

PATHS OF DREAMTECH

Book 2 of the Dreamtech Trilogy

ISAAC PETROV

Future Notion Press

Copyright © 2022 by Isaac Petrov

Published by *Future Notion Press* — press@isaacpetrov.com

Cover art by Leraynne S.

Episode art by Maxim Mitenkov.

This book is a work of fiction. All characters and events in this publication are fictional and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. None of the companies referenced within the book have endorsed the book.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Sign Up – No Bull Sci-Fi

ISAAC PETROV – EPIC SCI-FI AT ITS BEST!

Come over to my site at [IsaacPetrov.com](https://isaacpetrov.com) and SIGN UP to get fresh SCI-FI updates, discounts and goodies:

<https://isaacpetrov.com/lovebook2>



OR SCAN THIS WITH YOUR CAMERA!

What happened in Book 1?

“History is Written by Victors. (Winston Churchill)” but what if it weren’t so? What if we could relive history through the eyes of the protagonists and ride the roller coaster of emotions and events that they experienced first-hand?

It is the twenty-sixth century and Ximena Epullan, a historian working on her PhD, partakes in a seminar led by the famous professor Miyagi, the greatest historian alive. Using the latest dream sensorial technology, Miyagi and his students dive into the twenty-fifth century, and more precisely, into the life of Edda van Dolah.

Following the first collapse of civilization and the Dem-Pandemic, society has begun to flourish once more under the religious leadership of aws Head. However, there is still one major issue—humans only live to the ripe old age of 27, called their Joyousday.

Despite all this, there is still hope. Aliens have been watching our every move and wish to prevent a third collapse by implementing a *Reseeding effort* which involves finding humans whom the marai deem worthy to give access to their

What happened in Book 1?

dreamtech and so become Walkers of the Mind. After all—collaboration is power!

Juf Edda van Dolah, beloved daughter to Willem and the late Anika, strives to prevent her father's untimely death by uncovering the truth behind the Joyousday. We follow her journey through the marai's *Trials of Worth and Soul* with the personal training and guidance from the marai named Rew. As Edda embarks on the *Path of Light*, we see her stretched to her limits and see her determination amplified with each new challenge.

We all know that Edda and Aline's plans to set fire to the Joyousday building and spread doubt about aw's Head have succeeded, but will their *Century Blasphemy* be disruptive enough to prove that they are worthy of the *Path in the Shadow* and put an end to the tradition of the Joyousday?

Michelle Falzon, 5th September 2021

Western Europe 2399 A.D.



North Sea

Germania

Hanseatic Imperium

Celdershitte

Britain

Old London

Rhine river

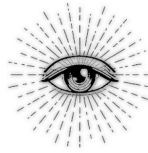
English Channel

Old Brussels

Golden-age Coastline

Old Amstêrdam

Lunteren



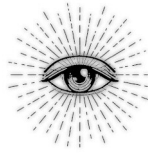
THE SECOND WAKE

Episode IV

“You want to start a revolution? Here, in Lunteren? Just with... dreamy stuff?”

“Indeed, Redeemed van Dolah—What, if not dreams, is the fuel of revolutions?”



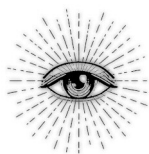


INTO THE SHADOW

Episode V

“A technology that allows the marai-ha to connect colonies spanning hundreds of light years.” Miyagi points at the alien hanging statically in midair. “This, no less, is Rew’s gift to Edda. And to humankind.”

ONE



The Eye of Goah

“**Y**ou seem upset,” Cody says to Ximena as she sits beside him with a heavy sigh. His kind expression has soured at the sight of her gleaming blue eyes.

Recess time is almost up, and the amphitheater is filling up quickly. The laggards—inevitably in the Lundev section—are hurrying to their seats. Ximena avoids looking in their direction. “Don’t mind me,” she replies, her two thick side braids swaying over her chest at the shake of her head.

“I gather the last dreamsenso section is still irritating you? Your... change of place?”

Ximena shrugs, but says nothing, her dark skin unable to hide the warmth on her cheeks. Her eyes follow Miyagi as he walks down the central stairs with that sure, practiced gait of his.

Cody follows her look, and a shadow crosses his pale, chubby face. “It irritates me immensely, if it makes you feel better.”

Ximena turns to him, pursing her lips. It is strange, but it *does* make her feel better. “Why did he do that?” she asks. By ‘he’ Ximena is, of course, referring to Professor Miyagi, who is

stepping onto the stage as she speaks; and by ‘that’ she is referring to—

“The Century Countdown—the Century *Blasphemy*—was altered, yes,” Cody says. “That is undeniable. It paints an Edda in fierce confrontation with aws Head.”

“But not just with the local Hanseatic corruption, Cody. Not just with that demon, Mathus. With *Townsend*, Goah’s Mercy. With *us!*”

Miyagi is whispering something to Ank, his elegantly dressed Neanderthal assistant. She returns to her seat on the bottom bench.

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” Cody says, blinking rapidly. “The cognitive dissonance is killing me.”

“Cognitive...? Yes, I know what you mean.” Ximena turns her deep-blue eyes towards Professor Miyagi, who is gesturing the students in the auditorium for silence. “Professor Miyagi would never spread historical bullshit.”

“He reveres history like we revere Goah, Ximena. *History*—not propaganda.”

“Welcome back, people.” Professor Miyagi’s artificially boosted voice echoes across the amphitheater as Ximena feels a slight mental pang that demands her sudden attention—undoubtedly the work of Ank.

The auditorium falls silent—expectant. The professor pulls back his long, white hair and smiles radiantly, but nobody seems to react. *What a difference from the first session.* Then, Ximena could barely hear her thoughts with all the cheering and whistling. Now everybody is eerily quiet, almost on edge. Not surprising, after all the flying emotions in the last session. But if that bothers Professor Miyagi, he doesn’t show it.

“So glad you’re all back. Nobody is missing, right?” He shoots an inquisitive look at Ank, who curtly shakes her head. “Great, then I think we can get the ball rolling, if you allow, Censor Smith?”

“Of course, my dear professor.” Censor Smith is sitting on the bottom bench, below Ximena. She can’t see his expression from behind, but his voice sounds unburdened by the sulky atmosphere. “Proceed at your leisure.”

“Thank you. Where were we? Ah, yes,” he chuckles lightly, “the Century Blasphemy has just happened. In Lunteren. Anybody cares to provide some historical context?”

The students exchange uncomfortable glances, but nobody speaks.

“Come on, *context*, people. History is ninety percent context, five percent facts and zero percent maths.” Some Lundev students chuckle obligingly, but it’s going to take more than a bad joke to break the ice, Ximena thinks.

“Come on, people, wake up! Lunteren, 3rd of January 2400. Anybody?”

“Uh...” A Lundev student clears his throat. Ximena raises her eyes and immediately diverts them as a punch of heat spreads up her guts and cheeks. It is Mark, her fellow bench companion until a few minutes ago. Goah, she’s been so rude to him. And she can barely remember why anymore. He is standing straight—so solid, so comfotingly stable—his bulky Neanderthal frame so obvious now, and begins to speak calmly, his blue eyes unflinchingly fixed on Miyagi. “Willem van Dolah’s Joyousday is due sometime in February, right? Just a few weeks off. That is a factor to consider.”

“Thanks, Mark. Yes, hundred percent. It is a very relevant fact. Edda van Dolah is pushing her agenda under the ticking bomb of Willem’s looming Joyousday. To save her father, she needs the power of the Path in the Shadow. And to access such power she needs to win the Trials of Worth and Soul, which are still far from over, people. Edda van Dolah and Aline Speese are competing with two more teams, both extremely motivated as well. But let’s forget about the Trials, aliens and dreamtech for a minute, all right? I want you people to take a

step back and look at the bigger picture. The colony of Lunteren... What do you think is going on there, after the Joyousday House goes up in flames and a subversive message—a blasphemy of epic proportions—is broadcasted live during the century countdown? Speculate, please.”

“Well,” Mark says, “I guess that the Goahn hierarchy is probably looking into what happened? Heresy is a serious crime in any theocratic regime.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Miyagi spreads his hands. “So simple, huh? People, don’t be afraid of joining in, all right? Mark’s intuition is spot on. The reaction of the Head of Goah is what is driving history forward at this time. People: *context*. On one hand, think about the *system*, the regime. Goah’s Imperia were built over solid legal foundations. Citizens’ rights—the sacred rights, as they called them back then—were pretty much the same human rights that we have inherited since the American and French revolutions. They were legally enshrined and protected by aws Compacts—check out *Fahey’s Legacy* for more details,” he says with a wink, referring to the sensorial that won him the Rowan Prize and worldwide fame. “Imperia colonies were free, self-governed, tolerant places. And this is even truer in Lunteren—again, context! A marginal colony, on the fringes of the Hanseatic Imperium, far away from the centers of political and economic power. Nobody that mattered back then—nobody with real power—had ever heard of it before. Nobody would have cared about the pranks of a few bored teenagers either, however heretical. Surely just a matter to be left to the local aws Head officers? Quaestors were particularly trained to deal with this sort of... *aberrant* behavior. But... not this time. Why not? More speculation, please?”

“The broadcast!” Lora says from within the Lundev ranks at the opposite side of the amphitheater. “*Everybody* heard the countdown. Throughout the whole country, right? What was its name again?”

“Germania,” Cody says, standing beside Ximena. She nods in unconscious support. Finally, a Townsend student daring to join the discussion. “And it was not just the country,” he continues. “The broadcast made the news all over the Hanseatic Imperium. The Century Blasphemy was repeated in the news over and over again for hours by all radio stations. Everybody heard them. Aws Head was forced to declare official heresy in order to enforce censorship. According to some old books I dug up from the Townsend library, by dawn of the New Year, several dozen Joyousday Houses had been burned down, mostly in Germania, but even as far as Scandinavia and Russia there were some scattered attacks.”

“Bravo, Cody.” Professor Miyagi raises his hands towards him and claps. “All true. And with a dangerous heresy underway, aws Head had to... well, *send a message*.” He points at Cody, but Ximena gets the distinct impression that his eyes flicker towards her. “Extra credits for reading books. People, learn the habit! You’ll learn more from books than from any fancy sensorial. Context is everything, and a dream sensorial might provide plenty of immersion, but it does a poor job regarding context. That’s why we have to actually talk things through in class. Or, like Cody, read books. And now,” he gives Ank a curt nod, “who else is itching to feel the pulse of Lunteren, three days after the blasphemy?”

“It is our *fault!*” The powerful voice of Quaestor Marjolein Mathus from Lunteren—or *demon* Mathus, as Ximena has learned to know her, since her first introductory class to modern history—is practiced and sure, and falls down like rain after a drought on the hundreds of revering faces that gather in this sacred place.

“Our fault,” the congregation murmurs in reply. Some are

nodding, some shut their eyes, and all kneel—knee-to-knee—on long, padded rows that cover the entire space in packed, elliptical layers; not a single spot is left unclaimed.

The Eye of Goah! Ximena gasps in awe as her gaze slides across the enormous oval expanse. *Wow!* The energy, the atmosphere... It is hard to believe this place has the same function as the Eye she frequents every Tuesday, in Entre Lagos. Really, to call this an Eye of Goah, is like calling Townsend a town. But, of course, this is an Eye of the Classical Age, when the Imperia of Goah still span around Earth. An imposing presence, as long and tall as the largest Gothic cathedrals—and as spiritually loaded.

The whole roof is translucent, a single oval skylight made of light-colored glass extending from wall to wall, impossibly flat, a marvel of engineering. Covering the glassed center, a large circle of particularly red, dark crystal, enhances the illusion that the edifice is meant to portray: a huge, staring eye, drilling down onto the mortal heads of the gathered with its red pupil.

“It is our *responsibility!*” She points at her audience and turns slowly, her hand extended at the blur of entranced faces, a full circle of recrimination. Her blonde hair is braided in chaotic strands, falling like lightning bolts on the formal purple robes that cover her body except for her small, bare feet, which seem to almost dance on the round platform that dominates the center like a stage: the sanctuary of the temple, which mimics in tone—dark red—and shape—flat round—the menacing glass pupil that hangs exactly above it. The faithful engulf her in devotion from *every* side.

“Our responsibility,” the congregation whispers back.

Then, with a theatrical wave of her hand, she points at herself. “Oh God Of All Humans, you know it is *my* fault above all. Bless my flock with your *absolution.*” She looks up at the glaring Eye above her and stretches her arms in a gesture

of submission. The Eye is masterfully engineered to seem partially closed by artificial eyelids made of inconceivably large sunshades—flooding daylight softened to spiritual, soothing perfection.

Magnificent! Ximena lets her eyes loose across the mirrored curve of the wall, its glorious reflection running from floor to glass ceiling, and along the *entire* periphery of the temple, closing into itself in elliptic perfection. She feels small, insignificant, as the flawless surface multiplies the solemn figure of the Quaestor into an infinite landscape of religious fervor.

“No!” Hundreds scream at once. “Our fault!” some say. “Our responsibility!” others say.

Marjolein opens her eyes, and extends her arms straight up to the all-watching Eye. “It was *me*, oh Goah! I tried to put the name of our colony on *every* lip of Germania! It was me, and only me, that brought the Century Celebration to awes devoted Lunteren.” The echoes of her words, reflected like light by the mirrored walls, reach with clarity every last, captivated ear, both in the Eye of 2400 and in the amphitheater of 2515. Ximena throws a side glimpse at her fellow students. All follow the unfolding scene with unblinking attention, hanging on the Quaestor’s every word almost like they were themselves down on their knees among her followers. Historians, watching history.

“Praise awes Head,” some say. “We thank you, Quaestor,” others say. “Our fault, our responsibility,” others keep murmuring.

“I am so selfish!” Marjolein shakes her head in exaggerated regret, her wild, blonde braids shaking in the air. “I wanted our trade to flourish. Oh Goah, I am sorry. Our steel.” She points at a few individuals dressed in fine tunics, heads down, eyes shut, nodding and mumbling. “Our fish.” She slides her finger at a broader indeterminate section of her audience. “More visitors—more merchants—more dowries.

Goah, I am so selfish. Heresy was spreading in the shadows, and my arrogance made me... blind. Demons were plotting to ruin our legacy. And I was too proud to see. Too—*hopeful*, Goah has Mercy. I was blinded by my love, my ambition for our colony: a prosperous future, thriving under Goah's Blessing. Alas, under my careless vigilance, evil brooded. And now our name is synonymous with *blasphemy*. I am so sorry, Lunteren." Her head sinks. A tear—an honest to Goah real tear!—runs down her cheek. "I failed you." *Oh, she's good!* Ximena thinks.

"No, Marjolein!" Her last words drown under desperate protests. "Our fault, our responsibility." Some voices keep the litany alive.

"The blasphemy!" Marjolein's voice, as strong as ever, trembles with practiced emotion. "The shame! I can't..." her voice breaks as she kneels, head down. *Oh, she's so good!*

"Marjolein, Marjolein, Marjolein," some chant. Others stand, their hands reaching out at her. "Our fault, our responsibility," the murmur persists.

She raises her head, stands up and turns solemnly around, looking at the whole audience in their eyes. "Oh Goah, spare Lunteren! I assume all blame!"

"Marjolein! Marjolein! Marjolein!" The chant reverberates as everybody stands and extends their hands toward their Quaestor, every person touching the one in front, while the closest to the center touch the platform where Marjolein is standing still, head and shoulders down. Some students look in awe at the view of the congregation in communion, as if they could also feel in their veins the flow of spiritual energy through the network of souls.

"Oh God of All Humans!" Marjolein shouts, her powerful voice stopping the chanting at once. The echoes reverberate between the walled mirror for some time, until they slowly turn into an expectant silence.

Marjolein looks up at the red glass eye above her. “See my soul,” she says.

“See my soul,” murmurs the audience at once, as hundreds of heads bend back to look at the Eye, their arms still joined in communion.

The Eye begins to open, flooding the congregation with light. Ximena exhales as the canvas eyelids are slowly retrieved. The effect is mesmerizing, as the Eye’s fresh light crashes against the mirror, multiplying the impression that an inconceivable cosmic presence is turning its attention to the lit faces of the faithful.

“See my soul!” Marjolein says, extending her arms up to the Eye, the luminosity from the sky and from the surrounding mirror seeming to ignite her purple robes. Her refulgent long braids look like lightning in a storm. “Bless aw’s servant with your will.” She shuts her eyes.

Silence returns to the chamber. A long silence of exalted breathings. Only Marjolein moves, nodding occasionally. Sometimes her lips seem to tremble slightly, or to speak indistinctive words, eyes shut. Hundreds of expectant faces follow her every move, arms stretched forward, nobody moves, nobody speaks.

So good, Ximena thinks. She can’t believe Mathus was able to perform like that, three times a day!

“I beg aw’s Mercy!” Marjolein’s desperate cry reverberates between the mirrored walls and crystal ceiling. She sinks her head and arms slowly, the image of defeat.

The Eye on the ceiling begins to shut—the eyelid-shaped sunshades closing slowly. Marjolein’s robes stop shining as the soft, spiritual ambient slowly creeps back into the chamber. The faithful disconnect the communion in utter silence, dropping first their arms, like they are shaking off something precious, and finally their bodies as they kneel—wrinkles of worry in their brows, flashes of fear in their eyes.

Silence lingers, uneasy.

Marjolein raises her head, hints of tears in her eyes. She makes a slow turn full circle, as if looking into every soul before she breaks the gloomy silence.

“Colonists of Lunteren,” her voice is serious, business-like, empty of passion, “I am the bearer of bad news.”

Hundreds of faces exchange anguish glances.

“The Head of Goah is concerned. No... not concerned. *Gravely disappointed.*”

Some among the audience take the hand of the person next to them, others murmur inaudibly with closed eyes.

“It is our sacred duty to Goah—and to the rest of humanity—to prosper. *Our* duty—under Goah. Aws Head granted our fore-elders two endowments: the Gift of Goah and the Colonial Compacts. One brings life, of the body and the soul; the other brings civilization; both intrinsically meshed together into something harmonious, the two plates of aws Balance. Without these, Lunteren would today be a place of death or barbarism.”

Many in the congregation nod in agreement. “Praise aws Head!” some shout.

“Aws Gift and aws Compacts—we have been blessed by Pontifex Kaya Fahey and, yes, Goah awself, with the greatest miracle humankind has ever received. Aws Balance is survival. Aws Balance is life. We should be eternally grateful—and humble.” Her voice sinks. “And yet, we allowed demons to flourish among our walls. Heresy is bursting out from our very homes.”

She pauses and points a finger at the Eye above her. “I tried to explain to aws Head that heresy is not rampant—we are devout colonists of aws Gift—we are *believers!*”

Hundreds of heads nod vigorously. “Yes!” many shout. “Praise aws Head!”

Marjolein points at the audience. “But we are *fooling*

ourselves.” Her voice is harsh, accusatory. “Aws Head made me see the truth. Heresy of the sort we lived three days ago is like a worm creeping out of a blasphemous corpse: a sign of deep corruption. Colonists of Lunteren, the truth is that we are demon-ridden.”

A murmur of denial surrounds Marjolein, as she sinks her head. “I told aws Head that it was all *my* fault, that my pride made *me* blind—but to no avail.” She pauses, taking a hesitant step forward. Then she looks up at the transfixed faces and says, “I must regretfully inform you that...” Her voice breaks. She clears her throat and continues, “... influential voices in aws Head have requested the formal *withdrawal of aws Gift* from Lunteren until—”

Her words are pulverized under the sudden roar of protest. Most colonists stand in outrage, fear in their eyes, frustration in their fists. They talk loudly, shouting over each other, echoes clashing in chaos in the mirrored chamber. The commotion does not stop, and Marjolein says nothing, letting it run its course.

After what seems like minutes the Quaestor finally begins to wave her hands, gesturing the faithful to kneel. They slowly comply, but the murmurs persist.

“I know, Lunteren. I was... shattered. A *withdrawal*—unprecedented! Goah, I believe not a single colony in the Dutch Province has been quarantined in living memory. I begged aws Head to wait. The investigations of my office shall uncover the corruption, I told them. Surely, we can cleanse the demons without causing unnecessary harm to us, pious colonists.” Nods and whispers of hope. “I explained that, regardless of the pain to our hard-working colony, my office had ordered the immediate closure of all markets, businesses, factories and public activities for an entire week, while the investigation runs. I tried to make them see how we take such pain: with dignity, resignation, and deep understanding of our

duty to aws Head. But the truth is,” she sinks her head, “that we have lost aws Trust.” Anguished gasps and muted lamentations. “Aws Mercy! I cried, but aws Head’s duty is to protect our souls without any regard to our physical needs. Aws Mercy! For the good people of Lunteren! I cried.”

“Aws Mercy!” murmur her followers, desperation in their voices.

“But then,” she steps forward, raising her brow, a smile slowly forming, “Goah, maybe taking pity on my suffering and my devotion for Lunteren, blessed me with a thought!”

The murmur stops as hundreds of eyes focus on Marjolein’s proud figure, not daring to blink.

The silence builds, in the agony of hope.

“I begged them to send an official of aws Head’s inquisition—without delay! The most experienced Inquisitor they can muster shall lead the investigation, I told them. A Grand Inquisitor.”

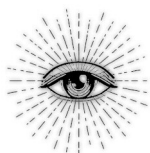
“Grand Inquisitor,” some colonists mutter. Many nod in silent hope.

“There was resistance! Oh there was, Goah is my witness. Aws Inquisitors’ core duty is to unveil demons and to cleanse them, they said, not to investigate blasphemies, nor to uncover heresies. True, I replied, but exceptional circumstances require exceptional measures. Aws Trust must be restored, and jurisdictions aside, uncovering heresies is not unlike uncovering demons.” She smiles broadly, stretching her arms, turning slowly around to face all her congregation. “Lunteren, I am exultant to announce that aws Head has agreed with my humble—”

A grateful roar covers her last words. Claps and cheers reverberate in the chamber as one by one, then in larger groups, and finally *everybody*, stands in ovation. Dispersed shouts turn gradually into a hypnotic chant. “Marjolein! Marjolein! Marjolein!”

The chant goes on as the scene begins to slide away from the triumphant Quaestor and over the grateful heads. As it slowly approaches the far end of the chamber, the scene zooms to a section on the last row where two tall figures stand out: Pieter and Janson Ledeboer—eyes frozen in dread.

TWO



A Storm in Old Amsterdam

An archipelago landscape slides in the auditorium *below* the students, as if they were gulls gliding gently over a sea sprinkled with rocks and islets. The gorgeous sun shimmers over the water, transparent, turquoise, hinting at the shallow sands not far below the surface. The breeze raises tiny white curls over the crest of balmy waves.

The flying perspective glides towards an area of open sea, devoid of land and rocks, except for a white speck at odds with the blue-green pristine expanse—a sail.

As the scene approaches the sail, the sound of the wind skimming the waves engulfs the auditorium. Ximena can now smell the salty freshness. The sail gradually turns into a small fishing boat; two triangular sails, one smaller than the other, both wide open and filled by the wind, tilting the boat slightly as it glides purposefully forward.

Four figures occupy the benches carved in the spacious stern of the boat, two boys and two girls, none of them older than sixteen. Ximena recognizes them at once.

“I’m not so sure, Edda,” the dark-blond boy—Pieter Ledeboer—says, brows drawn into a slight frown. “A Grand

Inquisitor doesn't look like a joke to me." He is sitting on the back of the downwind bench, expertly holding the rudder stick in his left hand. The other three youngsters are sitting side by side on the opposite bench, balancing the boat with their combined weight.

"Come on, chill, mensa," the black girl with the short, curly hair—Edda van Dolah—says. She is leaning back, eyes shut, enjoying the fragrant breeze and the gentle warmth of the winter sun on her face. "They'll never figure it out, no matter who they send. There's just no evidence." But Ximena knows that she is not as confident as she looks. Not *inside*. The psych-link is active, and her thoughts and feelings pass through unimpeded, providing Ximena and the rest of the students participating in Professor Miyagi's Global Program an amazingly immersive perspective. They can literally get under the skin of the characters that shaped the *worlds* a hundred years ago.

Pieter turns his gaze to the other girl, Aline Speese, and the focused expression of his broad face softens at once. Ximena finds it amusing, how transparent love is, especially in the very young. "And what about all that... stuff you left in that shed, love?"

"The electric maintenance cabin? Oh, don't worry." She is also leaning back, seemingly enjoying the caresses of the sun on her fair skin, her long, black hair swaying in the wind. Facing the clouds, her gleaming, brown eyes look at nothing in particular.

"Don't worry?" Pieter scoffs. "You sure as Dem are taking it smoothly. I bet that as we speak, they're combing every building that stinks of technology."

Aline looks at Pieter and winks. "That's the thing. Maintenance cabins are just glorified electrical hubs—they don't *stink* of the sort of radio technology required to jam a broadcast. I told you the place was perfect. On top of that,

nobody goes in there except authorized personnel. It is too dangerous. You touch the wrong thing and *zap!* Off to Goah. And since the Quaestor had the occurrence to shut the whole colony for a week, there is no authorized personnel available anyway. Everybody has done the same as us, and has taken their holidays until Monday. Half of the colony is away in other Geldershire colonies visiting friends and dowries.”

Pieter curls his lips and shakes his head. “I beg Goah you’re right and you aren’t underestimating the Quaestor; or worse,” he turns his face to Edda, “the Grand Inquisitor.”

“Don’t worry, mensa,” Edda says. “If shit hits the fan, we are all protected by aws Compacts. Not even a Grand Inquisitor can ignore our sacred rights.” To her surprise, Ximena realizes that Edda believes what she is saying.

“Don’t worry, sure,” he scoffs. “What can possibly go wrong, right? Troops on the streets of Lunteren? Oh, come on, that’s absurd! A withdrawal of aws Gift? Ha! Unthinkable. Don’t worry, you girls say...” He shakes his head and looks squarely at Edda. “*Arrogant sailors drown faster*. The world is too complex to keep everything under control, Edda. Look at poor Elder Aaij. What is he going to do now?”

“What happened to him?” the other boy—Janson Ledeboer—asks. At fourteen, he is the youngest aboard, and yet he is almost as tall as his brother Pieter, and as muscular. The resemblance is undeniable, with the broad faces and protruding jaws, but Janson’s hair is brown, and his eyes large and green.

“Not again.” Edda rolls her eyes.

“He was fired,” Pieter says. “Dishonorably. Nobody is going to employ him now.”

“I told you I would speak to school management next week,” Edda says with a pinch of exasperation. “There’s always work for good guards.”

“And what are you going to say? That he couldn’t stop you

from burning the Joyousday House down because he was drugged on duty?”

“We saved his life!” Edda stretches her voice defensively. She turns to Aline. “You tell him, girl.”

“She’s right, Piet. There’s more at stake here than a man’s job. All those Joyousday Houses in fire all over Geldershire. That was... grandiose! We are stirring something in the people that really matters, love. Goah, I think,” she chuckles, “that we can really change the world! I’m also sorry for Elder Aaij, but—”

“So easy to say by a specialist,” Pieter interrupts, shaking his head. “You girls can exchange jobs like lovers, but for some of us they’re our livelihood, a way of life that defines us and makes us proud to get out of bed in the morning.”

Edda scoffs. “You sound just like the Smook siblings.”

“They ain’t wrong just because they’re assholes. Jans, wake up! Mind the jib.”

Janson jolts in his seat, squints at the front sail and pulls lightly the rope he was keeping in his hand. Ximena feels the boat thrusting forward with a noticeable kick.

Aline leans in and kisses Pieter gently on the lips.

“What’s that for?” he asks, his lips curving into an unconscious smile.

“We are out here to relax, not to fight,” she says, leaning back and closing her eyes slowly. “Goah, we should do this more often.”

“Yeah,” Edda says, turning her head, her eyes losing themselves in the blue horizon. “Lunteren is not fun after a shit-storm of such monumental proportions. My dad is not even talking to me now.” She smiles, almost proud. “It’s good to leave all that crap vibe behind; the suspicion, the repression.”

“Repression?” Aline asks. “More like holidays.”

“No fishing,” Pieter says, his voice tense. “No karma.”

“Well, it’s only a week,” Edda says. “And the Quaestor promised compensation for lost income.”

“You a fan now?” Pieter asks.

“If you leave aside the killing us all in our Joyousdays, I guess she is a decent Quaestor.”

Janson, his eyes lost in the waves, bursts out a sudden laugh. “I still can’t believe that you girls are the ones behind the Century Blasphemy. And you too, Piet. So sexy! Way, *way* bigger than when we sunk that Siever barge last year with that thing you built, Aline.” He laughs again, and claps a few times. “What a stunt!”

Pieter gives his brother a warning gaze. “Not a word to anyone, Jans. Nobody can ever find out what happened on Friday. Least of all those chatterboxes in your drama club.”

The young man nods absentmindedly and says, “You women are... Wow! Aline, Edda, please sleep with me?” He mockingly flutters his eyelashes.

“I’m on a *very strict* sex diet,” Edda says with a side-smile, to which Aline scoffs noisily. “*But*,” Edda continues, “I’m sure Aline wouldn’t mind making some space to enjoy the complete Ledebøer experience.”

“Oh, yes! Oh, yes! Oh, yes!” Janson claps with theatrical enthusiasm.

The others laugh wholeheartedly. “Aline,” Pieter says, “can you please whack my horny brother for me?”

She slaps the back of Janson’s head. “Ouch!”

“Thanks, love. And another one for Edda, please?”

Edda holds her friend’s hand, laughing. “Okay, okay, Piet, drop it. Hey, Janson, you’re seriously doing drama?”

“Yeah,” he says, casually leaning back and expertly balancing the boat against a sudden gush of wind. “Why?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t quite fit you, you know?”

“It was actually the Quaestor’s suggestion. And I happen to like it.”

“The Quaestor?”

“She said that it might help with my, uh... nightmares.”

“They’re bad,” Pieter says, unable to conceal the concern in his voice.

“So the drama club is like a kind of therapy?” Edda asks.

Janson shrugs. “It helps.”

“I’m not so sure, Jans,” Pieter says. “You still wake up. Every night. But if you like playing make-believe with those weirdo friends of yours, hey, there are worse hobbies.” He turns to Aline and Edda. “Guess what part he’s rehearsing now? None other than fucking Solo!” He bursts out laughing.

Edda and Aline turn to Janson, who blushes, looks away and mutters: “A reinterpretation of *The Empire Strikes Back*.” Ximena doesn’t recognize the cultural references—probably old ones, from before the Second Collapse. After Dem and the reduced lifespans, humankind didn’t have much leeway to create fresh culture, so they had to do with what they already had.

“Ooh, the protagonist,” Aline says. “You must be pretty good!”

“The protagonist is Luke,” Edda says.

“Arguable, very arguable,” Aline says, and turns to Janson with a warm smile. “Let us know when you perform, huh? Don’t be shy.”

“Since when you have these nightmares?” Edda asks.

He leans back and turns his eyes to the ocean. “Since the military month. I completed the training in the summer, and since then...” He doesn’t finish the sentence.

Edda frowns. “My military month was actually fun. Shooting with real rifles and guns. When was that? Goah, two years ago already. How time flies!”

Aline nods in agreement. “Mine was last year. I loved the survival part. Oh, and the tactical games!”

“Did they also make you hunt barbarians?” Janson asks, eyes still skimming the waves.

Aline nods again. “As part of the games, one team played the barbarians, the other the colonists.”

“No, I mean—*real* barbarians.”

“How? There are no barbarians in Geldershire.”

Janson purses his lips. “This year they took us down to the continent, far south into the province. We hunted wood barbarians.” His voice was barely audible over the sound of the wind and the splash of the boat breaking the waves. Edda and Aline lean closer to him. “There was this group of children.” He closes his eyes and shakes his head once. “Almost naked—lived alone, no adults—they didn’t even have a proper language. I wonder how they survived so long...”

“You did them a favor,” Pieter says, trying and failing to mask the concern in his voice. “Think about it as providing Goah’s Mercy. Forget about it, Jans.”

“I know you, Piet.” His voice shakes. “Believe it or not, I’m tougher than you—you’re the one always worried about the little, puny things. One day you complain about the steel factories and their dirty smoke, another you insist on fishing farther to let the stocks replenish. I would like to see you... No—actually, I don’t.”

“*Providing Goah’s Mercy...*” Aline places a hand on his arm. “Were you ordered to...?” She doesn’t complete the question.

He shuts his eyes. And weeps silently.

“**T**hat is the northern most point of the island of Utrechtshire,” Pieter says, pointing at the stretch of land they are passing by, less than a mile off their port side. The island appears wild, wind-struck, shy of vegetation, rich in sand dunes and low shrubs.

“How long until Zeist?” Aline asks.

Pieter studies the waves, the wind, and their position relative to the island. “Three hours.”

“So long?”

“We could camp north of Zeist, if you prefer. One hour then. Perhaps two. That coast is beautiful! There are small, protected coves everywhere. Transparent waters, sandy beaches—I can fish us something to grill on the fire...”

“Let’s sail to Old Amsterdam!” Aline says. “I would *love* to explore it. You always say it’s so scary, Piet. Maybe we’ll find ghosts, or relics!”

“Come on, there are no ghosts, and relic-hunters pillaged it decades ago. There’s just... death and ruins. It’s quite sad, actually.”

“Oh!” Janson says. “It’s so creepy, you’ll love it! Let’s go, Piet! It’ll be fun spending the night there.”

“Yeah! Creepy ghosts of the golden age!” Edda says, turning to Pieter. “Can we go? Please?”

“Hmm, let’s see...” Pieter scans the surrounding sea. “The Utrecht Channel ends here. You see right at our bow? The waves are taller and farther apart from each other. That’s where the Dutch Sea begins—we would sail slower there. We can also expect stronger winds when we get out of the shadow of the island. The wind is good though, south-west, beam-reach all the way. Without tacking we would make good time. It’s a tad strong for my taste. Hmm, it should be coming down soon,” he says, looking at the sun’s position, doubtful. “We would make it in about, uh, three hours—a bit too close to dusk for my comfort.” He turns to the others. “So, what do you prefer? Lying on the beach, grilling fresh fish, or three more hours of sun and wind to spend the night in the darkness of a flooded, ghost city?”

“I shouldn’t have listened to you,” Pieter says. “The wind is picking up.”

Nobody is minding him. They are staring in awe at the alien landscape around them. The boat is sailing at a brisk pace through an archipelago of ruined buildings emerging from the surface. The setting sun, occasionally peeking out from between the dark, oceanic clouds forming on the west, illuminates their broken walls with traces of orange and red, projecting long shadows on the darkening sea. There must be hundreds of fantastical man-made constructions, spreading as far as the horizon, but not too clustered together; the small boat has ample space to maneuver, moving like a floating leaf among frozen giants. Each building is different from the next, made of the most varied materials: stone, concrete, bricks, metal.

“Hey!” Pieter says, a pinch of concern in his voice. “We need to find a place to dock, mensas. And quick.”

“Can we do that later?” Aline asks. “Check that out!” She points around in admiration, building after building of wonder.

Some structures, the most spectacular, are tall—traces of dirty glass still covering their walls—and come in all sorts of shapes: many are rectangular, others are round or oval, or as if smaller buildings had been put on top of each other in a strangely-harmonic cacophony; there are even a few that are wider on the top. One of them has the shape of an inverse pyramid, and another one looks like a giant twisted it in rage. Architectural wonders, a tribute to long-gone human ingenuity, and now home to loud colonies of gulls, puffins and guillemots—their bird chatter filling the ghost archipelago-city with life.

Other structures are old, really old: grandiose domes, towers and pikes of buildings from eras truly lost in time. So

old, yes, that even the golden age remained but a distant ghost of the future, an uncertain promise of destiny.

But most of the buildings are simpler; short and long, functional, their walls covered in rows over rows of decrepit terraces and balconies, an array of rectangular glassless holes, gaping uninvitingly into their dark guts.

“Sorry, Aline,” Pieter replies. “We can explore tomorrow, but now we really need to find shelter. It’s getting dark and the wind is stronger by the minute. I’m afraid a storm is coming.”

They all turn to Pieter, apprehension on their faces.

“Jans, pull down the sails.” His tone is commanding, confident. A captain. “Aline, get the oars out from the cabin and hook them there and there. Be careful, don’t drop them in the water. Edda, get out of their way and sit here. Take the lens from that bag and look for residential buildings in the shape of an L or a U that can shelter us from the west.” As he sees Edda’s inquiring face, he points towards the incoming wind. “Protection from *that* direction.”

A small but warm fire fills the small room with dancing shadows. It is dark beyond the reach of the flames. The lack of light is eerily enhanced by the fierce whistling of the wind outside, and the irregular ramming of the rain on the walls.

Pieter walks into the room from a wall opening and sits down around the fire with the rest. “I just cleared that chamber.” He points back at the opening. “I pushed all the debris to a corner. If you need to do your...” he gestures, unspecifically. “Do it there. That other door,” he points to a half-rotten door, hinting at the blackness beyond, “don’t open it. It’s just a path to dozens of other enclosed areas like this one.”

“Oh!” says Aline, visibly disappointed. “Not even a peek?”

Pieter shakes his head, looking at her with warning eyes. “Not in the dark.” He turns to the others. “There are things better left for the daylight.” He smiles. “This is adventure enough for now, don’t you mensas think?”

A clap of thunder makes them jump in place.

“Will the boat be okay?” Aline asks. “If it sinks...”

“It’s well secured—away from the storm. Don’t worry,” Pieter says.

“*Don’t worry,*” she says, and smiles warily. “I’ve heard that before. We should have listened to you and gone to that Utrechtshire beach. Sorry, love.”

“Actually, with such a storm I prefer to be here.” Pieter smiles, exposing the palms of his hands to the fire. “We would now be sitting somewhere in the wilderness, behind a hill or some rocks, cold and wet, no way to get a fire up. Mensas, cheer up! Here we’re fine. There’s plenty of shelter in Old Amsterdam,” he gestures around, “if you don’t mind the wandering spirits.” He laughs seeing the expression on the others’ faces. “Just kidding! Relax and enjoy the creepy night, that’s what we’re here for, right? Come here, love.” Pieter extends his muscular arm and Aline leans cozily against his warm body.

Janson looks awkwardly at Edda, raising his own arm. “Uh—”

“Oh, shut up,” she says, smiling. They all laugh.

Pieter, visibly satisfied with Aline in his arms, says, “Edda, I want you to teach me all about the Path in the Shadow when you win the Trials!”

“Hey,” Edda says with a light chuckle, “don’t sell the bearskin before killing it, yeah? We might still lose.”

“Oh, that’s impossible. Nobody can beat what you started on New Year’s Eve.”

“Who is underestimating now? I doubt Gotthard or the

Smooks are giving up anytime soon. They still have time to,” she spreads her hands, “*whatever* until the deadline. When was it?”

“The fourteenth,” Aline says. “Ten more days.”

“And then what will you do?” Janson asks Edda.

“After the fourteenth?”

Janson nods.

“If we win?”

He nods again.

“Learn the Path in the Shadow, of course. What else? And quickly! I barely have time to...” Her expression darkens as her eyes lock on the gentle flames. “Joyousdays aren’t going to stop just because we destroyed a building.”

Nobody breaks the heavy silence until Edda speaks again, louder this time. “The seeds of revolution are in the ground now, and with some Walking love, they’ll bloom until awes Head yields or breaks, right, sister? We started something big on Friday, yeah?”

“We sure as Dem did!” Aline says.

Edda beams at the two boys. “We will change the world, mensas!” With a finger, she traces a loop over her chest. “Goah is my witness.”

“I want in!” Pieter says. “In your revolution, I mean. Will you teach me the Path in the Shadow, Edda?”

“I can teach you!” Aline says.

“Aline, I love you. Goah made you so sexy, so smart, you can build such... complicated things... but *teaching*?” He scoffs. “Nobody’s perfect, y’know? I mean, you couldn’t teach a baby how to cry.”

“Asshole,” she says, lips curving in spite of herself.

Out of nowhere, Janson says, “Who are they?” His trance-like eyes remain locked on the dancing fire. “The aliens—the marai. Where are they? What do they want?”

Edda shrugs. “I stopped asking such questions long ago. I say, while they’re on our side, does it really matter?”

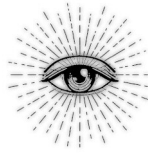
Miyagi makes a casual gesture at the frozen scene above him, where the four friends sit around the gentle fire, an oasis of warmth in the lost, dark remnants of the golden age. “The 4th of January 2400 comes slowly to an end. It looks so peaceful, doesn’t it? So uneventful. A night like any other in humanity’s slow struggle to make it through the dark ages of the Second Collapse, or to die trying. And yet this place, in the heart of the last standing ruins of the old city of Amsterdam,” he points with the finger, “is about to become the improbable backdrop to one of humankind’s most crucial discoveries of all eras.”

“The Second Wake,” Cody whispers to Ximena, an undertone of excitement in his voice. “I think it happens now.”

“The Second Wake?” Ximena whispers back. “But I thought the Second Wake belonged to the Path—”

“In the Shadow. Correct.”

THREE



Ghosts

The scene is barely visible—there is just not enough light—but she can make the contours of the half-ruined room in some flooded ancient city of the golden age. Edda, Aline and the Ledebøer brothers sleep wrapped in warm, soft blankets around the long-extinguished fire. The storm still battles outside, hammering the walls, gusts of wind erratically moving the blankets. And yet the four figures breathe regularly in their sleep.

There is a peculiar quality to this darkness, though, Ximena thinks as she squints trying to absorb every last photon with her hungry eyes. Yes, there is something unnatural there, in the blackness. It seems dense, fluid, almost alive.

And then it hits Ximena with the certainty of realization: the scene is of course a dream—a dream that has just begun. But whose?

“Look at her.” Professor Miyagi’s voice floats from the shadows beyond. The dream’s point of view begins to slide towards one of the sleeping figures. “Smart, beautiful Aline Speese. Almost forgotten by history, especially her role while she was just her own human self.” The scene camera

seems to float over her body. She is face-up, her perfect features relaxed by deep sleep. “This course—and the dream sensorial when it’s ready for the public—aims to correct this injustice.”

Aline opens her eyes.

“This here is her dream. As you can see, she is dreaming that she cannot sleep—a classic, isn’t it? But she *knows* that she is dreaming. She is *aware*, in the Mind Walker jargon. The mare Rew has trained her well.”

Aline shuts her eyes and slightly moves her lips.

“You know, people, in case you begin wondering, nothing of what we are watching here is pulled out of anybody’s orifices. Not at all. For this coming section, for example, there are two independent historical sources: the De Vroome’s interview, of course, and the testimony of none other than Speese Marai herself, who detailed Aline’s very thoughts in this historical moment. Look at her,” he points with a finger. “She is still frustrated, because she never had the chance to explore the apartment-block ruins. See the way she eyes the door? She is curious. Very, very curious. She wonders what her dream mind might come up with if she just stands up and wanders off. Luckily for us humans, she does just that.”

A line stands.

The scene quality changes abruptly. Ximena feels like this is a new scene, although with the same protagonists in the same position and posture of an instant ago. And yet something has fundamentally changed; even the rain outside, heavy and loud, sounds somehow more *real*.

This is not a dream anymore, Ximena realizes. The dreamy quality of the air is gone. But the darkness is not what you would expect from a well-sheltered ruined apartment room in the heart of an abandoned city in the small hours of the

night. On the contrary, everything is flooded with light, *unnaturally* so. Not bright, but crisp; no discernible sources of light; no projected shadows. As if light diffused out of objects themselves, like ethereal gray emanations.

Even Aline looks startled. Ximena would love to hear her thoughts in her own head, to feel her awe at the eerie realism of her *dream*, but sadly, the psych-link is not engaged. She must content herself with watching Aline scanning the room with a puzzled expression.

Aline gasps as she looks down at her sleeping friends. There are still *four* people there! All four sleep placidly in the warm blankets. Their bodies radiate ghost-like light, but instead of the bland, soft gray light that pervades everything else, they sparkle blue—a *blue* of the mind, a conceptual blue of such intellectual purity that nature can only approximate, but never attain.

She bends to watch the sleepers more closely. Although all fiercely blue, there are obvious differences in the *texture* of their respective glows. Edda's is bright and sharp, tight close to her skin, twinkling rapidly. Pieter's is not as bright, but his light blinks equally sharp. Janson in contrast is pale blue, barely blinking, but *dynamic* in a way the others are not—the blue radiance seems to creep along his skin in slow-motion waves.

The last sleeper is Aline herself. She inspects her own sleeping body with fascinated eyes for a long time. Her skin glows as bright as Edda's, perhaps even brighter, but her light is not sharply focused around her body. Instead, she scintillates further, like a blurry cloud of the purest of blues.

She takes a deep breath, as if reflecting about such wonders, and at that exact instant the sleeping Aline takes a similarly deep breath, otherwise keeping her eyes shut and her features deep-sleep relaxed.

Aline leans lightly forward, inches off her own face, and holds her breath for a moment. Yes, Ximena sees how Aline's

sleeping body also stops breathing for that same instant. Aline then begins to pant, and her sleeping body matches her quick inhalations and exhalations in perfect coordination.

Aline straightens up, clearly baffled. She then extends her right arm to watch her wriggling fingers. Her body is not made of flesh, but of that same blue glow that emanates from her sleeping body. The intensity of the light twinkles in uncanny synchronization with her sleeping body. She stares at the wrinkled perfection of her hand's palm, expressed as light instead of skin. Then she looks *through* the palm, to the walls behind, to the partly-wrecked door that leads out of the apartment and that Pieter so vehemently forbade her from going through.

Aline smiles.

She takes a tentative step towards the door while staring at her feet. Her smile widens as she realizes that they don't touch the floor. As she then studies the rest of her body, a chuckle escapes her throat, probably as she notices what Ximena has been very conscious of all along: she is completely nude. Furthermore, there is no trace of hair *anywhere* on her smooth, gleaming body. She rubs the top of her head, letting her hand glide across her scalp.

She returns her attention to the door, and keeps walking—or rather, *floating*—across the ruined room.

Like a ghost.

As she attempts to push the door open, her hands pass through the rotten wood.

Like a ghost.

She stops, watches her hands with a frown of confusion and carefully probes her own body, confirming her own solidity. Some students giggle.

She then squints at the door and, with a slight shrug, she steps *through*.

A line's expression is curious and determined as she roams the guts of the ruined building, darkness somehow blown away by the ever-present, uncanny gray light. Her translucent blue body is obviously immune to the freeze of the deep winter night, or to the battering of a storm enraged by an atmosphere that has been overheated for centuries.

The apartment block feels ancient, as only ruins of better times ever do. Ximena knows that the building predates Aline's own time by four or five centuries, and has been abandoned for most of that time, untouched by humans as history slowly transitioned into archeology.

There are over a hundred apartments in this building alone, each a ruin in its own unique way. Some are open to the elements, with gaping windows and balconies, missing walls and even a collapsed side of the building. Other areas, behind deep hallways and crumpled walls, appear more sheltered, like the one in which the four friends chose to spend the night. Everywhere Aline *ghosts* in, she finds heaps of unrecognizable debris, shadows of rotten furniture, shards of putrid wood, scattered blunt glass, and an ever-present layer of dirt-turned-soil covering it all as nature reclaimed ownership.

Aline's eyes, initially beaming with marvel, turn gloomier with every room she steps into, each a depressing echo of ancient lives, generations of families, a metaphor of lost illusions. Ximena can also feel the full weight of history slowly dragging her soul.

Aline freezes as she turns a corner into a long, wide corridor, her eyes gaping in dismay. Dozens of horrified gasps, Ximena's included, crisscross the auditorium.

The floor is littered with bones—human bones—eerily vivid, preserved like in a time capsule by the dry, stagnant air of the building's guts. Uncountable skeletons lie scattered, from

her feet to the far end, stacks of them piled against the walls, in bizarre postures; the marks of low-tech violence in every skull: cracked, crushed, severed from the neck; black, blind eyes staring at Aline, jaws open in silent screams and promises of dread that send chills down Ximena's spine.

Aline's blue body walks through the rotting door.
Like a ghost.

Her features lighten with relief as she sees the four bodies peacefully sleeping. She slides closer to her own flesh body, as if an invisible force was pulling on her. But she stops and turns to Pieter, lying right beside her, his arm extended in what must appear to her like a promise of consolation.

"Piet," she whispers in his ear. "Wake up."

Pieter doesn't react. His breathing is slow and regular.

"Piet!" she says, louder now. "Can you hear me?"

A sudden movement draws her attention to her left, where Janson, sleeping next to Pieter, seems to be writhing lightly. Aline observes him for a few moments and then kneels next to him. Yes, Ximena can see it now, his head jerking almost imperceptibly from side to side, the shadow of a frown in his brows. But what she finds more striking is his halo, which although as blue as ever, is no longer soft and smooth. It now twinkles in furious, irregular flashes.

"Janson?" Aline mutters.

Her hand moves towards his shoulder, as if to wake him up. She reaches out and...

... **T**he scene warps. Sudden daylight floods the auditorium—Ximena must squint and turn her head while her pupils adjust.

The scene has the texture of a dream; a dream of the high seas during a storm. No land in sight. The sky is white and gray, in constant turmoil. The waves are like toys to an angry god of the winds, tossed loudly aside in a chaos of deep, dark greens and salty splashes of white.

In the center of it all is Pieter's fishing boat. He and his brother are in a soaked frenzy of action: tugging, moving, balancing, staying alive.

Aline kneels behind them, holding herself steady, visibly shocked at the sheer natural violence of the dream. They have not seen her.

A wave hits Pieter with unconceivable force, snapping him overboard in an instant.

"Piet!" Janson screams, and leaps to the starboard pulpit, his body half-hanging over the railing, eyes widened in terror trying to pierce the wall of foam. "Piecet!" His shout drowns in the roar of the tempest. His eyes swell in despair.

Aline, visibly distressed by the dream, shuts her eyes with determination and...

... **T**he scene warps. Aline is back in the ruined apartment, her blue ethereal body kneeling next to the agitated—but still sleeping—Janson. His body is contorting anxiously, and his halo keeps sparkling wildly, but he seems unable to escape his dream—his nightmare.

"Janson, wake up!" Aline shouts on his face.

Janson shakes and sits bolt upright, eyes wide in terror. He looks around, left and right, whining loudly like a beaten dog,

naked fear in his eyes—which, Ximena realizes, can only perceive the pitch darkness of this goahforsaken place.

Pieter is awake. He has heard his brother—thank Goah!—and with a powerful pull takes Janson in his arm. “It’s okay, Jans. Shh, it’s okay. Just another bad dream. Just another bad dream.”

“Piet? Janson?” The drowsy voice of Edda calls from the other side of the dying embers.

“Just a bad dream,” Pieter repeats while Janson cries on his chest like a boy half his age. “Just a bad dream.”

Edda walks up to them and kneels on the floor. She puts a hand on Janson’s shoulder, but as he jumps in place, she removes it and turns her eyes towards Aline—the Aline lying on the floor wrapped in clothes. “Goah, how can she sleep through all this?”

“The— There are ghosts here,” Janson says, panic drenching his voice. “There are ghosts here.”

“You’re safe, Jans,” Pieter says. “It was a bad dream. Just a bad dream.”

“Ghosts. I can hear them.”

Aline—the blue semitransparent one—turns her face to him and leans closer. “Janson?”

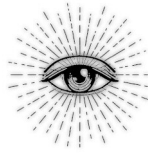
“You’re awake now,” Piet says. “There are no ghosts here.”

“I can hear them. I can hear them!”

“Janson?” Aline’s eyes widen. “*Janson?!?*”

“Calling my name!”

FOUR



The Second Wake

“The Second Wake?” Edda asks, gaping at Aline. “You really believe what you are saying, yeah?”

It has dawned in the ruined apartment, and the four friends are warming tea on the fireplace. Pieter is gnawing at a piece of dried meat. Janson keeps his in his hands, untouched.

“Absolutely!” Aline says, and turns to Janson. “There’s no question I entered your dream, right? You did dream that Piet was washed off your boat.”

Janson nods slowly, eyes lost in the flames.

“And then you heard me, didn’t you, Janson? You heard me calling your name! Nobody else did, but you—”

“Pure sin!” Janson says, shaking his head like he was shooing off a fly. “I almost shit myself right there.”

“What is the Second Wake?” Pieter asks, mouth half-full.

Aline turns to him. “I can’t really explain it. Elder Rew spoke repeatedly about it; It’s like... a place, or a condition or something the marai use to—what word did they use?—to bring people’s dreams together.”

“The *melding* of minds,” Edda says, remembering. “Are you sure, Aline? Really? The Second Wake?”

“What else could it be? I was outside of myself! I had two bodies, Goah’s Mercy! I could see myself sleeping, and... and... I could see *everything* in the dark. I mean, even the concept of *dark*... It didn’t make sense, you know? I could see you—I don’t know how to explain it—like a blue force around each of you. And my body was made of that same stuff too, I think. I could walk through doors and walls,” she casually gestures at the rotten door, “like a ghost. Edda, it’s got to be the Second Wake! And it’s quite a matching name too. It’s like totally being awake, but, uh, *sideways*, if that makes any sense?”

“So sexy!” Edda says. “Goah, it’s... incredible!” Ximena feels Edda’s sheer exhilaration—the intensity of her curiosity, the roughness of her envy—stirring wildly in her guts. “But you know what that means? That’s Path-in-the-Shadow material, sister. You’re saying you’re fooling around in the Path in the Shadow? On your own? Without marai help?”

“What else could it be?” Aline smiles.

“You must absolutely show me how to do it!” Edda says. “Starting tonight, you are the teacher, yeah?”

“I don’t even know how I did it myself. What if I can’t do it again?”

The boat is sailing briskly over the rough waves, the tallest buildings of the old, submerged city already disappearing behind the horizon. Heavy clouds hang menacingly, but it is not raining at the moment.

“Good wind, bad sea,” Pieter says, expertly pulling and pushing the rudder with every wave. “We’ll make it in time.”

“My stomach might not!” Edda says, as pale as her dark skin allows.

“Don’t close your eyes,” Pieter says. “You’ll get better if you fix your gaze on the horizon.” He turns to his

brother. “Jans, connect the batteries; time to radio home. We’re close enough to the Zeist station, they can relay a message. Tell them that we are fine and we’ll make it for supper.”

Janson opens the cover of the electronic equipment and starts operating the bulky device.

Edda leans closer to Janson. “Don’t mention my family. Just send to the Speese, yeah?”

“But after the storm, they must be worried sick,” Aline says.

“Let him suffer a bit longer,” Edda says.

The other three give her an incredulous stare.

“You can’t be serious,” Aline says.

“I am.” Edda purses her lips.

“You should be ashamed,” Aline says, disappointment in her voice. “Pure sin!”

Edda looks away, and says nothing.

“If your dad goes ahead with his Joyousday, you should be spending every last bit of his last weeks on Earth together, in family harmony.”

“You sound just like our dear Quaestor.” Edda’s lips tighten. “If he calls his Joyousday, I’m not coming.”

“You are not serious, Edda.” Aline’s voice sounds increasingly exasperated. “You would regret it forever.”

Edda looks at her. Then looks away.

“Edda? Don’t make that mistake. You would never forgive yourself!”

Aline and the two brothers stare at her in silence.

“Oh, *whatever*,” Edda finally says with a mocking tone. She turns to Janson. “Send the damn message to the Van Dolahs as well, yeah?”

Aline stands up, tumbles towards Edda, takes her head in her hands and kisses her loudly on the cheek. “Stupid girl!” Aline says with a broad smile.

“Leave me alone,” Edda pushes her back, the hint of a smile on her lips.

“We are entering the Utrecht Channel,” Pieter says, pointing at the northern tip of the Utrechtshire island passing by on their starboard, and then at Geldershire much farther, barely visible, on their port side. “The sea is calmer here, Edda.”

She nods, grateful. “How much longer?”

“Hmm, three more hours, four tops.”

“Oof, I’m tired.” She leans back, extends her arm and playfully touches the water with her fingertips.

“We all are,” Aline says. “What an adventure, huh? The sailing, the storm, the night in the ruins—”

“Your discovery of the Second Wake,” Edda says. “Yeah, it didn’t get boring.”

“Not to forget your *business*, sister!” Aline says. “Goah’s Mercy, I still can’t believe it. How could you,” she waves a hand at her lower abdomen, “you know, in the middle of... all *that*!”

Everybody laughs. “Hey, what can I say?” Edda says. “My guts are precise as clockwork.”

“Clearly there are too many sausages in your life,” Aline says.

“Those were not mere sausages,” Edda says. “We are talking about authentic Van Dyne’s here. They slaughtered a pig for New Year’s Eve!”

Aline rolls her eyes. “Thank Goah it was in the morning—a dump of such magnificence before bed and we would have fled the room to sleep with the skeletons.”

They laugh wholeheartedly. Ximena can feel how the mood lightens the closer they get to their warm, dry homes.

“What skeletons?” Janson asks after a while.

“**A**nd then there was this corridor... Goah’s Mercy. Full of bones... of corpses... Massacred with... with...” She looks up at her friends. “Sorry, I don’t want to spoil—”

“Actually,” Pieter says giving Janson a meaningful glance, “we’ve seen plenty of, uh, hints of human remains underwater, when we dive for prawns and lobsters. They’re *everywhere*.” Janson nods, stirring a rope with his foot. Pieter pats him on the shoulder.

“Edda, you are the teacher,” Janson says, raising his head. “When did all that... *killing* happen?”

“About three hundred years ago. The First Collapse. Before Dem.”

“What happened?”

“Well, we call it now the *Rape of Gaia*, ever heard of it?”

“Yeah, in the Questor’s sermons. The importance of awa Balance and all that.”

“Exactly. The imbalance caused by the *Rape* was such that, quite suddenly, the lower latitudes became uninhabitable, and crops began to fail all over the place. Imagine a world populated by billions that—”

“Millions,” Aline corrects.

“No, Aline. *Billions*—with a B.”

“What’s a billion?” Janson asks.

“A thousand million.”

“Impossible...”

“The golden age, mensa!” Edda points back with a finger to the general direction where they woke up this morning. “It’s called that for a reason. There were, I think, about *ten* billion people when the collapse kicked in.”

“Ten...!” Janson turns his eyes to the waves. “Impossible...”

“Possible,” Edda says with a smile—the Juf in action, “but not sustainable, obviously. Now imagine that, one day, quite suddenly, Earth stops providing for, say, half of them.”

“Whoa!” Janson gapes at her. “Is that what happened? People would starve... in their millions—billions!”

“And so they did. Eventually. But, of course, they didn’t go in silence. The human animal is wired to survive. First, the refugees overran the small pockets of stability that remained in the lower latitudes, like plateaus and the high valleys, where crops still grew and temperatures remained bearable. Then, they migrated *en masse* to the higher latitudes, billions of them, migration waves larger by orders of magnitude than those ever witnessed in history. Nobody could stop them. They tried. Thus,” she gestures with her head back over the boat’s wake, “the *killings*. The old nation-states—and there were over a hundred of them, most of them with a population larger than the whole Hanseatic Imperium today—they all disintegrated into thousands of intensely xenophobic city-states. Thus,” she shrugs, “more *killings*.”

“Pure sin...” Janson mutters.

“And when the dust settled,” Edda continues, “Dem arrived. And so began the *Second* Collapse. Much more gradual, but much more deadly in the end. No calamity arrives alone, it seems.”

“So Dem... Did it really happen?” Janson asks. “I thought it was all a lie.”

Edda rubs the back of her neck and wets her lips. “I think it really existed, yeah. In the beginning. But, of course, we’re all immune now.”

Janson frowns. “How do you know?”

“Well, natural selection, of course. Adapt, or die, yeah?”

“Natural what?”

“Oh, Goah, Janson! Who was your schoolteacher again?”

Waves splash leisurely against the sides of the boat. Sails are full and tight. The four friends look to the distance in silence. Ximena can feel the refreshing sensation of the salty breeze on Edda’s face.

“The harbor looks so empty,” Janson says, squinting straight ahead, hand over his eyes. “I can’t get used to it. It’s so... unnatural. Like... dead.”

“How can you tell?” Aline asks, squinting herself. “It’s so far away!”

“With Jans on board,” Pieter says, a relaxed hand on the rudder, “who needs a spyglass?”

Edda is also staring squarely across their bow, where the shade of Lunteren Harbor begins to take shape against the turquoise-tinted waves. “It looks just as boring as when we left.”

“Let’s hope they haven’t found your stuff in that cabin, love,” Pieter says, winking at Aline, but failing to suppress the crease of worry in his brow.

“Nah,” Aline says, rolling her eyes. “Trust me, they won’t.”

“Hey, it’s almost five, Jans,” Pieter says. “Tune in to the news.”

Janson leans back and flicks a switch on the radio box. The electric burst of loud static is quickly displaced by a female voice.

“... is not available for comments at the moment, but Colder van Kley and Colder de Ridder, speaking outside the Elder Council, have already extended their congratulations in the name of Lunteren to the newly elected Colony Elders of Oosterbeek, and to all the colonists of Oosterbeek for the smooth democratic process. When asked about the alleged violence and intimidation, they declined to comment.”

Aline straightens up. “What happened?”

“Shh!” Edda puts a finger on her lips and leans towards the radio box.

“Our correspondents throughout Geldershire report similar bland official reactions to the bombshell election results in the capital colony, except for Colder Wilgenhof from De Haere, who is openly calling for an official involvement of Praetor Huck into what he describes as, quote, an unexplainable power grab in Oosterbeek by radical criminals, unquote.”

“Radical criminals?” Aline asks, a deep frown on her forehead. “Who—?”

“Shh!”

“Our correspondent in Oosterbeek reports that Aedil Markos Swick, awa Head highest representative in Geldershire, is allegedly indisposed and unable to comment, or so his aides at awa Eye claim. But religious services have been canceled until further notice, and rumors abound that the Aedil has fled Oosterbeek due to unspecified threats.”

“What—?!” Aline blinks.

“Shh!” Edda reaches out to the radio box and turns the volume dial all the way up.

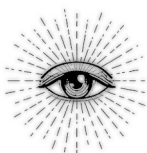
“The freshly elected Colony Elders of Oosterbeek and their brown militia are mixing in the streets with their supporters. The mood is festive, especially among the commoners, who have been celebrating for hours already. The democratic victory of all five Colder seats by five previously unknown commoners has no known precedence in the entire Hanseatic Imperium, at least as far as our editorial staff can tell. Not a single specialist will rule over Oosterbeek in the coming four years. Our correspondent has tried to obtain a reaction from the most established specialist families, including administrators, industrialists and traders, but none so far has been willing to go with their concerns on the record.”

“An all-commoners colony,” Pieter mutters, exchanging a glance with Janson. “So sexy!”

“Goah’s Mercy,” Edda mutters. Ximena feels how Edda’s initial unease has grown into an eerie foreboding, tickling her belly from the inside. “I think it is—”

“The new treasury Colder, Luuk Smook, said, quote, the people have finally freed themselves from the corrupt rule of spezziess, unquote. His sister and now Colder of Health, Culture and Social Assistance, Mirjam Smook, proclaimed the end of the tyranny of the elites. It is uncertain what...”

FIVE



Newton, Einstein and Babi

“I’d swear to Goah we had more time,” Rutger says, his tall, thin figure leaning carelessly against the dusty brick wall, his splendid winter tunic be damned. Behind him, Ximena recognizes the long workbench packed with electric equipment and the brittle wooden steps that lead up to the old bell room. This is Gotthard Kraker’s private lab in the old church tower, as poorly lit, moist and *cold* as she remembers. She shivers and wraps herself tightly in her own white-and-blue robe.

“It is the 14th of January, mensa,” Gotthard says. Ximena’s eyes linger on his classic North African complexion. The asshole is quite attractive, she has to admit. And his one-year-old toddler, in his arms, seems to agree quite literally when he grabs with a giggle a curl from his thick, black hair. His perennial frown disappears at once, replaced by a radiant smile. He squats to put the little boy on a soft blanket with colorful patterns and turns his attention to Rutger, frown back in place. “Time is up. It is tonight that the aliens decide the winner of the Trials.”

Rutger adjusts his glasses and purses his lips. “Pure sin, so either we make it work today, or...” His voice fades.

“We will,” Gotthard says as he hands the toddler an old electric circuit. “Won’t we, Gerrit-y, Gerrit-oo?” His voice climbs a few notches in pitch. “Who’s my baby, baby-oo?”

The toddler inspects the green piece with large, black eyes and starts chewing a corner with spontaneous delight. A smile crosses Ximena’s face. Toddler Gerrit is wearing an adorable tiny tunic of fluffy, white cotton in cute contrast with a skin a few shades darker than Gotthard’s own. *So sweet*. Ximena’s smile widens. *So precious*—the dowry bond between the Kraker’s and the Van Dolah’s in the flesh. He’s even got Edda’s inquisitive eyes.

“You should not give that to Gerrit,” Rutger says. “He could swallow something.” His light brown eyes hint at disapproval, but his smile is as warm as Ximena’s.

“I checked. No loose parts, don’t worry,” Gotthard says as he stands. “All right, let’s get back to work. We have some catching up to do, if we want to beat the Smooks.”

“You really think we have a chance? I mean,” Rutger pulls a strand of brown hair behind his shoulder, “taking power over Oosterbeek... That was pretty impressive, Gotts. I’m afraid our marai friends might find that sort of ability useful for whatever they,” he shrugs and spreads his hands, “are planning to do.”

“We can’t have a couple of hicks beat us, can we? Not those assholes.”

“I don’t know how they pulled that off. They took over a whole colony, mensa! Two commoners, Goah’s Mercy! And we spend night after night only to beg in dreams a bit more karma for our equipment.” He gestures at the bulky devices spread over the wooden bench—electric cables creeping out of every opening and linking the machines together in a mesh of chaos. “And it’s not enough. It never is. So hard to influence the Colony Elders—even my parents!”

“Yes, I assumed you rich people were more... *generous*.”

Rutger laughs. “You know nothing of wealth, mensa. You expect my parents to give? For *nothing*?” He chuckles. “That is bad business. Generosity is a pastime of the poor.”

“And what about philanthropy? Support of the arts? Or of science, in our case? The Colders are helping us. Might not be much, but—”

“Politics, my friend. *Never* generosity. Didn’t you know that a rich man has more in common with a monkey than with a poor man?” His smile widens. “Both trade favors and back-scratching with gusto. Only the poor do it without expecting something in return.”

Gotthard laughs. “And here I thought I was the cynical one.” His smile fades. “But that goes a long way towards explaining our lack of funds.”

“If Qoh had helped more actively, perhaps I could have swayed my mother, but with pretty words and cheap emotional appeals...” He shakes his head, a sad smile on his face.

“The marai did not help the Smooks either, mensa. Nor Edda and Speese, for sure. They did what they did with their *people* skills alone—not our strongest suit, unfortunately.”

“You still believe Van Dolah and Speese are behind the Century Blasphemy, don’t you?”

Gotthard laughs. “It is not a belief, mensa. It is a *fact*. Who else otherwise?” He spreads his arms in an exaggerated gesture. “If it wasn’t them, what do you suppose they’ve done instead for the Trials? Have you heard of anything else coming even close to that stunt of the Smook farmers?”

“The whole colony is upside down! The Quaestor and Colders are turning every stone trying to find the blasphemers.”

“No, it’s not the blasphemers they are looking for. They sure as Dem already suspect who’s behind it all, but their hands are tied by aws Compacts. What they are doing is searching for *evidence*.”

Rutger shrugs. “I think they are shit scared they have nothing to show for when the Inquisitor arrives. Shouldn’t we turn them in? With our testimony, perhaps—”

“My dowry sister?! And Speese, our main supplier of...?” He points at the bulky equipment. “No, mensa. Chill. What we have to do is beat them in the Trials. Not with people skills, no. But with science—and *fear*.”

“Well, sure,” Rutger chuckles with a sad smile. “We still have a few more hours, don’t we?”

“**Y**es, here, take a look!” Gotthard puts a greasy finger on the black screen, filled from top to bottom with rows of—for Ximena unintelligible—numbers, letters and mathematical symbols. “A pointer of float instead of a pointer of double, eating away significant digits. No wonder the antenna guidance was off!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I still think that the orbital parameters are too old. Mensa, that book,” Rutger points at the thin booklet open on the bench, with rows and rows of numbers on its yellowed pages, “is almost four hundred years old.”

“*Too old?* This is orbital mechanics, not a piece of goat cheese! I introduce those parameters into the computer,” Gotthard gestures at the same book, “run my software, and kaboom! Newton does the rest. Maths don’t care about the age of numbers.”

“Well, I hope you are right. The antenna is connected.” He shoots a glance up the stairs. “And batteries are charged.”

“Did you remember to place the antenna in front of one of the openings?”

“Duh, of course! And don’t worry, it can’t be seen from the ground.”

