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by
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Part 1

Chapter I

An Unexpected Circumstance

The lights of the imposing skyscrapers furiously peeped through the impenetrable, filled with indomitable vice rainy blackness. The suppressed din of never-receding distorted music and environmental blank noise coming from the centre of Orton City was always present during the night hours, the live clamour never dying. The moon was futilely trying to make its way through the unyielding veil but was entirely shadowed out by the semi-dark clouds that were accompanied by an almost non-existent array of smoke hinting of a tamed over-industrialized feverish world. There was a rich variety of fleeting colours over the horizon that repeatedly merged together as if in an abstract nonsensical dream. The source of that spectacle of lights came from the so-called Heart of Orton, where the cosmopolitan populaces of the ostentatious highlife constantly gathered at the most luxurious and decadent parts of the city. The artificial colourful beams unceasingly shimmered beyond the skyline.

The night was yet again set in motion and vainness was being unfolded in its entirety, and somewhere along the dark crevices of 55th Avenue a silent and peculiar figure stood still, ruthless in its observatory acuteness. The autumn rain was growing heavy and the contrastingly bright lights of the many overhung buildings were reflected onto every drop in their full glimmer, creating a real illusory and breathtaking night show. The figure was part of it, but its attention was focused on something else—something that wasn't pre-planned, which had become a fairly rare occurrence in most aspects of his life nowadays.

And it so happened that a powerful roar was suddenly heard as if coming out of the frothing maw of a raving lunatic gnashing at his own desiccated flesh: it was the sound of a low-depth forcing engine.

Only a handful in the city could afford this particular model, and naturally almost everyone in Orton was aware of who exactly had the means of coming into possession of it—everyone raised in Orton knew who were the biggest clans that ruled the city, and if one asked them about their dealings, about how they'd accrued their immense fortunes, they'd probably respond with the only viable answer: hornsern crystals.

Since the mid-50s hornsern crystals had been an extremely efficient and indispensable for almost every industry, city and household energy source. When their full potential was harnessed for the first time, they were proven to be a powerful and highly sustainable fusion energy source, as only several grams of concentrated material could power up to 125 households on average for an entire week. As a turning-point event and a scientific discovery of the century (and probably of the millennium), the hornsern fusion energy had quickly come to be associated and equated with unrestrained political power and influence.

Thanks to the established monopoly on the grind-and-thresh processing industry of hornsern crystals the three clans, who held exclusive state rights for their management and distribution, had become one of the most unreachable and invincible syndicates not only in Orton, but in the whole North American Domain. Each of them operated their own independent business endeavours, and at the same time headed and were majority shareholders in one of the biggest investment management megacorporations in the world. Being among the first to sense the potential of the promising lucrative product, in no time did they succeed in turning it into their most dreadful joint tool for rule and power, every clan having its own equal share of profits from their grind-and-thresh processing facilities of the precious substance.

Unofficially, Orton was divided into three districts: Sundan, controlled by the McCarter clan; Meakton, respectively a territory

belonging to the Chopheads clan; and Urridge—dominion of the Hemingswhale clan. Each district had its own unwritten laws by which all underground players had to abide—laws set by the three clans which, together, formed a triumvirate alliance known as the Grouzers.

It could be said that the city was almost entirely corrupt to the bone—from the lowest tiers of local executive enforcement to the highest ones of state judiciary authority. All attempts against the Grouzers, either legal or illegal, were ultimately futile, and even by some sheer luck someone got close enough to rustling the central government apparatus by making too much noise, they ended up missing with their digital identity erased from the global registry list.

The Grouzers were known not only for their monopolistic business practices and sway over every facet of the city’s industrial, administrative, and public life, but as well as for their unconventional methods of imposing tyrannical authority upon the more rebellious areas of the city. All local and most major state media outlets were owned by them and they rarely, if ever, brought up the names of the people running them, always keeping their public image to a bare incognito minimum.

“Agent B75, identification number 780901. Permission for location update to Headquarters. Main target within range. Location update sent. Request responding units, disband prompt protocols.”

Waiting, Braduer Collins decided not to let the auspicious moment go to waste while he studiously observed at a distance the dismounting passengers face by face who had just arrived with a blast and thunder. The area was mostly calm, the buildings around mingled with secretive darkness, the only light coming from the neon streetlights that poured over the wet sidewalks an arctic-cold blue hue. There were no other signs of activity except for the occasional passers-by here and there.

He found himself standing atop a gold mine—a circumstance he could never have anticipated. It was as if everything were set up by the opportune hand of fate: he was in the right place, at the right time, no in-between. Watching the subjects, he hoped to see

that one face which had become his primary cause of much trouble and hassle since his appointment in the investigating team consisting of four other independently working Agents on the “Harthongate” case, the target being no other but Shunningan himself—one of the Grouzer members and the “Chopheads” clan boss that controlled the Meakton District.

Despite his innate and trained patience, every second Collins grew more and more uneasy. This time it was different, he thought, and the circumstances permitted a reasonable deviation.

The front seemed clear. At least for now.

Being in a convenient observational position within the concealing alleyway between two half-dead flats, his readiness to act and finish the job once and for all couldn't have come at a more perfect moment when the long-awaited target finally showed up. Nay, it was *too* perfect—the timing, the setting—everything, and soon he was beginning to think that something had probably gone wrong from the start; he felt duped.

The “Rickman” Hotel on 55th Avenue wasn't among the most impressive hotels in the city, at least on the outside, but that was not the initial goal the owners had in mind when they decided to start the project. Its true appeal lay in being a reputable ground for secret meetings and gatherings between the local big shots, available any time of the day with customizable preferences, as the hotel was known for offering exclusive services to big fishes of the wide criminal underworld which, in turn, allowed the owners to form long-lasting relationships with them and sometimes even partake in their front business endeavours. The hotel's facilitation was immune to any kind of police surveillance, having established strict and reliable security measures and simple, but ingenious, verification techniques.

Shunningan was a well-known business side-partner of the owners, but for some reason he seldom used their services; the mutual trust between them had been unquestionable and unshakeable for quite some time now, though.

With a brief and heavy gait the 350-pound Shunningan slowly and staggeringly came out of the aeromobile, inaudibly

murmuring something under his nose as was his habit. He was in an ostentatious bourgeoisie dark-blue velvet suit with a prominent scarlet shirt, tie-free and with an unbuttoned collar, wearing elegant, fashionable boots of crocodile skin that, when wet, glittered with a strong contrast. Accompanied by two young girls at his sides, the corpulent man headed straight for the entrance with an unreflecting umbrella under his arm; two bodyguards with hardened faces followed him.

They should've arrived by now, Collins thought with an acerbic strain as he watched them getting in.

“I’m going inside,” he said after a while, holding his interactive high-frequency radio transmitter up to his mouth.

Hastily turning off the device, he left his vantage spot.

Along the brightly lit corridors of the Police Department a certain inescapable sense of rushed movement was always tangibly present in the air, materialized by the unceasing trotting of multiplying metal, polycarbonate-polished soles. Men and women, most of them in identical uniforms of highly resistant interglossed polyester black trousers and hard-sewn jackets, treaded hastily over the 15-centimetre-thick glass floor whose transparency could hardly be noticed—beneath it another floor was appended to it which was lit by an abundant ever-spreading aluminium-like whiteness from an unknown underground source. The pervasive rapid and irregular pace indicated that the Police Department’s usual work rhythm wasn’t disturbed, which was always how things ought to be in this line of duty.

It was 22:45 and the clamour of multitudinous bustling voices was just beginning to gather inertia for the approaching general night shift. The luminescent lights of the building shone with a snow-white tint across the matte walls so that one couldn’t tell apart day from night even if they looked through one of the side filtering windows alongside them.

At the end of one of the corridors a lively, squeaky woman's call was suddenly heard amid the racket, but it was almost immediately suppressed by it:

“Mike, wait! Hey! Mike!”

A tall, brown-haired middle-aged man spontaneously turned around, as if invisible hands were pulling at his shoulders. At first he had difficulties looking across and beyond the passing jutting crowd, but before long he was finally able to descry the jumping and hand-waving of a negligibly small figure at the opposite end of the corridor. He needed only a moment to recognize the beckoning to him person, after which he headed towards her with much pushing and bumping into others.

A girl wearing a dark-red leather jacket and uniform trousers, at the age of around 25-26, now stood before him. She had an attractive pale face, a slim, but athletic body, and she seemed to be in the peak of her youth. She also had long smooth blond hair, easily wavering at the slightest movement she made.

“Jesus Christ, Mike! Each passing day you get more sluggardly,” she said with a meek voice of slight reproach looking at him, a nascent smile on her face.

“I’m sorry, you see how crowded it is,” said the man on the sly with a somehow gloomy and dejected look. “One can barely hear his own thoughts. What’s the matter?”

“Heard something about that affair concerning Lester and Gloria,” she started with an enthusiastic expression, but quickly lowering down her voice before she was about to utter the two names. “I suspect that both have something contrived in their minds that I don’t fancy at all. Well, as of now it’s yet to be confirmed, you know, just rumours and all, but—”

“But they’re still rumours,” he interrupted her unexpectedly. “And rumours should be treated as such. Look, Amanda,” he started with a strained voice, evidently on the hurry, “I know you well enough and can tell right away that what you’re currently doing is overcomplicating things... like you usually tend to do. I understand your concern and to some extent even share it, but at some

point, when there's nothing else but the never-ending hearsay, you just have to let it go before it turns into an obsession. Trust me, I've been down that road many times."

After saying this he saw the apparent gradual change her face had undergone, having become less cheerful and even sombre. Around them the flock of people continued to ebb and flow from all sides, incessantly twittering back and forth, with the din increasing and entangling ever the more—some were talking on their iono-phone players, others were stopping at the infoposts giving verbal requests, and still others were engaged in a loud chit-chat while ambling in the direction of the elevators or helical escalators that were going to take them to one of the 26 Divisions or many other sub-Divisions all scattered throughout the 32-floor building.

He continued, realizing how harsh his words might have sounded, trying to make up for it:

"I think you only the best, Amanda, and I hope you know that. Didn't mean to sound rude."

He waited for her to say something, but in vain. Amanda only looked at him with an intent and fixed gaze, until he added:

"Okay, look, I'd gladly help you with that little 'investigation' of yours, but right now I have other more demanding things to do. But you have my word that if you happen to find something promising, then I'd gladly—"

"No, it's okay," she interrupted him tartly. "I understand you; I understand that it's too much to ask." She began to turn away from him, her eyes now looking elsewhere. "My shift's already ended and I see that yours has just begun. Don't want to detain you any longer, so see you tomorrow."

She had already turned her back to him without letting him finish what he had to say, heading towards the elevators with light steps until she completely disappeared out of sight.

The noise and activity around him continued as ever before. Everyone was now an indifferent black silhouette, indistinguishable and formless, like a haunting manifestation with no purpose. Every one of them was looking for their way out, towards the infinite and

unreckonable space of unacknowledged freedom that would never be attained. At that moment the whole building was reminiscent of a prison—prison of disjointed bodies and souls; it was suffocating, oppressive, and hostile.

As if already having long ago come to terms with that, he found himself staring fixedly at a random point, standing motionless amid an ongoing and unnoticed parallel world until something finally snapped him out of it and he began to slowly return to reality, walking back to where he'd come from without minding the many faceless people around him. He now remembered Amanda.

Chapter II

Whereabouts

Especially during the night, the monolithic “Rickman” Hotel stood out like a golden pearl amidst the murky and tremulous sea of concrete structures, the shining glistening lights of its façade marking a whole new different realm that contrasted with the nearby mundanity. Even though its exterior appeared simplistic when compared to the cosmopolitan outlook of other high-end venues, its persuasive humbleness, as well as its detached location was more than enough to serve its purpose as an exclusive hosting place.

As he walked towards the entrance, suddenly a brief, dull clink was heard. Turning around he saw that from the inner pocket of his old woollen overcoat his federal identification card had slipped off, on whose transparent glassy background with big digital and glowing blue letters that were now being dissolved back and forth by the rain could be read:

AGENT BRADUER SIMONT COLLINS
INTELLIGENCE DEPARTMENT, ORTON CITY
IN: 780901, AL: 5

Without turning his head around or making any rapid movements, he crouched, picking up his card from the wet asphalt as quickly as possible. Then, standing up, he looked around only to see that no one was presently watching or stalking him; the diminishing tipsy voices of some drunkards were heard not so far away from there, but soon even those died out.

He put his card back again. Before resuming his walk, he hastily pulled out his blaster together with a separate solid silencer after which he held it close to the gun’s muzzle; pressing and holding a small indentation on the metal tube, the silencer automatically fixed itself onto the weapon with a sharp magnetic clang.

Speeding off, he continued walking towards the entrance, until he finally stood before the hotel's conspicuous wooden Baroque double-door, abundantly varnished yet visibly worn; he waited with a pang of misgiving. No sooner had ten seconds passed when a sudden peeping sound was heard, followed by a metallic chirp. Another chirp, as if a closer one, peeped again: one of the wooden doors started to slowly open, but hardly had it unfolded several inches when it suddenly stopped short, being left ajar. From inside a faint mingled odour of a variety of cigarettes, alcohol and heavy perfume entered his wet nostrils; musical renditions could be faintly heard as well, soft piano and violin rhythms, probably from a sonata by some old, now largely forgotten composer.

From the open space between the two doors a playful eye was glancing at him—it was looking at him and scanning him from head to toes, making full bodily inspections. Collins could hardly discern the shape that was hiding in the dark space: only the peculiar and intimidating eye was visible, a canine eye, lit with dark fire and flickering behind the bushes and thickets ready to eagerly defend its territory. A hoarse, drained male voice then rasped:

“What’d you want? No vacancy! No outsider freaks!” the immersed in darkness face murmured rudely, without any signs of movement.

“I’m here on behalf of an important client of yours—Mr. de Véry,” answered Collins calmly. “I have an appointment with people he has dealings with. I’m already late, so don’t stall it.”

He was about to step in, but strangely enough, the big, almost three-metre-high door didn’t budge at all.

“Back off, freak!” shouted the voice abruptly; it carried a violent connotation. “Extra accommodations require pre-paid verifiers! Do you have one? I thought so! Now fuck off!”

Collins knew what the outcome of this situation was likely to be, and it was naturally foolish to think that he would be granted access just like that.

“What did you just say?” he said with a naïve but spiteful tone.

“You deaf? Don’t come here ever again, freak!” the voice shouted even more irritably, about to close the door.

“Listen,” began aggressively Collins, stopping it with his hand, “I don’t have time for this bullshit. You’ll be going down if you don’t let me in!”

After saying these words, no answer came from the other side; only a sensible heavy panting was audible which Collins thought was a sign of worry and alarm.

He was still standing in front of the doors, waiting patiently, assured of what he was doing. The eye was now gone.

Stepping over the threshold of the hotel, he now found himself standing in a medium-sized, almost dark room. As far as he could tell, it was completely naked—there was neither furniture, nor any electronics. The door behind him through which he had entered a moment ago closed automatically with an inaudible clash, and after the same thing was repeated, he saw that it was actually another door—an inner, sliding one—that was made of metal and which had now double-sealed the place.

They’ve reinforced their security measures, he thought, remembering the last time he visited it.

There was no trace of the man with whom he’d just spoken: he was left all by himself in this strange, engulfed by darkness space. The pleasant orchestra music could be still heard, this time louder and coming from somewhere ahead. A lightning indicator before him went on; he stepped forth, opened the lobby door until a bright, almost blinding light began to protrude from inside.

The enormous and grandiose hall that was revealed seemed to him surprisingly changed, too: during his last visit there (which was more than a year ago) the interior had nothing in common with the present design, completely differing by all standards—from trite, unimpressive and ordinary the lobby-saloon had undergone a complete transformation, turning into an aristocratic and royal dwelling place. There were no signs of the old furniture—instead a genuine Neo-Gothic, Victorian one was placed everywhere, which was more than what the owners could afford; the floor was entirely

replaced as well, now made of marble. The live soft classical tunes could now be heard clearly and enchantingly; paintings were hung everywhere on the walls, mostly of the late-Renaissance and Romanticism era, little free space being left between them—full of splendour pieces of art that one could not help but marvel at for hours, indulging in their exceptional artisan mastery and beauty. Several big glimmering chandeliers stretched down heavily from the tall ceiling and their mild light met with the overshadowed dimness below.

Collins was left overly impressed at the sight of the articulate ornaments and the re-design the hotel's large lobby had undergone, although this lasted only for a while before he began to make his way through.

Midnight was getting nearer, and the Police Department still abounded with swarming officers that perpetuated time itself even more. Michael Riverstone was lingering at his work desk at the Criminology Division, sitting in his uncomfortable unpadded chair with a fixed gaze at the tabmonitor before him. Although he wanted to do some overtime tonight, his thoughts floated somewhere else.

After his conversation earlier with Amanda something untraceable and looming had stuck in his mind: he couldn't come up with any logical explanation for, nor comprehend the condition he presently found himself in. A sudden anxiety and foreboding had overcome his body to the extent that his hands had begun to shake uncontrollably.

Alone in the room and without the possibility of someone interrupting his chain of thoughts for the rest of his shift, and completely immersed in his own pondering and usurping dilemmas, he leaned over his desk and pulled out of his pocket an unusually interesting small toy—it was a miniature model of a Boeing B-17. He placed it before him and concentratedly began to look at it in a captivated, silent determination, contemplating the small thing until his eyelids got burdensome and heavy.

Chapter III

Some Disturbances

Guests were heading towards the smaller entrée rooms, others were sitting in the open compartment lounges in groups, and some were merely hanging around at the lengthy luminescent maple bar; the ones who were clad in formal clothes could be clearly distinguished from the lowbrow ragged pushers and intermediaries who mixed in between them.

Despite the comfortable and predisposing atmosphere, Collins couldn't afford any respite—he thought it was just a matter of time before he was caught without even wanting to think what would happen afterwards. He kept walking on, trying not to look anyone in the eyes. The backup was still due, and the probability of disastrous consequences increased every second; Shunningan was still nowhere to be seen.

Walking around aimlessly, he was on the lookout for CCTVs as well, bearing in mind that they've probably been re-customized and made less conspicuous. Ultimately, he detected at least five of them covertly put at different places in the lobby-hall. Finding a dead spot next to an ageless stand with smooth intricate cherubic figurines on it at the other side of the lobby, he temporarily waited there, beginning to doubt the choice he'd made.

Gazing at the many faces, the mingled air of various scents and reeking aromas bore a deep relaxing effect on him. His vision began to get blurry, his body becoming as though a wispy feather soaring up to a calm and quiet place allotted only to him and him alone. His limbs felt numb, and that numbness then spread to the rest of his body.

This mesmerizing deviation was short-lived, however, when an unknown image suddenly appeared in his mind while gradually coming to his senses; he remembered to whom it belonged:

Shunningan, his lips started, almost speaking out loud the wretched name.

With a warily placed hand on his holster where the relatively hefty Stax-45 rested, Collins slowly headed towards the man sitting a couple of metres away from him. He was stretching leisurely in a sofa in the company of others—save his entourage with which he'd arrived, there were also three other men and two women at the table across him, all elegantly and slickly dressed. There was a rich choice of alcohol on the long round table in the middle whose edges were doubly lit in a slanting purple to white flare.

His pulse began to gradually speed up, and a sudden surge of adrenaline boosted every single cell of his body: he could hear one of the men across Shunningan talking loudly, profanely, on the brink of bursting into inconsiderate laughter. He began to slowly approach them.

When the tall figure in damp clothes appeared out of nowhere at the occupied table, the obese bald man turned halfway around and irritably, without entirely seeing the face of the daring person behind, dragged on with a deep bass voice:

“You got five seconds to get your ass outta here, boyo. And if you're still here by then, I'm gonna have some fun with y-...” he stopped short with a voiceless note of surprise, taken aback.

Closely observing the obese man as he turned around until he was able to face him in his entirety, something immediately set Collins off in the wrong way, but having realized the crux of the moment, he warded it off. Tension was still building up.

“Mr. Shunningan, Agent Braduer Collins from the Intelligence Department,” he started with a self-assured grave voice, taking out his federal identification card and showing it to the whole company, yet as discreetly as he could. “By order #557-105-WK in accord with the Veltmier-Strussald Federal Directive, I'm here to apprehend you on multiple charges filed against you, including several felonies related to murder and distribution of state-prohibited psychoactive substances on state territory. I'm going to ask you to step aside from the table with your hands put behind your head. I'm granted the right to open fire upon disobedience,” with a mildly calm tone concluded Collins, at the same time in an authoritative manner, trying to handle the situation as professionally as possible

in this extremely difficult ordeal. He was aware it was nothing but a standard procedural charade and what he hoped for was exactly disobedience. Strangely enough, the linchpin's two bodyguards didn't reach out for their guns.

Contrary to his expectations and most unexpectedly, Shunningan—his seemingly hideous physiognomy altering in different expressions at first—obediently got up without making any unnecessary movements or gestures. Although Collins remained in total self-control, it seemed to him that things had already gotten out of hand before they'd even begun.

It was not until the lofty man stood five paces away from the table as ordered, when his former feeling of unrest and boosted adrenaline took over him again. Strained veins bulged on his forehead, cold sweat perspiring. He very well realized that he had to somehow gather himself up again, but when the final breakpoint inevitably took place, he felt as if crushed.

Witnessing the ensued scene, some guests' attention was already drawn to them. The three men at Shunningan's table finally stood up.

"Sit down!" He finally drew out his blaster and pointed it at them.

Not heeding his threats, their guns were now being unveiled. With the corner of his eyes Collins noticed at least four other men across their table standing up and fixing sinister eyes on him.

The air felt sensibly electrified. The situation was sure to spin out of control as he wasn't prepared for those extra few who had now considerably tilted the odds against him. Shunningan's seriousness disappeared, and in its place a short wrinkled smile appeared on his face. He began to giggle.

"Point that gun at me and you'll mourn the day you were born in this world, boyo."

Collins pointed his silenced blaster at him.

Unworriedly, Shunningan threw a glance to his right, giving his bodyguards a brief, cryptic look, after which he turned towards

Collins again, this time striking him with a completely changed, piercingly cold gaze.

“This poor drenched fellow’s dumb as a rock,” he said to his acquaintances, not unscrewing his eyes off the middle-aged man’s hard-looking, stubbled pale face.

“Clean shot or a dirty one?” said one of his men, his hand hovering over his holster.

At that moment Collins felt a cold pricking pressure against the back of his head—someone had already pointed a weapon against his nape.

“Drop it, freak!” furiously screamed the man from behind.

Of course, he immediately recognized the voice.

Straining for his last iota of reason, he convinced himself to attempt the most logical thing: feeling for the right moment, with a skilful and quick swerve he lowered his gun, and turning around while at the same time blocking with his left hand the pointed at him blaster, ducked, getting away at only a hair’s length from the burning concentrated plasma beam that sizzled off by his head. Speedily hitting the man’s wrist with the solid grip of his gun, the latter dropped it, disarming him. In a role reversal, he now held him tightly, his neck locked with one hand, the other firmly pointing the gun straight at Shunningan. It had happened in the blink of an eye.

The men from the other table, including the two bodyguards and the three acquaintances, had already managed to take their blasters out, nine barrels currently gaping out at him—just when it seemed that the balance had finally weighed in his favour.

In the meanwhile the localized tension had already affected the rest of the guests—realizing the proximal danger they were in, most of them quietly left the lobby, while some distanced themselves from the troublesome lounge as much as possible. Shunningan remained as unflinching as before.

“I have to give it to you, Agent,” he began, “I haven’t been properly entertained in a while.” His dysgenic face was beaming under the amber light. “One versus nine—who are you even kidding?”

Suddenly and out of nowhere, the tails of inflamed open-fire shots were demarked in the vibrating air with deafening hisses. The already ensued pandemonium was progressively ramping up, and tables were being overturned while a myriad of continuous lightning streams of thermal-ionized beams criss-crossed the saloon halfway up the ceiling, striking in all directions in one unresolvable dreadful entanglement; fire-flashes and explosions followed in restricted deadly bombardments. The tumultuous chaos didn't cease even after total darkness descended upon them.

Chapter IV

Over the Wet Pavement

Watery gushes spurted onto the sidewalks of Aeton Avenue out of the hastily sped-up police aeromobiles' propulsions. They cracked and popped through the late-hour silence of the inner city zones, and only the muted machinery noise of still working faraway factories and power-processing substations countered them.

In one of the aloft vehicles there were three civilian officers, each wearing a lightweight para-aramid nanopolymer protective vest. From the time of their departure from the Police Department, responding to the highly prioritized emergency signal, no one had yet spoken a word.

Heading to the re-directed by the Intelligence Department location of the purported backup signal, darkness had already begun to crawl inside and only the cluster of the many electronic tab lights around the mainframe display dissolved the condensed gloom. Hovering at an altitude of four hundred metres, the discrepant flats' shimmering windows could often be made out from above, intruded by hyperactive holographic advert projections that occasionally went out of order whenever they crossed some of the signal-charged landing sites that topped the buildings. Beneath and around them the erratic incursions of other red-and-blue illuminations seemed distantly sharp.

"You nervous?" uttered the man in the passenger seat over his shoulder as he turned around facing the girl behind him, deciding to be the first to break the stale silence.

"Not exactly," answered the girl in the back seat without turning her head, still looking thoughtfully through the window at the mute cityscape.

"If shit goes south," suddenly said the driver, joining in the conversation, "stay close to the group and strictly follow the orders you're given—that way you'd have much bigger chances of getting

out alive, *intact*. I want to get home tonight without the extra headaches. Is everything clear? The same goes for you as well, Gregory.”

The two answered affirmatively.

“That’s the spirit. Your new partner will personally answer for you—hear that, Sergeant Gregory?—whatever he says, you do, no exceptions. I was told that this is your first big *gig*, so don’t blow it up—I don’t want any uncalled-for stupidities. If anything happens—no matter what—report without hesitation.”

“Aye, Lieutenant,” answered Amanda, still looking solemnly through the reinforced rain-dribbled window.

Around a dozen police cars had landed on the north-eastern side of the “Rickman” Hotel, with more to come. The quietness was interrupted by the sprung-out stampede of the many police officers who had got out in waves taking positions round the building.

One of the first to step out was Commissioner Rowlan who had been put in charge of the operation: before long he began giving instructions, forming various units and placing them around the tactical perimeters of the vicinity. He was of a stout, solid build and one of the most experienced in the Department. For more than 25 years he’d been an exemplary policeman to be looked up to by the ambitious rookies with his punctiliousness and dedicated hard work, and although it was plainly clear that workaholicism had become an inseparable part of his lifestyle—his face being marked from severe overwork and his eyes always appearing dim behind his full-rimmed glasses akin to two murky oval shadows—the result of his incessant exhaustion was incontestable and self-evident by his case records and history as a policeman.

“Curter, Garret—I want you and your whole team stationed southward. According to the blueprints, there should be an emergency exit right next to the ground ventilation shafts. Be vigilant and keep the radio line alive.

“Measfield, you and your people will check out the area and report for any irregularity you happen to come upon.

“Lieutenant Wyton—you, me and Captain Charlestone will be the first to break in from the main entrance. The rest of you will maintain the rear flanks and provide a cover. In less than two minutes the technical team will be ready to break through the security protocols, after which the whole site will be open and cleared out for us. The Hopper’s going in first, so we’ll be scooping up the leftovers. You know the protocol: expeditious and effective execution with zero collateral damage.”

Giving his last orders, the Commissioner, together with his men, looked to their positions. Not so far behind, double-checking her blaster’s maintenance status, stood Amanda. Although this was her first active operation ever since her recruitment as a Sergeant in the Department, she wondered at her inability to truly find the right feelings and reactions to everything currently happening; in a way, her excitement was benumbed.

Two men in uniforms were now standing by the big wooden double-door, deftly working on the sophisticated keylog device. One of them had knelt right at the threshold, holding in his hands the remote-viewing integrated digital display which took half the space on the side, with some buttons along its edges that bled back into it.

Following a few switches and tweaks, the brief and at first look elementary configurations that had taken place were followed by several clicks coming from the other side of the double-door.

“You’re good to go,” said one of the cryptographers.

The tabmonitor’s screensaver that had been active for some time now spun its own sustained colourful game, a seemingly insipid and repetitive spectacle of abstractly deforming malleable geometric forms and figures put on a loop.

The eyes of the already carried away man at the desk didn’t seem to react to it at all, his slackened head leaning over a stack of papers without giving any signs of wokeness; afterwards he would fail to recall most of the time spent during the night.

A fresh scent of recently mown grass had mingled with the air. The sun shone insistently; the ocean-blue sky sprang across the vast horizon and seemed to subdue everything below it under its immeasurable greatness and unreachability.

The openly lively mood was impossible to ignore—children's exuberant songs reached his ears, accompanied by echoing calls of tease and shared mirth, together with occasional cries and whimpers. Excited boys and girls were eagerly heading to the playgrounds with their parents by their side where now a true revelry was taking place; some of them were just sitting on the nearby benches, talking amicably with each other, and some were partaking in the ceaseless play into which they were lured by their kids.

He longed at the sight; he was overwhelmed by a long-forgotten, unknown feeling of happiness. He felt that someone, somewhere waited for him in expectation amid all the commotion and endless laughter. He stood there for a while, contemplating. Everywhere the noise became more and more distant and isolated from him.

Benjamin! the thought suddenly came to him with a striking pain. His 8-year-old son Benjamin, and his beautiful, radiant wife Veronica.

But something wasn't quite right... they were missing.

Searching around and going through every single face, he couldn't find them anywhere. He began to panic. The joy he felt until now was replaced with a bitter premonition dictated by danger and disquiet: he now found himself calling them by name, shouting for them, but to his surprise no one seemed to be even aware of his presence.

