

Twice.

“Where?” he finally asks in a dim, ice-cold voice.

“Ev’rywhere!” Noseless says, putting a finger on the southern edge of the map. “Oosterbeek, Roz’ndall, Rheden,” he moves his finger to the eastern colonies, “Ugchelen, Beekbergen, De Haere,” and then slides it inland, “Harskamp, Garderen,” and finally, he rests it on the north-western coast, “Ermelo. All on fire, ‘xcept—”

“Lunteren,” the Inquisitor says, voice slithering between clenched teeth, eyes fixed on the western coast of the map.

“We’re in the last standin’g aws Eye in all fuckin’ Geldershire.”

Another warrior clears his throat. “The Joyousday Houses in Oosterbeek and Harskamp are also burnin’, Inquisita. Those were the ‘nly two that survived the Century Blasphemy Fires’r out of control.”

“Firefighters?”

“Never arrived, Inquisita. They might’ve b’n blocked. Or they, uh... took part.”

The Inquisitor raises his gaze at his men. “Who did this?”

“Unknown, Arch,” Noseless says. “Intel reported possible sightin’s of brown militia. But there’s no confirmati’n.”

“Those brown demons ain’t alone, Inquisita!” the other warrior says, and throws an exasperated finger at the map. “This fuckin’ land is lost ta Goah! Heresy here spreads fasta than syphilis in a whor’house.”

“Brown bast’rds got eyes ev’rywhere,” Noseless says. “They know when we go for a piss. As soon as our men marched outta their colonies, they made’er move.”

The Inquisitor puts both hands on the table and stares across the map for a long while.

His men exchange glances in respectful silence. This is not their first battle. They’ve reported, and now they await their orders.

Ximena notices an almost imperceptible shudder in the Inquisitor’s hands as the fury thumping fiercely in his guts begins to melt into shame. “On my watch,” the Inquisitor finally mutters.

“Arch?”

The Inquisitor straightens and meets Noseless’ eyes. “This is not just heresy, John. This is *desecration*. A desecration like aws Imperia has never seen before. A challenge to the power of the Pontifex herself. And it happened on my watch!”

Noseless doesn’t reply. With pressed lips, he simply puts a hand on the Inquisitor’s shoulder. The warrior behind Noseless rests his own hand on Noseless’ shoulder, and soon every warrior around the table is linked together, hand on shoulder, in brotherly solidarity.

The Inquisitor straightens, and everybody sinks their arms at once. With a blank expression, he meets the silent gaze of his men, one by one. “I made a mistake. A commander is *never*



to underestimate the enemy. But this stops here.” He turns to Noseless. “John, when are our troops due to arrive at Lunteren?”

“Er...” Noseless puts a finger on the western part of the map, and slides it along the roads that lead towards Lunteren. “Late mornin’ and throughout the afternoon. Full house by sunset, Arch, ‘st like you ordered.”

“Scrap that. Issue new orders. They are to march back to their previous deployment at best speed. I want aw’s Fist back to every colony of Geldershire before sunset, understood?”

“Aye, Arch.”

The Inquisitor turns to the map, and puts a finger next to Oosterbeek, at the narrow strip of land that connects Geldershire with the Hansa mainland. “Order Hawkins to deploy a three-shift squad on the Arnhembridge and another one on Oosterbeek Harbor. I want the Rhine Marshes and the docks under constant patrol. Not a soul is to enter or leave Geldershire until tomorrow after the public cleansing.”

“Aye, Arch.”

“The rest are to interrogate the local populace as soon as they reach their assigned colonies. I want them to get a clear picture of where everybody was when the fires began, what have they seen, who they suspect... I want a thorough crosschecking of testimonies. And tell our men not to shy away from resolving inconsistencies with the necessary vigor.”

“The lads are warriors, Arch, nat civilian ‘nvestigators. Shouldn’t they leave the spotlight to aw’s Head’s guards and stick to keepin’ the place in order?”

“Too long. Too soft. I want answers now. I want names. Our men are to break down every door until they dig out those names, understood? Demons are easily spotted in the aftermath of chaos. Whoever gloats, whoever dodges questions, whoever hides, whoever lies: they go on the list.”

“And what do we do with ‘em?”

“Summary cleansing. And may Goah have Mercy on their souls.”

“But, Arch... Aws Compacts...?”

“Let me worry about aws Compacts. You worry about getting results.”

---

The kitchen of aws Eye is smaller than Ximena would have guessed; not much larger than her own home kitchen. Perhaps that is why the hearty scents emanating from the sizzling pans and steamy cauldrons permeate the space with such intensity.

Ximena is salivating.

Elvira Abspoel and two teenage helpers—a boy and a girl—stir pans, adjust fires, peel potatoes, clean counters, all while humming to the pop music that beats rhythmically out of a radio device.

The outside door opens, letting a gush of early-morning daylight into the room. A short, shapely woman with broad, South-Eastern Asian features leans in and scans the place. Her sixteen-year-old face lightens up when she sees Elvira. “Ah, here you are, Elder Abspoel. I went to your home, but—”

“Brr... Close the door, please, Isabella, honey,” Elvira says with a warm smile. “It’s cold outside.”

“Sorry.” Isabella shuts the door behind her. “You started work early today.”

“Yes. I want to finish soon for obvious reasons.” She gives Isabella a pointed look. “Thankfully Iwan and Linneke volunteered to help me out, Goah bless them.” The boy and the girl smile, but keep their eyes fixed on their tasks at hand. Elvira walks to the corner and turns the radio volume down. “You are also early today. Is everything fine, dear?”

Isabella sighs. “I’m nervous. For *obvious reasons*. Here.” She hands Elvira a formless package wrapped in paper.

Elvira places it on a counter and unwraps it carefully. It is filled with finely cut herbs. “Iwan, brew these in the mustard soup, please. As usual. Thanks.”

Isabella’s eyes follow the young man as he expertly sweeps the herbs onto a long plate with a knife and walks away. She leans in and whispers in Elvira’s ear, “Does he know what that’s for?”

“Oh, you can speak freely here, Isabella.” Elvira gives her two apprentices a casual smile. “Iwan and Linneke are on our side.”

“Oh! Really?”

“They’ve been at the De Bron permascape a couple of nights already. Yesterday, they began their first lesson with Elder Rijnder. By the way,” she turns her chubby face towards her young helpers, “I never got to ask. How did that go?”

“So, so,” Linneke says, to the concurring nod of Iwan. “Sometimes I can’t understand what he says. Why don’t you teach us instead, Master Abspoel?”

Isabella says, “Your chef is too busy. Sorry, I don’t mean to downplay your training, but your master,” she looks at the stocky woman, eyes filled with pride, “is one of the most important people in the world right now. Perhaps even more than Juf Edda.”

“Oh, come on, dear,” Elvira says with a soft chuckle at the sight of the two awestruck youngsters. “Leave that nonsense.”

“Nonsense, my ass! Sorry for my English, Elder Abspoel, but it is thanks to your leadership that we are spreading the word and getting more recruits than we can handle.” Isabella throws a demonstrative gesture at Iwan and Linneke. “A revolution is underway, Goah’s Mercy! And we owe it to your prodigious organizational skills.”

Elvira laughs. “See all you can learn in a kitchen, kiddos?”

Isabella joins the laughs. “You look so relaxed, Elder Abspoel,” Isabella says. “Even... happy.”

“When you reach my age, dear, any thread of purpose will put a smile on your face.”

“Aren’t you the tiniest bit anxious about tonight? Everybody’s lives—your son’s included—depend on everything working exactly as planned.”

Elvira shrugs, her smile unwavering. “That’s Edda’s department—and yours—not mine.” At the sight of Isabella’s tight expression, Elvira gives her an impulsive hug. “Oh, dear. Have faith. Goah is on our side, and Juf Edda sure as Dem knows what she’s doing. After dream months of painstaking planning and training, you kiddos are more than ready for—”

A sudden set of loud, regular beeps bursting out of the radio catches everybody’s attention at once. As Elvira rushes across the kitchen to turn the volume up, a female voice takes over the kitchen.

*“My apologies for the interruption to your regular local program. This is an emergency news report brought to you by Elder Flora de Vroome from Lunteren. With less than twenty-four hours to what imperial media are unanimously calling the ‘trial of the century,’ we are waking up this 5th of February with shocking news from all across Geldershire! The Offices of the Quaestor of Lunteren and the Grand Inquisitor both declined to comment on what you are about to hear, but your reporter has radioed her correspondents in every Geldershire colony, all of which confirm the following events as true and unheard of in the history of awa Imperia.*

*“Throughout the night, horrifying acts of sacrilegious vandalism have set fire to every Eye of Goah complex in Geldershire! You are hearing correctly. Every Eye of Goah in Geldershire has been destroyed by fire. The last one standing is the Eye of Lunteren, possibly because of the presence of awa Fist troops. There are unconfirmed accounts coming from every affected colony of trapped personnel killed in the fire.”*

Isabella, eyes widened in disbelief, seems about to lose her balance. Iwan and Linneke look similarly stunned. Only Elvira

appears unperturbed, her gaze fixed on the radio, but Ximena notices the tightness of her lips.

*“As if these atrocious attacks were not enough, the Joyousday Houses in Oosterbeek and Harskamp have also been put to the torch. Due to the heavy winds of the night, fire spread downwind into residential areas in both colonies with catastrophic speed.”*

Iwan lets his body slip down until he is sitting on the grubby kitchen floor. Even Elvira is now covering her mouth, eyes aghast, as the news keeps pouring down like a blizzard of knives.

*“Our correspondent in Oosterbeek reports minimal human casualties after the heroic coordination of the colonial firefighting forces with civilian volunteers, but the fire in Harskamp is still blazing out of control; the southern boroughs are devastated, especially the residences along the Laar Way. Dozens of families are presumed dead, allegedly caught by the flames in their sleep.”*

“Goah’s Mercy!” Isabella says, her voice quivering. “Goah’s—!”

*“With the destruction of every aw’s Eye, every adjoining structure, including the administrative offices and colonial archives, have also fallen prey to the blazes. But it is the incineration of aw’s Wombs that without doubt weighs heaviest on our souls. Our hearts suffer with the hundreds of devastated parents awaiting their dowry newborns in the near future; a future cut tragically short.”*

“Oh, no!” Tears well up in Isabella’s eyes, her lips trembling visibly. “Oh, no!” Ximena remembers that Isabella and Bram are also expecting. Luckily for them, their offspring is still growing safe and sound in the last functioning aw’s Womb of Geldershire.

Iwan’s eyes are also misting over. “Who in Goah’s—?!”

*“Without official confirmation from the offices of aw’s Head and aw’s Fist, at this point we can only speculate about the identity and motivation of the perpetrators of these atrocities, but their timing and location can hardly be a coincidence, just a day from Lunteren’s ‘trial of the century,’*

*when Geldershire is in the spotlight of the entire Hanseatic Imperium. Our correspondents report generalized fear of renewed attacks tonight, as the trial—”*

Ximena jumps in place as a sudden, loud bleep startles everybody in the kitchen. It takes a second for Ximena to recognize Lunteren’s public address system, particularly strident here, in the guts of Lunteren’s Eye of Goah.

“ATTENTION, DEPENDENTS OF LUNTEREN. THIS IS GRAND INQUISITOR ARCHER RHODES SPEAKING. ATTENTION, DEPENDENTS OF LUNTEREN. YOU ARE TO STOP YOUR TASKS NOW. I REPEAT, STOP WHAT YOU ARE DOING, AND LISTEN CAREFULLY.

“BY THE POWERS BESTOWED UPON THE OFFICE OF THE INQUISITION BY THE HEAD OF GOAH, I HAVE DECREED THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE GIFT OF GOAH FROM EVERY COLONY IN GELDERSHIRE, EFFECTIVE AS OF FIVE MINUTES AGO. THE GELDERSHIRE PENINSULA IS IN OFFICIAL DEMONIC QUARANTINE SINCE NINE HOURS OF TODAY, THE FIFTH OF FEBRUARY TWENTY-FOUR HUNDRED. THE COLONIAL SACRED RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES BESTOWED BY AWS COMPACTS ARE NO MORE.

“ATTENTION, DEPENDENTS OF LUNTEREN. I HEREBY DECREE EXTRAORDINARY CURFEW, STARTING IMMEDIATELY, AND LASTING UNTIL TOMORROW’S TRIAL.”

Isabella straightens with a sudden gasp, her eyes wide open, aghast. She turns to meet Elvira’s worried gaze.

“I REPEAT, YOU ARE TO MOVE TO YOUR QUARTERS AT ONCE, AND REMAIN THERE UNTIL YOU HEAR TOMORROW’S CALL TO THE TRIAL OVER LOUDSPEAKER. STRICT ENFORCEMENT

BEGINS IN THIRTY MINUTES. DEPENDENTS OF LUNTEREN, YOU HAVE NOW THIRTY MINUTES TO RELOCATE TO YOUR QUARTERS.

“I THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION.”

“No!” Isabella says, shaking her head, eyes still locked on Elvira’s. “I still need to distribute today’s ration of sleep herbs! Without them, our Walkers won’t—”

“Then go!” Elvira says, eyes wide open. She pushes Isabella gently on the shoulder. “Now!”

Isabella begins to move towards the door, but then she stops, her blinking eyes widened in terror. “There’s no time! The round usually takes a couple of hours, an hour and a half if I hurry.”

“So long?!”

“I have to go door to door, Goah’s Mercy! We have three goahdamn teams, and there are members from everywhere in the colony.”

“Okay...” Elvira takes a deep breath. “Teams Aladdin and Solo are smaller, and they are crucial for tonight’s plan. Go to them first.”

“And what about team Reserve?”

“My team is too large, and if everything goes as planned, we won’t even be called into action tonight.” Elvira shrugs. “Tonight we will have to manage without your sleeping help.”

“We can come with you, Woman Zegers,” Iwan says, gesturing at Linneke and himself. “Together, we can cover your route three times as fast.”

Elvira smiles at her young apprentices. “Oh, kiddos, that’s so... Thank you! Just make sure you’re in your own homes in thirty minutes, alright? Go now!”

“Come with us!” Isabella says, eyes on Elvira. “With four, the risk is even lower.”

“I can’t leave. Somebody’s gotta give the prisoners their

soup.” She points at the cauldron into which Iwan threw Isabella’s herbs before.

“Oh, But... Pure sin! Are you going to stay here overnight?”

Elvira shrugs. “Somebody has to, honey.”

“No, Elder Abspoel. The plan counts on all of us being in our homes tonight. And you are the leader of team Reserve, Goah’s Mercy. You can’t stay here!”

“Hopefully, Reserve won’t be needed. And if—Goah forbid—we are, Juf Edda will know how to adapt the plan to my new sleeping location.”

“But... the Forum will be teeming with warriors! It will be almost impossible to get you out on the streets.”

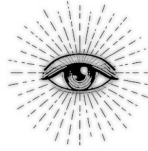
“Well...” Elvira shrugs anew. “Then somebody else will just have to take over. But I can’t abandon my... the prisoners.”

“I’ll do it,” Linneke says, stepping forward. “I’ll stay, Elder Abspoel. You go with Woman Zegers and Iwan. I’ll make sure that the prisoners get their rations. Goah’s my witness.”

Elvira smiles softly, walks to the young girl and puts a loud kiss on her cheek. “Thanks, honey.” And then throws the rest a hasty signal to rush out the door.



## ELEVEN



### Cleansing Sunday

The salty smell of the nearby ocean surf fills Ximena's nostrils. It is windy and dark in the skies above Lunteren. Electric lamps around the periphery of the Forum manage with great effort to displace the worst of the shadows. Only the Eye of Goah—the last one standing in the entire Geldershire—glows gold at the far edge of the Forum, its surrounding spotlights bright enough to hint at oceanic clouds dashing eastwards not far above the complex of buildings.

From this elevated viewpoint, like a seagull soaring above the Forum, it is hard to make any details in the darkness beneath. But Mark pokes Ximena in the side and then raises his finger at what looks like three moving shadows, three spots darker than the dark background, in the middle of the Forum.

The scene glides leisurely down, wind howling noticeably weaker as it approaches the black figures: three warriors, walking calmly towards the Eye of Goah.

“Here we go, people!” Professor Miyagi says. “It’s Sunday before sunrise, mere hours from cleansing. It’s finally showtime, ladies and gentlemen!” His tone is mockingly reminiscent of a circus ringmaster about to present his next number. Ximena is

glad that he has recovered his usual well-humored enthusiasm after the ugly discussion with Censor Smith before. When history does that to you—when history makes you forget your pains—you know you are a historian. “We’re about to see what Edda van Dolah and her freak team of human Walkers have dreamed up—pun intended!—to free themselves, and take over Lunteren.”

Miyagi takes a few steps and extends both arms in the air, like a rock star that had just entered the stage among cheers of adoration.

“We’re about to see what happens when a month’s worth of dilated time meets extreme talent, motivation, and a badass schoolteacher. What a privilege, people! Whoever said history is boring?”

*Indeed!* Ximena is all pumped up, and a glimpse at the eager eyes of her fellow students across the auditorium confirms that she is not the only one; GIA, Lundev, doesn’t matter, they are all in, every eye locked on the three warriors, now clearly distinct as the scene viewpoint closes in on them.

They’re big—larger than most men—early twenties, and wearing bulletproof vests, helmets and protective armor, like the anti-riot police of the golden age. They stroll side by side—baton, handgun and walkie-talkie ready on their belts, and a heavy-looking mechanical machine gun casually hanging around their shoulders. Their voices are clear to hear, loud even, like they were strolling the market at noon and not the deserted Forum of Lunteren in the early hours of Cleansing Sunday. They laugh occasionally and wholeheartedly, but their eyes never leave the surrounding shadows—not for a second.

One of them spits to the side, half-coughing from laughter, and says: “Jessica’s goin’ ta swallow yar balls whole!”

“And how’s she goin’ ta find out?” the middle man asks, grinning wildly.

“Sure’s Dem she’s worried sick,” the first man says, “you

sailin' the gap ta fight demons, and 'nstead you fuck 'em!" He slaps the middle man hard on the shoulder and bursts into a fresh round of laughs.

And then, with no obvious cue, the three freeze at once, like cats that just got a sniff of prey. With a swift, single movement, they pull down their semitransparent helmet visors, and take the machine guns off their shoulders. Then, while turning in wary silence, as they squint deeper into the shadows, their left hands—like they had a life of their own—retrieve a long knife-like object from the belt and attach it to the machine guns' muzzles.

Whatever has alerted the warriors is beyond Ximena's perception. She unconsciously leans forward, gazing towards the west access to the Forum, where the three men are now marching, elbow against elbow, in a coordinated line. But there's nothing there, only night, and a salty breeze on her face.

Wait! Ximena can now hear steps above the wind... Yes, many steps, and voices too. Angry voices! How could she have missed it?

And they come into view: a large group of colonists—two dozen, perhaps more—walking towards the Eye, holding long sticks and heavy-looking tools, some sharp, details hard to make out from the distance. They sure look angry, or rather *sound* angry, since their expressions are but hints in the shadows.

"Halt!" the man in the middle shouts, and retrieves a small stick from his belt, leans back and throws it towards the multitude.

The stick flares up in the air, a parabolic beam of sparkling white that falls short of the startled colonists. They stop their advance, squinting and protecting their eyes from the sudden shine, as Ximena must initially do as well.

“You’re in violati’n of curfew!” the man shouts on. “Stan’ down, and do nat resist arrest!”

The colonists glare, naked hatred in their eyes. They exchange hesitant glances with each other, but then, as the contagious confidence of the mob takes hold, they slowly begin to march forward.

“Halt! Or we’ll send you back ta hell, demons!” The three men raise their machine guns at the approaching mass, but this only seems to inflame the colonists further, who shout at them, words indistinct in the noisy chaos, but the meaning obvious as they wave tools and sticks menacingly.

They march on, slow but unstoppable, like a tide of hate.

“Permission ta shoot, Gale!” the man covering the right flank yells, taking aim.

“Hol’ it!” the man in the middle—Gale—shouts. He sweeps an analytical look across the approaching mass, and then turns his head back at the Eye of Goah, beaming in the night behind them. “Reform back, two hundred yards, go!”

They begin to trot backwards, without ever losing sight—or aim—of the mob, expertly covering ground towards aws Eye.

As the front line of colonists swallows the sparkling flare with their feet, they turn from distinct bodies to menacing silhouettes, marching on, compulsively together, waving solid, sharp objects and shouting mad words of hate and hope.

“Line up, lads,” Gale shouts, putting a knee on the ground and dropping his weapon while hurriedly fiddling with his belt. “Ready yar billies, fire on comman’!” The other two men form on his flanks, and stare at the approaching mob with raised machine guns.

With his left hand, Gale retrieves a heavy-looking box—a walkie-talkie, Ximena realizes—and flips a switch with his right hand.

A piercing, electronic beep begins to wail out of the device, and of similarly bulky devices hanging from the other two

warriors' belts. Ximena winces at the sudden noise, which she recognizes as the alarm that got the Inquisitor out of bed to attend the Friday Fire business.

The wailing goes on for seconds, Gale's eyes locked on the slowly approaching mob, until an electric squeal finally interrupts it. "Archer here," a voice calls out angrily from the device. "What now? Over."

Gale pulls the walkie-talkie to his face. "*Amber* here, Inquisita. Sorry, Inquisita, no false alarm, some real shit goin' on: 'bout thirty hostile dependen's approachin' Eye from west Forum. Slow pace. Blun' weapons. Won't listen, won't stop. Requestin' permission ta shoot, Inquisita. Over."

The hissing static only lasts a couple of seconds. "Understood. *Bark, Hoof*, converge to Amber now. Amber, what do the dependents want? Over."

Gale scoffs. "They sure's Dem wan' us out, Inquisita. Really pissed off, like possessed. An' I think they wan' ta free the demons. Over."

"How long until they reach aws Eye? Over."

"Two minutes, tops. Permission ta shoot. Over."

"Negative, Amber. We won't send uncleansed souls to hell if we can do something about it. Gale, lead Amber to the colony vault and retrieve a non-lethal deterrent. Then take command of *Bark* and *Hoof* to suppress the hostiles. We'll save their souls, Goah's my witness. Confirm. Over."

"Copy, Inquisita," Gale says, standing. "Take non-lethals from the vault. An' arrest 'em with *Bark* an' *Hoof*. Over."

"Go, Amber. John, do you copy? Over."

Gale hangs the walkie-talkie back on his belt, while the chatter goes on—"John here, Arch. Over."—and makes a gesture in the air with his left hand.

The three men hang the machine guns on their back with a swift movement and run smoothly towards the lit complex, while the radio frenzy continues: "John, take the rest of the

squads, and cover the perimeter of aw's Eye. Nobody's allowed in or out. Lethal Oscar Kilo. Over and out."

---

Gale, panting slightly, unlocks the small wooden door on one of the smaller buildings on the northern side of the Eye complex, and storms in. He flicks up the ceiling lighting, as his two squad mates enter the musty room after him.

A large, rusty, metallic safe, like a golden age bank vault, claims most of the space. *That must be the colony vault, Ximena supposes. Where they store all sorts of valuables and colonial equipment, including what Gale came looking for: crowd-suppressing weapons.*

He walks to the safe door and stares at the attached numeric keyboard—ten buttons, each thick, mechanic.

"Fuck, fuck," he mutters, and raises his head to the ceiling, closing his eyes.

"Gale," one of the men behind him says, "do ya need—?"

"Got't!" Gale says, and begins to press on the keyboard with his right index finger. Carefully.

One by one.

Eight times.

The door shakes with a heavy click somewhere within.

Gale smiles, grabs a protruding lever and begins to pull the heavy door open. It barely budes, until he flexes his muscles and leans out, using his whole weight.

The door slides gradually open. It seems to take forever, but Gale finally stops, takes a breath, and turns to enter the space inside the safe.

As he crosses the opening gap, something grows out of the rim: huge, metallic teeth, rusty but sharp like a shark's. Gale freezes, but before he has time to react, the iron jaws shut with a slam, slicing into the helmet and protective armor as if it were just flesh, and into the flesh as if it were just blood.

The safe eats him whole with a satisfying, juice-squashing sound.

---

Gale doesn't even open his eyes. "Hmckin'... nightmare," he mutters, as he rolls onto the other side, tucking himself tighter under the warm blanket. After mere seconds, his breathing has settled down to a slow, regular rhythm.

The barracks where Gale and about a dozen other warriors are sleeping in bunkbeds are lit with the ever-present astral glow of the Second Wake. Two blue haloed figures stand next to Gale's bunk, wide-eyed and smiling.

"Finally, it worked!" Aline says, observing the placid features of Gale. "I would kiss him if I could!"

"Your taste with men leaves much to be desired, Speese," Gotthard says. He stares at the sleeping Gale. "This fucker is still a goahdamn fanatic."

"Yes, but not the trigger-happy psychopath the others are, thank Goah. Finally one that prefers to call the boss for instructions rather than begin mowing down civilians. Goah, I was giving up already on our engineered dream." Aline turns and gestures at the other men sleeping closest to the entry door, those with more stripes on their folded uniforms. "Look at them, aren't they cute when they sleep?" She scoffs in disgust. "Fucking aw's Fist monsters."

"Maybe that's why they didn't resist your thread-making."

"Okay, Gotthard, here is another Shadow-Walker lesson: the trick to mild-melding is to remove every trace of hostility from your mind."

Gotthard scoffs. "Our little deception doesn't count as *hostile*?"

“We are just trying to make sure that nobody gets hurt! And that includes this scum too.”

“Nah, I think it worked because they are just too dumb.” He shrugs. “Or they simply don’t give a damn. For these mensas, whatever happens is all just good fun.”

Aline’s expression darkens. “Okay, let’s hurry.” She shoots a glance at the empty expanse of the Forum out of the window. “Team Aladdin is waiting for our intel.”

Gotthard notices her sudden change of mood, and begins to reach out with his hand to her shoulder, but at the last moment he stops. “You know...” He wets his lips. “It’s not easy to say this, but regardless of all the crap I said back in HQ, I am actually glad they put Ledebøer in charge of Aladdin.”

Aline turns to look him in the eyes.

He blinks and sinks his head. “M- My own life, *our* lives—our *future*—depend on your lover not fucking up the next step of the plan.”

“It’s so dangerous, Goah’s Mercy.” Aline voice wavers noticeably, tears welling up in her eyes. “It’s not dreams they’re going to face out there.” She gestures out the window.

“I know. I know. But you know what? I think they are going to pull it off all right. I’ve seen Aladdin in the simulations, Aline. And those rat mensas sure as Dem know what they’re doing.”

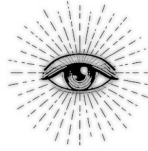
Aline takes a deep breath.

And then another one.

When she finally looks at Gotthard again, her expression slowly distends into a grin. She walks up to him, puts a finger an inch away from his nose, and in a teasing voice, says, “Who are you and what did you do with the asshole?”



## TWELVE



### Guns n' Cloaks

---

The scene—a gentle night glide over the roofs of the colony—is unfolding slowly in the darkness of the auditorium. It is not a dream this time, Ximena realizes with a rush of excitement. This is the eerie reality of Cleansing Sunday, unfolding in real-time.

“The deep night hours are usually very dark in Lunteren,” Professor Miyagi recites in a hushed voice, as if telling a scary tale to the entranced students. “But not tonight! All the streetlamps are shining, like strings of diamonds on black velvet, colony batteries be damned. For, tonight, the brave warriors of Goah’s Fist are *especially* vigilant,” he speaks gradually slower and softer, down to almost a whisper, like a medieval bard reaching the climax of a fairytale. “For, tonight, is but hours away from the trial that all ears in the Hanseatic Imperium are awaiting with morbid expectation. And, tonight, nothing—*nothing!*—is allowed to go wrong.”

Miyagi takes a few silent steps, hands behind his back, as the seagull's point of view begins to slowly dive into the shadows between the sleepy houses of Lunteren.

“No, tonight is not allowed to go wrong for those craving

redemption, the restoration of order, the cleansing of demonfolk. Or even, ah... the oh so *sweet* glory of souls saved for Goah.”

He melodramatically stops walking and turns his face around slowly, as if he could reach the eager eyes of every student behind the thick wall of darkness.

“No, tonight is not allowed to go wrong for those craving *freedom*, the restoration of aw's Gift, the end of the quarantine!” He stretches his arm with a quick, exaggerated movement, pulling the students' attention precisely where two figures are moving silently in the shadows, virtually invisible under black, hooded cloaks. “Or even, ah... the oh so *sweet* promises of hard power.”

The scene zooms closer to the two figures as they reach a shadowy corner. A third figure, equally camouflaged in black, is already waiting there.

“Louisa, Thank Goah,” Pieter whispers, pulling his hood down. His face is painted black, as is his hair. In the darkness, the students can only see the faint sparkle of his blue eyes as he scans their surroundings. “Any news of Marten?”

Louisa—wearing the same long, black cloaks as Pieter and Janson—also pulls her hood down, her dark, South Indian features merely a hint in the shadows. She shakes free her long—naturally black—hair. “Not yet. He's late, but he must make it all the way from the Fish Market, and with all lamps on,” she gestures at the street illumination, “it's hard to stay unseen.”

Pieter sighs. “That was a nasty surprise. They've never left the lights on so long.” He shoots a worried look westwards. “I hope Marten keeps to the shadows.”

“And I beg Goah for no more surprises tonight,” Louisa says.

“I hear something!” Janson warns, his whisper like a snake's, silent but urgent. With a swift movement, Pieter and

Louisa pull their hoods back over their heads. The three seem to dissolve in the darkness.

Faint steps approach, irregular, careful. Invisible, unless you know what you're looking for.

"Marten!" Louisa whispers, waving her hand. "Goah be praised. Here!"

The short figure, covered with the same black cloak as the others, breathes out a sound of relief. "Whoa, that was intense!"

"Did you cross any patrol?" Pieter asks urgently. "According to Intel, there's only one patrol somewhere down Back Street." He gestures southwards.

"No, nothing. But I was shitting myself, mensa." His voice sounds young to Ximena, a boy before puberty. "It's scary as hell in the night, when you know there are *real* monsters roaming about."

"Yeah," Janson says, eyes flinching nervously at the neighboring streets. "I totally hear you, mensa."

"The simulations were as scary and realistic as this," Louisa says. "Even worse, with all those unexpected encounters!"

"No," Marten chuckles silently. "At least not for me. We knew all along it was just... *dreams*."

"Yeah," Janson says. "It just ain't as exciting if you can't be killed for real, huh?"

"Alright," Pieter says. "We gotta hurry. Marten, leave your cloak here."

Marten unhooks and folds the cloth with practiced speed into a small pile, which he hides in a shadow by the wall. "See you soon, hopefully," he whispers to the black fabric, and then turns his pale, freckled face at his three teammates. Thin, small and intensely red-haired, he's dressed in a common, lively, everyday tunic. The young man, who can't be older than eleven, looks like yet another lamp lighting the alley.

"Remember your training," Pieter says. "Let's move."

He begins to walk smoothly along the alley. Behind him, the large figure of Janson embraces the smaller Marten, covering him whole in his own cloak. They move as one, a black bulk following Pieter with skilled silence and speed. Louisa takes the rear.

The alley ends up in a broader street, empty but illuminated. Pieter scans for a few seconds. Nothing moves. Not even the air. He gives a signal and they swiftly cross to the safety of a narrow space between two houses. And on they go, moving lightly in the shadows of alleys and backyards, like eels that can only swim in darkness.

Until they reach the Forum.

“There.” Pieter sighs with satisfaction as the others gather around him, peeking at the island of light that forms the buildings surrounding Goah’s Eye. “Just like Intel reported.”

He is discreetly pointing at the two figures sitting outside the door of a smaller building, the one closest to them. Devoid of electric lamps, only darkness provides any meaningful cover on the open expanse of the Forum. There is nothing but flat space between their position—behind one of the houses on the rim of the Forum—and the two bored-looking guards a hundred yards away.

“Not quite,” Janson says. “Look!”

He is pointing to a more distant group of warriors—five of them. They are casually walking out of one of the larger buildings of aw’s Eye’s complex, and towards the west end of the Forum, away from them. They are too far to even hear.

“Fucking Mercy, another patrol!” Pieter says. “A fucking fiver! Intel didn’t see that coming.”

“Tonight’s full of surprises,” Louisa says glumly.

“They look like they’re just out of the barracks,” Pieter says, pointing at the elongated building. “Fuckers are either very paranoid, or very good!”

“Why good?” Louisa asks.

“Cause they’re taking extra precautions precisely the night in which we...” He spreads his hands.

“Whatever.” She shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. They’re moving away anyway, and Team Solo is expected to wake in five minutes. It’s now or never!”

“Wait!” Janson says, his head raised like a deer that just smelled something in the air. “Intel says we wait.”

“But we can’t wait any longer!” Louisa says, urgency in her voice. “Everything, *everybody*, is depending on us acting now. If we fail, they die! According to the plan, it’s—”

“No,” Janson interrupts. “The plan’s been fucked up by that extra patrol.”

“Is Intel *talking* to you now?” Louisa asks.

Janson nods silently. “Aline says they must, er, *integrate*,” he pronounces the word slowly, “that new patrol into the plan. So we stay put.”

“Goah, how come you are the only person in the whole goahdamn revolution that can hear traversing ghosts?”

He shrugs. “Does it matter?”

“If Intel is asking us to wait,” Pieter says, giving Louisa a pointed look, “then we wait. They got the bigger picture in HQ.”

“But Team Solo—!”

“We gotta be clever, Louisa,” Pieter says. “The situation is fluid, and we must—”

“Aline’s back!” Janson says, turning his attention to the night sky.

“Goah!” Marten says. “I’ll never get used to that time dilation magic.”

“Okay.” Janson turns to Pieter. “Intel says we wait for that new patrol to be really far away, but not enough for the old patrol to return.”

“Fine,” Pieter says, and sits on the ground, back against a wooden fence wall. “How long we gotta stay put?”

“Uh...” Janson’s eyes glaze over for an instant. “She says tactics estimate around fifteen of our minutes. They’ll let us know when exactly.”

“Fifteen minutes,” Pieter says with a nod, gesturing for the rest to sit with him in the shadows. “And then we move.”

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Pieter, Janson, Louisa and Marten stare in silence across the Forum, at the closest building of the Eye of Goah, which in the darkest hours of the night resembles an island of dim electric light engulfed by an ocean of blackness. Their gaze is locked on the small building’s door, guarded by two awl Fist warriors sitting on crude chairs under the open sky. Their machine guns stand against the wall, just an arm’s reach away.

The two warriors chatter incessantly in a hushed tone and laugh occasionally, and yet their eyes never depart their barely lit periphery, nor the darkness beyond. Ximena feels a chill every time the scanning gazes aim directly at the group of cloaked conspirators, but the pristine darkness of Earth’s nights a century ago renders them invisible.

Janson breaks the long silence with an urgent whisper, “We gotta go!” He puts a hand on Marten’s shoulder. “You’re up, mensa.”

“Showtime, I guess,” the eleven-year-old mutters, and wets his lips. His white skin, red hair and bright-colored tunic almost seem to shine in the dark. “I feel fucking naked.”

“Go, Marten!” Pieter says, putting his hand on the boy’s other shoulder. “Now!”

“And good luck!” Louisa says, her voice gripped by sudden emotion. She grabs his small hand like her arm has a mind of its own.

Marten gently lets go of his teammates and gives them a good-humored wink. “You keep the luck for yourselves,

mentas! You sure as Dem need it more.” And he walks out on the open Forum, staggering, and begins to yell in the icy silence an inebriated, cacophonous song—something about sweet beer and bitter love.

The two men guarding the door react almost instantly. First, they stand. “Who’s there?!” And a fraction of a second later, they are holding their machine guns aimed squarely in the direction where Marten sings—or rather shouts—at the top of his lungs. But he is moving away, stumbling westwards, each step in the dark separating him farther from the two baffled warriors.

“There!” one of the men says, pointing directly at Marten. “It’s only one. A drunkar’.”

The other man chuckles and sits back, shaking his head. “You take care of ‘im.” He lets his weapon rest against the wall, and with a bored gesture begins to scrutinize the surroundings once again.

The standing man trots towards Marten, while pulling up his walkie-talkie to his mouth. “Snow here,” he shouts. “Disturbance by the colony vault. A single man. Looks like a drunk fool lost on ‘is way home. Pursuin’ for arrest. Forum north, goin’ west. Over.”

“Copy, Snow,” a rough voice replies. “Hoof here. I wonda where he’s gettin’s booze at this time. Even brothels close afta curfew.” The voice laughs, which through the squeaky radio resembles a burst of electronic cough. “We’re on our way ‘st in case. No risks allowed tonight. Five minutes out. Over.”

“Copy, Hoof. The drunkar’ saw me, and’s runnin’ away.” The warrior begins to run behind. “West Forum ta Narrow Way. Over.”

“Copy, Snow. We’re interceptin’. Over’n out.”

As the running man disappears in the distance, Pieter turns his attention to the remaining warrior, sitting with a bored

expression beside the door, and takes a deep breath. “Okay, we’re up,” he whispers to Janson and Louisa. “Ready?”

Louisa nods, Janson mutters a shy, “Yes.”

“Stay tight behind me and wait for my signal.”

The three kneel and pull the fabric of the cloak over themselves, covering them in black completely, without the slightest gap to see through—or be seen through. Blinded and melded in the blackness of night, they begin to crawl over the open, bricked floor of the Forum, Pieter slightly ahead, towards the lone guard.

The crawl is slow but steady, as hands and knees push the three black figures ever closer to the unsuspecting guard.

Occasionally, for the briefest moment, Pieter lifts the fabric ever so slightly before adjusting his general direction of movement. Louisa and Janson—a paragon of discipline—don’t once peek out; they just crawl on, blind and silent, adapting their pace and course by the inelegant but effective procedure of touching Pieter’s backside.

Their slow creep seems to take forever. Ximena’s anxiety grows with every tedious minute of it. She glances down at the stage, where Professor Miyagi observes the unfolding scene with the same absorbed attention as Pieter. He is obviously not planning to jump forward to indulge his impatient students.

An unexpected noise interrupts the heavy winter silence, freezing the three lumps in mid-crawl in its terrifying wake. Ximena and the other students jump in place, some gasping in shock. A loud and protracted fart—the stuff of legends—breaks the night like a chainsaw ripping apart a trunk. The guard has just raised a leg, relieving the overwhelming pressure of his left buttock on the wooden chair, and is sinking it with a satisfied grin.

Laughter bursts in the auditorium like an anticlimactic tsunami in stark contrast with the stoic, aghast silence of the



three still figures risking their lives not twenty yards away from the source of the commotion.

For as long as the uncomfortable laughter takes to dissipate, Pieter, and by extension Louisa and Janson, do not move a muscle, remaining virtually invisible to Ximena's—and the guard's—eyes and ears.

The auditorium is long back to expectant silence before Pieter dares to move once again, slower than ever, not risking the merest rustle.

The dim, electric lamp over the door glows a soft yellow, drawing on the red-bricked Forum floor a small semicircle of diffuse light against the sea of darkness. Pieter finally stops the agonizingly careful approach right before reaching the lit edge—a mere ten yards away from the sitting warrior—and waits under the cover of both night and cloak while Louisa and Janson slowly crawl into position on his left and right flank, respectively.

“Emmet, Percy here.” The warrior's walkie-talkie bursts with sudden life. “We lost ‘im. The bastar’ slipped away. Over.”

The warrior chuckles once and as he reaches out for the walkie-talkie hanging from his belt, Pieter's muscles tense under his cloak. A fraction of a second later, both Louisa and Janson tense beside him. They are ready. They are *eager*. Like sprinting athletes anticipating the shot of the starting pistol.

“Copy, Percy. At least you shut the fuck'r up. Return yar useless ass now. I'm gettin' bored. Over.”

“Aye, Emmet. Returnin' ta post now. One minute. Over'n out.”

As the sitting warrior begins lowering the walkie-talkie, Pieter, Louisa and Janson leap forward as one, side by side, like hunting lionesses giving up the protecting cover of the savanna on their final—and only—attack. The three figures begin to sprint swiftly—a practiced, coordinated move—cloaks of darkness flutter around them in a startling display of action.

It takes a running person at least three seconds to close the distance separating them from the unsuspecting warrior. Three seconds of surprise against a lifetime of professional training.

After the first second, the guard has raised his head and let go of his hold on the walkie-talkie, which drops like a brick to the floor. His left hand is already pulling down his helmet visor while his right hand begins to reach for his weapon: a machine gun leaning on the wall with a bayonet—a sword-like spike—attached to the muzzle.

After the second second, the guard is standing—not an inch of skin exposed behind the full-body armored uniform—and raising the machine gun in his hands, the bayonet seeming to whistle in the air.

After the third second, the warrior is on the ground, locked in a struggle with three panting bodies holding him still. Louisa and Janson finally manage to pull off the warrior's helmet, all while keeping him harshly in place using their combined weight.

Pieter stands, takes the machine gun from the floor nearby, and points it directly at the warrior's head. He immediately stops struggling, his wide eyes locked on the tip of the bayonet almost touching his nose.

“Nice to meet you, *Emmet*,” Pieter says, still panting from the struggle. “You stay out of our way, you’re gonna be alright, Goah’s my witness.” Pieter touches his own chest lightly with the palm of his right hand.

While Louisa and Janson hastily pull Emmet up and tie both hands behind his back with expert speed, Pieter leaves the weapon with Louisa, slams the wooden door open and storms into the colony vault.

*A large, rusty, metallic safe, like out of a golden age bank vault, claims most of the space.*

“Twenty,” Pieter says aloud, and runs to the safe door.

“What?” Janson asks, as he and Louisa push the prisoner

into the room, shove him to the floor, and begin to methodically tie his arms to a wall pipeline.

Pieter does not reply. He is inspecting the vault door and the small keyboard attached to the safe. With creases of concentration on his brow, he begins to punch the keyboard.

*Carefully. One by one. Eight times.*

“Thirty,” he mutters, as he enters the last number.

The safe door shakes free.

Pieter barks a curt laugh of joy and begins to pull the heavy door open. A narrow beam of white, electric illumination escapes from within the widening gap.

“How did ya...?!” Emmet is gaping at the safe in disbelief. Louisa unceremoniously slaps a piece of duct tape over his mouth while Janson leaps to assist his brother.

In a few seconds, both men have pulled open a gap large enough for them to enter the safe. Metallic shelves cover the walls, filled from floor to ceiling with food, medicines, weapons, and sealed boxes of all sorts and sizes.

“There!” Janson points at the shelves labeled “security”: helmets, body armor, boots, handguns, machine guns, grenades, batons, knives, radio equipment, and more.

“Forty,” Pieter says, increasing tension in his voice. He throws an urgent look at Janson while spreading arms and legs wide open. Janson, without a word, reaches out to the shelves where pieces of body armor are cluttered together.

“No time!” Pieter says. “Just the front! Just the front!”

With a nod, Janson attaches a large section of protective armor over his chest.

“Fucking fifty! Come on, Jans!”

A hurried lace to hold it in place, and then Janson reaches out to take the leg paddings.

“No!” Pieter says, turning to him. “No time. Fuck! Arm yourselves, just in case.”

He takes a helmet, pulls it unceremoniously over his head and rushes out of the safe.

“Sixty!” He takes the warrior’s machine gun from Louisa’s hands and runs out of the building, no time to even close the door behind him.

He slams into the same chair that the warrior was sitting on a minute ago, and sinks his head, visor down, weapon across his lap, legs as far back as they go under the shadow of the chair.

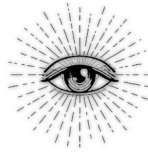
Breathing a tad too quickly for a bored, sitting man, he keeps his head down when hurried steps approach noisily across the Forum.

The other warrior—Percy—sits down heavily on the chair beside his with a long sigh. He places his machine gun against the wall and leans back.

“The drunkar’ was quick like a rat!” he says with a chuckle, and turns his head to Pieter.

His smile freezes in place at the sight of the bayonet aimed squarely at his face.

## THIRTEEN



### Diver

Ximena feels a psych-linked gush of relief when Edda turns to greet Marten. “Oh, Goah be praised. You are back!”

The small eleven-year-old man has just popped up into existence not far away from her, in the middle of the Eye of Goah. Or more precisely, in the middle of a *permascaped* version of the colossal worship edifice—a dreamed interpretation—glittering around them with the same magnificent glory as its wake-world twin. They are standing on the round central platform—the sanctuary—elevated over the extensive oval-eye-shaped space, and enclosed by floor-to-ceiling mirrored walls that repeat the resplendent pattern forever.

*HQ*, Ximena thinks, as she lets her eyes roam the monumental space with almost reverent wonder. And not in the religious sense, because this dream place is not a place of worship. There are no padded rows for the faithful on the main floor. Instead, half of the space has been transformed into an outdoor spring landscape, flooded with daylight, while the other half is covered by the darkness of night. And glaring at it all from far above, the all-encompassing Eye made of colored

glass is also split into day and night, mirroring the halves straight below. Ximena estimates twenty or more figures scattered in small groups all over the enormous place, attending conspiratorial duties with fanatical dedication.

“Did it work?” Marten asks, staring at Edda with widened eyes. “Did it work?!”

“Yes, of course! Your team is safe and sound, and waiting for you in the vault with two extra guests.”

“Woo-hoo!” He raises a fist in the air, but then hesitates and squints at her. “Did something go wrong? You don’t look that excited.”

Edda laughs. “Trust me, I am—I *was*. You should have seen the celebration when Team Aladdin took control of the colony vault. But you know how it is.” She chuckles. “Time dilation cures all ills—and joys! We’ve been expecting you for hours already.”

“Sorry, Juf Edda. I, uh, had some trouble diving.”

“You did?! But you’ve always been a natural, yeah?”

“Well, sorry if running for my life from *two* patrols got on my nerves!”

“I’m just kidding, Marten.” Edda laughs. “So proud of you! I knew you wouldn’t disappoint when I recommended you for Aladdin. Come.” Edda waves him to approach. “We need to talk over your next move.”

Behind Edda, four men—Willem, Gotthard, Ambroos and Marcellus—seem to be in the middle of a heated exchange. They are leaning over a gigantic round table that claims a good portion of the sanctuary. A huge hourglass—as high as two men—stands prominently nearby for everybody in the temple to see at a glance.

“Ah, Man Rijnder, welcome back,” Willem says, tapping Marten’s back warmly as he and Edda join the group by the massive table.

And the table... *Whoa!* It draws Ximena’s awed attention at

once, covered to the rims with a toy-like model of the entire colony of Lunteren, each building—each street—a detailed three-dimensional rendition of reality.

“That was excellent work out there,” Willem continues, gesturing at the area of the model where the Eye of Goah complex shines at the edge of the Forum with painstaking realism, enhanced by accurately positioned spotlights and electric lamps beaming true light, and projecting true shadows. A miniature blue genie, the size of a rodent, is placidly sitting on the roof of the small vault building on the north side of the complex. The genie turns and gives Marten the thumbs up.

“We scored a goal on our first op!” Gotthard cheerfully says to Marten. “Aws Fist zero, aws Middle-Finger one.”

“Problem is,” Willem says, “the new patrol—you know, the five-man one that crossed your way—has forced us to make some changes. Starting with alternative locations for meeting points and weapon caches.”

Marten whistles. “So all the sites we memorized—?”

“All rubbish now,” Willem says. “We were discussing the latest analysis from Intel. Marcellus and Ambroos,” he gestures at the two young men standing next to Gotthard, “have some actionable suggestions, places closest to our operatives that are least likely to cross their patrols.”

“Least likely as of right now,” Ambroos hastily adds, nodding at the titanic hourglass. “The situation is fluid, with two independent patrols roaming about almost randomly.”

“Those paranoid fuckers are good,” Gotthard says with a nod. “But we are better. Their speed is constant, and Speese and I are shadowing their every move. Those over there are your surprise encounter.” He points at one of the patrols, meticulously modeled as five fierce-looking doll warriors in fighting stance, their helmets rising over nearby roofs. They are strolling along a narrow street near the Fish Market. “We call

them *Hostile Five*.” He winks at Ambroos. “We couldn’t agree on a cooler code name.”

“Sorry, boss. The *Turdatons* just didn’t fly for me.”

Gotthard pulls Marten closer to the table. “You see the red zone around the patrol?” He moves his finger over the soft red glow that spreads in every direction with the patrol in its epicenter, flooding the alleys nearby like morning fog filling a valley. “That’s our three minute mark. That’s wake-minutes, of course. About an hour and a half for us.”

“And the orange zone?” Marten asks, his finger pointing at the extended orange fog spreading irregularly around the red areas.

“Seven minutes mark,” Ambroos says. “Beyond that,” he shrugs, “we don’t dare predict.”

“They move around as unpredictably as flies over *turds*,” Gotthard says with a smirk pointed at Ambroos. He pulls Marten closer and gestures at the table. “What you see here is Intel’s real-time best guess. Same with *Hostile Three* down there.” He points at the three similar doll warriors walking along the southern end of the Back Street, red—followed by orange—haze flooding the nearby streets. “But this probabilistic model is more than enough for our analysis. Put it simply, knowing where the patrols might be in the next few minutes, tell us where they will *not* be.”

“Which brings us back to our discussion,” Willem says, turning to Gotthard. “What is Intel’s recommendation for the next step of the operation?”

“Behold,” Gotthard says, and wags a finger down to the colony model, like he is firing a gun. Six small meteorites appear from thin air and fall like whistling shooting stars over the central and eastern parts of the colony. Six thin smoke columns begin to rise from the collision points, marking six different places, all far away from the scarlet threat of the patrols.



“That’s six caches,” Willem says, examining the selection. “Our original plan only accounted for three.”

“Redundancy,” Gotthard says. “I’m being ultraconservative now, Elder van Dolah, since failure will have a severe impact on our life expectancy.” He begins gesturing over the model colony. “We’ve recalculated the time that Man Rijnder needs to return to the vault, and for Aladdin to distribute the weapons to the three original caches while dodging all the extra guard attention, and *then* for our operatives to reach their closest caches unimpeded. Well...” He shakes his head with pursed lips. “Not good, I’m afraid. Hostile Five fucked it all up really bad. So we are applying basic risk management. Sorry, Man Rijnder, but your team is going to have to drop the weapons in six caches instead of three. The extra risk will be more than compensated by the reduced risk of aws Fist getting in the way of the other teams.”

“Good thinking,” Willem says, shooting a side glance at Edda, who has been staring in silent reflection at the model the whole time. The other men around the table also turn their attention to her.

“I like it,” Edda finally says with a curt nod. “How much time does your recommendation,” she swipes a hand at the six smoke columns, “give our operatives to wake, run to their closest weapons cache and then to their assigned meeting points?”

“Five wake minutes,” Gotthard says. “Plus minus one.”

“Five minutes!” Marten whistles, turning to Edda. “Did you run that number by Woman Zegers?”

“No worries, Marten,” Edda says, gesturing to her right. “Isabella and the rest of Team Solo have trained the timing extensively in simulation, yeah?”

Ximena follows her finger to the half of the Eye where night reigns supreme, a *true* night, just like in the wake, that falls over structures half-hidden in darkness. A group of three

on the edge of the shadows—Is that Rutger Siever?—stare in full concentration at hints of moving shapes beyond.

*Goah!* Ximena’s eyes flinch at a sudden movement out of the corner of her eye. There’s something there—*somebody*—where there was nothing before.

“Ah, Speese!” Gotthard says. Aline has just materialized next to him and floats an inch down to the floor. “Finally! Got an update?”

Aline holds up her right hand and remains silent, her expression highly focused. She extends a finger of the raised hand at the western side of the miniature colony, and the group of five tiny guards move abruptly halfway down a side alley.

“Okay, let’s see...” Ambroos says, and together with Marcellus begins to shift the red and orange misty areas around the new position of the patrol by physically pulling and pushing the fog with their fingers, while carefully measuring distances with their own extended hands.

Then Aline turns her attention to the smaller patrol, and the three doll-men slide half a block north along Back Street, away from the edge of the colony. “That’s all this time. Nothing to report around the vault and the cells,” she says, throwing a casual finger at the Eye complex on the Forum. She then shifts her gaze to the six thin smoke columns. “Are those the new cache points?”

“Yes,” Gotthard replies. “Our latest version.”

She nods slowly, eyes sweeping across the table, and then raises her look at Gotthard. “What are you still doing here? We need constant eyes out there. It’s your turn.”

“Yessir!” Gotthard gives Marten a good-humored wink. “So long, Man Rijnder. And good luck. We’ll be following your every move.” He disappears before he has time to reply.

“I can’t believe Gotthard can already traverse *way* better than me,” Edda says.

“We’re lucky to have him,” Willem says. “Right now it’s just him, Aline and you. Traversers are our scarcest resource.”

“Well, Janson’s ability to hear traversing ghosts is even rarer,” Aline says, pointing at the small Aladdin genie sitting over the colony vault. “Unique, to be exact.”

Willem nods. “True.”

“My mom can also traverse the Second Wake,” Ambroos says, pride in his eyes. “She might not be very good at it, but she can do it.”

“Yes, she can,” Edda says with a wide smile. “At least enough, I hope, to teach it to others if the rest of us,” she clears her throat, “are *absent* in the future. Thank Goah for Elder Abspoel. Anyway, ready for the next phase of the plan, Marten?”

“Sure, though a *lot* has changed.” Marten is staring at the columns of smoke rising from the miniaturized Lunteren like he’s already memorizing their position. He turns to Willem and says, “Now I understand why you insisted that I dive back here before reuniting with the rest of Aladdin, Elder van Dolah. I always thought it was a waste of precious wake time.”

“Waste of time, ha!” Edda says, embracing Willem’s arm. “When you think my dad is fooling around in battle, you better turn to see what’s coming up your ass.” She raises up on her toes and kisses his cheek.

Willem laughs, and says, “Well, for all the tactical advantages that we’ve got, there is an obvious disadvantage, and, you know what they say: *manage* your weaknesses before they *mismanage* you.”

“You mean,” Marten says, gesturing at the miniature colony, “that once out there, awake, we are blinder than a mole, right?”

“And deaf, too,” Edda says. “Even with Janson’s ghost-hearing ears. Without time dilation, we can’t analyze and react appropriately to whatever the enemy is doing. So my dad

insisted on adding a couple of safeguards on every op team: first, a leader capable of flexible thinking; and second, but not least, a *diver*,” she gives Marten a pointed look, “to re-coordinate with headquarters as often as possible. So!” She claps twice. “Let’s finish your preparations and get you back to Aladdin ASAP.”

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**I**t is quiet outside the vault building. Like in the eye of a storm.

The two guards—fitted with helmets, protective armor and boots—sit idly on the wooden chairs in weary silence; weapons on laps, fingers caressing triggers. The timid lamp over the door struggles to wave away the surrounding darkness of the Forum.

A rustle from the shadows—something is moving beyond the lit edge—reaches Ximena’s ears. And not only Ximena’s.

The two guards stand without a word, machine guns aimed at the source of the noise.

“Forty-two, forty-two,” a voice whispers at them.

It is his face—elongated, pale, and topped with short red hair—that they see first, like it is floating in the dark. The small, thin boy approaches silently, hands raised, hood down, and body cloaked in mimetic black cloth.

The two guards relax instantly.

“That was quick,” Pieter says, raising the visor of his helmet.

“Not quick enough,” Marten says, walking into the light, his voice tinted with anxiety. “Hurry, we need to move.”

“Come.” Pieter knocks on the door twice and opens it. “You stay here,” he says to the other guard.

---

The two awa Fist warriors, sitting on the floor in the corner next to the pipes to which they are tied, raise their heads as Pieter and Marten enter the room. They look sullen and resigned, mouths covered with duct tape. Ximena almost pities them; the proud warriors of Goah so unceremoniously swept away in a dusty corner by... fishermen.

Pieter shuts the door behind him.

“Goah be praised!” Louisa says, as she turns around and stands. She was working in full warrior uniform inside the colossal vault, sorting handguns into cloth bags. She walks to Marten and embraces him fiercely. “Goah be praised.”

A giggle escapes his lips, but he quickly turns to Pieter and says, “Mensas, there’s been a change of plans.” He reports in short, efficient sentences the situation and fresh instructions from headquarters. He concludes with, “Then Louisa and I sneak to our new meeting point, where we’ll join Team Solo. You and Janson,” he gestures at the entry door, “are to stay, make yourselves strong here, and keep those fuckers away from the toys.” He nods at the open vault.

The two awa Fist prisoners have been staring at him the entire time he spoke with wide-eyed astonishment, and Ximena cannot blame them. She can only imagine their disbelief at this man—no... *boy*, not even of military-month age—laying out the details to distribute weapons among a network of night conspirators all over the colony. To what end?

“Understood,” Pieter says, nodding thoughtfully. Then he turns to Louisa. “How many weapon-bags have you prepared?”

“Just the three. That was the original—”

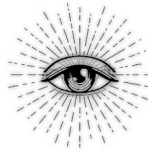
“Marten, tell Louisa the exact location of the caches she’s been assigned, and of Solo’s meeting point. Make sure she

memorizes them well.” He turns and walks towards the vault. “In the meantime, I’ll prepare the missing bags.”

As Marten takes out a folded map of Lunteren, he says, “Plan’s moving along nicely, isn’t it?”

“Hush, Marten!” Louisa says, a finger on her lips. “Don’t be a crow!”

## FOURTEEN



### Sisters

---

Isabella Zegers' broad face peeks from behind an alley corner, catches a glimpse, and leans back.

Back Street looks eerily silent. Perhaps it is the fact that the electric lamps are on, which is unusual in these early hours, or perhaps it is the sharp knowledge that the enemy is very, *very* close.

Isabella turns her hooded features back to the three cloaked figures behind and waves them forward. They move as a smooth, coordinated pack, silent like salivating wolves, a testimony to countless dream hours of incessant training.

There, down the street, the shadows dissolve and three running warriors, large and armed to the teeth, charge at them like berserkers, screaming promises of death.

"Pure sin, they've seen us!" Isabella calls, standing upright. "Spread! Meeting point Gamma."

They turn their black-clothed backs to the approaching thread at once, rendering themselves virtually invisible, and then each runs off in a different direction, silent like an explosion in space, spreading to the four cardinal points and dissolving into the darkness.

The warriors stop in the middle of the street, waving their machine guns back and forth. They scan their surroundings behind closed visors. A bright yellow question mark appears hanging over their heads.

“Excellent!” Isabella says, exiting an alley and clapping slowly with raised hands. “Again. Redeemed Siever, please reset the simulation.”

“Woman Zegers, I hate to interrupt your exercises,” Rutger says. He is standing on an elevated platform, floating steadily over the nearby roofs, together with Theodoor and Valentijn, both of whom are staring down at the simulation intently while gesturing unconscious minute movements with their hands—the walls and shadows below growing and shifting to their every whim.

“What is it?” She looks up at his lean figure, bending over a railing to talk to her. Above him, on the roof, the Eye of Goah glares its night half down at her.

“The Van Dolahs,” he says, waving a thumb at the central stage. “Tactics has called for you. I think it’s important.”

“Like this is not,” she says, frowning with irritation. “Fine. Elder Rijnder?” She turns to the man beside him. “Take over. Keep practicing contingencies.”

“Yes, Woman Zegers.”

She takes a deep breath and jumps high in the air like gravity is no concern. She flies—or floats—a precise ballistic path, with no course corrections in midair. Rutger follows her smooth motion through the air as her shapely body begins a controlled fall towards the giant hourglass and the large round table around which five people seem to gesticulate at each other. A heated argument reaches Ximena’s ears even before Isabella makes a soft landing near Willem.

“Elder van Dolah,” she says with a respectful tone. “I hope it’s important. We’re—”



“It’s never enough for *you*, is it?!” Aline is pointing an accusing finger at Edda, her cheeks blushing with anger.

Willem gives Isabella an apologetic smile and holds his hand up, a gentle request for patience. On the south end of the table, Ambroos and Marcellus are measuring distances on the miniature streets of Lunteren, failing to look like they are not following the discussion with fascinated interest.

“Whoa, sister!” Edda says. “This is not just—”

“You don’t get to *sister* me. You failed me so often I stopped counting.”

Edda is gaping at Aline. She doesn’t seem to know what to say.

Aline points a finger at her. “You dragged me into your stunt on New Year’s Eve. No risk, you said. Ha!”

Edda takes a step back, blinking rapidly, as if Aline’s mock laugh had physically hit her.

“Then you beg me not to confess,” Aline continues. “Trust me, no risk, you said. Ha! And now you want to fucking take *eight* aw’s Fist soldiers head on?! You just don’t give a fuck about others!” Tears begin to well up in her eyes. “But I have a baby daughter and, thanks to you, my brother and dad are *all* she’s got now. I mean, look at how you’ve fucked up your own family!” She gestures at Willem.

Edda takes another blinking step back, eyes also wet.

“Enough, Aline,” Willem says. “You’ve made your point. Let’s not forget we’re all in this together, all right?”

Aline glares on, but says nothing.

“Now, Isabella,” Willem continues. “We thank you for coming. We know you’re very busy, for all our sake. As you can see, we’re still *debating* the merits of each possible course of action, and we need your perspective as leader of Team Solo.”

“Yes,” Aline intervenes, wiping her eyes dry. “You’ve seen Team Aladdin’s success taking over the two guards by the vault.”

Isabella nods. “That was a good job.”

“Just two guards,” Aline continues. “And Aladdin had only four operatives to take them. You’ll have six.”

“Six? We’re also four at Solo.”

“There was a change of plans,” Willem says. “We decided to transfer Woman Louisa van Kley and Man Marten Rijnder to Team Solo after the distribution of weapons.”

Isabella smiles widely. “So sexy! We haven’t trained together, but with their training and experience, I’m sure—”

“Excuse me, Elder van Dolah,” Aline says, and looks to Isabella. “With *six* operatives, how would you estimate your chances of taking the two warriors guarding our cells?”

Edda is about to say something, but she bites her lips at a gesture from Willem.

Isabella frowns. “That’s not the plan we’re training for.”

“I know, Woman Zegers. But please, humor me. *Hypothetically*, could Team Solo set us free from jail?”

“Wow! When, *now*?”

Aline nods.

“Okay. *Hypothetically*. Hmm, so we got two guards. Right. And we’re six. The cells are on the southern side,” Isabella turns to the massive round table and points at a long building attached to the main Eye of Goah structure. “The access is farther away from the barracks,” she gestures at the north-western side of the complex, “around the Eye and the terrace, which lowers the risk of nasty encounters. And I think it’s safe to assume that the guards carry the cell keys with them. There is more flat terrain to cover on that flank, but it’s dark enough. All in all I would say, hmm, chances are good, Woman Speese.”