“Sure as Dem?” Gotthard stares pointedly at him.

Rutger smiles, pushes his glasses up his nose, and says, “Nobody will know what we are doing up here, mensa, as long as your antenna doesn’t start yelling the disco channel at the roofs below.”

Gotthard chuckles. “I’m sure that would raise a couple of eyebrows. Luckily the only loudspeaker is this baby here.” He taps the small black box wired to the largest electronic device on the bench. “Okay, powering up. Cross your fingers!” Gotthard takes a thick plug in his hands and slides it into the jack of the device.

Analog dials immediately come to life with a soft electric buzz, as backlit needles jump to rest midway up their scales. Gotthard inspects the dials, turns a few knobs and then places his hand on a yellow switch. He gives Rutger an expectant smile.

“For the love of Goah,” Rutger says, eyes wide with anticipation. “Do it, Gotts!”

Gotthard flips the switch, and white noise begins to blast out of the speaker. Toddler Gerrit gasps with surprise from the corner as Gotthard hastily turns a knob, until the volume drops to a comfortable level.

Rutger steps closer and leans forward. They listen intently to the ever-changing whispers of random nothingness.

“Pure sin,” Rutger says after a long while, his voice drenched with disappointment.

“Check the antenna,” Gotthard barks, somber eyes locked on the noise-spitting speaker. “It should be pointing south, south-west, about twenty degrees elevation.”

Rutger runs up the stairs, two steps at a time. After a few moments, he comes down, panting. “Looking good. Almost straight to the sun.”

Gotthard slams his palm against the bench. “Fuck, I don’t

get it!” Toddler Gerrit starts weeping softly at the sight of his upset father. Gotthard walks towards him, softens his features and picks him up. “Sorry, baby-oo. Na, na, na,” he says, absentmindedly caressing the toddler’s head.

“Let me double-check the frequency.” Rutger peers at a long rectangular dial. “Two point three gigahertz, is that correct?”

Gotthard nods. “Same frequency used by the original Voyager probes in the twentieth century. And by the lost colony last summer. It’s the right frequency, mensa.” He sighs and puts Gerrit back on the blanket. “Goah, what are we missing?”

Rutger scans the equipment with sad eyes. “What if they are not transmitting?”

Gotthard looks at Rutger in disbelief, but Ximena can feel his emotions, his thoughts. He is actually afraid that Rutger might be right. But no, he refuses to believe it. It would be... Yes, the end. “They *are* transmitting, mensa. I know they are.”

“Maybe they are just—I don’t know—sleeping, taking a dump.” He spreads his hands with a shrug. “Goah knows.”

“Those people,” Gotthard points straight up, “possess the technology of the golden age. I’m sure that they are transmitting. And they are waiting for our reply.” His voice trembles with frustration. And his innards with fear.

Neither speak for a long while, their eyes lost in thought. Only the playful noises of Gerrit break through the white noise.

“What if the problem is *Newton*?” Rutger mutters, squinting at nothing in particular, as if lost in thought.

“What?”

“Newton...” Rutger repeats slowly. “The orbital elements...” He raises his head and meets Gotthard’s eyes. “It’s a near-sun object, right? Orbiting inside the orbit of—”

“Mercury!” Gotthard interrupts, eyes widening in sudden

realization. “The precession problem! Yes, yes, that’s it. You’re a genius, Rutger! Newtonian mechanics fail to explain Mercury’s orbit.”

“Especially after,” Rutger gestures at the old booklet with row after row of printed numbers, “four hundred years around sun’s gravity well. We must use—”

“Einstein’s General Relativity!” Gotthard walks to the edge of the bench, and starts typing on a dusty keyboard. “The algorithm is somewhere in the orbmech library. It’ll take a couple hours to calculate, but...” He bursts out laughing. “Yes, that’s it. It must be! The helical antenna,” he points up the stairs, “is powerful and sensitive, but *very* narrow. Anything slightly off the point in the sky where it’s pointing to, and it’s as blind as aw’s Head.”

“You’re welcome.” Rutger mocks a deep bow.

“Ninety-nine percent!” Rutger says, voice vibrant as he stares at the bulky monitor over Gotthard’s shoulders. Green, shiny lines of text and numbers on black background run down the screen. A blinking, underscore cursor waits patiently at the very bottom.

“Shh, Garret is asleep,” Gotthard says calmly, but Ximena feels the twitchy lightness in his guts, like they were about to explode from sheer excitement.

“No wonder; the white noise is... hypnotic.” The loudspeaker keeps sizzling its random whisper from the other end of the workbench. “After two hours of this,” he nods at the screen, “I would have fallen asleep as well, if we were not about to make history.” He chuckles.

“Almost there, almost there,” Gotthard says, staring intently at the screen. “Aaand... hundred!” He begins to type away at

the keyboard. “Yes, check this out!” Gotthard points at the green rows of numbers on the screen. “The relativistic orbital elements are slightly different. That was it!”

“I knew it!” Rutger says, raising a fist in the air. “Newton was a smart mensa, but Einstein... Ha!”

“Let’s see about that... Introduce these parameters in the antenna guidance system,” he says while he writes the numbers on a piece of paper already filled with long-forgotten notes. “That should connect us right away.”

Rutger tears the paper from Gotthard’s hands and runs up the stairs, two steps at a time.

Gotthard walks to the sizzling loudspeaker and turns the volume up. “*Shsszssshzsshchshsshtsszssh...*”

The wooden boards that separate the room from the old bell room above creak under Rutger’s strides. Traces of daylight sneak through the narrow spaces between the boards.

“Come on!” Gotthard mutters, eyes—and ears—locked on the loudspeaker. He places both hands on the edge of the bench. “Come on, come on!”

Rutger’s weight shifts upstairs and runs over the boards back towards the stairs.

“*Sshszshzshssthssshszshchshssztssh...*”

Rutger flies down the stairs, three at a time. “Antenna realigning. It’s—!” His words are interrupted by his own misstep as he falls noisily on the floor at the base of the staircase.

Toddler Gerrit giggles and claps enthusiastically. The louder white noise and Rutger’s tromping above conspired to wake him, and now he is celebrating Rutger’s performance with visible delight.

Without a word, Rutger stands as quickly as he fell, and runs behind Gotthard, ignoring the bruise on his cheek. “Anything?” he asks.

The speaker is dead silent.

“Did you turn it on?” Rutger asks.

Gotthard holds up his hand and keeps listening intently. And then gasps. “It’s on!” he says, eyes wide with realization.

Rutger tilts his head and squints in concentration. “I can’t hear anything.”

“The white noise... it’s gone! The silence...” Gotthard turns to Rutger and grabs him from the tunic, still dusty from the fall. “The silence is a transmission!”

Rutger turns his head to gape at the loudspeaker. A smile begins to form on his lips.

The loudspeaker squeaks loudly, making them both—and Ximena—jump in place. “*This is an automated message to Earth survivors, Earth survivors, Earth survivors.*” A calm, female voice begins in strongly accented English.

Ximena feels Gotthard’s raw exhilaration only for the briefest of instants, before the discipline of his scientific upbringing takes firmly over. “Take note, mensa” he says to Rutger, who hurries to grab a pencil and a dirty piece of paper, and begins to scribble on it.

“*From Atira habitat New Alexandria, New Alexandria, New Alexandria. Also known as Shamash, Shamash, Shamash.*” The voice recites the words with a lack of passion that contrasts starkly with the anxious mood in the room—and in the auditorium, Ximena notices, as she throws a side glimpse at Cody and her fellow students. Some of them are sitting too straight to be comfortable, listening to the transmission with entranced concentration.

“*Semi-major axis null point three three null...*”

Gotthard murmurs something unintelligible between clenched teeth, his eyes locked on the loudspeaker with animal fixation, as the message goes on reciting cold numbers for the good part of a minute.

“... *nine five. Be advised. Asteroid Babi is en route to collide with*

Earth the second of February of the year twenty-five ten, the second of February of the year twenty-five ten, the second of February of the year twenty-five ten. Asteroid Babi has a mean radius of eight hundred forty-eight meters, eight four eight meters, eight four eight meters. Request reply on this same channel or dual at two point one gigahertz. Repeat cycle five one nine null five completed. Over.”

The speaker falls silent.

Gotthard and Rutger keep staring at it blindly; barely moving—barely *breathing*. They dare exchange a gape, but both remain silent, as ever more seconds pass by.

And the seconds turn to minutes.

And then, with sudden casualness, the female voice returns, “*This is an automated message to Earth survivors, Earth survivors...*”, and so it continues its monotonous litany with infinite patience.

“**S**o it’s all true!” Rutger says, wide eyes lost somewhere on the bricked wall. “Pure sin, in a hundred years a space rock is going to hit us!”

“More like a mountain,” Gotthard says, glaring at the still talking speaker with somber eyes.

“Like the one that killed the dinosaurs?”

“This one is smaller. But the destruction will be...” He shakes his head and takes a deep breath. “And any survivors won’t last long in a freezing world without sun. If that rock falls, it’s game over. So yes, we’ll very literally go the way of the dinosaurs.”

Rutger gives out a curt sigh. “How do they know? Who are these people, anyway?”

“*Just* the lost colony of Shamash, mensa. *Just* the last relic of the golden age, in tight orbit around the sun.”

“And why should we trust them? What if they’re wrong about the rock?”

“If there is something we can trust a space colony about, is *space*. They know what they’re talking about.”

“But... That was an *automated* message. What if they are all dead by now?”

“Their death wouldn’t change the trajectory of the asteroid, would it? But come on, Rutger. I heard them speaking in the summer, Goah’s Mercy. That was no goahdamn recording. No, trust me. They are alive and kicking. I even saw a picture of them, remember? They looked so... *old*. Like Dem is a hoax, as Edda always says.”

“But then, what are we going to—?”

“Simple. We need to contact them, and get them to deflect the asteroid for us with their space technology. Start the transmitter.”

“Are you sure?” Rutger says, rubbing the back of his head. Ximena can hear the slight shake in his voice. “So far we haven’t done anything strictly forbidden, but if they are really demon-ridden, we—”

“Do it, mensa!”

“Goah has Mercy,” Rutger says. He walks to a wired device on the floor next to the bench, leans slowly down, and, with a curt sigh, flips the main switch.

The device comes to life with a subtle electric purr. As he taps on its controls, Gotthard operates a machine right next to the loudspeaker, turning a knob while a needle climbs a dial all the way to the edge of a red line. He breathes heavily, grabs a crude microphone and looks at Rutger.

“Two point one gigahertz,” Rutger says with a nod. “The stage is yours, Gotts!”

Gotthard turns a protruding handle and speaks on the microphone: “This is a message to New Alexandria, New Alexandria, New—”

He stops with a surprised gasp as the device discharges intense sparks and then dies with a sharp buzz. Both stare in

disbelief—no, in *dismay*—as black smoke begins to escape the guts of the machine.

“Okay, try again,” Gotthard says.

The nighttime has arrived with its usual winter haste, and it is much darker now with just the sole electric bulb hanging high on the wall above the work bench. But No, Ximena realizes. It is not just darker—it is *gloomier*; quite fitting Gotthard’s mood, from what the psych-link is feeding her.

Rutger turns the knob, but nothing seems to happen, except a faint burning stench begins to spread across the auditorium.

“Pure sin!” Gotthard says, slamming a hand on the bench. “The fucking transformer, where did you get it from? It’s junk!”

“That was the strongest I could get in sort notice without, uh, attracting attention. And look at this.” He puts a finger on a dial with the needle resting close to the bottom. “The batteries are out of juice.”

Gotthard shakes his head, lips pressed, brow creased in frustration. Ximena cannot avoid pitying him, as his eyes keep jumping across the bench in search of something, *anything*, they can still try. But he then shut his eyes and leans forward on the bench, sinking his head between his arms. “This is it, mensa,” he says.

Ximena shakes her head, but nothing can dispel the overwhelming sense of defeat that the psych-link keeps remorselessly pumping into her guts. Sometimes she would rather watch history from the sideline, just with her naked eyes. Not quite a laudable wish for a historian, she knows. But sometimes, immersion hurts too much.

“I know,” Rutger replies after a long silence, his voice as

exhausted and beaten as Gotthard's. "We tried, Gotts. If we had more time..."

"If we had more time!" Gotthard says with a sudden, harsh voice, raising his head at Rutger. Ximena feels his frustration turning quickly into anger. "If we had more karma! If we had more batteries! If we had an industrial transformer! Goah, if we had the goahdamn Path in the Shadow! Any more excuses?!"

"Hey!" Rutger stands bolt upright. "It's not my fault!"

"And who bought this piece of dung?!" Gotthard points a finger at the bulky transformer, where a smoky, black stain still bears witness to their latest futile attempt at reanimation.

"Fuck you, mensa!" Rutger turns and begins to stride towards the wooden door.

"Wait, no!" Gotthard sinks his head. "Fuck, Rutger. Sorry."

Rutger stops, turns his head slowly, and gives Gotthard a *very* annoyed glance.

Gotthard, eyes still lowered, says, "You've heard the lost colony yourself. Doomsday is coming—in the shape of an asteroid. That focuses minds, I would say."

Rutger, still glowering, paces tentatively closer.

Gotthard continues, "Compared to that, who cares if the marai help us or not? We have to keep working either way. Now that we lost the Trials, we have all the time of the world, right? And if all we need is more karma, then Goah is my witness, I'll get it."

"How?" Rutger asks in a slow, controlled manner.

Gotthard shrugs. "Somehow. Begging if needs be."

"Seriously, Gotthard; how in Goah's Name are we going to get karma without Qoh's help?"

Gotthard takes a deep, thoughtful breath. "Extra shifts down at the press... More *cozy* favors to Colder van Althuis... Squeezing rich friends out of their savings..."

A chuckle escapes Rutger. “You sure as Dem are good at that.”

Gotthard smiles with uncharacteristic shyness, walks to Rutger and puts a hand on his shoulder. He looks at his friend in the eyes, in silence.

Rutger clears his throat. “Goah knows, perhaps Van Dolah and Speese will win the Trials. And then they can help us with whatever Path-of-Shadow stuff they learn from the marai.”

“No, they won’t help us,” Gotthard says, his expression souring. He walks back to the bench and slams in his chair. “They would never believe us.”

“Sure they would, if we show them the automated message. Or even better, if we get to speak to the lost colony—”

“With some aspects of human nature—the more *materialistic*—you are such a cynic, Rutger, but you are surprisingly naive with how we humans deal with the truth. They would never believe us, because they don’t *want* the truth to be... *real*. It’s too painful. Humans don’t do truths that taste bad.”

“Come on, Gotts. We are talking about Van Dolah and Speese here. They are not uneducated hicks. They are smarter than... than... yes, than me! And perhaps even than you. If we prove it to them with—”

“No, mensa,” Gotthard says with a firm shake of his head. “Accepting inconvenient truths is not a matter of intelligence; not even of wisdom. It is a matter of *courage*.”

“Hmm, I wouldn’t call Van Dolah and Speese cowards...”

“Not that sort of courage, mensa. Courage of the mind. The courage of rational science.”

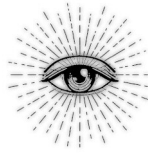
“Well, we can at least try, right? They might surprise you.”

“They might, yes. Perhaps. But first, they must win the Trials. If those Oosterbeek hicks beat them, then all we have is,” he gestures around the room, “ourselves.” He sighs, and

throws a glimpse at his son, who sleeps soundly on the blanket like only toddlers can. “It’s getting late. Let’s call it a day.”

“If they’re behind the Century Blasphemy, they’ll win. Don’t worry, mensa.”

“I hope you are right.” Gotthard begins to pace towards Gerrit. “Let’s go to sleep, and find out.”



The Brown Militia

As the scene materializes across the auditorium, Ximena immediately recognizes Edda's bedroom. Edda herself is tucked in bed, asleep, her breathing slow and regular. An already familiar setting under most circumstances, ordinary even. Except this time there are four *extraordinary* elements embedded in the scene that make Ximena sit upright and engage all her senses with eager interest.

First, Aline is there as well. She is standing beside the bed, watching Edda's relaxed expression with feverish intensity.

Second, Aline is wearing no clothes—not even underwear. And her head is perfectly bald. There are no traces of hair to be seen on her naked body.

Third, there is no darkness in the night. Far from it. All surfaces in the room—every object—come sharply into view, radiating what seems to Ximena like a shadowless gray light. The cactus plant on the desk under the window appears to cast a brighter shade of greenish-gray.

The Second Wake, Ximena realizes as she lets her eyes be drawn to the skin of both girls, to their *halos*, which shine an unnaturally bright blue—a sparkling blue of the mind.

But it is the fourth element that attracts her attention like a ravine the wind.

They are not alone.

A mare stands behind Aline, floating a few inches above the ground. Her body is boneless thin, and elongated into a grotesquely humanoid shape, her head barely skimming the ceiling. And her skin... it is also translucent, not unlike Aline's, and it also fulgurates rabidly, but in dashes of red instead of blue. She is staring down at Aline in silence, unnoticed.

Aline keeps her eyes locked on Edda's body, her torso slightly flexed, her hands contracted in fists. "Come on, sister. Come on," she mutters. "You can do it."

"What do you expect Redeemed van Dolah to achieve, Woman Speese?" the mare asks in a familiar female voice.

Aline turns around with a gasp and looks up into the mare's expressionless white eyes. "Elder Rew! You scared me. You are so... *red!*"

"I am indeed. I did arrive to take you to the Trials. Overseer Yog is awaiting us. She shall hear the appeals from the three finalist teams and then select a winner."

"Uh, right." Aline gives Edda a confused glance before turning her eyes back to Rew. "Sure!"

"I was expecting to find you in your own bed," Rew says, stretching one of her boneless, long arms towards a point on the wall, behind which, Ximena assumes, is Aline's house down the street. "Sleeping." Her voice is as calm and bland as ever.

"Yes, well. I am there," she smiles apologetically. "Sleeping."

"I do realize that." Rew stares at Aline in silence for a few moments.

Aline smiles again and spreads her arms. "Ta-da!"

"Who did guide you into the Second Wake?"

"Um, nobody, really," she says with a shrug. "I did it on my own." She gestures at the sleeping Edda behind her. "And now

I was actually trying to teach Edda how to do it, too. We have been at it for, I don't know, over a week? But," she shakes her head and looks at her sleeping friend, "it isn't working. I don't know if I can't teach, or she can't *ghost*."

"Ghost?"

"Sorry. I mean, whatever you call... *this*." She gestures at her own body.

"You are traversing, Woman Speese."

"*Traversing*," she speaks slowly, as if savoring the word. "Right."

"You are the first human I ever witness traversing the Second Wake."

"Well, I hope I'm not the last one. Perhaps you could help me out with Edda."

Rew's eyes remain fixed on Aline's blue fulguration for a long while. The silence stretches to the point where Aline shifts in place and clears her throat.

"Such raw walking talent has no known precedence," Rew says. "Not even among marai. You did traverse without guidance. You did enter the Path in the Shadow. On your own."

"Er..." Aline clears her throat again. "Thanks?"

"Do name the extent of your discoveries, Woman Speese. What else can you do in the Second Wake?"

"Uh, well... Hmm, I can go through walls and doors. I mean, I can *feel* them, you know? But..." She shrugs.

Rew keeps her stare on Aline and says nothing.

"Uh, I can also—how do I explain it?" She wets her lips. "*Teleport?*"

"Teleport—do clarify, Woman Speese."

"Hmm, look," she says, and her body vanishes. Ximena hears some of her fellow students gasp at the sudden disappearance.

Rew, now alone with Edda, remains perfectly still. Her eyes fixed on the place where Aline used to stand.

And then, a few seconds later, Aline reappears in what Ximena seems like a flash of blue. She is in the same exact place, as if she had never left. “There!” she says. “See?”

“Do name the location where you did spacelessly-traverse?”

“Spaceless... what?”

“The location where you did... *teleport*?”

“Ah, well, I just went home. But I can go anywhere I want, as long as I know the place.”

“Anywhere?”

“I think so. Like, I even went back to the ruins of Old Amsterdam, a golden-age city far away on the—”

“I do know what Amsterdam is. And what else can you accomplish with your traversing body, Woman Speese?”

“Hmm, oh I almost forget the most important! I can enter the dreams of others.” She points at Edda in bed. “All I need to do is touch her,” she gestures at the blue fulguration shining fiercely across her skin, “uh...”

“You do meld your halos.”

“Our *halos*, yes! Why is yours red?”

“You do have the halo of a natural traverser, Woman Speese. And Redeemed van Dolah’s is a natural controller. Your talents are marked in your halos. Yours is the most potent I have ever witnessed—in a human. And Redeemed van Dolah’s is not far behind.”

Aline inspects her own blue glare, fluffy and expansive, and then Edda’s, tight and sharp, both sparkling intensely as she watches.

She turns her gaze back at Rew with a frown of curiosity. “And why is yours red?”

“Alas, you are blinded by what you cannot understand. Unsurprisingly,” Rew looks at Edda, “you are unable to pull other humans into the Path in the Shadow. And not even with

your natural talent can you hope to progress on your own down the deeper parts of the Path.”

“Then teach us, Goah’s Mercy!”

“I cannot, Woman Speese. Not before your victory in the Trials.”

The three competing teams stand in close proximity to each other, each two humans and a mare. There stand Gotthard and a somber looking Rutger. With Qoh, of course, their master mare. Over there are Edda and Aline, with Rew. And the last team is the two Smook siblings with their mare, whose name escapes Ximena at the moment.

Edda, unable to stop fiddling with her hands, throws a sidelong glance at the Smooks, who are glaring back at her in murderous silence. *If looks could kill...* she thinks, her thoughts and anxiety flowing unimpeded into Ximena through the psych-link.

“Afraid of losing, hicks?” Gotthard shouts at the Smooks in a good-humored manner. Edda is impressed. He seems so relaxed, like his victory in the Trials—his dreams—were not at all at stake. She herself wouldn’t know what to do, were she to lose the Trials. The price—the *power* of the Path in the Shadow—is her last hope to save her father from his Joyousday... Which is just weeks away, Goah’s Mercy! She *must* win.

The Smook siblings turn their gaze at Gotthard, and then the tall Smook woman, without breaking eye contact, tilts her head and whispers something into the stocky man’s ears. His glower turns progressively into an eerie smile, and a shudder runs up Edda’s—and Ximena’s—spine.

“Sense and bind, Walkers,” the two bodies of Yog say with one voice. Other than Yog and the three teams, there is nothing else in the staging permascape—just the vast, black sky

and the infinite, flat emptiness. After so many *visits*, Ximena feels almost at ease in this dream place, where only what matters exists. “The Trials reach now their natural conclusion. My final judgment shall be given in compliance with the most favorable impact to the Reseeding effort. I shall now hear your appeals. Do commence, Walker Qoh.”

“Yes, Overseer Yog,” Qoh says, as his body floats forward a few inches. “I do fear my humans, Man Kraker and Redeemed Siever, have produced nothing of worth in the assigned lapse.” Ximena feels Edda’s rush of surprise at the words. “Thus, we do concede—”

“Wait, no!” Rutger shouts as he strides forward, to the astonishment of all—even of Gotthard, next to him. “We established contact with a space colony of the golden age! With a bit more time, they can help us deflect—”

A gesture of one of Yog’s four arms makes Gotthard, Rutger and Qoh disappear at once.

Whoa! Edda’s anxiety flutters in Ximena’s stomach. The empty permascape feels a notch emptier now. *And that’s how quickly your goahdamn dreams can shatter.* Edda is sad for her dowry brother, and yet, she is a step closer, isn’t she?

Yog turns her two heads slowly in her direction. “Your appeal, Walker Rew.”

“Yes, Overseer Yog.” Rew slides forward. “My humans have sparked a grassroots revolt against the ritual culling of their kind.” As she speaks, Rew raises one of her elongated arms and a sphere materializes over her head.

The Earth, Ximena immediately recognizes: white clouds, blue oceans and green-yellow continents, all in place in perfect three-dimensional rendition, rotating slowly. Before she has time to make out the details, the Earth begins to expand quickly until it covers most of the black sky, bringing into focus one particular continent: Hansasia. And the Earth doesn’t stop growing. Soon only the western part of the continent hangs

heads down in the sky. It is Europe—the north-western part, to be precise—and the planet keeps growing until it is almost flat. A new sky of sea and land now encloses the staging permascape.

Ximena squints below the clouds, and recognizes the western shore of Hansa, across the British Isles, but the shoreline is not what she would have expected. The Dutch province especially... It is very different. Larger, a tract of lush greens instead of the turquoise shallow seas. *This is not her Earth. This is.... Nubaria!* Ximena's own realization conflicts with Edda's confusion at the sight of the unfamiliar coastline.

"A revolt," Rew continues, her eyes—like everybody else's—looking up to the upside-down Earth, "triggered from the human settlement closest to Deviss." Two dots, one next to each other, begin to shine in the middle of the anomalous Dutch province. One of them is bright red; the other, blue—not unlike the blue halos of the Second Wake. "My humans did produce a message of revolutionary intent that has been heard by a number of humans estimated in the millions across the greater part of Oromantis." As she speaks, dozens—no, *hundreds*—of similar blue dots appear scattered throughout the whole visible continent, until the entire landmass seems to glimmer.

Ximena feels Edda's awe as the visuals spread beyond the horizon. But Edda's appreciation is more technical than her own. She is amazed at the precise control of the mare to render this... strange landscape in the sky, the *will* to achieve such... morphing of the dreamscape, such gradual transition. Without a reset!

Rew is skillfully letting the silence fill the staging permascape with the heavy evidence of the Century Blasphemy's true impact hanging in bright blue above them. Edda is quite pleased—almost intimidated—by the scope of her own success. Her anxiety is virtually gone now. The Smook

siblings, on the other hand, keep shifting their weight in place, and shooting Edda the occasional nasty glance.

“Reminds you of something?” Cody whispers in Ximena’s ear.

“What?”

Cody points a finger up at the floating Earth, and smiles. “That dream technology, where have you seen it before?”

Ximena squints. “It’s like... Oh, yes!” She chuckles loudly as she recognizes the roots of the technology that allow her—and the rest of the Global Program students—to witness history in such immersive detail. “Like a dream sensorial!”

“A dreamsenso inside a dreamsenso inside a dream. It makes your head spin, right?” Cody looks down to the stage, where a lone figure stands quietly staring up at blue-glittering Europe above them all. “I must admit, the professor is good.”

“Technically,” Rew finally says, “Redeemed van Dolah and Woman Speese combined classic third-step suggestion with their innate human whispering in order to move a group of individuals into compliance. They so obtained the means, the supplies and the opportunity. And they did so without calling undue attention upon themselves.”

She bows her head slightly and moves smoothly back next to Edda and Aline.

Yog maintains her eyes fixed on Rew for a few moments and then shifts them slowly towards Edda. And they remain there. So still. So blank.

So dead.

Oh, Goah! A chill runs up her spine, shattering her incipient confidence.

Aline tilts her head and, without barely moving her lips, whispers, “Can’t feel the love, sister.”

Yog finally turns her attention to the last mare, and says, “Your appeal, Walker Moih.”

“Yes, Overseer Yog,” the mare says, floating slightly in front

of the Smook siblings, both of whom hold an admirably impassive expression. “My humans have taken political power over their settlement for themselves.”

Moih raises an arm and the miniature Earth that was covering their heads from horizon to horizon disappears at once.

Ximena frowns slightly at the sudden blackness. She is used to a certain sense of depth when looking up, be it clouds, the sun, the moon, or even stars, if nothing else. But this... *nothingness*—she swallows—is almost claustrophobic.

A gesture of the Moih’s arm, and a fresh new scene comes alive in the sky. Not a planet this time. And not covering the whole firmament either—it is much closer to them now, more intimate. It is tiny people, minute *humans*. Many of them, actually. It must be like... thousands! All packed together, as if standing shoulder to shoulder on an invisible wide floor in the air. They have been wished into dream existence with meticulous accuracy, like real miniature colonists were really there, chit-chatting with lively gestures, wearing garments as varied as their individual features.

Edda is once more speechless at such casual display of dream control, such detail—such awesome *power*. That’s not something you can *dream* of doing with the rough will-control of the Path of Light. As Edda wets her lips, Ximena feels her *thirst*.

“I shall first illustrate the power structure of Elders Smook’s human settlement.” Moih’s eyes remain raised to the thousands of tiny colonists. “The humans here depicted are the lower echelon of society, the *producers*.”

A further gesture materializes a new set of people above the first. It is a smaller group, just a few hundreds, but the miniature people are proportionally larger, as to spread over the same area as the commoners below them. “These are the mid echelon, the *organizers*. They steer every aspect of the

settlement with their specialized privilege.” Ximena feels on her own cheeks the sudden rush of Edda’s indignant blush. “And on the top echelon,” a gesture of Moih produces yet another layer of only a couple dozen much larger figures that stand over the specialists with fine robes and smug expressions, “the *collectors*, that command in their hands all political, religious and economic resources.”

Rew slides forward and says, “As interesting—and indeed accurate—as Walker Moih’s anthropological analysis is, I do fail to perceive due relevance. My humans have triggered a revolution aligned with the interests of the Reseeding effort. The *worth* of your humans remains unclear, Walker.”

Well put! Edda tries not to smile.

Moih says, “I do acknowledge my argumentation might seem excessive, Walker Rew, and yet I do request further patience,” Moih turns her head to address Yog’s two bodies, “to indulge in the fineries of power distribution in the human ecosystem. A rough understanding is, unfortunately, a prerequisite to appreciating the achievement of my humans.”

Yog turns her faces to Rew. “You have already made use of your allotted appeal slot, Walker. You shall abstain from further interruption. Do acknowledge.”

“I acknowledge, Overseer.” Rew floats back next to Edda, who purses her lips.

“Do proceed, Walker Moih,” Yog says.

Moih raises slowly a boneless arm and points it at the top of her three-story structure of excited miniature people. “Behold, the distribution of *karma*.”

An enormous amount of shiny, golden dust materializes around the large floating bodies of the top elite, who begin to take vast amounts of it in their hands and to gulp the stuff like a thirsty camel gulps water. As they eat, their skins seem to absorb the dust’s golden glow. What sparkling dust they fail to take trickles down slowly. But the figures don’t let go, Ximena

observes with dismay. They kneel, and gobble as much as they can physically capture, shining ever more brightly, until the final sprinkles of gold disappear beneath them, out of reach.

And as the dusty delicacies arrive at the middle layer, it is now the mid-sized figures that jump gluttonously with spread arms, trying to capture and eat as much of it as possible before it is all gone. Ximena creases her brow at the sight of the expression on their faces. There is no hunger there, no. Not even desire. It is pure, naked *greed*, as their skins radiate like they are made of radioactive gold.

As the last remains of golden stuff reach the last, hungriest layer, the tiny miniatures scramble in desperate competition for what little is left. A few localized but fierce brawls break out. Edda looks away in disgust.

“Behold, the distribution of human produce,” Moih says, and a thin layer of silver-glowing dust materializes, but on the bottom ground this time, at the feet of the thousands of lower echelon people. They begin to pick it up, laboriously, in a slow, painful process, bending backs and knees, and what they pick, they throw up in the air, where it remains floating, forming a ghostly mist. Then, slowly, the fog begins to move and swirls of silvery dust flow upwards, attracted by the golden brilliance of karma emanating from each of the individuals above, until they accumulate and consolidate around each high person, especially the larger ones on the peak, with their elegant garments, that now shine a glimmering mix of gold and silver.

“As karma flows downwards,” Moih says, “economic and political produce flows upwards in a stable equilibrium of economic relations, favors and patronage that perpetuates itself.”

That’s not true! Ximena hears Edda’s indignant protest in her thoughts. *Voting, unlike karma, is a sacred right, guaranteed for every receiver of Aww Gifft, no matter how poor. Aww Compacts elections are the*

people's last line of defense against tyranny. We vote for our Colony Elders so that they protect our interests, Goah's Mercy, not their own!

And yet—the thought arrives a moment later, almost shyly—Edda cannot deny that she has consistently voted for Leo Siever, Rutger's father and Lunteren's Trade-and-Craft Colder since... Well, for as far as she remembers. Her dowry Kraker parents have always been quite assertive regarding the Van Dolah's vote, and they have happily complied. They're family, after all. But their vote is free, and that's what matters!

"Crucially," Moih continues, "Elder Smook's settlement is no exception. Such ingenious construct of mass manipulation has been strictly imposed in *every* human settlement in the Third Wake. You can surely appreciate the complexity that arises when, even the best of our Human Whisperers," Moih respectfully turns towards Rew, "does attempt to impose Reseeding doctrine."

As Moih raises her head, a miniature mare, glowing in fierce red, appears high in the air over the three-story human construct. The mare floats towards one of the largest figures, a man shining gold and silver on the highest level of the structure. The mare *enters* the man, mixing her red glow into the gold and silver of his radiance. Then, golden dust reappears over their heads and rain downwards through the echelons, and once again, silver specks appear below their feet and condense upwards through the echelons. Ximena tries to lock her eyes on the red glow left behind by the mare in that lone individual, but it quickly dilutes as wave after wave of gold and silver merge in swirls of chaos.

"In the few weeks that Elders Smook have applied their incipient Walking discipline," Moih continues, blank eyes locked on the floating mesh of people, "they have technically employed emotional suggestion on a wide shell of their settlement's population. The use of expansive permascapes, filled with like-minded individuals of the lower echelons, has

proved highly efficient, so swaying the convictions of hundreds of humans in only thirteen sessions.”

Ximena exhales in surprise as a small share of the miniature people at the bottom of the construct, one or two hundred at most, begin to glow... *brown?* A peculiar color to glow with. And the brown light spreads sideways, like rot on apples, slowly at first, but it quickly gains pace. As the putrid radiance advances, the affected colonists become more agitated—more... *ferocious*—as they shout and wave their fists up in the air. The larger figures on the second floor have taken notice, and are peeking down at them with increasing apprehension, but all they do is exchange baffled glances.

“Additionally,” Moih continues, “some judicious campaigns of targeted intimidation have proved instrumental in altering the settlement’s political process to their favor.”

As she speaks, and to Edda’s—and Ximena’s—astonishment, the browned miniatures begin to climb on top of each other’s shoulders, until they push themselves and their comrades through the invisible ceiling and up onto the second story, where they grow in size and shove off with overwhelming force the previous inhabitants of that floor, who now scatter like ants on a stomped ant hill. As the violent mob takes firm possession of their new—elevated—place, their brown bodies absorb the golden shine of their former owners, many of whom fall off the invisible edge, while others disappear altogether. *Where did they go?* Ximena wonders.

“Behold,” Moih says, “the elections.”

The thin silvery layer of dust appears—one tiny spot at the feet of each miniature. As they pick it up and throw it in the air, it twists in clouds of shiny political power that flows upwards, but this time much of it condenses around the freshly gained golden glow of, yes, the brown mob. The silvery dust seems to take five of them in their hold and elevate them—as the bodies grow even larger—onto the top floor, to the dismay

of the residents. Ximena readily recognizes two of the brown newcomers: the Smook siblings.

“And, to conclude my appeal, Overseer Yog, do allow me to point out that, with the innovative structure designed by Elders Smook, we are now in position to inject Reseeding policy *directly* into human society, with no risk of karma adulteration, as we simply need to communicate our instructions.”

Edda exhales, unable to stop fiddling with her dream fingers. *It's just one colony, Goah's Mercy! Who cares about a single colony? We are starting a goahdamn Imperium-wide revolution!*

Yog remains silent for a long while, her four eyes fixed on Moih. She seems almost pensive. “Thus, you are stating,” she finally speaks, “that we are in no further need of the skills of human whisperers.” One of her bodies turns her lifeless eyes at Rew.

“Indeed, we are not, Overseer. As long as we do assist Elders Smook to expand their political innovation to other human settlements. They do crave the chance to increase—and impose—their power.”

Edda swaps a nervous glance with Aline.

“How many settlements can your humans... *turn?*”

“*All* of them, Overseer. Given enough time, and our vigorous support, starting with your permission to initiate their instruction in the Path in the Shadow.”

“I do grant permission, Walker Moih. The human Trials are over.”

Ximena turns to Cody with a deep frown and says, “And here I was absolutely convinced that Edda and Aline were the winners!”

Cody himself is still gaping at the scene, watching the

Smook siblings celebrate loudly—this must be the first time Ximena sees them actually laughing. Edda and Aline have already been dismissed, even before they could react to Yog’s words. “You aren’t the only one,” he says.

“Yes, right?”

Cody nods slowly and then meets her gaze. “I read it in the *History of the Dreamwars* textbook, Ximena. I know I did.”

“And I just *know* it. Like... It’s always been obvious, in all the stories about Edda van Dolah, you know?”

Small discussions like theirs seem to be popping around them.

Ximena directs her frown down at the stage, where Professor Miyagi stands, hands behind his back, still watching the sensorial, and pretending nothing is stirring the benches. She whispers, “You think this might be another... *manipulation?*?”

Cody follows her gaze, but shakes his head firmly. “Professor Miyagi is not a revisionist.”

“How can you still be so sure?” she says, as she spreads her hands at the scene where the Smook siblings are trying to hug the considerably larger mare Moih. “This is... a lie!”

“A lie is a strong word.” Cody’s voice is quieter now—calmer—like he is retreating into his academic shell. “I would call this simply a *gap* in our understanding. I suggest we leave it at that.”

“But this version of history makes no sense! If Edda lost the Trials, how in Goah’s Name—?!”

The artificially enhanced voice of Professor Miyagi interrupts her words. “Ank, please, can you stop the sensorial for a minute?” The tumult in the auditorium has obviously grown too loud to ignore.

A gesture of the elegant Neanderthal woman in the front row removes the black, featureless sky of the staging permascape in an instant and brings in its place a bright,

morning day, with scattered, lazy cirrus clouds and fresh, invigorating spring air. A balmy, soothing sight, that still fails to calm the students.

As her attention returns to the stage, she spots Censor Smith walking towards Miyagi. From up here, she can only see the back of his bald head. As she raises her eyes to the other side of the amphitheater, she meets for an awkward instant the intense look of Mark, staring at her pointedly. She sinks her head in a sudden rush of adrenaline that quickens her breathing.

“Please excuse my dear students, Professor Miyagi,” Censor Smith says, loud enough for everybody to hear. “I suspect few are familiar with this radical... interpretation of the history of the *Trials of Worth and Soul*.”

“Radical?” Professor Miyagi frowns and spreads his arms. “Would you like to see the sources?”

“Which are?” The Censor’s voice sounds truly intrigued.

“Uh, the account of the survivors, mainly.”

Censor Smith waves a hand dismissively. “Who can trust the word of those that remain? You know as well as I do the extent to which the winners stain the pages of history.”

“There’s also the seminar paper of Professor Van der Hout. Surely you’ve read it. Was it in 2512? I think so. The one where she uncovers and analyzes the archives of the old Eye of Oosterbeek.”

Censor Smith laughs. “For every paper you name, I can name you two others. That’s the sad nature of our discipline, isn’t it? The lack of evidence opens it to too many... interpretations.”

Miyagi opens his hands in a gesture of exasperation. “History is a science, not a competition—and certainly not a horoscope. What you call lack of evidence, I call lack of sight. But please, indulge me, Censor Smith. What do you believe happened?”

“*Belief* has nothing to do with it,” he chuckles, “I assure you, Professor. But I do admit not being much of a fan of this,” he waves a hand up to where the scene was floating a few moments ago, “*Hansasian* line of thought.”

“Right.” Miyagi nods slowly. “Am I correct in assuming that in the GIA it is official doctrine that Edda is the victor of the Trials?”

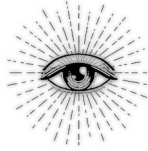
“Well, not doctrine, *doctrine* as such. Just good, old American common sense. I suggest you give it a hard try, Professor. Really do, and you’ll see you can move mountains with your reason. Archer Rhodes is about to arrive at Lunteren any day now. In full force. I assume all this still holds, even in your *version* of history?”

“It does indeed. *Even* in my version of history.”

“Then tell me, my dear professor,” Censor Smith continues, apparently immune to sarcasm. “How can a schoolteacher, a sixteen-year-old girl, hope to survive the eager attentions of aw’s Grand Inquisitor? *Unless*,” he taps his hairless temples, “she has *somehow* gained access to the Path in the Shadow?”

“That is a good question, Censor Smith. A historical question. A *scientific* question with a scientific answer, which I am looking forward to exploring with all our students in this seminar. But I’m afraid the answer is not simple—and it most definitely is not *simplistic*. To reach it, we need to follow Edda’s next immediate steps, when she traveled to Oosterbeek to beg the favor of Luuk and Mirjam Smook.”

SEVEN



The 156 Parachute Battalion

The scene camera descends over a forested road, where two figures on bicycles pedal side by side. It is raining hard, and the figures travel hooded.

The auditorium camera settles behind the riders and follows them closely for a few minutes. The road is not very trafficked, at least not under the weather, except by the occasional horse-pulled coach, or merchant bike trailer buzzing by with electric haste in the opposite direction, carrying out-of-season perishables northwards from the industrial freezers of Oosterbeek.

Ximena still has trouble getting used to such ultrarealistic immersion as the entire auditorium appears to fly a few yards over the narrow road, evergreen pines and leafless birches passing slowly by, the strong smell of the intensely wet forest in her nostrils, the unstoppable rush of rain in her ears. She feels like she is right there, pedaling along a ragged road like a time machine has magically transported her to this goahforsaken corner of the globe-spanning Imperia of Goah during the first fateful days of the twenty-fifth century. So alien, and yet so familiar. This is the same Earth she lives on,

after all. But as a historian, she knows well what a hundred years can do.

The two riders keep a steady, rhythmic silence, their breaths visible through the thick rain. One of them is considerably larger than the other. They are cold and sweaty at the same time. And miserable. Ximena suppresses a shudder as she tries to ignore the feeling of icy water relentlessly gnawing at her underwear.

And the goahdamn jacket was supposed to be watertight! The frustrated thought flows through the psych-link as the smaller biker wraps herself tighter in the full-body rain jacket. Her walking shoes, which she cherishes, are soaked. But hopefully, not ruined. As soon as they arrive at Elder Bakker's—Aline's favorite guesthouse in Oosterbeek—a long rest by the fire might salvage them. And her body. Oh, how she yearns for the hearth! But she knows that with the comforts of Elder Bakker's house, the dark thoughts will return. The paralyzing, soul-drenching thoughts of hopelessness, of defeat. Of fear. Fear of death—the death of her father. Fear of a maimed life, of loneliness. Shared loneliness, yes. She has Bram, after all. But a tear on a solidary shoulder is no less salty. Sometimes she wishes she had his strength. He takes it all at face value, without question, and just makes the best of it. Thank Goah, Hans has such a simpleton father. Edda realizes with a sudden chuckle how similar he is to Willem, and not just externally. Ximena smiles at the surge of Edda's love for her younger brother, like a spot of warmth in the freezing rain.

“Did you see that?” The large man beside Edda has raised his head and is peeking in the woods. He lets his bulky bicycle slow to a natural halt.

“What?” Edda stops her bike, removes her hood and squints in that direction.

“I saw another one.” The man—it's Janson—turns his young, broad face to Edda, green eyes wide open in an

expression of worry. “I swear to Goah, there was another of those brown-cloaked mensas behind a tree.”

She dismounts and with the bicycle in her hands, she takes a few, careful paces towards the woods. “You are imagining things,” she finally says, pulling the hood back on.

“And you are blind. Aline and Pieter were right; you are in no disposition to travel alone. You go about as if you were invincible.”

“Oh, come on. Not again. What can possibly happen, huh? Aline herself travels to Oosterbeek often enough. Without bodyguards, yeah?”

“That was then. She wouldn’t do it now. She told you herself!”

Edda sighs. “She very much did. And now she won’t even speak to me.”

“You just won’t listen. It’s too dangerous in Oosterbeek, Edda. You’ve heard the stories yourself. The brown militia do as they please, like they own the place. They cut off hands, they say. And noses and ears too. And some people are disappearing, Goah’s Mercy. People like you.”

Edda snorts. “Come on, you don’t really believe they’re hunting specialists down, do you? You should have stayed home. I’m sure Pieter needs you in the boat.”

“He’ll manage a few days on his own. Your safety is more important.”

Edda signals her disapproval with a loud exhalation. “We are almost there, anyway. You can—”

“What’s that thing?” Janson points at an obelisk-shaped stone at the side of the road.

“Ah,” Edda smiles and gestures for him to approach it with her. Ximena feels the Juf in her taking over. Her dad showed the obelisk to her once, a few years ago. “That is *history*, Janson.”

The obelisk is no taller than a man, made of smooth

granite, barely weathered even after the centuries. It is a memorial, and the plaque on it is still readable:

SEPTEMBER 1944
About here on 19 September
156 Parachute Battalion were held
by strong German forces in their
fight towards Arnhem.
Many officers and men were killed
or wounded.

“What does it mean?” Janson asks.

“It’s quite a story,” Edda says. “The greatest war the world has ever seen. Flying warriors from Britain fought the Germans here.”

“Flying...?! Whoa!” Janson’s eyes widen. “Here? In Germania? Why were they attacking us?”

“No, Goah,” she chuckles. “They weren’t... You know what? Why don’t you join my evening classes? I can sneak an extra history lesson or two just for—” Edda stops speaking, as her eyes land on the carved image at the top of the obelisk plaque. It is a warrior riding a winged horse.

A warrior.

On a winged horse!

Ximena feels Edda’s breath quickening, memories of a not-so-distant dream boiling up to her conscience like an explosive geyser. A frozen lake, shattered by cannonballs, and a winged horse carrying a precious soldier away in the air. And just like that, all her sorrows, her fears, her constant fights with her dad, her heated arguments with Aline, dilute away and leave behind only the purest of *certainty*. She would still be curled in bed, had not Aline—Goah bless her soul—shaken her out of that horrid pit of despair she was clinging to. Aline was right, of course. Her dad has only weeks to live. And when she stood, the idea

came to her in a flash, just like in those tales of divine inspiration. What she had to do was so obvious! She would come to Oosterbeek, rumors about the brown militia be damned. She would come and ask the Smooks for help. Such a simple idea! And yet so far-fetched, considering the *intricate* personality of the siblings. But what else could she do?

“Edda?!” Janson puts a hand on her shoulder.

But she ignores him, as she slowly traces with the finger the carving of the flying warrior. Whatever lingering doubts she had carried with her, they now vanish at the sight of a piece of granite by the side of the road. A sign planted ages ago by Goah awssself, just for her. Yes, Goah put her here, on this road, on this moment, for a *purpose*. She smiles to herself, convinced that, winner or not, she will save her father, after all.

“Edda!” Janson pulls her behind him with a sudden, forceful tug, and retrieves a knife out of his robes.

A smirking, hooded woman has just emerged from beyond the curtain of heavy rain, and walks towards them, followed by two likewise covered men. Their short, soggy tunics are dark brown, almost black from the water. Their working pants, beneath the tunic, are so sodden that they seem to sweat with every step they take. But they don’t seem to mind the weather. Edda’s eyes are immediately drawn to the knives that hang so casually from their belts. They are so long and thin as to be almost deemed swords.

“Redeemed van Dolah, I suppose?” the woman asks, pulling back her hood and revealing a neat, blonde hair cut short over her ears. Her features are soft and regular, her eyes blue like glacier ice. “Aws Blessings to you.”

“Who are you?!” Janson steps forward, knife firmly in his hand. He is a large man, but Edda doubts he can defend them both if the strangers really wish them harm.

The woman stares up at him—she is of the short type—and her smile widens. “And you must be the fisherman. Aws

Blessings to you too, Elder Ledeboer. My sources never mentioned how.... *well-formed* you are.” She walks to him and puts her hand on his knife. “No need for this, good lookin’. We’re friends.” She gently pushes his hand down.

Janson blinks in confusion and turns his head at Edda.

“Who are you?” Edda asks, stepping forward.

The woman points at one of the men behind her. “Redeemed Corneel Taalen,” she gestures at the other, “Elder Joris Vermeer. And I am Woman Anemoon Roskamp.”

“What do you want from us, Woman Roskamp?” Edda asks.

“Oh, Goah’s Mercy, just *Moon*. I’m no friend of those elitist naming rules. They’ve been invented by people like you to keep people like me at arm’s length. Can I call you *Edda*?”

“People like *me*?”

“You know, wise people, rich people. People of *class*.”

“I’m not...!” Edda purses her lips and quickly gets a hold of her temper. This is not the place nor time for a discussion. “What do you want from us, *Woman Roskamp*?”

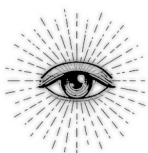
“Oh,” she laughs openly. “So sorry, Redeemed van Dolah. We’re here to welcome and escort you to Oosterbeek. The Colders Smook want to see you.”

“Right,” Edda says, and exchanges a glance with Janson. “That is actually... convenient. I was planning to request an audience tomorrow after—”

“Today,” Anemoon says. “They’ll meet you this afternoon, after you change out of those clothes. And don’t worry about your lodging arrangements. We’ve already sent word to Elder Bakker that as Colders Smook’s personal guests, you’ll be staying in the Elder Council’s residential wing. It’s pretty posh there; you’ll like it.”

“Well, er...” She turns her head towards the obelisk, and eyes the winged horse carving. “Sure!”

EIGHT



A World of Black and White

“Ah, finally. Aws Blessings to you, Edda,” Mirjam Smook says, gesturing invitingly into the large communal room. “Welcome to Oosterbeek.”

Ximena must admit that the tall, blonde woman looks beautiful in that long, elegant robe, and her brother, standing beside her with a sullen expression, comes off as almost classy in the fine, red-and-black tunic.

Mirjam turns her eyes to the woman that led Edda here. “Thank you, Moon. You can take, er, Hans, was it?”

“Janson,” he says, blinking at the sunlight streaming in through the large windows on the opposite wall, as he inspects the enormous room with suspicion. It’s quite the sight, Ximena thinks, and probably the largest inner space Janson has ever seen in his life—save the Eye of Goah. The direct reddish sunset floods the old, dark-cherry hardwood floors like it is almost bleeding. The ceilings are so tall that even three men on each other’s shoulders would not reach them. A long, wooden table, surrounded by leather-bounded armchairs, dominates the place.

“Janson,” Mirjam corrects, blue eyes locked on him.

“Sorry. Too many faces in the Trials to remember’m all.” She raises an authoritative finger at Anemoon. “Take Janson for a round, will ya? You can show him what we’re doing with Oosterbeek. I’m sure he’ll like it.”

“Yes, Mirjam,” Moon says, and smiles up at him. “Come, good lookin’. Let’s go play and leave the grownups to do grownup things, huh?”

“Er,” Janson’s confused look meets Edda’s. “I’d prefer—”

“Go,” Edda says with the confidence of the enlightened. “I’ll be fine. And I’m sure Moon will take good care of you, right, Moon?”

“I sure as Dem will.” Her smile widens wickedly, and without warning, she gives Janson a loud smack on his buttocks. “Let’s go!”

“And you two,” Luuk speaks gruffly to the two brutish-looking men that have flanked them since their encounter with Anemoon, “wait outside.”

Edda’s eyes follow Janson and the three brown-cloaked figures as they pace out. When the double door shuts, Edda turns her attention back to the Smook siblings, who are staring at her like a hunter would a splendidly crowned stag.

“Aws blessings to you, Elders Smook,” Edda says with a slight bow of her head. “I appreciate you—”

Mirjam raises a hand. “Nobody uses their formal titles around here anymore. Titles separate people, Edda. And we’re bringin’ them together. Call us Mirjam and Luuk.”

“Uh, of course... *Mirjam*. Hmm, I never had the chance to extend my congratulations for your victory in the Trials.”

“Thanks,” Mirjam says, and exchanges a glimpse with her brother. “It wasn’t easy.”

“Thanks to you,” Luuk says.

Edda smiles weakly and shrugs. “It was important for me to access the Path in the Shadow.”

“It *was*?” Mirjam sits on one of the armchairs and crosses her legs.

Edda shrugs anew, and says, “I recently realized that it might not be so important who wins, as long as our interests align.”

“Our interests?” Luuk asks.

Edda gestures around the room demonstratively. “We all seek change, yeah?”

Luuk’s lips stretch into an incipient smile. “I like how you think.” He sits next to Mirjam and casually stretches a hand towards a chair on the opposite side of the table. “Sit.”

“Thank you,” she says with a nod. She walks to the chair, pulls it away from the table, and pushes it slowly towards the siblings. Mirjam watches her with a sidelong smile, Luuk with an impatient stare. When Edda finally sits, she straightens her tunic and says, “I trust your... *lessons* have been productive so far?”

“Lessons?” Luuk asks.

“With... Elder Moih was the name? Can you already traverse the Second Wake?”

“You know a lot about the Path in the Shadow,” Luuk says. “For a loser.”

“No, Edda,” Mirjam says. “We haven’t *traversed*. We ain’t even sure it’s possible. Elder Moih says that the Second, uh...”

“The Second Wake,” Edda says.

“Second Wake, yeah. Elder Moih says humans can’t do it. Something about our simple,” Mirjam waves a dismissive hand in the air, “whatever.”

“That’s not true. Aline *can* traverse.”

“Aline... Speese? The engineer?” Luuk leans forward, eyes widening with interest.

“Aline Speese, yeah. The Second Wake is real, Elder... I mean, Luuk. And we humans can traverse it, yeah? From what Aline says, it’s a beautiful place that surrounds us everywhere.

And to think both of you get a chance to learn it all. How I envy you!”

Luuk smiles at the words. “Who taught Aline? Your marai?”

“Elder Rew? Not at all. She discovered it on her own. She’s good. Unfortunately, I’m not, so without a master marai...” She shrugs and looks down.

“And how is it in there? In the Second Wake? What is it good for?”

“Ah,” Edda leans forward, like she is gossiping with old friends, “Aline says that she can travel at will, move through walls, see in the dark. You know, like a ghost.” Edda chuckles and gives him a wink. “You know very little. For a winner. Oh, sorry!” she quickly adds, as she notices Luuk’s sudden change of expression. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t mind Luuk,” Mirjam says, and puts a hand on his lap. “This revolution of ours has wiped away the little sense of humor he once had.”

“Your revolution...” Edda says, sitting bolt upright. “I’ve heard rumors about, er, gangs... and violence, but surely...”

“All true, Edda,” Mirjam smiles at her. “Our brown militia rules Oosterbeek now. *We* rule Oosterbeek.”

“I know. You are elected Colony Elders.”

“No,” Mirjam shakes her head. “Not like that. We ain’t politicians, Edda. Goah forbid! We don’t give a fuck about politics. We’re farmers, *commoners*, oppressed people without your privilege and status. And now, finally,” she raises her hand and closes it into a fist, “*we rule.*”

“So the mutilations, the disappearances...” Edda leans back, eyes alternating between both siblings. “All true?”

“Argh,” Mirjam says, making a dismissive gesture. “Only spezzies. And only the noisiest. The last Colders had trouble accepting our rule, same as some of the head merchants down at the Rhinestide.” Mirjam points at the large tapestry that

dominates the wall, a wonder of exquisite threads and knots depicting an industrial landscape of cranes, barges and ships.

“But the Rhineland is outside Oosterbeek, isn’t it?”

Luuk chuckles. “We don’t give a fuck about technicalities.”

“And... And wh- what did you do to them, the Colders and those poor merchants?”

“What do you do to a rabid dog?”

“But... But... What about their sacred rights? What about aws Compacts? What about aws Gift, Goah’s Mercy?!”

Luuk glares squarely at Edda’s wide eyes and says, slowly and loudly, “We. Don’t. Give. A. Fuck. About. Technicalities.” He takes a deep breath, eyes shut, and after a few moments says in his usual rough voice, “You take it all for yourselves, and leave just the crumbs for the rest of us. But enough is enough. We’re liberating Oosterbeek from the corruption of specialization. We’re ending privilege and oppression. We are all equal now.”

“But you don’t understand!” Edda stands and takes a step back. Ximena feels her agitation. “You cannot mess with the Gift of Goah! We made it through the Second Collapse only thanks to aws Gift’s strict family specialization! We beat Dem only by accumulating knowledge quickly enough, and by entrusting it to specialized families that could pass it down the generations.”

“Dem is a lie,” Luuk says.

“I know.” Edda straightens her tunic, sits again, and leans forward, lips pursed. “You are starting a revolution here in Oosterbeek. I can see that. But revolutions run on *truth*. Without a deep truth that resonates in the people’s hearts, your revolution will fail them. You are lying to your people. You promise wealth, and fairness, a larger chunk of the pie, yeah? But that’s a lie. Without aws Gift—without specialization—there is no pie! You will only starve your people. And by the time you realize what you’ve done, the survivors will be your

slaves, drowning in an ocean of propaganda, and more miserable than ever. Your revolution will turn into tyranny, Elders Smooks. It has happened before many times in history.”

“You aren’t here to teach, *Juf* Edda,” Luuk says, and turns to his sister. “You still think it was a good idea to bring her?”

“We are civilized people, Luuk,” she says, eyes locked on Edda. “We have to give her a chance to prove her value. She’s just a little jealous, is all. Her own revolution died when she lost the Trials.”

Ouch! Ximena feels Edda’s frustration as her breath quickens.

“I know what you could do!” Edda says, eyes fixed on Luuk’s. “You want to give the privileges of the specialists to the commoners, yeah? Sure! Why not making *everybody* a specialist, like in the golden age? If you ban the Joyousday from Oosterbeek, people will have all the time in the world to learn whatever they wish!”

Luuk swaps a glance with his sister. “The more she speaks, the more she sounds like Elder Moih.”

“The marai want you to stop the Joyousday?!” Edda asks, the hint of a smile distending her anxious expression.

“Only delay it,” Mirjam says. “Until the twenty-ninth birthday.”

“Just two more years? But that’s not enough! To turn *everybody* into specialists, we need to live longer, *much* longer, yeah?”

“Two years, or twenty, who cares?” Luuk says, “We ain’t doing it. We ain’t tickling aw’s Head’s balls.”

“What?!” Edda stands and takes a deep breath before she sits again. The Smooks exchange a sidelong glance.

“That’s what you came here for, huh?” Luuk says. “To talk us into banning the Joyousday?”

“What are you talking about? It was the *marai* that asked you to lift the Joyousday age, not me!”

“Fuck the marai.” He chuckles. “And fuck you.”

Ximena feels Edda’s cheeks warming up. “But... But that was the deal! With the marai, I mean. That’s what the Trials were all about! The power of the Walkers of the Mind in exchange for,” she gestures wildly in the air, “helping them out! They want to save us all from ourselves, yeah? The entire humanity! That’s surely more important than your petty political games. The marai are training you already. You can’t forswear the deal now. You can’t cheat them the Path in the Shadow for... for nothing!”

“Oh, but they’re so easy to cheat, ain’t they? They can’t even lie, the stupid bastards. We make up excuse after excuse and they swallow them whole!” He gives out a sudden burst of laughter and continues speaking in a mocking voice. “Oh, sorry, Elder Moih, better wait because of blah blah, not ready, whatever.” He laughs again. “They’re so naive. Oh, and the best is they keep training us. For free! So dumb, the aliens. And don’t you worry about *humanity*, Edda,” he exchanges an amused glance with his sister, “we’ll take care of everything. But we won’t make the same mistake *you* did.”

“What mistake?”

“*Your* Century Blasphemy, of course. Look what you’ve done, all that kicking aw’s Head in the balls. And see what you got? Now Aw’s Head’s sending the fucking inquisition. And we sure as Dem don’t need that sort of attention here. Not yet. Not until our militia grows strong enough. But now, because of *you*, Edda, we must keep our heads down, and stay put here in Oosterbeek until the Grand Inquisitor finishes whatever goahdamn business he finds in Lunteren.”

Edda folds her arms across her chest. “He’ll find nothing.”

“We won’t make your mistake. Can you imagine what would happen if we raise the Joyousday age now, or worse, if we ban it altogether?”

Edda, lips pursed, stares back at him but does not reply.

“You see,” Luuk continues, “that’s the way of the world. A few disappearances here, in the far end of the province, nobody gives a fuck. But we touch the Joyousday, and before you know it, aws Head’s pushing aws Fist deep up our provincial asses.”

Edda remains silent, but Ximena can feel her last hopes vanishing. She finally realizes that it is pointless trying to convince these people. They are too fixated. They are thoroughly intoxicated by their recent rise to power, and they obviously crave more of it. Much more.

As if reading her mind, Mirjam says, “We have ambitions, Edda. Our militia’s about to sprout everywhere, like weeds on the fields. And we need loyal people to fertilize the soil. Are you loyal, Edda?”

“You want *me*?” Edda frowns. “A *spezzi*?” She pronounces the word like it is rotten.

“You’re strong—and revolution is obviously in your blood. After Luuk and I learn the Path in the Shadow, you’ll be very, very useful to us. We can drop you into our targets’ dreams, let you influence them for us. We saw what you did to bring the New Year’s Festival to Lunteren. And how you put the Blasphemy itself on every goahdamn radio in the Imperium.” She whistles loudly. “That was so sexy! Join us, Edda, and we’ll take good care of you.”

“But—”

Mirjam raises her right hand. “And don’t you worry about the Grand Inquisitor. We can hide you. We’ll keep you safe here, in Oosterbeek.”

“Thank you, but I’m not afraid of the inquisition. We were careful to leave no evidence.”

Luuk sighs with exaggerated impatience. “Are you in, or not?”

“Sorry, Luuk, Mirjam, but I won’t help you destroy aws Gift.” Ximena feels Edda’s full weight as she stands, dragged

by the blunt feeling of disappointment as her last threads of hope vanish for good. “I’m afraid our interests are not as aligned as I first hoped. Sorry for taking up your time.”

Luuk gives Mirjam a told-you-so look and says, “A pity. But it was worth a shot.” He then turns his smirk to Edda and spreads his hands in an apologetic gesture. “In this world of black and white, of haves and have-nots, if you ain’t our friend, then you’re a foe. Joris, Corneel!”

The double door opens at once and Anemoon’s companions—the two hooded men that escorted Janson and Edda all the way from the road to the Elder Council—walk briskly in.

Edda’s breathing quickens as her sadness transmutes into instant fear. Ximena herself winces and shifts her weight as she tries to shake off the unpleasant rush of adrenaline that the psych-link pumps through.

“Yes, Luuk?” Joris—the short, ugly one—asks.

“It didn’t work out with spezzi Van Dolah here. Could you please take her down to the docks?”

Joris smiles wickedly, and scans her body up and down with his small eyes. “Sure thing, Luuk. Can we, uh...” He wets his lips, eyes locked on Edda’s bosom.

Luuk laughs. “You horny dog. I don’t care what you mensas do to her, as long as no piece ever surfaces again, understood?”

“Wait!” Edda turns her panicked eyes at an impassive-looking Mirjam. “Okay, fine! Yeah. I’ll do it!” The two men grab her arms violently back. A curt scream escapes her as they begin to tie her wrists together. “Mirjam, please! Stop them! I’ll work with you!”

Mirjam stands and shakes her head slowly. “What a waste,” she says, and paces out of the room without giving her a second look.

Edda screams and begins to struggle, but she is no match for the thugs, who unceremoniously put a bulky, dirty piece of cloth in her mouth. Ximena, almost gagging from the foul taste and the rough pressure of the fabric, can barely believe it actually fits.

“Oh,” Luuk says, as he exits the room, “and tell Moon to take out the fisherman as well.”

“Thank you, Ank,” Professor Miyagi says to the Neanderthal woman as the scene freezes in midair, with the double door still open, Luuk’s back still visible in the hallway, walking away, and the two brown-clad thugs lifting in their arms a terrified, gagged Edda.

As the psych-link releases its intimate grip, Ximena leans back and gives out a sigh of relief. And she is not the only one. The benches seem to wake up as students across the packed amphitheater slowly shake off their tension.

“So there you have them, people,” Miyagi says. “*Colony Elders* Luuk and Mirjam Smook, doing their thing. What a charming couple, right? But, unfortunately for them, their obsession with their own revolution has distracted them too much from the teachings of the marai.” He turns to Ank and says, “Transition, please.”

Ximena jumps in place as a sudden blink engulfs the frozen scene above the amphitheater, which, with a bright flash of crisp clarity, transmutes into the already familiar Second Wake. Every surface becomes vividly clear in that shadowless gray glimmer that permeates everything. Everything except the sky outside the window, which appears dead black now, devoid of even the last hues of the sunset that tinted it before. But it is the people that, as usual, attract Ximena’s attention, with their shiny blue halos.

Ximena gasps in surprise as her eyes are drawn towards the anomalous red glow next to the wall.

A mare!

Floating impassively an inch above the ground.

Her blank eyes locked on the departing Luuk.

Before Ximena has time to digest the implications, the scene camera closes up to the marai, and then slides *beyond* her, to the far end of the room, where she now notices yet *another* halo lurking behind the table. Ximena squints and gasps anew.

A young woman—nude, semitransparent, hairless—glistening fiercely blue, expression frozen in terror.

Aline.

As Miyagi's speech drags on and on about the impact of the Second Wake in human affairs, Cody turns his pale, chubby face and says, "I regret to admit it, but the more Professor Miyagi shows us, the more I tend to agree with him."

"I know. He is that good. But we can't lose sight of reality, no matter how persuasive his arguments."

"Uh, I'm not sure I agree. If arguments are persuasive enough—you know, based on best evidence—isn't our professional duty to let ourselves be persuaded? That's science 101."

"Perhaps. And what do you find so persuasive?"

He wets his lips before saying. "Maybe Professor Miyagi was right all along, and Edda *did* lose the Trials. What if what we've been taught was propaganda? Look at that." He gestures at the scene floating so tantalizingly close to them, so eerily solid. "It all kind of makes sense, doesn't it? She lost, so she came to Oosterbeek to try to sway the *real* winners into stopping the Joyousday."

"Hmm, I don't know, mensa." She bites her lower lip and

then says, “Okay, let me think this through. Bear with me. I begin with the standard assumption that the Hansasian interpretation is wrong, all right? And ours is the correct one. So, in this scenario, Edda won the Trials. And if she did, the obvious question is: why did she then come to Oosterbeek? Hmm, yes, yes... Why? That’s not in the textbooks.” She rubs her chin. “My guess is that she just wanted to confront the Smooks.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm, remember how they attacked her in the Trials? I bet she came to get an explanation.”

“You think? And why didn’t she confront them before?”

“Uh, who knows?” she says with a curt shrug. “Probably she was too focused on training for the Trials. She didn’t have the time to come and—”

“Do you hear yourself? You know how it sounds?”

She smiles and shrugs anew. “Just because it sounds like conspiranoid verbiage, doesn’t make it any less true.”

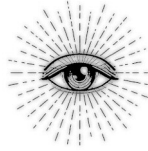
“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” he says with a chuckle. “And that would only beg more questions. If she had really won—and with a Grand Inquisitor on his way, remember that!—she would certainly have better things to do than pick a fight with the Smooks? And even then, would she have traveled virtually alone? With all those nasty rumors making the round about the brown militia? Come on, Ximena, you must admit—”

“Sorry, people,” Miyagi’s artificially enhanced voice interrupts at once the growing murmuring in the auditorium. “I know, I know. I digress. One of my—very few!—flaws. Where was I? Ah, yes. If you think this meeting between Edda van Dolah and the Smook siblings was *intense*, you better brace yourself. And I know what you’re thinking. *What is my favorite professor of all times talking about?*” He speaks the question with a mocking voice that draws chuckles and outright laughter from

most students. “*Edda’s troubles in Lunteren haven’t really begun yet, so she obviously survived Oosterbeek.*” When the laughter dies, he continues in his normal voice. “And, of course, you’d be right. All of it is true. She made it back to Lunteren, yes, but with scars—deep, *horrendous* scars—both in body and soul.”

He paces slowly, as if lost in thought. Then, when he reaches the exact center of the stage, he stops and raises his head at the gripped students. “What we are going to live in this coming section is not pretty. But history seldom is, am I right? And you, people are historians. But since you’re also humans—not aliens nor machines—I asked Ank to keep the psych-link detached for the next sequence. So relax, observe with a clinical eye, and try to maintain a professional distance.”

NINE



The Mad Hatter

Night falls swiftly in the Geldershire midwinter. But tonight it is extra dark—and *chilling*—here, in the Oosterbeek docks.

Ximena wraps herself tighter in her tunic as her eyes sweep the expanse of black waters. Oosterbeek is the capital of Geldershire for a reason, uniquely located where the mighty Rhine river—after winding across half a continent—finally meets the deadly embrace of the Atlantic Ocean. The surface is wide here, quiet, vast, empty. Dark. The opposite shore, the Hansasian mainland, hides well beyond the invisible horizon.

A shiver runs down Ximena's spine.