Stopping by a bench where a couple sat and then carefully observing the two persons, an unpleasant sight began to intrude before his vision. It can't be! he thought, appalled and scared almost to death. How?

Before him, and already having lost any sense of rationality and logic, he was gazing at no one else but himself. Yes, it was he who was now sitting on the bench together with his beloved one.

And on top of everything, something seemed quite altered in their appearance—they had aged tremendously! Despite the wrinkles, hoary hair and permanently hunched bodies, he still managed to recognize them easily—they seemed to him at least 30 years older, and the silence had become deafening when he—

Almost as if in the likeness of a frightened hare, he was awakened in a violent convulsion, drowning in his own breath. He rapidly got up from the desk, calming himself down and trying to remember what had just happened. Assimilating himself to the surrounding place, he remembered the vivid dream (or was it a nightmare?) from which he'd been plunged back in such a stupefying manner. He was glad that everything was just a spontaneous by-product of his subconscious imagination. But there was still something that continued to torment him and spread unrest even in his most confined moments of peaceful repose—something that would follow him till the rest of his days, kill and revive him again and again. He feared that he had lost it forever.

Chapter V

Mismatch

He was lying wounded behind an upturned table amid an indiscernible motley of broken and scattered furniture. The last remaining guests were hastily limping towards the exists after the initial series of crossfire waves. Spilt blood had stained parts of the walls and floor, and in the gradually altering light the first few dead bodies could already be seen, some of them having become unrecognisably deformed.

During the first several seconds he was unresponsive and inadequate, unable to get hold of himself. He tried to comprehend what had happened and was still happening while the storm of highly charged plasma flows was still ongoing, even though considerably abated by now.

The first thing he did was to check if he still carried his weapon, and to his relief he quickly found it lying on the floor just a couple of inches away from him; he grabbed it. After a brief attestation he saw that it wasn't damaged in any way. The next and most important thing was to evaluate the injuries his body had sustained, since a sharp pain was now throbbing somewhere down his body. Faintly trembling, he began to carefully touch different parts of it, and reaching a spot a little to the left of his waist, the pain suddenly became significantly worse. Seeing the scorched cloth, he rolled up his sleeve to see how bad it was. It could've been much worse, he said to himself; it wasn't deep enough to have damaged any vital organs.

After making sure he wasn't gravely injured, he decided to another, more extensive look around him; slowly standing up, he cautiously showed his head over the upturned table.

Coming from both directions blindingly tempestuous white flickers passed by each other in a ravaging superwhirl that left a thin, but rigorous wheeze. Rapidly advancing from the direction of the arched entrance, police officers exchanged unhesitant fire with the

men to his right. The hall music had long ago ceased and currently nothing but the gunfire could be heard together with some weaker persistent background thumps.

At that moment a buzzingly swift object fled past him—he immediately recognized it and was glad that it had been included per the auxiliary operational standards of the Police Department.

The so-called *Hoppers* were essential and inseparable offensive and tactical tools that had been at the disposal of all Police Departments since the 2050s, formerly a mostly outdated military-exclusive property that was finally implemented into the civic federal task forces after they'd become outdated. Following a series of continuous and extensive debates and bureaucratic drawbacks concerning the ethical nature of the proposal put forth by some ambitious Senate members, these exceedingly efficient products of the military industry had finally found place outside their natural habitat. With the years going by, the Compact Disarming Counterattack Crosser, or more commonly the *Hopper*, had become a technical centrepiece of the Police Departments' tactical operations, having integrated itself into and revolutionized the state combat arsenal.

The Hoppers were T-shaped tricopters that operated via hydrogenic-plasma static turbines and were of the size of a metre and a half in both length and width. They were multifunctional, their accessibility ranging from soft-electronic mid-range blocking and ultrasound stunning, to being equipped with long-distance weaponized plasma stacks with a full centred 360° outreach. Apart from being extremely quick and well-manoeuvred, the Hoppers were also reinforced with last-gen hard-fledged graphene alloy that secured good resistance against any weak-to-mild blows and shots.

Presently, Collins counted only one Hopper traversing the hall, but evidently that was enough to guarantee a total swipe-out of everything scattered and moving.

The last thing he remembered before the storming was his aiming at Shunningan. After that things had happened way too fast that he could hardly recall and reassemble the rest of the missing pieces. Rummaging through his recollections, he was trying to force out from his mind whatever he could that would prove helpful. And

then he remembered it—it was so clear as if it had happened just a couple of moments ago. In fact, it really *did*.

“Hold back, we’ve already got them!” a male voice was shouting from somewhere.

Amanda had already come to terms with the fact that she would fully ignore any persuasions and threats directed at her—during the beginning of the skirmishing, she stayed behind the front lines as she was ordered. After the Hopper’s breach, a clean position had been opened for the units. By then everything was going according to plan until she decided to break apart and go full solo: at that time the officers closest to her were left dumbstruck at her reasoning and sudden, inexplicable decision.

“Sergeant Thorson, what in the hell are you trying to do?” infuriatedly yelled over the transmitter Commissioner Rowlan; he had taken a temporary cover within an alcove together with two other officers.

In the meantime another officer had run up to him, his face more than usually alarmed. The Commissioner looked at him with his big expectant eyes in which an impatient fiery exaltation was skilfully being suppressed.

“Shunningan proved a dummy, sir.”

“Shunningan’s got away,” another voice from behind said almost immediately. Turning around, he saw a panting man with a hard-pressed hand against his waist, his other one holding a distinguishable gun. “The bastard turned out cleverer than I thought. Listen, the entire perimeter has to be secured, and you’d have to send the rest of your available manpower to the upper floors; I’d also recommend to put the Crosser on a constant fly-by round the hotel. Everything was a rouse all along, the man lying out there isn’t the real Shunningan.”

A moment later the message was circulating throughout the closed channels.

Chapter VI

The Chase

It was probably one of the most exhaustive climbs she'd ever done—due to the elevators' emergency blockage she didn't have much choice left except to take the only option available at hand, not stopping even for a moment's breath.

Resolutely and determinedly and as fast as she could, Amanda advanced up the steep wide steps, passing floor after floor. The polished chestnut handrails and newels, the gilded elaborate thick balusters, as well as the remarkably long oriental imperial-red carpets covering and stretching the hallways from beginning to end, didn't catch the least of her attention—she was focused only on the main target that was currently slipping away.

When she finally reached the 14th floor she encountered a handful of guests gathered and clustered outside of their rooms after the noisome shattering racket from below as well as the activated emergency indicators in their apartments had resounded throughout the whole building. Some of the staff were seen laboriously and hastily inspecting along the hallways, assuring the worried and disconcerted guests and calmly instructing them to head for the exits.

But what the staff didn't know was that there were still other guests to be accounted for, and she naturally took advantage of that fact. Standing in the middle of the hallway, she began with the apartments on the right. Aiming at the locks and then shooting at them, she proceeded to checking out the rest of the rooms on the current floor.

“All of you, empty the floor! Now!” without batting an eye she threatened the remaining staff, holding her federal ID in one hand, and in the other her gun.

The first room she entered was empty. The second one too. The next one was also vacant. Despite her complete awareness that by breaking into the apartments in such a brusque manner she risked getting caught way sooner, she nevertheless proceeded doing it.

Her directionless wandering caused her hopes to start waning little by little. And yet, breaking through another room, she espied exactly what she'd expected to see.

He was standing by a wide window the moment she pushed out the door. Contemplating the nightly scene, he immediately turned around, fixing two bloodshot eyes on her.

“Get on the floor and put your hands by your sides! Do as I say and don't act like a stupid fuck!”

It seemed that there was no one else in the dim room save the one dressed in white slick tuxedo Shunningan. No signs of nervousness could be traced on his face, but rather the opposite—he remained deeply tranquil and firm. Still standing there and with an unpredictable smile on his face, he said:

“And since when do they take little-brittle girls like you in the task force? This must be some kind of a joke!” he began cackling contortedly.

“Don't push me over the edge! Do what I say, fat fuck!”

Shunningan didn't waver for a second; and it appeared that he didn't have any intentions of obeying her orders either. His smile now being replaced with a more resourceful one, he replied:

“A pretty gal, you are. Shame a beauty like you won't last much in this earthly life.”

Amanda gripped her blaster even harder and was closer than ever to pulling the trigger.

“I've to admit that I'm bummed to put an end to this so engaging a conversation of ours, but alas. It was a real pleasure, cop-girl.”

Just when she was finally about to shoot, three or four men in suits suddenly jumped out from inside and momentarily opened fire at her; so quick were their movements that they almost seemed like some sort of unbidden apparitions, fluttering against a background of indissoluble darkness. But before that, something had intervened by pushing her away just in time to evade the blazing deadly beams that left several smoking bores in the wall. Still lying

on the floor in the hallway, she was surprised to see her colleague Gregory leaning by her side.

The two immediately darted out of there after firing a couple of shots through the door, from time to time half-turning to see whether they were being aimed at until they reached the end of the hallway. No one had come out of the room yet. Meanwhile, armed men had appeared from the stairwell and were now quickly approaching the ajar door.

They don't stand a chance, Amanda thought, completely assured and convinced in the positive outcome of the denouement of the operation.

"I think they saw us. We'll wait for them to give us a sign," whispered Gregory. "Yes, they're definitely aware of us. Be ready."

Halting by the door, Commissioner Rowlan made a brief gesticulation which prompted two men to appear from behind whose hands were busy with something. The devices they held were seemingly plain matted spheres. Standing close by the open door, the two men simultaneously pressed the spheres with their thumbs and then tossed the four devices right into the room. A loud, one-time whizzing squelch raised an electric outcry and then immediately died out.

"Move!" howled commandingly the man at the lead.

Chapter VII

Measurement

The squad dashed forth in a series of single charging formations, everyone pressing together in one fierce set of surging bodies. But the second they entered the room, they were met with a countering force.

The shock-hallucinogenic grenades didn't work as intended, since it seemed that the men inside were thoroughly prepared beforehand against the well-known police tech used on such occasions: the specially constructed auditory tentacle-goggles they wore blocked the infrasounds and the highly intensive sub-spectrum rays that led to a temporary transneural stunning.

Collins and Commissioner Rowlan fell under crossfire: as soon as they stepped into the room, they managed to eliminate several men at close, but their fast and swift reflexes didn't entirely prevent them from catching plasma beams—feeling a sharp burning pain in his left leg, Commissioner Rowlan had stumbled onto the ground in agonizing screams; for the second time that night Collins also caught a shot, but still managed to stand on his feet, his pararamid vest considerably alleviating the blow.

It was an easy sweep for the outnumbering assembled police squad, who had succeeded in overpowering and obliterating the two phalanxes on either side. Among the officers no dead were reported, but some were badly hurt and now others were attending to them.

“Screw it if I'm alright or not, I want that piece of trash Shunningan's ass on a plate!” shouted angrily commissioner Rowlan, after he was asked if he was alright. “Report anything you find!”

“You heard him!” Captain Charlestone, who had just entered the room, repeated his command, but this time louder so that everyone could hear. “Split into groups and if needed, turn everything upside down until you find Rascal 2!”

Naturally, Gregory and Amanda joined in.

The thorough search was expected to last less than 30 seconds. Haunting him since he'd received the coordinates, Collins couldn't shake off the premonition that this would invariably and deliberately lead to something bigger and much unpleasant, believing that this was anything but an accidental event and even less an auspicious one—nothing so far added up, and even if Shunningan were put behind bars for good, he felt that this would only make things worse.

Turning away from the Commissioner, Gregory suddenly cut his way short, almost bumping into him.

“Excuse me,” apologized the young Sergeant.

Taking only a brief customary look at the pale, light-brown-haired young man, the man in drab overcoat walked off, mingling with and disappearing among the others. Gregory's eyes remained fixed on him, confusedly watching him from a distance.

Collins was contemplating something direly important that had suddenly shone upon him. He stood there, frozen, not casting away his glance from some covert fixation at the other end of the apartment. As though possessed, he ran forward. Reaching the other end, he stopped before an aspen wardrobe: it was big enough to easily fit three adult persons. He opened it. Hardly had he stepped inside than he vanished—the officers that happened to be nearby stood there bewildered after seeing the person disappearing in front of their sight.

Clever, but not enough, he muttered, after finding himself in the neighbouring apartment's bedroom.

The first thing that caught his attention was the open balcony. He went straight to it and saw that no one was there. However, no sooner had he looked out across the glum night than he saw Shunningan standing on the hood of an aeromobile, laboriously balancing himself. They exchanged brief looks, and just when Collins was about to pull out his blaster, Shunningan had already gotten into the vehicle through the open backseat door.

Bursting into condescending laughter, the latter began to gradually disappear into the humid gloom where the rain had

already stopped; the engine's revving became more and more distant as darkness shrouded round the aeromobile, making it a hard task to estimate the speed that continued to increase every second.

Holding his blaster and removing the silencer, Collins aimed and shot at the flying vehicle, but as far as he could tell no visible damages were caused. At that instance he remembered that all aeromobiles had the same vulnerable spot that required only one precise shot to be sent down spinning round its axis—and this was the transmissive high-conductive catalysator that was localized at the rear of every car, tightly cramped between the main exhaust grids.

Gathering combustive speed, his target was almost out of sight—it was only a matter of seconds before it disappeared completely.

Feeling the cold wind over his face, he took a deep, painfully freezing breath. Increasing his gun's burst-fire power to its maximum capacity by turning the little hard-wired knob on its side with his thumb—an adjustment only a few federal-issued blasters had—he aimed it at the flying vehicle that appeared like a formless dusky speck with its near-dead taillights.

The front sight of the weapon made contact with the tiny darkened dot that was losing itself in the undefined vectoral space, and when they finally evened in one line, he pulled the trigger. Dropping the blaster as a result of the strong unleashed recoil and sparkled intensity, the single shot was sent cutting away through the perpetual uncertainty in the remote distance, everything seemingly slowed-down. A faint, but bright enough to be noticed quivering light then appeared from the same spot where the beam was directed to, lasting only a second or less. A pale tail of smoke was unfurled—it coiled and gathered round itself stark yellow flakes that followed it all the way down.

“Did he slip away?” asked a police officer who had suddenly appeared from behind, arriving just in time to witness the last moments of the mysterious diminishing sight in the loom before them.

“I don’t think so.” As he walked away, he turned around once again facing the freshly cleared char-coloured sky. “I don’t think so.”

Chapter VIII

Aftermath

Overbearingly standing within the round barricade that prevented the curious bystanders from entering the enclosed area, Commissioner Rowlan was smugly following the two officers with his eyes behind his partly smudged lenses as they shoved the underground boss in the escorting police car.

“Your sugar-coated ride will soon end, Commissioner,” said Shunningan sardonically across the scrawny-lit diminishing fog, noticing Commissioner Rowlan’s distanced mute supervision; his white costume having become raggedy dirty and stained, there were several fresh bruises and blackened spots on his wholly bald head, as well as many abrasions down his neck as a result of the crash.

“I wouldn’t count on that if I were you,” said the Commissioner, not caring if he was heard or not, turning away from the escorting police officers.

Countless policemen and forensic investigators treaded around the zone where the aeromobile had crashed; for a while there was a wailing concoction of sirens coming from the fast-approaching ambulances and fire brigades that even further stirred on the confused mess of clamorous indistinct reverberations throughout the locality. Near the crash site Amanda, Gregory, and Lieutenant Wyton stood with sullen faces before Commissioner Rowlan, who had been unsparingly and indefatigably haranguing them at length.

“They didn’t do anything wrong, Commissioner,” someone suddenly interposed, stepping forth. “The situation demanded a different approach and quick decision-making. They knew exactly what they were getting into, and they were aware that they would’ve otherwise been deterred, so they took the risk. To be frank, I’d also have done the same in their place. Leave them be.”

At first the Commissioner didn't exactly seem to approve of the way Collins saw it, but giving it a second thought and pondering on it, in the end he was inclined to desist.

"By the way," continued Collins, "I never saw the Hopper reconnoitring outside the hotel."

"Major connective malfunction. I was told that the CR was long-range DDoS'd, they're still trying to trace the signal back to the source. Considering the timing, I'd be damned if this had nothing to do with the raid."

Not saying anything, Collins was overthinking some things.

"Agent Collins."

Watching their limping superior walking away, Amanda and Gregory could finally take a breath of relief. Presently, and rousing from his thoughts, Collins turned to the girl in red jacket:

"Let me guess, you've come across his room's access card. Naturally, the room number was on it."

Amanda looked at the tall, stout, green-eyed man before her.

"That's right. With the only difference that it was partially damaged by the time I picked it up, the last digits were unintelligible."

"One thing I can't quite get, though—how were you so sure that it was a double?"

"The drinks. I suppose you, too, noticed the dead give-away."

Pleasantly surprised by the young Sergeant's astuteness, Collins looked at the two, carefully observing their faces.

"Correct. Well done, you two."

"Thank you," said Amanda, shaking hands with the man in dark-grey overcoat, after which they parted.

While on his way to one of the landed medical cars where he was going to get a preliminary examination, Collins suddenly caught a glimpse of an elongated silvery-shining rectangular case that was held in the gloved hands of one of the forensic guys leaning

over it—he was surrounded by several police officers all of whom had been curiously watching the item for a while now. Suddenly, the forensic investigator opened the case, and Collins saw how the men’s expressions immediately appropriated a disappointing look. He walked up to the scene.

“What’s that?” he asked, gazing at the empty platinum case. There were several oval empty foam nests arranged in a row, but whatever was placed in them before was evidently gone now.

“It was found inside the vehicle,” answered one of the forensics. The metallic lids were covered with some dried leftover sooth, but apart from that they were perfectly intact. “Pretty thick fucker. No idea what it is, though, or what it might’ve contained.”

“Interesting,” murmured Collins, slowly turning away and walking off in introspective silence.

Chapter IX

The Commission

“According to your report, Agent B75, that night you decided to act on your own initiative, not taking into consideration the proper chain-of-command channels at all. You also didn’t wait for the backup. Here, allow me to quote:

‘As the circumstances didn’t allow for any further ado and thus required an expedient handling, I deemed it necessary to proceed by taking an immediate action. It was inevitable to deploy myself into an undercover position within the venue. For many years the main target had been holding a high-priority status both nation- and world-wide, and every missed opportunity on my side would have drastically decreased the agency’s chances of making him face trial. Due to the backup’s delay I couldn’t afford to miss the exigent opportunity.’

“End of quote. Do you confirm your statement?”

“I do.”

“As was already established, while the backup units were on their way to the location, by that time you were already present within the lobby of the hotel, successfully convincing the man at the entrance to let you in. Several minutes later you are standing face to face with what appears to be a body double of the primary target Edgar Shunningan, pointing your weapon at him. Here, again according to your own words, the same person who’d let you in suddenly appeared behind you, putting a gun against your head at point-blank; he threatens you to let go of your blaster, or else he’d shoot. Exactly here you managed to disarm and neutralize him, ending up holding him tightly within your grip. Next thing you realize is that the situation had become worse, having reached a dead end: at that moment you find yourself surrounded from all sides with pulled out guns directed at you. Then we all know what happens.

“But one thing escapes me, Agent B75—how did you know it was a body double?”

A brief silence ensued before an eventual answer came.

“As I stood before him, I noticed something odd: it is a well-known fact that according to his medical record, the target suffers from an acute allergic reaction to rye, which is used for the production of the Bermudian Bliss whiskey—the same beverage the body double was consuming. It happened so that my eyes caught him taking big gulps from his cup, and getting nearer, I finally saw that there was nothing else on the table except for the two bottles of that same label.”

“Is this how you came to the conclusion that the person was a mere double?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you for your testimony, Agent B75. The rest of the formalities will be taken care of.”

“I have a question, if you permit.”

“We’re listening.”

“What about the metallic case that was found inside the crashed car?”

“We’re still waiting for the lab report, nothing has come out of it yet. We wish you a speedy recovery, Agent B75.”

Chapter X

Junkhood

Piloting his mostly antiquated Carson SLX-5 within the Arbridge Aerial Corridor, Collins hoped it wasn't closed yet. It was almost half past seven, and the autumn sun evanescently gave way to the ominous, impermeable night. Gradually, the irregular city widenings and angular curls altered themselves into utterly different and spontaneous shapes, the firmament above the horizon immersing solitarily into the woeful rhythm of the nocturnal shades.

Only several days had passed since the eventful night at the "Rickman" Hotel, and he was already on his feet, having completely recovered from the two moderate wounds and fully capable of performing his duties, and only one day since he received another anonymous and untraceable message with no less a perplexing meaning. Maybe it was an entrapment, he'd suggestively said to himself, or maybe not. Either way, and as it happened with the tip about Shunningan's presence at the hotel, whoever was trying to hintingly convey to him some deeper meaning of something currently in the works and at the same time solicit out of him a reckless involvement in someone's personal affairs, they were pretty successful so far and the prospects seemed more than convincing.

500 metres above the ground, and hovering among the entangled cluster of other buzzing vehicles gliding along different altitudes, he looked out of the driver's window and down the gloomy torpid stillness, and soon enough the whole down-scaled space beneath him, together with the many tiny buildings and even tinier inhabitants, appeared to him perfectly and incessantly harmonic. Looking this time up and around him and then assembling in his mind the whole surrounding landscape, he thought it for the dwelling place of many flying insects perpetually crossing into each other, but never actually touching one another.

Nothing more and nothing less than a never-ceasing spouting machine, bound to withstand by its complexity what no one can

ever truly comprehend, and no more different than other multivari-ous biological ecosystems, he thought with an ambivalent feeling.

“Approaching checkpoint imminent,” a female mechanical voice suddenly sounded from the dashboard speakers. “Initializing a landing procedure. Searching for a site... Site detected. Lowering begins in 3, 2, 1...”

Seeing the land now rapidly overstretching beneath him, he was getting ready to dismount, removing his seatbelt. And when he finally heard the message from the same female voice: “Landing—successful. Temperature: 16°C, atmospheric pressure: 1017 hPa, humidity percentage...,” with the pressing of a button he got out through the vertically opened door, taking a deep frosty, but refreshing breath. He had landed on 26 Greenhead St., which was one of the main junctions that led to the famous Junkhood neighbourhood—Orton’s biggest and most expansive industrial zone.

Strolling along the tightly tucked and overcrowded sidewalk, time and again he bumped into the many hustling walkers who didn’t even seem to heed him and remained oblivious to everything else save their own affairs in mind. It was the second busiest time of the day for the neighbourhood when the street steams from within coiled up in whirling veils that could be seen and sensed from afar. Junkhood was the industrial dwelling place of many upper-lower-class workers, surrounded by various densely packed tarnished factories alongside the residential areas that occasionally churned with dull grey vapours. It was widely known as a prominent and unrestrained mercantile hotbed—its indigenous street hawking and small-time market peddling had become an inseparable and distinctive trait of its own, consisting of miscellaneous congregated cultural commerce with a 24/7 trading flow whose activity only occasionally subdued, but never truly ceased. From exotic and pungent herbs, oils, textiles, and other products extracted and imported from the remotest corners of the world and lavished behind multiapplica-tional glasses covering the one-wheeled booth stands and carts, to repair services and workshops and second-hand tech hubs, Junkhood stood out as a provisionally gritty, yet easily explorable and unique place where the non-commercial labour spirit prevailed.

Some of the letters of the violet-glowing *TSIN DZI'S ROBOTIC AND MECHANICAL WORKSHOP* appeared to be damaged from the inside, constantly blinking in uneven intervals and sometimes even completely stopping; below them, the embellished smaller font and grungy vermilion texture of the Mandarin spelling was waxing as the sunset's last sashes faded away. The small, unpretentious workshop was stacked in between several other different shacks and lodgings turned into places of commerce along the gloomy foggy street that was separated and marked by the stooped streetlights' yellow glimmer. Standing at the threshold, Collins pushed the rusty handleless iron door, and in a moment was already inside the stuffed with whim-whams and trinkets, disassembled apparatuses and unfinished outdated exoskeletons workshop. Before long a voice yelling in Mandarin was heard from somewhere close.

"Mr. Dzi, Agent Braduer Collins from the Intelligence Department," Collins introduced himself to the 60-ish-something Asian who was of a small, but nimble posture, showing him his glassy federal identification card.

"Good evening, mister," he returned cordially with a slight puckering accent, immediately changing the language. "Please, step forth. I was just about to close. What can I do for you?"

Tsin Dzi had been the owner of the workshop for over 25 years, Collins had checked in the Intelligence Department's databases. An emigrant, the locals knew him as a warm-hearted and dedicated to his craft hard-working man. In his atelier one could wander around for hours, and still not get bored: his inventory included a wide range of old and new stocks of all prices, such as household, construction, and entertainment goods, as well as other things such as electro-magnetic hydrogenerators, plasma-engine resistors, robotic parts and appendages and so on.

Gazing at a pair of eyeballs floating freely in some quizzical light-green ooze in a jar that happened to catch his attention, at first Collins thought those for real human eyes. But as soon as he traced the tiny adapters pinned at the end of each optic nerve tentacle, he realized their unquestionable artificiality, most probably

biomechatronic implants than robotic components, judging by the long microscopic hairy things spreading out of the two plastic bits.

“I’m looking for someone,” he said, without turning around and continuing to observe the shelf. “He goes by the name Strageris Mapilton. I’d like to know if you’ve heard of him and if he’s been recently seen around these parts.”

When Collins finally turned his gaze over to him, the old Chinaman frightfully shifted his eyes to some other, arbitrary spot. He didn’t answer immediately, as if carefully considering his next words. Collins fancied a look of guilt on his face that he desperately tried to suppress. Presently, he answered:

“Strageris Mapilton, you say... Hmmm... Think it for a second. Oh, I think I remember! I recall a man came here yesterday, he introduced himself by the same name.” A moment of hesitation. “He had an extravagant look—in his 30’s, two short hairs at back of his naked head, his mouth... his mouth no right and always... always salivated—yes, that’s the word—and... who seemed to have... wait... yes, precisely—the skin on his neck and under his ears seemed a little burned, seemed not okay to me. He wore a dark-blue jacket and black jeans.” Again, a hesitant pause, after which Collins looked at him insistently. “If my memory right, he looking for something that not many places have... I was a bit surprised and I said I don’t have it, and then asked him why he need such thing. But he never answer me—next moment he gone. I never saw him again.”

Collins stood in silence before asking his next question.

“I see. And what was the thing he was looking for?”

An air of confusion surrounded Tsin Dzi: it was as if he were trying to reconnect and reassemble his scattered affrighted thoughts—for Collins could plainly read in his eyes alone that the old man had evidently been scared by something—the effort of trying to cover this appearance also plainly visible on his face. After muttering something, he said with a trembling voice:

“Aaahhh, he looked for some long-range solar antenna... tongs? yes, tongs—poacher antennas, possibe illegal fish hunting. It nothing special, but still rare to find these days.”

Without saying anything this time, Collins weightlessly walked towards a metal worktable across the room. A whole bunch of bolts, nuts, screwdrivers and hammers were disarrayed onto it, as well as a welding laser-point machine “Sayex”, a pair of stereoscopic scanning goggles and a small stick-like device with a sharp pointed end on it. Tsin Dzi walked after him with timid steps, shaking after every single move he made, the dim orange light of the workshop casting Collins in the likeness of an unfathomable wandering shade.

Taking the stick-like device from the worktable and pointing it at the Asian, he started fidgeting it close to his face; the old man cringed.

“Hm, antenna tongs. Okay.”

The two stood there exchanging nothing but prolonged glances. Collins’ attention was now drawn to the small piece of item he’d taken out of his coat’s pocket, now holding it at the tip in his other hand and mulling over it.

“In that case there’s nothing else you can help me with, Mr. Dzi.”

He put the miniature chip on the worktable.

“This is an encrypted one-side dialette—insert it in your player’s fast-ac slot if you happen to remember anything concerning our friend here,” he whispered clandestinely near his ear.

While putting down the shock-baton and heading for the door, the old man stood there unwavering and then followed him with a perplexed look when he suddenly detained him:

“Wait,” he went up to him. While he was surreptitiously giving the dialette back to him, upon reaching and grabbing the old man’s hand, Collins was surprized to see that next to it, within the clasp of his palm, he was holding something else. The Chinaman’s eyes were riveted onto his in dreadful anticipation. “Have a good day, sir.”

Collins didn’t say anything, and left.

Outside the workshop he realized how imperceptibly the last 10-15 minutes had passed: it was already a darkening dusk, the

throng of people as lively and energetic as ever—never halting and never slowing down. He didn't know what to make of the small triple-layered rectangular item he was so surreptitiously and unexpectedly handled, so he proceeded to walk after having dropped it in his pocket. The streetlights and the burningly glowing electric plethora continued to kindle the surrounding area, giving it a contrasting against the dying sky's background mesmerizing look.

Crossing the street, the variety of pungent spices and other unfamiliar odours began to entangle around him. Suddenly, stopping midway, he heard a hoarse, evoking the deepest senses voice that came from one of the carts on the same sidewalk. It was summoning him by his name, as though someone whispered it in his ear. Turning around, his eyes presently met those of a hunchbacked crone whose mouth—he could swear—was inaudibly moving. She was sitting on a stool in front of a ramshackle spice cart, her inattentive glaucomic eyes reflecting every single light source nearby.

He decided to slowly walk towards the old woman until he stopped several paces before her. He didn't know exactly when, but while he was approaching her the hunchbacked crone had stopped moving her lips.

“Were you the one calling me?” he asked hesitantly.

No answer. He repeated his question again. And again, silence.

“Excuse me, can you hear me? Just a moment ago I thought you were calling me. And how do you know my name?”

