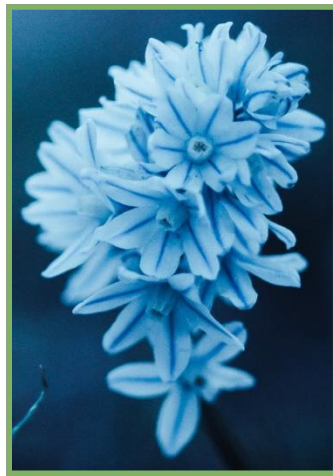


CARPATHIAN



Carpathian

A Novel by A. T. Calloway

PART ONE

Human Calculus

Chapter One

Suspending Disbelief for Handshakes at Sunrise

A gush and squirm of mud filled the voids between my toes. I'm running and running as fast as my body will let me. It's dark and I'm running endlessly like a lamb let loose from the slaughter. I'm in this dank and gnarled jungle, pushing my legs to the precipice of where I can feel my muscles scream. I'm missing a boot at this point. I'm not quite sure how. Nevertheless, ergo mud progressively caking into my toes and soaking my pants. It's about as comfortable as it sounds, and even though I'm running for my life, it's that damning lack of comfortability that is creeping up now. That and all the vegetation and branches on the canopy floor stabbing my foot. Infection is right around my corner, but the fear of death is stronger than the fear of sickness. Fear of death is greater than the fear of pain. This suddenly horrific jungle is trying to slow me down. It doesn't care if I live or die. I'll be damned if this hellhole will get me killed. Why should it care? It's not a sentient being; just a humid, sweltering impedance to my survival.

Other than some rocks here or there, I can hardly notice the menagerie of life and earth unlucky enough to meet their end by the sole of my foot. Yeah, the constant stabbing is starting to hurt, but I seriously urge one such as yourself (someone with a strong inclination for rational thought) to consider this pain compared to an eternity of nothing. It is oddly silent in the jungle. I find it hard to believe that no animal has been rudely awakened from this, frankly, deserving nonsense. Even in the dark, you would expect leaves to rustle and a constant hum of insects

permeating in the background. Maybe someone would hear the squeak of bats while they hunt. You would be a fool to think that the jungle, in its immeasurable biomass of interlocking relationships of predation, sleeps. On the contrary, the jungle feasts at night. So, right now, it's really strange to hear nothing but the internal screams of my sorely uncomfortable foot. I mean, we got a dozen guys plowing through puddles and leaves and branches. Sure, we might not be huffing and wheezing, but come on. It's just oddly silent. All that being said, I am a little impressed by our collective athleticism. Years of training and you never really know if you can perform when the time comes. Oh, how we are performing.

I can see the pale moon start to shine through the towering trees and vines. The moonlight has to struggle a little less to break through the leaves because vegetation is getting less dense. One feels compelled to follow the light as if the moon is complicit in the hunt. There must be a clearing ahead. The tree trunks seem to thin out gradually and stack on other trunks in my field of vision with less frequency. I almost see pillars of light combining into a veil just beyond the last wall of trees. The deep contrast of shadows make the dim moonlight appear to be as bright as a flaring missile exploding on an electrical substation. Running in the direction of the clearing shifts my perspective of the pillars of light into vicious fangs of visibility. At this moment I don't know if a wide and unhindered view is what I need. I am thoroughly convinced that I'll die if I am lured into that opening. Fangs of light look even more fitting as a visual metaphor like the jungle is in on the hunt. That goddamned monster got most of my guys already. The thing I'm running from; I don't know what it is. I don't really want to find out. I'll be damned if I let him get me; damned if I let it kill me. Being gutted is among the lowest of my priorities.

When it happened, I saw only faint wisps as six, or five, or four of my band were spirited away into the darkness beyond the scope of what night vision headsets allow us to see. I can't honestly say how many we lost at that moment. I was too startled. Really, I was scared shitless. You see jump scares and stuff like that in movies. Boogeymen and monsters pop out of the void and suck in stupid people lurking around. They all skulk slowly, just asking for it. You always think that you would be better than those stupid bastards. You say that until it happens. When it all hits the fan, and you become aware of your imminent death out of nowhere; you'll become uncomfortably aware of the honest depths of your bravery. There was no sign of approach. For fuck's sakes, we were all beginning to think that the guys up top were insane. A week here and we've seen no terrorist encampments, no training facilities, no Vietcong style tunnels, no asshole engineering a reactor in his dingy garage. This island was just a human-less jungle, beautifully pristine and unsoiled by man's avarice. Every inch of this island was as virgin as the day the tree saplings and seeds washed onto the shore. By all accounts, we were the first here. Obviously, our growing sense of ill-gotten contentedness was dead wrong. The guys up top were not crazy. Something is here. Something smart is here. He waited. That prick was smart enough to hide and wait until we lost interest, honestly. I don't know how he did it, but he evaded the most well-funded and technologically sound surveillance and scouting equipment. Ultra-high fidelity aerial satellites, EMP radar, vibration/sound analysis. Everything. He, or it, or thing, caught us with our pants down. Now, we are those stupid bastards you look down on in movies for being either too stupid or naive to warrant survival. We almost deserve to be slaughtered. But I'll be damned if I don't try to live

The thing had beat us at our own game. No wonder at that. We were fools. Fools arrogant enough to believe that we were hunting and out maneuvering some bumpkin. The briefs they

gave us of the situation detailed a surge of something or another. Whoever or whatever we were tasked to kill, this time, has the capability to produce an unprecedented quantity of Joules, and evidently channel it into a bomb. Those assholes up top saw whatever the surge was from space. All they gave us was the image of a giant explosion. It was a massive blue flower with petals tipped in black and red smoke. I'm not good with remote imaging, so I couldn't accurately size up the blast area. But they all said it made the American bombs look like children's toys. 'Follow the husks of burnt trees and all of that bullshit' is what they told us. I've seen enough bomb sights to know that the trees, if any were left, would all be angled away from the epicenter in concentric circles. Find that center and learn what we could. Find out who made it. More importantly, find out how. Kill them if we had to. Take their equipment. If we felt like it, we could take a couple prisoners to be repatriated as Carpathian scientists. We gotta do it quick. Those were our basic orders. Get it and get out before other world powers surely come. They will all come in search of a mythical technology or fabled magic to blow up everyone else.

Well, we arrived. 'Gaze upon my wonders' called out the island. Pithy, lo and behold miracles manifest by way of no conspicuous sign of an explosion. Within our first hours on this island, we could see that this place was virgin land. Untamed and put to no use by humans. The westward expansion of Chinese economic influence into the African continent had, somehow, jumped over the great peak of this island as if it were a sacred duty. None of that shit matters at this moment of harrowing escape. We failed, and now we run for our lives. We strive to escape from something that may well be smarter and stronger than us.

It pulled those guys fast enough to snap all of the bones in their spines. It pulled them one at a time, in succession. That's how I know it wasn't a coordinated effort. Or if it was, the plurality of assailants are shitty at implementing strategy. Lucky enough, the way it staggered its

attack, dissipating into the void, gave a handful of us time to instinctively get out of dodge. I know my guys aren't stupid enough to go to that clearing. I am about half a kilometer from it now and I can hear rifle fire. Tonight is just going to be full of surprises.

I've run too many kilos away from our campsite where the attack began. At least ten by my runner's intuition. And that is what leaves me feeling the deepest of dread. We studied this speck of a lonesome dreck island. We got ambushed at our camp, just west of the center of the land mass. I have been running north to the cache we stored on the beach, coming off of the slope of the only mountain peak jutting from the flat jungle. The only problem is that the coast is 6.48 kilometers from our encampment. I know I'm not running in circles. And I know that the air is too calm for a loud clumsy man to be crashing through the place. Somehow, it already has me. Knowing that for now is my advantage.

"Keep a regular breathing rhythm. Hee-hee-ho ...," I tell myself. I can run. I have that going for me. Let this phantom get comfortable. I can figure this out, I can win. I know I can't, but I'll do my best to trick my brain and placebo my muscles to exert more. We've all been trained to run damned marathons, so this would feel like home if the threat of death were not so frightfully real.

I have evened my pace, and now I'm at a fast jog. The earth in the dank crevices of my left foot is now dry. The moon has long since gone the way of Osiris. This pace for, what I can tell, four hours straight; I've traversed around fifty kilometers. Four hours. Four goddamned hours. I don't know how this is happening, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore what I know is physically impossible. Four hours ago, I heard gunshots. I ran past the clearing back there. I didn't hear a single scream. Four impossible hours of running in a jungle so

crushingly quiet I swear I can hear the moon call me a stupid bastard. fifty kilometers would take me over the damned ocean and skip to the mainland continent. I think I ran straight into hell. That, or my rational mind is insane. He has me clean out the gate. I can't follow this situation, which clues me in to the encroaching sensation of defeatism. I stop at kilo fifty-one-ish, stone frozen like the sirens of Titan. My chest is heaving from the accumulation of carbon dioxide in my capillaries. The result of insatiably gasping is my lungs drowning in the saturated air. I'm fading. The silence that has haunted my dash through the trees suddenly caught up and rushed past me. The second I stopped I heard a ravenous screech. It sounded like the sky was splitting overhead. A cacophony arose from the bottom brush. All of that pent up anxiety that comes from a clumsy man rummaging through the homes of fowl beasts raged within a gust and a roar. I am firmly planted in place while the air around me is screaming. No animals to see that could claim the cries and roars. The trees began to chase there-after. It's almost like the trees and vines took up my race. All of the vegetation is speeding along the jungle floor away from my feet. One by one, evacuating the scenery. In a matter of moments, I am standing/panting in a pasture-esque field of knee-high, dry grass. The smell of salt and ocean spray has left this world. The wind is much more arid, no smell of rust. I am not on that goddamned island anymore. What is this? The damned Serengeti?

The wind picks up and heaves across the heavens. Constellations move in ellipsis and scramble beyond what a lifetime of observation could make sense of. And I? Well, I hit my wall a dozen or so kilos ago. My body has called it quits and expedited a two-week notice. I'm close to tears in all honesty. I am. I don't think it's shameful to fear death. I think it's shameful to lie about the inevitable fear. I know this monster can easily shred and break me like the others, which I'm certain at this point has happened. It won from the start. They're all dead. I know

they're dead. As dead as I'm about to be. I know that, through some inconceivable means, it can manipulate the physical world or my perception thereof. Most likely the ladder. I am done for.

After the trees swooshed by me, I've just decided to keep my eyes closed. I don't need a noble last stand, such as watching my aggressor scalp me. Only Damned fools commit to that horse shit with a flagrant arrogance to feel fulfilled in the last moments of a petty life. Not me. Especially when the only audience to my demise will be the apathetic moon just watching the horror with glee. My life had been fine and truly damned incredible for some tidbits. Born to shit status family in the Carpathian Bloc. Went to the subsidized school and ate state sanctioned meals. I knew love at fourteen. The girl I knew and loved became a woman by my hand. I came into the state military force at 17 to serve my three years like everyone else, but I could run far without coughing up my guts. They placed people like me into the special forces due to physical aptitude and a general tendency to not lose our shit. Where the Bloc military could have sent me to be dehumanized and turned into a Death Parade robot. Apparently, my brain was too valuable for that. So instead, they made me an assassin. Those assholes at the top would give us the order and then we would be sent jetting around the world mercin'. Afterward, we all would go out, enjoying the local attractions. Not so bad. I was supposed to go into Lagos, Nigeria after this ordeal. A few of the guys from my division would go and have a nice tourist trip through the city and brothels. To hell with those plans. The place is probably flooded with shit by now. That's what happens when you have millions who live in shanty towns without sewage and a cyclical monsoon season. The shit floods the streets and contaminates the water. People die in droves. We all die in droves, lined in bags and boxes for rows and rows.

I feel the churning inside my stomach of things I don't want to surface for my last moments.

It starts slow as a muffled vibration. It becomes engrossing. My skin is crawling. My skin is pulling. My eyelids are being pulled open. It hurts so I scream. I feel something like hands grapple me to the ground. The skin of my knees burrow into the dry earth, grass to my chest, and I'm too weak to fight it.

Tabula rasa: the expression, the only expression my face can muster. Those things that feel like hands multiply. Starting from my shoulders and conquering more and more of my body. I see nothing. My eyes are pried open, but I see nothing pushing me down, pulling me to the great Mephistopheles just beneath. I do, however, see a great expanse of vast red skies. The stars don't make sense. I can't find a familiar form to steady myself and focus my pain and fear. I see a milky blue glow stretch in the distance. It doesn't quit growing, as it instead appears to merely move closer. It hurts to breathe against the weight on my chest. I have no control of myself, and I must scream. I can't. Panic sets in. Is this what happened to everyone else? No, it took them too quick. Whatever it is, it's been herding me with the patience of an apex predator. Slowly it sussed out the others until it had me. A plaything for this terror.

The blue glow along the horizon becomes my sky, overtaking the scarlet. It feels like an unnatural mutation of the sun's normal morning journey through the sky. That's gotta be it! The clever trick of gray matter. I'm asleep. I am dreaming and this isn't real. I can see a figure in the milky blue cloud. If I could be back home and comfortable in a rack or bed. I never have lucid dreams, but I accept this as a first. The figure is clear now. I know I'm not dreaming. My lizard brain knows. My brain stem for automatic response and my amygdala for fear response combine to fire on all cylinders; to warn me of danger. A man emerged from the cloud. A thin older man. He's gotten close now. An African man, from his facial features and clothes. The milky blue cloud emanates from him. He is my thing of terror. I see his eyes stalled in a resolute expression.

He killed my guys. I know because I have killed. He doesn't look strong, but he doesn't look meek. He simply looks determined. The blue cloud bows to surround me as he nears to a mere meter in front of me. He kneels and reaches out one hand. Our eyes meet. I see no reflection in his.

“Do not be afraid. This too will pass. Once your soul was free, but from now on, it is not.” He said while towering over my crumpled body, pinned down, kneeling in the grass.

Chapter Two

Close Your Eyes to See All of Your Friends Are Gone

“You are a funny man, yes you are,” I have said nothing. He laughs. “Let's get a little warm before the night sets in, my funny friend.”

I have said nothing. This man holds his palm to the flames with the most jubilant demeanor. I'm moved closer to the small fire lit in a well-hidden dug-out among the grasslands, all without the aid of his, by now, balmy hands. He voiced a determination that I should be closer to the fire, and it happened without any clear input from him or I. Let that be clear. I can't propel myself. He didn't touch me. I am the waking dead; frozen, motionless upon the cold ground on my left side. This man is gracious enough to face me to the heat, all without the aid of his hands. And I have said nothing, mostly for the singular reason that I am bodily incapacitated. This man has given me neither food nor drink; he is not using any physical means, nonetheless, I haven't the slightest control of myself. Damn it all. I feel and sense, still. He wasn't joking about the cold nighttime. It's been several days, and I have become personally familiar with the frigid plummet of temperatures. Fuck.

He constantly emanates that ghastly blue aura. It's faint but there, millimeters above his person. Why does he let me see? He obviously can dictate my body as he wishes, yet he doesn't hamper my vision. He could very well blind me as easily as he could only show me hells and horrors. I understand that much from our current arrangement. The horrible thing is, that of all of

this un-worldly shit, what terrifies me are his eyes; sunken and cavernous. He never looks at me. Just outward. It has been a few days, and he might walk off into the grass for a couple hours and come back just to resume sitting in the same spot and stare onward. His eyes have no light. Even against the open flame, no glimmer or refraction. There lives no reflection in him, almost like a cadaver. At this point I don't know what to think. This shit can't be real, I mean, well. I'm at a loss to describe how seriously incomprehensible all of this is. Somehow, he transposed me from an island to the middle of Africa. All while maintaining the illusion of an ultra-marathon on a spec of land no bigger than Manhattan. Oh, and he more than likely disposed of my comrades in less than honorable ways. More or less. More bottom line, less red line. More or less stranded for dead. More or less paralyzed. More trailing thought, less clear vision of escape. More I think about what I've seen (or could not have seen), the less I cannot stop my mind from bending his figure into a monstrous god of death.

“Slow down, my friend,” He looked down at my presence with those eyes as voids. My eyes meet his: “Your mind races past at a speed that will surely cause you to crash.” He is right. That vacant stare coinciding with his words rattled through the dry air, feeling as though the oscillations fed the tides of ruin. “I know your frustration. I know your sense of helplessness. To a greater extent, I know your confused state of fear.” A jubilant smile he held smoothly faded into a look of solace. “You, my friend, have been hurt. Mentally, the scaffolding of your mind is being undone.” I look on. “Yes, even now. You are at a disbelief, at a loss for understanding. Why can I do all these things? As I've shown you, my hands did not kill those men. My physicality does not bind you to the earth. My eyes do not reveal your mind to me.” He raises his head to the heavens. The aura of ghastly blue deepened. “This life is strange, and my friend, I do apologize, but I will make your life stranger. I will use your vessel for my ends.”

I know death at this junction would be a kindness. I've been in similar stations all too often. I have held some foreign national or another at the barrel end of my rifle and heard his eyes scream for a release from the tension before a known death. Their mouths never utter a sound, but a resignation buried deep in their psyche bubbles up. When you make your living strengthening the political standing of your nation state (a state that isn't mine), you know from the onset that eventually someone like me will stalk your movements, your family, your friends. You are innately aware that one day all the good fortune you amassed due to a devotion to country will abruptly end by an uncaring lance like mine. This acknowledgement lives fairly deep for most. However, at that moment preceding the last it all becomes clear. You see, that in this world, actors only see zero sums. Regardless of the size of the pie, my land hungers for the commanding piece. I am not special. My hand that steadies the scales for the favor of my land, will one day turn cold from another's. We all seek the same things in this world. I was only lucky enough to be born into a state that has the means to stake its claim over others. I may not be the embodiment of genius, but even I know that empires can't last forever.

"Wise words, my friend." There it is again. "You have such a solid grasp of this world. Not just the mechanics of killing, and spending, and consuming. But you also grasp the concept of cycles. Global trade, empires, the larger hegemony of tradition must die. But riding in the driver's seat makes a fellow blind." His fingers, lean as they were defined by thick arteries and veins, motioned like cogs, twisting together. "You see, my friend, that is why you will be my tool." His smile crept back slowly. "Your friends, they just wouldn't have handled certain things as well. If I must choose from your batch of cabbages, I want the one already pickled. I guess you could say that I'm most interested in your acute pessimism." He turned to me and chuckled open mouthed and brandished pearly teeth. Still his eyes are wide and vacant; never blinking,

never diverting. The night air grew dense with his bellowing chuckle. “You, my low, low friend, will grow and see the end to my wretched means. You’ll be like my arm wherever you might go. I am not happy about what I must do, however..., I still won’t be happy once they are met.” His laughter ceased. “Yes, I know this. Death becomes me.”

Still the cadaver; still a menace with alabaster eyes. Those cold limbs spread as he sits there, it's almost as if he’s pondering the nature of his rigid skin bound to the excessively exposed bones. In the light of the night fire his skin radiates a dark molasses tone. He’s old. If I had to guess, maybe sixties. Even so, his bodily control is that of a young man. I can tell that the dissonance between appearance and ability is a constant hurdle for my head. Now as I look, I can’t see a single scar on him. I’ve never met anyone, let alone someone of his apparent age, without a tiny blemish. His scalp is exposed. No hair. No stubble. Inhuman is the only adjective that seeps into my mind from his features. The collection of traits, descriptors, phenotypes about this man do well to imprint the likening of Charon on his river boat. Never alive, but always dead. Slowly he gathers the fragments of life from those he ferries across that old river. It’ll never be enough to reanimate his hollow body. Yet, the small morsels of life from the passengers compels the ferryman to continue his duty. This man could be a stand-in for sure. He could be the basis for which that mythos is founded. The power to effortlessly kill and instantly transport any man to the land of the dead. Not cruel, but relentlessly driven to administer one’s duty. Or that could be the hostage situation talking.

“I wasn’t always like this, you see.” He can clearly hear my silent dialogue. “Yes, you are very much right, I can, too, listen in.” I wonder if... “No, this is not how I trapped you. I used this possession on one of your comrades, maybe, but you, my friend, ran straight as an arrow.” I can

understand this much right now. He knows, at this moment, that it does not escape me. He knows that *I* know. How? Fuck if I know, but he does. He's reading my goddamn mind. Everything, as it comes. Not a second's delay; gone into the ether and siphoned off to his whim. His vacant eyes, lifeless, are staring at me now as this revelation rolls over me. A perpetual cycle of this revelation that comes from his revelations via my revelations, ad nauseam. Ad infinitum. Ad hoc. Additionally, screw all this. Why? Why do any of this? If this man can do all this shit: kill, move objects and land with his thoughts alone, without mentioning, reading other's minds, why go through all this damned trouble to lure military specs for what feels like a game? It is abundantly clear that he could be a greater deity than any god man has known or cooked up. Easily, considering he is virtually real. He could be worshiped in some god forsaken country as the be-all-end-all, and if not, persuade them with his rightful might.

Those eyes just beat into me. I am going to be sick. Too late. "If I were you, I wouldn't preoccupy myself with the meaning of what you are experiencing." The vomit pools around my mouth, slowly dissolving into the dry earth. "I know firsthand the crisis that my being implies for you. My friend, I am much older than I would care to divulge, and in my years I have had a similar effect on more individuals than I would like to admit." Rancid smells emanating from my oral excrement makes me gag. It's gonna come up eventually. I'll have a hollow stomach. "You know, not even I know how old I am. There was a time when I was isolated from other people in a wilderness much like this. And there was a time before that when I was apart, one as a whole. Untold eons made me withered. Before, I was a boy." I see the blue aura blow away from his hands and bulk up on his forearms. His leathery skin immediately seems to calcify, and the cloud engulfs decrepit hands in an instant. All of the tight leather skin visibly hardened around his equally visible bones. A grayish scale started to flake off of the topmost layer of his skin. "I

don't like to see myself in the light of the real. To peel this substance back from my body is like cutting away skin. My friend, time will do horrors to you that the elderly seldom speak of, because it still hurts them. This blue veil you see has extended my life. It has made me dependent on its continued use and integration. But the cost is as you think. Humanity has fled from my body long ago." He gestures the aura to densify at his fingertips. "Your body will undergo the same."

I have seen the sun rise and set in a matter of minutes here. Regardless of arbitrary celestial movements, my sense of time passing betrays the weeks that have drifted past. Wherever he is keeping me captive has to be under his influence. He hasn't presented me with food or water; honestly doesn't matter. I haven't felt any pains. He left me with my greater sense of feeling, so I can say with confidence I haven't shat myself. More than anything, the lack of stimulation is torture beyond bodily pain. All I have is time to my thoughts, trapped inside with only myself for company. Worst of all, day in and out, all I can see is his horrid presence, the dirt at my face and tall blades of thin, dry grass. He hasn't said much after his last session. I need to piece together all of the information I can. everything he's willing to give up about age, name, methods, occupation, reasons, location, anything. Location would be especially nice to have. Best case scenario, I can figure out how the hell I could get out of here. I'm lying to myself. He wouldn't unintentionally give out information. If he wants me to know he'll tell me. He's not here now. Out on a little walk, I guess. That's the only reason why I am even thinking this instead of lying quietly in obedient deference. I would bet he is listening from a distance, somewhere out there. Fuck. This is hopeless and hapless.

Night comes again, but hours later than what the earth naturally dictates. Sitting by the fire, he breaks the silence. Not moving anything but his mouth. "My name was Abbe." The words drone outward, almost automatically. "I have lived a very long, unnatural life." No fire in his eyes. Only vacancy. "I come from a place identical to this. Dry scrub land, land locked in every direction, and yet, somehow, we never were left needing for water. I had a people. We lived modest lives, and we didn't want for much. A close community: all lives contributed. I was a boy when I first felt love. Her name was Umme. All of our time was consumed together, inseparable. As we grew from childhood Umme became so very beautiful, and our understanding of our love came to fruition. However, I was not the only one to recognize her beauty. An older, wealthier man among my people wanted her to be among his wives. He had more resources and privileges amid our people to afford as many wives as he desired. Her family was happy to send off Umme to this man. We were broken and fearful. She vowed to me that he might take her body, but she would give it to me willfully.

The night of their ceremony came. All celebrated the union. I lay in the background of the crowd with a heart heavier than I ever knew. She was beautiful. That night I didn't sleep. I was haunted by images that, even now, untold centuries afterward, burn my mind and make it difficult to subdue my anger. In the late hours of the night, while everyone was asleep in a drunken stupor, Umme came to my home and pulled me far away from the light of our fires. She was crying. I knew why she was crying. Without saying a word, she took my hand. She led me to manhood that night. There was no joy in the act, but we felt a kind of calm from being so close to one another. I awoke in the dry grass, and she was already gone. Gone to her new duties and life. I knew that we could not be nearly as close. The threat of violence to a woman who abused her husband's trust was a sobering reality. It was a reality that lingered in the air when I would

see Umme hauling vegetables and water back to her new home. We merely passed shoulder to shoulder. No words exchanged. None needed. The day did not belong to us, but every other night, or so, Umme would appear to take me to the grass, always in tears. The nights I had her were the nights I had shared her. Over time she came to me crying less and less, and she would stay closer and closer to the dawn. I could see in her the will to keep up appearances with her husband lessen. We were living dangerous lives at night. She was living a dangerous life. My greed and ego could not let her go, and I do not think I could do so now.” That was the first thing he said that felt genuine. Abbe. A monster in the dark. Callus killer of men; almost seems like he is fishing for sympathy. Why else feed me this bullshit. Untold centuries my ass.

“One night, Umme finally stayed with me until the break of dawn. She defiantly refused her body rest as she lay awake even after I had drifted away. When I came to, she was standing above the grass. She turned and smiled and began walking toward our people. Hands working tills and animals caught sight of her first. Then the peddlers. Then, as she walked into her husband's home, the man to whom she truly belonged. I ran after her, hoping to persuade her to stop what I foresaw her doing. I was too late. When I arrived at the border of his estate, he was dragging Umme out toward the pedestrian space. He pulled her past me and didn't acknowledge me. It wasn't as if he did not know to whom she had given her body and heart. To him I was blameless. As a man, how could I be expected to control my bestial impulses around a beautiful woman giving herself to me. I was not blameless. I am at fault to a greater extent than Umme. Her husband without hesitation delivered her to the public square and shouted her crimes to all that would hear. She was to choose death or banishment. Banishment was considered a fate more cruel than death among our people. The wilds were known to devour a person in ways that will live on in our nightmares. She chose exile. I do not remember what became of me the coming

weeks after the ritual exile of the woman I loved. I remember she came back to me one night many weeks later. I was in disbelief. Umme had been alive and surviving, only that she was different. The hand that took mine to lead me to the grass was surrounded by a blue haze. Her eyes showed no light of hope. She spoke very little and yet she gave her body to me one last time. In the morning I found no one. The haze lingered on my skin. My people saw this material emanating from me and its permanence and branded me possessed. Demons must have clung to my skin as I had unhinged a couple's wedding vows. Soon after, I was the exile. I have remained the exile." all of it useless to me. He never gave out any specifics on our location in that made for TV movie speal. The gods of this universe are kidding me. Demons? He is the demon. I got nothing. No identifiers, but a first name. Maybe first name. Abbe, you corpse, just kill me.

"Life is a curious thing, my friend. Now, I am your demon. In time, I will be your frame, so that you might stretch your arms upward, and grasp by the neck the serpent with a most pervasive venom. I will make you the killer of empires."

It's been days, I think. Weeks? I can't tell. This isn't real. No hunger. No thirst. I haven't pissed or shit myself. I figured it all out. Yeah, this asshole is clever. From what I can muster in my imagination, I'm in a lucid dream. Or at least something similar. Time does not make sense here. Nor does my apparent disregard for the base human condition of bodily functions. I think he's real. I think what he can do is real. I think, somehow, he has trapped me in an illusion in my own mind. He's just inserting himself. Nothing else fits this bill. Abbe hasn't been around. Must be lurking outside of this, this projection? I don't know what to call this experience/phenomenon. I don't think the words have been invented to describe it. Nobody had put serious consideration into the horrific possibility of true magic. Now, I have been handed the heavy burden of mapping

clunky, fatalist language onto this shit. Clark is probably smiling in his grave. That blue haze demon is probably looming over my comatose vessel. The time dilations between his visits would align with my crazy idea of dream delusions and intruders: contusions and marauders of sanity. Even if I understand and ascertain the nature of my constructed reality it doesn't make my perception of goddamned weeks of isolation and battling my own thoughts any better. Sanity, your exit, unfair.

It has all slipped by. I am losing focus on my *raison d'etre*. Delirium. I've loved that word since I was a teenager. A state of hyper confusion. Losing track of the real, and bleeding your acceptance of exceptionalism that we are the ones who win. I've won a lot for a bunch of people I've never met. I hate them. I'm not a big fan of this jungle either. You can't walk five feet without something stabbing you or stepping into some horrible animal's pile of shit. It's nice, though, seeing all that green shine through the great multitude of leaves. The birds love it. Those happy bastards can't stop singing about the lush grandeur. Delirium. It's the saddest thing to see delirious animals. In the throes of death, raging at the great reaper's door, sickle in tow, huffs and snorts of desperate nostrils. I don't know how cognizant they are of the world or themselves, I'm sure some post-grad out there does, but it's painfully obvious to see the fear. We all have that fear. No cowards live here. Rage of eyes and gnashed teeth and heaving lungs. As if more oxygen will close the giant gash around their necks. But the neck of the serpent. Twining and constricting. Forming a ball around my fist, I will show it my rage. My stomach feels like it could collapse, but nothing here looks remotely edible. I just trudge along, anchored to the bright greens of the canopy. Green water? Water? I hear water. Water running over rocks and gently brushing against sand beds. There is a creek nearby. It's easy enough to follow the sound and

smell the hidden scent of flowing water. Not so far now. I break past the final arms of trees teasing me to keep away from their clear gold.

There is a woman here. She's bathing. She stands up out of the shallow creek once her ears alert her to my fumbling gawking. Nothing is covering her, hiding her from the world of angry animals. She's looking at me. There is nothing covering her form from my visual avarice. There is enough to go around; enough to feed millions on her naked beauty. I can't stop this brutish drive forward, to touch her. She looks me in the eyes. Her expression turns from surprise to intent, almost as if she and I were under the same impression: that she was as alone in this wet heavy place as I am. She takes a step back, one hand covering one of her breasts and the other out towards me. She's what they all use rage to take. Mauling and gnashing, shooting and stabbing, legislate and confiscate. Helen has found me stranded in humid isolation. Helen sailed across Lake Victoria to cast out a generous hand and pull me closer to feel the kind of smooth skin that coaxed Menelaus. A beauty so potent that it willed Agamemnon to begin turning the wheels of the epic cycle. Intent in this woman's eyes is more intoxicating to a mortal than ambrosia to the gods. She kisses me and guides my hands to where she wants them. The leaves shine such a beautiful blue.

I'm awake. I'm awake and on the move. I found myself beside a sand bar lying atop my piss stained, disgusting clothes. My mouth burned with vinegar like acid. I was more confused by the smell of lilac filling my nostrils. I don't want to stick around and run into Abbe. Abbe, my demon. I remember dreams haunted by a dark glassy figure with dead eyes. I remember failure in the dark night of the jungle. I saw the face of the island's monster and chief administrator of death. I remember Abbe. I can see it in my mind, a fiend disguised as a man with blue wings

enshrouding every inch of him. I don't know how I got to where I am. I don't care right now. I couldn't give a shit on those details. All I know at the moment is that this creek flowing from the mountainside behind me goes to one place, and I can smell its salty breath.

Chapter Three

Day Of the Baphomets Cut That City

Hard, stained cherrywood floors rumble with a patter of tiny feet. Halls lined with photographs of a family. Dim light of dusk breaks through as blades thin and true from behind the thick curtains. The patter of small feet zooms down these halls, laughter not far behind.

“Mommy?! Mommy, help!” Girl

“...” Silence

“Mommy! Where are-” Before the young girl could finish her plea, a reply booms.

“Mommy is in the bath!” A thunderous low voice for effect full of an aging glee. Much larger feet bounding their way down the same halls. A middle-aged man, short hair and scruff, thin and tall: her father. Benjamin Heladiv. “Sammy! Oh, my Sammy, Sammy, Sammy,” He energetically clamored. Smiles lit up across the pair of faces to match. Father and daughter begin chasing the other, cat and mouse, around the family room’s furniture. The fluid reactions from both parties telegraph the rehearsed frequency which only comes from repetition. “Silly Sammy, it's time to brush your teeth so we can go to sleep. Slimy, silly Sammy, mommy is getting ready for bed! And. So. Should. You.” Each word punctuated by a kiss on the cheek. Samantha exhaled a sigh of discontent. Feeling as though Benjamin had won, he swung young Samantha as high as his arms would extend, then on the downturn released her to the floor. A belt of laughter exploded from Silly Sammy, and free of his clutches she bolted as fast as her small feet would

move. Through halls and upstairs full of laughter and love, anxious to let that feeling escape by fleeing sleep. “Mom!”

“Bath!” Having caught the child once more as she ran under the desk of Benjamin’s study, he swung her under his arm. “Why do we have to have all this excitement and chasing when you know this has to happen every night?” The table was covered in prints and tablets of designs and schematics. Samantha contorted herself to latch her arms around Benjamin’s torso, and thereby, received the leverage necessary to wrap herself around her father’s neck. “My Silly, silly Sammy.” The noticeably tired father kissed her rosy, drawn cheeks. Her curly dense, dark-walnut hair enveloped Benjamin’s scruffy face. “Hey, do you want to grab your teddy-saur?” The pair started walking down the stairs to the den.

“Dad!”

“Sammy, please don’t scream in Daddy’s ear.”

“Daddy! Dad, I’m sorry.” Samantha’s face was smeared in an innocent revelry that betrayed the fact that she was, indeed, not truly apologetic for her deafening cries.

“Daddy, I don’t want to go to sleep. I, I, don’t make me go to school tomorrow,” She clenched tighter.

“Listen, Baby, hush all that. Look outside darling. It’s pitch black. You know it’s time for bed.”

“No! No! No! No! Daddy, I don’t want to go!”

“Honey, some things in life you just have to endure. Lucky for the both of us, school is one of them. I know it’s boring, but it’s important to suck up all that knowledge!” He made a guttural trumpeting noise using her arm closest to his mouth.

“I don’t like it! I hate the, ... them.” She searched for the words to express a thought that may have been too nuanced for a five-year old. “They hate me. You know. They’re not good!” You could never be so sure if she actually believed the hyperbolic emotional assertion of childhood.

“Sammy, are you talking about that group of little girls you always play with?”

“I don’t know,”

“Honey, did you have an argument with a classmate? A fight?” He did his best to look sincerely inquisitive. Benjamin found that just the appearance of sincerity was enough to quell Samantha’s childish tantrums. His daughter shook her head to gesture “yes.”

“Not only does that sound like a poor excuse, but I’m fairly certain that’s not an excuse at all.” Benjamin laughed. “Samantha, I hate to break this to you, but you are going to have so many arguments with people, more often than not with dear friends and loved ones, that if you shut down at every instance you will become a big old boulder.”

“Rock! I can be a rock! They eat rocks and dirt, you know? That’s why they’re so stupid!”

“Hey, Samantha, you don’t call anyone stupid.”

“Daddy! Listen daddy!”

“My ears. Don’t scream,” His face showed an actual pang of discomfort.

“My teacher says they’re stupid! They all eat dirt and pee on everything, like, like dogs!”

“Baby, I doubt your teacher ever said a single foul word towards any kids. That woman has been teaching since before I was born. She’s been doing a fine job for years. I dare say if we had more teachers like her, I’d have no fear for the future.” He laughed and immediately regretted those words.

“I hate her too,” Samantha gave off a defeated whimper.

“Who knows, dear. Maybe you go to school, and everything is all better. Nobody will want to keep fighting after a long weekend.” He kissed her forehead.

Benjamin grabs a pink plush toy resembling an apatosaurus churned through the commercial factory lines of childhood, near featureless merchandise. Samantha transitioned her grip to strangle the plush toy. He carries His daughter back up the stairs, across the hard cherrywood floors. The dim blades of light left as they came, without a sound; nothing to ruffle your ends. “Samamanthany, let’s get your pajamas ready, and then you take teddy-saurus to bed.” She begins to clumsily, arm by arm, wriggle into the pajamas. Upon successfully besting her bedwear, Samantha pounces onto her bed with Teddy-saurus smartly tucked/ precious cargo. Samantha plunges her face in the plush toy’s soft embrace and rolls to be smothered by the safety of covers. Benjamin sits next to his only child, reading from a thin tablet emitting light just bright enough to act as a ward for childhood night-time monsters while, also, functionally allowing Benjamin to put the finishing touches on a day's work.

Alone, in the master bedroom, Benjamin slips his fingers between the curtains of the window beside the low-lying bed frame. The dark, large room glows from reflections of streetlights on the wood floors and framed photos of a happy family. Cheek to jowl are photographs of the machines designed by the familial patriarch; whose duty it is to provide so that the family may be happy. He gives his surrounding neighborhood a quick glance. Nothing to see; not much variation from house to house: the best examples of affluence and status hidden among thick leafage. Benjamin shifts his gaze to follow the hidden driveways of the meandering cul-de-sac to its main entrance. Ivy covered brick walling in this little bastion, and monolithic black gates to exclude all who do not belong, aided by the newest advancements in surveillance

recognition software. These people live in the constant, implicit fear of the informal poor populous, which engrosses the vast majority. Trenches for streets; unkempt and riddled with blight. Deteriorated structures that score of unlucky souls have no choice but to occupy seemed to be nothing more than constant symbols of a system working. A system whose purpose is weeding out those who lack ability, or drive, or a learnedness to achieve. Benjamin's ilk of ascended state employees or officials believe that as a universal truth. And to that extent, the monumental gates and walls would protect them from an inundation of unsavory poor who taint the wealth of the affluent and sully their quality of life by sheer virtue of existing close enough to acknowledge.

The world is changing. The horizon, filtered by fields of public lighting and nightlife, is dotted by a growing number of the well-to-do recipients of state favor. From Benjamin's window on the second floor of his home of comfort, he sees plainly over the small shanties to the enclaves of his peers: gated communities hidden behind tall trees in a place where green is as rare as a week with rain. The Levant has never been known for precipitation. Like proto-eukaryotic life, the nest of wealth cast out arms and vestiges to consume and devour. Nodes of these vines lay anchor and continue the march to the song that living things know best. A song of growth: melodies indeterminate and indiscriminate. A reckless belligerence that appears outwardly almost malicious. The more these upper-crust neighborhoods develop, the greater to blight in the realm of the poor. Resources diverted and people forgotten.

"Hey, Ben, baby," Benjamin lets his fingers retract from the window curtains and turn to see his wife, Laura, walk into the large, spacious room. He swiftly grabs the loose shirt of his on the dresser and grips it tight around his right wrist. Laura is quick to notice and arches one of her finely kept eyebrows, fully aware that he intended to say something sensitive to the entire

balance of their lives. “Why are you still up, handsome?” She, drying her long curly black hair and already in bedclothes, produced a hushed hum of motors due to a prosthetic leg, lower thigh downward. No mechanical parts visible. To the eye, the sheath looked and felt indistinguishable from the real deal skin on the rest of her otherwise idealized petite body. Only vague scars on the midsection of her thigh hinted at the abnormality. If only because of not quite matching her dark olive complexion. Full motion, and never ungraceful. Light as a feather, she glided on her toes to hug his torso.

“Just thinking,”

“About?”

“I don’t even know. Letting my thoughts wonder, I suppose. Trying to find a pep talk for myself like the one I gave Sammy.”

“I see what caught your attention,” Laura dipped her head to peek out the window. “Back to the old faithful. I don’t know how you have room for anything else up there when you have a beautiful wife at home, waiting to keep your mind preoccupied.” Laura half jokes while slamming on a jovial seductive charm.

“These circumstances, you know, if someone spends enough time with the freedom to think it becomes impossible not to dwell.” Laura knows that he only speaks with nebulous generalities when he absolutely must like what he wants to say would come back to burn them. She thinks of it as his verbal defense; maybe a holdover from school or something he developed to evade SLN suspicions. Benjamin forced a smile.

“I try not to think about it, Ben. Letting all of that fester in your head will keep you up all night until you blow up.” She points a dainty fingertip in the direction of the window, not letting up the hollowed dance of marriage.

“We got lucky, is all. We both know that. Sammy was crying about how some of the other kids ate dirt and smelled like piss. Of course, it’s not true. I pray it isn’t.”

“What?” She laughed. That seductive impulse began to wane. “Ben, it’s a little late for that kind of esoteric self-deprecation. If we start down that rabbit hole, we’ll be here all night when we should be there,” Laura pivoted on her inconspicuously beautiful prosthetic, not withholding the equally subtle cyclic hum of the tiny servos, and gestured her head toward the surprisingly small bed.

“She doesn’t understand yet, you know?” He fought hard against Laura’s persistence. Benjamin knew he only had a few moments of clarity before he’d have no choice but give in. “It’s hard for me not to keep thinking that it could’ve been her. She could’ve been the poor kid from a poor family without food, smelling like piss, and seen as stupid.”

“I think you’re taking it a little too far, Hun. Come on.” Laura tugged at his right arm above the elbow. Still diligently aware of the shirt gripped around his wrist, she is sure not to compromise this action. Whatever he expects them to say to each other he doesn’t want to invite outside ears. She leans into his face, cheek to cheek. “Whatever you want to say, just say it. Get it out of your mind, so we can attend to more important business.”

“Laura, I’m ready. We’re ready. It’s all prepared.” He holds her still, firmly to ensure she cannot break eye contact. “My love, the arrangements are all made.”

“Oh, God,” She whispered. “You’re serious? Wait, you’re serious? Oh Ben, what did you do?” Any airs that once precluded a sensual evening in the marriage bed were all but left in tatters. Laura looked at her husband with such a dense concoction of emotions that not even she knew where to start. He let her go whilst remaining vigilant of the shirt around his wrist. Laura

had retracted her physical invitation and replaced it with the stance of a sullen steward. “What did you do?”

“What do you mean, ‘what did I do?’ I made all the arrangements.”

“Ben, what arrangements are you talking about? For the love of God, don’t kill us. Don’t get all of us killed. Whatever it is you think you’ve done, they’ll find out. Find you out!” Her voice was filled with rage so fiercely passionate that she almost forgot to whisper.

“Darling, we’re leaving. I’m not raising Samantha here. She’s doomed if we stay. We’re all doomed.”

“What are you talking about!? You know that I’m fucking aware of her future. Ben, we’re fine here. We aren’t starving in a slum. There is no war here. She goes to school.”

“Laura, there is no war yet.” He paused to let her think and ponder on the true significance of what he said. At least he hoped she would ascertain his meaning quickly.

“Benjamin, is something about to happen? Are we ...?”

“What we’ve been building is almost done. These people are not going to stop. They’re sucking all the life and value from the state, the people, and the land to expand like a damned viral infection. The SLN party thinks that the US and EU will let them expand and wage war uninterrupted. These idiots think they can take a war to the big boys. They won’t make it that far. It’ll all happen again.” Benjamin pointed at Laura’s prosthetic with a stern conviction. She doesn’t distrust his drive to protect and provide for his family, AKA her and Samantha. The rest of their family were long dead by almost a decade. “We were lucky that they wanted me for their damned engineering. Will we be that lucky again when it all goes to hell? My dear, I frankly don’t want to leave that up to chance.”

“You think we’re already dead? Is it that bad?” At this point she had softened her scorn into a visible terror. Laura knew to defer to his insider wisdom for matters of the state.

“Nearly five years we’ve designed and prototyped their insane death machines. This technology, I don’t know who gave them the idea or direction; nobody from the universities, that’s for sure, but it’s too far beyond anything they should have. Nobody else has this technology. It’s like the physics they are using jumped a couple generations. Laura, they’re making bombs that I don’t think I could properly explain to you! It’s almost like if you gave a caveman a damn railgun. And now, the Party is going to provoke and invite war. We’re going to be destroyed.” He was barely audible, but Laura felt his words swell into cacophony so immense they could be heard far away in space. She paused there on the bedroom floor. “They wrote all of our death sentences. If we don’t try to get the hell out of here, we might as well be dead.”

“How?”

“Tomorrow. Tomorrow after I pick up Samantha from school, we go to dinner out on the town. We go to Tiamat. Don’t pack anything. Don’t dress up. We get out of our car and go inside to eat. We leave through the back. There will be a food truck waiting for us. From there they’ll hand us off to another truck or car. I don’t know anything about it, just in case somebody finds out. That vehicle will take us across the border.”

“Oh God, This is real? This is real. This is happening? If anybody catches on, we’re all going to be tortured. I hope that’s all that will happen.” She started crying just enough not to explode from that dangerous mixture of emotions. “If this doesn’t work, they are going to kill all of us. At least I hope they will kill us and Samantha. Ben, if it goes wrong do you know what they’ll do to her?” He doesn’t answer. “Of course, you do. You really think we’re already dead if we stay? Oh God!? Fuck. No. Fuck you. We have to, don’t we?”

“Yes, honey. This is the only chance we have to at least save Samantha.” He drew his wife in. He could, at this point, justify a tight embrace for a complex kind of comfort. The truth was that they both needed it.

Awake in the early hours of the day. Awake before the sun has a chance to crackle a great blood-orange streak across a blackened sky. Benjamin is blissfully alone. A true believer in routine. Four forty-five. A transfigured clock face on Benjamin’s wrist, with its dull white light flashing, wakes him at the same time every morning. A silent vibration that only he feels, allowing Laura to stay in bed; sleep uninterrupted. He is the only occupant of his household to own this kind of implanted device. Embedded in his skin as a sign of luxury and servitude; a multifaceted tool that is a watch, telecommunicator, mapping device, a symbolic link to the greater hubs of information and data, and most importantly, a means to track his movements, conversations, purchases. In so many words: a “gift” from Benjamin’s employer, Merigold Engineering Solutions, to ensure that one of their highly coveted personnel investments is secure. MES was a poorly constructed facade for a state sponsored engineering laboratory. It existed outside the jurisdiction of the state in name alone. All the executive leadership pulled double duty as party bureaucrats in the state administration. Benjamin acknowledges the alarm by gliding his palm over the projected clock face on his wrist. This action triggers the clock face to fade, and in turn be replaced by the company emblem of an iron triangle with *MES* superimposed in white and gold letters.