The nights of the early twenty-fifth century were pitch black. And the ancient art of sonar navigation, like most technologies, had been lost to Dem centuries before. No captain worth the name would risk crew and cargo traversing the treasonous shallows of the Dutch Sea, where sandbanks, and uncountable old ruins—filled with the ghosts of the golden age—lurk submerged right beneath the tide, eager to claim their next victim.

“Oh Goah, what’s the smell?!” the taller thug—Corneel—says, wrinkling his nose.

It’s hard to spot them in the darkness, but Ank appears to have enhanced the almost non-existent light to allow the student’s eyes to perceive the unfolding events like a cat would. And yet the cover of night keeps flooding the senses, artfully remembering their human brains how utterly dark it really gets in the docks. The scene camera has been following the thugs as they move with the intimate skill of a lifetime through the maze of shacks, tall piles of wooden boxes, mechanical cranes and warehouses.

“What sm— Oh!” the stubby thug—Joris—says, and begins to cackle a laughter that makes Ximena shift in place. When she inhales next, the moist air feels outright icy.

“What?” Corneel asks while violently thrashing forward the whimpering Edda. Quite unnecessarily, because since her last beating, Edda hasn’t dared slow her pace.

Ximena cringes as the camera slides closer, and Edda’s face comes into focus. Her right eyelid is so swollen as to almost swallow her entire eye. Her nose is smeared with blood, and her upper lip is split, and so bloated that they had to remove the gag, probably to prevent her from asphyxiating—*too early*, Ximena thinks darkly as she swallows. She then gasps as a peek between Edda’s bloated lips reveals a missing tooth, and a bloody mess.

And yet, as Ximena inspects Edda’s body, she quickly realizes that there’s something worse going on. Worse than wounds, no matter how nasty. There is *something* there, in Edda’s expression. Or rather, there is something *missing*. Like... this is not Edda anymore. Not the Edda she has learned to know so intimately. This is a broken carcass, a body without a brain, shattered by horror, by fear of death. No, not fear. *Fear* is a word Ximena can still comprehend. Fear is intimate, painful, an emotion that she tries to avoid, and, occasionally, must face.

But she knows, by staring into Edda's eyes, that whatever Edda is feeling now, she herself has *never* felt before. What does a rabbit feel in the jaws of a wolf? And what when the mauling jaws begin to shut? Ximena takes a deep breath. She is *so* glad that the psych-link is off.

"That's fuckin' piss!" Joris says, half a laugh still in his mouth. "The spezzi's pissed on herself!"

"Oh, fuck, no!" Corneel says, stopping Edda's steps with a rough shake. He takes the hanging flashlight from his belt, turns it on, and inspects Edda's tunic studiously. And indeed, it is wet below her thighs. "Goahdammit, spezzi bitch! If you've ruined it..."

"It's only piss, mensa. Soak it with a plenty of vinegar, leave it overnight, rinse with soap, and that's it. Same with blood. Just picture Ankie's face when she sees her new, fancy tunic."

"Yes." A smile distends Corneel's face as he returns the flashlight to his belt.

"And if you think that stink's gonna spare you ma' tender cares," Joris says to Edda, grinning with his small, reptilian eyes, "you're in for a big, *big* surprise. You've no idea how much piss turns me *on!*" Ximena winces as he bursts into that loud, horrid cackle, once again.

"Oh, you gonna love this!" Anemoon says, taking Janson's hand and entering the front yard of the three-story house. "The party's already begun!"

It is dark in Oosterbeek, even in this well-off residential district. Electric lamps are set to their minimum, and some bulbs are even broken. Ximena can feel the eerie quality of the silence, like something is weirdly off. Nobody roams the streets, not even cats. Not even rats.

“Who... Whose place is this?” Janson asks. He lets Anemoon pull him along the stone path, next to a neglected flower bed and a tiny lawn in need of mowing. Loud, pumping music thumps mutedly from beyond the house door, and bright flashes of rhythm pulse from behind the window curtains.

“It belonged to a... Oh it doesn’t matter! What matters is we’re here, it’s Saturday, the night is young, and you’re my *exclusive* guest tonight.” She taps his chest with a finger and says with a wicked smile. “It’s my sacred duty to make your visit *unforgettable!*”

While the couple is still approaching the entrance, a sudden forward dash of the camera overtakes them and crosses through the wooden door like it wasn’t there.

Whoa! Ximena—and many of the students—gasps at the sight of what awaits inside the party house: five knife-yielding figures in brown cloaks, two of them crouched next to the door, the other three at an arm’s length. None of them moves, their stare tensely directed at the entrance, like a lurking crocodile invisible in its stillness as the thirsty stag approaches the river. Their stance feels outright grotesque to Ximena, with that thunderous disco music banging from behind and those hypnotic strobes bathing the walls in bright reds, blues and yellows.

The camera retreats through the wall and out just in time to catch Anemoon and Janson reaching the front door. *Oh no, Janson!* Ximena’s arm twitches, like she could reach forward and warn him from entering.

Janson stops in his tracks, eyes growing wide and lips parting like he had just seen a ghost.

“What’s up?” Anemoon says, and curls an encouraging hand around his arm. “Come on, good-lookin’.”

Janson tilts his head away from her. “What?!” he says, and takes a step back.

“What do you have?” Anemoon squints at his face with the

shadow of a frown, but then, just as quickly, her alluring smile returns. She stands on her tiptoes and puts a wet peck on his livid lips.

He doesn't seem to notice. His body remains rigid, and his expression is frozen in awe—or is it fear?

“Come on, don't be shy.” She rests her hand on his shoulder and pushes gently. “It's gonna be good fun, I swear by Goah.”

But his legs don't move. He slowly swings a disbelieving gaze at her impatient expression.

“What's—?”

He runs off towards the street before she has time to complete the sentence.

Anemoon exhales, gaping as the running young man dashes down the road. She then leaps to the house door. “It's me!” she shouts, and slams it open. “Quick, get 'im!” She points at Janson's receding body just as it melts with the shadows, but his steps still echo loudly against the silent walls.

“Goahdammit,” she mutters as the five cloaked men begin to run eagerly down the street, heads turning to every direction like hounds trying to pick up a scent. With a casual gesture, she retrieves a black brick-sized device from inside her tunic and brings it to her lips. “Moon here. To any patrol around the Batos. Over.”

“Hey, Moon, Walter here. What's cookin'? Over.”

“Walter! Move your ass to the Toulon and intercept a man running from Colony Street. He's about fourteen, tall and muscular, white, brown hair. Over.”

“Gotcha, Moon. Should be easy to spot in the curfew, ha! Like An elephant in the desert. Stand by. Over.”

“Moon, Walter here. We lost the man. Over.”

“What do you mean, you lost him? He’s not from here! Where’s he gone? Over.”

“We saw him once. Big fellow, yeah, just like you said. In a hell of a hurry. Running towards the Rhineside. We were waiting for ’im behind a corner, but then he leaped into the undergrowth of the Batos and... I dunno... He vanished. We looked everywhere, but... Sorry, Moon. What do you want us to do?”

“Fuck, how does he...?!” She snorts loudly. “Okay, Walter. Run to Zuiderbeek, to the eastern docks, all right? I think he’s going there. Over.”

“Gotcha. And when we catch ’im? Over.”

She hesitates, takes a sad, deep breath and finally says, “Dispose. Over and out.”

“Understood, Moon. Over and out,” Corneel says, and returns the walkie-talkie to his belt. “You’ve heard her, Joris. It’s time,” he says with a curt shrug, and then gestures with his head at the stunned, bloodied Edda.

“Oh,” Joris says with the tone of a candy-deprived child, “but the fisherman doesn’t even know where we are!”

“I guess they’re afraid he might fin’ out,” Corneel says with another shrug.

“Pure sin, Corneel! No way that Lunteren mensa can find us. Not here. He doesn’t know shit ’bout the docks. It’s a fucking maze,” he gestures with increasing agitation at the piled boxes of wares, taller than a man, scattered next to the Rhein barges and between the industrial-looking structures along the waterfront, “and darker than my ass! Who do they think he is? Fucking Batman?”

“I don’t make the rules, mensa. Orders are orders.”

“Is he even armed? It’s two against one, Goah’s Mercy!”

“He sure as Dem is,” he says, and demonstratively raises his two hands, which he then turns into fists. “Remember his size? The mensa’s a fucking mountain!”

Joris stares at Edda with a frustrated frown. She doesn’t seem to notice his rapacious attention, as she staggers lightly in place, eyes on the dirty stone of the dock. The tide is low tonight, and the salty mix of seaweeds and rotting fish fill Ximena’s nostrils.

“I know what!” Joris snaps his fingers and points to a nearby building. “We go to Lennaert’s safe house in Arnhemside. It’s right by the water for when we’re done with the spezzi bitch. And the fisherman’ll never find us there. What do you say?”

Corneel sighs. “Why don’t you just let it go, Joris? We must do what we’re told, and finish her now, quick and easy. There’re still plenty of spezzies running about, waiting for you.” He chuckles.

“Others? Are you blind?! This one’s the hottest chick we’ve had in... Oh just check out these titties, mensa.” Joris takes Edda’s left breast in his hand and squeezes harshly. Ximena winces as a surge of disgust upsets her guts, almost as if the psych-link were still active, but Edda doesn’t react to his touch in the slightest. She keeps her eyes locked on the ground, and breathes on, like there’s nothing else in the world left to do. “And these *ears*. Oh, mensa, they’re... irresistible!” Joris puts an almost tender finger on Edda’s left earlobe and turns his head to Corneel. “How can you resist? Come on, Corneel. You owe me big time. Listen, we go to the safe house, and I let you take her first.”

“You know I don’t fuck spezzies, mensa. And this one’s covered in piss, Goah’s Mercy!”

“Please, Corneel. You owe me!”

Corneel takes a deep breath and holds Joris' anxious gaze for a few seconds. Then he sighs and gives him a weak nod. "Now it's *you* who owes *me*, mensa."

The small warehouse, poorly lit by the last of the working bulbs that hang from the ceiling, is filled with uneven wooden boxes, piles of broken solar panels, and foul-smelling shadows.

"Lock the door, Joris," Corneel says as he casually shoves Edda inside. With her hands still restrained, she can't hold anywhere, and falls noisily beside a tall pile of industrial junk. She turns her head and looks at him, her large, dark eye gleaming in the dim electric light.

"You're fucking paranoid, mensa," Joris says, but he duly slams the metallic latch in place. He then shifts his attention to Edda, and closes on her as his lips curve into a grin so greedy—so *vicious*—that were Ximena dreaming without the assistance of her wu-sarc, she would wake in her room at once.

Edda, turning her bloodied head to meet the approaching man's avid gaze, exhales a hoarse gasp and shivers visibly.

Finally a reaction, Ximena thinks, and leans forward. Cody, next to her, is gaping at the vivid scene with eyes as absorbed as if he were witnessing Goah's goahdamn Creation itself. The entire auditorium is utterly still, like all students were holding their breaths at the same time.

Joris retrieves a knife, and Edda recoils, eyes filling with panicked tears.

He laughs. "Don't worry, gorgeous. It ain't your time yet. I'm just gonna free your hands, so that we can get cozy together." With a single slash, he cuts the rope restraining her wrists.

Joris' grin widens as he meets her blinking gaze. He slowly

raises the knife, closer to her shuddering face, and waves it but an inch off her nose. Her eyes—wide and wet—cross as they follow the cutting edge, and her breathing is so quick now that Ximena wishes Edda would simply hyperventilate and faint.

But she will not get that lucky.

“I like it quiet, spezzi,” Joris says. “So no fightin’, huh? Unless you wanna meet Goah without hands. Now, lie back. Yes, like that. And spread your legs like the good whore you are.” Ximena winces as he puts his hand under Edda’s tunic, on her thighs, and greedily pushes towards her groin. But then, his vicious grin turns into a startled frown. “What—?!” He withdraws his hand in a rush, brings it to his nose, and sniffs at it in bafflement. His eyes widen. “Shit!”

“What?” Corneel looks out from behind the pile of junk where he had retreated to give his friend a semblance of privacy.

Joris wipes his hand on his pants, a grimace of disgust on his face, and says, “The... The bitch has shat herself!”

Corneel stares at him for a few moments, and then bursts into peals of laughter. “You’re shitting me, mensa!” he says, eyes shining, close to tears.

“No, seriously! Oh, I see... Very funny.”

“You’ve always been the type to leave a strong impression on the ladies,” he says between roars of laughter.

“Pure sin! How am I going to...?!” He waves at Edda a gesture of exasperation while she laboriously gets on her feet, eyes locked on him.

“You’re not anymore,” Corneel says. “Obviously.”

“Well, if I—” Joris stops speaking as he notices Edda putting her own hand under her tunic, retrieving a handful of feces. “Goah! What are you doing? You better—!”

Edda shuts her eyes, presses together her bloated lips, and smears thick lumps of excrement across her face and hair.

Joris’ expression freezes in bafflement. “What... Stop!”

Edda opens her eyes and meets Joris' incredulous look. Ximena shudders at the sight of Edda's terrified gaze. Yes, the dread, the certainty of death is still there, as present as ever. And yet, there's also a tiny sparkle of defiance shimmering beneath the surface.

"What have you done, bitch?!" Joris makes a gesture as to strike Edda's face with the back of his hand, but he hesitates, perhaps at the thought of touching her now.

Edda coughs, spits and wipes her hands on her tunic, leaving visible dark streaks on the pale fabric.

Corneel covers his mouth. "Don't! Oh my tunic!" But then drops it in frustration and turns his attention to Joris. "Does vinegar work on shit as well?"

Joris does not reply. He is eyeing Edda with such raw hatred, that Ximena shudders at once. His expression distorts into a murderous grin as he throws himself over Edda—shit be damned—and clutches her screaming, writhing body. Her scream of pain—or *terror*—sends a second shiver up Ximena's spine. *It's happening now!*

The scene camera approaches the uneven struggle, closing up on the two heads, each a mere inch off the other. An intense stench—blood, sweat and feces—swamps the auditorium, bringing Ximena close to retching. Joris—"Stop moving, bitch!"—puts the tip of his knife right below Edda's eye—"I said, stop!"—and pierces her skin, drawing blood and a yelp that freezes Edda in place. Quick wheezy pants escape her twisted lips. Tears of horror—of certainty of imminent death—fill her reddened eyes.

Gasps and jittery murmurs swamp the amphitheater, as Ximena and the rest of the students realize that the moment of legend they were waiting for has finally arrived. Ximena throws an impatient gaze at the door, wishing for Janson to slam it open before it is too late. A childish hope. Like, somehow, thanks to Professor Miyagi's creative magic, this time

history could be bent. Like history could be turned into a story. A story with a happy ending. Ximena shifts uncomfortably in place. To her own surprise, she is not so keen to witness history after all. History—*truth*—can be *so* nasty. History—*truth*—can burn the soul. She yearns for the comforting lines of a textbook, or for Miyagi’s reflexive words, or, yes, right now she would even settle for an outright lie. But she knows that short of shutting her eyes and covering her ears, there is no stopping this *intimate* experience of history. *Thank Goah, professor, you cut off the fucking psych-link!*

“You see what I gotta do to get you to stop?!” Joris shouts, spitting on the terrified, blinking Edda. “Put a fuckin’ knife on your face? You spezzi whores, you never listen, huh? You go ’bout in your pretty dresses, bouncing your pretty hips, and thinking you’re so fucking special, huh? Better than us. Like Goah awssself has chosen you to do... Yeah, to do what?!”

He raises his right hand, the one with the blade, and with the handle firmly in his fist, punches Edda’s head with all the might of hatred. Her head jerks violently to the side and smashes against the ground. Her body goes limp at once, almost as if unconscious. But her eyes are still open, and her broken lips move in silent agony.

“I grow food, Goah’s Mercy! Food! And what do you spezzies do? Steal our karma, that’s what you do! We complain, and what happens? Nothin’! We complain again, and again. And it’s all for shit. Is it really so hard to listen? Is it so goahdamn hard?!”

With a practiced twist of the hand, Joris places his knife against the back of Edda’s ear, and pulls through flesh and cartilage with one swift, vigorous tug.

Edda’s left ear falls to the ground in a single piece—earlobe and all.

Ximena stretches her hand to Cody and grabs his arm. He doesn’t react, his eyes locked on the blood-spurting wound.

The shock shakes Edda's body into a rigid reflex, and then, in an instant, goes limp, unconscious. Her head tilts mercifully to the side, as if in sleep.

"You and your goahdamn hat," Corneel says with a good-humored chuckle. "At least I'm glad you finally gave up fuckin' that shitty mess. Send her to Goah, but no more blood, huh? Just strangle her."

Joris, a greedy grin on his face, takes the fallen ear and carefully wipes the blood off with the sleeves of Edda's tunic.

Corneel tries to stop him, "Hey, not with the...! Oh, shit. Whatever. I guess it's ruined, anyway."

"Sorry mensa," Joris says, retrieving a leather pouch from his belt. He opens it, eyeing its contents with something approaching love. No, not love. *Reverence*.

"How many already?"

"Eight with this one," Joris says, and he carefully places Edda's ear in the pouch. He meets his friend's amused gaze with a surprisingly soft smile. "Almost there. I want at least ten for the hat."

"Why don't you take both ears?" Corneel points at Edda's head. "That'd be quicker."

"Oh, Goah, where's your sense of art? Can you imagine how the hat would look like with both left and right ears all over the place? Like a goahdamn Ferengi fuckfest. No way, mensa. Only left ears. All matching—all... *listening*."

Corneel laughs. "The ladies'll sure as Dem know to listen when they see your hat."

A sudden, thunderous pound shakes the locked door on its hinges.

"What the...?" Corneel, gaping at the exit, takes a step back. "Impossible!"

"He found us?!" Joris stands and takes his knife in his hand. "How in Goah's Name...? Who's this mensa?"

The second blow to the door comes with such force that

even Ximena feels the vibration under her feet, as if she were standing there in the warehouse next to the two dumbfounded men.

“The door is not gonna hold, mensa!” Corneel says, a shred of panic in his voice.

Joris makes a hasty scan of the chaotic space around them. “Quick!” He points with a finger. “Go there, behind the spezzi, and when he comes in, keep him busy.”

“How? What am I...?” Corneel says as he hesitantly moves into position.

“Just distract him, Goah’s fucking Mercy!” Joris rushes to the side of the entrance and gets on his knees in the shadows behind a pile of empty boxes.

The door bursts open with a slam that shatters the frame and sends the unhinged door piece screeching across the floor.

Janson—panting heavily, forehead pearled in sweat—paces into the warehouse with a large, metallic rod in his hands, and immediately locks his eyes on the bloodied Edda.

Corneel takes a step back, retrieves his knife, and says, “You’re too late, mensa. Your spezzi is dead!”

Janson meets his gaze. Ximena shudders at the sight of Janson’s eyes, so bloodshot as to hide his usual green, and so wide with urgent desperation, that it reminds her of a famished bear about to make the first spring kill.

“Listen, big man,” Corneel says, raising his free palm in a gesture of conciliation. “Nobody needs to get hurt, huh? Not for a spezzi. You’re one of us, huh?”

Janson begins a slow walk towards him, taking the heavy iron rod in his right hand with the casual stance of a baseball player, the muscles under his arm visibly dilated with adrenalin.

“Come on, mensa,” Corneel says, the pitch of his voice raised a notch. “What’s the point? I’m really good with the knife, huh? Why risk a fight, Goah’s Mercy?”

As Corneel speaks, Joris leaves the shadows and begins to close in from behind. Still squatting, he moves with intention, a grin on his ugly face, knife ready in his hand, approaching the back of Janson in lethal silence. Ximena exhales, and leans in, tense from the desire to warn Janson. But Joris sneaks forward with the grace and deft of a snake in the grass, utterly impossible to hear.

“Just leave in peace,” Corneel says, his eye locked on Janson’s, skillfully avoiding the slightest flinch at Joris’ silent advance. “We’re in this fucking world together, farmers and fishermen, huh? I ain’t your foe!”

Joris completes his sneaky movement and his mad grin widens. Ximena closes her hands in tight fists and holds her breath. And she is not the only one. Utter silence befalls the auditorium as Joris raises the blade, ready to strike.

“Now!” Aline shouts, her glittering blue body emerging into sudden view next to Janson as the scene transmutes in an instant into the vivid sharpness of the Second Wake.

Janson—his halo vividly blue in the Traverse—swings the metal rod around, and smashes it against the side of Joris’ head with the nimble precision of a spider with eyes on her back. The mighty blow raises the man on his toes, which then falls like a limp sack on a stack of solar cell shards. His wrenched body begins to shake without control.

“Goah’s Mercy!” Corneel exclaims. He drops his knife, kicks it away and raises both hands in a trembling gesture of surrender. “She’s alive, mensa! She’s still alive!”

“I know,” Janson says, and begins to pace towards Corneel, who puts his back against the wall, waving his hands in the air with renewed insistence, terror in his eyes.

“Tie him, quick!” Aline says, alternating distressed looks between him and the unconscious Edda. “And then stop Edda’s bleeding!” As she says this, her hairless body blinks out of existence, only to reappear a few moments later in the exact

same spot. “We don’t have much time, Janson. Those brown bastards are combing the docks, looking for you!”

“Wait,” Edda says, half of her head hastily wrapped in rags, the other half still smeared in her own excrement. She releases her unsteady hold of Janson’s broad arm and begins a wobbly walk towards where Janson dragged Joris’ unconscious body.

“No time, Edda.” Janson anxiously looks at the night outside the door space. It’s pitch black again, since the scene warped back to the First Wake. “Aline says they’re getting close.”

Edda doesn’t seem to hear him. Or doesn’t seem to care. She kneels next to Joris and stares silently at him. “He looks so peaceful, yeah?”

“Edda, let’s go.”

“You think he’ll be okay?”

“I’m not sure. I hit him hard. But there’s nothing we can do anymore. We gotta go.”

Edda takes Joris’ knife, which was lying on the floor beside a cardboard box, and carefully places the tip over his chest.

Corneel, restrained and gagged on another corner, begins to make loud noises.

“What... What are you doing, Edda?” Janson puts a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Aline is getting upset. She’s saying you ain’t thinking clearly, and I should take you out now. Er... By force.”

Edda turns her head and meets his urgent gaze. “Would you do that to me?”

Janson blinks and lowers his eyes at once, shaking his head almost imperceptibly.

“This man is evil, Janson. *So* evil.”

“Aline says, *you* are not evil. She says, uh, that you’re better than them.”

“This man is a rapist, a mutilator and a killer. I *am* better than him, whatever I do.”

“Wait, Edda!” he hastily says as she begins to raise the knife to gather momentum.

She stops and turns her head again, a sad smile on her face.

“Don’t... Please... This... This will break you. Believe me.” He takes a gulp of air before speaking again. “Taking a life changes you, Edda. *Any* life: the life of a killer, the life of a barbarian, the life of a... *child*.” He lowers his head and purses his lips, like he doesn’t want to speak, like he doesn’t want to *remember*. “It’ll change you, Edda. And not for the better. You’re sacrificing your... your soul for... yeah, for what?!”

“For *justice*, Janson. I would sacrifice *anything* for justice. But don’t worry about my soul. This man is not human.”

“Aline says, er, this is no justice. Er, revenge. It’s revenge!”

“Aline is home, sleeping, clean and safe, with all her ears in place.”

“Sacred, er, sacred rights, er, she says these men should get an aws Compacts trial.”

“These men, the Smooks, their entire fucking militia, they are tyrants, above aws Compacts.” Her voice has turned bitter, deeply resentful. She hates the guts of these goahdamn brown monsters. But not for what they have done. Or not *only*. Edda is losing more than an ear tonight. Her entire worldview of peace and order, of Gifts and Compacts, is crumbling apart like a pile of rotten cards. “There is no justice here, except the little we bring with us.”

She holds her breath, drives the knife deep into Joris’ heart, and then exhales loudly.

Janson takes a step back and covers his mouth. “Edda...”

Corneel stops his muted complaints and begins to sob softly to himself.

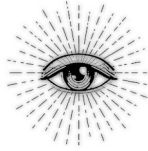
Janson tilts his head to the side and mutters. “I know... Sorry, I... Okay, yes. Edda, let’s go. Aline’s got an escape route figured out all the way to the Pietersberg Way. But it’s closing quickly.”

Edda extracts the knife with a sputter of blood and stands with visible effort. She turns her gaze to Corneel, who immediately freezes.

“Edda, we leave now, or we get killed. Your choice.”

She begins to walk towards Corneel, her eyes soulless cold. “This will only take a second.”

TEN



A Pack of Wolves

“Oh, did Elder Jansen remember to give you enough painkillers and antibiotics?” Janson asks. “It might take a day or two before we get home, if we make it out of Oosterbeek.” He strolls down the sleepy residential Pietersberg Way more calmly than his voice betrays, a discreet hat on his head, and a long, winter tunic hiding his muscled body.

“I got them,” Edda says, herself wearing a wide brim hat that partially conceals the clean bandages wrapped around her head. She walks next to Janson in a leisurely gait, like she is not hurting like hell—goahdamn psych-link is back on—and holds his hand with the casual easiness of a lover on a morning stroll to the seaside. Their disguise seems to work, as nobody appears to throw a second glance at them. On the contrary, people seem absent, almost agitated, some of them more trotting than walking. And they all move in the opposite direction, towards the center.

“Where are they all going?” Edda asks.

“Wherever it is, let’s count it as yet another Blessing of Goah.”

Edda chuckles at that and immediately winces at the sharp pain. “Ouch! Don’t make me laugh, please.”

“It’s not a joke,” he says with a chuckle, nonetheless. “Where would we be right now if Aline had not been looking out for us, huh?”

“Yeah... Or if you could not hear her ghost voice?”

“Or if the Jansens had not sheltered us in their house overnight?”

Edda nods. “Thank Goah Aline is such a good client of them. And thank Goah, the Smooks have not unleashed their militia against the merchants.”

“At least, not yet.”

“Nah, I don’t think they will. Whatever happens next, whatever their plans are, getting rid of merchants would be an all-out incompetent move. And those bastards might be many things, but incompetent is not one of them.”

“Hmm, I don’t know. If I was Elder Jansen, I would be scared shitless, with people being kidnapped and killed like... like...” He shudders. “All I’m saying is that I’m surprised they didn’t report us.”

“He is a good man.” Edda gestures at the place where the street makes a bend. “How long until the cavalry arrives?”

Janson raises an expert look at the sun, and then at the sky. “Pieter is probably waiting for us in the harbor.”

“Already? Wow, that was quick!”

“Well, he left in the evening, the minute Aline ran home with the news.”

“Uh huh, and I agree with her on this one. The only sure way to get us out of here, with those brown bastards controlling every corner and every road, is by sea. But I don’t like the idea of Pieter sailing the whole night, yeah? Alone—in the dark. Sounds awfully dangerous.”

He smiles comfortingly, but his eyes do not play along.

Edda notices. “You think he might have, er, crashed?!”

“No, don’t worry. He didn’t run aground. Tide was high, and our boat has a retractable keel. No worries, Edda. We know these waters like we’re mackerel ourselves.”

“And what about the harbor? I hope he doesn’t attract any *brown* attention.”

“Why would he? He’s just another docked fisherman. Besides, have you seen a single brown cloak yet in the streets?”

“Uh, yeah, right? Yesterday, the entire colony was teeming with them. Today, not a trace.” Edda eyes a passing boy that is running up the street. “There’s definitely something weird going on. Hey, boy!”

“Wait, no, Edda!”

The boy stops and stares squarely at them—at Edda’s head—with innocent curiosity. “Yes, Redeemed?”

“Aww Blessings to you, dear,” she says in her best Juf voice. “Sorry for my questioning, but why the hurry? What is happening?”

“Aww Blessings, Redeemed. Haven’t you heard the news?”

“No, I’m afraid not, dear.”

“Both Smook Colders are dead.”

“What?!” Edda meets Janson’s dumbstruck gaze.

“Yes, Redeemed. In their sleep.”

“But... How is it possible?!”

“Nobody knows. It’s a m... mystery.” He smiles as he gets the word right.

“Were they sick?” Janson asks.

“No, Elder.” His smile widens. “They say the Elder Council is haunted.”

“Haunted, yeah?” Edda gets on her knees, closer to the eager boy, her smile encouraging him to continue.

“Yes, yes. It’s all over the radio, Redeemed! The medics say their faces were like... like they saw something really, really bad. Horrible monsters that frighten you to death.”

“Goah’s Mercy!” Janson says, covering his mouth. “Both of them?!”

“Yes, yes, Elder. And that’s not all! The radio is also saying that warriors of Aws Fist are marching in from the mainland.”

“Aws Fist?” Edda’s eyes widen.

“Yes, the Inquiti... Insqi...”

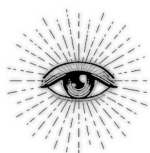
“Inquisition,” Edda completes, a tremor in her voice.

“Yes! And, and...!” the boy continues with eager excitement. “The brown cloaks are scared, Redeemed. They’re running away, fleeing into the woods!”

Janson whistles loudly. “Like headless chickens.”

Edda takes a deep breath. “Against a pack of wolves.”

ELEVEN



Status Report

The scene does not display that uncanny quality that Ximena has learned to associate with a dream, and yet it feels fully alien. The dry air smells pungent, metallic—*alive*.

Rew turns the corner into a wide corridor. The walls and ceiling are made of bare copper-colored metal and there are no windows nor natural light access. Instead, a thin cable—running erratically along the ceiling—emits a bright, white artificial light. The passageway has large openings on both sides, some leading to other corridors, others sealed by thick, entangled strands of vegetation.

It is claustrophobically busy in this long, narrow alien space. Other mares pass by, thin and tall, walking on two or four limbs indistinctively, their gait eerily grotesque and graceful at the same time, no hint of bones or articulations under their white, leathery skin. Some move alone, like Rew, others in small groups, marching in tempo unnaturally close together. They all acknowledge Rew's presence with a bow, which she does not return. Small carts buzz by closer to the walls, carrying unrecognizable gadgets and supplies, and pulled

by what looks like fast-moving plants made of the same thick vegetation that covers the room accesses—like a mix of ivies and frenzied octopi.

Rew stops in front of a *door*, no markings or features differentiating it from any other. The impenetrable vegetation immediately opens wide, like a curtain splitting, granting access. Rew walks into a small, metal room, copper-like surfaces brightly lit by a ceiling cord. Strange equipment and what looks like appliances made of a mixture of metal plates and thick, green sprouts spread erratically over walls and ceiling.

A rectangular, metallic-looking box lies flat in the middle of the room. Rew leans back on the box, as if it were a bed, facing up. The hardtop material slowly reshapes to fit her slender body. Vegetation tendrils from under the box slowly climb out and cover her fully, including her head. The overhanging light dims.

Rew stands on an infinitely spanning stone ground. Black sky. Soft light. Nothing else disturbs the flat perfection of this spotless landscape. *The staging permascape*, Ximena recognizes at once.

Rew stands still, no perceptible movement from her limbs nor head, staring straight ahead with her white eyes. It discomforts Ximena to watch her blank stare. It is too... *static*, unable to blink without eyelids.

Time passes. Seconds turn to minutes, and yet nothing changes nor moves. It feels dead, artificial, like a paused sensorial, until—

“Sense and bind, Walker Rew-at-Devis.”

Two mares, side by side, stand facing Rew. They were not

there a moment ago. The mares just *spoke* as one—in the sense that the students heard the same words coming from both bodies simultaneously, regardless of their shut black mouths.

“Sense and bind, Overseer Yog-at-Yian.” Rew bows.

The two figures remain still. “I did receive your summons, Walker—earlier than anticipated.”

“Indeed, Overseer. I summoned an official report gathering. I am here to inform Master Gorrobor of crucial events, and to bring her a proposal to... *unstuck* the Reseeding effort.”

“Do proceed with your report.”

“Master Gorrobor’s presence is required. I suggest patience—she shall arrive shortly.”

“Master Gorrobor shall not attend this gathering. Do begin your report now.”

Rew says nothing for a few moments. Other than the voices reverberating through the air, the scene is fully static, since none of the figures move in the slightest.

“Very well, Overseer. As of your proposal after my last report gathering, and Master Gorrobor’s ensuing confirmation, I do hereby confirm the termination of the two humans that you did declare the winners of the human Trials.”

“Despite your sarcasm, Walker, I do admit to being pleased. And I know to appreciate that it was you personally that uncovered their defiance to our direct control. In a way, it is ironic that you, human-whisperer—you, who championed human access to the Shadow Path—are the one to personally witness human fallibility. You surely admit now, Walker, how folly it was to pretend that we could recruit human agents to the Reseeding effort. Just as I stated from the beginning. Master Gorrobor shall know to heed my authority over the word of an erratic human-whisperer.”

“You do see humans as all alike, Overseer. As if the same

motivations would move them all in unison. You are wrong. *Your* humans failed, because power for them was an end to itself, not a tool. And thus when gained, power corrupted them at once. They were, ultimately, unworthy.”

“Despite your continued sarcasm, Walker, I do agree. Humans are indeed unworthy, as the human Trials did unequivocally attest.”

“It was the Trials that were unworthy, Overseer. It was your final selection that inevitably corrupted its purpose. I am here to request Master Gorrobor to forfeit your jurisdiction and to transfer the authority to discern the worthiness of humans to a human-whisperer.”

Ximena perceives the exchange as uniquely alien—the way three mares float over a featureless infinite dreamscape, facing each other in frozen stillness—and yet, their female voices reverberate psychic motivations that her human mind can intimately grasp. Domination is at play here, obviously. And status even, with its inseparable companion, the good old blame game. Ximena shifts in place, feeling eerily uncomfortable. *What is wrong?* she asks herself, unable to quite put it into words. It is not what the mares are saying. Ximena enjoys a power struggle as much as the next guy. It is what is *not* being spoken that she finds so... *disturbing*. There are no people here, no humans in this dream wasteland, and yet it is here, out of sight, out of *care*, where humanity’s fate is being... *managed?*

“You do seek Master Gorrobor to remove my oversight and transfer it to a human-whisperer, Walker? To you?”

“Indeed. Unless circumstances are so altered as to render such removal unnecessary.”

Yog’s two bodies remain silent for a few moments. Her tone of voice remains as neutral as ever when she finally replies. “Do name such circumstances, Walker.”

“Yes, Overseer. Were you to reconsider, in light of recent

events, the worthiness of the victors of the Trials, and thus were you to declare more worthy humans the true winners, then that would deem your removal superfluous.”

“More worthy humans... I do assume you are suggesting the limb-killer and her companion with the traverser halo?”

“Indeed, I am. As *true* winners of the Trials, Redeemed van Dolah and Woman Speese shall be thus granted access to the Path in the Shadow. Their contributions shall eventually save the Reseeding effort. And our own civilization, Overseer. And please Master Gorrobor, I shall add, in case that is more aligned with your priorities.”

That is some sweet tongue you got, Rew! Ximena thinks as she turns her gaze at Yog, who once again has fallen into a prolonged silence.

“Your human is too radical to be trusted with power,” Yog finally replies. “She would not content herself with raising the age of human culling. She would dismantle it altogether. Were she to succeed, where would that leave us, Walker?”

“Humanity is reaching its terminal stage. It is but a stagnant, fragile shadow of its former self, and doomed without *radical* intervention. We must *force* them to grow in resilience and knowledge before the next volcano, war, or climate shift wipes them out of existence. Were humankind to perish, where would that leave us, Overseer?”

“Their extinction and our return to the olakis is preferable to the risks of a humanity too strong to control. Their minds are primitive, their passions run wild. Were humans to become a species of Mind Walkers, where would that leave us, Walker?”

“Exile to the olakis is a foolish option. Even as a last resort. There is no guarantee we shall ever find another Earth in the void’s vastness. Were we never to resettle, where would that leave us, Overseer?”

“You do argue with conviction, Walker, and your

reasoning is persuasive. Dangerous, even. Fortunately, it is not dialectic that governs the Reseeding effort, but *me*. And you shall do as *I* dictate. I do hereby confirm the irrevocable termination of the human Trials. I do hereby instruct you to end at once all your dealings with humans. Do acknowledge.”

Rew pauses, and then replies slowly, marking every word. “Your drive for domination over reason makes you unfit for the oversight. I do request arbitration.”

Yog takes some time before replying. “As human-whisperer, you do possess the right of arbitration,” she concedes. “Albeit it is *my* duty to assess the facts, and at this point, I do perceive no valid grounds. The human Trials were executed in strict observance of all agreed formalities, up to—and including—its conclusion. Your request for arbitration is duly noted and thus hereby denied.”

Rew regards Yog in inscrutable stillness.

“Walker Rew,” Yog says, speaking a notch slower, as if to accentuate her psychic words. “Do allow me to be most precise about your limitations. It should not be necessary, but I do wish to dispel any lingering ambiguity. Neither you nor your Deviss Walkers shall make further contact with humans. More concretely, neither you nor your Deviss Walkers shall instruct them in the Paths of the Mind Walkers. And,” the two mare bodies take a step forward in unison to emphasize her words, “under penalty of immediate *termination*, you shall not tread the Path in the Shadow with *any* human. No exceptions. No room for contextual interpretations. These instructions can only be altered by me, or by Master Gorrobor in due arbitration. Do acknowledge.”

“Your urge for control does cost precious time, Overseer.”

“Do acknowledge.”

“Your foolish power maneuvering shall mean the doom of two worlds.”

“Do acknowledge, Walker. Or you shall be terminated at once.”

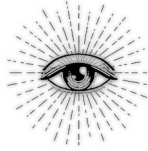
Rew stares in silence, her head wobbling ever so slightly.

The two Yog mares take another step forward, slow and intentional. “Do acknowledge, human-whisperer—or do not.”

“I acknowledge, Overseer.”



TWELVE



Pleasure After Business

It rains softly, but persistently, on the Forum of Lunteren. The evening is well advanced, and the large public space is empty. Dim electric lamps surround the flat extension, lights reflecting timidly on small puddles. The fresh smell of the wet colony fills the auditorium.

As the scene glides over the Forum, Ximena picks up the splashing steps of a man above the background murmur of the rain. A tall man, covered with a broad-brimmed hat and a long leather-like raincoat, hurries across the Forum towards its eastern edge, towards the Eye of Goah complex.

The scene slides ever closer to the man as he reaches the entrance of one of the lower administrative buildings attached to the main body of the Eye. Tall and slim, he raises his head at the door, as if hesitating, and his pale expression comes sharply into view. Ximena recognizes him at once: *Willem van Dolah*.

The man—Willem, indeed—lifts a heavy iron knocker featuring a gargoyle, and knocks three times.

While he waits, he adjusts his glasses, wets his lips and lets his brown eyes wander. He notices a large billing board on the

wall protected by a thin glass, and therein, a single placard that reads:

Our Quaestor Mathus, in redeeming love, to the destructor of our Joyousday House and blasphemer of our New Year Celebration:

*CONFESS NOW TO PROTECT LUNTEREN
AND YOUR SOUL*

Are you a lost sinner, seeking Goah's Redemption for your soul, and protector of the welfare of your fellow colonists under Goah's Gift? Then embrace aws Mercy and come forward in public repentance BEFORE the arrival of aws Head's INQUISITOR. Unless you come out to let us help you face your inner demons, our beloved Lunteren is facing the possibility of a WITHDRAWAL OF GOAH'S GIFT. Your continued defiance is risking the well-being of your family and fellow colonists.

Or are you demon-ridden, seeking our damnation? Then you are doomed. Aws Inquisitor will uncover and cleanse you.

I implore you. For your lost soul. For Lunteren. Return to aws Light and embrace Goah's Mercy.

Or face Goah's Fist.

Quaestor Marjolein Mathus of Lunteren

The door opens. A boy—not much older than ten and dressed in the long red robes of an acolyte of aws Head—peeks out.

“Aws Blessings to you, Meester Willem,” the boy says after an instant of recognition. “I’m afraid Quaestor Mathus has already concluded today’s business. Your Joyousday arrangements must wait for the morning.”

“Aws Blessings to you, Man Aaij. I’m not here on official business. Could you please tell the Quaestor I would like a word?”

“Regretfully, I cannot.” The boy bows respectfully. “The Quaestor has already withdrawn to her private quarters. I will leave notice of your unannounced visit. Good evening to you.” The door begins to close.

“Wait!” Willem puts a hand on the door. The boy frowns. “Please, Theo. Just announce me, okay? I’ll leave if she says no.”

“I’m sorry, Elder van Dolah. I have strict instructions to—”

“Oh, come on! Seriously, Theo?”

The boy blushes. “Uh, I... I don’t—”

“Don’t you dare force me to call a favor in, Man Theodoor Aaij,” Willem interrupts in a forceful, authoritative tone. “All those hours of arithmetic, of history. You wouldn’t be *here* if—”

Theodoor holds his hand up, blushing even more. “I know, Meester, I know. Sorry for...” He waves his hand in an inviting gesture. “Please step in and take a seat. I’ll be right back.”

“**Q**uaestor Mathus will attend you, Elder van Dolah,” Theodoor says, again all business. “This way, please.”

The boy takes Willem into a small room with a few chairs aligned along three walls.

“Please wait here. Good night, Meester Willem.”

“Night, Theo.” Willem sits.

The boy shuts the door behind him.

The door opens and Marjolein enters, but not in her usual formal robes. Cody, and some of the other—mostly male—students nearby, shift in their place as her female form comes into full view.

“What an unexpected surprise,” Marjolein says, a shade of a smile on her lips.

She is wet, as though just out of a bath, her naked feet leaving moist footprints on the stone floor. Two towels are the only clothing she is wearing, one wrapped around her head, like a turban, a few wild blonde curls escaping over her brow. The other towel, not much larger than the first one, barely covers what must be covered.

“Uh, s- sorry, Marjo,” Willem says, his face flushing. “I need to talk to you.”

“For you, Will, I’m always open for business. Come.” She turns and walks out, leaving the door open.

Willem follows her feline steps along a hallway. Her immaculate twenty-one-year-old skin, firm and soft, rubs slowly against the towel, which miraculously stays put, tightening and distending around her femininity. Willem blushes, captivated by the sight. He discreetly puts his hand in and out of his pants to rebalance what must be rebalanced. Some students, mostly a few females still capable of keeping the overview, notice his gesture and laugh out loud.

Marjolein opens a wooden double door with both arms and pushes herself inside. Willem steps in, the doors closing slowly behind as he enters a large chamber, dimly lit by candles, paneled in woods with elegant carvings. A fire roars and cracks in a stone hearth. The ceiling is painted with Goah’s Eye right above the one object this room was made for: an ornate, elevated bed, unusually wide and covered with brown, soft pelts over sheets of silk.

Marjolein turns around and gracefully places her hands on her hips. “State your business, Elder van Dolah,” she says with a smirk.

“Uh, yeah, it is...” He clears his throat. “Sorry, Marjo. I didn’t mean to... I came after hours because I needed to speak with you privately.”

Marjolein raises her hand off her right hip and waves it around. “This is *very* private,” she says softly, almost purring.

“I appreciate the...” Willem clears his throat again. “Uh, whatever we... *talk* about, will it stay between us?”

“Of course it will. We are formally inside the Goah’s Eye complex.” She points at the ceiling. The great painted Eye looks straight down on the bed, almost with eager expectation. “*Sacred Secret* applies. And since this is not official business, pleasure after business applies.”

One of her towels drops.

Marjolein and Willem, still partly entangled, look up at the overhanging Eye. Nothing covers their naked bodies, all the sheets and pelts rest on the floor. Their pale skins are still blushed, their breaths are still quick, their expressions are still *satisfied*.

Marjolein turns to her side and puts a finger on Willem’s chest. “I’m glad your daughter is safe.” Her smile seems genuine, which baffles Ximena. Or it’s just an act. “Aws medics reported that she will cure fine.”

Willem keeps his eyes locked on the overhanging eye. “Disfigured.”

“And alive. And well. From what I’ve heard, it could have been much worse. Besides, if she doesn’t care, perhaps you shouldn’t either.”

Willem turns his face. “How do you know she doesn’t care? How would you feel with a scar and a hole instead of an ear?”

Marjolein smiles weakly. “It would bother me. But I’m not as strong as she is.”

Willem laughs aloud—a humorless laugh, and returns his look to the ceiling. “If you are not strong, then I’m a puppy.”

“My puppy.” She kisses him on the cheek.

He doesn't react to her touch. "Goah, how could this happen?"

"You mean... Oosterbeek?"

He meets her eyes. "Why would they want to kill her?"

"Only Goah knows. Some sort of evil has been brewing there, out of sight, waiting for an opportunity. And then, when it happened, it was so sudden that aw's Head didn't have time to react. They killed people, Will. Edda was lucky. Yes, sorry, but I mean it. Many have vanished, May Goah have Mercy with their souls. Aedil Swick himself is nowhere to be found."

"Is Edda safe here? Will they come for her?"

"Oh, of course not! She was just a victim of circumstances. Wrong place, wrong time. What was she doing there, anyway?"

He purses his lips, and says, "She won't tell me."

"In any case, she is safe now. Aw's Fist has taken control of Oosterbeek. The Grand Inquisitor is there. Everything is fine now."

"The Grand Inquisitor..." He sighs, a deep crease across his forehead, and says, "That's why I came here, Marjo. I need to know if..." He takes a deep breath. "Uh..."

Marjolein smiles and puts a playful finger on his side. "And here I was, so naive to think that you came here for *me*. Just kidding, Will!" she hastily adds as his eyes widen with distress. "So, Elder van Dolah," her smile widens. "State your business."

"It's the Inquisitor, Marjo. You've also heard the rumors, right? About the aggressive pacifying of Oosterbeek? Is he really coming to Lunteren?"

Her smile vanishes at once. "You bet he is. He was already on his way, when Oosterbeek happened. But after he restores order there... He is *so* coming, Will. A few more days." Her eyes twitch.

"I'm worried."

She scoffs. "You sure as Dem are not the only one. I'm

scared shitless myself. You have no idea.”

“You are?” He sits upright and stares at her. “Why? I mean... What’s going to happen?”

“Hopefully nothing.” She rolls to her side, away from him, and stands. “If common sense prevails.” She puts on a short silk gown and casually throws a pelt at him for cover. “My staff has done everything possible. We even got a few extra hands provided by the Quaestors of Harskamp and Ermelo. But... nothing so far. Nothing conclusive, at least.” She shuts her gown and glares at him. “That’s what you really want to know, right? If we have anything?”

Willem does not reply.

“I wouldn’t be too relieved. When the Inquisitor comes...” She shakes her head.

“Yes? What then?!”

“I don’t know what will happen. With *us*. I mean, with Lunteren.” Her eyes sink. “With *me*.”

“What... what do you mean?”

Marjolein gives Willem a sharp, stern look. “But what I know—I *guarantee*, Will—is that aw’s Inquisitor will uncover the sinner.” Willem’s eyes widen as she continues. “Aw’s Inquisition is not so... bothered as we are with the limitations imposed by aw’s Compacts. Which makes them far more... *persuasive*. I’ll do what I can, but... Whatever happens, is really out of my hands.”

Willem blinks, his face a mask of concern.

“There’s still hope,” she says. “If cool heads prevail.”

“Cool heads...” Willem laughs bitterly. “Cool heads.” He shakes his own.

“We are doing everything we can, Will. We even covered the colony with placards. If we get a public confession, and we get it *before* aw’s Inquisitor arrives, then the consequences for everybody involved—especially for... the *sinner*—will be much less severe.”

“What do you mean... *less severe*?”

Marjolein sits on the bed by his side and grabs his hand. “We get a timely confession, and I can argue convincingly to aws Head that no serious heresy is underway here in our peaceful colony, just a... stupid prank. No investigation required. No Inquisitor. No risk to Lunteren.”

“What risk to Lunteren?” Willem’s frown deepens.

“Aws fucking Mercy, Will!” She raises her voice and puts a hand on her hips. “What do you mean, *what risk*? Have you been living under a rock?”

“Uh, I’ve been busy... The Joyousday arrangements and all—”

“Aws Head is,” she brings her thumb and index finger together, “a whit away from withdrawing Goah’s Gift from us.”

“Can they really do that?!” Willem straightens. “I thought it was all just a trick to get the, uh, sinner to, hmm...”

“What trick?! Goah’s Mercy, Will! A fucking genuine withdrawal can really happen! Right here. And that would be... How should I put it? *Not* good. For *anybody*. So, you see, we need that confession.” She looks at him, deadly serious. “We *need* it.”

Willem sinks his head for a few moments, as if reflecting. “If the *sinner* confesses. Then what?” He looks up at her.

“Goah’s Mercy, I told you already. The Inquisitor won’t—”

“No, I mean, what would happen to...” He swallows and meets her blue eyes.

Marjolein nods. “No cleansing—Goah be praised. A light exorcism, perhaps.” Willem tenses. “Nothing painful, don’t worry. Just a ritual.”

“That’s all?” Willem’s expression brightens with hope.

Marjolein cannot keep her eyes locked into his, and sinks her head.

“Marjo, please. What can—?”

“Exile,” she says, and blinks at him.

“Exile! Where?!”

Marjolein shrugs. “A new colony. Britain, probably.”

Willem remains silent, eyes widened, lips parted.

“There would be *life*,” Marjolein says. “A *new* life, a new beginning—more than... any *blasphemer* deserves—and Lunteren will keep thriving under Goah’s Gift. Sorry, Will, but it’s a no-brainer.” Her tone is more demanding. “At least it would be for any *decent* human being. How can she be so selfish?” Willem tries to say something, but she holds her finger up. “Yes, Will. Face it. A selfish and ungrateful bitch.”

“Marjolein, it’s not...” he says, waving his hands calmly.

“How not?” She stands, hands on her hips, glaring at him. “How is it not selfish to put Lunteren in such grave danger just to pull a prank? How in Goah’s Name is it not ungrateful to destroy my career like that? What have I done to her?!” Her voice breaks. “I offered you one more year,” she states, her tone turning colder. “One more year, Will, of life together. Stretching to the breaking limit the interpretations of our sacred traditions, of which I am sworn guardian.”

“I know, and I’m so grateful, Marjo. I’ve been thinking about it. If the Inquisitor leaves, if everything goes back to normal, I would gladly—”

“If the Inquisitor *leaves*?! Goah’s Mercy, Will. Are you... *negotiating* with me?”

“No! Er...” He raises his hands in a gesture of appeasement. “You have to understand. If that—!”

“Whatever an Inquisitor wants, an Inquisitor does! You think he would even listen to what I have to say?!” She scoffs and shakes her head, glaring at him. “I see gratitude runs shallow in the Van Dolah family. You think it was easy to get an official postponement of your Joyousday? You think it was easy to *request* it?”

Willem can only stare with blank eyes.

“I wouldn’t have done it for anybody else.” She keeps

shaking her head, hints of tears in her accusing, blue eyes. “I wouldn’t have done it for anybody else.”

Willem blinks, lips moving in silence. *Whoa!* Ximena can almost feel his inner pain from all that fury pouring down on him like a sudden summer storm. Worse than fury. Fury—and *love*. There is no stronger force in the universe, and Willem is utterly powerless.

“And what do I get?” There is hate in Marjolein’s expression, but not directed at him. “What do I get?!” She raises her voice. “You know very well what I got, Will. The whole of Lunteren knows—the whole fucking Imperium knows!—*humiliation*.”

She sinks her head, a tear running down her cheek.

“Humiliation,” she says softly now. “My career in aws Head, destroyed. Everything I ever wanted in life, destroyed.”

“Surely it’s not destroyed,” Willem says. “If—”

“Destroyed!” she shouts. “I had it all, Will. Education, connections, passion, brains, looks.” She gestures at herself for emphasis. “But now? No—You don’t understand the politics of aws Head. I’m a joke now. Nobody that counts can afford to take me seriously. Do you know how much I’ve sacrificed for my career?” She stares at him, tilting her head.

“Uh...”

“Everything, Will! Family, home, friendship. I sacrificed it all. Only to be sent to this goahforsaken place. Everything for Goah. Everything for Goah’s Head. Then I fell in love with this goahforsaken place.” She scoffs. “Then I fell in love *in* this goahforsaken place. And what did I get? Humiliation?” She points at him. “*Negotiation?*”

Will remains silent for a while. *Wise man*, Ximena thinks. *Don’t dare open your mouth.*

The silence stretches, chilly—long. Ximena watches the exchange with confused fascination. She feels like she is meeting Marjolein Mathus for the first time. This woman is a

far cry from the demon Pontifex of the Dreamwars that she has learned to love to hate. Ximena exhales when an awkward feeling inside her begins to burn her intellect. But she must ask herself, could all this be... *true*? Did this really happen? Or is it just a romantic dreamsense dramatization to please the audiences? But Professor Miyagi doesn't strike her as the romantic type. Nor as the audience pleaser, either; at least, not when dealing with history.

"I'm sorry," Willem finally dares to say. "I'm so sorry. Is there anything that I can do to—?"

"Yes! Only one thing, but I don't believe you will."

"Of course, I—"

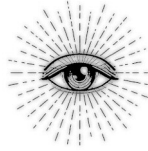
"Get her to issue a formal confession before aw's Inquisitor arrives. That might show aw's Head that I am not an incompetent hick that allows heresy to grow under her nose." Her eyes narrow. "Isn't she always quoting the sacred rights at her students, like a paranoid parrot? Warning everybody to watch for the slightest sign of *oppression* by the Colony Elders, or even myself? Well, tell her that unless she confesses, they might take all our rights away, like this." She flicks a finger. "The withdrawal would be squarely on her shoulders—on her conscience, if she has any. Will you do *that* for me, Willem?"

"Uh..." He blinks, and pulls back his long, brown hair. "I would do anything to help, Marjo. Anything that is in my power. But you know how some... *things* are not. I can only talk. And try to convince. And I would gladly delay my Joyousday one more year and even," he gestures around the room with a hasty hand, "move here with you, if that helps."

Ximena gasps, putting an involuntary hand over her mouth. And she is not the only one in the auditorium.

"*If that helps,*" Marjolein repeats, shaking her head, and staring at him with red, disappointed eyes. "How gracious of you. Pick up your stuff and leave. This is aw's Head's business now."

THIRTEEN



The Lure of Confession

“Be reasonable, my dear professor,” Censor Smith says. “I am doing you a favor. Such humanization of evil might be *avant-garde* in Hansasia, but I guarantee you that it wouldn’t sit well with our audiences at the Goah’s Imperia of the Americas.”

Ximena can barely hear his voice down below, at stage level, with the myriad of other discussions bubbling across the Auditorium. Everybody has an opinion. And everybody wants—no, *needs*—to share them.

“Besides, what is the purpose of such a scene? The quality of your dream sensorial—not only historically but also dramatically, if you allow me the briefest of intrusions into the art of storytelling—will be enhanced by the removal of this, hmm, *interchange* between Mathus and her supposed lover.”

Ank has removed the intimate, fireplace-illuminated scene and a pristine blue sky is now shining balmy warmth on Ximena’s face. But not even the soothing fragrance of a fresh spring morning can appease the flames of intellect.

“Marjolein Mathus and Willem van Dolah *were* lovers,” Professor Miyagi replies in a controlled, firm voice.

“Of course, of course. Nobody is discussing the bizarre inclinations of Elder van Dolah. The flesh is a powerful force, and Mathus possessed a well-built body. Good for him, if you allow me the comment.” He gives a good-humored chuckle. “But portraying the demon Mathus as a *vulnerable* lover,” he pronounces the word as if it were a curse, “or, even worse, a *caring* official of aw’s Head. No, Professor. Those theories will simply not fly in the GIA. In the Townsend we don’t tolerate deviations from the highest standards of academic rigor. And more so in the History Department. Call us old school, if you will, but science is too precious to compromise for this,” he waves his hand dismissively at the space over their heads where the scene was hanging a few moments ago, “*show*.”

The running discussion on stage appears to further inflame hearts across the banks of the amphitheater. It is too small a place for the passions that brought all the students of the Global Program together. Most are standing now, and arguments are being shouted to neighbors and strangers alike.

Cody, still annoyingly quiet next to Ximena, is smiling at the sight. “I love history.”

“Doesn’t it bother you? Not even a bit?” Ximena is trying, and failing, to keep her own nerves under control. The mood is contagious. “And it’s not just Mathus. What about Edda?!”

“What about her?”

She scoffs. Sometimes Cody can be so... limited. “She is out of options, isn’t she? Defeated, and barely alive. And the Inquisitor hasn’t even arrived yet. That can’t be the real Edda!”

“Hmm, the real Edda... I don’t know, Ximena. The more Professor Miyagi exposes his vision of history—”

“History cannot be anybody’s vision! It is either true or false, in which case it isn’t history anymore, but propaganda!”

“Or *myth*. This seminar is portraying Edda, and even Mathus, as... human. Mere *mortals*.” He pronounces the word in an

intentionally ironic tone. “What if Edda was not the superhero we grew up with? Imagine that you are Herodotus, Ximena. The first historian. Mid-fifth century BC. Imagine that you look back to a war that happened centuries before, a war engulfed in legend and romanticism. What would you think of Achilles, or Odysseus? It is hard to be objective about the heroes of your youth.”

“But Troy really existed!” Ximena replies defensively. She is afraid of the place where Cody’s words are drifting.

“Of course it existed!” Cody’s eyes shine. “As did the Lunteren of the Leap-Day Reformation. But where does history end, and myth begin?”

A sudden male voice joins their conversation. “I like how you think, GIA!”

Ximena jolts at the uninvited, enthusiastic shout. She turns her head and meets the intense blue gaze of Mark, who smiles radiantly at her.

“Oh, excuse me,” he says to the last white-and-blue robed student that has hastily moved aside to let him through. “Sorry, sorry.” He takes a seat to Ximena’s immediate right with an impetuous Neanderthal shove, and immediately extends his right hand across to Cody, who is sitting to her left. “Name’s Mark.”

Cody stares at Mark’s hand for a moment, hanging mere inches from Ximena’s flabbergasted look. He takes it limply in his own and gives a cautious shake. “Cody O’Higgin.” His voice is a notch quieter now, and his eyes wider. He seems fascinated with the red-haired Neanderthal. He probably has met as many as Ximena had, before Miyagi’s Global Program came along with all its *surprises*. “Charmed to make your acquaintance.”

“Same. Whoa!” He laughs loudly, sits back, seemingly pleased with himself, and meets Ximena’s gape anew. “Some heated discussions going on, huh?”

“What are you doing here?” Ximena feels an embarrassing warmth extending across her cheeks.

“What?! It was boring over there.” He points with a finger at the other side of the amphitheater. “There’s nobody to disagree with. Even Sky’s witty depictions of your Censor get tiring after a while.”

Cody leans forward, eyes widening in curiosity. “Would you care to share them?”

“I’d rather not!” He laughs, pointing a complicit finger at Cody. “But as colorful as her language is, her opinions are the same as anybody else over at the Lundev side.”

“Which are?” Cody asks with an encouraging gesture.

“Boring. That’s what they are. Too, er, *monochromatic*. And I love color!” His gaze drills Ximena’s eyes for the briefest of instants, before flinching back to Cody. “What is the point of the Global Program, if we don’t shake our narrow preconceptions and expand our perspectives?”

Cody nods thoughtfully. “I agree wholeheartedly. I celebrate that you decided to sit with us. You are a brave, uh—”

“*Man*,” Ximena says. “A brave *man*. Neanderthals are as human as we are, Cody. A different human species, but—”

“A different *species*?” Mark laughs again, beaming at her. “If I fuck you, wouldn’t you get pregnant? Oh, sorry!” He pauses at the sheer shock in Ximena’s—and Cody’s—face. “Did I say that aloud?”

“**S**peeze!” A loud call makes Aline and Edda stop their stroll and turn. A bicycle-mounted Gotthard brakes sharply by their side. “Here you are!”

Colony Street is quiet. Few colonists have business to attend

to, so early in the afternoon. Most are on the fields, on the boats, or napping. Even shops are closed.

“Aws Blessings to you,” Aline says, stressing the *you* almost like a question.

Edda gives him a sad nod. She is wearing a gray turban hat that covers most of her head, ears included, but healing bruises in hues of yellows and purples crisscross her face.

Gotthard dismounts and rests his bicycle against the wall. “Aws Blessings.” His bow is casual and hasty. He takes a moment to peer closely at Edda. “You are looking better today.”

“Thanks,” Edda mutters. Ximena is pleased that the psych-link is finally active, but the emotional stream that flows through feels dull and gloomy. And abnormally resigned, like she is letting go of what makes her so... *Edda*.

Gotthard keeps his eyes on her for another second, but then turns them to Aline. “I was looking for you in the workshop, but they said that you were taking the rest of the week off?”

She nods. “I can afford it. I’ve made some extra karma lately,” she says with the hint of a smirk. “As you well know.”

“Maybe you would like to... extend your vacation?” Gotthard says, and hands her a folded piece of paper.

While Aline unfolds and reads, a cart loaded with hay, pushed by an old horse, comes down the street. “Aws Blessings to you, Juf Edda!” the driver shouts from the front bench.

She smiles weakly and lifts a hand as the cart passes by, leaving a distinct smell of manure in its wake.

Aline whistles loudly as she folds the note and puts it in her pocket. “I don’t know, Gotthard.” She turns to him, shaking her head. “This is, uh, *heavy* gear. I can’t just, you know...” She snaps her fingers.

Gotthard laughs and turns to Edda. “Your friend sure knows how to negotiate—for an engineer.”

Edda rolls her eyes. “Keep me out of this... *business* of yours, yeah?” She glances a disapproving look at Aline.

“You know what, Speese?” Gotthard steps closer to her. “I’m a bit short of karma lately. I think it’s time to, hmm, enhance our... *partnership*.”

Aline frowns slightly. “I wouldn’t call it a partnership.”

“Exactly!” Gotthard says, pointing at her. “And it’s high time we do. Our families could profit from each other.” He stares at her intently, smirking. “Especially yours from mine.”

Aline bursts out laughing while Gotthard waits, his smirk untainted. “You’re serious!” she says.

Gotthard’s smile broadens.

“A dowry bond?” she asks. “With the Krakers?!”

Gotthard nods, extending both hands.

Aline chuckles loudly. “You can’t be serious. Besides, your sister is redeemed, isn’t she?”

“I’m not talking about Ima,” Gotthard says. “Your brother is too young, anyway.”

“Who, *you*?” Aline asks, eyes widening. “With *me*?!”

Gotthard keeps staring at her, smiling, self-confident.

“Oh, wow,” Edda says, and her lips curve into the slightest of smiles. “Where did that come from?” Her sudden interest—amusement even!—feels to Ximena like sunshine after a week-long rain.

“Give it a good thought, Speese. We Krakers need a baby girl, and you Speeses a baby boy. Plus, it would be the second awes Womb fertilization for both of us, so we get our redemption.” Gotthard throws a casual finger at Edda’s broad, black, ornate belt. “Not to mention the obvious synergies between science and engineering, as our *partnership* proves day after day.”

Edda gives him an astounded look. “You have *really* given this a thought, yeah?”

“No!” Aline says, shaking her head for emphasis.

“Absolutely not. My dad is negotiating with the Ledeboer elders already.”

Gotthard’s eyes widen and then he burst into a laugh. “The Ledeboers are *rats*, Aline. A *triple-rat* family, to be precise.”

“What do you mean, *triple*? They’re just an all-male echelon, that’s all.”

“That’s not all, Speese! Their parents were both male too. I guess fishing is no business for the weaker sex. But that’s not the worst. They broke *aws* Balance!”

“You’re pulling that out of your ass!” Aline says.

Edda blinks at her friend, stunned by her unusually harsh reaction.

“I’m not, Speese. Their parents were already redeemed when they closed a *third* dowry.”

Edda gasps, covering her mouth.

“That is a pile of bull.” Aline speaks slowly, glaring at him.

“It’s not. Janson Ledeboer is a third-dowry child. And that’s not all!”

“What?!” Edda asks, taking an involuntary step forward, her curiosity mingling with Ximena’s own.

“The late Senior Elder Ledeboer... He... he...”

“What?!” Edda puts a hand on Aline’s trembling shoulder.

“He placed his seed twice in his own family!”

“You are shitting us!” Edda’s gape alternates between Gotthard’s enthusiasm and Aline’s frown.

“I’m not! The Ledeboer brothers have the same biological father!”

“Wow!” Edda blinks at the news. “Genetic siblings! Like the families of the golden age!”

Gotthard chuckles. “Like fucking barbarians!”

“Come on, Edda,” Aline says, her eyes still glowering. “You can’t take this buffoon seriously. *Aws Womb* would never allow that.”

“Well, they did it this time. They probably thought it wiser to fill in an echelon than to break a family. Even a rat family.”

“Such a pile of—”

“Come on, Speese! You are a clever mensa. Look at the Ledebosers and tell me they are not of the same seed. Look at their broad faces, their strong jawlines, their muscles, their size... They are almost clones, Goah’s Mercy!”

“And what if they share genes?!” Aline says with a loud, harsh voice. “Who cares? We all share them with one of our parents, and the Earth keeps spinning just fine!”

“Genetic diversity is one of the pillars of aw’s Gift’s families,” Edda says.

Gotthard’s smirk widens. “How come I know all this, and you don’t? I hope you are opening more to your lover than he is to you!” He laughs at his own comment, as do Mark and a few other students in the auditorium. Ximena finds it distasteful.

“You classist asshole,” Aline says with a slow, hissing voice.

“Classist? Maybe. But at least my discrimination is harmless. It is aw’s Head who is keeping them dead poor, year after year. You know how much karma a rat family gets assigned? And a triple-rat family? And to top it all, they are fishermen, Speese. *Fishermen*. Do you seriously want to bond with fishermen? My dowry sister here,” he glances at Edda, “can attest to the advantages of binding with my family.”

“Actually,” Edda shrugs, “I can.”

“Edda!” Aline turns to face her. “Not you!” she says, visibly appalled.

“It’s not all about what we want, Aline. You must think about your family. And yes, Gotthard is right. Relations are important. Remember a few months ago, when Colder Siever was all over my dad because of what I was teaching in school? Well, Elder Kraker got him off our neck. That’s what an influential dowry relative can do for you. And what they may

lack in charm,” she waves a hand at Gotthard, “they make up with loyalty.”

“Thank you, dowry sister.” Gotthard bows at Edda and turns to Aline with a cocky, sidelong smile. “When considering your alliances, it’s not about who they are, but who they *know*.”

Aline says nothing, her fiery eyes locked on Edda’s, her pale features blushing fiercely.

Edda snorts. “I don’t know why I get involved. Goah, when will I learn?”

Aline walks to Gotthard, her red face stopping just an inch away from his nose. She speaks very slowly, her voice icy cold, “Don’t you dare come with any of this talk to my father, or our *collaboration* is over.”

“Whoa, whoa, chill!” He takes a deep breath and his expression turns unnaturally grave. “I really, really need *those*.” And he points at the pocket where Aline put the paper. “If karma is what you want, then that’s also okay. Karma is what you’ll get.”

“Karma will do nicely.” She turns to walk away.

“One more thing,” Gotthard says. Aline stops and looks sullenly at him. “Could you get my, uh, *supplies* before the Inquisitor arrives?”

“But that could be any day now, from what rumors say,” Aline says.

“Exactly, so could you provision them, hmm, tomorrow?” he says, and to emphasize he adds, “Please?” The word sounds out of place, like a jewel never worn for fear of theft.

“I’m not sure I can. Not this.” She taps on her pocket. “I expect delays from my provider in Oosterbeek. His supply lines are still disrupted. Why the hurry?”

He laughs dryly, but does not reply. He shifts his weight, as if gathering his thoughts.

“What?”

“Uh, I don’t know how to say this,” he says.

“That’s hard to believe,” Edda says, her interest aroused.

“Okay, listen. My mom has been involved as scientific advisor in the investigation of the Century Blasphemy.”

Edda and Aline exchange a silent glance.

“No evidence was found,” he continues, “so they had to stick to shortlisting the suspects. You know, people with the capabilities, means and motivation. And guess which names top the list.”

“Uh, who?” Edda asks, as innocently as she can muster.

Gotthard smiles without humor, shaking his head. “All I know is that if you don’t hurry with my supplies, I might never get them.”

Edda snorts. “Your concern is heartwarming.”

His smile vanishes. “What I’m doing is important, dowry sister. I swear by Goah. More important than...” He waves his hand at the surrounding colony. “And believe it or not, I care. Call me a romantic, but I don’t want Gerrit to grow old without knowing his dowry mother.”

She blinks and says nothing.

“You know,” Gotthard says. “There’s still time for a confession.”

Edda exhales noisily, rolling her eyes. “You sound just like my dad.”

“He knows?!” Aline asks. “I mean, about what we, hmm...?” She throws a hesitant glimpse at Gotthard.

Edda smiles dryly. “Of course my dad knows. He’s smarter than the three of us put together.”