The bespattered crone slowly stood up, her short stiff legs dragging at a half-pace; she made a sign to Collins to come closer. At first he was reluctant, but then decided to get nearer. It seemed to him that the closer he got, the more hideous she became to him, but at last he managed to bring himself before her, whereupon she beckoned to him to stoop over.

“Don't jump into the abyss... they're already all doomed... you can't save them... don't jump into the abyss... don't... don't...” she whispered in his ear in a weak, ghastly voice.

Completely confused from the uttered words, he reflexively moved aside and distractedly stepped back. He wasn't so sure what to think at that moment, nor how to react: there was something ominous behind those words and he immediately perceived a terrible foreshadowing in them.

Trying to assimilate what had just happened, a sudden surge of anger started to arise from within himself. But before long he quenched it and gradually began restoring his common senses, sobering up his faculties. He decided to forget and not to think about it, and without even turning back to see if that crone was still there he finally walked away.

During the whole time on his way back to his aeromobile it was as if he didn't hear, nor see anything, prancing like a sleep-walker on an endless road. Reaching the vehicle, he stood there for a while, leaning over the door and not doing anything.

He was lying, he thought, trying to focus on the Chinaman and the second message he'd received in a week that led him to this particulate place. *He's a laughingly bad liar, and his reactions untrained.* He got in his car, still thinking about the old sinister lady on the sidewalk.

With these images in mind he started the plasma engines and lifted off.

“Michael Francis Riverstone, Criminology Division, Authority Level: 4. Hold on for a moment, please.”

Waiting on the bench outside the cabinet, he was nervously fiddling his thumbs and tapping his left foot against the luminescent glass floor.

“Director Aberdeen is ready to receive you, Mr. Riverstone,” the infopost speaker uttered.

Getting up, he stood before the door over which the dark-brown varnished wooden letters “Ernst F. Aberdeen—Director of Police Department, City of Orton” were prominently sticking out. At first he hesitated, but then, overcoming his doubts, he entered.

It was a neatly tidied and spacious office the likes of which were allotted only to people of high ranking.

“Come in, Michael—it was Michael, right? and get yourself comfortable,” gregariously said the man in the hard-seamed leather armchair behind a large desk. “Something happened that I should be concerned of? I was told it was urgent.”

“Yes... Well, yes and no,” Michael said nervously, seating himself before the Director’s desk. “As a matter of fact, I’ll leave it up to you to decide how to accept what I’m about to tell you.”

“I’m all ears. Speak.”

Gathering himself and thinking how to commence this tenacious conversation, Michael released a heavy, but muted sigh, and then glanced at the portly, short-moss-haired dark-eyed Director.

“I would appreciate it if I got my job back at my former position at the Intelligence Department. Only if it’s doable, of course.”

The round-faced man gave him a perplexed, but harmless look.

“But, Michael, it was *you* who filed the transfer request not so long ago, remember? Why would you all of a sudden want to go back now?”

Upon hearing this question, Michael’s face made a slightly contorted twist. Of course, he’d long before anticipated this part of the conversation, but it still had an unexpected vivid effect on him the moment he heard the words being spoken.

“The reason for this is... How should I put it? Everything now oppresses me—the current job at the Criminology Division, the suffocating atmosphere at work, everything. It’s as if everything around engulfs me day by day, reminding me of things from the past which... I don’t want to be reminded of.” Silence. “I know it may be too much to ask for, and probably extremely naïve from my side, but I can assure you that I am completely confident and aware of my choice, and that nothing else can now dissuade me from—”

“Okay, okay, I understand,” the Director cut him short. “I’ll see what I can do to get you back on your former job. But you gotta

realize that after that there's no turning back—you stay where you stay, no exceptions, or you quit the job for good," he concluded with a serious voice, leaning over his desk with crossed fingers and a fixed indifferent gaze.

"I perfectly understand that. And I thank you for your solidarity."

"No need to. They told me you were an excellent Agent, from the rare stock. I don't see any reasons why the Commission shouldn't give you the green light."

The two stood up, firmly shaking hands across the lofty desk, after which Michael headed back to the door, finally leaving the room.

Walking along the corridor, he suddenly noticed a familiar face—the well-memorized face of Gloria. The black-haired braided girl was now conversing with the secretarial dispatcher, leaning over the worktop with her back turned against him. Passing by her, he slightly turned his head to his left, pricking up ears for reason he himself didn't even know. Performing that, at the same time he caught and felt her cold predatory look stitched on to him, as though letting him know that his prying had been exposed.

All of this had lasted only several short moments, during which Michael had no other choice but to take a turn towards one of the two helical escalators that curled downwards and upwards between the floors; turning around for the last time, he saw that she was no longer there.

Chapter XI

Billy and John

The inner precincts of Orton City almost entirely constituted of spearing the sky at dizzying heights skyscrapers that formed a true labyrinth of imperial towers whose boundless reach had no match. And as soon as night fell, the massive monumental buildings struck one with awe with their chromatic shimmering effect caused by the arcane myriad of glinting specks and smithereens that interweaved into one minimalistic shade of gradient glimmer—every single building emitted its own differently structuralized lights that effulgently pulsated next to each other with a constant ebb and flow. The unceasing prevalent throbbing of the city’s heartbeat contributed to all of this as well: the eternal aerial traffic, the striding in opposite directions packs of people, the all-day, all-night entertainment and business metropolitan venues.

But if there was one thing that attracted the bystander’s interest the most, it was the rising at more than 1100 metres and seemingly insurmountable Elzeron Tower: a symbol of the transitional process propelled by the new socio-political and economic ideologies and principles widely introduced and accepted in the early XXI century, it had become a beacon of the already embraced technocratic and corporate societal beliefs and a reflection of the current zeitgeist. It was the highest skyscraper in the world and everything about it seemed flawless to the last detail, blotting out everything around and above it by making it look significantly inferior.

In the underground facilities of Elzeron Tower screams of agony and pain now transpired through the dank walls. Their source came from behind a big steel door, in a basement-room that no one would have ever guessed that was under one of the most renowned and majestic buildings in the world.

Surrounded by several staunch figures in a dimly lit room, a man hanging from the ceiling in chains and shackles was beaten and thrashed mercilessly by two tireless reckless hands; tortured for

hours now, and his face and body entirely covered in both dry and fresh blood, he was unrecognizably disfigured and maimed by the blows, his bare toes hardly ever touching the ground.

Suddenly, the torturer stopped pummeling at the naked man only because he began to feel his hands numb and stiff. When silence finally ensued in the small bedraggled room, broken only by the chained victim's occasional heavily distorted breathing, the man with bloodstained shirt and hands who stood in the middle of the room spoke at length:

“Dispose of the body and clean up the place—oh, and make sure the others have gotten the message too.”

The battered swinging man suddenly uttered some semi-conscious imploring words when the man was about to leave. The latter gave him no heed.

Hardly had he walked out of the door than the long-haired, green-eyed man with a deep diagonal scar that was as if always fresh and never healing and which passed through his right cheekbone, caught the last dying-out moans; closing the heavy door, they became almost inaudibly silent, until finally the very last groan died out in the echoing passages.

Walking along in the murky and dirty passageway, he was suddenly caught unawares by a voice behind him. He turned around.

“We’re getting seriously behind schedule, Billy. Not that I give a flying fuck about what he personally thinks of us, I’m just sayn’ that it’d be in our interest to not rattle the same boat... for now,” said the man standing by the door in the shadows.

The man with the scar looked at the svelte guy in pristine costume who was also long-haired and who had the same eye colour, but almost immediately turned his back and continued to walk on; the other guy followed him.

“I’m getting tired of spelling it out to you, John—how many times do I have to tell you that everything will be met in due time? By the by,” he started again, this time significantly lowering his voice, “whatever happened with that thing of ours?”

“It’s done,” answered cautiously the other long-haired man.

A strained silence between the two followed as they walked side by side.

“You know that *no one* has to learn about this. No one.”

“I know.”

A moment of silence filled the stifled air again, this time more prolonged.

“I see that you’ve had quite the fun back there, huh?” John broke in, noticing the splashed bloodstains on his brother’s hands and shirt. He gave a macabre smile.

“Put that aside and tell me what’s up with Shunningan.”

“Everything’s going as planned. The final arrangements are being negotiated as we speak, and if the fuckers carry out their part—which I doubt not they will—he’ll have his ass out again in a couple of days.”

“I see. Let’s hope the greedy bastards won’t cry for more—because you know what they say about the greedy ass...”

“...that it shits blood.”

Sinister smiles showed on their faces.

Reaching a rusty elevator at the end of the passage, the two entered. While being carried up, Billy took out his ionophone player from his trouser’s pocket, speaking a name-dialling command.

“Tell them to put some clean clothes in my office,” he said after connecting with the dialled person. “And bring the car in front.”

“Fuck, almost forgot,” said John after Billy hung up, “Beckard’s calling a meeting with the board. They’ll be discussing the particulars around the acquisition of the quartz mines in some bumfuck shithole—and he wants our presence there as well.”

“And yet again to hell with my plans,” the other green-eyed man exclaimed irritably, sighing with an indignant temper. “Always with the unpremeditated bullshit.”

The Billy and John McCarter brothers were one of Elzeron Investment Management Incorporation's founders, and were also part of its Board of Directors. It was founded in 2071 as a result of the historical conglomeratic merger between their ground-orbit telecommunications company "Lyancast Global Networks" and other two corporate giants: namely, Edgar Shunningan's "Gaulkros Energy Grounder"—back then one of the five biggest fossil energy fracking and excavating companies worldwide—and Beckard Simawvire's "Advanced Cybernetics & AI Research Institute", a leading company in the technological innovation field, encompassing research and development within the spheres of Cybernetics, Bionics, AI, Robotics, Nanorobotics, and many other branches.

Becoming the biggest investment management firm the world has ever seen, soon Elzeron Incorporation began expanding and attracting many big firms and corporations under its umbrella. For no time the company's tentacles reached to other various fields as well, which in turn provoked a serious public backlash that ultimately brought up the government's necessary intervention in the matter. Soon, however, that intervention turned out to be only provisional and not making any difference at all for the other non-affiliated market players.

Despite such insignificant attempts at limiting its outreach, Elzeron Incorporation was yet to grow even more, until finally one particular move proved to be a game-changer: 2048 was marked as the year when a revolutionary scientific breakthrough would forever change humanity's perspective on energy usage, finally becoming independently free of all hitherto conventional methods. Not only that, but the sudden inception of this new and promising energy source would also become the catalyst for many other technological innovations that would further lessen and break the boundaries of other century-old problems and inconveniences met in the ordinary person's everyday life.

The discovery took place in Tronsberg, Norway, in the laboratory of the physicist Dr. Antern Hornsern and his small team of university scientists. An extremely powerful synthetic radioisotope was in the end created of which even only very small quantities had

the properties of emitting highly concentrated and charged energy waves—it was named “hornsermium-302”. But the newly discovered energy source had one downside: it was too unstable to be directly used by any of the traditionally known methods. But nonetheless that obstacle was soon overcome when a cheap and efficient solution was finally found—to isolate its disproportionate unstable characteristics, quartz crystals proved to be the most suitable host for its radioactive isotopes, being the best choice among other mineral rocks or any other substances.

Elzeron Incorporation was one of the first companies to lay its hands on the lucrative prospect. It was also one of the first enterprises to get an official governmental approval of practicing their new promising business venture via daughter companies, founding subsidiaries that would later deal with the additional grinding and threshing processes.

Several years later the four owners and founders of the investment management company—Beckard Simawvire, Edgar Shunningan, and the McCarter brothers—took the title of one of the most influential and powerful men not only in the North American Domain, but also in the entire world. Their company became a major player in the energy business, legally partaking in the dictation of prices and in the household energy distribution of nearly half of the country; it was a main supplier to most of the Southamerican Protectorates as well, establishing mastodonic business roots in Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Chile.

As a result of that, it could be said that after some time their long desired political ambitions on a nationwide scale were finally realized: the four of them got to have their own influence in the Tribunal Council, backing up their own political partners elected as Tribunal Representatives and practicing careful, but otherwise rewarding in the long-run backstage control.

Chapter XII

Leads

After the operation at the “Rickman” Hotel Amanda and Gregory stuck around each other, a mutual trust having been developed between them for a relatively short time.

In the café-restaurant the air was pleasantly stifled with sweet aromatic scents, having been lucky enough to find a vacant table at that hour. They sat by the main undivided curving window designed in a vintage fashion, through which the clear and breezing sunny day could be seen outside behind a filtering tangerine tint. Their free time they decided to spend at leisure discussing the latest rumours and events surrounding the Police Department.

“So, you think those two are broiling something that could be of a potential threat to the Department’s interests?” asked Gregory.

“I can’t quite put my finger on it, but something’s definitely going on between the two, like... they don’t actually belong to this place... almost as if they are mere undesirable visitors. Gloria has been giving me these looks lately—”

Just at that moment one of the waitresses came up to them to take their orders.

“Just a coffee?” asked Amanda in surprise, after the waitress was gone.

“Yeah. Don’t feel like eating anything right now.”

“If you say so. By the way,” she started, “I have to stop by the Libroom, to pick up something. Want to come?”

“Sure, why not.”

Along one of the many corridors parting the whole Eastern Wing of the Police Department, labelled and numbered doors on both sides trailed on like ceaseless domino tiles, whirling one’s head in a vertigo of inescapable insipidness. But there were also doors

that could be immediately recognized on the spot, that of the main spacious Libroom being one of them.

It was the “Criminal and Undermining Activities” Division’s comp&toolkit room for everyday use, being located at the end of a corridor that intertwined with three others. The Libroom was mostly frequented by the lower-rank officers like Sergeants and Lieutenants for either personal or professional purposes, offering access to the Police Department’s server archive systems from which specific information about arrests, charges and current case statuses could be extracted, depending on the authority level.

Amanda and Gregory had already arrived there, and this time there were only a few people scattered at different corners, with only the working computer machines’ faint buzzing being audible. On such rare occasions of serenity, the Libroom was another perfect place for spending the noon break in placidity, when one would often find themselves wandering and skimming and rummaging through archive files of trials and completed spec ops merely out of boredom.

“This way,” Amanda beckoned to him, heading up to one of the empty clean-slacked desks.

Gregory followed her; joining her, he sat right next to her before the low-glowing 3D sheet-monitor on which against a blue background the outer edges of the static Police Department emblem altered their rippling layers. From time to time he turned to look around himself, as if for the first time acquainting himself with the place—in any other case Gregory wouldn’t even have been there, as he seldom visited the Libroom, and when he did, it was only for reasons exclusively pertaining to his official duties, such as acquiring and collecting additional information needed for a case whatever team he was at the time part of worked on. He was intently watching Amanda’s soft slim fingers briskly tapping onto the holographic bright keyboard, their tips passing through the projected translucent grid and being smeared with lucid rims the moment they made aerial contact. Taking out her federal identification card, she inserted it into a slot in the desk and waited.

A synthetic voice was heard, confirming the authorization in a warped tone. She started tapping on the desk again.

Gregory's curiosity slowly grew into a puzzlement, expecting to finally hear an explanation for their being there at that moment. And just when he was about to speak out, with an appropriated eagerness on her face Amanda suddenly pointed out at something on the glowing sheet-monitor.

“Look. Here. Do you see?”

He moved himself closer to it and silently began to read:

Case #8401-H-5... Breakdown... local chain... strip club venues... front... manufacture and packaging...—

“No, the paragraph below it.”

Case #883091-ML4275

Name: Christopher Mullock Dinkston

Born: 27.3.2055, Orton City, OT

Status: Pending. Prioritized nationwide apprehension.

Charges: Federal espionage and theft of classified and sensitive data.

Summary: The occupying at the time rank of Senior-Sergeant at the O.C.P.D. Christopher Dinkston, whose immediate apprehension is demanded, was last seen on the night of August 26, 2087. Probable accomplices involved, possibly insiders with whom the subject has been cooperating over a certain intervening period of time. Collusion with high-ranking members of the O.C.P.D. is likely.

Last updated: 17:22, September 5, 2087

Having read it, Gregory remained in his chair in thoughtful silence while in the meantime Amanda had taken out from her jacket's pocket a small plate-like device of a quirky design. She inserted it into another, narrower slot and began concentratedly and rapidly typing on the holographic keyboard.

“Wait, what's this?”

“As I already said earlier—I came to pick up something.” Amanda then stopped typing, fixedly staring at the screen before her.

Presently, Gregory turned his eyes towards the monitor as well, currently following thousands upon thousands of untraceable pixels assembling, re-assembling and disintegrating again and again upon one another with unfathomable speed, cryptic code lines stacking and delineating through what appeared to be back doors and vulnerable spots.

“I don’t like how this looks,” he started. “You know how badly we’re gonna get burned for this, right?”

But it was as though Amanda didn’t listen to him—judging by her face it seemed that she was in total control and fully and confidently aware of what she was doing.

“Let’s go,” pulling out her ID card and the peculiar device, Amanda declared, getting up. “I’ll explain later,” she added shortly thereafter.

Before he could even say anything, she was already heading towards the door, and not having any choice left, he followed her.

Leaving the Libroom, the two walked up to one of the elevators; it was empty. Gregory was still unresolvedly perplexed by what had just happened, but Amanda kept assuring him that everything would be fine and that she’d explain everything to him as soon as they got down.

They got inside the elevator.

“I thought we were leaving the building?” Gregory turned to her when he saw her stepping out of the cabin after they’ve arrived at the new floor.

“Come,” she answered, and continued walking on without stopping or looking back.

“For god’s sake, will you finally tell me what the heck’s going on?” Catching up to her, he continued, becoming slightly irritated by her unheeding behaviour: “Where’d you get that device, and what’s up with that case file?”

But no answer came.

At first she seemed to have difficulty finding the right path, but at length she steadied her course as she passed by the mundanity of bland, identical doors. Gregory was beginning to consider the possibility of him being, after all, used as a patsy who would corroborate her possible alibi. But this conjecture was almost immediately proven wrong.

“We’re going to see someone who might help us find some answers. When we get there I promise to explain everything.”

“Who’s the person?”

Speeding up the last several paces until they finally stood before a door, she said:

“He’s one of the very few that we could actually trust.”

But the door turned out to be locked, just now noticing the red glowing seal. Gregory then looked up to see what was written on the plank: “MICHAEL FRANCIS RIVERSTONE—CHIEF INSPECTOR-CRIMINOLOGIST”. The look of bitter disappointment on Amanda’s face didn’t remain hidden from him.

Taking out her player, she spoke into it a dialling command and waited. Several seconds later, Gregory heard the automatically responding message that the contact wasn’t available right now.

Looking at her, he could read the genuine dissatisfaction that showed in her eyes—she now strode back and forth at a nervous pace, her mien a rather haplessly frantic one.

When a random officer passed by, Amanda stopped and asked her:

“Do you happen to know where Michael Riverstone could possibly be right now? His room is locked and he isn’t answering his player.”

“Oh, Michael—he quit yesterday. Don’t know for what reason, though. Do you know him personally?”

As if stricken, Amanda stood there unable to move or say anything. But eventually she came to her senses.

“Yes... yes, I know him.” A restraining spasm suddenly took hold of her. Presently, she asked, releasing herself from its

smothering hands: “Did... Did he leave any message... for anyone?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

Forcing herself not to look so despondent, she and Gregory began walking away.

After a while the two now stood in silence in the middle of the corridor. Amanda’s grave remoteness was beginning to affect Gregory, so he decided to tactfully check if everything was alright.

“You okay?” he asked. “Looks like this thing’s really bugging you. Is it really that important?”

“It’s not that,” she said. “It’s *him*, Michael. He didn’t mention anything of this sort. I don’t know why he’s acting like this... or maybe I do, and it’s probably my fault.”

“So, do you have any idea where we can find him?”

“Yes, I do.”

Chapter XIII

A Brief Trip

The Intelligence Department was the only federal institution on a national level whose activities exclusively encompassed undercover, intelligence, and counter-intelligence activities, as well as other anti-infiltration protective measures that were often left out of the disclosure-based public record. The Intelligence Department was an organization that, similarly to the Police Department, was under the scrutinizing authority of the Tribunal Council—the supreme governmental body whose power was absolute and impregnable.

All future employees of the Intelligence Department were carefully and strictly selected, only the most experienced, ambitious, and talented individuals being picked and seen fit for the job. Ex-militarymen were the most suitable ones, as well as those with a remarkable and outstanding career in the Police Department who were usually quickly noticed.

In 2043 a decision was voted that the Police Department agency be officially attached to the Intelligence Department, and a year later the two institutions were merged into one bipartisan cooperative institutional structure, although still preserving their status as two independently operating federal entities. They both shared judicial responsibility and accountability before the Tribunal Council, but their formal partnership stopped there—none of them meddled into the other's affairs, drawing a line and maintaining a certain distance between each other and cooperating only when it was necessary, most of the times this being expressed in exchanges of sensitive information of mutual interest.

The Intelligence Department was located against the outskirts of the city, surrounded by little to none infrastructure in a relatively less populous than normal area where there were many open and untapped spaces and where the aerial traffic was almost non-

existent. From the outside, the federal complex had a plain outlook, but at the same time was resembling a mysterious black rectangular casket, impenetrable and without any kind of opening, piously keeping its secrets within its confines. It was entirely covered in anti-reflective, deeply black glass fractals that from a distance looked like one giant curtain spread over the whole building.

The afternoon autumn sun's brightening rays now relentlessly tried to penetrate through the building's ebony blockade, but all they could achieve was only one faint, almost perishing will-o'-the-wisp over this dead marshy satin surface that loosed its blackness in a long-stretching overshadowing daub—here the outcomes of the never-ending collision between the natural and the human-made was strikingly reminded of.

An aeromobile was now quickly approaching the area, until it finally landed on a nearby desolate cracked parkpad. Around it were some old, long ago abandoned tarnished blocks with interconnecting gangways between them whose worn-off and corroded paint was a rustic rod unfittingly interposed against the otherwise marine-coloured sky; nearby and across them an endless empty alley was disclosing an isolated passage towards more concrete and rusted iron structures alongside which haphazardly malformed and torn out waterpipes peeking out of the grounds occasionally released high-pressurized sparkling mist.

“Haven't been here since forever,” said Amanda as if to herself, while the two walked on along the narrow paved way amidst the green lawn of the Intelligence Department building; sturdy bushes and linden trees rustled from all sides and refreshed the air with a reviving pollinated scent, while at the yard's far end downsized monuments of inexplicable diabolic shape disturbed the pervasive quietness.

Throughout the whole time Amanda's attention was constantly fixed on her player, and even as they walked away from the car towards the building's vicinity she kept impatiently looking at the screen.

“Where'd you get that slim device you used in the Libroom?” Gregory asked her.

“The person we’re about to meet gave it to me,” she said while simultaneously scrolling up and down the screen with her thumb.

Reaching the illusorily indistinguishable, black-on-black overlaid slidedoor that was as if embedded into the rest of the building, they looked up and around in awe feeling themselves so small and petty under the overreaching gargantuan monolith which was a great vastness in an unlimited space.

“Will they let us in?”

“I hope so.”

Getting closer, the door unfolded automatically. As they entered, two blue side strokes of light immediately flashed at their sides as if piercing them, accompanied by a stingy signalling sound. Gregory stood still for a moment, but then guessed what that could be.

“*Scanning check,*” a mechanical female voice suddenly echoed with a clear intonation throughout the whole room. “*Identified subjects—Amanda Holloway Thorson and Gregory Enton Millow.*”

“I forgot to tell you about this,” Amanda said. “It’s just a routine facial check. The first and only time I was here I also reacted the same way.”

The section they were in was made out of a translucent material that could be perceived as a colourless, dense diamond-like crystal box. Gregory looked around to see if he could find the source of the flashes that caught him unawares, but it seemed that the space they were in was completely naked and ordinary.

Continuing on their way up to the far end of the small room, they stood before the thin outlines of what appeared to be another door—its saturation gradually increasing as they were getting closer, its crystalloid serrated inner refractions becoming darker and more homogeneous—but without a handle or any other protuberance. Next to it was some sort of a panel, iridescent and smoothly polished, angular protrusions coming out of its surface, with a cross-shaped input opening right above it.

“What’s next?”

But Amanda needn't answer, for the same mechanical voice sounded again:

“Place your palm on the scanning panel and insert your federal identification card in the slot above.”

Amanda placed her right hand on the smooth surface and then felt a weak tickling brushing against it: the iridescent panel's edges glinted thrice in addition to the dark-blue lines.

“Biometric recognition successful. Please insert your federal identification card.”

Taking out the rectangular glassy piece with glowing letters on it, she inserted it in the slot and waited.

“Access denied. Minimal Authority Level required: 5.”

The card was ejected.

“Well, that was something to be expe—”

“Wait,” Amanda cut him short, making a sign with her hand.

And almost at the same time the voice spoke again:

“A video conversation with an employee is optionable. Would you like to start one?”

“Yes,” answered Amanda.

“Please, voice the three names of the desired receiver.”

Gregory stood there watching with unhidden interest, closely following every move Amanda made throughout the process.

“Michael Francis Riverstone,” she said, enunciating the name.

“Initializing a connection. Please wait.”

During the brief intermission the two didn't dare say anything, their eyes only screwing on around the whole brightening glacial room that they had already grown accustomed to, its heavenly white-bluish texture mesmerizing them. A polyphonic continuous sound as though from a distance reverberated within and without.

The space around him was completely darkened and obscured, old crippling shadows from the past now lurking in from all sides and trying desperately to cling onto him; they seemed distanced and at the same time eminently distended due to the bright glimmer that came forth from beneath his feet, shedding a preternatural encircling radiance over and around him. From the tips of his fingers projectile buds of light now twinkled, and from them a five-set holographic multitask imagery spread ablaze like the nocturnal blossom of an untouched radiant sundown sky.

A sonorous voice notifying him of the call suddenly disrupted the silence, dissolving the menacing darkling wights. The room was lit again after which he accepted the call. The widespread screen changed and on it appeared the beaming face of a young girl.

“Amanda?” he said, half-surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“Couldn’t find you anywhere and you didn’t even pick up your calls. I then learned from another person that you quit and I wanted to know if everything’s okay.”

“Yes, everything’s okay. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you—I’ve been really strung-up the last couple of days because I had to get some pressing obligations done. I’ve to admit that it’s a real surprise seeing you here.”

“Had no other choice, you know. Well,” Amanda went on, “will you let us in? I’ve got some stuff I’ve been meaning to show you. Can’t be delayed any longer.”

A short pause followed from the other side. Michael carefully observed the two waiting youngsters. Stuttering the first words a bit, he said:

“I don’t think that’d be a good idea. It would be better if you two waited for me outside the building. I’m coming down right away.”

Five minutes later the three were already outside the Intelligence Department, sitting on a bench among the linden trees and trimmed bushes and turned sideways to the dismayingly behemoth

rectangular structure. Gregory listened attentively to the conversation between Amanda and the brown-haired man who somehow looked solemnly downcast.

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t share it with me,” Amanda was saying, sitting next to him and Gregory at her other side.

“The idea occurred to me spontaneously,” answered the strong-jawed man with sullen eyes, whose facial movements Gregory followed with the utmost interest. “Although it could be said I was considering it for quite some time now. It just happened because I needed the change.”

A moment of silence descended between the two; then Michael broke it:

“But you’re right that I should’ve told you about it. I’m sorry. Last time we met I behaved rudely, and I didn’t want you to—”

“No, please don’t go down this way again,” suddenly exclaimed Amanda jovially and smiling at him. “It’s okay, really. And if there’s anybody to blame, that would be me. *I* was the one who reacted rashly and childishly. Let’s just forget about it.”

Michael nodded agreeably.

“Don’t know if you’ve heard,” she turned again towards Michael, “but me and Greg were part of the operation at that hotel. And if it weren’t for his timely intervention”—here she turned towards Gregory on her right—“right now I wouldn’t be here talking with you.”

“What?”

“Yes, it’s true. That night he saved my life and I’ll be forever grateful to him.”

“We both know that you’d do the same for me,” said Gregory. “But one thing she missed to mention,” here he turned to Michael, “was that Shunningan was caught thanks to her. She did what no one else back then dared to, and on top of that she went entirely in the dark ready to risk getting shot. A deed worthy of praise, I daresay.”

“Well, I’m impressed,” said Michael, looking at her with composed face. “And you, Gregory, I owe you one.”

Calmness seemed to have embraced the three of them, during which they remained impassive as if not aware of each other. Presently, the sun was blotted out by a billowing cloud, and before long everything turned dull and grey; a chill wind whistled around.

“I’m curious to know how you two met,” Gregory broke the silence.

“The truth is there isn’t much to tell,” began Amanda. “I was still a freshman at the time when he was temporarily appointed General Mentor of my class. The first time we began working together was when our Divisions teamed up for some case that involved a number of local gangs affiliated with the Grouzers. He was the first person in the Department who gave me actual useful advices for the job, and he taught me a lot of things you wouldn’t have otherwise learned from the undergraduate courses.”

“Hell of a friend you’ve got there,” said Gregory, turning his gaze at the Intelligence Department building that appeared to him like some ancient artefact threatening to entirely spread over them any moment now.

“I know, right?” concurred Amanda smilingly. “You don’t get to know a former Agent every day.”

Clouds began joining with each other, making the sky darker; they could tell that a storm was imminent. A warm, increasing violent draught was battling over the entire area.

“Will you now tell me what was that thing about in the Libroom today?” Gregory again reminded her.