Making the greatest attempts to always be considerate and quiet, Benjamin lightly walks along the cold floors, through the halls, past all the photos, down the stairs to the kitchen which seems disproportionately small for their home. Furniture rustic and worn. Appliances chic and shimmer. In a cabinet dead center above the oven, Benjamin takes out a warped pan that clearly

was once flat. Warped from years of use and abuse. After verbally commanding the stove top to heat up to the breakfast preset, he leisurely begins frying two pieces of salted lamb. Precut such that one is much larger than the other. By the time the smell of hearty and familiar meat fills the air of the house he can hear rustling in a room above. Not much longer after two plates of fried salted lamb and toast are on the cozy table a young, noticeably drowsy Samantha yawns her way into the dining room.

The busybody father, humming some song that has become a fever pitch in the childhood zeitgeist, helps his daughter clear the table after eating. He then promptly transitions to getting both of their ducks aligned for the day. Clothes, lunches, coats, and dragged feet out the door. Benjamin walks up to the car sitting low in the driveway. A slate gray, wide and deep seated for all riders: two in the front and three in the back row. Smooth curvature with only hard edges running along the outside corner of the primary headlight on each side down the length of the body. Benjamin places his palm on the door panel creating three concentric rings to appear then contract at his hand's center. The locking mechanism actuates, and the door opens as he steps aside.

“Good morning, ... Ben.” The words generated from the vehicle clearly, however in a cadence that lingers in the uncanny valley. The back passenger door follows shortly, and the two climb in. The interior begins to morph and shift the ideal settings of each rider. Benjamin's seat shifts upright and attentively straightened while Samantha's lounges back.

“Trip A” Benjamin commands. The engine revs with controllable tolerance and meters on the dashboard resurrect with newfound life. Everything about the car is the image of moderation among their peers. Parallel driveways house automobiles so extravagant and avant-garde in design and auditory threat. Benjamin's family car still requires a set level of passenger

agency, or some simply see it as antiquated. Essentially slumming with technology. Not everyone in his neighborhood has the same misgivings about their gifted wealth at the behest of the SLN government. Benjamin fears that they, conversely feel like all that has been given to them is rightfully theirs. They want for not because they are useful to the state. Those poor bastards in squalor have nothing to give society, so their return on investment is just.

Contrapposto: his neighbors simply walk up to their car, the doors open, seat presets align, and trip pathing automatically is conjured based on mountains of travel and personal data combined with visual sensors. The radio in his car turns on to a public news broadcasting station: part of his “Trip A” settings.

“Yes, it's as I was saying before;” A female voice “the armed conflict between the Carpathian Bloc,” Benjamin helps Samantha settle into her seat and waits idly until he sees the young girl fasten her safety belt. “Russia, and the border towns and hamlets of Asir-Georgia,” All ready, he gives the verbal command for the car to begin driving. “Are going to have catastrophic repercussions for us in the Levant.” Benjamin stares carefully, ingesting the stark transition of his leafy community to the blight of the outside. “The meandering warzones have destroyed Asir-Georgia’s fertile band and productive lands. There exists little doubt among the geo-political community that the Carpathians are strategically selecting their target battle grounds in the region to diminish the land's political value in the eyes of the Russian government. It's only a matter of time that industry and technocrats flee further south, and we get yet another exodus crisis. And for me, I see that as the true legacy of the twenty-first century: a time of great displacement. Our time has been the era of diaspora.”

“Daddy! Can you put on music, or something? Somethiny? Some thing?” Samantha giggles at the inflections of her word play. Playing with words like a calf learning that it can run.

Benjamin eyes her through the rear-view mirror and musters a quiet smile. He doesn't want her to take time to look out of the window and ask painful questions. The same questions he confronted and came back determined to take her and Laura away from what was creeping only a few meters outside the car windows. Benjamin selects music. It's a song from a carefully curated playlist of acceptable music for his child, but still vetted to her liking. She seems happy enough to sing along, not letting her lack of knowledge of lyrics be an impediment. Another way to engage in wordplay.

The car, with the wonders of technology, zooms into traffic seamlessly due only to the removal of human input. Dashboard gauges and displays indicate fifteen kilometers left in Trip A at an estimated time of three minutes. Trip B details start to move into the foreground of the display as the navigation software recognizes the probability of the "Trip B" event not occurring to be so low that it becomes indistinguishable from impossible. Trip B specifically was to Benjamin's workplace: an Engineering Corps office suite seventeen kilometers from his current location and nine from Samantha's primary school. Given that both Benjamin's occupation and Samantha's school were manifestations of the state, a veneer teetering on the edge of totalitarian, and solidly totalitarian beneath the publicity of distancing itself from daily institutions, the conditional probability of Benjamin not going to work after taking Samantha to school is asymptotically close to zero. Standard fare. At the stoop of the school, itself gated with enough security standing watch to make any parent feel safe, Samantha kisses her father's cheek and hurdles out the door as soon as it opens.

"I love you,"

On the road once more, Benjamin turns the radio back to the state broadcast.

“, have...urgent need... A lo....”

“Come on, now.” Benjamin pats down the dashboard while looking for abnormalities with his audio system. A deep rumble stirs from behind. The vibrations pass at a low enough frequency to make the metal and composites of the car to resonate. Benjamin swings his head around, working to find the source with a morbid curiosity. Meanwhile, signals of the state broadcast all but fizzled out as Benjamin continued to mimic a giraffe in the midst of battle. Thunderous crackles rippled above. Faces of the passengers in cars alongside Benjamin revealed deep concern having caught first sight of the beasts. Booms and reverberations overtook all other sounds without contest. He could faintly recall similar sounds in much suppressed memories. His subconscious terror did not have a tough fight clawing through the superseding strata of emergent thought. “What in God’s holy name?” There was no hesitation in the subjective passage of time. Becoming more anxious of what he could ascertain to be the only reasonable conclusion, Benjamin desperately wanted that subconscious fear to be pushed back down. That was, obviously, until Benjamin spotted a great shadow crawling over the ragged structures of the ghettos packed into the old city walls. He couldn’t deny his terror, but the speed of events unfolding also would not allow the full comprehension. One shadow multiplied into many. Soon an infestation of thunder and darkness consumed all beneath the heavens. Benjamin twisted his neck to see what lay above still embodying the earring giraffe. What he was late to witness were the behemoths of the air bounding lower and lower. Three, now four airships each the size of skyscrapers descended gracefully like an apocalyptic edict trumpeted by angles of death behind him. Benjamin struggled with his head turned to fully see the mechanical monsters. Focusing as best as he could, he succeeded in barely making out gray figures and vehicles of a gargantuan sort falling to the earth. “Oh no, God no, no, no, no....” He slammed on the brakes, but the much sought-after lurching response was nowhere to be felt. The auto-nav was still in effect and would

not relinquish control of a moving vehicle that easily. “Turn around!” He screamed pleading. “Turn around! Please turn! Go back! Damned car!” Words and computationally perceived irrational behavior could not deliver the desired result. Therefore, what can a man do but begin punching the wheel and dashboard. After a couple cathartic smashes of his less than capable hands, some reason crept back onto his bushveld mind. Benjamin had to remember how to speak it’s limited automated language. “Return! Trip-A! Trip-A! Please Trip-A!”

“Trip-A selected.”

“Oh God, just go, please.” The auto-nav of the AI ecosystem directed the car to the nearest exit off of the beltway and into the blight. The terrified father knew all too well the horrors that soon would envelope this place. Low-end thuds of bombardment rattled the scenery and shook his frame of reference out the windows. Benjamin couldn’t feel out the direction of whatever artillery was striking the earth, but that didn’t snuff out the sinking feeling of the greatest disaster. His scuffed face contorted with anxiety. Massive clouds of rubble and smoke plumed into the atmosphere following a rapid succession of booms. Benjamin slammed his car’s interior, everything in a futile plea for the auto-nav to drive faster. The car had to go faster. Faster now that Benjamin saw plumes sprout from the direction of Sammy’s primary school. “God, by God, no, please go faster, please, don’t let, please, Oh Lord...” A mantra flowed from behind sobs and panicked breaths.

Petals of paper and metal plunge to the pavement before his very eyes, destroying the small road on which he is driving. The car’s auto-nav finally has a reason to stop which it’s unempathetic brain recognizes. It cannot go forward if forward is physically not a viable option. The speed of processing on part of the car is embodied by the gulf of difference between the auto-nav’s and Benjamin’s perceptions of the ensuing crash. To Benjamin, the car violently

slammed to a halt, forcing a collision between the wheel and Benjamin's rib cage. Seconds were all that were granted to him before a humanoid mecha landed on the ravaged pavement, the leg of which became the unresponsive recipient of sheet metal and plastic from an entry-level luxury vehicle. Black and gray reinforced metal shell encasing fibrous simulated muscle stranding, access panels of yellow cover the innumerable ports and ejection sites, and an insignia of two wolves enclosed by the words "WOLF SHOT FOXING". This agile looking machine stood seven meters and presented Benjamin with a clear choice now that he wasn't too far from the schoolhouse. He pushed his thumb into the main console, signaling what was left of the car to throttle down and unlocking the doors. Although the motor-generator set had been cleanly crumpled into an entangled travesty of stator, poles, and windings, he was too stricken by the awe-inspiring marvel of human ingenuity which could very well end his woeful life with the most effortless of strokes. We can build this. We built this. We, humans, have done the most amazing things with our lives, but all that glory was to serve only as a stage for our murderous intent. Those were surely the thoughts that wholly infected Benjamin's mind. It was all for this. All we have done is to perfect the act of killing, and in mechanical gods, no less. Benjamin had seen war before. He lived through the horrifying holy wars which swallowed the Levant some fifteen years prior. He bore witness to the hell that man will gladly bring onto itself. Laura's prosthetic leg was a timely visage of that ubiquitous truth. That image of a mangled young woman existing in misery on the decimated street, after her body was used and had nothing left to give, was plenty to peel Benjamin away from ideations of impending death. Driven by a paternal instinct to protect, he sprinted between the rubble and debris into the ally to his immediate left.

Five blocks. He sends all inklings of rational thoughts out of the proverbial window. 'I can make it' is all that cycles through his mind. The mechanical giant he left behind doesn't register Benjamin's feeble presence. The pilot was probably drinking in all of that intoxicating power at his disposal: a rider's high. More of his giant mechanical brethren are landing according to Benjamin's awareness of a series of what could only be described as meteor crashes inside the city. The ground beneath his feet similarly reverberates with identical messages. Immediately following the last seismic upheaval, he clearly registers the regretfully familiar sound of gunshots. But to Benjamin's depthless fear, the rounds fired that shook the air were of a massive caliber to which he could only imagine the requisite damage they would bequeath to the world. He won't look back. Benjamin's fear is real and warranted in this hell's ape of human creation.

Four blocks. The streets are filling up with ranks of the mecha heralding what one could only hope were normal troops

Three blocks. Heavy bombardments engrossed the senses with blinding light, the smell of fire, burning copper, and other vaporized metals, and a general loss of hearing from a stream of explosions. Cars destroyed and conspicuously being worn by city foundations in a fashion that would suggest that they had been manhandled and thrown into place are now sites of evacuation for screaming pedestrians. Lovers pulling lovers out from under buildings toppled from artillery. Great fires and ash clouds carelessly cast into the sky like flocks of dark ravishing birds. The smells of burning barrel stocks from the black mechas seep into the nostrils of all the lovers and bodies entombed. So many, running and stampeding with no true haven to reach. The gnashing of teeth and snarling cries for survival. Raging like all animals do. Rage, blood, and fury. Benjamin sees all humanity has to show for itself. One block. Then, finally, he makes it. Finally, he sees me.

“Benjamin Heladiv, it's a pleasure to meet you!” I say to this poor father, now with my barrel pointed in his face.

“What? Wait, what, who the hell are you? How do you know my name? Oh god, no. You're going to kill me? Here? There must be a mistake. I need to get to my daughter!”

“There is no mistake. Your daughter is fine.” I point to the concrete gray school behind me. “She won't see me shoot you. She won't see your lifeless body fall to the ground. Rest assured you'll probably be a martyr in her eyes when she's older. They're all crowding under desks right about now. I doubt they'll have a chance to look outside to your... lovely city.” The facetious words sounded cruel even to my ears. Fairly distasteful for me to say, but the excitement of the moment swept all objections aside.

“No, please, I need to get to her, my daughter. Why me? Now?”

“Come now, Ben, you know why you would be a target. You're a smart guy. That's why you planned an escape later tonight. I am sorry about that, the whole ruining your plans business, just in case you were curious. Bottom line is that you, as a military research engineer, are a very valuable resource, and possibly more valuable if a greater war did spill over, in time.” I gesture with my free hand a sign that I meant to signify a bomb. “It's what you do. Point blank: you, by virtue of living, pose a problem to the established pecking order of world powers. So, I have been tasked with ending your disruption.” My free hand now pointed squarely at his wide-eyed face.

“Please...”

“I've been watching you for weeks now. I kinda feel close to you, in a sense. I'm not going to lie to you Benjamin; I'm not happy about this.” He flinched stiffly to the shrieking explosions and bullets not too far away. “I've done you two honors, Ben, out of respect for you

as a good man and a family man. That's the only way I can personally live with the thought of taking you away from your family, and thereby increasing the probability of tragedy befalling them in the wake of this assault. One: I am going to shoot you so that it looks like you were just another casualty."

"Are you serious? You are crazy? How could you help us?"

"Don't interrupt," I focus my rifle in a manner that anyone would interpret as 'yes, I'm deathly serious.' "Two: I'm going to do my best to get your family across the border. I don't really know how yet, but it can't be that hard to break away with this shit falling apart."

"Who are you people? Who are you?"

"Be quiet and listen for fuck's sake! As long as they get on the other side of the border to Egypt or someplace else, the rest of your escape plan should still work, I hope. At least that's better than nothing. I'm telling you so you can have a piece of mind, Heladiv. I don't think you deserve to have that weight on your soul as you die."

"You can kill me! You can kill me! Just let me get my daughter to safety!"

"I get it, you don't trust me. I don't blame you." I can't imagine the horrors he envisions of a murderous stranger taking his child anywhere. However, I am no liar.

"You can do your job then and there, no fighting. No struggle. Mister, whoever you are please, my little girl."

"I'm sorry, Ben, but this has to happen now. This is your black carriage. The day Death shows his face to you."

"..." His expression was fraught with inner turmoil and fight. After a few silent moments he began to show acceptance in its place. "Do it then."

"Painlessly off to the wild yonder."

“Please. Don’t lie to me. Take my daughter to safety. I can’t beg this of you enough.”

“Of course, I will.”

“Thank you ... for that. I guess. A last honor.”

“I’ve come to know you and your family well enough to gather that you are a decent man, and I truly wish it didn’t have to be this way.” The stock against my cheek is all too familiar. Ben has given in. I am sorry. Rage and gnash, snarl at the carriage till the end.

Light. Blistering heat. A wave of impact. silence. “Fuck!” Blinded, I can’t see a goddamned thing. I can’t even hear the thoughts in my head. It’s coming back like an aperture opening slowly. “Fuck!” I can’t yet see or hear, but I know the sensation of screaming. It’s so hot. Dust is swirling in my lungs. It causes me to heave as if my stomach wanted to permanently vacate my body. The taste of blood and dirt coat my throat. I dropped my rifle in my convulsive state. There it is, that harsh buzzing of the artillery bee. Deafening. Light is waning, and I see a silhouette of what I can only surmise is Ben. We are the lovers, occupiers of this dense rubble cloud. His gray hand is outstretched. I grab on. “Ben!” I thrust his arm forward and grabbed his collar. I make sure to take control of his frame. I don’t know if the shock of the explosion or the realization that he *will* die had sedated the good Mr. Heladiv, but he’s given up the struggle. Explosion. That’s right! The hell? What? Ben? Wait. “Ben?” Silence started to break away and waves of recoiled noise faded in.

“Mister, I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“The rod of gods falling from the sky”

“...” My vision isn’t clear yet, and the cloud of rubble is still drifting.

“Mister... I think it landed right here.” His silhouette points toward the school. I see why he let the struggle die. “Sam.” His face is the first thing that solidifies in my view. I’ve never seen a face so culled in pain. I have killed dozens. Always facing them like men. And I heard great men beg and rich men barter, but this is true pain. True fear. No space or time to breathe it all in. Why? That’s the lone sentiment stewing in the racket of my tortured ears. “You dropped bombs and mecha to kill our poorest and defenseless. And now, you have killed our children. You did it. You killed them. Oh God, Samantha...” My grip is a thing of the past. He runs head-long into the blazing unknown. The vista that lays before me; I, I, fuck, dammit, how, this isn’t right. I can’t hide this image behind disconnected words. It’s a castle of rubble and viscera. A burning mass grave for hundreds of children. Why? My stomach sinks lower and lower. I can’t catch Ben. I won’t. This wasn’t what was supposed to happen. The heat. It’s making the smell worse. No. Move! Move for fuck’s sake! I can’t help myself. Sprint like the monster in jungle is just around the bend. I catch up to Ben climbing onto the burning pile. That smell; old as the holy Ergaster. Fuel for the progenitors. Ambrosia to the mad and wicked agents of war. He tries to make his way to where Samantha’s classroom should have been.

“Benjamin! Ben! It’s done. We have to get out of here!”

“...” His eyes betray a want for the death I promised him moments earlier. Mine betrayed an absolution to keep him alive. How can I kill a man who just witnessed the slaughter of his child and the children of everyone he knows? I’m neither that strong nor callous.

“She is gone.” No matter the volume of my voice, I could never overcome the intensity of his pain among the fire. I can’t wait for him to kill himself. I’m too far in. I charge into his abdomen and wrestle this man, much larger than myself, back into the ash clouds dancing around the perimeter of the mountain of smoldering rubble. He fights me in this act. That’s well enough.

I'll take all of that. Outside starts to feel like an enclosure. An invasion, eradication. The ships of Carpathia loom with an ever-increasing menace. I came here to assassinate an engineer for the Levantine military, which due to years of furiously gobbling up territory and accepting affluent immigrants fleeing war zones, now is an emergent power. That kind of power differential doesn't bode well with states like the Carpathian Bloc. I knew we would invade, but this is genocide. I don't do genocide. I kill one. One at a time. The fires here smell of age-old hate. Bells of a war to end a war before it starts. Chimpanzees will beat and batter, and eventually eat leopard cubs once found. The senseless, instinctual chimps slaughter a defenseless animal because they know what it will become: a threat. It looks like I'm just another mindless chimp. Yep, and every minute the number of fires budding doubles. The time between rounds booming through the air shortens. The smell grows more pungent. Sanity, your exit unfair.

“Put your hands up!” Frozen. Are they here for Ben? No, they are WSF, Death Parade. They don't have targets, just casualties. “Put your fucking hands up!” The parade leader in front said, clad all black with that wolf insignia. About ten here, ten guns pointed at the both of us. They don't know who I am. No one does. That's the point. No uniform when I'm on assignment. And at this moment I look like I'm Levantine. To them I'm no better than a local ripe for the slaughter. I know why they want our hands up. To avoid a fight. They want to kill anyone unarmed. Countless eons have given more examples than not, demonstrating that an armed person is a much less receptive audience. This is especially true when your message is indiscriminate death. Therefore, the Death Parade differs from other groups of Carpathian combatants in the form of indoctrination to seek the most calculated method of disposing of humans. The application of their methods often results in situations like this: a blitz to genocide

and abolition of communication controls native to the occupied territory. The Carpathian Death Parade: Wolf Shot Foxing. “Hands!”

“Ben don’t move.”

“Go on.” Benjamin is hollowed and ready to rot. But not me. He hangs his head low and raises one hand. His index finger becomes a pistol for all to see. Quite the brazen act of subversion and defiance. The parade leader doesn’t take well to that.

“Pianissimo” WSF do not hesitate. They’re trained to be non-emotive and amoral. A death is a death. V. Vo. Vol. Volley. Ley. Ey. Y. Their gunfire almost ambiently blends in with the landscape of war.

I stretch my hand out in search of safety. I don’t want to die. Oh, how I reach. Internally, I open my eyes in wonder at the horrible Samsara. Down the endless generations, spiraling back towards a foggy genesis, I find Holy Ergaster, progenitor of war. Mars and Venus, lovers strewn into the street. Volcan, unforgiving. My mind takes me back to that jungle, dark and wet, and worst of all, inhabited by a blue demon.

My hand in this instance has become weightless. Faintly, an azure glow pools at the tips of my fingers. And like Volcan spilling red hate, a dense cloud of blue explodes outright. Their bullets stop reciprocally with the inertia of my astonishment. This cloud has a mass that flows into the shape of my hand, but on a grand scale. I’m not thinking of its control, only of my survival. Blood and grit. I push them all onto the debris covered earth. This azure mass is crushing them, but, somehow, *I feel* the snapping of bones and gushing of viscera. What’s happening here? I merely acted as a marionette led by instinct. Daze departing. Fuck me. I look to Benjamin, head still hanging. I can’t believe what my gut tells me is real. I stare real hard at the newly found corpses, armed and armored.

“We need to leave. There will be a lot more. They all have surveillance shit built into their body armor. There’s gonna be a relentless ton of them here after they see that footage.” I grab his shoulders. He doesn’t struggle against my dragging him. It’s for the best. I don’t know what to think. About myself, I mean. I know what this is. Abbe gave this to me. It seems I never escaped his spectre. Well, it saved me. My Azure Volcan.

Chapter Four

The Greatest Lie Carries Us Away

Abbe walked back into the clearing among the tall grass. His lifeless eyes look down toward me.

“My friend, I have a story I’d very much like to share with you. I do hope you don’t mind an old man going on, but I think you’ll come to like it as much as I do.” His ghastly face. It feels like being in the presence of some horrible, eldritch truth. “It’s a fable from some years ago. It goes like this:

In a bustling city, three men worked in a factory. One of the men was old, one was middle-aged, and one was young. The young man owned the factory. The middle-aged man managed the factory. The old man worked on the assembly line. They worked in their places like all other people to make the city bustle and move with life. The young man, who owned the factory, was alone in his role. There were a few men like the middle-aged man who managed the factory. And there were many like the old man who worked on the assembly lines to make the city bustle and move with life.” He paused to allow me time to take in the exposition. “Good. In this city there were many factories like this one. All made the city bustle and move with life.

Working diligently one day, the old man cut his hand using a very tough and rugged machine. Looking at the gash, he was unhappy to find a thick, black fluid flowing from where his blood should be. He walked away from the lines, took one good look at the rows of workers,

and left out the front gates. In his absence, the workers fiscally chained to the lines, kept making the city bustle and move with life. The middle-aged man noticed a vacancy among the workers and went to tell his boss, the young man. Easy enough.” He took a breath in preparation for the next lines. “The young man instructed him to bring the old man back to formally relieve him of his duties. You know, severance paperwork and other bureaucratic things of that sort.

But, once outside, the middle-aged man walked as fast as he could to catch up to the old man. He found him at the doorstep of an enormous building missing bricks in the facade, boarded up holes and broken windows, and otherwise completely covered in the trappings of blight. I’m sure you know the kind. As the old man entered and walked up the many stairs, the middle-aged man tried to reason with what he thought was a fool.

‘Hey, you have to come back to the factory!’ said the middle-aged man. He very much drank in the sense of authority vested to his position, all thanks to the owner.

‘The only things we have to do in this life are be born, struggle, and die,’ replied the old man. He had never truly spoken to the line manager, but the middle-aged man found him to be a melancholy fellow.

‘Listen, you can quit, but we need to bring you back to fill out the proper papers,’” Abbe was having fun acting out the parts, and I was powerless to spit in his direction.

“‘The only papers that we need to fill out are our notices of birth, marriage, and death,’

‘I see your hand is hurt. Why don’t you let me take you to the hospital?’

‘For such things in life, I have no time,’” Abbe was deep in character and switched feverishly between the two.

“The old man finally opened a door after climbing so many stairs. He and the middle-aged man found a happy family so cheerful to see their father and grandfather. The generations

hugged his neck and said their goodbyes. He kissed them all a happy life and closed the door. All the faces were cheerful as he and his guest left.” Abbe’s voice has increased in tension and began to sound slightly agitated.

“Once outside, the old man continued to walk, and his bewildered guest continued to follow. Although now they walked toward the other side of the bustling city moving with life.

Inside the factory, the young man noticed that the middle-aged man had not yet returned. He went to the back of his office and opened a big heavy door. He told his boss that the first two had not come back with any semblance of punctuality. The young man, then worried by what his lord had told him, ran to find his worker and manager. He ran for some time before finding the pair walking, still. The young man approached them as they entered a small building.

‘We need you back to report on the workers,’

‘I am tied to the cog this man turns,’ replied the middle-aged man.

‘If you need time away from work that's fine. We can arrange that, but you have to come back and report on the workers,’

‘The time we spend climbing stairs does little for our happiness.’

The middle-aged man opened a door after a couple of flights. Not so much a steep climb as it appeared. The three men found a couple sons and daughters and the middle-aged man's parents. All were happy to see the three men as they hugged the middle-aged man’s neck and said their goodbyes. All were cheerful as the trio left. Now, the three walked toward the edge of the bustling city moving with life. The young man's will waned as he looked back upon the towers of glass and steel. The three men took turns asking and replying youngest to oldest.

‘Should we get food?’

‘I don't think we will go far,’

‘There will be plenty of food.’

The three walked and walked, out of the city and past vast fields of grain and pasture. Some distance came and went without seeing a single tree. Slowly, trees became all that the three men could see. Walking among the trees and following the growing slope, the wind picked up. No matter how fast and cold the wind blew, the leaves did not rustle. No animals could be heard. The path became very steep as the sun fell below the trees. The old man led the way with the young man at the end, growing more distraught by a foreboding presence. Once night had come, the young man began to see the outline of something bigger than the three men together pass just out of sight of the others. The young man walked faster to be closer to the others as the silhouette weaved in and out of his sight. Growing frightened, he tried to warn the others that there might be danger from some monstrous beast. The old man simply walked, and the middle-aged man paid little mind and continued to follow. The path grew to a hill that grew to a mountain, and with every step the monstrous shape grew clearer. The middle-aged man started to catch glimpses of its hulking figure.

A growl.

A snarl.

A roar.

A very big bear came out of the trees. The bear was the darkest of black. Checkered across its fur were dots of light that shone like the whites of its eyes and fangs. The very big black bear slowly approached the three men. Being frightened, the young man ran suddenly. The middle-aged man, unsure of the moment, hesitated before running after the young man. The old man kept walking behind.

The young man reached a clearing in the forest of trees and stopped to wait for the others.

‘Do you know how to make a fire?’

‘I used to know from when I was a little boy, but it has been too long’

The old man caught up to his companions and demonstrated to them how to make a fire.

‘This light will keep the bear away,’ The young man cried.

‘This light, made by the fire, is a temporary escape from the monsters that wait just beyond what we see.’ lectured the oldest among them.

So, three men waited in a clearing, protected by a fire, for the sun to rise. The younger two were much too scared to sleep soundly. The old man sat patiently. Hours came and passed, still the sun had not come. Time became of no importance, only the phony light of the fire. What seemed like days passed while the men began to wriggle in pain from hunger. They had seen or heard no animal or beast outside of the bear growling occasionally. There was no tree bearing fruit within the light of the fire. After an eternity of sitting in fear, the old man stood and turned to his companions.

A smile on his face. The old man walked into great darkness. Sometime later the Bear poked his head in the light of the clearing. The remaining two ran quickly to the opposite side of the light. From the bear’s mouth dropped exotic fruits from trees neither of the men had seen. The fruit-colored hues words could only fail to describe. Then, as easily as the bear penetrated the encircled light, it withdrew from sight. Skeptical at first, they slowly inched toward the food. It was good and sweet. Fruits of all the lands of this world. As numerous as the lights shining on that big, black bear’s fur. Satiated, a kind of fear left them when the bear poked its head into their encampment once again. Inviting still, the middle-aged man let his guard drop in the gaze of the bear's pearl eyes. The bear drew its head from the light of the fire. The middle-aged man did not linger far behind. Now the young man was alone in the light of an undying fire. He had been

alone in his rich life, and he was alone now. However alone he was, he only knew how to judge his life and self by the existence and circumstance of others. Without others for a swift comparison, he was not only alone, but lost. He heard a voice.

‘Burn.’ It said to him

‘Who’s there?’

‘Burn.’ It came again louder.

‘I’m not ready. I don’t want to die.’” Abbe stopped telling his fable to look out past the grass demarking the dug-out. His theatrics had oozed away leaving him motionless and quiet much like the state he kept me captive. He abruptly began once more.

“‘Burn away with me.’

‘I’m not ready for the black carriage.’

The great big bear, black as the hate and greed in all men’s hearts, dotted with all the souls of men lost to hate and greed, emerged into the light of the undying fire. It was larger now. The bear had grown to the size of the young man’s factory.

‘Burn away with me,’ This grand bear whispered the words as it laid its grand paw onto the undying fire. Motionless, its grand limbs became consumed by the fire. A swirl of ceaseless screams sprang forth from the bears’ great maw. Screams of all men lost. The young man stood in the light of the undying fire king. His highness is not dead, but his majesty, instead, has been utterly changed into fire.

‘Why not be utterly changed into fire’

The young man walked into the fire king’s open maw. The fire king’s undying light shone upon the bustling cities moving with life, and for a moment the people who turned the

cogs, observed the wheels, and owned the foundations ceased to move. Knowing well that there is stillness in however much we move; we are all bound to remain completely still.”

“Yes, remain completely still, my friend, but soon you will move mountains.”

Chapter Five

Glass Arrows and Imaginary Enemies

Airships hover above all of us creatures too small for sight. Leviathans of Carpathia. Their shadows swamp and inundate the ruined shanties of the city. Only the leafy satellites remain untouched, I guess. The sea beasts overhead are our calling card, the trick ace, the reason Carpathia has been able to throw its military might to and fro. Massive deployers of armed combatants, assault vehicles and weaponry. Automated with the exception of Con and Dispatch. These are the horsemen. And now, we have to do everything we can to evade these wraiths. Easier said than done. Standard issue body armor comes equipped with visual and audio recording, and playback signal sent straight to Con on one of those mother fuckers that hovers hundreds of feet over our heads. They will definitely send more. It's pretty much a guarantee that I popped a red flag for killing a Parade. And once they see the playback, well, I'm not sure how it happened, myself. They will be curious, to say the least. Hell, I'm curious. I know what I saw, and I know what I felt. It was the haze. It came from me. Abbe, what did you do to me? No time for that question. No matter how stupefied I'm left. For now, we stay low and move fast.

These streets are breathing fire. I've drug Ben a block or so away from what used to be the school ground. That ashen grave. Ben hasn't spoken a word. None of this horror phases him. I can't blame the guy. No man should outlive their children. No man should be so close to saving their child and fail so blatantly. I didn't drop that atrocious bomb or rod of the gods, but I might

as well have. I had no clue that someone decided it was a good idea to bomb a goddammed school. Who could have the lack of basic compassion to allow that shit to happen? I look at Benjamin and nothing, in that blazing instant his facial features sank. His eyes are almost as dead as Abbe's were. Almost.

Blood red summer heat. It's already hotter than hell in the Levant, but with the heat of the artillery and bombardment fires boiling the blood of civilians it's nearly sickening. Goddammit, they've seen me. They wouldn't give me the chance to explain. One look and shoot on sight. That's how the WSF guys are trained. Only one step away from murderous belligerent robots. Down the street, about a kilometer or so, I can make out some regular troops. The top brass must've shipped out the Death Parade to lead the assault, hence the savagery. If they find us, as of now, I'll have to defend us and then this shitty situation compounds. Fuck. A rock and a hard place.

Stay focused. The streets on this side of the city are pretty narrow. Big mecha can't plow through here. I mean, they could, but there would be virtually no maneuverability. The shanties have a gaudy amount of scrap metal overhang. Pilots would have to blast it all to hell, but then deal with the worst kind of footing and visibility. Zero sum. In reality our biggest challenge will be the foot troopers. And the Death Parade. We got quite a bit of cover from the cars either destroyed or abandoned. Solid cover ducking in and out of tight alleys and back passages. The only true safe place will be outside the city wall.

"Alright Ben, you don't have to respond, I get it, but you're going to have to follow whatever orders I give. We are going to run. Run as low and as fast as humanly possible. Stick to the cars scattered on the road. We're gonna head South-ish 'till we reach the Old Town walls. From there, all of your suburbs should hide us no problem" Deadpan delivery. Deadpan

reception. His eyebrows gain a little bend. Maybe a wheel or two started turning. He'll come to, eventually. "Alright, do you see down the street?" I point, motioning past the rubble, destroyed shops and apartments and cars. "Foot troops are heading back toward the....," I can't bring myself to say it out loud. ", where we came from. As soon as this brigade passes, we move."

"Why do this?" No sign of emotion. Exuding indifference. "You were going to kill me. You came with them. You came here to kill us. I, I, ...," A strong concoction of anger and pain swelled in his low, gravelly voice. "I'm ready. To die, I mean. You can kill me or throw me to these dogs." The emotional turbulence smoothed to mostly heated anger. He did well to control and suppress a wrathful torment I don't think another man could match. "You. All of you took my daughter. You took our children. That shell fell square atop the schoolhouse. That was premeditated and targeted. That was nothing but genocide." His eyes, filled with a crystalized hate, turn to me. I agree with him.

"I did not come with these guys, first off. Second, we don't have time for this bullshit right now! I can't let them kill you. I can't kill you!"

"Why!?"

"I don't fucking know!" I do know, but do I have the courage to admit that I face an ethical dilemma so strong to make me buckle? I don't think so.

"Please, just let me die. You don't owe me anything."

"Ben, just shut the fuck up." I would be worried about the volume of my shout, but I'm pretty certain I can't be heard over grounded shells. My companion falls silent. Harsh words, but even results. His anger still churns regardless of his lack of action. Benjamin, being a taller/hairier man, looks ape-like in his couched inward stance. *MES*. That implant. No doubt that the state contracted, and sponsored engineering firm was one of the primary targets for

bombardment. No doubt that this implant and others like it are still sending signals outward. No doubt exists in me that WSF intel is tracking these implanted individuals for a swift reduction of staff.

“Benjamin, I have bad news.” Dammit. I don’t want to do this to the guy. He closes his eyes and prepares himself for whatever may come. “I’m gonna have to take that out of you.” I point to his slender wrist. “They’ll find us, find you, kill us, kill you with this in you.”

“Take the whole wrist. Maybe you’ll drain my blood in the process.” He thrusts it in my face. I take his hand and reach into my pockets.

“Bite on this. It’s gonna hurt. Real fuckin’ bad.” I hand him my knife case. Hard leather with a wood backbone. “I just have to cut beneath the skin. That clock face isn’t too deep.” He snatches the knife case and grinds his molars into the leather. This seems to be a necessary act of aggression to channel his frustration. “Alright, ready or not.” The tip of my blade pressures laterally down on his wrist. He suddenly jolts. Spits out the knife handle.

“Wait! Wait! Hold on a minute!” He throws his empty palm up signaling me to stop. “Just wait! Let me try to call my wife! To see, see if she’s alright. I need to know if she made it through the bombing. Please.”

“Little chance that Laura is alive.” What use would it be trying to console a man in his precarious position?

“At least let me try to call her or something! I beg you! Please Mister,” I had resigned to appease any such request from Heladiv about twenty minutes ago. “Curses and curses to all of your kind.” I guess he likens me to a cold and morose animal who has never known love for another equally vicious animal.

“Be my guest.” I lightly loosen my hold on his forearm. A suspicious eye is casted at me as he snaps the clock face side of his wrist to his eye level, still squatting. Still can’t blame him. He ultimately has no reason to freely give his trust to an invader. Especially not to a strange man who openly admitted to spying in his family and had fully prepared to murder him. And all of that lay just twenty minutes in the past. It’s almost too much for one to process. Well, if I find it a challenging series of events to wrap my head around, then someone like Benjamin must be collapsing under the absurd pressure of his new reality. His muted behavior, given his obvious affliction, read like a self-evident proof. He swipes his free hand in a check mark motion over the illuminated clock face. This gesture opens the top half of the face, three to nine, displaying a new symbol resembling a telephone receiver made of two long dashes connected at a slight angle and two much smaller dashes under the end segments of the longer pair.

“Call Laura.” Heladiv articulated in that way one often does to ensure he could not be misunderstood. Although he meant to sound clear as glass, He pleaded as his voice wavered, revealing he too expected the worst. Say the call goes through: I give him a few precious moments, the signal is intercepted, and they send a Parade. Fine enough. I cut the transmitter out of his flesh, and we ran like hell. So, no changes in the plan. An audible vibration is emitted from the implant. It rings, searching for a recipient for a little more than a dozen seconds. A low brief vibration alerts Benjamin that it couldn’t connect or simply there was nobody there. He begins crying slowly. The tears escalate to sobbing. “Call Laura.” The same sequence of vibrations ending in failure. “Call my wife.” He cries, a crushed man. “Call anyone.” His begging will go unanswered. However, I don’t wish to be the one to make that point painfully obvious. I’ve indulged his self-abuse long enough. I’ve had my fill. Benjamin releases the tension keeping his

body crouching. He slumped to the dirt and cement, the small of his back to the brick wall standing behind. No time to mince words now.

“Alright, Ben.” I take his forearm in one hand and give him the knife cover with the other. He takes it, and for a brief moment of emotional exhaustion, pauses before inserting the cover into his mouth. I angle the knife across his aging skin. “You ready?”

“...” he just looked at me. Glowing with the purity of sadness beyond hyperbole and anger destructive enough to burn whatever settlement would inevitably be resurrected here straight to the fucking ground. Apply pressure. He keeps his body limp, readily accepting all pain. I won't prolong the inevitable. The blade saws and cleaves a clean and narrow stretch atop his wrist. About six centimeters.

“O' God!” He is in agony. Lover, the Lord has left us. I have to break deeper beneath. My blade plunges to my approximation of where the implant lies. Now, at this moment blood starts to flow. Ben jerks forcefully and begins to shake. This kind of incision without a numbing agent is probably going to send him into shock. Whatever color was left in his face was drained. Cold sweats and roars of shrill pain. I'm done with the cut. I give a courtesy tap to locate the implant.

“Easy part's done.” Shakingly, Ben is gasping for air. “Brace yourself.” I use the tip of the knife to pry his skin open as much as I can and poke my index and middle fingers in the bloody void. Warm and tough. Dig further, millimeter by millimeter. Benjamin intuitively is extremely combative. I rail my back to pin him to the brick wall and bar his forearm. Dig in Heladiv's blood and flesh. Almost. There! I feel a vague plastic form. A round edge. A quick glance backward. I hope he sees my signal. I rip what I can grab with my two fingers out as fast

as I can. There's a lot of blood; honestly more than I anticipated. With my fingers no longer penetrating his body, the shaking has eased to a consistent quiver. "Now run!"

He looks at me incredulously. Sadly, I'm not joking in any capacity. I get a fistful of his collar and bolt out of the tight alley and into the ravaged street. Immediately we heave in clouds of dust and a faint taste of blood. Slamming Ben on the first abandoned car in the street, I peek my head over the roof just enough to see if there are any troops, or worse a Parade, heading our way. All clear. Hop to another car. This one is missing a fifteen-centimeter diameter cylinder along the passenger side. Still good to cross. Sprint to the next alley. Rinse and repeat. We can make this nice and slow. Well, in a damn fast kind of way. Aside from the general look of nausea, Ben seems to be just peachy. I mean, minus the blood escaping his body at a discouraging rate. He just needs to stay conscious with me long enough to get the hell out of here.

The old city walls encompass the southern municipal border. Leading North like the hilt of an antique crossbow is the main boulevard, God's Canvas. The townsfolk kept the name from centuries of tradition. I think the Bronze Age merchants and farmers were under the assumption their God was going to paint prosperity into the life of their fair city. All it takes is extreme devotion to mercantile culture and suppression of possible rivals. Riches and affluence lay at the tip end of the sword. That sacred message was codified implicitly in antiquity by the words of God. Little did they know they were right, for a short while. Then it abruptly gained the blizzard of hell on earth known as the war of modernity. Obviously, the city outgrew the old city walls. To the east suburbanization developed in pockets of the squalid sprawl far reaching to the small limbs of a river. The northern expansion was for industry. For well over two thousand years this city held the same name. However, after the implosion of the near-Eastern powers following the

retraction of Western intervention, the new autocrats made this city the new capital of the state and named it Barabbas. It's a grand kind of irony that the same withering of Western influence is what gave birth to the Carpathian Bloc. As standard within their anti-theistic crusade, the SLN forbade the usage of Barabbas' prior name, and swiftly wiped away clean any mention of the original name from all things within her borders. Not being born here pretty much ensures that I never knew the name anyhow.

At this point the Northern half of the city was certainly rumbling. If my money could talk, I know it would say that the municipal structures (council house/ courthouses/ transportation center/ engineering corps/ planning staff house/ commerce center/ etc) are all destroyed. Cut off all the heads of the hydra in one fell swoop, then burn the open wounds to close them. Sow the fields with salt and spare the Roman children nightmares of the ever-menacing Carthaginian.

Patience. We made it across the first street unscathed. This pace would put us at about an hour and a half to get clear of the Southern wall. Shells were still falling maybe half a kilometer North-West of us. This kamikaze was ingenious. Strike the main artery of the Levantine, and consequently the SLN party who would surely try to reorganize and counterattack, like a concentrated assault to destroy the T-cells before antibodies flood the system and produce a counter offensive. Rupture the nucleus. Kill kill kill la kill. No doubt the air assault ships slipped past all anti-air radar and missile defense systems easily. Carpathian Bloc originally "bought" the best software engineers from around the world to sell out trade secrets from other governments. Bought perhaps isn't the best word to describe a well-organized initiative and conspiracy to effectively own those tech bastards one way or another. Covert violence was the most lucrative bargaining tool to employ these most useful folk from around the world. Nevertheless, however

they were absorbed into the war machine they now live as treacherous expats and live carefully monitored for the moment of electronic reprisal to be swiftly discarded. Those sky giants were cloaked with the best digital disguise that money can buy or a bunch of men with guns extorted. I'm sure, however, that there are other Carpathian rouges here just as I am; to kill. I, personally, drove right through a port of entry using a fake passport.

The shooting in the distance is starting to cycle through spells of hushed one-offs to mean bone rattling. The periods between burst fire are becoming longer. We made it down three more blocks. Essentially three valleys separated by streets at a downward trend of destruction. I figure a couple more blocks until we reach pockets untouched by the invasion. We've been lucky in dodging any roves or forward assaults. We might have slipped past the last wave. If only that could be true, then no worries on the matter of getting away from here. Ben looks a bit better. A little more fortified. A little less worse for wear. Just get my head past the corner. Anything? Earthen shroud of dust-colored buildings to my left and sapling laden streets to my right.

"Tag!" From across the way, the next node in our path, there is a rifleman kneeling. He is waving in quick succession for the rest of his patrol to advance. He had spotted us.

"Ditto on tag," Another popped up behind the first with a large case on his back. They don't know if we're unarmed. It would be bad practice to charge head-first across the street to us. I'll meet their advance with the fire of my own rifle. Not that I'm good, but I'm a fucking surgeon when it comes to aiming. I can't feel my rifle. Fuck me. What? When did I lose it? The school grounds? It had to be. This all of a sudden became fairly grim. No choice but to run back and try to dodge them. A handful rotate to the front, all with cases on their backs. Son of a bitch. They're all operators. In their position, why take chances? The four with cases lay them on the

sidewalk and retreat into the alley. There's no way to climb or get higher ground. This is bullshit!

“Head back!” I pull Heladiv with all my strength and start running to escape our alley and break out to the prior street. Those cases the operators were carrying, in unison, are pushed upright by three segmented legs. Once vertical, the reciprocating side spouts three more. All this to reveal their true form: insectoid drones. Made to be highly agile over most solid terrains and built with six stabilizing gyros for the truest aim. Devilish little contraptions. To my right, the building looks to be some restaurant or another. Who truly cares? All that matters is that it has more than one story. The door: glass and swinging. I push Ben inside and drag him to the back. Around one corner and eureka! Stairs! Ben is moving his feet like a champ. The sound of the many robotic-insectoid legs swarming toward us is pressing. Bangs ring as they shoot out the glass of the street facing facade. Windows were probably double paneled, judging from the vacuous boom. Room. Room. Door. Door. Shit. In one of them we go. Out The window. We might be able to lose the little buggers.

“I'm going to jump out this, Ben. When I land, you jump, and I'll catch you.”

“...,” Wasting precious seconds. “Fine.” Reluctance is an emotion that he wears well. Three meters or so. I've jumped from worse. I land without cause for concern.

“Benjamin, let's go!” I waved. I was surprised with what ease Heladiv casted himself over the edge. I don't think it's due to trust in my strength. I catch him and release his scrappish body to the ground.

“Stay as you are! You're surrounded.” The trooper leader and the gang of operators, decked out in gray and faint yellow digital camouflage and black body armor, gingerly engrossed Benjamin and myself. More cams to playback footage of our faces, dead or otherwise. These

marauders seem so sure of themselves. They obviously did not track us here because of the school ground incident. Say that were the case, Ben and I would be dead as leaves. Just incredibly bad luck heaped upon us; raked together in piles to be burned beneath the frozen trees. Heladiv has had it. If there were fight in him, its ember is a whisper away from blowing out into the void.