Aline purses her lips and puts her right hand on Edda’s arm. “Perhaps we should rethink—”

“No! No, Aline. There is no evidence whatsoever. Gotthard just confirmed it, yeah? And what can the Quaestor or that goahdamn Inquisitor do without evidence? We might be far away from Townsend, but aw’s Gift and aw’s Compacts are here as strong. And our rights as sacred. Trust me on this, sister. We

just tend our daily business as usual, and one day, you'll see, the storm will have passed."

"But..." Aline wets her lips. "Do you realize what they might do to Lunteren?"

"You're worried about the *withdrawal*?"

"Aren't you?!"

"You really think they're going to quarantine a colony? In the twenty-fifth century? Oh, come on!" She scoffs. "And besides, what do you expect us to do? To confess and go into exile? Force my family to move to Britain, among barbarians, like my dad suggested?"

"Your dad offered to—?!"

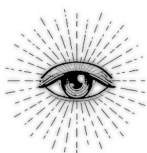
"He isn't thinking clearly, Aline. All the stress with the Joyousday preparations, which he's still carrying through, mind you." Edda's voice turns cooler.

"At least now you're talking to each other." Aline puts her hand on Edda's shoulder. "I'm proud of you, sister."

Edda sinks her head. "Listen, I know there's some risk. I'm not stupid, yeah? But I assume full responsibility. Nobody else will get harmed, not you, not this asshole." She puts a playful finger on Gotthard's nose. "Not Lunteren. Nobody. I swear by Goah." She gestures a cross on her chest.

Gotthard swaps a worried glance with Aline and says, "You are very brave, dowry sister, there's no question about it. Whether you are a brave genius or a brave idiot, well, I guess we will find out soon enough."

FOURTEEN



The Fist of Goah

Pieter lifts another wooden box with a practiced shift of weight that avoids rocking his sailboat, and passes it to Janson, who is standing on the pier. Their arm muscles tense with the familiar effort. Janson stacks it with the other boxes, heavy with glittering fish, some still flapping. The air of the amphitheater fills with the pungent scent of seafood, which Ximena finds surprisingly pleasant, fresh, a promise of the flavors of the ocean.

The harbor is large. Remarkably so, for a colony the size of Lunteren. Pieter and Janson's boat is moored on the old section, the smallest and closest to the road that leads back to the Fish Market and to the rest of Lunteren. Other men farther up and down the old piers—some humming and singing aloud, and sweating, despite the cool January afternoon—unload the catch of the day from other similar sailboats, all wooden, painted in bright reds, greens or blues.

“What’s that?!”

The shout makes Pieter and Janson pause to peer at the *new* harbor, the largest—and busiest—section, where long, wide piers shelter four merchant ships behind the massive

breakwaters. A man is pointing to an approaching vessel, unlike any of the routine barges or merchants that sail up and down the Rhine-Baltic circuit, and whose elongated shape is well-suited to the rivers and sea lanes that form the arteries of the Hanseatic Imperium.

This ship is different: ocean-worthy—wide, short, with high decks and even higher bow clearly designed to withstand rough waters. But the most striking feature of the vessel is its color: the wooden hull is painted white—worn-out white, the sure sign of a life of heavy usage—and the main sail features an imposing black fist.

“Pure sin!” Aline says, tilting her head at Edda to make herself heard over the street chatter. It seems like the entire colony has come out to the streets, and is exchanging gossip and fear with nervous enthusiasm. The atmosphere is tense, expectant—far from festive. Many glances, not all friendly, fly in their general direction.

“Understatement of the year,” Edda says, throwing glimpses at the surrounding faces with pressed lips. Her apprehension—her nerves fluttering wildly inside her—are obvious for the psych-linked Ximena, but she manages to give Aline a smile of reassurance. She is still wearing the gray turban-hat, but her visible bruises are healing quickly.

Aline and Edda have elbowed their way to a spot alongside the Post Way. To their left the street stretches through the heart of the colony, both sidewalks teeming with people, most peering tensely into the distance, towards the Fish Market—shifting, wondering, waiting. To their right, the street crosses Colony Street, and opens into Orange Square—the geographical center of Lunteren—where the three-story Elder Council dwarfs nearby commercial buildings. Usually an open

space, today it is nothing like it, and not only because Thursday is market day. Not a soul more could fit between the stalls.

“I think he’s here,” Aline says, taking Edda’s arm in an almost reflexive gesture, and pointing the other hand to their left, to the end of the street. Ximena leans forward and stretches her own head, listening. Yes, the nervous chattering is getting more excited over there.

“Praise aws Head!” some nearby colonists begin shouting with pious passion.

“Praise aws Head!” others join in. Ximena sees on their faces a mix of elation, zeal, and naked fear of Goah.

Two mounted men approach along the street, side by side.

Ximena squints at the two figures, almost holding her breath. The nervousness she is feeling, the *expectation*, is not Edda’s alone. Nor her own. Cody and Mark, next to her, seem equally enthralled.

At first glance, the two riders look like a warrior and a priest, their white horses walking with the proud step of beasts bred for battle. Behind them, a double line of men marches with casual steps, warrior-like in their gait and size, about twenty of them. Their long, thick tunics would have been white, had they been recently washed. They carry large rucksacks on their backs, handguns on their belts, and machine guns on their shoulders. Chatting in a lively manner with each other, they smirk at the passing crowd, wink and wet their lips at women, and burst out in sudden, rough laughs.

“Praise aws Head!” The shouts of the multitude have turned at this point rhythmic, almost hypnotic.

“Praise aws Fist!” some begin chanting.

The two front riders reach the spot where Edda and Aline stare in tense fascination. The warrior is a big man indeed, his tunic shaped by underlying muscles. He is broader and taller than most men in the twenty-fifth century, or any century, for

that matter. He turns his head and locks his gaze on Aline's generous bosom. She leans back, eyes wide open in dismay. His nose is missing, and a horrendous scar runs across the right side of his face. He raises his look, meets her gaze and flaps his tongue obscenely at her, broadening his rapacious smile. Aline gasps, and he bursts out a loud laugh.

Edda has noticed none of this. She is staring squarely at the other rider.

"Praise aws Head!" the deafening shouts continue. "Praise aws Fist!"

A short man, and yet his posture, his gait, his pale blue eyes, his shaved head, all radiate raw authority. Under his grave expression, Ximena perceives a hint of annoyance. He is not as amused by the crowd's reception as his men are. An old blue tattoo runs down from his left eye to his chin, a geometrical chain-like pattern. Ximena notices that same tattoo on the large rider and on a few of the men marching behind.

But what Edda and many in the crowd stare at with engrossed fascination is the other tattoo, spreading black against white skin over his entire forehead, and powerfully symbolic: a piercing, open eye. The same symbol that more than a century later adorns Censor Smith's own forehead. The Eye of Goah.

"Praise aws Inquisitor!"

"Grand Inquisitor, please, a word to the press!" A tall woman with a tall hat, carrying electronic equipment strapped to her back, approaches the walking horse while waving a wired microphone. The man turns his three-eyed head at her and his horse halts. His retinue stops on the spot and gives her an amused look.

"Thank you, Grand Inquisitor," she mumbles, and turns a

knob on the micro. In a loud, almost theatrical voice she says: “Elder Flora de Vroome reporting from Lunteren, Geldershire, in the Dutch Province. Another flash news report from our modest colony, which is entering the twenty-fifth century with shock after shock. First the blasphemous countdown, and now the, uh, *reaction*, am I correct, Grand Inquisitor, hmm...?”

“Grand Inquisitor of aws British Mission in Worthing and Imperial Commander of aws Fist Archer Rhodes,” the Inquisitor says with a thick, odd accent. “And you are most certainly correct, Elder de Vroome.” He smiles. “I am under direct orders from Imperator Cisek himself to deal with your little... *problem*.” His voice is self-assured, masculine and vibrant, matching his *advanced* age. Like the rest of his men, he must be twenty-five or twenty-six already, at the peak of his experience, and probably eager to meet his maker soon. “Apparently, there has been some loud demon chatter in your pretty colony.” He smiles at her with his mouth, not his eyes. “I’m Goah’s Reply.”

Gotthard and Rutger bend over a bulky machine placed on the dusty floor. Thick wires sprout out of an opening, up onto the nearby wooden bench that runs alongside the wall, and into scattered electrical gadgets covered with dials and knobs. The lack of light and warmth in the old church’s tower room makes Ximena eerily uncomfortable—her eyes need time to adapt to the lone electric bulb in Gotthard’s lab.

“Not there, mensa,” Gotthard says, waving his friend away from the empty spot behind the machine. “That place is for the battery stack—the big box that Speese brought yesterday with this sweet, beautiful transformer.” Gotthard taps the machine like it were of his own flesh.

“Thank Goah, she managed,” Rutger says with a wide smile. “I had my doubts!”

“Ah there was never any doubt, mensa. She enjoys your karma too much.” He laughs.

Rutger joins in, and then says, “Now I’m really dry. You are going to be pulling many night shifts down there,” he gestures at the door, “just to pay your part off. And if anything else goes wrong...” He shrugs and shakes his head.

“Don’t be a fucking crow. We’re almost there, this time for real.” He kneels over the transformer’s opening. “Pass me the—”

A sudden, shrill bleep makes them—and Ximena—twitch in their place.

Gotthard and Rutger raise their heads, lips parted.

“ATTENTION, LUNTEREN!” A female voice thunders across the auditorium. “STOP YOUR CHORES, AND LISTEN.”

A pause. Gotthard and Rutger exchange a puzzled glance. “What—?” Rutger is interrupted by another bleep. It is the colony’s public address system. With a loudspeaker on the top of this tower, it is particularly loud here. Mark moves his hands over his ears, a frown over his Neanderthal forehead ridge.

“ATTENTION, LUNTEREN! THIS IS YOUR QUAESTOR SPEAKING. ATTENTION, THIS IS AN EMERGENCY REQUEST. I REPEAT. THIS IS AN EMERGENCY REQUEST.”

The voice wavers, almost hesitantly, drenched in emotion.

“THE HEAD OF GOAH HAS DECLARED THAT LUNTEREN IS DEMON-RIDDEN. I REPEAT. LUNTEREN IS OFFICIALLY DEMON-RIDDEN.”

A breath-catching sound and another pause. Gotthard and Rutger stand slowly, their faces turning pale.

“ATTENTION, LUNTEREN. THE HEAD OF GOAH CALLS ON YOU TO ACT NOW. YOUR PARTICIPATION

IS CRUCIAL.” Her voice wavers noticeably. “AWS GRAND INQUISITOR RHODES GRACIOUSLY GRANTS US TWENTY-FOUR HOURS. I REPEAT. TWENTY-FOUR HOURS BEFORE—” Her voice breaks.

Gotthard and Rutger don’t move. They listen intently, gaping at the wall without seeing.

“TWENTY-FOUR HOURS BEFORE HE WITHDRAWS THE GIFT OF GOAH FROM LUNTEREN. TWENTY-FOUR HOURS BEFORE HE ASSUMES EXTRAORDINARY POWERS TO CLEANSE OUR COLONY FROM DEMONS.” She pauses for emphasis. “BY WHATEVER MEANS NECESSARY.”

“No!” Gotthard says, eyes glaring. He clenches his hands into fists.

“PLEASE, FELLOW COLONISTS, PLEASE!” Her voice turns warmer, less mechanical, more personal. “THE SINNERS HAD THEIR CHANCE. FOR ALL OUR SAKES, IF YOU KNOW ANYTHING, EVEN A SUSPICION, COME SEE ME URGENTLY. QUAESTOR MATHUS OUT.”

Gotthard slams a fist on the bench.

“Goahdammit, those bitches will ruin it all!”

“Juf Edda!” The six-year-old girl waves her raised hand impatiently. “Juf Edda, here!”

Edda stifles a yawn. Her sleep deprivation is dragging down Ximena’s own awareness. It is funny how it feels to yearn for sleep from within a dream.

“What now, Margriet?” Edda’s voice is slower and rougher than usual.

“What is a *demon*?” she says, big blue eyes wide.

“A demon...” Edda pinches the base of her nose, shaking

her head. “Didn’t I say no more questions about the Inquisitor?” Ximena feels Edda’s irritation for letting the arrival of that man affect her sleep.

“Yes, Juf Edda,” she nods repeatedly. “But my question is... Oh, is the Inquisitor a demon?!”

“No, no,” she chuckles weakly. “The Inquisitor *hunts* demons, yeah?”

At the sight of a dozen shooting arms, she raises a hand and says, “No, children. No more questions about inquisitors, demons, and the like, yeah? Go talk to your Quaestor during your next service if you must. Now,” she turns to the blackboard and knocks the surface with a piece of chalk, “these are today’s sight words—”

A loud bleep coming from outside makes the children gasp.

“Not again,” Edda mutters to herself. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” she says louder, waving her hand soothingly at the children.

“ATTENTION, THIS IS YOUR QUAESTOR SPEAKING. ATTENTION.”

The children exchange tense glances, some with eyes close to tears, others giggling with excitement.

“AWS GRAND INQUISITOR RHODES REQUESTS THE IMMEDIATE APPEARANCE OF COLONISTS REDEEMED EDDA VAN DOLAH AND WOMAN ALINE SPEESE. PLEASE REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO AWS HEAD’S MAIN OFFICE IN THE EYE OF GOAH. I REPEAT...”

Edda’s eyes, looking out the window, appear frozen as the broadcast continues and ends.

Edda doesn’t move. The children stare at her with increasing anxiety. Tears begin to roll down some cheeks. “Juf Edda?” Margriet asks.

The door slams open. Willem runs in and takes Edda into his arms. She doesn’t seem to react, her empty eyes still locked on the window.

“It’s okay,” Willem lies. “It’s okay. I’m coming with you.”

“Meester Willem?” some children ask in trembling voices.

Willem ignores the children’s calls and pushes his daughter gently towards the hallway. As they reach the doorway, he puts a kiss on her cheek and says, “Remember our fights about confessing? Well, that barge parted for good. You now keep your mouth shut, girl!”

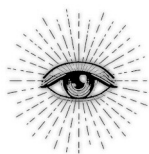
He kisses her again.

Twice.

She doesn’t seem to react.

“Goah’s fucking Mercy, Edda! Whatever happens, don’t admit to anything. You hear me? Do *not* confess!”

FIFTEEN



Alien Oaths

“I’m so afraid,” Aline says, as she and Edda reach the front of Edda’s house in the Miel Way. The residential street is unnaturally empty of bikers, dog strollers and nosy neighbors. They are utterly alone. And it is eerily silent. Not a seagull is to be seen on a roof, nor heard in the distance.

A dream, Ximena immediately realizes, as she notices how the low winter sun scatters light. Yes, the air feels denser, more vibrant, and smells a tad too fresh, even for a colony of the twenty-fifth century. Not to mention the presence of Edda’s left ear on her perfectly healthy face.

“Why don’t we sit?” Edda asks. “Come.”

She gently takes her friend into her house’s front yard and up the steps to the porch. They settle on two comfortable rocking chairs, facing the sun as it floods the garden and the porch with light and warmth.

“I’m also afraid,” Edda says. “But less, now that you came. Thank you.”

“It’s a miracle I could even focus my mind on ghosting.”

“For me, it’s a miracle I could even get myself to sleep.” Edda sighs.

“You’re used to cells, though,” Aline says with a weak smile.

“Very funny.”

“Sorry, sister.” Aline puts a hand on Edda’s arm. “What do you think will happen now?”

Edda shrugs and purses her lips. “They can’t keep us locked up without some sort of procedure. We have rights. And remember, they have *nothing* against us. We just shut our mouths and we’ll be fine, yeah?”

“I wish I were so certain.”

Edda takes Aline’s hands into hers. “Don’t forget my oath, Aline. I won’t allow anything bad happen to you. If shit hits the fan, I’m taking full responsibility, yeah?”

Aline meets Edda’s intense gaze. “I doubt shit stays put so neatly.”

Edda frowns, sinking her head.

“Sorry, I didn’t—”

“No, don’t worry, sister. It’s just a thought that crossed my mind.”

Aline smiles. “Care to share?”

Edda looks squarely at her friend and says, “What if you aren’t here?”

Aline raises her eyebrows. “If I’m not... here?”

“What if you’re just a dream of mine—not a ghost? What if I’m just talking to myself?”

“Woman Speese is indeed here, Redeemed van Dolah.” Edda and Aline jump at the sudden voice. Even Ximena does, and from the many gasps around her on the benches, she is not alone. A mare is standing next to them, on the porch, staring down at the two sitting girls as if she had been there all along.

“Elder Rew!” Edda stands and embraces her lean lower body. Ximena chuckles at the sheer joy that streams through the psych-link. Or is it... hope?

Aline gapes at Rew, as she stands there in silent and serene acceptance of Edda's effusive hold.

Rew finally says, "The mind-eye is the first step of the Path in the Shadow, Redeemed van Dolah. Alas, still beyond your capability."

Edda steps back, smiling, eyes sparkling.

"As you learn to project your mind, you will sense the difference between the essence of a true dreamer," Rew raises a demonstrative arm at Aline, "and the moody chaos of the dreamscape." As Rew turns her head to the side of Aline, a second Aline—smiling widely—appears right on that spot.

Edda laughs aloud, clapping in delight. Even Aline—the original one—chuckles.

"I thought you forgot about us!" Edda says, frowning now, a hand on her hips.

"She didn't," Aline-Copy says, and gives Edda a playful wink. "But those Smook fuckers had to be dealt with first."

"Did you kill them?!" Edda asks Rew, and then turns her head to Aline-Copy, and back to Rew, uncertain who to speak to.

"My walkers did," Rew says, and with the briefest of looks, Aline-Copy vanishes, leaving behind a sudden but pleasant smell of roses and thyme.

Edda whistles loudly and exchanges a wide-eyed glimpse with Aline. "I don't know whether to thank you, or to fear you."

Rew spreads her arms in a very human gesture. "Do thank me."

Edda laughs. "Thank you, Elder Rew, for cleansing the world of such a pile of rot."

"Speaking of cleansing," Aline says. "Can you help us with our little problem? We are, uh..."

"You are held in detention by your security forces," Rew says.

“Goahdamn right,” Edda says. “And we are getting, uh, a tad nervous, yeah? Can you get us out of here?”

“Alas, I cannot.”

Edda’s smile vanishes. “Pure sin! So, what are you here for?”

“I do admit to being myself in wonder of being here. This visit puts me in direct violation of the instructions of my superiors.”

“You are... *sneaking* in to see us?!”

“I am risking my existence.”

Edda blinks and exhales, while Aline covers her mouth.

“Why?” Edda finally asks.

Rew doesn’t immediately reply. Ximena has the distinct impression that she doesn’t know why herself.

“There is more at stake than our fleeting existences, Redeemed van Dolah. There is the continued presence of our species in spacetime that is at risk.”

“Whoa!” Edda chuckles, taking a step back. “Aren’t you exaggerating a tiny bit?”

“Very well. Do allow me to put my train of thoughts in more digestible words. You do surely agree that it is imperative for your civilization to end the ritual culling of its youth.”

“You mean the Joyousday, yeah?” Edda says, eyes widening with increasing excitement. “Of course! It’s a pile of bull! And a fundamental violation of our sacred rights too. Isn’t life the most sacred of rights? Nobody—not even aw’s Head!—is above aw’s Compacts.”

“Indeed, Redeemed van Dolah. And that *pile of bull* shall only end when a selected group of *human* Walkers of the Mind plant in the *human* consciousness a desire for change. Initially, it would suffice only in your geographical proximity. That alone should keep Elder van Dolah alive. His termination is due soon, is it not?”

Rew pauses briefly to let her words sink. And they do, oh

how they do! Ximena places a hand on her own chest, as if to stop Edda's sudden hope from bursting free.

Satisfied with Edda's flushed expression, Rew continues, "Saving your father, and those in similar straits, shall only be the beginning, Redeemed van Dolah. You are an instructor in your community and thus acquainted with human history. You do know that the passions of liberating ideas are hard to contain—they shall inevitably spread. Initially to neighboring dwellings, then farther—and faster—until they become the new norm. Humanity shall start growing again."

"You want to start a revolution? Here, in Lunteren? Just with... *dreamy stuff*?"

"Indeed, Redeemed van Dolah. What, if not dreams, is the fuel of revolutions?"

"Train us!" Edda steps forward, as her house, the garden—the whole colony—begin to shine and dim in rhythmic pulses, like a heartbeat of exhilaration. "Show us the Path in the Shadow!"

"Do ground yourself, Redeemed van Dolah." Rew gestures at the throbbing dreamworld. "Your awareness is slipping."

"It is not!" Edda raises a finger, and the entire dream of home and Lunteren stabilizes at once. More than that, the dreamscape appears to sharpen in ultrarealistic rendition, and to come alive around them. Ximena can hear traffic on the street now, and the barking of two dogs somewhere beyond the hedge. A woman passes the garden gate on a bicycle and nods at them a casual salute, impervious to the alien's presence. "Show us the Path in the Shadow!"

"I do admit that I find myself faced with a dilemma, Redeemed van Dolah—I have been explicitly forbidden from instructing humans to Walk the Path in the Shadow."

"Why? How can we deal with the Inquisitor and save my father with only the Path of Light? That's not enough, is it?"

"And that is precisely the source of the dilemma. No,

Redeemed van Dolah. Without mastering the Path in the Shadow, without the skills of a Walker of the Mind, I do fear there is no hope of stopping the culling.”

“Uh, then excuse me, Elder Rew,” she says, her voice stretched with irony, “but from here, I can’t see the dilemma. You don’t have a choice. You *must* complete the training!”

“That is indeed what logic dictates. Nevertheless, I was hoping for enough time to... overcome the resistance of my superiors.”

“But there’s no time! My dad’s Joyousday is in three weeks, and here we are, stuck in fucking jail. Only Goah knows what they will do to us, and without us, what have you got, huh?”

Aline’s eyes widen in alarm. “You said that it would be all fine!”

“And if not?!” Edda shouts, giving her friend the briefest of glances before refocusing her attention on Rew’s soulless eyes. “You don’t need to tell shit, Elder Rew! Your superiors don’t need to find out that you are training us further.”

“Alas, it is not so simple.”

“It is! This is more important than us, yeah? You said it yourself. Just lie your ass off!”

“I can’t subvert the truth. The marvelous human skill of intentional deception is beyond the capabilities of my species.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that before. Pure sin! It’s... hard to believe. How can a society evolve without lies? I mean—what about, er, imagination, for example?”

“I do admit imagination does not come easy to my species.”

“But—there is *so much* that depends on imagination! Not just lying. Stories, for example. Don’t you have stories?”

“Our culture knows no fiction.”

“Oh, wow, how sad. I bet your free time options are pretty lame. And what about, uh, diplomacy, negotiations, even

scientific research? How can you evolve technologically without imagination?”

“We do have our ways.”

Edda chuckles, and spread her arms effusively. “See?! You are good with secrets! You may not be able to lie, but you can surely shut up. Problem solved. Train us, and don’t tell.”

“I can choose not to reveal information, that is indeed correct. Alas, not a long-lived solution. My superiors shall eventually request a report. My continued silence might even hasten their request.”

“What happens if you just... ignore their orders and do as you please?”

“They would terminate me.”

“Pure sin!” Edda whistles. “Seriously?”

“Undoubtedly. And my termination would also end your hopes of saving your father—and our worlds.”

Edda remains silent, thoughtful, her hands idly touching the porch railing, unconsciously grounding her awareness in the dreamscape.

“Furthermore,” Rew says, “your situation is indeed delicate. If I do risk my existence, then time is of the essence, and it seems that yours might be cut short prematurely.”

Aline gasps and takes a seat on one of the chairs.

Edda raises a hand at her in a calming gesture and turns to Rew. “There is time. We are quick learners. You’ve said it yourself often.”

“You are to learn swifter than even my most talented Walkers ever did. Only by making you true Walkers of the Mind—*human* Walkers of the Mind—and showing to my superiors your enhanced capacity to sway your civilization in ways our *alien* minds are incapable of, only then might I survive my next report. Only then, might our worlds find a future.”

“We’ll do it! We’ll put every dream minute into it. Plus,

Aline is already halfway, yeah? She can ghost like a pro! The *Second Wake* it's called?"

"Traversing the Second Wake is, indeed, an integral part of the Path in the Shadow." Rew turns her head at the quick-breathing Aline. "And Woman Speese has indeed traversed it without prior training. An outstanding talent, just as her halo predicted. And just as yours predicts as well, Redeemed van Dolah. In hindsight, it was inevitable that you would end up nibbling the edges of the Path in the Shadow."

"Train us, Goah's Mercy! We can make it!"

"I do believe you can. I can make you the first Mind Walkers of humankind. Your action at the Trials might have been dangerous and reckless, as your current circumstances attest, but my Walkers do report that the defiance you broadcasted breeds like protected prey in hunting grounds. And yet, the time constraints... the risks..." Ximena has never seen a marai hesitating. But that is exactly what Rew is doing.

"Train us, Elder Rew!" Edda grabs Rew's arm with both her hands. "Train us and we promise to do *everything* you say! We promise to be your most devoted students. That should make your risk acceptable."

Rew stares at Edda for a long time.

Edda drops Rew's arm, and takes a slow step back, but does not unlock her eyes from Rew's.

"Humans do deceive," Rew finally says.

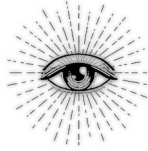
"Come on, Elder Rew. You *know* me better than my dad." She places her right hand over her heart. "I solemnly swear by Goah that I will faithfully follow your instructions, whatever they may be, also after our training." She drops her hand and turns to Aline. "Now you, sister."

Aline blinks, puts her finger on her chest and makes the gesture.

"Then we are in agreement, Redeemed van Dolah,

Woman Speese. Your first step into the Shadow begins now.”
Rew skews her head slightly at Edda. “As you can see, my
species has no trouble engaging in negotiation.”

SIXTEEN



The Arrogance of the Gods

Edda, Aline and Rew freeze in the dream porch that fills the auditorium.

Ximena takes a deep breath and stretches her arms, taking advantage of the unexpected pause.

“Sorry for the interruption, people, but before we move on, I want you to put your historian hat on for a minute.” Professor Miyagi points at Rew straight above him. “It is the 21st of January 2400, and the marai—or at least a faction within them—seem hell-bent on introducing humanity to the Paths of the Mind Walkers. Any thoughts on that?”

“What can possibly go wrong?” Lora shouts from the opposite side of the amphitheater, triggering the laugh of her classmates, even the blue-and-white robed ones around Ximena.

“It reminds me of Prometheus,” Qiao says, “defying the gods to gift the fire of civilization to humankind. But this time, it was not a myth.”

“More like colonists of the Americas, selling rifles to the barbarians,” Mallory says. She is sitting below Ximena, on the first bench, right next to Censor Smith. Ximena partnered

with Mallory once for an assignment, and they worked pretty well together. A focused girl from Atlantic.

“To the *natives*,” Mark’s voice erupts from Ximena’s right. He stands to meet Mallory’s look. “And to make your analogy more precise, it would have been like giving cannons to them, not rifles.” He then turns his gaze down to Miyagi on stage and to Censor Smith on the first bench, who is following the exchange with placid interest. “It humbles me to think that had this not happened, I would now be nothing more than an illiterate, short-lived Nubarian semi-slave—or, most likely, simply extinct.” He sits and gives Ximena a casual wink.

“Rew reminds me of Atahualpa in Cajamarca,” Ximena whispers to Cody and Mark.

“Here, Professor!” Mark takes Ximena’s hand and shakes it in the air. “Something about the Incas.”

“Oh, Ximena. Please.” Professor Miyagi waves her to stand.

Ximena shoots a murderous sidelong glance to Mark and stands. “Hmm, yes, I was thinking not so much in terms of technology transfer, but on how, uh, misguided attitudes can, in the right time, and the right moment, put history on its head. Like Atahualpa in Cajamarca.” Ximena can feel the stare of the entire amphitheater squarely locked on her. *Oh Goah!* She clears her throat. “Uh, the mare Rew reminds me of the Inca Emperor Atahualpa, when he left his army outside the city to meet the conquistadors unarmed.”

“Oh, I like how you think,” Miyagi says with a widening smile. “The *great man* theory. Go on, please.”

“Yes, he was a single man with the weight of a barbarian empire on his shoulders.”

“A *civilization*,” Mark says next to her.

“A man at a crucial history chokepoint,” she continues, raising her voice. “Had his opponent been other barbarians, it wouldn’t have really mattered whether or not he made a stupid

mistake. Whether he dies or lives, whether his empire survives or collapses, that wouldn't have had any impact on the larger structure of history. But he made the wrong call when he was in the fulcrum of history. And he made it because he underestimated Pizarro and what that *alien* represented. Atahualpa made the most consequential mistake in over ten thousand years of history in the Americas because he was filled by the arrogance of the gods."

"The arrogance of the gods..." Miyagi repeats softly. "That is some out of the box thinking, people. I love it! And you are, of course, implying that our favorite mare is as blinded by the arrogance of the gods as Atahualpa was, right?"

Ximena nods with a shy smile and sits.

"Awesome!" Mark whispers in her right ear.

"Well done," Cody says to her left.

"I see..." Miyagi puts his hands on his back and paces the stage. "You are saying that Rew is also underestimating the," he stops and turns to Ximena with a chuckle, "*aliens*. And that she is about to fuck it up so monumentally that the structure of history will shatter."

Many students laugh at Miyagi's out-of-the-blue explicit.

"Fascinating insights," Miyagi continues, nodding with satisfaction. "Thank you, Ximena. And thank you all! I love how we are finally coming together, Townsend and Lundev! And how the Global Program is finally mixing and enriching our unique knowledge and perspectives. Isn't it wonderful, Censor Smith? And to our point here," Miyagi throws a casual hand gesture at the frozen scene, "you all obviously grasp the material importance of this—how should I call it?—*technology transfer*. But I would like you to expand your perspective, people. So far, it's been too... human-centric. Think about it; the Path in the Shadow is the cornerstone of the dreamworm civilization—the base of a technology that grants any lichai colony control over an entire world." Miyagi pauses a few

seconds for greater effect. “A technology that allows the maraiha to connect colonies spanning hundreds of light-years.” Miyagi points at the alien hanging statically in midair. “*This*, no less, is Rew’s gift to Edda. And to humankind.”

“**W**hy can’t Aline train with us?” Edda asks, gesturing at the spot on the porch where Aline was a few moments ago, before Rew’s mare popped up to take her elsewhere. “Wouldn’t it be quicker to train together?”

“It would not, Redeemed van Dolah. Woman Speese’s capabilities and progress do differ significantly from yours.”

“Yeah, I know.” Edda rolls her eyes. “Super Aline’s ghosting talent.”

“Indeed, albeit without the degree of control you do master. Thus, I shall undertake your guidance into the Shadow, and Walker Moih shall undertake Woman Speese’s.”

Edda folds her arms. “How can you trust that, hmm, Elder Moih?”

“I do fail to understand your question. Moih is one of my Walkers. Not only is she an accomplished Walker of the Mind, but her talent to instruct others is only second to mine.”

“She beat you at the Trials,” Edda speaks slowly, and almost intelligibly, so clenched is her jaw. Ximena can feel Edda’s fierce animosity against the mare that trained the Smooks.

“Indeed, she did. She is my best Walker. And since time is of the essence, she is the most obvious choice to handle Woman Speese’s instruction.”

“Won’t she betray you again?” Edda asks, her voice filled with poison. “She might go to that asshole marai or your superiors and tell them about our little project.”

“I do see now the nature of your mistrust. But it is

misplaced. Do allow me to briefly explain. Walker Moih did not *betray* me. Walker Moih is *my* Walker, and I am her *master*. Walker Moih did what she was instructed to do. And she did it to the best of her abilities. Unfortunately for us, she knew exactly what to say to sway Overseer Yog's decision."

"If she was so good, why did you assign her to the Smooks?"

"Because I was instructed to."

"Pure sin! You marai are so... so... *alien*."

"Thank you. Now, since time is of the essence..." Rew waves her hand-appendages and the house, the garden, even the sky disappears in a blink. The scene substitution is sudden and complete.

Edda and Rew are now floating in a gray, featureless void. There is no ground, no sky, no horizon. Only a monotonous emptiness that extends forever in every direction. The utter silence, the odorless air—feels clinically *dead*. There is gravity, though, a definite sense of *down*, Ximena notices. And Edda's white tunic remains tightly wrapped around her body.

"What a cheery place!" Edda says, peering about. "Where are we?"

"We are *nowhere*. Thus, no distractions."

Edda whistles. "You were not kidding about your lack of imagination." She chuckles. "A couple of flowerpots would sure as Dem cheer the place up."

Rew ignores her words and begins, "The mind-eye is the first step of the Path in the—"

"I see a problem, though," Edda interrupts.

"A problem?" Rew replies, her female psychic voice as soft as ever, like her patience was not being stretched in the slightest. Ximena chuckles. Edda might be an excellent teacher, but as a student...

"Yeah, how am I going to stay aware?" Edda gestures

around. “There is *nothing* here for me to dig into. What if I forget that I’m dreaming?”

“I am pleased that you do realize the risk of slipping—it is a genuine risk for a Walker of the Light. A Walker in the Shadow, on the other hand, is expected to stop relying on the senses generated by the dream-body, and use the mind-eye instead.”

“Mind... eye?”

“The *mind-eye*. The *dream sense*. The first step in the Path in the Shadow. And this... *nowhere* you so seem to dislike is perfectly suited to assist in your development of a dream sense.”

“Hmm.” Edda turns her head to the *nothingness* around her and purses her lips. “How?”

“Your mind does *know* that you are dreaming, Redeemed van Dolah. With sufficient practice, your mind shall learn to *feel* the presence of that knowledge. A Walker of the Mind learns to use that feeling, that instinctive conviction that you are indeed dreaming, to dig herself into the dreamscape. And do so permanently. Do promise to return to the nowhere in my absence to develop your dream sense further, Redeemed van Dolah.”

“Fine, I’ll practice,” she says, a pinch of self-doubt in her voice.

Aline materializes nearby in a sudden flash of existence and turns her smiling face at them.

Edda twitches and takes an unconscious step back on the groundless void. “Aline?”

Aline shifts from one foot to another, widening her smile, but says nothing.

“Oh, Goah! Aline, is this really you?”

Aline nods eagerly, but says nothing.

“The instruction of the first step,” Rew says, “begins by pondering the true significance of sharing the dreamscape with

an independent sentience.” Rew waves a hand appendage in Aline’s direction. “Redeemed van Dolah, you do have a visitor—or do you?”

Edda turns to Rew, frowning in confusion. “But—this can’t be Aline.” She then gives her friend a studious glance. “Is it you?”

Aline nods again with an unwavering smile.

Edda’s frown deepens. “She can’t be,” she says with a firm shake of her head. “Aline is with Elder Moih.”

“Do ponder how to discern whether this is just a dream character and not the real Woman Speese?”

“It’s obvious. She would never... act like *that*.”

“Perhaps the real Aline would have acted like this?” Rew waves the hand appendage again, and Aline bursts out laughing.

“Oh, sorry, Edda,” she says, her voice still shaking with laughter. “It was Rew’s idea. She asked me to remain silent and try to fool you.” She claps once. “Goah, we got you!”

“No, really?” Edda says, eyes widening. “Is that you? How did you—?”

“I do gather that Woman Speese is delighted to be inside our dreamscape,” Rew says.

“I am! Elder Moih is good, but she gets a bit tiresome really quick, you know?” She looks around. “What is this place?” She turns to Edda. “The furniture needs a bit more work.”

“So, you are, uh, real Aline, yeah?”

“In the flesh! Well, in the dream flesh, but you get the idea.” She makes a playful twirl that opens her tunic like a ballerina.

Edda tilts her head, her frown still beaming skepticism.

“Oh, you’ve always had a thick skull, Edda. If it doesn’t bite you, it doesn’t exist, right? Do I really need to bite you?” Aline puts a hand on her hips. “Okay. What if I tell you a secret? Something that only both of us know?”

Edda purses her lips and waits in silence.

Aline takes a deep breath, and her expression softens. “Remember two years ago—Hans’ birthday? I still remember the tension—your dad especially. For a moment I thought he was going to pass out when we entered aw’s Womb and that birth engineer brought the baby out, clean and neatly wrapped in white blessings. The Van der Veens were also there, of course. The lot of them, hoping for a girl.” Her eyes wander in remembrance, her smile widening. “Remember your dad’s face when the engineer consulted the dowry bond and handed him the baby? Oh, the relief—the happiness! We cried our eyes out, all of us! A boy, and a new Van Dolah generation! But while walking back home with Hans in your arms, you began to cry again, remember?”

Edda nods, her gaze elsewhere.

“Those were not tears of joy. Nobody else noticed, the rest were behind, but I could see the sadness. It was... tearing you apart! I asked you why you were so upset. You wiped your eyes and said—”

“Is Mom watching?” The memory gleams in her black eyes.

“So you remember.” Aline’s lips curve into a sad smile.

“How could I not.” Edda represses a sob.

“Come here,” Aline says, and stretches her arms.

As Edda steps forward to embrace her friend, Aline’s expression freezes in horror. She opens her eyes and mouth in a mask of dread, like a fish looking a fisherman in the eyes. Her body stretches grotesquely. Her head loses all features, except the now-dead eyes and a black-humid mouth. Her clothes melt into white, leathery flesh. Aline has morphed into Rew in a heartbeat.

“Fucking Mercy!” Edda says, leaping back in reflex, as do Ximena and most of the students. The scene vibrates in sudden, wild agitation.

“Calm down, Redeemed van Dolah. Do dig in,” Aline-turned-Rew says. “Or you shall pierce into the wake.”

Edda stares at her palm while taking deep breaths. The vibrations slow down and finally fade. She turns to Rew. “What the *fuck*?!”

“I do apologize for the demonstration,” Rew says. “I trust that it has been effective?”

“What have you—? Where’s Aline?!”

“Woman Speese is dutifully training with Walker Moih.”

“*That*—was not her?”

“*That*, Redeemed van Dolah, was a projection. A dream character.”

“But she acted so... She *knew* stuff, Goah’s Mercy!”

“Indeed. All I did was to release the Aline projection from my control, and your dreaming mind took immediately over. Thus, as a puppet of your own mind, she did naturally know everything that you know. Or more accurately, she did know everything that you know that she knows. She did speak and move and act as your mind would expect her to. She did fool you because the dreamscape is foremost a make-believe illusion generated by our own dreaming minds.”

“But then, how’s it possible to know if somebody is... *real*?”

“It is indeed challenging, as you have just experienced. The answer is, of course, the mind-eye, the dream sense, the first step in the Path.”

“This *dream sense*—how does it feel?”

“Hard to grasp. It is beyond the senses of the flesh. But a Walker of the Mind can feel the dream like your skin can feel the warmth of the winter sun, or the gaze of a stranger.”

“Okay,” Edda says, shrugging. “If you say so.”

“The lesson of this demonstration is double-fold. On one hand, you shall attempt to develop the instinct of the dream sense with every opportunity. Seek it in every training session.”

Edda nods.

“On the other hand, you shall remain aware of the risk of intrusion.”

“Intrusion?” Edda frowns.

“A few moments ago, you were convinced that Woman Speese was an intruder—a sentient being traversing into your dreamscape. And yet she was not. You could not tell.”

“I know, I know,” Edda rolls her eyes. “The dream sense.”

Rew morphs gradually back into Aline, shortening, widening, white leather skin transforming into a white winter tunic. Only her blank facial expression stays throughout the transformation. “I am an intruder, Redeemed van Dolah,” Rew-Aline says, in Aline’s voice. “Can you *sense* the difference?”

Edda stares at Rew-Aline for a few moments, meticulously scanning her dream body. Then she raises her hands and takes a step closer, as if feeling the warmth of a fire. Edda tilts her head, her expression a focused frown, like when hearing somebody call your name almost below the threshold of perception. “I’m not sure...”

Rew-Aline waves a hand and a second Aline, a perfect copy of herself, appears beside her. The fresh Aline smiles warmly and says, “I’m not an intruder, just a dream character. Care to compare?”

Edda steps closer to Dream-Aline and spreads her arms to feel the dream around her appearance. Dream-Aline reaches out and playfully places a finger on the tip of Edda’s nose. “Activating dream sense detector,” she says with a jolly voice. Edda ignores her, except her lips tighten with the hint of a smile.

A few moments of inspection later, Edda twitches her head and walks back in front of Rew-Aline, her arms stretched, her expression still deep in concentration, like listening to a faraway melody intertwined with the wind. “Yeah,” she says, nodding slowly several times. “Yeah—like there is a thin

membrane of... *something* invisible around your body—like a change of temperature that can only be felt with the mind, not with the skin.”

Rew-Aline nods and morphs back into her alien self. “Do hold to that feeling, Redeemed van Dolah. Do learn to recognize it. Do use it to dig into permanent awareness. Do use it to sense the intrusion of foreign sentience. For a skilled Walker of the Mind, the dream sense is second nature.”

“Way to go, sister!” Dream-Aline says, clapping her hands. “I’m proud of you!”

“Thanks.” Edda smiles and winks at her dream friend.

“The mind-eye is the first step into the Shadow. You shall practice in my absence with Woman Speese. Do acknowledge.”

“I acknowledge, mensa,” Edda says, and high fives Dream-Aline.

“Very well. Alas, where the first step is intuitive, the second step is not.”

“The second step! We’re progressing quickly tonight!” Edda says. Ximena feels the surge of her anticipation. Mark, next to her, seems almost as excited as Edda. He is a Mind Walker, so he probably can appreciate such things in a way she... just can’t.

“Do not allow your talents for some of the steps fool you into underestimating those where your gifts do not extend. The second step—the *Traverse*—is unnaturally demanding, even to my kind. Thus, we marai have perfected, since time immemorial, a dream *metaphor* that Walkers of the Mind do apply to their more challenged apprentices. And you are in need of such extraordinary assistance.”

Dream-Aline chuckles, and says, “And I’m not!”

“Oh, shut up, sister. Whatever it is, Elder Rew, I’m all in. Let’s do it, yeah?”

“I do warn you, Redeemed van Dolah. It shall be—unsettling.”

“Uh, unsettling?”

“I do fear so. Are you ready?”

“Of course she is,” Dream-Aline says. “You can do it, Edda.”

“Oh, shut up.” Edda turns to Rew. “What do you mean, *unsettling*?”

“Traversing does not come with ease. It does require a more than casual proficiency in all three steps of the Path of Light. The transition from the Light into the Shadow does feel initially *unnatural* to every Walker. All the abilities of a master of the Light must be combined together in non-intuitive ways.”

“Whoa, sounds... hard.”

“It is indeed. Thus, the *metaphor*. Designed to bend the mind of even the most inflexible of apprentices.”

“*Bend*—sounds... violent.”

“It is violent. But effective. Are you ready?”

“Hold on, hold on. But how did Aline do it?” She points at Dream-Aline, who nods in eager agreement. “I’m sure there was no violence involved!”

“I am not aware of the circumstances of Woman Speese’s transition into the Traverse. But it is undeniable that she has an intense traverser halo—it comes to her with greater ease than to you. Nonetheless, she must have bent her own mind, possibly by instinct—she does have it.”

“I do have it,” Dream-Aline says to Edda, raising her brows mockingly.

“Oh, shut up,” Edda says. “Let’s do this, Elder Rew. Go ahead. Shoot.”

“Very well. I shall start the metaphor in a moment, and shall guide you through its execution. You shall attend my every instruction, and implement them to the best of your abilities. You shall consciously use all the skills of a Walker of the Light. You shall remain dug in the dreamscape at all times. If you do fail and pierce into the wake—and you will, because

no Walker ever passes the metaphor in her first try—you shall immediately dive back in and try anew.”

Dream-Aline says, “Ah, don’t worry, Elder Rew. Edda is too strong a Light-Walker to let herself wake up. You wait and see.”

Rew turns her head towards Dream-Aline. “You are full of confidence, Redeemed van Dolah.”

“Uh, I don’t...” Edda hesitates and then shrugs.

Rew turns her white eyes back at Edda. “When you do pierce the wake, you shall immediately tread the first step of the Path of Light and dive with haste to try anew. The metaphor shall run until you pass. Are these guidelines understood?”

Edda nods slowly. “I think so. I do everything you say and try not to wake up. Doesn’t sound too hard. What happens if I don’t pass?”

“You must.”

“Yeah, but... what if I don’t?”

“Woman Spese can Traverse—thus, humans are psychically capable. You shall pass.”

“But Aline is more talented than me, yeah? Maybe I’m just too dumb. What then?”

“You must. Otherwise, our agreement is worthless and I must conclude it before my existence is put further in jeopardy.”

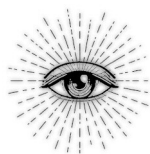
“That’s pretty radical!”

“The Traverse is a crucial skill of every Walker of the Mind. Without it, there is no hope for our mutual... agendas, and therefore no point in sustaining our agreement. You shall pass. Or your father shall die.”

“Whoa—uh, okay. Thanks for the pep talk. Let’s do this.”

“Very well.” She raises an arm, and an infinite expanse of flat stones pops into sudden existence beneath their feet.

SEVENTEEN



The Traverse Metaphor

Rew makes a gesture and a row of stones next to Edda begins to rise from the flat, featureless ground with a deep rumble. They gradually take the shape of a nude stairway with three steps, each step as tall as Edda, leading nowhere, high in the air.

“Behold the metaphor for the Path of Light,” Rew says.

As Edda looks up at the steep, gray steps, her own body begins radiating a pulsating, white light. Her lips part in surprise. She gapes at her hands and down at her glowing self. The milky light keeps brightening until it becomes so intense that Ximena’s eyes need a few moments to adapt.

“The light is *you*. The Path is with *you*.”

Edda is made of light. *The Path of Light?* Ximena wonders. *Very metaphorical.* The only other objects on this empty expanse, Rew and the tall stairs, cast long shadows on the featureless stones.

“The Path of Light is about *you*. Only yourself, nobody else. A way *inwards*. It is the Path that leads to a higher level of consciousness.” Rew points at the top of the stairs. “The Path in the Shadow, on the other hand, is a way *outwards*. It is about

the universe beyond your own consciousness—the rest of existence beyond the limits of your limited mind. It is in the Shadow where consciousnesses do touch each other.”

“Where?” Edda asks, and waves a finger. “Do I need to climb the stairs?”

“Do remember the guidelines of the metaphor, Redeemed van Dolah. Do listen. Do obey. Do resist piercing the wake. Do dive back when you do.”

Before Edda has time to even nod, Ximena feels her surge of adrenaline as a black, thick, tar-like liquid begins to flood the infinite plains of the nowhere, rushing over the stepping stones all the way to the horizon, as if emerging from the gaps between them. A deep, gurgling sound grows noticeably louder with every inch the bubbling liquid rises. The substance whirls, tugs and pushes in chaotic currents. The air gets thick and humid as the liquid surface spits whiffs of black vapors. Ximena frowns at the sudden stench.

Edda yelps as the bubbling tar-like liquid covers her ankles—Ximena instinctively raises her own feet. It’s freezing cold!—and keeps rising steadily but rapidly towards her knees. “Pure sin! What—?!”

“These are the metaphorical waters of the dreamscape,” Rew says, her voice eerily crisp and calm over the all-encompassing flooding cacophony. “*Your* dreamscape.”

The rising waters already reach Edda’s waist, thick blotches leaping and staining her tunic. The liquid is partly transparent—her glowing legs are still visible under the black surface.

Edda lifts her arms, trying to keep them dry. “Oh Goah!” She turns to Rew, whose tall, elongated body stands placidly staring at her, seemingly undaunted by the creeping flood, her white skin in strong contrast with the black waters.

Ximena grabs Mark’s arm with her right hand, and Cody’s with her left. They don’t seem to mind.

“Okay—*focus*, girl,” Edda murmurs to herself. She takes a

deep breath and her expression softens to a light frown. She takes another breath and remains still for a while, face frozen in intense concentration.

Ximena's eyes scan the bubbling waters with anxious eyes, but nothing happens. The flood keeps rising with the same seemingly inexorable *hunger*.

As the waters reach Edda's chest, her jaws clench and her eyes widen. "Pure sin, it's not working!" Her eyes flinch nervously at the water as it now approaches her neck, the strong glow of her submerged body piercing the putrid surface. Ximena takes a thick gulp of dream saliva to repress a gag.

Rew, her white, long leg limbs already invisible under the currents, says, "I do appreciate your trying to control the dreamscape—it is indeed the correct instinct of a Walker of the Light. Alas, it shall not work."

"Why not?!" she asks, her pitch a notch higher than usual. She stands on her toes. "I tried to stop the flood—but nothing! I also tried to move the dream somewhere else—to reset this... *nightmare*—but nothing! What's going on?!"

"I am blocking your attempts at will-control. Do be proud, Redeemed van Dolah. Your control is firm for a Walker of the Light. But even iron will-control breaks under the slightest exertion of *faith*-control."

"But... goahdammit! Why are you stopping me? I'm supposed to use the skills of the Path, yeah?"

"You are—if you can. I do apologize for the inconvenience."

"Inconvenience?" Edda laughs without humor, her voice shaking. "This... water is freezing, it stinks, and I can't do *anything* about it!"

"A necessary inconvenience. The waters are a metaphor of your dreamscape—a nightmare in this instance—so it is naturally unpleasant. The Traverse metaphor is designed to motivate you to escape the dreamscape. As your guide, it is my

role to block all the easy exits that a Light-Walker would instinctively seek, and thus, force your mind to seek the Shadow. My apologies again, Redeemed van Dolah. It is going to get more uncomfortable.”

“Pure sin!” Edda says through clenched jaws, tilting her head back, trying in vain to keep her mouth over the gurgling surface. The rotten stench in Ximena’s nostrils is so intense at this point that she must take her left hand off Cody’s sleeve to cover her nose.

Edda’s eyes lock on the high stairway structure just as the waters flood the first step. Two more dark gray steps raise in soft contrast against the empty sky. She pushes hastily through the waters, partially swimming, her face jerking with effort as she fights her way through the chaotic currents, hands stretched over the surface. She grabs the just-submerged step and pulls herself up with a grunt. Her body falls flat on the tread with a splash.

The scene illumination shifts abruptly. Edda’s body glow diminishes a notch, while the submerged step under her feet begins to radiate the same pulsating, white light. It is as if her body had transferred part of her energy. Edda, still panting, frowns and squints at the immersed lights as they diffract through the bubbling surface.

The flood becomes louder, as if furious at her attempt to escape its grasp.

Edda rests on her hands and knees, face down, soaked, nauseating water dripping from her nose and chin on the rapidly rising surface. The chilling tide immediately engulfs her hands and legs. She stands, tries to futilely shake her curls off the cold stench, and raises her eyes up the two remaining stairs, each as high as a person.

She grabs the edge of the second step, leaps, and pulls herself up with a grunt. As she stands, dripping and *finally* completely over water—Goah be Merciful!—the glow of her

body diminishes again, and her light transfer somehow to the two steps below her feet.

She scans with jerking eyes the rising waters. They extend pitch black to the horizon, an infinite darkness except right under her feet where the milky luminosity of the staircase radiates timidly through the surface whirls. The fetid waters appear to speed up their inexorable climb, the first black blotches already falling around her feet.

Edda takes a quick breath and climbs the third and last step. As she reaches the narrow flat top, the glow of her body is fully gone. The only lingering source of light is the partly submerged staircase, its pulsating radiance beaming through the waters, as if Edda were standing on dancing white-hot embers, creating unnatural shadows on her breasts, shoulders and face.

“What now?!” she shouts at Rew, who has not moved since the black flooding began, her head the only part of her tall body still above the surface.

“Do attempt to appreciate the metaphor, Redeemed van Dolah.” Rew’s voice pierces the chaotic gurgling with uncanny clarity. “You have mastered the three steps of the Path of Light. It is on the Path where you dominate over the dreamscape. But you can see how the power of the Light-Walker is a mirage. Because the Shadow always arrives.”

As if on cue, the flood accelerates its rush with a sudden roar. Rew’s head rises with the water, eerily static, as if bodiless. The black fiery liquid engulfs the second step in an instant and starts creeping up Edda’s legs, a palm per second!

“The time has come, Redeemed van Dolah.” Ximena gapes at Rew’s emerged head as it begins to grow rapidly in size over the frenzied waves. It becomes as large as Edda’s entire body, and is still growing. “The shores of the Shadow are your only hope now.”

“Goah’s Mercy!” Edda’s anxious eyes stare as Rew’s

soaring head grows ever larger. Hairless, the texture of Rew's tight white skin is enhanced by the black dirt of dripping water. Uncanny white eyes, no eyelids, no pupils, not a trace of dirt, beaming down at Edda like the sun at the earth, as large as a building.

Ximena gasps as the alien's black mouth—so far always kept shut, since Rew *communicates* with her mind—opens. She has never seen the insides of a marai before, and Edda hasn't either. A grotesque, lipless grin distorts the lower half of her head, revealing rows of filthy teeth not unlike those of sharks—the jaws of a predator about to strike. The mouth keeps opening, ever wider, letting the black waters flood into it.

A sudden, violent jerk shoots along the black flesh deep in the mouth, as the upper and lower teeth clash together in a bone-chilling, wet crack, like a trap tripping. All while the monstrous mouth remains wide open—its fervent inner hunger on display. The closed inner teeth tremble and relax their pressure, reluctantly retreating into the black, drenched flesh of the gargantuan throat. It's an otherworldly sight, unlike anything Ximena has ever seen on Earth's natural world: an inner jaw, closing and reopening in eager spasms of craving, inside an opening mouth of black flesh.

“Fucking Mercy!” Edda says, her voice trembling in horror, eyes locked on Rew's colossal maw. The relentless, rising waters shoot up her face and cover her completely. A shock wave crosses the dreamy substance of the scene, and...

Edda sits on the bunk with a loud gasp. She scans in confusion the solid darkness of the windowless cell. She cannot see her own hand as she puts it on her still pounding chest. “Fuck!” She shakes her head in frustration and disappointment. Disappointment at herself. “Pure sin!”

She hastily drops her back against the hard mattress, presses her eyes shut and takes short, deep breaths. Her features relax almost instantly. Her thorax expands and contracts visibly under the blanket, settling into a slow, regular rhythm.

A sudden blow of freezing violence engulfs Ximena as Edda opens her eyes fully emerged in the roaring, black, putrid ocean. Grey lumps of formless matter, like dirty snow, swirl in the water at the mercy of dark currents. The faint glow of the stairs of the Path of Light, submerged deep beneath her kicking feet, provide the only illumination to the ghastly scene. Light reflects like a myriad of broken mirrors on the surface several feet above her. The ever-rising flooding has apparently stopped—finally!—and the surface appears stable.

With a vigorous kick, Edda swims straight up. Two more hectic swipes of her arms, and her head breaks through the thick, membranous surface. *Oh, the stench!* Ximena wrinkles her nose.

“Behold, Redeemed van Dolah!” Rew’s command pierces the scene like thunder in a storm. Edda turns her body to face the monstrous head. Her white, dead-like eyes fixated on her, sending chills down Ximena’s spine. Black, fetid water is pouring into the still wide-open maw—a waterfall. “I am at the north of the *wake-compass*. Do feel the pull of the dreamscape into the wake.”

The waters around Edda take hold of her swimming body and tug her into a new, dominant current—towards Rew’s mouth waterfall, and the dripping rows of teeth beyond.

“The shores of the Shadow are your only escape now.”

Edda scans hectically above the agitated waters, left and right, until her gaze freezes as she spots something that was not

there before—a few yards away, to her side. Ximena squints in that direction. Yes, the waters are splashing there against some type of... rock? No, not a rock—it is artificial, barely visible at the edge of the underwater glow, with regular lines.

The scene's point of view slides closer to that structure, until Ximena recognizes its nature: a set of large, dark stone steps not unlike the ones still shining under Edda's swimming body. But these stand above the waters, a promise of solidity in the surrounding chaos. The bottom of the stairs, covered in shadows, are at the limit of the reach of the submerged light source. How many and how far the steps rise into the darkness is impossible to discern.

"Do escape the dreamscape," Rew's mind voice reverberates over the fetid waves, "or it will engulf you."

The current closes firmly around Edda, like a thousand worms, sucking her towards the waterfall in Rew's looming maw.

Rew's eyes glare at Edda's pathetic attempts to swim against the current. "It is the nature of the dreamscape to drag you out to the First Wake, at the north of the wake compass. Into failure." The row of teeth deep in Rew's mouth tremble for a few moments, as in anticipation, before snapping shut with extreme violence. Ximena jumps as the loud shrill echoes across the auditorium.

Edda changes the direction of her frantic swim with sudden determination and tries to move perpendicular to the all-swallowing current, towards the promise of the shadowed stairway.

But in vain, as the flow pulls her ever closer to Rew.

"Do feel the pull of the First Wake. Do sense its *attraction*. Do see it with your mind-eye, Redeemed van Dolah. You are the needle of the wake compass."

"Fuck you!" Edda shouts between clenched teeth, her arms losing the fight against the relentless waters.

“Do *bend* your mind, Redeemed van Dolah.” Rew’s voice sounds abnormally intimate. “If Woman Speese did manage, it is within your reach. The shadow is hidden from intuition. Do follow the wake, but not directly—do *sense* the lure of its direction and avoid it. It is *sideways* you must traverse.”

Edda, perhaps acknowledging the futility of her efforts, stops the frenzied swimming and focuses her eyes on the receding stone steps. Her face relaxes in focused attention as raging waters drag her further.

“Do bend your mind.” Rew’s voice echoes loud again, threatening, her colossal mouth mere yards downstream. “Do wake up *sideways*—or our agreement dies. Do traverse into the *shadow*—or your father dies.”

Ximena gasps as the furious burst of willpower flows through the psych-link. Like an electrical pulse down her limbs, and into her chest, she can feel how Edda’s razor-sharp focus moves away from that cascade of dread and towards the emerging stairs.

With an abrupt shake of her body, her forward momentum stops at once. Ximena swaps a wide-eyed glance with Mark before returning her gaze to Edda’s impossibly immobile body, so suddenly impervious to the roaring drag that now bends around her like a mountain stream around a boulder.

“Fuck you,” Edda mutters, her voice trembling with mental exertion.

She stretches her right arm towards the enigmatic stairs, and her left arm into the current, towards Rew, creases of concentration crossing her brow. Ximena feels Edda’s senses expanding, as if the angle of her arms carried some deeper meaning.

The wake compass.

Edda takes a gulp of putrid air as she focuses her attention along her left arm, and beyond, where Rew’s voracious jaws await.

The First Wake lies straight ahead.

She then refocuses her attention along her right arm, which, on a right angle to her left one, points dead-on towards the emerged steps.

The Second Wake is perpendicular to the First Wake. Sideways.

The voice of Rew echoes in Edda's mind.

Bend. Your. Mind.

The water rumbles louder, as if outraged, when Edda begins to slide slowly *against* the current, straight towards the shadow steps.

Ximena cannot suppress a loud cheer, and she is not the only one in the auditorium.

"That took me *months* of practice," Mark whispers in awe, eyes locked on Edda's *traversing* body.

As she reaches the bottom step with her right hand, she pulls herself up and turns her gaze to the steep stairway, its rising steps drenched in darkness.

"The Path in the Shadow," she mutters, as if talking to herself. "How many—?"

"Three," Rew says, who is now standing next to her on the bottom step. The alien's body has morphed back to her usual elongated form, head bent down at Edda, mouth neatly closed. Thank Goah. "Three steps on the Light. Three steps in the Shadow."

"Three? Sure as Dem?" She squints and tilts her head, trying to pierce the blackness. "I could swear there are more..."

"A Walker of the Mind must tread *three* steps on the Light, and *three* in the Shadow. No less. And no more. Beyond there is only—*darkness*. Now, I do congratulate you on reaching the shores of the Shadow."

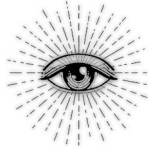
"This feels so wrong!" Edda says and bursts out a lighthearted laugh. "It's like... like... waking up by falling asleep, like hanging upside down from the ceiling, like—"

“I do trust we have had enough metaphors for today, Redeemed van Dolah. Now, do complete the Traverse and pierce the Second Wake.”

“What?”

“Do wake, Redeemed van Dolah.”

EIGHTEEN



A Horrible Daughter

As Edda *wakes*, her flesh turns into blue luminescence and the nightmarish ocean of putrefaction pops out of existence. Ximena—the memory of the damp stench still gnawing her nostrils—leans back in relief as the pristine sight and dry smell of Edda’s confinement cell wipe her senses clean—an awkward feeling, considering Edda’s predicament in the *real* world.

Ximena lets her eyes scan the crisp visibility of the cell, as every object in the room appears to radiate an eerie, all-encompassing soft luminosity, leaving no place for shadows.

The Second Wake.

And unusually crowded too. There are three figures tonight in the cell. The first figure is Edda, of course, sleeping as placidly on the bunk as if it were her own bed. Her exposed skin glows that same blue luminescence that students recognize from Aline’s *ghosting*—the same sharp blue of the mind. The second figure is Edda, *of course*, standing next to the bed; her semitransparent body, nude and hairless, twinkles that same blue glow in chaotic patterns that match exactly those of her sleeping body. The third figure is Rew, of course; her white,

leathery skin transformed into a fierce red scintillation sharper and brighter than Edda's.

Edda—the blue one—scans her surroundings in silent astonishment. Her lips slowly curve into a wide smile as she discovers her sleeping self. She steps closer and bends forward, observing with fascination the shifting brightness on her face. After a short while, she places her hand an inch off Sleeping-Edda's mouth and turns to Rew with a chuckle. "I can feel her... uh... *my* breath!"

Rew does not reply.

Edda tilts her head, curious eyes wandering up and down Rew's red iridescence, the corner toilet eerily visible through her. "What's with all the red light?" she asks, waving a finger at Rew. "You could earn your karma in a hooker's window."

"The *halo*."

"The halo," repeats Edda slowly, and looks down at her own body. "Naked—yeah, just like Aline said. Ha! Nice shave!" She raises her right arm and studies it. "Sweet!" Edda grins. She pulls her hand over her eyes and waves it back and forth, looking through it, her grin widening. "So sexy!"

"The flesh of all living things diffuses a halo in the Second Wake," Rew says. "But traversers are pure halo—no flesh."

"**W**hoa!" Edda says, her blue refulgent body elevating rapidly over the roofs of Lunteren. Ximena breathes eagerly the cool air of the winter night, fresh from the nearby woods on the east, salty from the nearby sea on the west. "Supergirl!"

She stops her ascension and takes a hesitant look down. "Wait, let me get used to the height. Oof!"

"Gravity does not interact with halo particles," Rew says,

standing still next to her, as if on a surface. “Your traversing body cannot fall.”

Edda stares down, face contracted in vertigo. “My terrified halo guts aren’t listening.”

“Do divert the attention of your animal brain elsewhere.”

She shakes her head, takes a deep breath, and turns her head towards the alien. “Hey, Elder Rew, why are you red, and everybody else blue?”

Rew remains silent.

“Elder Rew?”

“I do fear I am not free to say.”

“Ookay.” Edda shrugs and then squints at something on Rew’s body. She points at it with a finger. “Are you *free to say* what’s with the, uh, appendage coming out your, er, ass?”

Rew turns her head all the way around, one hundred eighty degrees—Ximena cringes at the sight—and bends down. “Outstanding observation skills, Redeemed van Dolah. And I am indeed free to explain. That is the *cord*—at least the visible part of it that attaches to the traversing body. It is hypothesized that the cord extends invisibly all the way back to the physical body.” Rew’s head turns around and back to face Edda. “You are traversing, thus, you do have one as well.” She gestures with her boneless arm at Edda’s feet.

Edda looks down, and indeed, sprouting from under her feet, a faint finger-like strand of blue light points straight down, towards the Eye of Goah complex and its cells. The cord light dims quickly as it extends away from her until it completely dissolves a yard below. Her eyes widen involuntarily at the sight of the chasm beyond, and she lets her gaze wander about. “Oh!” Her face lights up as she makes out the distinctive roof of her own house among the forest of buildings that is Lunteren from up here. “Home!”

Without hesitation, she throws her blue refulgent body towards her house and flies off like it was second nature to her.

The scene camera leaps forward across the air like a diving falcon, barely keeping pace. The sudden acceleration makes Ximena's head spin lightly. She keeps her eyes locked on Edda's fleeting feet, trying to fight her own vertigo, reminding herself that she is not really there, flying through the night sky of Lunteren, nor is she in a university auditorium either. Her real self is *home*, safe and sound, tightly wrapped in her own wu-sarc.

The thought is comforting.

Edda stops in midair, right outside her bedroom. "Oh!" she says, pointing with a finger. "Somebody left the window open." She *floats* through the gap and into her room. "And forgot to make the bed. And to tidy up." She gestures at the random assortment of clothes and underwear scattered across the floor. Edda turns her grinning face at Rew. "I guess nobody entered the room since I last left." She laughs.

A sudden, high-pitched shriek, barely muted by the wooden door, makes Edda turn and tilt her head in instinctive attention. Nothing is to be heard for a short while. As Ximena begins to relax, a loud, long wailing makes her jump in place.

"Hans!" Edda's expression changes at once into a mask of anxiety as her maternal instincts kick in. She runs to the door and as she tries to grab the knob, her hand passes right through. She stares at it, confused—"Fuck!"—and tries again. The wailing intensifies—a toddler is crying through night terrors.

"There is no need to—" Rew has no time to say more, as Edda rams through the door.

The scene camera follows Edda out to the second-floor corridor, where she is dashing along the wide hall, her feet making no noise on the ceramic tiles. On her right, a wooden, ornate balustrade separates the elevated hallway from the vestibule below. On her left, a wall with doors, otherwise covered with oil paintings with scenes of the golden age: a

cityscape with unfathomably tall towers in the middle of the desert; a harbor painting with a docked ship so monstrously large that it dwarfs the industrial buildings beside it; a lively lunar settlement half-burrowed in regolith, high-tech structures of all sizes and inscrutable purpose.

A door farther down from Edda opens abruptly, making her stop in her tracks as an agitated, blue-haloed Willem, wearing a thick night robe, rushes out. Barefooted, he hurries down the corridor and into the next room—the source of the distress.

The wailing stops at once.

Edda walks cautiously into the room. Willem is holding the two-year-old in his arms, against his chest, humming indistinct, comforting words, their blue halos merging into one. Hans, drowsy eyes, giggles softly and leans his head on Willem.

Edda approaches slowly. “A nightmare, I guess,” she whispers in his left ear. “He’s going through a phase.”

“Elder van Dolah cannot hear you,” Rew says. She is standing next to Willem, on his right, the red scintillation of her body reflecting in the young man’s eyes. “Nor see you.”

Willem keeps humming patiently, swaying his body to a slow, hypnotic rhythm. His right hand caresses Hans’s head, the toddler’s eyes narrowing further with each tap.

Edda watches, entranced. “Look at him—Dad’s exhausted,” she says, her gaze alternating between grandfather and grandson. “He’s taking the night shift every day now—won’t let Bram nor me take care of Hans.” She slowly raises her hand until she is almost touching her father’s humming lips. “And now, with me in jail... What if I don’t return?” Her voice breaks. She sinks her head.

“Redeemed van Dolah, I do suggest we return to your room to rebalance your emotions.”

Edda doesn’t move, her blue shine noticeably subdued.

“Redeemed van Dolah?”

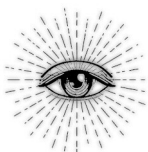
She raises her head and looks into her father's eyes. "How can some love *so* much—so unconditionally—knowing that they'll never be loved back?" She turns to Rew. "He doesn't give a shit, does he? About me being a bitch to him, I mean—he'll never care." She returns her gaze to her father. "He'll do what he thinks is best for us, no matter what." She shakes her head with the saddest of smiles. "Oh, Goah! My emotional blackmail is falling right through him. He doesn't need my love—at all! I can see that now. He'll never, ever—*ever*—stop loving me. Or Bram. Or Hans." She looks at Rew, eyes wide open with clear realization. "I'm such a bitch! Oh, Goah! What if they don't let me out before he is..." Her breath quickens. Her voice begins to shake. "What if he meets aww Embrace without knowing how much I love him? And not caring either—not *needing* it—completely satisfied with simply having loved his family?"

"Redeemed van Dolah, I must insist that we—"

"Why am I such a horrible daughter?"

Rew takes a moment to reply. "I do hope that is a rhetorical question, Redeemed van Dolah. After long exposure and careful study, I can confidently say that I am well versed in the exquisite intricacies of human emotions, yet the nature of your relationship with Elder van Dolah is... beyond my comprehension."

NINETEEN



Football and Porn

The sprawling dash of the Milky Way scurries across the auditorium as Ximena feels the void of space gnawing on her skin, eager to suffocate her, to freeze her, to suck every last molecule of gas and liquid out of every orifice, to kill her in a frenzy of multiple agonies. Luckily, the dreamsenso keeps the disturbing sensation to the bare minimum, just enough to remind her how ruthlessly hostile the universe is to the existence of humankind.