“Only good?” Aline asks.

Isabella shrugs. “Shit can happen anytime, in the most unpredictable way: an alarm called before we can take control, a stray shot too loud to ignore in the night, an unexpected

change of guards, or even a shooting frenzy. So, yes. *Good* is the best I can offer.” She turns to Edda and Willem. “Is this official?”

“Not yet,” Willem says. “We’re still assessing all possibilities. Edda, what’s your take on Aline’s proposal?”

Marcellus and Ambros are staring squarely at her, not even pretending anymore.

Edda clears her dream throat. “Sorry, Aline,” her eyes glance into Aline’s glare, and immediately look away, “but I don’t agree that liberating us now would, uh—”

“Stakes are too high for apologies,” Willem says, bluntly. “Don’t soften your words. Don’t beat around the bush. Stick to your point. Keep it factual.” He turns to Aline. “Same goes for you. We’re trying to analyze and decide our best course of action, using our heads.” He taps his. “Not our hearts. Understood?”

Aline folds her arms across her chest, and nods once, looking away.

“Go ahead, Edda,” Willem says. “Be specific.”

“Yeah, well, what we’re doing here, you know...” She gestures at Isabella. “Our operations, our tactical objectives...” She leans over the table and points at the colony vault building, over which a miniature blue genie is sitting with a bored expression. “This is a real battle. A *military* battle. And we must apply the rules of war.” She raises her eyes at Aline. “Liberating us at this point would be a mistake, Aline. A rookie mistake.”

Aline scoffs and rolls her eyes. “Isn’t the whole point to liberate us?”

“No.” Edda shakes her head emphatically. “We discussed this when we all voted, ages ago. Our goal tonight is to take hard power over Lunteren. *That* is what will liberate us. *Permanently.*”

“You aren’t serious!” Aline stares at her and at Willem

alternatively. “You are *really* still planning to take over? You think we can still pull it off after a surprise like *that!*!” She points at the five miniature warriors patrolling the western district of the colony.

Edda takes a step forward, eyes locked on Aline. Ximena hears the urgency in her voice, like a mother praying for her sick baby’s health. “Our little *Hostile Five* surprise is precisely what makes it so urgent to adapt our plan, but not our objective. Your escape fantasy does not even begin accounting for them. Where would we go? And *tomorrow?*” Edda wets her lips before continuing. “We are at war, Aline. And, like in any war, our primary tactical objective is, first and foremost, to suppress the resistance of the enemy.” She gestures at the two patrols roaming the streets of the model Lunteren. “*That* is the enemy. *Resist the lure of premature success,*” she says, as if reciting a well-known saying. “In the age of wars, before the golden age, professional armies would only take enemy cities to gain a tactical advantage, like destroying an enemy military asset, disrupting an enemy supply line, or destroying the enemy’s morale, but *never* for the sake of the city itself, even though they of course were the final war price. Competent commanders know that they can take entire countries with a single sweep of their armies, but only *after* they destroy every last speck of the enemy army. Fastest track to losing a war? Exhaust your warriors on vanity sieges for glory or pillage. Classic rookie mistake. Which I made myself, by the way. Remember, Dad?” She turns to Willem. “When you beat me the first time we played Waterloo?”

“Huh?” Willem frowns.

“You know...” Edda shifts her weight. “Your Wellington kicking my Napoleon ass when I got so obsessed with taking and keeping that walled farmhouse, remember?”

Willem squints like he does not know what Edda means,

but then he shrugs. “Well, then I guess I must be pretty good.” He gives Aline a lighthearted wink.

“Come on,” Aline says, rolling her eyes. “You’re talking about playing with toy soldiers. This is *real*, Goah’s Mercy. We get out, or we get cleansed.”

“No, Aline,” Edda says, her voice more urgent. “If we run free now, we lose our strength, our tactical advantage. We *must* commit all our resources into disabling aw’s Fist first!” Edda slams the rim of the table, and the doll-sized warriors on patrol jump briefly, as if startled. “Forget the rest! *The goal of war is to destroy the enemy forces—not the enemy.*”

“Destroy the enemy forces...” Willem nods in appreciation. “I admit, that makes sense.”

“Of course it makes sense, Dad. You’ve been repeating that to me like a mantra since... forever!”

“Have I really?” He chuckles. “Well, then I guess I must be pretty wise.” He winks again at Aline, who clenches her jaw but says nothing.

“Sorry, Aline. But we’re going with our original plan,” Edda says, and meets Isabella’s eyes. “Team Solo will now proceed to neutralize Hostile Three,” she points at the three warriors patrolling the south end of Juliana Street.

“We’re more than ready,” Isabella says. “Especially with two more in the team.”

Aline shakes her head in frustration. “Even if you succeed—which I wholeheartedly beg Goah for, Woman Zegers—then what? Hostile Five is a tougher nut to crack, you’ll all agree,” she gestures at the five guards patrolling the western side of the Post Way.

Willem nods. “Those are scary as fuck, I agree. Oh, sorry. My language.”

“We’ve never seen *two* patrols before!” Aline says. “We’ve never seen a patrol with *five* warriors, Goah’s Mercy! And this

one is packed with their most senior ones, led by the Inquisitor's dog himself, the one without the nose."

"Scary," Willem repeats. "But we'll deal with them when we must."

"I think they're just too many!" Aline insists. "Edda, Elder van Dolah, I say we move to Plan B."

"No," Edda replies in an instant. Her gaze rolls over to the half of the Eye where sunlight streams with generosity over a pleasant spring meadow with round hills, a running stream and a small pond. There, the largest group of dream conspirators—around ten—are training, split in working couples. A fruit tree has just begun growing larger in real-time under the concentrated look of a young woman while Elvira Abspoel, arms folded, nods nearby with visible satisfaction.

"They're called Team *Reserve* for a reason!" Aline says. "With ten guards already on the street," she throws a finger at Hostile Five, then at Hostile Three and finally at the two guards on the southern end of the Eye's complex, guarding their cells, "and eight more a gunshot or alarm away from waking," she points at the barracks on the northwestern side, next to the vault, "I say it's high time we mobilize our reserves, Goah's Mercy!"

Nobody replies immediately. Aline's words hang heavy around the round table.

Deep in thought, and with lips pressed, one by one they begin to raise their heads and lock their expectant eyes on Edda. Even Willem.

Edda is the last to raise her eyes. "No." She shakes her head firmly. "We must keep Reserve out of this at any cost."

"Goah's fucking Mercy, Edda." Aline speaks slowly, dragging words in what seems to Ximena almost like sadness. "You're going to kill us all."

"Sorry Aline, but whatever happens to us, Elder Abspoel and her Walkers must stay away. They might be everything

that remains; our last hope to liberate humanity from the Joyousday.” Edda shakes her head again and lifts her chin. “Generous water, yeah?”

“I think you should ask Elder Abspoel.” Aline extends an open hand at Ambroos at the other end of the table, who is staring back at them with clenched jaws. “Perhaps she’s not so willing to sacrifice her son for the greater good. And the same goes for the other parents, sisters and brothers in her team.”

“Leave me out of this, Woman Speese,” Ambroos says. “We’ve voted already. And my mother knew what we were getting into. This is all bigger than...” he waves with his hand, like he’s looking for the right word.

“Our lives?” Aline scoffs again.

“Well, *yes*.” Ambroos nods once. “Our lives! I want mine to matter. And, sure as Dem, my mom will make sure that it does.”

“*Sure as Dem...*” Aline snorts, while shaking her head. “Oh, the irony.”

“Aline, Plan B was never really on the table,” Willem says in a soft, reasonable voice. “Way too desperate. And bloody. It was more of a, er, theoretical concept; just for the sake of analytical completeness.” He turns his head for everybody to hear, “Truth is, Plan A is all we’ve really got, and we cannot fail. That’s why we must confront each threat *separately*, as an independent battle in a war campaign. Napoleon style.”

“Napoleon style...” Aline snorts. “The power-thirsty tyrant that betrayed the revolution that brought him to power? Your words, Edda.”

Edda sighs. “At least he knew his shit on the battlefield.”

“Woman Speese has a point, though, if you allow,” Isabella says, attracting everybody’s eyes. “I mean, I totally respect keeping Elder Abspoel’s team out of our, uh, operations. Just in case. But, uh...” She hesitates and then waves with her right hand. “Never mind.”

“Go ahead, spit it out,” Edda says.

“Okay, well. It’s the weapons, Juf Edda.”

“Please, don’t *Juf* me, Isabella. Just Edda, yeah? Soon we’ll be dowry sisters.”

“Right. Edda. Well, my concern is, uh, what if we are *really* forced to use the weapons?”

Willem and Edda exchange a glance, and then Willem says, “I really hope you don’t. We are dealing with professional warriors here. I trust that the threat of irresistible violence will be enough for them to yield. It worked with Aladdin.”

Isabella nods, biting her lower lip. “Right, but... What if, uh, they *don’t*? Or even worse, what if we somehow fail and they start shooting at us?”

“Hmm...” Willem takes a moment before he replies. “You are of course the leader of Team Solo, and it’s your job to decide on the spot what to do, reacting to whatever might happen around you, like you’ve done endless times in training simulations. All I can say is what I’ve always said: *avoid bloodshed at all costs.*”

“Even when, uh, it’s either them or us?”

“That’s your call, soldier. And your conscience.”

She tilts her head. “Sorry, Elder van Dolah, but I just don’t get it. Why is it so goahdamn important to avoid bloodshed? They sure as Dem don’t have such scruples.”

Willem is about to reply, but then stops and frowns in confusion, like he cannot find the right words. He turns to Edda and gestures for her to reply.

“It’s all about the long game,” Edda says. “The war after the battle. Say we succeed tonight. What then? Not every colonist is buying our ideas. Imagine we come to them with blood on our hands. What would that make us in their eyes? Criminals? Demons shooting their way free and murdering members of aws Fist in cold blood? And always keep in mind that taking over the colony is just the first step in the really long



game—the one that matters—of ridding the world of the Joyousday. I don't know how aw's Head would react if we took control peacefully, but I sure as Dem know how they'd take the murder of their envoys. An open war between a tiny colony and all the Imperia of Goah would be..." She exhales loudly, shaking her head. "For us, there's only hope in keeping a low profile and the quiet spread of our ideas, yeah?"

"I see," Isabella says. "So if we kill our enemy, we kill our future."

"Nicely put," Edda says. "But right now, what matters is your mission, Isabella. Time's up. Is Team Solo ready to get out there and neutralize Hostile Three?"

"As ready as we'll ever be, *sister*," Isabella says.

Aline shifts in place and scoffs, deep creases crossing her brow. "If that's Tactical's last word, then I'll guess I'll refocus Intel on Hostile Three's movements."

"Thank you for your discipline, Aline," Edda says with a shy smile.

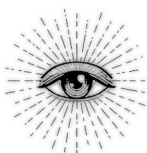
Aline glares back into Edda's eyes for a few moments, and then, without a word, disappears into thin air.

Willem shakes his head, looking at the spot where Aline was a moment ago. "I don't feel the love."

Edda snorts and looks away, hiding her eyes from her companions.

But not from Ximena.

## FIFTEEN



### Cover Your Balls

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The Roskammer Alley is long and narrow. And very dark at night. The promise of electric light lies a few yards ahead of the three pacing warriors, where the alley flows into Colony Street. The warriors walk side by side with heavy, noisy steps. A patrol is meant to be heard, and usually seen. But in the darkness, Ximena can barely make out their shapes, let alone their faces.

“When’s our shift end?” the warrior on the left asks in a bored tone.

The central warrior laughs and places a heavy hand on his shoulder. “We’ve a busy nigh’ ahead, lad. Full spread tonigh’.”

“Doub’l patrol, doub’l shift,” the first warrior complains, and then sighs heavily. “Inquisita’s gettin’ old ‘n paranoid.”

“Paranoid my ass. Haven’t you heard ‘bout those fires yest’rday?”

“That wasn’t here,” the first warrior chuckles. “Not with us ‘n our billies doin’ the round!”

The central warrior snorts. “You lads were nat at Crawley last summer, were you?”

“Nat anothe’ war story, grandpa.”

“All I say is, beware the nigh’ before a cleansin’. Bad things can happ’n, you listen ta me, lads. Dependents get itchy. Sleepin’ demons awake.”

“Ooh!” The first warrior waves both hands in a mock gesture of fear, as they begin to walk out of the narrow alley and into the partly lit Colony Street.

“And tomorrow’s cleansin’,” the central warrior continues, “is a fuckin’ big deal. Live’n radio and all. Not like that pathetic bitch demon in Crawley.”

“I wouldn’t mind a bit of acti’n.” The mocking warrior slides his machine gun off his back and into his hands, and shakes it, laughing like a crow before putting it back.

“Ah, the foolishn’s of youth.” The central warrior shakes his head and joins the laughter.

The three men stop dead in their tracks, mouths frozen in mid-laugh, as six high-caliber handguns whiz out of the shadows, and enclose them tightly in a neat circle of iron and threat. With their visors up, each guard stares cross-eyed down a pistol muzzle, while another muzzle rubs their lower backs, right between the plaques of protective armor.

They don’t move.

They don’t speak.

Professionals know when to call it a day.

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**V***an Dolah, Van Dolah, Van Dolah!*

The chant echoes off the mirrored walls of the permascaped Eye of Goah, as twenty dream throats shout as one.

*Juf Edda, Juf Edda, Juf Edda!*

Fists extend ecstatically in the air, as the well-oiled machinery of the conspirators has paused their tasks in celebration. Half of them are yelling, flying and dancing

around the central platform, where a blushing Edda gestures with her hands, trying in vain to stop the crowd. Willem laughs wholeheartedly beside her.

Edda gives up with a shy smile, raises her head, and with a theatrical flick of fingers, eight full-sized floating figures—Pieter, Janson, Louisa, Marten, Isabella and the rest of her team—appear in midair over the central stage. They look shiny, splendid in their magnificent tunics, like Greek gods, as they raise both hands in the universal sign of victory, and the two large siblings even begin flexing their muscles like it's a bodybuilding competition.

A roar of approval and enthusiasm engulfs the place.

After the celebration, after everybody has returned to their post, Gotthard is still speaking with excitement beside the round Intel table.

"It was three seconds, I swear to Goah," he says, gesturing at the southern half of Colony Street. "Everything was over in three fucking seconds. It was brilliant. You should've been there!"

"We get it," Edda repeats soothingly. "We get it, Gotthard. Now—"

"And no violence! It was *tjas!* Like a surgeon. They didn't have a chance. I can't believe it worked so... Wow!" He locks his eyes on Edda's. "First, the Ledebøer brothers take the vault's weapons, and now we take hostile fucking three without shedding a drop of blood. We're really going to make it out of here, aren't we?"

"I'm as hopeful as you are—" she begins to say.

"Don't *but* on me now," he interrupts, squinting. "We *are* going to make it, right?"

"Well, everything is looking great so far, yeah?" She leans

over the colony model and extends a finger at the Eye of Goah. “Piet and Janson are on standby in the vault with two prisoners.” She turns to point at the edge of the town on the southeast. “Isabella and her gang are over there, locking up their three prisoners. And, to top it all,” she gestures at a small, red-haired figure placed in running motion in a narrow back street nearby, “Marten has almost reached his designated diving bed. As soon as we’ve worked out our next move, we can expect to transmit fresh instructions quickly to our operatives. So, yeah, all is looking rosy.”

She isn’t smiling. A slight frown carves her brow.

“Hmm...” Willem nods soberly.

Gotthard raises his eyebrows. “What?”

Willem places a hand on his shoulder and says, “When a plan is working too well, cover your balls.”

“Oh, come on, don’t be a crow! This is reality,” he scoffs, “not a cheesy radio show.”

The floating scene begins to zoom out and to distance itself from the enormous round table with the miniature Lunteren, slowly disengaging from the historical figures still discussing around it.

Ximena leans back and lets her eyes grace the entire landscape of celebrating conspirators across this very peculiar version of the Eye of Goah. It is a privilege, she thinks, to watch the rebellion as it unfolds, right from the heart of it—the rebel’s permascaped headquarters—like she was really there among them.

Mark’s sudden whisper in her ear, “I wonder if that conversation actually happened?” makes her twitch in place.

Ximena turns to meet his gaze. He is so close, staring at her intently, eyes so wide and blue, hair so unruly red, brow ridge so prominent, so... *forbidden*. She clears her throat. “What do you mean?”

Mark gestures at the distancing central stage. “That

*premonition*... Cover your balls, and all that. You think there are historical records of that particular conversation?"

"You think Professor Miyagi made it up? That doesn't sound like him."

"Uh, I don't know if you've noticed he has quite the developed sense of drama."

"Sure," Ximena chuckles lightly. "But he would never alter history for... a good show."

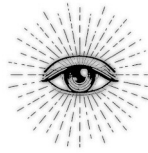
"Of course not, but that exchange alters nothing. And I suspect the professor is not above a good narrative flourish..."

"*Narrative flourish*." She laughs, attracting not few curious neighboring looks. "You might be right there. The professor is as much a storyteller as a historian, and that Van Dolah's premonition sounded just like he is foreshadowing something bad about to happen."

"Yeah, and I know what it is," he says, leaning in closer to her, his breath caressing her ear.

"Yeah?" Ximena turns her face at him. His eyes, so close. Their noses, almost touching. She reigns in her breathing as her heart quickens. "You do?"

His smile widens. He speaks slowly, intentionally. A lover's whisper. "Ledeboer's death."



## SURE AS DEM

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### Episode VIII

*“Hope is the enemy of victory,” Edda says, like she is reciting an old teaching.*

*“Hope separates the fighters from the victims,” Willem replies.*

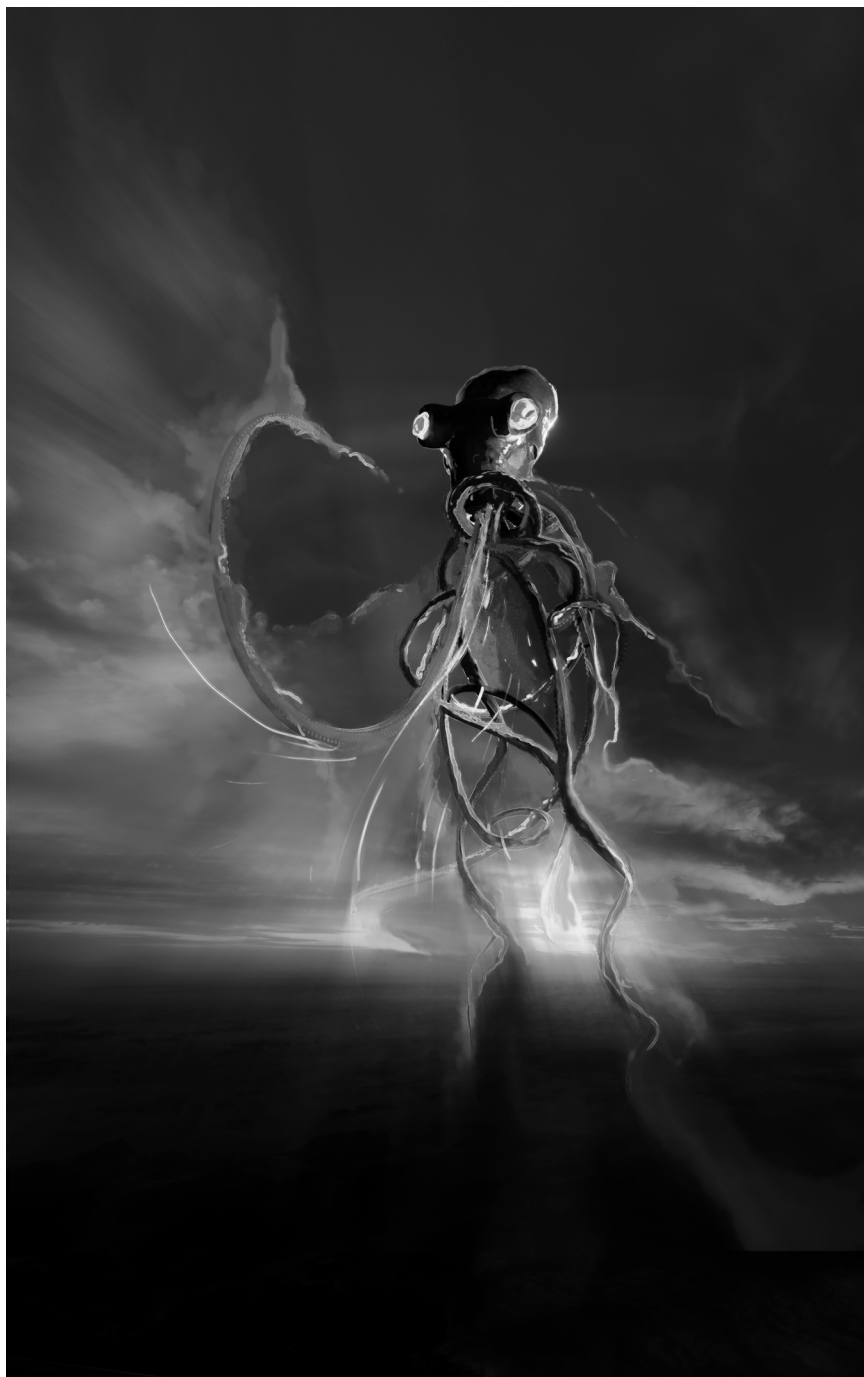
*Edda raises her chin. “Hope is the fool’s last errand.”*

*“While there’s life, there’s hope.”*

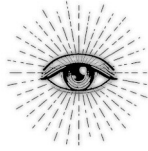
*Edda snorts. “What a pile of bull, Dad!”*







## SIXTEEN



### The Fool's Last Errand

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“A diversion might split them,” Willem suggests. “Perhaps lead one or two off the Berkhof Way. We’d deal with them later.” Together with Edda, Aline, and her Intel boys, he is staring intently at the five doll-sized warriors roaming the northern streets of the miniature Lunteren. Their combined eyes absorb every detail with the hunger of an eagle descending on an unsuspecting rabbit.

“It might work,” Edda says, “and it might not. These brutes are a disciplined lot. We can’t take chances. We need something that—”

Edda stops at the sudden materialization of Gotthard beside them, inward traversing out of thin air. The appearance is not unusual per se; Intel is constantly traversing in and out, scouting and reporting in a rhythmic frenzy that is at the very heart of their capabilities. It is the expression on Gotthard’s face that freezes Edda in place. His light brown skin is paler than usual. With widened eyes and pressed lips, he is the living image of dread.

“Inquisitor!” he says, his voice shivering in agitation. Taking big gulps of dream air, he looks almost sick. “There!”

He points with a trembling finger at the edge of the miniature colony.

“Calm down, mensa.” Aline places a hand on his shoulder, creases of worry crossing her brow. “You’re in dream time now. Take your time.”

“There’s no time!” He waves a hand at the Forum. “He’s a wake minute away from Aladdin!”

Aline and Edda cover their mouths, gasps spilling like blood through their fingers. Ximena sits bolt upright from the sudden rush of adrenaline the psych-link pumps into her veins.

“Goah’s Mercy!” a gaping Ambroos mutters from the opposite side of the table.

“Gotthard,” Willem intervenes, his voice calm and soothing. He puts a hand on his shoulder. “Situational awareness. First, let’s get the facts right. Tell us exactly where he is. Place him in the model.”

Gotthard turns to the Forum and extends a finger towards a spot somewhere in the middle of the open space. He squints in concentration, while taking a few deep breaths, and a nebulous cylindrical form takes shape on that spot. “There.” He gives up shaping the misty form into something more meaningful. “I saw his halo by pure chance when I was flying over to check on Aladdin. His pace is quick. About thirty wake seconds away from the barracks.” Gotthard points at the elongated building neighboring the colony vault. “Thirty more to the Ledeboers, if he doesn’t stop there.”

Every eye around the table fixes on the miniature Forum, on the spot marked by Gotthard in the middle of it. Ximena can almost hear Edda’s chaotic thoughts as they stagger into calculating times, thinking alternatives, and just wildly guessing what might be going on.

“He might have some business to attend in the barracks,” Aline says, voice tainted with hope and fear, as she mindlessly waves a hand to reshape the nebulous form into a proper, doll-

sized mean-looking Inquisitor, striding towards Lunteren's Eye of Goah with determination, unperturbed by the surrounding empty darkness of the central Forum. "Or he might turn south to check on the two warriors guarding our cells."

"Or he might not," Edda says, staring at the pacing figure—like everybody else—with fear in her eyes. "We can't take chances."

"There's more!" Gotthard says with urgent sharpness, locking the undivided attention of the others. "He was holding a walkie-talkie. While walking." He gestures wildly at the lonely figure on the Forum. "I think he was shouting at it."

"What was he saying?!" Aline says, putting a hand on his chest.

"I don't know! I came here right away."

"Didn't you think that it might have been important?!"

"He was thirty fucking seconds off the barracks! You think I had time to go down and snoop around?"

"Goah's fucking Mercy, Gotthard! Go back and shadow him until you know what he's saying, or where he's going next!"

Gotthard blinks at her and, without a word, dissolves in dream air.

Edda, clenching her jaw, turns to Aline. "How did this happen?"

"What?" Aline squints at her.

"Fucking Inquisitor goes for a night stroll, and *nobody* sees him? How the fuck did this happen?!"

"He's never done that before! Not once in the whole week. What do you expect from us, *Juf* Edda, that we also shadow the Quaestor? And the five Colders for good measure? It's just Gotthard and me out there, Goah's fucking Mercy! And we don't have the luxury of time dilation in—"

"Stop that!" Willem's voice is unusually harsh. Enough to attract everybody's attention at once. Aline and Edda cross an

inscrutable look, but remain silent. Willem shuts his eyes for a long second, takes a deep breath and says with his usual calm tone, “Focus.” He leans over the edge of the model and gives the Forum and the approaching Inquisitor an intense gaze. “Aline, how much time have we got, in dream time,” he gestures at the colossal hourglass standing next to the table, “before Gotthard returns with more intel?”

“Uh... Let me... We’re talking about ten to twenty seconds of wake time, hmm, five or ten dream minutes, more or less.”

“Thank you. Okay, everybody. For the next five minutes, I want us to assume the worst. The Inquisitor woke up, grabbed the walkie-talkie to check on his guards, and our two prisoners,” he points a finger at the colony vault building with a blue genie sitting placidly on the roof, “are not replying.”

“Or Pieter had to answer,” Edda says. “And he doesn’t know the first thing about aw’s Fist’s protocols. We should have studied their communications while we had time.”

Aline replies with a mocking tone, “We’ll add that point to the lessons-learned list, Edda. Just in time for our next cleansing.”

“What about Hostile Three?” Edda asks, ignoring her friend. “Their radio is also out.”

“Good question.” Willem shrugs. “Whatever the reason—and I’m just assuming the worst here—the Inquisitor is checking on Pieter’s post.”

“Since we’re assuming the worst,” Edda says, eyes growing wide, “with so many radio anomalies, the paranoid fucker might suspect armed resistance, and is waking everybody in the barracks!”

Willem stares at the Inquisitor with a thoughtful expression. “No.” He shakes his head slowly. “I don’t think so. At least not yet. The walkie alarm is loud enough that Gotthard would have heard it. And look at the Inquisitor, roaming around in-person in the middle of the night. If he really were on high

alert, he would sure as Dem send his warriors instead.” He turns to Edda and Aline. “Options?”

“We must warn Piet!” Aline says.

“Impossible,” Edda says, scanning the model buildings around the Forum, some of which have small busts of co-conspirators rotating slowly over the roofs. “Look. Nobody can wake and reach him in time. The inquisitor is seconds away.” She turns and meets her friend’s anxious eyes. “Aline,” she says, speaking softly, “Piet’s on his own.”

Aline goes pale.

“If it’s all as we suspect,” Willem says, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder, “he’s got the guards’ walkie-talkie and knows what’s coming at him. He’s good, Aline. The best ops leader we’ve got, Isabella forgive me for saying that. Quickest wits under stress, and decisive like a hammer blow. If anybody can navigate out of this gracefully, it’s him.”

“Remember, they’re armed,” Edda says, “and the Inquisitor isn’t. I bet they’ll take him prisoner, and we might even get an unexpected win out of this scare.”

“And, I beg Goah, shedding no blood,” Willem says. “Especially not the Inquisitor’s.”

“Still...” Edda shifts her weight, shaking her head. “We can’t afford to assume all will be rosy. What if the Inquisitor triggers the alarm before he’s taken prisoner?”

“Good tactical mind, girl. True, if that happens... Well, then...” Willem gives her a sad smile. “Checkmate. With our reach so severely limited and out of wake time, there’s nothing we could do, were every aw’s Fist warrior to wake up now. But hey, we still don’t know what the Inquisitor is doing out on the street in the middle of the night, do we? Perhaps he is just nervous, can’t sleep, and needs some fresh air. There’s still hope.”

“*Hope is the enemy of victory,*” Edda says, like she is reciting an old teaching.

*“Hope separates the fighters from the victims,”* Willem replies.

Edda raises her chin. *“Hope is the fool’s last errand.”*

*“While there’s life, there’s hope.”*

Edda snorts. “What a pile of bull, Dad!”

As Willem is about to reply, Gotthard reappears in the exact same spot where he was a few moments ago, and turns his head to meet everybody’s expectant gaze.

“Bad news, mensas. It’s official. The Inquisitor is closing in on Aladdin. And fast.”

“So much for hope.” Edda scoffs, and turns to Aline. “Listen to me. There’s no time to argue. The Inquisitor might blow our plans out of the water if he sets off the alarm.”

“I’m sure Piet—”

“Listen to me, goahdammit!” Edda takes a step forward, eyes freezing Aline mid-sentence. Edda blinks for a moment, wetting her lips. “Trust me, sister. Please, trust me. There’s no time to argue. No time for what ifs or what might. If the alarm goes off...” She points a finger at the elongated barracks building next to the colony vault. “If those eight warriors wake up and join the fray... We’re done for. Period.”

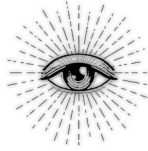
Aline presses her lips, eyes still locked on Edda’s. She nods in silence.

“Go out there and make sure they don’t wake up, yeah?”

“How?!” Aline exhales loudly, eyes widening in dismay. “What can I possibly do?!”

“You are a Walker, Aline. And an engineer. You’ll think of something.”

## SEVENTEEN



### Brothers

---

As the Inquisitor enters the circle of dim light surrounding the colony vault, he glowers at the two sitting figures, and hurries his pace.

Leaning back on their chairs with their backs against the wall, heads down on their chests, and deep breathing muffling through their closed helmets, they are the living image of guards sneaking a nap while on duty.

“I swear to Goah...!” The Inquisitor stomps his way towards them. “You call yourselves aw’s Servants? You aren’t worthy!”

The two men seem to wake, startled, and stand to attention. One of them theatrically sinks his helmeted head in contrition.

“I’ve been calling your position. Where are your fucking comms?!” The Inquisitor points at the empty hooks on their belts.

One of the men gestures timidly with a thumb towards the door.

The Inquisitor shuts his eyes with a snort and pinches the bridge of the nose. “I need a sleeping pill to be fresh for



tomorrow,” he shakes his head with exasperation, “and because your radios are too heavy I must come *all the way* to the colonial supplies to get one?!” He walks to the door. “Come!” He gestures impatiently, and crosses the threshold to enter the room. “I beg Goah to be more forgiving with your souls than Commander Harlow when he disciplines you.”

It takes a few seconds for the Inquisitor to realize that something is very wrong.

He first stares blankly at the open vault, then at the pile of weapons in the corner, and finally at the two warriors tied to a pipe, who don't even dare meet his gaze.

He turns around to meet the muzzle of two guns pointed directly at his head.

“Checkmate, Inquisitor,” Pieter says, helmet visor up, as he closes the door behind him.

---

“**T**ie him. And take off that ridiculous helmet, will you?” Janson, next to the wall, takes a hesitant step forward and stops.

“Come on, Jans. Shoo off the seagulls, already. What's up with you?”

“Junior Elder Janson Ledebøer,” the Inquisitor says with a deep, knowing tone, drawling on the last vowel. “Is that really you?”

“Shut up!” Janson says, removing his helmet and glowering at the Inquisitor with threatening eyes. “Don't... Just shut up!”

The Inquisitor begins to laugh. Initially a gentle laugh, as if he were trying to keep it inside. But it slowly increases in intensity until he cannot control the spasms and his eyes begin to shed tears; not of pain, not of sorrow, but—Ximena can clearly see—of something equally dark. And then, when he seems to be over it, a bustle of laughter bursts out afresh.

Ximena feels her own spine contracting into a horrified freeze as she tries to suppress a chuckle, so strong is the pull of that manic laughter.

Pieter stares at the protracted laugh like he had just caught an unknown oozing creature in his fishing net. He just watches on, gaping in dumbstruck silence.

Janson steps forward abruptly. “I said, shut up!” And, with all the might of his naturally muscled arm, he thrusts his gloved, open right hand against the side of the Inquisitor’s face. Ximena exhales as the violent slap throws the man sideways against the wall, and then to the floor.

“Jans!” Pieter’s dumbstruck eyes stay locked on the shaved head of the Inquisitor. “What the fuck?!” The Eye of Goah tattooed on the pristine skull seems to glare up at him in soul-squeezing admonition.

The two tied and gagged warriors on the corner noisily pull on their constraints, faces red, eyes injected with promises of death.

Although the Inquisitor has stopped laughing, he did not utter the slightest complaint when he was struck down. And now, he slowly raises his head to Janson—his left cheek rabidly red—with an impish grin.

“Somebody’s got a little secret...” The Inquisitor’s teasing tone is like that of a child playing with a sibling.

“I said—!” Janson raises the back of his hand over the Inquisitor, eyes red with fury—or is it *fear*?

“Jans!” Pieter’s bark halts his brother’s hand in place. “Enough! Remember our mission directives!”

Janson takes a step back, a frown of confusion crossing his brow—or is it *pain*?

Pieter steps over to the Inquisitor and lifts him with strong but delicate hands, even dusting off his robes. He then shoots his brother an irate glance. “What the fuck came over you?! We are to avoid bloodshed at all costs, Goah’s fucking Mercy!”

The Inquisitor—eyes on Janson—coughs lightly without ever losing his smirk.

“Grand Inquisitor Rhodes,” Pieter says. “I’m so sorry. We never—”

The Inquisitor meets Pieter’s gaze, still grinning. “My brother warned me I was making a mistake letting you go, Elder Ledebøer.”

Pieter frowns. “Letting *me* go?”

“As usual, he was right. A mistake. A grave mistake. And I thought I was being an old fox,” the Inquisitor chuckles, like the thought is funny. “Pride’s a *deadly* sin. I hear you, Goah,” he lifts his eyes to the ceiling. “This ungrateful barbarian-born has defiled aw’s precious Gift, just for the glory of catching a couple of bitch demons.”

“Which bitch demons?” Pieter’s voice raises a few notches, eyes locked on the Inquisitor.

“Piet!” Janson says with desperate urgency. “Let’s gag him and put him with the others. Piet...!”

“My last mistake, I see.” The Inquisitor turns his head to give the two horrified-looking warriors a comforting smile. “Lads, I was hoping for the mother of all Joyousdays, celebrating together with you and the rest. But it’s a small price to pay for my slip. Tell ‘em it was a hell of a ride, will ya?” His tone seems to gain a more guttural quality to it, like a suppressed primordial accent is fighting to burst out.

“Piet...” Janson’s voice falters. He clears his throat. “There’s something I need to—”

“Which bitch demons are you talking about?!” Pieter grabs the Inquisitor’s robes harshly.

“You already know, Man Ledebøer.” The Inquisitor takes Pieter’s grasping hand off him in an almost gentle gesture. “What you don’t know—”

“Piet!”

“—is that, shortly after the ultimatum I gave to the colony, a witness showed up in my office.”

“A witness...” Pieter squints at him. Then he turns slowly to Janson. “A *witness*?!”

“A patriot, really. Offering his denunciation to save his colony from the sure privations of a Withdrawal.”

“*Denunciation!*” Pieter says, like it is a curse.

“But only with a condition. A *small* condition, I thought back then.” He chuckles. “*Grave* mistake, Goah be Merciful with my soul.”

“Which. *Condition*?” Pieter’s voice is sharpening like a late winter breeze, his face flushing redder by the second.

“That his *brother* be spared.”

“Piet...” Janson’s voice is trembling, pleading. “It was you or them, Piet. Everybody knew who did it. He was gonna find out, anyway. I kept you safe, Piet.”

“What have you done?” Pieter takes a step towards Janson, who takes a hesitant step back, fear written across his boyish face. Pieter’s eyes are shimmering, his chin trembling lightly. He takes another step forward, and shouts at him word by word: “What! Have! You! *DONE!*”

Janson recoils until his back hits the wall. He opens and shuts his mouth repeatedly, without a noise coming out. His expression is frozen in sheer terror.

“No!” Pieter shakes his head in disbelief, while tears begin running down his cheeks, a murderous look in his eyes. “You *didn’t* sell Aline. Please, Jans. Tell me you didn’t sell Aline.”

“And Redeemed van Dolah, too,” the Inquisitor says. “You should be proud of your brother, Senior Elder Ledebøer; a loyal servant of the state.”

“I’m so sorry!” Janson begins to weep. “I did it for you! For you, Piet!” His speech is hard to understand between the heavy sobs. “If I lose you—”

With brutal force, Pieter strikes him on the jaw with the back of his right hand.

Janson collapses into a pile and Pieter kicks him fiercely all over the armored suit, each hateful kick plucking a pitiful whimper from Janson as he blocks the blows with arms and legs.

Behind him, the Inquisitor eyes the pile of handguns on the floor next to the vault and begins to inch in that direction, his eyes fixed on Pieter.

Ximena gapes in increasing horror as the Inquisitor sneaks ever closer, taking advantage of Pieter's rage attack. Some students even yelp like they are trying to warn him.

As if Pieter had heard them, he turns his head in a reflex movement.

He meets the Inquisitor's gaze, who with a desperate jump, closes the last inches separating him from his prize.

The Inquisitor reaches out and his hand closes clumsily around a gun, when Pieter's heavy body falls flat over him, tackling him solidly against the floor. The weapon slips out of his grip.

"Was worth a shot," the Inquisitor mutters, and laughs while Pieter pulls him up to his feet with rough hands. "Guess I thought Goah had forgiven me. But, alas..."

Pieter unceremoniously pushes the Inquisitor far away from the vault. He then turns to Janson, who is standing on his feet, a trail of blood down his chin.

"Get out." Pieter points a finger at the door.

"Piet, please!" Janson sobs. "I didn't know what to do! If something had happened to you..."

"Out!" Pieter barks, and shoves him violently towards the exit. "I don't want to see you *ever* again."

"Piet!"

"I lost a brother today," Pieter says, deep sorrow in his voice, and then gives Janson a final push out.

Janson staggers out to the cold Forum night, almost stumbling. "Piet!"

The distraught call is muffled by the slammed door. Pieter slides the lock, and then collapses to a sitting position, back against the door. His face, covered by both gloved hands, begins to shake softly with every silent sob.

After what feels like an eternity to Ximena, Pieter takes a deep breath and, grunting as if made of lead, slowly stands up.

The Inquisitor applauds, slowly, rhythmically. "That was all *very* entertaining," he says with a smirk.

"Turn around, please, Inquisitor," Pieter says with the broken tone of a man whose soul has been drained out of his body. "I must tie you with your men."

"I'm afraid that is not going to happen, Elder Ledeboer."

"Please," Pieter says, with the infinite tiredness of a warrior sick of killing. "Just... Don't resist, Goah's Mercy."

"Goah's Mercy, indeed." He turns his sure, smiling face to the warriors tied on the corner floor. Both look at him with tears running down their cheeks. "Farewell, brothers. Bid my goodbyes to the rest, will ya? I'm takin' a piece of all of ya with me here." He taps his chest twice. "A present to Goah, a foretaste." He chuckles. "Until you lazy bastards decide to bring the rest of yaselves."

"What are you talking about?" Pieter asks.

The Inquisitor doesn't reply. With a placid smile, he reaches for the walkie-talkie hanging from his belt.

"Don't you fucking dare!" Pieter shouts, body tense in sudden alert. With a swipe of his arm, he points a gun directly at the Inquisitor's head.

"Only Goah knows how serious you really are at avoiding bloodshed at all costs," the Inquisitor says, as he unhooks the walkie-talkie and raises it to the reach of his other hand, a finger extending at it. "But very soon, I will know, too."

“I’m dead serious!” Pieter’s voice snaps like the crack of a whip. “Drop it, or die!”

The Inquisitor closes his eyes and moves his lips in what seems to Miyagi’s students like a silent prayer.

“I swear to Goah, I’ll shoot!”

The Inquisitor’s finger edges closer to the bulky device, and then, with a sudden jerk, flips a switch. A piercing, electronic squeal begins to wail loudly. With eyes still closed, the Inquisitor exhales a deep sigh of satisfaction. He looks happy, almost ecstatic.

“No! Drop that or I’ll kill you!”

The walkie-talkie, firmly in the Inquisitor’s hand, comes to life. “John here. Who’s callin’ the fuckin’ alarm?”

Pieter shoots. Twice.

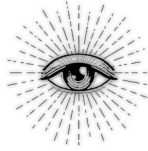
Ximena jumps in place with a shriek, and before she knows what she is doing, she finds herself holding Mark’s left arm.

“Nice shot,” the Inquisitor says, nodding in appreciation at the ruined gadget. The walkie-talkie is silent, a dead lump of metal in his hands. “But too late. Let’s see how you fence against twenty of my lads. They’ll be here in no time.”

Pieter’s hand is trembling, gun smoke dissipating in the air. His face has grown paler than the moon on a cloudy night.

“And if you don’t even dare pull the trigger when your life is on the line,” the Inquisitor chuckles, shaking his head in disbelief, “what are your chances against my warriors? You are now living the last minutes of your life, Senior Elder Ledeboer. May Goah be Merciful with your soul.”

## EIGHTEEN



### Reserve

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Edda staggers, wide-eyed, unfocused. She leans on the round table and sinks her head.

“Goah’s Mercy, Edda,” Gotthard says. “There’s no excuse now!”

“No...” she says, her voice dissolving into a shaky exhalation. She meets her father’s eyes, who stands next to them in sullen silence.

Marten, Ambroos and Marcellus follow the exchange from the other end of the table, terrified expressions crossing their faces. Marten’s left hand shakes slightly, and his right hand rests on the shoulder of the much taller Ambroos.

“We *must* activate Plan B, goahdammit!” Gotthard yells, both hands on the round table, eyes pleading, red with anger and fear. “Without Reserve Team out on the streets right now, we are dead! How can you not see it?!”

“No...” Edda sinks her head and shakes it slowly. “No... No...”

“What else have we fucking got?” Gotthard says, and shrugs theatrically. “*Hope?!?*”



With head still low, she whispers, “*Hope is the fool’s last errand.*”

“There.” Gotthard folds his arms with a head tilt. “Now you’re thinking again.”

Edda nods once, slowly. She then takes a deep breath, exchanges a swift glance with her father, and turns her gaze.

“Ambroos, if you’d be so kind,” she gestures down at the daylight side of the complex, where, oblivious to the latest developments, ten enthusiastic Walker apprentices train across the dream spring meadows, “go fetch your mum.”

---

“I see.” Elvira Abspoel, lips pressed and forehead furrowed, studies the miniature colony meticulously. “So these five men are moving in already, correct?” She points at Hostile Five, running down Shaepman Street towards the center of the colony.

“Yes,” Edda says gravely. “I don’t think they know what’s going on yet, but they sure as Dem know something is wrong.”

“How long we got?” Elvira asks.

“Five wake minutes, Mom,” Ambroos says, gesturing at the enormous hourglass beside them. “About—”

“Two hours,” she says.

“A bit more than that.” He shrugs. “But yeah.”

“Five minutes. Hmm, we need, er,” Elvira wets her lips, “about four wake minutes to the meeting point, which would leave us only one minute to reach the Forum.” She turns to Edda, apprehension in her face. “Doesn’t look good.”

“So long?!” Gotthard asks, dismay tinting his voice. “But you’re all sleeping in your clothes, ready to go, aren’t you?”

“Still, a minute to wake and go out onto the streets in *silence*, another minute at least to the closest weapons cache, and no less than two to the meeting point.” Elvira shakes her

plump head. “It’s like a baking recipe: each part takes its time, and there’s just no way around it.” She raises her large brown eyes at Gotthard. “Perhaps we could shave a minute if Intel guarantees clear paths. We could then risk a sprint.”

“You got it,” he says. And disappears into the Traverse.

Elvira turns to Edda. “Fine. What are our supporting assets, Juf Edda?”

“Well, let’s see. Aladdin is in the colony vault.” She points at the small building on the north face of the miniature Eye of Goah complex. “Or Pieter, to be more precise.” A shadow crosses her face. “He’s alone, with three prisoners. One of them is the Inquisitor himself.”

“Where’s Janson Ledebøer?”

“He’s sitting here.” Her finger moves across the open space in front of Pieter’s position to a little Janson figure in full warrior uniform, except without a helmet. His doll-like form is crouched against the red-bricked wall behind one of the houses on the edge of the Forum. “Hiding in the shadows. He’s crying. Luckily, in silence.”

Elvira gives her a puzzled look.

“Long story,” Edda says. “I’m not sure he’d be of any use.”

“Hmm,” Elvira mutters. “And Solo?”

“Yes, they are our only real asset out there, I think.” She points at the forest east of the Forum. “Their prisoners are already secured in the woods and they’re on their way back to the Dinger Lane meeting point.” She gestures at a dark street south of the Forum. “They should be there in two minutes. We can send Marten with fresh instructions any time.”

“I’m just a wake minute away,” the freckled boy says, “sleeping nearby at the Boterman’s.” He extends a finger to an unremarkable house on the southern end of Dinger Lane, over which roof his own red-topped head—smiling like it’s a family picture—rotates slowly.

“So that would be us ten from Reserve, plus Solo’s six.”

Elvira throws a casual nod in Marten's direction. "Against thirteen awesome Fist warriors."

"Fifteen," Edda says with another gesture at the Eye of Goah complex. "There's also these two guarding our cells."

"Gets better and better." Her face contorts like she's tasting something bitter. "What are our chances, really, Juf Edda?"

"Does it matter?" Ambroos says before she can reply. "Or let me rephrase your question, Mom. What are our chances if you *don't* activate Reserve?"

Edda nods sourly. "There's that. But," she sighs, and sinks her head, "it's your call, Elder Abspoel. You know that Reserve has always been much more than just a plan B. You are our future, our legacy to the world."

"Generous water, yes. I know. But..." Elvira looks squarely at her son, and with a slight tremor in her voice she says, "I'm discovering that, confronted with the final choice, I might not be so *generous* after all."

"Mom..." Ambroos says, like he is going to admonish her, but then, eyes spilling existential fear, he lets his head sink in silence.

Edda looks Elvira in the eyes. "Fine," she says with a nod. "If we are doing this, then I insist on some additional safety measures. We need to partially offset the risks of losing it all, yeah?"

"I like safe," Elvira says.

"Okay, then." She raises a thumb. "First, as soon as you wake up, you will find a piece of cloth, whatever—a blanket, a tunic, yesterday's underwear—and wrap it around your head."

"Underwear, ookay... But that will cost precious time."

"A small price to pay for anonymity, if you end up having to flee and any of you make it back to safety."

"Okay, makes sense. Anything else?"

"Yeah, I know our chances are already, uh, not that great, and I hate to reduce them even further..."

“But...?”

“*But* you will remove from this operation two of your strongest Walkers. They’ll remain home and safe.”

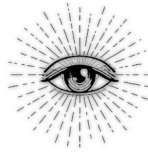
“*Two*? Whoa, you are blowing twenty percent of my capacity!”

“I know. And I’m sorry. But if things really go awry, we’ll want to die with a glimmer of hope.”

“That word again,” Willem mutters.

“I know, Dad. I know.”

## NINETEEN



### Macabre Dance

---

“Forty-two,” Marten whispers to the man in full warrior uniform sitting tensely by the door

“Marten!” Pieter stands, raises the helmet visor and waves Marten to the door. “Inside. Quick.”

The Inquisitor and his two warriors—squatting on the corner floor, tied to a solid-looking pipe—stare at the panting freckled young man with pointed interest. Their mouths are gagged, but their gazes seem amused.

“Thank Goah, you are finally here,” Pieter says. “One more minute and I think I would’ve just run away, leaving these three bastards here alone.”

“Thank Goah you didn’t, Elder Ledebøer. Our instructions are to stay put. We’re officially bait now. We gotta lure the warriors—force them out of cover into the open Forum. Solo and Reserve are gonna—”

“*Reserve?! How—!*”

“Long story, mensa,” Marten says, raising an apologetic hand. “They’re gonna envelop the fuckers from all sides. Bam!” He slams his hands together, as if catching a fly.

“Okay, so what are we supposed to do? Take the Inquisitor

out on the street, and wave him under the light, like we're fishing salmon?"

"Yes," Marten replies with a broad smile. "That is a *good* idea."

"Yeah, right?" Pieter scoffs, his eyes flinching over to the smirking Inquisitor. "What can possibly go wrong?"

---

"They're marching down the Narrow Way," Gotthard says with undisguised agitation to Edda, who floats with a similarly edgy expression beside him. Gotthard lifts a blue, semitransparent arm towards the western—the main—entry into the Forum. "Any second now."

High over the roofs, their point of view covers with a swing of the neck the whole theater of operations: the open expanse of what is the Forum of Lunteren, the Eye of Goah complex on its eastern edge, by the woods, and all the surrounding houses and structures. Any seasoned battle general would happily exchange their best battalion—if not a kidney—for this grandiose strategic perspective. The all-encompassing shadowless sharpness of the Second Wake makes every detail stand out with pristine clarity: every brick, every leaf, every tile, and—above all—every human, their unmistakable blue halos shining like screams in the night as they rush into position.

"See there?" Gotthard says, swinging a finger along the elegant houses bordering the northern edge of the Forum. There are humans there, a string of eight separated people—a lone individual every fifty yards—each hiding behind a bush or a wall, each shimmering fiercely blue. They're still and silent, like spiders waiting for their prey. "Reserve is in position."

"Good," Edda says. "They made it in time, Thank Goah. And Solo is almost in position, too." She gestures at the other side of the Forum, where five blue haloed figures are taking a

similar distribution—albeit leaving a broader separation between individuals—along the southern edge.

“Barracks still silent,” Gotthard says, raising a nervous finger at the elongated building neighboring the colony vault. “If the warriors inside join the fight before we can finish the Hostile Five, then,” he clenches his jaw at the thought, “checkmate.”

“That’s beyond our control now,” Edda says, matter-of-factly. “We can only hope Goah is really on our side.” She turns to Gotthard. “Any news from Janson?”

Gotthard snorts, an expression of disgust crossing his face. “That’s him, over there,” he points a finger at the farthest figure on the Forum’s northern side, right opposite the colony vault, “Whimpering like a baby, the little traitor. Elder Abspoel tried to convince him to join the fight, following your instructions, but he wouldn’t get his shit together. So pathetic. But what can you expect from a treacherous rat... There!” He suddenly points with his finger to their right, where the Forum joins the rest of the colony. “Hostile Five!”

Five large men—side by side in battle formation—march into the Forum from the west, as expected, helmets down and machine guns ready in their arms. The man in the middle—the largest, Noseless—raises a fist and they all stop at once. The two men on both ends drop to their knees and turn outward and partially backwards, scanning the surroundings with lifted weapons.

Noseless grabs a thick, metallic tube from his belt, and—with a shake of the hand—extends it into a spyglass. From the distance, it is hard to make out his expression as he peeks through it. Not even his misshapen, scarred face can be discerned from up here. But it is clear what he’s looking at.

Edda and Gotthard turn their heads left at the same time.

The entrance to the colony vault is bustling with activity. There are five men in the open, right out the door. Two of

them are standing, one tall and broad, the other small and thin: Pieter and Marten. They are holding guns to the heads of the other three men, who are on their knees, with their hands tied behind their backs.

Pieter harshly pulls one of them up to his feet: the smaller, white-robed one—the Inquisitor. With somehow exaggerated gesticulation, Pieter pushes the man around, making him stagger. They are talking, yelling. It must be loud, but from up here in the air, it is still too far to make out the words. The man finally falls on his side, roughly, and Pieter kicks him. Not a very convincing kick, Ximena thinks. He then grabs the curled-up figure with brutal strength and pulls him up to his feet again. And the show begins anew.

Edda and Gotthard turn their heads right at the same time.

Noseless is watching through the spyglass, his posture eerily still for a long while. From the distance, one can only wonder what might be crossing his mind.

He then packs the spyglass away on his belt with a casual move, and begins to turn his head around—carefully, intentionally—scanning the deep-night darkness of the open Forum in utter silence.

“Come on, asshole,” Gotthard says, gazing at him. “What are you waiting for, Goah’s fucking Mercy?! Go save your brother!”

Edda says nothing, her eyes locked on the large warrior the entire time. As Noseless finally lifts his chin and takes his weapon back into his arms, Edda throws a jittery glance at the whole theater of operations, like a general that has already committed their forces to fate. “Here we go,” she mutters between her teeth.

Noseless barks an order, and his men react instantly. With two efficient swipes of their hands, each warrior removes the bayonet knife from their gun’s barrel, and screws in its place some sort of cylindrical object.



“Headlights,” Edda says.

“How can you tell? Can’t see the beams.”

Light is everywhere in the Second Wake, but it is an illumination from *within*, a luminescence that impregnates everything with vivid clarity. Whatever its nature, it is not the light Ximena’s eyes are used to. There are no First Wake photons at work here, or if there are, they are invisible to the senses of the Traverse.

“Common sense,” Edda says. “See? Just look at them.”

The five warriors stay in place while they sweep their guns side to side, systematically scanning their surroundings.

And they are taking their time.

“It’s as if they knew there’s something fishy going on,” Edda whispers, as if afraid of the warriors hearing her traversing voice up here.

“That flat-face asshole has a good nose,” Gotthard says. “I’ll give him that.”

Noseless barks a sudden, curt order, and the group immediately splits in two. They are on the move; legs flexed, guns ready.

“What are they...?” Edda mutters, a crease of worry tightening her brow.

The left group—the three men led by Noseless himself—turns sharply, and runs north, away from the open space of the Forum and into the neighboring alleys. The right group—the two other warriors—is running in the opposite direction with raised machine guns.

“What the fuck?!” Gotthard says, as he and Edda watch with growing dismay.

The warriors move with remarkable efficiency—light-footed and virtually silent for armored men of such size and carrying such heavy gear.

Edda and Gotthard turn their heads to follow the steps of

Noseless's group, which are the first to reach the edge of the Forum.

"The paranoid fucker isn't going to bite, is he?" Gotthard says, eyes aghast.

As the three warriors enter the first line of buildings, they turn sharply east—parallel to the Forum—and begin to trot in loose formation along the narrow service alley that neighbors all the frontline houses' backyards.

Yes, the same alley and backyards along which a loose string of ambushing Reserve conspirators are hiding, each crouching alone in their assigned position, each waiting in vain for the arrival of five loud warriors stumbling across the open Forum, each totally blind to the warrior's surprise maneuver.

"I think they're combing the back alleys!" Edda says, a notch louder. "Oh, Goah, look! They are going to bump into Reserve's flank."

"Clever bastard," Gotthard mutters, and throws a glimpse at the southern edge of the Forum. "Fuck. Same's coming at Solo," he says, his voice shaking. As he returns his attention back to the three marching warriors, they are quickly closing on the first oblivious Reserve conspirator. Gotthard points at the squatting man. "Who's that?"

Edda squints. It's too far to make out the features clearly. "Elder Velderman, I think." Her voice is faltering.

"Shit, shit, shit! Not looking good, dowry sister."

She opens her mouth as if to reply, but just stares on at the unfolding events with horrified dread, utterly powerless, unable to steer her eyes away.

Noseless's squad—the three bulky blue halos barely visible behind walls and fences—rush on, virtually silent, mere yards away now from Elder Velderman's crouched figure, who, still facing the wrong direction, seems pitifully unaware of what's coming at him.

"Goah's Mercy..." Edda's eyes widen. Even Ximena's

breathing has quickened, and must close her hands into fists to stop them from trembling.

Elder Velderman makes a sudden move, probably as he sees the flashlights leaping on him.

From this distance and height, Ximena can barely see what is really going on, even with the pure sighting of the Second Wake.

Elder Velderman's haloed shape stands abruptly and then appears to freeze, like a deer caught in the headlights of an approaching car—no, not a car: a goahdamn eighteen-wheeler intercontinental truck.

The eerie silence of the night shatters as three machine guns begin to scream hard death at once. Ximena jumps in her seat and involuntarily takes hold of Mark's arm, eyes fixed on the horrifying spectacle.

Edda observes in sheer horror, her hands over her mouth, as Elder Velderman's silhouette seems to leap in a desperate attempt to escape.

He begins to run.

He stumbles.

And then his shape shakes in the macabre dance of lead, and continues to do so even as he collapses.

"Fucking Mercy..." Gotthard watches in tears like Babi had just smashed Earth—or like there's nothing else he can do to avoid it.

The ear-deafening rattle of the machine guns continues briefly, but the sparkling blue halo of Elder Velderman has long vanished. His body is now just one more gray-green object in the landscape, like the trash bin beside him.

The three warriors do not linger. They leap over the corpse and are on the move again, a notch slower, dead straight towards the next conspirator on the line—a woman standing and squinting towards the source of the commotion a mere fifty yards away.

“Redeemed Haack,” Edda says between whimpers. “Haven’t you heard the shooting, Goah’s Mercy?! Flee!”

Gotthard and Edda turn their heads south at the sudden burst of machine gun fire coming from that direction.

“Solo...” Edda mutters. “No.”

Ximena looks just as the attack on the first Solo team member begins, and this one is firing back—with a pathetic handgun, Goah’s Mercy!—albeit for just a fraction of a second.

The small body drops, blue halo fading before it even hits the ground.

“Woman van Kley...” Gotthard says, dragging every word, forehead clenched with pain, jaws clutched in terror.

“Louisa...” Edda whispers the name.

At this point, mayhem has already taken hold of the neat line of ambushing conspirators. From Ximena’s privileged viewpoint, they look like ants scattering in wild disarray under a stomping boot. Everybody is on the move, spilling away into the dark guts of Lunteren. Screams of confusion and panic reach their ears. One particular word—*abort!*—resonates repeatedly across the Forum.

Too late for Redeemed Haak. She doesn’t even see them coming. Noseless’s squad—relentlessly moving east along the alley—intercepts her fleeing attempt from behind.

Edda turns her gaze away and shuts her eyes.

Gotthard also jerks his head, as if about to look away, but then he steels himself and looks squarely at the gruesome scene, eyes mad and wet, like he refuses to let the sister of his friend—who has risked her life to free them all—die alone, like a barbarian. But she does, when a fresh rattle of fire violently shakes her young life out of her body.

Gotthard sobs, eyes shut, in silence.

“It’s over,” Edda says between whimpers. “Plan B is over.”

“It’s over...” Gotthard mutters, eyes closed.

“Survivors are retreating to the meeting point,” Edda gestures at the scattering conspirators, moving through the alleys north and south of the Forum. “Will take some time to regroup.”

“*Retreating?*” He snorts. “They’re running for their lives, Edda! Like rats! It’s hopeless. It always has been and we’re nothing but fools to have believed otherwise.”

“Don’t be so harsh. There’s still—”

“Are you fucking blind?! Look at us, Goah’s fucking Mercy! A bunch of children trying to play war with warriors that eat barbarians for breakfast. It’s just... *pathetic*.” He then raises a finger at the elongated building next to the colony vault. “And if the Inquisitor’s alarm hasn’t woken those eight bastards yet, all this firefight sure as Dem will. Edda, it is *really* over. At least, for us.”

Edda shakes her head, lips parted, but says nothing. Her eyes follow the three warriors combing the back alley of the Forum’s north edge. As they rush farther east, nobody crosses their path anymore. The surviving Reserve conspirators are long gone—each isolated and dashing into the back alleys of the colony in swift and silent moves, like their training is finally returning to their limbs.

“I’m going down there,” she says, and with no visible effort her translucent body plunges at a dazzling speed, faster than a diving hawk.

“Edda!” Gotthard looks down, confused, but then he throws himself behind her.

The point of view of the auditorium scene dives together with Gotthard, forcing Ximena to shut her eyes for a moment from the sudden rush of vertigo. The smell of gunpowder, streets and vegetation—even more vivid than in the First Wake—mixes in her nostrils with swift violence. An instant later, the scene has closed up on Noseless and his two flanking companions, marching in disciplined rhythm, machine guns at

the ready. They are breathing heavily, but steadily, their pace efficient and relentless. Bricked houses pass left and right, with their sleepy backyards, children's sandboxes and wintered vegetable gardens. Edda and Gotthard are sliding along a few yards behind the three men, their feet floating inches over the ground.

And then they reach the edge of the Forum.

A gesture of Noseless stops the warriors in their tracks, just a step away from the open space. Silent as cheetahs, they turn off their flashlights, drop to their knees, and observe.

Only a hundred yards of esplanade separates them from a building dead ahead: the colony vault.

"Piet..." Edda whispers, eyes aghast at the sight of the warriors' expressions as they scan their objective. So quiet. So centered. So *predatory*.

Pieter is standing in full armored uniform just outside the vault entrance, his tense features visible through the transparent helmet visor. He is facing away from them, as if scanning the western shadows of the Forum, where the last shots were heard. Marten, beside him, is awkwardly holding a handgun and looking aimlessly around. Kneeling on the ground nearby, hands tied behind their backs, the two stripped-down warriors and the white-robed Inquisitor observe their confused stance with a smirk.

"Who's that?" Gotthard points at a blue-haloed figure sitting not far away from Noseless and his men, crouching behind a low fence to their left.

Gotthard and Edda slide towards the neighboring house until they can peek over the fence.

"Janson Ledebøer..." Gotthard hisses between his teeth, staring at the young man like he had just discovered a hair in his soup.

Janson's face is contracted with fear, eyes wet, his breathing heavy and irregular.

Edda gets closer to him and says softly. “Janson, we need you.”

The young man shuts his eyes and begins to violently shake his head, exhaling loudly with every breath. He seems to Ximena uselessly shellshocked.

Luckily, the three warriors are too far to hear him. Their full attention is being claimed by Pieter alone. Noseless whispers something: a word—too low to be picked up by ears other than his two flanking companions. Then, in perfect coordination, legs still flexed, they step onto the esplanade.

And they split.

Noseless walks straight on, his moves slow and careful, intentional, machine gun aimed squarely at Pieter, while the other two warriors dash away, one left, the other right, both tracing a wider curve around their prey.