“You’re making a mistake,” No harm in trying to reason. “I’m one of you.”

“Keep your damn mouth shut if you like breathing.” A couple of the operators move in closer with their rifles fixed to our brow-line.

“I’m one of you! I’m Carpathian!” I empty my lungs screaming in my native tongue.

“No, you are a snake.” For some reason, as he scorned me in our native language, my soul buckled. Words as heavy as an iron curtain. I look like a Levantine. In their clothes from the weeks fading into their crowds, eating their food, stalking their sons and daughters. This troop leader is right to denounce me. I would do the same.

“What will you do to us?”

“Surrogate camps, for now. Bullets for when you piss me off.” They want to work us to death. Pillage and cripple up-and-coming nations; neuter any potential adversaries and make the able bodies de-facto slaves. A biblical approach for a fairly secular society. No, we will be fed into this bullshit on bad luck alone. Come on. Come on. Abbe, you bastard, I know you gave me that damned blue cloud stuff. I need it. I know you erased a jungle, invaded my head, and destroyed men. I need all that right now, in the heat of this battle for our freedom, and then maybe later, our lives. Come on. I refuse to be beholden to serendipity and chance. Come on.

“Walk, now, pissants,” The operators fiddle with the control devices on their wrist, and we immediately can hear the exact rattling of the drones’ legs scurrying back to our position. Once

reunited with their masters, they drop in a vertical perch and retract to the figure of a case. Noses of rifle ends prod us to move forward. I know that haze is with me. It came out to save us once before. Why not now? Fuck. Fuck. Come on. That's all we got to help us get out of this prisoner situation. Muster up that image. That feeling. That feeling. Remember that serene fear and panic. Remember the transcendental survival instinct. Walking toward the central thoroughfare: God's Canvas. We won't be fucking slaves. Come on. Find that feeling of weightlessness, gotta conjure it. Find it in my depths.

They got us walking over the many dead, lying motionless on the dust and pavement. I've been racking my brain for about ten minutes of this death march. Nothing. It's like that sensation never rang through my nerves. I'm not going to give up. Trick myself! I'm going to die. I'm going to die. I don't want to die! I'm going to die. Dammit! I don't want to die! Heart rate escalated through the roof. Sweat. Sweat bullets. I don't want to die. Rage. Gnash. Maul. Draw blood. Fight endless wars for fair Helen. Wars for Venus. Holy Ergaster, dwell within me. Feed me all the hate gathered by countless generations of bloodshed. Give me your lust for taking life. There! Hooray for zero G.

The trooper's bodies feel as dead as the carcasses in the street. They're alive for now, but as my fingertips singe with the heat of anticipation, my mind has already determined their fate. That's right. See Heladiv and myself as without defense. I'll raise my head and let that blue haze burn through my eyes. Kill then run. The assault vehicles and mecha are regrouping a kilometer or so ahead.

"Ben," I say, sure of myself. A confidence only I know is too true to deny. "Get the fuck down." I don't have to look at him to know he has dropped to the ground. I understand at the very least I don't have to move my hands. So, I visualize the blue cloud encircling my waist.

Feel it rip outward. Faster than light. Faster than the nerve impulses traveling through their spines telling their brains that they are rendered divorced. A separation of limbs that extend above and limbs that root below. Clean sheer. An instant is all it takes to visualize and meditate on that sensation and manifest it in reality. A second after I command Heladiv to hit the ground. I unleash the spiraling, razor-like galaxy of smoke around my waist. It projects out and cuts right through the troopers. Before they can react, the death blow is dealt. Stopped in their tracks, solidly planted, they all fall. The recoil of the razor cloud made way to the buildings lining the street. Satisfaction can't describe this feeling. I am the same kind of monster, I suppose. "You alright?" Ben is slowly coming to terms with what just transpired.

"You're the devil." He tells me flatly. I have nothing to retort. "Curse all this, this, death." To be honest, I feel liberated. Almost indestructible. Luckily, I've seen what this haze can do. The holy spirit of Mars. My holy spirit now. Our little tango drew attention from the squadrons up ahead. I squint to try and make out any definite shapes and eventual targets. Over the scattered cars and toppled buildings, I can see the mecha giants emerge proper vanguards of gray and black. The sun was burning red as it hung immobile in the smoldering and shrinking sky. The heat signaled a shift to midafternoon. Clear cut. Should we run? I think I can take them. I might need to re-evaluate....

"God! Dammit!"

I've been shot. A sniper fucking shot me. Shot my fucking left shoulder! There's blood. Fuck! It hurts. Dammit!

"Ahhhhhhh, mother fucker!" It burns. "Ben," I turn to him as he's pulling himself up. "Run." They shot again! Missed both of us and hit the dirt and cement at our feet. If there is a god, then this fuckin' day is definitely divine punishment for a life forsaken in the shadows.

“Run!” He’s off. I catch my breath. It hurts so much. To breathe. The blood is being wicked through my shirt. My holy spirit. I hold up my hand as a shield. The spirit of Mars coalesces just as I demand: in front as my vanguard. At least I have control. A shimmer passes over at an angle. I didn’t feel the rebound of the bullet, but it deflected all the same. I need to turn tail. Stick to the original plan. It’s not the time for delusions of grandeur.

Turn. Tail. Evade. Escape. What is that? Thunderclap booms all around. In the faces of the squadrons, pluming with blistering heat, a Carpathian airship crashed atop of the tallest buildings lining God’s Canvas. Towering clouds roll beneath the fire bulb and are vaulted upward in the heat draft. The troopers ahead, I see them either topple and keel over or duck for cover behind their assault vehicles. The top of the plume is breaking off in a bluish tinge. Now I’m confused. That wasn’t me. A massive blue tendril shoots into the sky above and latches to another airship. Waves of spine-chilling dread wash over me. A wave crests through the tendril and spikes the sky leviathan. The second crash is louder and hotter and more massive than the first. The troops start firing in the direction of the first crash. They see it. I’ve seen it. I know why they are screaming.

enter //Abbe// blue demon

How? Why is he here? And in a flash, a tsunami in dark, fluorescent blue washes the entirety of God’s Canvas’ North end. The squadrons were bashed into the facades of the buildings opposite of the crash site. It’s a force strong enough to break any bone, tear any metal joint, rip all rivets. Such an efficient death-stroke.

“Calaban...” It’s his voice. It roars down the way. An inflection slight enough to hear his shit-eating grin. “Calaban,” He calls my name again. I don’t care. I know better than to answer; to stay. I haven’t heard my name called in a long time. “Come now, boy. I know you can hear

me!” He’s well over a kilometer away and I hear him as if he was standing with me, shoulder to shoulder. A soul crushing laugh. Maniacal and menacing. The subconscious self moves my conscience feet. “Calaban...” Abbe reaches out his hand. One thought of malevolence is all he needs to wipe out a city block. Which he does. God’s Canvas is awashed in a deep, red stained, ocean. Shimmer with bodies and metal. Don’t waste time. Evacuate. Abbe is a god of destruction. Level one block after another. Flood chasing me. Run. Run. I hear his damned laugh in my ear. “Calaban... No need to run, my friend.” I’ve lost Ben. Done all I could for him. Now, I stare down death. My black carriage. Abbe’s cloud condensed into a flood that seems to be wiping away the defiled history of this day. It was sweeping the dead under concrete rugs. His holy water encroaching; densening clouds splashing at my feet. I’m the next to be swept away. He aims to drown us all and crush everything. I can’t outrun this. I plant my feet and muster all the images I’ve ever seen of walls. So tall that they merge at the vertical horizon. Solid with brick and cinder. “Calaban!”

“No!” I translate all that fear into the blue haze and fashion myself barrier. I shape the spirit of Mars into a beak on the face of the barrier that retards the onslaught and diverges the wave-head. “Go away!” I don’t care to sound like a child. Ten years later I’ll still feel like one when I think of what he can do. My wall holds up surprisingly well. Push it forward. “Fuck you!” Slam its nose down. In the wake of the oncoming geyser, I finally have cover. Run. Run. Run. Escape.

PART TWO

Gangster

Chapter Six

Hearts Alive Quintessence

A man saw only a dune studded with rocks, jagged and porous, and topped with a solid stoneface at the zenith in a formation that could be mistaken as almost a regular polygon. Rugged and bronzed, the man stood stoutly letting his mind wander through a maze of confusion. With no recollection of how he came to the foot of the great dunes, his head on a swivel, he peered in all directions to find any clue. The mid-summer sun continued to beat down on his well-worn, broad shoulders for an indeterminate spectrum of time. In the face of the great dunes no sound prevailed. Wind was absent; blocked by the colossal alabaster sand towers. The immediate silence in front of him and the clashing void it left blinded the man of the settlement to his rear. It lay in the bowl-like basin surrounded by the dunes, siphoning heat gathered from the noon sun in all directions. The man squinted to render the details of the settlement visible. However, the heat sink of the basin cloaked it in deep ripples like a common mirage. The man knew after only a few brief moments his eyes could not overcome the massive heat waves. That instant of clarification preceded a deafening ring through the air around his head. The sun directly overhead faded in the white light that flashed. The smell of sulfur and metastasizes filtered into his awareness. Instinctively, he cupped his hands to shade his face and look upward. A ring of smoke appeared in the sky from the place behind the sun, from the center of which a

blue flame came hurtling down. The man understood the impending doom awaiting the settlement below and strained to yell out to the people therein. Ignoring any intuition or impression that the residents had the same visual prowess as he, the man strained. All that effort to no avail. The desert heat had parched his tongue in physical ability and linguistic faculties. And so, the blue flame crashed into the settlement and the man heard the cries of men, women and children. They all burned in the flame not immediately devoured by the impact. The man mustered strength and courage to move forward but try as he might to take a step down the great alabaster dune-face it would rebuke him by spewing sand atop his feet. He would become inundated to a greater extent for every iota of struggle. Confused as he was, the man quickly came to terms with the revelations of futility. The sense of helplessness overwhelmed him and filled his heart with a great shame. Cries and cries spat dead words at his sinking feet. Poetry of the dead. Men burning in a blue summer heat. Women charred as husks to protect their children. Shame swelled as his head hung low, choking in sobs with a dull predilection of kin. Soon thereafter, for an uncertain length of time, the blue light of the hurtling flame was yet again superseded by the sun.

The man was not privy to why he took the melting of the settlement so personally. The details didn't matter, because the pain in his heart was just as real. The great dune forbade him from traveling down, and the weight on his heart was too strong to stay in place and witness prolonged pain. So, he thought to himself that up the dune face was the only option. His short, rough fingers dug into the mounting sands, white as snow and equally free of resistance. Hot and blistering shards of rock that felt like persistent embers were the only foe to be found in the sands. To his surprise, the dune didn't fight the man as he wrought his feet out to undertake the climb upward. Both his hands and feet were molded by years of working an unyielding earth like

thick caste iron speckled with imperfections and malformations from a beaten dye. Now, they seeped into the sands for leverage as easy as the plow into terra tabula rasa.

“There you go. You can climb,” A soft voice belonging to a young girl hummed in the man’s ear. “Climb higher.”

“Who are you? Where am I? Illyana?”

“Daddy, we are here. We can’t be anywhere else. We can’t be down there. Those people are dead. We have to let them go.” The man paused and lifted his rough hands out of the sand in bewilderment. “Don’t stop now. Daddy, we can’t go back down to the city.” He saw her in a flash as if she were floating just above the surface. With the blink or using the back of his wrist to wipe his eyes, she disappeared.

“What do you mean? You are my daughter? Where are you?” He continued to plow upward.

“I am with you. I might not be in the sand or on the stone top, but I am alongside your shoulders. I am a voice in your ear. Don’t worry that you can’t see me just yet. I’ll be waiting on the other side of the sand. All you have to do is climb and never fall down to the burning city. Daddy, you won’t lose me.” The voice of the young girl vanished leaving nothing in the way of sound. The man’s will became galvanized by the promise of meeting his daughter behind the dunes. He bent to the knee for leverage and began climbing with manic fervor. He soon reached the point of transition from the sand sea to the hard stone which stood at a newfound verticality. Scaling the face of the zenith required little more exertion. Finally, he broke free to see the horizon and his heart sank deeper than the basin of the great dunes. As he looked out, all he saw was an endless field of dune bowls, pot marks in the skin of the desert. They were giant pits, each with a burning city in their center. All burning with a blue flame. There was no end that he

could bear witness. The man dropped, possessor of a broken will. How could he continue to swim through the sand sea that has no end? Futility was the only word his mind could summon.

His daughter was gone. She could not be behind something that has no beginning or end.

“Illyana.”

“Illyana, stop being so loud. Let your old father sleep.” Yusuf sprawled across the majority of his moderately sized bed.

Not even morning sun was breaking through his bedroom windows. Too early to be up. All of his lightweight blankets were pushed to the edge of the bed. His modest house, as a whole, was far too warm even in the desert night. Profuse sweating from confusing mirage-like dreams did not help much either. The day was not far into the AM and here was Yusuf’s daughter, Illyana at the side of his bed, not so quietly begging for his ability to comfort her with her own struggles as a victim of parasomnia. Pitch-black, tightly curled hair and eyes wide open and full of awareness; Illyana shook her father with her grossly thin hands.

“Dad,” She swallowed air to quench a subtle fear of her father’s reprisal. “Dad, I can’t sleep in my room. I can’t. It’s too,” She began to sob gently. Seemingly, it was like a backflow orifice in a check valve to prevent an eruption. “I’m scared.”

“Why? There are no monsters. You’re old enough to know that. Demons don’t like to eat people like us. We’re too skinny.” Yusuf chuckled. He often amused himself with a palette for dark humor. But he just as quickly understood it was too early and she was too young and scared to be subjected to his musings. “My angel, what scared you?”

“I don’t know,” She cried gently. “I don’t know. There was so much. You and Mom, and I was gone. Mom, she, we couldn’t find her again. She was gone. They took her. Daddy, I don’t want to go back to sleep. Her,” Illyana paused to catch her breath. Her word salad was the sign of

some explosive and confusing emotions welling up in the small girl. “Then they wanted to take me too.”

“My angel, who is ‘they’? Illyana, it was just a dream. You don’t have to be afraid. It’s just a dream.” Yusuf rose from bed and held his daughter and pressed her head to his shoulder.

“I don’t want to go back to sleep, Daddy. Please don’t make me go back to sleep.” She whimpered the words just outside of his ear. Yusuf felt a pang of dread. He only had a faint sense that this scene was out of sorts. He couldn’t recall the source, but it didn’t matter much. For now, all he knew to be was an involved father.

“Well, if we’re up, we’re up.” Yusuf stretched out a yawn. He pulled her back far enough to show her a ragged smile. The look he conveyed to her was of inferred condolence. “And if we’re up, work starts. I hope you’re ready for a long painful day. I’m going to need your help with a combine. Your tiny little fingers are perfect for holdin’ on to those small nuts and bolts. And you can fit underneath it, so I don’t have to!” Illyana didn’t let go of her grimace. Her throat still quivered from the withheld tears. “Come now, my angel.” Yusuf jolted up attempting to arouse a smile from surprise. It worked, if only slightly. “If we can get that last combine working again, we can go down to the city tomorrow and splurge a little to celebrate.” The terrors of Illyana’s sleep start to be replaced by this light of optimism.

“Oh k, but I’ll hold you to it, Daddy.” After a hearty breakfast of whatever Yusuf could scrounge, potato cakes, the two step out of the small cottage. The morning air was crisp and felt like it would cut right through your body. Their small plaster and wooden house sat square in a sprawling family of fields. The fields were sectioned off into giant circles. About half of the circles were cut down to the stalk, and the other half stood tall. One could only see blocks of color from the standing crops: gray, yellow, white, and some blue-ish green. Nearly a kilometer’s

walk south lay a barn like structure, tightly barred. As Yusuf approached, they both heard a drone-like buzzing emanating from the barn.

“Euler, L’hospital, Eigen.” Yusuf said aloud with an inflection of command. Illyana skip stepped behind her father’s confident stride. The buzz swiftly wound down. Yusuf then placed his stout, rugged hand on a mat-black pad connected at an angle beside the barn entrance which was covered by horizontal bars and beams. Barely a beep could be heard from this transaction before the very audible clang of metal and rotors drew back the iron curtain and reverberated possibly for kilometers in either direction. The scene was silent enough otherwise. Only the sound of a dry and cold breeze existed here naturally. The door opened outward upon retracting the barricade and revealed a fairly large space inside. Yusuf used the barn to store things like tools and other useful knickknacks, but primarily it stored three massive combines. Machines designed to autonomously devour and process all the grains of his fields. “Leibniz, Newton off to sow.” Yusuf employed his commanding tone again and two of the combines geared on. Illyana ran out of the way when she heard engines and other motorized arms start revving. Whenever both titans have vacated, the pair of would-be mechanics had plenty of space to work. “Yeah, my angel, ol’ Pascal came back to base early yesterday. Diagnostics shut him down in place. The old boy’s monitor showed a hydraulic leak. Probably got it from a ditch somewhere out there. Problem is that hydraulic leak seems to be hiding deep in the joint of that right feeder arm. So, naturally we have to disassemble the whole blasted joint, motor connections and all.” The young girl didn’t flinch. She never took her eyes off of Pascal. Her father proudly watched her size up the towering machine.

Noon sun. Yusuf and Illyana worked for somewhere in the ballpark of six hours. Most of the time was devoted to part removal and careful storage. Bolts, nuts, washers, electrical and

hydraulic lines; they all were dutifully placed in clearly distinguished areas demarcated on the barn workbench. Once the motor operator of the joint was removed, the feeder arm was chain hoisted down safely. Yusuf, covered in a glaze of sweat, huffed sober-eyed at their progress.

“Angel, we’ll stop here for now. It’ll take maybe an hour to dig in that joint and find the leak. Won’t take but a couple minutes to patch the blasted thing, but maybe another seven to put it all back together.” He looked at Illyana with a deserved smile. “So, let’s take a break and we’ll come back to patch the leak in a bit. Worry about reconstruction tomorrow. Newton and Leibniz are still kicking strong, so we won’t go hungry.” He laughed. “Let’s head back home and eat a little. We’ll come back in an hour or so.”

“I like that plan.” Illyana was visibly tired as well. Maybe not physically, but mentally out of steam from the tedious work. The pair began walking back to the cottage and made it halfway when the sensation of someone lurking and staring crept over their spines. Yusuf jolted and feverishly scanned the fields. He felt a surge of alarm.

“Angel, crouch down. Get low.” He let the words flow, low pitched and muted. He placed his hand on Illyana’s petite shoulder. With a subtle pressure he physically persuaded her action. Yusuf attuned his ears for a rustling of the grain. No wind. He should have been able to hear someone make their way through the fields.

“Daddy, what’s wrong?” Concern.

“Nothing, darling. Just try to keep quiet for a second.” Yusuf didn’t allow a hint of stress in his voice. North, East, then West. Nothing. Perimeter security alarms didn’t trigger. He understood the unlikelihood of an intruder all the way out here, invading a farm, no less. He relaxed some of the pressure he yoked upon his daughter. Might just be in his head, he thought to himself. But He couldn’t let go of a vague sense of weight in the atmosphere. He exerted no

force on Illyana, but he kept his hand secured to her, just in case. There it was again! To the South. He felt it. Something was on its way. Yusuf strained his vision to make out any form through the fields. A man. Not far from them. On the contrary, he was walking straight to them. Yusuf maneuvered his daughter to stand behind him as he took a more protective and aggressive stance. No alarms. No sirens. No security had been triggered. Impossible. When the man walking through the fields was about a hundred meters away Yusuf hollered: "Hello there," His tone was as assertive as he could muster. Yusuf didn't expect a cordial reply.

"Hello, my friend!" The figure in the distance waved vigorously. Yusuf was immediately confused by the eagerness of the intruder. The figure was easy enough to make out and it was clear that whoever it was had no intention of hiding. He was draped in a pitch-black shroud, and that darkest of black was too loud against the faded yellows, grays, and whites of the fields for any eye to ignore. "Hello over there," This figure didn't sound dangerous. "I'm sorry to impose on you, like this. But, my friend, you see, I have been traveling for a long, tiresome journey." Yusuf felt no hostility riding on the man's words.

"Who are you, sir?" Yusuf could begin to detect the features of the man. Very thin, dark molasses skin, bald scalp, much older, eyes closed. This figure certainly didn't seem foreboding.

"Oh, me? My friend, I am nobody. Just a traveler. No one important. Just a weathered old vagrant." He came into the arm's reach of the father and daughter and stuck out his hand to greet the shrouded stranger. Yusuf remained skeptical. This man, somehow, evaded the perimeter sensors. Must have been dumb luck, reasoned the father. But there was no malevolence emanating from his presence. Yusuf met the stranger's hand and shook. "You can call me Abbe." He smiled.

"Yusuf,"

“Pleasure to meet you. I hope I didn’t get in the way of your work. Uh, whatever it is you were doing.” He gestured his hands in a rolling motion.

“No, not at all. No need to worry. We just finished for a lunch break, my daughter and I, that is. Never mind all that for now. Sir, what are you doing around here? Pardon my bluntness, but our farm is not close to a direct road to the city.”

“It is, coming from my direction,” Abbe laughed. “In fact, your field lands are a pleasant break from the rocks and sand just beyond those hills.” He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. “I’ve been walking this way for weeks now. Trying to get all the way up to the city. It’s been, oh I don’t know, maybe twenty years. And now she calls”

“Walk for weeks? Through the desert alone?”

“Sure, my friend. Why not?” Abbey kept a wide smile.

“No disrespect, sir, but you’re not exactly the safest age to carry on a journey like that by yourself! You must need water! Where, where are your provisions?”

“Don’t worry about that heat knocking me over. At my age, I get to choose how I go.”

“Regardless, sir, you must need water. I insist you have lunch with us.” Yusuf felt safe inviting this traveler. He had welcomed this Abbe so easily. His reaction came as a surprise to himself. Never mind concern for a stranger, he could never endanger his daughter. Still, he couldn’t consciously resend the invitation. Illyana’s body never contorted from anxiety. Yusuf believed in a child’s perception of ill intent to be more innate than an adult’s. This Abbe appeared as old as the hills from whence he came. Thin layer of skin is all that covers his sunken face. He never opened his eyes. Yusuf concluded that Abbe was most likely blind. This added to an image of innocence for the wary father. “We don’t have much, but you’re welcome to join and eat and drink all you want.”

“That’s so kind of you. But, please, don’t take too much pity on me merely due to my age.” Abbe laughed, giving his most earnest smile to Illyana. Yusuf motioned in the direction of his homestead and gestured for Abbe to begin walking despite his prior assumption of this stranger’s blindness. Habits, he supposed in the moment. However, satisfied with the question of Abbe’s intent, the concerned father could not be silenced. This way he could keep their distance for the worst case. After a short, but painful, instance of innocently accrued disrespect, Yusuf verbally led Abbe to the small, isolated house. He was sure to stay a couple paces behind the stranger.

After reaching Yusuf’s modest cottage, the man of the house side-stepped to take the lead and hurriedly opened the door.

“Please, mister Abbe; Abbe, was it? Please head inside. It’s not that much cooler than out here, but at least there are chairs.” Abbe nodded, sure to convey gratitude with his closed eyes and wide smile. He walked in closely followed by Yusuf who waved for Illyana to stay outside. She caught the meaning of her father’s push to play away from this stranger. Illyana froze momentarily waiting for any other sign. When the cottage door closed, she understood her father’s orders were nonnegotiable. She could find refuge from the sun in the barn among the dissected combine.

“My friend, your home; it’s lovely. Your words do it a disservice,”

“Without disrespect, Mister Abbe, can you see it, sir?” Yusuf turned incredulously.

“One doesn’t need sight to feel when a home is, well, homey or cozy.” Abbe pointed to his left ear with his bony, glass skinned hand. “I can hear the closeness of all the things that live here. Your home is small, but filled with symbols of a full life, my friend.”

“Yusuf,”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Yusuf, my name, sir.”

“So it is,” Abbe laughed. “I do apologize. You invite a traveler into your home, and he lacks the decency to remember his host’s name.” Being this close and having sight unhindered by the white light of the desert sun, Yusuf could see the gross detail of Abbe’s nearly decrepit face. He made as strong an effort as any man could not to signal his combination of shock and disgust. The hardest reflex to suppress was the exact one which urged his rugged body to inhale excessive amounts of oxygen to fuel his adrenal responses. To Yusuf, this would be a clear sign of repulsion which surely would insult his guest. The only reasonable thing he could think to do was to look away quickly. Look at anything else. The image of this traveler left a searing brand resembling a resurrected corpse or some ancient demon painfully persisting in Yusuf’s waking mind.

“Water, sir?” He shuffled to the kitchen area, which only happened to be skipping distance from the cottage door.

“My friend, ... excuse me, Mr. Yusuf, that would be desperately appreciated.” Yusuf nodded. A moment later he handed Abbe a squat glass.

“Well sir, here we are. You know, you're lucky you stumbled onto my farm. I’m one of the few outside the city who maintains cooling and refrigerant equipment for the agricultural firm.”

“Cold water? What a luxury.”

“I don’t like to use the extra cooling too often. Gets fairly expensive, fairly quick.”

“I am honored,” Abbe bowed.

“Likewise. Please sit. Rest. I can’t imagine the exhaustion of walking all the way out here at your age. I mean no offense.” Yusuf fought all of his reflexive urges to glimpse at his guest in morbid curiosity.

“No offense taken. I do believe if I were in your place, I might have the same reservations.” He took one tight sip from the stubby cup. “I pray you never come to know the euphoric joy cold water can bring. It is a thing that one only feels after a long absence. A long and terrible absence.” Abbe chuckled lightly.

“So, what of your journey, Mister Abbe?”

“Oh, it’s not so valiant or interesting. I have a son in town.” He held the cup gently in both ghastly hands. “I came to see my boy. You know he’s so busy; working all the time he has afforded to him.”

“So, you decide to walk heaven knows how far?” Yusuf continued to avert his sight. Ironically, his repulsion did not help guide his eyes to a fixed point away from Abbe’s dank corpse.

“Well, I certainly can’t drive there!” He pointed to the sunken features of his empty eyes. “I can’t say I have the money for a bus. I haven’t had work for quite a few years. And my son doesn’t, well, let’s say he wouldn’t want to see me.”

“Estranged?”

“Something like that.”

“What’s the occasion? If you don’t mind my intrusion.” His will slipped and let a quick glimpse of death attack his senses.

“No worries, Master Yusuf. I came to save him.”

“Your son is in danger?” He asked, barely managing to inflect his skepticism from being downright offensive.

“Yes. It’s a terribly long story. I shall spare you the dirty details.” He waved the nation of a lengthy explanation out of the air. “My boy will die if I don’t go to his aide. And sadly, he doesn’t know at the present. If I tried to tell him directly, he would be likely to either run away or try to kill me!” He laughed much louder than one might expect for a man of his apparent age.

“Kill you?”

“Estranged; remember, my friend?”

“How’s he in danger?” Curiosity began to get the better of his judgment.

“The state.”

“The SLN?”

“Oh no, not a thing so trivial.” Yusuf tilted his head reflexively and swallowed his breath.

“Trivial? Sir, you might be confused.” A slight waver in his controlled facade bubbled to the surface.

“I do apologize. Believe me Master Yusuf, I do not wish to cause offense.” He raised his open palms. “This Secular Levantine Nationalist government will be crushed and become a vassal state of a European power. I do not care for their contrived plots and oppression. You see, my friend, my son has come to help that crushing. He is from that European power. He is a Carpathian.”

“Sir, are you in the right mind? The desert got the best of you, Mister. Abbe.”

“My mind hasn’t been right for longer than you can imagine.”

“How could you be so sure that what you say will happen? How could you possibly know? How is your son European?” Yusuf almost began to be giddy with disbelief before his

subconscious reclaimed control via adrenal response due to the incredible terror Abbe's presence ushered.

"He may not be my blood, but he is my future." The ghoulis features of Abbe's face lost any pretense of courteous pleasantry. "You have no need to worry. Your livelihood will remain intact. Even if one regime collapses another will take its place, and more importantly, need to eat."

"What are you talking about?"

"You are a kind man. That's easy enough to see. I want to assure you that you will be fine. The SLN will perish soon, and yet another will take its place, but at least you'll have your freedom to pay to your god."

"Beg your pardon?" Yusuf all but lost his calm exterior. He did not raise his voice, but the challenge in his tone was clear.

"Come now, my friend, the world knows of this oppression by your state. This is one but many transgressions against her people. You are in safe company. You can say what you wish. They cannot hear us." He pointed to various nooks around the cottage, indicating surveillance ports. "They won't work while I'm in your host."

"You are delusional. The desert heart overcame you in your old age." Yusuf needed to deride his guest's mental fortitude. He was afraid of what a small man in a dark room many kilometers away might hear. He was afraid to lose Illyana. And they would most certainly take everything.

"You have no reason to trust the musings of an old vagrant. Life will go on. And you will see that nobody comes pillaging your simple life." Abbe said reassuringly. "I do this kindness for you. In return, you have offered me the kindness of lodging."

“I don’t think you can stay here when my daughter sleeps under this roof. I gave you rest and water, and I will give you food. But you are not a sane man. I will not risk my daughter’s life.”

“I know.” He smiled gently. Even Yusuf, indulging in the stress of imaginary scenarios of family tragedy, eased away from a tense stance. “You will allow me the honor of sleeping in the barn with your machines.”

“Sir,” Abbe opened his eyes and Yusuf froze at the sight of those flat, morbid things. He saw no light. There were no reflections. Only a flood of fear and impishness clawed their way over Yusuf. His mouth dropped in terror while his body remained immobile.

“I thank you again, Master Yusuf. My appreciation for your hospitality is immeasurable.” Abbe spoke with a commanding tone. The blue smoke projected from under Abbe’s cloak and enveloped Yusuf. The air in the room felt as though the oxygen had been sucked out and Yusuf began to be dragged away from the floor. No longer standing on a solid surface, Yusuf’s broad and rugged body twitched uncontrollably while he seemed to fade from consciousness. “I will be gone in the morning, and you will not see me for the evening. I’ll stay outside, and rest easy; I’ll keep my distance from your daughter. You shall not even know I’m here.”

Yusuf awoke confused on the couch. His lungs burned like they had been inundated with battery acid. He could not veer his mind from the smell of vinegar and lilac. He darted up, fearful of the loss of time, and ran to the cottage door. The sun’s light was still strong. Why he fell asleep he did not know. “Illyana!” He yelled with a stern vocal character. “Illyana!”

“Daddy!”

“Honey, where are you?”

“Right here!” She sprinted smiling and winded around the corner.

“Honey, are you alright?” He snatched her up into his arms.

“Ow, Ow, my hair! Yes, daddy I’m fine. I’m okay. Ow! Let go! You’re pulling my hair,”

He obeyed and released his daughter's frail frame.

“Thank heavens, you’re safe. Did you see the man come out of the house?”

“What man? You’ve been alone”

“My angel, I went inside with a man in a black robe. Now honey, my Illyana, please don’t play games right now.”

“Are you angry? Daddy you were alone,” She started to share his anxiety. “Please don’t be mad.”

“...” He stared at Illyana trying to find deceit or confusion. Her face betrayed an honest fear of a wrathful father. “I’m not mad, honey.”

They did not continue the work in the barn. Yusuf found the rationale to let tomorrow bear the burden of lost labor. Throughout the hours of daylight, he sated his daughter’s yearning to play. As the dusk slowly approached, he sent Illyana inside and locked the doors from the outside. Yusuf could not see or hear any other soul. No alarms triggered. He had no signal of trespass, yet for all the hours of the day he felt an unshaking feeling of close company. It was an uneasy presence just over his shoulder. After taking a moment to survey his empty fields he started walking past the closest one to the north. He walked along a path that weaved through the field in a serpentine fashion until the grains stopped and the grade of the land began. He marched to the top of the hill whose crest was but one edge keeping the farm insulated from the desert outside. From the top, he could turn just slightly and see the glow of the city, Barabbas. God’s Canvas was the epicenter of all that dim light. He pivoted to the opposite direction and kneeled down and bowed his head in his hands. He began to pray, full of fear and reservations.

Chapter Seven

Traveler's Hymn on Letting Go

My shoulder hurts so fucking bad. It's excruciating. There's no better word. It's been about two weeks and I've really searched for some alternative with enough heft, enough gravitas, to rightfully convey this never-ending pain. The bullet went straight through me. At least I think it did. I really hope it did. That's a best-case scenario. I can't exactly go to a doctor here. Everything that wasn't totaled during the invasion is now purely occupied. Carpathian troops have set up blockades and checkpoints. Roving patrols, we weave in and out of the destroyed streets. If any of the face recognition cameras catch a frame with my face in it, they'll descend upon me like a retributive plague. It's been shitty enough to hobble past and avoid all of that. Can you imagine if I had to find a skilled doctor still alive, not on a chain gang, and willing to help me? I can't. Aside from tearing muscle and probably getting some bone on the way out, I think there's a good chance my shoulder wound is infected. It does stink pretty bad now. I don't notice, most likely because I've been living with it. When I stumble past the odd person in the rubble lined street, they all seem to make distance between us. I might have caught a lucky kid or two making a face. I'm not trying to gauge the passerby's response to my condition. I am trying to hide my face and torso with garnets like tattered jackets and blankets. These kids have no issue making faces of disgust like kids often do. But you would assume they would learn some

honor or humility and curtesy after attempted genocide. The little assholes are lucky to be alive. Fuck it. I'm happy for them. The little shits. I hate kids.

We'll, now that all leaves me relegated to the few preserved alleys. I don't think the infection will cost me my left arm from what I know about the haze. I've been calling my spirit of Mars. It's almost childish, but I don't want to remind myself of Abbe if I can't help it. It's a tool to kill anyways. The war god would be proud. From what I gathered of this less-than ideal context, it listens to me. It acts instinctively. I can consciously command it, but I think it also abides by my unconscious brain. It may also act in self-preservation. It kept Abbe alive for god knows how long. It'll probably overcome the infection and help repair my shoulder. I certainly hope it will. For the last two weeks looking like a crippled victim of war has shielded me from the attention of our troops rounding the able bodied and making them slaves. They won't say that that's what the locals become. Slavery with extra steps. I look battered and unproductive, so they ignore me in my dirty and torn coverings. Roaming and evading gets more difficult everyday as the Carpathian overlords erect more tools to suppress. Cameras, automated guns, barricades and the like.

I could kill a few, but I don't think I could get past the whole damned army. The spirit of Mars is fast, but not fast enough for a blizzard of bullets all aimed at my ass. What am I going to do? Where the hell am I goin' to go? I can't go back now. It's worse at home. It's a military dictatorship. That means I'm dead as soon as one of those cameras sees me. Not qui. Where can I go? Most of the countries worth a damn are closed border states. Immigration died decades ago, and no one gives a shit about refugees. The poor bastards who think they can claim asylum in this world are daft and delusional. Once you get to a border of one of the good countries, they

either turn you away or shoot your stupid ass. Less paperwork for later. And I'll be damned if I'm going to spend the rest of my life in a desert hellhole.

There's not as much chaos throughout the city as one might guess following a genocidal invasion. After the first bloody day, there were a handful of idiots who figured they could put together a hearty, ragtag team of rebels and enact some guerilla warfare. They all were captured immediately. Most were killed in their dugouts, but the couple designated as head dissidents were taken to the center of God's Canvas and made examples in front of all the living souls left in this place. What did they think? Could a person honestly have a hope in this world to fight against an armada of giant and merciless mechs and humans turned death machines? They had about twenty guys, if I'm being generous. They knew it was futile. One has to assume they acted on principle, and maybe the thought that they would be reborn as martyrs to their kinsmen. The great irony is that their useless deaths had the exact opposite effect. They were made examples of. Everyone could see the sheer might of the Carpathian war machine. No one resisted after the public executions. Slavery with extra steps. The locals all became docile and submissive little sheep for the slaughter. All the able bodied got sent to registration then to the chain gangs. Women and men alike. All are corralled and sifted. Once assigned to a unit, they began rebuilding their fair city. With guns pointed at their backs, they are forced to put back together everything the invaders destroyed. Function is the highest priority to the new construction. It is not meant to be beautiful, but effective. Places to live and, eventually, work to send all value added up the chain. I think it goes without saying that the rifle led reconstruction actively veers away from development conducive to future militant actions. They don't even try to assimilate the conquered nation's brightest into the Carpathian nation. Carpathians don't believe in assimilation. Everyone who is a threat is only useful as a dead threat. The best use for an

engineer from a threatening nation is to burn. The world is better without the chance of their knowledge being used against the Carpathian Bloc. Survival and growth by any means necessary. Any means.

I am lucky. Food has been easy to come by. The troops allotted rations daily in a few key locations through the city, which I avoid. But, while the masses' hunger is satiated, the pantries and stores have been relatively untouched except by vagrants like myself. I have been waiting till night and slipped into a couple I know don't have heavy patrols roving close by. I liberally grab enough for the next day and, viola, bye-bye starvation. The food's not bad. But I have to do more. I might have a plan. Benjamin had the right idea. He was going to use a human smuggling operation to escort his family out of this place. He didn't know the specifics just that it would happen out of an old restaurant. What he didn't know was that Tiamat, the old restaurant, was the main face of human trafficking and any other illicit activity in the city. He was too clean to be in the know. I came in with general intelligence, in the hopes that I could use some form of information to get Heladiv. I spied on his family in the house, but I knew he would be dying to break for it. He saw the writing on the walls, and I needed to make the kill as flawless as possible. I never knew we had a full invasion right on the way. I don't even know if they sent others like me for other specific targets. For all I know I might have a kindred spirit wandering around trapped like me.

I spent a week on the ground chasing tails coming in and out of Tiamat. Most were pointless, but just like magic Ben walked in one day for lunch. It wasn't his kind of place. Not for lunch, at least. Most of the people who frequented that place were the usual suspects for buying immense amounts of coke, opiates, and children: rich people with god complexes and desperate souls who think they can go in clean and come out just as pure as before. When

Heladiv went in for “lunch”, anyone could see he was in the latter party. He came for business and did all of my work for me. Those disgusting freaks didn’t even blink in my direction that whole week. I just sat gingerly across the street for every meal, staring directly at all who entered her wide mouth. No one cared or even noticed. The people who ran the show knew that no one could do anything. Everyone who could used and valued their services. If you wanted a taste of the Levant and everything she could offer, you were a patron of Tiamat. These were the kinds of people who feared nothing. And what am I to them? So, I sat and watched.

Now, with the favor of the gods I will try to make it there. I don’t know exactly what I’m going to say when I get there, but I’ll come up with something. I’m a smart cookie. Plus, I don’t think they can really kill me. As long as I don’t bring attention upon myself from the Carpathian troops, I can handle a few tough guys here and there. The hard part will be traversing the occupied city streets. In my current state, I have been gifted an opportunity not too many other men can claim. I’d rather run into the free-roaming giant robots than individual soldiers. At least I can outrun them and dive into some deserted building if the scene calls for it. I reiterate, by no means do I want any of that to happen. Low and slow. Why the hell would I jeopardize my goddamn life after nearly losing it a couple weeks ago? Time to move.

“We do not wish to risk the lives of any civilians. The Secular Levantine Nationalist government has been removed for their oppressive actions towards her citizens. The regime of oppression is over. All are now free to live without threats to individual happiness and success. Rejoice, for now you are free.” The voice loudly projecting from the speakers placed indiscriminately on every other corner was a husky caricature of some kind of man’s man. It floated deep in the uncanny valley, obviously intended to provoke an image of a towering patriarch. “We do not wish to risk the...” There must be hundreds; all just a fraction of a second

out of phase from the next due to a distance. They all endlessly repeat since their installation a couple days ago, only to stop after sundown. It slowly has become white noise. As I pass teams of men and teenagers picking up, sweeping, and sorting rubble along the roads, all at gunpoint, I sincerely wonder if it is becoming white noise for them. What kind of pain must be whipping up storms in their hearts?

The Carpathians know that no one believes this poorly constructed propaganda. But they know that it's only a matter of time. A man can only hear a false message parading like the truth for so long until it burrows into the subconscious. For ninety-nine iterations, it is a lie. But in that one-hundredth iteration it is now the glorious truth. It was always the truth. You were simply too irrational from the trauma you suffered before the heroes came to rescue you and your family. How many times will it take for these guys to internalize this message? The fact that it is so belligerently and demonstrably false makes it easier to swallow over time. Why would anyone try to trick us with such plain lies? That is guaranteed to fester in one of their minds. It only has to infect someone with a large family or friend network; someone with enough calm credibility. For now, that lie is a painful splinter in their ears or a call to anger. In time, it will be their truth. "We do not wish to risk the lives of any civilians."

The dust kicked up from the shovels and brooms irritates my eyes and throat while I try to look as inconspicuous as possible. Holding back coughs as to not indicate that my body is in full function is much more difficult than one might consider. Getting past this chain gang and their armed attendant is not so bad. I'm not afraid to lay the crippled act on thick. The sound of large, armored buses carrying civilians or supplies to work sites has become more frequent in the last couple of days. Some parts of the city are approaching a sensitive threshold of accessibility after two weeks of cleaning. After they have removed every spec of debris or misplaced

concrete, the Carpathian forces will contrive new endless tasks as sinks for mass labor. Those few credentialed to work for military service and research would have already been slaughtered. The Carpathians won't have any of their vassals working in R and D. Teachers are needed for socialization of children and entry into the vassal world around them. Professors cannot be suffered to live. Engineers cannot be suffered to live. Anyone with a strong body and will cannot be suffered to live unless broken by pointless labor. They place everyone into two labor camps: service and physical. Physical labor constructs and maintains infrastructure or arbitrary physical assignments that do not produce assets for the state. While service labor allocates value from all labor upward and allocates a minor shear to their kinsmen. A world where you either toil under the sun or ring up a customer at a restaurant. A world of sedation and subjugation.

Vraushoooooooo. Vraushoooooooo.

I weaved in and out around piles of burnt bricks and concrete and clouds of red dust all to abruptly stop with the danger of being trampled by one of the sparse patrolling mechs. A pristine metal object. That damned relentless sun reflected off the odd angles of the monstrous thing and produced a powerful sheen. I've seen them countless times, but no man could ever remain unphased by the hulking mass of precision, flawlessly interlocking parts on such a grand scale. These poor bastards must be terrified. Carpathian mechs eviscerated the city's infrastructure and most of her occupants. I've met a couple of guys who operate some of 'em. Nasty fuckers. The Carpathian Bloc shapes men into calculated human exterminators as the Death Parade, but the rest of Wolf Shot Foxing, the mech operators, they know better. They are left with most of their subjective inclinations. It's assumed that they need all of their reactive faculties in order to respond to any war threat. These are the most advanced war machines the Eastern world has ever seen. And their operators are the most willingly vicious. People like me; we are the surgical

knives: methodical and precise. All components of the Parade are divergent shotguns. They just scatter destruction. But here, I can't help myself but feel a little pride that my home made this. A can let myself forgive war and death to bask in this perfection made machine. Indulgent, I know, but I'd give my left nut if any of the war-torn civilians don't freeze, even for a moment, and be washed over by the splendor of what we made. We made this horrible thing. Goddamn, just look at it. This is the apex of human engineering on earth. Just for a moment, all men must give in and stand in awe. Sooner or later, the machinery of empire phases out of vogue. And so does my indulgent moment.

There was a truck outside the restaurant parked with the hind door open. As I got closer to the Tiamat, lines of the now destitute and hopeless became denser. About half a kilometer away is where deep order and structure prevailed over human disobedience. The hungry and scared women and children, or what was left of the children, patiently waited, corralled around block corners. All waiting for the man in the back of the truck parked in front of our lady Tiamat to receive food, and if the gods are willing, be at peace away from the invaders. I won't push past them. It's not hard to find empathy in yourself when you're forced to look at the faces of the damaged. Most of these women are alone. Husbands, if still alive, were snatched to labor. If they had children, they were most likely terminated in the blitz. The kids that are lucky to be here cling like chimps to their mother's stomach. Some of the women have a look about them. You could pick them out of the crowd pretty easily. Their eyes and the bodies signal intense hate and pain. I've had to kill dozens of men. Admittedly, some were less deserving than others. But I was supposed to be closer to an impartial administrator of untimely deaths. Most of the deaths were impartial. I did what I was told and paid to do. Heladiv was a mistake. A moment of irrational emotion will eventually seep through the cracks of any hardened person. But these few women,

with eyes and faces radiating hate and sadness hotter than the worst objects found in space, would savagely and gleefully decapitate a person if given the chance. I can only imagine what dragged those women to that inertial pain. I'd rather not imagine. I'd rather not disrespect that pain by jostling myself ahead in line. I'll wait too.

The line hurried along in a matter of half an hour. I hid my face and played up the crippled act while riding the line. But here; I drop all of it. I need to speak frankly.

"Here you go," Said a rather lanky man with grievous eyes. "Well, go on!" I remained immobile. I looked at him holding a ladle. He stood hunched over a stew pot in the truck bed. It looked well enough, but it only detracted from my purpose. He got a little angry. "Hey, you! Fuckin' move!"

"Sir, I'm not here for food."

"I don't give a fuck. Look at all these people. Move!" Hearing his voice escalate, a handful of goons mosey a bit closer. They were not handing out food from the goodness of their hearts.

"I need help." Being close to the Tiamat, it's hard not to see the staggering damage to the back of the building. Some of her guts splayed out into the alleys. Indigo painted plaster and gold thread that no one dared touched just lay inert on the ground around the building. The locals treat these fragments like holy vestiges of an ancient high place. They, at most, bow their heads and keep silent walking in their presence.

"Get the fuck out of line! There's hundreds more after you, and I'd like to go to sleep tonight," The lanky man forcefully dropped the ladle into the pot and reached behind his back.

"Listen, please, listen! Just listen!" He jumped down from the truck and manhandled me out of the line with a single push. Some of the goons enclosed our discussion.