Space is far from empty, so deep in the gravity well. Down here, deep inside Mercury's orbit, the bulging hell that is Sol glowers fiercely over her head and radiates blinding death.

Something in the center of the auditorium, a sparkle, comes into sudden view, attracting Ximena's attention. Three bright dots in a row, which grow at once into the shape of three asteroids. A strange configuration, Ximena thinks, as her eyes lock on those three pearls shimmering in the black. The two on the extremes are probably rotating in gravitational equilibrium around the central body. And what are those filaments linking each of the rocks to their siblings? They look artificial, like

cables... Yes, definitely artificial. Tubes or conduits of some sort.

Ximena watches the asteroid triad growing in size at an alarming pace, like she is tied to the bow of a derelict spaceship dashing through space towards that central body at suicidal speed. Ximena leans back with an involuntary gasp as the spheroid expands in an instant into a radiation-battered rocky landscape.

And then, the deadly void is displaced by an explosion of light, warmth—and *life!*

“Youssef crosses the midfield... Ball to Farag!” The sports commentator’s strongly accented words roll quicker than the contenders gliding through the air. Ximena gapes with fascination at the fierce action dashing across the zero-gravity sports arena: ten men and women competing in some sort of weightless sport match.

The arena is the approximate size of a basketball court, with all six walls made of thick, transparent glass. It is behind one wall where a few dozen enthusiastic spectators—sitting on a tiny fraction of the several thousand-strong capacity of the three-dimensional arena—try to compensate the woefully empty benches with loud cheering and waving of red or blue scarf-like clothes that stay comically in the air in all possible angles. Most in the crowd are watching the contest through what appears to Ximena like pretty standard sensorial visors.

Sweaty players in shorts and t-shirts—red or blue depending on the team—rotate, flip, and push against any and all of the six walls, gliding in straight, calculated trajectories, and then maneuvering in midair by means of vigorous arm movements that the harnesses they wear around their trunk translate into flapping of wing-like structures. Like flying insects, they race and clash against each other, in furious pursuit of what seems like a soccer ball covered with erect feathers.

“Farag leading the red counterattack,” the commentator continues, as a young man dives through the air with the ball between his feet, kicking it side to side with short, precise ankle moves, his right hand up, signaling furiously. Ximena recognizes him instantly. *Binyamin Farag—Bini—the Dreamwars hero, and Edda’s—*

“This year’s Science surprise signing, Farag’s first appearance in the Rahil Tournament as a pivot is nothing but bold. With only twenty-two years of age, he’s the first to... Oh, hey! Science is spreading forward along the walls, leaving their goal unprotected. Oooh, daring!”

An opponent approaches from the flank, a large man in his forties, long black hair waving behind, legs extended, eagerly seeking the flurry ball.

“Amin on Farag!”

The younger man skillfully raises the ball with his right knee, getting it out of the older man’s way, who slides through towards the wall, too quick to stop in midair.

“Farag dribbles again!” the commentator continues, raising his voice.

“Ooh!” Half the crowd throws their hands down in disappointment while the other half raises theirs in hope. The glass wall does not mute the noise from the fans, quite the opposite, their every emotion is artificially amplified into a vibrant, all-encompassing thrill.

As the ball rises, the young man waves his arms from side to side, muscles contracting and pushing against the harness, making the membranous wings on his back flap in just the right way to twist his body ninety degrees. His left leg, extended and ready, comes down with merciless force on the ball at just the right angle. *Whoosh!*

The tiny crowd behind the glass yells as the ball, untouched by gravity, flies in a straight line through a gap between the opponents.

“Frag seeks Ghabras. Attention, she’s coming into position!”

A teammate, a woman in her mid-thirties with a wild grin, thrusts through the air, feet first, wings partially extended to brake and control the approach.

The ball appears to fly too fast. It will shoot past before the woman’s stretched legs arrive. But the friction of the ball’s erected feathers against the air quickly reduces its speed, granting the woman the time to roll herself into place as her body arrives at the sweet spot. *Whoosh!*

The spectators—also those in the auditorium—go mute and hold their breath as the ball flies towards the inner corner of the net. The blue goalkeeper stretches her arms.

Too late.

“Goal!” The red section of the crowd—and to Ximena’s surprise, even Mark to her right—jump at once, arms in the air. “Goal, goal, goal!” Ximena laughs, the excitement and passion impossible to resist. She can almost imagine the commentator’s spit on the microphone.

The players flex their elbows and knees to a halt on their next wall bounce. Frag lands beside a laughing Ghabras and both celebrate in a loud embrace.

“Science one, Engineers one. Wow, the 2400 Rahil Football Tournament is getting hotter by the minute! The century edition does not disappoint. What a performance, ladies and gentlemen! What a show, what a privilege! Isn’t it, ya New Alexandria?”

The tiny crowd—there are more students sitting in the amphitheater than fans in the Arena—yell louder, their cheering artificially amplified to simulate the excited cheers of those hundreds of seats behind the glass walls that are now so eerily empty.

“Our thoughts go to the essential personnel that could not join the rest of their fellow citizens here in the Arena. And a

special thanks to our administrator,” one large man in his fifties, with long white hair in a ponytail, stands and salutes, “for... well, for keeping us alive. Ah, the players are ready! Johnson puts the ball in motion. To Amin. Wait! The referee is stopping the game. He has his hand on his visor. I think he is talking to somebody. What could...? Ah, he is now calling Amin and Farag, the pivots. The referee is telling them something. A change? Yes, there is a change in the red team. Oh, number two is leaving! But that is Farag himself! He seems to be in a hurry, he’s flying for the exit. What’s going on? He doesn’t look hurt. And... er, let’s see... Number eight is taking his place. This will be Zhao’s first ever game in an official match. Oh, wow, with all respect to Zhao, this doesn’t look too promising for the Science team...”

The scene slides closer to the corner of the Arena, where Farag flaps energetically towards the exit. A female figure wearing a white laboratory coat opens the glass door and pulls him into the corridor beyond with a firm tug. The scene camera crosses the swiftly closing glass door as if it weren’t there. The tall woman has black-graying hair, sure gaze and classical Middle Eastern features.

“Is it—!” Farag asks.

“Yes! Quick, ya Bini,” she interrupts, hastily stripping Farag from the fixtures of the harness. “It’s been more than a minute! We will lose it soon. Here, take my visor. Already authorized for you.” Her clumsy hands—the only show of distress in her otherwise cool facade—finally fit the gadget around his head.

“Bad timing, ya mom. The match...” Bini says, gesturing back at the door separating them from the slowly resuming action. “It’s going to look suspicious!”

“We must take the risk. I had to invent an indeterminate family urgency—we’ll fill in the details later to cover our asses. Now, listen. There’s no time to go down to Shamash. Did you remember to hide your access in the senonnet?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Good. Now go sneak into one of the dead corridors—”

“What? That—!”

“Hush.” She puts her finger on his lips. “No time to think, ya darling. I’ve already done the thinking for you. Find a quiet room deep in the dark. Now go!”

He hesitates for the briefest instant, but then he flexes his leg muscles and pushes hard, beginning a rash slide along the corridor. His shoes stay magnetically attached to the metallic floor, with just the right friction, allowing him to thrust forward in zero-G, not unlike a racing skater.

The scene camera follows closely behind Bini, the point of view approaching the back of his head as he sprints forwards, past the only well-lit accesses—showers, locker rooms, storerooms and lifts. The end of the corridor is becoming increasingly darker—wall lighting receding behind him—his frantic shadow stretching ever longer on the floor in front of him.

Right before the last remains of light vanish, the scene camera seems to reach—and enter!—Bini’s head. Ximena gasps in surprise as the auditorium scene transforms into a *first-person view*, bouncing sideways in the dark with every leg push.

“So sexy!” Ximena mutters, and then she sits bolt upright as she feels Bini’s rush of adrenaline running through her own veins.

“Whoa!” Mark says with a sidelong smile. “I love these psych-link rides!”

“Contour overlay,” Bini mutters between heavy breaths.

The darkness loses significance as Bini’s visor begins to draw vivid white lines along the wall intersections and openings. The visor’s software renders the outline of his own running body in light yellow. The world has turned into a dynamic painting of thin, neon-like lashes over a pitch-black canvas.

Bini reaches the end of the corridor. The visor draws the white outline of two doors opposite each other, both rendered featureless in the dark.

“Geo-label,” Bini says, his voice urgent, his heart pumping. Ximena has to restrain her own feet from leaping in haste, the intense urgency ringing inside her own amygdala like a slow-motion explosion. He has been waiting for so, so long, and it had to happen when he was in the middle of that damn game!

His visor renders two thin, blue floating texts in the air, each connected by a blue line to a door. *Pressroom*, states the one on the left, *Nerg & Comms* the right one.

“Perfect,” he mutters, as he opens the latter in a rush and pushes through, slamming it behind. The sudden temperature drop sends a shiver down Ximena’s spine. The room is filled with what the overlaying software paints as aisles made of racks of technical equipment, thick and thin cables linking everything together, blinking lights piercing the dark.

Bini leans back against the closed door, and with feet magnetically stuck to the floor, he sinks until his knees press against his chest. “Uh, temp,” he says, his breath visible in the frigid air.

“Four celsius,” a warm, female voice says.

“Proximity alert, fifty meters,” Bini says.

“Confirmed,” she says. “No activity currently—”

“VR!” he barks.

Ximena squints at the sudden brightness. The dark room has vanished and immersive three-dimensional space, full of color and light, has taken its place. It is a desert landscape, sun-baked, a wide river flowing lazily nearby, thick vegetation on its bank, irrigation canals spreading in all directions, life-giving crops of diverse varieties thriving along their banks. In the distance, above the horizon, three ancient pyramids loom grandiosely. A small text—*Sensonet VR New Alexandria 3.1*—floats on the upper left part of the scene. On the upper right

another text says, *Welcome Binyamin*, and a larger, inviting *Where do you want to go today?*² floats close by.

Bini raises his arms, bizarrely visible in the simulation as those of a short-sleeved tanned man, and makes a complicated gesture. The scene changes again: the hall of a renaissance palace where a dozen exotic scantily dressed young females look ardently into the point of view, lips parted, a hint of tongues.

“Porn,” Bini says swiftly. “Hetero, reality.”

“Name your fantasy,” the female voice replies.

Bini does not hesitate. “Spanish conquistador meets tribe of amazons.”

The scene transforms into a world of greens: the virgin jungle, humid and—Ximena sighs with sudden relief—warmth. The sensation is quite the experience, she thinks, taking in a deep breath in the thick air of the jungle. Yes, even if the snobs call it the Dreamnet’s poor cousin, the way it engages the senses is still immersive enough for most *everyday* users. Ximena turns her gaze at the thick undergrowth behind which tribal percussion music thumps hypnotic and suggestive—*inviting*. To her surprise, Bini gestures his avatar to run in the opposite direction, towards a particularly wide and old tree. A large opening on the trunk leads to a hollow interior.

As Bini leaps inside, the opening shuts behind. The dimly lit space is silent and dry. Bini reaches for a plastic sheet rolled up into itself that was leaning against the wooden wall and extends it on the floor. He bends eagerly over it as the sheet turns opaque and lights up with software dials, controls and displays, some with dynamic charts. Ximena recognizes on one of them the familiar waveform of a running sound broadcast, the amplitude changing in real time with sharp, symmetrical curves.

Bini thrusts his hand at a blue button labeled *Sensolink*.

“Link to communications array acknowledged,” the female voice says.

“Confirm access level.” Bini’s words roll out so quickly, it seems a miracle that the AI can understand him.

“Private.”

“Time since incoming.”

“One hundred forty-five seconds.”

“Shit, shit, shit!” Bini’s nervous gaze scans the displays. “Replay... No, no time. *Transcribe* transmission.”

The plastic sheet empties from all software artifacts as neat lines of text appear in their place. Bini begins to hastily scan the words, a stretched finger following his anxious eyes.

00:00 *It on. It is already on. Oh. I am transmitting.*

00:15 *How is the transformer holding. It is purring gods. You are talking to the stars.*

00:32 *This is a message from Earth to New Alexandria. Do you copy. Over.*

00:56 *This is Earth. Transmitting to New Alexandria. Do you copy. Over.*

01:14 *New Alexandria. Do you. — Check the gain root girl. Yes. Peaks well. You are transmitting.*

01:42 *New Alexandria. We received your automated warning. We need to talk. Over.*

02:09 *Earth to New Alexandria. Do you copy. — What if they are dead. Shut up root girl.*

02:35 *Do you copy. Newal. — It has been looping for years. No. For months. I checked the maths.*

03:13 *Do you copy. Over. — It does not look good gods. They are dead. Or they*

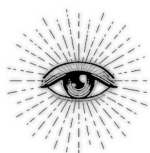
The last line is filling in real time—at the speed of speech!

With a wave of his hand, the dials and controls return to

the screen, and his thumb slams into a round, red button, which starts blinking intently.

“New Alexandria here!” he shouts. A sharp vertical line appears on the display next to the throbbing button. “New Alexandria here. I read you, ya Earth. Over.”

TWENTY



Devourer of Souls

“I read you, ya Earth. Over.” Bini repeats, and puts his thumb on the blinking button again to stop the transmission. “Input to audio,” he mutters, his voice still shrill from stress.

“Acknowledged,” the female voice says.

An almost imperceptible hiss fills the auditorium. Ximena waits, staring intently at the stretched flexible screen, where a line moves horizontally on the input display, only perturbed by the tiny peaks and dips of background noise.

“Ah!” he says, like he just remembered something. “Open *don’t panic*.”

“Opening document titled: *Don’t panic*.”

A white page pops into existence, blank, except for a few bullet-pointed lines of text on the top half. The visor has rendered it in midair, a few inches over the floor. It shows the texture of a real A4 sheet with text that could have been easily been typed by a mid-twenty-century typewriter, each character subtly expressing the moods of ink and writer.

Bini places his index finger on the top of the floating page.

Clarify protocol, states the first line, the word *protocol* crudely underscored.

“Protocol, right,” he mutters, as his fingertips begin tapping the floor next to the input display. “Come on, come on, come on.”

Ximena catches herself holding her breath as she gazes in tense silence, but the hissing background lingers on, unimpressed by Bini’s burning impatience.

“Goddammit!” Bini shakes his head and reaches out with his thumb towards the screen. As he is about to press the red button again, the input display shows a sudden peak.

Bini—and Ximena—jump in place, their breathing quickening at the sight of the abrupt surge of graphical activity.

“Goah be praised!” a voice bursts out, that seems to hesitate for a second before continuing. “Uh, awes Blessings to you, New Alexandria! This is, uh, Earth, responding to your automated call. Over.”

Gotthard, Ximena recognizes his voice, expressive and warm even as the radio taints it in metallic undertones. She purses her lips in consternation. *Oh Gotthard... This is your infamous first contact with the lost colony, isn't it?* Gotthard is not Ximena’s favorite person—historical or otherwise—but she cannot repress a wave of pity clouding her eyes as she listens on.

“As Salam Alaykom, ya Earth!” Bini says, thumb on the red button. “Be advised, New Alexandria is a Near Sun Object four light seconds away from Earth. Real-time conversation is impossible. I repeat, real-time conversation *not* possible. Please proceed with patience. Every reply takes a minimum of eight seconds. I repeat, *eight* seconds. Feel free to pack longer transmissions to accommodate. Do you understand? Over.” He pushes the button again, and waits.

At least a dozen seconds pass before the reply echoes across the amphitheater.

“Copy eight seconds, New Alexandria. I was already aware of the distance and light-speed limitations.” The voice seems to draw a deep breath, then another one. Finally: “Be advised, this is a... *rogue* transmission. The authorities of aw’s Head have banned all communication attempts with New Alexandria. I repeat, this is not an official communication, and I put myself at considerable personal risk by contacting you. My transmission is unidirectional and pinned directly to your orbital parameters, so nobody on Earth can hear what I say. But yours is being broadcasted all over Earth. I repeat, your transmission is *public*. Please keep my denomination off the air at all costs. Over.”

Bini presses the button and starts talking as soon as the *over* comes through. “Copy, ya Earth. By a sad coincidence, this also happens to be a rogue transmission. We are a group acting against the will of our administrator. But we exert complete control over the only long-range communication array of New Alexandria. Your transmission is secure. Nobody else is listening here, and no activity is being logged. For increased security, I suggest changing protocol to dual digital. We support all standard encryption algorithms of Pre-collapse Earth. I can also narrow our transmission beam to a radius of a couple of kilometers around your location, if you send us your coordinates on the surface. Over.”

While Bini awaits, he takes some hasty notes on the virtual piece of paper, on the bottom half, by using his index finger as a pen. The text flows under his finger as if typewritten. *Authorities: Os-Hed. Who are you, rogue? What do you want that is worth the risk?*

“Copy, New Alexandria. Whatever your reasons, we thank Goah that somebody out there still cares. The stakes can’t be higher. My transmitter is rather, uh, simple. Negative on dual channel. Negative on digital and encryption. But positive on beam narrowing around my position. I bet my life that mine is

the only equipment listening to the SHF band in hundreds of miles. Standby for coordinates in decimal degrees format.” The background hiss only lasts a few seconds before the transmission continues. “Coordinates five two point zero eight one north five point six one one east. I repeat, five two point zero eight one north five point six one one east. Over.”

Bini takes notes of the coordinates on the paper as they are spoken. He raises his head and mutters, “Link to comm array.”

“Link established,” the female voice replies.

“Minimum output spread. Lock antenna to these Earth coordinates,” he says, finger on the written numbers.

“Acknowledged. Minimum spread. Coordinates locked to the town of Lunteren, Netherlands.”

Bini presses the transmission button with a faint smile on his face. “Ya Earth, this is New Alexandria speaking to, uh, *Lunteren* through a narrow beam. Do you read? Over.”

While Bini waits for a reply, he gestures with his finger across the first entry of the floating paper. A coarse typewritten horizontal line scratches the words *Clarify protocol*. He slides his finger down to the second entry: *Establish identity and representation*. He scratches it casually as well and moves to the next point: *Dementia status?* The word *dementia* is underscored twice.

“Copy, New Alexandria,” the radio voice says, and then a faint noise that could easily be a sigh of relief. “I appreciate the privacy—guess the old tried-and-true method of ear-whispering never gets old.” The speaking stops, although the breathing can be still made out over the static. Then: “I don’t know what you know about us, New Alexandria, nor how long you have been, uh, *alone*. I guess that if your technology allows you to thrive on a rock exposed to hard vacuum and solar radiation, you probably know more about us than we know about you. Actually,” the voice scoffs, “I’m sure of it, because we know next to nothing. I have so many questions... Why do

you choose to contact now, after so many centuries? Who are you really? Is it true what aw's Head says, that you live long lives outside of Goah's Gift? How is that possible? But none of these matters anymore, not since I heard your radio warning. It has driven everything else out of my mind." Another short pause, then: "New Alexandria, please clarify threat of Babi asteroid to Earth, and what in Goah's Name can be done about it. Please confirm lethality. Over."

Bini lets a small chuckle out and nods appreciatively. "Your priorities are spot on, ya Lunteren," he mutters to himself, and then presses the transmit button. "Ya Lunteren, the Babi threat is real. I repeat. The threat *is* real. Positive on lethal. Our calculations show a collision probability of eighty-eight percent. It will happen in one hundred and ten years." Bini sighs. "It's a big rock, ya Lunteren. Highly metallic. The impact winter will last several years. We understand Earth's civilization is agrarian and concentrated in the temperate belt. Over."

The pause is long. More than usual. Finally, the voice returns, noticeably drained of energy, speaking slow and tired words: "New Alexandria, understood. We can kiss photosynthesis goodbye; and our sun- and wind-based energy supply; and our balmy, liquid-sustaining temperatures." Another long pause. "We are fucked, aren't we?" The voice gives a sad, brief chuckle. "Over."

"Ya Lunteren, you are not fok. I repeat, you are *not* fok, whatever that means. Where there is life, there is *amal*." Bini pauses, adjusts the feedback volume with a faint touch on the screen, and continues. "Listen carefully, ya Lunteren. Earth must rise to the challenge and create the industrial base to send a gravity tractor to Babi. I repeat. Send a gravity tractor to Babi. An artificial satellite around the asteroid will tilt its course by the tiniest of fractions, but if done early enough, its long-term trajectory will miss Earth altogether. It might require the

concentrated efforts of many nations, but... well, since the alternative is extinction, it just... has to happen, doesn't it? And soon. Over."

This time, the voice breaks the communication lapse with a dry, humorless laugh. Then: "New Alexandria, your technology is a paradox. You seem to know so much about so many things, but then you lack the most basic understandings about the simplest facts." The voice sighs, then: "Earth is not ready to believe the Babi threat, or more precisely, we are not ready to believe *anything* you say. Our religion—like all successful religions—is *very* jealous. You live unnaturally long lives, so our religion marks you as demons and your words as seductive, deceitful lies. Never mind that even if we could listen, we cannot just read a few old books and make such a technological leap. It's just impossible. Truth is, we run a subsistence economy. Our industry is... basic, *very* basic. We try every day to avoid simply regressing back. Our people have been—how can I phrase it?—*happily stagnant* for centuries now. Our religion is optimized for survival, not for development. Over."

Bini shakes his head lightly as he scribbles with his finger on the bottom of the floating paper: *Paranoid theocracy*. And below that: *Subsistence economy*. Then he slides the finger to the top half of the page until it hovers over the third entry on the list, *Dementia status?* Bini nods.

"Ya Lunteren, I must humbly apologize in the name of my people. We are now aware of the cultural shock that last summer's communication inadvertently caused. My... uh, the scientist that kicked off the Earth Communication Project has transferred leadership to me, in the hope my age—I am only twenty-two Earth years of age, ya Lunteren—would make me an acceptable counterpart to your leaders. I'm sorry, ya Lunteren, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Binyamin Farag, code name Bini, representing a group of citizens, uh,

dissatisfied with our administrator's vision. I repeat, Binyamin Farag, code name Bini. There are pressing questions we need answers to, ya Lunteren. Most above all: *Dementia Furiosa*. We need to know: is your prevalent youth motivated by some type of cultural taboo, or is Dem still alive and kicking, killing Earth's oldest? For us, it is critical to find out if Dem has been finally eradicated, or if survivors have developed some type of immunity or cure. Please respond. Over."

"Did I read you correctly, Elder Bini? You are asking about *Dem*?" A baffled pause follows, then: "Yes—I mean, no. Never seen Dem in action. An outdated religious myth for social control, only old folks and religious nuts still believe it. Why would you care about Dem? Was it really a thing in the past? Over."

Bini's face flashes—a glimpse of excitement, or perhaps hope—as he pushes the transmit button. "It was most definitely a thing, ya Lunteren! *Dementia Furiosa* was the sole cause of the Second Collapse of humankind. It came swiftly, at the worst possible moment, when Earth was still broken and licking the wounds from the First Collapse. It happened *everywhere* at once—no patient zero—impossible to isolate, impossible to hide. The eldest went first, and soon it started eating down the most mature—the repositories of Earth's collective knowledge. Everything went to hell in a few decades. Dem—and the death, chaos, ignorance and bigotry it unleashed—was the cause my ancestors fled Earth. Perhaps that is why our culture is so private, ya Lunteren; paranoid even. Fear and awe of Earth run deep in our collective veins. And terror of Dem, which only deep space seems to stop. But," he chuckles, his voice regaining strength, "it's over! Dem is no more. Wow!"

Bini scratches *Dementia status?* off the floating typewritten paper and moves his finger down to the fourth and last entry of the list: *Bestawros*.

"Ya Lunteren, our people, I mean, the group I represent,

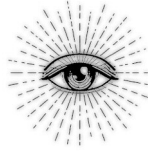
strongly believe that our difficulties—and yours—will only get worse, unless our leaders finally start communicating. We must try again. There is so much we can do for each other.” Bini clicks his tongue, as if looking for the right words. “Our situation here in New Alexandria is far from optimal, ya Lunteren. Some of us would even say desperate. We need Earth. We need you, ya Lunteren. Unfortunately, our administrator and his people are masters of self-deception, and have other plans.” He pauses for a moment, while briefly shaking his head. “Ya Lunteren, we believe that if we convince *your* authorities, uh,” Bini glances at his typewritten notes, “*Os-Hed*, to talk to me—hoping my youth be culturally acceptable—then our administrator will have no alternative but to engage. Administrator Bestawros is not an unreasonable man. His family is well known for—how can I put it?—*vigorous flexibility* in the face of, er, *evolving circumstances*. Please, ya Lunteren, tell me you will relay our message up your hierarchy. Over.”

After the usual wait, a short, harsh laugh begins the reply. “Your request comes at an inconvenient time, *ya* Elder Bini. Lunteren is recently under heavy scrutiny. If I speak up, I risk much more than my reputation. I know, I know—I understand the stakes, and I also see our fates as one. Hmm, I need time to think.” The voice stops talking, only irregular breathing coming through, and unspecific back noises, like there is more than one person at the other end, mumblings words too faint to understand. The Earth voice finally resumes with renewed urgency: “I beg you, *ya* Elder Bini, Goah’s Mercy, is there nothing *you* or any other space colony out there can do to tilt Babi’s trajectory with your technology? You are our only hope. Over.”

“Ya Lunteren, negative on other space habitats. Some survived the Second Collapse for some time, but without Earth’s resources, they all ultimately...” Bini swallows. “We’ve

been the only island of humanity outside of Earth for the last two hundred years, and frankly, it's a miracle we are still around. We have had some serious, uh, *troubles* of our own. And as for our assistance with Babi..." Bini hesitates for a few seconds, staring at the flat line on the display. His tone drops a notch when his thumb engages the transmission button. "I'm afraid we cannot help you, ya Earth. I'm so sorry. You see, among administrator Bestawros's most recent initiatives was the *Pristine Earth* project. He mobilized Alexandria's scarce resources for years to scan and select the asteroid with just the right mass, just the right orbital stats. Our scientists were lucky to find an Atira asteroid not unlike New Alexandria. It was perfect, not far away from us, and already in the right trajectory by means of the Kozai mechanism. It just needed a nudge to fulfill its fate in decades instead of eons. We then built and sent a gravity tractor to alter its trajectory just slightly so, in just the right way. The operation was a resounding success, ya Lunteren. Completed last year. And during the celebrations, Bestawros—inspired by the mythology of our ancestral land—named the asteroid *Babi, the devourer of souls*. Over."

TWENTY-ONE



Savior of Souls

Ximena's eyes flinch in bafflement when the scene morphs. Gone is New Alexandria's deep, abandoned darkness. She squints while getting used to the early afternoon light filtering down from roof crevices in Gotthard's old-church-tower-room-turned-lab. An irregular electric hum spills from the equipment set up on the long, wooden bench and on the dusty floor around Gotthard and Rutger. But what attracts Ximena's attention at once is their expression, their *eyes*, so widen by purpose as both bend over the speakers, tasting every word like Goah awssself is spilling secrets from the afterlife.

"... named the asteroid *Babi, the devourer of souls*. Over." A needle flips down to zero in a dial and the electric static dims to a hiss.

Gotthard and Rutger exchange a long gaze.

"Fucking Mercy!" Rutger says. "Fucking! Mercy!"

Gotthard nods slowly, his face the expression of a man attempting to reorient the universe around him. He turns to the microphone, lips parted, but stares at it in silence, his right hand shaking on the transmitter's handle.

Rutger places a hand on Gotthard's shoulder, but says nothing.

Gotthard nods slowly, like the touch of his friend had been words and not feeling. He takes a deep breath and turns the handle. The needle jumps up inside the dial. "Copy, ya Elder Bini. I don't know what to say. Er, I guess, I'll just take it at face value, like a scientific fact. Babi's on its way and *nobody* can help us, so Earth has a century to, er, rub its eyes open and get its lazy ass up." He chuckles without humor. "Pure sin! How am I going to...? Uh, ya Elder Bini, I suggest we keep Babi's origin a secret for now? It will be hard enough as it is to convince somebody in aws Head to—"

Sudden, loud thumps on the wooden door interrupt his words. Gotthard and Rutger jump as Ximena turns her head to the doors. *Oh, no!* The thumps turn more insistent.

"Open the door!" a harsh voice yells. "Open the door to Goah's Fist!" The door shakes on its hinges with every blow. Voices behind yell ever more urgently. "Open the fucking door or face aws Rage!"

Rutger, baffle-eyed, runs to the shuddering door, and as he reaches out to the latch, he turns around to exchange a glance with Gotthard, who returns an anxious nod. Rutger slides the latch. The door blasts open, pushing him hard against the wall. He falls to the floor with a shriek, hands on his bloodying face.

"Rutger!" Gotthard yells as three large warriors in forested camouflage—upper bodies built like they had bull ancestry—charge in and without a word, scan the room and take positions with professional efficiency. They look like soldiers straight out of a golden age action sensorial, Ximena thinks, out of place, anachronistic. Their full-body armor are indeed relics of the golden age: bullet-proof tough, and yet light and flexible, the wet dream of any medieval knight, or of any World War soldier for that matter. Their helmets' semi-transparent visors are raised in a non-lethal stance, allowing

the students a glimpse into their professionally impassive expressions.

One warrior, holding a mechanical machine-gun with a long knife attached to the muzzle, stays close to the door, eyes squinting like those of a guard dog ready to jump on an intruder. The largest warrior—Ximena watches his features with gluttonous fascination: brown piercing eyes, two irregular holes flaring where the nose is missing, a blue chain-like tattoo falling down his left cheek, and a horrendous scar down his right—leaps to Gotthard and pushes him violently away from the bench and the buzzing equipment, while the third man runs up the stairs, gun in hand, the roof above shaking with his every step.

Gotthard staggers and leans over Rutger, helping him up, both shocked to silence.

The third warrior runs down the stairs. “Clear!” he says, with a curt nod at the noseless man.

“Show’s all yars, Arch,” the noseless man calls, his thick accent drawling the vowels like an ox plodding the soil apart.

A white-robed, short man with a shaved head walks in, radiating authority like flames radiate burns. Just like the noseless man, a fine, blue tattoo runs down under his left eye, reminiscent of a chain of tears. The man stares at Gotthard and Rutger, a large depiction of Goah’s Eye tattooed on his forehead. It is the same symbol that Censor Smith carries on his own forehead, but on this man, it suggests something far more menacing. This third Eye—sharp and accusing—evokes in Ximena an oppressive feeling of vulnerability; the gaze of a nightmare predator on the hunt, a horror impossible to hide from.

His pale blue eyes wander leisurely around the lab and linger on the bench covered in electric madness. He nods slowly with a smug smile.

Another man, dressed in fine, red robes, staggers noisily

into the room. It's Colony Elder Simon van Althuis, his gait uncharacteristically hesitant, almost apologetic. "Grand Inquisitor Rhodes, please," he says, "it's really unnecessary to — Redeemed Siever, your face!" He reaches out and carefully raises Rutger's bloodied lips with his fingertips, inspecting the damage. "Are you okay?" He turns to the Inquisitor. "I must protest! Redeemed Siever and Man Kraker are among the finest colonists of Lunteren, their families are important contributors to—"

"I beg your indulgence, Colder," the Inquisitor interrupts, raising his hand in an imposing gesture, "and with utmost gratitude for your collaboration so *far*, we kindly ask you to wait downstairs until the investigation is over."

Rutger and Gotthard turn to face the Colder, who unconsciously takes a step back from the sheer force of their combined glare. He holds his hands up. "I did nothing more than my duty as Colony Elder, and as press supervisor." The Colder's words are directed at them, voice shrill and defensive. "Some workers came to my office right after aw's Inquisitor's, uh," he gestures at the short man, "ultimatum on Thursday. Your scientific experiments up here, your association with Woman Speese, all those machine-parts deliveries... Yes, what can I say? People are afraid. If aw's Gift is withdrawn, the quarantine will kill all the colony exports." He points at an indeterminate point on the floor. "The press will close, sure as Dem—together with half of the colony's businesses. This is no joke."

"We are doing nothing wrong," Gotthard says, voice trembling, fists clenched.

"I know," the Colder says, reaching out with his fingers as if wanting to touch his face, but stopping in midair as if realizing they are not alone. "I explained to aw's Inquisitor that you are merely running scientific experiments up here, and most of your equipment was delivered *after* the unfortunate

events of the Century Festival. So please answer aw's Inquisitor's questions so that we can all return to our duties."

The Inquisitor exchanges a fleeting glance with the noseless man. "Thank you, Colony Elder. Now, I really must insist you wait downstairs."

The noseless man grabs the Colder by the arm and drags him out. "This is no way to—!" His shocked protests are in vain, as he is firmly led out. "Aw's Compact protects aw's Colonists from arbitrary—!" His shouts dissolve behind the slammed door. Noseless turns and walks back to the side of the Inquisitor, his grotesque expression as calm as if he were sleeping with open eyes.

The Inquisitor gestures at the still humming equipment and meet's Gotthard's gaze. "What is that?"

"Get out!" Gotthard cries in sudden fury. "You have no right to enter a private—!"

Noseless smacks Gotthard's face with the back of his gloved hand. He tumbles with a scream of pain. Rutger hastily holds him in place.

The Inquisitor puts a hand up on Noseless's shoulder. "Easy, John. Remember, aw's Compacts are *still* in force, and these gentlemen are *still* blessed with aw's Gift." The thick islander accent, mixed with his deep, calm voice, drowns his words in sarcastic undertones. "And I'm sure they're keen to collaborate with the White Guards of aw's Fist." He turns to Gotthard. "Are you not?"

Gotthard stands slowly and walks up to the Inquisitor. Noseless stirs almost unnoticeably, like a snake about to strike. The Inquisitor puts a steadying hand back on his shoulder as Gotthard approaches, until he glares down into the Inquisitor's cold eyes, noses practically touching. "Get out of my lab, little barbarian." Gotthard's slow and venomous words hammer across the amphitheater. His eyes are injected in blood, his left jaw swelling red.

“Gotts!” Rutger grabs his tunic. “What are you doing?” His voice is shaking wildly.

The Inquisitor laughs warmheartedly. He seems genuinely amused. “All the wrong instincts, esteemed colonist. I like you. A true believer in the civilizing power of aws Compacts.” He puts his right hand gently on Gotthard’s chest and with light pressure—more a suggestion than a push—Gotthard takes a step back. The Inquisitor keeps smiling as he says: “I am a believer as well, you know. A long time ago, Goah saved my—*our* lives,” he gestures casually at the guards. “I was too young to understand back then why, but it soon became clear that I was meant to bear aws most sacred of burdens—a responsibility heavier than most *civilized* colonists would dare to bear. Goah has entrusted *me* with the care of aws most precious and delicate expression of love: aws Gift to humankind. I am aws ultimate Protector, aws *Hand* to spread and nurture aws Gift beyond the existing frontiers of civilization, aws *Fist* to keep it free of corruption, pure from *demonfolk*.” The Inquisitor pauses, still staring into Gotthard’s confused eyes, and his smile fades. “And you know who is usually the first to claim sanctuary in aws Compacts, esteemed colonist?”

Rutger steps forward, wetting his lips. “Please excuse Man Kraker, Inquisitor. It has been a long day. We were in the middle of, uh, a delicate experiment.” He waves with his hand at the humming devices. “I hope you understand and forgive. We have nothing to hide, and of course we are pleased to assist you and your investigation anyway we can.”

The Inquisitor turns to Rutger and nods appreciatively. “It is me who must offer an apology, esteemed colonist. Aws Fist is not reputed for aws manners. Let me introduce myself: Grand Inquisitor Archer Rhodes of aws British Mission in Worthing and Imperial Commander of aws Fist. Goah’s Head has deemed it wise to divert me away from my usual duty. Apparently, some demons are wreaking havoc in the guts of

aws Imperia.” From the inflection of his voice, it is obvious to Ximena that he is unimpressed by his assignment. He bows curtly. “And you are?”

“Redeemed Rutger Siever.” He takes another step forward, blood drying on his face, and bows. “Perhaps you’ve heard about Siever Steel? We’ve made the occasional supply to Britain, if I recall correctly. And this is Man Gotthard Kraker, member of the most reputed scientist family in Geldershire.”

Gotthard keeps his glare fixed on the small man for a second and then bows slowly, lips pressed.

“How may we be of assistance?” Rutger asks.

“You could begin by explaining the nature of your so-called *experiment*?” The Inquisitor extends his hand towards the clutter of hardware.

“Of course,” Rutger replies promptly, and stretches his hand across the electric devices. “This is *astronomy*. Or *radioastronomy*, to be accurate. We have set an antenna up there.” He points at the stairs leading to the floor above. “And with this equipment we can accurately point it to any celestial body of interest, and track it along its orbit with a specific software developed by Man Gotthard himself.” He points at a heavy-looking metal box standing on the floor under the bench, cables coming in and out. “We were just testing the radio spectrometer when you—”

“You obviously know a lot about *radio wizardry*,” the Inquisitor interrupts. “Which is very convenient, Redeemed Siever, because I know nothing about these...” He waves dismissively at the electric mesh of metal and cables. “Perhaps you can assist us with your expertise and answer this question: what type of machine would you require if you were planning to corrupt the Century Festival broadcast with blasphemies?”

“Oh!” He clears his throat. “Hmm, let me see... For one, I assume you would need a large transformer, er, an antenna, of course. Then—”

“Excuse me, Man Siever. Let me rephrase the question. Would I find any of those things *here?*” he asks, pointing at the equipment.

Rutger frowns in confusion. “Well, uh,” and raises a finger at one device. “Right there, that is our transformer, but I guess you could—”

“What Grand Inquisitor Rhodes is *really* asking,” Gotthard interrupts his friend, his voice sharp and sullen, “is whether we are the blasphemers.”

The Inquisitor laughs warmly. “I do like you, Man Kraker. I can see in your little operation here who brings the brains and who the connections. No offense meant, Redeemed Siever.”

“None taken,” Rutger mumbles diplomatically.

Gotthard speaks again, “As Colony Elder van Althuis mentioned before being kindly asked out, we provisioned most of our equipment *after* the Century Festival. You can check this with any of the press workers downstairs, since they seem so keen to talk to you, anyway.”

The Inquisitor chuckles. “They are, aren’t they? I think they’re honestly concerned about the future of this colony were this heresy to spread. I find their apprehension... understandable. Don’t you?”

“By all means,” Gotthard says, his voice rising a notch, “if there had been anything *real* to report about. But gossips don’t cut it, Grand Inquisitor. We did nothing wrong. And honestly, I don’t consider that yelling blasphemies across the whole Imperium is the smartest thing to do anyway. Why would we?” He gives the Inquisitor a pointed look. “It might attract the wrong sort of people.”

The Inquisitor laughs again, shaking his head. “Oh, esteemed Man Kraker, it was a stupid thing to do, all right. On that, we agree. And yet, building the necessary,” he waves at

the wired mesh of circuits, boxes and dials, “requires some uncommon skills, wouldn’t you say? Like those of a scientist?”

“Uh, actually any engineer could easily build a transmitter,” Rutger says.

“Any engineer... Like Woman Speese?”

Rutger exchanges a nervous glance with Gotthard, and says: “Uh, well... Yes. Or any other.”

“There aren’t that many *other* engineers in Lunteren, Redeemed Siever, not with the right access to the right hardware. I hear you’ve been in contact with her?”

“Uh, with Woman Speese?” Rutger nods hesitantly. “Well, she has helped us out with some, er, supplies.”

“And did she ever mention where she got those *supplies* from?” the Inquisitor asks.

Gotthard shrugs. “Never asked. I suggest you talk to her directly.”

“Oh, I certainly will.” He smiles, showing his teeth.

Gotthard presses his lips and exchanges an inscrutable look with Rutger. “Can we get back to work then?” he asks slowly, his voice monotonous and controlled.

The Inquisitor turns to the humming experiment. “Quaestor Mathus failed to mention your investigation. Has all this been sanctioned by aw’s Head?”

“Uh, not explicitly,” Rutger says. “We started this astronomical research on our own initiative, using our private resources and free time. But I’m sure once—”

“No, Redeemed Siever,” the Inquisitor interrupts, his voice warm, almost affectionate. “You will not complete your experiment.”

Rutger swaps with Gotthard a glance of confusion and begins to ask, “I beg your—?!”

“Much, *much* better!” The sudden sparkle in the Inquisitor’s pale eyes sends a shiver down Ximena’s back. “Thank Goah

we crossed paths, esteemed colonists, because I can now protect your souls.”

“Our *souls*?” Gotthard intervenes. “What are you—?!”

“When you are as old as I am,” the Inquisitor says with the patient and intense voice of a preaching missionary, “and you do for so long what I do, you get a sense for things that are... *beyond* the perception of the plain folk. You start to *hear* them—the demons. You can smell the corruption they leave behind, the stench of their creeping tendrils as they extend their reach towards their next victim. You can feel the stickiness of their machinations on your very skin. This experiment of yours,” he gestures at the buzzing mesh, “stinks of demonwork. I know, I know.” The inquisitor raises his voice and hand as Gotthard and Rutger seem about to protest. “You are good lads, and you have nothing to fear now. Both of you are of fine upbringing, and it is well known that aristocracy enhances natural resistance against evil. I can see you’re still fairly untainted by the demonic fumes that emanate from all these... *contraptions*. Goah be praised, esteemed colonists, that my sacred duty has reached you in time.” He turns to the giant, noseless warrior beside him. “John, cleanse this place, and report back to aw’s Eye.”

“Aye, Arch,” Noseless says, and reaches with his massive right hand over his shoulder, where an assortment of menacing-looking weapons hang strapped to his back. He retrieves a massive, metallic-tipped club and starts walking towards the bench.

“No! What are you doing, grunt?” Gotthard leaps in front of him, extending both hands like a desperate man trying to stop a charging bull. “You have no right to—!”

Noseless’s left arm jerks out like it has a life of its own, his gloved fist traversing the space towards Gotthard’s face like a diving hawk. The cracking noise makes Ximena cringe as blood splashes across the floor. Gotthard falls on his back, inert

for a whole five seconds before he can even begin to writhe and wail in excruciating pain.

“Gotts!” Rutger runs and leans over him, taking his bloodied head between his hands. “You broke his nose, barbarian!”

The Inquisitor places a hand on Rutger’s shoulder, and says in a comforting, warm tone: “Take your friend downstairs before he hurts himself, Redeemed Siever. My men will be done in no time.”

“Goah’s fucking Mercy!” Rutger shouts. “This is not the frontier, where you can do as you please. This is a Gifted colony of the Hanseatic Imperium, barbarian, and be assured that our Quaestor and our Colony Elders will hear about you — your—! You are a horrible—!” He stops himself from finishing the sentence, reddened eyes locked on the man’s third eye.

“I care little about your opinion,” the Inquisitor says with a warm smile and a patient voice, “or your body. To me, only your *soul matters*.” And he walks out of the room.

Gotthard’s anguished wails are gradually replaced by a deep, heart-breaking weeping—tears and snot smearing the blood on his face—as Rutger helps him to his feet.

As they stagger to the door, Noseless raises the club over his head and—taking a gulp of air—smashes the generator to pieces. Many students cover their ears as the reverberating bang of metal against metal blasts across the amphitheater. The all-encompassing electric hum stops as all dial needles fall flat to zero. An eerie silence remains behind—hanging in the auditorium like dust in a sunbeam.

Noseless raises the heavy club with a satisfied groan and prepares to discharge it over the microphone this time, its handle still set to *transmitting*.

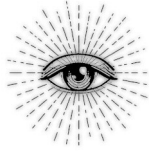
Ximena stretches her dream arms and rubs the back of her dream neck as the scene evaporates. She throws a glimpse at Mark and Cody. With deep creases in their brows, they stare with blank eyes at nowhere in particular—and not just them, she realizes, as she scans the gloomy benches across the auditorium.

“Wow, have you ever had one of *those* days?” Professor Miyagi cheerfully asks from the stage, looking up and around the disturbed faces. “I mean, a totally *fubar* day, like the one Gotthard Kraker just had? Think about it, people. You wake up as usual. One more day, like any other. Brush your teeth, hit the road, first shift to finish early, then tinker with your buddy on your private project, hoping to get the damn transmitter to work. And then... Bang! First meaningful interstellar communication in centuries! What a historical achievement! Your dream has come true and all that, but the day goes on, people.” He extends his hands theatrically, like a bad actor. “And what a ride it turns out to be! You discover that nobody is really interested in stopping what can only be described as a genocidal, slow-motion assassination attempt on humankind. And it gets better! You engage in a brutally honest exchange with the authorities, and your dream gets literally shattered by ignorant thugs. Oh, to top it all, you lose your ego and break your nose. Phew, yeah! Some day, huh? Does anybody dare a guess as to what might be crossing Gotthard’s mind when he finally lies down to sleep?”

Ximena doesn’t feel like guessing. And she doesn’t appreciate the professor’s tone either. Too... casual. Too good-humored, as appropriate as a doomsday party.

Miyagi paces the stage in silence, hands on his back. He walks as if lost in thoughts, but Ximena knows him better by now. “Let’s put our historian hats on for a minute, all right?” He speaks while pacing on. “This is an amazing historical

sequence, what we just watched. And not just because I produced it.” He chuckles softly. Nobody else does—but he continues with unabated passion. “I count *four* historical vectors smashing heads on against each other. Four, people! Not three, not two. Four! We got the long-lost colony of New Alexandria, who has decided that Earth needs a change in administration. We got a faction of space rebels, trying to warn Earth. We got Gotthard and Rutger, so alone—Earth’s powerless ears. And of course, the historical vector that never fails to show its ugly face: the good, old *establishment*. Starring the one and only Grand Inquisitor Archer Rhodes! What a man, huh? He embodies, like no other, the raw power of an empire that spans the world. What a historian would give to take a peek into his dreams! Wait a minute...” He stops and raises his head, a wide smile of complicity on his face. “We can!”



Barbarian

“I’m not sure Elder Rew would approve of this... *action*,”
Aline says.

She and Edda, resplendent blue, float over the roofs of Lunteren, smoothly sliding towards the Forum with the naturality of the practiced, like the Traverse was already second nature to them. It is obvious to Ximena that they have been training intensely in the last couple of days. Long sleeps in their cell, she guesses. Long dreams. And without a single visit, increasingly anxious about what is happening in the world outside their four walls. The Second Wake is their only taste of *freedom*.

Not a soul is to be seen on the shadowless streets below, at these early hours of the 23rd of January 2400... Which is bizarre. Not even the usual weekend party animals seem to be in the mood this evening.

Ah, but that is not entirely true.

As the two hairless, semitransparent girls fly over the Forum, Ximena sees the blue refulgence of a group of those men from aw’s Fist, walking smugly across the bricked expanse and chatting like it was noon and the world belonged to them.

“I’m sure Elder Rew wouldn’t expect us to stay put, yeah?” Edda says. “Were it up to her, we would spend the entire day and night dreaming and training without end.”

Align sighs. “At this point, I wish I could sleep through the daytime too. It has only been two days in that cell, and it’s already making me crazy, waiting for something to happen.”

“Stay strong, sister, because they are keeping us locked a few more days.”

“A few?!” She gapes at Edda in dismay. “How many?”

Edda shrugs. “The Quaestor was not very specific.”

“She never came to see me.” Aline purses her lips.

“She brought lunch herself and left immediately. She just told me that our process is due in a few days.”

“That’s actually quite nice of her. To give you some context, I mean. And at least you’ve got to see another person.”

“Come on, you see me all the time. And you also visited Piet, didn’t you?”

“Uh... yes, but only briefly.” She smiles. “I had to practice inward-traverse with somebody that wouldn’t freak out.”

“How’s he doing? Did he say anything about...?”

“Your father? No, sorry.” Aline’s smile widens wickedly. “But we didn’t talk much.”

Edda laughs. “I bet you didn’t! I’m not sure Elder Rew would approve of *that* action!”

Aline joins the laugh, but her smile quickly wanes. “Piet mentioned that the mood is getting very tense in Lunteren.” She shakes her head slowly. “What else did Quaestor Mathus tell you? You think they found something?”

“Nah. Impossible. We left no trace.”

“Ah!” Aline points at a red-tiled building along the Narrow Way, right where the street meets the Forum. “That’s the house.”

“Oh. That one belongs to the van Althuisen.”

“Really? I always wondered—it’s always empty.”

“I guess Colder van Althuis wants to score an easy one with aw’s Head. Hosting the Inquisitor in one of his guest houses costs him nothing.”

“I wonder why the Inquisitor doesn’t just stay with his men?” Aline raises a finger eastwards, towards the other end of the Forum, where the Eye of Goah looms next to the woods.

“With those brutes?” Edda laughs loudly and descends towards the house.

The Inquisitor is sleeping face up on a double bed, his breast raising and sinking regularly under the fine blanket. And he is dreaming—even Ximena can tell as much, by the way his blue halo scintillates across his skin.

The two ghost-girls lean over him and observe his shaved head with the fascination of children at the zoo. Ximena’s eyes are immediately drawn to the large open Eye of Goah tattooed on his forehead. She has always found that symbol deeply comforting, especially when she had a bad day. Goah watches. Goah cares. But this one seems—probably by design—to glare back in reproving admonition. Creepy as hell.

“What do you think these are?” Edda says, pointing with a finger at the chain-like tattoo running down his left cheek.

“Looks like... *mystic tears* or whatever. Goah knows. Many of his men had it as well. To think that our fate rests in the hands of this... lunatic.”

Edda inspects his—to Ximena, still quite youthful—features. “Nobody is above aw’s Compacts, sister. Not even aw’s Fist.” She turns her head at her friend. “Let’s do this.”

She throws herself towards the man, joining her halo to his. But she doesn’t go through. She doesn’t go *in*. “It’s solid!” Edda says, shooting a surprised look back at Aline.

Aline raises her eyebrows, and then shrugs. “Traversing is just not your thing. Focus, sister.”

“Oh, come on. Outward-Traversing might not be my strongest suit, but I never had trouble with Inward-Traversing, yeah? How many times have I entered your dreams in the last two days? And never once failed!”

“Hmm... Let me.” Aline steps forward, and pushes her body against the Inquisitor’s twinkling halo with a deliberate, careful move. She blinks in surprise as her advance is met with resistance. “Pure sin!”

“I told you! What’s going on?”

Aline studies the Inquisitor’s face and mutters something to herself.

“What’s that?” Edda leans in, tilting her head to aim her remaining ear at Aline. Ximena observes that, unlike in dreams, the bodies in the Second Wake retain their original form. Which kind of makes sense. It is reality, after all. Another version of it, perhaps; but reality, nevertheless.

Aline meets Edda’s eyes. “I think it’s our *intentions*. They might not be the purest, right? Remember with Elder Aaij before the Century Festival? How Elder Rew could not meld him into our permascape because we wanted to deceive him instead of helping him? I think this is the same.”

Edda turns her eyes at the Inquisitor. “Whoa!” And takes a deep breath. “That’s a tough nut to crack! With Elder Aaij we found a way to *bend our minds* into helping him, by saving his life from a fire. But with this asshole?”

A red bright dash out the window attracts the girls’—and Ximena’s—attention at once. Somebody is out there, flying over Lunteren’s Second Wake. Somebody *red*. And approaching quickly through the air, squarely towards this house, towards this room.

“Elder Rew?” Aline asks, squinting at the approaching elongated figure.

Edda frowns at the sight and then exhales a curt gasp. “That’s not Elder Rew! Quick, under the bed!”

The scene camera hastily follows the girls as they drop prone and crawl eagerly beneath the broad bed.

Next to each other, they stay totally still, and turn their anxious gape at the floor nearby, where—Whoa! Ximena jumps at the sudden sight—there is now a red haloed leg-like extremity with three appendages floating an inch from the ground, not a yard away from their faces.

And it remains there.

Ximena holds her breath, like she was frozen in place next to the girls. She feels the chills running down her spine as Edda and Aline exchange a terrified look.

Edda puts a finger on her lips, a red shimmer glistening in her eyes.

Aline nods slowly.

They both turn their attention to the alien leg, but it is nowhere to be seen. Not anymore. They promptly scan the floor around the bed, but the red glimmer appears to be gone. The solid stillness of the Second Wake fills the bedroom once again.

Ximena turns her gaze back to Edda and Aline. They do not seem to be in a hurry to crawl out of cover. Nor to speak a single whisper. Not for a good minute or two. By the time Ximena begins to shift her weight on the bench, they finally exchange a timid nod.

“Are you sure that wasn’t Elder Rew?” Aline whispers.

“That was that asshole boss of his, Yog.”

“How could you even tell? They’re identical!”

“Trust me, I know her well. And marai are as diverse as we are when you get used to them.”

“You’re full of talents, sister.”

“I know,” Edda says without a hint of humor, and creeps out of their hideout.

When Aline joins her, Edda is staring intently at the Inquisitor.

“Come on.” Aline grabs Edda by the arm. “Let’s get out of here before she comes out!”

Edda meets her eyes, and says, “We must go in, sister. We need to know what’s going on in there.”

“Are you nuts?! If that marai sees you...” She shakes her head, keeping her gaze locked with Edda’s. “Remember what they did to the Smook siblings?”

“We must,” Edda says coolly. But Ximena feels her drive—her conviction—bubbling fiercely inside her. Edda’s determination is a force of nature, Ximena realizes by now—a hurricane about to hit land.

Aline’s eyes jolt nervously between the Inquisitor and her friend. “And what about Elder Rew? If her boss finds out that she is instructing us, they’ll kill her! We gotta go, Edda!”

“You go,” Edda says, while studying the Inquisitor’s peaceful features. “Look.” Edda drives a finger along his blue halo. Ximena leans forward. Yes, she can see it now, mixed in the chaos of blue scintillation. There, a sparkle of red! And there goes another. Edda meets Aline’s wide-eyed look and says, “I must know what’s going on in there.”

Aline blinks, her breathing quickening, her mood souring visibly. “You can’t, Edda! You’re risking too much! This is not about you anymore. This is not a decision for you alone to make.” She throws an impatient gesture at the sleeping Inquisitor. “Besides, remember how we can’t Inward-Travel into this mensa? There’s no way you can rid your mind of bad intentions.”

“What bad intentions?” Edda says, her voice slow and intentional, eyes locked on the Inquisitor’s face. “Who gives a fuck about the Inquisitor anymore? Did you miss what just happened? A goahdamn marai has shown up, Aline! And

entered the dreams of the most powerful man in Lunteren, Goah's fucking Mercy!"

With a sudden, swift movement, Edda throws her ghostly blue body against the Inquisitor's halo. And disappears.

Aline—alone now in the Second Wake—gapes in disbelief.

"Look, Mom," the little boy with pale blue eyes says, holding up a clam. Barefooted, and wrapped in little more than dirty layers of plastic and thick leaves, he is very young—about five—and his accent is so strong that Ximena needs a moment to realize that his words are indeed English. A very old English. "This one good?"

The young woman—she can't be older than Edda—takes it and inspects it. "No, darlin', too small," she replies, and smiles at the boy encouragingly. "But keep at it!" Her clothing is not much of an improvement over the boy's, although Ximena thinks there are rags of pelts in the mix, but so old and worn as to deem them almost unrecognizable.

"Arch!" another boy calls while running towards the little boy across the hard wet ground of the low tide. He is taller—larger—but not older. "Look what I foun', Arch!" He raises a large, red crab in his hand, skillfully held between two fingers.

The rest of the tribe—a group of a couple dozen people—grace the beach in relaxed chatter while recollecting sea delicacies from the sands at a leisurely pace. Ximena watches the group with the fascination of a paleontologist studying a lost stone-age tribe. They are all so young, she thinks. The oldest cannot be much older than twenty. And—Ximena smiles at the realization—they all have that thin blue tattoo running down their left cheeks like a chain of tears.

But this is not the stone age.

Enormous buildings—structures lost in time—raise like

long-dead Goliaths behind them, around them, across the shallow sea, and even beyond the opposite shore, three miles away. Ximena gapes at the maze of brick, concrete and metal that spreads in all directions as far as the eyes can see.

Nature has taken over long ago. No wall is free of ivy, nor roof of seagulls, nor shadow of moss. And ancient oaks, sycamores and birches grow tall and proud between the buildings.

A tall, spiked clock tower emerging from the waters right between both shores catches Ximena's attention, as does the gigantic Gothic-style complex to which it is attached. Although distorted by the merciless decay of time, she recognizes the place at once.

Old London.

Nowadays—in the twenty-sixth century—that entire area has been reclaimed from the sea and restored to its pre-Collapse glory. Nobody lives in the ruined city anymore, of course, but it is now a world-renowned touristic attraction and archaeological site. She *must* visit it someday. GIA permitting.

The young mother picks up a clam from the sand. “Arch, John, look!”

Both boys run to her while she opens the clam with a flat piece of metal. With a practiced jolt of the hand against her palm, she cracks the shell open and takes it avidly in her mouth. “So good!” she says between noisy slurps. “Will you help me fin’ more?”

The air bites cold, Ximena thinks, repressing a chill. And then she exhales in the sudden realization that that was not her own feeling. The psych-link!

Where’s Edda?

Ximena scans the post-apocalyptic landscape, eyes searching. She lets the subtle pull of the psych-link guide her, and her eyes immediately lock on Edda, her left knee on the grass, peeking from behind a large oak next to an ivy-ridden

building. She is eyeing the little boy. She knows instinctively that he is the protagonist of this dream.

Edda's eyes jolt about, searching, peering behind the bushes and in the shadows. Ximena can feel her anxiety burning inside her. *Where is that goahdamn marai?*

Good question, Ximena thinks, looking around for the mare herself.

But Edda realizes that if Yog is hiding, she must hide better. Her expression relaxes at once—the girl knows how to focus her will!—and her body shrinks in an instant into the form of a seagull; one more nondescript seagull among the myriad that traverses in noisy excitement the paradise of fish and safety that is Old London. With a heavy flapping of her wings, Edda takes off rather clumsily, and flies to the top of a moss-covered wall nearby. A fantastic vantage point, Ximena thinks, letting her eyes glide along the beach, the sea and the jungle of emerging colossal ruins.

A sudden noise makes the young mother turn around as a dozen uniformed men march into the beach in line formation, guns on their hands, knives on their hilts, death in their eyes. An unarmed man in robes paces behind, his head shaved clean, an enormous glowering eye tattooed on his forehead.

The young mother shrieks, takes the two boys by the hand and flees, dragging them along the hard ground of the low tide.

The rest of the tribe seems paralyzed by the sight. Some raise their bare hands in gestures of peace.

The warriors stop mere yards from them and raise their guns.

Ximena covers her mouth. This is not a dream, no. This is a nightmare.

A curt order by one of the armed men begins the massacre. One by one, shots are dispensed economically—surgically. To the head. To the chest. The barbarians don't stand a chance.

They cannot flee, they cannot fight. They can only stare back, push their children behind them, and die.

Ximena covers her mouth in pure disgust. *At least they are sparing the children.*

“This can’t be right,” Cody whispers to her left, a tension in his voice that Ximena has not heard before. He is shaking his head. “This can’t be right.”

As the killing progresses, slow and relentless, shot after shot, Ximena sees out of the corner of her eye an increasing agitation across the white-and-blue ranks of the amphitheater, an unease that doesn’t seem to spread to the Lundev section. Even Mark, next to her, seems to watch the massacre with quiet, professional distance.

As only the whimpering sobs of children remain on the beach, the man that gave the order lowers his gun and inspects the bodies with the satisfied look of an artisan. Upon raising his head, he eyes the running young mother in the distance, pulling frenziedly from the two boys. With the hint of a grin, he takes aim and shoots.

Once.

“Here are the last ones, Inquisitor Rhodes,” the warrior says, pushing the two weeping boys next to the others.

The man with the shaved head inspects the group of shaken, shell-shocked children, one by one, and lets his eyes scrutinize their squalid bodies like he could peer into their souls. When his gaze reaches the small boy, the tall boy takes his hand.

“That one is too old,” the man says, a finger pointed at a little shaking girl, not older than six or seven.

One warrior shoots her in the back of the neck.

Ximena jumps in place, aghast. As do most of the students.

“No,” Cody mutters, gaping at the little body.

The man with the shaved head looks at the remaining children with something close to pride in his eyes, and says with a warm smile, “May Goah bless the taker of aw’s Gift.”

Every armed man reply in unison, “May Goah bless the giver.”

“Rejoice, little barbarians!” the man says, spreading his arms in a wide gesture of welcome. “For today you are rescued from barbarism. Rejoice, colonists, for today you are born again as children of Goah!”

The children’s uncomprehending eyes keep flickering back and forth between the preaching man and their dead parents scattered wide-eyed across the beach. One warrior paces among the corpses, administering one last shot in every head.

“Rejoice! For you shall join the new colony of Worthing, where many families anxiously await the arrival of their youngest echelon. Most of you will soon tend farms, make bread or fish the seas. Some of you might even learn and become specialists. Or perhaps, if you are really lucky,” he points a finger at the grinning warriors, “aw’s Head might call on you to spread aw’s Blessings throughout the land. Goah be praised!”

Mark chuckles and says, “Goah be praised,” sarcasm oozing from every word.

Cody turns to him. “What did you say?” he says, glaring at the Neanderthal.

“Don’t mind him, Cody,” Ximena says, and throws Mark an admonishing gaze. “He cannot understand.”

Mark frowns at both, baffled at their reaction. “Understand what?”

“Exactly,” Ximena says.

Cody leans forward, eyes locked on Mark’s. “This is just a dream,” he says, his voice once more under tight control.

Right, Ximena thinks. Just a dream. A dream can hardly be taken

seriously, right? There could be dragons fucking faeries right behind that building for all they know, right?

“Sure,” Mark replies with a shrug. “Probably a recurring dream too.” He throws a finger at the little boy, who is gaping at the man with the shaved head like a mortal gapes at a god. “I bet the Grand Inquisitor is treated to this pearl of a dream every single night.” He laughs and throws a wink at Cody. “Trauma fucks the mind like that.”

“No,” Cody says, shaking his head slowly. “This can’t be right.”

And Ximena agrees wholeheartedly. This *can’t* be right. This is not how *aws Imperia* was made. Sure, *aws Fist* were no angels. That wasn’t their role, whatever the heroic sensorials of the post-Fahey age—as popular as ever—keep vomiting to the masses. Historians know that the soldiers of Goah would not shy away from culling the heathen elites if they refused conversion. A small blood price to pay for the liberation of the people from the rot of the post-Collapse world.

But this scene—this *dream*—is showing a very different picture, a very *disturbing* picture. And judging by the sickening feeling that flows through the psych-link, Edda—watching from the top of the ruined wall—seems to agree.

This definitely can’t be right.

This is *not* history.

Ximena gasps as the scene gives a sudden shake around her, like there was a tremor, but without the physical movement. *What was that?!*

She turns her attention to the beach, and to her surprise, there is only one figure there, the little boy in rags of leaves and plastics, alone, so vulnerable. Even the birds, the insects—all gone, the dead city truly dead now, the lingering silence almost sinister. Except for the little boy—and a seagull on a wall nearby—nothing moves, nothing *breathes*.

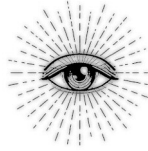
And then—*whoa!*—Ximena leans forward, lips parted in

disbelief when the Eye of Goah appears in midair in all its resplendent glory. The Eye of Goah—*literally*, not figuratively—floating above the shores of Old London and beaming threads of gold across the dark sand, its radiant light gleaming in the boy’s awed eyes.

“Goah’s Mercy!” Cody mutters.

Aws Eye hangs still a few yards away from the boy in sublime geometrical perfection, its contours made of gentle curves of solid radiation, without depth—more a symbol than an object, like it doesn’t belong in the universe.

The little boy falls on his knees and stretches his hands towards the dazzling apparition. “Goah,” he says with the voice of an adult man. “Goah be my guide.”



Servant of Goah

The Eye of Goah speaks with a monotonous female voice. “Sense and bind, human leader,” it says, pulsing golden light with every syllable.

The little boy kneels and sinks his head while his body begins to grow in size. He gradually loses his hair, and gains a thick gown. An eye tattoo materializes on his forehead. Grand Inquisitor Archer Rhodes raises his eyes to the holy apparition in silent expectation.

Ximena can feel Edda’s increasing agitation bubbling inside her. Her indignation at this... *sin*, this... *blasphemy!* How does she dare, that fucking marai, impersonating the God Of All Humans?! Edda is not of the pious type, but the sight of this... *abomination* gnaws at her soul. With a discreet flutter of her seagull wings, she glides to the ground, not a hundred yards apart, her small yellow eyes glaring indignantly at the false god.

Shit, Edda, Ximena thinks. Not so close!

“You shall terminate every human that defies my power,” the Eye says. “Do acknowledge, human.”

The Inquisitor nods in silence, gaze sunk.

“Do acknowledge, human.”

“Yes, oh G- Goah,” he says, a slight stutter in his voice. “I am your Fist. I am your servant.”

Edda feels a strange sensation. It is something resembling... *fear*, but it is not an emotion of her own.

“You shall remove every vestige of resistance to my will. Do acknowledge.”

“Yes, oh Goah.”

Edda squints at the Inquisitor, and indeed, there it is, that strange *fear*, like a second skin around him. And it doesn’t come from within.

“You shall unleash your weapons against my enemies. Do acknowledge.”

Whoa! The fear intensifies at once. An eerie feeling, alien and animal at the same time. She can almost see it in the air, glimmering around the Inquisitor, crawling into him. But she is not watching with her eyes! Edda blinks, initially unsure about her own perceptions, and then exhales in wonder. It is her dream sense! It has blossomed into something akin to a third eye—an eye of the mind.

Outstanding! Ximena thinks. *But you’re not the only one with a mind-eye around here, Edda!*

“Yes, oh Goah, yes,” the man begins to sob, his voice distorted with terror. “I am your servant.”

The Eye speaks again. “You shall desire a raise of the culling of two years.”

“I d- don’t understand.”

Ximena—through Edda—can *see* how the emotional blanket thrown at the Inquisitor morphs at once. The repressive fear dissipates, and a strange, unnameable emotion takes its place. Although alien in nature, it doesn’t feel unpleasant. It is like... a sort of... *satisfaction*, like... after a copious meal.

“You shall desire a raise of the culling of two years,” the Eye repeats.

“Culling?” the Inquisitor says, his voice a notch louder, overcome by relief. “I am sorry, oh Goah. I don’t know the word.”

The Joyousday! Edda’s thought strikes Ximena like a lightning bolt of hope.

“The human culling at twenty-seven years of age. You shall desire it raised to twenty-nine.” The feeling of satiation around the Inquisitor intensifies abruptly. “Do acknowledge.”

“The Joyousday? Yes, oh Goah! With two more years, the souls I could save for you!”

But... two years is not enough! Edda’s hope twirls in a maelstrom of frustration. *And what can this man do? He is just... a puppet of aw’s Head.*

Ximena, increasingly alarmed at Edda’s wild emotions, leans forward when Edda’s hope and frustration clash in an explosive mix with despair and pious indignation at such blasphemy. Her naked passions flash out like a nova through the dreamscape. *Grand Inquisitor or not, he doesn’t have the authority to—!*

The Eye of Goah jolts abruptly and fixates on Edda’s seagull-shaped body.

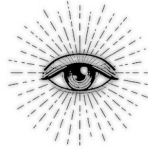
Oh Goah! Ximena sits bolt upright.

The thoughts of the alien reverberate unfiltered across the ruined remains of the old city. But it is not words that Edda hears. It is the shadow of a feeling. A feeling of surprise. And disbelief. The emotions flow unimpeded and fluid. Fully alien, and yet unmistakable to Edda’s mind-eye. In an instant, the incredulous sensation turns into doubt—a doubt made in equal parts of suspicion and skepticism.

Edda, her breathing quickening, watches the swift transition of alien emotions like a rabbit caught in the headlights.

Ximena grabs Mark and Cody by their sleeves, eyes locked on the vulnerable seagull.

As the alien sense of doubt begins to flare into rage, the seagull stretches its wings and disappears.



Daughter of the Juf

“Okay, people, calm down.” Professor Miyagi raises his hands at the GIA section of the auditorium, around Ximena, where voices are getting louder and shriller. “Calm down, please. Let’s talk about it, all right?” He turns his gaze to Ank and gives her a nod.

The scene disappears and a sunny spring day holds the amphitheater in a warm embrace. It seems to do the trick, since most voices relax at once.

“Thank you, thank you.” Miyagi waves his hands in a gesture of appeasement, a light frown on his usually relaxed features. “This is great, people!” He shoots a nervous glance at the bizarrely silent Censor Smith, whose usually placid face has turned into a stoic mask of unreadable emotions. “A great opportunity for a discussion, isn’t it? Nothing like a bit of intellectual sparring to blow off some steam, huh? Let’s begin. Anybody?” Half of the GIA students raise their hands. “Ah, er...” He points at the girl sitting beside Censor Smith. Her name, Mallory Pardee, floats briefly in large, bold letters over her head. “Mallory, go ahead.”