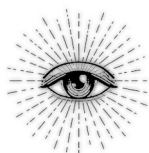
“Who’s there?!” Pieter says, sweeping his own machine gun at the surrounding darkness.

Edda covers her mouth with her fist as the three warriors close on Pieter, pinning him down from three sides simultaneously, their elegant, practiced assault as hushed as the rustle of wind through leaves.

“I said, who’s—?!”

The warriors open fire at once.

## TWENTY



### Ledeboer

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The gunfire bites into Pieter's armored body from three sides simultaneously, the piercing blasts echoing like a train of thunder across the Forum.

Edda's shrieking scream lasts for as long as Pieter's macabre dance—too long, thinks Ximena, a fist in her mouth.

Too long.

Gotthard's horrified eyes remain glued on Pieter the entire time, as if his gaze—his will—could protect him from such brutal physical harm.

But Pieter finally staggers and collapses on his back.

"Pieter!" Marten's eleven-year-old voice cracks with horror. He reaches out with his left hand at the place where Pieter fell. His legs are shaking like they want to move, but cannot.

The three warriors never stop moving. Not even while firing. They push on their relentless approach, and now they are upon the group.

The three tied prisoners are lying flat against the ground, their eyes beaming with anticipation. Pieter groans beside them, and shakes a coarse, wet cough under his helmet.



Marten keeps staring at his fallen leader, paralyzed, a gun forgotten in his right hand.

The last breaths of the redhead, freckled boy, are quick, terrified pants.

The warriors raise their guns and fire three deadly bursts that shatter his unprotected, small body. His hood and belly explode with gore at once. His soul embraces Goah before his immature body has even time to embrace the ground.

Edda screams again, and her translucent halo begins to scintillate wild shades of blue, unstable, throbbing like a threatened squid.

Gotthard—like Ximena—is paralyzed by the scene, unable to turn away from the violence, morbidly gripped by the death of hope.

“Clear!” Noseless cries, and the three warriors pace among the five bodies, weapons loose on their arms like they own the Forum. Which they now do. Noseless removes the Inquisitor’s gag and asks, “Ya okay, Arch?”

The Inquisitor laughs and begins to get on his feet, his hands restrained on his back. “Well done, John.”

Noseless shrugs. “Just doin’ ma duty.”

“Those *demons*,” the Inquisitor seems to spit as he says the word, “were using us to bait you into a trap.”

“No shit,” Noseless chuckles, as he takes a knife out and begins to free the hands of the Inquisitor and the other two restrained warriors. “They alm’st waved a red cape, the noobs.”

“Did you get them all?” the Inquisitor asks, rubbing his wrists.

“No, ‘st neutralized the threat.” He shrugs his huge shoulders. “Nothin’ to worry ’bout, Arch. They’re weak. They’ve no organizati’n, no coordinati’n, no leadership. Soon we hit ‘em, they crumbled like dust, and fled like rats, the cowards.”

“Naturally. Demons are foul creatures of darkness and filth. They can’t bear the righteous shine of Goah’s Fist.” The Inquisitor turns his head to look at the bricked houses at the edge of the Forum. “Tomorrow, after the public cleansing, we’ll hunt them down, one by one. It will be grandiose, John. Right here, in the Forum of this goahforsaken dependency,” he raises his finger at the western expanse, eyes lost in the thought, a smile curving his dry lips, “we shall set up an array of fires in the shape of aw’s Eye. Can you see it already? A glorious evening of purifying fire to blaze their saved souls into aw’s Mercy.” He makes a quick gesture on his chest. “Goah is my witness.”

Noseless walks to Pieter’s writhing body, takes his helmet off and throws it to the side.

Pieter coughs a thick clot of snot and blood. Ximena flinches at the sight of his eyes moving wildly around, unfocused, confused. In excruciating pain. In fear—in *certainty*—of death.

Noseless raises his weapon with a casual move and, with a deafening blast, shoots Pieter point blank in the face. His head implodes with a final jerk of the limbs.

Ximena and most students gasp as one as Gotthard jolts. He shuts his eyes in a long cringe of pain, his lips moving silently, like he is muttering a prayer.

When he opens his eyes and turns to Edda, he extends a hand, as if wanting to offer comfort, or as if he *needed* that comfort himself, but Edda—her halo flickering in convulsing waves—simply vanishes.

Gotthard, staring at the empty space where Edda has just been, begins to take quick and deep gulps of air, like a hyperventilating death-row prisoner at the end of the path. He looks at the warriors, moving leisurely about and in full control. Then, like a drowning man reaching up to the receding surface, he turns his eyes over to the houses bordering the

Forum, and mutters, “You’re everything humankind has got left.” He takes a deep breath, full of icy despair. “May Goah have Mercy on our souls...”

Ximena follows the direction of his gaze—and she gasps anew.

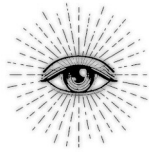
Janson is on his knees, a mere hundred yards away, and is staring at his dead brother with a disturbingly blank expression.

He is breathing quickly.

Too quickly.

Ximena covers her mouth and sheds a tear of pity. Nobody deserves to watch their dearest person on Earth die like that. Nobody.

Janson bends forward in a sudden, violent spasm and, with both hands on the ground, begins to vomit in furious shakes.



## Tactical Supremacy

“Ah, here you are!”

The urgent whisper makes Gotthard flinch. He turns around to see Elvira Abspoel reaching out and grabbing Janson firmly by the armored shoulders.

Janson—still shrunk in himself, trembling, and fiercely embracing his knees—doesn’t react to her insistent shakes. He sobs on, like she doesn’t exist—like the universe doesn’t exist.

“Get out of there. They might see you. Come!”

Gotthard raises his head to follow her glance to the low building across the esplanade. The Inquisitor is talking to Noseless, his words lost in the distance, while another warrior—one of the two that just arrived from their hit on Solo—is pulling the corpses by the arms and piling them against the wall. The rest are out of sight, inside the vault.

“Elder Ledebøer—Goah’s Mercy!—come now!”

She pulls insistently on his arm—the weight of her small, stocky body unable to move the massive, collapsed young man.

She sighs in frustration and lets go of him. “The others are back at the alley. We need you, Man Ledebøer!” Her whisper becomes more demanding. “We *really* need you, and

I won't take *no* for an answer. Come with me, Goah's Mercy!"

Janson's wet eyes resemble those of a blind man, gazing at something beyond the perception of the seeing. His body rocks back and forth, eyes widened in mad withdrawal.

"No time for this," Elvira mutters. She kneels and, with all the force her fleshy arms can muster, drives the palm of her right hand across his face.

The slap makes him jolt, eyes jumping at her in confusion.

Elvira grabs his broad chin with her small hand and pulls his head up until her glare meets his eyes. "Your brother is with Goah now. Tell me, Man Ledebøer, what did he die for?"

Janson blinks, his eyes finally focusing on Elvira's.

"What did your brother die for, Man Ledebøer?!"

---

"Ah, the traitor finally decided to join us." The tall, blonde woman glowers at Janson, arms crossed across her chest. "What an honor! We're not worthy, Elder Ledebøer. We thank you *so, so* much!"

The look of the other two men and two women by her side is not filled with much more love. The entire group is hiding behind the backyard of a particularly large house adjacent to the Forum, still breathing too quickly, and sweating like they have just run for their lives. Which, Ximena supposes, is quite literally what has happened.

"Enough, Sofie," Elvira says.

"The fucking traitor's got the *lives* of Lieke and Ron in his conscience! We can't—!"

"Stop it!" Elvira glares furiously at Sofie. "Their lives are on *my* conscience, and my conscience *alone*. And you are going to stop this nonsense at once. All of you!" She looks into the eyes of each remaining member of her team before she

continues. “This is not the moment to accuse—nor mourn. We have a mission to complete, remember? Everything—*everybody*—is counting on us!”

Without waiting for a reply, she turns to Janson while sweeping a hand at the others. “So here you are, Elder Ledeboer. This is your army now.”

“At least what’s left of it,” Sofie mutters, looking away.

Elvira ignores her. She is staring at Janson with calm eyes. “Your instructions, commander?”

Ximena can hear Gotthard’s thoughts through the psych-link, as he gapes at the woman. Did she just ask this broken man—this treacherous ruin—for *instructions*? Did she just call him: *commander*?

And, judging by Janson’s expression, he himself seems baffled. “M- My instructions?”

Elvira rolls her eyes and folds her arms across her chest. “Juf Edda was very specific.”

As if summoned by her spoken name, Edda appears in a flash of blue next to Gotthard, panting. “Pure sin!” She blinks with wet, shocked eyes, and looks hastily around, as if reorienting herself. “Pure sin!”

Ximena feels Gotthard’s sudden rush of relief at Edda’s arrival, but the psych-link quickly overflows with renewed dread. There’s *nothing* they can do anymore. Their cleansing in the morning is unavoidable. It is truly over. Ximena exhales at the sense of overwhelming fear. *Terror* is a better word. But not terror of death, Ximena realizes. To her surprise, Gotthard is *not* afraid of dying. He is not even afraid of the prolonged agony of the inquisition’s fire. It is the future that he laments, a future that dies today with him. In the end, the universe proved too savage to permit a speck of humanity to spoil its pristine vastness.

“Pure sin,” Janson mutters, raising his chin.

Sofie snorts. “To put it mildly.”

“Your instructions, *commander?*” Elvira repeats, looking pointedly at Janson.

“Edda?” Janson blinks, and begins to look around, pain finally emerging across his face. “Edda?! He’s dead, Edda!” He says between sobs. “He’s dead!”

Sofie is about to say something, but a harsh gesture from Elvira stops her in her tracks.

Edda sighs, slides towards him, and reaches out, as if to put a hand on his shoulder. “I know. I’m so sorry, Janson. I’m so sorry.”

“I- I told the Inquisitor about you and Aline.”

“I know, Janson. Intel was in the depot when he told Pieter.”

“He- He’s dead. Piet’s dead, Edda. Because of me.” He exhales loudly and shuts his eyes. “And Aline and you are next.”

“Piet died because he was killed by aw’s Fist, Janson! Despite all you did to keep him safe, they killed him!”

“Oh, Goah!” He begins to sob, snot and tears mixing on his face.

“Janson, what you did... It was an act of love and fear, not hate. There’s a world of difference. You are a good man, Janson Ledeboer. I know you are. You saved me in Oosterbeek, remember? And yeah, you fucked it up. But I forgive you. And now, you are going to save me again. And Aline and the others, too.”

He weeps noisily. “Piet! He- He said...”

Elvira slaps him anew on the face with all the might and frustration she can summon.

Janson puts a hand on his cheek and looks at her, his expression distorted with grief. “I- I don’t understand, Elder Abspoel! What do you want from me?!”

“To fucking take command, Goah’s Mercy!” Elvira shouts in his face. “Or we fucking die!”

“C- Command?”

“Juf Edda’s crazy plan C.” Elvira sighs. “I must admit that I’m not very fond of the idea of following a...” Elvira clears her throat. “But Juf Edda was very specific. She said,” Elvira takes his chin in her right hand, and looks up straight into his dumbstruck eyes, “if all goes to hell, Elder Ledebøer is to take command.”

“You are,” Edda whispers in Janson’s ear.

“Me?!”

“Yes, Goah’s Mercy!” Elvira shouts in his face. “Please, please! React!”

Edda’s voice is calm, soothing—almost tender. “You’re special, Janson. Only you can hear the whispers of the Second Wake. And I swear to Goah, I can whisper *very* loudly. I’ll tell you what to say, what to do; and when to do it, yeah? Piece of cake.”

*What the fuck?!* Gotthard’s thoughts mix with Ximena’s own in bewildered harmony.

Janson takes a deep breath, wipes his face with his right sleeve, and his body seems to relax at once, as if surrendering his will to Edda’s would also purge his grief—and his sin. His expression turns blank, almost robotic.

“Look at your new team,” Edda whispers. “Look each of them in the eyes.”

He takes a step back away from Elvira and lets his eyes slowly scan the rest of her team. *His* team.

“Speak,” Edda says. “Situational awareness.”

“Situational awareness,” Janson says in a quiet, monotonous tone, repeating word by word Edda’s stream of instructions. “The status at the vault is clear. Our assets, Elder Abspoel?”

“Uh,” Elvira is still looking at him with a frown. She clears her throat. “Well, this is it,” she throws a hand at the other



conspirators. “We’ve still got our weapons—unused.” She grimaces, as if tasting something bitter.

Edda takes another look at Elvira, Sofie and her other four members—a very *intentional* look. Her eyes take in their unprotected, hooded outfits, their stolen machine guns, their knives, flashlights and other equipment hanging from their belts. She finally turns to Janson and whispers...

“Radio?” Janson asks, not a trace of emotion in his question. “Communication?”

Elvira shakes her head. “No, we didn’t—”

“Flares?”

“Uh, I think we’ve got some?” she says, turning a quizzical gaze at Sofie.

“Two,” the tall girl says. “The handheld type we always used during the military month.”

“Grenades?”

“Not me,” Elvira says, and looks at the other five. “Anybody?”

“I got one,” Sofie says. “Standard type, also right out of the military month.”

“Explosive or smoke?” Janson asks without even looking at her.

“Er, it’s a smoke grenade, I’m afraid. I thought maybe if we needed to hide and—”

“Solo?” He turns his attention back to Elvira.

“What?”

“Team Solo. Status?”

“Uh, well, we don’t know... er, unknown,” Elvira replies like a nervous student standing in class at the mercy of the Juf. “If anybody survived the attack, they should be arriving at the meeting point any minute now.” She waves a finger northwards.

“Your cloak, Elder Abspoel. I need it.”

Elvira stares at him for a few seconds, squinting like she

didn't understand his words. Then she unclasps her cloak and hands it over to him slowly, as if unsure. He takes it, shoves the black, hooded cloak over his back and fastens it in place.

Then Janson turns and walks to Sofie. He extends a hand, palm up.

"Smoke grenade and flare."

Sofie frowns at him, but then retrieves both objects from under her cloak, and gives them to him.

"Elder Abspoel," Janson says, turning towards Elvira, "move north to the meeting point and wait there until you hear a shot. When you do, start counting slowly to three... Wait, no." He keeps his eyes fixed on Elvira for a moment of silence. "Make that *five*. And then you shoot up in the air. Then you count to five again, you shoot again, count, shoot, and so on. Keep the rhythm. Every five seconds. Like a clock, yeah?"

"Uh, yes, but why—?"

"No time. If you don't do what I tell you—exactly how I tell you—your son dies, yeah?" His tone is neutral, like a man small-talking about the weather.

Elvira nods at him twice, eyes widened in focused anxiety.

Gotthard is gaping at Edda and Janson in awe, the one whispering words, the other speaking them with unfiltered automatism. The glimmer of warmth in his guts runs a chill up Ximena's spine as she recognizes the feeling: it is hope—dark, treacherous hope.

"When Solo arrives," Janson continues, "you take command and lead them straight to the barracks. Make them form a semicircle fifty yards from the door and windows. If anybody tries to leave the building, use suppressing fire to keep them in."

"And, uh..." Elvira is panting and blinking like Janson's words flow quicker than her own thoughts can cope with. "If- If they're already out, I mean, when we arrive?"

"Then you hide in the woods. Whatever happens, Elder

Abspoel, you make sure to survive the cleansing and spread the word, yeah?”

“But, uh, what if they—?”

“No time. The rest is up to you. Go now.”

Elvira turns to run, but then, in a wild impulse, she takes Janson by the arm like a pleading warrior to his God of War. “Are we going to make it, Elder Ledeboer? Is my son going to live?!”

Janson looks her in the eyes, and says, “Yes.”

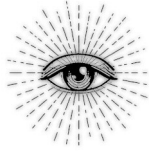
“But there are seven warriors in the vault! Plus those in the barracks! And they’re real killers, Goah’s Mercy! Armed to the teeth! We’re just—”

“They don’t have a chance, Elder Abspoel,” Janson says. “We still have a brief window of tactical supremacy. You do your part, we do ours, and your son will be in your arms within the hour. Now go. And remember, wait for a shot, then count to five, shoot, count to five, shoot.”

She goes on her toes, gives him a quick kiss on the cheek, and with a curt bow to the rest of her team, leaves, trotting through a small gap in the wall.

When she disappears from view, everybody turns their heads back to Janson, their faces beaming, energized—*eager*.

“The enemy is momentarily distracted,” Janson says, his expression as blank as a mask, his voice as bland as the air before a storm. “But they are also reorganizing. And when they’re done, they’ll be invincible. We have less than a minute to assault the position of a superior force, so listen carefully.”



## Shh... Everything Will Be Alright

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**F**loating in midair, higher than the nearby roofs that flank the Forum, Gotthard's ghostly body watches the Forum esplanade with the intensity of a man that *knows* with the sharp clarity of reason that, whatever happens next, determines whether he will ever see his baby son again.

The dream sensorial has rendered Gotthard so close to Ximena and melded his Second Wake perspective so perfectly into the amphitheater benches that it seems to her almost like she is floating next to him—the ghost of a ghost. This man and her, they are one and the same, she realizes, as she feels the connection of the human tribe, bridging across time with fierce solidarity, like a century is but a second, together in the clutches of the same fate. A fate that followed directly from the events in this place and time.

And that connection grows stronger with the intimate realization that Gotthard—and his baby son—are both her elder, part of an uninterrupted chain of love and upbringing that fuses their destinies together into blood steel.

Ximena exhales slowly and lets her dream senses embrace the setting: the Forum of Lunteren in the early

hours of the 6th of February 2400. Her hair stands on end as she feels the weight of history finally reaching the breaking point, like two continent-sized tectonic plates rubbing against each other with unimaginable pressure, about to burst with unpredictable violence; the fate of mountains and trenches in the balance, Earth itself holding its breath.

The Traverse hides nothing from her eyes. Not from this vantage point. Her eyes fall immediately on the four warriors outside the colony vault door, two of them leisurely balancing on the outside chairs, and the other two pacing aimlessly, machine guns hanging loosely from their shoulders. The Inquisitor, Noseless and the two liberated guards have entered the building a moment ago and remain out of sight even to her enhanced senses. There is a lamp over the door, but Ximena has no need for something as crude and limited as light; all warriors shine blue, each halo enhancing their every move against the relative dullness of the inanimate background and the two corpses piled against the wall.

Nothing but empty flatness surrounds the vault entrance—usually. But now six cloaked figures spread flat against the ground in a broad semicircle around the small building. They don't move. They barely dare to breathe. With no more cover than the fragile darkness of the First Wake, the blue glow of their halos jump to Ximena's eyes like six fat spiders crossing a living room at once, each crawling from a different angle, all converging on the same hapless insect. Their machine guns are laid down in front of them, fingers on trigger, aimed squarely at the warriors.

To Ximena's untrained eyes, the conspirators' semicircle appears vulnerable, improbably fragile against the wall of warriors in full combat gear at its vortex; each exposed as a lone, blue dazzle surrounded by the empty, bricked vastness of the Forum; each pressed against the ground like an insect

trying to remain undetected in the desperate stillness of darkness.

Ximena can recognize Sofie on the far left, at the eastern end of the Forum, close to the woods, staring at her prey over her machine gun across two hundred yards of exposed esplanade. At the other end of the formation, deep amid the western expanse of the Forum, she cannot quite recognize the hooded man that lies in symmetrical opposition to her. He seems unfocused though, sneaking nervous glances at the elongated building nearby—the barracks—door and windows still ominously shut.

Janson—his unmistakably large body right below her, and as still and tense as a lion about to leap—has taken the most central position, the closest to the vault. He is holding a handgun, not a machine gun.

And he is not alone.

Edda's refulgent blue body slides right beside him, and she is peering intently at the bored-looking warriors, and very specifically at the gaping door next to them. She tilts her head to the right, to the barracks building, but it is just an instant—a powerless glance. She returns her attention back to her primary objective and whispers something to Janson. He nods almost imperceptibly and keeps breathing with the slow, controlled rhythm of the hunter.

Something moves at the door, attracting Janson's—and Ximena's—attention at once.

A shape. Somebody is coming out.

Janson does not hesitate. He raises his gun and fires a single shot into the night sky.

The four warriors react with instant reflexes, springing into action as if triggered by an adrenaline injection.

The two sitting warriors are on their feet, and the other two have dropped to their knees. With machine guns already in their arms and extended aggressively, they scan the

darkness around Janson. Or rather, the darkness where Janson *used* to be when he took the shot. He has since rolled over a few yards to the left, the faint rustle of his cloak rubbing against the ground concealed by the urgent scramble of the warriors.

“Status!” Noseless shouts. He is the one that just emerged from the door, and he is now in full combat stance. Two more warriors hasten out of the building, weapons raised and uniforms missing some small protective plates around their arms and legs. Ximena recognizes the two hapless warriors that were still tied to a pipeline a few minutes ago.

“Single shot,” replies a short and stocky warrior. “North. Very close.”

“How close?” Noseless kneels and sweeps his weapon left and right, as if trying to shoo the darkness away with the barrel.

“Nat know. Very close.”

“Light yar billies up, lads!”

The seven armored figures turn on the flashlights attached to the barrels with a swift gesture and point back into the darkness.

A surge of adrenaline freezes Ximena for a second as she realizes that the flashlight beams—invisible to her in the Traverse—must be sweeping over the prone figure of Janson, not even a hundred yards away. But, to her relief, they do not see him. Perhaps because the beams are too weak in the still considerable distance, or because Janson has wrapped himself completely inside the black cloak, even the hood over his face; unable to see, but—crucially—unable to be seen.

A gunshot somewhere behind Ximena’s back echoes like a hammer across the Forum and makes some of her fellow students jump with shrill gasps.

Noseless recoils at the unexpected noise, and stays still for a second, squinting in the direction the shot came from. He turns

his helmet at the short warrior. “That’s nat close,” he says in a reproving tone. “It’s off range—deep in the alleys.”

“No, John. That’s nat the—”

Another shot interrupts the warrior: the same single shot again, echoing once more along the streets north of the Forum.

Noseless stands, weapon loose on his arm, and takes a few confident steps into the Forum, chin raised inquisitively at the source of the commotion.

As he separates from the six warriors, the five ambushing conspirators—all except Janson—shift their aim at once, and the five barrels turn to point directly at Noseless. Their movement is sudden and precise, and attracts Ximena’s attention like a growl in a cave. She even notices how Sofie moves her hooded head back and forth, rhythmically, as if listening to internal music.

Then—*again!*—the same shot breaks the silence, seemingly from the same place, somewhere beyond the reach of Noseless’s scanning eyes.

But this time, the shot does not reverberate alone.

Ximena gasps as the five aiming conspirators fire their machine guns at once. Each a single shot, and all at precisely that same instant: with the arrival of that third distant shot.

*Goah!* Events begin to unfold way too quickly across the entire field of operations for her to absorb in real-time. She leans forward, at the edge of her bench, trying to make sense of the moment.

In the next few seconds—as the scene explodes into violent action—she hastily tries to follow the chaos of the military engagement bursting furiously at the same time throughout the battlefield.

Her eyes flinch right down below her, where Janson is taking advantage of the commotion to take a careful peek out of his hood. And then, with swift determination, he pulls his weapon out from under the cloak to aim it squarely forward.



At the ready.

Ximena's eyes flicker over to the other five shooting conspirators as they begin rolling over themselves on the ground vigorously. Some roll right, others left. There is no discernible pattern, except that they all shift their positions. It appears from Ximena's elevated viewpoint like a bizarre, synchronized exercise—out of place in a gun battle. When they're done, panting slightly, their five barrels are aiming once again at the warriors.

At the ready.

But it is the thunderous cracking sound at the epicenter of the attack that makes Ximena's eyes widen with hungry anticipation. There, next to the colony vault, an invisible force seems to smash against Noseless' lower body from all sides. His body twists like an irresistible power had just pulled a rug from under his feet, and falls with a heavy thump on his back. His chest and leg armored plates have cracked in several places, exposing the bullet-proof fabric below.

"John!" the short warrior cries out at the writhing figure, and then, without hesitation, "Supressin' fire!"

The six warriors drop to their knees, and begin shooting bursts into the black, empty chasm surrounding them. Aimlessly. Blind.

Bullets are swallowed harmlessly by the darkness.

"Where are they?!" a warrior yells over the roaring fire.

"Nat know! Came from ev'rywhere, cannat pinpoint!" the short warrior replies.

A few yards outwards, on the ground, Noseless is grunting between heavy gasps and moving his limbs as if trying to regain some measure of control over his body.

And then, like a tower clock striking the next hour, a *fourth* shot blasts from beyond the Forum. And once again, it is joined by the fiery thunder of six simultaneous shots that smash against the chest, back and legs of the short warrior. His stocky

body jerks without control, and collapses between excruciating howls.

Four of the remaining warriors are turning their helmets and weapons hastily around, as if trying to make sense of the combined echo that engulfs them from every direction, but the fifth one shoots long bursts at a specific spot in the dark with skillful accuracy. He seems to have seen the isolated flash of a firing muzzle.

Ximena covers her mouth with her hand, while other students gasp in horror.

It is Janson's position.

The bursts of bullets miss their target—some by mere inches—since Janson, like the rest of his companions, has rolled his body off to the side as soon as he pulled the trigger.

“Go dark, fools!” Noseless screams from the ground, his voice drenched in agony.

A flick of the wrists of the warriors kills the flashlights attached to their weapons. One of them turns around and, without hesitation, shoots over the vault door. The lightbulb shatters in a dust of glass, engulfing the Forum in a blanket of First Wake pitch-black invisibility.

*Oh, no!* Ximena clenches her jaw as the warriors fall flat on the ground in combat-ready position. In the darkness, they are now virtually impossible to hit from a distance.

“Clever bastards,” Gotthard mutters, as silence returns to the esplanade below. A brittle, tense silence, accentuated by the contained groans of Noseless and the short warrior, their wrecked bodies writhing nearby.

The *fifth* shot arrives punctually, together with a fresh round of enveloping shots. Five this time, though. Janson did not take his shot. Following Edda's instructions, he is instead crawling forward, silently, closing in under the complete cover of his cloak.

The conspirators' bullets whistle harmlessly over the

helmets of the prone warriors, who raise their heads and return aimless bursts—short and futile—before settling back into edgy readiness, waiting for the unavoidable next round.

The routine repeats a *sixth* time: engulfing shots—five again—blind in the dark, an equally blind reply. And more nerve-gnawing waiting.

The warriors are pinned down, and a standoff has been reached. Both parties regard each other, each trying to find a way out of the deadlock.

“Goah’s Mercy!” Gotthard mutters, throwing an anxious glance at the nearby barracks building, so eerily quiet. “There’s no fucking time for this!”

*No time, indeed!* Ximena thinks, as she nervously turns her gaze over to Edda’s refulgent blue body, sliding prone an inch over the ground, her mouth throwing a flurry of urgent whispers in Janson’s ear. *Goah’s Mercy, Edda. Whatever you’re asking him to do, he better start doing sooner rather than later!*

With predictable accuracy, the *seventh* round of simultaneous gunshots shatters the Forum’s silence. But this time there *is* a difference.

*Oh, Goah!* Ximena grabs Mark’s arm in an impulse. And he is so absorbed with the unfolding events himself, he doesn’t seem to notice.

While the bullets keep the warriors’ heads duly nailed to the ground, something solid—a small cylindrical object—falls nearby, bounces slightly and then comes to a rest a few dozen yards away from them.

The object begins to hiss fiercely, and to spit brilliant sparks that cast long shadows behind every single body in the vicinity. Or so Ximena imagines it must look like in the First Wake. In the Traverse she can hear the intense, sizzling sound of the ignited flare, but the sparks and dazzling brightness remain invisible to her Second Wake eyes.

“Edda, Ledeboer!” Gotthard mutters with raised eyebrows,

the shadow of a smile twitching the tense edge of his lips. “Sexy teamwork, mensas.”

The warriors are all staring at the flare like a rabbit at an incoming truck. And Ximena sees it in their eyes at once: they know the deadlock is over.

“Retreat!” Noseless screams. “Secure the Inquisita!”

The five intact warriors jump to their feet and make a move towards Noseless and the short warrior, as if to carry them away from danger.

“No!” Noseless waves them off. “Inquisita!”

The disciplined men do not hesitate and obey. The last of them is just leaping through the door when the *eighth* blast hits the surrounding walls, littering it with holes and covering the ground with rubble.

*Eight shots in the air*, Ximena thinks, still in awe at what she has just witnessed. *Forty seconds of battle. Forty seconds that felt like forty lives.*

*And the battle is over.*

Janson stands and, followed closely by Edda’s blue translucent body, approaches the two fallen warriors with the gait of a man walking into a cemetery, gun hanging loosely in his hand. He kicks their dropped weapons farther away, raises his helmet visor and gives Noseless a soul-chilling glance. Ximena cannot read his expression, but something is out of place, something that she cannot quite pinpoint.

Edda whispers something at him. Janson nods, raises his right hand and waves it in a wide circle. At once, the six conspirators stand and begin trotting forward, weapons raised in a wary stance.

As they reach his position, Janson is standing next to the door, his back against the wall; safe from any shots that may be attempted from within. With a casual gesture, he leans in, shoves a small, round object through the gap, and then returns to the wall.

A few seconds pass in silence. Janson remains still like a statue, his look frozen forward.

A trickle of smoke begins to escape the opening. Small at first, it quickly turns into a thick column of impenetrable, unbreathable fumes.

Janson turns his head to the door and shouts, “Come out unarmed, and you’ll be spared!”

He doesn’t need to wait long. Coughing and wriggling their arms up in the air, fingers spread out, the Inquisitor and the five warriors step out of the vault. The faces—no warrior is wearing a helmet—seem inflated, bloodshot eyes streaming tears.

They drop to their knees between uncontrollable coughs. Their bodies appear to slowly ease the convulsions as Sofie and her companions secure their hands behind their backs.

“De Ridder,” Janson calls to Sofie. “Get a medic.” He gestures at the short warrior.

As Sofie runs off, Janson turns to another of his men.

“Jeroen, you stay with me. The rest,” he raises his arm to the building next door to their left, “off to the barracks. Support Solo if they’ve already arrived.”

“And if—?” One of them begins to ask.

“Then you take positions fifty yards off doors and windows. Shoot anything that moves inside. Go now!”

They run away as one, westward.

The Inquisitor, his face already recovering from the smoke, is grinning. “You are living the last minutes of your life, Elder Ledeboer. All of you are.” He chuckles. “If I were you, I would flee and turn those minutes into days.”

Janson gives him a quick glance, but ignores him. “Keep them quiet,” he orders Jeroen, and turns his head at Noseless, who is still grunting on the ground between heavy breaths, hand pressed against his stomach.

He begins to walk towards him. A slow pace, like he is savoring every step.

The Inquisitor raises his head, and his grin fades away.

Janson reaches for his military belt under the cloak and extracts a long knife. He walks on, knife in hand, as slowly as an old man enjoying the first, warm spring stroll after a cold, dark winter.

“Remember, Janson! No bloodshed!” Edda calls from behind, throwing a hand towards Janson, as if she could physically stop him.

Janson carefully kneels beside Noseless. As he scans the wounded man, his blank expression distorts into a smile. If that can be called a smile...

Ximena feels the chills crawling up the back of her head.

“Janson!” Edda takes a few steps towards him. “This is only a battle. We need them all alive to keep every option open.”

With exquisite care, like a nurse attending an old, fragile patient, he removes Noseless’ helmet, and looks him in the eyes. Ximena recoils at his horrendously scarred face. Smearred with blood, snot and tears, Noseless blinks back at Janson between pants and gasps.

“Janson! Stand down, Goah’s Mercy!”

Janson leans in and, with infinite sweetness, slides his knife into Noseless’ guts.

The warrior’s eyes bulge, his cheeks inflate, his panting quickens. Bursts of bloodied spit begin to run down the corner of his mouth.

“Don’t move!” Jeroen shouts from behind. With trembling hands, he is hastily waving the machine gun at the prisoners. The warriors are clenching their jaws and fists, and their bodies are shaking with tension, as if about to leap. The Inquisitor, tears in his eyes, is gaping at Janson like he had just seen a rabbit devouring a wolf.

“Shh...” Janson whispers in Noseless’ ears, his voice like a lover in the intimacy of the sheets. “Everything will be alright.”

He drives the knife deeper inside the thorax, slowly, tenderly, until his arm is down to the elbow inside Noseless’ now motionless body.

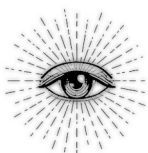
Ximena exhales in horror as she tries to suppress a gush of pity for the fallen warrior. A hard life, surely. And that might be an understatement. A life that began as an innocent barbarian boy in the wilds of Britain, and ended as a faithful killer in Lunteren’s Forum.

Janson stands very slowly. He takes a step back and contemplates his work.

The knife falls on the bricks with a metallic clatter that seems to wake him up. He stares at his hands, at his arms—still dripping blood and gore.

“It’s okay,” Edda says from behind, her voice drenched in compassion, in solidarity even. “Janson, it’s okay.”

His expression contorts in pain, like a rigid mask that suddenly shatters. He staggers, tries to control a gag, and then falls forwards, vomiting his guts out between violent convulsions.



## The Carnival Committee

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Janson—and Edda next to him—peek through the window into the darkness of the barracks. It is pitch black, at least for Janson. As if everybody inside were—

“Sleeping!” Edda says in awe. “They’re all sleeping in there!”

“How is that possible?” Gotthard asks from behind. “With all the shouting and shooting?”

Not only that, Ximena thinks. She can clearly hear from out here the earsplitting blaring of the warrior’s alarms—impossible to ignore, and yet, ignored.

“Are they dead?” Janson asks.

“No,” Edda says, squinting into the room with her traversing eyes. “They are breathing, thank Goah.” She lets her eyes scan the space, lips pursed in thought. She finally says, “Whatever’s happening, we are not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Janson, enter quietly with a flashlight and remove all their weapons. Then you wake them up at gunpoint, yeah?”

With a curt nod, Janson makes a waiting gesture to the armed conspirators deployed in a tight semicircle around them, and begins tiptoeing towards the door.



Edda turns to Gotthard. “They are in a permascape. In the *same* permascape.”

“How do you know?”

“Go in, and find out what’s going on, yeah? I’m staying with Janson.”

“Whatever you say, dowry sister.”

Gotthard slides into the building through the wall, like a ghost. And like a ghost, the floating scene follows him inside.

Ximena cringes at the sudden thick smell of dry sweat and unventilated breathing. Before she even has time to adapt, her eyes are immediately drawn to the entrance door, which opens a notch with the faintest of creaks.

A gun muzzle moves up and down the small gap. It’s Janson, peeking inside.

Ximena returns her attention to Gotthard, who is gaping in silence at the eight large men sleeping soundly in a row of bunks against the wall; their snores trying—and failing—to compete with the deafening, rhythmic shrieks blasting out of eight bulky devices. *Walkie-talkies*, she immediately recognizes, scattered about beside piles of clothing, armor plaques, helmets, weapons and other instruments of their trade.

Gotthard is inspecting the nearest lower bunk, where two embraced men manage to sleep on a narrow mattress. Some students at the other end of the amphitheater giggle as he leans over their hips. But it is not the two bulbous erections hinting under the sheets that Gotthard seems interested in.

He reaches out, slowly—his facial expression overcome with that intrigued, inquisitive look of men of science—until the tips of his translucent fingers skim the blue, scintillating halos on their skin.

Then, even somebody as dreamtech-illiterate as Ximena can see it as well. There, where the two halos mix, is most clearly obvious: the scintillation over both bodies is *simultaneous*. The glittering auras seem to sparkle randomly, like bubbles do

over boiling water, but somehow both bodies share the *same* random fluctuation. And, as she turns her head to the other bunks, she notices that it is *all* of them, the eight sleeping men, that twinkle in perfectly synchronized unison.

Gotthard doesn't hesitate. He throws his glowing body against the closest man's halo and vanishes from the Second Wake.

The scene begins to lean forward, ever quicker, closing into the same man. He must be twenty-three or twenty-four years of age. His handsome, heavily tattooed face keeps growing in the auditorium, until all Ximena can see is the blue radiance around his skin, and then...

... Ximena recoils at the sudden overflow of her senses: loud, thumping noise of electronic music hammering over dozens of beautiful bodies that jump at every beat with their hands in the air; stroboscopic lightning of every color of the rainbow flashing across their smiling, sweaty faces, their eyes lost in blissful trance. Those flexible bodies are a view to behold: splendidly shaped men and women in their twenties, healthy, happy, dancing, dancing, dancing, tunics so tight and short that they enhance what they fail to cover.

"Goah have Mercy."

Ximena turns to find Gotthard standing on the edge of the dance floor, watching with dumbfounded expression the hypnotic whirling of bodies.

He needs a long time indeed to divert his stare away from the dance floor. Then he walks over to where the dashes of light begin to wane, towards what appears like broad, cushioned benches, scattered invitingly around the dance floor in concentric—ever darker, ever more intimate—rings. There seems to be no end to the benches, no wall to limit their spread. They just go on and on, until darkness swallows the farthest ones.

It is not the benches that attract Ximena's attention.

Rather, it is the storm of passion unfolding over them. She breathes in a short involuntary gasp as gorgeous bodies twirl over each other sensually, magnificent and slow like pythons, rubbing skin against skin.

“Permascape sex,” Mark whispers in her ear. “Ever tried it?”

Ximena meets his gaze. He is smiling broadly, his blue eyes drilling into hers.

Ximena feels her cheeks glowing red hot, but she keeps her eye locked on his. Her lips stretch to the shadow of a suggestion, and she wets them briefly with her tongue.

Mark blinks with sudden confusion, and blushes so violently that Ximena chuckles and puts a finger on his flat, wide nose before returning her attention back to the scene.

Oh, are these her own feelings, or is this the psych-link at play? She exhales as if to release the warmth that pumps up from her lower belly, her own breathing quickening as she absorbs the explosive sexual energy oozing from the naked bodies, smashing against each other like tectonic plates about to reach breaking point. There is such delight in their eyes, such drive, such—

“Speese?!”

*Whoa!* Ximena raises her eyebrows in disbelief. She had not originally recognized her features among the orgy of bodies. Her eyes and facial expression... Yes, it is undoubtedly her, as is her fully exposed pearly skin shining in sweaty glory. But her body has changed. Her hair is much longer, and falls in thick, sensual black curls down to her now wider hips. Her legs seem longer too, her thighs tighter, her breasts fuller. It is the body of a woman deep in her twenties.

Aline looks up and squints. “Gotthard?” she asks, pushing a woman’s lips away from her neck. “Is that really you?” She stands, covering her breasts with her lustrous mane, and gives

him an awkward smile. “Wow, this sure as Dem is embarrassing.”

“You look...” His eyes scan her naked, mature body with astonished admiration.

“Yeah, this.” Aline looks down at herself and chuckles. “When in Rome... I’m not made of ice, you know?” As she raises her eyes, her body and mane shrink into their usual sixteen-year-old selves, her modesty now safely secluded inside a long, blue tunic. “So happy to finally see somebody. I’ve been waiting for hours! Three or four at least. I was getting very nervous.”

Gotthard nods at her, mute.

“Oh, come on, Gotthard. How did it go?!” Her expression is urgent, eyes intensely focused on Gotthard’s.

“What?” He blinks at her, as if it were hard to hear her words in the loud, beating music, or as if it were hard to shake the vivid memory of Aline’s monumental nudeness from his dream retina.

“The Inquisitor? Hostile Five? What happened?!”

“Oh, yes.” He swallows. “We got them.”

Her features expand with relief. Her smile broadens, and then she bursts into a laugh of simple, pure joy.

“What’s all this?” Gotthard asks, waving a hand at the furious party surrounding them. “A permascape?”

“A very private permascape, yeah. You meld the mind of eight horny warriors with as many members of our carnival committee as you can thread in such a short time, and... Bang!”

“Bang, you bet,” Gotthard says, nodding absentmindedly as he scans the dozens of beautiful people around them. “How many?”

“Hmm, I guess I had time to thread about fifteen minds, give or take. The barrack warriors were the easy part, all nicely

sleeping side by side. I could thread them all together—whoosh!—with a single swipe. The problem was the rest, you know, traversing house to house, melding one by one. And I had only—what?—a minute tops before the Inquisitor would reach the vault? But I managed to get a few. It was important to get them, and not only to punch in some decent time dilation. I just don't have the skills to, um, *entertain* so much and for so long."

"But there are tons of people here! Who are they?"

"Most are just dream figures, you know? Generated by the unconscious desires of, uh, my *guests*. But you will find each and every of our dreamers enjoying themselves here somewhere. Like, hmm, Elder Overmeen, over there, you see him? With the foreign warrior?" She points at the president of the carnival committee, fiercely *assisting* the warrior's muscular body.

"Elder Overmeen... Goah have Mercy!"

"Yeah, right?" She laughs. "Would you believe that all I did was create a harmless carnival party in the woods, with a band and all? It got crazier and crazier with time, you wouldn't believe it. Total madness."

"I believe you." He laughs. "I believe you."

"I swear to Goah that all I did was the minimum to keep the party going, you know, perhaps a small tweak here or there to spice things up. But, whoa, they're animals in heat!"

"Who are?" He chuckles. "The warriors, or the carnival committee?"

"Exactly! So how's it looking with our sleeping beauties in the barracks out there? Is the threat already neutralized?"

"They're going to wake up any second now with a gun on their face."

"Thank Goah. I guess this was all a bit of an overkill then. But hey, better safe than sorry."

"So you made all... *this* just to keep the warriors asleep?"

“Yes, of course. With the Inquisitor making the round in the middle of the night, anything could happen.”

“So the loud music—?”

“Yeah, it gets annoying after the first couple hours, let me tell you that. But it sure as Dem can cover any unexpected loud noise out there, right? Especially with time dilation.”

“Time dilation?” He blinks.

She smiles. “You are the scientist, mensa. Think about it: the outside noise must spread thinner now, when entering our time-dilated brains, right? Think *frequency shifting*. And not just the frequency, also the *amplitude*.”

He nods slowly. “Yes, yes. Uh, the energy of the sound wave doesn’t change, of course, but it stretches over a longer time.” He spreads his hands wide. “And as wavelengths widen, er, frequencies lower. The noise turns... *deeper*—”

“And dimmer! Yes, time dilation is also *noise dilution!*” she laughs. “Exactly what the doctor ordered.”

He nods. “Like cosmic red shifting, but with sound... Makes sense...”

“Of course it does,” she says, tapping her own left shoulder proudly. “Sound engineering to the rescue!”

Gothard laughs softly. His eyes have changed, Ximena notices. The tense look that has accompanied him for so long is gone now. He looks tired, relieved, happy.

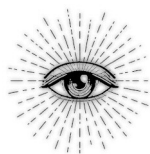
Hopeful.

“Oh, Speese, you sure as Dem are the smartest person I know.” He bows his head and places a hand on his chest. “Thank you. I owe you my life—*our* lives. Lunteren is finally ours for the taking, but, er, not everything went according to plan...”

“Huh?”

With a sad smile, he puts both hands on her shoulders and locks his eyes on hers.

“Aline... Brace for bad news.”



## Tears of Celebration

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Edda staggers out the cells' door without letting go of the safety of her father's arms, like she would otherwise drown in the ocean of darkness that is the Forum at this early hour. She inhales the icy air with an almost anxious thirst. Oh, so exquisitely sweet, Ximena thinks. So fresh, the fragrance of freedom.

Most of her imprisoned companions are already out, absorbing reality with the intensity of a newborn, their tunics stained and smelly from the days of imprisonment that weighed like months in their minds.

Their external co-conspirators surround them with hungry joy, taking them in fierce embraces—smell be damned—and shedding tears in astonishment of their combined achievement, like freedom was but a matter of will, persistence and hard teamwork. They have been more than fellow conspirators these last dream months. They are brothers and sisters in arms.

Ximena tries to keep her eyes dry as she watches Elvira's expression, her eyes shut in infinite relief as she tenderly pats

Ambroos' head, who is crying openly on her bosom. The rest are equally merged in a bittersweet emotional display. Ximena spots Isabella running towards Edda and Willem, laughing tears at the sight of her dowry family. Out of the corner of her eye, Ximena sees Mark trying, and failing, to wipe his freckled face dry.

Janson approaches with a blank expression and speaks to Edda like he is just continuing a conversation, which, from his perspective, is accurate, Ximena realizes. "The last two guards are being taken to the barracks with the rest."

Edda nods, lets go of her father and says, "Take their weapons to the vault and keep it under constant guard. Make sure nobody has access to it."

As Janson is about to turn to carry out her instructions, Willem reaches out, puts a hand on his shoulder and says, "Janson. I- I'm so sorry."

Janson turns his expressionless green eyes at him and says, "There's nothing to be sorry about, Meester Willem. I deserve worse."

Willem's brow furrows. "That is a pile of—!"

"Let him be, dad. He needs time. Janson, please, go secure the vault."

"Wait," Willem says. "Okay. Fine. Janson, when your people are done with the vault, could you please also secure the colony communications?"

"Right," Edda says. "We don't want anybody to get word outside of what happened here. At least not yet."

Janson gives them a curt nod, and as he leaves, another figure—a woman—is running frantically towards them. Ximena cannot initially recognize her out of the shadows of the night, especially since she is wearing a simple night tunic instead of her involved Quaestor robe, and her blond hair falls flat in careless disarray behind her back instead of her elaborately intricate braids.



“Will!” Marjolein throws herself into his arms. “Oh Will!” She takes his head in her hands and kisses him passionately. And his response seems as vigorous. After a time that feels to Ximena as exceedingly long and increasingly embarrassing—Edda’s thoughts, obviously—their lips finally part to catch some air. Marjolein, panting heavily, sweeps her gaze to Edda and then back to Willem. Funny, Ximena thinks, how you can be happy and mad at the same time. “What in Goah’s Name have you done?!”

The scene camera begins to recede, giving Ximena a broader perspective of the Forum. There are people cautiously approaching the emotional turmoil from neighboring streets, as news spreads at the speed of thunder across the shell-shocked colony. Most were not even asleep. Not tonight, and certainly not after the shots began. And now, they know what happened. They know that curfew is violently over. They don’t know what it means, but they know it is big.

The camera turns around to the imposing presence of the Eye of Goah building and the small cell door on its wall. The last prisoners are walking out. Or more crawling than walking. Their expressions... Ximena gasps in pity. To them, freedom is not liberation. To them, the future holds dread, not promise. First out is Elder Rijnder—young Marten’s dad—followed by Theodoor and Marcellus. Each stays to himself, blind to the others, and blind to the crowd slowly growing on the Forum. Blind of purpose, they pace the red bricks because that is what you do when you are alive: you move forwards, somehow.

And last of all emerges Aline, crumbled in Gotthard’s arms.

The conspirators, the entire crowd, have fallen into mournful silence as five corpses, covered in bloodied sheets and carried on improvised stretchers, are put down on a neat row in the middle of the Forum.

A man—Elder Rijnder, Ximena’s heart shrinks at the sight—walks to the smallest body and, without a word, lies on the floor and puts an arm over the sheet, his eyes shut as if sleeping. Ximena exhales as a tear brims over her eyes.

Edda, her eyes as wet as Ximena’s, walks to the five bodies and kneels, head sunk in silence.

Without a word, her fellow conspirators turn and begin shifting their position in small, instinctive steps until they form an almost perfect circle around Edda, Elder Rijnder, and their five fallen comrades. The larger crowd that has been trickling into the Forum has also moved and stands now in respectful silence around them, scattered in a broader circle. Ximena lets her eyes sweep the gathered congregation and how they have spontaneously arranged themselves in a concentric wheel of grief.

And then Edda stands and begins to clap.

A slow, timid clap at first. A clap that instead of stirring the solemnity of the moment, enhances it.

Willem begins to clap in unison with his daughter. And Elvira. And Gotthard, Isabella, and the others.

The claps gain in strength, in tempo. In passion.

And it lasts forever, the rhythmic sound echoing off the walls of the nearby Eye like Goah awssself joins in their homage.

Edda finally raises her hands and the applause quickly abates. She turns around and looks at the expectant faces. “These tears we are shedding,” she rubs one off her cheek, “we shed in celebration for the greatest gift the living can give. And we thank you for your life, Elder Ron Velderman.”

“For your life, we thank you!” the rest reply at once. Ximena recognizes the words, the ancient ritual still spoken today in war memorials. A ritual to honor heroes and martyrs.

“We thank you for your life, Woman Louisa van Kley.”

“For your life, we thank you!”

“We thank you for your life, Redeemed Lieke Haack.”

“For your life, we thank you!”

“We thank you for your life, Elder Pieter Ledebor.”

“For your life, we thank you!”

“We thank you for your life, Man Marten Rijnder.”

“For your life, we thank you!”

“Your gift is our duty now. Goah be our witness, your gift is our duty now!” she cries, another tear running down her cheek. “No more tyranny. No more Joyousday. We are going to live, Goah’s Mercy! We celebrate!”

The applause resumes, sudden and harsh, mixed with cheers and cries of joy and grief.

“We are free! And it is our sacred duty to share our freedom with the world! Tell everybody. Spread the word. Tell them to come here where it all happened, where our friends sacrificed everything. Fate—no, Goah awssself, this can’t be a mere coincidence—has brought us liberation in February of a Leap Year. Tell *everybody* to come to our Forum on the 29th of February to celebrate with us the leap into a new golden age.”

“Juf Edda!” Gotthard shouts—a spontaneous cry of gratitude and relief. “Juf Edda!”

“Juf Edda!” Elvira joins in, her hand on her son’s shoulder.

*Juf Edda, Juf Edda, Juf Edda!* The chanting reverberates across the Forum, contagious, a wheel of concentric fervor shouting hope.

Only Aline remains silent.

The auditorium camera jumps upwards, taking Ximena and her fellow Global Program students up into the air. As they rise over the dark roofs of the colony houses, the scene transitions abruptly into the Second Wake. The night vanishes at once as the Traverse engulfs Lunteren with sudden, pristine clarity. The fervorous crowd keep chanting below around Edda, their concentric formation of radiant blue halos contrasting sharply against the shadowless gray of the Forum expanse.

And the camera keeps rising, overtaking the tallest structures: the Eye of Goah, the tower of the old Church, the colonial repeaters. The entire colony fit neatly in the amphitheater now. And it seems *alive*: blue sprinkles of humanity pepper every street, coming out of every house, moving in confusion, up and down, mingling, and slowly letting the tide of history drag them towards the Forum.

A sudden dash of red light out of the corner of her eyes makes Ximena turn her head with a gasp. *What—?!* The camera has stopped, and right there, in midair, two elongated figures float in perfect stillness, their semitransparent bodies shining fiercely red, their expressionless eyes fixed on the Forum below.

*Mares!*

Ximena had almost forgotten about them. With the historical events in Lunteren now really gathering pace, and the Leap-Day Reformation around the corner, the meddling of the dream aliens in human matters seems almost secondary.

Their female psychic voices reverberate with enhanced sharpness in the Second Wake. “I do fail to understand, Master Yog.” One of the mares wriggles the three appendages at the end of her arm downwards. “How are these happenings of relevance to the Reseeding effort?”

“They are not,” the other mare replies.

“And yet, here we are. Putting ourselves at risk of being spotted by their Mind Walkers.”

“As long as they roam the Third Wake, humans cannot see us. Besides,” Yog turns her white eyes to the other mare, “there is no such thing as a human Walker of the Mind. There *cannot* be.”

“And yet, they do tread the Path in the Shadow. They do traverse the Second Wake.”

Yog returns her gaze to the center of the refulgent-blue concentric circles in the middle of the Forum. “Very few do. Outliers. There are abominations of nature in every species, and yet, not even abominations can surpass their physical limitations. Nothing in nature can. A human brain is no exception.”

“And yet, they have proved surprisingly elastic organs.”

“Nothing does stretch forever. Not without snapping. Their brains evolved to dominate their physical environment, not the psychical.”

“Master Rew was convinced of their capabilities.”

“Indeed. And I-Rew was wrong. The human brain is incapable of exerting faith-control to the level required to tread the last step of the Path in the Shadow. Without faith-control, emotional persuasion cannot be applied. And without the power to persuade, they pose no threat to the Reseeding effort.”

“And yet, you did insist we divest some of our Walkers to observe these humans closely, while staying out of their sight.”

“A precaution. In case I am wrong.”

“Why not simply terminate all abominations—as a precaution?”

“Unnecessary. And risky. Their treading of the Paths is raw and instinctive. The human creature is wild and dangerous when cornered. Humans to whom fear pushes to fight instead of flight do so with unpredictable—even fatal—ferocity. Our

lives are too precious. Theirs are short and brutish. No, Walker Qoh. There is no need to put our Walkers in harm's way when we can afford to wait for nature to run its course. We do have time on our side. Humans do not. In a dozen years, no abomination down there will be alive. Possibly even a few days, as soon as the human elites attain consciousness of the challenge to their power that is brewing in this corner of their world."

"And yet, here you are, Master Yog, watching human affairs in person. Why here? Why now?"

"I do admit this might seem illogical, but the risk is minute, and more than worth the experience. The events that we are witnessing in this human settlement are... *fascinating*. I-Rew am a human whisperer after all, Walker Qoh. I-Rew do crave the knowledge that can be extracted from the intricacies of their interactions. This is a fascinating moment. The abominations have just regained their freedom." She keeps her blank eyes on the Forum for a few silent moments. "I-Rew am wondering what they shall do with it."

"It is that female in the center of the human circle, is it not, Master Yog? She is indeed fascinating."

Yog watches in silence. Her voice reverberates softer than usual when she finally speaks. "Redeemed van Dolah..."

"Is it really the curiosity of the whisperer that drives you, Master Yog? Or are you unconsciously attached to the female?"

Yog turns her gaze to Qoh. "Attached?"

"*Emotionally* attached."

Yog returns her eyes to the ground, but remains silent.

"She was your disciple, and you her master," Yog says. "Same as I was. The bond between a guide and her disciple lingers strong. Furthermore, the female was the incarnation of your belief in humankind, was she not? To the point where you

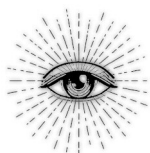
gave up your independent existence for the faint hope of her species crossing the Paths.”

Yog replies slowly, as if lost in thoughts. “Redeemed van Dolah...”

“And yet, she did terminate your limb. A human. Terminating a marai-na. In the dreamscape. That must have left a deep scar in your psyche.”

Yog’s voice turns into a whisper. “Wild and dangerous when cornered.”

## TWENTY-FIVE



### King Washington

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“Now what?” Gotthard asks as Iwan—Elvira’s teenage cook apprentice—hastily comes out of the kitchen with yet another pot of mustard soup in his hands.

“Now, we eat,” Edda replies.

Iwan puts the heavy pot on the long table around which the former prisoners devour bread and soup like it is the most exquisite breakfast they have ever had in their lives. With a shy smile, he takes the old, empty pot and disappears back into the kitchen.

“But we’ve got to discuss our next move!” Gotthard says, crumbs of bread stuck on his week-long beard.

“Simple.” Edda meets his gaze and her lips curve. “We’ve saved ourselves from cleansing, and Geldershire from the Joyousday.” Her smile broadens wickedly. “Now, we save the rest of the world.”

“Are you serious?”

Edda chuckles. “Come on. Let’s eat first, yeah?”

“Whatever you say, dowry sister. But we better hurry, or Ledeboer is going to get very physical with the Colony Elders.”



Willem nods, a piece of bread in his hands. “They insist on talking to us immediately. To you, girl.”

Edda frowns at her father. “The Colders? I didn’t notice.”

“That’s because your puppy,” Gotthard gestures with the spoon at Janson, who is standing next to the door in full-body armor with a blank expression, “was very protective. The Colony Elders had to settle with your minions.”

Willem laughs at that. “They also drilled you with questions, didn’t they, Gotthard?”

They are all in a good mood, Ximena thinks. Nothing like freedom, a warm meal and a postponed death to lift your spirits, right?

“Questions?” Gotthard smiles widely at Willem. “Those hysterical shrieks sounded more like demands to me.” He turns to Edda. “Half of them want to join us. Can you guess who?”

Edda lifts her chin at Rutger, who is placidly dipping bread in his mustard soup next to Gotthard. “Colder Siever, I bet. De Ridder,” Edda gestures with her finger at Marcellus, who is chatting animatedly with Ambroos and Theodoor down the table, “and Van Kley.” She scans the rest of the faces with a slight frown. “Where is Valentijn?”

A shadow crosses Gotthard’s expression. “He is outside, with his mom.” Gotthard purses his lips. “He wasn’t hungry.”

Edda lowers her eyes for a second. Then she raises them at Gotthard. “And they really want to join us?”

“You surprised?”

“A little. They risk losing in one stroke the karma and power that their families have been growing for generations, yeah?”

Gotthard scoffs. “What good is karma and power, when an imperial loony can arrive at a moment’s notice and kill your family?”

“Well put,” Willem says. “Unfortunately, Colders Van

Althuis and Beulens were... not so supportive. And I have the feeling that Lunteren itself is as split as our Colony Elders are.”

“What do they want?” Aline asks, eyes on her soup. It is the first time she has spoken during the entire meal, so everybody turns their heads towards her.

Willem blinks and pushes his glasses up his nose. “Uh, from what I could gather from all their yelling,” Willem replies, “they pretty much want us to free the Inquisitor and his men, and then leave Lunteren for good.”

Edda snorts. “I don’t care what they want.”

Aline stands with such fury that her chair falls backwards on the stone floor. With widened eyes and red-hot cheeks, her sudden reaction attracts the immediate attention of the entire table. “Who do you think you are, Edda?!”

Edda blinks back in confusion. “What do you—?”

“We cannot impose our will by force!” Aline is more screaming than speaking. “That’s illegal! No, no. Much worse. It is immoral!”

Gotthard stands and raises a hand, palm towards Aline. With an unusually soft voice he says, “It’s for their own good, Aline. Van Althuis and Beulens, and all those other stupid morons, they are blinded by fanaticism and fear. They would rather die than change. And we can’t let them die!”

“They are our neighbors, Goah’s Mercy!” Aline meets the gaze of everybody at the table. “They have rights. The same rights we have. We cannot just sweep aside aw’s Compacts right after fighting for them!”

“We are not fighting for aw’s Compacts,” Gotthard says. “We are fighting for our fucking *lives*, Aline! And for our future. And—yes!—for the future of our oh, so dear neighbors, even if they are too goahdamn stupid to see it.”

Some conspirators mumble in agreement.

“That’s just so wrong!” Aline says. “In so many ways! We can’t rule without legitimacy.” She looks pointedly at Edda and

spreads her hands wide. “What would that make of us? Civilization matters, Edda. Rules matter. *Legitimacy* matters!”

Edda drops her spoon in the bowl, folds her arms and meets Aline’s pleading gaze. “And what do you suggest we do?”

“Call an Assembly of Elders. And get them to vote as soon as possible.”

Edda rolls her eyes. “We can’t do any of that until we’ve stabilized the situation in Lunteren—in the entire Geldershire.”

“But that will take, what, *months*? This can’t wait! These are the people’s *sacred* rights we’re talking about!”

Gotthard sits back on his stool and, while picking up another piece of bread, says, “What would you rather we do, Speese?”

“We must go, Goah’s Mercy!” She looks at him with fierce intensity. “The Colders are right, Gotthard. It’s the only way. We aren’t safe here, anyway. Let’s leave. Today. And Lunteren might survive whatever happens next.”

“Exile...” Gotthard snorts loudly. “To where?”

“Wherever we are safe. I don’t know. What about Old Amsterdam? We would be safe there. We can then spread our revolution hidden from sight. Nobody will be able to stop us.”

“Old Amsterdam?!” Gotthard scoffs. “The *fuck*! Lunteren is our home! We need resources, *real* resources, not just fish and a view. And what about our dear neighbors, huh? You want to just flee and abandon them here to the mercy of the Inquisitor’s whims? That’s what’s really immoral, Speese! They’re ignorant. They just don’t know any better. We must help them, even against their will, if need be. We’re strong now. And it’s the ethical duty of the strong to protect the weak, even from themselves.”

“Oh, come on. I can’t believe it!” Aline’s eyes jump from person to person, desperate, searching for support. “Geldershire is filled to the brim with aw’s Fist troops. As soon

as they learn what happened, they will march here in full force! They're fucking killers, Goah's Mercy!"

Edda shakes her head. "As long as the Inquisitor remains our guest, they won't dare."

"Actually," Gotthard says, turning to Edda. "Yes, they will. Those fanatics don't give a fuck. They're too eager to join aw's Embrace bathed in glory and blood. Even in the blood of their dear Inquisitor."

Edda clenches her jaws. "Well, let them try. We've got weapons now. Our allies and Walkers can fight them off."

Aline gasps. "You are delusional, Edda! You really want an open war? Against aw's Fist? And then, what, we fight the whole Imperium? Every fucking Imperia of Goah?!"

"Easy, Aline," Willem says. "Don't mind Edda. She is just angry and doesn't mean it." He turns to his daughter. "You don't, do you?"

Edda rolls her eyes and then takes a deep breath. She meets Aline's gaze. "You don't know history, Aline. I do. And history comes packed with very practical advice."

"Oh, does it?" Aline folds her arms and tilts her head. "Please, enlighten us, oh Juf Edda."

Edda sighs. "Okay. For starters, the great revolutions that led to the golden age were certainly not fought from the comforts of exile. You see, all of them required the hoarding of *very* hard power, and its exertion from the very core of the empires they were about to unleash on the world: Napoleon in Paris, Stalin in Moscow, and, uh... The American Revolution mensa..." She begins to snap her fingers and turns to Willem. "Dad, what was the name of the first North American king?"

"Hmm..." Willem frowns. "I should know that..."

"Washington!" Edda says, pointing at Aline. "All of them, Napoleon, Stalin and Washington, had to stay put to destroy their old regimes from the inside."

"*Napoleon... Stalin... Washington...*" Aline raises an eyebrow.

“Are these your historical examples of virtue, Edda? Sorry, I know I’m just a humble engineer of limited education, but in your frequent rants against aws Head, these mensas come up a lot, and you’ve always referred to them as *blood-thirsty tyrants*.”

Edda furrows her brow, but only for an instant. “Yeah, I said that. But I couldn’t see the whole picture back then. Napoleon was not a tyrant, Aline. Neither were Stalin or Washington. No, they were the opposite of tyrants. They were *liberators*. Now I can see it as clearly as I see you. Yes, Napoleon took absolute power, but he had to do it to liberate Europe from the tyranny of birthright. Likewise did Stalin, who liberated Eurasia from the tyranny of karma. And King Washington rid North America of the last vestiges of barbarism. Yes, they all ruled with an iron fist for decades, but their legacy was the golden age.”