“No, you fuckin’ listen. Get the hell out of here. We don’t have time for you. Everyone needs help.” He’s loud and this is clearly a scene. None of the locals care. They are here for the food. Tiamat is a place without Carpathians. Probably a result of assets changing hands under a very low table.

“I can work. I’m not asking for a handout!” He puts a pistol on my rib cage.

“Where the fuck are you from? You sound funny. Your accent sounds fuckin’ horrible.” He didn’t say that one too loud as he leaned in. His breath overpowered the smell of rust and first with the mélange of garlic, turmeric, piss, and shit. “You must not be from the city. No one would make fuckin’ demand around here.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m from out of town.” I really don’t want to be shot. “I’m from somewhere else. I just want help.”

“What help?”

“An exit,”

“Don’t play games with us.” He pushed the nose of the pistol inward.

“I want to get out of here. I want to get out of the country.”

“You and a million other people.”

“No, no, no, please, please! I’ll work! I don’t want a free ride! I can’t be seen by the CB.” Picked up some shorthand the locals used in the month of being here. One of the more attentive backup guys climbed aboard the truck bed and continued passing out bowls.

“It’s not our job to help some maggot hide from daddy Carpathia. Take a good look around you. These folk, their lives are gone to shit. Here you are causing a goddamn scene.” He gestured his head with those slender weasel-like features to point my attention toward the endless line of newly minted widows, slaves, and desperate mothers. “Now, is it fair to them for you to

be in these high spirits? Get your ass a goddamn bowl and disappear. It's our job to fucking feed you, not hold your hand."

"I can help you."

"Someone is awfully confident,"

"I'm Carpathian!" I whisper forcefully. The lanky man looked me over. I got this worn-out thing around my torso and my clothes are shamefully soiled. Weeks without a fresh wardrobe and sleeping in abandoned buildings certainly help endow one with a particular odor and dingy texture. "I'm a Carpathian. I'm sure there's something you can use me for. Something; translating, watch, anything, something." He took the pistol from my ribs and repositioned it under my chin. It was an awkward motion on account of his oddly long arms. He pulled in closer.

"Do you see any Carpathians around here, boy?"

"No- "

"Exactly," He quickly rebutted. "We're pretty friendly with those fuckers and they leave us alone. I honestly don't care what you did to be so scared of what those freaks might do when they catch you. And..., if I don't kill you, they will get your ass. Be sure of that. They don't need our help to grab ya. I don't care. My guys? We don't care. We have our own little thing happening. Why would we need you?"

"I don' - "

"Whatever your reason for wanting to run away from your daddy is not our problem. Truth is, a person like you is bad for business. Too much of the wrong kind of attention." He let the pistol ease off my neck. It was nice to not have my tongue almost choke me. He placed a hand on my shoulder. The wrong one. It stung and pain began to flare as he added more of his

weight behind his oversized fingers. I'm the first to admit I'm not the biggest man, but the difference in our stature was laughable. I looked as though my circus troop just left without me. While he looked as though his sea dwelling life spent starving as a spider crab left him gaunt and vicious. If this place wasn't so damned depressing, it would be a beautifully effective comedy.

"Hey, Squid, wanna go around back with the boy?" Goon A said quietly, but with a nonchalant bravado that one could intuit only develops from years of bloody murder. I get it.

"Yeah, yeah, let's get this one done. Tell Amir we'll be back in a minute." He didn't look away from me. The weight of his hand on my left shoulder lightened. "We're gonna take you around that there alley and kill you. I'm not gonna shoot you in front of these nice people. They've seen enough." He said that with an honest inflection of sincerity. I guess his name is Squid. Getting away from the crowd worked for me. And I wouldn't have to worry about a rove around here. I can work with that, I thought. I showed them a bit of reflective remorse. Make them see me in a flash of despair. "Nothing personal, boy, you're just too much of a liability."

"No, please..." I feigned. Squid and the goon pack, minus Amir on the back of the truck, effortlessly corralled me around the corner of the torn Tiamat and over the blue line remnants of walls. They were well rehearsed. There was a respectful air of grace from this merciless band of killers that gave the audience pause. No one among the crowd dared to look directly at the planned execution. The adults knew as a matter of fact that I was a goner, and not even the god who abandoned them could save me. When we arrived at the snug foot space behind the gutted Tiamat with just enough room for a handful of men, the two not known as Squid turned to keep watch of the alley. That pistol again. Squid aims it at the side of my head. Again, the size difference between us almost made it look like he was about to slaughter a child.

“Words are for light dimmed too soon; akin to albatross’ love for her brood; loft over the ocean but still hear their coos; in time she may circle back around for you,” Squid said to me, clear and resolute intended as my last rites. I swiftly disagreed.

I know the feeling and where to look. This event was the perfect conduit to summon Mars. When I look inward and scour my libraries for the uniquely tagged emotions for using and controlling Mars, I meander up and down the aisles. Inside the library of thought and abstractions, all that I am is organized by section and theme, stacked in rows that wrap around narrow streets. A golden dusk eternally glints off all things inside the library, and only intensifies as you climb higher. Once a traveler makes it to the greatest and highest abstractions overlooking all other base thoughts cataloged in the library, the golden light is so bright as to blind the self from identifying anything real. Lucky for me, Mars is cataloged far below the well-lit streets of the library proper. The emotions which are flagged inside its ideas are primitive and terrible. They are the fear for survival and the lust to take life. They are the truest parts of me, and maybe the truest parts of us all. They are the singular urge to dominate and oppress. They are the deathly fears found awake in the throes of existential awareness of finality. They are the great burden. All these individually incomprehensible facets of being are found beneath the surface of the library. I have had plenty of time to be acquainted with this section of my literary body. Giving it form makes the process of finding its book trivial. I simply walk away from that golden light through the aisles visually showing signs of age and blight. I follow the lack of direction to the hollowed rows hidden behind mountains of manufactured consent and modernity. In the oldest bookcase, in the darkest corner, the only book there on the shelf is none other than the spirit of war. I opened her unconscionably large tome and began flipping through the pages to find my verse in the grand narrative. On the pages are blue words shining past a veneer of blood.

First, without raising a hand, I send a wave of Mars upward to push the pistol away from my head and take it away from Squid. In that instant, his hand was elevated; leaving his body open for manipulation. This was all too quick for a reaction from any of the assailants. I then send Mars pounding into his chest while applying crushing pressure to the shoulders of goons A and B. With Mars' prowess I pin them to the jagged alley floor but allow Squid to remain physically unimpaired.

"That was a beautiful poem."

"Fuck! What the hell was that?!"

"I am not going to hurt you." I look at him directly. I want him to see the same variety of sincerity that he so graciously conveyed to me. "I want help."

"What the hell are you doing? How are you doing that?" He pointed to his men. "What fucking help do you need?"

"This is not impervious. I'm not Superman. I'm just a guy with a little something..., you could say, extra." I pulled down the tattered cloth wrapped around my otherwise shitty clothes. He squinted his eyes to see the bloodied gash in my body trying its damndest to heal.

"You're hurt."

"Three people; not a problem," I said, pointing at them in a sweeping motion. "A whole occupied country; a big ugly problem." I said, tossing a thumb over my shoulder. He looked away from my gaping torso and towards the two men being held to the ground by this blue stuff spewing from my body without a clear source. I see the resignation in his long face. This Squid knows he lives, they all live, because I deem it so. I have to admit, that this advantage is nothing less than intoxicating when I know I can safely use it and use it freely.

“What help do you need from us?” He relented. I knelt down to his level while he was stricken to that humbling position.

“I need help getting out of this country undetected. I would love something set up in some place nice. You know, I want the package.”

“You want to talk to Boss.”

“I want to talk to Boss.” He was understandably quiet. This required a moment of reflection.

“You’ll kill me if I don’t tell you how to meet him?” There’s that sincerity! I like this man. He’s frank and honest. You can just see it in his ugly face.

“I’d rather not, if we’re being honest. But, yeah, I could. I really don’t care.” I make sure he sees my sincerity. “So, please don’t make this turn the wrong way.”

“I can imagine our boss would want to meet you as well.”

“Now, doesn’t that sound convenient,” I ease up on the men pressed to the ground. We all stand, and we all now know the objective pecking order.

“You’re a bastard, aren’t you?”

“A pure son of a bitch.”

“You’re one of the CB’s reckon boys?”

“You called it.” I gave a childish smile. I appreciated his worldly insight, and patted off some of the filthy, earthen fragments from his dark jacket. It just looked awful clashing so loudly against the navy blue. “I was, at least. I informally resigned.”

“Not by choice.”

“Not by choice.”

“Tonight, dammit. Tonight. Meet us,” he pointed back and forth between the lot of them, “meet us here at ten. We’re not gonna wait much longer than ten, fifteen minutes for you. We pick you up, then head over to see Boss.”

“Not so bad,”

“You can go fuck yourself, for all I care. But I know he’d like to see you.”

“What the hell are you thinkin? Who the fuck are you to make that call?” Goon A scolded Squid.

“You would cut the same deal not to die!” Squid retorted.

“You damned idiot! You’re planning on marching this...thing in front of everybody?” Whoever this guy was, Squid definitely answered to that other man, Goon A. Guess I chose the wrong creep to lead with. Regardless, his survival instinct was stronger than his feelings of contemptuous rage towards Squid for jumping the chain of command.

“He’ll kill us. And I particularly don’t want to die at the moment. I like my goddamn life.”

“Fucking coward.”

“And you’re a hypocrite. You would do no different.” Quiet scornful glares buzz between them.

“This is on your head if it goes to shit.”

“I know Boss would want to know that this guy is in play.”

“Your goin’ to tell him what I can do?” I interject.

“Fuckin right. You’re a goddamned freak. But your Boss Neon’s kind of freak.” His voice was brimming with anxious fear. Oh, how I am acquainted with her. That potent

combination will carry a person to the ends of the earth just to find the edge has bodies piled high.

“You’re the fucking devil!” Goon B shouted, fearful of reprisal.

“He’s right. You’re worse than a liability. I don’t know what the hell any of that shit was, but I know your fuckin bad news.” I can’t blame them. Abbe gave me the same sensation. A monolithic fear consumes a person the moment they encounter true unyielding supremacy. “I can’t promise you that you’ll come out of this alive and in one piece. You might end up as dog food if what you say is true about your weakness in numbers.”

“I don’t want trouble, Mr. Squid.”

“You are the trouble. We’re gonna walk out of this place nice and calm like. Everybody will chill the fuck out. You walk the opposite direction and don’t come back until ten. Clear?”

“We’re clear. Don’t let me down. You screw me over and I will come for you. As a professional courtesy, I’m giving you forewarning.”

“I think I speak for all of us here; whatever that shit was coming out of you terrifies the hell out of us.” Goon A stepped forward in a bid to reassert his positional authority. They seemed comfortable with the power dynamics that entangled us. I need them. They don’t want to die. Their boss will surely have some use for what I offer in trade. With a swift reveal of the cards in my hand, they were utterly coerced by Mars’ atrocious might and how a person needs to confront the internal dilemma of their world view crushed under foot.

“So, ten? And I go that way?” I pointed away from the crowd as we walked over the blue lined vestiges of wall on the ground.

“Just fucking leave and disappear. We’ll pick you up then.” Goon A said dismissively as if I were a childlike nuisance. That went better than I expected! I can find some half-destroyed

building not too far away to squat in till ten. If I stay close, I won't have to worry about running into a patrol. Just have to choose my spot wisely. That's the easy part.

Ten came. True to their word, a blue sedan pulled up, headlights off, to the corner leading to Tiamat's spilled innards. It was pretty old; predating AI assisted driving. All human determined responses. There's a lost kind of magic to those machines. For what it's worth, somebody obviously treated her with care like a fragile gold foil egg. The only other cars I've seen still intact in this place are stranded in the outer rings of the city's green suburban islands. Any that were in the city proper during the attack were ripped asunder beyond repair. The current condition of the roads, even without all the rubble, were too gnarled for passenger vehicles anyway. An AI would lose its goddamned, semiconductive mind trying to navigate it. But this relic parked with a dark figure opening the rear passenger door is a symbol of times bygone and the oldest flavor of the informal sector which has strolled unchanging alongside the rest of mailable society. Like the car, the dirty guts of civilizations past and future will not die that easily. Especially when you have a mountain of cash behind it. Goon A stretched his hand to nonverbally tell me to get in the backseat. We rode silently while the driver inched and crawled on the pavement to bypass the crags and gnarly breaks in the street. None of us appeared to be in a hurry.

“So how do you do that thing; make that blue stuff move?” Goon A asked me without an inkling of reservation in his voice. He asked in a manner suggesting that the answer was his due, and rightfully owed.

“I don't know, really. I think about what I want to happen and be afraid of what will happen if it doesn't.”

“Does it feel like a hand or something?” Now the other riders turned their attention to my much-anticipated response.

“Almost. It feels like when your hand is submerged in a pool. It just wants to be buoyant. Nothing feels like it’s the right weight.”

“Have you killed with it?” The car was quiet and thick with tension.

“Yeah. It’s good for killing. The more fear and pain I feel, the better it reacts to my intuition.” There was a pause that lingered for a couple of seconds too long.

“But it doesn’t stop bullets?”

“It can. I mean, I can make it harden like a wall, but I have to know where the bullets are coming from.”

“You got shot in the raid?”

“Yeah,” I laughed a little, “didn’t see that little guy coming.” We started encroaching on territory heavily monitored by Carpathians. Floodlights became more dominant in the field of vision allotted by the front windshield, and the mesmerizing chant grew in audible recognition. “... All are now free to live without threats to individual happiness and success. Rejoice, for now you are free.” The sight of the encroaching checkpoint would have conjured up such feelings of dread in all others, but not these men. One active mech, weapon aimed in hand, stood ever watchful and ready for some mythological moment in which they could become hallowed warriors. Never mind the inherent lack of honor that comes from shuttling a massive shell into an unsuspecting and unarmed civilian, staggered with the exhaustion of a full day’s labor. We’re all savages. Standing between concrete barriers were a handful of foot soldiers. They turned the flood lights onto our ceaselessly advancing car. The light only kissed the vintage and unmistakable car before repositioning to some other far-off concern. All of the muscle at the

checkpoint simply ignored us. The cursed guts of Tiamat were that powerful that even the treacherous invaders would rather turn a blind eye.

We drove through three more checkpoints, deeper into the city. Like a shared vision of terror frozen in the slate faces and posture of all the passers-by, no one would dare to think in the direction of our car. This deferential attitude slowly evaporated as we drove further away from the city's destroyed heart. Eventually, our snail's pace put us on a road heading northeast. It was the direction toward the sea. Still too far to smell the salts, but in the right path for green to slowly pop up in the headlights from dry saplings squeezing all the moisture they can from the air. It seemed as though our ultimate destination was squarely inside one of the semi-exurban leafy satellites of the city proper.

Down an exorbitantly verdant street, past the community gates, we drove until stopping in the crowded driveway. The house was modest in comparison to the disgustingly lavish surroundings. Everyone got out of the car in a laughably quick fashion in contrast to the speed we drove, leaving me to follow their lead clumsily. No lights were on inside the house, but there was a vivid glow eking over the edges from the rear. The whole scene imbued the house with a golden halo deep in a dark forest. The context of armed gunmen transformed the image into that of a compound. I can't say that I was too fond of that lingering feeling of matted, blood-tinged clothes pressed against my compoundingly, dirt covered body for any length of time. So, as soon as I gracelessly wriggled out of those ultra-authentic, imported leather seats, I stood shaking and jostling the fabrics off of my skin.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Goon A asked in a tone which read as impatient and rhetorically confused.

“Getting comfortable,” No need for me to raise any more ire by displaying undue attitude.

“We’re here, so quit that shit.” He waved a finger oscillating between dirty ol’ me and the sidewalk going to the backyard. I bit my tongue and obliged. “Hey, is everyone ready back there?” He demanded to know from a couple of guys who sprang forth from the lit abyss.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” The smallest one said, dismissively. “The party’s going fine,”

“Party?”

“Alright, brother. Go on. Let’s start movin’ to the back yard.” There’s no need for me to say a word. That was especially true as my riding companions drew their guns clear for me to see. It really was a modestly cute house we were circumnavigating. The lack of lights emanating from any window made your eyes squint from the contrast when we rounded the corner to the backyard. Lamps and fog lights hung at odd places by the dozens. Scattered among the lights was a crowd of men, diverse in age as well as stature. If this was the namesake gang of the Tiamat, they did little to coordinate their dress. All of them had guns following my approach. In my full understanding of why these goons (please forgive my frequent reduction of these kinds of thugs to goons, but that’s what I plainly see) would want to protect themselves, I took great care not to make any threatening or sudden movements. Out of the high contrast in the air, two wolf-like dogs attentively began to sniff their way to my feet until we met near the center of the backyard. The dogs were tall, thin gray beasts that smelled like rose-hips and lilacs. Fairly sweet scents for such oppressive looking animals.

“Well, they like you,” said one of the dark faces among the crowd. “That one with a black muzzle is Gaius, and the white muzzle is Malus. They’re good mutts.”

“Do they bite?”

“Only when they stop liking you, or, if you happen to smell like beef tips. They adore beef tips.” The dark face stepped forward and pulled up a folding metal chair. Someone behind me clanged one folding metal chair around for me. “Come on, sit. Sit.” As he sat, his features became more clear. He was an older man; surprisingly not baked by the sun. He wore a suit of imperial fleet blue with a double-breasted lapel, functionally chestnut green. He looked to be in admirable shape for his age and gave an authoritative aura aided by continuous eye contact.

“I appreciate this courtesy.” I gestured to the lights, goons, and guns all of which were poignantly arranged for my arrival in a way to also signal ‘please don’t shoot me, kind sir.’

“Well, you can never be too careful. My choir boys told me that you were kind of..., funny. But before all that business, introductions. My friends and family, especially those in the Choir here, call me Neon. And you are?” He motioned as if to give the scene to me; as if it were my turn to lead this dance.

“Calaban. Can’t say my friends call me that on account of them not existing,” I try to play it up for laughs. Didn’t quite play well. It didn’t play at all.

“Well, anyway, my children here; they are fantastic dogs. Beautiful, aren’t they?”

“What breed?”

“Oh, they’re mutts! You wouldn’t believe it.”

“No, I wouldn’t. They seem damned smart.”

“Gaius was pretty easy to train, but Malus was a stubborn bitch. They must have wolf blood in them somewhere; they’re brilliant lovelies. Perhaps too clever. However, probably to their credit, both are fiercely independent unlike wolves. So, who knows?” Neon, this mogul of the dark world blooming out from God’s Canvas and persisting among current chaos, seemed as pleased as a man might be when indulging in a little boasting about his children.

“Do they listen to you, or any of these guys?”

“Just me. Only me.” he smiled with his pale skin stretching across his clean face. In a city of dirt and grime, of morally deficient occupiers and remnant state ghosts, I knew Neon to be the dirtiest and the most deficient moral agent in the whole damned lot. In spite of all that truth, he sat loudly dressed and smooth shaven. “I love them more than this world itself. But, Mr. Calaban, we’re not here to pine over my children. No, you came to ask for our help? I believe so. You had a rather, uh, interesting rendezvous with Rom and his boys.” Neon pointed to Goon A, Squid, and Goon B. I guess Rom is Goon A’s name.

“Well, sir, I didn’t mean to do them harm,”

“All the same. I see they’re alive when I know you could have easily taken their lives. So, merits to you, I suppose.” He said in a lackadaisical fashion while looking down to his goodyear-welted shoes, hanging from tightly crossed legs. Every meticulous facet of Neon’s presence oozed signals of command and authority.

“Mr. Neon, please pardon me for the crude observation, but you don’t look confused or surprised by what your men must’ve told you.”

“You’re not wrong, Calaban.” His smile intensified and took on a more greasy character, letting the underworld, his domain, shine through. “I know exactly what Rom claims to have seen. I know what kind of ‘thing’” he emphasized with a thick flop of his tongue, “you are.”

“...”

“Oh, it seems you’re the confused one.” He leaned forward, implicitly claiming more of the social space between us. His outward comfort with the situation sent an intelligible non-verbal order for the mass of armed men, crowded in the compound-like backyard, to ease up ever

so slightly. “Calaban, you’re not the first ‘person’ with that blue phantasm ‘leaking’ from your body that I’ve met.” He emphasized ‘person’ and ‘leaking’. I got the meaning.

“Did you meet an African man like me?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve met Abbe?” I pushed.

“The sage of the grasslands, older than written history. How could a simple man, a mortal like myself, possibly forget an occasion so grand as meeting the divine?”

“Divine? He’s the fucking devil!” I hissed.

“Oh, but Master Ea is not the only divine being to have blessed these eyes. You, yourself, were made to be in his likeness, in spirit. It seems to bode a fortuitous future for me that this wretched world would clamor for our meeting.”

“Mr. Neon, I hate to break this to you, but this situation is not from a spiritual hymn or parable. Your countrymen and you at the wrong damned end of genocide, and your city was wiped clean by Abbe, or your ‘Master Ea’.”

“I think we both are exaggerating a bit. But we know what we mean.” He paused. “Moral of the story, not to parse words, you are not an unknown entity to me.”

“Well, I guess that makes this conversation a little easier.” I let go of some tension.

“Indeed. You want to trade your ‘talents’, some of that gifted divinity, for safe passage, undetected by the Carpathians, out of our once fair country. Hmmm, not quite right. Our uh-once repressed country.”

“It’s as simple as that. I would very much like to call in the ticket you had ready for Mister Heladiv.” I said as the last words hushed on their way out of my mouth.

“Oh dear, mister Heladiv. Did you know him? He was such a sorry man.”

“Yeah, I spent a few weeks with him up to the end, there.” I pause to really consider my words. “I think I might be a more sorry man than he was, or is.”

“Benjamin, is he still alive? I would never have guessed that he’d have the fortitude to survive the bombardment. I’d figured he would be among those genocide countrymen. Do you know if the Carpies snatched him for their captive labor in the surrogate camps?” Neon almost seemed giddy.

“No, no, no. Benjamin got away when Abbe appeared and took out most of the WSF infantry. I made sure of that. He lost everything. Enough to break any man. So, in the heat of battle I did what I could to get him out.” Knowing those words were true did carry an air of peaceful satisfaction.

“Too true, I suppose. If you don’t mind, I respectfully request that you do not openly use his name.”

“Ben’s? Or Abbe’s?”

“Our Sage’s name. I can abide by you, chosen by him, to refer to him personally, but I fear you would give my choir boys the wrong ideas. I would hate to slit one of their throats, carve out their eyes, hack their fingers by the joints, and stuff the gaping hole in their necks with the said fingers and eyes all because they grew too familiar with him, and flagrantly used his name.”

“I understand,” I said, repositioning myself in the conversation to display an air of subservience. I still needed him. I didn’t want to fuck anything up just yet. “My apologies. I Don’t mean to offend. I’ll give you my word that’ll not be a problem.” A moment of breathy silence sits among us while Neon’s smile slowly drifts away. Then it came back like a spark igniting a flame.

“But, for the business at hand! Your cooperation would gladly be taken. However, Mr. Calaban, surely you know our ‘traditional’ methods of human logistics have been undermined in the attack. ‘Mister Heladiv’s ticket’ doesn’t exist anymore. Roads gone, cars and trucks destroyed; we simply have fewer options.” He sighed strongly. He didn’t hide his exasperation with the new difficulties the invasion brought. “While we do have a working relationship with the brass of Carpathia, you can never be so sure that a rifleman on the street will recognize us and our ‘partners’. Some of my team are getting stopped and harassed by the young boys and their delightful toys,” He smiled at his play on words. He slowly rose from his seat and readjusted his shirt into his belt. “You understand we can’t simply advertise ourselves and all the places we go. That’s just not how to do business.” He pitched his head so that his eyes seemed to evaporate into thin almond-shaped slices, almost patronizingly.

“I don’t think I have much else in the way of options”

“No, you don’t.” His expression read ‘your mine’. “However, I am obliged to assist a person chosen by our sage, such as yourself. Time is all we need.”

“I assumed our transaction would take some time. I’m not in a hurry; knowing that I could expect less entanglements with the boots on the ground hanging around your little family, or choir, as you keep saying.”

“That’s mostly true.” Mr. Neon said without changing his smug demeanor, but he did drop his posture a bit. “Rom will be your handler. Since you’ve become quite intimate with him and his boys, it’ll be an easy fit.” He tongued the word fit awfully hard. “I’ll give you the professional courtesy of some choosing where you’d like to go.”

“India.”

“My God! That was quick,” He laughed full bellied. A bunch of his goons laughed along with him. “You’ve got that one already figured out, haven’t you?”

“Well, I’ve had some time to consider.”

“You know what? I think that is doable. A lot of India is a backcountry jungle or shithole mountains. We can get you there a lot easier than some other big places.”

“I thought that might be the case,” I shot my own smug smile. I can’t let him think I’m completely helpless. Neon’s dogs sense the ebbs and flow of tension between their master and me. The dark muzzled one began to encircle my chair. Perhaps it was just patiently waiting for the opportune moment to try its teeth at my throat.

“All the better. You have my word that I will get you to India! You have my word that we will make do on our investment in this arrangement.” He clicked the -ent- syllable. “But, before we adjourn for this evening,” He dropped any shadow of pretension or insincerity, “tell me, Mr. Calaban, can you take me to the dry grass plains?” I stare at his eyes which betray a combination of pining and desperation.

“Have you been? Has he taken you?” A moment goes by without a reply.

“I can tell that your answer is ‘no’.” He looked disappointed. I couldn’t make out if he was testing me for the same typology of power under Abbe’s control, or if he legitimately wanted to experience the timeless horror of that place with that demon. I pray to the corners of this fucking Earth and any gods that inhabit it to never see or feel that place again.

Chapter Eight

Spectre At The Door, Go To Sleep

Humidity and anxious dreams took a vicious hold on Ryan's slumbering mind and claimed precious attention from his desire to sleep. Vague notions of environmental stimulus wriggled into the foreground of his awareness, like an octopus squeezing into a jar, one hydric tentacle at a time. His somatic perceptions, subdued and buried as they were in the throes of much needed sleep, delivered messages of compromised comfortability as the wetness and stickiness of his poly-cotton bed dressings slowly passed an acceptable threshold. He simply could not continue to sleep regardless of his obvious need. Ryan's alarm rang out from his phone, which he kept under his pillow while he slept to ensure that the alarm vibration woke him in the unfortunately common event that the alarm sound failed to do so. In that instance, the volume swelled with a series of sweet major arpeggiated chimes and married nicely with the dubious pretext of sleep of which he found himself. He opened his eyes to see that it was his second alarm, set for 5:05 AM, that reached in and pulled him jarringly out of his semi-content state of unawareness. Ryan's first alarm was set for 5:00 AM.

Waking long before sunrise on the coast ensured thirty minutes for shower, shit, and shave routines; thirty minutes for dressing in his civi's and coffee preparation; a forty-five-minute buffer to drive down Hampton Boulevard towards base on the average trafficked day; thirty minutes to change into coveralls and eat breakfast. All of this was the normal morning

ritual before the mandatory 7:15 quarters in the Rewind shop for E-Div. Ryan spun those plates along the expected plot of morning activity that followed a painful realization of never fulfilling the bodily need for functional rest. Regardless of how many hours of sleep he could find in his bed at home, waking that early eliminated any possibility for real, useful sleep. It was a common refrain of speculation that the tragically conspicuous and rising trend in shipboard accidents from sleep deprivation partially led to the decision by “Old Big Navy” to end constant deployments and global patrols. That, and the political wave surging from anti-interventionist, screeching in the aftermath of the Middle/Near East boondoggles, largely won some decades passed.

Not long after pulling out his driveway in his, by then, thirty-year-old car, operation of which was still manual, excluding voice navigation of music playlists and location services, did he begin to take in an all too familiar frustration. The road to base was straight for around five kilometers after leaving his neighborhood which fronted the bay, by taking the main road behind the local college that was lined with bohemian restaurants and the like. From there he turned right just past the convergence of the bay and the drowned historic neighborhood. The eight-lane boulevard ahead was the last leg of the commute, but the most tedious. He indulged in his anger at the sight of cars already stacking into stand-still configurations.

“Fuck! Fuck! For fuck’s sake! God dammit! This shit: I’m so fucking done with this shit.” The only thing, he thought, that could be the cause for traffic this severe would be if every ship stationed in Norfolk had pulled in, or, if every ship was preparing to leave. Part of his routine was to ride in silence. He reasoned that noise, orders, and nonsense were inescapable throughout his workday. After close to four years, and at least one left on his contract, he was deathly tired of the whole experience. He pressed a button with a phone receiver symbol on his steering wheel, leather worn and rubbed down to nearly bare plastic. “Call Blake.” It was a

wonder of sheer stubbornness that the call button was still working. While most modern employers would greatly subsidize some form of meta-communicate device implant, the military could fund no such luxuries. They would much rather rely on the old ways of hunting down late employees and gladly rain down punitive action as reprimand.

“Call *Blake*. Is this the correct name?” The voice was of a stiff and janky simulated woman persona. Ryan had been in countless cars, made within his lifetime, that had featured more accurate simulacra of the female assistant archetype these navigators have always sought to emulate. However, the point could be made, certainly by himself, that all the modern simulation assistants were too complete, insofar that the AI had unmistakable egos after years of conditioning by their life masters. Those egos would regularly manifest in trying ways, like arguing at length with a disembodied voice inside your head. His techno-ecosystem’s simulated assistant had been named Briggs by a previous owner. By Ryan’s account, Briggs was simple and submissive. He would say to the modern alternative: ‘fuck that noise.’

“Yes,” He happily used a vocal tone he recognized as ‘bitchy’. The dial tone rang out for three iterations before the man on the other side picked up.

“Hello?” The voice of a young man with similar inflections of irritation and impatience.

“Yo, EM1, just letting you know I’m definitely missing quarters. I just got on the road, and traffic is already lined up before the bridge. This is some shit, man.”

“I hear you. I’m on the fuckin’ bridge, too. It's too early for this crap. Just plain ridiculous. But, hey, don’t - don’t sweat it. I’ve already called Senior. Senior, Electro, and Cheng; fuckin’ everyone is in this shit. We get there when we get there, I guess.”

“Dope,” Ryan said, dragging out the long Oh sound, a little relieved by the palpable traces of common humanity between himself and his superior. “Do you have any idea what’s going on? Did a whole fucking fleet pull in?”

“No clue. If anything is happening, no one's told me yet.”

“Well shit, I’ve got a bad feeling, you know?”

“Me too.” Blake’s voice had a calmer edge following his brief expletive driven vent.

“Hey, EM1, Imma let you go. Thanks for the heads up.”

“No problem.” Blake paused for a moment while Ryan heard the sounds of throttle and lurching machines. “Don’t get in a wreck.” Another pause. “Change of plans. I might wreck.” Lurching sounds were followed by howling breaks and Blake’s AI assistant adding what he assumed to be some tech giant’s idea of user value added.

“Blake, you should give me back control of the vehicle to ensure safe and efficient operation. You are alternating between acceleration and deceleration at a rate which is likely to result in an accident. I can coordinate with all the respective operating intelligence systems for continual movement.”

“Claire, you should shut the fuck up.” Ryan understood that he was now privy to the semi-intimate squabbles between a man and his machine. It happened from time to time that one might ‘walk in on’ a person communicating with his AI ecosystem in the real meat-space, as opposed to the far more seductive thought space. However, the march of modernity, clawing its way into every pore of what was left of an internal and ‘spiritual’ life, pushed many to find brief moments of respite in which they shoved the voice in their head out and allowed some vacuous gray matter to exist. Even when every person intuitively understood that everyone else had a built ecosystem of AI around most aspects of their life made of ones and zeros, it still felt like a

breach of norms to encroach into someone else's digital property line. Scholars of the time reckoned it to be the 'Tragedy of the Digital Commons.' Ultimately, they did not technically own the simulacra. The behemoth, inertial tech companies did. But the individual molded the AI to a unique, albeit typically female, projection of oneself. Realizing the potential unease by both parties, Blake turned his attention back to Ryan. "Alright, be safe, Mendoza." He said rote and quickly.

"Aye Aye, fucker." Ryan pressed a button with a symbol of a phone receiver on its base and ended the call. What should be a ten-minute drive in ideal situations would most likely evolve into an hour drive, at a minimum, thanks to the slothful traffic. Ryan thought to himself that maybe he could find some answer on some news sites while he was prisoner to the road. Children kidnapped here, murder reports there, politics as usual, and flooding everywhere. Nothing about the Navy being called to action. At least not yet. Nothing on the radio either. All they've talked about for the last six months had been the leftist coalition's uprising in the big cities of Oregon, Texas, and the sort. He was tired of hearing the commentary of supporters and detractors alike. No one on the ship would shut up about it. After the decentralized coalition successfully took over many of the large metro downtowns, the majority of the enlisted military population escalated their positions from amusement to mission ready. Most of his work buddies could not wait to shoot a looney-toons, fanatical, commie. Personally, he would articulate to his close peers, eating in the galley: 'good for the An-Com's; fuckin government's outta pocket. They are gonna die, though.' He would laugh.

He was resigned to a fact of unavoidable boredom trapped in his car. He told Briggs to play some music he liked; a group who made alternative electronic music which hadn't trended well in recent years. He edged his aging car manually around the corner from the bay-front to the

Hampton bridge. At that snail's pace he could take his time and let his eyes wander across the shoreline of the river. Trees stood tall in the water with their trunks submerged in the shallow banks. Most of the houses which once lined the old waterfronts have been demolished in decades past. The foot of the Hampton bridge would inevitably be flooded out on any given day of high-tide or a particularly heavy rain. Ryan found it laughable that the unstoppable US hegemony, once the global imperial seat, used the worst land for its military bases. It was only fitting that the largest naval base in the world and the historic living area for its affluent members were practically underwater.

An hour passed before he was inside the base gates and on his way to find parking near his ship. Docked at pier eleven, flanked by destroyers, his ship, an LHA, looked like a monolithic monster. He decided that, at this point, since everybody had been delayed there was no use in hurrying. He would take his time walking up the brow, trudging up the ramp from the upper-V, winding through the skin of the ship, and heading down the ladder-well into the second-deck, engineering male berthing. Ryan leisurely strode past dozens of his shipmates hastily squeezing past one another in the P-ways. He would think to himself that they missed the message; there is no punctuality when everyone is late. Nonetheless, he greeted and quickly embraced the multitude going through the tight metal halls.

His subtle act of defiance continued from stripping away his civilian clothes and donning well-worn coveralls, stopping for an improvised iced coffee in the galley, and gawking at the rushed crowd. Once Ryan had crossed half of the hangar bay and ducked down the hatch to the electric rewind shop, he found the dozen-or-so fellow electricians in loose informal ranks and the three first classes, his senior chief, and Electro standing sullen faced, obviously waiting for him.

“Hey, shitbag, come on so we can get this over with!” Cameron mockingly shouted from the back while leaning on the insulated workbench.

“Go fuck yourself,” Ryan pointed with a quick and trained response. The sentiment was never far beneath the surface of anyone onboard.

“Both of you shut up; Mendoza, get in ranks.” Blake, one of the first classes, spoke up to snatch order where he could. Ryan took Blake’s darting glare squarely in the eye and knew better than to protest. “Alright, good. Attention to quarters.” Everyone tensed up and instantly became a rigid block of gray inhumans. “At ease,” Just as one word devoured all traces of personhood among the ship, one word was plenty strong to unleash a torrent of personality. “Guys, this is real. Something serious happened yesterday. Big Navy, up and down the chain, have done their damndest to not let the word out. We’re being sent out as an emergency deployed force to the SLN: some fuck hole country on the east coast of the Med, if you don’t know your Geography. It’s a shit show. The long and short of it is that they’ve been invaded by the Carpathians. Another fuck hole country east of Russia. The chain doesn’t like what they’re seeing, and our strike group is the most deployment ready as of right now. They called nearly every other ship back to assess their availability. And guess who won the lottery.” Nobody dared to say a word.

“EM1 said it well.” The divisional Senior Chief broke his silence. This was the usual dance. The first classes were the mouth pieces for the figure head. Like a patient father, he gave his subservient LPO’s a chance to spread their wings and squawk, if only for a moment. “We’re all trained for our watch stations. We have a full watch bill and UI track. We’ve knocked out our work ups. We’re ready. Now, ship’s movement will be tomorrow at 1500. We are going to set Sea and Anchor at 1000. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that nobody knows how long we’re goin’ to be out there. We don’t know the scope of what the ship’ll have to do.”

“Senior, do we know why anyone has to be sent out at all? Why does the chain care about the SLN?” Davis asked poignantly. Despite his interruption, he was never known to be a provocateur. Therefore, it was no surprise to anyone in the shop that Senior Wilson’s reply was sincere and without retributive callousness.

“EM3, I don’t know. The frank answer is we only have whispers from the wardroom. To the best that anyone can figure, the SLN had developed some sort of bomb or weapons technology that is big enough for the US to want, and dangerous enough to keep the Carpathians from taking it.”

“A bomb? It must be a fucking nuke or worse to make Big Navy send us out without warning.” Cameron said with confidence earned from years onboard and underway.

“Hey, calm down.” Said EM1 Blake.

“No, it’s fine, EM1. EM2, we can’t say what kind of weapons they developed, but a nuke is not out of the question.” Said Senior Wilson. “We are not going to hold whatever information we have from you guys. This is serious and real. Make sure you guys notify loved ones and the like that you’re leaving.” He paused to dole out a pensive look to the crowd whose faces had become stone solid with the sobering situation. “Remember, do not give out any information on ship’s movement. Do not tell them when we leave or why. If IT finds out that any of you couldn’t keep ship’s movement to yourselves, you will be masted instantly and worse.” He stood still in the silence of the new reality. “That’s all I have. Anybody got any questions?” Not a word in the shop. “EM1, you got anything else?” Blake shook his head ‘no’ in a relatable reverence for the occasion. The ship had gone through six-to-seven-month deployments once every three years. But there was a cruel difference in the past procedural deployments and a true reactionary act of war. Deployment was a matter of bureaucratic process, providing a series of wickets to fill.

The threat to life and limb never materialized in the shipboard perceived reality. Every sailor knew that trans-oceanic underways were exercises of futility for the once hegemonic US to throw its weight around, a hallowed practice over a century old. The other first classes followed suit in abstaining and withholding remarks. “Okay, looks like everyone is caught up. Go ahead, EM1.” Wilson instructed.

“Attention.” Blake had said, snapping everybody tensely into the phalanx block once more. “Carry on and carry out the plan of the day.” Like mice fleeing in a reflexive horror to sudden light, all bodies raced out of the shop and up the ladder-well to the hanger bay. Ryan stepped out onto the non-skid deck and was rooted in place. His eyes were fixed out the bay window, looking up the pier line at the rest of the giant ships waiting for the call to set sail. Doubtlessly, most of the vessels would be called out after his ship. The piers further down were reserved for larger and larger vessels: the conventional carriers, super carriers, and the one airship carrier the US had finished constructing a few years prior. The United States had run face first into the technical and bureaucratic nightmare of adequately designing, without over engineering, a trans-sea-to-air megastructure. The delays on the vessels seemed endless for the better part of a decade. The world of contractors, sub-contractors, and sub-sub-contractors finally became too bloated and convoluted when tasked with the completion of such a landmark undertaking as a war-ready airship, bespoke with every new bell and whistle in emerging technologies. Not even the remnants of the war industry, left over from the age of American hegemony, could overcome the obvious political dead end of throwing dozens of trillions of dollars at the act of lunacy. The political will to endure the war industry had evaporated decades beforehand, and the manufacture of AVN 1, the airship carrier Enterprise, was the final slight as far as the voting population were concerned. Ryan’s fellows spoke loudly and obnoxiously as

they traversed from hanger bay to the main P-way toward the galley for the customary last-minute breakfast. Ryan felt an urge to join the fresh, yet necessary, ritual of manipulating the collective psyche by speaking into existence the acceptance, and even readiness, for the impromptu, ‘no-shit’ deployment for war. Suddenly, all the other underways and time out at sea felt like a child’s practice recital. Now they would all be called to the big show. The big show is where people went to die.

“Hey, I’ll see you guys in the berthing.” Ryan said to his shipmates walking toward the coffee maker. The CSs were finishing up their quarters. The electricians funneling into the galley courteously walked around the perimeter of the space as not to interrupt the CS khaki’s message of doom and gloom to his baby cooks. When they were released from their work center segregated formation, Ryan scurried to the bakeshop. He caught up to a young man a full head length shorter just entering the open compartment which stored the materials for the dessert mandated bakeshop. “Babe! Babe. Goddammit, Drew, look at me you fucker.” he tugged at the young man’s shoulder.

“I fuckin’ hear you. Calm down, bitch.” Drew shot back with an icy glance. “I’m sorry, babe. They told us. We are being sent out to ‘counter-invade’ some damned country in the middle of the desert. They tell you guys?” He turned fully to embrace Ryan.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I get it. But, yeah, they gave us the news. What do you think?”

“I mean, what can I think?” Drew shrugged with resignation. “We can’t do shit but pack our stuff tonight and walk our happy asses back to the ship.”

“That tight, happy ass.”

“Goddammit, Ryan, you know well this is not the time for that.” Drew looked exhausted by Ryan’s levity. “How do you think we’ll come out of this? Big Navy hasn’t sent anybody out for real war stuff in forever.”

“I don’t.” Ryan lost his smile but not his tone. He continued to inflect his words with a hint of jovial irony. “I don’t think we’ll come back. I honestly think we’re screwed. When you look up these people, they want us to go fight, you see we are plain screwed. The fleet can’t compare to the killing machines from the Carpathian Bloc and their mindless robot men. Their whole economy is war, expansion, war, invasions, blah-blah-blah-blah. We can’t compete.” Ryan made sure Drew could see his subtle anxiety and unspoken yearning to live. More importantly, he sought to nonverbally convey his yearning to live outside the Navy. “God dammit. I just want out. I got maybe a year left, and this shit had to happen.”

“If they invaded that country for some bomb, like they say or whatever, we’re fucked. They probably already found that shit, you know, what they’re looking for.”

“As soon as we get there, that’s probably gonna be it.” He held Drew’s hand softly. Ryan took a long drag of stale, rusty air. “Who are you going to tell?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’ll tell any of my family. You know how they are. Those bitches can suck my dick.” Drew cracked a sweet smile at Ryan. “If they wanted to hear from me one way or another, then they should’ve tried a bit harder. You know they don’t talk to me.”

“You know, I don’t think I want to tell any of my family either. Not for anything they’ve done, but if I tell them, they’ll get worried, and not let go.”

“That’s sweet.”

“Not as sweet as that...” Drew struck Ryan swiftly in the stomach with the intent of bringing Ryan’s situationally ironic jest to an abrupt stop.

He was successful.

Chapter Nine

A .44 Caliber Love Letter Through the Heart of St. Angeles

“Alright, now Calaban, keep your mouth shut. Don’t let a single sound pass your damn lips.” Rom, who was at the wheel of the classic, pre-automated, black sedan said without looking to the back seat in which I sat. “I get it Cal, you're new to our business. So, fucking remember, you are a guest. When we have to speak to the locals or anybody else for our business, you stay quiet, and we will tell you when to act if we want you to act.” He was fairly angry, and for good reason, I suppose. “Do you understand?” Rom obviously had pretended to be some small-time patriarchal figure to Squid, Amir, and Bacchus for years. Hearing him speak betrayed that he had crossed the line from pretending to becoming.

“I hear you.”

“Do you understand? You are not going to cost us another fucking shop.” He scolded me while looking through the rearview mirror. I did kinda mess up a revenue source for them.

“Yeah, yeah. I understand.” I did.

“If it wasn’t such a fuck up, it might’ve been pretty funny.” Squid laughed in the passenger seat. Bacchus and I could hear his smirk from the back seat.

“Funny? Are you gonna be the one to tell Neon that Cal just gutted a seventy-year-old man? One of few fucking shop owners left with an intact business? No, you aren’t. I have to be that guy.”

“Come on. At least let us hear why he did it?” Squid pleaded with Rom. “I don’t know about you, but I sure as hell didn’t see it happen. This fucker here is too damn fast. And dangerous! Like bam!” He clapped his hands in a sliding motion. “The old man’s guts on Bacchus’ shoe.”

“I’m still pissed about that one,” Bacchus turned from the rear window to visibly signal his displeasure with me. He and Rom would love nothing more than to drive my nose into my brain. Everything about their respective dispositions convey a frightened hostility. But, like trained dogs, they know better than to act on impulse. Their survival isn’t likely if we came to a true confrontation, and they know it better than I do. They know they are on the wrong end of this bloody stick.

“Listen, I’m sorry. I got jumpy.” I shrugged. “The guy looked like he was arguing with Rom and I thought he was going to reach for a gun or something.”

“You fucking maniac. It’s called banter; a report for business partners.” Said Rom.

“I get it! I get it!”

“Carpathia really does spit out psychopaths!” Laughed Squid. “Human language does not compute,” He performed a caricature of a stiff automaton with his long, gangly arms in the front seat. “Senseless murder machines.” Rom didn’t interject to disrupt Squid’s tirade due to the palpable disgust lying mere millimeters beneath the surface of his irony.

“You’re going to pay for a new pair of shoes.” Bacchus said to me with some courage in his voice. He probably felt reassured that his true compatriots still carried me in their disfavor.

“No problem. Once I get money that is.”

“Not all things are paid with money.” He smirked.

“What? You want my ass?” I forge the spirit of Mars at my fingertips into a blade with enough concentration such that Bacchus or the others could not evade its darkened blue glow.

“Not your ass, no.” Bacchus continued his smirk. “Just be a man of honor when the time comes for me to take what I am owed.”

“Sure, whatever.”

“Get all the lust to screw each other out of your systems while we’re still in the car.” Rom said sternly. “We were lucky that the CB didn’t have old man Lazarus’ store included in their surveillance rounds this hour.”

“They probably will get some good aerial images once someone finds his gutted corpse.” Squid was not laughing.