“Thank you, Professor,” she says, standing and pulling back

her long, brown hair. “Hmm, I don’t even know where to begin. There is so much wrong about what we’ve seen.”

Wrong, disturbing, world-shattering, eye-opening. Ximena doesn’t know what to think anymore. She takes a deep breath, trying to release the tension from her own heated discussion with Mark and Cody.

“Wrong?” Miyagi smiles politely at Mallory. “All right. I respect that. Skepticism is the beating heart of science. And humility too—Goah knows I’ve been wrong before. Rarely though.” He laughs, as do many Lundev students.

Ximena doesn’t think it is the moment for humor. And judging from the icy silence around her, it seems her fellow GIA students agree. Even Mark is wise enough to bite his lip.

“Apologies, Mallory,” Miyagi says, the tense mood not lost on him. “Please, go ahead.”

“Thank you, Professor. Hmm, first was the way the barbarians were massacred. It was unnecessary, and a blatant attempt to demonize aws Head. And aws Imperia.” Some voices begin to raise in the Lundev section, but Miyagi puts a finger on his lips. Mallory continues, “I am sorry to say this, Professor Miyagi, and I mean no disrespect, but I think your sources may have been contaminated by Hansasian propaganda.” Miyagi doesn’t wince, he gestures for Mallory to continue. “Most barbarians welcomed the civilizatory freedoms of aws Imperia. They came in rags to our colonies, begging for the blessings of aws Gift. The rare exceptions were oppressed by elites too corrupt to give away their power. And yes, those required some heavy hand. But once rid of them, the bulk of the population would join in droves.”

“Okay, let’s debate this,” Professor Miyagi says, turning his attention to the Lundev benches. “Anybody care to...? Ah, Sky. Your take?”

“What the GIA chick is describing—”

“*Mallory*,” Miyagi interrupts in an admonishing tone.

“Mallory, sure. What she is describing is the formation of classical empires—a powerful nation absorbing neighboring nations. But the Imperia of Goah, despite its name, is not an empire. It is a single nation. People were not absorbed. They were *supplanted*.”

Mallory scoffs, “That’s absurd. Where is the evidence?”

“Please, Mallory,” Miyagi says. “It’s Sky’s turn to speak.”

Sky folds her arms and shifts her weight. “It’s so fucking obvious, that I don’t even know where to begin.”

Mark stands. “What about culture?” Every head in the amphitheater turns towards him. He gives Ximena a wink, but Ximena, who is slowly learning to read him, can see that he is not as comfortable with the public attention as he seems. “What about language? Goah’s Imperia were a global phenomenon, the first global political unity in history. How do you explain,” he directs his gaze down at Mallory, who is glaring at him, “that every Goahn colonist in the world, from Townsend to China, would speak the same English, local accents aside? Or that they would all share the same cultural backbone, local traditions aside? The world before aw’s Imperia was a patchwork of diversity. How do you explain that changed so radically if aw’s Imperia’s expansion was done, as you say, through mere integration of neighbors? It’s even in the way they call themselves. They are not *citizens*, they are *colonists*!”

“Damn right,” Sky says, smiling widely from the other side of the amphitheater. “You don’t need evidence to see the obvious. You just need fucking common sense.”

“Sky, please.” Miyagi gestures her to sit. “Evidence is always important in science. And more so in a science like history, where evidence is always suspect. Now, Mallory, you wanted to raise another point, I think?”

“Yes, Professor Miyagi. What I found extremely disturbing about that dream was the way the mare Yog attempted to influence Grand Inquisitor Rhodes.”

“Understandably so,” Miyagi says with a slow nod.

“No, I don’t think I’m making myself clear.” She wets her lips. “I mean, the Grand Inquisitor is a leading member of aw’s Head. He belongs to the establishment. He is part of the elite.”

“Very much so.”

“So it begs the question whether this... *influencing* was common practice across the elites of aw’s Imperia? Was aw’s Head actually working for the dreamworms?”

“Well, it kind of was,” Miyagi says.

Ximena gasps, as do many on the nearby benches.

Mallory herself seems caught off guard. She clears her throat. “Everywhere? Or just in the Hanseatic Imperium?”

“Everywhere. The Reseeding effort was active worldwide. Okay, people, relax,” Miyagi says at the sudden commotion. “It is not mind control, all right? They were pretty clumsy at their attempts to influence. They can’t lie. They aren’t the best actors, you’ve seen Yog in action! That’s why they put so much value on Rew and the other few Human Whisperers. And even they were quite limited. Rew’s promise to his superiors is to use *actual* humans to influence humans, remember?”

Mallory presses her lips and then asks, “Are there sources to corroborate this... *theory*?”

“Naturally. Like, take this dream of the Grand Inquisitor, for example. There are contemporary sources—straight from the publications of Flora de Vroome, which have proved time and again to be accurate to the last comma. I have attached a link to De Vroome’s publications in the seminar’s reference folder. As for the rest of the material on post-Collapse history, our library is open to all members of the Global Program. There is an indexed—”

“I was not aware of this point,” Censor Smith says, his voice uncharacteristically abrupt and cool. He stands and paces across the stage towards Miyagi. “Is this *access* extensive to the Townsend University students?”

Miyagi blinks at him, a baffled expression on his face. “Well, of course.”

Censor Smith exhales heavily, shakes his head slowly, and says, “This was not part of the agreed Global Program protocol.”

“Uh, well, breathing wasn’t either,” he smiles, spreading his hands. “You surely agree that historical material is hardly controversial in a historical seminar.”

“I am sorry, Professor Miyagi, but I must insist you remove such access at once.”

What? Ximena leans forward in alarm. She was counting on it for her PhD!

“Uh...” Miyagi seems to hesitate for an instant. “But our students need the material to contrast the veracity of the content of the seminar.”

“I assure you, we have enough material of our own in the Townsend archives. All carefully curated for the consumption of *my* students.”

Curated? They decide what we read?! Ximena turns her eyes to Cody, who returns her wide-eyed gaze with pressed lips. She remembers now Abuelo’s remarks when she told him about the extraordinary sensorial on Atahualpa and Pizarro, and the treasure of material available to all Global Program students. *That’s so, so wrong!*

Miyagi, after exchanging an inscrutable glance with Ank, continues, “But that’s great, Censor Smith! What about if you also grant the Lundev students access to the Townsend archives? The more, the merrier, am I right?”

“I am sorry, Professor, but this is nonnegotiable. The wrong message, the wrong idea, can too easily find root in the young mind. And then, we only have ourselves to blame when corruption takes hold. You know as well as I do how the historical record is littered with propaganda, how one-sided history is, always written by the winners.”

“Sure, you’re right, Censor Smith. And precisely for that reason, exposure to as much material as possible is so crucial. Our students must consume, analyze and learn to find the contextual meaning hidden behind every piece of historical document. How can they otherwise hope to evolve the critical thinking required to, uh, well, to think *critically*? We are making historians here!”

“I respect your passion, Professor, but—please, don’t take this the wrong way—I find your mindset too naive for the modern world. We are indeed making historians—professionals able to serve the State. My students have put their careers in the hands of the University of Townsend, a responsibility that, as a member of the council, I’m sworn to take very seriously. I don’t play with the trust of my students, nor with the trust the State puts in our institution. I’m sorry, Professor, but if you don’t revoke the access to your archive of all Townsend students, I’m afraid the Global Program is over on its first-ever seminar.”

Miyagi turns his gaze to Ank, a rare crease of confusion on his forehead, and bites his lower lip. Ank stands at once, walks to him and, a hand on his arm, whispers something in his ears. Ximena watches with admiration how the elegant Neanderthal woman seems to bring the professor down to earth. This is the real world of the twenty-sixth century—even here, in this permascaped auditorium.

Miyagi nods slowly at Ank’s words and then turns his eyes to the waiting Censor Smith. “Our technicians will need ten wake minutes to revoke access to the Lundev servers.”

“No,” Ximena mutters, aghast, eyes on her lap. “No.”

Mark puts a hand on her shoulder, lips pursed in solidarity.

“Splendid, Professor,” Censor Smith says, all smiles once again. “A short recess will do us good. Should we reconvene here in ten—?”

“No!” Ximena shouts, and by the time her thinking catches

up with her, she finds herself standing—“No, please!”—and attracting every look in the auditorium like an explosion. *What am I doing?* Her breathing has quickened by the rush of adrenaline, her eyes fixed on Censor Smith, imploring. *Goah’s Mercy, what am I doing?*

The entire amphitheater is dead silent now—a heavy silence, an *expectant* silence. Ximena can feel the combined pressure of every gaze like a beam of heat on her skin. Even Mark gapes at her like she just turned into a toad—or rather into something far sexier, from the look on his face.

Censor Smith, who has stopped his slow pace back to the bench, is glaring up at her in disbelief. “I beg your pardon, Woman Epullan?”

Ximena takes a gulp of air, trying to rein on her nerves. “S-Sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to...” She clears her throat, eyes twitching around the auditorium. *Ground swallow me up.* “Uh, if I may... I was really counting on the access to the Lundev university for my research, and I’m sure I’m not the only—”

“Sit down, Woman Epullan.” Censor Smith’s smile has vanished.

“But... But...!”

“Sit down!”

His voice is so irresistibly assertive that Ximena begins to bend her trembling knees. But, once again, before her mind can fully acknowledge what she is doing, her body is standing bolt upright, and her mouth is saying, “What if I renounce the protection of the University of Townsend?” Her voice is shaky, but surprisingly loud.

Censor Smith keeps his eyes locked on her for a time, his expression frozen in place. A lone giggle from the far benches—Sky most likely—fails to break the almost solemn silence that seems to choke the auditorium.

“Sorry, sir. I really mean no disrespect. But if I declare myself solely responsible for my future career, then no harm

would come to the university. I'm happy to sign any document you give me." She looks around her. *What in Goah's Name are you doing?* some inner voice says in her mind. *Let it go before it's too late!* But the gaze of her flabbergasted comrades prompts her mouth to keep speaking, "Perhaps others would be willing to sign it as well?" She blinks at Cody. "Our research would—"

"Sit down this second, Woman Epullan," Censor Smith says, his tone sharp like a shard of ice, "or consider yourself expelled from the university and no *future career* to worry about."

Ximena gapes back in silence, her knees defying her will to bend. She lets her eyes wander at Professor Miyagi and Ank, who are staring at her from the middle of the stage with an unreadable sparkle in their eyes.

Cody grabs her left sleeve and tugs softly. "Sit down, please, Ximena."

Ximena turns her eyes at him, who nods and tugs anew. "Don't throw it all out the window."

Mark whispers in an urgent tone, "Sit and live to fight another day."

Ximena, still gaping and stunned by her own action—and the harsh official reaction—sinks back on her bench, eyes lost in her lap.

Censor Smith, his eyes still locked on her humble pose, throws an admonishing finger at the white-and-blue robed benches. "All of you carry the name of the University of Townsend." He lets his glare skim every single one of them. His unusually grave expression—enhanced by the enormous Eye of Goah tattooed on his forehead—gives every of his word the impact of a hammer. "It is an honor. No, not just an honor. It is the greatest of honors! A privilege *thousands* of hopeful candidates fail to achieve. But with that privilege, you carry an *unshakable* responsibility, a duty to guide and protect the same institutions that granted us all we have and all we are. You owe

your fealty to the Imperial University of the Goah's Imperia of the Americas that first took you under its wings, and to the University of Townsend that put you here today, and as an extension, you owe your loyalty to the entire state apparatus, to the Reconstruction Council and to our Pontifex." He lets his gaze rest on Ximena. "*Loyalty* is the invisible thread that weaves us all together and makes us a thousand times stronger than *any* individual could ever be. Loyalty gives meaning to our lifework. I expect the utmost loyalty from each and every one of you. The road to your future is paved with loyalty."

Mallory stands and begins to clap. Others join her at once, and soon the entire GIA section is standing and applauding in sync. Even Ximena, pulled up almost harshly by Cody, is clapping in rhythm, her face frozen in a mask of what she hopes approaches humble obedience.

His usual placid smile returns gradually to Censor Smith's lips as he paces back to his spot on the front bench and takes a sit. "I beg your indulgence for hijacking your seminar in such a harsh manner, my dear professor," he says. "But I'm sure you understand. We were all young, weren't we? And a gentle nudge in time goes a long way."

Professor Miyagi clears his throat. "Not a problem, Censor Smith. Not a problem."

"Oh, I regret to tell you that this last scene will have to be left out of your commercial dreamsenso."

Miyagi takes an unconscious step back. He blinks and opens his mouth as if to reply, but he uncharacteristically doesn't.

Censor Smith continues, "I know I'm here just as professor of history, not as censor, but I can already tell you that no amount of editing can salvage that... *story* we just watched. I am really sorry, my dear professor. But on the bright side, it is just one scene. The rest of it is excellent so far, and perfectly salvageable by a competent censor. I'm really looking forward to

reacquainting myself with the Grand Inquisitor—the *historical* one—after the,” he waves a finger at Ank, “technical recess.”

It takes but a gesture of Ank to make the students vanish from the auditorium all at once, off to their short wake break together with Censor Smith. Only three figures remain in the permascape: Ank, Professor Miyagi, and, yes, Ximena herself!

“Hello?” Ximena’s wavering voice echoes across the empty stairs as her gaze graces the bare benches, their stones eroded like they had been exposed to millennia of rain and wind. It is so eerily peaceful now, so rid of emotion; even the breeze seems to bring a whiff of spring and silence to the now vacant amphitheater. “Sorry, uh, Elder Ank. I think you forgot about me.”

“It’s just Ank, dear,” she says, smiling radiantly at Ximena. “I told you I’m not Goahn.”

“Sorry, Ximena,” Professor Miyagi says, and walks along the stage towards the central stairs, Ank following close behind. “I hope you don’t mind me keeping you here for an extra minute, but I have something to discuss with you in private.”

“Not *discuss*, Kenji,” Ank says, playfully slapping his shoulder. They climb the steps. “Just *inform*. And most certainly not in private!”

“Sorry, hon.” He chuckles, as he sits where Mark was sitting a few seconds ago. “In my heart, I cannot conceive of you as a separate person, even though you are way prettier than me.”

“He’s a bit self-centered,” Ank says, giving Ximena a wink as she sits to Miyagi’s right. “But he’s got the sweetest tongue.”

“I- I don’t understand,” Ximena blinks, eyes locked on the

professor. “Why me? Because of the, uh, *exchange* with Censor Smith?”

Miyagi laughs, and says, “I have to admit that kind of forced my hand, yes. The information we have for you... Well, I was planning to talk to you in private after the seminar. But,” he exchanges a complicit glimpse with Ank, “perhaps it’s better we don’t delay it anymore.”

“Information?”

“It’s not a big deal,” Miyagi says, raising a hand. “Don’t be alarmed. Just a... hmm, curiosity I found about by pure chance. You see, while researching the power struggle in pre-Columbian—”

“Oh, stop beating around the bush, Kenji,” Ank interrupts. “Look at her. She is nervous enough as it is.” She turns her gaze to Ximena. “You are the direct descendant of Edda van Dolah and Gotthard Kraker, dear.”

Ank and Miyagi regard Ximena in placid silence as the meaning of Ank’s words begins to seep in.

“A direct...?” She lets the word linger, eyes alternating between Ank and Miyagi. “Of... *Edda*?!”

“And Gotthard Kraker,” Miyagi confirms.

“But... How is that even...?” Ximena doesn’t finish the sentence, her eyes lost on a nondescript point at the other end of the amphitheater.

Miyagi speaks in an uncharacteristically soft tone. “Edda was the biological mother of Gerrit Kraker, Gotthard’s son.”

“Dowry mother,” Ximena mutters.

“Exactly,” he continues. “He had a daughter, Vanessa, who emigrated to your hometown in the mid-thirties.”

“Vanessa...” Ximena’s eyes widen. “Abuelo mentioned her a few times... Her dowry mother?”

Miyagi nods and sinks his shoulders like a man just released of a significant burden.

Ank speaks in her deepest, softest voice, “Would you like some time alone, dear?”

Ximena stands, lips tightly pressed, eyes still lost in the distance.

Ank and Miyagi exchange a long, concerned glance, but say nothing.

Ximena sits abruptly, turns her gaze to the couple, and says in an almost defiant tone, “So what? There are probably many other descendants, right?”

“Perhaps,” Miyagi says slowly. “After all, with the population explosion after the Dreamwars and the Rebalance, it wouldn’t surprise me if there were indeed other descendants across the Andes. But how many of them are historians of the University of Townsend?”

Ximena does not reply. She just gazes in silent reflection as her mind races to bring together the shards of her shattered worldview into a semblance of order.

Ank’s golden eyes stay locked on hers in comforting understanding. It is almost uncanny how this Neanderthal seems to read her mind. In a sudden gesture of solidarity, Ank leans forward across Miyagi, takes Edda’s hand into hers and smiles deeply before saying, “How many descendants of Edda can expect a career that will land them squarely into the elites of the Goah’s Imperia of the Americas?”

Ximena scoffs. “What career?” She keeps her limp hand inside the firm grasp of the woman. “I doubt Censor Smith will be too supportive after...” She shrugs, lips pursed. Then, as if a thought had just hit her sideways, she asks, “Why did you tell me?”

Miyagi raises his eyebrows and Ank releases her hand. They seem honestly baffled. “Well,” Miyagi clears his throat, “I just thought you had the right to know.”

Ank says, “This is about who you *really* are, after all, dear.”

“I am who I am, obviously,” Ximena says, a deep crease of

suspicion in her brow, her tone drenched in subdued anger. “Who my ascendants were are nobody’s business, *obviously*.”

“Fine,” Professor Miyagi says. He exchanges a concerned look with Ank, clears his throat and makes a gesture as to stand, but Ximena’s words interrupt his motion.

“Why do you tell me now? Why in the middle of the seminar?”

“Uh,” Miyagi shifts his weight and wets his lips. “Well, to be very honest with you, Ximena, I thought I would tell you while I still had the chance.”

Ximena blinks, eyes widening. “You think they are going to expel me, Goah’s Mercy!”

“No, no,” Miyagi says, his voice expertly reassuring. “I’m sure you’re fine, Ximena.”

“Don’t say that,” Ank says with an admonishing voice. “She must know the truth if she is to make it across thin ice.” She turns to Ximena and says, “I’m sorry, dear. We don’t mean to scare you more than you already are. The truth is that we just don’t know how Censor Smith, or the Townsend for that matter, will react to, er, to your urge for... *independence*. Perhaps they’ll expel you, yes. But most likely, if you show an adequate degree of contrition, you might be fine, as Kenji says. He’s not lying.”

“Why did I have to speak up like that, Goah’s Mercy?” Ximena’s voice sounds slow and uncertain, her mind still wandering the forest of her fears. “What for? For research? For knowledge?”

“For truth.” Professor Miyagi nods, eyes locked on hers.

“And what is truth worth, without a living?” A flash of Abuelo’s intense expression crosses her mind. “My family is counting on me so much it is scary!”

Miyagi and Ank regard her in respectful silence.

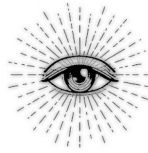
“If Townsend finds out who I am...” Ximena says, eyes twitching nervously between both of them.

“Then there is no limit to what you can accomplish in the GIA,” Professor Miyagi says, a sparkle in his eyes like she had only seen before in her own family before she was about to do something... *very* regretful. “A daughter of the Juf, speaking history to the masses.”

Ximena’s eyes widen in terror. “Please, don’t tell them! Please, Professor, Elder Ank, I beg you! Don’t tell Censor Smith!”

Ank smiles warmly. “Our lips are sealed, dear.”

Professor Miyagi nods and stands. “Now, if you hurry, you can still get a quick break, but don’t be late or you’ll miss the first face-to-face encounter of our two favorite mares. And I assure you, Ximena, that you don’t want to miss it.”



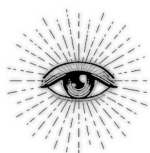
THE STUFF OF MARES

Episode VI

She is a historian, goahdammit! Perhaps not the most important profession to a tribe, a city, or a nation, but certainly the most important profession to a civilization destined to survive the death of the sun.



TWENTY-FIVE



Old Deviss

Professor Miyagi looks up at the benches on the hemicycle of the auditorium, packed tightly to the brim with students. He then turns and paces the stage, hands behind his back, reflective. “History,” he finally says, thoughtful, almost solemnly, “is a psycho.”

The amphitheater quickly fills with light laughter, Ximena’s included.

“Yes, people, bear with me. When you think you are reaching the end of history, it comes back at you and,” he curls his right hand into a fist and dives it forcefully into his left hand, “*bang!*” he shouts. “It has always happened. You have a stable bunch of hunting-gathering tribes for thousands of years and then... *bang!* Agriculture, patriarchy, writing, city-states, you name it! Okay, you say, but then the dust settles, borders harden, trade flows, hundreds of years go by and... *bang!* Horses, war, empires, slavery, organized religion, the whole lot! Oof! Okay, let’s try again, barbarians, shit, dark ages, crap, colonization, yikes, revolutions, industry, world wars, cold wars, give us a break, goahdammit!”

The laughter spreads like fire across the benches. Lunde, GIA, doesn't matter, everybody is enjoying noisily.

"History is most certainly a psycho. I can imagine her—yes, people, in my mind, history is a goddess, beautiful and merciless, wearing a kimono made of the most exquisite silks—plotting against us, humans. Oh, how cute, she thought. Look at them, they are trying to escape Earth, settle on other celestial bodies. But, oh my goodness, we cannot allow that, can we? That would make it too hard for me to fool around with them. Let's get them back before it's too late, shall we? Hmm, what about a nice environmental collapse? *Bang!* Let's spice that up with, uh, I know, I know! A pandemic. *Bang!*"

Ximena cannot repress a burst of laughter. Mark, like most of the students, is roaring to her right, and Cody, to his left, seems to cough uncontrollably, tears welling in his eyes. It is a welcome change to the heavier mood that has plagued the last few hours of the seminar.

Miyagi, visibly energized by the flood of laughter and whistles, continues his passionate monologue. "Oh my goodness!" He is imitating a female voice now, and the students love it. "Perhaps that was a bit too much? Uh oh, I think I overdid that. They're all dying! Oh, dear. Ah! They are bouncing back. Oof, that was close. How cute, those resilient little things! So... What now? You know what? I'm so horny, I think I'm going to call again that handsome marai I met at the history gods' bar. *Bang, bang, bang!*"

Miyagi joins the roaring laughter, and as the students begin to clap, he mocks a bow. Ximena keeps clapping and laughing for what feels like an entire minute. Miyagi knows his business. In the classroom and on stage.

"*My point is,*" he finally says, loudly enough to kill the remaining noise, "that human history is not just *human* any longer." He points a finger at Ank, and a snowy forest

landscape scene appears, floating vividly as the light in the auditorium dims. “Does anybody recognize this place?”

A cold, humid air, deliciously refreshing, hits Ximena’s face. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. The auditorium is filled by a deciduous forest with thick, tall beeches and oaks, naked, gnarled branches competing for every scrap of space on the ground and above. At the diffuse light of dawn, the falling light snow is barely visible, except what has accumulated on a thin layer over the branches.

“Reminds me of the Appalachian forests,” Mallory says from the bottom row, next to Censor Smith, “where I grew up. But... no, it’s too flat.”

“Good guess. But wrong. A hint: this is not Earth—at least, not strictly speaking.” The scene begins to *glide* over the canopy until a sparkle of light attracts Ximena’s eyes close to the horizon. Yes, it is some type of technological settlement embedded in the wilderness. The scene approaches quickly, spreading it into view. The size of a small city, it unrolls into a complex assortment of eerie *alien* structures—large buildings with no sharp angles, smooth and rounded, dull-looking, copper-colored, with no discernible openings. Their purpose is elusive, except that a few of them are topped by what look like chimneys—thick, white smoke raising vertically—hinting at an industrial intent, but are covered by what from this distance looks like green, moving filaments, creeping over their surface. The majority of the other buildings, dirty with dust and snow, appear abandoned in contrast. But the most striking feature of all, what draws every eye in the amphitheater, are the twenty or so *towers* built around the perimeter of the settlement. They are *magnificent!* All identical, perfectly cylindrical, and so high and wide as to dwarf the rest of the structures, their top curved into a sharp peak, their purpose inscrutable.

“A dreamworm city,” Sky says from across the amphitheater. “Deviss?”

“Good guess, and this time, a correct one. Old Deviss, the heart of the forested Diamar territory. This is the city from where our favorite marai is leading her heroic Reseeding effort. Contemplate it, people, as it was a good hundred years ago, so tiny and pristine, still untouched by human hands. It’s almost like, uh, a dead monument, isn’t it? Without the vehicles, roads, airport, apartment with a view to the Bestawros Park from where a humble teacher is dreaming a seminar...” He chuckles and gives Ank a nod. “Let’s take a peek.”

“Fucking Mercy!” Edda is standing by the door of her dream bedroom, looking out the hallway. She slams the door in frustration. “I just... can’t!”

“It is imperative that you do succeed, Redeemed van Dolah,” Rew says. “You do lack *conviction*.”

“I’m trying, all right?!”

“There is no *trying* in faith-control. There is only *doing*.”

Edda folds her arms. “Spare me your useless mantras, Elder Rew, and give me something more tangible, yeah?”

“You do realize, Redeemed van Dolah, that your efforts have been stuck for two entire sessions. Two days I had to dedicate exclusively to you, to the detriment of Woman Speese’s own progress.”

Edda rolls her eyes. “Here’s another mantra for you, from a teacher to a teacher: patience, patience, patience!”

“I do fear you trivialize the situation, Redeemed van Dolah. A report to my superiors cannot be delayed any longer. The time window is closing with haste. You *must* progress. I must report a success so resounding that my disobedience shall be deemed heroic, not heretic. Alas, your lack of progress is compromising my life. And subsequently the future of our species. And your father.”

Edda sighs and wets her lips. “You don’t seriously believe I’m not trying my best, do you?”

Rew stares at her apprentice in silence for a few moments, like a bridge engineer gaping a gorge. “Do clear your mind, Redeemed van Dolah. If you do focus, you *shall* succeed. Do remember: *Will* is the realm of Light, an efficient means to control the dreamscape, but ultimately weak—insufficient to overcome the ingrained expectations of the mind. *Faith* is the realm of Shadow—far more powerful, since dreams are assembled from belief. Do make another attempt.”

Edda sighs and begins to slowly reach out with her hand to the knob.

“Do stop wishing,” Rew says, “and do start *knowing*. It is all—”

Rew vanishes.

Edda freezes. “Elder Rew?”

The scene morphs at once, and a pungent smell immediately fills Ximena’s nostrils. *This is not a dream*, she realizes, the peculiar thick texture now absent. The small room is made of copper-like metallic walls, and scattered over walls and ceiling are inscrutable alien devices: contraptions made of metal intermixed with what looks like moving tendrils of thick vegetation. A large rectangular box dominates the space, shaped like an elongated coffin, it is fully covered in a dense layer of those same crawling ivy-like tendrils.

A marai—thin, tall, albino-white—is standing in the room and stretching a boneless arm in a not-quite-human fashion towards the box. The covering vegetation seems to have reacted to the marai’s touch by sharply retreating around, down and under the box, like spiders escaping a bird, revealing in their wake another marai lying over bare golden-red metal.

The exposed marai sits upright and turns her white eyes to the standing marai in silence.

“Master,” the standing marai says with a bow while the other marai climbs slowly out of the structure, almost flowing, like she has no joints, “this unplanned wake piercing has been triggered by an unannounced visit. Overseer Yog-at-Yian has arrived at the city gates, and summons your urgent attention.”

Rew stares at the marai for a few moments. “Fuck,” she finally says.

“Do clarify, master.”

“A relevant human silence-filler. Do ignore. Which gate?”

“Sixth olaki. Shall I organize the escort?”

“No. Do notify the Overseer that I shall join her.” Rew walks towards an opening blocked by impenetrable vegetation. As she approaches, the vegetation retreats like a curtain, revealing the busy metallic hallway behind. Rew halts on the threshold and turns back to the marai. “Do get two forest-readers to sixth olaki as soon as ready—with hunting gear.”

Rew walks out.

The air of Old Nubaria feels icy and humid on Ximena’s face, and more fragrant than she has lived on Earth. Pristine of human progress. The auditorium scene has transported them across the alien city. The empty streets of Deviss—or rather, the open space between the large alien structures—are covered with sheets of copper-like metal, regular, spotless. Snow melts as soon as it contacts its surface, myriad drops moving as if by their own volition into nearby tiny holes in the ground. The only noise is the wind howling between the smoothly curved metallic buildings.

Two marai stand on the edge of a large open space, next to a wall made of that same golden-red metal. The wall, three

times as high as the marai, stretches far, until out of sight on its circular path around the alien city. Next to the marai, the wall opens to the forest beyond, but a thick vegetation layer covers it completely, effectively denying access. A gate, obviously.

“Sense and bind, Overseer Yog-at-Yian.” Rew bows, her female voice reverberating as calm and neutral as ever.

Yog bows lightly. “Sense and bind, Walker Rew-at-Deviss.”

“I do observe you did arrive with only one limb.”

“That is accurate. My other limb remained in Yian.”

“A long journey.”

“Two days and two nights by treader.”

Rew lets her blank eyes rest on the strange-looking *vehicle* parked nearby. As large as a truck, and made of the same copper-like metal as everything else, but with the shape of a box with no concession to aerodynamics. It has no wheels. Instead, beneath it, bulky layers of ivy-like vegetation support its weight. She turns her eyes back to the marai. “Perhaps regular melding would have been a more... *efficient* way to communicate?”

“Agreed. Unfortunately, our recent summons have all been ignored.”

Rew does not reply.

“Master Gorrobor’s inquiries and your persistent silence have forced me to send a limb out here.” Yog scans the city, her alien expression inscrutable to Ximena.

“I do fear Deviss is not primed for administrative visits,” Rew says. “Most of us do hibernate.” She raises her head at an enormous structure nearby, impossibly high and as thick as a building, that Ximena recognizes as one of the twenty-odd colossal cylindrical towers that surround the city. Ximena gapes at the smooth perfection of its surface, and lets her eyes climb along it until the falling snow conceals the rest. “Only a minimal crew and garrison remain in service. If we had been

notified that an Overseer was underway, we might have had time to thaw a service detachment.”

“I do not require comforts, Walker. Only answers. Why did you reject our summons?”

Rew takes a moment to reply. “I did not *reject* your summons, Overseer.” Her voice is slow and deliberate, every word carefully measured. “I was not *prepared* to report. So I decided not to.”

Yog says nothing, and Rew remains equally silent. Both hold each other’s stare for a long while.

Yog finally raises her head at the wind-whirling snow. “I shall take your report indoors. Do lead me to the Reseeding quarters.”

“Certainly, Overseer. But since you have already made your way to the periphery of Oromantis, and must regretfully tolerate the inconveniences of a wound-down city, may I suggest that you do take advantage of one of its few privileges?”

“I have no need for indulgences. I shall hear your report. Do take us indoors. Now.”

Ximena catches a movement from deeper in the city out of the corner of her eye. The two marai turn their heads.

With a soft swish, two small vehicles, similar to bulky motorcycles, enter the open space swifter than any horse could ever gallop, each piloted by a marai. No wheels; instead, a thick layer of intertwined tendrils of vegetation, as high as a leg, flow impossibly fast, thrusting the vehicles forward in a silent frenzy. Both vehicles stop next to Rew and Yog, and the riders dismount.

“As per your instructions, Walker Rew,” one pilot says with a slight bow.

Yog gives the vehicles a long glance. “Forest-treaders?” she asks.

“Fully equipped for a hunt,” Rew says. “A perk of life on

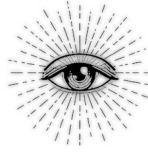
the rim. I shall duly report on the morrow, but indulge with me today on the wild pleasures of the hunt.”

Yog stares in silence at the vehicles.

“When did you last nourish on *genuine* terror?” Rew asks.

Yog says nothing, still staring. The ivy-like tendrils—thickly meshed under the vehicles’ piloting platform—creep idly, as if craving action.

“When did you last *feast* on wild human flesh?” Rew asks.



A Hunt in the Woods

A woman and a child gather herbs in the shadows of the deep forest. Their garments are made of pelts, skillfully cut and sewn together to cover their bodies in warm furs—whites and grays matching the winter surroundings as to make them virtually invisible to predatory eyes. Under their furry hoods, Ximena recognizes the large wide noses and slant foreheads of Neanderthals.

“Neferu!” Mark says, loudly enough to be heard across the auditorium. “My ancestor,” he adds, proudly.

“Neferu, indeed.” Professor Miyagi gives an appreciative nod. “Is she really a relative?”

“Yep. Direct line straight to my father.”

“You are full of surprises, Walker of the Mind.” Miyagi gives him a thoughtful look, and then, for an instant, his eyes slip over to Ximena. “You have blue blood running through your veins.”

Mark laughs and turns his beaming expression to Ximena.

Miyagi lets his gaze roll across the student-filled benches. “In a seminar dealing with the fall of Goah’s Imperia, we were bound to meet Shaman Neferu sooner or later. We’ll

study the bulk of her historical involvement when we dig out the nitty-gritty details of the Dreamwars, but what you are watching now is fresh out of the oven of science, a recent discovery just published last year. This scene portraits the earliest known historical reference to Neferu, earlier than the events that made her famous—or infamous, depending on who you ask. This boy is Neferu’s firstborn son and apprentice, although I’m afraid he is not your ancestor, Mark.”

“**W**hat’s that, Mother?” The boy, about ten years old, leans to see what Neferu is collecting from the base of the tree.

“Red moss,” Neferu says, her voice soft and calm, as she cuts some with a tiny metal knife. The earthy smell of freshly cut herbs engulfs Ximena at once. “Very effective against infections from open wounds. Dispense as infusion.”

She hands the herb to the child, who blinks at it with large, blue eyes. He takes it to his nose and sniffs.

“It also grows north of here,” Neferu says, turning to point in the direction. The sudden movement agitates the live rabbit and mouse hanging from her leather belt. “Look for it at the base of the largest oaks, especially those covered with ivy, usually on the north part of the trunk. Remember, moss hides from the sun.”

The boy freezes, eyes and lips open wide in shock.

“Sabri?”

Then he drops the moss and hugs his mother, trembling visibly.

“Sabri!” Neferu kneels down and scans her son. “What’s wrong?!”

The boy is weeping silently. “I don’t know, mother. It…”

He shakes his little head, unable to continue, eyes beaming naked panic at her.

Neferu stands and presses her son tight against her body in a protective gesture. “Don’t be afraid, Sabri. Don’t let the fear engulf you.” She hastily scans the shadows of the gnarled branches. The two small animals hanging from her waist begin to move and squeal. Neferu closes her eyes for an instant and mutters something, her breath visible in the air.

The rabbit and mouse calm at once, and the forest settles into an edgy silence.

An unnerving silence.

Ximena can *feel* it as well. The invisible threat. The unnamed danger. She finds herself holding her breath, eyes locked on the shadows of the undergrowth.

“Sabri, we need to move!” Neferu commands, urgency tensing her voice, arms around her son. “Can you run?!”

The boy, shaking heavily, does not reply.

“Sabri, come now!” Neferu takes the hand of her son and pulls.

The boy does not move, his eyes wide open in frozen terror. His little hand slips out of his mother’s grasp.

“Sabri!” Neferu grabs her son’s hand again and pulls with force. The boy’s legs finally react, dragged by Neferu’s vigorous steps. “It’s okay. All is good. Think of Father, Sabri. I promised not to tell, but he is bringing you a toy from the farmers’ market.”

They move hastily, sticking to the densest parts of the forest, where trunks gather intimately and branches promise concealment.

The boy’s tremors intensify. With a violent jerk, he falls flat on the ground and begins to shrill loudly, his voice dripping anguish, his hands on his face, covering his eyes.

“Sabri!” Neferu’s voice breaks, close to tears. She drops on her knees and places her hands on his fur-hooded head. “Be

brave. I can feel the fear too. It's not real, Sabri. Be silent, please. We need to move. Father is waiting. He brings a new toy."

Neferu tries to pick up her son in her arms, but he is too heavy for the fragile woman.

"Sabri, stand!" she says, scanning the surroundings with frenzied glimpses.

The boy keeps screaming, inconsolable.

Neferu stands slowly, lips pressed. Ximena gasps as she takes a long knife from her belt. Black and shiny, probably basalt, she raises it with her right hand and shuts her eyes, moving her lips as if in silent prayer.

The scene zooms out and reveals a larger portion of the forest. Eerily quiet, the sleepy undergrowth of winter creeps between the trunks, where the ever-present rotting layer of wet, brown-black leaves reminds of happier seasons.

With a practiced, swift move, Neferu unstraps the rabbit with her left hand and raises it. The small animal, face down, lurches as if just awoken. It jerks violently, trying to flee.

An unnatural movement on the far side, behind the white trunks of a group of birches, catches Ximena's eyes. It doesn't seem to escape Neferu's attention either, as she freezes her gesture momentarily, knife in one hand, panicked rabbit in the other. Then, muttering louder, eyes still closed, Neferu thrusts the knife's tip with deadly accuracy into the rabbit's heart.

The rabbit dissolves in thin air, turning first into red-glowing dust, like tiny embers suspended in midair, and then into ashes, thinning and disappearing before even a drop of blood touches the ground.

With shut eyes and lips still speaking silent words, Neferu kneels and places her now empty left hand on her son's head.

The little boy stops shaking and looks up at his mother, eyes wide open in confusion. "Mother?"

Neferu opens her eyes and breathes out—she had been

holding her breath. She gives him an urgent smile. “Sabri. We must go to Father. Now.” She pulls her son up. “Run!”

And they run. Swiftly. With the natural ability of lifelong forest dwellers, moving around and over the winter undergrowth as if it wasn’t there.

The auditorium scene follows their hasty race from a distance, giving Ximena a bat-like perspective, zig-zagging frantically among naked branches, trying to catch up with the receding mother and son.

Something catches Ximena’s attention. A movement on the far edge of the scene. She turns her gaze.

Two forest-treaders in full motion, both marai pilots leaning forward in a balanced and flexible stance, white eyes locked on their prey. The forest-treaders—golden-red metal over a frenzied blur of green machine-like vegetation—thrust side by side in pursuit, skillfully avoiding trees, gracefully gliding over dead logs, bushes and fallen branches.

Neferu, still clutching the black knife in her right hand, glances back at their stalkers and quickens her strides, pushing her son to hasten his smaller steps. *They don’t have a chance!* Ximena realizes, clenching her fists until her knuckles whiten.

“Mother, I—”

“No talk now. Run!”

The two treaders approach silently, zeroing in on the running Neanderthals. Then, at once—as if sharing one mind—they turn sharply away from each other, one left, the other right. Ximena can see from her vantage point how the treaders slide through the forest on a wide curve around their prey to pin them down from both flanks.

The little boy—his frantic breathing visible in the cold air—begins to wail ever louder.

“Be brave!” Neferu says, pulling him harder.

A shadow moves behind a thicket to their left.

Neferu pulls away rightwards, frantically tugging the boy along.

A forest-treader emerges from the undergrowth right in front of them. The marai dismounts with the elegant fluidity of a boneless body, even before the treader stops its movement.

Neferu steps back while jerking her head in all directions, her son shrieking and trembling in her embrace. She raises her hand in a threatening gesture, the basalt knife still shaking in her grip.

“As the hunt comes to an end,” Professor Miyagi’s voices come somewhere below the winter drama, “I’m activating the voices of Rew and Yog. I want you to hear their psychic interchange. Very instructive. Remember that their prey cannot hear what they say.”

Ximena feels Mark shifting his weight next to her. “I’m not sure I can listen,” he mutters between his teeth. His voice oozes so much venom that Ximena turns her head at once. His usual sweet face is distorted in a grimace hard to stomach for her. She puts her right hand on his fist, which stops trembling. Even his expression softens a notch, but his blue eyes remain unblinkingly locked on the scene. Ximena sighs. *This man is not made to hate.*

“*Dreamworms,*” Mark whispers to himself, his voice like a promise of slow, sweet retribution.

Such raw hate. Ximena is not sure she can relate. But then a flash crosses her mind: Pizarro and his brutes annihilating the old world of her ancestors. A shiver of disgust runs down her spine. No, not disgust. Hatred.

Neferu points the knife at the approaching figure. “I will fight you, mare!” Her voice trembles. “I can see through your mind games.” She pulls the weeping boy behind her back. “I will kill you if you touch my son!”

The marai slides closer, white eyes locked on her.

She glances furiously around, perhaps seeking a route to

flee, and cringes when she sees the other marai, already dismounted, approaching from behind.

“Its resistance is formidable,” Yog says. “The specimens in Yian are not so... *satisfying*.”

“Unsurprising,” Rew says. “Humans bred in captivity lose... *authenticity*. I am most pleased to share this experience with you, Overseer. A taste of the old ways, when our ancestors first settled Nubaria.”

“The cub’s resistance is finally breaking. Its fear is... *luscious*.”

“Do approach with caution, Overseer. The parent is a pregnant female protecting her cub. She shall fight fiercely.”

“I left caution back in Deviss, Walker Rew. This primitive pleasure is... *revitalizing*. It awakens memories of a better age. The raw *fear* of wild prey—the fleeing *terror* of sentient game—is the most exquisite of nourishments, worthy of the risk of damaging this limb.” Yog slides forward, unperturbed by Neferu’s shaking knife.

Little Sabri, terror-struck, trips over a protruding root, and falls on his back.

Neferu reacts instantly, unhitching from her belt—with her now free left hand—the remaining mouse. Before the animal has time to react to the abrupt grab, Neferu shuts her eyes—her features relaxed in sudden concentration—and impales it with the basalt knife with a precise thrust. As soon as the tip pierces the soft tissue, the mouse bursts into a glowing cloud of red dust and ashes.

“That ploy anew,” Yog says. “What is its nature?”

“A bizarre transmutation, Overseer. Its nature is unknown to me. I do advise caution.”

“Your lack of knowledge is disappointing, Human Whisperer. You are our foremost expert on human culture.”

“I do accumulate deep knowledge of third-wake humans—

a valuable asset for our Reseeding effort—but the culture of First Wake humans is beyond my understanding.”

“Sabri! Run and hide!” Neferu shouts, as she throws the knife up in the air over the still approaching Yog. “Now!” She turns her face to her little boy, urgency in her eyes, and flicks her left hand in a strange gesture.

The terror in the boy’s expression dissipates for a moment. As if jerked by involuntary reflexes, unnaturally quick, he jumps to his feet and flees, disappearing between the undergrowth before the marai has time to react.

The basalt knife spins in the air as it arcs down on Yog, its parabolic path strictly following the predictable laws of motion. The marai glides swiftly aside to dodge the falling blade. Ximena exhales. *It’s going to miss.*

Neferu shoots both arms forward, palms facing Yog, and mutters unintelligible words with her eyes shut.

The knife completes its trajectory, thrusting into Yog’s head with a squishy sound, the knife’s leather-bundled handle protruding from what on a human would be the forehead. Ximena’s eyes widen. *What’s just happened?!*

The forest seems to hold its breath. Nobody moves. Both marai seem paralyzed by the unnatural turn of events. Neferu’s anxious eyes remain fiercely locked on Yog’s wounded head.

“Impressive!” Rew says.

“Impossible!” Yog replies, her *voice* unperturbed. “A primitive blade, poorly flung, chaotic rotation, foreseeable trajectory. Simple to dodge. Which I did.”

“May I speculate that the long journey from Yian—”

“No,” Yog says, slowly extracting the knife out of her own fleshy head, blank eyes locked on Neferu. The open wound, which remains eerily dry, exposes fatty transparent tissues under the leathery white skin. “It was the human.” Yog drops the knife. “She caused *this* somehow.” Yog begins to slide

towards Neferu, who takes a step back, a defiant expression on her face.

“May I remind the Overseer,” Rew says, “that although this human’s... creative challenges may have made the hunt particularly *exhilarating*, we are not to prey on her meat. Wild humans have endangered status. We can hunt males and cubs, but female adults are most specifically protected by the conservationist policies of Oromantis. We are only allowed a taste of her fear.”

“Its fear is *sour*,” Yog says. “It does display astonishing resistance to my influence.”

“My human knowledge does allow me to speculate that this female’s fear is suppressed by the fiery instinct to protect her progeny.”

As if she had heard the marai’s telepathic words, Neferu steps forward, extending both arms to her side, unarmed, provocatively opening herself to Yog. She glares hatred.

Yog halts her approach and turns her face to where Sabri ran deeper into the woods. “But its cub did manage to flee. After I did paralyze it with terror. Another enigma.”

“I do presume she is maneuvering to distract us from pursuing her cub. He is very young. His chances alone in the wild are already vanishingly low. Her intention is possibly to sacrifice herself and so increase the probability of his reaching safe haven.”

“Your speculation might be accurate, Walker Rew. And the human might still pose a danger—its capabilities are... unpredictable. Do neutralize her. We shall hunt the cub.”

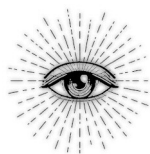
Rew extracts a metallic stick from the forest-treader, and taking advantage of her confrontation with Yog, moves swiftly behind Neferu. As the edge of the stick touches Neferu’s skin, she collapses, unconscious.

“Mother!” The weeping, terrified cry of Sabri emerges

from under a bush not far away. The two marai raise their heads.

“Our hunting shall be short,” Rew says, “but our feasting shall be long. Overseer Yog, do allow my extensive knowledge of human anatomy to guide your feeding. You shall savor the refined horror of prolonged agony like you never have before. And then you shall indulge in the most exquisite and tender flesh that nature can provide.”

The two marai slide towards the bush.



A Matter of Luck

The scene freezes and dissolves, spring sunlight returning slowly to the sky over the amphitheater.

“Ah, the primitive pleasures of the hunt,” Professor Miyagi says, eyes squinting from the direct sun. “My producers forced me to stop the scene at this point. What a shame. As far as I know, there has never been a proper marai feeding ritual recreated in sensorial before. But, well, they wouldn’t budge. Go figure.”

“Thank Goah!” Lora shouts from within the Lundev benches.

Miyagi smiles at that. “Yes, please. Bring in the comments, people.” He points up at the now empty space of the auditorium. “Any thoughts about the mares?”

“What a bunch of fuckers!” Sky says, not far away from Lora.

Many students chuckle and nod, including Ximena.

“*Fuckers?*” Miyagi places a hand on his chest, eyes wide open in mocking shock. “Are lions fuckers? Are sharks fuckers?” He waves a finger at the students. “Are *we* fuckers? Dreamworms—mares and their leech masters—are apex

predators. *Interstellar* apex predators. Top of the food chain since they settled in Nubaria millennia ago. And yet," he pauses for effect, "they allow Neferu to live, isn't that a sign of... *humanity*?"

"Are you defending them?!" Mallory asks in her neat white-and-blue robe from below Ximena, on the front row right next to the pleased-looking Censor Smith.

"*Defending*?" Miyagi chuckles. "No, no, Mallory. I'm a historian. And a historian does not defend—nor censure. A historian seeks to see, and tries to understand, but never judges. Ever." He looks up at his audience. "I know Mallory speaks for most of you, people. When I was a student, I also felt outrage at the uncountable injustices of the past. But—let me be very clear—I was *wrong*. Our profession is the most important in the world." His tone and eyes do not hint at humor or exaggeration. "We do not cater to the needs of individuals, like doctors or lawyers. We do not cater to the needs of people, like firemen or politicians. We cater to the needs of humanity. As historians, we have both a sacred duty, and a deeper duty. Our sacred duty," he lifts his thumb, "is to dig out the truth and to understand its context. Truth. And. Context. We never let our sense of morality cloud our understanding. But we also have a *deep* duty," he raises a second finger now, "to guide humanity into the future. We are the guardians of our species' memories. We are humanity trying to avoid tripping twice on the same stone. More than that. We are humanity growing wiser."

Nobody speaks. The silence falls heavy, almost solemn. Miyagi has touched a chord. Ximena feels inspired, *energized*, more eager than ever to pursue her career to its ultimate consequences. She is a *historian*, goahdammit! Perhaps not the most important profession to a tribe, a city, or a nation, but certainly the most important profession to a *civilization* destined to survive the death of the sun.

Miyagi gives his students a long glance and then smiles.

“What’s with the serious faces? Come on, people. React! I’m spoiling you here with the result of bleeding-edge research on the Fall of Goah’s Imperia! And from the perspective of the mares, no less! Don’t you get a historgasm? This is *context* at its best. Come on,” he gestures with both hands invitingly, “shoot me some questions.”

“Uh, sorry, Professor. Stupid question,” Lora says. “How is it that mares hunt so well, if they cannot hear? Nor smell?”

“Silent ignorance is stupid, questions are not. It is true that mares communicate telepathically, and that’s the reason they *speak* to us only within dreams. Their brains can’t translate sounds to *meaning* the way ours can. Very different evolutionary paths. But mares can most definitely hear and smell. The skin on their heads is extraordinarily sensitive to pressure, and sound is nothing more than tiny changes in air pressure, right? They also have a sophisticated array of chemical receptors along their extremities—their sense of smell rivals that of sharks. Their evolutive history as hunters in their home world is fascinating. As is their relationship—first competitive, then symbiotic—with their aquatic cousins, the leeches. But that is best left for a xenobiology lecture. That was a good question, Lora. More?”

Sky stands abruptly. “Sorry if I missed it, Professor, but I didn’t get that about Neferu stabbing animals that then disappear with a... *puff*?”

“Yes, right. You would be forgiven to think that it was some kind of magic or that her pagan gods of nature granted her divine powers,” he says, waving his fingers in the air. “But no. What you witnessed was just *luck*. Well, *pushed* luck. By what we nowadays call *quantum splitting*. I’m just a humble historian,” this causes some laughs, “so I have no clue how that works. Anybody more... *numerically* inclined cares to explain?”

“From the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics,” Qiao begins, more reciting than speaking, “every

quantum interaction causes the universe to split. A quantum observer can in theory *push* which side of the split to entangle to, no matter how unlikely, as long as another observer—hence the sacrificed animals—counters the likelihood by entangling to the opposing universe. In terms of the wave function—”

“Enough, enough!” Miyagi chuckles and puts two theatrical fingers on his temples. “Thanks, Qiao. Wow! Let me rephrase that so that even a historian gets it: Neferu can manipulate *luck*, all right?”

He takes a few slow steps, as if collecting his thoughts.

“One hundred years ago,” he continues, “the ritualistic art of Nubarian shamans was humanity’s most advanced usage of the quantum splitting technology. It was never discovered elsewhere, not even in the Earth of the golden age, although it is hypothesized that when Neanderthals roamed Earth, they transmitted the ancient art to Sapiens, which persisted in different forms on the fringes of civilization, only to disappear forever during the enlightenment. Which was a pity, because, until the advent of dreamtech, it was the only known way to pierce the dimensions.”

He takes a few more steps, hands behind his back.

“*Crucially*,” he pauses for emphasis, “mares did not understand it—nor cared, thank *Goah* for their lack of curiosity—or that psycho of history would have kicked humanity’s balls so epically, that Earth’s humans would have surely gone the same way as their Nubarian siblings, or as cows for that matter: a hopeless existence of inescapable slavery and exploitation.”

He shoots an apologetic smile up at the benches. “Sorry, people, I digress. Let’s get on with the events that led to the Leap-Day Reformation, shall we? But first, a quick question, just to see who’s been paying attention. Rew needs more time to instruct humans, doesn’t she? So she’s been avoiding her superiors. And now that she can’t pull the silent treatment any longer, she takes the mare Yog for a picnic in the forest to

gain... Yes. Who can tell me how much time has she really gained?"

"One night," Cody says.

"Indeed. One night. To complete Edda's and Aline's training in the Path of Shadow. How does that sound?"

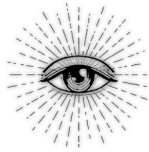
"Impossible," Mark says with a firm shake of his head. "Not even the most talented human to have ever existed could come close to pulling that out."

"But then," Lora says from across the auditorium, "why is Rew even trying?"

"I don't know." Mark shrugs. "Desperation?"

"You might be right," Miyagi says, pointing a finger at Mark. "Or not. Let's watch."

TWENTY-EIGHT



Know What You Want

A tropical beach of white sands fills the auditorium in bright daylight. The sun sparkles on the ocean, gently murmuring soothing songs of blue and emerald, bringing fresh, salty air to Ximena's grateful lungs. Seagulls search noisily for crabs and mussels on the wet shore. The beach goes on forever, along the undulating coast, low dunes of the finest sand stretching almost one mile wide against a wall of palm trees. Ximena doubts such a place ever existed in the real *worlds*.

But it is the huge bones of mythological monsters protruding from the sand that attract her eyes, scattered across the immense beach as far as she can see. Ribcages as large as cathedrals, femurs from mythical leviathans as high as towers, colossal skulls from unrecognizable behemoths. This dream must be some sort of fantasy, Ximena thinks. A vivid, beautifully realistic fantasy of sea, sand and memories of an impossible past.

The scene gently zooms in closer to the sands, where two female figures in short tunics stand among the titanic remains.

"Come on, sister," Edda says. "Fucking *want* it!"

Aline is focusing her attention on a large, elongated bone, the size of a cow, lying on the sand. “It doesn’t—”

“The trick is to want it sooo much... like nothing else matters, yeah?” Edda says. “Like this!” The bone immediately shoots up in the air over their heads, and then falls back slowly, like a giant feather.

Aline shakes her head in frustration. “Oh, it looks so easy when you do it. I don’t know, Edda. Sometimes I can do it as well, but today is not my day, I guess.”

“There are no bad days for wanting stuff! Just—”

“If you do allow, Redeemed van Dolah,” Rew is standing behind them, whereas a few instants ago she wasn’t. “I may be of assistance to Woman Speese.”

“Elder Rew!” both say simultaneously, turning around.

“We were practicing together,” Edda says. “You’re late.”

“I do apologize. I was... unusually busy. I do celebrate that both of you are here, because it is imperative that we do expedite your instruction. But before that, Woman Speese, I would like you to complete the task that Redeemed van Dolah has assigned to you. A Walker of the Light should indeed have no trouble, whatever the day.”

Aline presses her lips. “Okay... I’ll try.”

“Will-control is not a matter of trying, but of desire, of *ambition*. Your selfless nature weakens you, Woman Speese. Do take example from Redeemed van Dolah. She has the instinctive selfishness of a master controller. Her will is iron-hard and crystal-sharp.”

“Uh, thank you?” Edda says with raised eyebrows.

Rew locks her white eyes on Aline. “Your will is weak because you are lacking motivation. If your inner desire cannot awaken your will, external motivation might.”

A gurgling, choking noise makes the girls turn their attention to the heavy bone. Pieter is trapped below it, half-

buried in the sand, red-faced, asphyxiating, unable to move the massive object, stretching his arms, *pleading*.

“Pieter!” Aline screams, and the bone shoots up into the air so rapidly that it dissolves into white sand.

“Atta girl!” Edda says.

When Pieter stands, coughing, Rew makes him disappear with a gesture. “Motivation is the fuel of will,” she says. “Seek it inside you, Woman Speese, or you shall never Walk the Shadow Path. It is imperative you do focus your every thread of consciousness to your training, and not to your lover.”

Edda tilts her head. “I think somebody is a bit grumpy today?”

Rew stares back. “It is distressing to witness such display of weakness.”

“Come on, that’s unfair. Aline just needs some practice.”

“There is no more time for practice, Redeemed van Dolah. No more time for trying, and failing.” The marai stares in silence at the two girls, her eyes as inscrutably blank as ever.

“Is everything all right, Elder Rew?” Aline asks, a frown of concern on her brow.

“No, Woman Speese. Everything is certainly not all right. Your progress and the progress of Redeemed van Dolah have been lacking. Your abilities are still far from spanning the Shadow Path. Alas, I do fear my time is up. My instruction is reaching its inevitable end.”

“What do you mean?” Edda asks, exchanging a wide-eyed glance with Aline. “Your... *bosses* that you can’t lie to?”

“Indeed. My report on the Reseeding effort is due on the morrow, and it shall trigger a conflict of which consequences I shall have scant control over. At this point, it is uncertain whether I shall return to you again. Tonight might be our last time together.”

Edda gasps. “But... That’s not enough! My dad—!”

“Why don’t you escape?” Aline asks. “Wherever you are. Just... run away!”

“That would be my death. My biology is not like yours, Woman Speese. I do have... certain needs that only my masters can provide. Without them, there is only death after the prolonged agony of starvation.”

“Er, *prolonged?*” Edda asks. “Like, how many nights of training could you sustain if you—?”

“Edda!” Aline glares at her friend, a scandalized frown on her brow. “I can’t believe what you’re suggesting!”

“Hey!” Edda crosses her arms over her chest. “It’s up to Elder Rew! She was the one always saying that this is about saving our species, yeah? And, Aline, I *really* want to save my dad!”

“It is indeed accurate that my starvation might last the necessary time to complete your instruction. It is equally accurate that the future of my and your species is my utmost priority. And yet, I must admit that I do value my life to the point where I shall attempt to persevere and impose my priorities on my masters, even without the hard evidence of human Walkers of the Mind doing the bidding of the Reseeding effort.”

Aline and Edda swap a silent glance.

“If I do succeed,” Rew continues, “there shall be ample time to complete your training. Albeit, it is wisest to prepare, in case I do fail. Only fools plan for success.” The mare turns to face both girls. “There is no more time for digression. Today, there is only hope in haste—we shall stretch tonight’s session to the utmost. Tomorrow, there is only hope in luck or fate. Do acknowledge your commitment.”

“Yeah,” Edda says, nodding. “Let’s do it!”

“Yes.” Aline nods, too.

“Very well. Considering our extreme lack of time, I shall pursue an equally extreme training plan. This has never been

attempted before, but we shall embrace the risk. I do trust that no side effects shall linger in your Walking abilities. I shall split the Path of Shadow into two separate branches, leveraging your respective natural talents: the *traverse* branch for Woman Speese and the *control* branch for Redeemed van Dolah.”

Rew stares at both girls in silence, until they nod.

“You shall each master your partial branch of the Path. In case of my... *premature* departure, you might possess the combined knowledge to complete your mutual instruction.” Rew turns her white eyes to Aline. “Woman Speese, you are in dire need of practicing the abilities of the Path of Light, but now is not the time. Practice shall await more permitting circumstances. We will depart now into the Second Wake where you shall enrich your traversing skills with the mysteries of the *second* step in the Shadow.”

Rew then turns to Edda.

“Redeemed van Dolah, as soon as Woman Speese achieves the required proficiency to progress on her own, I shall return to commence your instruction on the *third* step in the Shadow. Until then, do exercise the highest level of will-control of which you are capable. That shall align your psyche to the intricacies of the third step. Do acknowledge.”

“Uh, sure. Practice control until you’re back, yeah? No problem. And it’s okay to skip a step?”

“I do acknowledge the risk of improvising like a human, but I do fear there is no feasible alternative, short of my starving to death. And now, Woman Speese, you shall attempt to pierce into the Second Wake. Do remember to focus your sense of direction on—”

Aline—without waiting for Rew to complete her instructions—winks at Edda and vanishes.

“Wow!” Edda says, a hint of a smile on her lips. “Sister’s good!”

“Atta girl,” Rew says, and disappears.

The seagull by the water becomes larger and larger—as large as a grown person. The other birds nearby take to the sky, squawking in complaint. The seagull eyes Edda, reproachfully.

She chuckles. “You remind me of somebody—hmm, ah, yeah!”

The seagull turns into Marjolein Mathus, her long Quaestor robes getting wet from the clear waters of the surf. Marjolein places a hand on her broad hip, and points with the other at Edda, accusingly. “Blah, blah, blah!” she yells, before stopping with a shocked expression. She puts her hand on her throat and tries again. “Blah?”

Edda laughs, and with a dismissive gesture, Marjolein turns back into a giant bird that jumps away indignantly.

“I do fear you might not be taking your instruction as seriously as circumstances dictate,” Rew says from behind.

Edda turns. “Ah, finally! How is Aline doing?”

“Woman Speese is progressing as per my expectations. I cannot say likewise about you.”

“Oh, come on, Elder Rew. You were taking *forever*. And I’ve also made progress, yeah? Look.”

She turns to face the landscape of titanic bones, skulls and ribcages across the wide beach. She draws a deep breath and every trace of emotion escapes her expression at once.

The landscape shifts and the sands shake, rumbling deep vibrations that Ximena can feel on the stone bench. The colossal, petrified remains begin to morph and thicken, growing even more massive, more polished, snapping into straight lines. They are turning into inconceivably tall buildings, towering over Edda and Rew ever higher in the sky, thousands of rectangular holes opening simultaneously on every wall, gaping like wounds into their black insides. A crust

of dirt, tubes, wires and broken glass protrudes from every surface at once, like tumors covering ever farther structures in sick decay.

The rumbling finally stops, and silence returns to the auditorium. An eerie silence, only broken by the soft surf of the ocean and the shrieks and croaks of birds roaming excitedly in the ample vertical spaces between the skyscrapers.

Edda turns to Rew with a beaming smile. “What do you say? A full environment transformation, without a reset!”

Rew takes a moment to absorb the scene with her blank eyes. The sands between the sea and the jungle have transformed into a golden age city, or rather its long-dead remains. The decaying city—impossibly large, impossibly high—serpents along the coast, disappearing behind the horizon.

“Redeemed van Dolah, your sensitivity to allegory is as remarkable as your will-control.” She turns to Edda. “But a Walker in the Shadow must learn not to rely on something as fragile as *will*.”

Her smile wanes. “Faith, I know.”

“Faith, indeed. *Faith-control*, the core skill of the Path in the Shadow. Unfortunately, your efforts so far have been... underwhelming.”

“It’s not for lack of trying, Elder Rew. I don’t know... it’s so hard!”

“It is imperative that you do succeed. There is no further space for futile attempts. Faith-control is the key to unlocking emotional persuasion, which is itself the key to assist Elder van Dolah—and your fellow humans.”

Edda holds Rew’s gaze, but remains uncharacteristically silent.

“I shall attempt to expedite your instruction with a simple exercise.” Rew looks about and raises her arm at a crystal skyscraper nearby. The colossal building disappears, flooding

Edda and Rew in sudden sunlight. In its place stands a small, red-bricked Lunteren-style house.

“That’s home!”

“Here were you raised,” Rew says. “Your human mind is hard-wired to this house by an entire life of home and family. Bending its lifelong conditioning is beyond the power of will. Even of a will as fierce as yours, Redeemed van Dolah.” Rew gestures with her hand-appendages at the entrance. “Do open the front door, but do not cross the threshold.”

Edda walks into the front yard and up the few steps that lead to the main entrance. Her expression is tight. She gives Rew a nervous glance and opens the door.

“Now what?” Edda asks, peering at the vestibule beyond.

“Do close the door,” Rew says as she approaches. “Behold.” Rew opens the door to a sunlit bedroom.

“That’s my room!” Edda says, gaping across the entrance. The dark vestibule is gone now, replaced by the familiar intimacy of her bedroom. She blinks, and then raises her gaze at the side of the house, at the second floor, where the sun beams through her bedroom’s window. She shakes her head in awe as her gaze returns to the main entrance.

Everything is there, right across the threshold: her unmade bed, her desk with the cactus plant and typewriter, the sun-flooded window with a view of the ruined city beyond. She laughs as she notices that, inside, the sun streams in from the *opposite* direction, since the room has been rotated 180 degrees to get both doors to match.

With a smile on her face, she crosses the threshold into her bedroom, walks to the window and opens it with a practiced move. Without hesitation, she leaps out and flies down to the street level, landing smoothly next to an impassive Rew. “So sexy!” Edda says with a nod, peeking again through the entrance into her bedroom, the sunny window still open.

Rew closes slowly the door, slides back several feet, and turns her white, dead eyes towards Edda. “Do replicate.”

Edda’s smile vanishes. She stares at the wooden door—the familiar “Van Dolah” engraved above the thin slit used for correspondence—and shuts her eyelids for a few moments. Ximena can feel her sharp mind refocusing her desire. Edda exhales every last molecule of hesitance out of her lungs and pushes the door open.

Into the vestibule.

“Goah’s Mercy!” Edda slams it shut, her frown deepening. She takes another deep breath and opens the door again. “Fucking Mercy!”

She tries several more times.

To no avail.

She finally slams the door and turns to Rew, her face contracted in frustration. “I don’t get it!” she says. “I can do such large changes, like this.” With a snap of her fingers the nearby ocean vanishes, leaving the wet, sandy seabed exposed to the sky, littered with a myriad of little creatures flapping helplessly in the sun. “But I can’t do something as small as *this*.” She points at the door open to the dark vestibule inside.

“This is the dreamscape, Redeemed van Dolah, where large is not hard, and small, far from easy. The dreamscape is not ruled by the laws of nature, where energy reigns supreme. Here you can create a world, or a doorway, and yet the latter is more demanding. Do speculate about this apparent contradiction.”

“Hmm, I guess that if my mind has no real... I don’t know... *attachment* to something, then size doesn’t matter?” She snaps her fingers again, and the ocean reappears, waves splashing placidly against the sand as if they had been there an instant ago. “But, if my mind knows something to be, uh, *certain*, then...?” She shrugs.

“Very good, Redeemed van Dolah. You do understand the

limits of will-control. Indeed, your *certainty* is the obstacle you must overcome. When you do open that door, you *know* what is behind, as sure as you know that your head is above your shoulders. Your own home, the place where you have been raised since you are capable of memory, is as intrinsically linked to yourself as your own body. Even in the dreamscape you cannot convince your mind otherwise.”

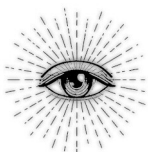
“I think I get it,” Edda says, voice still tinted with frustration. “When I open the door, there is a conflict between what I *want*—my bedroom—and what I *know*—the vestibule—yeah?”

“Indeed. You are of skeptical nature, Redeemed van Dolah. Skepticism protects inner knowledge from external beliefs. Alas, this is not the wake. In the dreamscape, there is no distinction between knowledge and belief. In the dreamscape what you know, *is*. Faith-control becomes possible when your knowledge becomes flexible.”

Edda nods slowly, still frowning. “Okay, Elder Rew. So, I have to believe with enough... *conviction* to overcome my sixteen-years-long ingrained preconceptions, yeah? Easy peasy.”

“Not *believe*,” Rew says, apparently missing the sarcasm. “*Know*. Skepticism is the light that destroys the shadows of faith. When you open that door,” Rew gestures at the entrance, “what you want and what you *know* must be one and the same. You either want what you know, which changes nothing, or you know what you want, which changes *everything*. That is faith-control. Now you shall open that door into your chamber, Redeemed van Dolah, or condemn us all.”

Edda turns her eyes over to the shut door, fists clenched.



Drugs and Hope

A line is flying—*traversing*—over the sleepy colony of Lunteren. The soft light of the Second Wake illuminates the scene in vivid, shadowless detail. Heavy rain has just begun falling loudly. Ximena feels the cool moisture of the winter night in her face and breathes the distinctive fragrance of wet earth.

Aline's blue-glowing body slides through the air faster than any bird could ever fly, and seemingly without effort. She flies with precision, in repeating patterns, moving ever quicker, ever slower, reaching the same house or street over and over again, her expression contracted in concentration.

Until she stops in midair, right over the Forum, the Eye of Goah complex on its eastern edge as sleepy and wet as the rest of the colony.

She blinks, and the scene changes abruptly. Dry, heavy air hits Ximena's skin, as she realizes that they are now inside a spacious bedroom. The rain sounds muted behind the covered window. Aline *slides* to the bedside, and bends over the blue halo of a sleeping form.

Pieter.

Aline's features soften as she watches his innocent, teenage face, breathing slowly, lips slightly parted. She reaches out, perhaps tempted to join his dream—Pieter's halo blinks actively, and in step with the movement behind his eyelids—but she stops.

And blinks. The scene changes abruptly, sending the whole auditorium back to the cool Forum night. She blinks again, and the scene flashes back to the warm bedroom by Pieter's side. Aline repeats the pattern several times, methodically, precisely, disciplined. Ximena must turn her gaze, feeling dizzy.

With a satisfied grin, Aline blinks once more and appears in Edda's bedroom, and dives right into her sparkling blue halo.

The scene morphs abruptly into sunlight, the murmur of waves in the distance, and the texture of dreams. Aline has appeared next to Rew, in front of Edda's house. She gapes up at the colossal skyscrapers, broken by time and casting shadows of decadence, but her eyes are promptly drawn to the sound of a sob in Edda's yard. There, sitting on the stairs that lead up to the porch, is Edda, face down, weeping silently, shoulders shaking softly. Rew is staring at her from the street, silent, still.