The sudden eruption of chuckles and laughs from the opposite side of the Amphitheater surprises Ximena. What in Goah’s Name is the Lundev lot laughing at? It must be some cultural Hansasian joke. A glance at Mark confirms that he is also smiling widely. Ximena is about to ask, but then Edda’s words snap her back into the scene.

“Those are the lessons of history: you cannot pull off a revolution from exile. The old regime must be broken from within, with the iron fist of hard power. And dreamtech gives us power.”

Aline exhales, shaking her head. “You are losing all sense of proportion. Take a look at us, Edda. We are a single colony against the whole world!”

“There’s Geldershire,” Edda says.

“So what? Even if the entire Dutch Province were on our side, we would still be minuscule. Can’t you see? We are a tiny spark of fire trying to stay lit in the rain one second at a time. And a fucking storm is coming!”

Edda laughs at the metaphor, which doesn’t seem to

improve Aline's mood in the slightest. "You got it all wrong, sister," Edda says. "History doesn't care about large and small. There was Caesar, civilizing endless masses of barbarians in Gaul. There were Cortés and Pizarro," the mention makes Ximena bolt upright, "ridding an entire continent of barbarism." As chuckles cross the Lundev benches anew, Ximena feels an intense sense of unease. Edda's words... They sound... *misaligned*, and yet, that's the history she has learned, too. "Hard power, Aline. That's all it takes. Hard power, and being on the right side of history."

Before Aline can reply, a female voice shouts from outside the door. "Will, Edda!" It's Marjolein, panting as if she had run all the way. "I need to talk to you!" She is trying to walk in, but Janson is blocking her attempts with polite determination.

Edda ignores her and returns her attention to the soup.

Aline scoffs, walks past Janson and Marjolein, and disappears in the still-dark night.

"Let the Quaestor in, Janson," Willem says.

Janson stares fixedly at Edda, who, after a spoonful of warm, creamy soup, makes a curt nod in the air. He stands aside.

Marjolein trots towards Willem, a crease of anxiety crossing her brow. Everybody is staring at her in expectant silence. Everybody, except Edda.

"Will, I'm just out of a radio call from Oosterbeek. It was the aws Fist deployment there, trying to reach the Inquisitor. Apparently, they've been checking in their regular channel and couldn't get hold of him."

Between gasps and worried mumbles, Willem turns to the door and says, "Janson, weren't you supposed to secure all colonial communications?"

"Uh..." Janson blinks. "Yes, Meester van Dolah. And we did. Everywhere else. But... Uh... She is our Quaestor."

"Don't worry," Marjolein says, raising both hands. "I told

them he was spending the night with a hooker and didn't want to be disturbed."

Everybody around the table gapes at the Quaestor in astonished silence. Even Edda does.

Willem stands and kisses her on the lips. "Goah bless you, Marjo. You just bought us a few more hours."

Edda stands slowly, clears her throat and says, "Thank you for your... support, Questor Mathus. I'm glad you are on my side."

"I am not on *your* side, Edda. I am on Lunteren's side."

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"I see, I see..." Censor Smith's powerful voice makes Ximena—and every other student in the auditorium—turn their attention away from the still-unfolding scene and back to the academic reality of the twenty-sixth century. "A comment, if I may, my dear professor. Could you please get your, er, Nubarian assistant to pause the sensorial?"

"You may address me directly," Ank says. Ximena is sure she hears a twinge of irritation in her usually controlled sweetness. As she speaks, the scene vanishes, leaving in its wake the sunlight and subtle fragrances of a spring day.

"Thank you, Professor," Censor Smith says. Ximena follows his relaxed pace down on the stone stage as he walks towards Miyagi.

"All comments are welcome, Censor Smith," Miyagi says, attempting an uncertain smile. "Especially—"

Censor Smith raises an impatient hand. "Thank you, thank you." He stops and turns his attention to the flabbergasted students. And more specifically, to the section where Ximena sits. And yet, he speaks as if addressing the Professor. "I just wanted to comment on your... creative interpretation of these historical events, my dear professor."

“I don’t think I follow.”

“Of course not.” Censor Smith chuckles softly. “Let me clarify. In the... *story* we’ve just watched, we can finally get a glimpse of how Mathus begins her machinations.”

“Marjolein Mathus? She is just trying to—”

“To take over the leadership of the rebellion.” Censor Smith is now clearly speaking to Ximena and her fellow GIA students, his eyes meeting theirs, his smile intense and eerily comforting. And Ximena feels the compulsion to believe him. “By means of her considerable influence on the Van Dolahs and the rest of Lunteren, and by abusing the trust of the Quaestor office, she is about to take power over the entire rebellion.”

“No, Censor Smith. I’m afraid that’s not how—”

“*Demon Mathus*,” Censor Smith’s smile widens, his voice filled with venom, “was *hungry* for power. And if she couldn’t attain it legitimately by climbing the ranks of *aws* Head, then she would not hesitate to unleash a heresy of *such* proportions, that millions would die, and many more condemned to hell.”

“You are wrong, Censor Smith.”

*Wow!* Ximena exhales at the firmness of Professor Miyagi’s rejection. Where is the silk-gloved, accommodating professor, so eager to pull Townsend University into brotherly academic collaboration? Even Censor Smith appears taken aback, at least his smile seems to wane for an instant.

“For better or worse,” Miyagi continues, “the Leap-Day Reformation was Edda van Dolah’s brainchild, not Quaestor Mathus’.”

Ximena exhales anew and leans back on her seat, blinking at Miyagi like he had just kicked the air out of her lungs with his words. *Edda, brainchild of the Reformation? No. Impossible. The Reformation—and the Dreamwars it unleashed—are the worst calamity humanity has faced since the Second Collapse. Edda would never...!*



“Ximena?” Mark is staring at her, his prominent brow frowned in concern. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” She blinks and gives him a sorry attempt at a smile. “I’m fine.” But her thoughts keep whirling, unstoppable. Edda has been Ximena’s hero since Abuelo used to tell her all those wonderful bedtime stories. Were they all fantasies? *Lies?* But Abuelo wouldn’t tell her lies, would he? *Come on, Ximena. You are not a child anymore. Everybody tells lies when sufficiently misinformed. It’s not a lack of love. Or abuse of trust. Love and trust are just a path to safety, truth be damned.*

“Are you sure? You don’t look fine to me.”

She raises a hand at Mark, a gesture of patience. She feels conflict inside—confusion. Almost pain. As Professor Miyagi’s seminar has picked up its pace with the relentless ruthlessness of history, she has been getting the growing ominous feeling that something was... *off* with her own understanding of the world. But, so far, she has successfully kept these unsettling thoughts from ever reaching her consciousness. Until—it was bound to happen—Professor Miyagi slaps her on the face with... *the truth?*

“For better or worse,” Miyagi repeats, his voice a notch louder now, more intense and intentional in his reply to Censor Smith, “it was Edda’s flawed understanding of history that put her on her path to power.”

*Flawed?* Ximena takes a deep gulp of air, trying to prevent a sudden surge of dizziness from overwhelming her. Somehow, she feels personally attacked, like it is not Edda who the professor is really speaking about. *Is my understanding of history... flawed?* Ximena has always thought of herself as quite the cynic. Of course, she knows that everything she’s ever learned has been exquisitely sugarcoated to fit the projected self-image of the regime she lives in—which, let’s face it, it’s the exact same regime that Edda lived in. But *flawed* history? *False* history?! No! That can’t—!

“Ximena?!” Mark puts a worried hand on her arm.

“Don’t touch me!”

Mark recoils at once, and leans back away from her, pain in his eyes. “I- I’m sorry!”

“No. It’s me who’s sorry, Mark.” She shuts her eyes and tries to get a hold of her emotions. But it’s not easy to accept that she might not be a historian, after all. How could she be, if all she’s ever learned are lies? Or worse, fucking half-truths? “Please, give me a minute.”

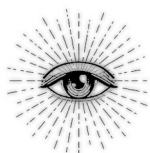
Down on stage, Censor Smith is already replying to Professor Miyagi, both hands in the air in a gesture of appeasement. “You misunderstand my words, my dear professor. Or my intentions.” From up here, Ximena can only see the back of his shaved head, but from the tone of his voice, she can almost imagine the smile on his face. “I love your work.” He gestures at the air above him, where the scene was running a minute ago. “It is so... refreshing and instructive. So full of potential. I’m just trying to help you, because I want to believe that we can still salvage your project. You have already poured so much work and resources... Isn’t it worth salvaging? I’m sure with a bit of creative editing, we could yet get you published in the Goah’s Imperia of the Americas without—”

“No, thank you.”

Ximena stares at the professor with renewed admiration. He didn’t blink for a second. And that is a ton of karma he is giving up. Unlike her, Professor Miyagi knows, *without a trace of a doubt*, what he truly is. And by now, he certainly realizes that his work will only get approved in the GIA after *very* significant tempering. There is no way in hell he would ever compromise the truth of his work, no matter how much karma they throw at him.

“Do me a favor, please, my dear professor.” Censor Smith says, while returning to his seat on the front bench. Now Ximena can see his face, and his confident expression is that of

a man that knows, *without a trace of doubt*, that everybody has a price. “Just sleep over it. In the meantime, I’m sure I’m not the only one looking forward to the reaction of the old Hanseatic Imperium to the most anticipated radio broadcast of the new century.”



## Eggs and Lies

Sunday. Still Cleansing Sunday. A day marked in history, fortunately not known for cleansing after all. But this 6th of February 2400 feels to Ximena like it goes on and on without letting you go. And—Ximena exhales—the day hasn’t even properly begun yet, but judging by the few traces of the sky that are slowly becoming visible through the windows of the Van Dolah’s kitchen, the sun must be about to rise.

“I can cook you some eggs with porridge!” Bram offers, eyes shining with eager happiness. “You haven’t had a decent meal for a week.”

“We’re stuffed, boy,” William says, tapping his belly. “We’re just out of a detox session in aw’s Eye with plenty of soup and bread. Tea is more than enough.”

“And you, Elder Ledeboer? Eggs? Porridge?”

“No, thank you, Redeemed van Dolah.” Janson raises his cup. “Tea is good!”

“I’m not Redeemed yet,” Bram says while opening the tea cupboard.

“Soon you and Isabella will be,” Willem says. “As long as we keep aw’s Eye and aw’s Womb in one piece.”

With the arms halfway stretched, he turns his head to his father. “What do you mean *in one piece*?”

Willem sighs. “A lot has happened this weekend in Geldershire. But, for the time being, we’re safe here, in Lunteren. I’ll tell you everything as soon as we’re done dispatching the next set of orders to make sure that it stays that way.”

“Sure, dad.” Bram’s expression of exasperated patience reminds Ximena very strongly of Willem. *They are so alike*. He carries on with his tea-making activities.

Edda enters the room with a fresh white tunic, hair still wet, and a sleepy toddler in her arms.

“Oh, Edda,” Bram says, while opening a can of fragrant herbs. “It’s still too early to wake him up.” But his voice is soft, and his gaze is placid at the sight of his sister with his son.

“Couldn’t resist. Sorry. We’ll keep it down, yeah?”

“Sure you will. Eggs? Porridge?”

“Yes to both, thanks!” She sits at the table, Hans half-asleep against her chest, and turns to Janson. “Have you told my dad the idea about the performance?”

Willem chuckles. “It’s nuts. But I think nothing short of nuts can help us right now.”

Edda laughs softly, arms around her son, and meets Janson’s eyes. “I’m still in awe about how you got your drama club to join us. And just like this.” She snaps her fingers.

“You’d be surprised how easy it was,” Janson says.

“That’s what worries me. Do they really know what they’re getting into? We are changing the world here, Janson. We are starting a revolution, yeah?”

“You don’t get us, Edda. Some things, we actors just can’t resist: a good show, a good drama and,” he chuckles, “a good audience. When I told them they would perform for the whole goahdamn Imperium, they began jumping over each other for a role like freshly caught mackerel.”

“I love the idea,” Bram says, as he breaks an egg against a pan. “It’s so... *bloodless*. And if it works, it will sure as Dem keep the Imperium off your rebel asses. And off Lunteren.”

“At least for a while,” Edda nods. “Hopefully enough to gain momentum with the revolution.”

“Spreading like vermin in the shadows of the dreamscape,” Bram recites like it is poetry. “I want to learn that trick too, Edda. Can you show me?”

“Sure! Dreamtech is for everybody, yeah? Even for little brothers. But it takes a long time to learn. Speaking of time, the cleansing broadcast is due in just a couple of hours.” She turns to Janson. “Please bring De Vroome.”

“Elder de Vroome? Aws Greetings to you,” Edda says, stretching a hand at the inquisitive-looking woman wearing a tall hat that enhances her already considerable stature. They are just outside Edda’s kitchen, in the front yard, the first traces of dawn making their appearance in the sky. “Thanks for bringing her, Janson.”

The reporter shakes Edda’s hands with casual blandness while staring with intense, curious eyes—professional eyes—at the expectant crowd gathered on Miel Way, kept in check by two of Janson’s armed guards. Ximena recognizes both of them from the gunfight outside the colony vault: Sofie and another young man from the Reserve Team. The reporter is moving her lips almost imperceptibly, as if composing words in her mind for a journal story.

“Elder de Vroome?”

“Sorry, uh, aws Greetings, Redeemed van Dolah.” The reporter eyeballs Edda with undisguised fascination, as if putting in memory every detail: her short, wild curls and how they barely cover the scar where her left ear used to be; her

lustrous, dark-brown skin and how it fiercely contrasts with her long, immaculately white tunic; the gomen—the belt of the Redeemed—and how it loosely rests on her hips, enhancing her femininity. The reporter finally meets Edda’s amused look.

“Like what you see?” Edda asks.

“I do.” The reporter nods and smiles, professionally immune to sarcasm. “This is...” she gestures at the anxious colonists beyond the hedge, at the two armed guards, at Janson and finally, at Edda herself. “... news!”

Edda smiles. “I’m glad that you don’t let this affect you.”

“Oh, it affects me—very much does! I feel almost... horny! Oh,” she giggles, “did I say that aloud?”

Edda laughs politely. Janson just stares on with a numb expression.

The reporter glances at him and says, “On our way here, I barely managed to extract from Elder Ledebøer a word about your night of, uh, *action*.” She wets her lips. “Lunteren—no, the whole Imperium!—needs to know what happened here. In detail. How a small group of colonists took arms against the fierce warriors of aw’s Fist... and prevailed! How a schoolteacher became the improbable leader of a rebellion against... Yes, against *what*? Grant me an interview, please!”

“Whoa, whoa.” Edda raises a hand. “That’s not why I asked you here. We need to talk about the broadcast.”

“Yes,” the reporter purses her lips and looks away, a tinge of sadness clouding her expression. “We had everything set up and ready in aw’s Eye for the court session beginning in, uh, about two hours from now.” She returns her attention to Edda. “The whole imperial media has been pounding the audience day after day, raising expectations, flaming the fires of hype.” She sighs. “*Millions* are going to be *very* disappointed. I can guarantee you that. And the Emperor, very much not amused. What a shame. What a waste.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Elder de Vroome. I can imagine

what the broadcast would have meant for your career. I truly feel for you.”

“Thank you. Yes.” The tall reporter—still impervious to sarcasm—casually waves her long, brown hair to the side and wets her lips. “But I’m sure that an interview will go a long way in compensating for the cancellation of the broadcast.”

“Oh, you misunderstand,” Edda says, wagging a finger. “The broadcast is going to proceed as scheduled.”

Even Janson’s lips curve slightly at the reporter’s expression.

“I- I don’t understand.”

“I’m sure you don’t. Let me explain. This is more than just a rebellion, Elder de Vroome. This is a *revolution*.” Edda raises a quick hand as the reporter seems about to ask something. “Bear with me, please. A revolution needs time, yeah? As much as we can get. Time to regroup and to spread our message, hidden from the spotlight for as long as possible. And, as you so accurately pointed out, if the broadcast doesn’t go live as expected, we’ll sure as Dem get more attention than even you ever wished for. So,” she smiles at Janson, “the show must go on. Care to elaborate, Janson?”

“Uh, sure.” Janson turns to face the baffled reporter. “My drama club is ready to—”

“*Drama club?*” The wide-eyed reporter blinks in confusion.

“Yes, drama club.”

“I’m not sure I follow...”

“Just bear with us, yeah?” Edda says. “Janson, continue.”

“Yes, uh, as I was saying, my drama club is ready to perform live and on time. They are already scripting and rehearsing a complete court session.”

The reporter is still frowning. “You mean, like, theater over radio?”

Janson nods. Ximena thinks she sees a spark of emotion in his eyes. “We are the best actors in Geldershire! We live to



make believe. Script or improv, doesn't matter, we nail it. They're still working the script, but hopefully aw's Fist gets a few lines and I can play the Inquisitor or one of his men," he says with a slow, graver tone of voice, and an accurate rendition of the slurry foreign cadence. "We also got Redeemed Stoeten. He's a fucking genius with sound effects. You should see what he can do with whatever he grabs out of a garbage bin."

"But... The broadcast is due at ten!" the reporter says. "There's no time to—"

"Man Gotthard Kraker—Juf Edda's dowry brother—is with them," Janson continues. "He's put all my drama mensas together into a *permascape*," Janson pronounces the word carefully, "to get them enough time to work the details before the show."

"And to assist them with the script," Edda says. "It has to be *very* impactful to keep them off our necks."

The reporter is gaping at her. "And they're doing all that in, what, an hour and a half?"

"That's why they are there. In the *permascape*," Edda says with a cocky sidelong smile, "time slows down to a drag when you're having fun."

"Wow!" The reporter alternates looking between Edda and Janson. "I'm not sure I quite follow..."

Edda raises her index finger and her voice. "Elder de Vroome, this broadcast will go down in history. Sure as Dem will. But crucially, it will buy us precious time here in Lunteren."

"Right," the reporter says, a crease of confusion still crossing her brow.

"No, Elder de Vroome. You don't understand. Remember the Century Blasphemy? The broadcast?"

"Who doesn't?" The reporter smiles fondly at the memory. "Biggest news ever."

“No. That was peanuts compared to what we are going to broadcast today.”

The reporter’s eyes widen. Her breath quickens. Her lips part.

Edda smiles. “Ah, it’s finally coming through. You probably are asking yourself why I called you, yeah?”

“At the beginning, I was hoping for an interview. But now... Yes, Redeemed van Dolah. Why am I here?”

“Good question!” Edda claps and points a finger at her. “Well, truth is, we would hate to miss your expertise, but Janson assures me there is this actress dying to take your role.”

“You mean,” she turns her frowning head at Janson and then back at Edda, “you’re offering me to participate in your, uh, make-believe broadcast?”

“Yes,” Edda says. “The most important broadcast of your life. Acting as yourself.”

The reporter laughs out loud. Then, at the sight of Edda’s and Janson’s expression, she says, “You are serious!”

“It’s easier than it sounds,” Janson says, still beaming excitement. “All you need to do is picture that the live performance is *really* happening right in front of your eyes. Then,” he shrugs, “you just do your journalist thing as usual. We’ve got plenty of time to practice. Don’t worry about that. We can get you asleep and in the permascape in no time.”

“Whoa!” The reporter takes a step back. “You are really asking me to *fake* a live broadcast to millions of listeners? To the *Imperator*?”

“To put your name in the story of the century, yes,” Edda says. “To change history with us. To star in a revolution. To be somebody. But if you are not convinced, that’s perfectly fine, yeah? Janson, tell that actress that—”

“No!” the reporter says, her eyes moving wildly as if astonished at her own reaction. She blinks several times and turns to Edda. “No need. I’ll do it.”

“I had a feeling that you would,” Edda says, a sidelong smile on her face. “Thank you. And you’re welcome.”

The reporter swallows, her face still in shock. “I want that interview! Exclusive! For publishing after you’re done with all this revolution business.”

Edda’s smile widens. And then gives her a curt nod. “You’ve got yourself a deal, Elder de Vroome. Now go and break a leg.”

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“... **A**nd we connect to the Hanseatic broadcasting network in three... two... one... Welcome, Hansa! It is finally here, the most fateful Sunday this corner of the Western reaches of the Imperium has lived in centuries! The Sunday we have all been hearing about in the waves and itching to listen to live. I can also feel your excitement! It is electrifying. Gather around your radios, Hansa! Lean forward! It is finally the 6th of February, and it is finally 10 o’clock!

*“This is your reporter, Elder Flora de Vroome, live from the epicenter of the infamous Century Blasphemy of two months ago. And once again, the colony of Lunteren in the Dutch Province of Germania is the epicenter of breaking news! Yes, Hansa, I bring news so fresh and so hot that they rival the events that shocked us on New Year’s Eve! Hold on to the arms of your sofas, Hansa, because what you are about to hear, is going to leave a mark, I guarantee it!*

*“For starters, the most anticipated trial of the century, the reason you are tuning in today, has been canceled by aws Fist. You’ve heard correctly, Hansa. The Court of aws Compacts that was due to convene today in the Eye of Goah has been dissolved by direct order of the office of aws Inquisition. But the cleansing is going ahead as I speak, Hansa! You heard that correctly, we are witnessing an official inquisitorial cleansing without the redeeming verdict of the Court of aws Compacts!*

*“I know, Hansa. And yes, the situation in Lunteren is even more shocking than it sounds. You are surely asking yourselves from the comforts of your home*

*how in Goah's Name are colonists of aws Gift arbitrarily cleansed without due process? And the answer is more astonishing than the question, believe me! It has been an intense weekend here in Geldershire. But instead of reporting myself, it is my professional duty to let the eyewitnesses speak for themselves.*

*"What you hear in the background—all the voices, the screams, the tumult—are the colonists of Lunteren gathered in the Forum around an extensive surface that aws Füst has covered with piles of firewood and cleansing poles. But there are also colonists from the broader Geldershire region in the crowd that have arrived in the last hours, escaping the troubles of their home colonies. Here with me is... Your name, please?"*

*"Er, yes, er, Redeemed Kelders. Evelien, er, Kelders. Sorry, Elder! This is all... I'm very nervous."*

*"Only understandable, Redeemed Kelders. Please calm down. I am sure our listeners would like to know where you are from."*

*"From Harskamp. I'm from Harskamp."*

*"For our listeners, Harskamp is a colony in the heart of Geldershire. And why are you here today, Redeemed Kelders?"*

*"I- Because of the fire. Harskamp has been burned to the ground!"*

*"The entire colony?!"*

*"Yes! The colony is gone! A smoky ruin. We lost everything! And so many died, Elder. So many..."*

*"Oh, Goah, no."*

*"The flames caught them in their sleep. The rest of us..."*

*"It's okay. It's okay. Maurits, please hand Elder Kelders a handkerchief. It's okay. No need to cry. You are safe now. Please carry on. The Imperium needs to know what happened this weekend in Harskamp."*

*"S- Sorry, Elder. There are... There are thousands of us sleeping rough in the woods, in the middle of winter! I- I don't know how many are dying of exposure. My family marched to Lunteren. We are lucky to have a dowry brother here. Goah bless him."*

*"But... The fire. How is it possible? How did it happen?!"*

*"It was aws Head, Elder. Aws Head!"*

*"Aws Head? What do you mean?"*

*“Some of us found the poison. In the Joyousday house!”*

*“Poison? What poison?”*

*“Joyousday poison! We stormed the house and found it. Some forced the Quaestor to drink it, and he died in front of our eyes with foam pouring out the mouth!”*

*“You mean... the Joyousday... Dem...?”*

*“Dem is a lie! It has always been a lie! Joyousday houses are slaughterhouses run by aws Head!”*

*“Goah’s Mercy! That can’t possibly be true!”*

*“It sure as Dem is! Nothing is surer than aws Head killing us all when we turn twenty-seven!”*

*“But...! Why?! It can’t...! And the fire?!”*

*“We began protesting on the Forum, screaming for the people to wake up to the Great Lie and join us. And then...”*

*“What?! Elder Kelders, please. The entire Imperium is hanging by your words. We need to know what happened!”*

*“S- Sorry! It was horrible! Aws Fist came for us.”*

*“Aws Fist?”*

*“We were—Oh!—surrounded by so many warriors! They knew that we had uncovered their Great Lie! They began shooting and we ran! They killed dozens of us!”*

*“Shooting? At colonists of aws Gift?”*

*“Yes! We hid in the streets, in our homes. And they... they...”*

*“No! The fire?!”*

*“Yes! Aws Fist destroyed our colony! Too many witnesses of the Great Lie!”*

*“But there were fires as well in the other colonies of Geldershire! Were they related?”*

*“Of course they were! It’s impossible to keep such an atrocity in silence! The same story repeated everywhere. There are people here from all over Geldershire. Talk to them!”*

*“Goah’s Mercy! They also discovered poison in other—?”*

*“Yes! Everywhere, the same! As soon as people found out, they stormed*

*their Joyousday houses and Eyes of Goah. And aw's Fist put them all to the torch. Only Lunteren was spared."*

*"So Dem is—?"*

*"Dem is a Lie so large that... that... Goah! It's impossible to believe, I know. It's impossible to believe unless you witness it firsthand! Whoever is listening to this, I beg of you, go to your local Joyousday house, go to the back rooms, and see for yourself. There are flasks of poison everywhere!"*

*"Goah's—! Oh, sorry Elder Kelders, one second. Please stay here while I report the running events. Hansa, as I speak, the White Guard of aw's Inquisition is bringing the prisoners out of aw's Eye's cells and towards the cleansing stakes. Oh Goah, there are so many prisoners that there aren't enough poles to tie them all to, so they are also being chained to each other, ankle to ankle. Oh, their eyes... They look terrified. A guard is spilling water over their heads. Oh, the smell. That isn't water. That's oil!"*

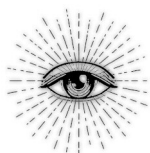
*"Oh, Goah be Merciful! One of the watching children, a young girl, has escaped the hands of their elders and is running to the pile! Ah, a guard just grabbed her, thank Goah, and... What?! He is dragging the girl to the pile of wood! Oh, Goah! He is tying her to one of the prisoners. The poor thing... Can you hear her cries of desperation? Maurits, point the mic at the crowd, there, at her parents. Oh, you hear their cries? It's heartbreaking. Oh Goah, it's too much for them. They are leaping over the line and running towards their daughter. Their expression is... Oh, it is perhaps a blessing that you cannot see their faces, Hansa. What is...?! Maurits, mic to the crowd! More colonists are crossing the line, some carrying sticks and knives! You can hear their shouts yourselves, Hansa. And more are joining by the second!"*

*"The White Guard looks confused. They are surrounded and are aiming their fire weapons at the crowd. Oh, Goah, they're shooting! They're shooting! Goah's Mercy, Maurits, we need to move out. This is a massacre! Goah, a guard has just set the pile of wood under the prisoners on fire! And they keep shooting, even to those that remained behind the line! This is madness! This is..."*

*"Goah, the shooting is now constant! I don't know if you can still hear me, Hansa! The Forum is littered with blood and bodies. Oh, a few*

*are still moving! They need help! But the guards are—Goah's Mercy!—shooting at their heads. Survivors are fleeing into the streets. But they are being chased!*

*“Maurits, run! They're coming for us! Goah, Elder Kelders?! Elder Kelders! Those monsters... they killed her! Drop it, Maurits! Drop it all! They're coming for—!”*



## Clash of Faiths

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Ximena pulls her hand over her nose as soon as Janson and Aline walk into the barracks. The smell of twenty men stuck in the same closed room for over a day is *intense*, to say the least. Some are laying or sitting on a bunk, expressions of boredom and resignation on their faces. Others stand around the only table and speak slow and dim words to each other. They look awkward in their civilian tunics, like wolves wearing sheep's wool, almost too tight for their bulky muscles. There is a wheelchair next to a bunk where a man appears asleep; probably the warrior wounded yesterday outside the vault.

“Woman Speese.” The Inquisitor, who is standing by the table, begins to walk towards her but stops as Janson gestures with the machine gun he is carrying. “To what do we owe the honor of your visit?”

“I came to beg you to stand down,” Aline says.

The Inquisitor raises his hands and smiles. “I surrender. Happy?”

“No, I mean... your men...”

“We are at your mercy, Woman Speese.” The Inquisitor



sweeps his hand demonstratively at every man in the barracks room. They are all staring squarely at her. Even the wounded man has opened his eyes. “We know when we’ve lost a battle. Not that it ever happened before, but the Paths of Goah are inscrutable.”

“No, you misunderstand me, Inquisitor Rhodes. I mean your troops.”

“My troops?” The inquisitor raises an eyebrow and his smile widens. “They know we are compromised and they are on their way, aren’t they?”

Aline purses her lips, but nods twice.

“It was inevitable, Woman Speese. The first platoons will begin arriving by... nightfall, if I assume correctly?”

Aline nods again.

“Oh, don’t worry. They won’t assault immediately. My lads aren’t fools. They will wait for every platoon to be present and in place. I taught them to fight for victory, not for glory.”

“Please, Inquisitor Rhodes. Come with me to the radio room and ask your men to stand down. Please.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. You see. We’ve lost a battle, but the war... Well, we cannot lose a war with Goah on our side, Woman Speese.”

“But...” Aline wets her lips. “If Goah were on your side, you wouldn’t have lost a battle.”

“Oh, that was my fault. Sorry, lads,” he turns his smile to his men. “I failed you. Worse. I failed Goah. I sinned. I should have heeded aws Call for immediate cleansing of demons, as we have always done in the British frontier. But I am only a man, and I was seduced by the Hanseatic mainland and the charms of civilization. And by the wishes of Imperator Cisek for an exemplary trial. And so Goah, in aws infinite Wisdom, called my own flesh and blood to aws Embrace to purge me of sin. And to remind me that there is nothing else on this world that matters more than aws Mission.” He stretches his hands in

a gesture of inevitability. “We can’t lose this war, Woman Speese.”

“But... Oh, you don’t know. How could you? There have been... recent developments in the Imperium. They need you there. Not here. We don’t matter anymore. Come with me and call your Imperator. He will confirm what I’m saying.”

“Which... developments?”

“Uh, you see, a wave of... you would call it *madness*, I guess, has spread to every corner of the Hanseatic Imperium.”

“Madness...?”

“Rebellion, Inquisitor! Against the Imperium! Thousands of colonists are pouring onto the streets calling against Aws Head. And thousands more are coming out to defend it. It’s ugly.”

“No. That’s Impossible.”

“Call your Imperator! Ask him yourself! Goah’s Mercy, many Joyousday Houses and Eyes of Goah have been put to the torch. Just like here in Geldershire.”

“Impossible. Aws Head would have told us as soon as it started. You are trying to deceive me.”

“No, I swear by Goah.” Aline places her right hand on her chest. “It all happened yesterday. You were already locked up here.”

“Yesterday? You are lying, Woman Speese. Revolts take time—months!—to spread.”

“Uh, there was this broadcast yesterday morning. You know, the trial broadcast?”

“There was no trial yesterday.”

“But there was still a broadcast, Inquisitor Rhodes. And, er, *everybody* listened.”

“I see.” He turns his gaze away, to some indistinct point on the wall. “Lies can be powerful. They can inflame hearts with the passion of faith.”

“Call your Imperator, please. You and your men are

needed elsewhere. Geldershire is not important. Not anymore. Take your troops and leave us alone, please.”

“No.” The Inquisitor raises his chin at her, his gaze placidly sure. “I won’t make the same mistake twice, Woman Speese. I’m not going anywhere until my *mission* here is fulfilled.”

“But if Emperor Cisek orders you to leave—!”

“There are higher powers than the—”

The door bursts open, and Edda storms in, hastily followed by Sofie. “Aline! What do you think you are doing?!”

“Oh.” The Inquisitor smiles at the sudden intrusion. “This will be entertaining.” He pulls a chair from the table, sits, and watches with a side smirk.

Aline, a frown on her brow, crosses her arms across her chest. “What *you* should be doing. Trying to save lives.”

“And you do it behind my back? Janson, why did you let her in?”

“Uh,” Janson looks at both girls and raises a hand in a gesture of surrender. “I just...”

Tears begin welling up in Aline’s eyes. “You are going to kill us all, Edda.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This is not you!” Aline screams, pointing a finger at her. “Where is my friend, Goah’s Mercy!”

Edda takes a step back, like she had been physically hit. “I’m the same—”

“No, you’re not! You are drunk with power! You command everybody around,” Aline gestures at Janson, “like we’re your puppets, incapable of independent thought.”

“That’s not true!”

“Who decided what to do with that goahdamn broadcast? I certainly wasn’t consulted. I heard it on the radio for the first time.”

“You ran off. What do you expect? The world doesn’t stop spinning just because you are in one of your moods.”

“Oh, yeah?” Aline nods at Edda with exaggerated emphasis. “Okay. Okay. I wasn’t around. Fine. Who decided, then?”

“Well, my dad was there. And Gotthard.”

“Your dad looks like a ghost, Edda. All that extended planning, non-stop, for months of dream time. He’s exhausted, Goah’s Mercy. And Gotthard... I talked to him. He said he was just following *your* instructions. *Gladly*, he added.”

A smile begins to curve Edda’s lips before she can stop it.

“Oh, you love it. Don’t you, *sister*? All that power to do whatever the fuck crosses your mind. But no amount of power can fix your lack of foresight.”

“What foresight?”

“Exactly! That has always been your problem. You act, you do, and—fuck it!—you let the world deal with the consequences. But that has to stop, Edda. You have *power* now! People’s lives hang on the sounds that come out of your mouth. You know what you’ve started with that goahdamn broadcast? People are going to die, Goah’s Mercy! They are going to tear each other apart!”

Edda sighs. Ximena can feel her anger waning with every breath she takes. But not her determination. Aline is upset. Okay. Won’t be the first time. Won’t be the last. “Listen, Aline. I know you don’t want to hear this, but there are no bloodless revolutions.”

“But...” A tear runs down Aline’s cheek. “You wanted to do all this to keep your dad alive! And you did it! You saved your family where I failed mine. Congratulations, Edda. Why in Goah’s Name are you then doing this?”

“This is not about my dad, sister. Nor about us. This is so much larger! Now we get a real shot at saving everybody from the Joyousday, yeah?! Everybody! We can grow old... begin our own golden age... That was Elder Rew’s dream, too. She would understand.”

“Elder Rew...” Aline scoffs. “You don’t give a fuck about Elder Rew, about me, or anybody else, except your family. And you would do *anything* to keep them safe. Even let the world burn.”

“That’s not true! You are my family too, Aline. And Janson. And...” Edda presses her lips, and blinks.

“And Piet,” Aline mutters.

“Like I said: very entertaining!” The Inquisitor claps at them. “Bravo!”

Edda turns to him and squints. “You are going to call off your troops, Inquisitor.”

“I am deeply sorry, Redeemed van Dolah,” he shrugs, a placid smile on his face, “but that is not going to happen.”

Ximena exhales at the intensity of the rage that smolders in Edda’s guts. “Call. Them. Off.”

“No.” His expression doesn’t change in the slightest.

Edda takes the gun hoisted in Janson’s belt and points it squarely at the Inquisitor’s smiling face. Oh, Ximena feels the itch on Edda’s trigger finger. The tantalizing urge. “Call. Them. Off!” She wants *so* badly to *liberate* the world from this bastard!

“Edda?” Aline says, raising her voice and her hands. “What are you doing?”

The men in the room tense in an instant, like tigers about to leap. Janson and Sofie wave their machine guns at them. “Easy...” Janson says between clenched teeth.

“Back off, lads.” The Inquisitor throws a casual wave of his hand at his men. “Back off. We all confront our own sins at our own time, and yours has not yet arrived.”

“The hell it hasn’t!” Edda says, and aims the gun at the head of the wounded warrior lying on a bed, whose eyes widen in sudden horror. “As Goah is my witness, I’m spilling your men’s brains, here and now, one by one, until you call off your goahdamn troops!”

“Edda!” Aline screams. “Consequences!”

“Brothers,” the Inquisitor says, turning at them with a widening smile. “It may be time, after all. We’ve done well, haven’t we? It’s been quite the ride, cleansin’ and civilizn’ a good chunk of Brit’n for Goah’s Glory.” The expressions of the combat-toughened warriors relax at once. Some even chuckle at the memories. “Keep your chins up, lads, and meet awa Embrace with the same pride I feel for you!”

Ximena gasps at the sudden surge of wrath inside Edda. *How dare he?* She is furious at the Inquisitor’s resistance. *I won. You lost. You must do what I say! And you fucking will!* If the Path in the Shadow has taught her something, it is that with *absolute* faith, *everything* bends to her will. “Have it your way,” Edda whispers.

“No!” Aline jumps between Edda and the wounded man, shaky hands stretched towards Edda. “No! No!”

Aline’s gaze freezes Edda to the core. The *terror* she sees in it... Terror of *her!* But... How can she be? She is her most intimate friend, her *sister*; more than that, she is part of her. How can she be so *afraid?*

“They are fanatics, Goah’s Mercy!” Aline shouts. “You’ll kill them all for nothing!”

Edda’s hands begin to tremble. Especially the hand with the gun. “Get out of the way, Aline.”

“Kill me!” Aline screams at her, pointing a finger at her own forehead. “That will sure as Dem be quicker than whatever awa Fist does to us tomorrow when they arrive and find out what you’ve done!”

*I won! They lost!* “Aline, move to the fucking side!”

“They’ll kill your dad! And Hans and Bram, too! They’ll kill us all and turn Lunteren into ashes!”

*Dad. Hans. Bram.* The tremor in her hands intensifies.

“Consequences, Edda! Please! Power is not only about doing what you want, when you want. Real power is also about

dealing with the consequences. In the world at large. And in your own soul. Can you really deal with the consequences of killing these bastards in cold blood?"

"What power?" the Inquisitor asks with a chuckle. "No matter what you do, you all have but a day before returning to hell. A week tops, if you are smart and flee."

Edda points the gun at him. The shakes are getting so bad that it takes all of Edda's willpower to keep the gun aimed.

"Edda! No, Edda!"

"A pleasure, lads." The Inquisitor raises a farewell hand at his men.

Edda falls to her knees.

And begins to sob.

---

**E**dda and Aline are attracting more than a few gazes as they discuss their options in plain Forum daylight with such obvious passion. Janson and Sofie remain at a discreet distance, and with their glances, keep the curious passersby out of earshot.

"Come on, sister!" Edda says, taking her friend's hands into hers. "It's going to work, sure as Dem!"

Aline withdraws her hands. "None of us is that good, Edda. Not even you. I doubt even Elder Rew could pull that off."

"We'll practice, yeah? We'll set a permascapc just to simulate the Inquisitor's reaction. We'll do it over and over again until we nail it."

"We can't simulate the Inquisitor's reaction! We don't know shit about him."

"We can... We can guess! I've seen him, Aline. Deep in his dreams; when he was a small boy. We can let my subconscious feel the blanks and see what happens."

“Why don’t we just...” Aline sighs and shakes her head. “The truth is that I have no fucking idea what’s the right thing to do, anymore. Everything has unpredictable consequences. Other than fleeing and staying alive, I’m out of ideas.”

Edda meets Aline’s gaze for a long time, her thoughts swirling too quickly for Ximena to follow. All she can tell for sure is that Edda is not trying to manipulate Aline into compliance. Not anymore. Ximena can feel Edda’s struggle, how she *really* wants to do what is right, how she understands that what is right is not always what she wants.

“What is right...” Edda mutters to herself. “Consequences...”

“What?”

“Fine, Aline. Okay. We flee.”

“What?!”

“We take our families, and flee. And we take Janson and the others, of course.”

“You are serious?”

“Yes. We can’t fight aw’s Fist head on. Not in our dreams.” She snorts at her own pun. “When they arrive tomorrow and take position around Lunteren, it’s checkmate.”

Aline is frowning like she can barely recognize Edda behind all that reason. “Okay...?”

“But we still have today, yeah? Why not give it a try? Why not make a desperate, last-ditch attempt to sway the Inquisitor our way?”

Aline stares at her friend in silence.

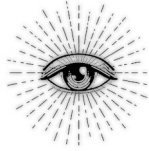
“Why not?” Edda insists, taking Aline’s hands into her own. “Why not, sister? If we fail, we leave, yeah? But perhaps—just perhaps—we won’t fail...”

This time Aline doesn’t withdraw her hands. She just breathes on, eyes locked on Edda’s. After a considerable while she gives Edda a slow nod and says, “Only if Quaestor Mathus joins us.”



“What?” Edda releases Aline’s hands and takes a step back.  
“Why?!”

“Because, Edda, to give this idea of yours a real chance—to be truly *persuasive*—we must speak Goah’s language to these men.”



## Demon-Speak

---

Marjolein leans forward over her office desk, like she refuses to let go of it. “Excuse my skepticism, Edda, Woman Speese, but it takes quite the leap of faith to believe that you can sway Inquisitor Rhodes and his White Guard to such an extreme. They don’t strike me as the type to change their minds. Not even with your, er, dream *sorcery*.”

“Dreamtech,” Edda says. She is standing with her back against the door with folded arms, as if refusing to fully enter the small office. “We call it *dreamtech*, and I assure you we can pull it off.”

“Dreamtech... Sounds like demon’s work to me.”

Edda sighs, eyes locked on the floor. “You are a woman of faith, Quaestor. Why don’t you just take a leap of faith, for all our sake?”

Aline, standing between Marjolein’s icy squint and Edda’s freezing gaze, raises a hand, as if trying to cut with it the tension in the room. “We cannot do this without you, Quaestor Mathus. We really need your... expertise.”

“My expertise?” Marjolein snorts. “What you need is a miracle, and an abundant amount of Goah’s Mercy.”

“You are both to us, Quaestor,” Aline says.

Her words actually seem to strike a chord with Marjolein, Ximena observes. Her lips have parted, and a hint of a crease has appeared for an instant on her brow.

Aline takes another step forward and puts her hands on Marjolein’s desk, her intense brown eyes staring down into Marjolein’s blue. “Please, Quaestor Mathus. I’m begging you. If you don’t help us, Goah knows what aw’s Fist will do to Lunteren when they arrive tomorrow.”

Marjolein stands, a red flush of anger tinting her cheeks. But she is not looking at Aline. “Now you care for Lunteren? After all you’ve done? After all you are *doing*?!”

“We’ve saved our lives, Goah’s Mercy!” Edda screams back. “We have the right to live!”

“You brought destruction to our colony, Edda. This is your fault alone.”

Edda, bloodshot eyes squarely meeting Marjolein’s glare, steps forward and slams a hand on the desk. “I saved my dad, Goah’s Mercy! I saved your lover!”

Marjolein stares at Edda with blinking eyes and panting silence. Her rage seems to evaporate with every breath until she finally lets her weight fall limply on her chair. “Saved... for how long?”

“Forever, Goah’s Mercy! Forever! If you help us.”

“I am a servant of Goah, Edda. I will never betray aw’s Calling.”

“We’re not asking you to!”

“You...” Marjolein waves a hand at both girls in an indistinct gesture. “Your... *dreamtech*. It is the work of demons. I cannot—”

“Who is to say dreamtech is not a Gift of Goah?” Edda asks.

Marjolein—and even Ximena and a good portion of her

fellow GIA students—gasp at the blasphemy, so casually uttered.

Edda continues, undeterred by Marjolein’s scandalized expression. “Yeah, why not? Who is to say Goah is not acting through *me*? Through *us*?” Edda gestures at Aline.

That *certainly* strikes a chord with Marjolein. And Edda seems to notice, because she leans forward, her voice more insistent, more intimate. “Faith is all about *choosing* to see the obvious, yeah? Then *choose* us, Quaestor! Goah has done so, why not you? We deserve your faith as well! Your flock deserves your faith!”

*Goah!* Ximena stares at the sixteen-year-old black girl in awe. Her words are... powerful. She is truly a master manipulator, who doesn’t even need dreamtech to turn a blasphemy into... *faith*.

“Okay...” Marjolein says, her eyes lost out the window. She stands slowly and raises a finger, like she is composing a sermon in her mind. “Okay... Goah’s Tools... Aws Will on Earth...” She turns her gaze back at an expectant Edda, and then at Aline. “I think I can work with that. But it won’t be easy.”

“Nothing worth doing is easy,” Edda recites, a hint of a smile on her face.

Marjolein speaks as if thinking aloud. “How to make them accept Edda’s authority...?”

“Yes!” Edda says. “How?!”

“... where they haven’t even accepted a Quaestor’s.” Marjolein continues, tapping her desk with a finger. “Possibly not even the Emperor’s... Hmm... But they...”

“Does that mean you’ll help us?” Aline asks.

Marjolein turns towards her and takes a deep breath. “Do I have a choice?”

“Thank you, Quaestor!” Aline says. “Thank you, in the name of Lunteren.”

“And also in the name of the Inquisitor and his warriors,” Edda says.

“The Inquisitor and his...? Why?”

“Because if they don’t fall on our side of the fence, Quaestor, I’m going to have to kill them all.”

---

“I am giving you one last chance, Inquisitor Rhodes,” Edda says as she enters the barracks room. With a sure, intentional gait, she steps towards the table.

“A last chance?” The Inquisitor asks. He is standing next to his men among the bunks, kept at a safe distance by Janson’s machine-gun. “You are being more generous than Goah or aws Fist will ever be to you, Redeemed van Dolah.”

“I am Goah’s Will, Inquisitor. And you are about to get a taste of aws Mercy.”

The Inquisitor and his men stare fixedly at her for a few moments before bursting into cackling laughter. Janson is looking at her with raised eyebrows.

Edda stops by the table and puts a hand on her hip while she waits for the laughter to die out. Next to her, on the table, a thin, white cloth—very intriguing, Ximena thinks—covers a large tray that Janson has brought in a minute ago.

The Inquisitor rubs his eyes, and, still laughing, says, “Your demon-speak gets more daring by the hour, Redeemed van Dolah. But no amount of demon-speak can sway the faithful.”

“I know.” Edda shrugs, like a soldier just following orders. “I told Goah that it was hopeless to reason with you. But Goah insisted on bringing you this.”

With a dramatic sweep of the cloth, Edda uncovers a multitude of small flasks laid in neat rows. Ximena leans in and squints. Even the Inquisitor and his men inspect them with more curiosity than suspicion.

All the flasks are transparent, like made of thin glass, and topped by a small cork. They all seem to contain the same thick liquid.

“This is proof of the Great Lie, Inquisitor Rhodes.” Edda says. “Poison.”

“What poison?”

“Aws Head’s Poison. Administered on our Joyousday to kill us all. *Dem.*”

The Inquisitor smiles. “You are lying, demon,” he says, and gives his men a reassuring look.

“Am I?” Edda gestures towards the Inquisitor’s men and says. “Ask one of your men to drink it up. See for yourself.”

“Edda!” Janson blinks at her with scandalized eyes.

The Inquisitor laughs anew. “Oh, I believe those vials contain poison, Redeemed van Dolah. I really do. But what does that prove?”

“We found these stored under lock in aws Eye’s storerooms!”

“Demon-speak. Your lies are getting tiresome, demon.”

Edda takes a deep breath, shaking her head. “I am losing my patience, Inquisitor Rhodes. I brought to you proof of aws Head’s corruption, yeah? Take it or leave it. Either way, I consider my duty to Goah fulfilled.”

The Inquisitor snorts. He begins to walk towards Edda and Janson, a smirk on his face.

“Stop!” Janson shouts, machine gun raised.

The Inquisitor keeps walking with undeterred calmness. He doesn’t even look in Janson’s direction.

Edda gently pushes down the barrel of Janson’s machine gun and gestures for him to follow her towards the exit.

The Inquisitor stops beside the table, uncorks a flask and swallows it without hesitation. He stares back at Edda with amused defiance.

“Goah’s Mercy!” Janson exclaims.

Edda simply folds her arms.

“Inquisita,” the man in the wheelchair calls, “can you pass a dr’nk?”

The Inquisitor smiles, takes a flask and as he hands it to the crippled warrior, all the others—without exception—have already moved to the table, and each taken a flask.

“Edda!” Janson says, his voice loud and urgent. “What the fuck are you doing?!”

“May aws Brothels be as welcomin’ as in Worthin’!” one man shouts, and gulps down the content of his flask.

“And aws Hook’rs as fillin’!” another man shouts, and empties his.

The rest roar with laughter, swallow the viscous substance, and shatter the flasks against the floor.

“Goah’s Mercy, Edda! Aws Fist’s gonna wipe their asses with Lunteren tomorrow!”

---

“Oh, thank Goah!” Janson says.

The Inquisitor and his warriors lay unconscious on the ground—or in the wheelchair—many snoring soundly.

Edda gives Janson a harsh glare. “You didn’t seriously believe I was going to let them die, yeah? What do you think I am? A monster?”

“Er...” he looks away with an incipient blush. “I didn’t mean—”

Edda laughs, and puts a hand on his broad shoulder. “Just pulling your leg, Jans. Come on, relax.”

A shadow crosses his face. “Please, don’t call me that.”

Edda takes a step back. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Janson. I didn’t realize—”

“No, no.” Janson gestures apologetically. “It’s me who’s sorry. I’m just... not ready, you know?”

“No need to explain. I’m truly sorry.”

He smiles awkwardly, and then points at one of the few flasks on the ground that by some miracle has survived the smashing party. “What was *that* then?”

“Guess!” Edda’s smile widens, as she grabs the vial and hands it over to him.

He squints through the glass at the thick fluid, and then takes a cautious sniff. His eyebrows shoot up. “Woman Zeger’s goodnight potion! But... Whoa!”

“Yeah, I know: a very concentrated dose. But not dangerous. Don’t worry.”

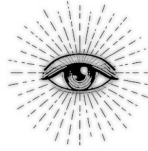
“Why didn’t you warn me?”

“Sorry about that. I know you’re a good actor, but... Why risk it?” She claps at him. “You were superb!”

“But... I don’t get it. Why all this, er, *theater*?”

“Theater? *That*?!” With a chuckle, Edda reaches into her tunic, pulls out a flask and drinks it in a single gulp. “Believe me. I’m just warming up.”





## Prophet of Goah, Walker of the Mind

---

The Inquisitor and his White Guards, dressed in the immaculate white robes of the Fist, walk up the stairs in disconcerted silence.

They exchange glances of confusion, and try to peek through the all-engulfing fog—a thick, whirling mist with a smell that vaguely reminds Ximena of freshly laundered clothes, but which feels eerily dry on her face.

The warriors can see nothing beyond the immediacy of the stairs where they stand. The steps are made of the purest white marble, and are so wide that they could all stand side by side and they would still not get to see the rim.

Who knows, perhaps there is no rim.

As the warriors move tentatively up, the lower steps they had recently walked crumble and fall into a bottomless abyss of ragged clouds.

There is only one direction to go in this place.

“Approach, children.”

The female voice, sweet but imperative, floats to them from above, from beyond the wall of fog.

“We made it, lads.” The Inquisitor gives his men a nervous

smile of encouragement. “I’m glad and honored that circumstances have brought us here together. Prepare to meet awa Embrace!”

The men grunt *aye* and other expressions of assent, their pace a tad surer now, but not by much.

The scene in the auditorium begins to silently slide up the stairs, past the awestruck men, ever quicker, until Ximena feels on her face the sudden cool humidity of the wall of fog. And beyond it, hidden from view, three female figures await at the top of the stairs.

“They are getting closer,” Edda says. “You better get ready, Quaestor.”

“How do you know?” Aline says, frowning at the wall of mist. “I can’t hear anything yet.” She taps her headphones, which are wired to a nearby machine with small electrical speakers.

“I can *sense* them.” Edda squints into the fog, like her eyes could see through it. “Or their *emotions*, to be exact. I think it’s their emotions. They’re so intense... Can you feel them, sister?”

“No, but wait... I can hear something now.” She takes off the headphones, flips a switch on the machine, and the speakers begin to hiss softly. “Yes, here they come—they’re reaching the final steps, where we placed the microphones.” Now even Ximena begins to slowly make out the sound of boots on marble and heavy breathing above the static noise.

Edda remains silent for a moment, then she nods slowly. “Yeah, it is their feelings... Whoa, they are *afraid!*”

“Of course they are!” Marjolein says. “As far as they know, they just died and are about to meet their god.”

“Well,” Edda says, “then I suggest you give them *hell*.”

Marjolein takes the microphone with a sure gesture and observes the familiar device in her hands. “I never thought I would be using one of these in a dream.”

Aline shrugs. “Why use magic when technology is so much sexier?” As if to prove her point, she turns a knob on the machine, and the two colossal loudspeakers that flank the women begin to vibrate with electric expectation. Aline smiles with satisfaction and gives Marjolein a curt nod.

Marjolein pulls the microphone up to her mouth. “Stop, sinners, and kneel!” Her voice is a practiced, vibrating soprano. The loudspeakers blast her words down at the fog wall.

“They stopped,” Edda whispers, smiling. “I can feel them. Oh, yes, keep going, Quaestor. They’re *so* afraid.”

Ximena leans in, but only the breathing of the warriors comes through the speakers now—a much-quickenened breathing.

Marjolein raises the microphone again and speaks slowly, with godly authority. “You are *not* welcome!” Her words are meant for mortals, and it shows.

Edda frowns. “Oh, wow. Be careful, Quaestor. Their fear is... Don’t be too harsh on them, yeah?”

“Archer Rhodes!” Marjolein continues, with that same voice of absolute dominance. “You call yourself *my* Inquisitor?”

A weeping sound comes through the speakers, like a trembling sob.

“Wait,” Edda whispers, holding up a hand. “This is too much. They cannot even speak. They’re paralyzed by terror. A bit more of this angry god thing and you’ll kill them for real.”

Aline frowns, squinting down the stairs as if there were something to see in the whirling fog. “I can’t feel anything at all, Edda.”

“Their feelings are almost *physical*. I don’t know how to explain it. Like a cloud of... *something* wrapped tightly around them? And that something has texture... meaning... Yeah, *feeling*. Hold on, I think I can touch it with my thoughts. Yeah, I can *taste* their fear as if it was my own. They might

need a few minutes to recover, Quaestor. Or a word of hope.”

Aline’s eyes widen. “Try to push that cloud with your mind, Edda! Use your faith-control!”

“Can I..?” Edda frowns, and stares into the fog for a long while. “Goah, it yields! I- I’m changing its... *shape!*”

“Goah’s Mercy!” Aline gapes at Edda. “Are you really manipulating their feelings?”

“I think... Wait...” Edda shuts her eyes and tilts her head. “Yes... I’m *diluting* their fear.” She blinks and gives Aline a startled gaze. “Whoa, I think this is working, sister!”

“If it’s true, do you realize—?”

“Oh Goah!” the speakers come suddenly to life with the quivering voice of the Inquisitor. He sounds terrified, Ximena thinks, but at least he can now speak. “I assume all responsibility for aw’s Disappointment—whatever aw’s Reasons.” The Inquisitor needs a few moments to catch his breath again. “I beg aw’s Mercy. Please spare my men! They deserve aw’s Embrace. They have always followed my orders with pious certainty. Any misinterpretation of aw’s Will has been my own.”

“Child,” Marjolein says, her voice a notch softer. “You honor your men with your loyalty. And so you honor *me*. That does partly redeem you, Archer Rhodes.”

“Thank you, oh, thank you, oh Goah!”

“But it is wits, not just loyalty, that I seek in my Agents on Earth. And you have been witless, Archer Rhodes.”

“I beg aw’s Indulgence, oh Goah, but I don’t understand. How—?”

“That you do not understand is sadly and precisely the problem, my failed Inquisitor. First, I sent you to Lunteren to protect my Prophet. And what did you do?”

Aline turns a shocked gaze at a wide-eyed Edda. “Did she say—?”

“Aws Indulgence, oh Goah. I don’t... uh... aws *Prophet?*”

“You tried to cleanse my Prophet, child. And all her followers.”

“Oh Goah, you mean the Van Dolah woman!”

“I sense a notch of skepticism,” Edda whispers, her eyes piercing the fog like it was not there. “I’ll try to... It’s stiffer than fear, but if I press... enough... There! Oh, this emotional reshaping... It’s—”

“Oh Goah!” the Inquisitor cries out. “I didn’t know! I didn’t know she was aws Prophet!”

“She did not know herself. Until now.” Marjolein looks pointedly at Edda as she speaks. “But you were my Inquisitor, Archer Rhodes. You were bestowed with the most sacred of duties. And yet you failed to see the signs that I so clearly lay upon her. What shall I do with you, Archer Rhodes? Do you deserve my Embrace?”

The Inquisitor’s voice whimpers loudly, apparently unable to articulate a word.

“Does my blinded Fist deserve my Embrace?”

The sobbing has grown louder—and coming from many mouths, from the overlapping sound of it.

“They’ve frozen again,” Edda whispers to Marjolein. “Take it easier on them, yeah? They’re not likely to suffer a heart attack, but let’s not push it. All right, I’m calming them down. Wait, wait...”

“I beg aws Indulgence, oh, Goah!” the Inquisitor says, followed by a whine of desperation. “I beg aws Mercy!”

“Pray and repent, sinners! Prove that you are worthy of my Mercy!”

She turns off the microphone and turns to Edda and Aline. “Show time. Ready?”

Edda straightens her tunic and nods.

Aline holds up her hand. “Wait a sec. Edda, how well can

you target this,” she gestures indistinctly, “*emotional manipulation?*”

“Pretty well, I think!” Edda sounds quite surprised herself.

“Can you target *specific* emotions? Like... Can you turn *hope* up? And, uh, *conviction* as well?”

“I can sure as Dem try, yeah? Hmm, let’s see... First I need to find it—their hope. If I use my own to... *there*, I can see theirs! Well, *barely*, because it’s almost non-existent. So, okay, um... up it goes.”

Aline stares at her friend, gaping in awe.

“Now *conviction*,” Edda continues. “I got a lot of that... And, ah, theirs is also in pretty good shape, but hey, let’s bring it up a notch, anyway. All... right! I think they’re in the right mood now.” She laughs.

“Sister,” Aline says, “you know what you’re doing?!”

“I know! So sexy, yeah?”

“No, no, Edda. This is beyond sexy! I bet this is what Rew wanted to teach us before he disappeared, remember? The last step of the Path!”

Edda’s eyebrows rise. “The third step!”

“How did Elder Rew name it?”

“*Persuasion...*” Edda nods slowly. “And it certainly comes in handy!”

“Goah’s Mercy!” Aline gestures down the stairs. “I think you just aced the Path in the Shadow!”

“The Path in the Shadow... Have I really—?”

“You are a Walker of the Mind, Edda!”

“I am, yeah?” Edda whispers, wide-eyed. “I am a Walker of the Mind, yeah?”

“You are what Elder Rew was always looking for. Take a human with enough charisma and sensibility to alter others’ behavior.” Aline waves a hand at Edda. “Grant her godlike manipulation powers, and she can... change the world!”

“Woman Speese, Edda,” Marjolein says. “It all sounds very impressive, but I suggest we focus on the task at hand.”

“Sorry, yes,” Aline says, but then turns to Marjolein with a sudden frown. “One last question before we move, Quaestor. Why *me*?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I understand you show yourself, of course. And Edda goes without saying. But *me*? I’m just...” She shrugs. “Why did you insist on having me here with the two of you?”

“Well, for one you come with a nice assortment of gadgets.” Marjolein gestures at the electric equipment. “And there’s also that some say you are a stronger Walker than Edda.”

“That’s arguable,” Edda says with a side-smile. “At least until you learn *persuasion*, sister.”

“But the main reason is,” Marjolein continues, “that we must *domesticate* these men at all costs, or they won’t bend for long.”

“Domesticate...?”

“Domesticate—tame—however you want to call it. These are men of the frontier, Woman Speese. Barbarian-born. Think about what that really means: men born from women. From women’s wombs.”

“Ew!” Aline’s face contracts with revulsion. “I didn’t know. I thought that colonies in Britain lived under aw’s Gift.”

“They do. Some. Now. But twenty years ago, not so much... If we want to really *convert* them, to be able to rely on them, they must first accept that women are more than just creatures to subjugate when in need of pleasure or reproduction.”

“I see,” Aline nods. “And three women kicking their metaphorical asses... Yes, I can see how that sends a powerful message.”

“Three women *saving their souls*, Woman Speese. A powerful message indeed.”

Aline nods. “All right. Let’s do this.”

The three women take a deep breath, put a blank expression on their faces and step side by side into the fog. Then, with a flick of Edda’s finger, the thick fog moves behind them, revealing twenty-four hapless figures kneeling and praying pathetically on the cold stairs.

“Do not despair, Archer Rhodes,” Marjolein says in her best soprano voice. “You and your men shall have my Mercy.”

“Q- Q- Quaestor Mathus?!” the Inquisitor says, looking alternatively at the three women, eyes widened in wonder and horror.

“I am the God Of All Humans, you fool!” Marjolein raises her hands and her eyes upwards, and, right there, over the heads of the three splendidly dressed women, a resplendent golden Eye of Goah appears in midair surrounded by glorious whisks of radiance. Ximena immediately recognizes the Eye from those dreams of a barbarian boy on the shores of Old London. And yet, regardless of the intimate familiarity, she feels eerie awe at the presence of this wondrous Eye of pure godly splendor. An Eye that seems to glare straight into the Inquisitor’s soul, as if about to melt it into oblivion.

“Oh, Goah!” The Inquisitor sinks his trembling head.

“I am the God Of All Humans, speaking through my Agents on Earth.” Marjolein gives the Inquisitor a sustained and piercing glare. “And this time, I shall spell it out for you, my dimwitted Inquisitor. My Faithful on Earth are under attack. Do you understand?”

The Inquisitor nods several times. He does not dare look up. The rest of his men kneel and shake across the steps with their brows against the marble.

“I have sent my Prophet and my Agents to guide my



children through these glorious times. A new age is about to dawn on Earth. Do you understand?”

More nodding. More shaking.

“Look up, Archer Rhodes. Meet my Agents on Earth.”

The Inquisitor raises his eyes, and stares at the three women, like he is seeing them for the first time. There is an unnatural brilliance around their shapely figures, like a glow of sanctity.

“Aws greetings to you, Inquisitor Rhodes.” Edda speaks softly as she paces down a few steps, growing in size as she does, until her head appears to touch the refulgent Eye floating over her black curls. *What a sight!* Ximena watches in awe her entire figure, greater than life. Even the scar on her missing left ear shines gold with the same fierce pulsation as the Eye, in perfect synchronization. Edda smiles at the Inquisitor. “I am the Prophet of Goah. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The Inquisitor blinks at her in silence, tears welling up in his eyes.

“I am Goah’s Mouth,” Edda continues. “I am Goah’s Will. I came to save you all.”

“To- To save us...?”

“A new age is beginning. The true age of Goah. A world without Dem. A world where you learn, where you age, where you take back your destiny. It is Goah’s Will.”