“Look,” she turned towards Michael on her left, “my fears are not without reason—there might really *be* a connection between the Christopher Dinkston case and the suspiciousness around Lester and Gloria. And that’s not all—it seems that someone has gained prohibited access to the Police Department’s main server.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know about the bill that was passed in 2076 stating that every piece of information about all powerplants is to be from

then on stored on each state Police Department's main server, right? Well, that's the reason why the breach happened that night in August—blueprints, system and support maps, statistical data from the last ten years and protocol access configurations were only one of the few things that were stolen... well, copied.

“You now probably wonder how I know about all this stuff. After our last meeting, I decided to go to our Division Supervisor, Dep. Frieschnik, with the intention of sharing with him my concerns about Lester and Gloria. Walking towards his office, just when I was about to take a turn, I heard his door being opened. He was conversing with someone, which meant he wasn't alone. Hiding behind the corner at a relatively close distance from him, I patiently listened to their conversation. At some point I was about to walk up to them, and just when I was about to give up my eavesdropping, the two voices suddenly became clearer and more audible—Dep. Frieschnik had stepped out of his office, and with him I could now recognize the voice of Commissioner Rowlan.”

Amanda stopped and looked around, her breath inverting. She continued:

“At first I could barely hear what they were talking about, but towards the end of their conversation I heard them mentioning something about a major system breach, an unauthorized data extraction that seemed to have stirred up the upper floors of the administration. Particularly, they were talking about hundreds of terabytes of stolen information about the city powerplant. Dep. Frieschnik also mentioned that according to the expertise report, that was the job of at least two perpetrators, if not more—one had to manually go through and cut off the defence chains before the backup boot was activated, and another to plug a specially designed hardware decoder in any one of the computers in the Department. And how an outsider could have gained access to the main server underground no one yet knows—the camera recordings have been pre-emptively deleted.”

“But why would someone go through the trouble to get his hands on that sort of information?” exclaimed Gregory. “What do they intend to do with it?”

“Haven’t got a clue.”

“This whole affair seems too odd and illogical—maybe there’s something more to it that we can’t even begin to guess.”

“Maybe. But whatever it is, someone has to try and get something out of them—that is, out of Lester and Gloria.”

“I’ve a question,” Michael joined in, “what makes you so sure that Lester and Gloria have anything to do with that server breach? And what is this device that Gregory mentioned earlier?”

“Before we arrived me and Gregory went to the Libroom. From one of the computers there I downloaded the rest of Christopher Dinkston’s archived case with this simple looking, but wondrous thing”—she took out the small rectangular device and showed it to him,—“and on our way here I managed to read the content to a more detailed extent. Looks familiar to you?”

Michael peered at the slim device, immediately recognizing it.

“I almost forgot about the telecoder. So it worked?”

“Yeah. So, what really struck me was how the conversation between Frieschnik and Rowlan perfectly added up to Christopher Dinkston’s data theft back in August—namely, that he was the one who had purportedly breached the main server and stolen the powerplant’s dataset. In the report it is said that he was last seen on August 26, and from their conversation I learned that during the breach there had been a brief disturbance in the electrical power system on the 10th floor.”

“The ‘Criminal and Undermining Activities’ Division?”

“Yes. They insinuated that this could hardly have been a coincidence, and that the alleged culprits are probably the ones that have disturbed the building’s power grid while performing the data extraction from a regular computer on the same floor.”

“Our floor,” Gregory said, bemused. “I remember there really *was* a brief power disturbance that night—me and several others noticed how the lights acted funny, and for a moment we thought there was some kind of an ongoing power outage.”

“Yes,” said Amanda. “I too was there around that time, but unlike you I didn’t pay any attention to it at all. But what I *did* notice, however, was Lester and Gloria’s presence that day.”

“Let me get it straight—you think that Gloria and Lester are the culprits in question that helped this Christopher guy steal the data from the main server system because they happened to be at that floor at that exact time?” asked Michael.

“Yes. And because the two were especially secretive that night and acted in a way I’ve never seen before.” Here she sighed. “I know it’s a far-fetched assumption, but at least it’s something we can start from and hold on to for the time being. Conduct our own little investigation, you know.”

For a while each of them didn’t make the slightest conscious or inadvertent move, contemplating their present ambivalent situation and thinking about the thousand ways in which unknown future events would develop and disentangle and affect them. They were so deeply sunk in their own private thoughts that they even failed to notice the light drizzle that had begun dribbling down their heads, aloofly unresponsive to the world around them. At length Amanda spoke:

“I suggest we keep it quiet and play our cards smartly—it’s obvious that the Police Department has long ago been compromised and that we can’t trust anyone anymore. We need to unravel this from its very beginning to its very end, but we also need to keep it tightly sealed.”

“I agree,” said Gregory.

“Mike, I’m sure you could be of a tremendous help to us... that is, if you want to get involved in this.”

Amanda and Gregory were now looking at the middle-aged man and waiting for his pending answer. But before saying anything, his eyes appeared as if oblivious and he himself not present.

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do. And I’ll make sure to do it discreetly.”

“Great! Now,” continued Amanda, presently looking up and squinting at the dropping light rain, “when will our next rendezvous be?”

“How about the old ‘Krauman Kinetics’ building? Seems fit for the purpose,” said Gregory.

“I think I know where it is. Well, in that case, one week from now, and the hour we’ll further appoint. Michael? We’ll still keep ourselves in touch in the meantime, right?”

“Of course.”

The three stood up from the bench and, looking round through the veil of brisk silvery drizzle, their eyes stopped on the dreadful sight that was the Intelligence Department: solemn and like the outreaching imperceptible pitch-black cosmos, its luminosity was still unaffected by the sparkling water drops that made everything else shimmer. Splitting, they walked off in opposite directions.

Heading back to the enshrouded in perpetual night building, Michael’s rummaging hand suddenly came upon something small and hard in his pocket; he took it out. Carefully observing the miniature Boeing B-17 and making sure it was intact, he put it back again. He continued walking down the narrow paved surface, the rain having become even more heavy and antagonistic.

Part 2

Chapter I

Behind Bars

The date was October 3—two days since Collins’ visitation at Tsin Dzi’s workshop in Junkhood, and one week since the operation at the “Rickman” Hotel.

The state supermax penitentiary “Craeton Fauerd” was the only one of its kind in the entire state. Southeast of the densely cramped areal “Beverlige” condominium, it was situated near the Maton river on a steppe land marked by many fens and bare-stalk withered shrouds.

The prison was surrounded from all sides by high-resistant passive plasma laser-hedges whose outreach went up to 130 metres from the ground; passing through them resulted in an immediate death, and there was a security admission check-up system with vertically cutting laser mines hidden underneath right next to the laser fence, which made any kind of escape almost impossible. “Craeton Fauerd” had four wings besides the main central building, and each of them had many landing pads that were marked with bright holographic projections floating above them. The prison itself was isolated with its own iron-made walls that had tungsten rods forged into them for extra stability and durability.

Collins’ aeromobile was now scudding ahead towards the large fortified building, flying over the devoid of any liveliness uncongenial fields whose only pattern for the most part was that of a drained wasteland to which time had long ago lost its essential meaning. Reaching the wrapped in mist prison, a diluted lighting beam suddenly gleamed from it and stopped onto his windshield, projecting over it a spread notifying message for a required authorization. Inserting his federal identification card in a slot on the

dashboard, Collins pressed some buttons and waited. Whereupon the message on the windshield changed to a greenlit text stating:

ACCESS GRANTED. AGENT B75, INTELLIGENCE
DEPARTMENT
ENJOY YOUR (HOPEFULLY BRIEF) STAY

Then on the dashboard display a three-dimensional schematic structure of the building popped up, where a selected landing pad on one of the wings now glowed and flickered.

The airborne-plasma vents roaringly released a thrusting rev and, accelerating, the flying vehicle headed for Wing B. From that altitude the prison looked like one big primordial warrior rune left on the surface by some long-forgotten indigenous tribal giants who in times of yore had dwelt there and then disappeared just as inexplicably.

When Collins finally landed, he got out of the car and cautiously, taking his time, explored the grim surrounding misty area. The haze made anything in radius of several steps indiscernible, and the only things that could be seen at a distance were the twinkling dim lights coming out of the holographic projectors. Round him were elevator cabins and he headed towards one of them. Picking floor five, he began to descend, and after several seconds he was already inside the prison.

He'll certainly be happy to see a familiar face, thought Collins as he walked along the busy passageway.

Heading towards a computer navigator, he pressed a button on it.

“Prisoner’s registry,” he said. And then: “Edgar Shunningan.”

“Prisoner E2480307 is currently suspended in cell 43A.”

Turning left, Collins began to walk along another passageway, passing by several guards equipped with protective helmets and parashock whips. After a while he stopped before a cell that was unusually bigger and loftier than the others he’d seen till now, its

door evidently being extra reinforced and having a sophisticated security locking mechanism with biometric detection and a numpad next to it as well. “43A” was carved in the steel surface.

Putting his head closer to the little glistening LED ball on the door, Collins’ eye was quickly illuminated and scanned.

“*Please enter your SSV code,*” a voice spoke. He entered the 10-digit code.

A signalling pip was heard. As the door began to open, a guard suddenly approached and stopped right next to him. His attention was first directed at the slowly gliding 2-ton circular door, and then at Collins.

“Another visit for the day, huh?” he bantered, semi-smiling. “You guys just don’t seem to give up, do you? The likes of him always get away with it, way sooner before you get to squeeze something out of them. You came all the way here only to stain your car.”

Collins pretended he didn’t hear his remark; he walked in.

As he’d expected, it was an irregularly big-sized room and it didn’t feel like a prison cell at all: a creamy, predisposing light was evenly distributed over a soft carpeted floor, the amber-welded walls burning with secret celestial fire. The furniture was scant, but enough and befitting a minimalist look, the most basic necessities having been secured such as two armchairs, a bed, a table, a food-storing container and even a separate bathroom. There were air filters all over the ceiling that were constantly working due to the cell’s lack of windows or any kind of openings. All of this shown to him through a several inches-thick plexiglass; the limited cubicle he was in was nothing like the room behind the partition: it was an empty space with naked walls of bleak standard prison design.

“You’re looking pretty rough these days,” he spoke, redirecting his gaze towards the obese slackened figure sitting in an armchair halfway turned around. He looked again at the thick transparent barrier and saw that it was spotlessly clean save the locked pass-box for transferring items. “Despite all the conveniences assured to you by taxpayer money, the cell’s still a cell, isn’t it?”

“Teasing is the last resort to despair,” Shunningan’s deep voice emitted from the surround speakers. He didn’t stand up or turn facing him, and it seemed that he had no inclination of doing so. “Why’d you even bother coming here? You know well enough that we’ll be seeing each other again in person, Agent.”

“Yeah, I was told the same—that it won’t be long before you get your well-deserved parole. But listen carefully what I’m about to tell you next, because it won’t sound anywhere near as sweet as your lawyers’ dandy talk.

“I’ve to admit that your people aren’t very competent at covering their tracks. Even when you get bailed out, this time your freedom won’t last long. I’m slowly beginning to unravel the things you and your mates have been cooking up for some time, and so far I can only tell you to watch your back—because I guarantee you I won’t stop here, even if you get away with only a slap on the wrist. But don’t worry, I haven’t come here to try and strike a deal with you, that’ll never happen. I just wanted to warn you to keep your eyes open, that’s all.”

At first there was a dead silence, then a sudden laughter came out of the man in the armchair, his thick hands and considerably large bald head shaking for a moment and then stopping. But either way he didn’t say anything: he remained in his armchair and it seemed that his attention was now entirely fixed upon the opposite end wall he’d been gazing at. Having nothing more to say, Collins turned around and headed for the entrance; but no sooner had he done this than the circular door commenced opening itself before he’d reached it. From it a man in a hurry appeared; he was in a business-like attire and was holding a solid, but ergonomic briefcase in one hand.

“And who are you, if I may know?” were his first words when he saw the tall pale green-eyed man standing by the plexiglass barrier.

“Agent Braduer Collins, Intelligence Department,” answered Collins, taking out his federal identification card and showing it to him. “And you must be his lawyer, I suppose?”

“Yes. Stikeman. Grigorius Stikeman. I’m Mr. Shunningan’s lawyer and representative at court,” said the lean man with snub nose and jutted-out cheekbones.

Collins looked at him and observed him closely. Small and prickly, his face had devious and deceptive traits hidden behind compellingly innocent and conformist eyes whose lurid gloss tried to hide the fact that they were nothing but a heinous trap for the gullible ones. Or at least he thought so.

“Well, Mr. Stikeman,” he said as he stepped out of the visitor’s cubicle, “I’ll leave you alone with your client. I’m sure you have a lot of important and confidential stuff to talk about.”

He left the cell.

Lifting off, he reached for the dashboard keypad and manually dialled a number.

He’d already reached an altitude of 200 metres and was still going up when a strange fit of unexplainable paranoia suddenly took hold of his mind, not knowing where or how it came nor why at such a moment. Was it the meeting with Shunningan that had triggered such an undesirable and stirring his otherwise relaxed state premonition, or was it just a gratuitous whim of his latent desire to cross a rarely overstepped boundary and once again dive straight into the dangerous and life-threatening? He couldn’t know or guess.

Maintaining the optimal for long-distance travel 500 metres, the board computer notified of a successful connection.

“Miles, you hear me? Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s copasetic, Brad,” answered a male voice on the other side. “You calling for the results?”

“Yeah.”

“Algorithm needs a little more time. It’s already day two since I put it on augmented modular search. After all, we’re talking about more than 400 million people and their individual public camera records—the whole pick-and-trace game’s a real heck of a carousel. Besides, the quality of the picture’s bad, which makes the whole process even more challenging.” A short pause between the

two. “Remind me again—why are you making me do this, when your resources at work are several times more powerful and effective than mine?”

“I already explained it to you,” Collins said. “Since the Police Department was compromised back in August, I don’t trust anyone anymore.”

“I understand. Well, I don’t mind at all doing it this way, so... Hold on for a second, gotta fix and re-adjust something in the network adapters’ binary matrixes. I’ll be right back.”

Collins didn’t have much to do but wait. From the other side nothing distinguishable was heard save the occasional frequential white noise caused by the high-altitude piloting. He was already heading up north to Urridge District and accelerating, he glided on in the air even faster.

Just then something happened—he had the feeling that he was being tailgated and followed. Looking over his shoulder, he first turned to his right, then to his left. Nothing—nothing except the stale morning smog over the barren fields below whose only populace were the withering shrouds and bubbling mires. The city’s outskirts still seemed distant and like one thin black line doodled against a grey canvas that was the city’s unfinished early-October landscape. Sighing with relief and focusing again, in the meantime he decided to check the atmospheric pressure and temperature. The main glowing dashboard display showed 1015 hPa and 9°C; he also checked the gyroscope—no deviations in the angular velocity were detected.

Something suddenly hit the windshield, leaving smudges of blood; he started. He couldn’t see what it was exactly, but it was definitely something small and black.

Probably a crow or a raven, he thought, still a bit startled. He turned on the wipers.

At that moment the dashboard speakers boomed out.

“I’m here. Sorry, Brad, but damned I be if those adapters aren’t crying for a replacement.”

“I’d like to ask you something.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I need you to find me some info on this person—*Grigorius Stikeman*. Anything related to him. He’s a lawyer. Shunningan’s current lawyer.”

“I’ll do it. I’ll also gonna call you once the database search is done, which would be in about 4 to—”

The connection’s quality was drastically distorted. Collins tried to reset the signal and re-dial again, but the frequencies were still disrupted.

Before long the communication finally died off, leaving only white noise behind.

“Failed to re-connect to 03I085,” sounded inside the car.

Collins had no idea what could possibly be the reason for this mischance. The weather was fine, and there weren’t any other vehicles flying around to disrupt the signal except for...

All of a sudden two black aerofreighters appeared from both sides—they were flying near him, maintaining the same speed and altitude. They had blackened-out windows and nothing could be seen inside. Before long two dark-blue spheres slowly appeared up from their roofs, and he saw that they were fit within something like additional transparent spherical shells. He immediately sensed the danger: he had to get out of there as fast as possible. Speeding up and descending, he was now below them and tens of metres ahead. For a moment he thought he’d rid himself of them, but then quickly realized he couldn’t have been further from the truth—310 km/h and they were still after him, getting closer and closer despite their crude build and several times heavier weight.

“330... 350... 390 kilometres per hour! That’s not possible!” he thought, reaching dangerous override levels.

The two aerofreighters were aligned with him again. He tried to escape them with every possible manoeuvre by descending, ascending and swerving around, but everything was to no avail. A moment later the two spheres began to glow, until they radiated with a burningly bright blaze.

A flash, and the aeromobile’s main system was shut down.

Collins felt as if he was struck by a lightning bolt, his body shaken and stunned; he could still move, but somehow his limbs were detached and relieved of their sensitivity. And while trying to figure out what to do next, he began to pass out—first a vertigo, and then his sight starting to blur, until finally leaning back in his seat with his whole weight pressing against him, losing sense of direction and space. His aeromobile slowed down and then, trapped within the gravitational grip of the two side vehicles, continued to be freely carried along between them.

Chapter II

A Truant Away

“If you’re done with the file, I’d want you to go up to the 16th of ‘Domestics’. They need some extra help with their September archival.”

“I’m almost ready,” Amanda said, finishing up with the last details of the report. The Division’s Chief Deputy stood there bent over her, with hands tucked in his pockets and with an inquiring look repeatedly shifting at her away from the tabmonitor. Standing there for several moments more, at last he turned and headed to the other desks.

Amanda sighed with desperation, while her fingers worked on the touchless lit keyboard.

She wondered what Michael was doing at the moment, now that he was once again back to his old job.

In one of the big meticulously structuralized work-offices of the “Criminal and Undermining Activities” Division, an incessant pool of movement and talk was ruling over. The day was expected to be long and tedious, and everyone was currently focused on their tasks before the regular noon break hit the clock. Lifting herself up from her chair, Amanda threw a quick glance over the numerous divided partitions, searching for Gregory among countless faces. Finding his spot not so far off her, she saw his upright head showing above the other partitioned stalls.

Sitting down again, she began thinking about Christopher Dinkston, the stolen information and all the secrecy around Lester and Gloria... Gloria! with the side of her eye she descried the familiar face that was now leaving her workspace, heading for the corridor. Indecisively caught between several options, at first Amanda wasn’t sure how to approach the situation. She geared up her entire courage, stood up and went after her.

Getting outside the work-office, she searched for her after having temporarily lost her. Quickly finding the walking figure

again, she began to follow her, keeping a reasonable distance and not taking eyes off of her. Finally getting into the elevator, she quickly ran up to the same spot; there she saw the number “0” shown on the counter.

She’s leaving the building, she thought.

Stepping forth into another elevator, she pressed the “0” button. On her way down she had to stop several times at different floors, and was now beginning to worry that she could lose Gloria before she even got down.

Under great pressure, she finally reached the entrance floor of the Department and began tracking down and looking out for her. But she was nowhere to be seen. Mini-carriers were buzzing around with items and parcels hooked on to their needle-like legs that were about to be delivered throughout the entire building; and apart from that, the usual hustle and bustle made it especially difficult for Amanda to espy Gloria.

She must’ve already left, the bitter fancy went through her mind.

Walking toward the exit, she was now outside the building standing in front of the main entrance doors; and looking around, she finally saw Gloria somewhere in the distance at the parking lot. She was just getting inside one of the police aeromobiles, and starting up the engine, lifted off. Amanda ran up to the parked cars; picking license number “J735”, she put her hand against the left front window, and gaining biometric access, quickly got in the aeromobile and ascended.

Catching sight of the car, she was steadily keeping course behind her. But soon the whole endeavour proved extremely difficult and tricky when the aerial traffic began to impair her course, becoming more and more challenging to her to keep the track fresh—mainly aeromobiles and aerobuses were the ones that frequently blocked her sight, and so in the end she had no other choice but to shorten the distance without raising the least suspicion in the totally unaware Gloria.

You won't escape me this time, thought Amanda, steering up the handle-set and closely watching the vehicle before her.

Soon it became clear to her that Gloria had been heading to that part of Orton which was notorious for only one thing: the Urridge District was known as a territory where many kidnappings happened, and it was believed that the abductees were later used in illegal and monstrous experimental practices which no one knew where they were conducted or why. Even to this day the mystery remained unsolved, and now Amanda was about to enter that territory of many buried lost voices forever wiped out of time.

For some reason Gregory was reminded of her: his sustained concentration wandered away in some other direction, and now deciding to see and check out if he could catch a glimpse of her, he stood up a little just enough to look around at the many other faces and heads that jutted out of their workspaces. He searched for her, but couldn't find her, and so sat again.

Maybe she's overflowed with work, he thought, focusing on the charted content on the tabmonitor before him. Soon he was again immersed in his mundane work and would remain so for a while.

Like a flock of frenzied, bestial carrion birds landed on a breathless insidious field the megalithic buildings conveyed a certain feeling of inescapability and perdition. The Urridge District with its ever-overshadowing buildings and blocks was a dangerous place especially at night, when people suddenly disappeared without a knowing or a word. Since 2075 it had been a territory of Beckard Simawire—the head of the Grouzers—and being a place where no law or justice could ever reign again, most of the law-enforcement authorities evaded it and seldom had any business there. Many of its residents having moved to live somewhere else, the Urridge District was now for its most part unpopulated and infrastructurally abandoned, with lots of its former neighbourhoods that were once inhabited ridden of almost any human presence, the dilapidated decaying places abounding with bums and drug addicts.

However, there were three private modern institutes in the Urridge District: “Bioelectronics Engineering”, “Bionics Research, Application, and Enhancement”, and “Styron Laboratory”, all of which were the remnants of Beckard Simawvire’s former company “Advanced Cybernetics” before it became part of a mutual consortium under the umbrella of their investment management corporation. Many rumours surrounded these three scientific institutes, and their true nature and activity were always questioned.

Amanda cleaned off the condensed windshield with her sleeve; it was still relatively cold outside and her windows constantly got blurred. Already having entered the Urridge District territory, like a phantom chaser she continued to follow Gloria’s car, this time at a bigger distance and higher up. Everything below was dark and gloomy as if night always reigned there; she couldn’t see clearly if there were any people on the streets, nor any movements or extraneous lights. But still, she knew that there was still life going on down there, just not as active as the rest of the city.

Just then a worm-like slithering trail appeared somewhere in the distance: another one, and then two more, and now they were all stretching and reeling and making turns, diving low and surfacing again and then mingling together with other vehicles when everything was to be dispersed again, disappearing far off into the wideness of the grey sky. It didn’t take much time for Amanda to recognize the depreciated Boltnok-T reactive trains that transported the few remaining inhabitants daily between faraway areas and points not only within the District, but to and from the whole city as well.

Life here’s still unquenched, not giving up, she thought.

Still driving after Gloria, suddenly she noticed how her automobile began to descend towards a low-lying white modest building. She followed her. Then to her surprise, she noticed that the building had several vertical recesses in it, one of which Gloria was now heading to; going through it, her car disappeared into the darkness inside.

Doing the same, Amanda headed for the same cavern-like slit gap until everything turned black before her: she was completely enshrouded in darkness that only her headlights pierced through and

made the way ahead visible to some extent. Seeing an end wall and suddenly stopping mid-air, before long the entire space was lit: it was some sort of a big inner landing room which had been painted in a dull green shade. There were two stair-ramps on both sides, each leading to a door in the middle of the long yellowish-green-painted walls. There were also scaffolds, big cover plates, forklifts and other known and unknown machinery spread throughout the whole site. Touching ground, Amanda saw that there was no one else there save Gloria's empty parked aeromobile. Getting out of her car, she walked around, looking for her colleague but still in vain—there was no sign of her.

Noticing a caged lift before her, she walked up to it. There was a sign over it, and getting nearer, it became clearer to her. She could now read:

SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTE
“BIONICS RESEARCH, APPLICATION, AND EN-
HANCEMENT”

Z1

Strange, she thought. *The name sounds familiar.*

Walking the rest of the distance and stopping before the caged lift, she pressed a button she saw next to it. A noisy, heavily screeching chain-like sound rasped from below. Suddenly, she heard, or thought she heard, fast-pacing steps. Turning around, she saw that there was no one else except her.

It's probably coming from the lift, she said to herself.

At that moment the lightning was turned off, and with it the lift stopped working as well; nothing could be seen at a close range. Only the faint outdoors light coming from the entrance opening in the distance presented what little visibility it could afford, but still nowhere near enough to reveal what was really happening. Amanda pricked up ears and put a hand on her holster. Cautiously, she began walking with silent steps, turning her head every second in the insoluble murk.

Suddenly, she heard fast-pacing echoing steps behind her. She turned around, taking out her gun. There was nothing around her as far as she could discern.

Turning around again, something heavy hit her from behind, causing her to swing away until she dropped on the ground with her eyes closed.

Chapter III

Recollections

November 20, 2051. Around midnight witnesses had noticed a sudden burst of sparks in the sky, followed by spread-out spasmodic flames. Everything had happened in seconds: a curving object was falling down towards one of the two main parks on Willington Avenue, causing total havoc and panic thereabouts.

It was a public train and the reason for the crash a highly unlikely malfunction in the front reactive engine that shouldn't have even happened. Even to this day no one had yet been found guilty, the final court decision ruling a tragic accident caused by unforeseen unfortunate circumstances.

Police, firefighting, and medical units were immediately dispatched to the place. Just at that time Anthony Collins and his partner Phil happened to be near the area on a midnight patrol shift, when the night dispatch reported an accident downtown with possible casualties. Having speedily arrived at the place, the reactive train hadn't yet been entirely engulfed in flames: it was reported to them that the engines had been still working during the fall, which in turn had drastically softened the landing. The people nearby had told the first police officers that there were passengers inside that were still alive and moving, seen through partially cracked and shattered windows. Most of the train had remained unaffected by the spreading flames, but the door entrances were warped and crumbled and thus made impassable due to the heavy crash; the windows were the only direct way through which one could get in or out.

“Wait, man,” shouted Phil, who stood nervously and disconcertedly by the aeromobile, seeing his colleague running straight towards the burning machine that had left behind a total wreckage of demolished smouldering trees and debris.

“Disperse the crowd to a safe distance,” his partner responded through the cracking and snapping hot air.

“This is nuts, Tom! Don’t do it!” his friend continued to deter him, not giving up, but the galloping figure was already way ahead until its sight was finally lost beyond the billowing smokes and flickering ember specks around the burned trail in the grass that spread far out into the suffocating mist.

Getting nearer to the flame-enshrouded snail-bent machine composition, he felt an irrepressible heat under his clothes and against his face. Fiery dust stuck on his perspiring eyebrows and eyelids, burning them with hot stinging. He was quickly covered in a thin layer of ash and soot when he could already see some unconscious bodies in the seats behind the broken windows, as well as some that appeared to be slowly crawling and staggering on the floor, but apparently unaware and in shock. The lighting inside was still up, flicking in pale blue. The two exhaust plasma valves at the front were completely wrecked and deformed, spitting out electric sparkles that sizzled and mingled with the flames that were currently spreading towards the rest of the hull.

Resolved not to lose any more time, he tossed his jacket away; and taking out from his pocket a psychotropic capsule for dulling the nerve perceptive points, he put it in his mouth and squished it with his teeth. Dashing forward, he hurled himself right between the writhing flames ravaging from both sides. The heat had become unbearable, intoxicating. Unbuttoning the blaster from his holster, he crushed the cracked window open with the bottom of its handle. Getting in through the gaping hole, he saw several lying bodies on the floor, together with another half a dozen on the seats that were either swaying sideways or in a completely unconscious state; brooks of blood were at his feet. Rushing, he went up to the first conscious passenger who was a young woman. She was moving her head lethargically and murmuring something as if in a feverish fit—she was in shock and her two legs were badly broken, a bone poking out of the one. Getting a tight grip around her, he took her body up and headed back to the broken window. Stepping outside in the open, torching flames were the first thing that met him; with a long leap he quickly passed through them, and, striding forward with the girl close to his chest, he finally got out of the dangerous

zone. Crouching and carefully laying down the girl next to the girthy trunk of a tree, he shouted and made a sign to Phil in the distance who was just finishing up with helping scattering the onlookers to come and get her out of there.

Up till now the psychotropic capsule had been working as intended, but now he was starting to feel its effect gradually diminish. As he headed back to the blazing train, suddenly a distant roaring noise was heard coming from the sky. He looked up, and through the dense grey smoke he could make out the coming emergency units. Leaping again through the fiery barricade, he returned inside the wagon; there his eyes were fixed on the floor where now a middle-aged man was struggling to get up, holding desperately for one of the seat handles, blood coming out of his mouth as well as from his badly wounded head. He grabbed him for the shoulder and the two staggered out of the hole. Before long he lay him down against the same tree. Running back to the train for the third time, he could already hear voices behind him accumulating in an altercating congregation. The flames were getting extremely lethal and out of control, the fiery encirclement round the train completely devouring it from all sides. His skin and ragged clothes were beginning to burn and tear off, so he quickly quenched them with patting strokes. Soon, he knew, the bulky waterpunges would release from above several tons of water at once. Lifting another woman in his arms, he plunged again through the broken window, blue and red glimmering dots being visible through the dark smoke in the distance. He descried several faint silhouettes in the lighted smoke quickly approaching him, one of which he made out to be Phil. Staggering along the way, he ran forward as fast as he could, his arms' strength weakened to the point of dropping down, his legs already giving way under him.

Suddenly, his partner and everyone else on the other side were blinded and smitten by an unseen burningly bright imploding effulgence, cleaving asunder the dark sky above. The explosion that followed caused an impact wave that made everything near atremble, shaking the ground foundations in tremor and fury. A dead silence ensued.

Chapter IV

Beckard

“Wake up! Hey, do you hear me? Wake up!” a woman’s voice called from somewhere, sounding excruciatingly vivid in its inflection.