Aline runs to her, a crease of consternation across her brow.

Edda meets her gaze, liquid eyes beaming sadness. No... not sadness. Desperation. And self-loathing, judging from what little the psych-link lets through. Thank Goah, it has not been fully engaged, Ximena thinks. All this... dreamtech exposure is complex enough to follow as it is, without having to deal with the extra burden of Edda's emotional rollercoaster.

Aline sits by her side and embraces her friend without a word. Edda hides her face in Aline's tunic, shivering lightly while Aline glares at Rew, lips pressed, shaking her head.

Rew remains silent, inscrutable.

A minute passes by before Edda's trembling subsides.

“So...” Aline whispers, caressing her friend’s short, thick curls.

“Yeah...” replies Edda, her voice breaking.

Rew walks forward into the yard, in her awkward, boneless gait, and stops next to the sitting girls. “I am disappointed.”

Edda hides her face deeper and begins to shake silently.

“Don’t be an asshole!” Aline says. “That isn’t helping.”

“I do fear it is too late for help,” Rew says. “Time is behind us already. I do fear I did overestimate your abilities, Redeemed van Dolah.”

“Whoa, whoa—!” Aline complains.

“And I shall pay the price of your failure,” Rew continues, unperturbed, voice as steady as ever. “Perhaps the ultimate price. As shall my people, in our arrogance. As shall humanity, in its weakness. As shall your father, in his ignorance.”

Aline glares silently at Rew.

Edda turns and lifts her own head, meeting Rew’s eyes for an instant before avoiding her impenetrable blank gaze.

“You are on your own now,” Rew says. “We all are. And so we do reach the end before we even began—Redeemed van Dolah, Woman Speese, I do fare you well.”

Rew disappears.

“No!” Edda cries. She leaps to her feet, fear in her face. “Quick! Traverse! Don’t let her go.”

Aline stands, eyes wide open in confusion.

“If she goes, it’s over!” Edda screams. “I’ll convince her. Grab her, Aline. Don’t let her go, and wait for me, yeah? Go now!”

Aline hesitates for an instant, then blinks and disappears.

“Oh Goah. Oh Goah. Oh Goah,” Edda mutters to herself. She takes a few deep breaths and extends both arms, one forward, the other to her right. She shuts her eyes firmly, breathing ever slower. With closed eyes, the dream scene fades quickly into darkness, although the shrieks and crows of birds

and the fresh smell of the ocean still lingers in the auditorium.

“Oh Goah. Oh Goah. Oh Goah.” Her disembodied voice fills the blackness. “Fucking... wake-compass,” she whispers, and then Ximena hears her breathing out. “Bend your,” she breathes again, “mind.” And again, deeply. “*Sideways!*”

The scene warps abruptly into Edda’s bedroom, vivid in the light of the Second Wake. Her sleeping body is resting peacefully under the blankets. Her semitransparent traversing body stands in fierce blue radiance next to the bed and turns her bald head with anxious eyes.

“You do still display worrisome clumsiness treading the Second Wake, Redeemed van Dolah,” Rew says from the middle of the room, her red scintillation in vivid contrast to Aline’s blue beside her. “Woman Speese did insist *vigorously* to wait for your arrival, hinting at a proposal. I do hear.”

“Sorry, Edda. I didn’t know what to—” Aline says.

Edda holds her hand up. “Yeah, I actually do! I mean... a proposal. I have a proposal!”

“I do hear,” Rew repeats.

“I’m almost there, Rew. Just a bit more practice and I will faith-open the fucking door. I know I will!”

Rew clumsily shakes her head, imitating the human gesture. “I do fear time is truly up. My next lesson would most likely have been the last one. The instruction plan I did devise is already condensed to the extreme. It does not allow time to practice previous steps—especially when success is... uncertain.”

“It *is* certain!” Edda says. “Trust me when I tell you I just need a few more hours, and my brain will finally crack open its preconditioning. I can feel it, I swear by Goah!”

“I do believe your conviction, Redeemed van Dolah. Alas, no practice time can be allocated any longer.”

“But there is!” Edda takes a step forward. “Listen, you

don't need to worry about it. Just come tomorrow night, and I will be ready—faith-control, and all, yeah?"

"Do excuse my skepticism, Redeemed van Dolah. Do clarify."

Edda's traversing body takes a deep breath before hastily continuing. "Tomorrow I'm going to fake a fever or something. I will drop by the pharmacy. Isabella is my dowry sister, you know? Or will be soon. She'll give me something to sleep, and I mean *sleep*. I will go to bed, take the nap of my life, and spend it training. *Hours*, in the middle of the day! I will make it, Elder Rew. You can count on it!"

Edda stares at Rew with expectant eyes, panting heavy breaths of fear.

"She'll do it!" Aline says, turning to Rew. "We'll be ready. Just come, and we swear by Goah we'll make it count."

Rew does not reply, her icy stillness as thick as her silence.

Edda swaps nervous glances with Aline. Ximena shifts uneasily on her seat as seconds pass by, ever slower.

"Come on, Elder Rew!" Edda says. "Just imagine that I have just opened that goahdamn door, yeah? If you come tomorrow evening, I will have had!"

"I do not ordinarily entertain my imagination with hope," Rew finally says, "but since the alternative is surrender to fate, hope is indeed the rational choice. Very well, I shall come once again—if I can arrange it. But we must make the—possibly—last lesson count. To maximize our already scarce chances of success, both of you shall promise to do as I say, without discussion. Do acknowledge."

Edda takes Aline's hand and they nod eagerly.

"Very well," Rew continues. "These are my instructions. Firstly, Redeemed van Dolah, you shall practice throughout the day, using drugs as you suggested until you learn to bend your faith to your will. Secondly, you shall recruit fresh apprentices to the Path in the Shadow."

Edda and Aline raise their eyebrows and exchange a baffled glance.

“Two should suffice,” Rew continues. “Of your deepest trust, and keen to walk the Paths. Do select them among the humans that trod the Path of Light during the Trials. Thirdly, the *four* of you shall prepare your body throughout the day for extraordinarily long dreaming. I suggest strenuous physical activities, or the chemicals from... *Isabella* that Redeemed van Dolah shall distribute as necessary. Do arrange for undisturbed dreamtime. Fourthly, the four of you shall synchronize your diving into the dreamscape to two hours earlier than Redeemed van Dolah’s accustomed time.”

Edda turns to Aline, “That’ll be, hmm, eight.”

“Fifthly, Woman Speese shall promptly intrude into Redeemed van Dolah’s dreamscape. I shall meet both of you there at... *eight*, to begin your last instruction session.”

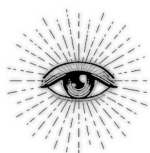
“We’ll be ready, Elder Rew,” Edda says.

“I don’t understand,” Aline says. “I mean... Sure, we’ll do as you say. But having new people at this point? They’ll slow our progress!”

“On the contrary,” Rew says. “As soon as Woman Speese—”

Rew vanishes in the middle of her explanation.

THIRTY



Rew vs. Yog

The copper-colored metallic room—spacious and perfectly round—is mostly empty, except for the inscrutable machinery scattered next to the curved walls. An intricate filament, fractal-like, zigzags across the high ceiling, incandescent, flooding the chamber in white light. Ximena's eyes are attracted by the faint movement of the ever-present ivy-like vegetation that intertwines with some devices as if they were an intrinsic part of their workings, their leaves and tendrils in slight, constant—and definitely very un-plantlike—motion.

Wudai, Ximena realizes, sniffing the pungent but familiar smell that permeates the dry air. *Of course you'd expect a mare city to be filled to the brim with wudai.* Since she was a little girl, wudai has always fascinated her. Only they allow that seamless melding of body, psyche and technology that defines dreamtech. In her own bedroom, a century in the future, the wudai of her wu-sarc are in this same instant covering her sleeping body in green comfort. Always watchful, they keep the chemistry of her mind primed for dreaming, and remain ready

to react at a moment's notice to her body's needs or her mental instructions.

A thick wall of wudai vegetation writhes to the side and uncovers an opening. A mare enters. The figure paces with its strange, boneless gait to the center of the room, and remains there, still.

Silence returns to the auditorium until a second wudai entrance parts on the opposite wall and four mares come through. One of them walks to stand in front of the waiting mare, while the other three stay next to the entrance, heads down.

"Sense and bind, Overseer Yog-at-Yian," says the mare that just walked in.

"Sense and bind, Walker Rew-at-Deviss," says the mare that first walked in.

"You have instructed my underlings to tear me out of the Third Wake and bring me to your presence," Rew says, gesturing back at the three mares standing behind.

"Indeed, I have. My earlier summons were... unanswered," Yog says. "Again, and again. The pattern is unmistakable. You are actively avoiding my oversight."

Rew seems to hesitate for an instant before replying, "I do trust your needs have been duly attended, considering Deviss' limited—"

"I did receive your invitation to inspect the conduit human settlements around Deviss," Yog interrupts. "I did decline, and did request your attention, Walker. Then another offer came in. To hunt. Again. How unusual, considering the conservationist policies you insisted upon during the yesterhunt. Does the natural reserve permit one hunt every day?"

Rew does not reply.

"I did decline," Yog continues, "and did request your

attention. Again, to no avail. The pattern is evident, is it not, Walker Rew?"

Rew takes a few seconds to reply. "I do hereby request adjourning the report until the morrow, Overseer. There are... urgent matters that require my attention, and cannot be delegated."

"Which matters?" Yog asks. "Which matters are urgent, and cannot be delegated?"

Rew says nothing.

The silence stretches, uneasy.

"I do hereby deny a prorogation," Yog finally says. "Your urgent matters shall wait until after you deliver a comprehensive report to the Reseeding effort."

A heavy silence floods the round room again. Ximena shifts in her place, trying to fend off the tension.

"You did overstep your authority," Rew finally says, "when you issued instructions to my underlings to bring me here. Your formal jurisdiction does not extend to the Deviss operation."

"I did what I deemed necessary to pursue the Reseeding interests, which are under *my* jurisdiction, Walker."

"I do hereby dispute your right of jurisdiction, and request arbitration for gross overstep. Master Gorrobor shall make a final judgment. Until then I shall delay my report."

Yog takes a small step forward. "Your right of arbitration requires compliance of the facts in dispute. It is my duty as your Overseer to deem those facts fit enough to relay for arbitration. They are not. I do hereby deny your substantiation of the facts. Thus, I do declare your right of arbitration inapplicable in this instance."

Yog turns partly to the side, towards a small machine with the shape of a round table made of golden-red metal and wudai vegetation. The machine slides, transported by a frenzy of weeds and tendrils on its base, until it stops beside Yog and

sinks with a soft *clunk*. Ximena shoots a glimpse at Bob, the wudai machine standing next to Ank in the front row, barely visible below the unfolding scene. The resemblance is striking. “I do fear I cannot accept your silence any longer, Walker. Your refusal to report is tantamount to dereliction of duty, and thus punishable by termination. I do hereby activate official recording.” Yog turns her blank eyes to the wudai machine. “Recording device, do acknowledge activation.”

“Acknowledged,” the machine says, using the same type of voice modulation that the students have learned to associate to the mares’ psychical reverberation. It sounds less... *human*, though—almost artificial.

Yog continues, “Recording device, do activate conduit to Yian, official Reseeding protocols. Do acknowledge.”

“Acknowledged, conduit opened.”

Yog turns her gaze back to Rew. “Protocol Oversight Report of Walker Rew-at-Deviss to Overseer Yog-at-Yian,” Yog recites. “Nubaria date: 813,950. Location: Deviss-at-Diamar. Overseer Yog does hereby request an official report on the Reseeding effort to Walker Rew. Do proceed, Walker.”

Rew remains silent.

“Do you refuse oversight, Rew-at-Deviss?” Yog asks.

Rew does not reply. This time Yog seems to embrace the silence. She remains in patient stillness for a long while.

Almost a minute passes by before Yog finally says, “Very well. I do hereby—”

“I shall report now, Overseer,” Rew says.

Yog seems taken aback by the interruption, her head wobbling slightly, but she says, “Do proceed, Walker.”

“Follows my report as requested, Overseer. The focus of the Deviss operation to progress the interests of the Reseeding effort has centered on the human settlements closest to third-wake Deviss. I did send my Walkers,” she gestures back at the

three mares standing next to the wudai entrance, “to monitor the general sentiment as the level of reactive control of the elites has tightened since the events triggered during the human Trials. I do expect a degree of resistance in the human populace. My next report shall confirm or deny such point.”

Yog seems to require some time to absorb that information.

“Acknowledged, Walker Rew. An unusually succinct report. Especially considering the unusual delay. Is there nothing more of relevance that merits Master Gorrobor’s attention?”

It takes a second for Rew to reply. “Master Gorrobor was intrigued by the notion of engaging humans as whisperers of other humans.”

“A failed concept, revealed as such by the aftermaths of the human Trials. I never shared Master Gorrobor’s... *curiosity* about such an experiment. It is my perception that granting a third sentient species access to our technology—no matter how limited—is an unnecessary risk that may lead to unpredictable trouble. Lack of prediction is lack of control.”

“The risk is most definitely necessary, Overseer,” Rew says, taking a small step forward. “For to reseed with haste, we must break the spine of human culture. The empowerment of the Paths on the precisely right individuals shall crack the strictures of their civilization. With some wise constraint of our own, those cracks will widen and free their buried potential. Humans shall blossom back to the levels of the pristine age.”

“Your flaw is not a lack of vision, Walker Rew. It is a lack of prudence. And an excess of pride. Now, your delay in relaying the report indicates that there is information that you are not keen to report. Do state its nature, Walker Rew.”

Rew takes a step back, with a slight wobble of her head. A few seconds pass before she responds. “Protocol addendum, I do hereby request official permission to instruct a few selected humans into the Path in the Shadow.”

“Permission denied. The results of the human Trials were

unequivocal in their..." Yog stops in mid-sentence and remains still for a few moments. She then takes a step closer to Rew. "Walker Rew, has any human been instructed into the Path in the Shadow?"

Rew takes a step away from Yog. "There are no human Walkers of the Mind, Overseer Yog."

Yog takes a step forward. "Has any human *begun* treading the Path in the Shadow, Walker?"

Rew does not reply.

"You have taken human apprentices, have you not?"

Rew keeps her eyes locked on Yog's for a short while and then takes a step closer to Yog. "Indeed, I have."

Yog remains silent. Her eyes wander for a moment to the wudai recording machine.

"With promising success," Rew continues. "The subjects still tread awkwardly, but with enough—"

"How far?"

"I do fail to make sense of your question, Overseer Yog."

"How far do your subjects tread into the Path of Shadow, Walker Rew?"

"The two first steps have already been mastered by the highest skilled humans. None has trod the third as of yet."

"Protocol addendum, humans have been granted access up to, but not beyond the second step of the Path in the Shadow. Walker Rew-at-Devis, do acknowledge these facts."

Rew remains silent.

"Do acknowledge, Walker."

"I acknowledge."

"Protocol addendum, I do hereby apply overseer authority to declare formal emergency of containment. This oversight has successfully detected a breach in its early phase. I do hereby declare an immediate suspension of the Reseeding effort in Devis."

Rew wobbles her head. Ximena, closer to the wall behind

Rew, notices that the three other mares behind her are also wobbling theirs.

“Protocol addendum,” Yog continues, “I do hereby apply overseer authority to declare Walker Rew-at-Devis in violation of the explicit ban on human instruction, uttered by Master Gorrobor, to limit scope up to, but not beyond the Path of Light. This ban was consequently embodied with a penalty of immediate termination, uttered by Overseer Yog-at-Yian. Walker Rew, before consummation of the penalty, do state the full denomination and location of human subjects that have walked the Path in the Shadow.”

Rew remains silent.

“Was any of the humans the female that terminated my limb during the human Trials? I did sense the hint of her presence during a recent Reseeding intrusion. Alas, I did fail to recognize the obvious, unable to grasp the enormity of your violation. Fortunately, I did allow my instincts to haste my arrival to Devis. Is there anything else you wish to include in the protocol before your termination, Walker Rew?”

“Protocol addendum,” Rew says. “I do acknowledge my overstep of Master Gorrobor’s explicit instructions. But I do hereby reject the legitimacy of Overseer Yog to terminate me as a consequence. I do state that Overseer Yog has overstepped her jurisdiction and possesses no authority to embody penalties on Master Gorrobor’s utterances. Thus, I hereby request a formal trial. Master Gorrobor shall decide.”

“Protocol addendum, I do hereby fail to acknowledge the facts upon which Rew-at-Devis substantiates a rejection of due authority. Request hereby denied.”

Rew’s head is not wobbling any longer. She remains fully still, cool—silent. Unlike the three mares behind, who are still noticeably shaking their heads.

“Underlings,” Yog continues, turning her white eyes to

them, “do terminate Walker Rew-at-Deviss. Recording device, do protocol termination process.”

The three mares direct their wobbling heads at Rew and begin walking towards her, as the recording machine slides next to Rew and twitches slightly, as if staring up at the mare.

Yog turns and heads calmly back to the opposite opening through which she entered. As she reaches the weed-covered entrance, the vegetation does not part open. She attempts another step forward, but a harsh rustle entangles the green wudai tendrils even tighter.

Yog turns around. In the center of the room, a line of four mares stare at her in silence, the recording machine observing one of them with meticulous attention.

“Underlings,” Yog says, voice drenched in authority. “Do terminate Walker Rew at once. Do acknowledge.”

The four mares stare back in defiant stillness.

Rew finally speaks. “These are no mere operative underlings, Yog,” she says, gesturing at the one mare on her left and at the two on her right.

“*Overseer*—”

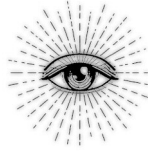
“These,” Rew interrupts, “are Deviss Walkers—*my* Walkers. Fiercely loyal in their faith—*my* faith—that the Reseeding effort must be *thrust* with extreme vigor into an already fragile humanity before its final collapse. They *know*, as I do, that only human Mind-Walkers can restore the ecological balance of the pristine age. Walkers, under my authority as Reseeding effort Walker at Deviss, do terminate this one limb of Yog-at-Yian. Recording device, do protocol termination process.”

The three underlings walk calmly towards Yog. The wudai-propelled recording machine follows eagerly behind. Yog puts her back against the blocking weeds and stares in stoic silence.

“Protocol addendum,” Rew continues, “I do hereby

request formal trial against Walker Rew-at-Deviss for illicit termination of one of Overseer Yog-at-Deviss' limbs. Master Gorrobor shall decide." As Rew's Walkers close in on Yog, Rew says, "You shall not suppress the facts this time, *Yôg*. I shall have my trial in the morrow. And shall live another day."

THIRTY-ONE



Lack of Faith

The auditorium darkens as a bright scene comes to life. A dream—its nature made immediately obvious by the setting: two tiny planetoids floating in space close to one another, static, each a sphere just large enough to host a house. Around each house, its garden—sprinkled with small trees—covers the rest of the spherical body, running around behind the curved horizon and closing on itself from the back.

It is spring on the planetoid with Aline's house. The garden is covered in the deep greens of lush trees and thick grass—a freshly mowed fragrance fills that part of the auditorium. Flowers stick out from among the green in bright contrast.

It is winter on the other planetoid, the one with Edda's house. The roof and garden are covered in a thin, spotless layer of snow, naked tree branches sprinkled with white. Ximena sees some students sitting closer reach out for their jackets, their breath visible in the damp, cold air.

Three distant suns, one red, one yellow and one white, shine from different directions in the sky, flooding the scene in multicolored patterns of lights and shadows. One side of Aline's planetoid reminds them of midday, the opposing

hemisphere of dusk; behind Edda's house a green, blurry shadow discolors the snow.

"Isn't Rew taking too long?" Edda asks, biting her lower lip.

She and Aline are sitting on the front porch of Aline's house. The comfortable wicker chairs would have been ideally placed to watch life and people passing by along Lunteren's Miel Way while enjoying a steaming cup of tea. Here, in the dreamscape, the surrounding spring garden disappears behind the—barely a dozen yards distant—horizon. Edda's snow-planetoid hangs still in the sky, not far away.

"Uh, a bit, yes. Perhaps she didn't make it after all." Aline shifts her weight.

"She's coming. She's gotta. We need her, sister. How are we going to stop the Joyousday with just these," she waves her hand, "cheap *dreaming tricks*? We have to learn something with more punch to *stir* things in the real world."

"The wakes, the dreamscapes, are all parts of the same *whole*, Redeemed van Dolah." Rew is standing beside them on the porch, facing out at the garden.

"Rew!" Edda stands, her relief filling Ximena's innards with the sweetest warmth.

"A Walker treads them all," Rew continues. "A Walker can *stir* the whole." Rew turns to face Edda. "But you are still not a Walker of the Mind, Redeemed van Dolah. Thus, no... *punch*."

"Sorry, Elder Rew, I didn't mean—"

"I do fear my time with you might have reached its inevitable end," Rew interrupts, "then I do face a very uncertain fate on the morrow. Thus, either you tread tonight the best part of the Path in the Shadow, or you shall oppose the culling of your species with nothing but *cheap dreaming tricks*."

Edda and Aline exchange an anxious glance. "We are ready," Edda says.

Rew turns her eerie white eyes towards her. “I do trust you fulfilled your promise, Redeemed van Dolah?”

Edda bites the side of her lower lip. “Uh, sure. I promised, yeah?”

“You did perform faith-control, did you not?” Rew asks.

“Uh, *yes*.”

Rew stares at her for a long moment. “Remarkable. Faith-control is the heart of the third step of the Path in the Shadow. I do confess to holding doubts about the capacity of the human psyche to achieve it. This does change it all. This is irrefutable proof that humans are psychically capable of treading the Paths of the Mind Walker. Human faith-control carries the potential to save both our species.”

“But, uh, I still fail sometimes.” Edda sinks her head. “A lot of times.”

“Faith-control does require time to master. It is the first success that matters most. The rest is—” Rew interrupts herself. “You are not deceiving me, are you, Redeemed van Dolah?”

Edda looks up with widened eyes at Rew’s blank stare. “No!” she says. Ximena can feel Edda’s surge of indignation flooding her own stomach. Yes, indignation, but there’s something else there too, blurred into the mix. Is it... *fear*? Yes, fear of failure. *Panic* of failure.

“Prove it, for all our sakes,” Rew says. “Or our time together is over.”

“I’m not lying!” Edda says. “Look!” Edda walks with determination along the wooden porch to the front door and places her hand on the knob. She hesitates, closes her eyes, and mutters something unintelligible. She pulls the door open.

Ximena leans in, to peer through the shadows beyond the threshold. It is Edda’s bedroom.

Edda turns around at Rew, puts a hand on her hip and says nothing.

“This is not your own house,” Rew says. “A weak association. You have exerted simple will-control.”

“Will-control, my ass!” Edda takes a step forward. “Aline’s is like a second home to me. I was practically raised here.”

Rew does not reply. Her long, skeptical silence speaking louder than words.

“Oh!” Edda says, her voice drenched in exasperation. “Aline, wait here.”

Edda walks through the main door, into her bedroom. She turns around and looks at Rew. “Come on, step in!”

Rew enters the room in her awkward mare gait and Edda shuts the door behind. The floating scene warps immediately into the darker coziness of Edda’s bedroom. Bed, desk, closet, window—everything already intimately familiar to Ximena. “Now I’m home, yeah?” Edda gestures around, exasperation still tinting her words.

“Indeed.”

“Oookay.” Edda reaches to the door’s knob, hesitates for an instant, and opens it with determination.

Into her house’s second-floor corridor. Ximena immediately recognizes the characteristic wooden balustrade right behind. Edda’s face goes pale. “Pure sin!”

“Indeed.”

Edda slams the door and turns her fierce eyes to Rew. “You’re making me nervous!”

Rew returns her stare in silence.

Edda takes a long deep breath, relaxing her features. After a few seconds, all emotions seem to have abandoned her. Either that, or the psych-link is malfunctioning.

“*I know*,” she whispers. She takes the doorknob in her right hand, knuckles protruding. She breathes again. Deeply. “*It is*.”

Daylight floods the bedroom as she opens the door anew. *Yês, Edda!* Exclamations of awe and relief can be heard among Ximena’s neighboring students.

Edda and Rew—together with the scene’s point of view—step out of her house’s front door. But this is not her house in Luntereren’s Miel Way. This is her house standing oddly alone on a small planetoid, surrounded by a still winter garden. The light of three suns beams down upon leafless trees, casting creatively colored shadows on the snow.

“Eh!” Aline waves her arms at them from the veranda of her own house, hanging in the sky upside down—tied by her planetoid’s own gravity. She jumps up in the sky, and into the empty air between the planetoids. “So sexy!” Aline screams as she *flies* towards them. She turns skillfully around in midair and lands with grace on Edda’s own porch, almost on top of Edda herself. As she touches the wooden floor, Aline and Edda embrace fiercely and jump up and down, screaming with joy.

“**S**orry, Professor!” Mark says, standing next to Ximena with a raised hand.

“Yes, Mark?” Professor Miyagi asks while Ank pauses the dream sensorial. “What’s up?”

“I beg your pardon, Professor. But I don’t buy it. I mean... Edda learning faith-control like that. There is just no way in hell even she could learn so quickly something so... *tricky*.”

“Is it so?” Miyagi’s smile broadens.

“It took me months! I’m not exaggerating. And I was the best in my class. Sorry for the bluntness, but it’s true. And Edda does it, like... *over a nap*? Without even time dilation? Sorry, Professor.” He shakes his head. “But this is very hard to believe. Are there historical records about *this*?”

“I’m proud of you.” Miyagi points a finger at him. “People, Mark here is acting like a real scientist. That’s the attitude I expect from all of you.” He gives Mark a curt nod. “I celebrate your skepticism. It is indeed the soul of science.” Miyagi begins

pacing the stage, hands on his back. “Physics—the leanest of all sciences—is like a concrete house built on deep foundations: compact, solid, indestructible except by the occasional paradigm-shifting earthquake. History—the *sexiest* of all sciences—is more like a city made of paper and built on sand: moody, shaky, inconsistent, always growing, always falling apart. The body of evidence upon which the science of history is built is rarely watertight—it’s the nature of the beast. But in *this case*,” Miyagi gestures up at the frozen smile of Edda, “the facts are hard to dispute. There are several—as in *more than one*, a luxury in history—documents from which these events can be directly inferred, with limited scope for interpretation. You’ll find the references in the seminar folder. I encourage you to check them out.”

The words leave a bitter taste in the back of Ximena’s throat. She throws a reproachful look at Censor Smith on the front bench below. From behind, she cannot see his expression, but she imagines it as smug and placid as ever. The bitter taste turns sour in her mouth.

Miyagi continues: “There is also *independent* confirmation of the timing of events during these fateful days. Facts have been carefully timed, day by day. This scene we are watching, for example, is Wednesday, the 26th of January. We even know the time, a bit after 20:00. So... Yeah, I get that it’s hard to believe, but... Does it help if we agree that with extraordinary motivation, and with extraordinary talent, some people achieve extraordinary things?”

Mark sits down. “Thank you, Professor. I’ll go over the references.”

“Please do. And Mark... I get it. Some of the historical events that we are witnessing this course are so *improbable* that sometimes it’s easier to believe in the deliberate acts of a merciful deity, planting the seeds of our salvation in the barren lands of humanity’s last chapter.”

“Or the deliberate act of propaganda of a corrupt professor.” Mallory’s muttered words barely reach Ximena’s ears on her way up from right next Censor Smith. A quiet chuckle spread in her immediate neighborhood, including Censor Smith’s.

“I do trust you have... *recruited* the extra humans I did request,” Rew says.

“Yes,” Aline says. “It was hard, but I finally convinced my..., uh, Pieter Ledebøer and his brother Janson. In such short notice...” She shrugs. “Hope it’s good enough?”

“The Ledebøer brothers,” Rew pauses for a few moments. “Adequate—considering how our compressed schedule forces us to take risky shortcuts. Now, Woman Speese, you are a moderately skilled traverser, but the second step of the Path in the Shadow delves deep—possibly deeper than any other step of the Paths. There is much you are still called to master. I do trust you have been practicing your spaceless-traversing skills? Tonight, there is time for neither practice nor failure.”

“Don’t worry, Elder Rew,” Aline says. “I’m really good at it.”

“We shall see.” Rew turns to Edda. “Circumstances do force me to design this very unorthodox training session around each of your individual talents: the *traverse* of Woman Speese, and the *control* of Redeemed van Dolah. You shall share this session and tread together forward in the Path, supported by your own strengths, and—perforce—by the strengths of your companion. Together—in just a *single* session.” Rew pauses, giving Ximena the impression that the marai is astonished at her own words. “I do fear there is no alternative. We do lack the time.”

Edda meets Aline’s gaze and swallows, clearly more

intimidated than Aline by the scope of their imminent challenge.

Rew turns to face Aline. “Woman Speese, you shall begin. Do look around you, do *feel* this dreamscape with all your dream senses. Do *thread* it in your memory, the same way you thread a place that you wish to spaceless-traverse to.”

“So you want me to teleport directly into this dream, right?”

“Indeed. To complete your mastery of the second step, you shall learn to spaceless-traverse *beyond* the wake barrier. The required skill is the same as traversing to a linked place in the Second Wake, only with a bit more... *punch*. A master traverser should have no trouble diving into a threaded dreamscape.”

“You are the boss. Threading...” Aline presses her lips and her expression goes instantly blank as she shuts her eyes. When she opens them, her body levitates slightly, and her long hair and tunic move unnaturally, as if gravity had ceased to exert its pull. Edda’s bewildered eyes follow her weightless friend up into the air. Aline, displaying expert control over her dream body, stretches her arms in a deliberate, slow manner and separates her fingers. She is floating in place, breathing regularly, when she suddenly spins full circle, like an airborne gyroscope. An abnormally rapid turn. Just once, her hair and clothes momentarily jerked sideways by her own centrifugal force. “Got it!” she says, as she floats down to the ground. “Now what?”

“Now we do traverse,” Rew says. “All of us,” she says as she turns to Edda. “We shall meet over Redeemed van Dolah’s house in the Second Wake.” Rew vanishes.

Aline looks at Edda, shrugs, and disappears.

Edda snorts. “Oh Goah!” she mutters. “Pure sin. Ookay...” She shakes her hands and takes a deep breath. “Wake-Compass...”

Ximena looks down over the roofs. Night has set on Lunteren, but it is early and the streets still display a decent amount of traffic, illuminated by the ever-present crisp luminescence of the Traverse. The sounds—horse carriages on the streets, singing bikers, dishes in houses, laughs—reach up to Ximena’s ears in the sky. She even picks up the scent of burning firewood and late dinners in the fresh winter air.

A blue-haloed figure comes *flying* up from the house right below.

“It took you a while,” blue-haloed Aline says.

“I know, I know,” Edda says, as she reaches Aline and the red-haloed Rew standing—*floating*—next to them. “I’ll practice when we finally get some slack, yeah? Whoa!” She stares at Aline’s hairless-nude body and chuckles. “What do you think Piet would make of your shaved—”

“Redeemed van Dolah, Woman Speese, we shall proceed with the *melding* of minds, if your abilities do allow. Do concentrate on my instructions.”

Both girls nod. Ximena, as focused on the marai’s words as the two girls, finds herself nodding as well. She throws a glimpse at Mark. Hopefully, he didn’t notice.

“Very well. The depths of the second step are called *melding* by some walkers. Others name it *thread-making*. Two sides of the same leaf. Either way, its successful implementation requires a Walker with both a mastery of spaceless-traversion,” Rew gestures at Aline, “and an incipient grip on faith-control,” Rew’s face turns to Edda. “We shall mimic the skills of a master thread-maker by combining your individual abilities. Redeemed van Dolah, do place yourself beside Woman Speese’s cord.”

“Cord? Ah, yes.” Edda looks down. Below her left foot, her traversing cord extends straight down like a thick, blue rope

towards the roof of her house, its halo dissolving into nothingness about a yard down. Aline's cord protrudes from her right foot, pointing obliquely towards her own house farther east along the Miel Way.

Edda floats down, closer to Aline, until her head faces Aline's knees. She stares at the thick glowing cord stretching down. "It looks kind of like, uh..." she chuckles.

"I know!" Aline joins in the laughter. Their tension seems to slowly vanish as they giggle for a while.

"Do rein in your humor," Rew says when the laughs finally die out. "Time is tight. Do concentrate on my words."

"Sooorry," Edda says. "The cord, yeah. What now?"

"Redeemed van Dolah, do take your own traversing cord into your traversing hands."

"Oh?" Edda peers down below her left foot. She bends her knees and reaches with her left arm out to the cord below, but her hand passes through it like there is nothing there. She snorts and waves her hand again and again through the cord, which remains stubbornly immaterial. "How?" she finally asks, looking up at Rew.

"You shall take the traversing cord in your hands not by *wanting* to, but by *knowing* that you can."

"Uh, gotcha." She takes a deep breath. "Faith-control it is."

She reaches out again and puts her fingers about an inch away from the base of the cord, where the halo glows brighter. Shutting her eyes, she takes another breath and mutters something to herself, like an elder praying silently in aw's Eye. When Edda opens her eyes, her gaze is calm and firm, and her breathing slow and regular. With a sudden jerk, she closes her hand around the cord, which reacts to the abrupt grab with a subtle—but satisfyingly solid—vibration.

Aline gasps, wide-eyed, and then breaks into a loud round of clapping and laughing.

Edda pulls the cord up slowly, bending and stretching it as she does. “Faith-control, check!” She smirks at Rew. “Where do you want this?”

“Very good, Redeemed van Dolah. Do hold now with your other hand Woman Speese’s cord, and *thread* them together.”

“They’re so flexible,” Edda says with a chuckle, as she complies. “And sticky!”

It doesn’t take long—a few attempts, more questions, some experimentation—until Edda’s cord successfully extends out in Aline’s direction, meeting her friend’s own cord in the middle, where each cord forks again down towards their respective homes, disappearing in the night a yard below.

“Very good,” Rew says. “A thread-maker does meld minds together. You are now *melded* together.”

“What do you mean?” Edda asks. “I can’t feel anything.” She turns to Aline. “You?”

Aline shakes her head.

“And yet, you are,” Rew says. “A master thread-maker would complete the melding by diving directly into the dreamscape.” Rew turns to Aline. “This is your duty, Woman Speese. Your part in this task. I do fear I am unable to predict if your attempts shall succeed, since you are not the thread-maker. But you *are* melded. I do hope that suffices. It *must* suffice.”

“So, uh, what do I do?” Aline asks, her voice tense.

“Do use your strengths. Do tread the first step in the Path of Light to pierce the wake barrier and recall the targeted dreamscape. Then do tread the second step in the Path of Shadow to traverse there spacelessly.”

“Okay, so I just, what, move back into the dream?”

“Indeed. But before that, you shall attempt a simpler exercise to tune your mind. Do spaceless-traverse right here.” Rew raises her arm, gesturing to an indistinct point in the air.

“Sure—” *Both* girls suddenly disappear and, in the same

instant, reappear where Rew indicated. Aline's voice, except for the abrupt change of location, flows without interruption "—thing. Oh!"

Edda gapes at Aline and looks down at the colony roofs. "What was *that*?!"

"I took you with me when I teleported!" Aline says, her voice vibrant with excitement. "That's... Wow!"

"Very good, Woman Speese. The melding is effective, and it appears that all threaded bodies do spaceless-traverse together, even when the traverser is not the thread-maker, as I did suspect. It does appear that the human psyche is in essence not unlike my own kind's. Interesting. Perhaps a result of the convergence evolution of sentient predators."

"Elder Rew?"

"Do not mind my words. You are now ready to complete the *threading of minds* by spaceless-traversing directly into our last dreamscape. Do proceed."

"Sure thing."

Edda and Aline are jumping and screaming in a fierce embrace. They are on the porch of Edda's house, on the winter planetoid. Aline's spring planetoid hangs in the sky above them. Everything is just like Ximena remembers, the fresh air, the cold temperature, even the main door is still partially open—a hint of Edda's bedroom behind.

"Woman Speese, Redeemed van Dolah, it is imperative we proceed."

Both girls stop and turn to Rew. "That wasn't half bad, was it?" Edda says proudly. "Aline nailed it!" She places her hand on Aline's shoulder.

"She did indeed," Rew says. "As did you. Both of you have walked the entire second step together. Rarely has an instructor

achieved so much with so little. Alas, there is no time for exchanging congratulations. Woman Speese, Redeemed van Dolah, you shall now use your new thread-making skills to bring the Ledebouer brothers into this permascape—without my assistance. Do so with haste. I shall await here.”

“But they will be dreaming,” Edda says. “How do we grab their, uh, *cords*?”

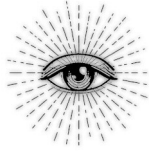
Aline giggles.

“A sleeping body’s halo *is* a traversing cord. To be precise, it is the *source* of the traversing cord. Do simply stand by their sleeping forms, and take their halo into your hands, like you did with Woman Speese’s cord.” Rew takes a step forward, wobbling her head. “Time is slipping—it is crucial to meld more minds into the permascape with haste. Therefore, to hasten our session, you shall thread together the halos and cords of the *four* of you, so that Woman Speese can bring you back all at once.”

“Gotcha,” Edda says. “Let’s go, sister. Meet me over my roof, yeah? Then I meld us together, and you teleport us to Piet’s.” As Aline nods, Edda turns to Rew. “We’ll be back before you know it, Elder Rew. And then you can finally explain what a *permascape* is. Sounds important.”

You have no idea, Edda, Ximena thinks, smiling to herself.

THIRTY-TWO



Permascape

Rew stands stoically still on Edda's porch, looking out at the snowy garden. As time goes by, her head shows the occasional wobble, but her white, inert body resembles a marble statue.

"So sexy!" Edda says, as she appears on the snow together with Aline, Pieter and Janson. Aline and Edda exchange a high five, while the men scan with sheepish eyes the two planetoids and the too-many suns.

"What the—?" Pieter begins, but stops as he spots Rew on the porch, staring at them. "Oh, this is a dream," he finally says, a hint of doubt in his voice.

"Welcome to Edda's dream!" Aline says, and leaps into Pieter's arms, laughing. She winks at Janson.

"Aline, please. Give the mensas some room," Edda says. "This must be confusing enough as it is."

"So, this is why you were *so* insistent on us taking that awful tea and going to bed so early?" Pieter asks with bright wide eyes. "It really is true, isn't it?" He turns and points at Rew. "You are doing the shadow thing! Is that you, Elder Qoh?"

“Don’t be ridiculous, Piet,” Janson says, still frowning with confusion. “This is just a dream.”

“Indeed, Elder Ledebøer,” Rew says. “This is a dream, albeit—”

“I’m not a dream, Jans,” Pieter is saying at the same time. “Maybe—”

“This is Elder Rew.” Aline also starts speaking. “She has been—”

A firm—but short—shake of the planetoid interrupts the cacophony as Edda holds up her hand; some snow falls from the roof and trees. “Goah’s Mercy, everybody shut up,” Edda shouts with her best teaching voice, “or this is going to take forever!”

They all stare at her in silence. Ximena chuckles at the boys’ baffled expressions. Even Rew looks startled—for a mare, which means she doesn’t really look startled at all and it’s all in Ximena’s imagination.

“Thanks,” Edda continues. “I will do some explanations now, if it’s all right with you, Elder Rew, because these mensas are more lost than a fart in a storm. What they need is a couple of minutes of good old *human* teaching, yeah?”

“**W**hat I still don’t get,” Pieter says, “is what’s in it for *her*?” Pieter points at Rew, frowning. “Why is she risking her own life like this?”

They all turn their gaze at Rew.

“It’s a fair point, Piet,” Edda says. “And it’s complicated. What I know for sure is that Elder Rew is on our side.” Edda winks at Rew.

“On our side of what?” Pieter asks.

Before Edda can reply, Aline says, “A revolution, love. We are at war against aw’s Head.”

Pieter laughs. Aline hits him on the back of his head. “Ouch! Oh, so you’re serious?” Pieter asks, rubbing his head.

“Okay, yeah, I admit that all that about Dem also sounds a bit like religious horseshit to me,” Pieter says. “Probably a fairy tale. But it has its purpose. What do you want, a return to the golden age?”

“Why not?” Edda asks. “Don’t you want Aline—or yourself!—to live three lives instead of one? Don’t you want your children to own the world and the stars?”

“Are you nuts? Goah’s Mercy! You teach history, Edda. You know what happened, what’s still happening! You really think Earth can survive another round of us spreading like vermin?”

“I say history is a powerful teacher,” Edda says. “I want to believe that our descendants will handle that... *problem* somehow, when the time is ripe. But *we* must focus on our here and now. We are dying, we are being killed!”

“*I say* history teaches that we *raped* Earth,” Pieter goes on with sudden passion. “And when we were done, we turned against each other like seagulls fighting for scraps. We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Kaya Fahey and aws Balance. *I say* we are not being killed; we are being kept alive while Earth tries to recover.”

“Wow, really? Aline, can you tell your lover he can stick his environmental activism up his—”

“But then why did you bring us here?” Pieter says, gesturing at his brother. “What do you need us for?”

“I also wonder,” Edda says, turning to Rew with raised eyebrows.

“Thank you, Redeemed van Dolah,” Rew says. “I shall take the instruction from here. You have been brought here for three reasons, Elder Ledebøer. The first one is to support the spread of Walking skills among humans. The second—”

“So you want to teach us, too?” Pieter asks, his expression brightening. “The shadow thing?”

“I shall *attempt* to, Elder Ledebøer. My chances of success are only limited by your skill and by your self-control from interrupting my instruction.”

“Oh, sorry, Elder Rew.” Pieter meets the warning gaze of Edda. “You were explaining why you brought us here.”

“Indeed, I was. I shall conclude now, if you do permit.” Rew stares at Pieter, waiting.

“Uh, sure, sure. Please.”

“Very well. The second reason is that your presence is necessary to advance the understanding of Redeemed van Dolah and Woman Speese. The permascape—”

“Yeah, exactly!” Edda interrupts. “What’s a permascape?”

Rew turns to Edda and says nothing for a few seconds, but finally, “You are in a permascape right now, Redeemed van Dolah. All of us are. This dreamscape is anchored by our melded minds, thus purveying *permanence*.”

Nobody speaks—they just look at each other in confusion.

“I do realize this explanation might seem initially meaningless,” Rew says. “Thus, a demonstration is in order. Redeemed van Dolah, do pierce into the wake and then do dive back.”

Aline turns to Pieter and Janson. “That means that Edda will wake up and fall back to sleep.”

“We are Walkers of the Light, love,” Pieter says. “No need to translate.”

While he speaks, Edda disappears.

“Aaand, there she goes!” Aline says.

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Janson says with a frown,

switching glances between Pieter and Aline. “Where did you say Edda went off to?”

“I told you,” Aline says, slowly and patiently. “She woke up. And now she’s probably diving. She’ll be right back, you’ll see.”

“But... didn’t you say that *this* was Edda’s dream?” Janson gestures around. “If she’s awake, then she ain’t dreaming, right?”

“Oh!” Aline turns to Rew, open-mouthed.

Rew does not speak. She simply stands still.

Edda reappears nearby. She stares at them, and then turns her gaze at the house, the sky, the other planetoid. “So sexy!” she finally says. “You’ve been here the entire time?”

“Yes!” Aline says, her lips curving into a smile. “Whose dream is this, Elder Rew?”

“Nobody’s, Woman Speese. Then this is a permascape—the melding of minds—the ultimate consequence of the second step of the Path in the Shadow. As two or more minds meld, their common dreamscape turns into a permascape.”

“How long does it last?” Edda asks, as she kneels and takes a fistful of snow that feels cold in Ximena’s own hands.

“The permascape shall persist as long as minds remain engaged within it.”

“So we all must wake up for this dream to stop, yeah?” Edda lets the snow fall from her hand, observing its vivid detail.

“Eventually,” Rew says. “But even with every melded mind in the wake, the permascape runs for a considerable time in the communal unconscious of the participants, and can be easily resumed by any dreamer. Even by *standers*—non-Walkers. It is hypothesized this is how the permascape grants effortless awareness to all melded minds, even to untrained standers.”

“Damn,” Janson chuckles, “and here I was so proud of myself thinking that my awareness had magically improved since the Trials.”

“Still,” Pieter says, “I don’t see the big deal. Am I missing something?”

“A permanent, shared dream?” Edda gapes at Janson. “Where you never forget you’re dreaming? Easy to dive to even by... *standers*? How is that not a big deal to you?”

“Uh...”

“The permascape is *creation*,” Rew says. “There are some among my kind that hypothesizes that the universe began when the Gods melded their minds.”

“Oh, you mean we might be living inside Goah’s dream?” Edda smiles, wide-eyed.

“In the realm of faith,” Rew says, “everything is possible. Especially the impossible.”

“Elder Rew,” Janson says, “may I ask you something?”

“Do ask, Elder Ledeboer.”

“When we were in the Trials, with all those people and the Smook assholes, was all that a permascape?”

“Very observant, Elder Ledeboer. Indeed it was.” Rew gestures at Edda and Aline. “And now you humans possess the knowledge to meld permascapes of your own creation, for your own designs, without further marai assistance.”

“And what about time?”

“I do fear I do not understand your inquiry. Do expand.”

“Uh, in the Trials, every night of training felt like... weeks and weeks!” He swaps a glance with Piet, Edda and Aline. “Is that a permascape thing too?”

“Very observant again, Elder Ledeboer. Indeed, it is; which brings me to the third reason I requested your presence, Elders Ledeboer. The third reason is the most crucial. It is the need for, indeed, *time*.”

“Time...” repeats Janson, glancing sideways at the others.

“We do lack time,” Rew says. “Your presence here does mitigate the need. Partially.”

“How so?” Edda asks. “The more we are, the more time

we need for, say, training, or endless discussions.” She gives Pieter a sidelong glance.

“Indeed, more minds do produce more... *friction*. But also...” Rew seems to hesitate for a moment. “A demonstration might be more effective than words.” Rew turns to Edda. “Redeemed van Dolah, do create a chronometer.”

“A chrono... what?”

“A time-measuring device. Do make it of any sort adequate to measure brief passages of time.”

“Hmm, all right. What about...?” She waves a finger and an hourglass as large as a person pops into existence next to her on the porch. The sand, ready to fall through the narrow gap, hangs in the air, eager.

“Should suffice,” Rew says, and turns to Aline. “Woman Speese, you shall pierce into the Second Wake. Once there, you shall simply count up to,” Rew gestures at Aline’s hands, “ten. Do count uniformly, one number per unit of time. Do attempt to be precise.”

“So I traverse,” she nods at Rew, as if seeking confirmation. “Count ten seconds, yes? And then?”

“Do spacelessly-traverse back into this permascape.”

“Okay!” Aline says, and vanishes.

“Redeemed van Dolah, do start the chronometer.”

With a gaze, Edda releases the sand flow, which begins to trickle down and fill up the second markers with inexorable precision.

“Wow,” Edda says, eyebrows raised in surprise. “I don’t need to control the clock! It’s running by itself.”

“Indeed,” Rew says. “Dream automation is powered by subconscious computation. The more minds do meld into a single permascape, the larger the communal subconscious, thus, the more capable the computation. A carefully designed permascape attains wondrous feats of information processing, like persistent storage of data, analytical computing,

automated imaging, three-dimensional simulations, instant communication, and more.”

“Is that how you marai get shit done? With permascapes?”
Rew takes a step back, but does not reply.

“**F**ifty-two, fifty-three,” Edda counts aloud, voice trembling with increasing excitement, eyes wide open in wonder at the fine-lined markers as the hourglass keeps dropping sand. “Fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty—”

Aline reappears. “Ten!”

Edda screams with delight and takes Aline into a fierce embrace.

“**O**kay, okay, let me see if I got this straight,” Edda says. “You’re saying that the more of us,” she gestures at her friends, “*share* a dream, the longer time will, uh, *stretch*, yeah?”

“Indeed,” Rew says. “Time does dilate linearly with every melded mind. A natural consequence of the additional computational resources.”

“Forever?” Edda asks. “I mean, if we bring a hundred people here, or a thousand, time stretches and stretches forever?”

“No. There are physical limits. Minds are computational units with physical substrate.”

“So what’s the limit?”

“We marai do achieve dilation factors up to forty-five to one. Naturally, only under ideal conditions. Best performance is achieved by increasing the mind density, thus packing a multitude of melding minds on the tightest possible

permascape. That maximizes computational capacity while minimizing computational requirements.”

“Forty-five to one...” Edda repeats, thoughtful.

“So for every hour we sleep, we would dream for, hmm, almost two days?” Aline asks.

“Possibly, but unlikely. Human minds are likely not as computationally adept—your evolutionary path has been more... *physical* than ours. But they certainly cause time dilation,” Rew gestures at the still dropping sand in the hourglass, “as I suspected they would. This is most crucial for today’s training session, and the third reason, Elder Ledeboer,” Rew turns her white eyes at Janson, “why you are here.”

“We’re computers!” Janson says, smiling at Pieter.

“Indeed. Thanks to which we may now begin your, so far, longest ever training session: more than a complete day of intense instruction time if I do not err.”

“You mean, more than a day of *continuous* work?” Edda asks. “More than twenty-four hours straight? What about drinking, eating, or,” she chuckles, “sleeping?”

“Those are the raw needs of First Wake bodies,” Rew says. “They have no place in the dreamscape.”

“But, uh, I might have to, you know...” Edda says, unconsciously crossing her legs. “I drank a lot of tea before going to sleep. No way I can hold it through the night!”

“If need arises, I do trust you shall fulfill your *draining* needs with utmost haste. Your training is paramount, Redeemed van Dolah. Yours too, Woman Speese. While I do initiate Elders Ledeboer into the Path in the Shadow, both of you shall move to Aline’s domain,” Rew raises her arm at the planetoid in the sky, “and practice the full depth of the second step of the Path in the Shadow, together. You shall fill each other’s knowledge gaps. With time, you shall reach independence from each other. When my duties to Elders Ledeboer permit, I shall approach to supervise. A word of caution, Woman Speese,

since you are the master traverser. Permascape's time dilation does not extend to the Second Wake, so do keep your traversing time to a minimum."

"Okay, good to know," Aline says.

Edda is tapping her chin with a finger. "I guess we can plan and prepare as much as possible here in the permascape, before traversing. Perhaps... Oh!" She takes Aline by the shoulders. "We could create a simulation of the Traverse! And practice there to death before doing it in the flesh."

"Outstanding suggestion, Redeemed van Dolah. The permascape is indeed the ideal medium to simulate the wake with great fidelity. With your talents, I do expect nothing less than full mastery of the second step by the end of this session."

"And what about the third step?" Edda asks.

"You shall focus your attention today to the second step, Redeemed van Dolah."

"Sure, sure, but... That persuasion power, that's the third step, yeah?"

"Indeed, it is. *Persuasion*. Powered by faith-control. The last step of the Mind Walker. That shall be the object of our next session. Alas, tonight you shall dedicate your efforts to the second step."

"Yeah, but... but..."

"Yes, Redeemed van Dolah?"

"What if you don't return?"

Silence spreads across the permascape. And across the amphitheater.

"Difficult circumstances await me in the morrow. Very difficult indeed. And yet I do still hope to guide you one more time, at the very least. Even if the worst comes to pass."

"What's going to happen to you?" Creases of worry cross Edda's brow.

"You shall not concern yourself with that which lies beyond your reach. Do concentrate on the now."

“But,” Edda steps forward, takes Rew’s appendages into her hands, and stares up into the marai’s eyes. “In war, you plan for success, but prepare for failure.”

Rew takes a moment to reply. “Wise words, Redeemed van Dolah.”

“That’s what my dad always says.”

“Then wise of you to have listened.” Rew meets the expectant eyes of the three humans. “Very well. These are my last instructions. Should I... not return, you shall use your gained skills to stop the culling of your young. It is imperative that your species regain the numbers and resilience of the pristine age.”

“Stop the Joyousday? Without persuasion?!”

“Indeed, Redeemed van Dolah. With due effort, you can convince your peers with more mundane means. I suggest *reason*.”

Edda scoffs. “I think you overestimate us, Elder Rew. We don’t do reason very well.”

“Where reason fails, *leadership* might succeed. Either way, it is imperative to teach the Paths to others, so that they can in turn teach others. And so on, until your species is restored.”

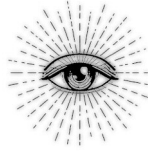
“A chain reaction,” Edda says, exchanging a glimpse with the others. “Leading to a revolution.”

Pieter’s expression has soured, Ximena notes.

“Indeed, Redeemed van Dolah. A chain reaction. To regain your freedom.”

“But a chain reaction requires *time*,” Edda says, shaking her head. “And my dad’s Joyousday is in a few days! How in Goah’s Name can I stop him without *persuasion*?”

“A fair question, Redeemed van Dolah. Thus, I do suggest you pray to your god for my safe return.”



The Tech-Progress Illusion

Deviss shines dirty under the noon sun. The scene approaches the alien city from high above the tallest structures. The settlement looks like a golden-red technological wound in an otherwise virgin, snow-covered forest. Ximena breathes in the fresh winter air, oxygen-rich from the woods below.

“Ah!” Professor Miyagi gestures at the round, metal city floating over his head. “Here it comes. Watch!”

Nothing seems to change in the sleepy winter silence. Ximena scans the alien city as their bird’s eye view approaches, bringing ever more detail to her eager eyes—but in vain.

“Come on, people. The olaki! This one.” He points with his finger at a specific point on the city’s edge.

Ah, she can see it now. One of those enormous cylindrical towers—one of twenty identical soaring structures placed at equal intervals in a circle around the city—begins to rise in the air. Slowly. Silently. Its top is a sharp peak, an architectural anomaly in a city otherwise shaped by smooth, curved surfaces. The behemoth floats vertically in eerie quietness, levitating ever higher over the city, ever quicker in gentle acceleration.

“The olaki,” Miyagi says, eyes shining with admiration. “Which reminds me...” Miyagi gestures Ank to pause the scene and looks up at the benches. “Anybody knows what the tech-progress illusion is? Ah, Mallory?”

Ximena sees her head turning to Censor Smith sitting next to her, as if she was replying to him instead of Professor Miyagi. “The tech-progress illusion is the belief that technology evolves always in one direction, from simpler to more advanced, but never the other way around. It is a false belief, like the many that plague historical sensorials.” That causes a few nearby chuckles, including Censor Smith’s.

“Close. But no,” Miyagi says.

A loud snort escapes Ximena before she has time to cover her face, attracting a good deal of attention, including Mark’s and Cody’s embarrassingly loud attempt at not laughing. Mallory turns her glare up at her. And then Censor Smith does likewise. *Oh, Goah!*

In the meantime, Miyagi is saying, “It is true that the tech-progress illusion is a mistaken belief. But is not a simple belief in always-advancing technology. That is a trap that no historian, no matter how dumb, would ever fall into.” He chuckles, shaking his head. “Dark ages, societal collapses, and the like, they’re everywhere you look. No, the tech-progress illusion is more subtle, and unfortunately still widespread among too many of our fellow historian colleagues, which is why I’m bringing it up. We don’t want those sorts of beliefs here, do we? We are looking for—”

“Maybe,” Censor Smith says abruptly, his voice absorbing every eye in the amphitheater, “Woman Epullan would care to enlighten us?” He looks up at her, next to a grinning Mallory.

Ximena exhales at once, her face frozen in angst. Beside her, Cody and Mark sit bolt upright like Censor Smith had addressed them too.

Miyagi seems momentarily taken aback by the sudden

interruption. He blinks and says, “Only volunteers in *my* seminar, Censor Smith.” His expression is unusually grave, and his voice unusually tight.

Ximena stands. “It’s... It’s all right, Professor. I volunteer.” She clears her throat. “The technological progress illusion is... hmm, the belief that all cultures, if left undisturbed, are bound to develop the *same* technologies, in the *same* chronological order—which is clearly nonsense.”

“There!” Miyagi points at Ximena. “Example?”

“Uh, well, for instance, pre-Columbian cultures lacked many of the inventions that were the base of old-world cultures, like the wheel, or metallurgy, and yet their cities were a marvel of engineering, their size and complexity rivaling even the most advanced cities in Asia or Europe. Their agriculture—”

“Okay, okay, we get the idea.” Miyagi holds up his hand with a smile, and gestures for her to sit. She does so, locking her eyes on her lap, avoiding any glance down to the first bench. “Thanks, Ximena.”

“*So sexy!*” Mark whispers in her ears, imitating Edda’s voice. Ximena chuckles.

Miyagi pulls back his long, white hair and says, “Technology doesn’t progress like a young river, that flows straight down from the highlands, but like a spawning delta, that splits and rejoins in chaotic branches. There are many examples in history where a culture prioritizes specific lines of progress, and leaps over others, because of their constraints, their beliefs, or simply by chance. Even ourselves! Compare our wonderful hyper-technological civilization with our ancestors’ of the golden age. Are we more advanced? On the surface, you could argue so. Our space-tech is definitely more advanced, also our environmental sciences, and we even possess new technologies they lacked, like dreamtech or quantum splitting. But are we *really?*” He scoffs. “Our

information and automation technologies are a sorry shadow of the wonders before the collapses, as is our bioengineering, our nanotech, our military, just to name a few. The sheer size of their civilization—billions and billions of souls—an economical and sociological marvel.”

He remains silent for a few seconds, looking around at the students as if enjoying their captivated gazes.

“*Or...*” he raises his voice and points up at the colossal needle floating over the alien city. “What about the dreamworms? Are they more advanced than the humanity of Goah’s Imperia?” He chuckles. “What an absurd question, isn’t it? I mean, even if we consider the New Alexandria survivors. Ridiculous! Look at that. The olaki is a true marvel of their technology: interstellar spaceship, inter-system shuttle, hibernation facility, industrial colony core and, occasionally,” he points at the scene, “sub-orbital transporter; all in one practical, compact phallus.” That attracts many laughs, Ximena’s included. “Have you noticed how, uh, elegantly it moves? Olakis go up so smoothly, without a hiccup, no noise whatsoever. Compare that with our blasting planes, or with one of our rockets roaring up in smoke and fire.”

He gives Ank a combination of hand gestures. She nods and the floating scene begins running in very slow motion, zoomed into the olaki, showcasing its miraculous, silent lift. Miyagi looks up at the rising vehicle and smiles. “Look. At. That! What can possibly push such a massive object up in the air with no visible exhaust? Ha! For us this is...” he waves with his hand, “a physical impossibility. Our scientists have proposed some hypotheses—gravity manipulation, warping of space-time—but nobody knows for real. So, yeah... of course dreamworms are more advanced. I mean, they came to Earth from *other* stars in those things, while we are still jumping between rocks in our home system. Right?”

Most students nod, but Ximena, Cody, Mark and a few others shake their heads with knowing smiles.

“No, not right! Come on, people. Wake up! What have I been babbling about? Tech-fucking-progress *illusion!* Don’t fall into the trap! The dreamworm civilization is just that, a civilization, with its own choices and restrictions. Look at that *overkill* over there.” He gestures at the soaring olaki. “They are using a goahdamn interstellar spaceship just to transport Rew to another city a few hundred miles east! Where are their land transportation systems, their rails, their roads?” He pauses for effect. “No *wheel!* And their lack of information technology? Sure, who needs a phone when you can just meet in a permascape? More examples anybody? Lora, yes?”

“Military technology, Professor. Before the Dreamwars, dreamworms had no notion of war. They are a united species, so they don’t even know civil war.”

Miyagi nods approvingly. “Good example. Anybody else?” He points a finger at a handsome black student in the Lundev benches. “Enam, shoot.”

Enam stands. “Uh, well, what about research and development?” He shifts his weight to the other leg, seemingly uncomfortable with the sudden attention. “Like, they are culturally conservative. Or more than that. *Stagnant.*” His voice sounds more confident with every word. “Where are their scientists? And their labs? They have barely changed in all the millennia since they arrived in Nubaria. Not even their intimate contact with human technology appears to have made much of an impact.”

“Excellent point!” Miyagi says, presenting his wide smile to the entire amphitheater. “Makes you wonder where they got their wondrous technology from in the first place, doesn’t it?”

“Welcome to the assembly of the Reseeding effort,” Miyagi says, waving a hand in a welcoming gesture. The sudden change of scenery takes Ximena by surprise. She leans forward, enthralled by the alien setting, peering into the unfamiliar. “From this building,” Miyagi continues, “the leech Gorrobor leads the effort over Oromantis, which is the huge administrative area broadly equivalent to our North-Western Eurasia. And of course,” he chuckles, “this is where Rew’s fate will be decided. The ride she just hitched in that olaki only took a few minutes. We’re expecting her any second now.”

Ximena gazes at the vast open space that fills the entire floor of a building; the top floor of a skyscraper to be precise, judging from the staggering scenery encircling them beyond the transparent wall and ceiling. The space is broad and perfectly round, and as high as thirty feet. The wall—fully transparent, more solid air than crystal—closes in a wide circle. The high ceiling, equally transparent, is but the smooth extension of the wall as it bends over them like a dome. Daylight floods the room from around and above, hard to tell the time of day, since the sky is overcast, shades of gray moving gently in the wind.

Miyagi points with the finger. “Do you notice how intense everything looks, how vibrant the textures feel, how cleanly light reflects? Anybody guess why?”

“A dream?” Lora says, squinting. “But no. It’s different.”

“Not a dream, no. This is Rew’s harsh reality.”

“We’re underwater, aren’t we?” Mark says, wide-eyed.

“There!” Miyagi points at Mark. “This enormous space, the entire floor, is filled with water,” Miyagi says, and scans the benches with a broad smile. “Cool, huh? It’s like looking out from within a fish tank. And check out the view!”

The room hangs at breathtaking heights over a dreamworm city not unlike Deviss, but larger. Soaring

structures spread in all directions around them, each different from the next, most cylindrical; their copper-colored metallic skins devoid of sharp angles, no discernible openings on their smooth surfaces. But this city feels *alive*, much more so than Deviss. There is the lifelike movement of a myriad of thin tendrils of green—wudai, Ximena realizes—crawling slowly in tight packs over some edifices. Other lower structures exhale white smoke profusely. And far away below, on the ground, there are glimpses of activity. Ximena can even feel a subtle rumble, more vibration than sound, that permeates everything: the unmistakable rhythms of life and industry.

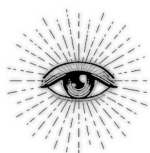
Ximena raises her eyes to the distant edge of the city, a perfect circle separating civilization from the wilderness, but much wider than Deviss'. Here, colossal olakis also stand equally spread along the round periphery, like a wheel of needles, towering several times higher than the tallest skyscrapers in the city. The sheer number of them is staggering. Over a hundred, compared to Deviss' twenty.

"Behold Yian," Miyagi says, "the lichai capital of Oromantis, not far away from our old Moscow. And look over there." He points up beyond the olakis, where a snowed, forested wilderness spreads flat in all directions, only scarred by a sumptuous river serpentine across the landscape. Several settlements can be made out along the banks of the river. Although the distance distorts them into a confusing blur, they actually resemble *human* settlements—*medieval-like* villages to be precise—surrounded by barren fields that extend along the riverbanks. "Neanderthal humans," he continues. "Conduit clients of the dreamworms."

A sudden *whoosh* turns Ximena's attention back to the inside of the vast, liquid-filled room.

"Oh, the show begins," Miyagi says. "Let's watch some history, people."

THIRTY-FOUR



A Trial in Yian

The awesome landscape high above the alien city of Yian immediately loses its fascinating magnetism as soon as a thick layer of intertwined, ivy-like wudai slides aside on the floor, revealing a vertical shaft in the center of the massive circular open space. The inside of the hole—at least as far down as Ximena’s view reaches—is crisscrossed by thicker tendrils, which pulsate in waves like an intestine moving its contents along in peristaltic spasms.

Two elongated figures emerge out of the shaft, pushed up by its inner weeds. Two mares, but with arms and legs unnaturally flattened. The mares swim gracefully, using their flat limbs as natural paddles, and let their sinuous bodies sink gently down until they stand by the transparent wall, facing the central shaft where two more mares begin to emerge. They also swim and form next to the first two. And so, pair after pair of mares spit out by the building’s innards join the others until a total of twelve stand side by side in a row of expectant silence.

A larger figure begins to emerge shortly after—its size almost as wide as the gap. “Gorrobob has arrived,” Miyagi says, smiling as the leech floats gently over the rim. The

coordinated movement of its appendages thrusts the colossal body—as large as an elephant, as soft as a slug, as white as a mare—up above the shaft with gentle precision. When Gorrobor’s head almost touches the dome-like ceiling, she stares down at the line of mares with her two enormous eyes—bulbous like those of an octopus, but soulless white—that protrude from an otherwise featureless head, which is as massive as the rest of the body. “Behold a lichai in the flesh,” Miyagi says. “Magnificent, isn’t she?” Her imposing presence—now floating idly in the currents that keep flowing upwards out of the opening on the floor—dominates the room.

The twelve mares bow in unison to Gorrobor, who keeps her stare on them in silence.

“Sense and bind, Master Gorrobor.” Ximena recognizes Yog’s voice, which has a heightened snappy quality to it, as if truly physically spoken underwater. Nice touch.

“Do name yourself, and state the objective of this gathering,” Gorrobor says, taking ownership of the room with the deep voice of an old matriarch.

“Yes, Master Gorrobor. I am Yog-at-Yian, Overseer of the Reseeding effort in Oromantis. We are gathered in formal trial to assess the actions and, if deemed appropriate, terminate Walker Rew-at-Deviss.”

“Sense and bind, Master Gorrobor. I am Rew-at-Deviss”, a mare right next to Yog bows, “Walker assigned to the Reseeding effort and Human Whisperer. I shall respond to my decision to terminate a limb of Yog-at-Yian. I do additionally request official arbitration on the promising tactics I am developing to advance the interests of the Reseeding effort.”

Gorrobor observes Rew with attention. “I have been expecting with anticipation a status report for some time now, Human Whisperer. You did request, and I did *grant*, permission to instruct human Walkers into the Paths, in the hope they shall prove valuable agents to the Reseeding

effort.” She turns her protruding eyes towards Yog. “I am displeased at receiving the summons to an official trial instead.”

Yog sinks her head in submission. “My overseeing capacity has reached unexpected limits, Master Gorrobor. Alas, your judgment has become incumbent.”

Gorrobor floats in silence, her short appendages swaying in the currents like white seaweed. “Do state your facts,” she finally says, looking at Yog.

“Yes, Master Gorrobor. Walker Rew-at-Deviss requested permission to initiate humans into the Path of Shadow against your explicit—”

“I am aware of what I have forbidden, Overseer. Do state the facts, nothing else.”

“Yes, Master Gorrobor.” Her head bows curtly. “I did deny permission. I additionally did embody your ban with a penalty of termination.” Her head turns to face Rew. “In the yester, Walker Rew-at-Deviss did acknowledge her initiation of humans two steps into the Path of Shadow.” Her head turns back to Gorrobor. “I did suspend the Reseeding effort in Deviss. I did declare Walker Rew in violation of your ban. I did order Walker Rew’s due termination. There was no compliance. Walker Rew did instruct her underlings to terminate my limb. They complied. Those are my facts.”

Gorrobor’s eyes turn and scrutinize Rew for a long moment. “Your facts, Human Whisperer.”

“Yes, Master Gorrobor. Overseer Yog did select winners in the human Trials that proved grossly unfit as Reseeding agents. I did request to salvage the program by selecting worthy individuals instead. As Human Whisperer, I am uniquely—”

“Do state your facts, Walker.” Gorrobor’s bulbous eyes barely move, their attention eerily locked on Rew.

“Yes, Master,” Rew says, and remains still for a few moments before speaking again. “Overseer Yog denied my

request and forbid my further interaction with humans. A Human Whisperer, forbidden from—”

“The facts, Walker.” Gorrobor’s voice seems to sharpen. “Only facts.”

“Yes, Master Gorrobor, I did successfully achieve humans that can tread the first two steps of the Path in the Shadow.” She pauses an instant, almost like hesitating. “Overseer Yog did request my termination. I did dispute her right to establish penalty. Overseer Yog did refuse my request for arbitration. I did order the termination of Yog’s limb. My order was carried out. Those are my facts.”

Gorrobor’s eyes unlock from Rew and retract slowly—like a snail’s—into the massive head. She stays still in what, after some time, seems like deep sleep, her body floating in mid-water effortlessly, sustained by invisible currents streaming up the shaft. The mares stare at her in patient silence. The two mares in the center of the line, Yog and Rew, are not as still as their companions, as their heads wobble ever so slightly, a bit more with every passing moment. Ximena shifts in her seat and exchanges a tense glance with Mark, who seems to be holding his breath. Like history could go either way.

Gorrobor’s eyes unfold and stretch out, seeking and then focusing their gaze on Rew.