The Inquisitor exhales, eyes widened in astonishment and terror. “Goah’s Will...”

“A new age of Goah, which begins in Lunteren, and spreads across the world. With your service, Archer Rhodes, and with the service of the *true* Fist of Goah.”

“I- I- I-” He can barely speak. A lone tear runs down his cheek, right over the blue chain tattoo.

“I am the bringer of hope, Inquisitor—*Archer*. Hope for the world, but also for you.” Edda extends a hand at something behind the Inquisitor, who turns his head.

Ximena gasps.

Running up the stairs is a barefooted little boy wearing rags of plastic and thick leaves. He is tall, but doesn't seem older than five.

The Inquisitor falls back, blinking in shock at the sudden apparition that approaches him with a wide smile.

"Look what I foun', Arch!" The boy holds a crab in his hand.

"J- John?"

The boy keeps running up the stairs, towards the grandiose-looking Edda. With every step he grows larger, older, his shoulders broaden, his hair shortens, his rags turn into cloth, and then into full-body armor. He reaches out to a warm-smiling Edda, who takes his large hand into her own.

"Fear not, John Harlow of Worthing, then despite your misguided fortune, I redeem you in full for your fierce loyalty to your family, to your duty and to your god." Edda gestures invitingly up the stairs. "In the name of Goah, I welcome you to aws Embrace."

John turns around, an ugly scar where a nose used to be, looking exactly like out of the battle for Lunteren. He scans the frightened men with a proud smile and finally meets the Inquisitor's desperate gaze with such an intimate warmth that Ximena must blink a tear off. "See ya soon, brother. Take care of the lads for me, will ya?" He then turns, climbs the stairs and disappears in the mist.

The Inquisitor drops his head and begins to sob, his shoulders shaking with a mix of emotions that Ximena—thank Goah—can barely comprehend. Grief? Happiness? Relief? Hope?

"Rejoice, Archer Rhodes," Edda says. "Your blood brother is with Goah now. As you shall be one day—after you *serve*. Rejoice, men of aws Fist, then the Realm of Light is yours for the taking—after you *serve*."

The Inquisitor and his men nod in reverent silence, eyes fixed on Edda like a drowning man on the shore.

“And be in no doubt, men of Goah: you *shall* serve me, Redeemed Edda van Dolah, then I am Goah’s Prophet on Earth.”

When her calm and sure gaze meets each and every one of their terrified eyes, they drop their head at once.

“As you *shall* serve Woman Aline Speese,” Edda waves a hand gracefully to her right, behind which a splendid-looking Aline stands with blank expression, “then she is the Conscience of aw’s Prophet and the Master of the Second Wake. Under our guidance, you shall commit yourselves to learning the holy Paths of the Mind Walkers to defend my Faithful against the corruption of the old aw’s Head.”

*The old aw’s Head?* Ximena swaps a confused look with Cody, as some of her fellow GIA students begin to whisper into each other’s ears. The words wouldn’t have been out of place if spoken by Marjolein Mathus or her heresy, but this was Edda speaking!

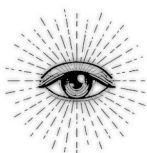
“As you *shall* serve the *true* Pontifex of Goah,” Edda waves her other hand to her left, behind which a blinking Marjolein barely manages to keep her surprised expression under control, “Marjolein *Fahey*, who Goah commissions the foundation of a new *reformed* Head of Goah.”

*Whoa!* Gasps of dismay spread across the white-and-blue section of the amphitheater while Ximena gapes at the floating scene in flabbergasted silence. *Edda herself, raising Mathus to Pontifex of the heresy!*

“Men of Goah, hear your Prophet, hear your *god*, and bow to your true Pontifex! She shall be your guide in your sacred mission to cleanse the Earth of the corruption of the old faith!”

Half of the amphitheater seems to explode at once in a roar of outrage and disbelief.

## THIRTY



### A Matter of Principle

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“Goah’s Mercy!” Ximena says. “Goah’s Mercy!”  
“You can say that again,” Cody mutters next to her, his voice drowned by the uproar that the last dreamsense segment has unleashed across the amphitheater; or, more accurately, across the blue-white-robed section where they sit. The diverse Lundev bunch is staring at them with a varied mix of bafflement, disdain and pity.

“What’s going on?” Mark asks, his words barely able to break through the cacophony.

“Goah’s! Mercy!” Ximena repeats.

“And you know what’s worse?” Cody asks, his dark eyes still aimed at the empty spot where Edda-Prophet was standing a few seconds ago.

“Cody?” Mark asks, leaning forward behind Ximena to better look at him. “Mensas, what’s going on?”

Ximena nods, eyes absent in midair as well. “What’s worse is, it’s probably true.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Cody sighs, nodding slowly. “Fuck.”

“Mensas?” Mark’s frown enhances his prominent Neanderthal brow ridge, head turning left and right as every

GIA student around them stands or shouts or throws in the air indignant gestures, or points accusing fingers at the other side of the auditorium, or—like Ximena and Cody—gapes in silent disbelief. “Why are you—*they*—so upset?”

“People, please!” Miyagi’s voice—even now, artificially enhanced by Ank—doesn’t seem to appease the unleashed havoc. “Calm down!”

“Hey!” Mark waves a hand over Ximena’s eyes. “Ximena? Is it because of what Edda has done to the Inquisitor?”

She turns her gaze slowly until she finally meets his widened blue eyes. “Not to the Inquisitor,” she finally says, dragging her words. “To the world.”

“The *world*? But that was... just a dream!” Mark says. “A permascape to manipulate the Inquisitor to spare Lunteren from—”

“This is when it happened,” Cody says, pointing a finger in the air and looking Mark in the eyes. “In this dream. Here is when the Leap-Day Heresy was born!”

“The Leap-Day Reformation?” Mark asks. “No. Here it’s still the 7th of February, a few weeks before—”

“It was Edda who triggered the Reformation...” Ximena says. “It was Edda. Not Mathus.”

“I don’t see—” Mark says.

“It was Edda all along who declared Mathus the head of the Heresy,” she says. “It was Edda who named her *Fahey*!”

“So what?” Mark asks, brow furrowing further. “Edda names Marjolein a Pontifex of the Reformation, and Marjolein names Edda a Prophet of Goah. What’s the big deal? It’s all a big show, just dreamtech persuasion—all fake, except it actually saved Geldershire from violence, so it got the job done.”

“Fake...” Ximena mutters. “Fake...”

Cody wets his lips and looks at Mark, waving a hand at the missing scene. “This interpretation of historical events—these

dream tricks forged by Edda to fool a zealot—are highly problematic for us. That is not the... um... *doctrine* we have been raised up with in the Goah's Imperia of the Americas.”

“You don't believe Professor Miyagi?”

“Oh, don't get me wrong,” Cody says. “I do believe what he is showing us. It makes so much sense. And it is documented.”

Ximena snorts. “What I would give to get my hands on those sources...”

“Indeed,” Cody says. “The fact that our own institution is denying us access to evidence is highly suspect, to say the least. So no, Mark, I believe Professor Miyagi's research. And I think Ximena does too.”

She bites her lower lip, but then nods slowly.

Cody gestures at the loud, indignant chaos surrounding them. “But not everybody is as... rational.”

“Or wants to be,” Ximena says, eyes on the first bench below, where an apoplectic Mallory is screaming outrage next to a seemingly controlled Censor Smith. Ximena turns to Mark. “What Edda and Mathus have done to the Inquisitor involves more than simple tricks—*way* more. Those *lies* they told the Inquisitor and his men... They took a life of their own. They changed the world, Mark. For us in the GIA, Edda is more than a hero. She is aw's Prophet—the Voice of Goah—that uncovered the Dreamworms' true nature. We believe that Edda van Dolah was sent by Goah aw'sself to liberate humankind.”

Cody nods. “And we also believe that Mathus was a power-hungry demon that took advantage of the chaos of the turn of the century to stage a coup against the legitimate Head of Goah.”

“We believe demon Mathus triggered the Leap-Day Heresy.” Ximena takes a deep breath. “But it was Edda all

along... Goah's Mercy... It seems we've been taught plenty of fairy tales during our history lessons, Cody."

He shuts his eyes and exhales deeply. "I wonder what that makes of us."

"Yeah." She sighs. "Certainly not historians."

"Wow." Mark nods at Ximena and Cody. "I think I get it. Thanks. In Hansasia," he shrugs, "we see in Edda van Dolah just a very driven girl, desperate to save her father, and then the world, from the Joyousday. In Marjolein Mathus, we see just a woman trying to keep everybody afloat in a world collapsing under her feet. Both, just human. Both, creatures of history."

Ximena smiles at him. "You sound like the Professor."

"Awesome people sound alike."

Ximena and Cody laugh wholeheartedly, a rare sight in the midst of blue-and-white chaos, which goes on louder than ever.

"I think that's enough!" Censor Smith has stood and is walking towards an unusually stern-looking Professor Miyagi across the amphitheater stage. As he does so, the GIA benches fall into sudden silence. Even Mallory and the other students that were yelling on their feet sit now to join their expectant companions.

"Thank you, Censor—" Miyagi begins to say, but Censor Smith interrupts him, a finger pointed straight at his face.

"What are we watching here, Professor?"

"I'm sorry, I can't follow—"

"Lies! Blasphemies! The Dreamwars are long over, Professor. What are you trying to accomplish by exposing my students to such flagrant Hansasian propaganda?"

Professor Miyagi purses his lips, but doesn't reply.

"You think us so gullible and you so... *dashing* we would instantly fall under your spell? Oh, no." Censor Smith gestures back at the GIA students. "We are *historians*, Professor Miyagi,

not mere... *civilians* you can impress with your pretty dream sensorials. If you expect to publish this trash in the GIA—”

“I won’t publish my work in the GIA, Censor Smith,” Miyagi says, his voice firm and controlled, his face professionally expressionless. “I won’t allow a *censor*—no matter how academically decorated—anywhere near it.”

For a moment, Censor Smith seems at a loss for words. “That... is very regrettable. The GIA is the largest market—”

“You expect *me* to publish *lies* for profit? You offend me, Censor Smith.”

“Not lies, Goah’s Mercy! We expect the unbiased truth, especially on a work that,” he gestures up in the air, to where dreamsenso scenes fill the auditorium when rendering, “is supposed to resemble history! But this... dream of Grand Inquisitor Rhodes... It’s—”

“Blasphemy? *Lies*?”

Ximena can’t see the Censor’s expression, but he stretches both hands in a gesture of obviousness.

Professor Miyagi does not immediately react. The auditorium is in utter silence, both the GIA and the Lundev section watching his every move, waiting for him to flinch, but he remains as cool and controlled as a politician impervious to public flame.

After a few seconds that seem to stretch forever in the tense atmosphere, he finally turns to face the GIA benches. Ximena blinks as she has the distinct impression that he is looking straight into her eyes.

“The dream where Edda van Dolah, Aline Speese and Marjolein Mathus persuade Inquisitor Rhodes and his White Guard to join the Reformation is recorded in two contemporary documents which you are free to consult—and I actually urge you to.”

“Townsend students are not allowed access to—”



“Ank, please,” Miyagi says, ignoring the Inquisitor’s words, “look for *The Chronicles of Speese-Marai*. It should be in—”

“Got it,” Ank replies from the first bench, legs crossed in a quiet, elegant pose. “I had a feeling it would come in handy. And I guess you also want Flora de Vroome’s *An Interview With the Juf?*”

“Yes, please.”

“De Vroome?!” Censor Smith scoffs. “Are those your sources? That so-called journalist was an opportunist and a traitor.”

“Her interview matches point-by-point Speese-Marai’s memories. You also disregard her validity?”

“She is a mare. A demon.”

“She is a marai. Unable to lie.”

“But the one that recorded her stories was only human...”

Miyagi laughs. “Of course. You have already called me a liar before. What about we keep our theories to ourselves, and let our students form their own? A bit of scientific method cannot harm. Only the lack of it can. Ank, please send both documents to every dreamail address registered for the seminar.”

“No! Townsend University does not allow—”

Before he can finish the sentence, Ximena sees a large, shiny envelope icon appear over her head—and the head of every other student in the amphitheater, both Lundev and GIA.

“Don’t!” Censor Smith has turned around and is raising a warning hand in her general direction. “You are forbidden access to uncurated documentation under penalty of expulsion!”

His words freeze Ximena and every other GIA student in the auditorium, some hands—including Cody’s and her own—halfway stretched up towards the enticing, spinning envelope. Mark is the only student in the GIA benches that takes the

envelope in his hands and tears it open with the same eager enthusiasm as every other of his Lundev comrades across the amphitheater. The envelope dissolves in Mark's hands, leaving behind two magazine-sized publications. He turns them around, eyes widened with interest.

"This is outrageous!" Censor Smith turns back to Professor Miyagi. "I thought I was very clear that my students were not to be granted access to your library!"

"You were. I assure you Townsend students don't have access to the Lundev library," Miyagi says. "But of course you cannot expect me to withhold seminar handouts from my students."

"They are not your students!"

"This is not a Lundev seminar, Censor Smith. This is the Global Program. Every student here is *my* student."

"Not for long if you decide to skirt the Townsend principles."

Professor Miyagi snorts and takes a step towards Censor Smith. "I don't get it," he says, shaking his head. "This insistence on threatening the Global Program is getting old. Doesn't it mean anything to you? To the GIA? The Global Program is much more than an academic event. It is about Earth healing her wounds. This," Miyagi waves a hand across the auditorium, "is supposed to be just the beginning—a show of goodwill by both sides to leave the past in the past. But it takes two to dance, otherwise we better stop the music."

Censor Smith sighs. "We are here, aren't we?" He gestures back at the students dressed in orderly blue-and-white robes. "We are even sitting through your... *distorted* interpretation of history—I'm trying to be diplomatic here—with little pushback. But our tolerance has limits. And those limits are the rules of Townsend University." He turns around towards Ximena and her fellow GIA students. "From now on, you are

expected to delete any unauthorized dreamail on sight, starting with this one.”

*No!* Ximena blinks as student after student waves the floating envelopes out of existence. Most don’t even hesitate—they just do it, content to stay a step behind the line where true knowledge begins. *This is evidence, Goah’s Mercy! Evidence!* She is a historian. A scientist. She wants evidence. She *breathes* evidence.

Cody, next to her, seems just as hesitant. His breathing has quickened. He throws a glimpse at her, his right hand shaking in midair.

“Man O’Higgin, Woman Epullan!”

Ximena jumps at the mention of her name, and looks down to the stage, where Censor Smith is pointing a finger directly at her. The entire auditorium—Professor Miyagi included—is gazing. Ximena’s eyes flinch nervously at Cody and realize that they are the only two students in the amphitheater with envelopes still spinning over their heads.

Censor Smith looks at them for a short while, expectant, but since neither of them moves a muscle, he finally says with a curt gesture, “Delete your dreamail at once.”

*This is so wrong! How dare this man keep such clearcut evidence from us? Why in Goah’s Name would a Professor do that to his students? Ximena looks up at the rotating icon, her right hand unconsciously edging towards it. These sources are invaluable! Nothing less than the direct account of witnesses that were actually there, in Lunteren, and lived the advent of the Reformation! The memories of Edda—of my own ancestor!—written down, black on white, at the tip of her fingers...*

“Delete. Your dreamail.” Censor Smith’s stern voice makes her jump anew. He is squinting at them. “Or consider yourselves expelled.”

Cody stretches his arm very slowly, like it is almost too heavy to lift.

Every eye in the amphitheater remains locked on his still

shaking hand, as it keeps raising towards the tantalizing envelope, ever closer, until a lonely finger finally touches its edge.

And waves it out of the air.

Forever gone.

The entire auditorium seems to take a deep breath, only to immediately refocus their undivided attention on Ximena.

*Oh, Goah!* Her skin feels too warm, like it is about to break a sweat from every pore at once. “Sorry, Censor Smith. Sorry. I-I can’t...”

“You refuse my instructions, Woman Epullan?” He sounds honestly baffled.

“I- I must know the truth! I *need* to know the truth!”

“You are a cultured woman, educated in the world’s finest academic institution. You already know the truth.”

“I’m afraid I... I don’t anymore. Please, let me read these documents. I just want to know, that’s all. I swear to Goah that I’ll destroy them as soon as I’m done. And of course I’ll keep what I read to myself. I just need to know! Please, Censor Smith. I beg you!”

Censor Smith tilts his head and gives her a magnanimous smile. “I know you are confused. That is not unusual. I know all too well—I was also young once. But you must trust me, Woman Epullan. It is for your own good. And for the good of awns Imperia. You are still too young to understand what is really at stake here.”

“But... How can I trust the side that keeps the evidence under lock and key? Do you know how that looks?!” Ximena meets with pleading eyes the stunned gazes of her fellow GIA students. Some look back at her with sympathy in their eyes. Others—the majority—with scorn. “I- I’m a historian, Goah’s Mercy!”

“Not for long, if you refuse my orders. This is your last

chance, Woman Epullan. Please, do what I say and delete your dreamail.”

Gasps and mumbles cross the amphitheater for a few moments, but they quickly fade away in eager anticipation. The entire auditorium seems to hold its breath. Everybody—*everybody!*—is staring at her with morbid expectation.

“Delete it!” Cody whispers in her left ear. “This is not worth your career.”

“Please, Ximena!” Mark whispers in her right ear, his voice is urgent, fearful. “Just give the damn censor what he wants.”

Ximena wets her lips, way too conscious of the myriad hungry gazes stroking her face. Way too conscious of the one gaze that, for reasons she cannot explain, matters the most to her. As she meets those cool eyes, tranquilly squinting in her direction from behind Censor Smith, she feels a sudden surge of energy pumping up her spine. It might be the slight defiance hinted by his slightly raised chin. It might be the authority of his presence, his long, white hair, his sure pose. Whatever it is, whatever the name, it fills her mind with sudden clarity.

Because, in essence, her dilemma is not that complicated. Not at all. It is a simple matter of *principle*.

Ximena reaches up with both arms and takes the envelope in her hands, which instantly dissolves into two documents.

As the auditorium explodes in gasps—as Miyagi’s expression lightens up with *pride*—Ximena finally lets herself breath out.

It’s done.

She has just ended her career.

And yet, she feels the skin of her cheek stretching as her lips begin to curve.

It’s done.

A matter of principle.

Ximena lets her fingers slide across the surface of the paper. The smooth texture feels so solid and comforting... So

intimate... Perhaps it is the defiance, or the simple promise of truth. Whatever it is, it feels *right*.

Censor Smith sighs and gives her a sad smile. “Woman Epullan, you are no longer a member of the University of Townsend. Your academic honors and titles are hereby revoked. Your research papers and publications are to be removed from the archives. Since you are not entitled to attend this seminar, I kindly ask you to leave the premises.”

Ximena stands and nods once. She extends her hand to Cody—who timidly shakes it—and then gives a confident wink to the appalled-looking Mark. “See you around, handsome.”

“Wait, Ximena.” The voice of Professor Miyagi is loud and sure. When she looks down at him, he is gesturing at her. “Please, sit.”

“Professor?”

“Sit, please, Ximena. Thank you.”

“What are you—?” Censor Smith, frowning at him, begins to ask, but Miyagi walks past him, and towards the GIA section of the amphitheater.

“Ximena, how would you like to join my department in the Lundev?”

“What?!” Ximena blinks, alternating between Miyagi and a frozen Censor Smith.

Miyagi looks pointedly to Ximena’s left. “The offer goes to whoever else gets expelled from the University of Townsend for reasons of conscience.”

“This...” Censor Smith’s head lights up fiery red. “This is outrageous! And unethical! You can’t take my students away!”

“They are not your students anymore, are they?”

“Don’t play with my words, Professor Miyagi! You know very well that this is nothing more than theft by another name.” He points a casual finger at Cody. “Tempting away my kids is an act of extreme hostility. You dare take a single one of them, and your dear Global Program is over!”

“Well, nobody wants that, right?” Miyagi paces slowly back towards Censor Smith, his hands in his pockets. “What about you abstain from expelling *your* students, and I from recruiting them?”

“This is unheard of! Blackmail, pure and simple!”

“Oh, please, spare me the drama. You are a man of politics and negotiation. What I’m suggesting is diplomacy 101, basic de-escalation. Why not? You don’t do me a bad. I don’t do you a bad. And we all keep getting along just fine. Isn’t that what the Global Program is about, after all?”

“De-escalation...” Censor Smith turns his shaved head and meets Ximena’s anxious eyes square on. “Would you like to join our little game of diplomacy, Woman Epullan?”

“I- I don’t follow.”

He gestures at the two documents that she is still holding in her hands. “Delete the content of that dreamail, and we forget this ever happened.”

“No. I’m sorry, but I can’t. Not in good conscience.”

Censor Smith sighs. “That word again. Listen, is your... *conviction* more important than your career? Wait, let me rephrase that. Is it more important than the Global Program?”

Ximena exhales loudly, eyes lost in utter disbelief. *What just happened? Goah’s Mercy, what just happened?! What type of sick maneuvers did those two cook up with a snap of their fingers? How in Goah’s name is it possible that the whole goahdamn world peace suddenly depends on me compromising my principles?!*

Mark leans in and whispers in her ear, “You made your point, Ximena. That was amazing. More than that, it was fucking *glorious*. Now, please, *please*, let it go.”

With fiery eyes, and an exaggerated sigh of exasperation, Ximena rips the documents in her hands in two halves, both of which immediately dissolve in shiny glitter over her lap. “Are we good?!” she asks Censor Smith with intense contempt in her voice.

“Hold your temper, Woman Epullan. I’m still your senior. By a long shot.”

“Hold it...” Mark whispers. “Hold it...”

Ximena folds her arms and leans back, lips pursed in rage. She tries hard—*very* hard—not to cry of sheer frustration.

Censor Smith nods slowly at her. “I believe the Global Program just survived its first major crisis, my dear professor.”

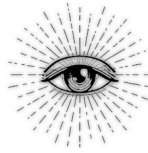
“It seems so,” Miyagi replies. He turns to the rest of the amphitheater and claps twice. “Okay, people. Let’s get back to what we are here for, alright? I’m sure this little tit-for-tat was very entertaining, but wait till you see what I have lined up for you. The Van Dolahs are about to find out that no amount of self-deception can stop the world from spinning. Ank, please, forward to the 13th of February, Quaestor Mathus’ office.”

As the auditorium darkens and a dreamsense scene begins to take shape in its midsts, Ximena, still simmering in anger, throws an annoyed glance at Mark. “And what in Goah’s Name are you smirking about?”

Mark looks at her, and his smile widens. “You really think I’m handsome?”



## THIRTY-ONE



### Sure as Dem

**M**arjolein raises her head from behind her desk as the guard enters her cozily spartan office.

“Aws Prophet and her father ‘st arrived, Pontifex,” he says. Ximena cannot recognize him immediately, not with that pristine-white ceremonial robe of the White Guard of aws Fist, but she finally realizes he is the one named Gale. The robe fits him too tightly—the man is large—and she is in no doubt that weapons and other tools of his trade lurk beneath the folds. “They are in the waitin’ room.”

Marjolein sighs. “She as well?” Marjolein looks tired, perhaps unwell. There are bags under her eyes, but her hair is still impeccably braided, and she wears her Quaestor robes with practiced, flawless grace.

“Aye, Pontifex. Aws Prophet came with ‘er father.”

“Please, Gale. Don’t call me that. At least not in private. Ask them in, please.”

“Aye, Pontifex.”

“A ws blessings to you, Will, Edda. Please, come in.”

As Edda and Willem mumble their greetings, Gale steps outside and shuts the door.

“You finally answer my call, Will. I haven’t seen you in two weeks.” Marjolein stares at him closely, especially at his face, paler than usual. “How are you?”

“Busy,” Edda replies. “I needed him by my side. There was—there still is—so much to do...” She looks around at the empty space between the entrance and Marjolein’s desk. “Ever thought of adding a chair or two?”

“I like my meetings efficient.” Marjolein looks pointedly at Willem. “Busy, you say?”

“You can’t imagine!” Edda replies. “Leap-Day is in... Goah! Just eleven more days! There is so much to prepare for... People are coming from all over the place, yeah? Geldershire, of course, and from the continent, too! Elder Abspoel’s operation is booming on autopilot, churning hundreds of new Walker recruits every day. You should see the size of our training permascape! The original De Bron is now just a speck in the center of it.”

“I’m sure it’s impressive.”

“When are you going to join, Quaestor, er... *Pontifex*? It’s a dream come true!” Edda laughs at her own pun. “Especially for such a fan of,” Edda waves a hand around the small office, “*efficiency*. You can get *so* much more done in a permascape, with time dilation and instant communication across the world... Speaking of which, Aline has already attached to our training permascape the first two colonies outside of the Hanseatic Imperium!”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. One is in North America and the other one in Japan. It’s my dad’s idea,” Edda smiles at her stern-looking father.

“Oh,” Marjolein turns her scrutinizing eyes towards Willem. “So, this was your idea? Tell me about these... colonies, Will. Why so far away?”

Edda replies, her voice bursting with enthusiasm. “To create bridgeheads! To get a solid base in the middle of enemy territory! To seed the revolution! And it’s a great idea to do it now,” Edda gives her father a peck on the cheek, “before aww Head and the Pontifex—the *other* Pontifex,” Edda chuckles, “suspect that we even exist. Ha!”

Marjolein sighs. “I see. Edda, I really beg Goah for your safe journey in these uncertain times, for all our sakes, but it is not you I needed to talk to. I was expecting only Willem. Why did you come?”

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry. Of course, you want to be alone. Okay, okay, but before I go, there is something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Marjolein spreads her hands. “Alright?”

“Yeah, uh, I think you should take more responsibility.”

“Responsibility?”

“Responsibility. Leadership. Call it what you want, but you are the Pontifex of our Reformation.”

“Oh, no, no.” Marjolein shakes her head, shoots a nervous look at the door and drops her voice a notch. “Same as you, I am what I need to be to keep aww Fist from going ballistic. That’s all.”

“But... the people need to see you, Goah’s Mercy! They need to put a face to the Reformation!”

“Isn’t yours pretty enough?”

“For a revolution, perhaps. But not for a goahdamn *Reformation*. We are talking about Goah’s Will, here. People need a woman of the *faith* to guide them to our new truth!”

“*Our* new truth...” Marjolein sighs. “You mean *your* propaganda.”

“Whatever you want to call it, it is now or never, Quaestor.

Since our little broadcast, the Imperium has its hands full with riots and rebellions sprouting everywhere. And not only in Germania. Gallia, Scandinavia and Russia are on fire as well! Joyousday Houses—even awes Eyes—burn down every day. We are invisible to awes Head, and while it lasts, I need you to turn the revolution into Goah’s Calling.”

“*You* need?”

“*We* need! The *people* need the ultimate motivation to change the world! It’s not about karma. It’s not about corruption or injustice. It’s not even about longer lives and prosperity. They must believe that it’s their very *souls* that are on the line!”

“Goah’s Mercy. You want an army of fanatics.”

“Think about it! We give them,” Edda waves a hand at Marjolein, “a new Pontifex, a goahdamn Prophet, a new compact with Goah... Awes Head won’t even know what hit them when the Imperium shatters into a thousand pieces! But we must move quickly, while we’re still in the shadows.”

“Sorry, Edda. But I can’t be your Pontifex. I mean... it’s ridiculous. And Goah knows Lunteren needs a full-time Quaestor. Now, more than ever. There is so much going on I can barely...” She sighs.

“But... the Colony Elders should take over all that business! That’s their goahdamn job, yeah? I restored them to their respective offices. With their experience—”

Marjolein snorts. “What experience? This is all new territory! For them as much as for me. They do what they can, but...” Marjolein shakes her head. “Lunteren is in dire need of leadership at the moment, and unless you want to take over, that’s going to be me.”

“Oh, come on. Things can’t be that bad. Surely—”

“You think this is just business as usual?” Marjolein lets her eyes wander in disbelief as she catches her breath. “While you’ve been away, Goah knows where, playing rebel queen,

refugees have kept pouring in non-stop from the rest of Geldershire. And as if our resources were not already stretched to the limit, the icing on the cake is the Inquisitor's decision to base the entire fucking aw's Fist here, in Lunteren. For your protection, of course."

"*Our* protection. You are their Pontifex."

"I don't want to be the Pontifex of hunger and misery!" Marjolein's voice is shriller now, like a string cord about to snap. "Look around you! Trade has fucking collapsed, Edda! No barges stop in our harbors anymore, no wagons arrive from the continent. We just have what we got for the time being. And karma..." She snorts. "What good is karma for when there is nothing to purchase?"

Edda nods and sighs. "A war economy. I've read about it in history books. But not for long. Rutger—Redeemed Siever—is setting up for his father—who is once again Trade Colder—some type of permascape initiative to sort this out. They are threading *every* Trade Colder in the Rhine-Baltic circuit into the same permascape room until they work out among themselves whatever new deals are necessary to get the economy back. It's all really innovative, and I suggest you hook up with them to see what it's all about. What are they calling the initiative, Dad?"

"Uh... I don't remember." Willem frowns. "Something with... Um..."

Edda snaps the fingers of her right hand and then points a finger at Marjolein. "The Free Colonies of Hansa! Not very catchy, but it should get commerce flowing again in a couple of weeks. A month tops."

"I'm happy to hear that," Marjolein's voice softens. "I really am. And I sure as Dem will go see Colder Siever as soon as I have a spare minute. But, for the time being, and as long as I remain Quaestor of Lunteren, I'm stuck in this office, and must deal with this shitstorm the best I can. Now, you

promised you'd leave us alone, Edda? I need to talk to your father."

Edda purses her lips, eyes locked on Marjolein's. "I misjudged you, Quaestor."

"Oh?"

"I always thought you were an ass-licking, ambitious bitch, ready to sell your own... whatever you awa Head people value, to get out of this place with a promotion."

Marjolein laughs wholeheartedly, tilting her head back, before meeting Edda's gaze anew. "You certainly misjudged me, Edda. But not as much as you think. True. I would do almost *anything* to... unlock my career, which admittedly has remained somehow stuck since that stunt of Aline's and yours on New Year's Eve. Oh, no need to feign regret. I know how you feel about me, how you've always felt..."

"Quaestor—"

"But I would *never* put my career in front of the wellbeing of my people. Never. That is my sacred duty, Edda. I answer first to Goah, then to my flock, and only then to myself."

"But as Pontifex, you could have it all! I'm offering you the power to fulfill Goah's Will as you deem fit, and to guide your flock—a flock larger than you could have ever imagined!—to a new world where they live long, fulfilled lives without fear of Dem and oppression."

Marjolein scoffs. "You still believe there is no Dem."

Edda blinks. "There is no Dem."

"You still believe awa Head poisons every colonist on their Joyousday."

Edda blinks again, but doesn't reply.

Marjolein takes a deep breath. "It might surprise you to hear this, Edda. But you are also a woman of faith. Perhaps more than me. Only you focus your faith on earthly matters, with simplistic explanations and clearcut villains."

Ximena feels Edda's energetic enthusiasm slowly turning into anger. "You aren't seriously implying that Dem exists..."

Marjolein rolls her eyes and turns them towards Willem, who is staring at her in somber silence. "I wanted to discuss this with you first, Will. In private, since I know Edda would never believe it. But, since both of you are here... Goah knows, perhaps it is aw's Will..."

Edda takes a step forward, anger turning to rage smoldering slowly in her gut. "You are not implying that Dem, the *disease*, not the poison, is still around, yeah? The disease that nobody has ever witnessed?"

"I know you can't believe me, Edda. Flexing your faith is beyond your capabilities. All I can tell you is that *I* have witnessed it. Several times already."

"Horseshit!" Edda takes another step forward and slams her right hand on the table. "Why the fuck are you doing this? I thought you were on our side!"

"I am on Lunteren's side! And Lunteren needs the truth!" She stands and points a finger squarely at Edda. "It is *you* who has to ask yourself on which side you stand. There are two sides. One of them holds," Marjolein raises her left-hand palm up, and looks at it, "the truth... and *Dem*, as sure as ever—"

"Horseshit! Liar!"

Marjolein raises her other hand, flexed into a fist. "—and the other side holds self-deceit and propaganda, soaked in a thick sauce of blind *faith*."

"Liar!" Edda raises her hand, as if about to strike Marjolein, but a thunderous voice stops her in midair.

"Edda!" Willem is glaring at her, his face flushed, his eyes widened... *terrifying!* A shiver runs up Ximena's spine. "Stop this instant! Behave like a civilized adult, Goah's Mercy!"

Edda blinks at her father, her lips trembling slightly, a hint of tears in her eyes. "But... But..."

Willem turns to Marjolein and wets his lips. “I apologize for my daughter, Marjo. But, you aren’t seriously saying that you’ve seen *real* Dem, right? I mean, actual people with actual Dem?”

“Until a few weeks ago, never, I admit it. But since there are no Joyousdays anymore... Well, age eventually catches up with everybody.” She raises a thumb. “The first one was Elder Muurling. Her family brought her to aw’s Eye, because she forgot how to make bread. It was Dem. After that, it was quiet for a while. But then, in quick succession: Elder Siegerink,” she keeps counting with her fingers, “Elder Seppenwoolde, Elder Abspoel, Elder Toersche—”

“Elder Abspoel?!” Willem says, eyes widening in horror. “No!” He turns to Edda. “I thought she was managing the recruiting operation?”

“Elvira...” Edda’s eyebrows raise in alarm. “She- She hasn’t been around for a few days now. Said she needed to take some time off.”

“No.” Willem shakes his head, and gapes at Marjolein. “That can’t be right. It must be something else.”

“Will, I’m trained to recognize the symptoms. It’s Dem. Classic, honest-to-Goah Dem. Just...” She drops into the chair, eyes shut, and exhales a long, deep breath. “... accept it.”

Edda clears her throat. “What are you doing with the sick?” she finally asks, almost in a whisper.

“What are *we* doing?” Marjolein glares at her and scoffs. “What do you think we are doing, Edda? You fucking forbade the Joyousday, remember? There’s just,” she shakes her head in frustration, “nothing we can do. Their minds are dissolving, Goah’s Mercy. They are forgetting *everything* and *everybody* in their lives. Can you imagine how it is for their families to see them slowly but relentlessly turning into dead, breathing bodies—robbed by *you* of the right to depart with any joy or dignity?”

“That can’t be right,” Willem mutters to himself. “That can’t be right!”



Marjolein purses her lips and looks away. “Goah be my witness. And I confess that I had to order the pharmacists an, er, *upgrade* to the Joyousday infusion. I- I had to...” She sighs, turns her gaze towards Edda, and lifts her chin a notch in defiance. “Well, you will be pleased to know that your policies have finally turned your paranoid fantasies about aw’s Head poisoning our people into a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Edda covers her mouth, eyes widened in disbelief.

“Furthermore,” Marjolein lifts her chin another notch, “I ordered my staff to begin urgent reconstruction of the Joyousday House.”

Edda opens her mouth, as if about to say something, but then she shuts it, and turns her dumbfounded eyes towards her father.

Willem is frowning, a finger on his temple, blinking, looking nowhere in particular. “What’s wrong with the Joyousday House?” he asks.

Marjolein turns her glare slowly at him and shrugs theatrically. “Nothing, Will. Just that your dear daughter burned it down.”

“What are you talking about?” Willem frowns. And then gives Edda a baffled look. “Did you...?!”

Edda and Marjolein exchange a wide-eyed glance.

Marjolein stands, eyes fiercely locked on his. “Will, when did we first kiss?” Her voice is filled with urgency. With *fear*.

Willem’s frown deepens. “Uh, I can’t follow...”

“Answer, please! Where were we?!”

Willem raises his eyes to the ceiling. “Um, uh...” He looks back at her with a deep frown.

“What happened the day Anika embraced Goah?!”

Edda leans forward in an instant, hands on the desk, glowering eyes on Marjolein. “How dare you?!” she spits the words like a cobra her poison.

Marjolein ignores her. “What happened during your sister’s

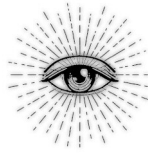
Joyousday, Will? There was an incident, remember? Something happened. Edda and Bram were there as well...”

Edda keeps staring at her with bloodshot eyes, upper lip trembling, but as Willem remains silent, she slowly turns her head. “Dad?”

Willem is staring at Marjolein, gaping in confusion and dismay. “Anika...? Anika is dead?”

Ximena sits bolt upright, as a flood of icy horror flows unimpeded through Edda’s psych-link.

Tears begin to well up in Marjolein’s eyes. “Redeemed van Dolah, it is my sad duty to inform you that your Elder has contracted Dem.”



## LEAP DAY

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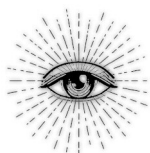
### Episode IX

*“Truth is too blunt an instrument of power to wield effectively. Propaganda, on the other hand, can be refined to perfection.”*





## THIRTY-TWO



### An Island of Life

The scene glides like a seagull that descends on Lunteren in gentle circles, offering Ximena alternating panoramic views of the great winter woods engulfed by the eastern horizon, myriads of fields and pastures dotted with grazing animals, and to the west, beyond an eerily silent harbor, the ocean shallows glittering turquoise under the sun. Ximena takes in the fresh air, her nostrils filling with intense undertones of pines, salt and low tide.

Then, without warning, most colors fade away from the rich scene.

Many students lean forward. Some gasp. But Ximena immediately realizes that the perspective has not changed; they are on the same gentle descent, and the air remains fragrant. The scene has just transitioned into the Second Wake. This is the Traverse now, a vivid world of black skies, sharp clarity and human-shaped blue halos going about their afternoon business on the streets below.

And, floating in the center of the auditorium, a female figure scans the colony below. It is Aline: blue-glowing, semi-transparent, nude and hairless Aline. She has seen something

on the western edge of the colony. At least, she is squinting intently in that direction.

Ximena follows her gaze. And there, barely visible between the narrow gaps of the old church tower, a particularly bright glitter flickers as a blue figure inside seems to move about.

Aline's expression turns into a puzzled frown. Then, without visible effort, her astral body *flies*—for lack of a better word—into the church tower at an impossible speed, oblivious to such mundane physical considerations as acceleration, air resistance or inertia. Her sudden movement violently drags with her the rest of the auditorium, forcing Ximena to shut her eyes for a moment to repress an abrupt surge of vertigo.

“Aws Greetings, Gotthard,” Aline says. “You went to sleep early today. What are you doing here?”

Gotthard's traversing figure—as nude and hairless as Aline's—turns towards her. “Speese.” He nods a curt salute. “I was... checking something. What about you?”

“Just back from Munakata—it's night in the China Imperium. I had to go to sleep early to adapt.” Aline whistles at the sight of the destroyed antenna: coils and metal tubes viciously split and twisted, discarded on the wooden-planked floor of the bell room. There is a long telescope now where the antenna used to peek out to the sky, with cables running out of it down into the space below.

“Yes...” Gotthard gives the ruined antenna a pained glance. “So much effort, right? And karma.” He shakes his head. “And for what?”

“Why don't you repair this... whatever it is?”

He shakes his head again. “They did a good job, those fuckers. I'd need to rebuild from scratch, and with the trade disruptions, it's impossible to get any specialized equipment.”

“Tell me about it,” Aline sighs. “If it wasn't for my tasks in Edda's revolution, I would be pretty much twiddling my thumbs all day.”

“It’s not *Edda’s* revolution. It’s everybody’s.”

Aline snorts. “You seriously believe that?”

“Hmm... How’s the Japanese crowd doing?” he swiftly changes topics. “Still motivated?”

She whistles again. “Like boys and girls playing medics in the dark, mensa. Especially the Traverse.” She waves her hand at the vivid substance around them. “They call it the *spirit world*, you know? I was there just for a demonstration on the Shadow Path and a talk about the possibilities of the permascape. Man Westhuijs from Oosterbeek also came with me. He stayed to assist with training.”

“And their morale is still high? Don’t they care about Dem?”

“What about Dem?”

“Goah, Speese, what do you think? What about that Dem is very much alive and kicking? What about that all our oh-so-glorious revolutionary talk about long lifespans and freeing ourselves from the Joyousday and the chain of superstition is just a pile of bull?”

Aline shrugs. “I guess the new recruits don’t even think about it. For them, that’s the way the world has always been. They get immediately infatuated with all this,” she wags her fingers, “*dreamtech* magic. And what about here? How is morale keeping up in Lunteren?”

“What morale?” He laughs without humor. “Isn’t it a paradox that revolutionary enthusiasm is mostly extinct where it was born, yet it thrives elsewhere?”

“So bad, huh?”

Gotthard sighs, and throws a finger at an indistinct point above the eastward roofs. “Edda left all her self-assigned duties and has been missing for over a week. Ledeboer and Zegers are struggling to keep a semblance of control over our jittery fellow rebels, but without her,” he shakes his head, “they’re lost.”



Aline's face contracts in disgust. "That bitch really enjoys her long baths of self-pity."

"Whoa, easy! Edda is devastated about Elder van Dolah. Tomorrow is his Joyousday, Goah's Mercy. And his mind is..." He makes a gesture with his index finger around his head. "He's gone. It's so... pathetic. Besides, I think she feels guilty about throwing the Imperium into chaos for nothing. I say we are still alive. That's not nothing!"

Aline shakes her head. "Typical Edda: assuming responsibility for others, and then running away when it gets messy. Goah, she never fails to disappoint."

"Whoa, that's harsh! I think you blame her for the death of your Ledeboer rat boy."

Aline's face contracts into a deeper scowl. "Goah's Mercy, Gotthard. You're such an asshole!"

"Sorry. Just saying things how I see them. Besides, at least Edda had the dignity to attend Elder Abspoel's Joyousday yesterday, and Elder Toersche's this morning."

Aline curls her lips and turns her face. "Been busy. You know that."

"How unfortunate. You're missing quite the party." His expression sours visibly. "Dem wipes the joy off everything, Speese. Joyousdays are now soul drenching. Have you ever tried to bid goodbye to someone who doesn't know who you are? That look on their faces, that... blind confusion. Some can't even recognize themselves any longer. They don't know where they are or where they are going. I only hope that they recover their old selves when they Embrace Goah."

"Of course they do!" Aline places a hand on Gotthard's shoulder. "Dem is an earthly disease."

"Thank Goah, tomorrow is the last planned Joyousday." He meets her eyes. "Are you going to skip Elder van Dolah's as well?"

She sinks her head. “He doesn’t know who I am. And Edda will be there.”

“You are a coward, Speese.”

She raises her head, meets his gaze and nods slowly. “Guess I am.”

Gotthard looks away, and says with a softer voice, “You are still bent on going on exile...” Again, not a question.

She shrugs. “What else? Leap Day is in three days.”

Gotthard scoffs. “Who cares?”

“You are in denial, Gotthard. In three fucking days, masses of people are coming. That’s bound to catch the attention of aws Head! You want to be in Lunteren, then?”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. The Imperium is in over its head, with all the rioting and open rebellion everywhere.”

“And for how long? What happens when the people realize that Edda’s broadcast was all a fucking lie and Dem isn’t a conspiracy, but a real killer?”

Gotthard scoffs. “They don’t know that. And they won’t, if we play our cards smartly.”

“What?” Aline exhales. “How?! Without the Joyousday, the old are going to drop like witless flies all around us! You can’t hide the truth from the people!”

“We’ll deny it. We’ll forbid any talk about it. We’ll call them reactionaries, liars, enemies of the people.”

“Gotthard!” Aline covers her mouth, eyes widened in disbelief. “You know what you’re saying?!”

“We can do it. We’ll use aws Head’s records to monitor the oldest and find an excuse to displace them in time. I don’t know,” he waves a hand, as he speaks, “reeducation... public works... military... anything! We can sure as Dem keep the illusion for a few years. Enough for...” He pauses.

“Enough for what? What are you selling your soul for?”

Gotthard doesn’t reply. He looks up through one of the tower gaps into the black sky, and clenches his jaw.

“Gotthard?”

“If you don’t like my intentions, then stay—and fight me!” Ximena notices a slight tremor in his lower lips.

“I don’t want to stay and play god! It’s... immoral!”

“We need you, Speese... Aline...” Gotthard keeps his eyes locked on the blackness, and blinks repeatedly. “*We* need you,” he almost whispers.

Aline regards him in silence for a few seconds.

Then she slowly raises her hand and puts a finger on his chest. “Come with me,” she says.

Gotthard turns his face and looks her squarely in the eyes. There is fear in his gaze, Ximena thinks. And something else, too. He gives her a firm shake of his head and looks away.

“Come on, Gotthard. Just... Come with me, okay? Janson and a few others are coming too, since Edda is a goner now. He says we’ll be safe in Old Amsterdam. There’s plenty of fish and shelter there. I’ve seen it myself. We just need to clean up, collect rainwater, and we’ll be fine. We can trade discreetly with Utrechtshire for essentials. And if it doesn’t work, we can always sail on to Britain.”

“I- I can’t,” he takes a step back, and looks again through a tower gap, letting his eyes wander over the southern fields. “I can’t leave Gerrit. He’s only one year old.” His face tightens with abrupt emotion, but he closes his eyes and regains control over his expression.

Ximena feels a sudden connection with this young man. It is not the psych-link. It is something more visceral. Gotthard loves his baby son fiercely. She can see that. Gerrit will turn into a father himself one day, and will name his baby girl Vanessa. She will eventually emigrate to the Andes, history turning its wheels, and have a dowry son herself, an Epullan baby. *Abuelo*. Who Ximena loves fiercely. The connection is almost electric. The love of this man—Gotthard—flows

through time into the future, and Ximena is the current recipient.

“Besides, there is the...” Gotthard wets his lips. “I- I really need resources. Proper resources: equipment, computers, karma, connections... And to obtain them, I need hard power. I don’t have a choice, Speese. I must stay. And rule.”

“It’s that asteroid of yours, isn’t it? The one that’s supposed to wipe us out?” Aline scoffs as she watches his expression tighten. “Come on, you are smarter than that! What hasn’t happened in—what, millions of years?—is not going to happen now.”

“Not now. In a hundred and ten years.”

“One day, one century, what difference does it make if there is nothing you can do to prevent the rock from falling on our heads?”

“But there is! With enough power, I could restart a space program to—”

Aline scoffs. “You are delusional.”

“Don’t laugh! We’ve got the knowledge. It’s all there, buried in books and drives. And we’ve got the time—a hundred and ten years. We just need to get our shit together and get to work.”

Aline shakes her head. “You are fucking delusional.”

“Babi is coming, Speese! Sure as Dem is! The lost colony nudged it our way.”

“Oh, come on! Why in Goah’s Name would they do that?”

“I don’t know! Rutger thinks they want to cleanse Earth from Dem and reclaim it later. He was also there when we talked to them. Ask him if you don’t believe me.”

She gets closer to him and takes his right hand in hers. “I’m sorry, Gotthard, because I know how important this belief is for you. But there are no psycho planet-killers alive in some goahforsaken space colony.”

Gotthard sighs, rolling his eyes. “You think I *want* to

believe? No, Speese. My entire... *soul* is crying out for denial. My mind is constantly on the lookout for an excuse to stop believing. But I am a scientist. And I know that cognitive dissonance is the parent of self-deceit. And I also know that self-deceit is the fatal flaw of our species. Self-deceit is what sent our environment, and ultimately our golden age, down the drain. But either we learn to confront all the uncomfortable truths that the universe keeps throwing at us—this time, literally—or we go fucking extinct.”

“Okay, I know you really believe what you are saying, but—”

“What if I show you?!” He points at the long metallic tube protruding out of the western gap that overlooks the ocean. “Would you deny your own eyes?”

Aline frowns. “Can you see your lost colony with that?”

Gotthard points in the same direction the telescope is aiming. “Its orbit is too close to the sun, so I must track it during the daytime, and with the sun, it’s just too goahdamn bright. I don’t have the filters. I doubt they exist any longer. But even if I could, it’s just too far away. A black rock against a black background doesn’t leave much of an impression on our ape eyes. Not even through a golden-age era optical telescope. So I’m afraid I can’t show you space colonists waving back at us.”

“Then,” she gestures at the destroyed equipment, “unless you rebuild all this, there’s no way to actually know if there is anyone out there.”

“Well, well. The Traverse is very peculiar, isn’t it?” He moves his hand slowly around, like he could feel the texture in the air. “So mysterious... Seems almost magical. But, hey. I’m a scientist. There is always a rational explanation for everything we can see. And everything we can *touch*.” He puts the palm of his hand on her cheek, and looks at her in the eyes—resplendent blue in the Traverse, intense and intimate, a gate

to the soul. “Uh...” He hastily takes his hand off and gestures at the world around them. “There are different rules here, in the Traverse, that’s for sure. But rules, regardless. Rules that can be observed, analyzed, hypothesized, and tested. There is science to be done here, Speese. For example, take electromagnetism. Our traversing eyes aren’t sensitive to light. Have you noticed?”

“What do you mean? There’s light everywhere! Everything glows.”

“Incorrect, Speese. We see *something*. But it’s not light. No photon is hitting our traversing retinas. Where’s the sun?”

Aline looks out the closest gap. Then the rest of the gaps. There are black skies everywhere. “Where *is* the sun?” she asks back.

“It’s right there,” he points with a stretched arm towards the deep blackness a few inches over the western horizon, “where it has always been at this time and date.”

“There’s nothing there.”

“Oh, the sun is there, alright. We just cannot perceive its photons. Everything we can *see*—the colony, the ocean, the fields, the halos—that isn’t light. It’s something *else*. I don’t know what yet, but it sure as Dem isn’t electromagnetic radiation. I’m still trying to come up with a testable hypothesis. But I think it’s related to life—or even consciousness. Fact is: everything we can see is either alive, or at the very least, covered with microscopic life. Space,” he gestures up at the sky, “is dead: the sun, the moon, the planets, the stars. There’s *nothing* out there. Just... what our mind interprets as blackness. But look around down here: bacteria thrives on every surface we see, on the streets, the walls—on every object. And then compare that with the vegetation—it radiates brighter than walls, doesn’t it? And animals shine even more. And nothing beats the radiance of blue human halos. Why? And why *blue*? Goah, there’s still so much to learn!”

“Oookay...?”

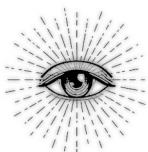
“You really want to know why I was traversing in the daytime? Well, for starters, there’s no sun here to blind us. Come, Speese. I set up the telescope in the Wake. It’s tracking as we speak. Take a peek and tell me what you see.”

Aline stares at Gotthard for a second, but then approaches the telescope and carefully squints over the eyepiece. “Um, it’s black. Ah, I see a dot in the middle. A bright dot. It, uh, twinkles flashes of,” her mouth drops open, “blue... and red?! Is *that*—?!”

“New Alexandria.”

“Impossible!” Aline keeps staring through the lens. “Must be something else. You said it yourself: it’s too far away. Too faint, even with a telescope.”

“You are thinking in terms of the First Wake, Speese. But what you are seeing is not light. It is *life*. An island of life—in an ocean of death.”



## The Shell of a Rotten Egg

---

Edda pushes the door to the main bedroom open with hesitant fingers, dread in her eyes.

Willem sleeps. His breathing is regular, and, without his glasses, his relaxed features appear as innocent as a child's—a young man resting, handsome and healthy.

The pristine shell of a rotten egg.

Edda's breath jitters at the sight of her father. And the psych-link keeps pumping her thoughts—her raw feelings—with merciless immediacy. Ximena tries to keep her own lips from trembling by pursing them, but the turmoil of defeat, fear, and loneliness fills her with deep, intimate sorrow.

*I will never see you again, will I, Dad? Your true self is already gone. And now it's too late to say goodbye.*

*I will never look again into your true eyes. Your soul has been forever locked away.*

*I've heard your voice for the last time. Goah, I can't even remember your last true word. Was it something you said in anger? It probably was, but there won't be any more fights for us, huh, Dad?*

*Your end was announced when you were born, and it arrived with relentless punctuality.*



*Tomorrow is your Joyousday.*

*Finally.*

*And I so desperately want it for you; the merciful release to aw  
Embrace. Goah knows I would have turned the world upside down if that  
had kept you on it. But there is nothing—absolutely nothing—I can do  
anymore. Not with all the power. And Goah knows I tried. But at the end  
of your path—of everybody’s path—there is only one sure fate.*

*A fate that destroys our links to the past.*

*A fate that destroys our dreams of the future.*

*A fate that leaves us so, so alone....*

Ximena throws a quick glimpse around at her fellow students—they all feel it, as enslaved to the psych-link as she is: the desperation, the failure, the heartache.

Bram is on a chair by the side of Willem’s bed. He has raised his broad face and is giving Edda an encouraging smile. Here, side by side, Ximena can see so much of Willem in him, as if his thirteen-year-old self were sitting by his own deathbed.

Isabella Zegers sits next to him on another chair brought up from the kitchen, sipping silently from a steaming cup. As she sees Edda by the door, she puts her tea down on the nightstand, stands slowly, so as to not make a sound, and gives Edda a polite smile as she passes next to her on the way out.

Bram raises a finger to his lips, and gestures for Edda to approach. Two-year-old Hans is sleeping over his lap and belly; a wool blanket and Bram’s embrace keeping him warm and content.

Edda really wants to be with her family. Together, at the very end, while it is still... *whole*. Perhaps that will ease her loneliness, if only a notch.

But is she really looking for relief? She looks again at her father, and all she wants to feel is pain, and caress it, let it bloom, let it be her homage to their shared life and the emptiness left in its wake.

With tears in her eyes, Edda takes a jittery step back out of

the bedroom, and gently pulls the door shut. She slowly stumbles to her own room, and drops like a dead body—a dead, weeping body—on her bed.

*Where are you now, Dad? I want to say goodbye so badly... Is there anything still left inside you?*

Edda exhales as a question creeps up her conscience. A question that overwhelms every other thought whirling in her mind.

*What are you dreaming, Dad?*

Ximena feels Edda's sadness gradually pushed into the background by her determination. Her body goes limp on the bed in an instant, and her breathing steadies so quickly that Ximena doesn't realize that Edda has fallen asleep until the air in the room wobbles—once, twice—as if made of translucent gel.

And then, before Ximena has even time to wonder, the whole auditorium scene transitions smoothly into the Traverse.

*Wow!* Ximena stares in awe at the sudden, spotless clarity of Edda's bedroom, and Edda's intense, blue shine. No matter how often Ximena experiences the transition into the Second Wake, she will never get used to that immediate feeling of liberation, like a film of fog had just been wiped off the surface of reality.

Edda stands.

No, not her body, which lies unconscious now over the wrinkled sheets, her chest rising and sinking in a slow, rhythmic cadence. It is Edda's ethereal self that stands, floats determinedly to the door and then right through it.

The auditorium scene follows her swift movement along the hallway and into her father's bedroom.

Bram is staring at Willem with a different expression. He doesn't look so confident now, so placid. Quite the contrary. He still taps the sleeping cuddled Hans with one hand, but with the other, he is holding his father's hand.

A trembling hand.

Ignoring her brother, Edda approaches the bed and stares carefully at Willem. She leans forward and inspects the thin scintillation covering his skin.

Willem's halo is so unusually weak... It is irregular and twinkles wildly—more so than a regular dreamer. The feeble blue glimmer seems almost *dirty*, like soot on snow, like chickenpox on a child's skin.

Edda reaches out with her right hand until her index finger skims over his face, a semitransparent finger, shining fresh and intense—in stark contrast to his pale, diseased halo.

Then, a sudden, fleeting flash of a red glint rises through his halo.

It happens only once—so subtle that Ximena's untrained eyes barely take notice. But Edda gasps and takes a step back, blinking eyes open wide.

*What the fuck?!*

The surge of bafflement also spikes Ximena's attention, who unconsciously leans in as Edda does likewise. She is squinting at her father's frail halo—at the chaotic dance of blue peaks and troughs—with unyielding concentration.

But, there's nothing there.

And yet, Edda doesn't lift her gaze. Her mind is so unnaturally quiet and tense, her will so fiercely attentive and patient, so sharp... like a... like a Walker of the Mind, of course.

*Whoa! There it is again!* A red sparkle, barely visible in the midst of blue, and gone as quick as it came. But now, even Ximena is sure of it.

Edda doesn't hesitate. She leans forward, her traverse muscles quicker than her own mind, and throws herself almost violently against Willem's halo.

Ximena jolts on her bench as Willem's bedroom morphs with a sudden shake into a... *desert?* The yellow-orange

landscape feels ancient and untouched. A desert, indeed, of the past turned to dust. The sun hangs high, unnaturally red, unnaturally weak.

Edda raises her head at the immense mountain that—just a few yards in front of her—emerges like a perfectly shaped volcano in the ocean of sand. No, it is not a mountain. It is artificial—its base runs in a straight line for miles; its surface is sharp and smooth, made of some sort of copper-colored metal that glimmers crimson in the sun, and that feels as old as the sands themselves.

Edda turns to contemplate the desert surrounding her, and her mouth drops open. In the far distance, other colossal copper-colored structures reveal the nature of the artificial mountain beside her: it is a *pyramid*—if such a mundane word can describe such a gargantuan structure.

And she has been here before!

Ximena gasps in recognition. Her gaze seeks a point above the horizon, where unfathomably tall ravines and intricate geological structures hint out of the thin atmosphere, hanging miles high in the sky like gravity was but an afterthought in this place.

Edda looks at the farther pyramids and squints. They feel different. Somehow, more dusty, more *inert*. She turns her gaze to the pyramid next to her. Even Ximena can sense it now: the almost imperceptible vibration emanating from the copper-like walls, like an infrasonic, thick hum at the threshold of human hearing.

Edda places a hand against the wall, which feels oddly cool to the touch, and eerily smooth, like metallic silk. And there are certainly vibrations across—

*What's that?!* Edda—and Ximena—jump at the sudden, but brief, passing of a large shadow right behind the wall, like it was not fully opaque, and something was moving inside.

Something strange... and yet intimately familiar.

“Dad?”

Edda shuts her eyes and moves the tips of her fingers across the surface of the pyramid, like a blind woman reading braille.

And the feeling intensifies, unmistakable now, even to Ximena.

Edda opens her eyes with a gasp. “Dad!”

Ximena feels Edda’s instincts tapping into the well of her Walker training as she unconsciously flicks her right hand.

A human-sized gap opens, revealing fuzzy, dynamic shadows inside. As Edda walks into the structure, the wall rematerializes behind her in silence.

The underlit interior appears completely hollow. There are no inner walls or roofs to stop her gaze from wandering deep and across the depths of the unimaginably vast open space. The illumination is dim and emanates from a distant place miles ahead—too far away to see clearly—maybe the center of the pyramid.

Edda stares into the air with raised eyebrows and parted lips, and as Ximena’s eyes adapt, she perceives faint movement there: distinct images—*moving*, three-dimensional images—begin to come to sight everywhere around her, floating in midair as far as her gaze can penetrate, like a million—a *billion*—silent holographic films competing for an empty spot inside the immeasurable vastness of the pyramid’s hollowed space.

Edda mutters a word as she lets her eyes glade from scene to scene, “Dad...”

The sheer amount of movement around her is staggering, but Ximena focuses her attention on those floating snippets closest to her, trying to make sense of what she is actually seeing. Each scene is a perfect sphere of silent action, each a bubble hanging in midair next to others, each showing a different—but ordinary—moment in the life of a colonist of the age of Goah. But the perspective in all of them is strange,

as if everything had been recorded from the first-person point of view of an individual.

Most of them show the same actors over and over again: Bram and Edda herself, at varied ages, the occasional glimpse of baby Hans, and very prominently in many of them is Anika—some when she was just a girl!—and an older couple unknown to her. Some scenes appear to have been filmed from within a school classroom: most looking down on children’s faces, but some embedded among children and looking up at a speaking adult. Marjolein Mathus appears on a good deal of them, too. Whoa, those are intense! There are sex scenes, tender scenes, fight scenes...

Ximena lets her eyes wander farther. It’s endless! There are going-to-the-market scenes, waking-up scenes, having-breakfast scenes, walking-in-the-woods scenes, taking-a-bath scenes, scenes of life, of family, of fulfillment, of failure, of happiness, of sadness, of love... A whole goahdamn life, as far as the eye can—

Edda exhales—as does Ximena—when a bolt of realization crosses her mind.

The life of *Willem van Dolah!*

The chaos is almost impossible to navigate through. Ximena wants to shut her eyes, but Edda keeps observing—*absorbing*—with astounded fascination the essence of her father, and thus, of herself. Even Ximena feels the connection; Willem is as much her ancestor as Edda is.

Something peculiar catches Edda’s attention: these fragments of life—these *memories*—disintegrate into glowing dust as they run their course, only for fresh, seemingly unrelated films to take their place. Images come and go in a dizzying display of life, dissolution and renewal.

Edda’s breathing quickens.

*What the fuck is going on?!*

The thought shines through the psych-link as brightly as

that distant source of light, miles away in the guts of the pyramid, that calls to her so tantalizingly.

Edda begins to run towards the light, sudden fear in her eyes, and then, in an instant, arrives there in that undefined way that dreams have of skipping the journey.

It is the geometrical center of the pyramid—and it glimmers!

The lingering, sparkling dust in the air—the afterglow of Willem’s vanishing life-fragments—gathers here as if carried by invisible currents.

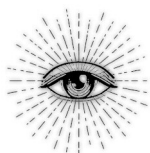
“Dad!” Edda screams at the sickening sight, as Ximena leans back in a spasm of horror.

The massive body of a leech dominates the area and absorbs—no, *ingests!*—the floating strands of refulgent memories. A flurry of short, tender appendages keeps her monstrous body floating in place, as if underwater. Her two octopus-like eyes—whiter even than her spongy skin—twitch in trance-like spasms as the dust of a myriad of life memories *falls* towards her. *Into* her.

But Ximena’s aghast eyes are drawn by four longer, throbbing appendages that reach down to wrap and caress the inert body of Willem van Dolah—his arms stretched without moving, his eyes open without seeing, his mouth open without screaming. He looks tiny under the leech’s engulfing body, like a mouse in the claws of an eagle.

Edda screams again, but this time it is a piercing wordless cry of pure, raw horror.

## THIRTY-FOUR



### Dreamworms

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The alien creature appears oblivious to Edda's presence. Her slug-like, white skin keeps absorbing steadily—*eagerly*—the faint threads of Willem's iridescent memories.

Edda takes a step forward, raises her arms and a machine gun like those carried by an aw's Fist warrior materializes in place. Clenching her jaws, she pulls the trigger all the way as a loud barrage of dream lead pierces dozens of tiny holes on the fragile skin of the leech.

Edda jumps back with a curt gasp and almost drops her weapon as an endless stream of memory fragments begin to escape out of the leech's body with a deafening screech, like air from a punctured balloon—so quickly that the images floating in the immense pyramid space must clutter closer to each other to make room for the unexpected spill.