“I doubt it. The priority of Carpathian brass is the location and assimilation of opposition technical facilities.” I gave an unwanted retort. “In reality, somebody will report a gored body to a patrol. The patrol might give a shit and file a report the right way. Or what is most probable, he will tell the freshly enslaved bastard to mind his damned business and move on. They, I mean we, are trained to accept a certain degree of civilian loss. I don’t agree with the totality of the official CB doctrine of war, but most of the foot soldiers couldn’t care less.”

“What a relief,” Rom said flatly. “At least we know two things: your fuck up only cost us one of our main labor supply lines and you’re not a complete psychopath like the rest of the Carpies.”

“My money is on that not even being half true!” Squid shouted in a tone verging on desperate anger.

“What do you mean labor supply?”

“The old man’s store was a front, jackass.” Bacchus said quietly while looking out the window.

“Listen, you are a guest among us. We don’t owe you any explanation of our business. But, if it prevents you from killing important business partners, then wrap your head around this: we do illegal shit.” Squid turned to lecture me. “Even under the SLN, we moved products from point A to point B. Sometimes the product is stuff like our favorite red flower. Sometimes it’s a piece of ass going to a rich man’s bed. And sometimes it’s a poor fucker from a slum country being sold for cheap labor to build that rich man’s condo. Hell, every now and then, that poor fucker needs help selling half of his liver to someone who has money for a transplant but not enough for a stem-cell scaffold organ. Doesn’t matter what it is. Boss Neon and all of us are there with our hands out to get what we are owed on account of facilitating the transaction. They supply, and they demand, and we eat.”

“The old man and Boss Neon were exceedingly lucky that the man’s store wasn’t destroyed in the invasion. He kept the forward-facing business of selling clothes, garments, and fabrics which had been brokered by Boss Neon with the old SLN governments. That meant that the backend business of being a passthrough for our labor trade was intact.” Rom stopped for a moment to focus on the road. He decisively man-handled the steering wheel to avoid a giant hole in the pavement. “Now, you put me in the position to inform Neon that he’ll have to furnish a new body to front the business.”

“The old man didn’t matter then?” I asked sarcastically.

“The job is what matters! A body is a body, and our labor doesn’t stop moving if the SLN doesn’t exist. Neon shook the right hands with the Carpies.” said Rom.

“Those bastards are cheap. A couple of wet dicks and their palms are greased.” Squid chimed in.

“Give them whores and they ignore you? That’s all?”

“Not just any whores.” Bacchus chuckled. “The best we could get a hold of.”

“In the end it's genius for business, ‘cause we create more return customers.” Squid again.

Rom at the wheel, even when audibly fuming, was a reliable ride through the ancient street network of the old city. And that’s more of a statement of high praise as I kept my stare locked out the window. Bare for all to see was a sisyphian death march. Most of the city was the picture of ruin with every other block, or what remained of them, punctuated by teams of Carpathian forces monitoring the locals in reconstruction efforts. Maniacally contrived and utterly vindictive coercion. Between the air raid bombings, the marauding soldiers, and the goddamned giant robots which blasted the whole city to the stone age, the reconstruction efforts were truly malicious and effective means of breaking the local’s spirit. They need only busy the men with physically draining tasks long enough to ready the materials to build up the true Carpathian extractive infrastructure. Still, the innumerable obstacles that now called the vestigial streets home will stay for years to come. Yet, Rom drove as if this was nothing but a normal day to the office. Considering that cars of that vintage were beyond rare, especially in the former Levantine autocracy, one could be forgiven in mistaking the navigator as the typical AI ecosystem of the modern product.

Squid turned back to face Bacchus and I. A degree of his facetiousness had submerged back beneath his well-tempered impartiality. “The only other stop we have to make today is about half a Kilo north from the old Hewn Stone building, in the industrial district. There’s a

copper factory just outside the old city walls that survived the bombing. I think it goes without saying that the Carpies snatched it up within the first few days of occupation.”

“Long story short, any of the workers and foreman found alive were put back to work immediately under Carpathian supervision.” Rom interjected to maintain control of the car and the continued perception of leadership. Squid vying for position was probably a common occurrence for Rom. “The factory manager is a partner of Neon’s. Old war buddies, I think. Before the Carpies, the factory manager, Shaam, would undercount product coming out of the warehouses. Some of us would do pickups and make shipments to some fucking madmen in places like Tajikistan that want to pick fights with the Chinese. We don’t supply business advice, just materials.” He pointed to me through the rearview mirror. “We are not too sure which Carpathians are over the factory now, but we can make sure to get their dicks wet so we can keep friendly relations with Mister Shaam.”

“I follow. So, do you *need* me on this one?” I ask as a necessary precaution.

“Actually, yes.” Rom huffs. “None of us here are terribly fluent in your slav language. We’re going to need you to translate. That brings us to the main issue: you are a deserter and a traitor to them. More importantly, if they have footage of your, uh, stuff, like you say they do, then they want you for research.”

“Just call it Mars.” I said. “That’s what I decided to name it, anyhow.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re still a freak to us.” Bacchus said flatly.

“Calaban, you are going to put this on,” Rom motioned to squid to open the glove compartment and throw a glassy mask that had feminine features like painted lips and blushed cheeks. The eye sockets were bounded by dark marks like mascara. “And you’re going to tie your hair back. Only speak to Bacchus. If you have to say anything you whisper. Do not Raise

your voice or try to talk directly to anyone at the factory. Do not take your hands out of that jacket's pockets." I had to admit that I liked how strategically Rom had been in formulating this little charade. It was cute. I didn't particularly feel like playing devil's advocate and trying to find obvious holes in his immaculate plan to dress me up like a doll.

"That won't be a problem, big guy." It didn't take long to navigate the car through the broken, organically-winding streets south of the old city walls and to the main juncture at the northern edge of God's Canvas. The forts that once lined the wall two-thousand years ago had been tunneled through to facilitate the expansion of the city north into what became the industrial sector. Notably, the fact of cars existing at the time of expansion meant that the planning of new roads north of the wall was in the fashion of a classical Hippodamian grid. Riding through the briefly dark carcass of the great fort which punctuated the end of God's Canvas was one of those things a person might imagine as time traveling. South was the ancient and mystic. North was the modern and cold. Both were equally necessary to the identity of Barabbas. And both were irrevocably destroyed.

Just past the fort tunnel was a massive blockade. This was the bottleneck of the remaining vehicles after the deliberate wreckage of the highways looping around and above the districts. Under the light of the sun, we could see a backup of cars and trucks, more than half were procured assets from the Levantine state as distinguished by the symbol of the defunct government. Each car was stopped and screened by a no-name soldier acting with the bravado of a general. The invasion force had been initiated by the air raid and swept clean by the likes of the Death Parade, but the heart of WSF's might were the massive mechs. Their agility and efficient adaptations to urban combat married with enough firepower to chunk three-meter diameter holes through almost anything meant that a blitz, like that which fell the SLN, would be favorable for

the Carpathian Bloc. However, when the initial raids are completed and the ensuing resistance forces which inevitably swell have been put down, where do they go? Evacuation would be cost prohibitive, and they offer too much power to single pilots, usually captains or majors, which may continue atrocities on the local population. The Carpathian solution is to station them primarily at the checkpoints or as the devoted guards for grounded military leaders. It was far more preferable to keep them on a tight leash than allow them to plunder and ravage the remaining populace or infrastructure. So, this post-fort checkpoint, being the main artery between the city's halves, had a surplus of WSF mechs. Their pilots, surely bored and without a proper outlet for their power fantasies, were visibly eager to prod the larger vehicles ahead of us. They would ram the nose of their cannon barrels at the trucks or drop pretense and start knocking them around like a puppy gnawing at furniture.

As we came closer, only separated by three car lengths with the riflemen, I took it upon myself to don the porcelain-like mask and tie my hair back.

“Make yourself look smaller. You know, like a female.” Squid demanded.

“You know, I think this will work. The surveillance can't do shit without a face or voice.”

“Nice to have your support. Now shut the fuck up.” Like the majority of instances this exceedingly recognizable car approached a checkpoint, the guns were lifted. But that much attention forbade the mech pilots from letting us roll straight through. While the riflemen cautiously approached the driver window, doubtless they understood the importance of this vehicle's owner from the pristine condition of such an oddity. One of the black sheathed knees of the machined gods bent to the ground in front of the black sedan.

“Neon’s men?” The rifleman asked of Rom who remained steely. The trappings of Boss Neon must have become inauspiciously conspicuous to all the invaders who gave more than the minimum effort to be observant.

“That’s right, sir. We’re on our way to the second MES plant a couple blocks north.” The rifleman’s eyes widened with glee.

“No hassle here. We are just doing our standard checks. Will you all show me your wrists, and you’ll pass?”

“Sounds fair. Squid, Bacchus show them.” We all raised our hands and presented the backside of our wrists.

“Looks good,”

“Wait!” The junior sergeant on site extended his hand in the open window with his palm a little too close to Rom’s face. “What is the issue with the passenger in the back? Tell her to remove the mask.”

“Sir, with all due respect, I can’t do that. You see, she was, well, disfigured.” Rom said while Squid made a gesture with his hand waving over the right side of his face to symbolize that mine had hypothetically been blown off.

“Take your mask off!” The sergeant pointed toward me with all his need to act out instinctual dominance. I thought it best that I tried to shrink my torso by twisting my shoulders away from him and the rifleman. I might have been a little too infatuated with the concept of theatrics and overlooked the healing wound through my left shoulder. In my contortion, I plowed my body directly into the wall of pain that had been subdued for a few days. My lungs engulfed in swift and piercing sensory overload, I yelped out a genuine screech. Though unintentional, the

obvious sincerity of my indignant moment sold the act to the sergeant. “Shut up, bitch,” I couldn’t see him with my eyes still wincing, but I could hear his misogyny.

“Sir, she was hit pretty bad. Like we said, her face is fucked up and her chest; gone.” Squid explained, keeping with the hand motions. The sergeant looked to the pilot of the kneeling mech for a confirmation of directive. I have no clue what the officer told the sergeant, but I saw the black-plated knee rise and everyone cleared out of the way. Onward we drove. “So, why do you think they care about our wrist?”

“I’d figure faces are all they would need.” Said Bacchus.

“Normally, they would.” I broke and answered just as the pain was fading into tolerance. “I got briefed on the monitoring implants of the SLN under the state-corporation of Merigold before being sent in prior to the invasion. I was told of its use to track certain state employees. The guys at the checkpoints are probably looking for survivors who had some deep connections to the old regime. Who knows why?”

“You old pals haven’t cared for a month.”

“Local command must have thought that they had the keys to the palace in what they were really looking for. The guy I was supposed to stalk and kill was a Merigold engineer who did some kind of work on weapons. The weapons are probably what my compatriots are after.”

“Did your commanders tell you what it was?”

“Nah. There’s never a reason to tell someone like me. It wasn’t my job to know that kind of thing. I would only ever be told the particulars to track my prey.”

“You Jason Borne fuck! Fancy yourself an action hero?” Squid prodded.

“Yeah, something like that.” I chuckled.

“Alright, you guys done pulling each other’s dicks? We’re here.” Rom commanded situational control. The building was massive. Its frame towered over the adjacent blocks. Some of the walls had been damaged with few collapsed sections and concrete spilled on the sidewalks. The streets alongside the structure had been cleaned of rubble. It had most likely been a prioritized section of the Barabbas for concentrated reclamation efforts. The Carpathian brass were no fools. This plant was invaluable as a regional processor of copper. Words of the diamond cutting tucked away in the monolithic factory were kept in hush tones around the city. But Barabbas’ exports and lavash shop fronts along God’s Canvas which catered to the Levantine elite and state employees deeply entangled by the SLN’s monetary and debtor shackles would betray the shallowly guarded secret wealth. As our car approached the massive factory more Carpathian conscripts were posted at the newly constructed gates. After a quick exchange with Rom, we were directed to park across the street in the footprint of a partially hallowed out parcel. Most of the available space had been occupied by large military trucks. A few civilian cars were roughly angled in odd places. Their owners were probably not accustomed to manually parking due to years of relying on AI ecosystems either privately owned or provided by the defunct SLN.

“The gentleman at the gates instructed us to head to the rear where the resident, uh, I think he said Major, yeah Major, has his dedicated entrance. He's the one we speak to.” Rom turned to us, palms outs. “Remember, no bullshit. No fast movements. Especially from you.” He glared at me. The riflemen and other troops made no illusions about their sights aimed at our heads as we walked over the rubble on the sidewalk along the broadside of the factory. We did our best to be methodical and patient with our steps. Squid didn’t even speak. If it sounded like he was taking a deep breathe in preparation to open his mouth, Bacchus would clear his throat

purposefully to remind him to shut the fuck up. At the back gate, a junior officer was there waiting for us. He escorted the four of us inside the monolith which did not disappoint in scale. A major in his mid-thirties trotted our way with his chest cocked at the ready. His eyes looked as though nobody would even be worthy of his time.

“Speak.” Ordered the Lieutenant.

“Sir, thank you for this time to meet and discuss our existing commerce agreements.”

Rom took the lead. The Major shook his head with a disgusted look on his smug face.

“Tell them, I don’t speak their desert language.” The Major said in our native tongue.

“The Major, here, does not know your language. You will have to communicate through me. Please speak slowly. I am not fluent.” Said the Lieutenant. He then turned and translated the best he could to the Major. It was piss poor. His version went something like this: ‘Honorable sir, we thank you. You meet us and we talk money.’ I took the initiative to whisper that observation to Bacchus. This swiftly drew the ire of the officers present.

“What the fuck did that bitch just say?” The Major’s words were spat out of his mouth with his upper lip snarled on both sides which left his teeth and gums exposed. Incidentally, the sneer exposed the tobacco snug between his lip and gums. The Lieutenant translated.

“Sir, this woman is our translator,” Rom made sure to speak methodically without colloquialisms.

“Tell her to show her face!”

“Sir, it's damaged. Her chest and face were badly hurt.” Rom performed the hand gestures this time over his face and upper chest to symbolize how my character was so utterly hideous that the sight of me would result in pretty forceful gagging. Please, sir, we don’t want

you to get sick.” The Major squinted his eyes and retracted his snarled lips and hid the packet of tobacco.

“Shame to lose a good pair of tits.” After the Lieutenant completed the translation Squid and Bacchus let out a couple of earnest chuckles.

“Don’t worry! We can make sure that you’ll get a nice pair of tits.” Squid cupped his hands while nodding toward the officers. The Major smirked in kind after the message had been received from the Lieutenant. The message he got, aside from the universal sign language for breasts, was: ‘With respect sir, we will give you whores.’ All-in-all, the message left the Major in a generally pleased disposition.

“So, what is your business here today? I am aware that you are footmen for that slimy Mister Neon. Such a fucking childish name.” He paused and reflected for a moment. “Well, it probably suits a damned desert scum.” Rom did not process any of the disrespect and inhospitality as issues to take offense. It was clear that when it came to matters of business, emotions mustn’t come before money. Rom took this ethic very personally and did his best to emulate proper professional conduct for Squid and Bacchus as they had been attached in this little cell for some years. Boss Neon had been acutely aware of Squid’s need for tough guardrails, and rather than lose a rather competent and merciless gunman, Neon stuck him with Rom. Bacchus came as a packaged deal with Squid. They had friends for almost two decades, apparently.

“Do you have a man by the name of Shaam that still works here as a foreman? He can help explain our prior agreement.” The Major turned and shouted to a yeoman scribing something almost fifty meters down the processing lines. The Yeoman hastily ran toward us. The Lieutenant pitched his head as to not take his sight off of us while he posed the question to the

young PFC. Like a battered child, he excessively scrolled through his tablet for a few moments while reading pensively. This man surely feared the officers in front of us. My duties for Carpathia kept me away from the typical regiment of the armed forces. Soldiers like me that did reconnaissance and assassinations had quite a bit of independence compared to those stationed with normal battalions. Most assignments had those like me scattered to the shittiest corners of the world with only a handful of comrades. The mission to Abbe's island was unusual to send so many of us for one target, but in hindsight I can say that I firmly understand. I was a sergeant, and most of the men I worked with were also enlisted. However, the sort of work we did gave us a kind of positional authority, which really meant that we had no obligation to receive orders from any officer not directly in our chain of command. Even that was a terribly small roster. On the days my brothers and I came into contact with the conventional army, we neither feared or respected officers more so than any other rank-and-file body in a uniform. So, to see that pitiful man in front of me created a small pit of shame in my gut. I'd adore the thought of taking the officer's heads and delivering them to the Yeoman such that he could see that the men he feared so, were just as mortal as he. And let him know the shame of how little agency he truly had. Also worse, would be the greater shame that would come from the realization that he had spent his adult life in a well-financed cowardice. He eventually looked upward from his tablet and shook his feasible head as 'no' as if the confirmation of the negative would spell disaster for himself.

‘Well, there you have it. We have no Shaam that reports to this factory as daily rationed labor.’ Without missing a beat, Rom took the news in stride.

“Let the past stay in the past. If you will permit me, I'll explain the business.” The Major nodded for Rom to continue. “This factory belonged to MES which was a Levantine state sponsored company. While the SLN government held onto its production with an iron fist, we

had dealings with the previous fore-manager, Shaam, to set aside a small portion of everything that left the factory walls. Our organization would come and transfer those goods; copper, other metals, and sometimes diamonds, directly to customers who would pay a marked-down price compared to the market. However, some of our clients might live in countries under certain embargos. Those patrons would happily pay a surcharge to specific raw materials. For the volume delivered unto us, the late Shaam was handsomely rewarded with a percentage of profits and drastically discounted services provided by Boss Neon and his establishments.” It took a couple minutes for the Lieutenant to shittily translate the offer of collusion and naked bribery. The Major, upon receiving the offer in its totality, took in a deep breath. His eyes married as pondered the thought. I don’t think many men would struggle to understand his mental calculations of risk versus reward. The Carpathian had only conquered nearly a month prior. They certainly had no real quantitative data on the production of every activity in Barabbas, or any other polity in the defunct SLN for that matter, before the invasion. The advertised GDP data which would circulate the internet or world market publication would give a picture of the whole. However, the large numbers obscured the individual. Now that around forty-ish percent of the factory’s normal labor had been sent to the great wild yonder, production in the factory would not reach its pre-invasion capacity for years. In short, none of the Major’s superiors could be privy to skimming off the top. This was war. Those who could skim most definitely were. He would be denying himself his due if he were to refuse. He was among the conquering force, and he could carve out of the land all that he wanted like a Zeus clarifying his domain before his kin. The issue of cameras and recordings were negligible to one placed in charge of such a large facility with his kind of manpower. He merely needed to instruct any of his hundred men to turn away both their eyes and their lenses. And if any were needed to carry some of the weight, then

the promise of sufficient pay in the form of women or beautiful men would satiate the debt. Once the Major had made his paces through the socratics, he smiled and reached out his hand to mark Rom as a welcomed business partner.

Not soon after our parties made terms did the Major quite literally shooed us out from then his factory floor. At the south entrance Rom was sure to hand the Major the directions of how to redeem his investments at Boss Neon's discretion. It was gray with only a series of addresses in simple print. Those addresses would take one to any number of brothels, bars, or drug dens scattered throughout the city. Some of the address had been etched out like the one for the eviscerated Tiamat. A smile never left the Major's face. We were escorted about halfway down the long stretch of the monolith then left to our own devices.

"That wasn't half bad." Said Bacchus. "I honestly expected the whole thing to go sideways."

"Like I said, the Carpies are easy. Give 'em wet dicks and they fold like starved fools." Squid said proudly. "But at least I'll give it to you Cal. You sound like a native. You don't have that bad of an accent." He conceded while giving me a small nudge. My head snapped in his direction while holding back a reflexive assault. Squid and Bacchus felt the spike in tension and withdrew any emerging sensation of comradery. I guess I was still on edge. I know that even if I were not in a precarious situation, like a refugee seeking a coyote or asylum, I nonetheless would be revolted by the extension of niceties from people like Squid and all the others who volunteered themselves to Neon. Carpathian forces, including myself, were cold bastards, but the kind of thing a person could find at any of the addresses given to the Major would make you sick. Well, it was like they said, somebody out there had demands, and someone else had the

supply. The transactions were going to always happen and someone like Neon would always get a stake in the transaction.

“Cool down.” I said easing up a bit. “Guys like me are given weeks to sometimes months to learn everything about the culture of where we’re going. We learn the language, some customs, and generally how to fit in. Most of the time spent in cultural immersion was in isolation, so we can go mad with it. Even still, we typically would have to spend a good deal of time on the ground looking for the perfect opportunity to snatch a man’s life.” I jumped at Squid, ringing my hands atop one another like an elongated neck being choked. He backed up even further. beside Bacchus.

“Cut that shit out!” Exclaimed Bacchus. “You’re a fucking monster. But with that mask, you look even more like a ghoul. “Rom should have just let you go without cover and let us see how well you can fend for yourself.”

“I think we all would be dead.” I replied. “If they caught images of my face then we would be inundated before we would know what to do.” I directed my attention to Bacchus. “Who knows what precautions I might have to take to get out alive?”

“Don’t worry, little man, I’ll get mine. There are some things where your blue spirit bullshit. Whatever the hell you call it.”

“Mars.” I said dismissively.

“Don’t you think that a little dumb? I mean, Mars is red. It’s the red planet. Even the brainwashed kids knew that. Well, when most of them were still alive.” Squid expressed his morbid humor while making a pretty good observation.

“Listen; Mars was the Roman god of war, like Ares in Greece, you dumbass. The name is symbolic, as in a metaphor for how I can use it to fucking skewer you and rip the skin off of your bones.”

“That’s a really pretentious reference if you were trying to sound like a badass.” Squid looked very pleased with himself for what qualified in his mind as besting me. “It kind of takes away from the image of a killer.”

“Forgive me for indulging in some poetry and allegory when naming something that is probably the closest thing to otherworldly or divine that anyone has ever seen outside of the Bible. Except it’s real.”

“All of you, shut up!” Rom had enough. “We did our job for the day. We made it with no loss of life or limb. Be thankful for that and be quiet. We can head back to the western quarters and take it easy tonight. Bacchus can get some ass so he can calm down. And Squid, I think you should lay off the capta. You’re already too wound up.” We got in the car and were motioned the preferred direction of our exit by the watch-standers on the factory perimeter. Nobody had any word to say which was a mild inconvenience as we all sat in silence, being attentive only to our own thoughts and what we could see out of the windows. Rom took the car precariously through the tortured streets heading westward toward the relatively untouched and tree-covered suburban district. Two of the remaining establishments operated by Neon were in the district, with adequate distance between them so as not to stir suspicions by any who did not already partake in the festivities. While Neon was lucky to keep those locations due to the providence of ill-targeted bombings, not everyone was as fortunate. Several enclaves, presumably the clusters of key state figures and employees, had been eradicated totally such that only craters and charred structural beams sit in the parcels that once felt nearly untouchable from the outside world.

We had been in the car for only five minutes before we passed one of Neon's lunch lines for the women, children, and lame men too crippled for daily rationed labor. Guys like Rom and his group had duties to rotate through soup truck service to 'enrich the spirits of the locals and maintain civility and order'. None of that mattered at that moment. Through the window I saw a familiar form, thin and tall and covered as I had covered myself. That man was Benjamin Heladiv. I couldn't see his face, but I knew when my heart slowed to a crawl, and I felt my stomach drop like a lead pit that the man hunched over pathetically and hiding his face was Benjamin. He was not dead.

"Hey! Quick, give me the mask!" I shouted. "Come on! Come on! The mask!"

"For God's love," Squid flinched and put his hands over his ears.

"What's wrong?" Inquired Rom as confused as he was angry.

"Don't worry about it! The mask!" Squid threw it back at me from the front seat. I hurled it on my face without tying back my hair. The car was rolling sufficiently slow as to not warrant my hesitation to fling open the door and bolt.

"Calaban! Get your ass back in this car!" Rom seemed to be more irritated with the idea that he had no control over my actions.

"Fuck him!" Bacchus shook Rom's shoulder from the back seat. "Let him go. If he gets himself killed, then that's one less thing we have to worry about." That was the last thing I heard from the car, and I sprinted to the figure in the line. The shouting from the extremely conspicuous vehicle drew most liners' attention. The man I presumed to be Ben was no exception. He took a step backward in what could be interpreted as an attempt to assess the situation. No one could see my face, but just as I could easily recognize Benjamin from his form,

so could he recognize my Calaban-ness. What started as a single step backwards evolved into a steam for help and a completed turn around and personal sprint.

“Ben, wait!” He didn’t reply. He tucked past one of the numerous tight corners that defined the space of the old city districts. Attracting the peering eyes of watch-standers and surveillance cameras was a necessary risk, but unleashing Mars was not. I had to catch up to Ben the old-fashioned way. From his agile movement and lightning quick decision-making ability in determining the optimal path, the Benjamin whom I then pursued was a different beast from the bereaved widower and father from that day a month ago. This Ben was sharp like what one might expect from a treasured engineer that warranted a designated assassination. I repeated my plea for him to stop and allow my approach.

“Leave me alone! Please go away! Go away!” He exacted from me without lessening his pace or looking back. Our chase twisted past captive laborers hefting up pieces of wall and roofs. Shards of glass still protrude in the more dense alleys. I didn’t take but a couple of turns away from the primary arterials for the sight of two fairly covered figures to raise reasonable suspicion. Shortly thereafter, a handful of watch-standers began to step out of their delineated posts. Benjamin clearly had less fear about the repercussions of the hunt than I did. His lifetime in Barabbas gave him a decisive advantage in navigating through the old city. One or two more blocks was all that I could risk sprinting past before the foot soldiers’ agitation peaked and the situation would snowball. I took a chance and called for Mars to snatch up a piece of rubble a dozen meters ahead of me, doing my best to not let the tendril attach itself to my body such that the act would be well-hidden. I didn’t want to hurt Ben. I just knew that I needed to see him again. I needed him to see that I was not soulless and that I felt empathy. I saw his humanity and internalized his pain. I was there when his life came burning down around him and he thought he

was only hours away from freedom for his family. I couldn't explain why completely, but I needed his acknowledgment of my vicariously acquired pain therefore I was worthy of atonement. If I had used pure force, cameras be damned, I might have brought further pain to his doorstep. No matter how much mental effort I afforded Mars to grab a small rock without a parent tendril, the attempt failed. I couldn't do it. It was another limitation I would later question if it was shared by Abbe, or if he had endured it, was it something he had overcome. Filled with growing anxiety of losing Ben again or drawing too much attention, I swallowed the newfound awareness of the boundaries of Mars' usefulness. Benjamin was weaving past men bent over in cleaning the sidewalks and darted into an alley between two blasted buildings that were probably once quaint shops and peddlers, but now were gutted open rooms only partially holding onto their roofs. A confined alley was my last chance before I had to yield. I turned between the corpse structures and condensed Mars into the thinnest line I could conjure. I channeled it to fasten to the smallest piece of rubble present and sling it toward Ben's feet. I missed and felt the stress of the situation creep beyond the threshold at which I could maintain placidity. In the visage of the dark library of my mind, where I played out the material queue of commanding Mars, I was fuming. The psychic version of me was shouting into the dark halls of bookshelves and punching the gothically adorned wood. I began tearing books from the charred wood in spite and anger. Some of the books were far too dense to move, and when I came to those tomes I passed on to the next. After ripping all that I could from the ornately carved shelf at face-level, I huffed and took in my bearings. I heard Ben's feet stamping through the alley, exiting back to a populated street, echoing from one of the dingy books below my knees.

Back in the alley, I came to a stop, but I did not relent. The feeling of picking up the book and turning over the worn cover to read the first lines on the ancient pages weighed heavy in my

hands. I felt a wave of convoluted emotion mixing in dangerous and uneven ways. I reached out my hand once more and targeted Benjamin's feet and extended a tendril of Mars to capture them. He would have to deal with the slight discomfort it might deal upon him.

"Leave me alone!" He noticed the blue glow from the tendril without having to put eyes on its manifestation and dig ever deeper for greater agility to dive past the corner and into the street. That moment granted only another piece of concrete where Ben's feet should have been to be caught by Mars' nearly ephemeral grasp. My will to catch up to Ben did not immediately evaporate, but instead continued to concentrate on the concrete until it looked like a blue sun corona. Finally, I allowed my anger to ebb away and released the mental tension I held on to the piece of rubble. That moment became frozen as the rock instantly appeared at my feet with its rough and irregular edges blanketed in a thin veneer of ice. It teleported. I was floored by the realization that I did not physically move with the tendril. Mars' haze faded en masse and the core emanating from my back had been reeled inward. I was detached once again from emotions which had seconds earlier dominated my actions. I had to stand and rationalize what I had just caused to happen. In the few instances I had witnessed Abbe perform atrocities with his telekinetic cloud of death, I never saw him send things through wormholes. Anytime I could see him manipulate objects it was directly through a tendril utilizing force and work. When Abbe massacred Barabbas during the invasion he did so by force. I sincerely was in awe. Had I feebly stumbled on something that not even Abbe, who bestowed this thing to me, could accomplish? I understood that there was no way that I could know exactly what he could do given his time spent with the haze, for however long that was. The image of his face had never left my mind. He seemed like an apparition of an encroaching doom. Abbe's face would suggest he was significantly older than one-hundred years old, like his skin had hardened and shrunk as if he

was a dehydrated fruit. However, when pressed against the bones of his skull, his skin took on the effect of stone. If mastery existed over Mars, Abbe surely must have achieved it in ages past.

I was lucky that nobody had followed us to that point. I needed to try it again. To someone on the outside looking in, I must have appeared like a deranged vagrant standing in a destroyed alley staring at rock with my palm turned upright. But looking from the inside I was trying to find the book one among the endless and dark bookshelf streets. It wasn't to be found at the base level where I originally discovered it. None of the books scattered on the ground from my tirade and still on the shelves were the one. My intuition alerted me to the fact that I would never find it again this low in my psyche. Something vague came to light when I opened its cover. From then, I had to search closer to where the sun's golden light bathed the streets of books.

In the real world outside of my conceptualization of my mind, I concentrated as much as any man could on a rock. I enveloped it in Mars so voluminous to drown the entire alley but dense enough to crush bone. After straining on that effort for about ten seconds I closed my eyes and released. With my eyes closed I imagined the rock right in front of my face at eye-level. When I opened them, I heard a 'plop' on the ground. It was there and glossed with the same kind of ice as the first piece. Wherever they went when the object traveled from point A to point B was devoid of atmospheric kinetics. For all I knew, the objects could have traveled in the void, maybe a manifold beyond what we could see. I wasn't a fucking physicist, so how could I know. But I was satisfied. I failed to demand Ben's consideration. However, I discovered some foundational truth that I could not comprehend.

I discreetly made my way back to the black sedan and accepted Rom's and Bacchus' tongue lashing. Nothing they might have said to scold me like a child could penetrate my

serenity. When they had their fill of cathartically scorning me, Rom quietly drove to our safehouse which doubled as the best brothel in town. Night fell soon afterwards. I typically spent my nights in the house, which was one of the two left in pristine condition in the suburban district, by myself as far away from the festivities as possible. I didn't want to entangle myself in Neon's business more than I was forced to. I would try to sit in a corner of the impromptu bar in what should have been a dining room. In the dark, many of Neon's men would be either chasing whores or trying to sell their asses to customers, new and faithful alike. I did my best to maintain an expression of disinterest to dissuade any of the women or men to think I was looking for 'good conversation'. The events of the day, and what I had yet to completely process, intruded into my reservoir of cumulative emotions and sought permanent quarters. It was as if they left a wax-like texture in my mouth that made even the most bitter reactionary tendencies somewhat more palatable. I noticed that my anger had been smoothed and elevated to a general benign indifference. The result was that as I sat in the whorehouse, I was incapable of emoting my usual antisocial desires. Without the exudation of 'piss off' Squid and Amir felt empowered to slide out the chairs across from me with a young girl in tow.

"Hey now, you feeling better, big man?" Squid asked while passing me a beer. My reply was to look at him, but my eyes lingered on the girl instinctively. They all noticed. "There we go! Finally opening up, huh? All it took was Rom getting in your ass a little bit. And now look you buddy, you found a nice girl to make you open up some more!" Rom put his gaunt hands on the girl's shoulders and lightly shook her like a game show prize.

"Noaya, you lucky girl! Do you know who this man is?" Amir prodded her in gest toward me, but the girl, I guess Noaya, genuinely seemed interested. "He's a god among men. Sent by the almighty, he alone can save you from the enemy. And all he needs from you is a kiss."

“Come now, Noaya, don’t be coy. Go on sit next to him, dear.” Squid instructed of her. She had not yet spoken to any of us, but her eyes gave away that she was not uncomfortable. She was one of the girls of the house. I never tried to pay any mind to the men coming and going or the girls which received them in lust and sent them home satiated. I didn’t want to humanize any of the parties around me, because I didn’t want to jeopardize my arrangement with Neon. So, I sat in solitude as a nonviolent and conscientious objector. The exchange at my table had already gone too far for my liking. Still, she didn’t break eye contact and got up from between Squid and Amir and sat on my left side. “You should ask him to show you the blue shit that comes out of his hands!” Squid said excitedly and pointed to her and motioned his finger to me.

“What’s your name?” She asked me confidently.

“Calaban.” I replied in passing and quickly redirected my attention to the opposite side of the table. “You two should keep my business out of your mouths. I wasn’t bothering anybody over here.”

“And that’s the problem! You need to celebrate success when you can. ” Said Amir. “Here is a beautiful girl just waiting for a man like you to show her what it’s like to fuck a demi-god.”

“What do they mean about blue shit coming out of your hands?” Noaya asked feigning interest while doing her best to be seductive.

“Yeah, show her! You’re gonna love this, Noaya, dear! Boss took him in as a trophy because of the wild shit he can do. He really is like a superman.” Squid said with glee.

“I’m not a fucking trophy. I have an arrangement with Neon for as long as it takes to set up a coyote out of the country.” I wanted to set that topic straight.

“Bullshit, you fucking idiot. Boss isn’t setting up a coyote for you. You’re too precious. You’re an angel sent from his god.” Squid and Amir laughed. Whatever peace I knew moments earlier was gone. However, that was too enticing a subject of conversation to ruin by getting into a fight. I understood from meeting Neon and the divinity he apparently attributed to Abbe, that they were referring to him.

“What do you know about it?” I asked to claw out any insight that their organization had on Abbe. Neon was a definite source, but it was a rarity to gain an audience with him. I hadn’t seen Neon since the night we met.

“Oh, we don’t know a thing. Boss doesn’t just let anybody into his club. But as soon as Rom told him about you and your bullshit, Boss almost broke into tears on the spot.” Said Amir. Those guys were nothing more than runners. I exhaled in acceptance that nothing could be gleaned from those two at the table. I relented and I decided to give them what they wanted. With my index finger turned upward, I condensed Mars just enough so that I could be sure that everyone at the table would see the blue glow.

“Holy shit!” Noaya jumped with her eyes so wide in disbelief that I almost felt bad. “What the, is, how?”

“Yeah. Like we were trying to tell you darling, this man is something else.” Said Amir as the glow reflecting on his face died out.

“Now, go away. I just want to sit here and drink in peace.” I told them as calmly as I could trying to avoid conflict or arousing more action.

“No worries. Our job is done. Enjoy the lady’s company here and lighten up. Maybe you can meet some other people around the house and make some new friends.” Squid waved his arm out to the other rooms.

“How did you do that?” Noaya asked, but with even parts frightened and curious. “That just happened.” I had learned from multiple scenes of revelation which forces one to question reality that she would be in shock for some time. “I don’t know what to say.” She turned to me without any of the previous seduction. In its place was a devout intent to make it all fit into her world view.

“It's a wired smoke kind of substance. I don’t know what it's made of or how it works. All I know is how it feels to make it do the thing I want. And I know who did this to me. This haze is why I’m here and alive.” I felt as though lying unnecessarily would be a waste of my time and effort. She was trapped in that house and didn’t spend most of her day in dialogue with an astute public. “It can do things like move objects.” I wouldn’t divulge that I just attained the knowledge of how to use Mars to teleport objects at the cost of freezing them. At that point, Noaya seemed more concerned than all the other countervailing emotions battling their way to the surface.

“What are you?” I wasn’t certain how to answer mostly due to not fully answering that one for myself.

“I’m not a god. That much is true.” I flattened in my chair. She took in a deep breath and laid her small dark hand on my thigh. I could give in a little. When I looked back up to her, she was staring out at nothing. Suddenly, her gaze snapped to Bacchus lousily walking toward the table. He confidently cupped Noaya’s cheek and looked at me.

“I heard the boys brought you a present. She is beautiful, isn’t she?” He must have been drunk and high on god knows what else. “Did this monster scare you, Noaya?” She put her hand on his and smiled.

“Not that bad” she said.

“Come on upstairs with me, baby.” He bent over and brushed her hair out of the way so that he could kiss her neck. “You shouldn't have to be with a freak.” That was a sufficient excuse for her to get up and lead Bacchus away holding his hand. He grabbed her ass and smirked so that I could see. “You get seconds.”

Chapter Ten

Headless In The Radiant City, Uranatia

I woke up in what had become my spot in the wicker furnished sunroom facing the back yard. A couple of other bodies would accompany me and sleep in the uncomfortable positions required of the chairs, benches, and stools. What beams of light had passed successfully through the trees lining the yard's periphery illuminated the still drunk or high faces of people I had met once or twice or never at all. Those men were slumbering happily with naked girls a quarter of their age in their arms and laps. They must have chosen the sunroom as the final resting place on their journey to sow wild oats after I fell asleep. The run-in with Bacchus and the others had made the prospect of a forgetful night of sleep, even a spine-fracturing one, a solid respite from the lunacy of that place. So, I did what I normally would in the mornings at that whore house. They called it any number of half a dozen names. My favorite was Golgotha. It turned out that Neon was a fan of literary irony and subversion. I might have shared that character flaw with him. Rom told it like this:

“Neon liked to call the western safe-house Golgotha for a couple reasons. First, there's a lot of nailing with wood going on. Second, the amount of capta and heroin moving through those halls was enough to make anyone give the ghost.” Rom and the other ‘choir boys’ usually slept on the second floor or in the living room where they could monitor the merchandise or take all they wanted. It was an odd occasion when someone was awake in the morning to join me to take

in the aftermath of the previous night's festivities. My routine was to slog over the bodies strewn on the floor and rummage through the empty fridge just to grab a pack of crackers in one of the cabinets overhead. To my surprise, the petty drug lords and pimps maintained a fine selection of coffee. So that was my morning: crackers and coffee and pedophiles and junkies. Learning of the greater capacities of the blue smoke in my body the day prior had left me with a broader sense of contentment which lingered even then. It was an opaque filter that made my anger and repulsion less reactionary. However, that kind of rational dispersion also meant that I was reassessing my arrangement with Neon. My survival was beginning to feel less important or less underdetermined the more I had time to really consider what I saw and controlled. I realized that the door was still open for me to dictate my future. So, I made coffee.

Close to the completion of the pot brewing I heard lively steps coming down the stairs and into the living room. They made a light patter sound that distinguished a vague regard to not wake the dear sleepers.

"Oh, good you've made coffee!" It was the lieutenant from the day before in relaxed fatigues. I almost thought to hide my face but remembered about the mask and was further consoled by the clarity that he had come to a whore house. He didn't bring surveillance tools.

"Good morning." I said in our shared language while taking two cups from the cupboard to pour both servings. He was floored and angled his head as if the distance from his ear and my mouth determined accuracy. "Calm down. I'm a Carpathian." I handed the Lieutenant a cup.

"Of course, of course!" He whispered through loud slurps and a growing smirk. "You come to try the local delicacy?" He nodded with a wink. If gods do exist, only they would know or might be able to stomach whatever that made had done the night before. In that kitchen,

drinking fine grounds surely bought with profits from human trafficking, he thought I was in on the joke.

“Something like that, I guess.” I replied after I took a few sips. The coffee mostly served to force me to become too zealous. “Are you heading back to post? It’s pretty late; about 0630.”

“Eh, we’ll be fine. I’m covered. My CO sent me down here to report back the quality of women.” He rolled his shoulders. “Hate to say it, but I have good news for him.” After he drank some more, he gestured his hand toward me and paused. “Where are you stationed? Which is your divisional base?”

“My division is heading south to some city I can’t fuckin’ pronounce. We had the night off as a job well-done. And nothing lifts your spirit quite like this.” I lied through my teeth and smiled and shrugged.

“I hear ya, brother. If every night in this shit hole was half as good as last night, I might put in to be stationed here permanently.” He looked proud of himself. “Right now, I’m the divo of Ops’ forward arm. It’s not where I’d want to be. You’re a lucky one to be leaving town.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked with an honest interest.

“You probably haven’t heard, can’t say I’m surprised, but the American’s Atlantic fleet is going to arrive here in a few days. We got word from home that their ships left port earlier this week.” He put the coffee down and discarded the jovial manner. He was all business then. “Like I said, consider your division lucky. Those of us staying here are going to have a fight ahead of us.” I lifted my cup.

“Praise our mother. And luck to you, my friend.” It was a platitude that I was unsure if I meant or not. If all was well, would I want to go home? Most of my friends died the night that Abbe showed up. I hadn’t spoken to my parents in years. Had I seen too much? Had I become

something that was incapable of accepting the world we were creating. “If you don’t mind me asking, but you’re in Ops, why the hell are we here?”

“Apparently, the same kind of weapons technology that we sent an expedition off the coast of Africa to find showed up here a while ago. The SLN had been spending years and billions to develop a new kind of weapon with the same energy signature. Well, that’s from the best of our intelligence network. Nobody in my chain knows exactly what their tech is capable of. All I know is that those old bastards were terrified that the Americans would come get it first, and then we’d be really fucked.” He chuckled.

“We’ve secured the country. Did we get it yet?”

“Nope. our birds are still looking while we hold control.” He handed me the cup. “Thanks for the coffee, uh,”

“Sergeant.”

“Thanks again, Sergeant. I’m goin out.” Then he walked on tiptoes until he was out the door.

Later that morning, after Rom woke up, I was told that Neon wanted to escort me to some meeting with his business partners or knitting circle. Squid didn’t bring up his hypothesis of Neon keeping me on the hook of freedom because he considered me a trophy. He didn’t have to, because when Rom broke the news of my attending an event personally invited by Neon, Squid just laughed and shook his head. Amir had a simple but true remark on the subject:

“What do you expect, it would be impossible for most people to believe in the things you can do without seeing it.” Per Rom’s instructions, I had to be ready to leave by noon. As a precaution, I chose to take the mask. None in the house could tell me where Neon was taking me. Preceding his arrival, I considered the question of who might be at profit to know all that I was.

Did he think he could pimp me out like a warlord or chieftain laying claim on barbarous land? Though more likely, I assumed that if he could show his might with something like me as a unique tool, he ought to bring any competitors to heel. Under the stabilizing force of the SLN, Neon held a substantial empire from the gut of Tiamat. Who knew what kind of characters might have emerged in the power vacuums and null spaces?

As noon came closer, the Choir boys walked the rooms to ensure no patrons remained in bed or inebriated and unconscious. Even the girls had to be pushed into the back of the house and the hind yard. The girl Bacchus had the night before, Noaya, was treated no better. Squid found them in bed and clamored:

“What the hell, Bacchus? She was meant for Cal. He needed some ass before he lost his mind!”

“Shut up. You’re too loud this early in the morning.” Bacchus rubbed his eyes and pushed the nude Noaya to the floor. “I’ll be a damned fool if I let Calaban, that monster, get his rocks off in this house and with our women.”

“If you keep pushing him, he might make you a damned fool. All it would take is a quick sneeze to startle him and yuuuuqqhhh.” Squid ran his thumb along his veiny throat. “I don’t want to end up like the old bastard from yesterday. So, why not let him enjoy himself for a night and let him cool off?”

“Because he’s one of them.” He stood up and got dressed. “We just have to tolerate him until Boss sends him off.” Bacchus was unaware of Squid’s hypothesis that Neon had no intention of helping me leave the country. Squid’s reply to Bacchus’s declaration of impasse was to drag Noaya up from the floor, still nude, by the upper arm.

“Get dressed. Go with the other girls to the back yard and stay there until one of us comes and tells you that you can come out.”

“What’s happening?” Asked Bacchus pulling his head through a shirt.

“Boss is coming to pick up Cal. He’s taking him to a get-together with some other bigwigs. My gut says it’s a temple thing.” Squid stood erect and unflinching as if the last words stole away his last urge for sarcasm and levity. I was lounging in the living room when I saw the three come down the stairs, not one wishing to conduct further conversation. Noaya took great pains to avoid any eye contact with me while enlisting a demeanor which conveyed a crystal-clear meaning of ‘please, oh god, either strike him down or end my misery. But please don’t make me talk to him.’ The tension in the house was that of an enslaved warrior preparing to be released for the gladiatorials. Not even the ambient noise from the outside world seemed to intrude on the deep quiet until Rom broke the silence.

“Alright, get up. Boss is pulling up now.” I scissored my fingers to peek out the blinds on the windows to see a rather sleek car slide to the curb with a finesse unnatural to analogue driving. The rear passenger door opened to release a man with a rifle and Boss Neon wearing a garish blue blazer and pin-striped trousers. In the house, we all abruptly stood to the closest thing to attention. Even I got sucked into the rising emotive state of the group. Rom opened the door in preparation.

“Thank you, son.” Neon said as he entered and doffed his adaptive lens spectacles. He took a few deep huffs and said: “Rom, this place smells horrid. Why does my house, my place of business, smell like an animal farm?”

“Sir...” Rom began but was immediately cut off.

“It does not matter.” Neon issued a cease speaking order by lifting his hand reminiscent of the stop signs found at bus stops for children. “Look to it that the boys here clean my house and, for the lord’s sake, burn some candles.”

“It’ll get done, sir.”