It gradually grew louder until he woke astir, returning to his senses and becoming conscious again. The dull impulsive vocal throbbing in his head was almost gone, and he could already discern and process the words around him clearly. He tried to move, but something wasn’t quite right: he felt a strong burning pain stretching over his entire body, his hands and feet numb but still responding. The next thing he realized was his upright position, his legs barely making any contact with the ground and occasionally swinging freely whenever he made sudden movements. His head felt unbearably heavy, as if extra weight was added to it; but in the end he could lift it, straining with inhuman efforts. His eyes were striving for clearance, but whenever he tried to open them they were always hindered by a blinding light. The same female voice called him again, and this time, as if revived by its summoning clarity and sonorous vigour, he finally opened them, quickly adjusting to the brightness.

At first everything was unclear and smeared. Then, after shaking his head and blinking several times, a small squalid and empty mouldy room was revealed before him; the initial greyish whiteness no longer appeared so harsh and seizure-inducing. Before long he saw that his hands were tightly bonded together by intricate sturdy cuffs from which long steel chain reached up to the deteriorated coarse ceiling where it disappeared through it. Shaking his body again and his legs desperately flinging back and forth, he tried to somehow break loose, but at length the only thing that resulted from all this was more wrenching pain in the back and arms. Only now did he notice the fair girl in red leather jacket next to him, she also being in the same hopeless situation as him, chained and

hanging loosely, but securely, with her feet almost afloat from the ground.

“Fuck, finally,” she said with a big sigh of relief. “Are you okay? You were unconscious for more than an hour and I—”

“Wait, a whole hour?” Collins interrupted her, surprised at this newly learnt information.

“Well, yes... give or take. But it might’ve been longer—I was knocked out as well. Don’t know how long it’s been since they dragged me in here... wait!” the girl suddenly exclaimed, “I recognize you! You were present during that skirmishing operation that night, Agent... Conrad?”

“Agent *Collins*,” he corrected her.

Suddenly from beyond the walls a suppressed mechanical wobbling noise thudded several times at even intervals; it was as if it came from all sides, hardly traceable and bearing a drum-like vibration.

Once again Collins shook his cuffed hands, trying to find some loose fixture through which he could slip off, but he soon gave up, seeing that everything was useless and that whoever did this he obviously made sure to leave no room for any negligence. He looked around, then listened attentively. Save the muted thumping noise beyond the walls nothing else was heard.

The blond girl on his left watched him in silence. But as she was about to break it, Collins spoke first:

“Do you remember how you got here?”

“The last thing I could recall is how I was on a stakeout. My mind’s still a bit hazy, and I feel dull pain in my head. I was probably hit just before I was dragged in here.”

“Do you know what building we’re in? Anything that you can remember, like small details or signs that you could’ve possibly memorized before you passed out?”

The girl in red jacket pondered for a while. She tried to recall the last moments just before she’d lost consciousness, the headache distracting her from properly thinking.

“The earliest thing I remember is how I got in through a narrow vertical recess of a building... I can’t tell what exactly it was, but it was an unusual yet simplistic structure, not too tall and not too wide... I also remember what was inside... I remember how I landed, and how she wasn’t there, only her car... some machinery equipment around... the staircases... the elevator cage... Yes!” she exclaimed, satisfied that she could finally remember. “The cage! I was just waiting for the lift when suddenly the whole lighting was turned off. And then, then I was hit! I was caught off guard and wasn’t able to see the face of the person who did it. It happened very suddenly.”

Hearing her account, Collins tried to make something out of it, but no matter how hard he pondered over it, in the end it was all futile. The thudding mechanical noise suddenly stopped.

“Something else?” Collins asked again. “Anything, no matter how trivial or unimportant it may seem?”

The girl began rewinding the events again prior to the moment of her blackout. Collins watched her patiently but at the same time something inside him was making him uneasy, and so he tried to put aside those pocking misgivings for as long as he could.

“There was a sign right above the lift-cage... yes, I can clearly remember it now.”

“What sign?”

“Bionics-something... ‘Bionics Research, Application, and Enhancement’, if I’m not being mistaken. Yes, that’s it—that’s exactly what was written. Do you think... what’s the matter?”

The girl looked at him, seeing his suddenly appropriated expression of bitter realization: it didn’t bode anything good or encouraging, and something told her that now their situation had become by default much worse.

At that same moment the walls thereabouts were again awakened, but this time the noise came as if right from outside—a tangible pneumatic tact that made everything whump and thump with rhythmic rumble; the girl and Collins could even feel it along the chains and with the tips of their feet. Everything around started

to move atremble as though enlivened by the former shake that had rattled their senses for a while. Then they both saw how the corners of the ceiling began to slowly move away from each other, unfolding, the walls spreading as the ceiling remained attached to the right sidewall and at the same time moving along with it. As this happened, a straight thin line suddenly appeared on it, beginning from Collins' side towards the end of the chain and allowing his and the girl's to freely glide along it, remaining attached to some other, outside ceiling. And then, just before the room was completely unfolded, the walls themselves began altering their state-matter, their surfaces rapidly changing colour and contrast until they finally intercepted and entwined into one intermixed palette of chaotically glinting blotches.

As the walls and ceiling were almost completely unfurled, the space outside was revealed dark and ridden of any glimpse of light. But as their sight grew keener, adapting to the blackness, they saw that it wasn't exactly so: soft twilight glow was flaring in diluted omnipresence, impossible to be looked at directly and always appearing elsewhere before one fixed their gaze upon it. It shuddered in a ghostly manner.

An air of exalted expectation lay dormant as usual when the time for the daily noon break announcement was approaching. Everyone looked forward to it with impatience that most often manifested itself in the usual leg tapping and occasional spontaneous and directionless glances.

A voice's timbre was suddenly distributed throughout the whole building, announcing with indifferent tone the long-awaited hour. The many seats' occupants stirred and hastened to get out of the work-office, forgetting everyone and everything for the time being.

Gregory decided to wait a little more for the congregated throng to disperse; he had just finished with his task when a big heavy arm landed on his shoulder.

"Kill or be killed!" said the man behind him who, judging by his voice, was in high spirits. It was his colleague and friend

Alfonso with whom he hanged and played football every Friday night with several other guys from the Department. “I definitely don’t wanna spend the break packed with the plebs in a line. Grab your shit and let’s get outta here.”

“What about Ernst?”

“He’s already waiting for us. C’mon, move them slacky legs!” the rumpled black-haired man spurred him on. He had inquiring hawkish eyes and his face bore a childlike expression and features—lively and amicable.

The two headed for the door, being one of the last ones to leave. But just then Gregory remembered something important; he turned back and went towards Amanda’s workspace—it was empty.

“What’re you doing?” exclaimed his friend realizing he’d just been abandoned in the most unmannerly way when he stopped at the threshold. “You deaf, boy? We’re already late!”

Gregory didn’t say anything. As they speedwalked, he decided to take out his playger, dialling Amanda. Suddenly someone’s unintelligible shouting was heard along the entire corridor’s length; a confused hubbub arose and the two halted.

“Turn on the local news stream!” was saying the indistinct voice as it began to mingle with the general clamour. “...has escaped!”

Alfonso and Gregory looked at each other perplexed.

“What’s this all about?” Gregory asked.

“No idea,” Alfonso said. “I only heard that someone’s escaped or something like that.”

Every and all movement around them had ceased, everyone having taken out their devices in haste. A multiple-layered semi-tonal echo filled the corridor’s confines.

Setting the channelling view-mode of his playger to *holographic*, Gregory immediately switched on to the local news stream. Moving aside the two now watched with fixated eyes the iridescent picture half-floating over the device. It was a live broadcast and in the background behind the reporter was a partially burning building with dark smoke surrounding most of the open area.

“...as an official address to the public is expected to be delivered soon by the warden Mr. Stone Heggins, as well as from other members of the administration. To our viewers who have just tuned in: less than 30 minutes ago the Orton State Penitentiary ‘Craeton Fauerd’ was breached by an unprecedented outside attack led by an unknown group.

“According to the information we have, three unidentified flying vehicles, one of which is thought to be an aerofreighter, have broken into the federal institution’s vicinity, temporarily shutting down all security systems by means not yet known. There is an ongoing investigation and as of now the authorities refuse to disclose any further information. What we do know, however, is that the prison’s CCTV cameras have allegedly been remotely overdriven. A controlled explosion has then followed in Wing B, demolishing a small chunk of it, and it is still unclear whether this has occurred from the inside or the outside.

“After a preliminary recount of the prisoners, only one individual is reported to be missing for now—and that is the local business magnate Edgar Von Shunningan, apprehended the night of 26 September during a specialized operation conducted by the Orton Police Department in the ‘Rickman’ Hotel.

“Many frozen cases and suspended trials have led several times to political unrest among the highest echelons of the government administration, and the Tribunal Council’s Special Supreme Commission often found itself unable to reach a consensus regarding the respective judicial proceedings. Such was the last trial that was scheduled for next week, which would have been Edgar Shunningan’s biggest one so far.

“An emergency meeting behind closed doors is being held right now between the mayor and the City Council. It is expected a thorough search operation to be soon initialized by the Police Department. It is also...”

Gregory turned off the stream. He and Alfonso stood there like two concrete statues, not speaking or saying anything, when suddenly Lieutenant Wyton came up to them pushing and bumping

in between officers, his nostrils and mouth inhaling and releasing air of fervent exertion.

“You two—hall 5E, now. Get your asses out there!” he commanded, not stopping for a second and continuing in frenzied haste down the corridor at a trot, making sure the selected people have received the summons.

“There goes our noon break,” jested Alfonso with a wry smile. “Fuckin’ A.”

At first the sheer unworldly gloom’s simplicity, as well as the inanimate faded pallidity of the thorough twilight caused inner spiritual peace—it was a benevolent interference that was soon to reveal itself in its full blessedness never felt and never known before to a living being. But that which Collins and the girl were subject to didn’t have any beginning nor end—they were caught somewhere in the middle of their inbeing, trapped in their own timelessness that was nothing but a remnant of their past lives and experiences.

And as it happened to attract them more and more to itself, all the sudden this long-desired heavenly dream was taken away from them, having lasted no more than a couple of blissful moments and then vanishing incomplete and never to be reached again.

Presently, the looming undefinable paleness began to be slowly cast away, dying out in the refined to perfection nothingness. A single pulsating uncharacteristic howl was born from somewhere—a bellow of an atrocious hybrid origin. Then a net of incandescent colourful threads soon began to form and twist airlessly in the darkness, in an unlimited motley of shapes and nuances—they passed between them, entangled round their legs and arms and whirled at random in one continuous loop. A thunderous rumbling noise came next, drumming their ears with a deafening excess of tearing tumult, and then, superseding it, a caressing sea breeze flared every single pore of their body. It became cold; everything around them transcended into stormy turbulent water flows. It was densely dark-blue, terrifying, but still euphoric. Creatures never before explored by man were now floating freely along the subterranean tide

and currents, their fins and tails flailing in depth and in resonance and harmony.

At one point Collins and the girl, so captivated by this vivid coexistent reliving, thought that they would eventually be drowned in this vastness of oceanic world, their bodies never to be found and pulled out. But soon they realized that everything was a mere illusion—an elaborate imagery and deception of the senses—as they still breathed and were not affected in any way by the dashing streams.

Everything ostensibly present was now gone; the refreshing breeze had also suddenly disappeared, and in no time everything was back to its former state: total impermeable blackness, as real as they themselves felt their current confinement.

“Can you slip your hands through?” Collins’ unchanged voice was heard out of somewhere.

“I already tried that, it’s useless,” answered the girl in return.

A heavy metallic stomping reverberated from an unknown direction. The two froze.

“Try it again!” Collins exclaimed after several moments of dreadful silence had passed.

And as the chains next to him begun to relentlessly clang, two bloodshot, demonic vertical lines appeared before them, standing there at a relative distance and immobile. Surrounded by infallible blackness, the two lines glowed there in a burningly bright red, sticking out like the eyes of a creeping ghoulish creature ready to do harm with sadistic finesse.

Another stomping, this time lighter and more human-like, was approaching them, the pacing getting slower and irregular. The two vulturous menacing lines were still directed at them with no inclination whatsoever of changing or shifting their malicious gaze away.

“Too stubborn, I’m afraid. But I still admire your perseverance, Mr. Collins,” a man’s voice suddenly filled the space around

with a distinct monotonicity that seemed to hold on in the air for quite some time. “Pardon me—*Agent Collins.*”

Then and there the void of darkness was almost immediately dispelled by a scorching stupefying light that struck their already accustomed perceptions with a hammering disbalancing momentum of fatigue. The main room they were in had well-polished grey walls, a dark-grey ceiling and a black floor, and along the corners of the ceiling pipe-like elongations were half-protruding from it. On each of the two sidewalls were three circular blackstone discs, in the centre of each an unknown matter constantly polymerizing and reshaping itself, this way creating a dazzling and charming malleability of a rushing myriad of intra-warped colours—an opalescent enclosure glittering with its own versatile firmament. The source of the clean light in the room came from eight luminous bulbs, and there were small circular grates everywhere on the floor.

After the submerging veil had been lifted, Collins and the girl could finally see the rest of the embodiment to which the two deadly red stripes were affixed: they found themselves standing before two silvery creatures face to face, their built made of seemingly high-quality end materials and components and having a slim and agile anthropomorphic anatomy. Collins immediately knew what they were—an enhanced model of battlebots used by the army’s primary Reconnaissance Corps, a stealth autonomous tool ready for any kind of close-hand combat neutering.

Behind the battlebots stood six men, three of which in suits, and all with indifferent grave physiognomies. But there was one person among them in particular who didn’t quite fit in with his differing composure and eerie presence: except that he stood in front of the rest like a harbinger of some inevitable punishment, his face appeared as if it had seen all the joys, sorrows, pains and tragedies in the world—the look of a weary, cynical wanderer who’d been absolving every single sin since time immemorial.

The tall man, walking self-assuredly towards the two hostages, possessed a look whose vigour was still preserved, having the expressive pale blue eyes of a youth even though he was probably in his fifties. His face—lean and yet hard-featured—included an

admixture of Iberian and Mediterranean traits; he was dark-haired, with a few grey strands on top, and had a clean-shaven face forwardly outlying the cheekbones. He was dressed in ordinary black trousers and a waistcoat, and beneath it he wore a white silk shirt unbuttoned at the collar.

*“He who ascends to mountaintops, shall find
The loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow;
He who surpasses or subdues mankind,
Must look down on the hate of those below.
Though high above the sun of glory glow,
And far beneath the earth and ocean spread,
Round him are icy rocks, and loudly blow
Contending tempests on his naked head,
And thus reward the toils which to those summits led.*

“Please, accept my sincerest apologies that we had to meet in the midst of such improper conditions,” said the man in waistcoat reservedly. He walked up to and stood before the two, first looking at the girl, then at Collins.

Since the very beginning Collins didn’t shift his eyes for a second away from him. Presently, the man opposite them stepped up to him, his face appearing closer and more prominent than it actually was; the two were now looking at each other continuously, maleficent fury fermenting in Collins’ eyes.

“Don’t act like you’re surprised, Agent Collins,” began amiably the man in front of him, delicate in speech and manner, “you very well knew that sooner or later you’d end up in a situation like this.” Here his face acquired a certain subtleness of comforting compassion. “You were warned several times, but you didn’t listen. You strived to keep faithful to your little cause of salvaging what’s left of this goddamn rotten justice as if the whole world depended on it, but at the same time were so blinded by your own conceit that it eventually fooled you into distancing yourself too far from that same cause. Please, make sure that you’ll understand what I’m about to say to you, because this will be engraved like a burning iron right here”—with two fingers he pointed at and touched his forehead—

“that is, in one’s most personal and sacred place: justice is nothing more but an unattainable illusion to those who don’t have the courage to overcome themselves and let their true nature flourish.”

As the girl carefully followed what was happening next to her, she was simultaneously trying to shake off the shackling chains in a last effort to free herself. Exactly then, latent until now, the two battlebots were awakened from what appeared to be their hibernating state, and treading perilously towards the girl with their wrists, ankles, elbows, and shoulders operating with a strikingly humanlike motion and mimicry, transient electric lightning strokes fizzled from their hands. At this unexpected sight she was wrought with a temporary freezing terror, her eyes bulging with fear. The two silvery-glaring robots stopped, seeing—or detecting—that the subject held hostage was no longer a potential escapee. Although their movements and crude shape were close to that of a human being, they were overall different from anything created and met in nature: they lacked ears, nose, mouth or any other orifices; no creases or distinctive outlines could be seen anywhere on their polished bodies save those at the limbs’ adjoining and their constituent parts; and instead of a normal pair of eyes, the vertical reddishly glowing stripe on their heads made the full anatomical semblance and conception even harder to assimilate, especially when inactive and put on a stand-by mode.

“And of course, what is life without a pinch of sweetness...” the blue-eyed man said alluringly, turning towards the girl in leather jacket and smiling ambiguously. Coming up to her, he outstretched his hand and flung a tress of hair behind her ear; she moved her head sideways in disgust.

Watching him, Collins was forced to accept his helplessness regardless of his burning desire to break loose and do something. Beckard, seeing Collins’ threatening gaze towards him, left the blond girl alone and returned to the hanging man.

“You’re an unapologetic cynic, Agent. Did you know that? Because I can tell it from afar,” he entertained himself, turning towards the five men at the other end of the room, instilling a sense of dramatic irony that appeared to amuse no one but him. “Amanda

Holloway Thorson,” looking back at the girl again he started with a completely different tone, his grin smile replaced by a serious one, “born December 14, 2061 in Greeley, Colorado, to a school secretary and a computer engineer; first and only child. In 2080 accepted in the Orton City Police Academy where proves to be an excellent cadet and where graduates in 2084, being among the top dogs of her class. Almost immediately assigned a Junior Sergeant rank in the ‘Criminal and Undermining Activities’ Division. Since then lives alone in a small two-room flat in the Tarren Bay neighbourhood. Of a mildly cantankerous temperament but largely extroversive behaviour, often prone to premature decision-makings... premature... yes,” concluded Beckard, slowing down and accentuating the last words.

Amanda kept looking at him repugnantly, realizing with spleenful bitterness that he obviously knew everything about her and her loved ones to the last detail.

“That cantankerous prematurity of yours tipped you off the right path, and just like him”—he looked at Collins for a moment—“you’ll direly regret your meddling on your own.” Facing Collins again, he continued under the disturbing thumping quietness in the room: “The struggle you were so entrenched in was already doomed from the get-go. No, in a matter of fact, there wasn’t any struggle to begin with.”

Turning around, he walked off to the other men, stepping outside the unfolded walls of the compartment which was an imitation of another, smaller room.

“All those convictions, indictments, trials, all that noise and racket throughout the years,” he continued to speak, with his back turned to the two, “is just an irrelevant triviality that has no weight at all in the grand scheme of things. Nothing of this matters, nothing has ever really mattered—it’s all just a farce without an end, without any bearings or consequences, a smokescreen for those who blindly believe in ridiculous idylls while at the same time harbouring false egotistic virtues. For those like you, Mr. Collins.”

A brief silence followed. Then, turning around in the likeness of an ardent preacher at a guillotine who is about to preach the final absolution to one condemned to death, he said:

“Tell me, Agent—why do you think you haven’t achieved anything substantial so far? Why have all your past operations and cases you’ve so relentlessly worked on failed so miserably, bringing no progress or success? Have you ever asked yourself those questions?” Pocketing in his trousers, he pulled out a small spiky metal plaquette, and placing it on his right hand alongside his knuckles, stepped up closer to Collins. “The people, Agent Collins, the people you work with, the people whose orders you so ardently follow—let me tell you that these people are just the same as any other careerist. And so, like any other normal human being with its inherent constant need for fulfilling its constant cravings and desires, they also have their... so to speak... flaws.”

At that instance the fixed metal plaquette released a luminous blurred impulse of light that crawled along his entire arm—a faint gleam visible through skin and clothe and lasting less than a second. Collins and Amanda saw that, and when they turned facing Beckard who was just rolling his sleeves up to his elbows, his lint-like arm hair straightened up as though charged by a strong electrical current.

“But still, I have to give you kudos for the determination and commitment you have demonstrated, because they were just about to lead you to something you wouldn’t want to be involved in.”

With a sudden quick swing a violent blow landed against his ribs—his body contorted in pain, legs bent and locked backwards together. He moaned through clenched teeth and his hands blanched from the tight grip at the chain.

Amanda, horrified, started, almost feeling the palpable agony his face and body conveyed. Right then the two battlebots were roused again; they walked towards her and, aiming two fierce lightning-blue electric bolts, stunned her, causing full-body convulsions and stupor.

Upon witnessing this, Collins gathered all of his remaining strength he could possibly find, but could hardly move, still being under the intensive shock's effects caused by the sledgehammering bash, weakened and hindered.

“Self-acceptance, Agent Collins, self-acceptance. If you don't settle down in peace with yourself, you'll always be chased by the voices of your indelible purposelessness you so desperately try to ignore.” In the meantime the battlebots retreated, switching back to hibernating mode, their vertical red markings reducing colour and brightness.

With impossible efforts Collins scrunched his head towards Amanda, the upper half of his torso subjected to throbbing pain, the other—sensitively alienated from the rest of his body. She was barely moving, head hung down and unresponsive. He then strove to open his mouth as if to utter something, but again the repression of his senses prevented him from this act.

“I wouldn't bother if I were you—your central nervous system's still recovering and it'll take a while before you could fully function again. Interesting trinket, isn't it?” Beckard said, enjoying the moment with sadistic pleasure written on his face. “My people call it an ‘electrostatic trance-inducing neuroinhibitor’. Comes in handy when you need something simplistic and optimal and sufficiently efficacious. What? What's that?”

Collins muffled something semiconsciously, one moment his eyes looking up and squinting at the light, the other opening widely, pupils disoriented and floundering.

“Oh, don't worry about the old Chinaman—I assure you he won't be able to say anything anytime soon. What? You think I couldn't have possibly learnt about that little visitation you paid him that day? Come on, Agent, an experienced man like yourself should know exactly what I'm capable of. I've got ears and eyes everywhere in this city, nothing is out of my reach and scrutiny. With one word I could erase an entire neighbourhood and build a new one in its place; I could shape, re-shape and modify entire populaces to my want, and I could direct the labour and financial flow wherever I want, whenever I want, with no repercussions. It was me who made

Junkhood the industrial hearth of Orton that it is today, and as a benefactor of such vast a dominion, vast benefits come at your disposal in return.”

Collins’ eyes were alit with contempt and he could clearly see this.

“Don’t judge yourself too harshly—you did your best and now you’re going to be properly rewarded. Heads up! In this world one has to think—to act—several moves ahead, diverging and luring away his adversaries who are always waiting for the right moment to fuck him up. One single mistake can cost you everything, and because of that to accustom myself to this *modus operandi* was of crucial importance. Alas, it is with bitterness that I must admit that my long-time partner Shunningan wasn’t moulded from the same clay as me, always causing us some nagging trouble with the authorities here and there, but this, of course, doesn’t matter anymore because, as far as I was told, he is once again free from the ravenous hands of injustice.”

Hearing this, Collins’ forehead began to be afflicted by muscle spasms, twitching minimally with strain. Beckard seemed more than delighted by this.

“I see you’re a little upset by what I just said,” he grinned. “Apologies. I so easily forgot that, taking into consideration your present unfortunate situation, there was no way for you to have learned about this. Well, it is now made brightly clear to you.”

He paused for a second, savouring the moment.

“Like I said, you can’t lead a battle alone if you’re constantly surrounded by flawless, but otherwise weak-willed people—one way or another, they’ll bring you down, betray your ideals and credos. You put too much unconditional hope in people that you don’t even remotely know—it is a suicidal thing to do. The system you’ve been part of has eventually turned against you.”

Beckard turned to one of the men behind him:

“Inform Shunningan of the time and place and wait for me outside with John. The rest—go with them.”

Billy McCarter, the long-haired man with diagonal notched scar, directed a glance of animosity at Collins, but quickly reverted his eyes. Next to him was his brother John McCarter, and the two now walked out of the room, followed by the other three men who were clad in a plainer attire.

“Well, the time has come to finally say goodbye,” Beckard said laconically and pompously. “As you might have guessed by now, this isn’t an ordinary room, no, not at all. This is a psychotronic cognitive emulator that scans and then imprints certain wavelengths of forced submissive aptness into the brain. Psychophysics at its purest.” Here he paused, as if sunk into a deep contemplative reverie. “After you’re properly *exhumed*,” he continued, “which is a long and tedious procedure, don’t get me wrong, you will find yourselves again in the same compactible *arranger* where you’ll be dulled for 12 hours straight without interruption and during that time any remaining deviations of subconscious resistance and resilience will be sifted out. After that...”—malevolent smile, ecstatic dilated eyes—“...you’ll be forwarded to a special experimental course for the further advancement of the applicable sciences and humanity’s greater good.”

Amanda had already begun to come to her senses from the electrocuting bolts. Lifting her head up, she saw that the other men were now gone and that the battlebots were still inactive.

“One more thing,” Beckard said. “Don’t expect to be tracked down by your playgers or transmitters. As I said earlier, I like to keep myself several steps ahead of the rest.”

Turning around and walking towards the end of the room, he halted.

“And don’t forget, Agent: justice is nothing but an unattainable illusion for those who don’t have the courage to stand up against and overcome themselves. I hope you’ll arrive at reconciliation with yourself before your mental capabilities are stripped away from you.”

He left the room.

“How are you feeling?” Collins asked her after some moments of silence had passed.

Amanda’s response came in delayed, inarticulate and muffled, just when the lights were turned off: the two were about to be submerged again in the unknown, a predestined tribulation that would forever erase their willpower.

Chapter V

Convergent Equilibrium

Somewhere among the abandoned bottomless outreaches of deteriorating outcast buildings in the enslaved by time's merciless Longfield Precinct, a lone faint flicker made its way through the dense, dustily polluted tenebrosity—a veritable briefness receded and then lost itself to a point of vanishment. A message was delivered and from that moment on the course of events was a foreseeable outcome dependent on readiness to act against all odds and chances.

A ghost-like silhouette crept out of the isolated gloaming with adroitness and nimbleness, daylight rays imperceptible due to the dominating rustic darkness hovering over from low to high spaces. Jumping and gliding on to ruined concrete walls and plunging swiftly from edges across other edges and then landing on askew clumps moments before they fell down and shattered into rudimentary pieces, the ascetic figure reached and met the earth with a soundless thud, whence it lifted off with a tremorous thrust, heading up above the sectioned sky of multitudinous layers and leaving behind the sawing cry coming out of a roving phaeton.

That's probably the end of it, thought Collins. But still, he kept restlessly fighting against the fear of the unknown, or more precisely—that which hid beyond the unknown. He didn't entirely give up hope yet and remained calm for as long as he could.

"Amanda, listen to me," he said in the dead darkness.

She looked at him with terrified eyes.

"Whatever happens from now on, do not resist—it will only make the process even more painful. Do you hear me? Do not fight it back!"

Getting farther and farther away, the light so brittlely interlarded with its counterpart darkened side began to grow out of it,

advancing and getting brighter. Crossing the widely sparse cloudy sky and flying over with a speed novel to those areas, the sub-reactive phaeton was trying to outrun time. Here there was no room for failure.

Nothing save their palpable breathing could be heard, and that was well enough to worsen the abundant dread dominating them. It all felt as a vicious prelude just before the beginning of the real and unconceptualized trial. Escape was already beyond consideration. They could feel that something appalling was nigh: getting closer, challenging them, about to break them to pieces.

“Bionics Research, Application, and Enhancement” was a place where everything human was transformed and twisted, reversed and impaired to the end of many purposes and goals with carefully calculated consequences, a reserved knowledge possessed only by those who’d made such an intervention possible in the first place with their infirm moral foundations. It was a place where everything was ripped off of one, where they became something more than flesh and blood and where they witnessed their predetermined partial death which was also the crucial ultimate obstacle standing in the way of what some would call an ascension to perfection. But many didn’t have that privilege of relishing the fruition of not only their physical, but spiritual mutilation as well: their lives usually lasted not enough to fully understand and comprehend what was being done to them. They were quickly brought up to that world of cruelty and estrangement and were even more quickly culled.

A weak, gritting sound fused out of the darkness. It was followed by ubiquitously expanding circlets and circles, shimmering and flashing and ceaselessly changing their initial forms and meshing into one another and then shrinking and distancing again. Their frolicking game became even faster, and the hermetic space already started to appear much bigger and spacious to Amanda and Collins. The pitching noises began delving deeper into their ears as though a cold wire was being penetrated in and out through their

temples. The circular modulating figures were now flicking acceleratingly in one giant unleashed vortex of concordant fumbling scribbles—a lapsing interstellar time-traveling of an indefinite beginning and end. But something was happening with their minds as if they were being deciphered and invaded; it was insidious.

Collins turned towards Amanda and sensed that she did exactly the same thing at that same time, for despite the glittering revelling around them he still couldn't see nor discern any shade or outline of hers. The lightning became epileptically insufferable to them, and lasting secondary imprints of their already diminishing original forms evolved into unrestrained stains of variations more and more haphazard from the previous ones.

“Can you still hear me?”

Everything started to smear itself in long spasmodic swipes of brash residue trails, the noise dominatingly aloft until it couldn't be told whether it was dead silence or unending perturbation.

“Barely...” Collins heard from somewhere near him, and he was assuredly convinced that the voice was real.

He couldn't grasp nothing thereafter—it was as if time had come to a halt, a force suppressing everything external to his conscious apperception.

Intershift. Intersection through interspaces; by-back clearance...