The leech's bulbous eyes turn to Edda with a spasmodic jolt, making Ximena recoil in paralyzing terror. She can feel the monster's *will* burning against Edda's skin.

The machine gun disappears and something invisible—something *violent*—pushes Edda at least thirty yards back



through the air. The pain is so abrupt and sharp that Ximena reaches for Mark's hand as she quickly catches her breath.

Edda falls flat on her back, her own momentum smashing her against the ground. The pain almost paralyzes Ximena, so she can only imagine what Edda has felt on the other side of the psych-link filter.

But Edda's discipline takes over at once. She begins to pull herself up while a single thought overwhelms all others. The only thought—the only *truth*—that matters now. A truth that clears her mind of worry, of fear, of rage.

*Pain in dreams is but a mirage of the mind.*

Before she can fully stand, the pyramid's floor stretches up in solid tendrils, grabs her hands and feet, and smashes her back anew against the ground with pounding violence.

*A mirage of the mind.*

The floor then engulfs her extremities and buries—swallows—them inside the ground.

Edda grunts and tries to wrestle herself free.

First, with her muscles.

Then, with her mind.

In vain.

A deep, feminine voice begins to speak—to *reverberate* psychically—pulling Ximena's horrified gaze back to the leech. "Ael-at-Deviss, do release the human conduit."

The uncontrolled memory spillage has stopped and the creature's wounds have vanished—not simply cured, but gone as if they had never happened. Her bulbous eyes are locked on a black sphere not far away that Ximena just notices now for the first time. The sphere is perfect and opaque, as large as a horse carriage, and almost invisible in the relative darkness of the pyramid's heart.

A mare walks out of the sphere—through its walls, as if it were made of air—and begins walking towards the leech while

scanning the area. She stops dead in her tracks as her gaze meets Edda's.

"Rew?!" Edda has stopped struggling to break free and just stares at the mare in shock. Ximena feels her thoughts run wild and incoherent, swirling in bafflement and incomprehension.

"Sense and bind, human." The mare stays still for a few moments, while her expressionless white eyes observe Edda's semi-buried body. "I do sense your *true* presence. My Overseer warned us that a handful of humans were capable of Walking the Paths, but meeting one in the flesh—in the feeding permascap, no less—is most remarkable."

"Ael-at-Deviss," the leech says, "you did abdicate your vigilance duty. Do explain."

The mare turns to face the leech and bows her head slightly. "Yes, master Librarian. When engaging in stabilization nightmares in the conduit, I did indulge in excess. The human's heightened emotional reaction was... *irresistible*. Its fear was wild and innocent, and did break my self-control. My sense of intrusion was temporarily blinded. I did fail you, master Librarian."

"You shall not feed when stabilizing the conduit."

"No, master Librarian."

"The timing of the intrusion has been most unfortunate, Conduit-keeper. I was peeling off the last layer of the prey's core. Alas, core memories are the hardest to absorb—they complete the meaning of all others extracted in previous sessions." The leech turns her protruding, white eyes at the mare. "Ael-at-Deviss, your lack of vigilance has precipitated a serious discharge. We shall now require an extra session on the morrow to empty this prey. You shall be disciplined for this subversion of our schedule."

"Yes, master Librarian." The mare's head wobbles noticeably.

"Do investigate the intrusion."

“Yes, master Librarian.”

The mare begins to slide towards Edda, who cringes and tries to shake her hands and feet free from the ground.

“Will-control is futile, human,” the mare says, closing in.

Edda stops struggling, shuts her eyes and goes limp. Ximena hears in her own mind Edda’s change of stance, the shift in the path, from light to shadow, from will to faith, from desperation to freedom. And the transition is as swift and elegant as an eyelid’s flutter. *She is good!* Ximena thinks, as Edda blinks out of existence and reappears on the same spot, standing on her feet.

“A human Shadow Walker. Most impressive, indeed. Yet, human, regardless. And thus, frail at its core.” The mare extends a boneless arm towards her. “Evolved to dream *unaware*, and to cling to self-deception at all costs.”

Edda staggers, a crease of disorientation on her brow, as Ximena feels the sudden psychic hurricane of misperception passing through Edda’s body. And it leaves behind a sense of *sweet, sweet* confusion, filled with the promise of liberation and peace.

A human figure—Willem—materializes next to Edda.

“Dad!” she says when she sees him, infinite relief loosening her expression.

*Oh, no, Edda!* Ximena’s legs unconsciously tense, as if about to jump into the dreamsenso to shake her into awareness.

The Willem figure smiles clumsily at her. “Come. We must go meet the others.”

“The others?”

“The other human Walkers. Where are they?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I’ve been busy with other matters.” She puts her right hand to her temple, as if trying to remember something. “Other matters...”

“How many are we?”

“What?”

“How many Mind-Walkers?”

Edda shrugs. “Growing steadily, that’s for sure. But I think you better ask Elder Abspoel. She’s the one that...” She shakes her head and cringes. “She’s the one that...”

Edda opens her eyes wide and turns to face the observing mare in astonished silence.

*That’s my girl!* Ximena was not even aware that she was holding her breath.

Edda leans slowly, eyes locked on the mare’s, until a knee rests on the ground. She then stretches her right hand and, with exquisite determination, lets her fingers slide along the cool copper-like metal, focusing on the silky sensation, grounding herself in the dream.

“Very impressive, indeed,” the mare says. “Few marai can recover as promptly from an awareness-removal attack of maximum intensity.”

“What the fuck are you?” Edda says, ignoring the mare. Her eyes voraciously scan the enormous leech. It is so disgusting. So... *alien*. Looming over her limp father, the creature keeps him firmly wrapped in those revolting tendrils. And this place... This storm of bubbles... Of memories... Each turning into twirling dust... Each falling into the leech like they are... Like they are...

... *food*.

“Leave my father alone, you sickening worm!”

Ximena tries to exhale some of the mounting tension, but the view is too terrifying. The lichai’s eyes grotesquely follow Edda’s every motion in eerie silence, like she were but an exotic bug to be curiously watched, or summarily squashed. That look... That will... Ximena can feel the intensity of the monster’s gaze like a physical touch. Those eyes... So white and soulless... Gooseflesh crawls over her skin.

“Do terminate the human, Conduit-keeper,” the leech finally says. “And until more is revealed, you shall assign a

security detail to all librarians operating feeding stations in Deviss.”

“Yes, master Librarian.”

The mare thrusts forward even before her right arm completes its transformation into a copper-colored stake, which she then drives with a swift movement—faster than the eye can follow—through Edda’s chest.

Ximena gasps in dismay as agony distorts Edda’s face, jaws opening into a silent scream, but her collapsed dream lungs can no longer produce sound.

*Goah’s Mercy!*

Ximena only gets through the psych-link but a hint of the excruciating pain, and yet it feels so sharp and all-encompassing...

Spasms shake Edda’s body, her legs go limp, but the mare holds her firmly impaled in place, the soulless eyes so close to Edda’s... like they revel in her tortured expression, in the way her tears stream down her face.

*Mirage of the mind, Edda!*

But the attack was too vicious and sudden, and Edda too out of balance, still trying to cope with the implications of finding a goahdamn leech inside her father’s dreams, sucking his soul empty.

Ximena feels Edda’s short-circuited brain already dissolving into oblivion—unable to endure such agony a second more. The permascape in her immediate vicinity begins to shake in violent waves, like a storm about to shatter the dream into a thousand pieces. Ximena blinks in relief. *She’s going to wake!*

But the mare moves even closer to Edda, embracing her shaking body like a lover hungry for her touch.

Ximena watches in dismay as the dreamscape around Edda stabilizes. Her mind is already gone, incapable of rational thought, only of naked fear. But the mare keeps her

awareness firmly grounded, her leathery white skin slowly rubbing against Edda's, like a sexual predator, aroused by her terror, eager to take her in.

The creature presses repeatedly her featureless face against the soft skin of Edda's neck—a smooth, sensual move, like she is absorbing Edda's panicked scent with every stroke—and when she opens her black, wet maw, filled with rows of teeth convulsing in delight, a shudder of horror runs up Ximena's spine.

“You shall not feed, Ael-at-Deviss.” Ximena gasps. She had totally forgotten about the leech. “Do terminate the human.”

The mare shuts her mouth and raises her head away from Edda's neck. “Yes, master Librarian.” Then, she slowly twists her arm-turned-sword inside Edda. Ripping her innards.

Ximena cringes at the sudden spike of agony—surprised that more pain was even possible—and feels Edda's already quickened heart trying to give its all now, trying to desperately deliver its precious cargo to a body it believes to be ridden with trauma.

And this is not just a dream heart. Same as lungs, both Wake and dreamscape share the same organs.

As the mare keeps writhing its tool of torture, the agony raises another notch, launching Edda's heart into a last frenzied attempt at sheer survival.

*Goah's Mercy!*

But it is too much—for too long. The prolonged effort begins to take its toll, as Ximena feels Edda's heart skipping a beat.

*Goah's fucking Mercy!*

Then, another one.

*It's going to kill her!*

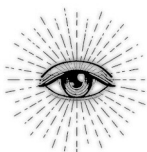
And yet Edda's heart keeps pumping. On and on it goes, skipping beat after beat, but determined to keep its host alive at

all costs, to never give up, like a staggering gazelle running for her life.

But even a young, healthy heart is just tissue fed by oxygen. And it can only take so much before total collapse.

Edda's heart stops.

The sudden silence fills Ximena with icy dread as the dreamscape fades into blackness.



## The Joyousday of Willem van Dolah

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Edda wakes up with a jolt and a gasp, eyes wide open, hands on her chest.

“Goah be praised!” Bram says, taking her hand. He is sitting next to her bed and looks exhausted. “You are fine, Goah be praised.” He begins to sob softly, shedding tears of relief.

Edda meets her brother’s anxious gaze, eyebrows raised in confusion. “Bram? What—?”

“Lay back. Thank Goah. Lay back.” He wipes his tears away and gives her a weak smile. “We heard your scream and when we came, you were...” He hesitates, but with a slight shake of his shoulders, he says, “... dead. You were dead.”

“What?!”

“Lay back, please, Edda. You are fine now. That’s all that matters.”

A woman—Isabella Zegers—hurries into Edda’s bedroom with Hans in her arms. “Edda, you’re awake!”

Bram’s eyes seem to sparkle at the sight of her future dowry sister. “It was Isabella—Goah bless you forever, Isabella!—who got your heart beating again, Edda. What happened to you?”



Your expression when we found you...” He shudders at the memory. “Like you’d seen a demon. Or worse.”

Ximena feels her head spinning in a fog of unreality, probably as a combined effect of her still recovering heart and the prolonged sleep. Her body feels so heavy, like it wants to sleep forever. With a tired sigh, she leans back and looks out the window to a dark gray sky.

Then, a sudden rush of adrenaline dissolves the fog in her mind in a heartbeat. “Dad!” Edda sits bolt upright. She is dressed in long pajamas, and gapes intently at her brother. “What time is it?”

“Edda, please.” Bram puts a hand on her shoulder and pushes gently. “You must rest. Lean back.”

Edda shakes Bram’s arm away, and stands. Too quickly, because the world spins anew. She cringes, a finger on her left temple, next to her missing ear. “Dad!” She stumbles towards the door, but Bram steps in front of her.

“He’s gone, Edda.” He stares into her horrified eyes. His lips flinch in a failed attempt at a comforting smile. “Dad is in Goah’s Embrace.”

“No...” She shakes her head. The world begins to twirl around her—*over* her, too heavy to sustain. She falls to her knees. “No, Dad... Can’t be...” she mutters, but she knows it is true.

Her father is gone.

Forever.

She closes her eyes as tears begin rolling down her cheek.

Taken by Dem.

*No!* Edda gasps, and throws a hand at her chest as the image of a mare thrusting an arm into her *inside* returns in a sudden flash of clarity. She sees again that featureless face, so close to her, stroking her neck... Repeatedly... Pure sin! She shudders. And then there was that... Oh, Goah! That throbbing creature of nightmare... That... *dreamworm*, feeding

on her father's life memories, slowly sucking him dry like a leech...

"I'm sorry you missed his Joyousday," Bram says, his voice warm and comforting. "Everybody was there to wish him well. He's had a good, long life. Plentiful. Full of love and respect, like the Quaestor said. And now he is with Mom. We will see them again. Don't be sad."

"I know what you think about the Joyousday, Edda," Isabella says. "But Elder van Dolah wasn't well. He really had to go."

"In the party, Dad could only recognize Hans and me," Bram says. "Nobody else. He did ask for you, you know?" His voice breaks. He clears his throat. "I told him you kissed him goodbye at home. I hope he can forgive the small lie, but I didn't know what to say."

"Of course he forgives you." Isabella puts a hand on his shoulder. "Don't be silly. And you," she takes Edda gently by the arm and guides her back to bed, her soft, caring manners impossible to resist, "go back to sleep. It's early, but you must recover. Make an effort, all right? For your brother's sake."

With Edda firmly tucked in bed, Isabella and Bram leave the room.

Edda, traces of tears on her cheeks, stares at the ceiling without seeing, eager for her thoughts to take her away into the sweet land of self-pity—that magical place in her mind where time ceases to exist and even hopelessness seems bearable. She shuts her eyes, her thoughts already sinking into the depths of her soul.

*Oh, Edda. Ximena exhales, looking at the young, sad girl tucked in bed like she had been herself so often at her age. Don't do this. Your dad isn't around anymore. Who is going to pull you back on your feet this time? So many people are counting on you, girl—uncountable people to disappoint, with Leap Day in just two days. No, Edda. No. You*

*can't allow yourself to fall beyond the reach of hope, because now you are truly alone. Either you do it, or nobody will. Lunteren needs you, or it falls. Bram and Hans need you, or everything goes to hell, yeah?*

With a sudden jolt, Ximena realizes that these thoughts are not her own!

Edda takes a deep breath, and her body goes limp in instant relaxation. Before she even draws her next breath, the scene has transitioned smoothly into the Traverse. Ximena gasps at the speed it all happens. *Wow, Edda, you're getting good at this.*

Edda's ethereally blue body flies off her sleeping self through the roof. As the auditorium scene rushes behind her glowing figure, Ximena repeats her routine of closing her eyes to quell the sudden surge of dizziness.

By the time the scene finally stabilizes, Edda is scanning Lunteren from above. Ximena feels her eagerness, her *thirst*. The vivid gray-green luminosity of the streets and buildings of the Second Wake contrasts starkly with the many bright-blue halos of colonists going about their early afternoon business. There is a large crowd down there today, more than she has ever seen before—the upcoming Leap Day already attracting visitors in their droves.

Edda squints at the Forum and a frown crosses her forehead. Her eyes suddenly widen and, with a curt gasp, she flies off in that direction, straight towards the Eye of Goah complex.

For a moment, Ximena thinks that she is heading for the temple—the main round building with the roof-top glass eye—but she instead approaches a small back courtyard on the eastern side of the complex, where the Quaestor has her private residence.

Two halos are sitting there, on a stone bench. One of them glitters in an unremarkable solid blue, but even Ximena

recognizes at once the sick, irregular glimmer of the other—and the occasional *red* spark within.

“Dad!” Edda lands by the side of the bench, gaping in shock at the two figures. A crying Marjolein Mathus is holding Willem in her arms. “You are still...!” She doesn’t finish the sentence, because *alive* is not the proper word.

Willem appears deep asleep, his breathing slow and placid, his handsome features unwound by the innocence of unconsciousness. Marjolein embraces him fiercely, while his own right arm hangs limply at his side. She kisses his forehead, his cheek.

And cries.

Edda is aghast at the sight. Not only because of her father’s body. The sight of Marjolein... Edda has never seen the Quaestor crying before.

Ximena feels a sudden surge of pity and solidarity—her own, not just Edda’s—as Marjolein keeps shedding tears like one can only do when fully alone. This is not the demon that GIA propaganda would have her believe. Ximena throws a glare down at Censor Smith, mumbling angry words to Mallory and other nearby students. She looks back up at Marjolein, at her shut eyes, at her shaking shoulders, at her caressing hands. This is a woman, pure and simple; living the pains of a human life.

“I am so selfish, Will, my love. May Goah forgive me.” Marjolein gently removes his glasses and caresses his long, brown hair. “I know it is time I let you go.” She kisses his forehead again and takes out a small glass flask from within her robes. “I am tired, Will.” She stares with wet eyes at the transparent fluid inside. “So tired—so lonely. What’s the point now?”

She removes the cork from the flask, sniffs the content, and puts the cork back in.

“Would you like me to come with you, my love? You will be restored by the Grace of Goah, and I can forget my failures.”

Marjolein sighs, puts the flask down on the bench beside her, and begins to caress his face.

“I failed my calling, Will. I failed Lunteren and aws Head. I failed Goah awssself. I failed in life. And in love. I’m so sorry, Will. I failed you.”

She puts a kiss on his lips and looks over to the glass vial.

“A few more minutes, my love. A few more minutes together in this world. Perhaps Goah shall forgive my selfishness. Perhaps not. I don’t care anymore.”

Edda gapes at the vial, and then at her father. Her mouth and eyes widen in horror. But there is another emotion in there, lurking inside Edda, that wants to burst out. It is so faint that Ximena almost misses it completely.

*Hope.*

---

**E**dda bursts into Aline’s bedroom, slams the door shut and leans against it to catch her breath. The sense of urgency pumping through the psych-link is intense. Almost desperate. She is still wearing her pajamas and is sweating like she has just sprinted all the way from her home down the street.

Which is exactly what she has done.

Barefooted.

This is the first time Ximena gets to see the most intimate place of Aline Speese. An engineer’s room, all right; the large desk against the wall, covered in tools and gadgets, resembles an oily workshop bench.

Aline sleeps soundly in her bed, oblivious to both the noisy entrance and the avalanche of afternoon light that streams in through the window. The peace in her expression and the

smooth regularity of her breathing contrasts sharply with Edda's adrenaline-shot eyes and shaking hands.

Edda dashes towards the bed and shakes her vigorously. "Aline, Aline! Wake up! Aline!"

Aline opens her eyes in shock, gives a curt scream and jumps to her feet at once. "Fucking Mercy! *Edda?*!"

"Aline, sorry. I need you to..." Edda speaks quickly, her words running over each other like a stampede of gazelles. "Dad. It's my dad. He's alive, Aline! You must—"

"I was at your dad's Joyousday this morning!" Aline yells. "*You* weren't! Who do you think you are?!" Tears of indignation well up in her eyes. "What gives you the right to run into my room like a deranged maniac?!"

"Sorry, I know. Listen. No time. My dad is still not gone, yeah? I mean, he is, but I can get him back. *We* can. I can't do this alone. You're coming with me. Listen, Dem is not a disease. *Not* a disease, Aline—it's those fucking aliens."

"What in Goah's Name are you talking about?! You aren't making *any* sense! Oh, of course. Of *course*! Let me put my insignificant tasks to the side right away to attend to her highness' latest whim!" Aline, anger smoldering in her eyes, takes a step forward and gives Edda a violent shove back towards the door.

Edda staggers and stares back at her friend, her features distorted by confusion and panic. "Aline?"

"I was in Japan, Goah's Mercy!" Aline yells squarely into Edda's face. "Doing *real* work. Training *real* people."

Edda leans forward, grabs Aline's arms with both her hands, and looks at her squarely in the eyes. "I- I need you, yeah?" she mutters. "My dad needs you."

Aline looks deep into Edda's blinking eyes, her lips parted. She sighs and says, "I'm sorry for your dad." Her voice is a notch calmer now. "I truly am. Believe me when I say that I loved him like a second father. But the world keeps turning. At

least for the rest of us mere mortals.” She squints at Edda. “Are those pajamas?”

“No time, Aline! No time!” Edda’s voice is soft—almost a whisper—but the weight of her look, and the pressure of her hands on Aline’s arms, leave no doubt about the gravity of her words.

“No time for what?”

“The mares... The Quaestor... No time, sister. Just shut up and do what I say.”

Aline’s mouth drops.

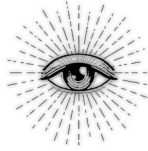
“Or my dad dies for good,” Edda says, as she lies down on the floor, face up.

Aline gapes at her in icy silence as Edda promptly relaxes her limbs. Ximena is in awe of Edda’s natural sense of friendship. She takes Aline for granted in a way that makes Ximena jealous. In Edda’s mind, there is not a trace of doubt that, no matter how Aline feels, no matter what Aline wants, she will drop the world to help her out. Because... Well, she is Aline, yeah?

Edda turns her head to meet Aline’s glare, and says, “Dive with me to the Traverse. We are going to aw’s Eye. When you see me melding, follow me in.” Without waiting for a reply, Edda shuts her eyes and falls asleep.

Aline gapes at Edda’s hypnotic breathing for a few seconds. She then swallows, and mutters, “Un—believable!”

## THIRTY-SIX



### I-Rew

Edda needs only a fraction of a second to scan the orange-yellow desolation of the Dreamworms' feeding permascape before she begins her run towards the cyclopean pyramid.

With the faintest of gestures, and without stopping her sprint, Edda forces the copper-like wall to split open like a human-sized knife wound. She heads for the gap.

A mare emerges at improbable speed out of the gap with both arms raised at Edda.

She bounces back. Hard. Like she had just hit an invisible barrier of phenomenal repulsive force that thrusts her backwards, far and high in the air. But she doesn't appear in pain, nor surprised. While airborne, her eyes remain firmly locked on the mare like a bullfighter's on the half-ton bull.

As her body is completing the ballistic fall back, she is already flexing her legs, at the ready. At the instant her feet touch the ground, she dashes forward at a phenomenal speed towards the mare.

The white, elongated creature seems unperturbed. As Edda approaches like a human bullet, the mare begins to raise her



arms anew, but then Edda leaps effortlessly hundreds of feet high and, at breakneck speed, flies over the staring mare and through the solid higher walls of the pyramid like she were a ghost.

The hollow inside is emptier now.

Alarmingly so.

Edda begins to slowly fall towards the brighter center of the pyramid through far fewer memory fragments than were present yesterday.

A particularly bright fragment where two toddlers play on a thick carpet catches her attention in midair. There are flames dancing gently on a stone hearth, and next to the wooden radio furniture, a couple sit and laugh together. Ximena immediately recognizes young Willem and his sister, Anika. A memory of more than a decade ago, obviously—an age of innocence and happiness.

The memory dissolves into glimmering dust, leaving hollow emptiness behind. There are no fresh memories anymore to take the place of the digested ones.

The pyramid is concluding its task.

And then Edda completes her fall in the center of the pyramid, where the final remains of dust coalesce into thick, floating threads that feed the colossal leech.

Willem—under the beast like a fly under a spider—stares forward without seeing.

Just when Edda is about to leap towards the monster, a wall of metal as high as the old church's tower slams out of the ground in front of her. She turns around; the mare is sliding towards her, sickeningly fast.

Edda presses her lips, and throws a gesture at the wall, which slams down back into the ground where it came from.

Both Edda and the mare seem to pause a beat as an unsuspecting Aline materializes next to Edda.

While Aline gapes and struggles to make sense of the

wildly developing situation—the vanishing memories, the charging mare, the monstrous leech, Willem and the throbbing appendages wrapping his limp body—Edda turns her attention back to the mare. Another gesture of hers, and, out of nowhere, a glass dome as large as a house pops up around the approaching mare, stopping her in her tracks.

“What in Goah’s Name...?!”

Edda ignores Aline’s words. She shuts her eyes and raises her right hand as the mare’s arm transforms into a copper-like metallic stake—not unlike the one that gutted her the night before—which the alien then thrusts hard against the glass.

In vain. The glass vibrates in a loud, deep hum, but resists the blow. The mare stares at the peculiar crystal up and around her.

“Edda!” Aline yells, pointing at the leech. “What’s *that* thing doing to your dad?!”

“That’s *Dem*. Ingesting my dad’s memories from inside his own mind. Now you know what’s at stake here. Go out and bring help!”

The mare calmly places the tip of the stake on the glass, leaves it there for a moment, and cracks begin to crawl across the transparent dome, echoing like thunder against the inner walls of the pyramid.

“Memories...?” Aline’s breathing quickens. She then stares frantically at the mare. “Is that Elder Rew?!”

“No. No time, Aline. Go, go! Traverse and call our Walkers!”

“But... But...” Aline blinks, and jerks her head around in utter confusion. “It’s too early in the day! Everybody is awake!”

Edda ignores Aline’s words, her attention fully drawn by the mare as the surrounding dome finally shatters in a deafening explosion of glass.

Aline gapes in frozen horror as the mare begins to charge towards them with incredible speed.

“Aline!” Edda doesn’t even look in her direction. “Go *now!*” Aline jolts, shuts her eyes, and slides into the Second Wake.

As the mare sees Aline’s sudden disappearance, she stops her charge, and stares silently at Edda, as if reevaluating the situation.

“Overseer,” the mare’s female voice reverberates across the vast hollow space of the pyramid, “the abomination has traversed into Nubaria. I shall pursue and terminate. I do hereby call you to release the conduit in order to protect the librarian.” Without a further word, the mare slides into the Second Wake.

And is gone.

Edda takes a deep breath and turns her gaze back to the leech. But before she can take a single step in her direction, *another* mare steps out of the barely visible black sphere in the leech’s proximity. Edda’s frown tightens to a petrified gape when yet *another* mare exits the sphere.

Two mares stand, side by side, between Edda and the leech. “Sense and bind, Redeemed van Dolah,” they say with a single female voice.

There is something in that voice... Something so intimately familiar... Edda stares for a long while, thunderstruck. “Elder Rew?” she finally asks, a shudder in her voice. “Is that really you?”

The mares take a moment to reply. “Depends on what you mean by *you.*”

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**A**line’s semitransparent, blue body has climbed high in the air. Her eyes scan in increasing confusion the unknown flat landscape of thick forests and dune-covered glades that extend below her as far as her traversing eyes can reach.

Lunteren—is gone!

Aline scans the horizon, her disoriented eyes slowly giving way to panic. Even the ocean is gone! There is only wilderness below her: older, wilder and lusher than any woods in Geldershire have been for millennia. Primeval. The Second Wake landscape glows bright, intensely alive.

And then she freezes. And squints at something close to the horizon. Ximena can see it as well: a metallic structure, rising vividly above the surrounding forest. No, not a structure. *Many* structures: needle-like towers placed in a wide circle—inconceivably tall, considering the distance. Ximena has seen it before, albeit not from so far away.

Deviss.

Ximena jumps in place as her peripheral vision picks a sudden, dashing movement—a red streak—coming at Aline from behind like a diving hawk. *What—?!*

Aline’s body blinks out of existence and reappears a few yards off to the side, just as the mare is about to ram into her.

The red-glowing mare stops in midair and turns to face her. “You do have impressive reflexes, abomination.”

Aline stares aghast at the mare. “Wh- What is this place? What do you want?”

The mare charges again, quick as a striking snake, and swings her left arm-turned-stake not at Aline, but at the *cord* beneath her—the faint strand of blue that extends a yard out of her ethereal body before dimming into nothingness.

Aline blinks away in the nick of time, just as the mare is about to sever her cord.

Aline doesn’t linger. Faster than thought—faster than even a mare can react to—she bolts forward and dives right under the mare. In an instant, she has closed her hands—and then her *jaws*—on the alien’s own red cord, and with a wild jolt of her head, she rips the cord apart.

The mare dissolves into nothingness.

“Why, Elder Rew?!” Edda takes a step back and gestures at the prone figure of her father under the leech’s gelatinous body. The pyramid is almost empty—almost *done*. The last memory fragments dissolve and spiral like milky threads into the leech, like stars *devoured* by a black hole. “You are killing my dad, Goah’s Mercy! I thought you were my friend!”

The mares stare at her in silence.

“Worse, you are killing us all! You *are* Dem!”

The mares’ heads wobble slightly, but remain silent.

“Why all the training? Why teach us the Paths? Why push us to spread the—?”

“Enough, human servant,” the mares say, their voice deeper now, harsher. “Do say, how many humans know of this permascape?”

Edda exhales, and takes a step back, eyes locked on the aliens. “Who are you?”

“Do say, human servant, are the abomination and you the only witnesses to the feeding of the Librarian?”

“Who the fuck are you? Are you *Yôg*?!”

“Do *say*, human servant.” The mares raise their arms at her and Edda gasps, like a silent wind has just blown through her.

“I’m not falling for that trick again, you fucking dreamworm,” she says, her voice trembling slightly.

The mares regard Edda for a few moments. “Your anchor is strong; your awareness firm. I-Rew was a competent master.”

“*Was*? What happened to her?” Edda glances at her father, limp and empty behind the two mares. “Goah’s fucking Mercy, I don’t have time for this.”

A machine gun materializes in her arms. She aims at the mares and pulls the trigger.

Nothing happens.

Edda frowns at the gun, shakes it and pulls the trigger again.

Nothing happens.

“And yet, I-Rew did neglect the instruction of the *conflict of wills*.” The two mares step forward towards her in perfect synchronicity. “I-Yog shall fill the void, human servant.” They approach in unison.

Edda moves back to keep the distance. *Pure sin! I totally forgot about the canceling of wills!* She drops the gun in frustration.

The mares continue speaking, as their right arms morph into sharp metal stakes. “Two wills in close opposition collapse the permascape to their minimum common acceptance. Thus, technology fails to the point of greatest ignorance. And since I am not acquainted with your human device, alas, it cannot function against my will. Your alien technology is useless here, human servant. But every sentient being in the universe knows the workings of a net.”

A net-like material appears on the mares’ left arms. The two figures speed up their approach, now sliding an inch over the ground.

Edda’s eyes widen in alarm. She waves a hand at them. Without result. Then she waves *both* hands, frantically now.

But in vain; the mares keep closing in on her, relentless. “The *canceling of wills*,” they say. “You cannot alter my nearby dreamscape against my will. Your fleeting human memory is quite the disappointment to me-Rew.”

Ximena feels the exertion of Edda’s usually sharp will, trying to remember the nuisances of dream fighting; trying to recall the instincts developed during her training with Rew; trying to repress her eyes from twitching over to her father and

that glutinous white leech behind the two quickly approaching mares. They are so close now! So close!

The two mares swing their left arms at once with practiced skill, and both nets fly into the air over Edda, extending quickly as small counterweights pull their threads wide open.

Edda staggers back, raises her hands in a last-ditch attempt to *will* the two nets out of existence, but the physics of a simple net are too ingrained in her understanding of reality to bend to her will. And they inescapably engulf her.

She fights the sudden clutch, trying to shake herself free, but with every motion the nets clutch her tighter. Until she finally falls flat on the floor, face up.

“The permascape conflict revolves around simple technology, human servant. Simple physics that every dreamer from every world understands so innately that they cannot be canceled, no matter how powerful the opposing will.”

With a swift move, the two mares thrust their stakes through the palms of her hands.

Ximena gasps from the sudden rush of pain that the psych-link allows through as Edda, nailed to the ground, screams her lungs out. Her dream body begins to wane, to pulsate in waves, as if to wake.

But she resists. Oh, how she resists! Her father needs her!

Ximena is expecting the mares to throw themselves over her helpless, writhing body and do their thing. But their white, soulless eyes just watch her in silence, their expressions inscrutably still.

Edda tries to free herself, to rip her hands free. *Pain is a mirage of the mind*, the thought echoes in the chamber of her mind, fighting its way to the surface of her conscience. But Ximena feels Edda’s still weakened heart going into overdrive once again, trying to fulfill its task no matter what. Dream or not, Edda is reaching the limits of her biology; her body—her mind—unable to cope with the excruciating agony.

The mares keep watching, but their heads wobble slightly, Ximena realizes, like they usually do when in some sort of distress.

Edda locks her desperate, teary eyes on the gazing aliens. “Fuck you!”

Her very thought is focused on resisting the call of the Wake, on grounding herself in torture, on being by her father, at *any* price.

Her heart misses a beat.

*Goah’s Mercy, Edda!* Ximena turns her horrified eyes at the silent mares, whose head wobbling has become considerably more noticeable. *Wake up! You are going to kill yourself!*

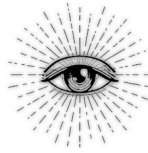
“Fuck y—!” Edda’s face contracts as a sharp explosion of pain thrusts across her chest.

“Redeemed van Dolah...” The words—the psychic reverberation—feel almost like a whisper, and they seem to jiggle as much as the aliens’ heads.

The two mares retract their spiked arms at once out of her limbs and glide a few yards back. “Redeemed van Dolah...” they repeat, the deep, female voice feeling astonishingly *urgent* to Ximena, a distinct quality to its tone. Almost... *emotional*. “Redeemed van Dolah...”

The gaping wounds on Edda’s hands and feet close and cure at the speed of thought as she blinks away the last tears of torment. “I’m okay... I’m okay...” Still heavily panting, she slowly staggers to her feet, and turns her glare over at the two aliens. “Elder Rew, you schizophrenic fuck. Where have you been?”





## Neanderthal

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“I did fail in completing your training, Redeemed van Dolah. I do apologize.”

Edda tilts her head and squints at both mares. “Is that really you, Elder Rew?”

“Not for long. The emotional hook of your distress has temporarily coalesced my essence into dominance. Alas, I-Rew shall promptly meld back into I-Yog. There is little time, thus I would welcome you acknowledging a request I bring to you with due urgency and without your routine resistance.”

“Why?! Why are you *doing* this to us? Why are you...?” She stretches her open hands at her father’s limp body, so helpless in the sticky clutches of the massive white leech. “I don’t understand, Goah’s Mercy!”

“Why do humans grow livestock? To *survive*, obviously. Like every other organism in the universe. That is the privilege of all life—as well as its liability.”

“And *this* is what you feed on?” Edda gestures with her hands at the last fading life fragments of her father, whirling slowly around the imperturbable leech. “Our *memories*?!”

“Not just memories, Redeemed van Dolah: experience,

knowledge, emotion. Your essence. Your *selves*. It is the natural order of things. We are a civilization of psychic species—lichai, marai, wudai—living in ancestral symbiosis. The lichai are Masters of the Mind: decision-makers, *feeders* and catalogers of knowledge.” The mares stretch an arm at the monstrous body of the leech, avidly absorbing the last remnants of Willem’s essence. “Their digestion provides understanding and nourishment for us marai, Walkers of the Mind: executors and makers. And the wudai serve the physical and technological needs of our civilization. It is the natural order of things. We did evolve in a psychic world where higher minds do prey on lower minds, and where lower minds do prey on *flesh*. Some, like us marai, locked in the middle of the food chain, prey on both, for better or worse.”

“You eat both meat and *fear*.” Edda says, eyes opening wide in realization. “Creatures of nightmare.”

“We marai do revel in the essence that impregnates the flesh after a surge of intense emotions. We have indeed evolved to terrorize our prey for maximum nourishment. It is the natural order of things.”

“Natural order, my ass!” Edda throws a desperate glance at Willem’s body. “You’re eating my dad! You’re eating our elders! And our future! You’re *Dem*, pushing us to extinction, Goah’s Mercy!”

“Alas, it is the natural order of things. Now, I do urge you to pay heed to my last plea, Redeemed van Dolah, before I dissolve back into I-Yog for good.”

Edda throws an urgent glance at her father and begins walking towards him. “No, to the side! That thing is killing my dad!”

The mares gently put their four hands on Edda’s shoulders as she passes by. “I do fear I cannot allow you access to the Librarian.”

She stops at the sudden, cold alien contact, and raises her scowl at the two looming faces. “Let me through,” she hisses.

“Do restrain your anger, Redeemed van Dolah. Do stay back. My control over these limbs is feeble as it stands. Only the relative safety of the Librarian is keeping the psych-core of I-Yog temporarily subdued. Alas, were you to engage, she would reemerge. And I would be gone. Forever.”

“So what? Get out of the way!”

“You would be gone, too, Redeemed van Dolah. I-Yog shall terminate you, were you to approach the Librarian.”

“I kicked her ass once, yeah? I can do it again.”

“You cannot. I-Yog am not whom you fought in the Trials. I-Yog am the next generation—with the added skills of a Human Whisperer and a Master Walker of the Mind. Furthermore,” the mares gesture at each other, “this time, I am *two*.”

She blinks, eyes on her father as a twitch shakes his hapless body. The hungry tendrils of the throbbing white beast slither to readjust him rudely in place.

The sight is hard to bear.

Ximena feels Edda’s rage and frustration twirling in a combustible mix. *Goah, she is about to snap*. But, somehow, her reason keeps an iron-clad hold on her bubbling emotions. A Walker of the Mind, indeed, Ximena thinks with admiration.

Edda exhales, raises her chin at the two mares and meets their white, empty gazes. “Aline will return anytime with help. Besides, I’m much stronger now than when you last trained me, Elder Rew.”

“Do not let your pride blind you to your limitations, Redeemed van Dolah. You cannot fight me-Yog, no matter your progress in the Paths. Your termination shall bring neither Elder van Dolah back to his old self, nor shall my designs for a shared marai and human civilization come to fruition. I do

need you, Redeemed van Dolah. My race needs you. *Your* race needs you.”

“Fuck civilization!” Tears well up in her eyes. “I just want my dad back!”

Ximena jumps at the words, harsh as a brick on her twenty-sixth century face. A whispered word—*blasphemy*—begins to make the rounds around the GIA benches, but for Ximena what she is watching is... a *revelation*. Truth is way more fascinating than propaganda. And historical Edda is so much more than the hollowed, idealized hero of humankind she was raised with. This Edda—Thank Goah for Professor Miyagi’s research—makes so much more sense. The history of humanity is, well, *human*. And here we have one, Goah’s Mercy. A genuine human girl—Ximena’s own ancestor—fighting against a world too big for her to comprehend. When we are scared and alone, things aren’t that complicated anymore, are they?

“Return my dad,” Edda continues, “and I’ll do *anything* you say!”

The mares stare at Edda for a long while.

“Please, Elder Rew! I’ll do anything!” Edda puts the palm of her right hand on her chest. “I solemnly swear by Goah, yeah?”

Rew’s two limbs slide backwards, away from Edda, and place themselves firmly between her and the feeding leech. “I do fear I cannot return your father to you. Alas, too many of his memories are already embedded in the Librarian. When she catalogs the last of his essences,” Rew gestures demonstratively upwards with her four arms, where one of the very few remaining spheres begins to turn into dust and to fall towards the leech, “his body will stop functioning for good.”

Edda is gaping at the transparent sphere with horrified eyes as it dissolves. It showed the day when baby Hans was brought in from aw’s Womb. And when the last trace of that memory is

gone, her heart is burning with heartache. And rage. “I’ll open that worm in half! Make her spill my dad whole!”

“Alas, that would prove ineffective. Unless...” Rew seems to hesitate. A very unusual mannerism for a mare, which also catches Edda’s attention at once.

“Yes?” Edda asks, taking a step towards Rew. “Unless?!”

Rew remains silent for a long while, but the increasing wobbling of her heads betrays a considerable struggle somewhere in the depths of her composite mind. Whatever she is considering doing to save her life’s work, it is obviously far from easy. Even when it is obviously her last chance.

Ximena admires the mare. *Rew-at-Deviss*. Her name, all but forgotten by history—at least in the GIA. Just a foot note as one of the demon instructors of the Juf. One of many that tried, and failed, to tempt the holy Juf into the darkness of the heresy.

But, thanks to Professor Miyagi, Ximena is meeting for the first time the historical Rew: the Human Whisperer, the Walker of the Mind. And the true master of Edda van Dolah and Aline Speese. Ximena begins to realize the colossal impact of Rew’s legacy. She was just as much a force of nature as Edda. Each with a will too strong to be contained by their respective civilizations. Perhaps it was unavoidable that they would find each other. Or perhaps it was just chance—a whim of history. Either way, human and marai history was at their mercy. For better or worse.

Rew finally speaks, her psychic voice slow and intense. “Your father’s essence can still be returned to his human body.”

“I knew it!” Edda’s desperation turns into hope in an instant. She takes one of Rew’s arm appendages into her hands. They feel cold and clammy, but Edda doesn’t mind. “Tell me how!”

“The window of opportunity is, alas, closing.”

“I know!” Edda looks up at the last vanishing memory spheres. “Tell me, Goah’s fucking Mercy!”

“Shall you do my bidding, Redeemed van Dolah? Shall you do what needs doing, so that both our races evade extinction?”

“Yes! Anything!”

“Alas, even bestowed with the information required to restore your father, the chance remains high that you shall ultimately fail. Time is scarce, and the hurdles are almost surely insurmountable for a human. Even for you, Redeemed van Dolah.”

“I’ll do it! Whatever it takes!”

“Were you to fail regardless—were Elder van Dolah’s fate to end here and now, as is most likely—shall you still do your best to keep yourself alive and do your utmost to save the future of our species?”

“Yes! Of course I will! I’ll do anything you say, yeah? But I won’t fail. Aline is bringing reinforcements.”

As if summoned by her words, Aline reappears next to her, wide-eyed and panting. At the sight of the two mares, she gasps in horror and takes a few hurried steps back.

“Woman Speese,” the mares say. “Sense and bind.”

“Aline!” Edda says, blinking at her friend. “Where’s help?”

“I- I-” Aline squints at the mares—at both of them—confusion written all over her face. “Elder Rew?”

“Indeed. For a short while, alas. It is most impressive to see you back from the Second Wake so promptly. Especially when compounding time dilation. I do conclude that you have escaped your pursuing conduit-keeper.”

“She tried to... to cut my traversing cord. So I cut hers.”

“Thus, you—a human—did terminate Ael-at-Deviss.”

“I... I *killed* her?”

“No mind in the universe can survive the severance of the cord.”

Aline gasps. “Oh, Goah!”

“Your traversing abilities have reached a truly frightening level, Woman Speese.” Ximena thinks to hear in Rew’s soft, female voice a tint of pride. “My Walkers report of a human *abomination* that surpasses the skills of our master Shadow-Walkers by an order of magnitude, and that can spacelessly-traverse to any point on the planet at whim.”

Edda holds Aline by the tunic. “You came *alone*?!”

Aline turns her startled face to Edda. “I couldn’t...!” Panic still lingers in her voice. “There was *nothing* in the Traverse, Edda! Only forest and a strange—!”

“*Nubaria*, Woman Speese. You did regard Nubaria: my First Wake, your *Third* Wake. This feeding permascape,” the two mares gesture around them with a wide wave of their four arms, “is *sourced* to Nubaria. When you did traverse, you became the first human from your Earth in millennia to ever make the transition.”

“*My* Earth?”

“Aline, my dad! His time is almost up, Goah’s Mercy!”

“Nubaria and Earth,” the mares continue, “are one and the same: two sides of the same leaf.” As she speaks, one of the mare’s bodies raises an arm and a green, lush leaf—a summer birch leaf—materializes in midair.

Aline—and Ximena—observe the floating metaphor as if hypnotized.

But not Edda. “I can’t do this alone!” She shakes Aline’s tunic. “*Please* go get help!”

“No!” Aline barks at her.

Edda takes two steps back, gaping at Aline like she had just slapped her.

“This is *crucial* information, Edda! For all humankind! More important than...” Aline throws a worried glimpse at Willem, and with a determined scowl on her face turns her attention to the mares. “Continue, Elder Rew: *two sides of the same leaf*...”

“Each side a perfect reflection of the other,” the mares continue, “same shape, same ecology, same fate. One on our side of the universe: the *red phase*. The other on yours: the *blue phase*.”

The metaphorical leaf begins to shine, like sentience in the Traverse, but each side of the leaf radiates a different color: the top glows red, the bottom glows blue. Ximena leans forward and stares with mute fascination. Even Edda does.

*Red and blue.* Although these are the colors that the dreamsenso puts into Ximena’s eyes, they are but a rough approximation of a much more essential concept, as impossible to describe as colors to the blind.

“You are talking about,” Aline gapes at Edda before returning her attention to the mares, “another *dimension*? You marai come from another dimension?”

“Not dimensions, Woman Speese. Dimensions are a continuum. Phases of reality are discrete: our native red phase,” she points an appendage at the top side of the leaf, “your native blue phase,” she points to the bottom side. “Both touching each other at every point in space-time. Your Earth, our Nubaria.” As she speaks, she moves her appendage up and down, pointing alternatively at each side of the floating leaf. “Your Geldershire, our Diamar. Your Lunteren, our Deviss.”

“Is that where I was? In your world?”

“Not quite. You were on its shores. On the Second Wake that permeates the red phase.”

Aline exhales. “There are *two* second wakes?”

“Second wakes are also distinct phases of reality. There are possibly infinite others. Alas, beyond the reach of dreamtech.”

“So your homeworld is literally,” Aline stares at the multicolored leaf, “just around the corner.”

“Nubaria is not our homeworld. We are colonists. The same as you.”

“Colonists?!”



“It did occur ten millennia ago,” Rew points at the leaf floating statically in midair, “that after eons of relativistic voyage, a *worm* did land on this particular... *leaf*. And took it for itself.”

A hairy caterpillar drops from nowhere on the top side of the floating leaf and begins to chew the juicy red fluorescence with greedy enthusiasm.

“A psychic worm: a *dreamworm*, as you have named us, Redeemed van Dolah. Devouring rapidly—too rapidly—everything in sight; oblivious to even the existence of the other side of the leaf. Until—”

The caterpillar’s intense munching ends up drilling a hole, and it contorts its fat body through to the bottom face—*phase*—of the leaf, where it resumes its frenzied feeding.

“—it does find a *conduit* to bluer pastures. And the rest is history—a regrettably predictable history of excess and ecological collapse that has brought both predator and prey to the brink of extinction.”

“A conduit...” Edda’s eyes widen, and she turns her head to the black sphere next to the leech. “A *conduit!*”

“Indeed, Redeemed van Dolah,” with a casual gesture, the floating leaf dissolves into nonexistence, “a *human* conduit. Humans are native to the blue phase, thus, human dreams are sourced from Earth. It was a lucky and fateful discovery by a marai reaper, millennia ago, that Nubarian humans were native to another phase. That discovery was the metaphorical hole in the leaf that gave us access to Earth.”

Ximena feels disgust lurching inside Edda’s guts. “A lucky discovery. Sure.”

“Nubarian humans!” Aline takes a step forward, eyes widened, lips parted. “There are humans in your dimension... phase?”

“Indeed, there are.”

“But how in Goah’s Name did they make it over?”

“Alas, they do not know themselves. Such knowledge was lost in the past long before our colonists settled. But that they are native to Earth is indisputable. They do shine their native blue in the Second Wake. Initially, we did not realize the far-reaching consequences of such unique phenomena. No other lichai colony in the galaxy had ever reported anything similar on their prey. Alas, we did feed indiscriminately, without realizing that we were driving to extinction the only known gate to another universe. Nubarian humans, and their blue halos, have turned our colony into a very special place in the lichai cosmos.”

“So that’s why we are blue,” Aline mutters. “And you, mensas, red.”

“Indeed. There is the occasional freak of nature. But our policies dictate the termination on sight of antiphasic newborns.”

Aline gasps, aghast. “You kill babies?!”

“Does that surprise you?!” Edda shouts at her. “Blowing up the bridges that your enemies can use is elementary tactics.”

“We are not your enemy, Redeemed van Dolah.”

“You eat us, Goah’s Mercy!” Edda throws a frenzied hand at her father, his last, isolated memories twirling slowly above them towards the monstrous white leech. “You promised, Elder Rew! Tell me how to save my dad, or Goah is my witness, I’ll—!”

“Time is almost out for Elder van Dolah. As is for me, I do fear.” Her two expressionless eyes turn over to Aline. “Time is of the essence, Woman Speese. In about a wake minute, Redeemed van Dolah is going to fight against me-Yog.”

“What?!” Aline takes a step back, and exchanges with Edda a horrified glance.

“It is imperative that you do heed Redeemed van Dolah’s call. Do pierce the Second Wake, and return with sufficient human Walkers to neutralize me-Yog. No less than twelve.”

“Twelve? In a minute?!”

“I-Yog feels the threat. As per my agreement with Redeemed van Dolah, danger looms over the Librarian, and my-Yog core is already attempting to engulf me away. A wake minute, Woman Speese. Then Redeemed van Dolah dies alone.”

“Aline...” Edda blinks at her friend, and then throws a glance at her dad, lying helplessly under the grotesque form of the leech. “Please...”

“But... It’s impossible! It’s still an hour to sunset in Lunteren—everybody’s awake, Goah’s Mercy! What help do you expect me to get in a fucking minute? And if I traverse, I’ll end up in Nubarria again!”

“The human conduit, Woman Speese.” Rew raises her four arms at the black sphere next to the leech. “Do enter it. Now.”

Aline gapes at the sphere—the *conduit*—its surface eerily reflecting one of Willem’s last memories as it dissolves in the air. With a curt gasp, she sprints towards it.

Ximena throws a nervous glance at the looming leech, but the creature keeps feeding ecstatically, the surrounding dreamscape far from her alien thoughts.

Aline, eyes and mouth wide open in desperation, leaps into the sphere and disappears inside, leaving heavy ripples fading away on its black, curved surface.

A few students in the auditorium—the most watchful—murmur expressions of awe. They have just gotten a glimpse of the inside, right when Aline’s thrust cracked the surface open for the briefest of moments.

And Ximena has seen it too.

There was *another* dream, right there, in the sphere’s guts: a fully independent dreamscape, a separate universe hidden inside that ball of darkness. There was a deciduous forest in winter, abandoned of life and hope. And a little boy—horror-

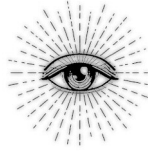
struck—hiding behind an enormous rotten log, face shiny with tears of terror.

Ximena realizes in a flash: that dream, it was a nightmare.

And that little boy... That little Nubarian human...

He was Neanderthal.

## THIRTY-EIGHT



### Fate, Will, Legacy

As Aline disappears into the black sphere, Rew's two bodies return their undivided attention to Edda. "You shall complete my lifework, Redeemed van Dolah." The combined pressure of those four soulless eyes sends a shiver down Ximena's spine.

"Tell me how to get my dad back!" Edda points at the limp figure of her father being stripped of his last memories by the slowly throbbing leech.

"I shall, but do remember: your survival is imperative, Redeemed van Dolah. You shall complete my lifework, even if with your best efforts—even if Woman Speese brings a dozen human Walkers to fight at your side—you are ultimately unable to restore Elder Willem."

"I'll survive! Tell me, Goah's Mercy!"

One mare limb turns slowly and points at the leech. "Behold a lichai of Huarai."

Edda follows her gesture. The thick, white skin of the leech seems to throb in ecstasy. Her two bulbous eyes, the only feature of her bloated head, are looking nowhere in particular.

"Librarians keep their cataloged memories in specialized

organs that occupy most of their lower body,” Rew gestures right above the myriad appendages that jiggle in waves as if in an invisible liquid medium. “Were that organ...” Rew’s voice begins to linger, as if every word fell heavier than the previous one. “... to be pierced...”

“That’s what happened yesterday, when I shot the goahdamn worm! But she cured herself in an instant!”

“With enough... violence...”

“Oh, Goah...” Edda’s gaze falls eagerly on the lower end of the leech, the sticky skin so seemingly soft there, where hints of peristaltic-like contractions are lightly shaking the surface. She takes a deep breath as the corner of her lips curve with raw anticipation. “Oh, Goah!” She begins pacing towards the creature.

Rew’s two bodies slide forward, blocking her way. “My lifework, Redeemed van Dolah.”

Edda meets Rew’s gazes. “Move to the side,” she says, very slowly—almost hissing.

“You shall complete my lifework. You shall spread the end of the Joyousday among humans, then only so shall humankind recover its former strength.”

“What’s the goahdamn point?! We’re just *food* for you, yeah? That’s never going to change! As soon as we let ourselves live a little longer,” Edda waves a hand demonstratively at her father, “you kill us!”

“We shall control our urges, Redeemed van Dolah. We *must* restore the ecological balance that held for millennia before the collapse of human civilization three centuries ago.”

“Three centuries... That was the First Collapse. The Rape of Gaia.”

“I was there, Redeemed van Dolah. Humans were thriving. You were as numerous as the stars. We could sustain our entire civilization by only harvesting a fraction of your eldest. But when your numbers collapsed so suddenly—”

Edda interrupts, eyes widened in realization. “The Second Collapse! Dem, killing ever more, ever younger! You kept the same predatory pressure on a shrinking prey population. How could you be so fucking stupid?! You destroyed your own ecology! You destroyed *us!*”

Rew doesn’t immediately reply, as if lost in thought. “We saw it coming decades before starvation pushed most of us back into hibernation. Some did try to reign in our impulses. Others... did not. We were eventually forced to establish the Reseeding effort, with compulsory jurisdiction over the entire planet. Alas, it proved as ineffectual back then as it remains today. We did try more creative solutions. Like feeding strictly on those humans that your civilization put to final rest in what you call the Joyousday houses. But even such enlightened policies were too timid, too slow. Too late. Keeping us—and you—stuck in an unstable suboptimal equilibrium, a fragile tip wobbling perilously at the mercy of nature’s every whim, about to throw you into extinction, and us back to the void.”

“And whose fault is that?! How can we grow, with you eating us? Take your ships and fucking leave us alone!”

“There is another path. And you shall pursue it.”

“Yeah, I know. But getting rid of the Joyousday is not enough,” Edda throws a desperate glimpse at her dying dad. “You gotta stop feeding on us, Goah’s fucking Mercy!”

“Indeed. At least, a sufficient time for humankind to rebound in strength. And since the Reseeding effort is unable on its own to subdue our pervasive hunger, I am pursuing an alternative strategy—a dangerous strategy—that I have kept in secret even from my most loyal apprentices. A strategy that shall bring a new ecological balance to both our worlds. A strategy that you shall execute, Redeemed van Dolah.”

“What strategy?”

“There are two ways to disrupt our perilous ecological

balance. The first one—to weaken our predatory urge—has failed. Thus, it is time to strengthen our prey’s resistance.”

“Dreamtech...” Edda mutters.

“The Paths of the Mind Walker, indeed. You are a human instructor—a master of teaching. You shall instruct the next generation of human Walkers that shall, in turn, train another generation, and so on, exponentially—an unstoppable chain reaction that shall make every human that treads Earth resistant to our predations.”

“Resistant? How?”

“*War*, Redeemed van Dolah. Humanity’s greatest weakness shall be our salvation. You shall bring armies of Walkers to the feeding permascape, fight our marai, drive our Librarians away, force my civilization to return to the olakis until humankind returns to the stars.”

“War...” Edda shudders. “A war in dreams... But you are way stronger than us!”

“You are far more numerous. Furthermore, dream violence is more lethal to us, creatures of Huarai, than to you, creatures of Earth. A new ecological balance must ensue, where humans grow again in numbers—and in age.”

“Fuck yeah, Elder Rew! We’re already at it, yeah? Geldershire is in our pocket, and you better believe we are seeding far and wide.”

“This is...” Rew appears somehow startled—for a marai. “... very unexpected and pleasing news. I-Yog have profoundly underestimated your potential.”

“We got our own permascape, you know? Just my school at first—Lunteren’s De Bron. That’s where we planned and trained to escape aw’s Fist. But now... Whoa, you should see it, Elder Rew! It’s like... a secret city—hidden in our dreams. And growing every day. Each new colony that joins the rebellion adds their own structures.”

“Which rebellion, Redeemed van Dolah?”



“Against the Joyousday! Just like you wanted! Unfortunately,” Ximena feels a surge of fatalism as Edda sighs, “the rebellion is already dying. What’s the point, when people keep contracting...” She gasps, her eyes opening wide. “... *Dem?!?*”

“It is imperative that you do prevent your human rebellion from going extinct, Redeemed van Dolah. You shall redirect the aim of your human rebellion—your hatred—against—”

“*You!*” Edda is staring at Rew, lips curving into a smile. “*Dem. Dreamworms.*”

“Indeed. Your rebellion must grow into a worldwide movement capable of resisting our colonization.”

“Oh, gladly! And not just to restore some horseshit ecological balance! I swear by Goah, we are going to throw your white, puny asses back into space!”

“And in the attempt, Earth and Nubaria shall find a new equilibrium of strength and resilience, our destinies irremediably intertwined. I do hereby consider my last duty satisfactorily passed over to you, Redeemed van Dolah. My lifework is, thus, complete. You are now solely responsible for pulling our civilizations out of the abyss of collapse.”

“Uh, solely *responsible?*”

“The fate of both our worlds is now subservient to your will. And to your will alone, Redeemed van Dolah. I do fare you well...”

“Elder Rew? Is it time? Are you—?”

“Fulfill your fate... Redeemed van Dolah... *Edda...* Fulfill... my legacy...”

“Elder Rew?!?”

The two mares go rigid for an instant, and then they turn their two heads slowly towards Edda, their expressionless white eyes drilling her in silence.

“Elder Rew... Pure sin...”

Ximena feels Edda’s sudden grief as she cautiously steps

back from the observing mares. “I am your will now. I promise, Elder Rew. May Goah take you in aw’s Embrace.”

“Rew-at-Devis is not dead, Redeemed van Dolah.” The mares raise their arms, which transform at once into copper-like metallic stakes. “Rew-at-Devis is part of me, like your lungs are part of you.”

“Yog, you sick fuck. You are a pathetic shadow of Elder Rew. You—”

Edda stops speaking as she *feels* the sudden burst of Yog’s anger like an icy wind pushing against her. And it’s enough to get her dream muscles at the ready, because in the following instant, the mares dash forward at the speed of thought and thrust their arm-stakes towards her.

But Edda is already jumping out of reach. By the time the mares turn their heads, Edda is twenty yards high in the air, and falling over the geometrical center of the enormous hollow pyramid—over the leech—like a falcon.

One of the Yog mares disappears into thin air. The other one leaps towards Edda in a blur, with no regard to inertia, air resistance or any other of the mundane physics of the First Wake. Her body smashes against Edda so hard—so *painfully*—that she drops to the ground like a shot bird.

The mare falls gracefully closer to the leech, blocking Edda’s way, and says, “For a creature bound to the flesh, you are of remarkable speed.”

Edda staggers to her feet, shaking her white tunic straight. “Obviously, not enough.”

“Your dominion of the Paths is worrisome. Even dangerous.”

“Thank you.” Her eyes keep jolting between Yog, the feeding leech behind, and her hapless father in her tendrils. *Is he breathing?!* She looks up. From here, she can still see a few isolated memory spheres floating towards the white monster. *So few now! How much time has passed in the wake, Goah’s Mercy? How*

*strong is time dilation in this hellish permascap? Has that Quaestor bitch given him the poison yet? Where the fuck is Aline?*

Edda tries to reign in her anxiety. *Nerves lose battles*, she remembers her dad telling her over the game board when she moved a battalion too hastily into action. “Out of the way,” she hisses.

“Alas, it is my-Rew’s legacy that may turn your individual danger into an extinction-level event. You do embody the largest threat that has ever tread this planet, Redeemed van Dolah. Were humanity to withstand our Librarians’ feeding, it would spell the end of my civilization on Nubaria.”

“Cannot happen soon enough. I swear to Goah, we’re going to get rid of you and your goahdamn Dem infestation, whatever it takes. So be smart, and fuck off back to space while you can, yeah?”

“Under no circumstances are you, Redeemed van Dolah, to be allowed to leave this permascap alive.”

The other Yog body reappears some distance behind Edda, who *feels* her presence at once, and turns around, all her senses at the ready. And then, whoa! Another *three* mares appear at a similar range on her flanks!

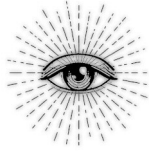
*Goah’s Mercy!*

Five hostile mares surround Edda—ten dead-white eyes locked on her like owls on a wounded mouse. Edda can feel their predatory hunger—their alien emotions almost tangible, like a physical wall encircling her.

*Flanks and rear exposed! Goah, I’m so fucked!*

“Walker Qoh, Walker Moih, Walker Pyv,” two of the mares say, “do shut all egress to the wake and terminate the human.”

“Yes, Master Yog,” the other three reply as one.



## Librarian

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A wall of naked fear hits Edda like a hammer on all sides at once.

Five elongated white aliens surround her in a ring of fright, exuding fear so cold and thick that Ximena freezes as she senses it splashing against Edda like a glacial tide. Mark, Cody, and every student in Ximena's peripheral vision gasp and sit bolt upright at the abrupt clutch of ice in their guts.

What is left of Ximena's rational mind knows that this is just a simulation, a poor psych-link approximation of the kiss of the marai at the end of the hunt. An awful—unimaginably awful—way to go.

Edda's mind seems to melt in sudden terror before her training can even kick in. Ximena feels the pull, the tearing of the dreamscape, the piercing of the veil, as Edda is about to wake up in—where was she sleeping through this madness?—Aline's room, was it?

But Edda's consciousness rebounds violently—painfully!—as the dreamscape remains steel solid around her.

*Goah's Mercy!* Ximena realizes now how the dreamscape feels so much more real and intense than reality. Those mares

are making her *stay*, rooting her senses firmly into the fabric of the permascape, shutting the wake, leaving no exit to this... to this... horror. Except, of course—Ximena gasps again—*death*.

Edda's expression is distorted beyond recognition, her body shaking almost too hard to stay on her feet, but then she catches a glimpse behind one mare—her father, his eyes open without seeing, staring directly at her, as if opening his soul to her one last time.

*Dad!*

Ximena exhales in awe as Edda's training finally kicks in.

Her *faith* blooms and immediately clashes against the tightly packed fear of the marai, stretching it wider around her, farther, tensing it, until it finally ruptures into nothing. The relief in Ximena's inside is immediate, like entering a warm shelter in a winter storm.

The five mares keep their expressionless gazes locked on her in silence. Until two of them, on opposite sides of Edda, finally speak with one voice. "Abomination," she says, so slowly as to almost separate each vowel from the next. "Another human abomination. Too dangerous to be allowed to wander the feeding grounds again. Walkers, do what you must to terminate this threat."

The five bodies begin to slide towards her, slowly, cautiously, their ten arms transforming into crude weapons of intimate violence, sharp and deadly.

*Oh, Goah, they're too many!* Edda turns her head left and right, lips parted. *Too many!* Her mind is flying in chaos, too quick for Ximena to follow, glimpses of wargames, of desperate tactics, the mares so close now! *Too many?!* An idea solidifies at the speed of thought.

Edda multiplies.

A hundred Eddas rush into a square formation, renaissance pikes in every hand, a hundred tunics turning into plate armor at the same time. Ximena feels the weight of the heavy pikes in

her own hands as the hundred Eddas dig their base on the ground and simultaneously lean them forward, opening their formation like a flower, a forest of pointed leaves directed outwards at the frozen mares.

“Outstanding faith-control,” the two mares—Yog—say. “Few Masters of the Shadow Path are able to actually *believe* that they are *many*. But know this, human: you are not many.”