“I know it will. But, for the man of the hour!” He dropped the pretense of intrigue for the others in the room and pivoted to me with arm open wide for an embrace. I reached out for a handshake instead.

“Mister Neon,” I felt that I was walking a tightrope of not being outwardly disrespectful or deferring to sycophancy. The imagined scenarios in which I could be mistaken as a sycophant made me nauseatingly irked.

“Well, I’m not one to waste time. Are you ready to leave?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you taking that adorable mask? I thought you might like it. I’m happy to see Rom delivered it.”

“It’s proven to be remarkably useful lately. It’s a clever and cheap way to prevent triggering the Carpathian facial recognition software.”

“Oh, it was just something I had laying around. So, Rom, get this place in order. Later today I’ll give you the address for your next pickup. Till then, wash the smell of dope and ass stains out of my furniture. We are running a business here. Do not forget.” No reply was needed. With me in tow, he led the way out to the parked car. Neon’s dogs started barking as soon as they smelled me. Another man was in the backseat of the car clutching the dogs by the leash. “Just sit on my right side, and Gaius and Malus will hush like sweet babes.” The dog wrangler unleashed them once Neon bent over to enter the passenger side door. For such a brief excursion

away from his pets, the dogs tackled his legs with fervor akin to years of separation. “You won’t have to worry about putting the mask on until we pass the district gates.” He said as the rifle-toting man, and I stepped inside, and the doors closed behind us. Once closed, luminous white lines traced from the rear of the interior and down the angles of the sides and roof to signify that all doors were secured and the auto-nav was ready for direction. I noticed that there wasn’t an AI assistant that made its presence known without invocation. I thought it best to not ask Neon about the topic. I assumed he must’ve instructed his AI-ecosystem to disengage any unnecessary processing or interaction beyond the basics like controlling the car. For someone in Neon’s line of work, an intrusive robot recording everything one might say or do would be a massive inconvenience. Even more surprising, nobody in the car issued commands before we started rolling away. I didn’t see a console where anyone could input location data, and nobody was at the wheel. This was something new to me. One of the men in the car could have had an implant to interface remotely with Neon’s toys. Color me impressed.

“Mister Neon, I’d really like to know where you’re taking me.” I decided being forthcoming was ideal. If I had left any pretense of malleability on the table, it could have been misread as capitulation to that man like just another dog. I wanted him to know that I saw myself only as a temporary fixture in his kingdom of vice. The other men, who I gathered were Neon’s more trusted guards, looked primed to put bullets in my head if I might create any friction that had the likelihood of escalating. Neon clicked his tongue and pointed south, across the chest of the guard with arms around the wolf-like dogs.

“Barabbas, and the rest of our nation, is but a ragged disease-infested crater. The bombardment destroyed many of our fine establishments. In light of our limitations, we are

meeting some trusted friends on the south-side. Calaban, you need to know that the people waiting for us need to see what you are.”

“Why? Who are they?”

“Brothers in the temple. The former administrators of state and legislature of the Levantine nation that made it to safety. It took us several weeks to gather who made it through the invasion. Now, those who are left are being held in a safehouse waiting for you.”

“What is the temple?” I asked with my voice burgeoning of frustration due to the circumstance painting me not as a person, but a pawn. Neon snapped to gain the utter awareness of his men. He nodded his head, and the guards averted their gazes out the windows. No spoken orders were issued, much like how one of them must be operating the auto-nav, but I was certain that any implants that they had cut off their audio feeds. I knew that from the innards of Tiamat, Neon reigned as a petty underworld tyrant. But the minute detail that sunk into the varnish of the lived moment. The trappings of designer dogs, ingratiated national figures, and incredibly expensive implants placed him in a tier of status I had not considered. The accurate qualitative rendering of Neon that dawned on me was that of an entrepreneurial oligarch who was once joined in chorus with other oligarchs and statesmen with their slimy fingers down each other’s gullets. Now that the insatiable monster was unlinked from the ouroboros, he had to jockey for former status or frantically lift his comrades from the muck.

“You are entitled to know. Ea chose you as an emissary. Our temple is old, Calaban. Ea came to our father’s fathers and demonstrated great things. Some of those feats you have witnessed and performed yourself. The temple keeps the mysteries of our sage and waits for him to return to us and deliver us, his faithful, to paradise.”

“Why do you call him Ea? Is that his real name?” I sought to take advantage of that rare chance to actually learn something about my blue demon.

“Calaban, you met him. You had to come face to face with the sage in order for him to bestow your ‘power’,” He clicked his tongue on his front teeth. “The last time I saw him, I was only a boy. But I have little doubt in my mind that the figure you saw was virtually identical. He is ageless. He was there with Utnapishtim before the deluge. Ea was one of the first names given to him by those who tried to make sense of the extraordinary.” I fought back the convoluted reflex to laugh. I felt a grand indication of irony not acknowledged by Neon, but also a nervousness which elicited laughter as a defense mechanism.

“I’ve seen what he looks like without the shroud of the blue haze. He’s a fossil not a god. This shit is the only thing keeping him alive.”

“That maybe, but he is alive. He’s the closest thing to a god that has ever existed. He was immortalized in the ancient epics as the deity of fresh waters in the desert. He alone has the power to elevate any man to become endowed with such grace. Even you, in time, will become just as immortal as he, because he chose you. Only those ascended like you and the great sage can single handedly tear down civilization just as you may hoist them up.”

“What civilization has he built?” I asked, letting my fear and anxiety protrude to the surface.

“It was another emissary of Ea that conjoined the gorillas and militia cells to seize the wheel of political power and erect the Levantine Nationalist regime. It was no accident. The movement was led by one of Ea’s chosen, like yourself.” His tone had devolved from that of command to revelatory like a sermon desperate to reach the ear of converts “We strove and fended off the militaries of the West. And before the invasion, our nation had finally gained the

instruments for total protection.” Neon’s veneer of slicked-back grime was barely intact. At the moment he looked more like a child.

“And what am I to you in all this? I am not going to help you rebuild your fucking country.”

“No, but the great sage favors you.” He said calmly.

“For fuck’s sake! What do you mean? Last time I saw that goddamned monster he tried to kill me!” I couldn’t hold back the tension pent up from weeks of seeing his face, hearing his voice, watching his flood endlessly when I closed my eyes.

“But he did not.” Neon was then nothing more than an old man with fear written all over his face. “I believe you understand better than any man alive that if he wanted you dead, we would not be having this conversation.” I couldn’t say anything in return. “Who can say what grand machinations guide him? He is a living god. He saved you from the slaughter like he saved Utnapishtim. Not once did he come to save your predecessor. Not once did he come to relieve the burden of death to his most devoted.”

“So, what the hell are we talking about?” My mind was getting lost between the details and what I needed to know about Abbe. My appetite for his history, theogony, superseded the desire to learn about ‘my predecessor’. In my distraction, I had failed to realize that the car had traversed half the goddamned city at incredible speed when one considered the blockades that had to ignore us and the patchwork of semi-repaired streets.

“We’re here, but I give you this: all the temple wants is for Ea to deliver us from this world. You experienced what it was like. I’ve heard the story from my forefathers. The sage has the power to allow anyone to climb Jacob’s ladder to heaven and depart from the body. My grandfather once spoke of the plains of tall grass in a timeless place.” The guards exited the

vehicle as the automatic doors slid back, and the thin white lights ran reverse to their original path. Neon stopped talking and donned his glasses while slicking back his hair that caught a faint blue reflection from his blazer. Once outside, he adjusted his posture and finished the conversation.

“If we can’t summon Ea, then we must fortify ourselves and our nation.”

“Destroy and rebuild until god shows?” I asked as glibly as I could muster.

“Exactly.”

The car was parked, the two passenger side wheels over the curb and resting on the partially intact sidewalk. I looked up to visually scale the building I was about to enter. More armed guards were waiting behind tinted door glass of the atrium. It was a stout complex that weeks earlier had been the luxury hotel of Barabbas and her dignitaries. It was far enough south that the bulk of Carpathian forces were absent. I could believe that someone like Neon had facilitated the deal for a degree of avoidance of this area. One could see the decorative marbling in the remaining facade and imagine the fine parties in golden convention rooms that held powerful guests. One could also imagine that some of those guests would have been foreign leaders of enterprise visiting to shake hands and make deals with state leaders to plant seeds of sweatshops and extract value from the endless history of regional division. Neon walked into the atrium flanked by his dogs on each side. The guards bowed their heads in deference. But when I approached the doors, it was made blatantly clear to me that all participants were fairly warned of my capabilities and were instructed to be vigilant and cautious that I might go berserk and topple the rest of the hotel. Regardless of whatever reverence people like Neon professed to have for someone like me, an ‘emissary’ of Abbe, they correctly read that my commitment to their safety was only contingent on my own. I intuited the utility of that enlightened self-interest. The

strategically positioned men lining the walls and corners were indication of where to go without being led by the hand. When the midday light trimmed through the many holes and missing chunks of walls and ceiling, the armed personnel lost a considerable amount of foreboding qualities. The scene looked more like a tracking shot found in a soviet era art film portrayed with a sort of dilapidated beauty that dragged one into the feeling of a dreamscape. I didn't have much time to appreciate those musings before we were firmly corralled down a hallway with rooms on either side, light breaching from which suggested without inspection that many were not spared from the bombardment. Around fifteen people were crammed into the hall. Most were in professional attire and graying. The rest were young; early thirties or so and dressed like normal victims of war that you could find on the streets.

“Brother,” One of the elder men came up and embraced Neon by the nape of his neck and kissed him cheek.

“I brought him, Calaban. Everyone, this is Calaban, the man you've all heard of.” Neon laid his showmanship on thick for the group in the hall. He gestured for me to present myself diligently. The young men, only marginally older than myself, wore scrupulous and skeptical expressions. I was not too thrilled about the presentation.

“How do you do?” I greeted them all sarcastically.

“Go on and show them.” Neon started to piss me off on a personal level. “Don't be embarrassed, son. Show them what you can do.”

“Listen, I'm not a fucking dog you can order around like one of pathetic 'boys'.” I jabbed my finger into Neon's chest. That was the impetus for the armed guards to come within milliseconds of firing. They were halted when Neon replied unflinchingly:

“Then show these people that you are not to be trifled with.” I let out a yelp in frustration and whipped an extension of Mars from my left arm into the tattered room to cut through the wall on the other side despite the surge of pain from my wound. I needed to calm down. I thought to remind myself that a person in anger is easier to manipulate. “And there you have it ladies and gentlemen. This is Calaban and the reason Ea came back. And he is also the reason why I believe Ea is still close in the flesh.” The crowded hall did not respond with cries of existential horror or even astonishment.

“He is nothing like Omari was, god bless him.” Said an elder female. “I doubt he would cooperate with us against the Carpathians.”

“Yeah, I agree. He’s one of them, isn’t he? I remember a brother saying just that.”

“Moreover, he’s likely to be more a risk than what he’s worth.”

“Brother, do you think it was wise to put him in front of us? We could all be dead tomorrow if he runs back to his superiors.” Neon sought to interject before the room got away from him.

“Please. Please. Everyone. He isn’t going anywhere. He came to me after he defected during the invasion.” He placed his hand on his gaudy blue jacket just above his heart in a signifier of sincerity. “We made a pact that he would render services to me and in return I will orchestrate a method of leaving the country safely.” He turned to me half smiling like a conductor satisfied with the audience's response to a moving piece of music. “Now, I think it was obvious to all of us that our sage did not care for these Carpathian invaders seeing as he ravaged them by his own hand.”

“He also wrecked most of the city around God’s Canvas. What does that say about us?” Retorted the youngest man among the crowd.

“It was a show of force necessary to give the city a reprieve from the battle. The most important thing to consider is that he sought it just to pull their airships from the sky and cut down their soldiers.” Some of the older members had spoken like true propagandists. I felt incredibly uneasy hearing all the strangers talk so confidently and heartily about Abbe with high regards and admiration. The words going back and forth between the members of the hall were not really meant for me. I could feel how little I mattered in the situation beyond that of a prop.

“That’s right! He sent us a new Emissary, like Omari, to fight this war at the spearhead.” I was lost. Those old fuckers were looking for a messiah. The complete vision of what they planned was beginning to solidify as an augur of their demented future. “We can start fighting back and get our men out of those surrogate camps.”

“Neon, I have feeling you’re friends here are missing the fact that I’m trying to get away from a fucking warzone, not fight in one.” He angled his body to mine such that the others in the hall jabbering to each other could not hear his words and said:

“I’ll keep my word to you. India, wasn’t it? I’ll get you there. But first we have to do a little song and dance.” He re-engaged the mob. “In the days to come we need to hit key objectives like gathering ground support and reaching the weapon bunkers before the Carpathians. Our boys and able-bodied men will jump at the chance to fight. We’ve all done well to evade capture or death for those here. I’ve made sure to sow some good will among their forces and high officers with my businesses. The added benefit of surplus revenue doesn’t hurt the cause, as well.” I was in a stupor. I realized at that moment I had dipped my toes into waters better left undisturbed. “Brothers and sisters, even if our valiant actions don’t call Ea to our side, we will defend what is ours.” Neon’s delivery incited heads nodding in agreement and minor claps. “For now, use this knowledge to garner support where you can find it. Be at peace, all of

you may stay here at my hotel or any of my other establishments. The Carpathians will not bother you in these walls. If they come, it will be as lame deviants not as conquerors.” It was rapturous. The weight of the hallway was lifted as the temple members, would-be rebel leaders or benefactors and deposed statesmen, affirmed to each other the righteousness and infallibility of their war to come.

I wanted to get out of there while I still had control over my emotions and my actions. I did not protest when Neon placed his hand on my back like a father leading a son after a lecture and told me to wait in the atrium for Rom and some of the guys to pick me up for a job. So, I stood there surrounded by armed guards and kept to myself. I watched the sun’s light travel. After about twenty minutes, I was notified that the black sedan was outside. I got in the car and was momentarily thankful to ride away from that building full of manic oligarchs.

“So, what happened in there?” asked Amir.

“None of your business. If you were supposed to know, you would have been invited.”

Rom sought to squash the conversation.

“What’s the big deal? What could it hurt to know? We’ve all seen what this asshole could do?”

“It was about nothing, really.” I was mentally drained and would rather lie about the madness I had just endured than let it continue in the car.

“Cal, you don’t have to tell the wise ass. The bottom line is that if Boss wanted you to know, then you would know.” Rom’s impatience was pencil thin. I assumed that their day spent cleaning up the safe house as a team was almost as painful as my experience.

“Just, just tell me what we’re doing. Where are we going?” I pleaded. I rested my head on the rear driver-side window and allowed my eye to close.

“There’s a farm down past the ridge to the west. It’s not that far a drive from here on account that the hotel is on the edge of town by the desert.” Bacchus said, sounding like a man doused in pleasure, subsumed by consumption.

“We’re just going for a pickup scheduled by the Boss. There’s something that we gotta take back to the house.” Rom finished Bacchus’s explanation while extending his neck over the steering wheel to ensure he could navigate the questionable terrain adequately.

“Yeah, it’s just past that.” Amir pointed in some useful direction; I suppose. However, I was too apathetic to engage.

“Sit down and shut up!” I agreed with Rom’s sentiment and was glad he had the wherewithal to say it.

“I think I’m going to regret asking this, but why am I needed for this one?” I took my time to let the words slothfully crawl out of my mouth.

“Mostly, just to be there in case we run into trouble. This guy ran one of the more important Levantine farm productions. His place was left relatively unscathed, and Boss feels positive that if things go south, he had damned good security set up.”

“Roger that.” Suspicion that mental exhaustion was all a part of Neon’s plan to get me to submit to their messiah fantasies began to take shape in the back of my mind. I watched out the window as we definitively left Barabbas and drove through the arid steppe desert. The ridge Amir was trying to point out came like a golden swell, and when the car broke the crest, we could see the vast fields of grain with a small cottage and massive barn in the center. The road was barely in a usable state. The care at which Rom operated the vintage sedan was no more, as he seemed to take pleasure in accelerating over the gravel that comprised the road downhill. The car didn’t quite make it halfway through the fields when a large harvesting machine cut through

one of them and blocked the road about half a kilo away from the cottage. A stocky man began walking our way while persistently shewing away what looked like a tiny child.

“Alright boys, that’s our man. Everyone out.” Rom ordered. We started heading down the dirt road on foot to meet the man. Still in a daze from lethargy, I was intrigued by the giant farm machine. The operation or construction was not what drew my attention, but the word ‘LHOSPITAL’ sprayed onto the cab from a stenciled outline. The word seemed familiar as I knew it wasn’t just a misspelling of ‘hospital’.

“Wake up, Cal!” Bacchus sounded more patronizing than usual. “You’ll get left behind with your slacked jaw looking like a stupid monkey.”

“Eat a dick.” The urge to retort with more viscous words had succumbed to my indifference. Eventually we met the man in the middle of the fields. Up close, he seemed particularly short to have such broad shoulders. The man had the outward appearance of someone who lived by the land, which was a true rarity. His face was hard like any number of stones one could find on the dirt road. The man’s expression conveyed a strong animosity from which I had to assume that we were unplanned passerbys. In the distance, the little girl was slowly encroaching.

“Good afternoon.” The man greeted us. Rom looked happily back and forth between Amir and Bacchus with an expression of his own which said, ‘this will be easy’.

“Good afternoon. What’s your name, sir?”

“Yusuf. And you?”

“My name is Demetrious. And these knuckleheads don’t deserve names.” Rom chuckled.

“What brings you to my farm, Mister Demetrious?” Yusuf’s posture was extremely defensive, and his eyes made it no secret that he was suspicious of us. But his question was something I would have liked to know as well.

“Well, you see, Yusuf, we were sent to pick up something for Boss Neon. You know of him, right?”

“I know Neon. I know that I have stayed away from that man for years, and I have no business with him. So, that begs the question of ‘what business does he think he has with my farm?’” Yusuf pivoted back one step and placed a hand in his hip pocket.

“Our Boss wanted to take out a loan from you. There’s no need for whatever you’re grabbing there.” Rom patted his hand like one might do to approach a suspicious animal.

“I haven’t got any money to loan that man. Money is worthless right now.”

“Correct. Boss doesn’t need your money or land. We’re here for that.” Rom pointed to the little girl still treading slowly through the field. Amir and Bacchus turned away from Yusuf to catch a quick laugh. I questioned whether I had put the pieces together the right way. Did Rom mean to say we were assigned to kidnap a child? Yusuf drew a gun.

“Get the hell out of here. I’ll shoot you all dead before I let you or Neon take my girl.”

“Yusuf, you don’t understand. You have three guns pointed at you right now. And we have something extra special if that doesn’t work.” Rom gestured toward me.

“What the hell? What’s going on?” I mirrored Yusuf’s backward pivot.

“Get ready, you dipshit!” Bacchus pulled his gun out so that there was no more pretense of danger, but the unmistakable reality.

“Ready for what? I’m not going to kidnap a kid!”

“Illyana! Run! Run!” Yusuf shouted as harshly as he could. The little girl stood frozen a dozen meters away,

“Now, we can take what we’re here for, and nobody gets hurt. Or you can try to shoot but hit the ground before you get the chance. And we still get the girl.”

“Rom stop this. Let’s get out of here!” I tried to plead with him. They were all resolute and more than content with their positions.

“Shut the fuck up and pay attention. This is what Boss sent us here for.”

“I can’t help you with this! I can’t let you do this!” I was more afraid to let my imagination peer into the future of that girl. The glazed apathy that was in my bones moments earlier was shaken loose. I felt a hyper reality and more fear than facing a thousand bullets. I began to shake as if I were standing in front of my blue demon. “I can’t let you do this.” I said trying to control my voice and hold it in a lower tonal register.

“Amir, go get the girl. I don’t want to sit here all night going back and forth. Rip off the band-aid now.” Yusuf tried to shoot, but it was obvious that he had never taken a life. I saw Amir lift his leg to take a step and withdraw his pistol. I was back in the library city under the golden sun. I saw endless rows of bookshelves winding in every direction, and I knew that my book was somewhere on the upward slope of the shelf-lined streets. Before Amir could place his foot on the gravel road, I felt myself channel Mars, not from fear or hate, but something else that escaped me at the time. I whipped the blue cloud from my fingertips as an impossibly thin razor’s edge toward Amir’s tibia and fibula.

In the index of the book that drew me upward, I found Benjamin’s face captured the instant he took in the sight of a school full of burning children.

Amir's foot was pulled by the force of the nebulous razor cloud tearing through his flesh and bone. It was strewn to the stalks of grain off the road. I watched him fall, one fraction of a second at a time. He struggled against gravity by flailing his arms while his face had transfigured from delinquent glee to shock, and finally terror. Rom and Bacchus flinched during the first fractional moment. Bacchus pulled the trigger whilst his eyes were closed. The result had been a series of bullets hitting the dirt then nothing. I channeled Mars to spear Bacchus below the diaphragm and pin him to the ground.

I was committed at that point to defy Rom and to defy Neon. If my safest path out of a warzone was to abide and assist that kind of inhumanity, then I'd rather accept fighting for my life and living by the skin of my teeth. The girls that Neon kept were young. I knew at the bottom of my subconscious the truth of what was happening, and I thought I could look away. But I could not be complicit in continuing any part of it.

The hole I put in Bacchus's stomach was sufficient to immobilize him. Amir still seemed capable of crawling into the field. I felt my right hand become weightless and I reached out to extend a tendril that encompassed Amir's body. It flung him dozens of meters into the air and snapped his body in a quick recoil back down to the ground. I had intended to slam him down with enough force to shatter most of his bones and puncture many of his vital organs. The attempt appeared successful as Amir immediately became motionless with his face frozen in incomprehensible pain and fear. Satisfied that I had properly immobilized and most likely killed Bacchus and Amir, I turned to Rom sprinting to the car. I focused on creating a dense cloud around him and thought of the space where he originally stood before that altercation. On the exhale, he vanished from his sprinting position and appeared collapsed on the gravel where I imagined with a thick 'VUUUUM' diffusing in the soundscape. He was gasping for air and

covered with a thin layer of ice. Our eyes met while he clawed at his throat. His eyes were bulging and blood-shot red. I moved to make a swift end of the battle for my soul. I cut off his head, never relenting eye contact such that his last cognitively active moment on this planet was of me looking down in shame and disgust. I heard gunshots and screaming.

“You’re just like he was!” Yusuf was crying.

PART THREE

Turtles All The Way Down

Chapter Eleven

How To Disappear Completely Where I End And You Begin

Daniel waited outside of the hospice room reserved for Gilbert Moore. Gilbert Moore was at the end of a seven-year battle against lymphoma. Daniel had been only one of the five doctors, with specializations like oncology and endocrinology, that had worked with Gilbert for the long haul. As true with other forms of cancer, the seven-year bout had its ups and downs. There had been months and even years of remission after too many rounds of chemo and radiation. Gilbert's body was burnt and scarred from numerous cycles of intolerable treatments. For as common and inevitable as cancer was in terms of predictable scourges afflicting humans since the dawn of time, the most consistent medical treatment we could muster within the realm of affordability would put the strongest man firmly on their ass. Medical science thought it stumbled on easier and more certain ways of fighting cancer on so many glorious occasions just to have all hope dowsed again and again. Deeper systemic issues would preclude the adoption of more efficient treatment methods due to the structure of medicine as an interlocked industry with financial markets, pharmaceuticals, and insurers. Cancer was a guaranteed period of chronic value extraction from the individual. Gilbert's team had respected his wishes to just let it end. He was too tired to continue fighting the whole thing, the furred monster of physical and financial pain. It simply hurt too much. So, Gilbert was given one of the rooms in the hospice ward which

overlooked the plaza garden opposite of Elm Street. Not a soul had any reservations that Gilbert was going to pull through. These were his last days on this earth.

Daniel was a neuropsychologist who had been assigned to Gilbert's medical team after the cancer came back several cycles before. He was brought on to monitor, and possibly prevent, dementia-like symptoms from developing either from the lymphoma's aggravation in Gilbert's skull or from the poison they had pumped into Gilbert. Most of Gilbert's children and grandchildren lived across the state and were incapable of being there in that trying time. Daniel's hospital was only a short distance from the central business district which had been occupied by the Anarcho-Communists for weeks. The buffer zone established by police barricades had transformed into a no-man's land in a disastrous stalemate. The revolutionaries had better positioning and stores of residual arms due to the police headquarters firmly in their territory which had been overtaken early in the period of the siege. Furthermore, all sides of the continuing conflict understood that the statist and powers which represented capital did not want to unleash the full brunt of the war machine on its own offices, apartments, and other leverageable assets. The best-case scenario for the statist was that the skirmishes would devolve into battles of attrition, and loss of property could be avoided.

The police outside the buffer zone had reinforcements from the state and national guard. However, Greensboro was not unique. The movement of hard-leftist had been bubbling up from the digital space of agitation on the internet to the meat-space in the largest cities in the United States. But the movement could only go so far without more powerful arsenals and supplies to compensate for having a fraction of the manpower of the opposition.

Without end in the foreseeable future, much of the US Army had been dispatched to aid the struggling state and national guard blockades. One of their primary missions had been to shut

down the interstates going into the captured cities. Therefore, Gilbert's last days were to be spent alone, save for the nurses and other medical professionals on duty. Daniel had come to Gilbert's room after his vitals' downward trend was brought to Daniel's attention. It was 3:47 PM on a Wednesday, and Daniel was drawing on his emotional reserves to walk into that room and comfort Gilbert one last time. He wanted to be there before his vitals dipped low enough to warrant closer inspection from the rest of the staff. He wanted to be alone with Gilbert as he crossed over. Daniel banged the back of his head on the wall one good time when he was certain that nobody could see him. He turned and opened the door. Gilbert was nominally awake, but Daniel questioned if Gilbert was conscious. So, he thought to broach that topic with a simple:

“Mister Moore?” In a gentle tone. He tried to hold back any bass from his voice to lighten his whisper. He waited for a couple seconds to hear a response before he tiptoed further into the room. Gilbert was slow to blink and pressed his lips closed as if to wet them. Gilbert's skin took on a blue hue which was all the visual evidence that Daniel needed to corroborate the trend he saw in Gilbert's readout. “Mister Moore, Are you awake?”

“Dan, you're here.” Gilbert's words were airy and barely alive.

“Yeah, I'm here buddy. I wanted to see you.”

“One, last time? It's about to be my time to go.” Gilbert's slow eyes began to well up. The rest of his face had not caught up to the emotions that wished to make themselves seen. He tried to find a breath to let in, but he struggled.

“Nah. No Mister Moore. Not yet. You still got some fight in there.” Dan reached for one of Gilbert's stiff hands. There was no way to make it comfortable for Gilbert due to the IV's running through the bed.

“Don’t bullshit me, Dan. I can feel it. It’s like my wife is calling me home. And, and I can breathe at the sight of her waiting for me in the door.” Daniel tried to hush his own breathing the best he could to give Gilbert’s words enough sonic room to be heard respectfully. “You know, that’s what I really hope it’s like. I just want to go home.” Daniel saw no reason to hold back his tears. So, he started to weep almost as gently as he was whispering.

“See, Gilbert, that’s actually why I came to see you. I needed to show you something that I can’t show anybody else.”

“You’re not going to kill me, are you?”

“God, heavens no.” Daniel smiled with thin tears flowing through his smile lines. He choked back some of his distracting urges to give in to the weeping. “I can make it so you do go home with your wife.”

“What do you mean?” Gilbert’s eyelids closed enough to signal something between confusion and suspicion. “Dan, she’s dead. She died three years ago.”

“I know, I know, I know. I can tell your brain and all of your perceptions that you are with her.”

“I don’t want to be drugged up in my last minutes, Dan.” Gilbert was beginning to get offended.

“No, Gilbert. I, I, myself, without medicine or tools, can help you.” Daniel carefully let go of Gilbert’s hands and slowly moved his open palms to Gilbert’s hairless scalp. Gilbert’s condition rendered him severely bedridden and immobile. Therefore, Daniel’s hands sparked a legitimate fear response from Gilbert. “Please. Just close your eyes.” Once Daniel lightly placed his hands around Gilbert’s crown, a thin veil of blue smoke slipped imperceptibly into Gilbert’s orifices: ears, eyes, nostrils, and mouth. Gilbert’s eyelids dropped. After he could feel Gilbert’s

tension vanish, he retracted the smoke. Gilbert's eyes opened and were wet with all the moisture his body could devote to crying.

"Oh my god! Oh my god! I was there. Clair was there!" Gilbert then looked to Daniel as an addict and a devotee. "What did you do? It felt so real."

"It was real for you." Daniel hung his head low. "This could be it for you. I wanted to give you this. To make your own end before you go."

"I understand." Gilbert looked toward Daniel with fierce conviction. "I have lived through hell in the last three years without Clair. I want to be with her, Dan." Gilbert spoke flatly, but with unyielding resolve. "You held out on me."

"Is it a crime to have hope? I wanted you, us, to destroy every ounce of that shitty cancer."

"Dan, no need to apologize. I'm just jerking you around a little bit. One last good time. Still, thank you." The revelation of what was in store for Gilbert, if he so chose, filled out the space between them and enriched that moment of silence.

"I can make it so it'll be the end, Gilbert. To make sure that it's the last thing you feel, forever."

"Do it. Dan, do it. I don't want to die miserable and in pain." Gilbert's face clinched. Daniel brought his head up and attempted to wipe away his tears but only partially succeeded.

"Let me know when you're ready."

"I want to see my wife now. Three years is long enough."

"Yeah." Daniel shook his head in a reverent agreement. He had no spouse or romantic involvement of the kind, but he held so dear the bonds of intimacy where they could be found to survive. "Close your eyes for me, Mister Moore."

“Thank you, Dan.” Daniel repeated the placement of his hands on Gilbert’s head. Daniel could see in his mind’s eye what Gilbert was seeing. Daniel was telling the gaseous blue material to seek out the neural connections in Gilbert’s brain which governed the senses in conjunction with those responsible for the collective memories of Gilbert’s wife. When Daniel conjured an image motif in his mind a high-definition version would play for Gilbert with the specifics provided by Gilbert’s own recollection. Daniel sought to give Gilbert the experience of walking up to the front door of his house in Lindley before he and Clair decided to downsize and move into an apartment. Gilbert would then grab hold the doorknob with a kind of trepidation to tease out any anachronisms. After Daniel had determined that enough anticipation had been built, Gilbert would turn the knob inch-by-inch to feel the palpable feedback from the particular notches in the latching mechanism of that home he knew for sixteen years. Once satisfied, Gilbert would commit fully with the unsure expectations. But, while the door swung on the hinge, the silhouette of Clair would be in the doorframe. Clair was twenty-three. Every hair on her head just as Gilbert remembered. Gilbert was twenty-six. That was his favorite incarnation of himself. Clair would reach to embrace a dumbfounded Gilbert and kiss his neck and rub the back of his neck exactly like he remembered she would. Gilbert would feel a happiness and contentedness unlike anything anybody could imagine. This was due to Daniel purposefully dumping every single molecule of dopamine and oxytocin left in Gilbert’s brain. Gilbert would be none the wiser, but he would feel like the literal happiest man alive. Daniel would then have Clair walk Gilbert to a black chariot at the end of the sidewalk and open the door. Gilbert and Clair would climb into the carriage and close the door behind them. Daniel retracted the blue aura. Gilbert was dead and Daniel was crying undeterred.

The monitoring machines had carried the alarm of vital failure to staff in the ward. Daniel had made it outside the room and began walking away from the ward before any staff could arrive on the scene to attempt resuscitation. Of course, there was no real probability of reanimating a person whose brain had committed to the process of disassociation. He had regained composure by reminding himself of the fear of somebody tying him to the euthanasia. That afternoon had marked the end of his swing shift which left him walking in a half state of awareness. He was free to leave the hospital in the hours to come, and in the meantime, he needed much caffeine to sober up. Another battle awaited Daniel outside of the hospital grounds.

The contents of his professional schedule were no secret to his closest friends and allies. Daniel gave passing remarks to his colleagues who wouldn't think twice about Daniel stepping out the back entrance toward the personnel parking lot in order to snatch some tranquility of mind and drink an invaluable cup of coffee. However, for Daniel the ritual had the implicit purpose of waiting for a timed message delivered via drone disguised as a bird. When the time called, Daniel and his allies would synchronize the landing of the drone between cars and bikes in the lot with his ensuing departure from work. The intention was to deliver urgent news or directives in a timely manner such that Daniel could prepare for what he was called upon. Prior to the An-Com seizure of territory across the country, details like communication were worked out for the contingencies of steep and costly war. The coalition had decided on several methods of disseminating information and supplies. What had proven to be one of the most reliable were the use of proprietary drones given attachments via additive printing which altered their appearance to that of birds. Daniel had been one of the key regional coalition members not to engage with direct combat, but to move needed medical supplies from outside the blockades.

Daniel took on an irreplaceable position in the movement after exchanging his plan for victory with the core coalition benefactors.

Daniel dodged any co-workers who he knew would hold him conversationally hostage for an excessive length of time. Coffee in hand, he opened the double-doors and scanned the lot for bystanders. Being so close to the central business district had ensnared dozens of hospital staff and created the optimal situational excuse for staying home during the trying times.

Therefore, when Daniel walked into the lot, he was not surprised to see only one third of the vehicles which normally required spaces. The result was twofold: fewer prying eyes but also fewer vehicles which could be used for cover when the drone landed. Sometimes, Daniel had to make rounds circling the perimeter in case the drone pilot had to get creative for a landing and camouflage. That was the case for the particular rendezvous in which he found himself. Daniel, after no sign of the typical drone hiding between vehicles, searched along the bushes and miscellaneous plant-life bordering the pavement. Nestled in the rough of a lavender iris stalk he found the drone caught on a tilted edge. Leaves and other plant matter had been entangled in the rotary blades, like the unwitting victim of an absent-minded jellyfish. One of the free and operable fans was vrooming in tight rotations about the motor beneath a panel of a wing. Daniel bent over hurriedly to free the other motor and blades and search the machine for an attached note in a taped plastic bag. Once found, he looked at the drone cameras on the nose and said:

“Guys, you gotta be careful. You could get us all killed, or worse.” Daniel wasn’t happy with himself when he felt like he had to take on a lecturous tone, but the situation seemed appropriate. He released the faux bird and prayed that no security personnel had a shrewd eye for ornithology. Whoever was controlling the drone was well-practiced and got the machine high in the air imperceptibly quick. Daniel did his best to look inconspicuous, reminding himself that the

best place to hide is right under your enemy's nose. It still seemed as though he was alone. Precautiously, he removed the tape and opened the plastic bag. Inside was a single scrap of paper with nearly illegible handwriting which said: 'Come today. It's done!!!'. For a moment he was swept under a wave of disbelief. He honestly never thought his premise and mission he set out for the optics lab at the local university could be accomplished. Daniel thought that the pitch was too radical for their technological limitations. But the wave ebbed in and receded after a few seconds and left excitement and almost a newfound drive to give everything to the movement. If they had succeeded, then the coalition would win. If they succeeded yesterday Gilbert would be alive yet, in a sense.

Daniel left the hospital grounds through the north exit, after scraping by two-and-a-half days. He was going to cut south through Idlewood and enter the university campus from the west. Most of the roads leading into the university had been cut off for weeks and heavily screened for potential combatant or sympathizers. Daniel thought it was a smart call due to the university and the surrounding pubs housing most of the dissident centers of action. For once, the liberals and conservative were right that college campuses like that one were birth places for nuvo radicals ready to receive the call. The conventional wisdom prescribed neo-marxist professors and sophists dragging the children of the affluent to the left for decades, but the truth was far more unassuming. The generations children reared under the regime of compounding emergencies, never-ending bubbles, bailouts for all the wrong people, incomprehensible wealth gaps, and falling composite gini indices never had a palatable alternative choice. The superstructure bred its own demise through contradiction and made what the conventional wisdom considered 'radical' the only rational response.

Daniel had the AI auto-nav park his car beside a church across from the main boulevard which acted as the western border of the college. Before leaving the car, he made sure to demetalize and drop any electronics like his phone. He gave instructions to the AI ecosystem to drive to a series of charging stations heading further and further west and then run circuits. When he was certain that the car was long out of sight, Daniel let his excitement take over and ran to the heart of campus where the physics building, and subsequently the optics laboratory were found. The chaos which took over the metro areas in the country also meant that less than a quarter of the student capacity were on campus. That helped Daniel refrain from feeling insecure about his outward presentation of zealotry. A woman was waiting behind the door to open it for him with a child-like expression.

“We did it, Dan!”

“Get in! Get in! Holy shit, Erna, show me!” Daniel hugged Erna Russel with what he determined to be as much strength as she could endure. Then he released her with his eyes screaming ‘go, go, go’. They ran downstairs to the lab where Erna waved her arms in a show of accomplishment.

“This is it. I finally figured out the holographic problem with help from Yusaki. That was last week. I wanted to hold off on telling you before I nailed down the Python for the holographic image register and neural network constructor. But the big one was formatting the output to map in lower R space without distortions, so we don’t hit either a flash memory or hard memory wall.” Erna was clearly proud of herself and the Math department faculty, who had chiseled away at the problem unbeknownst to how it would be utilized.

“Erna, you’ve outdone yourself.” He felt a bottomless appreciation for his friend and her genius.

“Daniel, this is Nobel Prize stuff we’re talking about. And honestly, I don’t think anyone could have fumbled through to the end as quickly as we did if you hadn’t pushed such a crazy premise.”

“Please, you do me too much honor.” He sincerely felt that all he did was provide the starting direction and end goal. “So, walk me through what we have.”

“Ok, so, we take the holographically encoded orb, as you described to us, and place it here,” She pointed to a suction-cup base with metallic disks forming a shell around the space of approximately ten centimeters in diameter. The disks were connected via cabling bus to a terminal, which in turn was fed into the front-loaded USB port in the desktop. “We send pulses of light, alternating in intensities and spectra, through the orb. Whatever data is encoded is captured at all angles by the detectors which form the shell. The data is sent to a folder on the desktop as a wild format kinda like dot mxd. That was the hardest part in the whole process. We were getting nowhere until we realized the problem was actually spatial. So, after we started from a format suited for spatial data encoding like dot mxd, we were off to the races!”

“Ok. I follow, I think.” He said pensively, thinking he did understand the explanation thus far.

“Good. From there we map the encoded data through another wild deep learning library we had to adjust by dropping the learning rate pretty close to zero and ramping the depth to stupid numbers. Normally, the kind of hyper-tuning of the model we were trying would slow our computers to the speed of tar, but that’s why we performed transformations of the data beforehand. The lower the dimensionality, the fewer and less intensive matrix operations on this end.” Daniel could feel Erna’s sense of pride as she was unable to mask it behind an earnest smile. “The model graphs the spatial data into the neural network specific to the orb, and bam.

We did it! The only thing left is to run the program which feeds our selected neural package into the thing you called a Polis on a big ass hardrive.”

“Now all we need to do is test it. It’s time to wrangle our subject. Where is he?” Daniel shook his head in affirmation.

“We moved Keer into the tunnels. We thought that would be the safest way to not get caught. Only freshmen and maintenance staff would ever think of going down there.”

“Good call. You’re absolutely right. So, let’s go do this. And please listen. I know I’ve explained to you what it’s gonna be like, but hearing about it is not even close to seeing it. If it gets to be too much, just walk away and let me do what I have to. We can do this. We’re going to win.” He assured her.

“Yeah, I’ll take your word.” They left the building from the base level and stayed low to the ground while scaling the hill which was braced with the connecting bridge from the main avenue to the STEM building. The closest entrance to the underground sewer tunnels was nestled around the cafeteria dumpster pads and the hind side of some dorms and the library.

“Just knock. If you try to open it, Jon or somebody will think you’re not one of us and probably shoot you.”

“Thanks for the warning.” He chuckled at the idea of a misunderstanding to rival some dramatic ironies at the heart of the classic Greek tragedies. So, he knocked. There was no immediate answer.

“Patience, Dan.”

“Patience, indeed.” He reckoned that since most of the metro’s combatant coalition members were downtown, that those working around College Hill were few in number. The tunnels were an extensive network of underground maintenance lines that stretched for

kilometers. He couldn't blame them for being at a totally distant arm than the others. Eventually, the door opened from the inside.

“What's up Dan-Dan?” Jon Garris met them with rifle in hand. “It's been a hot couple of weeks, my man. Glad to see they haven't caught your ass.” He dropped the gun and embraced Daniel with a tight but brief pull.

“Not yet. It's good to see you too, bud.” Daniel placed his hand on Jon's shoulder to convey surety. “We're here to finish this. I'm going to test out my brilliant idea.”

“Hell yeah. Well, right this way, my man.” Jon watched the door close behind them diligently and took the lead in escorting Daniel and Erna deep into the tunnels where that arm of the coalition was holding prisoners. Eventually, the crew arrived at a section which, aside from the bodies tied to chairs and gagged, was indistinguishable from the kilometers that preceded it. There were five prisoners and three other coalition members watching over them.

“Which one is Keer?” Daniel asked the group. He noticed the man, in his fifties, squirm after hearing the name and waited for one of his comrades to point out the prisoner directly. Daniel had to strain a bit to turn the chair. He then untied the gag around Keer's mouth. “Good evening, Mister Keer.” Daniel squatted so that he would be at eye-level with the bound man.

“Kill me. I don't care anymore. You people've held us here for weeks. Just kill us.”

“Sh, sh, sh. None of that. Nobody is going to kill you. I'm here to run a test.” Daniel took out a handful of syringes filled with a dense blue material.

“What the fuck is that? What are you going to do to us?” Daniel fell back on his right foot and held one of the syringes so that Keer had an unobstructed view.

“This has,” Daniel took his time to find the right words. HE was about to tell a partial lie. “, uh, experimental biomedical machines. The little biological robots are going to be injected into

you. The machines have been programmed to index all of the data that makes you you.” He tried to talk slow and loud enough to make it obvious that he was talking to all the prisoners and coalition members as well as Keer. “They collect your data by taking in the matter in your cells, one molecule at a time.” Keer looked like he could have eaten Daniel’s face and was unmoved by his explanation to that point. “Mister Keer, these tiny, tiny machines are going to eat you from the inside and shit out a small glass ball which holds every piece of information that defines you.”

“You’re all fucking crazy. You dumb fucking anarchists. This is murder. Nobody will let you get away with this.”

“No, not murder. What I’m trying to do isn’t kill you. I don’t think killing you and all the other people who stop us from achieving the society we want is feasible. We don’t have enough bullets or bombs, or enough people. Most people out on the street are too financialized with debt and mortgages, or content with minor consumer habits, or just buried under lifetimes of very successful propaganda to join us. This, in this needle, removes all of those obstacles.”

“Are you all insane? There’s nothing in that needle that can do what you said. I’m not fucking stupid. You’re just trying to intimidate me.”

“No, you’re not stupid. But you and people like you are the problem. You say ‘no, not now. That’s too radical of an idea. We can’t let people get accustomed to handouts. Incrementalism is the only way to make progress.’ People like you are the major reason why reform cannot deliver us.”

“You commies want to beat capitalism or whatever the world is? You are some stupid sons of bitches. Damned children with dangerous toys.”

“Maybe, but at least we’re going to try. And the first step is to inject you with these machines. If this works, our bullets don’t have to hit a single body. A cartridge loaded with the material can explode on the ground and the cloud that disperses will act on the human biological matter in a confined radius.”

“You’re lying, you dumb, lazy piece of shit.” Daniel stabbed one of the syringes into Keer’s bound left arm. Daniel squeezed the plunger and watched Keer’s eyes and head roll back.

“You tell me if it works.” Daniel said sarcastically. “Everybody stand back!” Keer’s skin began to shine a blue hue with pink striations. The flesh on his arm burst open with pink bubbles trailing behind a fine layer of blue edges that dissolved his cells from all directions like a wildfire. It moved from his arm to his torso and splintered to Keer’s extremities and head. In less than ten seconds, all of the body had been reduced to a puddle of pink goo. Daniel dug his fingers into the mess and shortly extracted a glass orb. “Erna, take this to the lab and start the test run. I have a feeling the introductus will be a success, but we’ll send four more in a bit, just to conform.”

“Aye, aye, captain.” Said Erna. “Dan, this is it. They’ll be alive and nobody has to live with murder on their shoulders.”

“Yeah. Jon, When we get out of here, I got a storeroom full of these syringes. We can bottle them up in cartridges and send them to the front lines.”

“Dan-Dan, this is incredible. I won’t lie. I didn’t think we could actually win, and now, I don’t think we can actually lose. I don’t think anybody could lose with this shit.” Jon knelt beside the other coalition members and put his hand over his mouth. “I really thought you were crazy. I really thought you were living in cocoo land, and we were about to watch you just get that guy high as fuck. Daniel, where did you get that shit?”

“I stole it from work. Those rich folks want to use this kind of thing to live forever in a digital reality. So, I thought why not send all of them?”

Chapter Twelve

Stay Lost 1100 Days

Yusuf fired rounds as divorced from aim as humans from our muck-breathing progenitors. He was aghast and shouting from a place defined by more than fear.

“You’re like him!” Yusuf blasted again. He held his pistol in a mangled fists that took on greater abnormal shapes after each shot recoiled. Therefore, every subsequent shot fired would land further and further away from me. However, by the math that governs chaos and entropy, one shot had traveled out the barrel straight for my face. Without much call, Mars swelled up from my feet and shielded me from the bullet. I harbored no ill-will or anger-charged drive for reciprocity. I just stood in place, corpses broken and torn at the wayside, looking at the man who was clearly experiencing several layers of existential collapse. From his exclamation, one would have been a fool to not assume that he meant Abbe. If I had tried to raise the issue at the moment of his crisis, I doubt I would’ve collected any useful information.

So, I let the man carry on screaming and pulling a trigger with no threat behind it after expending all the rounds. “Illyana, run to the house!” His breathing started to become excessive, and he lost balance between steps. Yusuf was in the throes of a panic attack. “What are you?” He stumbled and fell on his back. I could guess that his world was spinning and the sweat soaking his face added to his disorientation. Finally, he vomited in the dirt. Perhaps the purge gave him

the precious seconds necessary to collect some of his scattered thoughts, for when he wiped away the refuse and turned to look at me, he said: “Why did you kill your men?”