...25 years ago; compulsory training camp in Caracas, Venezuela; one of the many geopolitically cooperative military centres between the North American Domain and its South American Protectorates.

The rumblejack's grudged engines roved through the funnelling air currents, carrying 21st Infantry Platoon. The windows opened to a peaceful splendour: a burningly white sun ornated with its late-afternoon rays the highline of neatly squished like cotton clouds, painted them in a number of colourful palettes like plumages of a rare jungle bird. It was something to be marvelled upon, and he kept thinking about the incomprehensive ways the grand forces of

nature worked in—seemingly ordinary yet subtle and entropically beautiful.

For a moment he redirected his attention towards the indifferent solemn faces around him. It was as if everyone was unaware not only of the presence of the person next to him, but of their own as well.

Someone's voice was trying to pull him out of this reverie into which he'd unwillingly fallen.

"What's the matter?" the person asked happily while grinning, something seeming off about the way he looked at him. "Lost your mind in the clouds?"

He wanted to answer him, but he couldn't. It was as if his mouth had been stitched and sealed, his ability to speak neutered. He could only stay still, there, in his seat, a mute listener.

"I hope they station us somewhere near the coastline, right under Avila—I heard the conditions everywhere else were unbearable, too much mosquito and lice infestations and whatnot..." the person next to him talked at length, with an unexplainable irregularity that got more apparent every time he peered into his eyes. "Whaddaya think, huh? Will we be the luckiest motherfuckers on earth or what? Because we're talkin' about three damned months here, and it won't be getting any better once we bring our asses on the training campuses. At least this time the food'll be passable, not like the rancid puke we were given in New Zealand..."

He started to feel his body entering a new state of exacerbating turbulence, cold sweat drenching through his uniform. Weariness and then a severe vertigo was beginning to centrifuge virulently in his head, all the while the unceasing monologue of the person beside him multiplying itself into a choir of hundreds of simultaneous identical voices that rose to a preposterous hum foreshadowing petrification and death. Pulse beating rapidly, he looked about in desperation, hoping to find some comfort in the other faces, yet all of them being as ever devoid of any liveness and vitality as the last time he'd gazed at them, estranged from one another—and most of all from him.

He stood up and walked towards the end of the plane, reeling sideways and evading eyeballing glances. He searched for the emergency exit valve, but couldn't find one; then turned around. The same lifeless bodies stood up, and sauntering, they were now stiffly advancing towards him like inanimate freak dolls straight out of a wretched puppet show. Only the person that sat next to him remained in his seat, continuing babbling to himself or to some other imaginary companion of his.

The mass of dragging lifeless bodies was approaching him; he didn't know where to escape or hide and what to do. He didn't even want to guess what was about to happen to him—he only wanted to be left alone once and for all.

The hordes were still gathering, crawling towards him.

Many hands began touching his face, arms, legs, then his entire body. They began pulling at his clothes, pushed him, then took him down, until they finally began to lie over him one by one, the quickly growing weight suffocating him the more they piled over.

He passed out.

It was full of people of all ages. Sweets, cotton candy and drinks were being procured in abundance among crowds lost behind attractions of immense forms—so grandiose and unique were those extraordinary and provoking the young pristine imagination machines; living machines and space stations, and entire bioorganic florals with their towers concealed in shrubbery and vivid glittering sparkles and rivulets surrounding them.

Before her at not so far a distance the popular Accelerator P-Tei was the biggest and loftiest of the attractions in the amusement park—it was a solid build-up enclosure occupying most of the space in the section, and from it many transparent tubes protruded, some of which reaching up to 100 metres. Inside those tubes indistinct bodies were constantly appearing, disappearing and re-appearing, a controlled gravitational push-up elevating them to the highest point and after that dropping them again on a freefall, only the moment before they approached ground-zero to be slowed down

and hauled up again. It was a jaw-dropping and a tempting experience for those who wished to test their endurance limit.

Running up to the enclosure and entering with an exuberant breathlessness, they found themselves in the immense space where scores of people were being tossed away from one end to the other along the extension of the robust pipe-towers placed close to each other. As soon as she saw that a pipe was vacated, she went straight up to it, and just around that time Jeremy joined her in a neighbouring one of a shorter height. After being given a brief mandatory instruction, their doors were sealed and both were now ready for the upcoming long-awaited elevation, hearths pounding from unconcealed excitement.

The glossal interlaced stepping platform at their feet started to whizz on a fourfold-multitude axis and soon their bodies began to be lifted little by little by a strong, friendly gale that could be barely sensed and which seemed ethereally impalpable. When they were shut in, as soon as she reached the uppermost point, a mild panic attack disquieted her. She then remembered that there wasn't any reason to worry about her safety, and that everything was tightly controlled and secured and that nothing incidental could happen. All of a sudden, then, she began to fall. Never before had she felt so free and alive, faint aerial strokes straightening her hair as she left her sprawled body entirely in the embraces of the freefall—it emboldened her, made her stronger and more fearless against everything belligerent in the world, that same world now becoming small to her, not wanting to leave the bottomless and endlessly expanding tube; she wanted to stay there forever, soaring and descending, soaring and descending...

Several metres before reaching the starting-point platform again, after already making some full ecstatic cycles, the same feeling of panic began recurring again. This time she couldn't get rid of it, pounding against her chest as a discomforting ailment up to her head with strong pulsating pain, followed by a headache she'd never felt before in her life. Uneasiness was beginning to overtake her, and soon her state became worse as she searched for Jeremy but couldn't find him anywhere. As a matter of fact, everyone

around her was now gone, and she was left completely by herself—there, stuck forever inside the tunnel that only two minutes ago was her newly discovered paradisaal blessing. Ascending again, she began to wail, cry, then scream—smitten by the nightmarish terror of what was happening and what she couldn't control. No one was there to help her, to comfort her. She wondered why her parents weren't there to protect her, why they'd left her alone so helpless and vulnerable. Could it be that the same was happening to them right now? Could it be that everyone else was also sucked in some sort of a perpetual solitary entrapment, feeling nothing but loneliness, seized by a visceral lasting horror? There was no way she could know that, no matter how much she thought about it.

Presently, she began to spin and hurl around like a leaf, caught in an endless spiral of mortification and fear. She was screaming again, whimpering, crying. No help. She was beginning to think that this was the way she would end up as nothing more than a wraith ripped off of its former identity and being, a lifeless form of never ending perishing with no possibility of escape. The speed of the alternating falling and lifting was increasing; she was being hauled between two ends like a particle rejected by the microworld and nearing the reversal point of its own creation past which it would be just a fallacy that wasn't supposed to happen or exist. Reaching a point where her body and mind stopped functioning and assimilating the timeline, she found a little hidden spot tucked in at the frontiers of her subconsciousness—a safeplace as though triggered by itself when there was nowhere to hide anymore. The screams of agony had indeterminately stopped, and she felt that she wasn't tormented by anything anymore—no force now lay hold of her.

At first everything had gone completely white, only to be quickly replaced by darkness. There wasn't any room for perception or awareness.

Then the darkness was replaced again by the light. Familiar images and representations spawned out of it. Pieces were coming back together as if about to reveal something important.

And they really revealed something—her home; or at least a place reminiscent of it. But she then realized that wasn't her real home as she remembered it to be.

Before fully grasping everything she was again brought back to that safeplace and remained there for an unknown time. Then she understood that time was inconsequential here, it didn't exist; she was already where she had to be...

A handful of sentinels quickly found their premature death. Their assaulter was fast enough that they were able to catch only a glimpse and nothing more of her, failing to take a closer look at the face before falling dead, slain; but if there was one thing to be most sure of, it was this expressionless visage that had run amok among them—an unclear feral strength unburdened by any mortal scruples yet so menacingly swift that it remained indelible in one's memories once faced, a premortem death wish of serene cruelty.

The only lasting image that was left was recorded by the security cameras: a cast dim shadow of an extraordinary origin whose movements were fast enough to dilute everything around and render it unfathomable.

The shrilling alarm was raised.

Meanwhile several others on the lower floors close to the biomechanics testing labs were cold-bloodedly and singlehandedly slashed; gushes of blood were spattered on the floor and walls, a tremorous harrowing storm disorderly lashing out at everything in its way.

Entire squads of dozens of heavily armed men were rushing out of many intersections, in full readiness expecting whoever it was to appear soon from any of the two frontal passageways, but in the end nothing happened. Suddenly, part of the high ceiling above a group of men crumbled, cracking heavily over them, a long sharp blade piercing through their skulls. A chaotic multidirectional shooting ensued, all in vain—the plasma beams just weren't fast enough to be on par with the fearful set of unprecedented combat skills.

In the midst of the risen dense smoke several teal-blue do-decahedrons the size of a walnut clinked onto the floor, their constituent sides bursting out, then fastening on to a dozen rifles and depolarizing them useless; their holders were then pierced one by one at such a speed that it appeared to be happening almost simultaneously while others were being bored by a concentrated magmatic plasma beam directed from that same herald of obliteration. Few were those to whom the rare opportunity of actually standing face to face with it was granted, coming closer to its sinister corporeal form that slayed and cut apart entire limbs until their thread of life was finally snipped off just as easily.

After the mass bloodbath and the maimed and slit grotesque bodies there was only one pitiful survivor: the only remaining witness who had the misfortune of both witnessing and participating in the horrid massacre that had an already predetermined outcome from the very beginning. He was now cowering in a corner, his thigh bleeding with its visible tendons and sinews asunder, his eyes betraying little hope and expecting damnation. As he cringed there mute and bewildered, that same figure was beginning to acquire shape and to materialize, until it finally—only at a palm's mere distance—lowered over him, staring in his face with eyes not of this realm: there stood two light-warping perforated dark patches, emerald shininess picking out through the small dots within them that conflated at the centre and dispersed at the tapering periphery, fixed artificially on the seemingly placid meek face as if two nebulae which perfectly outlined the undulation of that part of the skull. Legs cut up to the ankles, in their place two rigid, intricately structured prosthetic contraptions of elaborate rods and struts were grafted onto the body, the separation line being nearly impossible to be pointed out as though they were natural limbs that had always been there. The hands were also an artificial enhancement, and they differed from the illustrious matte-black prosthetic feet with their unveiled mechanical intricacy. The tall female figure was completely covered with a black thick layer of flexible reinforced material, unseparated and symbiotic with the skin, and on it—along the whole body—a relief of protruding thin lines bending around every curve was

forming one continuous hieroglyphic pattern as though the venial system of something crude simmering with dark matter. There was a black belt around her waist, and on it two blasters of unconventional manufacture were resting in gimmicky cases, one of which had been just used in the open combat; other things that were hidden lay there stacked for some future use. But the main weapon with which she'd cleared her way she now clenched in her right hand, a modified titanium-forged blade sending off blood-stained reflections that served as an introductory gaze at the underworld, a long and deadly sharp tip with a stingingly honed edge appearing to slice the thin air even in a restful position; the handle was a solid forbidden craftsmanship of visceral design, prehistoric curvatures sticking out of all sides. The mesmeric figure had long blond ponytailed hair, her lips enticingly fatal, and the gallantness with which she moved and slayed a masterful art of silent killing. All of this synthesized into one body, a killing machine that conjured up immediate slaughter at will.

The man in the corner had been earnestly begging when he was grabbed by the hand. He realized that everything he did or said was, in the end, futile—an ignoble instinct and a desperate call before execution—moments before it was cut off, leaving a precise and clean malformation.

Left all alone drowning in his own agony, in his unceasing writhing and twitching the dying sentinel could only watch how the female cyborg was heading towards the transportation portal, holding nothing else but his own hand, fresh and warm blood still dropping from its end. The two mechanical doors opened, and she entered calmly. The last thing he blurrily caught before his heart stopped was the brightly lit access-board and his chopped off hand placed on it, and there in the darkness an absorbing shadow now disappearing behind the closing doors.

Collins started to feel the deeply embedded strobing delirium giving way to an oncoming paramount displacement, just as exacerbating and unsettling. His mind was anticipating a comeback to reality, and before taking the definitive step towards it, he was

experiencing a prolonged uninterrupted sojourn of transfixion where he was woven into a cocoon of unsteady gossamer that was about to be ripped apart any moment. Something pulled him out of that prisoning shell rapidly and suddenly, and the first signs of coming back to consciousness after a long abstinence from the material world were familiar noises, images and scents photographed in his memory like recent viewable negatives, but still yet to be revealed in their entirety.

The last bleak contours were dulling out, falling by his awakening mind's side parts; he wasn't sure when he'd opened his eyes, but now that the psychotronic emulating room was again lit, his sensibility was restored in addition to the old preceding pain tangible along his trunk and arms.

"Amanda..." he said phlegmatically, head swinging trippingly.

He turned around to see her—her eyelids and mouth quivering, she'd also just started to regain consciousness.

He wondered what could've possibly happened, for it was clear to him that his mind wasn't affected or damaged in any way, remembering now Beckard and the moments before he'd passed into an oblivious trance. The battlebots were still inactive, and there was no one else with them, the air hushed and left undisturbed.

Next to him Amanda woke up with an abrupt thrust and scream, shaking the chains round her uplifted hands with a clang; she opened her eyes wildly.

"What happened?" she asked, looking at Collins; the moment she saw him she became significantly calmer.

He was still uncomfortably giddy. Apparently, he thought, Amanda had been affected in a different way. "It seems like the emulation process has been aborted."

The two began wriggling and pulling down their hands, the sweat around their wrists being of extra help and making it easy for adjusting them inside the clapped cuffs. At the same time they kept a strict eye on the two robots, and seeing that they didn't react to their movements in any way, the two continued more determinedly.

After several laborious attempts Amanda finally managed to slide her hands through; they were both seared from the friction and marked with red burning abrasions. Her legs weakened, she limped towards Collins to try to help him.

No sooner did she reach for him than the two enamelled autonomous machines awoke from their hibernating inactivity, their bright red vision lines enflamed again and their hands electrified and prepared for a direct assault. But they weren't heading in their direction—turning to their left, they began ambling towards the exit.

Both Collins and Amanda remained stupefied and alert, following with wary eyes the continuation of the baffling events. As the battlebots approached the corner, suddenly they were put to a halt—or, as Collins reckoned—defunctionalized thoroughly to their deepest machinery innards. Abruptly, they fell in a kneeling position with hands and heads bent down, like two submitted altar relics in a secular, blasphemous shrine, dispossessed of any imitative form of life and their red glowing lines forever faded out to a dull dark. A greenish-blue bud-ball was gleaming with hollowing receding light on each of their metallic polished chests like two encrusted oddities. A creeping shadow spread out over them, then a lissom figure emerged from behind the corner in an unimaginable dreadfulness.

With a cool-headed assertive gait and unnatural movements, the figure—which Amanda had already recognized as a female one—paced up to them, soft-clicking against the floor and yet her presence unobtrusively ethereal. Seeing the unbidden cyborg all of a sudden pulling out a blaster from her belt and pointing it at her, she—unable to tell whether her head itself was the target or not—immediately cringed and ducked away: the blast the shot produced emptied and re-emptied the whole room in a circularly waning reverberation, a brocade of dazzling flashes kindling and then disappearing in the air above Collins.

His legs landed on the ground after the long chain had been shattered and his cuffs automatically opened. He was a little disoriented at first, but soon regained his composure.

Amanda watched the unfolding scene with eager curiosity and confusion, especially the tall young woman—an offspring of a

bleeding edge experimentation and a complete and refined by-product of the rapidly changing and evolving biomechatronical and neuroprosthetic sciences—whose body was entirely covered by a black metaflexible thin suit of a relatively rugged design, embossed thoroughly with long vague protuberant lines visible only under awry bright light. Simultaneous admiration and fright at the sight of such a groundbreaking alteration of the human embodiment were the things that one felt when confronted by something so explicitly derivative of the transhuman and possibly inhuman; and—just like Amanda now—one would fall into an immediate contradiction with themselves and start questioning the very path humanity has chosen to tread on and likely to never leave. Slowly puckering lips and eyes in a contemplative manner, she tried to peek in beyond these two mystically gleaming emerald eyes and find some residue she could relate to. In the meantime, the tall cyborg appeared not to be even aware of her presence, but the reality was that she very well knew she was presently being observed by the girl in dark-red leather jacket.

“The alarms are off, we should get out of here,” spoke the cyborg with a soft, but stern voice; it surprised Amanda by the predominant elegance, even frailty, accompanying it. But she knew these were misleading attributes and that behind them an unscrupulous and unhesitant killer was hiding. “More sentinels are probably on their way.”

And releasing the other blaster from her belt, she passed it over to Collins. With the same indifferent expression, she turned toward Amanda, then back at him again. He nodded assuredly, after which she handed over the other blaster to the girl. Amanda accepted the procured weapon with hesitancy.

“She’s with me,” Collins said to her.

The three headed for the exit, passing by the dead robotic creatures; Amanda stood staring at them for a while, then followed the others.

They were just getting inside the “Chennington” limo at the inner landing site of the second floor. Meanwhile, the alarm had been set off for unknown reasons.

“What’s that?” John McCarter exclaimed mildly surprised.

The two brothers who were sitting opposite Beckard began to look around them questioningly and inquiringly; but unlike them, the man before them was more than unperturbed as if nothing unordinary was happening, looking sideways outside the window and contemplating things no one could guess what.

“Beckard?” turned Billy McCarter to him. Nothing came out of him in answer and he appeared to be not even aware of his presence.

“What’s with the alarm?” John, the younger brother, said, reiterating the question with a more different tone, inspecting the unbecoming remoteness in the man. “Something’s happened, can’t you hear? I think it’s—”

“Whatever it is, it is now gone,” Beckard said placidly, cutting him short. Then made a sign to the driver to take off.

The luxurious white aeromobile’s engine blasted out with a deafening excess of nitrogen-plasma concoction, the car beginning to slowly separate from the ground until it roared thunderously past the vertical recess.

“Shouldn’t we send...” John started as the aerial muted slip-traction in which they were enclosed wheezed throughout; pausing and hesitating for a second, he continued: “...Tech-a-Raya?”

Still not shifting his gaze away from the window and unclear whether he was pondering on the question addressed to him or on something else, he answered:

“No, that won’t be necessary.” And after a while: “As a matter of fact, right now I wouldn’t like her to be anywhere near the building.”

The limo was taking slow imperceptible turns in harmony with the soft swooshing hisses it made at a high altitude, while in the meantime behind and in front of it two other aeromobiles were escorting it.

At that moment John gave Beckard a suspicious, demanding look, but immediately after that retracted it to a mere sidelong glance of familiarity; he wanted to say something, but quickly lost the desire for it. Suddenly, out of the pocket of his jacket, he pulled out a circular flat item which—from Billy and John’s initial perspective—looked like some kind of a detonating device. Beckard held the portable pocket disc in his right hand and fiddled with it for a while, concentratedly yet casually examining it from close.

“What’s this?” Billy asked tentatively; he had noticed that Beckard’s expression had become quite uninterpretable.

Beckard continued to look at the little device in his hand, this time more carried away than ever.

“This is... a necessary decision.”

The two brothers exchanged concerned looks.

“Build something to destroy it. And then again. You keep doing it until you realize that it hasn’t mattered at all and that everything is expendable. No exceptions.”

He pressed the button—the edge of the circular tool glowed yellow, indistinct sounds peeping from it; the two brothers started.

“What the fuck is this?” John repeated his brother’s words, self-contained but almost on the verge.

A beguiling smile of uncustomary satisfaction crept its way up to Beckard’s face. The limo continued to drift away at a relatively fast speed, expelling propellant snow-white sparkling azure gleam from the rear, the small, plainly composite building in the distance slowly disappearing and merging with the grey tenebrosity of the forlorn district.

They were already heading up towards the portal through which the cyborg had entered earlier and which led back to the C19 sector. Collins and Amanda could hear the risen alarm that had been activated prior to their release—resonating and having a sobering effect on them.

The virtually narrow bright-blue lightened corridor along which they circumspectly plodded was surprisingly desolate and

empty—doors on both sides hermetically shut, small window viewers revealing otherwise spacious laboratories and other similar facilities—also uninhabited—inside which tables, strapping beds, and strange oblique-screened chambers, as well as miscellaneous sets of medical, surgical and other unknown paraphernalia could be seen, neatly arranged as if ready to be used. According to the cyborg, that's how things were like when she passed through it the first time. All that variety of instruments evoked a genuine unsettlement and disgust in Amanda, and Collins, although he'd previously heard of the commonness of such nefarious experimentations going on all the times, was still trying to comprehend the vast scale of the unscrupulous and warped mistreatments of other human beings conducted and endorsed globally without any indications of ever ceasing. Cassidy, on the other hand, wasn't moved the least by the prevalent sordidness that was everywhere at every turn, already being herself a sole spawn of that same wickedness Collins and Amanda were currently exploring at first hand around them.

Before him Cassidy was leading them tactfully as if with precisely measured gait, Amanda being especially struck by the unrealistic yet unforced way she exhibited and employed her careful inhuman astuteness to the situation. Her long shimmering katana was now pulled out before her, its pin-sharpened point directed forward in readiness while appearing to cleave the air itself even when passively in motion. Everything about the cyborg was one unsolvable mystery, as though enshrouded by a certain rare quality that no one else in the world possessed or could even grasp the basics of, and it seemed that precisely this uniqueness was what made her perfect and complete to the bone, presenting her in a novel and unexplored light defying any weaknesses and inherent impediments.

Amanda, following behind them with great assiduousness and attentiveness, whose attention till now had been primarily occupied by the enigmatic cyborg ahead, began to question something else, something that was plainly obvious—namely, that there might be no one else in the building.

The more they crept forward, the more paranoid she became.

When the three finally reached the portal, Amanda immediately spotted someone's chopped off hand lying dead-cold on the floor, already having acquired a pale-blue colour with dried coagulated blood near the incised place. Cassidy reached for the mutilated hand and put it on the biometric scanner in the most accustomed manner, the whole brief procedure taking no more than a couple of seconds. Decompressing, the portal door slid aside smoothly and the three stepped out.

The limo was sweep-crossing through a dense mixture of darkened smokes and an already conceding sullied fog, floating across stale grungy buildings and diving in among other airborne vehicles, eventually mingling together with the intermittent sparse mass of scant flyover activity.

"Is this some kind of a joke?" continued insistently Billy McCarter, although insinuations of worry had begun to transpire through his voice. "And why did you temporarily discharge the entire personnel?"

Finally, Beckard looked at him: stupefaction and disbelief were at the same time being imprinted onto Billy's face while staring back at the man across him, totally aghast at the realization of what he'd just done. Beckard was still smiling contentedly, and this time even with a tinge of real, unadulterated satisfaction.

"Look behind you."

The two brothers immediately turned around, and as they did this something in the far distance caught their attention in the most extraordinary and unexpected way: a sudden sparkle, no bigger than a tiny dot on a big greyish desolate vista, flickered weakly, then, growing and becoming brighter so that it turned into one prominent lighthouse beacon upon the vastness, quickly proceeded to diminish, until it disappeared completely out of the oblique horizon's face; a thin spire of black smoke then appeared to be wringing up from the same spot, coiling towards the sky like a thin sewing strand, only in the end to reach and hind behind freely floating clouds where it disseminated and vanished into the unclarity.

As if the horrendous sight of the mutilated hand wasn't enough for her, Amanda had to be now faced with a scattered cluster of bodies most of which had perished by deep askew cuts and mercilessly slashed throats, some being nearly decapitated with only a few taut strips of tendons connecting them to their severed parts. But this didn't daze her so much as the inconceivable barbaric way those sentinels had found their death, lying on the bedaubed with their own blood floor, their wretched physiognomies having remained forever frozen in various different expressions onto which had been inscribed their terror during their last vivid moments.

"I guess they didn't teach you this in the Academy?" Collins turned to Amanda, testing her sobriety to see to what extent she was flabbergasted by the sight that even *he* didn't anticipate to face. "Amanda," he turned to her again, this time seriously, "we've to move on."

Quickly coming to her senses, she started off, seeing that the cyborg was now significantly way ahead of them, without this surprising her at all. Suddenly, as they waded through the sprawled corpses, the alarm died off. Nevertheless, they walked the whole way up to the other end of the sector, so when they finally reached it they found the cyborg already standing there patiently waiting for them by another portal that had no distinguishing signs on it.

Holding a rifle in her hands she'd picked on the way that wasn't disfunctioned, she signalled to them, slightly shifting gaze towards the pre-cautious Amanda and looking at her with the same uncompromising ever-glowing crystal-like emerald eyes, then redirecting it back to Collins. She reached for the display button on her left and pressed it; the solid limestone-coloured portal door was set in smooth motion.

The three found themselves in an exceedingly spacious and high-end modernized central hall: in the middle of it was a big circular multifunctional hot-key counter with a couple of empty chairs inside it and encircled by a high glass barrier; along the surface of that barrier a most variable motley of interactive colourful navigating signs and symbols, as well as face-to-face livecam frames

and other one-click info slates were constantly emerging, buoyantly hovering over and then disappearing. At the other end of the entrance floor several exit doors could be seen, and on the left and right rounded elevators were stacked next to each other, inactive. From the tall ceiling two holographic projections overhung in semblance to contemporary regalia banners that shone and depicted dynamically altering animations, beginning from the institute's prominent emblem to contemporary transhumanist slogans and graphics. There was no one on the floor but them, and despite the apparent emptiness they continued to move forth back to back, slowly and warily.

Suddenly, coming somewhere from the elevators on their right, an inaudible sound as if that of a knocking was heard, then almost momentarily subduing and finally ceasing. The three immediately turned in the direction of the unidentified source.

"I think it came straight from the elevators."

"There's definitely something in there," Collins agreed with Amanda.

And again—this time clearer and more distinguishable—the same thumping sound resonated from the same spot. He began walking towards it.

As they slowly advanced, a third knocking was heard, and this time there could be no mistake that its source came from exactly where the three were headed to. Halting before the cabin, Collins pressed the side-button that prompted the doors to open. What they revealed left him more than surprised.

It was a boy at the age of no more than 9 or 10, with light hazel hair and rotund, oval soft face; he wore plain dark-green patient kit with a stamped number on the blouse near the chest and was visibly frightened, his eyes flinching and exploring the objects and people with mistrustfulness and curiosity. Careful not to appear too intimidating or hostile, Collins got closer to the kid, stooping over him and giving him his hand.

"It's alright, little guy," he said in a placating, almost whispering voice.

At first the boy refused to get out, retreating distrustfully when Collins tried to get closer, but in the end he overcame his fears and, although a little hesitant, began timidly approaching him with his small unshod, bare legs. When he stepped up and joined them, Amanda thought he bore an exceptionally calm temperament; Collins also noticed this peculiar behaviour, and with this it flashed through his mind that the kid's memory of his past life was most probably erased, being what they called an *experimental unit*, or more commonly *EU*, recalling the way those kind of institutions operated, together with the horrible procedures and atrocious practices the abductees had to go through as well as the severe trauma they experienced shortly before everything prior to it was erased from their mind. The older the *EU*, the harsher was the after-effect, and this combined with regular dosages of hormone-based oppressing drugs and other similar substances that dulled the senses caused permanent damage to the victim's tender psyche depending on the period of exposure. The application of neural, biomolecular, and genetic engineering, interloped together with other main branches such as Bionics and Biomechanics, was used for the achievement of various goals of interest to many companies, institutes, foundations, cartel and mafia organizations—including the military sector—for more than a century; most of these purposes pertained to only one goal, and this was the creation of zero-agency and obedient ruthless professional killers who didn't question in any way the nature and the consequences of their given tasks. At the beginning of their course of a thorough transformation each *EU* had to undergo the necessary lengthy—but otherwise filled with many sufferings, deprivations and life-threatening surgical and biochemical interventions—procedures that usually lasted several years. Few were those who were genetically fit for such an intense physical and mental alteration, and even fewer were those who were able to survive and function as fully and normally as before: many complications would arise during the period of gradual transformation, and some were owed to purely psychological reasons like the mandatory memory and personality eradication.

Grabbing Collins' hand, the boy stood close to him with a certain attachment of security, and Amanda, gazing at him with sincere amazement, was at the same time wondering how on earth a ten-year-old child could've been forgotten there so carelessly, all by himself and unlooked for. But then again, she remembered where she was.

Suddenly, the floor began to shake with mighty intensity, and before long everything else became part of the unleashed tremor which increased its magnitude by the second. It took only several moments for the vast ceiling to start cracking and tearing apart, dust, plaster and entire pieces of hard jagged material falling incessantly and at random—everything around was risen to a tumultuous uproar, and before long the floor itself began to shatter unpredictably; the elevator cabins swayed precariously to and fro, a trembling commotion perforating the stirred up air.

Cassidy shouted at them to run, everyone darting towards the exit doors as fast as their legs could handle.

No sooner had they covered half the distance when the first incendiary flames broke out from all sides, fire bolts and explosions clashing together and resounding in rumbling loops each of which being more violent than the other, electric sparks showering across the floor and springing out from crevices and nooks; the more they got closer to the exit doors, the bigger the risk grew of everything collapsing down their heads.

"Move away!" shouted Cassidy as she ran towards them from behind, raising her gun. Shooting at the doors, the glass broke into small pieces whereupon she leaped out of it, clutching the little boy to one side. Collins and Amanda immediately followed her without wasting a single moment, and as they slid through the door-frames the first of a series of demolishing explosions caught them, the produced blast forcefully thrusting and sending them some fifteen or twenty yards ahead where they landed on the hard surface.