The alien’s words fall hard on her. Hard and *heavy*. And, suddenly, the pikes seem too massive for a sixteen-year-old girl to actually hold in her hands. Ximena’s own arms shake under the strain.

“You are an individual,” Yog continues. “You are alone. Without a mother. Without... a *father*.”

The pain—the *truth*—shatters Edda’s faith in an instant. The proud military formation of a hundred Eddas dissolves into nothingness, leaving behind a single girl, tears in her eyes, desperation in her soul. There is *nothing* she can do. No matter how much she *wants* it, no matter what she does, no matter the power, it is *never* enough. It will never be. Because she is just one. Alone. Against a relentless universe—too hostile to human life.

“Alone,” Yog says, as if reading her mind, “you are powerless.” One of her bodies begins to encroach on Edda from behind. “That is the curse of your race, human. Too weak as individuals, and yet, too weak-minded to unite.” The limb is now a mere couple of yards behind Edda and raises her sword-like arm. “Your fate is sealed. As is my-Rew’s *legacy*.”

An arrow—whoosh!—digs itself in her white, featureless head. And an instant later, another one flies through the raised arm, too fragile to resist the thrust, sputtering a transparent, thick substance in its wake.

Edda—and the five mares—turn their heads around. Edda’s eyes widen. “Aline!”

“And I’m not *alone*,” Aline shouts from where she

appeared, about five hundred yards closer to the leech. She is gesturing at four figures standing proudly next to her, all of them with just-sprung beautifully curved longbows in their hands that they hold higher than twice their own height. “Nor are you.”

“Goah’s Mercy!” Edda gapes at her friend’s four exotic companions: two females with distinct East Asian features, two males of obvious South-Hansian descent, all in their early twenties with black, loose hair down to their shoulders and delicate, colorfully patterned robes like nothing she has ever seen before. “You came!”

“I, for one, keep my promises,” Aline shouts back. “Luckily for us, Japan was already sleeping—and training. They are obsessed with competitive dream fighting over there. Meet my Munakata Shadow-Path students. Mensas, meet Juf Edda, the first Walker—our... *queen*.” There is a tint of sarcasm in her voice.

As the four Munakata Walkers bow curtly in Edda’s direction, Yog says with its two bodies, “Your assistance is timely, Woman Speese.” As she speaks, Yog’s wounded body extracts the dripping arrow carelessly from her head using her only healthy arm. “Alas, pitifully insufficient.” The wounds seem to close and heal with every word. “Walker Qoh, Walker Pyy, do neutralize the threat.”

Edda points a finger at the leech in the distance and shouts, “Aline, take the giant worm out! But only wound the lower body, yeah? Only the lower body!”

Before the five human Walkers can even switch their aim, two of the mares have broken their formation around Edda and are dashing against their flank with unimaginable speed. The closest man shouts a warning, but his words are cut short as four arm-stakes impale him through the trunk simultaneously. He vanishes into thin air at once, back to the mercy of the wake. And judging by the violence, Ximena

supposes that in enough shock and trauma to keep him out of combat for a day or two.

Aline and the remaining three Japanese Walkers jump to the side. Aline blinks, eyes still aghast at the speed and violence of the attack. The two Munakata women are already aiming their longbows at the two aliens, and as they swiftly pull back the strings, three-foot arrows appear in place.

The last-standing man drops his bow as he hastily positions himself between his female companions and the mares, and when he slams his fists together, a beautifully curved, long sword of resplendent steel materializes in his grip: a samurai katana, perfectly balanced, which he seems to wield with expert ease.

Ximena feels Edda's intense anxiety at the sight of the vicious attack, her hope vanishing before it had time to sprout. But her instincts pull her fiercely towards her friend. Taking advantage of the gap left open by the two mares, Edda begins to dash towards Aline and her Walkers.

But Yog's two bodies and his accompanying mare—Moih—seem to emerge from nowhere and block her way in an instant. "You *are* alone, Redeemed van Dolah." The voice reverberates eerily in Ximena's mind.

"Shoot, shoot!" Aline shouts at her female warrior companions as a heavy-looking mechanical crossbow—an engineer's weapon—materializes in her arms.

A barrage of arrows falls on the two approaching mares, so close to them now. One of them—Qoh—is hit on the head and chest, but she carelessly removes the projectiles as she thrusts forward.

"Fucking Mercy!" Aline takes a step back as a new arrow appears in her crossbow, metallic string already taut. She and her warriors shoot again.

And miss! The mares are too goahdamn close.

Pyv, the mare closest to the humans, is already sliding



towards the man with the katana, who is staring squarely back at her, following her every move, jaws clenched, sword raised. His two female companions drop their bows, useless at this range, and two lethal-looking katanas materialize in their hands.

“The abdomen!” Edda shouts in their direction, an image of her previous fight against Yog during the Trials of Worth and Soul flashing across her mind. “Go for the—!”

Yog and Moih charge simultaneously and throw at Edda their six lance-shaped arms in a move so quick and perfectly coordinated that Ximena only sees a copper-colored blur.

But this time, Edda is ready and reacts instantly. She jumps backwards high in the air, like gravity was not a concern, keeping the distance.

The three mares, side by side, dash forward with increased speed.

And Edda reacts by jumping again, higher and farther than before, and falls gracefully anew, always keeping the distance, her eyes locked the whole time on the three pursuing bodies.

*Goah, she’s good!*

The mares stop. Yog raises her four arms above Edda and a cloud of arrows identical to those used a moment ago by the Munakata archers materialize high over her head.

Edda looks up. For an instant the myriad arrows seem to hang there in the thick air of the pyramid, each feathered-tailed and metal-tipped, each sharp and lethal. But then, as if thrust by a sudden hurricane, they fall down *hard* on her.

Edda turns her head at the expectant mares, and without even a flick of her hands, four rock columns emerge from the surrounding ground, rise over her height in an instant, and fuse over her head like a cave dome.

The arrows break on the roof of the rock structure in harmless, brief drumming.

*Goah, she’s—!*

A scream makes Ximena turn her head at Aline's group, only in time to see a flash of blood disappear in midair.

The man with the katana, he is gone! Pyv is there, still swinging her two spiked arms in the now empty air. With an elegant move of her body, the mare redirects the eager tips of her metallic arms smoothly into the guts of one of the Munakata women behind.

*Goah!*

She drops her sword—eyes widened in sudden agony—and also disappears back into the wake.

Aline is in the meantime shooting at the other mare—Qoh—with increasing dismay, but the alien dodges every attempt with ease, no matter how quickly her will-power keeps recharging her crossbow. The mare is too goahdamn close to get a decent aim!

A net with threads made of copper-colored metal materializes over Aline. She barely has time to utter a curt scream before it engulfs her completely, making her fall on her back.

Qoh looms over her, arms ready to strike. But then, she freezes.

Also, Yog and Moih have stopped approaching Edda in that exact moment.

*What...?* Ximena feels the change. It is subtle, but real, like the air pressure changed in an instant.

Every mare turns their soulless eyes over to the last Munakata woman, still standing close to Aline. Her sword is embedded into Pyv's guts—or rather, into a cloud of dust dissolving in dream air with the vanishing shape of the mare.

*Goah!* Ximena hears Edda's thoughts in her mind and feels her sense of dread and despair drop a notch. *She killed a mare!* Edda doesn't wait for the three mares confronting her to react. With a casual raise of her finger, a piece of exquisite marble materializes high over the head of the central mare: a *massive*

sculpture, a grotesque mocking of Michelangelo's David, not shaped into a human, but into a marai—and crucially, as large.

Yog and Moih frantically raise their arms, and a protective rock structure—similar to Edda's arrow-rain shelter—oozes out of the ground and closes around the central mare at the speed of thought.

But the colossal statue is too heavy. It drops and breaks through the roof of the structure as if it were made of paper. It falls hard, smashing the hapless mare—Moih—with a brief, squishing sound which Ximena finds distressingly satisfying.

The two remaining mares—Yog's limbs—stare at the marble leech, still intact and half-buried in the ground between them, surrounded by rock debris and mare gore. Then they turn their heads at Edda in eerie silence.

A dash of frenzied movement out of the corner of her eye in Aline's direction attracts Ximena's attention. *Goah, it's so hard to watch both fronts of this battle at the same time!*

While Aline struggles in vain to free herself from the metallic net, Qoh—the last remaining mare on that side of the fight—approaches the last Munakata Walker, who swings her katana back at her with defiant expertise. But those gracious, sharp motions don't seem to impress Qoh, who instead of slowing down, stretches her arms and flexes her legs in a peculiar way that reminds Ximena of a hunter about to strike his prey.

The woman drops the sword as her face distorts into a mask of naked fear. Her sudden, shrill scream of terror lasts only a second before she vanishes into the wake, no doubt in as much shock as if a blade had ruptured her intestines.

Qoh turns to the net-trapped Aline, and leaps over her helpless, writhing body like a hyena on a half-eaten corpse.

Nobody can help her now.

Edda cries at the sight, a trembling hand stretched towards her friend, so frustratingly out of reach behind Yog, whose two

elongated bodies effectively block her way while gesturing at something high in the air.

At something.

High in the air.

Edda swings her head back to discover a marble statue exquisitely placed over her fragile body. The statue—*again* a marai, identical in every detail to the one deployed by Edda against them, but a *dozen* times larger—is falling with murderous momentum, like a shoe on a spider.

Edda spreads her arms with inhuman swiftness, so fast that Ximena barely sees the blur. The gap of air between the falling statue and herself seems to *solidify* instantly in the shape of a ramp, like a monumental children's slide; the size of a hill—and as massive. It is pristinely transparent, like made of crystal. Or rather, diamond, since it seizes the weight of the falling statue, and then deflects it without but a crack of complaint.

The statue rolls down the transparent ramp in an ever-louder rumble as gravity and acceleration thrusts it down and away from Edda.

And squarely towards the hapless left mare, watching the improbable, rolling statue approach with impassive white eyes.

And *over* her, without even a bump of respect.

The statue—now splashed with splats of silver skin and blackish flesh—rolls on towards the feeding leech, unperturbed.

Without even a second to mourn her last redundant limb, Yog turns around and skillfully materializes a wall of rock in its way. But the wall—still feebler than the murderous statue made of solid marble—crumbles in contact, and the statue rolls on over the debris.

Nothing can stop its prodigious inertia. But of course, *nothing* is too absolute a word.

Yog leans and stretches both arms forward, and *yet another*

statue emerges out of the ground—again a marai, the same form but even larger than the rolling one, and right in its path.

An unmovable object, about to be smashed by an unstoppable force.

The statues collide in an explosion of marble and dust. Ximena recoils at the deafening impact—*almost* painfully loud. Luckily, the dreamsenso filters protects her tender human ears from the excess noise, and her eyes and lungs from the excess dust.

Yog turns around to face Edda, only to find her just a mere foot away, rage and violence painted on her brow, and an axe in each hand. Which she swings at once with surprising skill.

Yog's two arms drop limp to the ground. The rest of the body stands and regards Edda silently, as if unperturbed by trauma.

Edda bends slightly and swirls both axes again. Many students gasp at her brutality, but not Ximena. As a civilized woman, she wants to believe that violence is never the solution. But as a historian, she *knows* that it often is.

Yog's two severed legs and her unsupported trunk fall to the ground.

Edda kneels and meets the soulless white look of the mare. And spits in her face.

"I do see now what I-Rew have unleashed," Yog says. "I do fear war shall draw us blind into mutual extinction."

"Shut up, *worm*," Edda whispers, and raises both axes, murder in her eyes.

"I-Rew is still within me, Redeemed van Dolah. Are you truly going to terminate my-Rew existence?"

A bone-chilling scream of agony freezes Edda in place. She turns her head, eyes widened in terror. "Aline!"

Qoh, the only other remaining mare in the pyramid, has an arm deeply embedded in Aline's abdomen, while the other hand keeps Aline's head firmly on its side against the ground,

the exposed soft skin of her neck torn into a bloody mess, blood bursting out in irregular squirts.

The mare turns her head squarely at Edda, who gasps aghast at the sight of the spasms of hunger on the tight, white skin around the mouth and at the thick, dark substance oozing from the rows of sharp teeth within.

A shudder runs down Ximena's spine. A mare in action. A mare *feeding*. A truly horrifying sight.

"Stop!" Edda shouts at Qoh, axes at the ready in her raised hands. "Let her go, or I kill your precious master!"

Qoh turns her maw towards Aline's neck, and slowly moves closer, as if enjoying the scent. Blood squirts on the mare's face, which trickles down her white leathery skin like tears of death. "The abomination's body is more fragile than her mind." Her voice is slow and intentional.

In an involuntary reflex, Ximena grabs Mark's hand without detaching her gaze from Aline. She looks... *broken*; her lips parted, her eyes glassy, her mouth opening and closing in silent spasms of unimaginable pain.

"The abomination's inner organs are on the verge of collapse," Qoh continues. "Do restore Master Yog, human. Or the abomination ends."

"I'm serious, asshole!" Edda's arms tense, about to strike down at Yog, whose expressionless white eyes stare back at Edda in icy silence. "Let Aline go! Now!"

Qoh twists her embedded hand and Aline begins to shake and to gasp uncontrollably until the mare stops. "Do comply, human."

"You do that again, and you can kiss your fucking master goodbye!"

"Do comply, human," the mare repeats, her voice a notch more intense.

Edda and Qoh stare at each other as seconds begin to pass

by, the silence between them as tense as a dam a drop away of bursting into an avalanche of death.

“Giiirl...”

The sudden voice comes from the center of the pyramid; female, but with a different quality of psychic reverberation than that of the mares; as chilly as a downhill glacier eating through rocks and soil; as deep as the promise of an earthquake.

Edda turns her head to meet the pair of white, bulbous eyes staring so fixedly at her she feels her soul exposed.

“Eddaaa. Dauuughter,” the leech speaks again, sending a chill down Ximena’s spine at the uncanny pressure of the alien’s scrutiny.

“Goah’s...!” Edda blinks at the speaking white monster, at her father, limp and helpless in the creature’s throbbing embrace, and with a sudden surge of dread she raises her gaze, only to exhale with relief at the sight of about a dozen fragments of Willem’s memories up there, in the air. The last dozen spheres. Her father’s very core. She doesn’t even dare look into them, but they seem to have stopped their descent into the creature and are now hanging still, unattended, waiting...

Ximena lets out a sigh of relief. At least the feeding has stopped. But the thought of Marjolein poisoning her lover in the wake gives her a shudder. Truth is, all this can be over any wake-second now. Ximena dearly hopes that time gets dilated enough to let the events in this dreadful permascape play out to the end, whatever that might be.

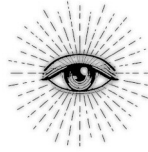
“You shall stop violence at once, Edda dauuughter,” the leech continues. “As shall you, marai-na,” she turns her eyes at Qoh, who, at least judging by her twitchy head, seems as surprised as Edda by the unexpected intervention of the Librarian.

“What- *who* are you?!” Edda asks, arm still flexed over the hapless Yog.

“You know better than to keep fighting a losing battle, Edda girl.”

“Dad?!”





## What Do You Want, Redeemed van Dolah?

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“**I**-your-father do know *you*, Edda girl: so obstinate and reckless, so assertive and fiery; so selfish, and yet so brave; so full of doubt, and yet so sure. So utterly *human*. So *dangerously* so.”

“What the fuck!” Edda rests the blade of an axe on Yog’s abdomen. “Let my dad go, dreamworm!”

Yog doesn’t move—how could she?—but somehow seems to radiate an invisible aura of almost physical... *fear*. Fear of death, Ximena supposes. The curse of every living thing.

“Edda daughter, you are a threat to your fellow humans. You did destroy me-your-father.”

“Shut up!”

“I-your-father did care for you beyond reason.”

“Shut up, shut up, *shut up!*”

“You did destroy your family. You did destroy your tribe. You might yet destroy your species. And *mine*. Edda daughter, *you* are the gravest threat of our age.”

“I’ll kill her!” Edda raises both axes over her shoulder, eyes on Yog’s abdomen, who pulses a thick wave of black fear like a fleeing squid. “I swear to Goah, I’ll kill her!”

“Violence has run its course, Edda girl. The point has been reached where any further action shall only harm our respective concerns. Thus, as rational entities as we are, we shall now embrace the more arduous path of diplomacy. I shall trade my-your-father’s essence in exchange for my continued existence.”

“You- you can restore my father?”

“Alas, no. But I can offer you his *memories*.”

“My dad’s memories? My dad’s...?!” Edda scoffs. “What’s that even good for? I want him back! Whole!”

“I do offer my-your-father’s sentience. That shall suffice to relieve you from the pain of his termination.”

“His... *sentience*?”

“What is sentience, but a long sequence of memories? I shall nominate one of my Deviss marai-na as a depository of every of my-your-father’s memories, restored in due chronological order. The marai-na shall access your dreams and take your father’s form. You shall not be... alone.”

A surge of hope mixed with dread makes Edda gasp like a fish out of the water. “Is that... Is that possible?”

“It has been done before. On rare occasions, admittedly. Evolution has made the lichai civilization strong and disciplined, but inventiveness and creativity we must unfortunately source elsewhere. Thus, we have occasionally imbued a marai-na with the entire sentience of a carefully curated member of a preyed species—a thinker, a scientist, an engineer. Their contribution always proves invaluable in embedding alien technology into our cultural repository.”

“You are... *parasites*!”

“We are *predators*, Edda daughter. Apex predators. As humans are on Earth. Or *were* until our recent arrival. Are we in agreement that a marai-na with my-your-father’s essence shall be arranged for your exclusive benefit?”

“But that is just... knowledge! Knowledge in an alien’s body. Knowledge without personality, without... feelings!”

“Personality and feelings are but side effects of linear experience and accumulated knowledge.”

“Horseshit! A fucking dreamworm with my dad’s... *soul*? That is... Goah’s Mercy, that is an abomination! That is blasphemy!”

“A word I cannot comprehend, I do fear; a word with too much emotion and too little meaning. I-your-father do suggest you let your rationality rather than your emotions guide your next move, like you would do a wargame campaign. Do raise your eyes from the battlefield and look at the war as a whole. Take what you can and leave to live another day, Edda girl.”

The words strike something inside her that seems to partially slow the whirlwind in her mind. Threads of thoughts begin to emerge from the chaos. Her father is dead, isn’t he? She cannot save him. Not without risking Aline. And yet, she could still keep a piece of him—his *essence*—alive in her dreams. She could talk to him, tell him about the world, the family. Argue with him.

Love him?

Edda stands, lips pursed, and taking a deep breath, she nods in Aline’s direction. “Release her, dreamworm. You got yourself a deal.”

“I do fear that is impossible, Edda daughter. Woman Speese—Aline—is beyond the reach of our agreement. It is imperative humankind be sterilized of abominations.”

Edda blinks. “What...?! No way!” She gestures with the axes where Yog’s trunk lies perfectly still at her feet. “She called me abomination too!”

“And you undoubtedly are. Your talents do not appear to be bound by the human condition. But, crucially, you are limited in *space*. Woman Speese’s mobility makes her unpredictable and

dangerous beyond measure, especially in combination with your continued existence. Only without her, you are tolerably weak. Only without her, you are permitted to live on.”

“No way!” Edda kneels and presses the blades of both axes against Yog’s abdomen, ready to pierce the taut, white skin. A fresh gush of terror spurts out of the mare’s maimed trunk, filling her immediate space with what appears to Ximena’s psych-linked senses like a thick, invisible substance, which Edda readily ignores. “If you kill Aline, I kill Elder Yog!”

The leech doesn’t immediately reply. Her eyes seem to wander between Edda and the hapless mare at her mercy. “The human-whisperer is of value to the Reseeding effort,” she finally says. “And yet, guaranteeing my continued existence is more valuable. Thus, I am ready to accept Overseer Yog-at-Devis’s termination in exchange for the abomination.”

A renewed wave of terror emerges from Yog, mixed this time with something else, not as dark, but sharper somehow. Edda ignores it again, overtaken by her own emotions.

“No fucking way! Leave Aline alone or, I swear to Goah, I’m taking out all of you! I swear to Goah, dreamworm! You don’t wanna risk me!” Edda raises her two axes, eyes and heart filled with murderous intent, triggering another outward burst of naked fear from Yog. “I’m coming right for you after I’m done with your fucking slaves.”

The leech observes Edda’s expectant breathing for a long while before replying, “You have always been so obstinate and reckless, Edda Girl. Especially when reality refuses to bend to your will.”

“I’m taking you out! I swear by Goah, dreamworm! You’re dead meat!”

“And yet, occasionally, recklessness does pay off. I do admit a certain discomfort at the vanishingly small risk that you might actually succeed in fulfilling your threats. I-your-father know too well that you do excel in the art of retribution.”

“You bet I do! Warm, cold, sweet... in every taste and form, *leech*. Let Aline go and you might yet make it out of here alive.”

“I am ready to offer an additional term to our covenant that I-your-father know you shall be in no position to decline.”

“I’m not leaving this place without—”

“A human reservation.”

Edda’s lips part, a frown of confusion on her brow. “A human *what?*”

“I do offer to the human race your entire native region of Diamar to live without predation and prosper in your natural habitat; unmolested by civilization.”

“Di- Diamar?”

“A natural reservation. A complete interdiction of lichai and marai activity inside its borders.”

“What the fuck is Diamar?”

An unexpected voice, Yog, rises from underneath Edda. “Diamar is...” Her voice waivers unnaturally. “Diamar... Diamar is...”

Edda frowns. “What is Diamar, Elder Yog?”

“Overseer Yog is paralyzed by fear,” the Librarian says.

Edda squints at the mare, and only then she notes the invisible substance that engulfs the maimed figure like a cloud of ice shards. *Terror*, as perceived by the heightened senses of a Walker of the Mind. Ximena realizes that not even marai can hide their emotions from a master persuader, their shape so invitingly distinct, so ready for manipulation. The full power of the last step of the Path in the Shadow all too obvious now. And it takes only an instant. With a gesture of her finger and the sure precision of her *faith*, Edda applies her dream control subtly, almost tenderly, like a healing balm on a wound. Ximena gapes in awe as the substance yields inwards at Edda’s whim, diluting slightly in the air.

“Diamar,” Yog seems to recover her voice at once, “is the

Nubarian region equivalent to your Geldershire and its immediate surroundings. The Librarian is making an extremely generous offer, Redeemed van Dolah. The possibility of such a reservation has often been considered by the Reseeding effort, but always deemed too risky. Were you to spare my life, I would be in a privileged position as Overseer of the Reseeding effort to guarantee the prompt and strict implementation of a natural reserve.”

“You mean... No Dem?!”

“Remove your culling ritual,” Yog says, “and you shall grow old, Redeemed van Dolah. As shall your cubs.”

“No Dem! Lunteren... Oosterbeek... The entire Geldershire... Goah’s Mercy, no Dem!”

“Furthermore,” Yog continues, “if Diamar’s humans do multiply again to numbers last seen in bygone centuries, I shall create other natural reserves to replicate the experiment. That is, if you do spare my life.”

“Goah be Merciful...” Edda looks over to where Aline lies, eyes blank, lips shivering, Qoh’s arm embedded in her guts. “Goah be Merciful...”

Edda’s dilemma is obvious to Ximena. No matter how great a Walker she’s grown to be, she knows that, were she to go berserk, she might not make it out alive. Violence, indeed, has reached its limits. And Edda knows it all too well. As for Aline and her dad... What else can she do? The dreamworms seem bent on killing her best friend, whatever the cost. And—a shiver crawls up her back—her dad might still get a second life inside her own dreams. Goah’s Mercy, why not? Is it really that crazy?! The alternative is... empty desolation—a void in her life too large to live through. But if she accepts the leech’s deal... If she accepts...

Goah’s Mercy, she is going to do it, yeah? How couldn’t she? Lunteren without fucking Dem! An image of a toddler—Hans—crosses her mind in a flash. And of Bram, Isabella,

Janson, Gotthard... Everybody, Goah's Mercy! Everybody's lives depend on what she does now.

"Goah be Merciful, Aline." Tears well up in her eyes, as Ximena feels her own heart shattering into smithereens. "I am so, so sorry... I- I love you, sister. My sister. I love you."

She is going to do it!

Goah forgive her... She has to!

She is going to leave behind this ghastly place—this permascape of death—to make Geldershire the center of a new world without Dem. She is going to leave behind her father, her *sister*, to the mercy of these dreamworms, so that people can settle from everywhere in the world and enjoy the most valuable resource on Earth: an entire life.

*Settle?*

*From everywhere?!*

Tears roll down her cheeks as images of power-hungry purple-robed figures cross her mind, followed by armies of warriors marching in armored suits, and uncountable colonists eager to replace the natives.

*Replace the natives!*

Will they also create a reservation for them? Somewhere deep in the Veluwa woods, perhaps?

"Do spare my life, Redeemed van Dolah." Yog's fear has been steadily expanding and thickening at the sight of Edda's tears. "And I shall order my Walkers to protect you from all harm."

Edda looks down into Yog's blank eyes. "You are hungry for life, Elder Yog." Edda wipes her eyes while pressing the mare's fear down a notch.

"I am. I do crave to continue my existence."

"But that's not all..." Edda squints at the mare's expressionless eyes, like she could see something there that Ximena couldn't. She scans the alien's broken body with the exquisite attention of her dream sense. And yes, Ximena can

see something now there, a peculiar emotion that Edda knows all too well, and it's pulsing right beneath the thick cover of Yog's fear. It feels warm and fluid, and it was there all along, imperceptible to her mundane senses.

Edda begins to caress this... *warmth* with her mind, easily, seamlessly, petting it like a puppy starved of affection. It immediately reacts, growing in intensity and size, its shape displacing the dark fear in its wake. And Yog doesn't seem to notice!

*You are hungry for power, aren't you, Yog?*

Edda brings her head closer to the mare. "Release Aline," she whispers. "Let me kill the Librarian, and you are free to do as you fucking please."

Yog doesn't immediately react, but when she finally speaks, it is also in a whisper. "Were a Librarian to be terminated by a human, it would unleash a war between our species that shall threaten our mutual existence. Humans shall be feared for the first time." As she speaks, Yog's own fear thickens noticeably. "And fear can only be satiated with bondage—or extermination."

"You are not afraid of war, are you, Elder Yog?" Edda makes the mare's flaring fear vanish with a thought. "Imagine how much *power* your masters would relinquish to you. The Overseer of the Reseeding effort, no less. And a Human Whisperer too, yeah? With Elder Rew inside you and all. You've always been so careful with us humans, so afraid of our potential. And you know what? You were right!" Edda raises that pulsing warmth up a notch as she speaks. "If I kill a Librarian, if the *abomination* escapes, then everybody will see that you were fucking right all along, yeah? Who else are they going to put in command of the war effort?" Another notch up. "Imagine the *power*. Imagine, Elder Yog, a slave marai that grows to be more powerful than most of her lichai masters!" Edda raises Yog's



craving for power to almost a burning radiation. “Who else can guarantee the continuity of your people? It can only be you, Elder Yog! War and power go hand in hand. And as nasty as a war might be, there is *survival* at the other end! And greatness!”

Yog’s head on the ground wobbles from raw desire now, her emotions fully transparent to Ximena through the psych-link. The mare craves life. And power even more. “What do you want from me, Redeemed van Dolah?” she says.

And she means it.

“War,” Edda replies, wide-eyed, her lips curving into a smile of prophetic realization; flashes of Napoleon, Stalin and Washington crossing her mind.

War. So simple, yeah? So obvious. War is the true fuel of revolutions, not dreams. How could she have been so naive to think otherwise? War not only destroys. It also *creates*. And with war comes, indeed, *power*. Power to protect. Power to compel. Power to control your fate.

With a casual gesture of Edda’s right hand, Yog’s severed limbs raise in the air and fuse in silence, restoring the marai into her elongated usual self.

“Edda daughter...” Ximena turns her head. She had almost forgotten about the white monster looming there like a spider in the center of her web. “My-your father’s essence and interdiction of feeding in Diamar... Do you concur?”

“Walker Qoh,” Yog calls. “Release the abomination and approach me.”

“Yes, master Yog.” The mare extracts the arm from Aline’s body, who immediately begins to cough uncontrollably, and—thank Goah!—vanishes into the safety of the wake. With a swift, elegant move, Qoh half swims, half flies towards Yog and Edda, until she finally stands in obedient attention next to her master.

Before Edda can utter a gasp of surprise, Yog thrusts her

own arm deep into Qoh's abdomen, who dissolves in the air at once.

Yog turns her expressionless eyes over to Edda, who takes a step back, at the ready. But Yog merely regards her in silence for a few seconds before disappearing into her Nubarian wake.

Edda turns around and, without a word—and with both axes still firmly held in her hands—begins to slide towards the Librarian the same way mares do, floating an inch over the ground.

“Lichai lives are *long*, Edda daughter,” the Librarian says, her voice most definitely wavering as her two bulbous eyes follow Edda's approach. “And *valuable* beyond what any mortal creature can ever comprehend. I do still remember the buoyant shallows of my homeworld, Huarai, eons ago.”

Edda ignores her words. She keeps sliding towards the colossal body, not a hundred yards away now, when a sudden, primal stench hits Ximena's nostrils like a chemical bomb. Edda sniffs and smiles like it was the sweetest of fragrances. “Oh, yes. You are scared shitless, aren't you, dreamworm? And rightly so, because I'm going to kill you!”

A sudden, invisible force of unimaginable violence hits Edda like a hammer just as she is reaching the monster, but instead of lifting her dream body in the air like a leaf in an autumn storm, the intense aggression dissipates into harmless nothingness, instantly canceled by Edda's willpower—or rather, by her *faithpower*.

“Edda Giiirl...” Her two bulbous eyes are fiercely locked on Edda. “Do allow me to call a Conduit-Keeper to take me safely away and I shall arrange for a human reservation the size of a continent.” The lichai's lower appendages unwrap slowly, almost tenderly, and then retract, leaving Willem lying on the ground like an empty carcass. “A continent of your choice. Do you concur?”

Without a word, Edda drives both axes smoothly across the

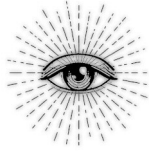
fragile lower abdomen of the Librarian. She is smiling—a grimace of animal pleasure—as her thrust takes with ruthless violence the ages-old life of a lichai of Huarai.

A dizzying whirlpool of memories—a flood of life fragments—erupts out of the open wound; an unfathomably gigantic geyser made of Willem's deepest essence. The boundless flow of spherical fragments reaches the miles-high inner roof of the pyramid in an instant, and falls back to the ground in a second instant, converging into a single point—like a magnifying glass focusing the whole fury of the sun into a tiny, burning dot.

And right there, at the exact center of the pyramid, a lying body awaits.

Willem straightens up with a gasp—eyes full of life.

Eyes full of *self*.



## Touched by Goah

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Marjolein holds the sleeping Willem tight, and rocks him with the lightest of touches, as if he were her baby. She has been crying, but her reddened eyes are now staring placidly at the ivy on her private courtyard's wall, while she murmurs some sort of prayer or song to herself, like a lullaby.

It feels to Ximena as if time in this small corner of Earth has lost all meaning. There is only sadness here, and the sorrow of loss of an unlived life.

Willem writhes lightly in her arms, turns his head towards her, and exhales lightly.

"Shh..." she says, shifts their weight on the stone bench, and pushes his head back onto her bosom. "Go back to sleep, Will." Her voice quavers. With her other hand, she takes the glass flask, uncorks it and brings it to his lips. "Take this. Sleep." She blinks a tear away. "I will join you shortly. May Goah's Embrace be warm and sweet, my love."

Willem absentmindedly pushes Marjolein's hand off his mouth and drowsily turns his head on her chest. "Goah, what a sweet, sweet awakening," he says, and smiles radiantly at her. "Cushioned in boobs and words of love."

Marjolein gasps, and begins breathing quickly, like she had just been hit by lightning on a sunny day. And then she screams—a long, wild, careless cry of joy.

“Marjo, are you—?”

She takes Willem’s wide-eyed face in her hands and covers him in golden braids and a million thirsty kisses.

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“Is it really true?!” Gotthard shouts as he slams the door open and barges into the cozy warmth of the Van Dolah’s kitchen, seeking eyes widened like a madman’s. When Willem, tightly surrounded by a jealous shell of family and friends, turns his smiling face from his place at the head of the massive wooden table, Gotthard bursts into a wild laugh of wonder and relief. “It is true, Goah must fucking exist!” And dashes forward to fiercely embrace his dowry father before he has even time to stand.

A young man in his early teens is whistling by the iron stove and stirring what smells like a hearty stew. His boyish face is beaming with such happiness that Ximena needs a moment to recognize him. Bram, of course, who points a casual finger at the cool February night beyond the still open door and says, “Shut it, please, Gotthard, and take a seat. Dinner’s almost ready. How did you get through the Inquisitor’s men?”

“I’m family!” Gotthard replies as he complies and takes the chair next to Aline, who raises her chin at him in a silent greeting. “Wow, you should take a look out there, behind the line of White Guards. People are...” He laughs, shaking his head. “It’s madness! The entire colony is freezing their butts just to get a glimpse of you, Elder van Dolah.”

“Ah, I’m not so sure.” Willem laughs. “I think it is Edda they want to see.”

“So it is true what they’re saying?” Gotthard turns his still flushed face to Edda. “Dem and the aliens are—?”

“Yeah, mensa. One and the same,” Edda says with a nod, her smile beautifully radiant. “Oh, they’re so fucked, Gotthard... You have no idea. We were just talking about it.” She gestures at the rest of the faces around the table: Marjolein, opposite her and grabbing Willem’s hand like a drowning woman a lifeline; Aline, to Edda’s left, a faint smile on her face; Isabella, next to Marjolein and opposite Aline, her expression beaming placidly while sipping a fragrant cup of mint tea; and a giggling Hans on Edda’s own lap, trying to escape her grip to climb all over her as she says, “We can see them when they prey—it’s that twinkling red in the traverse halos, yeah?—and wait till we take out a few more of those bloated mind-sucking worms. They won’t dare show their fat asses around here, that’s for sure!”

“Where did you hear so quickly?” Aline asks Gotthard. “We’re just out of that...” Her face tightens noticeably. “... *horror*.”

Gotthard’s eyebrows go up. “Are you kidding? Dem *cured*?! You don’t expect such news to stay put, do you?”

Bram laughs. “It might have slipped my tongue.”

“And mine!” says Marjolein, joining the laugh. “The more people hear the story of the Juf defeating the Dem demons, the merrier.”

Edda snorts loudly. “Somebody’s got an overdeveloped sense for drama.”

“Oh, *somebody* definitely does.” Willem reaches out with his hand and caresses Marjolein’s long braids. “I assure you.”

“I’m serious, Will, Edda! We need to spread this *joyous* news out to the entire world! Goah be praised. This changes... everything!”

“Few will believe it,” Aline says.

“Or *choose* to believe it,” Edda says.

“Especially if belief comes with an instant loss of power,” Willem says, nodding at his daughter.

Marjolein takes his face in her hands and gives him another loud kiss on the lips. “Wait until the people see Dem eradicated only among *us*, true believers.” She turns her gaze back to Edda. “There’s no stopping your Reformation now!”

“Reformation?” Edda’s lips curve into a sidelong smile. “And here I thought you called it, quote unquote, *propaganda*?”

“Well, pure sin! I- I was...” Marjolein shrugs as she extends her two hands in an almost desperate gesture. “... wrong! There, I said it. May Goah forgive my stupidity.” She then leans forward and takes Edda’s hands into hers, as if by impulse, making Edda jolt in place. “Thank you, oh, *thank* you, Edda. May Goah bless your way. And yours too, Aline.”

Edda tries to pull her hands away. “We didn’t do it for you, Quaestor.”

Marjolein laughs and presses Edda’s hand tighter. “And Kaya Fahey didn’t offer *aws* Gift to the world to save humankind from the Second Collapse. But that’s how Goah acts—*aws* Motivations rarely match ours.”

Edda rolls her eyes. “I don’t care much for Goah either, I’m afraid.”

Marjolein laughs and says, “Here comes a piece of wisdom I have picked up in my twenty-one years on this world—a few more than yours, Edda. I’ve dealt with many people throughout my career in *aws* Head: farmers, merchants, industrialists, politicians, you name it. They all talk, or promise, or bluff, or threaten. But in the end, what a person says is just vibrations in the air. It is what they *do* that matters. And you, Edda van Dolah, you are as touched by Goah as Fahey ever was.”

Willem chuckles. “Are you comparing Edda to Kaya Fahey?”

“I sure as Dem am!”

“Maybe we should stop using that expression,” Bram says with a chuckle from the sizzling stove.

“Listen, Edda!” Marjolein’s voice trembles with sudden passion, attracting every eye in the room. “I know how it sounds, but listen. Goah *did act* through Fahey back then. What was Townsend in the early twenty-second century, huh? What, but a tiny settlement in the high Missouri valley? But then, as the world kept collapsing under the weight of ever-earlier Dem, as the old nations dissolved into tribes, Goah *did speak* to Fahey. And then Fahey revealed aw’s Gift. Why? To save her family, of course! Just like you, Edda.” She puts her hand gently under Willem’s chin. “But what did she *really do*? What was the result?” Marjolein leans back, and with a sure smile, slams her hand on the table. “The Goah’s Imperia! That tiny flower in that tiny settlement grew and fed off the decaying manure of the Second Collapse until it covered the entire world. And now, Edda, Goah has spoken to you.”

Edda scoffs. “I think you’re making this a much bigger deal than—”

“A *bigger* deal...?!” She laughs and shakes her head in disbelief. “Goah’s Mercy! *You* have discovered the true nature of *Dementia Furiosa*! You found out what *really* collapsed humanity’s golden age and, were it not for Fahey, would have certainly finished us for good. And as if that wasn’t enough,” Marjolein leans in, takes Edda’s chin in her right hand and smiles at her, ignoring her frown, “you have also discovered the *cure*, may Goah bless the giver.” She turns on her chair, throws her arms around Willem’s neck and kisses him yet again.

“The cure for Dem...” Gotthard whistles with loud exaggeration as he pours himself tea from a steaming porcelain pot. “The holy grail of every scientist of the last three hundred years. That sure as... I mean, that sounds like a pretty big deal to me.”

“Not bad, Edda girl!” Willem says.



“Oh, come on! What’s so goahdamn hard about it?!” Bram shouts cheerfully from the stove. “Excuse my language, Quaestor, but does a Van Dolah teacher really need to come out and spell it out? Let’s see: a predatory alien race from a parallel universe that haunts our dreams to feed on the memories of our eldest.” He shrugs with theatrical exaggeration as he keeps stirring the stew. “How in Goah’s Name could any scientist worthy of the name miss something so *obvious*?”

Lighthearted laughter fills the kitchen while Isabella takes hold of the pot and refills the drinks. Then she stands and raises her cup. “For my dowry father, Willem van Dolah, the first person ever to come back in one piece from Dem—and from his Joyousday!” She throws a pointed wink at Marjolein, who blushes intensely.

“May he be the first of millions!” Bram shouts from the stove while the others toast.

“Yes, about his Joyousday. Uh,” Edda turns to Marjolein, eyes down. “I also need to- to thank you, Quaestor.”

“What for?”

Edda meets her gaze. “For not killing my dad.”

“Hmm, yes. Well,” she shrugs and smiles apologetically, “I didn’t do it for you.”

“A wise woman once told me not to judge by what people say, but by what they do.”

“And I toast to that.” Marjolein and Edda clink their cups again.

“Come on, Bram!” Isabella shouts. “Elder van Dolah is starving!” She gives Marjolein an amused side glance. “A man can live off feminine attention for only so long.”

Marjolein doesn’t join the laughs. She merely nods absentmindedly while her eyes lose themselves somewhere in the wall.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Quaestor,” Isabella says. “I didn’t mean to be disrespectful.”

Marjolein doesn’t reply. She is merely moving her lips, as if speaking to herself, lost in thoughts.

“Marjo, is something wrong?” Willem asks.

“Uh, sorry,” Marjolein says. “I was just, uh, thinking about, uh...” Her expression lightens suddenly. She turns her eyes to Willem and slams her hand on the table. “Oh, Goah has Mercy, *of course* it has to be me! Who else?! Will, Edda—Yes. *I* will be your face.”

Willem frowns in confusion. “Uh, what—?”

“Your *face!*” She takes Willem’s head into her hands, plants a passionate kiss on his lips, and then turns to Edda, eyes beaming, cheeks blushing and an expression like Goah awsself has touched her soul. “I accept your offer. I will be the public face of your Reformation. *Our* Reformation!”

“You mean—?” Willem’s eyebrows shoot up in sudden understanding.

Marjolein stands and says with a solemn, vibrant voice, “I hereby accept the hallowed calling of aws Prophet Edda van Dolah and of Goah awsself, who speaks aws Truth through her.”

“Oh, wow!” Gotthard says as the rest gape at her in different shades of disbelief.

Marjolein walks around the table to Edda, takes her hands, and meets her eyes.

“I am ready to accept your call as leader of a *Reformed* Head of Goah.” She turns and moves her hands at all present, as if she were again preaching on stage. “The barbaric practice of the Joyousday shall be cleansed from aws Faith. The faithful shall age. And learn. And live!” She kneels at Edda’s feet and sinks her head. “Bless me, aws Prophet, and I shall guide the faithful into a new, Enlightened Age of Goah.” She raises her

galvanized eyes to Edda. “Bless me, aws Prophet, and name me your Pontifex!”

“Prophet!” Gotthard chuckles. “Pontifex! It never gets boring at the Van... Ouch!” His voice is cut off by an elbow in the side from Aline.

“But you already are Pontifex, yeah?” Edda says. “We agreed, with the Inquisitor and—”

“No!” Marjolein says, passion drenching her voice. “That wasn’t real. That was only... A tactical pose. A necessary ruse. To save lives. It wasn’t Goah’s Will... Or...” She exhales loudly. “Oh, Goah, how could I’ve been so stupid?!” She looks at Edda. “First, a revolution! Joyousday Houses—entire aws Eyes—burn Imperium-wide. Then, out of nowhere, my love...” She turns her blue eyes to Willem. “... is returned to me. Out of nowhere, Dem is no more! But is it really out of nowhere? Are we really so deaf to not hear Goah’s Will when it is screamed into our mortal ears so clearly? Oh, yes, and in two days, everybody in Geldershire and beyond is coming to Lunteren to hear what some legendary Juf of dreams has got to say. Is it also a coincidence that the greatest revelation of our age—the end of Dem!—happens just two days before Leap Day? And by that same Juf of legend? No, Goah be Praised! It is Goah’s Will! Of course it is! And I am... Goah’s Mercy, am I really...?!”

Edda stands, takes a deep breath and places both hands on Marjolein’s head.

“I bless you, Marjolein *Fahey*.” Edda swallows, and continues. “True and only Pontifex of aws Imperia.”

“Congratulations, Marjo,” Willem says with a wide smile. “You made it to Pontifex. Lack of ambition was never your problem.”

“Nor, indeed, lack of drama,” Gotthard says.

Marjolein smiles wildly.

And begins to sob.

“Is this the complete list?” Edda and Aline squint at a sheet of paper with more than a dozen names on it and—unnecessarily—their addresses.

Marjolein nods and takes a casual sip from her cup of tea. “That’s this morning’s list.”

“There might be more people *infected*,” Willem says as he caresses the head of Hans, who is placidly sleeping on his grandfather’s chest. “That’s the wrong word, but you know what I mean. It takes a few days for symptoms to show.”

“Right. In any case,” Edda taps the paper with her finger, “we begin with these—tonight. They are the most urgent cases. And in the next days... Hmm, could we get a list of every colonist that is already twenty-six?”

“No problem,” Marjolein says.

“We must organize some sort of night patrol in the Second Wake to keep an eye on our eldest as they sleep. It’s easy to recognize dreamworms in their halos once you know what you’re looking for.”

With a sudden gasp, Aline, who is still studying the list, points at a name on the sheet and gives Edda a meaningful look. Edda’s eyes widen.

“I know,” Marjolein says, “Inquisitor Rhodes has also begun showing symptoms.”

“Lucky bastard,” Gotthard says, a cup of stew in both his hands. “Look at him. At the end of it all, he ends up in the right place at the right time.” He chuckles. “Goah may be with him, after all.”

“Of course Goah is with him,” Marjolein says. “The Inquisitor and his White Guard have a sacred calling now: to protect,” she gestures at Edda, “aws Work on Earth.”

“And he is doing a fine job at it, I must admit,” Willem says softly, to avoid waking Hans.

Gotthard nods. "Geldershire is under our absolute control."

Aline cringes and squints at him. "A control we must return to the people as soon as we restore aw's Compacts."

"When the people are ready, sure."

Aline raises her voice a notch. "And who judges that, Gotthard?"

"Well, us, of course!"

"Please, mensas," Edda says. "Not tonight, yeah?" She looks at the list again and shakes her head. "Whatever our personal feelings, we cure the Inquisitor first." Edda turns to Isabella. "We need, I would say, at least ten Walkers with some decent dream fighting skills, to be on the safe side. Can you get them?"

"Sure," Isabella says. "In an hour or two, the De Bron permascapes should be teeming with rebels from all over the Imperium. Come with us, Edda. You must address them. Tell them about, you know..." She waves her hand indistinctly. "Rouse them up."

"I want to address them too," Marjolein says. "Somebody pick me up."

Edda smiles at her. "We'll still make a Walker of you, *Pontifex*. Aline, can your Munakata friends come tonight again, you think?"

"Partly. I went there after our fight to check on them. A couple were too shaken to dream, but the rest were more eager than ever. They promised to make good use of Woman Zeger's goodnight potion recipe," Aline gives Isabella a nod, "so they can sleep well into the Japanese morning."

"Good. I'd like them to show our own Walkers their fighting style before we go on the hunt for red sparks. With De Bron's time dilation, we can even practice some of... Are you okay, sister? You don't look too convinced."

“Hmm... Well, sorry, perhaps it’s only me, but I don’t like to kill.”

“You prefer not to come?”

“No, that’s not it. It’s more...” Aline wets her lips. “Those, uh, *leech* librarians are crucial to their civilization. And perhaps they are even immortal. If we start killing them... Goah’s Mercy, it’s going to be all-out war...”

“What’s the alternative?” Edda asks. “Let them feed on us? Truth is, we’ve *always* been at war, Aline. But now, for the first time, we *can* fight back.”

Aline shrugs. “I guess... Regardless, I don’t like to kill.”

“No worries, sister. You leave that to me.”

“One more thing, before you go,” Willem says. “I think you should also bring observers from other colonies.”

“*Observers?*” Edda frowns.

“It’s the fastest way to spread the truth. And the cure.”

“I’m not comfortable bringing even more people into the... *operation*. We must focus our efforts on taking out the Librarian. We can’t afford to spread our forces thin to protect whoever wants to tag along.”

“You won’t have to. They’ll stay out of the way. And if the dreamworms get them, well, the more memorable the awakening.”

“If they awaken...” Aline says.

“Actually, they won’t attack our observers,” Edda says. “Not when they see us charging against their leech masters. And, yeah... My dad’s right. Observers will see how the dreamworms *feed*, and how they die and spill their stolen memories back into their victims.” Edda laughs loudly. “Observers will spread the truth about Dem farther, faster and more effectively than any rumors could ever do. And no amount of counter-propaganda can hope to stop us. You wait and see. Soon we’ll have an infinite supply of ultra-motivated recruits.”

“Oh, but,” Marjolein says, eyes widening in delight, “it is *so* much more than that... The testimony of observers will be the *seed* of our Reformation! Imagine, thousands of colonies softened up by observers... They will be *very* receptive to my gospel!” She puts a hand on Willem’s cheek. “*Observers*... Ha! I always knew there was more in you than just a pretty face and a sexy ass.”

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“**M**y dear professor, if you allow me a comment.” Censor Smith has stood right as every eye in the auditorium was watching, transfixed by the scene transitioning to the Leap Day itself.

“By all means,” Professor Miyagi replies while Ank abruptly pauses the scene. Ximena’s frustrated eyes can barely see the details—still a hint in the air—but when she squints and tilts her head, she begins to make out... Yes. It’s Edda’s bedroom; by now as familiar to Ximena as her own.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Mark mutters on Ximena’s right. Cody, on her left, sighs loudly with the same impatience that grips them all.

“Splendid.” Censor Smith takes a few steps onto the amphitheater stage. From up here, Ximena can only see the back of his shaved head and plain brown robe, but Miyagi’s expression remains placid and professional. “It’s a comment about Mathus.”

Miyagi puts his hand slowly on his chest. “I am shocked.” This invites a few chuckles, mostly among the Lundev benches. But to her surprise, Ximena hears a couple around her as well. Weird how that lifts her spirit, knowing she is not the only one that can see through the Censor’s—the GIA’s—wall of bullshit.

Censor Smith keeps speaking with his same, unaltered scholarly tone, apparently impervious to sarcasm. “You see, I

don't quite agree with her words to Edda van Dolah. What people *say* matters a great deal, perhaps even more than what they do."

Miyagi frowns slightly, evidently baffled, but says nothing.

"It shows *motivation*, no less. And in a science as sparse on evidence as history, motivation is sometimes the only guide left to a historian. Bear with me, please, professor," he hastily raises a hand when Miyagi seems about to speak. "What I am attempting to make our students understand," for a moment, he turns the tattooed Eye on his forehead and his serene smile towards Ximena and the rest of the GIA students, "is that *altering* the motivation of historical figures—as you are doing here with Mathus—is as much *lying* as tampering with the sources."

"What *I* am doing with Mathus?"

"This..." Censor Smith gestures indistinctly in the air. "... *redemption* of hers, like she didn't take the mantle of a so-called Pontifex by means of seduction, extortion and demonic manipulation. This ridiculous *alliance* with Edda van Dolah, as if the holy Juf herself had actually put Mathus in a position to unleash the ultimate heresy. So you see, professor: on one hand, you change the motivation of Mathus, making her seem almost human, while on the other you smear Juf Edda's, like she is the one to blame for the most terrible war humankind has ever seen."

"Interesting perspective," Miyagi says in a monotonous tone. "So all you dispute are motivations, not facts."

Censor Smith spreads his arms. "The historical facts are undeniable. Alien demons *did* feed on us humans for millennia. They *did* push us to the brink of extinction three centuries ago. Edda van Dolah *did* uncover the dreamworms and their true nature. And taking advantage of the tumult, Mathus *did* rise to power, split awa Faith in two, and plunge Earth and Nubaria into unimaginable carnage."



Miyagi rubs his chin. “I wouldn’t quite put it that way, but I agree in principle. Well, isn’t that something?” His lips curve into a tentative smile. “In that spirit, we might actually survive with a degree of civility the second half of my seminar, when we get into the nuts and bolts of the Dreamwars.”

“I’m afraid we won’t stay that long, my dear professor.”

*What?* Ximena and Cody exchange horrified glances as murmurs of displeasure and surprise cross the GIA benches.

Professor Miyagi himself seems taken aback, at least judging by the deepening crease in his brow and the way he shifts his weight. “You... won’t?”

“Oh, I’m sure you understand. If something as straightforward as the advent of the Leap-Day Heresy—the alien demons, the Dem cure, Mathus’ power grab—has proved so... *controversial*, I shiver just thinking what a Hansasian seminar on the Dreamwars would look like. But I am also glad we can leave with a degree of civility, as you so nicely put it. We could even call the first seminar of the Global Program a resounding success, wouldn’t you agree? After all, we made it so far.”

“Uh...” Professor Miyagi wets his lips. “But the whole point of the Global Program is to get both sides of the war together, to talk it through, to explore the deepest truths together, to let the old wounds heal once and for all.”

Ximena is barely listening to the discussion. She feels dizzy, as if the stone under her feet was slipping away. If there is one thing that she has learned from Professor Miyagi, it is how slippery truth really is. And, sadly for her, in some places more than others. Thanks to the professor, she knows all too well what awaits her back in the Townsend. How can she ever hope to call herself a historian in a place that breathes propaganda and paranoia? And it gets worse, because what the professor is revealing is not just some dry historical truth. Far from it. This is *her* truth! This is what explains her being here at all. The

story of her roots, her heritage, her family. What made her... *her. There is no fucking way I'm going to leave!*

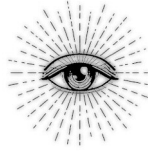
"I know, my dear professor. And I am two-hundred percent behind such a laudable goal. But... Some wounds need a long time to heal."

"It's been way too long already."

"So, what is a year or two more? We have made history today, Professor Miyagi. We have walked the first step. Together! And we part on good terms, don't we? Ready to recommend further acts of rapprochement."

"So, that's it? You take every Townsend student," Miyagi raises his eyes pointedly at Ximena, "and leave?"

"Oh, but not before watching the Leap Day! Goah excuse my almost morbid curiosity, but I wouldn't forgive myself—nor, I suspect, would my students—if we didn't experience in all its dream sensorial glory what promises to be a very peculiar interpretation of the most fateful date of our age."



29th February 2400

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Edda is finishing adjusting her ornate, black gomen-belt over an immaculately white tunic, when something catches her eye next to the window.

Something small.

Something white.

A sparkle in the morning sun.

Edda's eyes widen as she hurries towards the desk and leans over the cactus plant. She chuckles in disbelief while hastily pushing the book and typewriter aside to pull the plant pot closer to her. And Ximena feels it too, all too clear now: the overwhelming sense of relief—of *pride*—that overwhelms her through the psych-link as Edda reaches slowly out with her hand towards the cactus plant, the tip of her fingers barely grazing the tiny, white flower.

*I will be part of the plant now, and I promise you that when I bloom, you will bloom as well.* The loving, female-voiced words echo in Edda's mind with the clarity of trauma.

Edda's breath quickens as she takes the pot in her hands, her eyes misting over, locked on the bright, fragile blossom. *Mom!*

“It is time!” Willem pushes the ajar door open. “The guards are already—”

Edda jumps in place, a startled gasp on her lips.

*No!* Ximena thinks, as her own hands instinctively crawl forward. But it is too late.

Edda drops the pot.

Which shatters into broad pieces of terracotta and lumps of soil, sending a thick, musky smell into the air.

“Edda?!” Willem rushes to his daughter, who is gaping at the damage with trembling lips and fingers. “Don’t worry, girl. It’s nothing. The plant is in one piece. Let me...”

He runs off and returns a few moments later with an empty pot. Kneeling and, with exquisite care, he gathers every last grain of soil and carefully digs the cactus into its new home. “There.”

During this whole time, Edda has just been staring in frozen terror, as if her soul had just been ripped from her body.

Willem jumps to his feet and embraces her tightly. “It’s nothing... It’s nothing... There... There...”

But as much as Edda’s anxious eyes scan the restored plant, that lonely, white flower is nowhere to be seen.

“It smells like history, doesn’t it?” Mark whispers in Ximena’s ears, eyes on the electrifying atmosphere of sheer humanity that covers the Forum of Lunteren like a thick carpet of thunder and flame.

Ximena doesn’t reply, too awestruck by the myriad of colorful, yelling, hatted heads as the auditorium scene slowly approaches the elevated terrace that surrounds the Eye of Goah building. As she raises her eyes up there, what first catches her eyes are the white-robed warriors of awa Fist

standing in quiet attention at intervals along the edge, machine-guns on their backs. One of them, the warrior closer to where the scene seems to move, has just nodded permission for a shapely girl in a long, pale blue tunic to come up the side stairs.

Ximena feels a shake in her mind as the psych-link engages with that girl—Aline—right when she reaches the terrace. She turns her brown eyes—shimmering in the sun—towards the loud, gathering mass of people below and gasps loudly in awe at the sight.

Every soul of Lunteren—no, of *Geldershire*, of beyond!—seems to have taken claim to a piece of the Forum, and is fighting fiercely to keep it as still more people try to push their way into the packed space. Not even during the Century Festival had the red-bricked floor of the Forum disappeared so completely under what appears from up here like a vibrant and undulating ocean of humanity. To Aline’s surprise, it is brown-cloaked men and women—standing on wooden boxes strategically placed at intervals amid the crowd—who are keeping a semblance of order by means of shouts and gesticulations, steering people along predefined lanes and diverting them as sections fill up.

*The brown militia*, the thought pops in Ximena’s mind like it was her own, mixed with a sour taste on the back of her tongue. *There are more of them every day. And highly organized, too. The De Bron permascape has been good to them, no doubt.*

“Ah, Speese. There you are!” Gotthard nods a polite excuse to a group of finely dressed people mingling in the VIP section of the terrace, and runs to her.

“Gotthard, Blessings. Who are those mensas?” Aline asks with a voice loud enough to, hopefully, compete with the surrounding roar of thousands upon thousands of increasingly impatient throats. “Ah, silk fits you well.”

He looks down at his exquisitely smooth white-and-yellow

robe and smiles. “It’s not the cloth. It’s the frame beneath. And you don’t look too shabby either.”

She puts a playful finger on his face. “Your nose has *deflated* to an almost human level.”

He grimaces for an instant, but a beaming smile immediately takes over. “The slight bend makes me look more interesting, wouldn’t you say?”

“Picasso would certainly agree. Who are those *mensas* you were talking to?”

Gotthard passes a hand through his tight, black curls. “You are late, Speese.”

“It’s a miracle I made it at all!” She gives the masses below a wary look.

Gotthard chuckles. “Everybody is here already.” He gestures with his thumb towards the central area of the stage, farther along the terrace, where Edda, Willem and Marjolein seem to have a heated exchange with four of the Colony Elders of Lunteren. Behind them, Inquisitor Rhodes watches attentively from a polite distance, two of his White Guards standing next to him in full gear. “The show is about to kick off any minute now.”

The missing Colony Elder—the fifth one—is with the VIP group, Aline notices. “Who are those *mensas*, Gotthard?”

“Who?”

“The rich *mensas* you were talking to before.” Aline points a finger. “There, with Rutger and Colder Siever. Elder Haack is with them, too. That’s like half of the karma and all the pollution of Lunteren, in a single—”

Something in Gotthard’s expression stops her in mid-sentence, something that distorts his handsome North-African features in a way that Aline has never seen before on him, something that she wouldn’t have thought Gotthard capable of feeling.

*Shame.*

Her heart begins beating quicker. “Who are they, Gotthard?”

Gotthard blinks away. “Uh...”

“Goah’s Mercy! Answer me!”

He sighs and meets her piercing gaze. “Trade Colders, industrialists and merchants from all over the Free Colonies of Hansa. Those that wanted to be here in person today. That one over there,” he points at a short woman with a wide, furred hat, “has made the journey all the way from Russia’s Finnish province.

“The Free Colonies of... Hansa?”

“That’s how they call themselves—those that join us.”

“Us?”

“The revolution.” Gotthard throws a hand at Edda’s group, and then he slowly sweeps it across the roaring multitudes surrounding them. “The Reformation.”

“But...” Aline frowns at the VIPs, who chat animatedly among themselves, trading smiles and courtesies like they were dowry relatives. “Are they really on our side?”

“Unreservedly. Why so surprised?”

Aline, still frowning, shakes her head. “Karma hates disruption.” She scoffs. Ximena can feel all too well the depth of her skepticism. “Karma is the status quo’s most loyal friend.”

“Not if the new regime promises riches beyond their wildest dreams.”

Aline looks at him pointedly in the eyes. “What riches?”

He takes a step back. “Uh, you should see Rutger in action in those interminable permascape sessions.” He points a finger at his best friend, who is whispering something in his father’s ear. “He is a damn good negotiator. Say what you will,” he chuckles, shame still written across his face, “but he sure knows what makes those rich mensas tick.”

“What *riches*, Gotthard?”

Gotthard looks away and wets his lips. “Listen, uh... War is coming.”

“*War?*”

“What do you think this is?” He points a finger at the crowd. “A love declaration to aws Imperia? And this is a war we need to win, Speese. Whatever the costs.”

“Costs?” A shiver runs down her spine. “What... *costs*, Gotthard?”

“We *need* industry. *Real* industry, *heavy* industry, like in the golden age; able to bend Earth and space to our will. Or all this is for nothing.”

“What have you promised them, Gotthard?” A warm, acrid sensation begins to smolder in Aline’s guts. “What is the fucking price?!”

“We, uh...” Gotthard takes another step back, blinking in distress. “We... Aws... Aws...”

“Aws Balance!” Her guts tense like they are about to burst into fire, her fears painfully confirmed in his expression. “You gave them aws Balance! May Goah have Mercy on our souls...”

Gotthard doesn’t reply. Nor meet her eyes.

“You are fucking insane! Aws Balance is how we stop Earth’s ecology from completing its slide to hell!”

“I- I know, but—”

“You are dismantling the only policy of aws Imperia that is absolutely critical for our future! Fucking Mercy, Gotthard. Aws Balance is woefully underwhelming as it is, but instead of strengthening it, you want it fucking *gone*?! And for what? For.... *karma*?!”

“It’s much more than karma, Speese! Look at the size of aws Imperia! Look at us! How can we hope to prevail in a prolonged conflict without a strong economic bone?! Edda said that—”

“Edda *knows* about this?!”



The expression on his face as he gazes over to where Edda stands is louder than any reply.

“And she...? And *she*...?! Impossible!”

Aline is yelling at an appalled Gotthard, already beginning to attract the attention of some of the industrialists nearby, despite the noisy crowd covering the Forum.

*Edda? Impossible!* But deep inside, she knows it is true. She knows her best friend too well. It somehow... fits.

Aline walks a step closer to Gotthard and stares him squarely in the eyes. “Why did you keep me out of the loop? You should have told me! I thought, you... I thought, we...”

“I’m sorry, Aline. I tried several times, but I didn’t want to lose...” He shakes his head and looks away.

“To lose what?”

“Whatever we...” Gotthard blinks. “... have.”

“*We*?” Aline puts her hands on her hips and leans forward. “We have nothing, asshole! You disgust me!” She begins to stomp away.

“Wait! Please! Don’t... go like this.”

Something in his voice stops her. She turns and points a finger at his face, fury distorting her features. “If you wanted me so badly, why did you do this?!”

“There are...” He takes a deep breath and wets his lips. “There are higher...”

“Higher what?”

“Higher... *considerations*.” He takes another breath. “Higher even than aws Balance, Aline. Please, understand. Higher even than... you.”

“Oh!” She wags the finger at him. “The fucking asteroid, right? That’s what this is really about, huh?”

“Yes!” He spreads his hands wide, eyes widened in desperation. “Of course it is all about the fucking asteroid, Aline! How could it not be? Who cares about fucking aws Balance when an extinction-level-event rock is headed our

way? Without an industry able to rebuild a space program in a century, that's it! Bye, bye, humans!"

"Well, pure sin! Then, think of another way, Goah's Mercy! There is plenty of time, and you are a smart mensa."