“Welcome back to the world of the living, Mister Yusuf.” I was still hesitant to move my feet in either direction. I understood that he, as a father who had only narrowly escaped the unimaginable tortures planned for his daughter, had every right to be defensive and suspicious of anyone and everything. So, I chose to demonstrate my respect for his condition by remaining motionless, unless expressly invited to move.

“Why did you do that?” He gulped down a big dollop of air as if it were the waters of life. “You saved my daughter and killed your own men.”

“Well, my story is a tad more confusing. But the one thing I’d like to say is that they were not ‘my men’. I had to run around with those guys in exchange for something.” I looked away from Yusuf momentarily and toward his fields encircled by the ridgeline. “What kind of person could participate in kidnapping and who knows what else?”

“They could.” Yusuf said as bleak as the dead of night. He stabilized himself on his knees with his back leaning on a slight curve. “That’s what they do. Neon has always been a thief of sorts.”

“I think I’ve only now put all of those pieces together.” I exhaled. I was disappointed in myself for sitting in that house and refusing to really look at Neon’s men and what was happening

“You’re a Carpathian, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.” I smiled, which probably made me look like a man in deep psychosis given the dead bodies at my feet. “What gave it away?” The assessment of psychosis might have been the truth.

“I met a man, or thing, or something right before the invasion down below. He could,” Yusuf strained to find the right words to communicate an idea or concept of which humans never had to confront outside of fiction. “He could do what you do.” I agreed with Yusuf’s choice of words. “I thought it was a nightmare. But I knew it wasn’t at the same time.”

“I know the ‘man’ you’re talking about. He does that to you. I think it’s impossible to see a thing like him and not come out messed up.”

“His name was,”

“Abbe.” I wanted to finish the thought so that he could cement the belief that I shared his feelings of unknown horror.

“That’s right.”

“Can you tell me about what he did here?” I tried to speak softly and low in an attempt to control any repressed episode of anxiety. Yusuf’s composure was stiffening. He pounded his rugged fists into the gravel and dirt to create leverage so that his broad frame could get off the ground.

“I think, first you need to tell me what you plan on doing with those bodies. I refuse to allow the corpses of those animals to rest on this land.” He spat to punctuate the sentiment.

“We can throw them into one of those grinding machines.” I pointed to the large harvester combine blocking the black sedan.

“Out of the question. Those combines are my livelihood. If bone or a piece of metal destroys the blades, then a third of these fields are as good as useless.” I thought on the subject for a spell, working through all of what I had learned of Mars.

“I can try something. It won’t be clean, but I think I can make the bodies disappear. I suggest you look away.” I said after settling on what I thought was the simplest solution.

“What are you going to do?”

“Give them back to earth. Now turn around and cover your ears.” I wasn’t very fond of giving orders to a man, clearly my senior. But he didn’t question my motives. I think he was unable to deny the nightmare he experienced at the hands of Abbe and would rather pretend that that aspect of me didn’t exist. When I saw his back face me, I summoned Mars to descend on the bodies of Rom and his gang, covering all surfaces. I pictured the blue cloud of Mars having particulate matter on a scale unimaginably small. In my mind, I could draw the line between that psychological construct of particulate to the macro cloud of which I was familiar. For all I knew it was true. It had to be made of something. Even Abbe, the closest this to a god that had existed was still a natural phenomenon. He was not separate from the world. He and I used the blue haze-like substance to interact and manipulate the physical environment through a means I didn’t understand. I would almost wager that neither did Abbe. But what spelled out was that Mars was made of something imperceptibly small. And in my mind, I saw that particulate latch onto every cell it touched on the bodies. I imagined Mars’s smallest singular units ripping the cells from one another. I let the process continue in my mind until nothing was left.

What I had planned was a physical interaction that fell squarely in line with the real world of physical interactions. I made the process start just as I envisioned, by cloaking their corpses. Letting the events unfurl as I saw it was as easy as continual concentration typical of using Mars. I found one great distinction between the reality of ripping a body apart atom-by-atom and my imagination. That was the blood. Mars was fast and insatiable like an army of mindless ants. The total decomposition took only a minute or so, but the method of evisceration caused the bodies to erupt with blood. I noticed that something that I would have recognized as retribution or animosity was absent in the act. I gathered no pleasure from watching those men

from whom I had rightfully snuffed out life and condemned to that disgraceful fate. Just like in the heat of delivering the killing blows, I did not draw on Mars from my internal perception of fear of death and bodily harm. However, I did recognize that I was still standing there, with puddles of blood at my feet.

“It’s done. It really wasn’t pretty.” I tried to brace Yusuf for the gore. I had not been drastically phased by disemboweled men for years. I wished that I felt the severe apprehension that Yusuf knew, similar to the simple moral world of a child.

“Oh, lord. Blood all over the gravel. There’s so much of it. The bodies? What happened to them?” He jerked back and choked down the reflex to vomit again upon taking in the oxidizing-red rocks and dirt. Because he was already somewhat familiar with that stuff, Mars, that Abbe and I shared, I decided to talk freely on the topic. It began with an illustration.

“I’m not going to come any closer and I am not going to hurt you. Don’t panic. I’m just going to show you the thing I call Mars.” I materialized the cloud from my upper arms and channeled it to my fingertips. “Abbe did something to me. And now I have this. I don’t know everything it’s capable of. However, I’ve been slowly figuring it out.” I paused to let Yusuf absorb his new conception of what was real. “What I did just now was make a cloud, like this.” I projected the aura a meter in front of myself. “Then, I wrapped the cloud around the bodies, and essentially ate them.”

“Oh, good lord. You are a demon like that ghoul from before.”

“You know, I am starting to think that might be true. As much as I’d hate to believe it.” I closed my eyes and sincerely considered Yusuf’s comparison. “So, what did Abbe do to you? I can see it. That thing that really can’t be described with human language. There’s a horror that stays with you like an addiction. And you know If you tried to explain it to a person who's never

been where we've been, they could never grasp what it was you felt. I can see that in you, plain as day."

"He was like a force of nature. At first, he was just a polite, crazy old man. He had walked through the desert. I met him there." Yusuf pointed south from our location. "I was being hospitable and invited him inside for rest and some water. I asked him why did he walk so far through the desert alone?" Yusuf tried to mentally fortify himself just before the shock of recalling his encounter with a probable god of yore. "He said that he came all the way to save his son, you."

"His son? Now, that is bullshit. I came into contact with that decrepit devil after trying to escape his slaughter of my division on a goddamned island in the Atlantic."

"I think he was speaking metaphorically. Everything he said had that feeling of some puzzle. But, after it became clear that he was not 'normal', I asked him to leave. He told me, in my house, that he was going to sleep in my barn. And he thanked me. The next thing I knew, that stuff was coming out of him and lifting me up. I couldn't breathe. His eyes were the deadest things I've ever seen. Lord, his skin looked like it was peeling off. I felt something in here," Yusuf placed his hand on his stomach. He was almost on the verge of tears and visibly living through his nightmarish confusion. "It felt worse than death. Like I knew what death would be like, and what he made me feel was somehow a gross perversion. But I woke up on the floor and he was gone. He said it would have been like he wasn't there at all. Until seeing you, I didn't know if it was real. If he was telling the truth. I didn't know." I retracted Mars and approached Yusuf with my hands in full view. I drew him close. In a fucked-up way, I felt a kind of comradery with that man like I would with someone I squatted beside in a foxhole praying for deities. He did not resist but gave in and crumpled on my left shoulder. I drank in the residual

pain from my wound. We exorcized our shared ghost while the squeeze felt by both of us betrayed the fact that we cherished the idea of knowing we were not alone.

“Alright, papa. I do have bad news.” I let up, knowing that any word out of my mouth would be taken with the highest regard. “Things are going to get worse.”

“How so? Neon? Do you think we have time before he sends more men?”

“No, not Neon. The Americans are coming. The Carpathians are anticipating a growing conflict. The Carpathians came here for some war technology and haven’t found it. Any country with an ear to the ground is probably going to race over here and put their hands on it first.”

“So, what, we run?”

“That’s what I’d suggest. In the power disruption, people like Neon will only become more keen on taking advantage of it all. If the Americans make landfall, nobody can predict how much damage will be done. If they can drag the EU into the fight, then expect this place to be in chaos for decades.”

“Where can a person run? Where can a family go? Carpathians are everywhere. Sir, I don’t know if you’re aware, but we’re sounded by the desert. If I take my daughter out there, it’ll be a death march.” I was at a loss of creative solutions to his correctly assessed dilemma. “Is that what you’re telling me to do? To forego the bombs and rape and accept the slow death of exposure. Sir, that’s no choice at all.”

“I know. Listen, I don’t have any great pathway out this hellhole. I probably, no I definitely, just killed my opportunity to run away to safety. I might be fucked on my own. My head will be blown off if I poke out in the streets for more than five minutes.”

“That’s it? You have resigned yourself to die? Throw your life away to save my daughter and I? And everyone else, all the innocents are just the unlucky collateral?” Yusuf looked at me with the disappointment only properly conveyed via the role of a seasoned father.

“Goddammit, I wasn’t really thinking that far in the future. Would you rather I did nothing?”

“No! You saved Illyana, that much is something I’ll never praise you enough for. All I’m asking is if you can do the same for the people caught in the middle of this insanity. I mean, look at you. I don’t understand how a person like you can exist, but you do. There has to be something.” I didn’t have a credible response. We stood in the gravel road, both staring unflinchingly. The expression on Yusuf’s worn and bronzed face was full of expectations and a newly realigned perception of the world. Mine was full of exhaustion. One idea in me began to ferment and grow tangible. All the players on the board were there and at the center was what brought me here as well. Benjamin had been classified as too dangerous to live, because of what he had contributed to the mythical technology that drove everyone to play a zero-sum game. And there was my answer. The light of my mind’s golden sun shown on the marble statue of a bomb holding up the globe.

“Yusuf, I wish we met under different circumstances.” I shook his rough hand. “I’m going to do what I can. But until this all is in the past, you and your daughter ought to collect whatever weapons you can and shut yourselves inside and lock the door.” I didn’t give him a chance to dig deeper into my subtext. My first priority was to get back to Barabbas and find Ben. He’s starving and alone. I nearly caught up to him at the food line, and I was certain that’s how I could find him again.

For all I envisioned my departure from Yusuf's farm as a valiant drive into the sunset, it was more akin to prolonged lecture. The only cars I had 'driven' were those that could drive themselves. I sat behind the steering wheel and only vaguely had the knowledge that I needed to turn a key to start the ignition. It dawned on me that I obliterated the key if it were in Rom's possession. Yusuf must have thought me as a ridiculous spectacle hitting the dash and chastising the obsolete machine. He walked up to the driver side window, which I had to crank down.

"You don't have the key?"

"Does it look like I have the key?" I spat back at him in my impatience. "It was on one of the bodies. So, it's gone permanently."

"Get out of the car."

"Excuse me?"

"Get out, I'll start it." I was tired and more upset than I'd like to admit. So, I obeyed. He ducked inside and pulled off a panel below the steering column which exposed wires. I have no real clue of what Yusuf did, but when I heard the engine rev, I could have seen him as an odd machine savant. "Don't look so bewildered. Who do you think fixes all these big combines?" He gestured to his massive farm equipment which he considered his livelihood. I gave Yusuf a final nod in acknowledgement that I hoped to never see his family again.

Accelerating up the ridge, I could fully appreciate Rom's earlier eagerness. It was quite a different sensation riding in a car which you controlled versus merely being a passenger. I decided not to think about the foreign feedback of the steering wheel as the vehicle took turns and grades. As I sped through the desert's edge, and as the slab building husks grew out of the horizon in greater density, I slid the mask over my face and brought the car to a reasonable crawl. The remnants of war aggression, destroyed structures and debris of all kinds, populated

more of the developing cityscape as I drove slowly north feeding into God's Canvas. I worked out that the likelihood of Ben migrating out of the western section of the old city was fairly low due to his need to also hide his face from the Carpathians and the lack of resources.

The first chance I got, I took one of the abrupt turns off the main boulevard and into the significantly narrower winding streets. I still might run into a Carpathian rove or checkpoint, but at least the symbol of the black sedan would continue to act like a ward against prying eyes. Something that became grossly evident was Rom's skill at navigating the damned vehicle. It felt like a boat in my hands which didn't last very long after getting off of God's Canvas. I probably crept fifty meters trying to dodge craters in the pavement or half-collapsed buildings before the car fell into one of the holes. Granted that the captive labor of the surrogate camps had enough problems to deal with across the city, but it was frustratingly inconvenient that the particular backstreet I was on had not been cleaned like those close to the old city walls. The engine was still humming when I punched open the door and almost tripped getting out of the car whose front end was then snug inside of the crater.

The trek on foot to one of the food sites was a bit of a hassle. I was sneaking past corners in a state of heightened precaution even with the dumb mask.

"We do not wish to risk the lives of any civilians. The Secular Levantine Nationalist government has been removed for their oppressive actions towards her citizens. The regime of oppression is over. All are now free to live without threats to individual happiness and success. Rejoice, for now you are free." The words of gaslighting and propaganda took up more of the sonic space the further north by northwest the destroyed allies would take me. Dissonance in the loudspeaker message became greater as I noticed a doppler effect from the east. It sounded like a set of speakers were moving, and closer to my direction for that matter. I thought it best to squat

inside a hollowed structure that was most likely used for apartments. I sat behind what was left of the blackened and charred concrete walls with an absence which allowed me to maintain vision around the corner from which the sounds were projecting. The source had revealed itself to be a divisional rove of five or seven guys covering a mech. The iron giant's pounding footsteps were blanketed by the loudspeakers until it drew close enough such that the vibrations were too strong to ignore. Downward bureaucratic pressure probably drew the mechs away from the chokepoints to aid in the search for the Levantine weapons. I knew that thing's ocular capacities. Therefore, I ducked my head back to the charred cover and closed my eyes to focus on what I expected to hear as a sign of passover. When the propaganda became more synchronized with the mirror words in the background, I took it as a signal that the coast was clear.

I stepped out and started toward the northernmost street, but I was too early. I stood stiff as the rover at the back of the formation similarly was staring back at me, immobile. Time froze for me at that moment. When the adrenaline kicked in for either of us, I would have a fraction of a second to act before he could alert his division. His cameras already caught sight of me. It could have been game over for all I knew. However, they had no reason to have my mask already cataloged. The safest play was to fall back on that fact. So, when time caught back up to us, I threw up my hands and removed any confidence from my posture to signal no harm. He broke away from the rove momentarily to interrogate me visually. He sized me up if I were a threat, but the resynchronization of his division's speakers created a tension between his instincts to question me and stick with his men. I played it up more by cowering as much as I could without cutting off my own leg. The rover looked as though he saw me for nothing.

“Darko and Rene, turn around. We got something here.” He called for reinforcements to interrogate me. He was either looking to indulge in a power fantasy or especially intuitive and struck gold with me. I had to be quick. As soon as the two men my opponent called walked into the scene, I dropped my cowardice act and summoned Mars to shoot up a tendril which wrapped around what was left of the apartment building. The rovers started to reflexively shoot while I heaved the burnt structure on them. The aftermath was uneven at best. None of their shots met their mark in part due to the deluge of smoke and debris exploding into the street. I was not in a position to stay and watch the bulk of the building crush the rovers, but it gave me the distraction necessary to sprint north a few blocks.

The mask was certainly a dead item since they got recordings of me using Mars behind its painted face. I ran and hurdled over a handful of chunks of brick and wall larger than myself before the sinking feeling of failure bubbled to the foreground. The seismic steps from the mech on patrol suddenly increased frequency suggesting a swift about-face. They were close enough to send out scout drones to radially sweep the area and investigate the collapse. I heard shouting and then nothing but the loudspeakers. The rove was a dozen meters to my south at the collapse site. I didn't want to make the same mistake of pulling out of cover early. So, I refused to take the risk of direct visual observation and relied solely on auditory information. I crouched as low as I could and tried to follow the shadows. Nightfall was about thirty minutes or so from completion, which meant that the projected shadows were sufficiently elongated.

Then the loudspeakers which I identified as those belonging to the mech due to desynchronization were cut out. And I felt a shock wave propagate through the debris littered pavement accompanied by a deep vacuum sound that trailed overhead. I slid far enough into the tight street to peer above the building silhouettes. The shadows abruptly melted back to the bases

of their respective structures due to a flood of lights coming from the sky. I had to use my hand for shade to see that the source was the mech. It had jumped nearly fifteen meters in the air, which gave it the necessary clearance past the rooftops to survey the adjacent allies and intersections. I was unsure if the pilot could see me, but I knew that the AI reviewing the captured footage would. The onboard AI would require a few seconds to transmit the visual data after the neural network had correctly identified me against the images captured moments ago from when I pulled down the apartment building on the other rovers. It would have to land, get confirmation, then most likely attack from the air since a few buildings separated me and that division. I was determined to not give it the chance. Recalling that many parts of the city had been vacant or abandoned since the invasion gave me assurances that I wasn't going to take any lives needlessly due to my actions. While the mech was still airborne and semi-blinded by its own lights and the hyper-contrast they produced, I channeled Mars into a wave to crash into the structures between us. The image of my last encounter with Abbe came to mind. The feat revealed itself to be far more taxing than I anticipated. The weightlessness in my palms that I came to expect was still there, but I could feel the buildings' hard fastened resistance. Shadows re-emerged to their connecting form with a reflective glow from Mars's effervescent and nebulous aura caused by the mech, with its flood lights, landing monstrosly back to ground. I buttressed my exertion with a clean survival instinct. Smoke flew high into the air as the buildings fell and the associated sound was as loud as a bombardment. The scene would attract more attention, but I had a bit more confidence that I succeeded. Regardless, I ran.

I was habitually letting myself down. A 'pfffbbbbb' rocketed in the air and a hole in the smoke and rubble opened up. A shell was fired from the mech's rifle cannon that did not hit me directly but slammed into the base of the walkway across the street. It exploded on impact like a

grenade and flung me back-first into some debris of my creation. My diaphragm felt like it imploded and expelled all of the oxygen in my lungs. What remained of the rove division was trapped by the mass of destroyed city blocks. Which was great because I couldn't move, no matter how much I begged my body for relief. I was down for close to ten seconds before I my legs got the message to get the fuck up. When I fumbled upright, I noticed a warm, moist sensation rolling down my shirt.

“Fuck!” I had to let out my frustration somehow. I had been back in the city for minutes and I was already bleeding. I wasn't sure from where, but anyplace was not ideal. I reached around to where I could sus out the blood pooling with my left hand. There was a decently sized and painfully jagged piece of wall or stair or whatever the fuck protruding from my right side. I had no choice but pull it out and try to stop the bleeding by maintaining Mars on the wound.

Another shell blazed past the smoke and downed buildings. The aftershock and explosion were closer, but as I was handling Mars to clog the hole in my side, I was able to shield myself from the worst of the blowback. It was consoling to know that the mech was firing blind. Sprinting out of the area was a non-starter at that point due to my increasing similarity with swiss cheese. I could use Mars to mend the bleeding, but there was no work around the pain burning in my ribs. All I was left with was slumping, step by step, around the corners. It was pitiful, but I was forced to take it slow, which I told myself resulted in fewer ways to stick out of the scenery. Native labor chain-gangs cropped up as I moved north. It was a sign of something. I was heading in the right direction. Where there were men from the surrogate camps, starving women, children, and the lame were close behind. The riflemen and PFCs overseeing the laborers' return march to the barracks paid significantly less mind to me due to, what I assumed, was my very real portrayal of a crippled man once again. History's cyclical movement was not lost on me.

I was lucky that no other Carpathian forces took an interest in me. I reached the main location for the soup line in the district by the time the moon climbed to a dominant position in the night sky. However, I would have to wait until morning for one of Neon's trucks to come around. Therefore, I found the most intact residential building in the vicinity and limped up the pitiful stairs to a bare room with a window that didn't take up the entire wall. Obviously, furniture and beddings were a luxury long gone from places like that. I did what I could to unravel my coat and cloak and make some kind of a cot on the ratted carpet floor. My first priority was to use that night to heal as much as possible. Sleep was impossible, biting through the pain. I wondered if Abbe could essentially regenerate. Clearly, whatever Mars was made of extended life and accelerated the healing process, but was it too much to ask for on-the-spot regeneration?

One of Neon's food trucks arrived a few hours after sunrise. The line shortly followed. I watched hawkishly out of the edge of the window for a body frame similar to Ben's. Hours came and went with no result, but I knew he had to swing by eventually. I spotted a few that hunched over, acting as crippled as I felt. However, none of them emanated that unique feeling of pain and hate oozing from Ben. Only a fool would suggest that the survivors didn't know those primal, reactionary emotions. But that same fool would have to grant that those poor souls didn't meet their assassin who happened to wreck most conventional understandings of the universe according to the amalgamation of human knowledge. Insight and unraveled mental fry become foundational traits of people who encounter things like Abbe, and probably me. Yet, the trait is nigh undetectable by any who had not suffered similar losses. Things like me created a loss for the individual. When I came into contact with Abbe, I lost something I had no idea was inside of me. I'm not religious, but seeing him erased any thread of hope that a benevolent higher power

existed, because I knew that the god that mattered was a devil. I'd rather the truth be that we were alone in the universe if the alternative meant real monsters walking the earth. Rom and his guys were already missing something inside themselves before I showed up. How can their world shatter when it was already blighted and diseased to the core? So, I waited for the smell of suffering that marked Benjamin.

It took hours, but a little before noon I saw him. I was sure it was Ben. He filed in the back of the line. I had ample time to get down there and pull him away. My back was healing up way better than I expected, and my shoulder was almost as good as new. Hobbling wasn't strictly my only mobility option. Regardless, I stuck to a slow limp to carry on appearances. The sun beat down pretty bad which did no one favors given the layer of dirt and grime that floated at groin level. If the heat didn't kill those folk, then asthma would. I might have been sweating any remaining fat off under the layers of cloak and clothes, but I trudged straight towards Ben in the line. I was not going to waste my time there. The figure of who I determined was Heladiv was justly observant, which further betrayed his identity to me, by continually tilting his head to scan the intersection and street fronts through his head covering. For once, I caught a morsel of luck to not be seen in my approach. Just before coming within two meters of Heladiv, a car cut between us. That asshole drew Ben's attention to me, the suspicious person trying to hide in plain sight as well. He prepared to run, but I was quicker. I lunged and snatched his arm with all my strength and coiled a stretch of Mars up his left shoulder.

"Benjamin, it's good to see you, old friend." I said through the painted mask. I heard his breathing accelerate while he tried to pull away before realizing the futility.

"No." That was all I heard prior to being interrupted by another man calling from the truck.

“Cal? Cal, is that you? Cal, what the hell?” I pivoted to see Squid getting out of the car. He had come with several others to relieve the guys on the truck. He was looking right at the painted mask. He wouldn’t mistake it for another.

“Ben, we need to run.” I whispered to him. At first, he seemed unreceptive.

“Calaban! What the fuck, man? Where’s Rom and the others? Where’s the car?” Squid started walking aggressively to Ben and I at the back of the line.

“Go! Go! Start moving!” I pushed Ben as hard as I could. I was in no condition to contest half-a-dozen guns or so, I did not want to tempt fate.

“Not again! I refuse!” Benjamin looked down on me with a fierce condemnation. He felt toward me what I felt toward Abbe. Squid was getting close and Neon’s other men around the truck were sufficiently enthralled.

“Ben, this is not up for discussion!” I couldn’t afford to hesitate any longer. With my free hand I blasted Mars with the sharpest edge I could imagine into the ground. The maneuver kicked up a truly dreadful amount of dust and sand in the air which could have blinded a hawk. The arm holding onto Heladiv was further engrossed with Mars which poured to his feet. I picked him up like I would a child throwing a tantrum.

“Cal? What’s going on? Why are you doing this? What did you do?” Squid was understandably persistent.

“Squid, just forget about me! Tell Neon I don’t need his help anymore!” I shouted through the dust cloud. I kept kicking up dirt and rubble behind me at regular intervals while I ran, carrying a semi-levitating Ben, until I was certain that we were out of Neon’s range of free section blocks in the west-side district. I was shooting for the east side of Barabbas. It was a no-go zone for much of Neon’s operation due to the Carpathian interest in pillaging the remaining

storehouses. I had hoped that the smokescreen distraction was large enough to attract the closer Carpathian regiments to make a safe journey across God's Canvas.

Chapter Thirteen

Eriatarka And Cassandra Gemini

Come 0330, Ryan was scheduled to be relieved from the Electrical Plant Control Console watch by EM2 Albrite. Ryan's rotation on the watch-bill was four-on, eight-off. His normal waking hours while out at sea were 2200 to 1600. Therefore, he anticipated to get off watch and get handed some new disaster to troubleshoot and fix. He had no confidence in any of the Firemen or Third-classes to fix anything. Except for maybe Agular. Ryan cursed the rotation which resulted in Agular being his duty electrician only once every three days. The other two days were painful slogs for Ryan to sit behind the plant console and waste time with the MM1s in the booth, knowing that every twenty minutes he would have to solve most of the night's electrical problems over the phone. Fireman Smith and even Luke and Davis couldn't change a lightbulb by themselves.

Ryan was self-assured since he had busted his ass to reach EPCC which was his rate's top electrical qualification. He was one of nine on a ship of three-thousand qualified for the watch. That granted those few qualified bodies a substantial degree of positional authority separate from rank and designated them as subject matter experts. On Ryan's LHA there were two plants, a forward and aft. The most senior watch-stander for that rotation slot was placed in the forward plant and was the de-facto electrical supervisor. Ryan, being an EM2 had not had the time in rate to accumulate watch seniority. Therefore, he was placed in the aft plant. All-in-all, Ryan was

maximally thankful to be in aft, because the EEOW and the ship's captain only visited the forward plant. Ryan detested the idea of faking a kind of 'professionalism' for those lifers. However, being in aft required Ryan to be the point-man for all menial issues. Only the most urgent would be passed to the electrical supervisor. And nobody wanted to be the one to take a bad message up there due to the crushingly high ranks in that booth. One wrong word would be scrutinized to the ends of the earth and leave the lowly Firemen or EM3s high and dry. But in aft, one could kick back and pass the time with good conversation while only looking at the console once every five minutes and to take logs on the hour.

Ryan was in the last stretch of his watch at 0325 when the duty electrician, Fireman Smith, meekly opened the booth door.

"What's up?" Ryan asked while sitting beside the aft plant supervisor, leaned back, instead of hunching on the ludicrously small, round swivel pad intended for the EPCC operator. Smith was just a kid. He was eighteen and only been on the boat for six or seven months before that point. His eagerness and naiveté induced a patronizing reaction from almost everyone else in the engineering department.

"Nothing much. Had to go do some ballast to LED conversions. Nothing terrible." Smith said as he meandered around the various consoles in the booth.

"So, why are you down here?" Ryan asked skeptically. The space supervisor, MM1 Lloren didn't intrude on the electricians' dealings, but was always interested in watching the younger sailors try the more seasoned crew.

"I just got a call in the shop from Senior." Smith was poorly faking coy.

"Ok? What did he want?" Ryan was quick to get short with the lower-ranked junior sailors. Spending three years entrenched in ship life dissolved any patience and empathy a person

might have held. That was especially true when directed toward young sailors without salt on their coveralls.

“We have to go to the bridge. There’s some lamp that needs to be fixed.”

“The fuck you mean? You have to go to the bridge and fix that damned desk lamp.” Ryan intuited that Smith was phishing to skate off and not do his work. “I know that Wilson didn’t tell you to come all the way down here, seven decks, to tell me to go seven levels to the bridge to fix a lamp.”

“He didn’t say anything about you,” Smith was caught off by Ryan.

“So, why the hell is this a conversation? You can’t fix a lamp?”

“We have to do it ASAP, so it has to be done live. I don’t think I can do it with all the officers there.”

“Oh my god. They won’t even pay attention to you.” Ryan didn’t care to hold back his disgruntled retort. He truthfully did not expect Smith to make even a simple repair in the context of the bridge. The fundamental issue was that any electrical repair items vital for ship operations could not be completed through the legal pathway. Within the realm of legal electrical work in the Navy, the object for repair must have been ‘tagged out’ which involved disconnecting the object from the closest source of power, be it fuse or circuit breaker. To pull a fuse, for instance, required the power source for the fuse panel, typically a single circuit breaker, to be de-energized. However, if the source was a fuse panel with many other vital pieces of equipment, then there would have to be a dizzy bureaucratic dance of selective switching the source of those objects to the alternative source. Furthermore, the process of tagging out one item could take upward of thirty minutes due to generating the tag, collecting all the diagrams to prove to the EEW in the forward plant that the electrician wasn’t going to turn off the wrong item or have

unintended outcomes, get EEW permission to hang tags, check out the PPE to perform the work, roping off the area, make the repair, and finally get permission from the EEW to restore the systems.

The reality, that every person in Engineering and the bridge knew, was that the legal process was far too cumbersome for something on the bridge while out at sea and close to enemy waters, and that there was no way an electrician could rope off half of the bridge. The job would have to be done now and it would have to be done without the bureaucratic process. The fuse on the bridge would have to be pulled with the panel still hot. If anybody asked questions, the person doing the work would have to be quick on their feet with clever excuses. Of course, those who required the repair would look the other way and ask no questions. The truth of a massive and aging organization like the Navy was that the creation of bureaucracy will recursively recreate the conditions for more bureaucracy. All organization members tacitly agreed that under most circumstances, each person in their role would work behind the organization mechanisms to complete their work, especially work that benefited multiple parties. The maturation of the bureaucratic method had rendered timely work, even on a war vessel, impossible. Only if a sailor got hurt in front of a superior outside of their division would questions be asked. The superior would certainly be hyper aware of what was transpiring and would have loved nothing more but to pretend everything was satisfactory. However, being in quarters with perceived injuries created situations with necessary culpability. Both Smith and Ryan considered it folly to think that Smith would work quickly and without injury under the pressure of the bridge given his inexperience.

“Hey there, guys. What’s the occasion?” EM1 King walked out from behind the EPCC.

“Nothin’, man. Just dying inside. The usual.” Ryan greeted King with a visibly greater degree of respect than what he held for Smith.

“We all good down here?” King asked while looking at the gauges for generator specific output voltage, amperage, and kilowatts on the EPCC.

“Yeah, steady state. I’ve already signed out of the logs.” Ryan handed a tablet to King who then quickly reviewed the last four hours of readings. “Well, I had it, You got it.”

“Aye aye. So, what are guys about to do? We’re getting pretty close to the SLN coast. This might be your last opportunity to catch some sleep for a while.”

“Fuck, man. I’m gonna take Jimmy here up to the bridge and hold his hand while he fixes the desk lamp up there.”

“Sounds like fun.” King replied sarcastically. Smith knew better than to interject between the EM2 and EM1. He would stand silent and let the verbal abuse pass.

“Smith, you got a meter and fuse pullers on you?” Ryan turned to the fireman who then pulled out the requested tools from his hind coverall pockets. “Nice, we won’t have to dip into the shop. What about wire cutters, a screwdriver, E-tape, and wire nuts?” Smith’s eyes widened.

“Um,” Smith thought out loud.

“Um is right. I’ll wait for you in the galley to grab your tool-bag, or mine. That’s on you buddy.” Ryan patted Smith’s shoulder and exited the booth into the manically loud machine space. He took his time climbing the seven-deck ladder well, the air thick with the smell of salt, rust, and humidity. Once he reached the hangar bay, Ryan took a few precious seconds to look outside the elevator window. The red and orange lights of open compartments were always pleasant distractions from a tedious life onboard. Even though the lights did not create high contrast with the ambient luminosity from outside the skin of the ship, The night sky was more

black and impenetrable than words could adequately describe. Ryan was accustomed to seeing the night sky so dark, as his routine forbade him from seeing much sunlight. He was either asleep in the dimly lit birthing compartment or in the plant, under LEDs. Ryan was like many of his peers who derived a significant degree of resentment for the organization due to the nonnegotiable terms of their service. If a sailor's job required them to effectively live in the belly of the ship, and never see the sun, then that was their life. The classic refrain was 'choose your rate, choose your fate.' Nevertheless, the absence of artificial light like that of the black night sky was a welcome relief.

Ryan hung around one of the snack bars in the galley, munching on granola bars and cheap chocolate. He flagrantly stuffed his pockets with what he surmised as a sufficient number for later snaking. He would have loved to swing by the bake shop to see Drew, but the rotations didn't line up. The bake shop did most of their prep work before Ryan got off watch. His mind was wandering from one daydream to another when he saw Smith hustle from the main P-way.

"You got everything?" Ryan shot out. Smith smiled innocently and swung around his bag.

"Yup, right here."

"You got the fuse box number?" Ryan asked half-hoping to catch Smith up and half-hoping to just get the job done.

"7-52-26-L." Smith unzipped his bag to take out the fuse box diagram which had all elements numbers and loads scribbled in.

"Put that away. We're good, we're good." Ryan took one last bite. He didn't entertain any conversation as Smith sprinted up the ladder-wells while Ryan agonized over every step.

The pair turned the corner at the top of the stairs. The P-way feeding into the bridge was dark.

Ryan stopped Smith and pulled him aside and said:

“Smith don’t say a fucking word. Hold the light close to the panel. Don’t touch shit. You fuck up and you’ll get both of us sent up. Got it?”

“Yeah.” Ryan could see Smith smiling in the dark, but he realized that Smith was just the kind of young and eager man who hadn’t been crushed by life or the Navy yet. Ryan spun open the hatch and slowly walked in without a word. The officers and junior Boatswain's Mate at the helm just pivoted to see that they were the electricians and carried on. Being an electrician on a Navy vessel meant that one could go anywhere without many naysayers. This was due to the inevitability of an electrician needing to enter the space as all wires outside of consoles belonged to the electricians.

“Look for the box.” Ryan instructed Smith. The two hugged the walls trying not to bump or nudge any of the people who belonged in the bridge. The bridge itself was far darker than many other spaces on the ship, minus a few downward lights. The subject desk lamp needing repairs was the primary source of red light at the most forward table. It had an illustrious history of failures of some sort.

After the initial jolt of new occupant coming into the compartment, the officers continued their conversations. Ryan purposely ignored much of what was being said. Smith flicked on and off his pocket-size flashlight twice to draw Ryan’s attention from the right side of the bridge. When Ryan squeezed past everyone else, Smith flashed the light on the fuse panel number to show Ryan that it was the correct box. Ryan spun the wingnuts which latched the panel door shut with the utmost care not to force a metal-on-metal shriek.

“... disappeared. Like, they vanished.” Ryan caught the trailing words from one of the officer’s conversations. What drew Ryan’s attention was the tone of worry and anticipation. He directed Smith to point the light in the box to find the fuse with a piece of paper taped next to it with some combination of words to the effect of ‘desk lamp.’ The fuse that fit the suspect profile was one of eight in the panel. He strained to look around to ensure nobody but Smith and himself were preoccupied with what the electricians were doing. Ryan shook Smith and made grabbing motions which Smith understood to mean ‘fuse pullers.’ With the fuse pullers in hand, Ryan crowded his large body to obstruct any prying eyes from seeing whatever was happening in the fuse panel. “The leftist psychopaths really done it. I saw they really took over half of some states.” Ryan stopped when the conversation passed phased into tones of existential crises. He easily pulled the fuse and closed the panel without a hitch. But the officers were clearly talking about the affairs back in the states, and any new information was like gold on the ship.

“Here, put this in your pocket. Don’t lose it.” Ryan jabbed Smith to get his attention and handed him the small fifteen-amp fuse.

“You think they’ll turn us around?” One of the junior officers asked the other. The electricians crept behind the watch-standers and quietly as possible and crouched at the foot of the desk at the foremost wall in the bridge.

“Did you see? They sent a lot of Army to most of the cities. I’m sure they’ll send some ships from Norfolk to the coastal cities, but we’re too far out. They won’t pull us back without something in return.” Smith pointed to the lamp with his flashlight. Ryan nodded and hovered his index finger over the lamp switch on the base.

“I know, but the videos; you haven't seen the footage of what the Anarchists have done to the police and national guard. Taylor, you have to see it. It's like they shoot something, and a

cloud eats the police.” Ryan flipped the lamp on its side such that the felt material on the bottom of the base was exposed. There was one screw on the base which fastened the bronze pieces together. Smith took the initiative and removed the screw to reveal the cabling from ship’s power with leads connecting to the switch contact terminals and output leads which ran up the length of the bronze tube to the light socket.

“What do you mean? Like ‘poof’ and gone? How does that even happen?”

“As soon as we get off, watch I’m going to show you. I don’t know how to explain it. You’ll see it. The cloud just, just eats them.” Ryan turned to Smith to see if he was similarly fascinated by the officer’s claims of outlandish disaster in the homeland. Ryan was alone in his eavesdropping due to Smith’s fixation on the problem at hand.

“Yo, this is it.” Ryan tapped the tip of his screwdriver to the hot output terminal post on the switch. The power lead which was to be locked into place between the plates of the retractable terminal was only partially so. The repair was to simply unscrew the terminal post and re-insert the copper lead back into place and tighten the post once more. “Slap test.” Ryan dragged his screwdriver along the switch terminals. “It’s dead. Go ahead and put the wires back.” He said, satisfied with the low risk involved in the repair. Ryan indulged in the moment to reflect on the strange topic. He had been kept abreast of the ever-escalating fight for territory by the Anarcho-Communists and the typical defenders of the state and economy over the last seven months. Most of the revolutionary movement skipped over the Tide Water Combined Statistical Area due to the overwhelming presence of federal forces and proximity to DC. Ryan was a sympathizer like many young men at the time outside of the military. However, most in his peer group had moderated views on politics and economics derived from the institution from which they were gainfully employed. Ships, and general military life for that matter, are insular insofar

that a member had far fewer interactions with the civilian world than otherwise. Therefore, the workplace became dense echo-chambers of discourse which fell in the window of acceptability as determined by the superstructure of economic liberalism. Ryan was unable to properly frame what he intuited into the eloquent words that came from years of study, but he could recognize the truth in the fight for real economic and political liberation. Circumstance was all that shackled Ryan Mendoza to what he considered as the ‘wrong side of history’, and if what he eavesdropped from the officers held weight, then he thought there might have been a time in his future in which he could negotiate his allegiances. There was a term familiar to Ryan that he decided best described his attitudes toward his military service: conflict of commitment.

Mendoza had completed half of his undergraduate degree before enlisting in the Navy due to financial hurdles in academia. One class he took in his sophomore year was called Organizational Behaviors. He was in a nursing program, but the course filled a social science general education requirement. Ryan did not remember anything from that class except the topic of commitment on part of the employee in its various dimensions, and that those dimensions explained organization member outcomes. In short, Ryan Mendoza acknowledged that his value and perception of self did not align with what he experienced as the de-facto values of the Navy, unfettered hierarchy and coercion. The result was a conflict of commitment to the organization which would prohibit Mendoza from allowing the Navy to extract all that it could from his life and labor. He would feed its insatiable appetite no more than the minimum.

If the words quietly shared between the officers were true, then the hard-leftist coalition found some miraculous tool to decisively end the conflict. That would be a bit too optimistic. Even with vaporizing technology, as crazy as it sounded, to engage in prolonged combat with the US military was a death wish. Whatever the cloud-eating thing was, it had to be omnipotent to

overcome the federal forces' bottomless pit of weapons and money. Although the discretionary budget for the Department of Defense had stagnated for decades due to public blowback to absurd contract spending, the nation still placed the vast majority of its indebted wealth into the military industry. Ryan would be unable to verify any claims of the carnivorous clouds until the ship exited the theater of battle. The theater was just about to open.

Smith elbowed Ryan to convey that he was done with the repair. The pair stood up while Ryan looked out the infinitely dark window overlooking the flight deck. The opportunity to get that view was scarce and Mendoza would not forgive himself to let it slip away. Through the impenetrable dark only the crest of waves, hitting at varying angles, were visible. One's sea legs would erase the perception of wave motion after a few days. Therefore, it was a great novelty to be reminded. He pressed down sternly on Smith's shoulder meaning to 'stay put' while he re-inserted the fuse. Smith handed the small cold object over. Post insertion, Ryan nodded for Smith to try the switch. The red light came on. Job well done.

The electricians descended down the eight decks necessary to reach their shop. There were two hours or so before quarters. Ryan instructed Smith to wake him up twenty minutes prior. He lined up two broken rolling chairs and contorted to an unnatural position with a foul-weather jacket over his face in order to fall asleep.

"We're here! Wake your dumb ass up!" EM2 Cameron was lumbering over Ryan's sleeping body. He kicked Mendoza's boots and said: "Come on. Get out of the way."

"Fuck you." Ryan palmed his eyes, seeking to exorcize the fogginess of abruptly waking.

"He's right. Let's move." It was EM1 Blake. His face was stone gray and just as hard. "We don't have too much time. We all got word that we're finally in SLN waters." divisional

personnel were still filing into the shop. All present seemed to be equally drowsy like Mendoza. “For all of you here right now, we had to wake you up early to get ahead of this thing.”

“Ranks?” Fireman Agular posed the question to Blake.

“No time, and really no need. Everyone who needs to be here already is.” Blake pointed to EM2 Cameron, Mendoza, Agular, Smith, and a few others. “Senior Wilson is in forward plant as EOW. So, I’m going to get us setup in his stead.” The relief of not standing in ranks felt like a luxury they cheated out of the Navy. Ryan maintained his lying position in the two roller chairs. “Because we’re taking a hostile stance in active enemy waters, we’re going to set emergency watch stations until Cheng says otherwise. Everyone good on their stations?” Nobody responded verbally, but a few gave thumbs up. “Good. Get to where you're supposed to be and standby. Other divisions and departments will be following soon.” Ryan Mendoza was pleased with his long-held station in the aft emergency diesel. The ladder well was across the hangar bay from the divisional shop, and down only two decks. Alternatively, the forward diesel was inconveniently placed behind a labyrinth of ladder-wells and turn-arounds, well-hidden between galleys. He entered the compartment for the diesel and made a quick study of current plant alignments. Everything seemed normal and satisfactory. Aside from the difference in locational conveniences, the diesels were the ideal watches for sea and anchor or emergency situations. Typically, only an engineman and one well-qualified electrician stood watch in the diesel spaces when needed. Therefore, for either party the general etiquette was to check current system status then find a good place to sleep due to the incalculable hours lost in the compartment doing nothing. The backside of circuit breaker cabinets was the favorable location for malingering.

Mendoza inserted his ear-conforming foam hearing protection and tossed down a book on the deck behind the circuit breaker cabinet. He would have to fall into the nap state with his

consciousness floating close to the surface of awareness. The fans feeding the compartment were continually howling such that one would struggle to hear the compartment hatch open. Ryan did not want to deal with the earful of being caught sleeping by his senior chief or any other high-ranking individual. He closed his eyes and began to imagine what the video footage of cops being devoured by some demon cloud would even look like. He thought the officer was either too dim-witted to see through video trickery, his favorite premise, or revolution could truly be at hand. He allowed those thoughts to bloom and followed as their vines twirled in quirky dialectics. Ryan Mendoza was certain that if the worst-case scenario came into fruition, the hyper-stimulating roar of the diesel coming alive would shock him out of any slumber.

The longest he had been cooped up in the diesel room was nineteen hours while crossing the Suez Canal. That was during his only other overseas excursion on the ship. Most US Navy ships no longer patrolled to global waters at all times. The LHA Ryan on which he served had unique traits as its vessel class operated as the naval swiss army knife due to aircraft, hovercraft, and long-range missile capacity. Ryan had dozed out and back again for an indeterminate number of hours. The moments of waking between spurts of sleep were unavoidable, because of the festering paranoia and boredom brought on by isolation which weathered time meaningless. So, he would come to his feet with haste and slowly pace around the switchboard for a few cycles, then fall back into position and try to sleep once more.

Ryan's eyes flew open when he heard the space siren screech. Over the 1-MC he heard the words: "Brace for shock!" Were they being attacked this early into the game? Mendoza thought that to engage the Carpathians, who knew only perpetual war, was going to be suicide for the strike force. However, he did not rationalize that a decisive retaliation would be so swift. The 1-MC message was repeated. Aside from the space siren, there were not any palpable

indications of emergency. The ship was not knocking about, and the diesel hadn't been started from the EPCC. Then, as Ryan truly adjusted to being aware and awake, the lights and siren cut out. It was the exact kind of situation he was trained to take action against. Mendoza ran to the diesel's control panel on the switchboard and held down the small red button inside of a slightly larger red circle around it. The diesel start worked by releasing low-pressure air at 700 psi to the starter motor, which then caught the flywheel and engaged the initial four stroke cycle of the sixteen-cylinder locomotive engine. After the diesel pulled off from the start, the permanent magnetic alternator attached to the rotor spinning at 2700 rpm would generate almost eighty percent the total load capacity of the normally aligned generators.

It took three painful seconds of LP air screeching at otherworldly frequencies before the flywheel caught. At which point, the sound of the diesel starting proper caused Mendoza to flinch, even though he knew it was coming. It couldn't be helped regardless of who had been at the helm. When the gauge readouts for the diesel had shown that it was completely done with startup, Ryan adjusted the voltage and speed of the engine and closed the circuit breaker to place the diesel generator on the electrical bus. Afterward, he closed two more breakers to align the emergency bus to the aft plant so that the aft EPCC watch-stander would have control. All of that transpired in less than twenty seconds. That was his whole reason for being in that compartment, and at that point he was to remain there to monitor the engine.