Just then, as they lay on the naked concrete trying to get up with effort, the explosive wave and the abrupt landing having made them all dizzy and disoriented, a sudden burst thousands of whirling glass and other leftover shards was heading right towards them, the

two being completely unaware of the incoming danger. A little behind them the cyborg, who'd found the boy a safe refuge behind an aeromobile, on detecting the imminent combustive storm of sharp particles that was about to hit them, jumped over the car and—with a galloping stride of big listless steps—managed to get to another one a couple of yards ahead just in time to give it a redistributed powerful kick, sending it screeching straight to the unsuspecting Collins and Amanda, covering and shielding them seconds before the deadly tidal storm reached them and protecting them from the stabbing and tearing splinters that came on with full assailing force.

Before long the whole building began to collapse, and soon it was entirely evened to the ground, leaving a dense blotting smog around itself with bright flames engulfing it from within as though a giant ever-burning hearth had been kindled in its place; the blackened and polluted air was full of orange-glittering soot that overcovered everything along the nearly empty parking lot and beyond, like fireflies engaging in a mass invasion that were hard to get rid of.

Dim visceral blood-red radiance prevailed over Collins and Amanda whose bodies were now covered in a thin layer of ash, their hands chafed and stained with dirt and grinded plaster. Looking before him in the distance, Collins searched for the spot whence they'd been flung and pushed out by the strong explosive wave, but could only find one big pile of burning wreckage producing smoke that had veiled everything nearby and which was now soaring up to the almost indistinguishable dark-grey sky, making the day night and the night day with a tinge of duskiness and wreathing shades. His eyes then turned to the left where they inadvertently met two glitteringly oscillating green dots that were becoming bigger as she approached him with nimble comportment.

“Is the boy okay?”

“Unscathed,” said the cyborg with her distinctive clear voice amid the hissing and crackling; Collins peeked behind her and saw the kid crouched next to an aeromobile on the other side of the parking lot.

Chapter VI

Cassidy

It was one of those rare cases—a deformity that had deviated from any conventional norm and order—that stood out from the rest with one thing that no living human was ever capable of enduring.

“You, my dear, are a very, very special one...”

“You are something more than the others. Something more than all of us...”

“This world belongs to you, and to you alone...” the harrowing distant voices kept whispering to her, now vanishing in a long-forgotten, lost time.

They destroyed her, but then remade her. They took everything from her, and yet gave her everything. They showed her pain, but also taught her contentment.

They hoped they would keep her forever, to themselves, but, alas—something inside her overpowered her and destroyed years of valuable work. Some claimed they had simply made her too perfect; others—that exactly those same qualities that made her unique and one of a kind were the sole reason for her unexpected breakdown. But in the end, those were nothing more than hypotheses and conjectures: *no one* actually knew the reason that had led to this unprecedented event.

It had begun with another newcomer batch of EUs that was being prepared for the initial accustomization procedures, and among the abductees was a subject—a girl—that didn't quite meet the expected behavioural benchmark criteria: there was something robust in her, a kind of a leftover still kicking in that hadn't yet been observed in anyone so far, and they didn't have the slightest idea what that could be.

Somewhere beneath the densely clustered forests in Central Montana. The year was 2061.

“What do you think causes the amygdala’s unusual increased activity throughout the pathway neurons to the hypothalamus?” asked one of the assistants as he turned around facing the chief facilitator next to him with an expression that bespoke craving puzzlement. The two followed with a shared open interest the ongoing non-invasive procedure behind the hermetically shut room’s thick glass. “Even the most severely mentally ill subjects show a certain deadening of the limbic system, and they don’t even require to be injected with excessive amounts of propropynopol, let alone the use of additional electrocuting stimuli that most of the time aggravate the—”

“She’s remarkable,” the man interrupted his subordinate beside him with an almost suspended, but firm and placating voice, as if going through a divine revelation. His genuine attention was entirely focused on the ongoing neurological analysis before him; everything else at that moment was of no importance to him at all.

“What?” asked the young man next to him.

“You heard me.”

“But...”

Without lingering, the chief facilitator-neuroengineer hastened towards the exit door of the spectator room. Without saying anything, his young assistant darted after him.

“After eleven consecutive attempts,” the chief facilitator went on as if talking to himself without even turning towards his assistant, “the subject still responds positively to the emotional-stress tests, and that’s not even all of it—she even recalls old fragmental memories from her former life that somehow play a crucial part in this abnormality. Never in my entire damned career have I been a witness to such an unprecedented phenomenon—the dosages of propropynopol we’ve been giving her should’ve already dismantled her psyche to shatters, but not only are they rendered completely futile, her body has begun to develop tolerance to the chemical as well. Do you know what that means, my dear, humble friend?”

“What?” asked the assistant with rekindled unsubduing enthusiasm in his eyes, even though he knew well enough that the

question directed at him was outright rhetorical. They were already walking along the lengthy and well-ventilated passages of the underground facility with an air of eagerness and zeal.

“It means that the transneural inductive stimulator will finally find its practical implementation!”

Merging and disseminating peripheral snapshots continuously sprung out, fizzled away and then died off, leaving not a trace behind as if they never existed. Not so long after tickles were felt in indefinite parts of the body, almost uncatchable but still exposing their presence. These tickles turned into burning spasms of pain—a pain that appeared to make its way for the first time and then stopping at certain points, whence rapidly expanding in unimaginable scopes of no limit. And yet, that pain was as expansive as it was distant—maybe the mind was just making up all of this; maybe it was just one of those unexplainable and uncalled-for illusions that sometimes the mind can so randomly conceive that most of the time they just pass by before they could be even accounted for. Sometimes, wholly concealed, they dwell far beyond one’s phenomenological subconsciousness, and even then they can still unpredictably resurge and make things disarrayed again.

The time that had passed was smeared, diluted; it was unclear. But did it have a beginning? Did such a thing as “time” even exist? What is “time”? Do I exist? Am I here? Am I really speaking? Or is this just another figment of my imagination, a kind of precocious self-reflection? What is happening?...

...“Check the endorphin levels, and I want a full scan of the cerebral and cardiac activity. Prepare for an induced coma... coma... coma...”

“The limbic system’s activity remains within the norms, so far *stable*... stable responses between the middle brain and the stimulator...”

“There is no interruption at the present moment in the impulse transmission along the spinal cord towards the cerebrum, the

central neural *and*... and neuromuscular system react positively to the first injected chemical dosages... *dosages*... Psychological symbiose currently ongoing...”

“The organism has fully and successfully *accepted*... accepted the new body... *body*... *body*...”

“Preparations for initiating an *induced*... induced coma completed, proceeding to the injection of 15 milligrams sorophol. Status—stable. Injecting the second dose...”

“Attaining *full*... full unconsciousness in three...”

“...two...”

“*You can have... have anything you want... want...*”

“...one...”

Day 9 of the induced coma.

“And here’s our Delacroix of modern medicine... or, should I more accurately say... Dalí himself! Ha!” a rough, croaked laughter suddenly muted and overthrew the undisturbed serenity of the night. “Take a seat, Doc.” The high-spirited, tipsy man with thick shabby beard and ostensibly swarthy face pointed at the empty chair opposite him, at the other side of the long rickety wooden table on which three nearly empty bottles of wine, a couple of overturned glasses, several crumpled and stacked in a pile cigarette butts were lain, as well as some sort of a colourless powdery substance and two caesium battery-mags thrown in one corner.

The chief facilitator who was currently in his typical white lab attire cautiously sat in the wobbly wooden chair without casting his glance away from the black-haired man with a punctuating facial outline—he had a look of a fugitive convict-dissident faring straight out of the harshest and cruellest barren lands. But he very well knew that this initial attestation of his appearances didn’t correspond with the real truth at all.

Besides the two, a dozen armed men in light-absorbing Kevlar camouflage clothes were holding their respective positions nearby, and with a honed attention kept their focus on to the dense foliage of surrounding cramped dishevelled bushes and treetops

which were immersed in an impermeable darkness, only the gradient moonlight indicating their presence, stretching back their mystified silhouettes. Nightvision goggles with their attached mirrorless double-lenses with constant wireless video transmission were fastened to their crawling heads. Three additional men stood close by the table, two of which right behind the 60-year-old neuroengineer with their Warton 122M blasters restfully enclosed in their holsters. The third one stood right by the black-bearded man at the other side of the table, fully erect and unmoving like a reinforced pillar—he didn't carry any gun save a Bowie knife slipped into a leather sheath on his right thigh.

The visible part of the subterranean base was comprised of a tent of a considerable size through which faint diluted light transpired, with two or three low projectors that gleamed just enough bright-blue hue around the five men at the wooden table so they could discern themselves; several concealed among the shrubs military off-road jeeps, and a largely worn out and corroded elevator cabin twenty paces away from the table that appeared to be made out of tin and which was strangely and irregularly shaped.

The man with the seemingly Middle Eastern features spoke in an unsympathetic, emotionless voice:

“Listen now, it's been more than a week, you hear me? And she still hasn't woken up from her—now long overdue—*detour*.” Clumsily stretching out his shoulder, he put one hand behind the backrest of the chair, appropriating a still more slothful and carefree pose. “Tell me, Doc—has anything happened that I should be worried about? Like, are you hiding something from me? Are you?”

The man with the Bowie knife behind him stirred, moving for the first time since the beginning of the meetup: he leaned a couple of inches aside, reaching out for and touching the leather sheath on his thigh; this demonstration didn't escape the scientist.

“You know that”—started the man in white attire as resolutely as possible—“since I began working for you, during all these years, I have never let you down, least of all hid anything from you. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Subject-85 simply isn't ready. More time is needed for—”

“...for the transneural inductive stimulator to find the perfect balance point between the proprioception and the vegetative neural system via the aligning of the nanothreads with a minimum of 95% engaged bodily capacity,” continued the bearded man what the scientist was about to say. He sighed with a desperate inclination. “The same old balderdash—zero results, zero effectiveness.”

“This is only temporary. It’s part of the culminative process,” said the scientist, trying to remain firm and not letting agitation take hold of him. “It’s nothing unusual for these kinds of unorthodox experimental treatments.”

“I know. But, as you might be already familiar,” started the black-haired man with a more serious tone, this time leaning forward over the table and sending off an inquisitive look at the man at the other end, “I don’t have the whole time of the world. We’re playing a dangerous game here, Doc, and you very well know that. That girl is full of untapped potential and I don’t in the least find the idea attractive of just sitting here and leaving everything to chance when my investment remains unused. My competition is sniffing up my neck, Doc, and they’ve been pissing the fuck off of me lately.” And, after a brief silence during which the man with Middle Eastern traits seemed to ponder over something, he resumed: “How far off are we with this so-called ‘alignment’?”

“According to the prognostic evaluations, another seven to ten days would be required for the receptive nanothreads to completely intermingle with—”

“I don’t have that much time,” the black-haired man grunted, dismissively. “Her training course must start in no more than 3 days, and in a week’s time she should be having her first victims claimed.”

“But—”

“What can we do to speed up the process?”

The chief scientist clenched his fists in a sudden fit of rage, clinching at his clothes; his lips wrung, and his facial muscles twitched.

“The nanothreads are currently having some difficulties with their reaching and spreading over the limbs,” he said as he struggled to fight against this pecking feeling of disappointment he was now experiencing. “To be more precise, it is the hands and feet that refuse to accept the new nanobodies... However, in theory, their amputation and replacement with semi-organic biomechatronic prostheses could make the—”

“Do it.”

The chief scientist gave him a desolate, almost piteous look.

“I once again ask you to reconsider. There is no guarantee that—”

The bearded black-haired man made a quick short gesture with his hand, and the two armed sentinels that had been standing behind the scientist during the entire conversation made him get up. At some unknown to him point he'd forgotten about their presence, at least until now, when only moments later he was heading down the shaft, back where he'd initially come from, only this time—needlessly, he thought—accompanied.

The hastened recovery process, preceded by the completion of the cellular alignment, took two days: 99.98% of the organism's cells had successfully accepted and established a symbiotic connection with the nanothreads, which was more than a sufficient result. On the third day, after the compulsory injection of a number of immune-system-aiding substances, and after a couple of physiological and psychological evaluations, Subject-85 was already performing in the training facilities.

“Her triggered diffusive-biochemical correspondence reacts infallibly to the recalling of emotionally stressing situations and other memories that are otherwise deeply engraved into her subconsciousness: at crossing the Placidity Threshold, the transneuronal inductive stimulator—or as some of my colleagues like to call it *TIS*—momentarily detects and ‘captures’ the waves produced by the hippocampus, and then, in turn, automatically sends back a stopping electro-impulsive ‘announcing command’ to the whole limbic

system. During this limited timeframe of inactivity that could be estimated within the range of four to six milliseconds, TIS attracts and subsequently redirects those same hippocampus waves and spreads them throughout the entire body via the appended nanothreads, at which point every single nanocell enters into duplication mode whereby it initiates a process of infinite creation of its own ‘temporal’ interconnected counterparts until they reach a critical point of artificial stimulation where the muscular-skeletal system undergoes a drastic long-lasting change—the bone density and durability begin to grow multifold; after that, those same ‘temporal’ nanocells begin to die off one by one, this diminishing process starting with the first duplicated ones, until only the original—or the parental ones—remain. The shock produced as a result of this reaction causes her to instantaneously forget the said recalled triggering memories, but after a certain period of time she almost immediately begins to recollect them again—and this goes on and on until she’s gathered so much potential energy, that she has no other choice but to expend it, in some way or another. All this thanks to one miniscule two-millimetre chip—the pinnacle of the art of quantum mechanics.

“Of course, after the finalization of the required number of triggering recollections she, or rather her brain, just gives up, because from a psychological standpoint she is still an underdeveloped specimen, and therefore in the beginning her gained temporal strength and durability won’t last that much; but with time, as she grows, the stimulation’s open timespan will only but lengthen, and not only that, but she will become exceedingly stronger as well. Naturally, after all, the nanothreads do all the main work, but without a brain wave redistributor such as TIS, all of this wouldn’t be possible in the first place.”

“From everything you’ve just said, Doc, I couldn’t grasp even the half of it. But damn me if this lass doesn’t have the makings of the most ferocious motherfucker!”

The bearded black-haired man was more than astonished by this final enhanced human form permanently equipped with well-fitting prosthetic limbs who, at that moment, demonstrated its formidable martial and strength abilities in a lofty and entirely

upholstered with soft material room whose partition similar to an aerial translucent net, woven and comprised of small hexagons, separated him and Dr. Kornowitz from Subject-85. At that moment a headless orange rubber torso with a big crack in its middle flew towards the two men, went outside the translucent barrier, making the taut hexagons aglow, stopped and then flung backwards.

Already along the hexagon-tilted net, before he could even get the chance to form his next thought, several lucid display-frames had appeared: those were Subject-85's biometric data stats in real time: pulse, blood pressure, cerebral activity, hormonal and toxin levels, and so forth; and scarcely had the tawny man glimpsed at them, when the frame that showed the cerebral activity glided on to the centre and expanded, whilst the rest dispersed to the corners of the interactive net and then disappeared.

"During intensive training conditions we detect no deviations in the cerebral activity," the chief facilitator, Dr. Kornowitz, began offhandedly, at the same time concentratedly watching a few moving and wavering diagram-lines, numbers with unknown meaning, an image of an oversized brain whose different constituting parts were being continuously marked and unmarked in different colours, together with a whole bunch of other miscellaneous visualizations within the expanded display-frame, "and the biomechanic prostheses that we replaced her limbs with are functioning exactly as intended—not only did they accept and coalesce with the cellular nanothreads, but they also have a tendency of showing natural growth and developing proclivity as if they were real limbs."

After the chief facilitator's brief update on Subject-85's current status, the display-frame containing all the data stats disappeared—the default translucent visibility was restored again.

"So far everything looks great," said the bearded man who, still caught off-guard by this whole unexpected demonstrative premise, was evidently enjoying what was happening on the other side of the partition, "but two things I can't shake off my mind: as far as I understand this TIS thing won't be working all the time, right? And secondly, why hasn't it been ever performed on our other EUs?"

“I was just about to explain this side of the project—you see, no matter how well-developed and perfected a human organism is, in the end it is nothing but an organism—the perfect biological mechanism with its inherent imperfect limits. Under the constant influence of TIS, sooner or later the body becomes more and more imbalanced, and the psyche, unable to handle the pressure any longer, simply tears itself apart. In other words, the subject dies.”

The bearded man devoured every word with the keenest, yet still not satiated attention; but the neuroengineer wasn't yet done with the explanation, and so he continued after pausing for a moment and mulling over something:

“According to the results we have thus far compiled,” went on Dr. Kornowitz, “we have estimated that after a normative number of TIS-triggered memory recalls, the device could be used again not until a cooldown window of 15 to 18 hours. Of course, here we are talking about triggered recalls—the nanothreads' physiological effects usually last up to two or three hours, after which they begin to gradually fade away. But, like I said, the cooldown window between the TIS-triggered recollections is expected to shrink at exponential rates, whilst the duration of that gained strength to rise up to 40%. Of course, the cooldown window will always be there, since, as I mentioned before, that's the way the human body is constructed—something like an elaborate self-defence mechanism, something you can't just get rid of without simultaneously and irreparably annihilating the subject. But do not let this dispirit you, because, after all, even without TIS she would still be that same impeccable killing machine—as you yourself are prone to put it—and like all other successfully integrated *Experimental Units* in the base, her weak and susceptible cells are entirely replaced by much more resistant ones, her body also being additionally augmented with biocybernetic metamaterials.

“As to your second question, well, time and again I used to say that she is one of her kind—both figuratively and literally.” A short moment of silence ensued between the two, after which the scientist resumed: “The only thing that still connects her with the remnants of her former life are exactly those faint and convoluted,

but nonetheless persistent memories: we managed to turn them against her, to make out of them a sort of a *trigger*, a switch. No other subject of ours has ever had such a strong will as hers, such a craving desire for... nostalgia, for lack of a better word.”

The black-haired man was thoughtfully fidgeting at his beard as the chief scientist was just finishing up speaking.

“Great speech, Doc,” he said, “and a very exhaustive one at that. I guess that those 2-3 hours you spoke of would do the job for me. Hell...”—and he looked more closely into the translucent hexagon net, where all the 14 punching mannequins were now veritably ripped apart, a mess of deformed rubber heads and lumps scattered in all directions as if a grinder had just passed over them—“...that’d be even more than enough.”

Four strong jets of white aerial substance coming out of the corners began gassing the room at an excessive speed, filling it up and dimming it to the point of making everything inside scarcely visible. And moments before she fell on her knees, knocked-off by the sedative gas, the bearded man thought that for a moment there the 11-year-old long-haired blond girl was gazing at him with an open and profuse resentment—an unadulterated hatred—for a couple of seconds, a sudden chilling shockwave running through his body when he noticed this.

“She *can*’t see us, can she?”

“No. The net is a one-side-spectre membrane. Why?”

“Just asking. And how can we be precisely sure that she’ll continue to recall those same memories which seem to be so crucial to the whole process? Won’t everything turn out to have been performed in vain once she stops remembering, or simply forgets everything?”

“No, it won’t.” A negligible, satisfactory smile shone upon the face of the chief facilitator. He moved a step back, seeming to enjoy and savour that very moment to the very end, and even the black-haired man was mildly surprised at this unexpected showcase of him that was so unbecoming to his persona. “The thing is, my

friend, that she'll never stop remembering. And even if by some chance she stops doing it, we'll remind her of who she *was*."

Whereupon he took a rectangular glassy surface out of his pocket, and tapping a set of combinations onto it, he then stretched out his hand, showing it to the bearded man right in front of him. The latter bent forward so that he could see the images more clearly: two digital portraits were shown on it—one of a man, and another of a woman.

Over the course of three years Subject-85 did all kinds of assignments, unreservedly and unquestioningly. Most of the time she couldn't fully realize the nature of the deeds she was committing, but rather acted always on command and as if mechanically: she scarcely possessed any free will, and even during the rare occasions when she did seem to have and express one, it was only to allow her to realize the atrocities she'd committed earlier that day, just before she was put down into a state of induced sleep. And thus, her only episodes of self-realization during which she was able to retain the closest semblance to volition, were also her most tormenting ones—the everyday moments of remorse that landed unsparingly and with full force onto her otherwise ravaged conscience eventually turned into a living nightmare beyond what she could possibly endure, gradually becoming nothing more but distant repetitive projections she learned to cope with that quickly passed away, everything returning back to its routine normalcy and with no inhibiting memories on the next day.

Sometimes she had the feeling that her body was betraying her, being slowly and painfully deprived of its strength—and just then, as if by some coincidental occurrence, that same old man in white attire and thick dishevelled snow-white brows appeared out of nowhere, whom she felt she had known for a long time. At some point he'd begun showing her a series of different pictures of the same two people—a man and a woman—and asking her a number of questions which were afterwards almost immediately forgotten. Strangely enough and unable to tell whether it had happened immediately or after some time, after she was shown the series of pictures

she somehow slowly began to regain that same familiar impulse of life she'd become so estranged from, that vigour without which she feared she would perish: this was the moment when everything started all over again—like one endless cycle of murders, unsolved memory-dreams and again murders.

It was during a special assignment that had no room for mistakes. She could only recall that it was a town in the middle of a desert, and yet a populated one with a fine number of small, colourfully bespattered and closely arranged cottages, as well as thatched huts and a couple of windmills. This time she was enrolled in a completely new three-member squad—hitmen just like her, modified and enhanced inside out. She also remembered that the target was a man, probably some really powerful and wealthy figure of the criminal underworld, for whom they had intel according to which he and his men were located in one of the surrounding buildings, amongst which there were hard-lit bars and cheap, run-of-the-mill hostels of archaic design. The natives seemed to be in a state of exuberant merry-making, infused with a celebratory spirit, for there was music and singing that filled and elated the air all throughout the small town. There was also a lot of shouting and whistling and chanting that was more often than not interrupted by cracking shots resounding from every corner amid the general brouhaha, colourful dazzling lights painting the dark sombre alleyways in such a way that they looked like some other kind of outworldish abodes; popping sparks flickered for a second and then disappeared. All that noisy revelry with its exciting frolicking, together with the overall shared uplifted and joyous contagiousness—those were the things that first appeared in her mind whenever she recalled that particular day.

The next thing she remembered was the demolished and burned-down town, corpses laying on every side in the dusty streets, among which were those of the other two hitmen. It was raining un- gently, the last burning planks being extinguished with a wet hiss. She also remembered the many frightened to death locals who ran frantically without direction, the horrible and tearing screams, and then of course the sudden pour of heavy rain.

Feeling completely exposed and vulnerable, she didn't know what to do, so she sprang forth with all her might towards the unknown. But the important thing was that it was at least somewhere, for for the first time in her life she had the freedom of choice—that freedom everyone was born with, and which presumably nobody had the right to ever take away.

Running, she suddenly came to a halt, realizing that the rain was washing away something off her hands. Unfolding them, she noticed that a murky red substance was running down her already wet palms, legs, her entire body, until it reached and mingled with the damp sand at her feet: it was blood, but not hers. Whose then was it? Was it her who'd massacred all those people back in that town? Petrified by this inexplicable circumstance, she at once started running again, this time not daring to stop regardless of anything. With every step she could feel the hard metal prostheses plunging deep into the wet sand, rummaging and scattering the drossy sand. She then tried to remember, the shock gradually beginning to wear away.

Nothing; her heart was palpitating wildly. Again, she attempted to recollect the events from that scene and this time the underground base was suddenly brought up in her mind: as she was going through all the terror she'd endured back there during the last three years, to her it were as if reliving them again and again, persistent vivid fragments that was hard to believe they were hers; what she also remembered were the countless murders she had committed. Dreadful icy pierces made her body shiver: until that sole moment she wasn't even aware of being capable of committing such inhumane, cold-blooded monstrosities against other people, and she slowly came to the conclusion that the mass massacre of those natives was probably *her* doings.

She became nauseous, so she halted, feeling a strong urge to puke. The singular thought of what they'd turned her into made her debilitatingly sick. Gathering all her wits, she didn't let her emotions completely overtake her, finally becoming calm again. She resumed her attempts at bringing up the most recent events to her memory, everything remotely significant which for the moment

seemed inaccessible to her; and like the last time, nothing but distant unwilling murders showed up: she seemed to remember all the details around her previous missions, their targets, locations, and the secondary people of importance, but not what had happened in that small town—that missing piece caused so much painful unrest to her mind that eventually she gave up. But there was another thing that was also enshrouded in a mist of unclarity, and which probably was of more value than this particular event: of all things, of all the detailed reminiscences about that constraining underground facility, she couldn't remember her former life, her *real* former life—the life she had before she was abducted and destroyed from within.

After a while it finally came back to her that she was currently in the north-western part of the Central American Domain—she'd reached Hermosillo, the administrative capital of the Sonora state and also the biggest city in the district, around 250 kilometres away from the North American Domain border. She couldn't tell how far off she was, but estimated that at least a good 30-40 kilometres should have been covered by now.

The rain had stopped. Wet from head to toes and shivering in coldly spasms, she continued wandering through the breezy and dreadful dark Sonoran desert. She was wearing a special-operative track-jacket and black trousers with multiple pockets, and somewhere along the way she tossed away her two blasters whose caesium battery-mags were already dead, leaving herself with only two big hunting knives and a half-charged semi-automatic foldable rifle with an auto-tracking scope and an incognito-laser-point.

By midday in a hot and cloudless weather she had finally reached the urban city, having geographically familiarized herself in advance with the local area during the debriefing on the proceedings of the assignment. Terrestrial electric vehicles were abundantly passing by her, already having invaded every corner and going on and on about the heated-up and cracked roadway, while up in the sky the many swarming aeromobiles cast their feeble shadows down onto the streets, reduced to mere silhouettes under the ever-flaming bright sun that was relentlessly shining upon the whole city. Small skyscrapers and other buildings, as well as many business and

shopping centres were surrounding most of the central part; tropical trees with small public gardens added with their natural green lush to the otherwise brutalist dusty landscape.

On seeing across the street a fountain ornamented along its brink with several statues of cherubic human forms, she went straight to that strange but beautiful circular construction, and the next thing she felt was the cold brilliant water—pouring down upon her from the amphoras each of those angelic beings held—sprinkling her desiccated and dirty face: this bore a refreshing effect on her, and the produced relief from the coolness instilled her with a new stimulating rush to continue her journey.

At that moment two police officers who happened to be nearby took notice of her, shouting something in Spanish at her while at the same time approaching the fountain in hurrying steps. Not wasting a moment more there, she leaped out of the water with soaked to the knee trousers, and within a couple of seconds she was already out of their sight, mingling with the rest of the pedestrians and leaving behind her the dull sound of her metal prostheses clanking against the concrete ground—many curious looks were fixed on to her, especially on to the foldable semi-automatic rifle which hung across her bag and which caused most of the attention, but luckily for her her light and easy steps and the ability to appear as unobtrusive as possible prevented her from having to go through another rigmarole. As this place and everything about it was unknown to her, she didn't have the slightest idea where exactly she was or which way to go. And just as she was munching at an orange she'd easily snatched from an unsuspecting greengrocer's stand, suddenly, out of nowhere, a thought dawned upon her that she might have a small tracking device inserted somewhere into her body.

She could now trace back the entire thread that had led her to that unexpectant and completely random insight, and it was on that one occasion, during her first days in the training room, when she'd heard people behind the impenetrable undulating net mentioning briefly a certain *insurance* that was necessary for every single captive of theirs to have: once they were abducted, every *Experimental Unit* was being inserted with a microchip deep under the skin

of their right forearm: it was completely untraceable, and even the most proficient scanners failed to detect it, making its removal extremely hard and tricky—all microchips could be satellite-localized throughout the globe, with a precision of up to 10 metres, which made her start assuming that it wouldn't take long for them to find her.

Hiding in a secluded and empty alley, she drew out one of her hunting knives: it took her five entire minutes to find it, as well as a considerable amount of spilt blood with a lot of self-induced pain which, at least for now, she could suppress. She'd never before seen what the microchip looked like, and as she was finally holding it on the tip of her index finger, she noticed that it had a perfect rectangular form of a silvery material. She used her track jacket to cover the wound, tightly rolling it around her forearm and leaving herself in her t-shirt only.

By now they'd probably detected her approximate location, she thought, and so she resolved to leave the town as soon as possible. She instinctively looked up at the sky—the plan was already formed and executed in her head. As far as she could see, no one was following her at the present moment.

She came across a budget aeromobile next to a sidewalk, after which she easily hijacked it. However, another problem was looming upon her, which was the mandatory border checkpoint: a series of towers placed tens of kilometres apart from each other at the designated border produced a two-sided invisible barrier that overstretched along the entire border and up into the aerial traffic corridors. If even one inconsistency was to be detected during the checks, the aeromobile was to be immediately taken down by one of the numerous autonomous terrestrial pulsators, slowly and controllably descending until it would land on a discernible marked zone for a thorough search and detention.

She met none of the requirements.

The border checkpoint at Nogales was always pervaded by traffic jams; the late afternoon sun covered in bright amber shades the suburban wild steppe of the city's outskirts, and the uncountable aerial and terrestrial vehicles that crawled down the rugged road and

reeled freely in the sky seemed like little light-reflecting granite beads that blinkered under a fiery paper-lamp. At that moment she was entirely drenched in sweat, sticky with dried blood and filth, and not having slept for more than 24 hours.

She didn't want to toss away her rifle because she very well knew that where she was going not bringing any kind of self-defence means was a guaranteed suicide. However, she had to think of another, more demanding, obstacle—namely, the advanced border control system she was completely unaware of until now and which astonished her with its vast scale and overreaching functionality. If caught, everything would end up then and there for her.

Her unrelenting vengeance, however, so desperately sought and craved negated every fear and consideration of her being caught: the thought of inflicting personal retribution pushed her further in her zeal, becoming firmer in her decision to never again let herself be treated the same way by those who made her life a living hell.