"There is no other way, Aline. At least, not one that remains under our control. We *must* restore the golden age. And we *only* have a hundred years."

"Restore the golden age? Are you out of your fucking mind?! We don't live on the same Earth that our forefathers destroyed, can't you see? Our ecosystem is a joke! Half of the planet is still uninhabitable, Goah's Mercy!"

"With the technological and industrial output of the golden age, we could reconquer the lower latitudes."

"You can't be serious! You can't reap shit from a barren field. What do you want, to destroy what's left? The Rape of Gaia, all over again?!"

"If raping Gaia again secures our children's survival, then I'm first in line."

Aline slaps Gotthard on the face so resoundingly that this time the entire VIP section turn their faces.

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**A**s Aline reaches the central area of aws Eyes's terrace, and stomps into Edda's group, her cheeks are still warm with outrage, and her heart throbbing with ache. She is about to interrupt, but Colony Elder Simon van Althuis is speaking with such passion that she hesitates.

"And you expect us to accept this illegal power grab with a smile and bow?!" Colder van Althuis—Simon—is saying, an accusing finger pointed at Edda. The other three Lunteren Colony Elders present—Gisela Beulens, Stella de Ridder and Margriet van Kley—stand by his side with arms crossed over their chests and defiant glares on their faces. Willem and

Marjolein remain behind in awkward silence, exchanging occasional glances of discomfort.

“You don’t need to accept shit,” Edda replies with a tone of voice so uncharacteristically controlled that it sends an icy shiver up Aline’s spine. “You can also take your stuff and leave.”

“This is... unheard of!” Simon exchanges a wide-eyed glance with his three peers. “What in Goah’s Name gives you the right? Lunteren is our home! Our life! It has been for generations! And you ask us to either accept your coup, or fuck off somewhere else?!” He turns his flushed face to Marjolein. “Don’t you have anything to say, Quaestor Mathus?”

“It’s *Pontifex Fahey* now, Colder van Althuis,” Edda says with an eerie calm. “And no, this is not madness. This is *history*. And I suggest you step aside, or risk being stepped on; because history won’t stop—least of all for the old aristocracy.”

“What do you think this is, *Juf* Edda?” Colder Beulens intervenes, her voice filled with scorn. “The fucking French Revolution? I see you brought a mob.” Her eyes flinch over to the surrounding crowds still gathering below. “Where are the guillotines?”

Edda takes a deep breath. “We are keeping aw’s Compacts in place, Colder Beulens.” She says in a slow and patient tone—a schoolteacher’s voice. “All your rights are fully guaranteed by—”

“*Really?*!” Simon exchanges a long gaze of disbelief with Colder Beulens. “All our *rights*?” He spreads his arms wide. “What about *voting*? I was voted into office. The people down there,” he points with the finger at the masses, “voted for *me*. Who voted for you, *Juf* Edda?”

*Damn right*, Aline thinks, turning her eyes over to Edda, but she doesn’t reply. She is just squinting back at Simon in icy silence. And Ximena—or rather, Aline—doesn’t like that look a bit.

“I suggest we let the people,” Simon waves his hand again across the Forum, “vote for their leaders in fair and free elections. I know, I know.” He theatrically chuckles and makes an apologetic gesture. “What an amusing occurrence, an election. What a cute idea, isn’t it? Alright, may I dare to ask *at least* for one vote?”

“One vote...?” Edda frowns and tilts her head.

“Yes, one vote. A single-issue vote. A referendum. What if you graciously grant us the right to decide, I don’t know...” He twists a hand casually. “Whether to go to war with the rest of the fucking world, for example?”

Edda turns her face to the Inquisitor, raises two fingers and then points them at Simon. The Inquisitor nods, shouts a curt order, and two of his warriors trot forward.

“What—!”

Simon has no time to even complete his protest. Aline and the remaining Colony Elders watch aghast as the two bulky men in full military gear drag him away without regard to his puny screams.

“Where are you taking him?!” Colder Beulens asks, her eyes nailed to the back of the two warriors and the hapless, writhing man. “What in Goah’s Name are you going to do to him?”

“Don’t worry,” Edda says. “He’ll be fine.”

“Goah’s Mercy, Redeemed van Dolah,” Colder Beulens says. “You just arrested a Colony Elder, and I’m *not* supposed to worry?”

“He’s just being held for the rest of the day where he cannot use that serpent tongue of his to arouse a legion of fanatics. And tomorrow, he and his family will be politely escorted out of Lunteren.”

“No, Edda!” Aline says. “You can’t just—!”

“I see.” Colder Beulens interrupts with an authoritative raise of her hand. “Do you realize that not only have you

censored a legitimately elected Colony Elder, but you have also taken his freedom? And you did all that with a simple finger gesture,” she demonstratively moves her own, “with no regard to the due process guaranteed by aw’s Compacts. That is some serious power you have amassed in your hands, Redeemed van Dolah. But this is no dreamworld, where consequences don’t last. Here, in the *real* world, you should be very careful about how you yield it.”

Edda sighs. “I know how it looks. I really do, yeah? I hate doing this as much as you, but look at all those people,” she gestures with her head at the bubbling crowd. “Everybody that could make it here, *is* here. We are making history today, Colder Beulens, and we cannot risk that the message gets—how should I put it?—*distorted*.”

“I see,” she nods at her slowly. “So, when all this is over, and life goes back to normal, you will *naturally* call an election and then renounce power?”

“There’s no back to normal.”

“Of course not.”

“No, I mean...” Edda bites her lower lip. “There *is*, but not for a long time. And until then...” She shrugs apologetically. “What we are starting here today, well, it’s too important. It’s crucial for our survival, yeah? We must expose the dreamworms to the rest of the world, eradicate Dem and rebuild our civilization; all while juggling whatever nonsense aw’s Imperia throws our way. Until the dust settles, it would be irresponsible to run elections and trust our destiny as a species to the changing whims of ignorant fanatics—especially with the likes of Colder van Althuis and other sweet-tongued charlatans on the loose.”

Aline gapes in horrified silence at her friend, like a demon had taken over. But she knows her too well. This is the *true* Edda, alright; so afraid inside, so in need of control. She is going all-in, our environment and sacred rights be damned. As

if aw's Balance wasn't enough, she is now suspending aw's Compacts and ruling by whim. For the greater good, Goah has Mercy on us all.

"Spoken like a true despot," Colder Beulen says.

A shadow crosses Edda's face at the word, and, for an instant, her eyes flinch over to Willem and Aline. But she quickly regains her outer composure and turns her icy gaze back to the Colder.

"What I see here," Colder Beulen continues, "is a fucking revolution running its predictable script. What comes next? Ah, yes." She extends a hand at the Inquisitor and his attentive warriors. "The traditional substitution of elites?"

Edda purses her lips. "I assure you all your rights will—"

"And what is a revolution worthy of the name without a charismatic and ruthless leader that embodies the *people*?" Colder Beulen takes another step forward, squinting squarely into Edda's eyes. "Every revolution must spawn its Napoleon, its Lenin, its Fahey."

"Napoleon..." Edda mutters, tears welling up in her eyes.

"A leader," Colder Beulen presses on, "that seeks peace with *fanatical* determination. A peace that must be first torn off the still-warm carcass of the old regime. For only a true revolutionary tyrant understands that no price is too high to pay for that *one, true peace*. Only a true tyrant knows that there can be no talk of *rights* and *values* until peace reigns the land, unquestioned and supreme."

"Tyrant..." A lone tear runs down Edda's cheek. With a sigh, she turns to the Inquisitor, raises two fingers and points them at Colder Beulen.

"Wait!" Aline steps forward, stopping the two approaching warriors in their tracks. "This is messed up, Edda. You can't do this!"

Edda rolls her eyes. "Not you too, Aline. Not today, yeah?"

“It is today you are stomping on our sacred rights, Goah’s Mercy! If she goes, if *any* Colder goes, then I go too!”

“Are you blackmailing me? Are you threatening to go into exile?”

“I swear to Goah, I’ll do it! I can’t stand this anymore! A revolution should change things for the better, not erase every accomplishment of the previous regime!”

Edda snorts. “What accomplishments?”

“Aws fucking Balance, for one! Aws Compacts! Are you also planning to destroy aws Gift and return us to breeding like fucking animals?”

Edda shakes her head and takes a deep breath. “I cannot allow myself the luxury of being small and selfish, sister. Look at that!” She throws a finger at the increasingly loud crowd. “Too much—too many—depends on me now. On *us!*”

“Don’t give me that horseshit. Restore our sacred rights, or I’m out, *sister.*”

“You do what you must.” Edda says, a crease of anger on her brow. “I do likewise.”

Aline turns.

And leaves.

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**I**t takes Aline what feels like an eternity to reach her home on the eastern end of Miel Way. There are just too many people in every street and open space she crosses. The entirety of Lunteren is teeming with masses that seemed unimaginable until today. And yet, in high contrast with the loud chaos surrounding her, there is peace in Aline’s mind, *relief* even, Ximena notices. The sort of relief that lingers after finally committing to one of those tough decisions that, although life-changing, feels *right* in the guts.

The number of people is mindboggling. Most are visitors

from Geldershire, but many come from the rest of Germania and nearby Gallia, and some even from as far as Russia and Scandinavia, judging by their peculiar outfits. Everybody has been spread out evenly across the entire colony by the brown militia with surprising efficiency. Loudspeakers, water stations and even crude but functional toilet facilities have been set up at intervals along every square, street and alley. Most houses are open, and offer refreshments and hospitality to visitors in need.

The mood is expectant. It is almost time.

Aline has heard their words—their hopes—as she has laboriously made her way through the crowd. They want to tell their children and, yes, their grandchildren too—if those rumors about Dem are true!—that they were here, in Lunteren, the day the Reformation was born. They came all the way to the holy colony to show their devotion, to hear and hopefully get a glimpse of the new Pontifex, or—Goah Willing—even of the Prophet of Goah herself: Juf Edda, the dream queen who is on everyone’s lips.

The excitement is palpable in the air, as impatient glances are thrown with increasing frequency at the humming loudspeakers.

Aline finally makes it into her front yard. Her brother Michiel is at the door with a sleeping Alida—their toddler daughter—in his arms. He is talking to a young man that turns his head when she approaches.

“Gotthard?!” Aline, blinking in disbelief, scans the young man. Panting heavily, his face is sweaty and flushed, and the bottom of his once immaculate white-and-yellow robe is stained with road dirt.

He sighs with visible relief at her appearance.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, a frown forming on her brow.

“I heard you are leaving!”



Aline raises her chin. “And what if I am?”

“Leaving?” Michiel asks, as he shifts Alida’s weight in his arms. “Exile?”

Aline meets his brother’s eyes and sighs. “Yes, I made up my mind. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“Let me guess,” Michiel says. “Edda.”

“Not only. I’ll tell you later.” As she turns over to Gotthard, her gaze turns into a smoldering squint. “I thought I made myself very clear that I was not looking forward to seeing you again.”

He looks away, a sparkle in his eyes. “I had to... to see you before you leave.”

“I’m not leaving *immediately!* I’m not that hotheaded. It will take a week or two to arrange the move.”

Gotthard takes a deep breath. “And where are you going?”

“Why do you care?”

“Oosterbeek,” Michiel says.

“Oosterbeek?”

“Yes, Gotthard,” Aline says. “Oosterbeek. I have connections there, and it’s close enough for me to keep an eye on my family.” Her eyes flinch at her brother. “In case they prefer to stay in Lunteren.”

“No fucking way!” Michiel says. “Dad and I are coming with you. And Alida, of course.” He puts a casual kiss on her head, but nothing appears to affect the toddler’s sleep. “We won’t let those assholes split the family!”

Gotthard looks at both Speese siblings alternatively. “I see this wasn’t a spontaneous decision taken in the heat of the moment.”

Aline scoffs and shakes her head. “What do you want?”

Gotthard purses his lips and turns to Michiel. “Mind giving us a moment?”

“Why?” Aline says. “I keep no secrets from my family.”

“Ah, don’t worry.” Michiel waves a hand at her. “I’ll begin

preparations with Dad.” He walks into the house and shuts the door behind him.

Aline folds her arms across her chest and shifts her weight. “I’m waiting.”

“Uh,” he looks away. “I- I beg you to stay. Please. I- *We* need you.”

Aline is about to lash out, but there is something in his expression that stops her in her tracks. Is it vulnerability? Or even fear? In any case, it is as unusual in Gotthard as a kicking body in a sealed grave, and almost as terrifying. With a sigh, Aline puts a hand softly on his shoulder, and says, “I am sorry, Gotthard. I cannot, in good conscience, play an active role in the world’s destruction. I would rather live as a victim than as a perpetrator.”

He meets her gaze. “I understand.”

Aline snorts and folds her arms. “I doubt it.”

Gotthard takes a second to reply. “Fine. I don’t. But I have an idea that...” He hesitates. “It’s crazy, Speese. A crazy, crazy idea. But maybe you and I can... Maybe you... will stay.”

Aline scoffs again. “That’s quite a lot to ask of an idea.”

“You said I was smart.”

“Did I?” Her lips curve into a thin smile. “What could I be thinking about?”

“You also said that you despise me.” His voice is plain, but there is something in his dark eyes.

Aline doesn’t immediately reply. “What is this wondrous idea that will compel me to collaborate with a tyrannical, ecocidal regime?”

“Saving the world, of course. There might be another way. A *better* way. A way to put an end to the asteroid problem without resorting to heavy industry.”

Aline exhales and nods slowly. “Congratulations, Gotthard. You got my attention.”

“It’s dreamtech. And you.”

“You can’t stop a space rock with dreamtech!”

“Nor can you topple a world-wide empire that has stood for hundreds of years.” He stretches a hand towards the masses of people filling Miel Way. “Yet, here we are. Look, I’ve been thinking a lot lately about traversing.”

“What does that have to do with the asteroid?”

“Bear with me, Speese. Please. You know how some people are more talented traversers than others?”

“I know. You are pretty good.”

“I’m the best,” he says in all seriousness, “with one exception.”

Aline smiles, and then shrugs. “What can I say? A girl has talents.”

“It’s not just that you are better, no. It’s like the fastest person on earth would run like a rocket, and the second-fastest, only like a man. You are... on another level entirely. It’s thanks to you we have a presence in the Atlantic and Chinese Imperia.”

Aline shrugs again. “And your point is?”

Gotthard gets closer and looks squarely into her eyes. “I need your help to traverse to the lost colony and gnaw at their dreams until they agree to steer that fucking rock off course.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “But it’s in space!”

“I know. Unimaginably far away. But I think *you* can make it there.”

Her lips part, as if to say something, but she doesn’t.

“It’s not as absurd as it sounds. Look, I can guide you with my telescope, and we can stay in contact via you spacelessly-traversing back and forth every few hours. Besides, the lost colony is alive—it shines in the Second Wake—so when you get close enough, it will be like a blue lighthouse in the utter darkness of dead space.”

Aline blinks twice and chews on her lower lip for a few seconds, eyes lost in thoughts. “And red,” she finally says.

“What?”

She meets his gaze. “There were also red sparkles up there, remember? When we looked through your telescopes?”

“Uh... I guess. Why is that important?”

“There must be people up there sourced from Nubaria!”

“What in Goah’s Name are you talking about?”

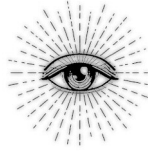
She wets her lips, nods to herself and then looks at him in the eyes. “Promise me, Gotthard. Swear by Goah that if we get up there and *persuade* those space killers to knock off their asteroid, you will talk Edda and whoever else is necessary into protecting aws Balance.”

“Yes!” Gotthard nods eagerly. “And you stay, right?”

“Swear it!”

“I- I solemnly swear by Goah,” he awkwardly places his right hand over his chest—an underused gesture, obviously, “that if you stay and we convince New Alexandria to neutralize Babi, I’ll do everything in my power to keep aws Balance in place.”

As the street loudspeakers come suddenly to life, and a roar of ecstatic expectation thunders across the entire Lunteren, Aline takes Gotthard’s head between her hands, raises up on her toes, and kisses him ardently on the lips. “You got yourself a deal, asshole.”



## The Voice of Goah

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“**A**ws Blessings to you, Lunteren!”

Marjolein’s powerful soprano voice immediately floods the packed Forum and echoes across the entire colony, broadcast by the public address system and the chain of loudspeakers set up on strategic corners, streets and alleys.

“Aws Blessings to you, Geldershire!”

Her confident smile widens as the crowd salutes back with a resolute roar. Ximena must admit the woman looks resplendent on stage in her new Pontifex yellow robes, her figure enhanced by the tenuous silks, and her blonde braids collected like filigrees of gold, high and around her nude neck. And her eyes, her smile... They are almost... magnetic.

“Aws Blessings to you, Hansa!”

Ximena absorbs the clamorous reply of the masses with a gasp of awe. Next to her, Mark and Cody are also staring with parted lips, as is every other student in the auditorium—Lundev and GIA alike—all virtually hypnotized by the significance of the moment. Human history turning a page, like a baby snake finally shedding its skin and growing into

something larger and stronger, more adapted to its hostile environment.

“I know why you are here!” Marjolein shouts on the microphone. “Some of you—Geldershire, I ache for you—are scarred by oppression. Others have witnessed the terror firsthand, or listened to it live on radio. But most of you are here because you have heard the rumors—haven’t you, Hansa?—rumors of *hope*.”

The crowd responds to Marjolein like a piano to the pianist’s touch: loud and harmonically. *Oppression! Terror! Hope!*

“Rumors of life!” She smiles at the uncountable faces enthralled by her words, and slowly places a hand on her chest. “Look inside your hearts, Children of Goah, and rejoice! Then what has brought you here today, *that* is the *Call* of Goah awssself, the *Voice* of Goah awssself. Can you hear your god, Hansa? Can you hear the God Of All Humans?!”

The crowd cries and moves in waves of ecstasy. *Aws Call! Aws Voice! GOAH!*

“I was deaf, Hansa. I was deaf, Goah be Merciful with my soul. All my life, I was deaf, believing myself to be a faithful servant of aws Will, but I was *lied* to.” She expertly modulates her voice, making it more stern and intentional. “As were you, Hansa. You were not pious servants of Goah either. No, Goah be Merciful with your soul. You—I—we were all deceived; enslaved by the will of demons that spoke the most horrifying blasphemy the world has witnessed since aws Creation. Demons that spoke in the name of Goah! And I believed them, Hansa! I confess to have believed aws Head’s every lie. I confess to have believed in the godly authority of the false Pontifex. What about you?!”

Thunderous shouts of agreement inflame the Forum and every street of Lunteren at once. *Lies! Aws Head! False Pontifex!*

Ximena gapes at the woman, at her perfectly trained posture, at her gestures designed to captivate, to *manipulate*.

Here, finally, she begins to recognize the Mathus of her upbringing: the heretic, the *demon* that took awes Imperia by storm and plunged the world into a spiral of chaos and death not seen in centuries. And yet, she is also the woman that worked ceaselessly to keep her flock safe; the same woman that held Dem-ridden Willem in her arms until the end. A woman, just a woman, after all.

“Deaf!” Marjolein continues, passion pouring out of her throat, burning the hearts of every listening soul. “But not all of us were deaf, no. And you know it, because you are here to see the woman that *heard!*” With a theatrical move, Marjolein points a finger at Edda, standing alone on an elevated platform in the exact center of the stage.

The crowd bursts into an explosive combination of cheers, frenzied applause, and yells of adoration as every eye in the Forum locks on her with fervorous fascination. Edda is facing the Forum in her long, white tunic with an impassive expression, the living image of a Black Goddess; a goddess of youth and truth. She is flanked on her left by a row of White Guards in ceremonial uniform led by a resolute-looking Inquisitor Archer Rhodes of Worthing, and on her right by a row of brown-cloaked militia men and women with heads sunk in pious deference led by Anemoon Roskamp of Oosterbeek.

“You are here because of her, aren’t you, Hansa?” Marjolein shouts. “You are here because of the one one-eared woman that heard the Voice of Goah, and tried to warn us, all too clearly, at the turn of the century. And yet, most of us called it a *Blasphemy*, and persecuted her and her acolytes for preaching awes Truth. Goah whispered in her only ear the terrifying truth behind Dem, that a race of dream demons were preying on our elders, killing them—killing us! That the false Pontifex of Townsend and the top hierarchy of awes Head had sold their souls to these dreamworms! That in exchange for keeping their depraved privileges, they enslaved us, *the*

*people*, to their predations! They poisoned and sacrificed us to their demon lords with the ungodly ritual we call the Joyousday!”

The masses covering the Forum echo her every word with blaring enthusiasm. *Aws Head Demons! Joyousday!*

Ximena is blinking in confusion at what Marjolein is saying. *Aws Head was never under the same sheets with the marai! The Pontifex, working for the dreamworms?! That's ridiculous, Goah's Mercy!*

“Goah is the god of truth!” Marjolein shouts. “Goah despises those that fall into the sin of deception. And make no mistake, we were all deceived by aws Head! And by our neighbors! And by ourselves, Goah be Merciful with our souls! We did sin. We did put our entire faith in the hands of the false Pontifex and the karma crumbs aws Head cared to throw our way. *They* pushed us relentlessly into Joyousday Houses like lambs into slaughterhouses, to feed the insatiable hunger of their dreamworm masters.”

Ximena, aghast at the words, says, “She is lying!”

Mark scoffs. “What did you expect?” He shouts his words in Ximena’s direction, trying to be heard over the overwhelming roars of anger and screams of outrage. “Every regime is born hungry for power. And the truth is always the first course.”

“But these are Marjolein and Edda! They would never... Is it possible that Professor Miyagi got this wrong? That this,” she gestures at the two women on stage, both absorbing the angry energy of the crowd like sunflowers the rising sun, “never happened?”

“This is the Leap-Day speech,” Mark says. “Word by word. Right out of the historical archive. Don’t tell me you’ve never heard it before!”

“There are records of *this*?” Cody asks, and gives Ximena a pointed look.

Mark laughs. “What do you think?” He gestures towards



the edge of the stage, where a small group of people surrounded by a forest of cables, speakers and electric equipment adjust knobs and direct microphones in every direction in a frenzy of activity. Ximena recognizes among them a very excited-looking Flora de Vroome shouting something into a microphone in her hand. And the other people next to her also look like journalists.

“Unbelievable!” Ximena says, meeting Cody’s gaze. “Why did they keep this speech from us?” She turns and stretches her hand at Marjolein. “And why is the Reformation kicking off with such a blatant lie?”

Cody sighs. “Truth is too blunt an instrument of power to wield effectively. Propaganda, on the other hand, can be refined to perfection.”

“Propaganda...” Ximena says, a flash of disgust on her face. “The Townsend University... Marjolein... Edda... Goah’s Mercy! If *everybody* lies, how can we ever expect to learn the fucking truth?!”

“You already know the truth,” Mark says. “That’s why you are so upset.”

“In some places words are instruments of manipulation, not of truth,” Cody says in an uncharacteristically sour tone. “At least now we know where we live, Ximena.”

“Rejoice, Children of Goah,” Marjolein shouts with renewed intensity, “for Goah has chosen the best of us to whisper aw’s Truth to!” She looks over to Edda, who keeps her chin impassively raised at the thousands upon thousands of adoring gazes. “Goah has chosen a *prophet* to speak aw’s Voice and save our souls from the lies of the Imperia of Townsend and the insatiable hunger of their demonic masters. Accept her words, Hansa, and you shall be saved, for she speaks aw’s Truth, and I can prove it! Do you want proof, Hansa? You want proof that Goah is on our side?!”

The resounding reply—*Yes! Proof! Our Side!*—only begins to

fade when Marjolein stretches her hand in slow motion towards Edda, expertly capturing every eye in the Forum.

“All of you have heard by now about the prodigious arts that Goah awssself has bestowed upon aws Prophet: a technology of the dreaming mind like the golden age has never seen: a vehicle to spread aws Message beyond—literally—our wildest dreams, a weapon to fight the dreamworms and their Townsend puppets. And those of you that haven’t yet, will soon live the wonders of dreamtech in your own dream skin! But there is more proof, Hansa! Much more! The ultimate proof of Goah’s love, revealed to aws Prophet; undeniable, for it is true!” Marjolein stretches both arms up in the air, and shouts with delirious passion, “Dem—is no more!”

The crowd seems to boil and melt at once in frenzied celebration. So loud are the cries of joy, so desperate the sobs of relief, and so persistent, that after several attempts at soothing her captive audience with calming gestures, Marjolein finally gives up with a patient smile, in the realization that it is like preventing a ravenous fire from spreading through a dry forest on a windy day. Sometimes it is better to let the world burn. Sometimes it is not even a choice.

After what feels to Ximena like an eternity of thunderous, fervorous, all-encompassing euphoria, Marjolein leans once again over her microphone, and shouts, “Rejoice, Children of Goah, for you are truly blessed! Goah has sent aws Cure to aws Prophet to save your life and the lives of your children! And the lives of your grandchildren—which you will meet, Goah be praised! Hansa! You owe your life—and the life of your family—to this one-eared woman,” Marjolein points with a finger, “that heard the Voice of Goah!”

She is forced to stop speaking as the volume of the yelling crowd eventually drowns out even her electrically enhanced voice. A chant begins to take form, hard to make out at first

among the impassioned chaos, but slowly picking up pace, ever more clear, ever more distinct.

*Juf Edda! Juf Edda! Juf Edda!*

On and on it goes, ever more fervent, ever more rhythmic—the two words hammering the air in an endless litany of thunder, every face in the crowd shouting them now.

*Juf Edda! Juf Edda! Juf Edda!*

Gasps of elation cross the Forum when Anemoon, the first of the brown cloaks standing on Edda's right, takes a knife out of her robes, slices her own left ear off and throws it at Edda's feet, a fanatic grin on her face and a string of blood down her side.

*Juf Edda! Juf Edda! Juf Edda!*

The rest of the brown militia behind Anemoon begin to imitate her sacrifice among shouts of devotion, and soon a bloody patchwork of left ears lay scattered in front of a serene-looking Edda, her eyes stoically fixed to the far end of the Forum, her lips closed in a thin line of solemnity. A Black Goddess of youth and truth.

It takes a few more minutes of Marjolein's patient smile and calming gestures for the crowd to finally begin to wind down. By then, those long minutes of ceaseless adoration and extreme display of deference seem to have made a dent in Edda's otherwise impervious expression: a lone tear is running down her cheek.

"Make no mistake, Children of Goah." The voice of Marjolein is more somber now, almost sinister. "Like there are two sides to every coin, a deep responsibility accompanies the blessings of aws Call. Aws Prophet has brought you both aws Truth and aws Cure. Now it is *your* sacred duty to protect them, spread them, and make them bloom."

Marjolein takes the microphone off the hook and paces forward, right to the rim of the stage. She gives her spellbound audience a long, studious gaze, pulls the microphone up to her

mouth, and says in a grave tone, “Winds of war are gathering.”

The crowd stirs uneasily, but remains reverentially silent.

“A war is coming against those demons of the mind: the dreamworms that prey on our Elders and mutilate our lives and our civilization.”

*War! Demons! Dreamworms!*

“A war is coming against those parasites of the soul: the heresy of Townsend and *their* Imperia, that shall resist our call to spread aw’s Truth across the world.”

*War! Heresy! Imperia!*

“Wars like the world have never seen. Wars that we shall win, for Goah is on our side, and we grow stronger by the day. Goah wants us to liberate the world of Dem and Heresy. Goah wills this!”

*Goah wills this! Goah wills this! Goah wills this!*

“Rejoice, Children of Goah, for you are bearing witness to the birth of a new nation. A nation that we found here today, the twenty-ninth of February twenty-four hundred in aw’s Holy Colony of Lunteren. A Reformed Imperium of Goah, where human spirit and civilization shall fulfill its true potential, finally free of Dem, the Joyousday, and the whims of Townsend!”

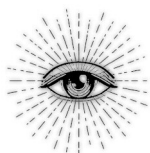
*Lunteren! Reformed! Free!*

“Rejoice, Children of Goah, for today we are not only celebrating the birth of aw’s Reformed Imperium. We are also bearing witness to a second nation in the dreamworld: a new, free nation of Walkers of the Mind that spans the world, with its own inhabitants, its own laws, its own infrastructure; unbounded, and united.”

*She is talking about the De Bron permascape!* Ximena realizes, and imagines it growing larger by the day, new colonies attaching themselves to the colossal construct of dreams as the Reformation spreads in the fiery winds of the dreamtech

revolution. Ximena looks around her, at the amphitheater benches, at the enthralled students—each dreaming from somewhere else in the world—at the two gates that connect this place with the Townsend and Lundev universities, and to the rest of the Dreamnet beyond. And then it sinks in that the Dreamnet already existed on the Leap Day of 2400. Only it wasn't called that yet.

“A nation,” Marjolein continues, “forged by a *queen*. Children of Goah, I—Pontifex Marjolein Fahey—am honored to present you,” she turns her eyes at Edda, and smiles as the Forum melts into cheers, cries and tears, “Redeemed Edda van Dolah of Lunteren, Juf of De Bron, Prophet of Goah, bearer of aws Cure, and Queen of Walkers.”



## Historian

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“Look at them,” Professor Miyagi says, his voice artificially enhanced to be heard over the crowd as thousands upon thousands of fanatic colonists cheer and yell at the top of their lungs. The scene floating in the auditorium begins to slide towards the focus of such devotion: the two figures standing side by side on the central stage. “Look at them, people: Edda van Dolah and Marjolein Mathus. Look at them. Think about where they came from, and where they stand now, this fateful 29th of February 2400, at the beginning of a path that will make them, for better or worse, the most powerful women the world has ever seen. More, perhaps, than Kaya Fahey herself.”

Ximena has only eyes for Edda, her face a mask of controlled emotions against the raw violence of public adoration. Edda, her ancestor, a part of her like her own parents and grandparents are. Perhaps more, considering the influence she had on history. And now, thanks to Professor Miyagi, thanks to the Global Program, she feels like she knows Edda more intimately than she could ever hope to know even her own parents.

*Why?* Ximena asks herself. *What were you thinking, Edda? That*

*you can serve a new, enlightened order to the world on a plate of lies? How many regimes in history have ever flourished on that recipe, Edda? Lies need constant nourishment to keep a semblance of consistency. They grow and grow into an amorphous tumor of corruption, despotism and tyranny that metastasizes into every organ in the body of the new regime, until it ultimately kills it in slow, predictable agony.*

Ximena feels the fierce connection with Edda turning into doubt about herself. *What would I've done in your place? You were not a historian, Edda. No matter how much you read, how much you learned, you were just sixteen, Goah's Mercy! Your knowledge of history was too flawed to guide you. How could you hope to distinguish truth from propaganda in such a brief life? And now I know—Goah!—that I've been fed bullshit my entire life. But at least I am a scientist—a historian—capable of critical thinking. At least, I know I've been lied to. And I know what the price for truth is.*

“Propaganda at its purest!” Censor Smith draws Ximena’s attention with a surprisingly powerful voice. He is standing a few feet into the stage, and has turned his three-eyed face towards Ximena and the rest of the GIA students. “What have we got here?” He gestures up at the two women on the floating scene. “A demon Pontifex turned human? A hero schoolteacher turned dictator?” He scoffs loudly and gives Professor Miyagi a derisive, sidelong smile. “Learn the lesson, my dear students. Never trust a Hansasian present, no matter how beautiful the package—and your dream sensorial is beautifully spectacular, my dear professor.” He gives Miyagi a curt nod. “Dangerously so. As tempting as a finely crafted Trojan horse at the gates of Troy.”

Miyagi sighs. “Come on, Censor Smith. This is the Global Program.” He looks at Ank and moves a finger along his neck. The clamorous scene in midair vanishes at once, leaving instead a spring morning sun shining its soothing, warm light over the blinking students. The sudden silence and the fresh fragrance of the surrounding meadows spread like a balm

across the amphitheater. “And you still talk like we are enemies.”

Censor Smith faces him. “After watching this charade, I honestly need to question your motives.”

“What motives?” Miyagi asks, spreading his hands wide. “The Dreamwars were long ago, Censor Smith. We are not your enemies anymore.”

Censor Smith rolls his eyes and smiles at the benches of GIA students. “Are you not?”

“No, we are not. Enmity is a state of mind. Enmity is a matter of will. Do you really feel threatened by,” he gestures at the now empty space over his head, “a historical theory? Let’s discuss it! We are historians. Let’s engage academically. That’s what the Global Program is all about. Let’s find our differences, let’s work over them, let’s agree where we can, let’s respect where we cannot.”

“I am sorry, my dear professor, but my students are concluding their participation at this point.” With a rash look at the benches and an imperative gesture towards the Townsend gate at the top of the amphitheater, students left and right of Ximena—above and below—begin to stand and stretch their limbs. “It would be irresponsible of me to allow them to witness your... *interpretation* of the Dreamwars.” Most GIA students begin to slowly move towards the central aisle on the way to the exit. Mark and the other Lundev students packing the other half of the amphitheater watch the departure of their GIA peers in silent disbelief. “Still, we made it halfway, didn’t we? What was the bombastic name of your upcoming commercial sensorial again? Ah, *The Rise and Fall of the Juf*, wasn’t it? Well, we made it through the *Rise* part, at least. That has to count for something. I suggest we call the Global Program a success, and a promising first step into a new age of collaboration between the Hansasian and Imperial scientific establishments. You,” Censor Smith points an



impatient finger at Ximena, Cody and the few other remaining GIA students still lingering in their seats, “hurry.” He raises his voice at the leaving students already approaching the gate. “Everybody gather in class 401! We are discussing what we have witnessed here before calling it a day.” He points again at Ximena and Cody and the short-of-a-dozen stubbornly seated students. “Come on! Move!”

“Sir,” Ximena says, standing and looking straight down at Censor Smith on stage. “I humbly request permission to stay for the rest of the Seminar.”

The stream of GIA students up the central aisle draws to a halt and everybody looks in her direction. A sudden, icy silence covers the amphitheater in stark contrast with the balmy sun. Nobody moves, not even the students about to reach the exit gate. They just stare at her, and then, at Cody, when he stands next to Ximena to say, “I do likewise request your permission, sir. Humbly.” The other sitting students also get on their feet now, and nod politely at Censor Smith, who returns their gaze in wide-eyed disbelief. A few other GIA students already on the central aisle begin to move sideways towards the nearest empty bench.

Censor Smith’s expression softens in an instant into a soothing smile. “I appreciate your thirst for knowledge,” he says, his eyes scanning each of them sequentially with benevolent warmth. “Be assured, the Townsend will give you more knowledge than you could ever hope to drink. But I ask you to be patient. And to trust me. This,” he points in Professor Miyagi’s direction, “is not knowledge. It is just... an old-world fantasy. A skewed opinion, at best. Come, please. It was fun while it lasted, but we have actual work to do.”

Nobody moves.

Even Miyagi remains silent, his expression as placid as circumstances allow. But he is not looking at Censor Smith, Ximena realizes with a gasp. Goah, his eyes are locked on hers!

As are Ank's too, sitting on the front bench among the GIA students, legs crossed in her elegant dress and neat, short haircut. They are both looking squarely at her, but this time, there is no disappointment in their eyes. There is something else, something that makes her heart beat faster. Pride, perhaps? Or a *warning*?

"Sir," Ximena says, meeting Censor Smith's narrowing gaze. "I request official leave. With Professor Miyagi's permission, I would like to spend my own time here."

Censor Smith wets his lips and shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "I have little patience for another of your outbursts, Woman Epullan. I think we agreed that, for *everybody's* sake—for the future of the Global Program," he nods in Miyagi's direction, "you were going to duly fulfill your duty as a loyal student of Townsend University."

"Sorry, Censor Smith. Of course, I don't mean to disobey. I'm just humbly asking your *permission*. That's all."

"Well," he smiles at her. "I'm glad to hear that. And in that same spirit, I am sorry to decline your petition. No Townsend student shall ever stay under Hansasian influence unattended."

Cody intervenes, his face unusually blushed. "But we are adults, sir! We do not require supervision. The idea is almost... insulting."

"Take it as you will, Man O'Higgin," Censor Smith says, his expression tightening visibly. "I have no leeway in this regard."

"And what if we decline your... instructions?" he asks.

"Then, to the shame of your family, your career as a historian is over. And don't think about turning to the Lundev for help." He looks pointedly at Miyagi. "Or to any other Hansasian institution, for that matter. None of us wishes the Global Program—and any other future collaboration aimed at easing geopolitical tensions—to be cut short because of Hansasian's bad-faith."

“That’s extortion!” Cody says.

“Take it as you will, Man O’Higgin,” he extends a hand invitingly towards the Townsend gate standing at the top of the stairs. “Shall we?”

Ximena exhales in horror. She can’t go! She must stay, whatever the costs. *I’m an Epullan, goahdammit! I’m a fucking historian! Or I’d be one, if they’d just let me.* But she knows she carries too much GIA baggage to even merit the name. And she also knows that in Townsend they’ll turn her into something much worse than a shrewd propagandist: a *believer*. A *fooled* believer. They’d make her swallow all their crap until she pukes it back as gospel. Is that her fate? To spill lies on her corner of the world for the rest of her life?

“Please, Censor Smith!” Ximena says, desperation in her voice. “I beg you, allow me to stay! I- I respect your authority. I do. But this... This is a personal matter. Please, allow me—”

“A personal matter?” Censor Smith frowns and tilts his shaved head. “How so?”

“Uh...” Ximena hesitates, her heart pumping adrenaline like a hare trying to escape a wolf. The words have escaped her mouth, but she realizes they are true. This is not only about her career. This really is personal. She *must* witness how Edda changes the world; and perhaps more crucially, how the world—the *war*—changes her. This is not some abstract history she is about to miss if she goes with Censor Smith; it is *her* history. And she must learn the truth; a truth that will be surely denied to her back home.

“Woman Epullan?” Censor Smith’s voice grows increasingly impatient. “Personal matter, how?”

“Uh... Yes...” An idea begins to tickle her mind. A simple idea: in the GIA, family matters. Goah knows, perhaps they’d make an exception for her! What’s there to lose? They might even allow her to attend other events and access their sources. She could even be an ambassador between—

“Woman Epullan!”

“I...” Ximena turns hastily towards Ank and finds alarm in her honey-colored eyes. “I am...” She then looks at Miyagi, who is raising a hand at her in warning. But it is too late: the words escape her mouth in a reflex of despair. “Edda is family! I descend directly from her and Gotthard Kraker.”

Miyagi and Ank sink their heads as a stunned silence stretches across the auditorium. Then a multitude of local whispers and murmurs erupt in the amphitheater. *What did she say? Descendant! From Edda van Dolah? Liar! And Gotthard? What’s his son’s name again? Gerrit Kraker. Could it be? Come on, she’s making it up. Pathetic.*

“I- I must stay, Censor Smith! I beg you! The history of the Dreamwars is also the personal history of my family.”

Censor Smith’s smile has vanished. He turns his stern glare and the fiery Eye of Goah tattooed on his forehead in Miyagi’s direction. “Is this true?”

Professor Miyagi raises his head at Ximena, who meets his gaze with anxious, wide eyes. She nods encouragingly at him, a gesture to speak up, but he remains silent.

The wordless exchange between Ximena and Professor Miyagi seems to trigger Censor Smith, who rushes into the stage of the amphitheater with an outraged finger raised at the professor. “You knew this!”

Miyagi slowly turns to meet his accusing glare. Still, he doesn’t reply.

“Sir?” Ximena asks, confounded by Censor Smith’s rage.

He looks up at her, blinking, and his expression softens at once. A smile begins to curve his lips, but not his eyes. “Woman Epullan. That is—I must say—fantastic news!”

“Uh, thank you, sir. Yes, right? Do I then have your permission to—?”

“Much better! I am going to arrange for a committee of expert curators to prepare a wealth of contextual and historical

material *exclusively* centered on your heritage. We will go beyond the Dreamwars,” he throws a dismissive gesture at Professor Miyagi, “and put all our copious resources into tracing every step of your family as they fled Hansasia to settle in the Goah’s Imperia of the Americas.”

“My family didn’t—”

“You are going to learn everything that there is to learn about what it means to be the first known descendant of aw’s Prophet. A historian, no less! In the GIA! What a fortunate coincidence. Goah’s Will, undoubtedly.” His expression lightens further. “Imagine what we can accomplish once we complete your education. Our publications will have the authority of the Juf herself! Oh, Woman Epullan. You are destined for greatness! The influence—the power—you will yield! Where are you currently based?”

The words of Censor Smith are becoming harder and harder to follow, in the whirl of confusion and alarm that is already blaring inside her mind. “Uh, I don’t see how—”

His smile broadens and waves a dismissive hand. “We will, of course, move your entire family to Townsend. The Pontifex herself will be so pleased to meet you! I’ll make the introductions. I also know people in media and public relations that will catapult your image, once ready. And I will personally make sure that you are ready, Woman Epullan. I’m taking you under my wings until you can soar on your own above the highest peaks of the Americas.”

Ximena, wide-eyed, looks desperately around her, trying to get a hold of what is happening. Cody, to her left, has sunk his head and looks defeated. Mark, on her right, meets her gaze and takes her hand firmly into his, but says nothing. What the fuck could he possibly say? Miyagi, Ank, they also are staring at her with that same fear in their eyes. Ximena even catches a glimpse of Mallory down there on the first bench where she has sat the entire time next to her beloved Censor Smith; and

she meets envy in her large, black eyes. Envy! With a glimmer of envy's uglier sibling: *hatred*.

Is this where Censor Smith is taking her life? Her family's life, Goah's Mercy? Is this her destiny? To fall prey to propaganda, like Edda did? To *make* propaganda, like Edda did? To... to *be* propaganda? For what, for *power*, like Edda?! What good is power if it destroys what you are?!

"I'm sorry, sir. I- I must respectfully decline."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your offer is... more than generous, sir. I really appreciate it, sir. But I'm more than happy to just remain here," she gestures at the amphitheater, and at Professor Miyagi on stage, who is watching her with a sparkle of... pride? ... in his eyes, "and learn about the Dreamwars, if you allow."

"Oh," he chuckles. "That is impossible, child. Now, more than ever. Under no circumstance are you allowed unsupervised exposure to extraneous influence."

"I- I'm sorry, sir. But I'm not going to Townsend with you."

"Oh, but you are, Woman Epullan. Of course you are."

"No, sorry. I don't want to."

Censor Smith purses his lip, and throws a nervous glance at Miyagi. "Come on, child. You know better than that. That is your selfish side talking nonsense. But you are not selfish, Woman Epullan. Deep inside, you are a family woman; everybody can see that. You would never let anything happen to your family."

"What about my family?" She asks, raising her voice.

"Nothing, child. Nothing at all. Because you are coming freely with me."

"Are you threatening my family?!"

Censor Smith laughs lightly. "You are so, so confused, Woman Epullan. Understandably so, after such a flamboyant seminar. But you will get a clear head soon enough, trust me.

You will see that I'm doing you a favor. Your fate is grandiose, child! And it is awaiting you. In Townsend."

Ximena exhales, aghast. She meets Cody's sad eyes, and it sinks in at once. They are both cells of a larger body, a clog in a relentless machinery perfected through generations to control every aspect of their life with the necessary subtlety. With the necessary *violence*. The regime owns her family. Thus, the regime owns *her*. Completely. With time, she will be totally absorbed into the elite. With time, she will be the willing voice of the regime, one more gear turning the eternal wheel of power.

"Ximena?" Mark asks as she releases his hand and begins to walk towards the central aisle. "He is bluffing! He can't really—"

"Stop!" Miyagi's shout freezes her—and the entire auditorium—in place. Even Censor Smith's smug expression seems to waver for an instant. "You have crossed a line, Censor Smith. A line that the Lundev—that Hansasia—will never tolerate."

"This is none of your business, Professor Miyagi. Please refrain from—"

"You made it my business when you began threatening the families of our Global Program students! Coercion, explicit or implicit, is unacceptable in the academic world of the twenty-sixth century!"

Censor Smith keeps his voice coolly controlled. "This is an internal affair of the Townsend University, my dear professor. For the Global Program's sake, you will refrain—"

"The Global Program is dead!"

A long silence follows the professor's shout. Everybody's attention is locked on his bloodshot eyes, on his outraged fist. Ximena barely dares breath.

Miyagi exhales, as if trying to regain his composure, but he then bursts out, "You just killed the fucking Global Program,

Censor Smith! You just delivered proof that the GIA is not ready for civilized peace!”

“I deeply regret your seeing it that way,” Censor Smith says in a slow whisper. “But maybe it’s for the best. Perhaps the next generation will have an easier time to find each other and join in peace.”

*This is madness!* Ximena thinks. The Global Program in shatters? Because of... *her*? But... it is too important! The cold war must come to an end, whatever it takes! This is Professor Miyagi’s declared mission. And he is right, goahdammit! The world urgently needs a geopolitical rapprochement, and the Global Program is by far its best hope.

“I quit!” She shouts, attracting everybody’s attention. “Fuck it. I’m out. I renounce my career as a historian.”

Professor Miyagi extends a hand to Ximena. “We would be glad to take you in the Lundev.”

“Unacceptable!” Censor Smith shouts at him. “Aws Prophet’s descendant in *Lunteren*? You would use her only to spread your Hansasian propaganda. If you think that the GIA will stand still while—”

“I’m not going to the Lundev!” Ximena shouts. “Nor to any other academic institution. I refuse to put in danger the Global Program,” she says, her voice softening with sadness. “I quit academia completely.” She sighs and looks at Mark when he takes her hand.

“Ximena,” Mark says, looking in her eyes. “You don’t need to do this. The Global Program is dead in its tracks already.” He throws a dismissive gesture at the gawking Censor Smith. “That clown is proof enough.”

Censor Smith lashes out, “How dare you, Neanderthal filth!”

Ximena removes her hand from Mark’s anxious grip and raises it soothingly in Censor Smith’s direction. “Look at us, fighting at the slightest slur! It’s obvious that these tensions



between us... They must end, somehow. The Global Program —*your* Global Program, Professor Miyagi—cannot be allowed to fail. We all share the same world—the same fate, Goah’s Mercy!” She sighs. “I renounce my career as a historian. I will withdraw all my publications and remove myself from any public activity. I know this doesn’t satisfy anybody, but please, *please*, Censor Smith, Professor Miyagi, please don’t let peace die,” she snaps her fingers, “like this.”

Both Professor Miyagi and Censor Smith stare at her for a long while and then meet each other’s glance in stolid silence.

“Okay, okay, enough, everybody!” Ank stands and walks onto the stage as two massive hands appear over the central stage, clapping loudly to attract everybody’s attention. “Not even a council session in an election year can pack such an amount of knee-jerk bollocks! This seminar is suspended. No, no!” The Lundev section of the amphitheater is beginning to stand and raise their hands and voices in indignant revolt. “Sit and listen!” she yells with sharp authority while the massive overhanging hands thunderously clap them back into silent attention. “You too, Kenji!” she says as one of the floating hands points a warning finger at Professor Miyagi, who seemed about to say something. “For all the gods, listen, please!” She turns to face the colorful Lundev lot. “This seminar is *temporarily* suspended. The department will organize the next session in a few wake days and communicate to you all the details. Until then, you are excused. And don’t forget your dream rest!”

They disappear without even a whoosh. Every single Lundev student is gone in an instant. Ximena opens her eyes wide and her hand jerks rightwards in reflex when the robust figure standing there vanishes.

*Mark!* she thinks, aghast. Her breathing speeds up while a sense of icy emptiness slowly creeps from toes to head. *Fuck,*

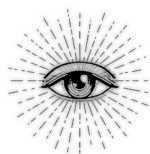
*this is really it, isn't it? This is the end. Goahdamn you, Ank! We didn't even have time to—*

“Thank you so much for attending Kenji Miyagi’s seminar,” Ank is now speaking to the gaping GIA students. “Regardless of your feelings about what you have witnessed today, the entire world is in your debt for your participation. Know that you have today helped make the dream of the Global Program a reality. I know we are not likely to see any of you again, so,” she stretches her arms wide, and smiles wider, “have a great day, and a nice life. Now, you may go to that classroom Censor Smith mentioned before and wait for him there. I won’t hold him long, I promise. And remember your dream rest!”

Before any of Ximena’s fellow GIA students have time to move a muscle, they are gone too, like they never existed. Also Cody, Goah’s Mercy! But she is still there. The only student left in the now utterly empty auditorium. Down on the stage, Professor Miyagi and Censor Smith are staring at Ank, one with a growing smile, the other with a melting glare.

Ank raises her hand, and with the snap of her fingers, the amphitheater vanishes, leaving the four of them standing next to each other on the now vacant fragrant meadow. Bathed by the balmy spring sun, among grass and flowers, several small baskets of freshly made bread—the warm smell making Ximena salivate at once—with a varied assortment of cheeses have been invitingly set up beside a white-and-red checkered picnic blanket.

“Censor Smith, Kenji, Ximena. Time to get creative. Sit, and start talking in earnest with each other, because, I assure you, nobody is leaving until you bake together a half-edible solution.”



## Bestawros

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The airstation is surprisingly spacious and busy, compared to the relatively cozy Townsend Central, where Ximena had to transfer ships for the last leg of her long journey. There are hundreds of passengers here going about their business, many more than in Townsend. And the ceilings... Somebody obviously had something to prove, because the glass ceilings here are so ridiculously high, that she can even spot birds flying around and nesting in the nooks and crannies of the overarching grandiose steel beams.

But Ximena is too nervous to pay too much attention to her bustling surroundings. She just wants to find the goahdamn exit. At least, her luggage arrived intact, she thinks as she throws a look of relief at the wu-trolley dutifully moving along with her on a frenzy of green tendrils.

She feels a familiar buzz inside her skull. A call. *Mamá*. She hurriedly searches her thick, color-patched robes while rushing towards the nearest wall to get out of the way of the intense outward traffic. *Where is it? Ah!* She finally finds her visor-glasses folded in one of the upper pockets. “Coming, coming...” she mutters, as she sets them on. “Mamá! Hi! Yes... I was going to

call you as soon as... But I just landed! Shouldn't you be in bed, anyway? What time is it over there? ... No, I haven't met him yet. I'm still in the airstation...." She chuckles. "Okay, I promise. But go back to bed, please... Okay, I will... Love you."

With a smile on her face, she puts her visor-glasses away and spends the next ten minutes of her life trying to navigate this monstrous contraption of an airstation until she miraculously finds her assigned exit gate behind yet another liquors-and-presents store. She gets in the queue and finally makes it out to where a wall of gawking people watch every exiting passenger with eager expectation.

She looks around, scanning the faces, trying to keep a reign on her nerves, trying to look stern, even bored after the longest—the *only*—journey she had ever taken in her life. *Oh, Goah, do I look tired?* She hastily wipes her eyes and adjusts her black hair, making sure her two long side braids rest neatly over her shoulders.

"You are shorter in real life, you know?" a familiar voice says behind her.

She turns around to a white smile and a pair of piercing blue eyes a mere yard away. "Mark!" Her nervousness, her shyness, immediately melts away at the sight of her seminar pal. It is true what they say: a friendly face is all it takes to turn a scary alien place into an exciting, exotic experience. With a widening smile, Ximena scans his wake body, and finds him reassuringly his usual self. "Look who's talking!"

"Ah, we Neanderthals are bearers of many virtues, which I hope to demonstrate at your earliest convenience. Alas, height is not one of them."

With a burst of mutual laughs, they throw themselves into each other's arms. His body feels good, she thinks as they finally release the embrace. So warm and... *solid*.

Mark is beaming at her. "You look so..." He cracks another laugh. A laugh of sheer joy, incredibly contagious.

She laughs with him. She feels welcome. And there is nothing she needed more at this time. “You also look so, Mark. Thank you for picking me up.”

“No force on Earth or Nubaria would have stopped me. Well...” He gestures with his hands at the world around them. “Welcome to Lunteren! How tired are you? Would you prefer a quick ride to the campus, or a long sightseeing walk across the city?”

“The walk, of course! But...” She glimpses the wu-trolley, patiently waiting next to them. “What about my luggage?”

He whistles at the sight of her bulky bags. “What are you carrying there? Your whole life?”

“Pretty much. At least, the foldable parts.”

Mark raises a finger in a particular direction and a man in a black uniform approaches in a hurried trot.

“Yes, Mr. Bestawros?”

Mark points at the heap of luggage. “Please, take Ms. Epullan’s things to the Lunteren-Devis campus. There is a residential unit reserved in her name.” He turns to Ximena. “Main student residence, was it?”

As she slowly nods, the man in black calls an identically uniformed man and between both quickly carry her things away.

“Now we can walk,” Mark gestures invitingly at the building exit. “It’s a beautiful morning, for a change, and I know a route that will take us through the edge of the Veluwa woods—beautiful at this early stage of autumn—across the old Forum and the ruins of the old colony and towards the Devis gate and the surrounding dikes. It’s quite impressive how they’re keeping the sea levels in check, you’ll see.

“What was that?!” Ximena asks, pointing at where the two uniformed men disappeared with her luggage.

“What? Oh, don’t mind them. They’re part of my security detail.”

“Security...? What are you, a crime boss or something?”

Mark laughs. “Not so romantic, I’m afraid. I’m just old karma. Family wealth and stuff.”

“Bestawros... That man called you Bestawros! Like in... Tadros Bestawros, from fucking New Alexandria in the Dreamwars?!”

Mark chuckles. “You are not the only one with intriguing family roots.”

“But Tadros was a... a...”

“Say it. A *sapiens*, yes.” He smiles at her. “I must admit with no little shame that there is indeed a tiny fraction of sapiens DNA in my genome. What can I say? Nobody is perfect, huh?”

“Oh, Goah. I remember now! You said in the seminar that you descend from Neferu, right?”

He smiles. “Tadros’ weak point, they called her.”

“You must be rich beyond belief!”

He shrugs. “I get by.”

“Why the Path in the Shadow training, then? You obviously don’t need the karma.”

“Why move half-way across the planet to study ancient history with Professor Miyagi? You could have stayed home and completed your PhD with whomever you wished, right?”

“All right, all right. Point taken.” She takes his arm and they walk side by side out in the fresh morning sun, leaving the noisy airstation crowds behind.

It is peaceful along the path they take. At the end of it, against the sparkling blue sky, the yellow and crimson patterned woods bring back fond memories of her own colony. Not painful memories, thank Goah. At least, not yet. Memories of home need time to hurt. And even longer when you are not alone, Goah be praised.

They walk silently for a long while, breathing the fresh air, side by side, she holding his arm, he displaying a silly smile on his face.

“Where do you live?” she finally asks, looking at him.

“Oh, my place is in the center of Deviss, too far for a walk. But if you insist on visiting my bedroom, I can call a—”

She slaps him on the shoulder with a chuckle. “You want sex? Tell you what.” She points a playful finger right ahead. “You are coming out the other side of those woods a very happy man.”

He freezes, his face a comical mask of bliss and horror.

She begins to laugh long and hard. “In your dreams, *Mr. Bestawros*. We are not there yet.”

He joins the laughs. “Your loss, *Woman Epullan*. By the way, you should call your family. Tell them you arrived—”

“Already did. Or rather, *they* already did.”

“How are they coping? I mean, with Censor Smith and all that.”

“Fine, all things considered. Censor Smith is keeping his side of the deal, and we intend to do the same.”

He nods and sighs. “It must be tough to keep your roots secret.”

“Not as much as you’d think. We are what we’ve always been. And our roots are an integral part of us, no matter how much we talk about them—which will be not at all.”

“Aren’t you worried about the secret spilling out? Every student in the seminar knows. Somebody is bound to talk.”

“Oh, already happened. Not in the Townsend—Censor Smith scared the crap out of all of them quite effectively—but I’ve already been approached by two Hansasian journalists.”

“Fuck! What did you do?”

“Just deny it. Simple. That’s the deal—and it works. They have nothing without our explicit statements, and neither me nor my family are about to open our mouths, for our own sake.”

“I still think it’s criminal, separating you from your family

and forcing each side to silence, or risk *unspecified harm* to the other side.”

“Of course it’s criminal,” she says with a shrug. “Welcome to the twenty-sixth century all mighty and holy Goah’s Imperia of the Americas. But, hey, at least I remain relatively free, I get bi-yearly paid visits back home, I can call myself a historian, and my mentor is none other than Professor Miyagi. Considering my options before Ank pushed this deal down Censor Smith’s throat—Goah bless her soul—I must admit, I have little to complain about. Cody, for example, is pretty much screwed.”

“Why? What happened?”

Ximena purses her lips and shakes her head. “We had a long chat, you know? He wants to be a *true* historian as much as I do. But when he tried to cut loose from the Townsend to come here—Professor Miyagi was very keen—Censor Smith reliably pulled out the *unspecified-harm-to-your-family* card. And that’s that.”

Mark sighs. “Poor bastard. I would have loved having him in Professor Miyagi’s seminar.”

“Oh, yes, the Dreamwars seminar!” Ximena’s eyes lighten up, and unconsciously holds Mark tighter. “I’m so looking forward to it. World War Three in full dreamsense immersion! Wow, I can’t wait to see Professor Miyagi’s unique spin on it. When is the rescheduled date?”

“Tomorrow. They were basically waiting for you to land and settle.”

“That’s so nice of Ank and Professor Miyagi.”

“Oh, and that’s not all! He is bringing a very special guest to the seminar! The entire department is so hyped... You have no idea.” He chuckles. “So don’t you dare arrive late this time! Nine a.m. sharp, remember. There is a wu-sarc in your residential unit, which I personally programmed for you. All



you need to do is lie down as soon as your jet-lag allows, and let the magic begin.”

“You’ve already been in my quarters?” she asks in a teasing tone. “How inappropriate!”

“Hey, I’m your assigned technician!” His smile broadens into a wide grin. “Self-assigned. Besides, I also made sure that you got a king-sized wu-sarc.”

“Oh, really?!” She laughs. “How thoughtful of you! And who is Miyagi’s special guest?”

“Oh, I don’t know if I’m allowed to spoil the surprise.”

“But you just said everybody knows!”

“Yeah, a visitor like that—it was impossible to keep it quiet.”

“Oh, come on. Tell me!”

“But if I tell you, you will faint on me,” he says, mimicking a concerned voice.

“Oh, Goah. You are making me *very* curious, Mr. Bestawros. You better tell me now, or I’m getting physical!”

“Is that a promise?”

“Goah’s Mercy, Mark! Stop it already!”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” he says with a face that clearly suggests otherwise. “I’ll give you a hint: the visitor is a survivor of the Dreamwars. An eyewitness. And not *any* eyewitness. Guess!”

“But the Dreamwars happened over a hundred years ago! Who could possibly be alive that still remembers those times?”

“Exactly! Who?”

Her eyes widen. “A mare!”

“Exactly! Who?!”

“No!”

“Yes! *That* mare!”

“Aline?”

Mark smiles, his face beaming with undisguised anticipation. “Speese Marai herself, standing next to Professor

Miyagi for another round of dreamsense immersion. I don't know if I'm going to get any sleep tonight!"

"Sleep is overrated," Ximena says, her lips stretching to a sidelong smile. "King-sized, you said?"

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THE END

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**T**hank you for reading *Power of Dreamtech*.

**Would you like to read an extra Ximena chapter?**

I wrote this extra chapter after the book was completed as an explicit wish of a beta reader—Hi, Fiona!

*"You think you are strong, because violence comes naturally to you? You think us weak, because it doesn't? Oh, how wrong you are, my dear censor. You confuse civilization with weakness."*

***Welcome to one of the most character-defining events in the life of Ximena Epullan!***

As a bonus, I also have for you a scene that I originally planned for after the spicy chapter *The Carnival Committee*, but I decided to remove it. It was superfluous to the plot, and didn't quite bring the tone I was looking for at that point. Still, I think it's fun, so here you go.

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For the same reason.*



## Acknowledgments

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My wife, Dado—a creature of the Iberian Peninsula—is not widely known for her patience. Yet for what matters, she is. All these weird projects I undertake—be them my latest startup attempt, AI research, or, now, fulfilling the childhood dream of writing stories—she has supported me every step of the way, even as I keep dumping on her my random obsession of the day, day after day, year after year, I hope forever.

That's love.

Dado has sparred ideas with me, from plot to marketing. Thank you. She has witnessed with infinite patience my slow transformation into a very early bird, the product of newly acquired writing habits. Thank you.

I'm lucky my family has been so supportive. Mamá, Nacho, thank you for being proud of me. Vero, Tamara, Eduardo, Ignacio, Gema, thank you for not giving a hard time to your older brother.

To my first alpha, Sam Kassé, thank you for your positive shove. When I sent over to you my first hundred pages, I was so insecure. I didn't know if I could write a good story, or rather, I didn't know if I could get them out of my head and put them on paper for others' consumption. In the entrepreneurial spirit of failing as fast as possible, I was ready to drop it all and get my hand around some new obsession had you found my words lacking. I'm happy you didn't. Also, your sensitive reading skills have been crucial in these—uh, how should I put it?—very sensitive times we live. That's something Isaac Asimov didn't have to cope with, lucky bastard. So thank you, Sam!

The brutal honesty of my developmental editors Chersti Nieveen and Amanda Rutter helped reconceptualize the first draft of *Dreamworms* into the nine episode long story it turned out to be. Chersti's analysis and personal sessions were crucial to see where *Dreamworms* fit in the broader world of fantasy/sci-fi literature. Thank you, Chersti, for your deep understanding of story, and your actionable suggestions, which made my work extend perhaps a year over my original deadline. Wow, and I'm not saying that sarcastically. I really mean my gratitude.

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## About the Author – Isaac Petrov

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People, you know how it is when you pick up a book, and it's a *meh*, or even an *ew*? Well, I am one of those poor bastards to whom that happens. **A LOT!**

But, oh, when that rarest of gems, the enthralling, no-bullshit story makes its rare appearance and sucks you whole? Oh, yes! *That* is what I live for, people: a good science fiction book.

Solid, no-bullshit science fiction is all about the playful engagement of the intellect; that mix of escapism and raw realism; that exploration of the human soul under the duress of the most tantalizing of realities. Oh, no other genre comes even close, people. Yeah, I know how arrogant it sounds. Sorry. Doesn't make it any less true.

But hey, this is where I get to tell you about my not-so-humble self, and if there is one thing, only one, that I want my readers to know is that **I do love science fiction**. Always have. A true nerd, since way before it was cool (yeah, I'm that old). And my promise to you is that I make the books that I want to read. Nothing less.

If you insist on knowing more, all right. Hmm, let's see. Born in Spain, I'm currently settled in Amsterdam with my wife and young son. Law and economics academic background. Software engineering career. A few start-up failures. Gamer when time allows. And a passion for science since... well, forever—I told you I'm a true nerd!

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