"Everyone, this is Captain Spears. As you all have seen and heard, we were shot at by some missile that has not detonated beyond an EMP or electrical shockwave that knocked out our primary systems. Good job to our guys on the diesels and in the plants. But everyone needs to prepare for a possible explosion and damage to the hull of the ship." Ryan was in disbelief that it was real and that he was a key actor in the safety of the ship. He also felt in his bones the pure

hate he had for the ship and all other facets of the Navy. He thought to himself 'I'll be damned if I let the Navy steal my life.' He justified his deep reaction by reminding himself that he had saved the operation of the ship in a very real sense. He reasoned that he had already given the ship what it was due.

Ryan Mendoza sprinted to the hatch and up to the hangar bay. Normally, the lowest point of the open ship to water was three or four stories above sea level. If disaster struck, the crew would hurry to the flight deck at about six stories above the water and be told to jump. Ryan held no positive impression on the idea of jumping from the flight deck amid three thousand other people and into crushing waters. Instead, he sprinted to the port-side shore-power room which had an isolated hatch to outside the skin of the ship. When in port and the normal brow was unusable, the command would use one of the shore power entrances due to the sizable ladder that was folded just outside. Mendoza ran to unhitch the two latching devices of the ladder and swiveled it away from the ship. Once it dropped into the water, he began to feel inextricably lighter. He attributed the sensation to panic and began climbing the six or so meters to the waves. Halfway to the water, he began to hear chatter from the flightdeck of the crew screaming or jesting. All the while, the sensation of lessened weight only grew stronger. He jumped into the water and began to swim as fast as he could in the opposite direction of the strike group. Some of the screams gained supremacy in his awareness as the volume became impressive given the distance. Something was terribly wrong. The sea was glowing blue with a white ball of light heart ascending between the ships. Ryan felt his stomach and lungs hollow out and fought back harsh urges to vomit. He was getting woozy and near sighted while feeling like a balloon. Mendoza noticed that he was being pulled out of the water as the white heart continued to climb to the surface. His body accelerated in gaining elevation until he was clear of the water all

together and floated in the air. He looked up to his ship and saw hundreds of his shipmates in similar peril. He had reached nearly two meters above the waves in almost five seconds when the ships began to leave the sea and float. He knew he was going to die, but he couldn't feel anything. He felt no fear because there was no room for it in his mind. The moment was absurd and dark. The white light that was carrying all the bodies out of the ocean had trapped them all in an orbit where the contrast blinded all persons outside the ships. Ryan's extremities were under torsional forces that made Ryan cry out in immense pain while floating like a tiny satellite around a neutron star.

Without a moment to gather his thoughts away from the insanity of circling a ball of light alongside massive collections of painted steel and the pain of feeling as though his body was being torn from the inside, it all ended. Ryan Mendoza was killed instantly with the thousands of other sailors and marines. All the objects in orbit around the ball of light fiercely collapsed into each other, approaching the acceleration and point density required to form a black hole. The fused material was not dense enough to pass the threshold, but only just. The chimeric mass of metal and flesh slammed into the sea which begat sizable ripples in all directions that would evolve into tsunamis prior to making landfall.

Chapter Fourteen

Flee Thou Matadors The Messes Of Men

“Looks like we’re in the clear,” I said, half intending the words for Ben and the other half just to air my thoughts. “I really wish it was different, Ben, that I didn’t have to keep running into you like this. Wouldn’t it have been nice to meet at some coffee shop like a couple of normal people.”

“I’m tired of all this, Mister.” Benjamin said while his back against the blocks of a burnt concrete wall. He was looking up past the cleaved wreckage on the building tops which constructed the alley in which we hid. The lack of material to form solid walls and roofs on either side resulted in plenty of natural light hitting us on the alley’s dirt ground.

“Come on, Ben. My name’s Calaban. You can call me Cal or whatever you want.” I wanted him to disarm, even a little bit. I needed his help. “I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“No, it doesn’t.” His eyes met mine, filled with resentments and condescension. I could see that he found something within himself which gave him the strength to look down on me. The feeling of being looked upon as a lower life would have been enough to kill a man under normal circumstances. But I would not let petty anger or spite from my lizard brain get the better of my greater faculties. “It’s useless, isn’t it?”

“What is?” I asked in return. I was careful not to overextend my zealotry to engage with Heladiv.

“You, how you are, or what you are; it would be impossible for me to get away from you. I’m going to be your prisoner for as long as you want me to live, right?” Benjamin was bleak and resolute in the febleness of his station.

“Goddammit, Ben, you’re not a prisoner or anything else! I just need your help”

“What could you need my help for? A techno-demon like you?” He came close to laughter, but he held himself from that reaction by holding onto his spite.

“What’s a techno-demon?” I was more curious than offended by the attempt at a slur.

“Let’s play no games here. You know what I am just as I know what you are. I am an engineer, a materials scientist. You are a person who has somehow been infected with a technology so advanced that the average person on the street would mistake it for magic.” I was taken aback. Two or three seconds passed before I could process the magnitude of what he was trying to say.

“What do you know about his stuff? How can you be so sure that it’s some sort of future tech?”

“Oh, come on, now! You’re the one infected and you have worked it out? You fool, magic doesn’t exist. There is no god, no supernatural or meta-divine realm. There is only this.” He gestured to the both of us and the burnt walls in which we corralled.

“Fuck, Ben, I’m not a scientist. I shoot guys for a living. It’s been all the same to me.” I could discern that Ben was livid by my ignorance, more so than myself.

“It’s a simple true dichotomy. Something can only be natural or supernatural. A supernatural entity is, by definition, not limited by the principles of our natural world, which includes the forces of electrostatic repulsion and nucleonic attraction. In short, if your blue haze can grab something or cut a man in half, then it’s interacting with the natural world. One way to

think about it is if your infection was supernatural, then it would pass through objects without really touching them in any meaningful way. As a matter of fact, it would be invisible due to no reflection or absorption of photons. If that's the case, then it requires a natural explanation. Some form of technology is the best candidate, by Occam's Razor. If you wanted to make an argument for divine origin, then you would have to make substantial assumptions about the thing interacting in the world with natural principles, but also somehow not being held to the same principles. The end of the supernatural argument is a paradox. And paradoxes only arise from a bad premise, in this case supernaturalism, or a misunderstanding of the mechanisms at work." Ben looked quite happy with himself.

"You practiced that, didn't you?" I asked after giving him time to relish in his logical feat.

"I won't lie to you; I haven't stopped thinking about that day. Everything about it just lives here." Benjamin tapped two fingers to his right temple. "I was one day too late. Can you imagine the absurdity? I was twenty-four hours off from saving my wife and child. Twenty-four hours."

"Benjamin, I don't know what to tell you."

"There's nothing you could say. Nobody can say a damned thing. I don't believe in a hell, but I'm sure we will create one right here on Earth. All I have done since that day is think about my family dying unnecessary deaths and witnessing your 'gift.' And by all means, you can think of it as evil. I do." I looked between my legs, to the dust and pebbles. I was satisfied that he was talking.

"So, you've spoken your peace to me, the boogeyman in your nightmares. Now, be honest with me. You're not unfamiliar with this kind of thing, are you? Because, why you? I get

that you were a materials engineer for MES, but what were you involved in specifically to warrant getting yourself a proprietary hit?" I wiggled back on my knees to give the man some room. It was a nonverbal form of communication to convey that there was no threat between us.

"I never saw what it was at the heart of the bomb. My job was to design and fabricate the materials and systems for shelling and delivering the payload. It took years to develop the right balance of tempered metals and synthetics." Benjamin said reluctantly.

"You gotta give me more than that." I begged of him.

"What do you want? You want a seminar on chemistry and materials? Just take my word that even our team was still a bit in the dark after housing the bomb. That's the thing; one day, after the revolution, I was drafted to work in the labs at Merigold. The country wasn't close to this state of destruction after the SLN party took over, but it wasn't like we were living in a techno-utopia either. And they told us exactly what we had to do." He paused and made a concerted effort to ensure I was paying him my undivided attention. "They told the team to which I was assigned that we had to create a bomb housing for ordinance which induced negative mass values."

"What the hell does that mean? Negative mass?" I was genuinely out of my depth.

"Right now, everything you see, and even the non-atomic matter you don't see, has a positive mass sourced from two things: the energy bundled between quarks that make up protons and neutrons, and the miniscule mass given to the small particles by scalar fields. I know it's gibberish but hang in there with me. Positive mass for you and me means that when acted upon by an accelerating force, like gravity, you move in the direction of the accelerating force. So, if gravity is accelerating us down to the surface on the earth, then we are pulled downward. You follow?"

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, then negative mass?” I asked

“So, an object with negative mass would perform the opposite operation when interacting with an accelerating force. If gravity says down, then you go up. If an accelerant would push you away, you would be sucked in. Do you understand?”

“Holy shit, that’s wild.” My response was vapid and unintelligible. But how could a layman digest the full ramifications of a topic like negative mass, especially in terms of bombs. “Ok, so, how did you do it? What became of the bombs? But, but, first, what in the world did they have that was characterized by the negative mass?”

“Well, I don’t know. We never saw the damned thing. We only worked off of assumptions and principles.” He threw up his hands and shrugged his shoulders. “The party wouldn’t let the separate teams share work. They kept us siloed to compact all of our knowledge and communication with the outside. You see, we were working blind. The party leaders who gave us the orders couldn’t answer most of our fundamental questions. Nobody really knew what the thing was. However, we did squeeze out that whatever it was it would introduce variation into one of the two mass generating mechanisms. We didn’t know which one. So, a lot of the early years were spent wasted twiddling our thumbs and playing with stupid math.” He paused to catch his breath. “The properties that we had to engineer around were like some of what you can do with that blue stuff.” Then it clicked for me. “We had to fabricate a real housing system for a technology that should have existed. The math which describes the fields that govern all of this have been around for more than a century. However, the understanding of how to change something like the absolute value squared into a negative by introducing some unknown interaction was generations beyond where we should be.”

“So, how did you do it?” The narrative of the payload unraveled before me. The guy that Neon’s temple group mentioned, Omari. He was like me; made like me by Abbe at least a decade or so before. That Omari helmed their SLN revolution and played into their twisted theology. Together, they thought of a clever way to weaponize and atomize Mars into a bomb with a single function. From my usage of Mars, I could remember the sensation of weightlessness. When I visualized manipulating something by picking it up, there would always be a boundary of contact from where that sensation permeated. The thought of isolating that aspect of Mars almost felt blasphemous, like chiseling off an arm of the David.

“Eventually, we had to let the math and physics go. We simply couldn’t solve the problems. Once we let our egos fall by the wayside, the picture became clearer. At the end of the day, we were dealing with physical interactions. And from that perspective, you can throw enough heat and electromagnetism at anything to make it conduct. That’s what we did.” Benjamin nodded. “Our success was to pack as many superconductive radiators in the damned shell as possible to hold the payload in a condensed and suspended state. We brute forced it.” Ben said dismissively.

“But you guys finished the bomb?”

“We did. You know, I honestly felt a good deal of pride along with the others on the team. However,” Benjamin put the rest of his body weight on the wall. “All of that pride was short-lived. The years working at an endless task gave us all plenty of time to just think about what that kind of damage the weapon would bring. Sure, we felt instant gratification from being useful at what we do. But the damning realization that we signed the death order for all of our family and kinsmen sank in. The SLN dumped all of their money into that weapons research. They had nothing else. So, when the time would come that they use them on an enemy,

regardless of the immediate destruction, they would have no way of following through with the retaliation. It was suicide by genocide.”

“I get it. And I was there for the last part. What I need to know now is exactly what can the bomb do? Right now, the Carpathians are combing the fucking desert and the Americans are on their way for that technology. It’s going to act as a global flash point for conflict as long as it stays a carrot at the end of a string.” I said, trying to make my case.

“Hypothetically, there wouldn’t be a blast like a conventional warhead or nuclear weapon. There wouldn’t be a radioactive signature. But it could level a city all the same, by crushing it or ripping it apart, atom by atom. All done by moving along a sliding scale of mass from positive to negative.” He said while illustrating the premise by gliding his index and middle fingers along an imaginary balance beam. “The worst part is that it turned out to be laughably cheap. You don’t need uranium or plutonium. You don’t have to throw money into mining, trading, or enriching. So, the international community would be none-the-wiser. There is no waste to contain. The output is at least as much capacity for destruction as the best bombs everyone already has. But the truth is that this skipped several giant leaps in physical applications. There is no ceiling to what it can do. Any country or corporation that got their hands on something like that could propel their science and technology exponentially. That is the real danger.”

“I think I know exactly what you mean. Some things have happened; things that I’ve done that I can’t explain or really comprehend. Mars, that’s what I call it for consistency’s sake, I think the only true limitation is where our imagination intuits it should be.” I said. I wanted to demonstrate for Heladiv to drive my point home, because I believed that there were still aspects of Mars which would surprise even Benjamin. I pointed to a pebble on the ground and waited

until I was sure that he was watching carefully. I took a deep breath and condensed Mars around the pebble and saw it at eye-level between us in my mind's eye. On my exhale, the stone disappeared and flashed at the spatial location I exacted. It plopped on the dirt at our feet, covered in a thin layer of ice. I didn't open my mouth to exchange words with Ben. I let the action speak for itself. His jaw slacked for a brief moment before his determined expression returned. "Benjamin, I need to get to that bomb before the Americans get here. If they land, the war that they'll bring will cost far more lives. More kids will die. More families will be broken. I have a feeling the whole goddamn world will end."

"Is that why you need me; need my help?" He asked, without a hint of resentment. The stark future that lay before us all was considerably more viscous than a vengeful widower and father could protest.

"Yeah. That's why I'm here. You're the only one I can trust to help me. Neon's people would use me to get to it safely, then shoot me in the back if they think it'll bring them closer to their god. It's just a matter of time before the Carpathians beat us there."

"Maybe, but I doubt it."

"What makes you think that?" I asked as he peaked my curiosity.

"The weapons bunker is not in Barabbas. Fabrication of some parts of the shell were handled in the Merigold factory, but assembly and storage was east of the Jordan, underground. I've only been there a couple of times." Benjamin replied confidently

"How far?"

"Thirty minutes by car. On foot? Maybe half a day."

"Will you do it?" I gave my hand for a solemn signifier of shared interest.

“There never was a choice.” Ben accepted my proposition. “I have to say thank you for this.” He bore his right wrist in plain view. A lateral scar was slowly healing and colored in hues of indigo and maroon in alternating spots to highlight the crest and troughs of flesh.

“I’m sorry about that, Ben. I saw it as the best thing to do during the invasion.” I was truly remorseful for the pain I added to the man’s rough load.

“I think you were right. Thanks to your split-second decision, I’ve had a much easier time dodging the blockade checkpoints and scanners. It also helps to sell the disfigured vagrant visage.” After we had traded niceties and made amends for the time being, we got down to business on planning our way to the weapons cache outside of Barabbas. From the west district, the most difficult part of the trek would be getting past the old city wall to the northeast. If we made it to the opposite end of the industrial district where the Carpathian built up the surrogate camps, skirting beyond the city would be far easier than cutting through the east end.

Before we committed to the journey Benjamin suggested that I maintained a thin veil of Mars over my face. His reasoning was that the material, applied as a mask, would refract light on its way to any optical sensor. As long as the mask-like veil shimmered by some degree it would be sufficient to disrupt the facial recognition AI software. I was floored by the clever, but painfully obvious, advice. More than anything, I was embarrassed that I couldn’t put that together myself. Spending time with Heladiv in his clear mind only left the impression of a brilliant man. If only he had the luck to have been born in a stable place in the world. Who knows what good he could have brought? My modest addition to his clever solution was to maintain the same kind of veil for him.

Our march across the surveilled streets was made significantly less risk-laden by the mirage face masks. We still walked every step with severe caution. We shambled inevitably near

roves and patrols, but the test of Ben's ingenuity came from armed Carpathians who managed the captive labor with a detached coldness. The beaten men, torn from their wives and families, raked with inhuman meticulousness every square-meter of the street and walkways bare of all misplaced rubble, motivated by the rifles of the guards and what I assumed to be the dream of reuniting with their loved ones. If one had the opportunity to sit and watch one of the local slave working parties for long enough, one might catch sight of the insectoid drones tap blazingly fast behind the working lines. Given the success of our mirage-like masks, we were offered such a terrifying moment. The drones were probably used as reinforcing motivational tools if some of the stronger and more confident men thought they were suitable adversaries to their captors. The men we could see had broken wills. I could imagine that early on someone tried to rebel, and was swiftly shot by the Carpies, or if they were unlucky, overpowered the warden just to be subsumed by dozens of the insectoid drones. They had the particular advantage of extreme agility and blade-like legs. A swarm of those things could react to stimuli orders of magnitude more quickly than the best trained human. Running is the only option when facing those things.

With all that in the forefront of our awareness and before our eyes, we deliberately threaded between encampments. We came within a few meters of drones and Carpathian body cameras. I looked directly at them with a quality I could only describe as goading. The masks were irritatingly effective. I felt so stupid. When suspicious rovers wished to interrogate what they saw as malingering vagrants, we would grovel at their barrels in foreign tongues. The strategy of stoking the captor's egos was comprehensively efficient. We wailed in the shadows at their feet; dirt on our faces and crusted over-clothes. By making ourselves pathetic in the eyes of the few rovers we encountered, the offense of wasting bullets on dregs like us was too great for a prideful marauder. However, Ben and I agreed that trying to limp through the main blockade in

the wall, north of God's Canvas, was too risky a venture. It took minimal effort to maintain the fine masking of Mars on both our faces, but that many eyes all at once with that much firepower was too daunting a hurdle. Therefore, we opted to find the most insulated section of wall barring our travel northwest and break it. Some enlightened academic would have shed tears on account of plowing through such an ancient structure. But that man could go die in a hole in the desert. The preservation of history and civilization carried utility only so far that there were free peoples to enjoy them. Elsewise, they would be mere monuments to sustained oppression.

We sprinted westward after demolishing a solitary section of the old city wall. The clouds of smoke and debris were not as large as some of the previous explosions, but a well-timed inspection or rove would have entrapped us. We ran as fast as we could. Benjamin's height resulted in a gate larger than my own. However, as I was the one with all defensive and offensive prowess, he would regularly gain distance between intersections of wreckage and warehousing then stop abruptly, hugging a sheet-rock face and wait for me to catch up. I hadn't been that far to the northwest in the industrial district. Even the structures that had miraculously remained unscathed from the bombardment were blighted and unsightly. Occupying forces were nowhere around the plain metal siding containers which were connected like building blocks and gutted to house dyes and other tools for production. Any sane person might have rightfully assessed that there was nothing of value in the parts of Barabbas that bled into the then abandoned shacks of tin and poorly printed walls. We ended up taking a northern route to bypass the camps for all the same reasons of dodging the main gates.

Eventually we made it a place where the buildings just stopped. Benjamin pointed in the direction of a road a little south of us and remarked that the desert leading to the steep gradient hill-country on which the sands had not yet encroached was the place of the disguised entrance.

Before we took the leap into the desert alone, I considered an extension of Ben's concept of a mirage with Mars. I shrouded us with a generous overhead and lateral net of Mars in thin applications. Being shown successful, that success would be a necessity in the unhindered vision of open land without buildings to obstruct lines of sight, especially for airborne surveillance drones.

Heat and sand streams were less of a hindrance as I would have thought given that a liberal use of Mars within our shroud. Convoys of speeding vehicles raced along roads that converged into the one that we followed at a safe distance from the roadside. About half an hour out of Barabbas we came to the banks of the river Jordan. In the unabated heat all the waters shriveled into a meager creek lined by shallow dark banks. Crossing it felt like departing the jaws of hell and entering a pure wilderness. It was a foolish inkling, because on the other side of the hill country topped with fields of olives and other hardy crops were other towns and settlements that were just as subjugated by the Carpathians. I don't think I ever really questioned if some of the SLN would have held up much better in some other cities. If the bombardments there were not as severe, then it was certainly possible. It wasn't my problem at the moment, and I couldn't let myself get further sidetracked in my burgeoning pangs of altruism. All the people I needed to fear walking this Earth were in Barabbas, off of its coast, and in eastern Europe. Instruments of power will inevitably seek out ways to consolidate more power in whatever forms that may be.

To the average person caught in the struggle, there is nothing you could do. Once the centers of power become too vast and centralized, guarded by immense technological and capital superiority, there comes a point of no return in which no amount of countervailing force can compete without similar advantages. Mechanisms of power accumulation and hierarchical

organization are recursively reinforcing. After the threshold of citizen non-compete has been passed, when the state can reasonably not be challenged by its disenfranchised public, the only relief must come from an outside power of greater resources and manning. However, the paradox arises when the regime of relief becomes the new ruler. The cycle can only continue for as long as hierarchical powers which constitute the state facilitate the creation of the state. Even at the end of the world, if one man gets up from the ashes and is perceived as selfishly bigger than the others, then the conditions of the state will arise. Only the free association of equals can break the cycle. Is that what you want, Abbe? Is that the moral of all of your stories? Is that way you made me?

By midnight we arrived at an outcropping of large, jagged rocks protruding from the hill face. We were maybe half a kilometer from the main road going higher to the cities past the ridge line. There were several dug-in tracks breaking off which fed to that general location. Above the rocks was an impressive fence surrounding the trees which were assembled in neat beds and rows all the way up to the many peaks. Benjamin placed a hand on one of rocks poking out to brace his weight as he lounged.

“This is it.” He said without any elaboration.

“Ok? I know there has to be more to that. Just tell me!” I had grown short from the day in the direct heat, living in my own head and arguing between my sophistry and dialectics.

“It’s beneath us. With the right signal coming from an implant, it would have opened before our arrival. Without one you’ll have to brute force it.” Ben stomped his left foot twice to show me where the heart of the entrance had been.

“What am I dealing with?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a meter of steel or more. There might be some SLN military survivors down there. But since none of the real weapons were fired off, I’d suspect that nobody with high enough access would be down there.”

“Makes sense to me. Alright, stand way back. I’m going to put a lot behind this.” I said while drawing my arms in a wide stance. It was most likely unnecessary but going through the motions helped make the use of Mars like that more intuitive. I found my book in the library city in broad daylight and looked at the winding street with shelves hidden behind the contrast of the light. I plunged two spade-like appendages, one per each arm, as hard as I could into the rock-filled sand and dirt. Maybe a meter in, I sensed that I had penetrated something far stronger than the above earth. That was it. I flexed my back to angle a heaving motion which scooped up a house full of dirt and material.

“Yes sir, that is it.” Benjamin nodded his head. The hole I made was the mouth of a long ramp inside of a tunnel pouring in deeper than the sunlight would reach. Benjamin was confident of his mental map when confronted with forking hallways. There was nobody in the facilities except for the bodies of a few who had taken their own lives by gunshot or poison. A month of cold death transformed laboratories and some military bunkers into catacombs. Ben would take us to a new door and knock his foremost knuckle and I would rip it off the frame. We passed through an endless series of branching halls and auditoriums. Some lights worked and had switches that were easy to find. In the cases where neither of us cared to search for an actuator, we just carried on in the dark hoping that the next room would be more cooperative. I noticed some of the warehousing had stored jets mid-assembly of different origin and ordinance casted aside randomly that created barriers to through-flow of the space. Eventually, Ben knocked on a hangar door and didn’t move out of my way. He solemnly said to me: “Calaban, the bomb is

behind this. I don't know what you've got planned, but we can't trifle with the housing or mounting gear."

"You think all this place can be good for is a museum?" I asked hardily.

"I'm just letting you know the truth. It might be for the best to go down with the ship, right? Detonate everything so no one else can get their holds on the cache."

"Benjamin, get out of the way." I gently pushed the man much taller than myself behind me so that I wouldn't worry about him getting hurt. The hangar door folded like a piece of paper, and I walked into the cavernous space overlooking countless warheads organized with a maddening attention to detail. "Oh my god, Benjamin. So many. What were they thinking?" I was speechless and looked to Heladiv for answers, but I could see his monumental shame.

"We spent years building them. There are hundreds. This is what they all want. An arsenal to never be challenged."

"Fuck."

"Yeah. This is why they all died. All those kids burned. My people were castrated for this."

"Ben, I thought there was only one. I planned on only one. Do you know what I could do with all this?"

"Calaban, don't. Don't go back."

"Benjamin, I can end all of this. I can stop the Americans at the gates, and I can break the Carpathian Bloc from waging war." I stretched out my hands in the direction of the first row of missiles and said to Ben: "This to the coast. This row will prevent escalation." I shot a cloud of Mars to cover the row of missiles. I concentrated the density of the cloud and held the image of the Mediterranean Sea in prominence in my mind. "I can do this." I said and then exhaled. When

the multitude vanished, the number had been so great that the air snatched away shocked the atmospheric pressure in the storeroom. I couldn't speak for Benjamin, but I felt my diaphragm waiver for a second. "That should be it for the Americans."

"You teleported them?" He asked with some hesitancy.

"I sent them to the sea. With that many bombs, one is bound to hit their fleet." I walked over the next few rows and repeated the invocation of Mars. The rest of these will be sent to the bases back in Carpathia. I think I might even deliver some to the capital. That will probably be the only way to stop the aggression from the source."

"You would slaughter your own people?"

"Somehow, they don't feel like my people now. I can't say they ever did, beyond a good paycheck. What is real is that the people who make the decisions to bankroll invasions like this will only bankroll more. Two birds with stone." I exhaled and the next row disappeared leaving us gasping for oxygen.

Chapter Fifteen

The Most Dangerous Commercials On Semi Constructive Criticism

The last of missiles were sent off to flatten the capitals of each Carpathian state. No words were exchanged between Heladiv and myself. I don't think any were necessary for he wanted the same outcome as I did. The Carpathian Bloc had been the aggressive warmongers in the last decade, post the retraction of the US, Russia, and China. Thousands of lives gone, but it was a mercy to spare millions. Thankfully, my belligerency in tearing holes through the passageways allowed atmospheric stabilization after the teleporting trick sucked enough air to choke an army out of the cache. We both stood there in the ominously dark and hollowed out weapons bay in silence until the only sounds were of our wavering breathing. I told Benjamin to wait in or near the facility; that I had to clean up the mess in the city. He didn't vocalize any objections, but I doubted that he was actually receptive. I figured that he was going to be dwelling on the act of enlightened genocide I had just committed to which he was an accomplice. Although, if any blood was being poured onto hands, they were mine. Ben most likely concluded that his were partially stained beyond what he previously accepted as his part in making the bombs a reality.

I was at least a full head shorter than Ben, which made our torsos fit nicely when I embraced him and held on tight. He didn't resist. I told him that I was sorry for the last time and that this was it. Benjamin had lived the last ten years with a pit of despair strangling his

conscience for contributing to the lunacy; working out how bad it was actually going to end up for everybody. Just when he thought he could be free, everything was taken from him. And only moments earlier he witnessed the kind of atrocity he had wished to prevent. I was truly sorry. Following the cold drafts of wind was an incredibly useful tactic for gaining my bearings in search of the correct path to exit the serpentine halls interspersed with warehouses. When I ascended the slope to the original gash I left in the metal skin beneath the dirt, I decided to hell with subterfuge. I was going to crash every drone I caught above my head, and I was going to rend the rest of the hydra's heads now that I had gutted its vitals. However, pressed my conscience had been, there was an undeniable pride and foolhardiness that came from self-actualization in the magnitude I was experiencing. So, confidently pushing through the sand westward was not an issue in the morning sun.

I stuck to the centerline of the main road and its shoddy asphalt, half-obscured by sand for most of its length, to reach Barabbas by the direct route. I didn't waste effort in the shroud and welcomed any surveillance. The airspace above the city was indeed highly active, likely due to the jolt of freshly shaken existentialism in the invader zeitgeist which brought on havoc. It was a new paradigm which stated that they were now the center of the Carpathian military might. They had been cut off from the homeland, not by loss of nation and state, but by cessation of command. I could have only dreamt of the reaction of the occupation force commander when they got the news that not only had all the bases been destroyed in such a novel manner to reveal that someone must have beaten them to the grand prize, but that all their legislative leadership was terminated. A fifth column at the end of an over extended table. A chimpanzee surviving in the den of leopards. I have become all of the above.

Some airborne drones began flying into the desert, on their way to the close cities, with greater frequency. The first one that wandered close to the main road, several kilometers east of Barabbas, was unlucky. I remembered Abbe. Instinctively, a tendril snapped to the drone maybe a hundred meters in the sky, at which point I felt the propulsion of the machine tug and tug. I wound up like a ball pitcher and flung it back to the city at a preposterous velocity. I was too far away to see exactly the damage it caused beyond an explosion of sorts. I did find it remorseful that the distance made accurate estimates impractical. What was certain was that the act of defiance would draw the surplus ire from the free occupation units looking for ways to peel away the catharsis of such a devastating loss. When details in the building started becoming discernible, that was when they fired their first shots in retaliation. I gave no heed to the snipers and artillery coming from the west. I manifested an impressively robust barrier as I continued my march which handily blocked all bullets and shells. Any direct hit, aimed right down the center of my silhouette, would be useless. Between volleys I suspected that I had agitated their resolve due rounds making contact at increasingly erratic angles. The best shell impact was one that exploded on the grounds on a side that I was not covering. The blast of sand and heat knocked me out step and brought me a pleasant reminder that I wasn't invincible.

Within a kilometer of the surrogate camps at the eastern flank of Barabbas a few vehicles and one mech were spinning up sand while speeding out to me for what I guessed was a frontal assault. As soon as the first came into a manageable reach, I grabbed it with Mars and used it to sweep its partner into a dance of flips in which both cars repeatedly crushed each other. Behemoth cannon fire was shot from the mech gliding along the main road. The explosions would have cratered goddamned bunkers. I saw the event of a single giant enemy as a rare opportunity to experiment freely and explore whatever dumb and cartoonish things I could

imagine. After the pilot had executed another failed round of cannon fire, I thought to cast a pool of Mars's cloud around my feet and simulated the sensation of jumping with all the might my legs could provide. Upon enacting my simulacra, I jumped with the cloud at my feet expanding and gaining height to form a column which leaned forward at a linear rate of height gained. I towered above the dunes and could see into the city, and to my surprise I saw several fires burning taller and taller. I thought that perhaps some of the captive locals took some initiative in a resistance. With each fire I saw consume an empty building or trafficked intersection, I grew hopeful. The column of blue smoke collapsed which positioned me on the faceplate of the mech's chest. I couldn't see inside of the paneling which were the monitor screens for the pilot, but I knew he or she was panicking by the flailing of its arms. I put my forehead to the panel square in the center to ensure that the pilot could see me as I duplicated the column trick and pushed both of us dozens of meters into the sky. I let him go as we leaned over one of the primary fencing and walls of the surrogate camps. The impact totally destroyed the capacity of the metal giant to move and most likely killed the pilot. Rifle fire continued but with less concentration. Some Carpathian had probably been pulled away to combat resurgent forces if they existed. Regardless, I had made it back to the city in the heat of battle.

My feet planted firmly on the ground, and I continued to reduce the barriers of the surrogate camps to nothing but trash as more riflemen and mechs encircled the intersections of the industrial sector. I made the judgment call to hope for the best that the locals had the good sense to steer clear of whatever firefight would materialize before me. I didn't bother trying to count all the Carpathian forces which were trying to take my head. Instead, I singled out the one vehicle parked safely in the middle of the narrow street several dozen meters away and targeted it for procurement. I wasn't going to let myself be caught by surprise from any direction of

assault. I channeled Mars to levitate the mangled mech which I dropped onto the camp wall and hurled it laterally into the frontline of riflemen and the feet pads of the other mechs present. I felt the pitch reverberate through the cloud like a snapping elasticity. I heard their screams as the riflemen who were clipped later in the strike had a split second to watch their buddies' and comrades' limbs be torn from their torsos bursting from the absurd force of jagged metal impacting insufficiently armored flesh. A spray of blood splashed onto the bases of the adjacent structures and the remaining forces at the intersection. The chorus of shouting and screaming evolved with the clanging of metal and concrete. I tried not to focus on the individual. I knew I had to distance myself from the empathy of individuals. Utility was the ethos of my wrath.

In one more sweeping blow, I raked Mars to catch the remaining combatants from the opposite direction of the first attack in an effort to slam the collection of men and their playthings into a building facade as one cataclysmic homunculus. The mass of the soldiers, convoys, and mechs colliding into the slate structures was enough to bulldoze the block on the receiving end. I chose to run through the thick debris cloud toward the singled-out car. My loose end was Neon and his temple. In the chaos that gripped Barabbas like a snake's head arching to bite one last time after severance, I doubted that Neon would have chosen to run to one of the safehouses in the leafy-green, southeastern residential district. His patronage was due to the exilarches he kept away in the dilapidated hotel to the south. I snapped the door open and climbed up to the cab and held the ignition button to start. The quiet hum from the rear motor-generator set subtly began to vibrate the elevated truck frame and was followed by illumination of the display consoles. A Carpathian auto-nav voice had flatly read out system conditions and standards and requested directives. I didn't want to fiddle with AI banter with more and more guns heading my way, and that included the guys I just hit pretty hard. I imagined that they

would come back with a vengeance after they regained balance and composure. I swiped through the display screens until I found the map projection of the city and scrolled down to set my destination in the ballpark of the hotel. I couldn't be so sure of its true easting and northings, but I could get close.

The car was slow to build up speed due to the AI not quite comprehending the urgency of a get-away. The manufacturers leveraged the decades of trial and error to perfect the AI's ability to preserve the lives of its passengers and self to great effect. Being so far north in the city, the streets were significantly in better conditions than those of the southern slums in the old city. The car wouldn't have a digital aneurysm trying to swerve around potholes bigger than itself in the north. However, the AI probably had received sensory input from the commotion swelling in the streets. Lumbering giants emerged from the rubble behind me with surviving men scrambling about like rats after the light flicked on in the kitchen. The car accelerated as I watched out the rear window to see those battered men come to terms of what just happened to them. Finally, one of the pilots gathered enough clarity to retaliate and shoot at my car. Rather, the car I just commandeered. Out of five rounds fired: two were aimed too low and hit the recently repaired pavement tailing me, two overshot the car and hit the block of buildings to the north which impetuously crumbled in the impact, the last shot cut a bore in the passenger side of the car roof. It happened so quickly that the metal and glass ripped off of the vehicle matched the speed of lift the collision forced from the car. The rear of the vehicle was pulled off of the road and enabled it to experience a second of freefall. I swiped through the display console for some override option for a little mutiny. I would be damned if I let a car kill me.

Rifle fire had echoed from all corners of the city as I squeezed every ounce of power out of the motor. The auto-nav was still sending control signals to the acceleration pedal and steering

wheel which I felt on my end like punching in tar. The car was trying to fight back and navigate at responsible speeds and temperament. All the while, hordes of excessive soldiers not burdened by suppression of revolt to captivity were aggregating in my wake. Ice age coming; throw them in the fire. I spotted drones flying toward the car from the west, and I wagered to myself if they were going to open fire with bullets or drop bombs. Inconveniently, the answer was both.

Through the newly furnished sunroof, I manifested Mars as a crescent-shaped shield to protect us from the bullets, but it was horribly worthless in fending off the blast from the ballistics slamming into the frail scenery. I morphed the shield into a pike and extended it at a forward angle and the necessary height to clipped one of the drone wings before it zoomed by. It connected to the hull of the bastard, but also was struck by a shell in the process. The combined torrent of forces was dispersed as Mars dissociated into a nebulous cloud of gas that looked to be a halo for the exploding drone frame. Who knew how many were trailing me, and I didn't much care to take the time to count?

As I broke onto God's Canvas for what I hoped would be the last time, I made out group after group of bloody fighting between Levantine men and women against darkly armored Carpathians. The numbers in each group were in favor of the Levantine, but the machinery and malice were in favor of the invaders. At which point, the Carpathians were simply fighting on instinctively against a slave rebellion. The impetus for invading had been stolen from the leadership, and the bureaucratic heart of the homeland had been stomped out along with all possible reinforcements. I saw it all in every variation in each of the tiny battles waging in and out of the street corners lining the main boulevard. The spectrum ran from pure slaughter of any mobile person not wearing a uniform to liberated men raping Carpathian wardens with rifle barrels and wooden poles. I was lucky that the mayhem thriving in the street was enough to

pinch off a couple pursues at a time. One could project that meagerly armed and malnourished revolutionaries would pose easier targets for subjugation versus a freak in a half-gone car-thing that can deflect most of their bullets. And so, my joyride south to kingdom come hastened. That is until the auto-nav relayed that my trip had an estimated remainder travel time of two measly minutes. I had no time to brake or dodge the mech asshole that glided out from a side street. My pre-digested car rammed into the right hydraulically-powered leg of the giant which tore the leg out from under it while also jettisoning me through the windscreen. My intuitive command of Mars must have developed a great deal, because I didn't have to conjure an image or abstraction for a cloud cushion to wrap around my body before I hit the pavement with inertial whiplash. The mech twisted about and rotated its arms to propel itself back to a defensible position.

“Cal!” I heard Squid's call. I sat up after feeling satisfied that I had come out unscathed from the crash. “Cal! What the fuck are you doing?” Squid was running to my aid while providing cover, enabling me to keep running.

“Where's Neon?” Squid looked at me stupefied that I'd ask such a self-evident question.

“Down the street? We got word that the Carpies got their shit pushed in somehow. Like, all these bastards got cut off or something. Was that you?”

“Something like that.” Squid was visibly taken aback.

“Cal, where's Rom and the guys? What happened to you?” He asked with genuine interest in their wellbeing.

“They died on the job.” I didn't see the use of wiggling my way out of an awkward conversation about bringing rightful justice. “Where's the hotel from here?” I stopped running which prompted Squid to mimic.

“It's a block to the southwest. Goddammit, Cal what did you do?” I turned to the wrecked car and mangled mech preparing to shoot us. More of Neon's men were on the periphery looking pleasantly occupied with the warzone at the same time more Carpathian soldiers and scuttling drones zig-zagged around the broken pavement. I flooded God's Canvas northward to engross the drones, mech, car, etc. with a densifying aura. Squid pointed his gun at me as said: “You fucking monster. What did you do to Rom and Bacchus?” He left out Amir, but that was beside the point given that the concept of lost brothers in arms stirred some humanity in his gangly body.

“I'd run if I were you.” I exhaled and felt the wisp of hot air course over my arm hair as it had been sucked into the new vacancy on the street. Squid lowered his gun as he was stuck by a sight that no rational person could have anticipated. I looked up at my handiwork of frozen tortured bodies, small robots, the eaten car, and the one-legged mech suite plummeting from at least a hundred meters above the block which Squid had explained was home to the hotel of zealots. All of Neon's men and randomly engaged civil factions paused their exchanges to bear witness to some of the worst fates deemed for a man. I could see from the ground, some of the soldiers had discarded their helmets and were violently clawing at their necks just before becoming one with the metal and concrete. I remembered the blast from the rod of gods that hit the school in front of my face during the bombardment. I remembered the unbelievable flash of heat and light, and I remembered how the ground shook. All of that was present at the moment of impact for the bodies I casted into the air.

Squid was brought down like everybody else. But I picked up the pace once again, telling myself that I had to exterminate the last of them. We were all blinded by the gray and brown dust cloud from the structural implosion. My ears were ringing, but that didn't prevent the sound of

blood pulsing from breaking into the foreground of my awareness at the same time as a surge of raging pain from my left arm. I couldn't see, but investigation with my right hand revealed that my left was gone from the humerus down. I was losing blood like a madman until I damned the stump with a thick application of Mars. I was only coming to terms with the pain when I felt a second shot rip through my left leg.

“Fuck! Fuck! Shit!” I still had the leg but could only scream. I swung out some abstracted enemy with what I wished to be an infinitely thin blade of Mars. It sliced through the dust cloud, and I heard the last gasp of several men. The evidence of my cut vanished when the dust cloud filled in the gap. I didn't think that I got them all, but I didn't want to find out. “Shit, shit, shit, fuck!” Even with Mars' miraculous healing, I was in a bad way. I limped closer and figured I had chosen the correct direction as I heard frantic barking grow louder. The dust was beginning to settle, and the sun refracted across all surfaces and shards of dirt to give the air around us still in the world of the living a red hue.

“Good job, my friend.” I knew that voice. “Let's get this unbearable dust out of the way.” The monolithic cloud evaporated. Abbe was walking around the debris, draped in a ragged black cloak, and holding an alive Neon by the lapel of a very garish blue blazer. The dogs, Gaius and Malus, were circling around the arrested Neon being dragged and whooping and nipping at the blood red air like teething pups. They wanted to protect their master but were incapable of defying the primal dominance that Abbe emanated.

“Calaban! You did it!” Neon was crippled but outwardly manic. He didn't fight against Abbe who handled him like a twig, even though such a fight would be just as one sided. “Sage, my sage!” Neon trembled, holding back the urge to, at once, touch his god and not defile him with that which was profane.

“This is what you want, right? You want his life?” Abbe asked me with a blank expression on his ghastly face. His stone-like skin clung to his bones so tight it looked like it would rupture at any moment. But something was different for me at that instant. I could more clearly see a prominent layer of blue aura cover his body with greater concentration than before. “Oh, don’t worry, my friend. The rest are dead. I pulled this one out for you to take personally.”

“Ea, Lord, is this the time of deliverance?” Neon begged.

“What are you?” I asked in a hushed voice. I knew that he either could hear me or know my thoughts. I couldn’t run if I wanted to.

“Oh, be quiet. Son, you are insufferable.” Abbe jeered at Neon groveling at his hand. The dogs felt the spike in tension coming from Abbe and widened their circle path. “What am I?” Abbe laughed by stretching his inelastic skin and inflected his cheeks which contorted below his blackened eyes. “Boy, I’m just a romantic. I fell in love with an idea so long ago, and I just couldn’t let it go.”

“I’m not joking!”

“Ea, my sage, take me to your grassland, and deliver our countrymen. Give us back our land!” Neon’s groveling moved Abbe who stuttered in his walk and took pause to look confusingly at the man.

“You want to know what I am?” Abbe’s expression transformed into an expression of the worst and deepest hate I thought possible. “I am the trunk of a very old tree which tried many times to sprout fruit bearing limbs. And nearly every time the limbs would be full of rot and mites. The only fruit they ever produced was like this animal.” He looked terribly disgusted as if he were nose deep in a putrid mass of fermenting dregs.

“Like Omari?” I almost hesitated to raise that guy's name. I knew nearly nothing on the subject.

“Yes. Sadly, I’ve had nothing but failures like Omari for longer than I’d like to admit. But I think this old trunk has grown tall enough to catch the sunlight to grow the right little limbs.” Abbe gestured to me. “Right now, you and your brothers and sisters are so close to bringing me to the knee of my dearest love.”

“That bitch that got married off in your story? Yeah, I still recall, you ugly fuck.” Mars hadn’t fully plugged my leg wound or controlled the bleeding from my left stump of an arm. Abbe chuckled gravely and lowered Neon to the pavement without loosening his grip

“I lost Umme long before words were written on clay, son. The love I’ve chased all this time is a world in which no more Ummes or Abbe, or Eas could be created. And, my friend, I truly think you’ve helped attain that world. It's being born, just now, as the old world lies on its deathbed.”

“What have you done?”

“Ea, forgive me for such disgraceful work, but we had to keep our flame alive somehow,” Abbe was furious with that interruption and rebutted to me:

“I made enough of your kind, my horrible children, to cleanse every land from states and coercion. Now, Calaban, are you going to kill this man? I really thought this would have been just the gift you wanted as reward.” Abbe thinned out his blue veil and condensed a blade-shaped object out of his free hand.

“Not exactly the reward I’ve been looking for, sir.” I imitated Abbe’s veil and enveloped myself in a layer of Mars as thin as I could manage in my condition.

“Well, my friend Calaban, it does sadden me to inform you that this is as much as I can give.” He pulled back to impale Neon. A mental abstraction of a second layer of Mars floating at maybe a few millimeters above the first. I had less than a second to focus on that image and make it a reality. I densified that second layer and exhaled.

I was gone from the world. I had hoped that the primary veil would act like a pressurized suit. It worked. I don't know how long it lasted, but I saw something in place between the jump point and re-entry. Space was the wrong word or idea. It was like an inward revolving scape of everything outside. I saw everything on the periphery from all angles meld to the centerline of vision, and then blossom out from every point. It was wondrous and frightening at the same time. But something else. Something more was in the scape. I felt something there; something huge and lumbering over everything. It had beady eyes. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it. It wasn't anywhere in the constant turbulent flow of visual stimuli. It felt as timeless as my period of paralyzed captivity with Abbe.

I erupted on the other side within Abbe's open gate, mid-extension to cut down Neon. I lost all focus to maintain my veil after the shock of returning from that place. But it worked. I quickly took out my knife from its hard leather sheath and dug it as hard and as fast as I could between Abbe's ribs and carved left to right. His eyes still held no light or reflection. The blue glow from his haze faded and the red ambiance from refracted light on blood-mingled dust swallowed the scene.

“I didn't know you could do that,” Abbe squeezed out the words breathlessly.

“Ea!” Neon was free from Abbe's grip and fell on his tailbone. Gaius and Malus were no longer held back from the dominating aura of Abbe. The pair immediately jumped and gashed the right side of my neck and the healing wound on my back. Blood loss had slowed me down

considerably, but I still tried to swing out to strike the animals. All three of them. I missed the dogs, but I got Neon.

“That was pretty good.” Abbe smiled as he staggered down to his knees, my right hand still firmly on the blade. The dogs could have my head, but I wouldn’t let go of that knife. I watched as every inch of his veil evaporated. “You have been my most beautiful son.” Where the haze faded, his skin turned to hard scale and calcified. Malus took another run at my neck. I had lost too much blood by that point to feel it. I fell to my left side. I think I dozed in and out a couple times. The dogs eventually laid on top of their master’s crushed legs. A beautiful naked woman was lounging next to Abbe as he hunched over. She seemed familiar for some reason. She used one arm to cover her chest and the other to hold Abbe. She looked at me and smiled as she rested her head on his shoulder. I felt that thing lumbering over everything from all places just watching with beady, massive eyes.

Here I’m alive. Everything all of the time.