“Human Whisperer, your termination of a limb of Overseer Yog-at-Yian is *aligned* with the interests of the Reseeding effort,” Yog’s head wobbles visibly, “only in the assumption that humans can indeed walk the Paths, and then be compelled to advance our interests.”

Gorrobor shifts her attention to Yog.

“Overseer Yog-at-Yian, your resistance to the flow of Walker Rew’s reports and her requests for arbitration is *misaligned* with the interests of the Reseeding effort.” Yog sinks her heads in instant submission. “Overseer Yog-at-Yian, your embodiment of my ban with a termination penalty, and its

subsequent attempt at enforcement on Walker Rew-at-Deviss without prior arbitration is *aligned* with the interests of the Reseeding effort,” Yog looks up again, “only in the assumption that human Walkers of the Mind are indeed an *unnecessary risk*.”

An uneasy silence spreads across the auditorium. Ximena lets her eyes wander out to the horizon beyond the crystal walls, as if the sight of woods, fields and medieval villages could release the tension she feels crawling in her stomach. It doesn't.

“Thus,” the deep female voice of Gorrobor breaks the silence, “I do require answer to this one question: are the *creative* efforts of Walker Rew-at-Deviss to achieve human agents of the Reseeding effort a *true possibility*, or are they an *unnecessary risk*? You shall now reason in sequence until full circle. Do begin, Human Whisperer.”

“Yes, Master Gorrobor.” Rew takes a step forward, or rather, pushes herself in the water with a casual wave of her flattened limbs. “First, I do hereby certify that my most promising apprentices have trodden two entire steps of the Path in the Shadow and can already meld minds without my assistance. Whether humans can Walk the Paths has stopped being hypothesis, and turned into fact. Second, a human Walker of the Mind is far superior in their capacity to influence and persuade than even the best of us marai-na. Not even the best of our Human Whisperers can match a human cub's ability to understand, influence and *deceive* other humans. A wise deployment of our human Walkers shall make their numbers flourish like in the pristine age. We shall empty all olakis once again. Those are my reasons.” Rew stands back in line.

Yog propels herself a step forward. “Master Gorrobor, the progress of the Reseeding effort in Oromantis is in line with our original projections and aligned with the ancestral marai-ba template for planetary population collapses. Regarding

Third Wake humans, the last century has brought statistically significant growth in their numbers, mostly by the standard practice of nudging humans into settling new territories. Our projections show that we shall be able to reawaken a tenth of our population from hibernation in a century. Maybe earlier, if any of our more *innovative* approaches bear fruit. I am, for example, personally leading an elite-influencing effort to raise the cull age. The Reseeding effort is working, Master Gorrobor. Thus, no risk is *necessary*. Only time is. Time and patience. Those are my reasons.” Yog falls back.

Rew moves forward. “Master Gorrobor, Overseer Yog-at-Yian lacks the deep knowledge I do possess on human biology and psychology. Their species is dependent on knowledge and culture being transferred by a slow process of continuous, direct interaction among individuals. Thus, their bodies did evolve to live long enough to assimilate knowledge from the previous generation, then to exploit such knowledge in their natural environment, and finally to transfer it down to the next generation. It is slow and frail, but such a learning process is to their civilization what a pumping heart is to their body. What Overseer Yog-at-Yian does fail to understand, is that humans are out of natural balance. Their species is under severe stress, on the verge of extinction. Their artificially short lifespans rob their culture of the ability to hold on to the critical science and technology to adapt to the continuing collapse of their ecosystem, which has already deemed broader spans of the Third Wake uninhabitable to their species. Overseer Yog-at-Yian does fail to accept that human existence is swinging by the faintest of threads, at the risk of a sudden snap by the next natural disaster, crop failure, war, atmospheric transition, epidemic, or any of the many other unforeseeable hazards of nature and civilization. Thus, patience is an unacceptable risk. Thus, an intense acceleration of the Reseeding effort by means of human Walkers of the

Mind is a *necessary* risk. Those are my reasons.” Rew moves back in line.

Yog moves forward. “Master Gorrobor, I might not have the deep experience and knowledge of humans that Walker Rew-at-Devis does possess. But it is well known that humans are extremely resilient creatures. Even the severe ecological correction triggered by their last collapse caused merely a decline in their population. They do still own their world, and do span it so completely, that any local calamity would but be a temporary inconvenience to their species. Thus, Walker Rew’s Reseeding variant—the creation of human Walkers of the Mind—is *unnecessary*. Furthermore,” Yog pauses for a few seconds, as if to stress her next words, “we cannot afford the *existential risk* of humans developing the capacity to Walk the Paths as a species. If they ever tread the Paths in large enough numbers, we shall be forced to leave Nubaria and return to the Cold for eons. Those are my reasons.” Yog floats back to the line of mares.

Rew moves forward. “Master Gorrobor, I do urge you not to let the fear in Overseer Yog-at-Yian’s reasoning cloud your assessment. Humans have indeed shown incipient promise to tread the Paths, but they are—and will always be—a faint shadow of our own. They shall never pose a threat. Their evolutionary path, unlike ours, has made their substrate more physical than psychical. Overseer Yog’s apprehension is unfounded. The truth remains—and this is crucial, Master Gorrobor—that to push against the unyielding forces of tradition that permeate third-wake human society, a powerful *spark* is required. Alas, human Walkers of the Mind are indeed a risk, I do admit so much. But a mild risk. And a *necessary* one. Only the full scope of abilities of a Walker of the Mind, mixed with the uncanny human ability to deceive, shall grant us the power to fulfill the promise of the Reseeding effort before the next disaster completes the extinction of

humankind. Those are my reasons.” Rew retreats with flowing grace.

Yog moves forward. “Master Gorrobor, I do fear Walker Rew-at-Deviss is recklessly underestimating human potential. A most severe lack of judgment as, according to her own report, her human subjects can already tread *two* steps of the Path in the Shadow. A considerable achievement, considering the limited time lapse. The risk is *unacceptable*, and the consequences, *existential*. Those are my reasons.”

As Yog returns to the line of mares, and Rew is about to make her next move, Gorrobor’s voice breaks in. “Enough. Circular reasoning has been reached, and the circle is thus closed. I shall emit verdict now.”

Gorrobor’s eyes retreat inside the fleshy white head, but this time her eerie trance doesn’t last long enough for Ximena to grow restless. After a mere dozen seconds, her eyes roll out, slowly—intensely.

“I do state as fact,” she begins, “that the Reseeding variant promoted by Walker Rew-at-Deviss has potential to advance the interests of the Reseeding effort in a fraction of the time projected for our standard operation. Alas, I do lack the expert knowledge to estimate the probability of its occurrence, or the gravity of its consequences, or the degree of its necessity—which itself requires both an accurate assessment of the fragility of human civilization, and of the stability of their ecological niche. It is my prerogative to delegate such analysis to my experts.” Gorrobor drills her gaze at Yog, and then at Rew. “Alas, my experts do not concur in their appraisal. They have succumbed to the weakness of distinct minds—separate experiences, separate learnings, separate perspectives, separate destinies do lead to separate conclusions, even on the face of the same facts.”

Gorrobor remains silent for a few moments, floating idly, her appendages subtly moving along her intellectual reasoning.

“The verdict I am to speak,” Gorrobor continues, “shall cause deep ripples beyond the Reseeding effort. It might impact our continued existence in Nubaria. Thus, I shall not allow judgment to be stricken with the weakness of separate perspectives. And so, I do speak my verdict. Walker Rew-at-Devis, you shall *mate* with Overseer Yog-at-Yian at once.”

The twelve mares seem to react to Gorrobor’s words by slightly breaking their rigid stance, some more than others. Rew and Yog wobble their heads most noticeably.

“Your mating shall turn your weakness into strength. Your minds shall fuse into one,” Gorrobor says. “The strongest psyche—the deepest conviction—shall absorb the weakest. All your knowledge, your experience, your temperament shall be merged into one. A single marai-na shall arise, with two limbs—an appropriate replacement to the limb hastily terminated in Devis—and one mind capable of leading the Reseeding effort through this most fateful of dilemmas.”

Gorrobor turns her eyes to Yog.

“Overseer Yog-at-Yian, if your psyche does prevail, your leadership of the Reseeding effort shall be enriched with Walker Rew’s deep knowledge of human quirks. You might decide to temper your cautious approach with Walker Rew’s extraordinary creativity.”

“Yes, Master Gorrobor,” Yog says, sinking her head.

Gorrobor’s eyes slide to Rew.

“Walker Rew-at-Devis, were your psyche to prevail, you shall lead the Reseeding effort as Overseer Rew-at-Yian. You might decide to temper your chain reaction approach with Overseer Yog’s caution.”

“Yes, Master Gorrobor. A request, if I may.”

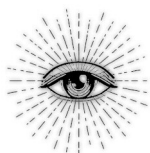
Gorrobor keeps her gaze locked on Rew in silence. After a few seconds, she finally says, “Do proceed, Human Whisperer.”

“Yes, Master Gorrobor. As confident as I am in the strength

of my conviction, caution forces me to request a brief delay of the mating. The morrow shall suffice to allow for the completion of certain... *affairs* related to the Reseeding effort that my untimely dissolution might otherwise deem useless.”

“I do fail to understand the haste. Any affairs shall be duly handled by the Overseer after the mating. Request denied. The verdict shall be executed now.” Gorrobor turns to Yog. “Overseer, do summon a librarian.”

THIRTY-FIVE



Overseer

As the scene freezes in midair, Ximena blinks and looks around the amphitheater. Some students shift or stretch, as their minds slowly return to the real world of the twenty-sixth century, but most seem mildly irritated by the interruption.

Professor Miyagi is once more pacing the center of the stage. “Sorry people, but I need to prepare you for what is coming now,” he says, and gives his students a resplendent, devilish smile. “A sex scene.”

Ximena leans forward, her attention irremediably captured by the magic word. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices Mark and Cody equally captivated.

“You know how it is,” Miyagi says. “Nowadays it’s impossible to watch a sensorial, even a boring history sensorial,” he gestures casually up at the paused scene, “without a sex scene.”

Laughs fill the auditorium.

Miyagi begins to pace the stage, hands behind his back. “Sex,” he finally says, as if tasting the word. “You either love it, or... No, scratch that. Everybody loves it!” More laughs. “Of

course we do. It's in our genes! When we see two dogs at it, or two earthworms, we know they love it, don't we? Ah how romantic, the fight against extinction. But!" He points above at Gorrobor and at the line of mares. "Those ladies up there." He shakes his head emphatically. "Nope. No fun for them. What we are going to watch now is the mating of two marai, a fully alien species, the result of evolutionary pressures unlike anything life ever faced on Earth. I mean, we have more in common, the way we... *do it*, with earthworms than with them."

Miyagi takes a few more steps in silence, head sunk, as if gathering his thoughts. *Alien sex*, Ximena thinks, her curiosity aroused. She never thought about it before. As far as she knows, mares are not sexually differentiated. *Do they even have different sexes? How in Goah's Name they do it?*

"In their native Huarai, natural selection ran *nuts*," Miyagi continues, raising his head and voice. "Total *loco*, people. That ecosystem featured not only the physical world, fueled by sun and flesh that we monkeys know and love, but also—talk about weird—the *psychical* world fueled by thoughts and minds." He paused a moment to let that sink in his attentive audience. "Think about it. Huarai's species had to compete not only with each other's claws and jaws, but also with each other's minds and *psyches*. Nasty, huh? The predictable result..." Miyagi gestures again at the alien creatures frozen in midair. "An overwhelming advantage of Huarai's sentient species over those of more... *classical* biospheres. Can anybody tell me the three cycles of marai reproduction?" Miyagi points at Lora's raised hand.

"Spreading, splitting and mating," she recites.

"Spreading. Splitting. Mating. Exactly. But today we are only concerned about the latter. What's the purpose of the *mating* cycle?"

"Uh, to join individual mares into a single mare?"

“Yes, but come on, Lora. Tell me more. Why do they do it?”

“Sure, uh, I think that when they need a mare to increase her capabilities for whatever reason, she mates to absorb the, uh,” she waves her hand indistinctly, “weaker one.”

“Uh-huh, kind of. Thanks, Lora. The alpha mare keeps her self-consciousness and takes the other poor bastard’s *mind juice* and extra limbs. Essentially, one mare lives and grows in intellect, while the other one dies. Sweet deal, huh? At least for one of them. Which begs the question,” he points at the center of the line of mares floating above him, “which of our two favorite mares is the *alpha*? Let’s watch.”

As the scene comes back to life, a shrill female student voice raises at the other side of the amphitheater and says, “Professor?”

Miyagi gestures Ank to freeze the scene in place once more, and turns to the voice. “Aha, yes, Sky?”

Enough with the questions, Goah’s Mercy! To her own surprise, Ximena is eager to watch what happens next. Like she doesn’t know.

“Why do they need a leech to mate? I mean...” She takes a strand of her long, black hair between her fingers, and plays casually with it. “Sorry, Professor, I’m not sure I’m making much sense. What I’m trying to ask is, hmm... How did the marai get to *evolve* in the first place on their own? Like, how it is that they even *exist*, if they need another species to hold their hands while they... fuck around?”

Miyagi laughs, as do Mark and many other students. Not Ximena. She doesn’t like the cheeky Hansasian bitch with her foul mouth and her oh-so-perfect South Asian features.

“Did that make sense?” Sky asks, frowning around at the laughing students with what looks to Ximena a theatrically perfect innocent expression.

“Yes, of course it does, Sky,” Miyagi says. “Thank you. A

great question. Leeches and mares, right? How did it all begin? I'm no xenobiologist, so people, double-check my words, but the answer, as far as I understand, is *symbiosis*." He raises his left hand in the air. "Leech A meets mare A, leech A *eats* mare A." Then he raises his right hand. "Leech B meets mare B, leech B *enslaves* mare B." He clenches his right hand into a fist, "Team B now is the symbiotic melding of a leech and a mare. Now, what happens when Team A and leech B meet in their homeworld?" He bumps his right hand against his left hand, which he opens with wiggling fingers as he makes an explosion-like noise with his mouth, like a little boy playing with action figures.

Mark, Cody and many other students burst out laughing, but Ximena stubbornly refuses to join in. She is growing impatient with all this back-and-forth blah blah. She wants to see some action, Goah's Mercy!

Miyagi continues, "Team B eats leech A for breakfast and goes off to conquer the universe for lunch. Sorry, Sky," Miyagi smiles widely at her, "I went a bit overboard there, but the fact is, without a leech to hold on to the memories of the mares, the mating would be little more than a glorified meal for the alpha, transferring nourishment and limbs, yes, but no intellect. In a way, you could say leeches domesticated mares. Probably these marai," he gestures at the line of twelve elongated bodies on the scene, "are as different from their homeworld ancestors as a poodle is to a wolf. Get it?"

"Sure, Professor," Sky says, "but then, why a *librarian*? I mean, why not just Gorrobor?" She points at the monster floating not far away from where she is sitting.

Miyagi shakes his head with a weak smile. "To be honest, I don't really know. Lichai are still quite the mystery, much more so than marai. Our best hypothesis—a guess, really—is that a librarian in dreamworm civilization is a type of specialist of *memories*. Good at extracting them, holding on to them, and

transferring them. Just a hypothesis, though. But it has the ring of truth, if you allow me to say something so unscientific,” he chuckles. “Remember, people. I’m no xenobiologist, so take all this with a pinch of salt. Anyway, let’s watch some sex, shall we?”

Yes! Ximena thinks, sitting bolt upright. *Finally!*

The scene shifts forwards in time with a casual gesture of Ank. There are two leeches now: Gorrobor, still majestically dominating the middle of the room, and a slightly smaller specimen—yet as tall as four mares. Her appendages are blurred in frenzied movement, propelling her decisively towards the line of mares, her colossal head almost grazing the transparent ceiling.

“Librarian,” Gorrobor says in her deep, matriarchal voice, “do name yourself, and consummate a marai-na mating.”

“I am Abarr, librarian to the assembly of the Reseeding effort in Yian.” The smaller leech stops short of the mares. Her protruding eyes move along the line of staring mares. “Alpha marai-na, do approach.”

Yog and Rew propel forward at once.

The librarian scans the two grotesquely elongated bodies. “Two single-limbed marai-na,” she says after a while. “Alpha, do name yourself.”

“Which marai-na is the alpha is a matter still unsettled, Librarian,” Gorrobor says. “A regrettable circumstance that is endangering our effort. Your consummation shall provide the necessary clarity.”

The librarian gazes at Rew for a few moments before saying, “Marai-na, do name yourself.”

“Yes, Master Abarr. I am Rew-at-Devisss.”

“Rew-at-Devisss, do commute.”

Rew approaches the immense body of the leech and extends her arms until they are within reach of the librarian's appendages. Rew's boneless arms are avidly engulfed in an instant, locking her firmly in place against her jelly-like flesh. "I do taste you, Rew-at-Deviss," the librarian says. Then she turns her eyes to Yog. "Marai-na, do name yourself."

"Yes, Master Abarr. I am Yog-at-Yian."

"Yog-at-Yian, do commute."

Yog joins Rew in the librarian's uncanny embrace. "I do taste you, Yog-at-Yian. Marai-na, do savor each other."

A shake waves simultaneously through the two mare bodies.

"Do hold on to each other's flavor, marai-na," the librarian continues, her voice seeming to drag, lingering with lust. "Do immerse into each other's self. Do penetrate the veil of *essence*."

The two bodies shiver again in unison, and go limp as one. Boneless legs give way to upper bodies as they begin to sink, until an abrupt shudder stops them. The librarian's eagerly lascivious appendages clasp their stretched arms in place.

"I do *have* you, Yog-at-Yian. I do *feel* your mind... solid, porous... Mmm..." The librarian seems to moan without intelligible words. "Sturdy... and *sharp*." Ximena peers in fascination at the bulky alien and the two mares attached to her, swinging lifelessly by their arms, eyes as dead as marble. "I do *have* you, Rew-at-Deviss. Mmm..." The librarian moans again, like a connoisseur that has just tasted an unexpected delicacy. "Hazy is your mind... and vicious, warm. Mmm, *fervent*. Exceptional indeed. Do meld your minds, marai-na."

The librarian retracts its eyes into the bulbous head, and remains still, in silence. Ximena notices a slight tremor in her lower body, but then, nothing.

After a few seconds of tense silence, the leech quivers again, this time more noticeably. Periodic convulsions wave

along her flesh, and down the mares' hanging limbs, for what seems like minutes.

Until it stops.

The librarian's octopus-like eyes emerge from within the white, thick flesh and refocus on the surrounding room, as though she were seeing it for the first time. Her appendages release their hold on the two mare bodies at once, which sink to the floor, seemingly unconscious.

The leech's lower appendages wave rhythmically, thrusting her away from the two lying figures, and turning her massive body around until she faces Gorrobor. "The mating has been consummated," she says. "Your marai-na is a most outstanding specimen, Guardian Gorrobor—a superb intellect."

"Nothing short of what the Reseeding effort craves," Gorrobor says, and turns her bulbous eyes to the two figures lying lifeless on the floor.

"The marai-na shall recover promptly," the Librarian says.

Silence returns to the room.

A long silence.

The space remains static, silent, ten mares in a line, two unconscious on the floor, and two leeches floating idly, all waiting. The only movement Ximena is aware of is the casual back and forth slow motion of the leeches' appendages and the occasional blur of urban motion somewhere in the spectacular landscape beyond the all-encompassing walls.

A gasp crosses the auditorium when the two mares on the floor twitch at the same time. Life seems to creep back to their limbs, arms and legs waving hesitantly, in abrupt jerks, like those of a baby laying face up on a crib. After a few seconds, the two bodies seem to synchronize, their movement more fluid and elegant. They finally rise, as they wave their arms and legs against the water, and swim as one—a coordinated and controlled flow that places them in a neat line facing Gorrobor.

"Sense and bind, Master Gorrobor," the mares say, and the

two heads bow curtly at the same time. Her voice has changed. It is neither Rew's nor Yog's.

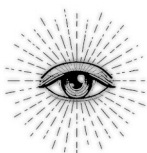
Ximena leans forward, peering into her expressionless eyes, hanging from her every word. She knows what is going to happen, of course. And yet, there she is, holding her breath like this were not history, but a story.

"Do name yourself, Overseer, and do state your policy on the Reseeding effort," Gorrobor says.

A peek out of the corner of her eye to her fellow students reveals to Ximena that she is not the only one enthralled by the scene. The silence is absolute. Every eye in the auditorium remains unblinkingly locked on the two-limbed marai.

"Yes, Master Gorrobor," the two bodies say with one voice. "I am Yog-at-Yian, Overseer of the Reseeding effort in Oromantis. I do hereby ban, with immediate effect, the human Walker variant formerly championed by now-ended Walker Rew-at-Deviss. I do hereby lift, with immediate effect, the Reseeding-protection status of Deviss-at-Diamar." She turns to one mare in the row. "Do return to Deviss, Walker Qoh, and arrange the thawing of every librarian."

"Yes, Master Yog."



Waters of Goah

“Bring the next witness, John,” the Inquisitor says, as he shuffles some notes over the high pulpit. He is sitting at least ten feet high over the floor, on a chair-with-pulpit made of uncut red stones—a scarlet cushion the only concession to comfort—that together with the other two twin chairs on each side looks almost like a natural rock formation protruding out of the wall, only accessible by steep, narrow, stone steps.

“Aye, Arch.” Noseless dutifully leaves the room. Another warrior, not as formidably large as Noseless, but as seemingly dangerous, shuts the solid wooden door behind Noseless and leans against the wall, inspecting his nails in boredom.

“You look unsettled, Quaestor.” The Inquisitor turns to his left with a polite smile, to the only other occupied stone chair.

Marjolein avoids his gaze. “It is this place, Grand Inquisitor. It has been sealed for generations. Opening it now seems...” She bites her lower lip.

“Uncivilized?” The Inquisitor bursts into laughter and lets his pale blue eyes wander around the square chamber with a satisfied smile. It is not larger than a school classroom, but the

ceiling rises at least double as high as the sitting Inquisitor, its verticality further enhanced by the imposing black-paint fresco of a glaring eye—Goah’s Eye—almost identical to the Inquisitor’s own forehead tattoo. The Inquisitor inhales deeply, like a city dweller enjoying the fresh air of the wild. He stretches his arms with pride and says, “To be allowed into the gutters of civilization is a privilege, Quaestor. Without functioning gutters, civilization would fall in rot quicker than a whore in gonorrhoea. If I do my job well—and I always do—you *civilized* lot will live your entire lives in blissful ignorance of the stench and corruption I must deal with daily down here, in the *gutters*. Piece of advice, Quaestor. Don’t be one of those idealistic fools that believe that there is no place for gutters in civilization—that it is a contradiction of terms—because if you do, you will be destroyed by a rival that knows better. I can assure you that Emperor Cisek is not such a fool. He was very explicit to me about his expectations.”

Marjolein meets his amused gaze, and says, “Please excuse me, Grand Inquisitor. This is all a bit... unexpected. I need some time, is all.”

“Oh, I understand. It can be overwhelming at first. But we are almost done here, anyway. Emperor Cisek will be pleased with our progress.”

“*Your* progress, Grand Inquisitor. Your threats have certainly proved more effective than my pleads.”

“Experience, Quaestor. Experience. More knows the devil for being old than for being the devil. Ah! Redeemed van Dolah, so glad to meet you in person. I’ve heard so much about you. Thank you for joining us on this glorious Sunday.”

Noseless gives Edda a rough shove as they enter the chamber. She staggers, almost tripping, brows and lips pursed in distress at the indignant treatment. She raises her eyes at the Inquisitor and Quaestor in their high places, and then tilts her

earless head up to the Eye glowering down at her from the heights.

Ximena cringes at the complex mix of emotions streaming through the damn psych-link. Yes, there is an undertone of relief at the lengthy seclusion being over, and a gush of hope. Surely aws Compacts are finally stretching their protective muscles around her colonist. But there are other, far more unsavory feelings. There is indignation, for starters. *How they dare treat a colonist of aws Gift like this?* There is overwhelming uncertainty. *Do they know something?* But pinning it all, like a cherry on top of a shaky cake of dread, is raw animal fear—fear of the unknown. Where minds get lost. Where legs get pumped. Where might devours right. Where hunger devours law. *What in Goah's name is this place?*

“Aws Blessings to you, Edda,” Marjolein says with a grimace approximating a smile. “Apologies for the long wait.”

Edda stares at Marjolein, her face hardening, bruises from her Oosterbeek visit still visible across her face. “It’s no fun being in isolation for, what, nine days now?” Her weak voice shakes lightly. “Like a convicted criminal!”

“That’s my fault, I’m afraid,” the Inquisitor says. “The inquisitive mind always takes its time.” He laughs at his surely overused joke. “Also, the interrogation performed on Woman Speese this morning took longer than originally foreseen,” Ximena feels Edda’s guts sink at the mention of Aline, especially at the concept of an interrogation being *performed* on somebody, “but was worth every minute. But, here we are. Finally. First let me introduce myself: Grand Inquisitor Archer Rhodes of aws British Mission in Worthing and Imperial Commander of aws Fist. And you are Redeemed Edda van Dolah, uh,” he leans over his notes, “a schoolteacher?” he asks, meeting her glare.

Before Edda can reply, Marjolein says, “A highly regarded

teacher, Inquisitor, as is her father. And her brother. Lunteren has nothing but love and respect for the Van Dolahs.”

“Warming words, Quaestor.” He turns his shaved head to her, an undertone of amusement in his voice. “You’ve attended lessons with them? Perhaps with her father?”

“No, no, I was destined here after, uh...” She blushes. “But their reputation is well known in the colony.” Marjolein turns back to Edda. “I suggest we begin with the questioning. First the formalities.” She clears her throat and points at the lone stone chair—of the same uncut red stone as the high pulpit chairs—standing in the middle of the square chamber. A stream of water surrounds the chair in a perfect circle, like a moat protecting a castle, its shallow basin carved on the stone floor. “Sorry, Edda. You must now undress completely. Only your nude skin and soul are allowed through aw’s Waters.”

Edda looks at Marjolein, wide-eyed, then slowly turns her head to the two guards by the door, who are staring at her with a grin.

“Please, Edda. I know... Just trust me. Take off all your clothes and footwear, and stand on aw’s Waters. Just... Let’s get this over with, please.”

“Did Aline have to do this as well?” She tries to speak loud and sure, but her voice cracks.

Noseless chuckles loudly. His companion joins him.

“She eventually did,” Marjolein says, her voice urging, almost pleading, almost *afraid*. “Trust me, Edda. Just shut your mind and do it.”

“Trust you, yeah,” Edda mutters, and slowly removes her winter shoes and thin socks. She leaves them neatly on the floor. She follows with her long, white tunic, her movements calm, unhurried, as she uncovers her dark brown skin. She then folds the tunic carefully and places it next to the shoes. Her underwear goes last: she unties the winter breastcloth, puts it aside, and then steps

out of her panties. Lastly, she removes the white monthcloth strip covering her vagina, tainted in red, and with a serene motion, places it—bloodied side up—next to the rest of her clothes.

“Ew, woman juice,” Noseless says from the door. His companion chuckles. Their eyes keenly scan her naked body.

“Thank you, Edda.” Marjolein speaks like she means it. “Now, aws Oath. Please stand on aws Waters.”

Barefooted, Edda carefully steps on the round stream of water. With both feet partly submerged, she turns her frown at the high chairs in silence, left arm covering her breasts, right hand her crotch, a gaping scar where her left ear used to be, and a tear running down her cheek.

Ximena, panting from the humiliation streaming through the psych-link, feels a sudden surge of pride. And realizes at once that this is not Edda’s feelings. It is her own. She is in awe at the bravery of the naked girl, at her strength, at her *defiance*. And, for the first time, Ximena feels a connection that runs deeper than the psych link’s. It comes with the realization that this girl—this woman—is her direct ancestor, not some abstract historical figure, nor are these events some abstract historical happening. Professor Miyagi’s seminar is suddenly much more than knowledge or a convenient career step. This is personal now. This nude, lone woman has stopped being history, and turned into *story*—the story that led to her own.

“Now what?” Edda asks, her voice breaking to her own chagrin.

The Inquisitor points a finger at her feet. “These are the Waters of Goah, brought in from aws Eye’s basin, and blessed by Quaestor Mathus with the prescribed rites.” His voice grows louder, more official, solemn almost. “These are the Waters of Goah, cleaner of souls.” The Inquisitor stands, as does Marjolein next to him. He continues, “Redeemed Edda van Dolah, your soul stands clean in front of a Court of aws Head

as Goah's Witness. You shall speak aw's Truth when inquired. Swear by Goah."

"Uh," Edda wets her lips, "I swear."

The Inquisitor and a visibly relieved Marjolein sit. He says, "No lie nor deception can be uttered by a human touched by aw's Waters. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You may sit now."

Edda steps out of the water on the inside of the circle and sits on the bare, red-stoned chair. Ximena feels the sudden chill of her warm body touching cold stone, but Edda leans back nevertheless and crosses her legs, left arm still covering her breasts.

"Excuse me, Inquisitor," Marjolein says. "It is important that Redeemed van Dolah unambiguously understands the theological implications of breaking aw's Oath." She turns to Edda. "Your soul has been purified by Goah, Edda. As long as you remain inside the circle of aw's Waters, it is *physically* impossible for you to avoid aw's Truth, understand? That is, if you *are* human."

"What else can I—?"

"In other words," Marjolein raises her voice, "were you to *demonstrably* lie, then the only possible rational explanation would be that you are demon-ridden."

"What? I'm not demon-ridden!"

The Inquisitor smiles patiently. "Spoken like true demonfolk, if you were lying. And like a bearer of Goah's Truth if you were not. Now, my first question to you, Redeemed van Dolah..."

The Inquisitor leans forward, both hands on the pulpit. “It’s a simple question, Redeemed van Dolah.” His gaze pierces her like he is trying to get a glimpse of her soul. “Were you directly or indirectly involved in the blasphemous events of the Century Festival? *Or* were you not?”

“Please admit it, Edda,” Marjolein says, her eyes pleading. “We already know the truth. A confession of guilt is the only way to prove your humanity. We can then beg for aw’s Mercy. I can give a good—”

“Quaestor,” the Inquisitor interrupts, shooting an admonishing glare at her. “Please abstain from undue influence on the witness. You risk the invalidation of her confession.”

“Apologies, Inquisitor. Edda, please answer the question.” She keeps her eyes locked on hers for a long second. “And think *very* carefully about what you say.”

Edda has not changed her posture since she first sat on the stone chair. “You should be ashamed of yourself, Quaestor Mathus,” Edda glares at Marjolein on the high chair. “How *low* can you still fall? This is not an interrogation, and I am most certainly not a witness. This is an aberration of a trial, yeah? A children’s brawl in the playground has more legal guarantees than these...” Edda waves her hand around, briefly uncovering her breasts. “Where is my defense? The evidence? *My* sacred rights? You call yourself pious, but you invite these... *barbarians* to do your dirty laundry and shit all over aw’s Compacts.”

With every word she utters, Marjolein’s face turns paler, and the Inquisitor’s smile wider.

“You bring me to this... place,” Edda continues, her voice filled with venom, “strip me naked, and now you are trying to bully me with your transparent good cop, bad cop psycho games? One day you will face Goah, Quaestor, same as

everybody else, and then how are you going to explain *this*? How did a *Woman of Goah* get dragged into this... *sham*?"

Marjolein, pale like a marble statue, clears her throat and lets her eyes escape Edda's merciless gaze.

The Inquisitor bursts out laughing, stands, and claps. It takes a long while for his laughter to finally abate. "Oh, I am so grateful, Redeemed van Dolah. Such righteous passion. This is far more entertaining than Woman Speese's so boringly predictable confession." He turns to Marjolein as he sits. "So obvious now who was the real brain behind the operation, isn't it?"

Marjolein does not reply.

"Very nicely put, Redeemed van Dolah," the Inquisitor continues. "But very wrong. Let me clarify your legal situation. The Compacts of Goah, at least as long as they remain in force, fully protect all colonists of aws Gift, which includes you. Now, this is not a Court of aws Compacts, and you are not under trial, nor are you being formally accused of anything—at least not yet. You are a *witness* of aws Inquisition, simply being asked a few questions."

"What if I refuse cooperation?" Edda asks.

"No problem at all!" the Inquisitor says with a broadening smile. "That is absolutely fine. Truly is. Your only legal obligation is to *hear* my questions under aws Waters' Oath. That's all. You are then free to go." He stretches his hand towards the door. "With a caveat: as of ancestral inquisition jurisprudence, refusal to answer a simple, binary *yes* or *no* question is legally interpreted as an admission of guilt. *Silence is acquiescence*, the old saying goes. Do you wish to leave? Be my guest."

Edda turns her eyes to the door, but does not move. She slowly turns her head up at the smiling Inquisitor. "What was the question again?"

He keeps a tight, patient smile, and says: "Your degree of

participation in the Century Blasphemy, Redeemed van Dolah.” The Inquisitor leans forward. “Our informant was very specific about your involvement, and Woman Speese’s, of course.”

“Informant?”

“We can’t reveal his identity until the trial. But I can assure you—*we* can assure you,” the Inquisitor gestures at Marjolein, “that his statement under aw’s Waters’ Oath was thorough—and convincing. Woman Speese provided the technical capability, while you masterminded the blasphemy message and set the Joyousday House on fire.”

“I don’t believe Aline admitted to anything of the sort. You’re lying.”

The Inquisitor chuckles and says, “You know her well—impressive. But you are wrong. Woman Speese admitted to her participation, although she denied yours. Isn’t that interesting? We have two separate aw’s Water’s Oaths, and both are already inconsistent, which means that we got a demon to deal with. Who of the two is lying?” His lips part to show his teeth. “My karma is on Woman Speese, but of course it will be the court that ultimately decides.”

“The court?” Edda turns to Marjolein, eyebrows shooting up in alarm. “Quaestor Mathus, please tell me Aline is—”

“She has been formally charged, Edda,” Marjolein says with unusual gravity. “Pending trial for blasphemy and heresy. I’m very sorry.”

“No!” Edda says, tears welling up in her eyes, “No... How *could* you?!”

“Did you really believe you could escape the truth, Redeemed van Dolah?” the Inquisitor asks in good humor. “This was a sure thing from the very beginning. A denunciation, followed by a confession? It doesn’t get much simpler than that. Civilization softens demons to a pulp. You should see the sort

we have to deal with in Britain—those are really devious motherfuckers. Now, it's getting late, so if you are so kind to provide your own confession, we can finally call it a day.”

Edda stares at him in silence, tears running down her cheeks.

Ximena is appalled at the methods employed by aw's Head. And this wasn't in the times of Kaya, no. This was just a mere century ago! In all her years in academia she's never heard of anything like these *gutters* of aw's Imperia. And it doesn't feel like a propaganda stunt. It stinks of truth. She can imagine the voice of Censor Smith claiming it is the corruption running deep in the Hanseatic Imperium, that it is the works of the demon Mathus. Ximena can only wonder what else they've hidden from them.

“Okay,” Edda finally says. *Don't speak!* Ximena's breath quickening. *Don't give in!* Like she could bend history to her will. Like she could bend Edda. “Okay,” Edda's voice sinks to a whisper, as she lets her head drop. “Yes. I did it. Everything that your informant said. The broadcast, the fire. All true. Except—”

“Except that, of course, Woman Speese is innocent of any wrongdoing,” the Inquisitor says in a mocking tone.

Edda looks at him, lips parted in surprise. “Yes! She did *nothing!* Aline never knew what I was planning to do with her equipment.”

“Just doing a friend a solid, right?” The Inquisitor rolls his eyes. “So predictable. This is almost too easy, right lads?” Noseless and his companion, leaning bored against the wall by the door, raise their heads and chuckle. “Anyway, let's wrap this up, shall we?” He turns to Marjolein. “Your assessment, Quaestor?”

Marjolein straightens her official purple robe. “Hmm, yes.” She meets Edda's intense gaze, and blinks. “I think we can

safely discard demonic possession. Redeemed van Dolah has confessed while under awa Waters' Oath and—"

"Inconclusive, Quaestor. She's obviously lying about Woman Speese's involvement."

"I'm not—!" Edda begins.

"Who is to say the informant is not the liar?" Marjolein interrupts, "Or perhaps neither is, and they just interpret the same facts differently. Who can tell?"

The Inquisitor scoffs. "I, for one, *can*. Anything else, Quaestor?"

"Er, yes. About her involvement in..." She waves her hand noncommittally. "I think there is room for leniency—*mercy* even. There are some mitigating factors you might not be yet aware of, Grand Inquisitor. Redeemed van Dolah acted motivated by her father's imminent Joyousday."

"The Joyousday, yes." The Inquisitor's expression turns uncharacteristically thoughtful. "I'm sure Goah would welcome our service for a couple more years..." He sighs. "But it is what it is."

"Er..." Marjolein doesn't seem to know how to reply to his words. "In any case, Redeemed van Dolah has obviously a hard time accepting it. And who would blame a daughter for loving her father so much that she can't let him go? But other than that, she's a respected teacher and valuable member of the colony."

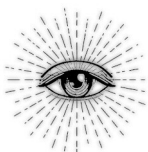
"*Other than?*" The Inquisitor turns to look at her and scoffs, amused. "You mean, *other than* broadcasting blasphemies all over the Imperium, she's a loving daughter? Or *other than* setting sacred ground on fire, she's a model colonist?" He laughs harshly, shaking his head. "I guess that pearl concludes your assessment, Quaestor?"

Marjolein gives him an indignant glare, but says nothing more.

The Inquisitor—making a visible effort to straighten his

face—turns his attention to Edda and clears his throat. He speaks in a quick, monotonous tone, like he is reciting a goodnight prayer. “Redeemed Edda van Dolah of Lunteren, by the powers bestowed upon me by Emperor Cisek, I hereby declare you demonfolk, and suspect of the grave crimes against aw’s Gift of blasphemy and heresy. Effective immediately as of today the 30th of January 2400, you shall be put in guarded custody—incommunicado with standard demon-hopping-avoidance measures—until your fate is ultimately sealed in a Court of aw’s Compacts, date yet to be determined.” He stands and turns to Marjolein. “Do you know any good place for lunch?”

THIRTY-SEVEN



Ripples on the Pond

Miyagi stops his thoughtful pacing, turns his solemn expression to the expectant students, and says, “A leech, a mare and a historian walk into a bar.”

The students burst out into spontaneous laughter, Ximena included. Nobody saw that coming. Some even clap.

Miyagi smiles teasingly. “Wait for it! Wait for it! So, the leech puts a coin on the counter, and says to the barman, *a penny for your dreams*. The mare puts another coin, and says, *a penny for your fears*. And the historian,” he spreads his hands, “takes both coins and runs off.”

Oh Goah, Ximena feels like slapping her face, but she is too polite. Cody and Mark, and many others, laugh wholeheartedly, perhaps *too* polite.

Miyagi laughs as well. “Sorry, I couldn’t resist, people,” he says, shaking his head apologetically. “History might be the sexiest science of them all, but it isn’t always the best paid, huh? No, the real joke is more... *brainy*, and goes like this: the historian takes both coins in her hands, turns them around, scrutinizes them, and finally says, *these are two coins*.”

Ximena exchanges a baffled look with Cody, and

immediately feels better. If he didn't get it, then it's more than okay that she didn't either. Other students are staring at the professor with similarly blank expressions, some scratching their head.

"Yeah, I know," Miyagi says with an apologetic shrug. "But the point of that joke is not so much to be funny as to be instructive. The historian got it *factually* right, but she totally missed what made those coins so interesting. A classic historian mistake! I admit myself having fallen into that trap too often in my," he clears his throat, "not-so-remote youth. But, luckily for you, people, I'm here to make sure you don't!"

Ximena has no idea what he is talking about. And for the look of her fellow students, she is no exception.

Miyagi scratches his chin. "Okay, hmm, how can I put it? Imagine that history is like, uh, the surface of a pond, all right? On a windless day, perfectly smooth. And a bored god-kid throws pebbles at it from the shore. Picture that? Well, what we've been doing throughout this seminar is to take a very narrow look at those pebbles as they hit the water. We have *obsessed* with those pebbles like the historian with her coins. But we've mostly ignored the concentric ripples that slowly spread in all directions. And the more pebbles, well, the more ripples, right? Throw enough of them, and the surface will be almost *bubbling* in chaos." He wiggles his fingers demonstratively. "Yes, pebbles are the driving, pivotal events that make for oh so dazzling history sensorials, packed with action, villains and heroes. But focus too much on them, which I admit is only human, and it most certainly also makes for lousy historians, the sort that forgets that it is the *ripples*—not the pebbles!—that shake the pond. It is the ripples that really matter. *Never* allow the cause—however spectacular—to obfuscate the consequence, people." He swings an admonishing finger across the amphitheater. "Causes *happen*. But consequences *accumulate*, until they eventually burst as momentous causes themselves.

Never forget this, people, or you'll never be able to unravel the bubbling chaos of history. Like... you know what? Let me show you something."

He walks to the first row and whispers something into Ank's ear. With a nod and a curt look at Bob, the wudai machine, a scene pops up into vivid existence in midair: a bird's eye view over Lunteren on a beautiful early afternoon. The winter sun, never far from the horizon, casts long shadows on the streets and yards that crisscross the colony, but it is the Forum that immediately attracts Ximena's attention. It is teeming with people, packed to the brim with a—Ximena smiles at the thought—*pond* of hats and heads.

"Yes, this is an excellent example of what I'm trying to say," Miyagi says, pointing at the tide of colonists. "We are watching events unfold that same fateful Sunday, just a couple of hours after the Inquisitor formally accuses Edda and Aline of heresy and puts them into jail—pending trial."

Ximena's eyes follow the scene's gentle movement through the air as it gradually sinks—like a gliding seagull—approaching the heads of the agitated crowd.

"News travel at the speed of light in small towns, doesn't it? And in those times aw's Balance kept all towns cozily small. Now, before we continue with the show, please bear with me. Look at these people *carefully*." Miyagi shoots a glimpse at Ank and draws a finger across his neck. She nods, and the scene comes to a sudden halt. "Look at their faces, their expressions. Nobody has called a meeting. All these people have gathered here spontaneously, following rumors and neighbors. Can anybody guess what's going on?" He scans the benches and raises a finger at the Lundev section. "Sky?"

"They're fucking shitting themselves, Professor!" Sky says. And Ximena would agree, from the looks of many in the crowd.

"Care to say why?" Miyagi asks.

“Hmm, I guess because they locked Edda away? She was a popular teacher in the community, wasn’t she?”

Miyagi shakes his head with a disapproving smile and sighs. “Ah, my young pupils. See what I mean? You’re telling me about the last pebble splash you’ve seen. Sorry, Sky. *Lousy* history.”

Sky blushes and purses her lips. *Ouch!* Ximena thinks. She almost feels pity for the bitch.

“Chill out, Sky. You’re the brave one, hats off.” He makes a gesture as if tipping an imaginary hat. “You just took one for the team. Most of your fellow students are none the wiser. Luckily, this is a university, and I’m a university teacher. And a decent one, I dare believe. So, let’s make you all the wiser, shall we?”

He points at the frozen crowd, at the colorful expressions of concern and tension. People appear to be yelling at each other, their mouths open in caricatures of fear.

“Observe the colonists of Lunteren. It’s the afternoon of the 30th of January 2400. Now, put your historian hats on, please? What have I been insisting on, over and over again, since you sat your asses on these benches?”

Miyagi moves his gaze slowly across the amphitheater, a broad, paternalistic smile on his face. Ximena rolls her eyes. *Always the showman.*

“*Context*, people! History is ninety percent context, remember? Think back, all right? Think about all those pebbles falling in the pond. And crucially,” he points a finger at Sky, “think about the *consequences* of the ripples in the good people of Lunteren, all right? So, Sky, start with the causes, as many as you can, and move on to the broad consequences.”

A few hands shoot up, but Miyagi ignores them, eyes locked on Sky.

“Uh, causes, sure.” She seems uncharacteristically nervous, the way she fiddles with her fingers. “Let’s see... The Century

Blasphemy is the most obvious one. Lunteren is a peripheral colony, and all of a sudden, it's on the lips of the whole Imperium, and for all the wrong reasons. I imagine people would be afraid, uh—"

"*Consequences*. Very good, Sky. Continue."

"Yes, they would fear a crackdown, I guess, which might affect their livelihoods. This actually came close to happening, when the Inquisitor threatened to withdraw the, uh—"

"Aws Gift, yes. Continue, please."

"Yes. Aws Gift. Which makes me think that perhaps they were afraid *religiously*." Some students scoff, but Miyagi gestures for her to continue. "Since they have such a strong faith, they may be afraid that some of their fellow colonists might really be, er, *demons*?"

"There! Nice one, Sky. Yes, religion—especially in a theocratic society like Goah's Imperia—is a *key* component of the context. And context drives consequences. Many colonists are indeed very concerned that demons are freely roaming their streets. Please go on."

Sky speaks with growing confidence. "For a few weeks, they tried to find the perpetrators themselves, which probably contributed to paranoia and denunciation among neighbors. Then the Quaestor, who is desperate to avoid the withdrawal of aws Gift, summons an Inquisitor. Hmm... that brought a good deal of hope and fear to the mix, I imagine. Then the Inquisitor arrives, exposes Edda and Aline as demons and puts them in jail. Hmm, that should have placated most of the fears, right? But then..." She points at the crowd, frowning with honest to Goah curiosity. "Why are they so nervous? I'm missing something."

"Good analysis, Sky. And good instinct too. You're indeed missing something. Something *big*, actually. The other half of the equation. Anybody dare to guess?"

"Perhaps that Edda was a very popular person in

Lunteren?” Lora says. “Locking her up probably pissed off many people.”

“That’s not what I had in mind. But you’re right.” He chuckles. “Edda’s prominence is definitely a contributing factor to the mood up there.” He gestures at the frozen scene. “Edda was renowned to be revered by her students, many of whom were Elders in evening school. So, good point, Lora. Thanks for bringing it up. But there’s something else, people. Something subtle, but *very* powerful. Let me give you a hint: the Leap-Day Reformation is just weeks away...”

After a few seconds of blank looks, a lonely hand rises next to Ximena.

“Cody, go ahead.”

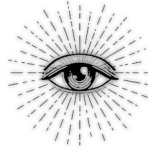
“I was thinking... Perhaps Dem? I mean, none of the people we’ve met so far seem to have personally witnessed an actual person with Dem.”

“That’s because of the Joyousday, mensa,” Sky says dismissively from across the amphitheater. “They’re all ritually killed before Dem even has time to—”

“But it’s more than that,” Cody interrupts, his voice as calm and analytic as ever. “They don’t even seem to have met a person who has met a person that has *actually* contracted Dem. Perhaps for generations, Goah knows. Which makes me wonder... Many probably doubt Dem. Edda and her friends certainly do so. What if they are not alone? What if the core message of the Century Blasphemy—the call against the Joyousday—actually fell on fertile ground?”

Miyagi raises both his hands at him and claps. “There! I’ll still make good historians out of you lot. Congratulations, Sky, Cody. You just raised your eyes from the pebbles to scan the whole pond. This scene,” he gestures up at the agitated colonists, “is pure context, people: Lunteren is shaken, on one hand, by *fear* of demons and the Withdrawal of aw’s Gift, and on the other hand by the *hope* of ending the Joyousday and

living the long lives of the golden age. We are already witnessing the immediate historical *consequences* of the Century Blasphemy, only a few weeks after the event: the ripples on the pond, people—about to shake the foundations of Lunteren. And, more immediately, of the Van Dolah family. And the Krakers. And some others too!” He chuckles and says in his best master-of-ceremonies voice, “It’s going to get *really* wild in the Forum of Lunteren in a minute, people!” He turns and gives Ank a wink. “Run it.”



A Torn Tunic

“Calm down, please!” Marjolein shouts. “Goah’s Mercy, hear me out!”

She is standing on the central stage of the high terrace of Goah’s Eye, waving her hands soothingly at the crowd gathered below her on the Forum, but her yelling is too weak to pierce through the cacophony of the hundreds—no, already *thousands*—of excited voices. The warmth of the winter sun, usually the most natural of sedatives, this time seems to be boiling blood.

She turns a helpless look at the five Colony Elders standing in a line behind her. The three women and two men are themselves in some sort of tense opinion exchange, but when they meet Marjolein’s worried glance, they make a visible effort to calm down, clearing throats, straightening fine robes and fancy hats, and trying—in vain—to clear their frowns from their troubled expressions.

“It’s useless,” Marjolein says. “They can’t hear me.”

“They must,” Simon van Althuis says. He is the Colony Elder standing leftmost, close to the edge of the terrace. “Man Kraker!” he calls. Gotthard is in the crowd nearby, red-faced,

uneven nose covered in gauze and expression so altered and unlike his usual cool, confident smile as to make him almost unrecognizable to Ximena. But he is facing the terrace and sees Simon's frantic gestures. "Gotthard! Come up here, please!"

As the sullen-looking Gotthard slowly finds his way through to the terrace stairs, Simon turns to Marjolein. "Quaestor, please, the keys to the Eye's depot. We need loudspeakers and amplifiers."

"Colonists of Lunteren, your attention, please!" Using her best Quaestor voice—powerful and pleading at the same time—Marjolein's words storm out, satisfyingly loud, from four mid-size speakers hastily spread around the edge of the stage.

Gotthard is sitting in the shadow of the left-most speaker, between open boxes of sound equipment. On his lap he holds a large, metallic box packed with knobs and dials: the nexus of an improvised mesh of thick black cables connecting loudspeakers and microphone across the terrace.

As Ximena observes the young man's sober expression, a sudden gush of emotion thrusts through the psych-link and into her guts. *It is Gotthard's!* she realizes. And the emotion is hard to pinpoint. It doesn't hurt—not directly at least—but it is almost as uncomfortable, like pain stretched too thin. It feels thick and engulfing, eager and overwhelming. *What's going through your mind, Gotthard?* Her pity merges with that sucking sensation that devours willpower quicker than a pond devours a pebble, leaving raw indifference in its wake, because everything that matters is ultimately doomed. *Despair, Ximena sighs. And acceptance.*

"Colonists of Lunteren," Marjolein screams more than

speaks into the bulbous microphone in her hands, “Please calm down!”

The all-engulfing chatter begins to fade as increasingly more hats and faces turn to face their Quaestor. It takes some time, but Marjolein smiles with practiced patience as she lets her soothing gaze skim the crowd. She might not be Ximena’s favorite person—demon Mathus—but she is in awe of her abilities. Few people can suck the energy out of a storm. After a few tense moments, the entire Forum is staring at her with expectant eyes, their nervous whispers down to a background rumble.

“Thank you for your patience, Lunteren.” Her amplified voice echoes against the bricked, tall houses far off at the opposite side of the Forum. “I would also like to thank our Colders for their last-minute attendance to this, er, improvised assembly.” She gestures at the stone-faced Colony Elders standing behind her. “It looks like the entire colony is here!” She smiles at the sea of frowning faces. “A *wonderful* opportunity to give you an update about, er, recent developments in the colony. We don’t want nasty rumors running amok in the community, do we? Not while we entertain guests from aw’s Fist in our midst.”

The silence is virtually absolute now, even whispers vanished after the mention of aw’s Fist.

Marjolein clears her throat and puts on her best professional smile. “You might have noticed,” she waves a raised finger at the two streets leading into the Forum, “that there are no White Guards posted here. You might wonder why Grand Inquisitor Rhodes himself is not standing up here with the Colders and with me.” Her voice grows increasingly grave. “You don’t believe for a minute that aw’s Head’s officials are not seriously alarmed by this *spontaneous*,” she twists her hand in a circle, “congregation of colonists. Listen to me, Lunteren. They are *very* concerned indeed. This is no game,

and I would betray my love for you if I were to cushion the blow. Know this: as soon as aw's Inquisitor heard about *you*," she dashes an accusing finger across the gripped crowd, her frown deepening, "he entered my office to start the official procedure of a Withdrawal of aw's Gift to enforce—"

The sudden roar engulfs her amplified voice. From Ximena's elevated perspective, the packed Forum does really resemble a pond that was previously calm, before Marjolein's words unleashed a thousand pebbles at once. Now it is a bubbling, loud mess.

"Please!" Marjolein keeps shouting on the microphone, "Please!" Her voice only seems to feed the chaos. "Please, Lunteren!"

Simon puts a gentle hand on Marjolein's shoulder and, with a smile, extends the hand towards the microphone. She stares at him for a few seconds, not quite able to react, but then hands him the microphone and steps to the side.

Simon turns to Gotthard, who sits on the stage floor with his back against a loudspeaker, staring with a blank expression at the crowd. "Man Kraker," he speaks on the microphone, eyes on Gotthard, who seems startled by the mention of his name. "Alarm, please."

Gotthard sighs, looks at the control box on his lap, and swipes two switches.

A siren begins to howl—loud and inescapable—over the loudspeaker system, like the bombing-warning systems of old. The crowd reacts instantly, confused looks staring up in unison at the front figure on the terrace, where a sure Simon is waving a calming hand. He gives Gotthard a subtle nod and the deafening wailing stops. Silence returns to the Forum—the uneasy, rigid silence of a dam about to burst.

Marjolein, standing next to Simon, makes a move to reach for the microphone in his hand, but Simon—eyes on the tense crowd—begins to speak. "My dear fellow colonist," his

soothing voice has the familiar inflection that Ximena recognizes from every career politician, “I’m here—*we* are here —” he points at Marjolein and the other Colony Elders behind, “to guide you safely through these difficult times. Please stay calm, listen to us, heed our advice, and we’ll be soon returning to our normal, safe lives. We all owe our dear Quaestor a great deal.” He turns his smile at Marjolein and puts a hand over his chest. “Thank you, Quaestor Mathus, in Lunteren’s name, for showing aw’s Inquisitor that our colony is mature enough to handle ourselves in a civilized manner. Thank you for convincing him that there is absolutely no need to impose the Withdrawal of aw’s Gift. Did you hear that, Lunteren? No Withdrawal!”

Simon lets the roar of approval in the crowd hang for a mere second, before he continues with louder passion, expertly keeping a fine control over the multitude.

“And thank *you*, Quaestor, for asking our guests of aw’s Fist to remain indoors for the time being, so that we have the chance here and now to act like the worthy colonists of aw’s Gift that we all are.” His voice turns stern as he continues, “Yet, we are only human... Coming to the Forum seeking each other like nervous toddlers, stirring rumors and speaking loudly, just because we hear of the arrest of Redeemed van Dolah and Woman Speese... That is far from civilized, Lunteren, and we would be now paying a heavy price were it not for our dear Quaestor.”

His ending ‘r’ reverberates across the Forum to great effect. A few thousand eyes absorb his every word in utter silence.

Simon sinks his head with exaggerated affection. “What Redeemed van Dolah and Woman Speese have done shames us all!”

Marjolein turns her head at him with a loud gasp, audible through the loudspeakers, as a rumble of whispers crisscrosses the crowd.

“Yes, our *shame!*” Simon continues, staring expertly at the crowd, eyes bulging with passion. “Demons in our *midst!* Walking among us, talking among us, *teaching* among us, Goah has Mercy! Grand Inquisitor Rhodes has done a wonderful job uncovering the heresy, and so swiftly that begs the question: how in Goah’s name have we been so blind and weak? Thank you, Quaestor, for providing us a second chance to prove to aws Fist—and to aws Head—that Lunteren can also act with the same decisiveness!”

As Simon turns to Marjolein to nod in gratitude, Marjolein steps in and snatches the microphone from his hands. “Thank you, Colder van Althuis,” she says, voice powerful and controlled, like she is preaching to her regulars during service. “We truly have a second chance to do the right thing, Goah be praised. Hear me, colonists of Lunteren. It is time to go back home and enjoy the rest of your Sunday while we ask our elected Colders,” she glances at Simon beside him and then turns to face the other four elegantly robed figures standing behind with somber expressions, “to do their sworn duties and prepare to hear, in a Court of aws Compacts, the serious allegations of aws Inquisitor against two of our fellow colonists.” She gives Simon a glare as she continues, “Only a *fair* trial under aws Compacts can legally turn innocence into guilt. Until then, we shall all abstain from speculations and —Will!”

She stares in shocked disbelief at the crowd nearby, which is neatly parting in two—like the red sea to a glowering Moses. A growing roar of confusion and cursing erupts in the wake of Willem’s trail, as he pushes his way through with unconcerned determination. He shoves one final colonist to the side as he reaches the stairway access to the stage, and begins running up, two steps at a time.

Marjolein and the five Colders watch his looming approach in dismay. He looks like a human wreck: long hair in disarray,

unsettled glasses, wrinkled tunic, barefooted, and eyes that gleam like a dragon while spitting fire.

“Will! Elder van Dolah, please.” The loudspeakers seem only to amplify Marjolein’s hesitation. “We all feel with you. We truly do, but this is not—”

Willem closes into Marjolein, eyes beaming passion like he is about to kiss her, but he instead grabs the microphone with his left hand, and pushes her away with the right.

Marjolein staggers backward and falls on her buttocks with an ungraceful thump and a baffled look on her face. The crowd is eerily silent, eyes locked on the wild-eyed man in frozen fascination.

“Hey!” Simon jolts Willem’s shoulder from behind. “What are you—?”

Willem takes the microphone in his hands, and with a wide swing—worthy of a golden age professional baseball player—drives it deep into Simon’s crotch. The blow reverberates over the Forum as Simon falls on his knees, hands between his legs, tears of silent agony welling up in his eyes.

Willem turns around to face the crowd, eyes so reddened as to seem on fire, and begins to scream his lungs off into the microphone—a long, harrowing howl, inarticulate, wild. Mad. Much of the horrified crowd below rush to cover their ears until Willem’s voice breaks as his exhausted lungs finally run out of air.

Thousands of eyes stare at the pitiful figure, Gotthard’s included. Ximena feels the young man’s heart pounding heavily in his chest, suffering in empathy at the sight of a man that he admires, a man that is *his* family, so publicly broken mere yards away, and there is *nothing* he can do about it. Nobody can.

Willem staggers and drops the microphone, which noisily bounces off the floor. With both hands, he grabs his tunic from under the neck, and with improbable force begins to tear the

fabric apart, slowly uncovering his chest while yelling another long lament of outrage.

Silence returns to the stage, and to the engrossed Forum. Thousands of mouths are open in consternation. Thousands of eyes are moist in solidarity.

Marjolein stands, straightens her purple robe, and stares at Willem with infinite sadness. Two hesitant steps, and she places a comforting hand on his now naked shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Will.” Her tone is deep, private, but her words are carried across the Forum by the microphone, still lying on the floor nearby. “I have put my remaining faith in the trial. Perhaps you could as well.”

Willem turns to face her, but says nothing; only his eyes speak of storms and fire. He then returns his attention to the crowd and, with a surprisingly smooth move, picks up the microphone.

“Will—” She cannot continue when he begins speaking, voice loud and broken.

“I, Willem van Dolah, Elder of the van Dolah family, colonist of Lunteren,” his voice gains clarity and determination as his vocal cords slowly switch from animal yell to human speech, “hereby, officially and publicly, renounce my Joyousday indefinitely. You all bear witness!”

The crowd initially doesn’t seem to react, eyes locked on the pathetic figure with the ripped tunic and bare torso, as the walls of the houses on the far end of the Forum swallow his last words. But then, from random places within the multitude, something stirs, some sort of confusion that begins to spread like waves of wind on a field of wheat. No, like ripples on a pond.

“We shall all bear witness to the Truth!” Willem continues. “We shall all see if Dem *really* takes hold of me. Truth cannot be hidden forever, not even by aws Head! Not even by aws fucking Fist!”

Shouts of dismay erupt from the crowd. Yells of passion. Heated arguments.

“You are all *fools!*” Willem’s words are filled with venom. “Credulous fanatics, that’s what you are. No, much, much worse. You are *cowards!* Yes... cowards—like myself. I knew the truth in my heart all along, but was too afraid to confront it, too afraid to *speak* it!”

His defiance is being absorbed by the masses like rainwater by the desert. Gotthard begins to breathe quicker, engulfed by the raw energy of the community—the irresistible pull of the tribe—like a sun-starved plant hastily brought out of the shadow.

“Dem is long gone!” Willem shouts into the microphone. “A fucking, convenient fiction! We are fools, letting ourselves be manipulated by... whom? Some goahforsaken Imperator? Some goahforsaken Pontifex beyond the oceans?! They send a couple dozen warriors and we just roll around and whimper? Is that who we are, Lunteren? Is that who *you* are?!”

“Will, please, stop,” Marjolein says, her voice close to tears. “This won’t end well.”

Willem ignores her. His bloodshot eyes reverberate against the gripped crowd, like a hurricane against the surface of a pond. “Aws Head kills you. The Pontifex kills you! We all heard the words in this same place a few weeks ago. Everybody heard them, the entire fucking Imperium! And they called it *blasphemy!*”

Ximena is so engrossed by Willem’s fire-spitting expression, by the enthralled crowd craving his flames like they were made of dry hay, that the repeated hostility towards the Pontifex barely registers with her. But out of the corner of her eye, she can see Censor Smith and Mallory—and others in their white-and-blue tunics—stir in place. Whatever. Ximena, for one, chooses not to let propaganda-soaked indignation cloud her judgment. What if Lunteren had not happened in West Hansa,

but across the ocean? How would have aw's Head reacted over there to a massive heresy? Quite the same, is her educated guess, Inquisition and all. She begins to doubt that the Hanseatic Imperium was the corrupted machinery her teachers and textbooks have so adamantly drilled into her brain. And, to be fair, it is also hard to believe that this... *demon* Mathus was the driving force behind the Dreamwars against the Imperia of Goah. Look at her! So horrified. So desperate. So *powerless*.

"They call it the Century Blasphemy," Willem's tone is distorted by fury and, yes, *hate*. "I call it the Century Truth! Every word! Shame on you, Lunteren! If those words didn't wake you, what will?! Will the killing of your parents wake you? Will the killing of your sister? Of your... *daughter?*"

He collapses on his knees into a pitiful pile, head sunk, eyes shut.

And begins to sob, body shaking with spasms of grief.

The microphone rolls on the floor towards a red-faced Simon, who is still panting heavily with a hand between his legs and a mask of pain across his face. He grabs the microphone. "Enough of this nonsense!" He spits more than speaks. "This is outrageous! Out of place, even for—"

His tirade is cut off by a sudden electric squeak. Simon's expression changes from rage to confusion as he squints at the microphone, twisting it around in his hand like he is searching for something.

"Elder van Dolah is telling the truth!" Gotthard's voice blasts out of the speakers. He is shouting frantically into a small microphone connected to the electronic box on his lap, fingers on a knob twisted to the bleeding limit, and passion bursting through the psych-link like torrential rain on a floodplain. Ximena can barely breathe. "Don't let the fucking Colders and Quaestors and *Inquisitors* tell you otherwise!" Hatred exudes from every word, as his voice thunders over the

Forum—over the entire colony—with the nasal quality of a broken nose.

He stands awkwardly, eyes reddened by fury and tears, wired microphone in his hand, and points a trembling finger at Willem. “Elder van Dolah is one of *us*, can’t you see?! He is our *Meester*, Goah’s fucking Mercy! Many of you know what you know, thanks to him. Many of you *are* what you are, thanks to the Van Dolahs!”

The Forum appears like frozen, the sea of heads as still as the ices of Austerlitz, like thousands of throats are holding their breath at the same time.

Gotthard raises a trembling finger. “And what are *you*, Colder?!” Simon is gaping back at Gotthard like Goah awssself had just popped out of the ground. “A pathetic old man! That’s what you are. Too stupid to see the truth. Elder van Dolah is trying to save your fucking life! Can’t you see that? You are going to die, Colder. No, you are going to be *killed!* And no amount of karma can save you. Are you that blind and stupid that you can’t see a truth that kills *everybody* around you? Do you want to die?” He turns his wild eyes to the bubbling crowd and peers across the shocked faces. “Come on, mensas, react! Do you really want to *die?!?*” He points a finger at a particular point in the crowd. “Rutger! Do you want to die?”

“No!” Rutger shouts at the top of his lungs, raising a fist in the air, face burning red rage.

“Marcellus, Ambroos, Theodoor, Valentijn!” He points at a group of young men in their mid-teens standing next to Rutger, all dressed in tunics of elaborate design, their eyes beaming, their gazes locked on Gotthard’s. “Do you want to fucking die?!”

“No!” they cry in unison.

Something has broken inside Gotthard. Ximena can feel its shards shredding his mind to pieces. There’s nothing left in the world of Colder Simon, not for him, not for *anybody*. There’s

nothing to lose by calling out the truth. Why fear the consequences? We're all doomed, anyway. All of us. Powerless to face an inhumane universe bent on our extinction. Without future, what matters, anyway?

There is future! Ximena wants to shout at him. His thoughts—his despair—resonate in her mind like it is herself up there on that terrace, yelling truth to the masses. Like a part of her own soul was being forged in Lunteren's Eye of Goah a century ago. Abuelo's dowry mother was a Kraker, Goah's Mercy! The granddaughter of Gotthard himself! *I am your future!*

"Well, *they*," Gotthard points an accusing finger at Marjolein and the Colony Elders, "want *you* to die! They," he turns his crazed eyes at the gaping audience, "want to *kill* you!"

A deep, powerful roar shatters the Forum, the rough clashing of a thousand throats.

"Are we going to let them kill us? Are we going to let them kill the very people that kept shouting to our face to fucking save ourselves?! That risked *everything* for us?" For a second, as he turns his face, he meets the silent gaze of Willem. And he sees there all that he holds dear: truth, family, community. Life. "Wake the fuck up, Lunteren!"

The crowd wakes.

Thousands of throats pour their outrage at once on each other's faces. The roar hits Ximena's ears like a bomb had just exploded in midair in the auditorium.

There are cries of *blasphemy*, of *treason*, of *demon*. Hate directed at Gotthard, at Willem—at their neighbors.

There are runaway accusations of *killer*, of *pea-brained*, of *fanatic*. Hate directed at Marjolein, at the Colony Elders—at their neighbors.

At the center of the elevated stage, Marjolein stares at her flock with *terror* in her eyes, and drops to her knees next to Willem. Shaking. Weeping.

Screams, shoves, fists, and all hell breaks loose in chaos and violence. To Ximena, the crowd resembles a pond shredded to pieces by ripples of hatred—the seeds of the Dreamwars staring at her squarely in the face.

Edda and Aline, captive by the Inquisition, may have lost their alien master, yes, but they have yet to explore the full potential of the Path in the Shadow. And they are far from alone: the Ledebøer brothers are with them, as are the masses of colonists that cry their names in the crowd below.

It is the 30th of January 2400, and the Leap-Day Reformation now looms too large to ignore.

THE END

Thank you for reading *Paths of Dreamtech*. But for the love of Goah, don't stop now!

Click to start reading *Power of Dreamtech*, and experience the epic conclusion in your own skin. I swear to Goah, it will blow your mind.

<https://isaacpetrov.com/getdt3>



<https://isaacpetrov.com/getdt3>

Leave a review, Goah's Mercy!

I can't overstate how important reviews are to making sure other people get a chance to read my story. I would also love to hear your thoughts—positive, negative or anything in between.

<https://isaacpetrov.com/reviewbook2>



<https://isaacpetrov.com/reviewbook2>

Goah bless you!

—Isaac

Sign Up – No Bull Sci-Fi

ISAAC PETROV – EPIC SCI-FI AT ITS BEST!

Come over to my site at [IsaacPetrov.com](https://isaacpetrov.com) and SIGN UP to get fresh SCI-FI updates, discounts and goodies:

<https://isaacpetrov.com/lovebook2>



OR SCAN THIS WITH YOUR CAMERA!

No-Bull Sci-Fi Books

ISAAC PETROV – EPIC SCI-FI AT ITS BEST!

May I interest you in another No-Bull Sci-Fi story?

Browse my work and escape into the mindboggling
marvels of science fiction!

<https://isaacpetrov.com/books>



OR SCAN THIS WITH YOUR CAMERA!

*For Elon Musk and Greta Thunberg.
For the same reason.*

Acknowledgments

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.

Thank you, Maxim Mitenkov, for your wonderful illustrations and cover of the Episodes.

Thank you, Leraynne, for your awesome cover design for the novels. I love what you did there with Ximena.

Thank you, Claire Rushbrook, for cleaning up my manuscript with such surgical precision. Those are some magnificent editorial powers you have!

And last but not least, I want to thank my beta readers for their feedback. Thank you Dado, Eduardo, James Ramsey, Scott Williamson, Fiona Mackenzie, and Garry Cairns. It is thanks to you that the story reaches its final level of maturity, a more nuanced texture somehow. It's hard to explain, but it's real.

About the Author – Isaac Petrov

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!

<https://isaacpetrov.com>