She almost reached the invisible double barrier—a huge holographic sign inertly floating in the air in both languages warned in the following bright lustrous letters against a molasses-dark background:

BORDER CONTROL OF NOGALES, MEXICO

WARNING: VEHICLES NOT MEETING THE BORDER REQUIREMENTS

WILL BE IMMEDIATELY TACKEN DOWN AND DETAINED

Her hands shuddered in fervour, and her legs were stifled under immense pressure. Surrounded by the many other aeromobiles which up there seemed to have assumed the likeness of innumerable insectoid machines infesting the waning blue sky, she could hear the working grumble of her aeromobile's airborne-plasma vents that now partook in that same steadily moving buzzing cloud.

The moment had come.

Releasing a deep sigh, she suddenly realized that nothing had happened: the Sonoran northern prairie continued to take up the entire horizon before her in the distance, the air-warping translucent eddies vaporizing as they rose from amid the thinly veiled skyline.

The confounding fact that neither the weapon, nor the stolen car or her unregistered status had triggered the border control check-system gave her solid enough reasons to think that this wasn't a fortuitous occurrence at all. Furthermore, she came to the conclusion—which also seemed to be the only logical explanation—that the people she'd escaped from had, in fact, interfered with and exerted control over the local border authorities by making her, as well as all other fellow Subjects specializing in foreign operations, exempt from any international border liability upon automatic detection. But then the following question arose: why hadn't they still revoked that special privilege of hers? What were they waiting for? More than 18 hours had passed since the incident in Estacion Torres, and considering she no longer had a microchip to be detected by, the whole situation seemed none the less self-contradictory and concerning.

Cold chills assailed her for the second time, more tangible and severe, and all the way onwards they didn't let go of her until she finally reached the plenteous green forests of Central Montana.

She was home.

What was left from the late-afternoon blazing heat began to entangle with the veils of clouds soaked in rich and varying dyes. Unlike the neighbouring Central American Domain, here the climate was much more bearable and pleasant: the ever-humid air filled and betook the senses with its enlivening cleanness and smell of untouched flourished nature, an eternal forestal refuge from the plight and clamour of the outer hostile world. If the boundless and evenly spread burning sands of the Sonoran desert represented the harsh and trying conditions of another realm, the unfurled dense greenery of the Montanan mountain range and woodlands represented the conditions of a known, paradisaical one.

Twilight.

The aeromobile was hovering noiselessly and concealingly above the nearly impenetrable growing darkness. No one had followed her, nor attempted to stop her during her flight from Nogales, already forgetting about those temporal perils and now focusing entirely on her only objective that mattered, the outcomes of which were yet unknown to her. One final hit, she'd said to herself, one final shot before she would sink into that long-awaited spiritual ease no matter what was awaiting her behind those doors—she was ready to sacrifice everything to pass through them.

Thanks to the many lift-offs taken from the underground base during these last three years, she knew its exact location which had been repeatedly and subconsciously memorized by her mind, and not even all the endless ridged space on earth could hinder her from rediscovering it.

Hidden and concealed among the tall surrounding trees, the bare piece of land lay open before her eyes. Strange, she thought, for this time neither tent, nor any projectors were there; no light emittances could be seen either, and no movement—as far as she could tell from that height—could be detected. Piercing through the dusk again, she could descry nothing. She then finally began to descend over that same spot, dirt and gravel being blown away in all directions by the heated upsurge coming from the roaring airborne-plasma vents.

Upon the first contact with the ground, she could already sense the raw softness of the soil, her slowly submerging into it, and its contained dampness and fertility of an unspoilt nature—it felt so palpable and convincing that for a moment she thought she had her real legs again, experiencing *real* contact with *real* things. However, she quickly came to the bitter realization that the sensations she felt were merely the evoked sensual signals of the constantly symbiosing with her body nanoelectric limbic biosensors, metal adjoined with flesh and flesh adjoined with metal. The last flatline shades of the day gave way to the inevitable cloak of night.

She began to walk slowly towards the only entrance that led to the underground base, which was a tin elevator cabin that was not so far off from the place where she'd landed. The access was granted

only via identification microchip or a retinal scanning; she knew she didn't have the first. Hoping that her retinal minutiae would be still valid, and looking up at the black scanning dot, two yellow lights immediately then blinkered, the confirming message transforming into an incandescent outlining along the shaft's frames which glowed pleasantly, satisfying in the blackness of the night.

The doors opened with a heavy rusty screech. She stepped in. But suddenly something stopped her at the threshold line—a dreadful epiphany farther provoked her misgivings, deterring her from entering the precariously standing elevator cabin. She felt a strong urge to back off, acknowledging a certain odour in the air: an odour she thought was that of the unknown, an ubiquitous threat waiting for her at every step, but no sooner realizing that it was an actual rancid smell that came directly from inside.

All it took her was a mere second to rapidly retreat as far as possible, and that second alone was enough to save her life by a thin margin.

At first the cabin began to shake and rattle, heat and smoke coming out of the crevices in the lower corners, whereupon a sudden powerful blast sent it off some fifty yards up in the sky, only to land with a strong clash somewhere nearby in the forest. Conflagrating flames then erupted from the empty spot, the whole earth trembling for a moment, all the birds around starting and flying off in disorderly flocks. Her left shoulder injured from the heavy explosion wave that hurled her some ten paces away from the hotspot, staggering and stumbling she darted straight for the aeromobile. Meanwhile the fiery gazer increased exponentially in size and burst, making everything alit, spewing out burning chunks and glowing rudiments in all directions.

No sooner did she reach the vehicle than she hit the autopilot button on the dashboard; and with a rapid thrust from the ground, the car quickly set off in motion, soaring up away from the burning centre that made the night sky iridescent with sultry tawny heat.

As she floated lost and directionless for some time in the darkness above a moonlit coverlet of swishing foliage, drowsiness began to slowly tame her strained alertness. Her head began to

slowly recline to one side, arms and legs gradually giving way to a long-desired repose, mind calling for retreat.

The next morning she woke up without any pains as if nothing had happened: the cut on her forearm she'd made back at Hermosillo had stopped searing, and her shoulder no longer ached. At places she had small, insignificant bruises, but overall she felt fully restored from any past injuries. She didn't know where the autopilot had taken her to, only that the car had been landed on a cliff, she saw, and around her lonely naked green fields stretching far beyond the visible periphery, with the occasional cluster of bulky elm and oak trees.

Getting out of the car, the first thing she felt was the morning sun rays meeting her tarnished cheeks, gently stroking them with warmth that wasn't scorching, but reviving; northern breeze was taking the dirt off her clothes, filling her lungs with air every breath of which she savoured. She was all by herself amid the uncouth greenness that reflected a greener, brilliant light. And suddenly, upon recalling last night's incident, a strange nihilistic melancholy took hold of her—she reacted to everything that had occurred the previous day with indifference that left no room even for the slightest contrition. Nothing bothered her, nothing was important to her anymore. Yet, she *had* to return to that place—if anything, at least she had to learn what had happened and who was responsible for the things done to her.

An enormous crater lay open right where the explosion had sent a vast part of the ground a-thunder—everything that once stood there was now annihilated.

Once.

Everything had been reduced to unrecognizable formless debris and burnt soil.

Looking more closely into the cemetery pit, a profound thought gripped her mind: something else had also found its death down there. Among all those lost and wretched lives, among strangers and torturers, she'd only now realized that there, after all,

lay something that *was* actually close to her, something that evoked only love and warmth in her—something she would probably never experience in her life again.

Her parents were forever buried down there, deep beneath all the dirt and scattered ashes and crushed bones, and with them all hopes to learn who they really were, and who *she* was.

As the months went by and the emptiness in her remained as ever unfilled, one time she gathered from several tapped federal info-channels that a well-planned inside job sabotage was what had caused the explosion that had brought down the entire central base of one of the biggest mafia organizations in the country. Several names of other rival groups circulated among the list of suspected perpetrators, but none of them meant anything to her—during her recruitment as a hitman they never shared with her any information concerning the ongoing internal affairs, nor the targets she'd been mercilessly and without a second thought eliminating. Everything she'd ever done for these people went through a total blackout, every possible trace forever erased and lost. There were no answers and no questions; she decided to move on.

For her, that life was now a heinous distant past—a past she was ashamed, repulsed and at the same time scared of. Now she had to survive day by day, hour by hour as she'd always done ever since. The future was uncertain to her but that didn't really matter—she *had* to keep going and not give up, finding herself new restarts, new reasons to live, new goals to strive for—something necessary to keep her human part alive in what was a rapidly developing, grievously cruel world to her, whereas her other side she had to constantly keep under a lock, regardless of whether it even existed or not: self-preservation and keeping up to her true self was the only genuine *purpose* she ever knew of, and the only thing that kept in check the strange, unexplainable dormant enmity she was most afraid of in this life.

Part 3

Chapter I

Visitors

Collins and Amanda felt the unsparing tiredness quickly catching up to them as they took long roundabout cuts on Montgomery St; and just when they thought that the flow of aching weariness had been finally put to rest, it immediately came back right after their false conviction had eluded them that they would quickly recover. They continued to drag on, trying to avoid the main streets as much as they could, and as their bodies began to feel way heavier than usual under their feet, they finally stopped next to one dilapidated rough brick-and-mortar building on 78 Lorsted St that was part of an old bedraggled flat complex and where they could take a short break and decide what to do next. The cyborg, of course, didn't appear to be even remotely exhausted, and her expression escaped not a single sign of tiredness. There wasn't much ongoing activity where they were, only the usual aerial traffic criss-crossing way above their heads and the infrequent terrestrial autonomous public transport. It was 15:45—four hours since Shunningan's breakout, and an hour since the research institute had been blown off.

The boy they managed to salvage from the institute, despite all their efforts to make him talk, didn't shed a word, answering only by staring with his openly curious eyes at the people who had introduced him into a world he'd already forgotten and to which he was a complete stranger. Obviously, they thought, Bud (the temporal name Amanda had decided to give him) had already went through a total memory and personality erasure, depriving him of any distinguishable behavioural characteristics and habits and transforming him into a completely shallow, timidly existing organism without a past nor an identity.

The four walked up to a big garbage container, warily on the lookout. Everything around was grey and unappealingly polluted, the sun half-darkened by spread unclear clouds, a sort of dependency misting throughout the outer zone of the Sundan District they'd walked a long way to reach.

"We continue or what?" Amanda asked, trying to appear as minimally debilitated as possible, but nevertheless releasing a deep mournful sigh that was indicative enough of her fatigue. She looked at Collins, turned towards the cyborg with emerald eyes for a moment, then again at Collins.

"We're approaching more crowded areas, it's not worth the risk to continue with you," said the cyborg with a calm and unquivering voice. "You're on your own from now on. I'll be waiting at the appointed place."

At present, Cassidy got up, her intricate biomechatronic feet and ankles steadily balanced on the evened ground.

"See you there," she said to Collins.

And springing forth and up, she was already climbing along the two adjacent buildings' walls which formed the alleyway they'd walked through, hopping from one side to the other, effortlessly and in a very specific and accustomed manner, her metal prosthetic limbs clinking with a soft sophisticated sound, working with inexplicable mechanical aptness.

The three went on as before, trying to blend in with the impassive grey homogeneity as best as they could and at the same time looking out for shortcuts that would spare them most of the remaining distance's trouble.

The room they were in was of lofty and spacious dimensions and yet felt closely confiding, being cramped up by all sorts of things such as processing and other computational power equipment, together with lots of unrelatable tech gear autonomously performing separate tasks in an otherwise interconnective fashion. It was thoroughly dark, only the many blinking dots and stripes that

enmeshed into one inorganic colourful blotch made the invisible visible in a chaotic pattern.

For a moment Amanda thought she'd caught something by her side that didn't quite seem to fit in that whole meticulously arranged set—no, it wasn't by her side, she immediately realized, it was somewhere deeper amid the lightning pool of almost noiselessly resonating specks, and now it was lost, its shade vanished as if it had been perfectly aware of her spontaneous glimpse.

There were no windows, and yet she felt a weak chilling current swooshing down from the high ceiling. As she advanced, the twinkling lights seemed to increase in number, and at the same time, as she looked around trying to extract a better pictorial summation, all of a sudden more equipment began to gradually appear, everything becoming even more confusing and less familiar: charging blocks, double-sided-glassed boxes with mildly flaming panels, long shimmering cables coiling and entwining all over the floor; other, thinner cables with miniscule sparks glistening inside of them; and on her left, she noticed, there were several tall rods with cut, straight ends put in a circle, the surface of those ends emitting pale organic light, and in the middle of that contraption, supported by a micro-thread as though levitating above the floor, a sphere the colour of warm raspberry with rapidly spinning around it small ringlets of variable shades, their movement creating flickering twisting spinors, unstable and yellow beneath them. More charging blocks and more quizzical mechanical elements in a profound environment of illustrious silent buzz.

“This is Miles,” Collins' voice suddenly pulled her back to reality.

Amanda, starting, and almost stumbling over a sectioned tube filled with bubbling fluid that connected several intersecting vertical processing machines, cast a glance before her, the overshadowed silhouette quivering as it spoke the words:

“He'll help us sort this thing out.”

It took her a while until she could clearly distinguish Collins' moving outlines, who, at the moment, was facing her several steps ahead.

Somewhere further behind him two green oblique circumferences penetrated out of the dark, perfectly visible despite the distance and the distracting shimmer and, as opposed to Collins, unmoving and steadily fixed in one place: it was the cyborg. She was seated at the edge of a medium-sized bureau at the other end of the room, one foot locked over another, her hand resting on that leg's knee. Assured she'd already become accustomed to the two diluted emerald spheres, she was once again struck by their unusual vividness, this time the darkness adding to them a more subliminal attraction, precise in their obscurity. Right next to Collins stood another silhouette, way smaller and half his length, and she saw that it was Bud.

“What’s up,” an unknown voice suddenly spoke out.

Of a humble, lean build, a young man in draped denim and swishing slicker whose textural colour was unsteadily changing under the brightness coming directly from an expansive glowing screen before him, worked with an easy manner on an ingrained into a long table glassy keypad that was also lit. He stood a couple of feet away from Collins, a solitary figure that had somehow succeeded in escaping her notice.

The first impression he'd evoked in her was his non-standard indoors clothing and his peculiar way of knowing her exact position when he'd only turned his head once—and briefly at that—as if to attest every single content—including the human presences—that was present in the room.

“Miles,” said Collins, turning to him. The slender man in slicker didn't seem to have any chairs nearby him, and as Amanda cast another glance around herself she noticed that the only furniture the apartment room contained was the bureau on which Cassidy sat and the big long table in front of Miles.

“Yeah?”

“The lights.”

Amanda's vision was suddenly disrupted and blurred out by the turning on of the lights—the room suddenly acquired a meek shade of yellowy-white touch, not too bright and not too dim. The

computational items and all the electronic mesh that were cramped were finally revealed in their miscellaneous entirety, distinctly visible and of such indecipherable complexity that Amanda no longer maintained her desire to understand them.

“Troublemakers, all of you,” the young man said banteringly, a tinge of humorous gaiety perceptible in his voice. “Didn’t think Beckard would turn out *that* crazy as to blow up one of his precious labs.”

The hazelnut-haired man didn’t pull his eyes away from the big screen even for a second, still working on the keypad with a stiff and slightly hunched posture, head looking straight forward. His denim seemed at least a size bigger, and his black unzipped slicker was vaguely gleaming in thousands little sparklings of mostly the green and blue variety. He had a scrawny, but well-laid-out face, lineless and with barely visible facial hair along the chin and jawline. The prolonged table was littered with a few empty plastic bags of energy-electrolyte drinks, some mobile accessories and other food packages and leftovers.

“Me neither,” Collins responded, moving and standing right next to the man in black slicker. The two were now both staring equally at the wide screen above the table. “You dig out something during my absence?”

Amanda joined them. At that instance Bud skittered playfully past her, mesmerized by the tech that irresistibly attracted his eager curiosity—Amanda realized that it was the first time she’d seen him act like this, as if his true past-self, the suppressed child within him had been reawakened. At the end of the room Cassidy had begun cleaning her dazzlingly shining and polished katana with a piece of old cloth, as reserved and undisturbed as she’d first encountered her.

“Yes and no. I ran Shunningan’s lawyer through the channels and his history record was impeccable, nothing shady and nothing too fancy. But... can’t say the same about our old Chinaman.”

Million terabytes of processed off-grid raw data spun in whirling flows on the screen in front of them, recombining repeatedly in textualized glyphs and symbols until they assembled into one

coherent layout that could be now read in its simplicity. A 16-bit digital portrait had also appeared, slowly becoming clearer, loading from a badly shaped, sharp three-dimensional image to a more finalized, smoother version. It was a man with Asiatic features.

“Couldn’t trace him back nowhere in the database, but... he popped up in the Chinese one. Gotta admit it to those fellows over there—they surely know how to build a strong defence system, had me busy for a while until I could crack their protocol keychains.”

“He’s dead,” Collins mumbled, dishearteningly, “that’s why you couldn’t find him in our registers.”

“Oh... In that case, here’s all the info I could gather ‘bout him during his Pan-Asiatic period.” Miles shifted his look from Collins back to the glowing screen. Presently, he started to summarize and at the same time reading the text: “Tsin Dzi—born October 15, 2021 in Baoding, Hebei Province. His parents were both workers at a local state-owned factory for cheap household appliances, no siblings. From a very young age has been showing inclinations towards the engineering sciences, which prompted his parents to prepare him as an apprentice in the neighbouring repair shop owned by a friend of theirs. Graduates the only Technicum school in the city with high honours, then accepted in the Beijin University of Sciences and Technology with a major in Mechatronic Engineering. This is where the fun part begins.”

Collins and Amanda leaned their heads closer to the screen, waiting to hear what their interlocutor was about to say next.

“At the end of his fourth and last year in university, just before graduation, he and a couple of other students were summoned at a special meeting with a number of government representatives—a long-time running practice between the country’s universities and the Chinese government, a sort of an unofficial recruitment program for extremely talented individuals. The said representatives were from the Ministry of Military Defence—top dogs you wouldn’t want to fuck around with. Apparently, he was the only one who put down their offer.”

At that moment a hologram projection was suddenly cast next to them over the surface of the long table; Collins and Amanda turned eagerly looking at it.

“Obviously, he’d severely underestimated the scope of power these guys had at their disposal, as he was convinced later when, two weeks before graduation, one day he found his parents dead in their house with their throats cut open. Not a very charming sight, if you ask me.”

A sequence of grotesque images appeared afloat in the strongly lightened air: they showed the bodies of a man and a woman in their forties lying on the floor next to each other with their eyes open in a stamp-frozen shock, wide deep cuts marking their throats out of which larynx cartilages were visible through the gore, a considerable amount of blood congested under their bodies and on their clothes.

“Naturally devastated, he realized they’d be soon coming after him too.”

“And this is when he decides to escape and seek refuge somewhere else,” Collins said.

“Exactly. Now, how he’d managed to save his skin I cannot tell. But it’s a fact that right after the tragedy he emigrated to the North American Domain. The rest is a dead end and his history record is completely erased.”

Tedious silence ensued for a moment.

“No wife, no kids, no nothing?” asked Collins dryly.

“Nope. Reached out to some of my sources at Junkhood before you came—the locals say the man is—*was*—a devout loner, basically a hermit spending his petty days in his repair shop. It’s apparent that he was an extraordinarily gifted technician and engineer, in spite of his humble living.” And after picking on after a while: “He most definitely wasn’t approached at random. He either had something the Grouzers wanted from him, or they wanted *himself*.”

“Perhaps they wanted this?” Collins picked up the same item the old Chinaman had surreptitiously passed to him in

Junkhood out of his pocked, giving it to Miles; Amanda noticed how the latter's countenance was immediately changed. "Seems familiar?"

"He gave it to you?"

"Yes. And he did it rather secretively. Why?"

"Well, because, for one, that's not something an old foreigner from the bric-a-bracs of Junkhood would have. This is a pre-constructed 12-exabyte keygen enacter used, as far as I know, as a decrypting password generator for something usually only big daddy government knows about and possesses—it might be used for stuff like authorizing a nuclear attack or other similar things. In such cases two enacters like this are required, sometimes three and rarely one."

"Are you shitting me?" Amanda, befuddled and with an even more poignant reaction than Miles, exclaimed.

"I shit you not."

"Are you sure that this is what you claim it to be?" Collins asked him, showing a serious concern. "A nuclear warhead enacter?"

"Yeah, I'm positively sure. But it's not necessarily applied for military means, it could also be employed for the protection of extremely sensitive information that could be used against the government. Come on, Brad, you of all people should know what this stuff is."

"I was well aware of the existence of keygen enacters, it's just that I never even imagined that someone like Tsin Dzi would have one."

"Well, he *did* have one. Which makes him even more important a persona than we thought he was."

"Do you think we should go to his place and find out what's all this about?" Amanda suggested.

"It's useless," Collins discarded. "I already went back there, he hasn't shown up for days. The Grouzers have probably got him, and it's very unlikely he's still alive." He looked again at the screen, then at the hologram projection, not focusing on anything in

particular. “We need to track down Strageris Mapilton. He alone might lead us to Beckard and the rest.”

The name Collins had just spoken was unknown to Amanda.

“I reckon you pulled out some bits and pieces about him too?” he inquired, turning towards Miles.

“Who’s this guy?” Amanda asked eagerly.

“The day before I went to Junkhood, I received an encrypted text message that turned out to be the coordinates of Tsin Dzi’s workshop with the name Strageris Mapilton also figuring in it. Funny enough, the Chinaman became quite disturbed when I brought up the name.”

“You’ve probably worked the old man more than you should’ve, especially if you’ve been in one of those trademark interrogational moods of yours,” Miles mused. “Anyways, there’s a person who goes by that name in the database, but no other information is attached to him. A literal ghost.”

“I knew it. Cassidy,” Collins turned towards the solemn bureau with the solemn figure upon it, “you said the signal you received was also encrypted, correct?”

“Correct,” said the female cyborg as she got up, her radiant green eyes diluting the warm light. She’d already put her katana back inside the sheath with a brief, thin metallic screech and then an abrupt clink. “Untraceable. We already checked it before you got here.”

“It seems like someone’s trying to help us, then. An insider, perhaps,” said Collins, incredulously. “And yet, we’ve still got nothing, not even a starting point.”

Miles suddenly broke in, as if reminded of something:

“You’re aware of what happened at the ‘Craeton Fauerd’ penitentiary, right?” and he made a couple of short taps on the glossy keypad, after which a video file was loaded onto the viewer section: it was the state penitentiary with curling smoke coming out of one of its wings. “Shunningan’s escaped a couple of hours ago.”

At first, a short-lasting fierce spark gleamed within Collins' eyes, but he didn't say anything, remaining in his usual steady mood.

"Expected," he said in the end, not entirely disappointingly but rather with a despairing sigh concealed behind a monotonous voice.

"I know who can answer at least some of our questions," Amanda then ventured to say.

And thenceforth she began recalling and telling everything that had happened to her in the past week, including her ensnarement by Gloria.

Chapter II

Just a Prickle

On their way to the Department, Amanda and Collins were carried on by the forced plasma vents' aerial thrust, the rumble of the engine mixing in together with the shared pervasive thudding prolongation of other thousands of aeromobiles stirring up in streaks of squinting flickers amid a receding gloomy sky. Upon departing, Collins had explained the situation to Miles concerning the little kid they'd found.

"I got ya, man," Miles had said to him in response, understanding, "I can arrange him a proper foster family, I know a good couple who'd be delighted at the news—the boy won't be sent to an orphanage, you can count on me for that."

He'd managed to procure him with a new transportation vehicle too—a decent '72' Norwell coupe that had been forfeited to him because of a long overdue sum he was owed. He had also given them guns and new playgers, as well as comms-rings with a receiving auditory field limited only to the carrier's audible field, guaranteeing them a reliable access connection between each other that required only a brief shake of the wrist for the voice receiver to be turned on.

They'd almost reached the greystone building of the Police Department when, as they waited for their playgers to be cloud-synched, Amanda turned to Collins who at that moment was looking with unquivering eyes at the open skyline before them:

"I'm glad I can have your confidence in this. They *will* talk, rest assured."

"Let's hope to find them first," he said acquiescingly; his face was calm and resolute, a depth of experience and fortitude perceptible in his eyes. At that moment two police aeromobiles with turned on sirens skirted past them in the opposite direction. "The whole city's under fire right now," he added, after holding his look on the two cars reflected in the rear-view mirror. "The Department

must've mobilized all the spare manpower they could afford for the fat bastard. That Gloria and her friend you talk about might be in one of these cars."

"Even if they are, they'll show up, sooner or later. They probably think I'm dead by now, so they don't have a reason to be on the lookout for me anymore. We'll get them by surprise."

They landed on one of the parkpads in front of the Department; Amanda got out of the car, and just as she was about to close the door, she stopped, halfway shut, lowering her head and looking at the still occupied driver's seat:

"You aren't coming?"

"I need to check out something important at my workplace. You go." The engine was still working, combusting at minimal force. "And don't forget to play it easy—be discreet and act as if nothing had happened."

She was perplexed.

"Wait!" she then hurried to stop him, remembering what had been on her mind before they arrived. Collins looked at her expectantly. "There's a man named Michael Riverstone who works at the IntelDep. I tried to contact him on our way here, but his playger seems to be turned off. I don't know if you've heard of him, but will you please inquire about his whereabouts once you get there? If you find him, tell him I need to talk to him and that it's urgent."

For a moment Collins had become mute—the name Amanda had spoken was one he'd not anticipated to hear ever again in his life, not after all those years; he'd tried to forget it—he'd buried it deep into his memories long ago, when it had become nothing but an undesirable bitter reminder of one singular moment tossed into a perpetual timeline which now appeared to have been reawakened more vividly and obtrusive than ever. The name stirred him.

"Actually..." he began, looking at Amanda's overhung pale face and realizing she'd most probably missed his transient change of expression, "...I know him. I'll ask about Michael and'll tell him to get in touch with you."

Amanda was mildly surprised to learn that he actually knew Michael. She was staring at him with hopeful eyes, and yet refrained from asking him further about him—it was not that she didn't want to, it was that something in Collins' voice had evinced a painful reluctance to speak of him, to mention him and to even think of him—yes, she'd noticed it.

This disturbed her once she saw it, but she tried to quickly conceal it and save it for a more convenient time. Collins was preparing for take-off and she shut the door tight and moved away from the aeromobile's diffusing burst that spread a fine dust of particles about it until it was separated from the ground ejecting hot air and finally was lost in the sullen sky.

She started off towards the building's entrance.

As it was expected, the Department at that moment was less crowded than usual due to the unanticipated search operation that was expeditiously prompted by Shunningan's escape, and she could premonitorily sense how the change of the atmosphere to which she'd been acclimating for a long time made her feel apprehensive of everyone and everything around her, totally different surroundings where she found herself a stranger and uncomfortably out of place. Dialling Gregory after seeing the missed call notifications while passing through the main expansive foyer towards the elevators, she was at the same time looking after Gloria and Lester but could find them nowhere.

“What happened? Where are you?” He was glad to see she was fine, showing relief upon her sight. It was blandly murky and grey around him, with some inordinate miniscule lights barely visible in the distant background—they were of tall buildings whose tops heightened up to just below his ears, and she thought that at the present moment he must've been standing on the roof of another one, the place looking unfamiliar to her. “I was seriously considering to report your sudden absence,” he said with a lowered voice. “Wyton and even Rowland asked about you. If it weren't for Shunningan's escapade to attract everyone's attention, I don't think I

would've been able to cover you—he's broken out of prison, can you believe this?"

"Yes, I already know that. Greg, listen, some developments happened." She stopped, looked around her to see if someone was eavesdropping, then stepped into the cabin. "I was abducted. That bitch Gloria... she's responsible for everything, she and Lester."

"Wait, wait, wait," Gregory began incredulously, "what're you talking about?" His voice was now raised; the rest of the words he spoke in a whisper after realizing it. "You were abducted? Are you okay? Where are you now?"

"I'm fine, don't worry. I'm at the Department, looking for the two shmucks. Have you seen any one of them today while I was gone?"

"Gloria and Lester? No, I don't think so, but... Jesus, who kidnapped you? And why? I can't believe it!"

"It was Beckard Simawvire, he used Gloria as a bait. Listen, Greg, you have to come down here immediately. I have no time to explain everything to you right now, but the situation isn't looking good. Can you come? Where are you?"

"I was enlisted in one of the searching units, but I think I can slip off. Wait, did you say Beckard Simawvire?"

She'd almost reached her floor.

"Okay, okay, I see—no questions," Gregory said, perceiving the annoying scolding look she gave him.

"Will you come? I need you."

"Yes. I'll call you when I get there."

The floor counter scintillated and she stepped out of the elevator as she ended the conversation with Gregory. The corridors of the "Criminal and Undermining Activities" Division were empty, the dimly-lit greyish-white luminescent floor stretching out from end to end.

She stood at crossroads and didn't know where to start, so she decided to begin with the most obvious of the places—the Libroom. Treading firmly and yet careful not to make too much noise that would give away her presence, walking past door after

door, she halted, hearing a weak, indistinguishable sound coming out from somewhere; she turned around, touching her blaster without drawing it out. She saw that there was no one out there. Waiting a little more just to be sure, she resumed her walk on her way to the door at the end.

Several moments later she heard the same sound again, coming from the same indeterminable spot somewhere farther along the lighted corridor. Turning and starting for the direction of the sound, she hoped to hear it again so she could trace its exact location. Drawing out her weapon, at a pace that was stealthily slow, she walked on warily, eliminating every other redundant sound in readiness to intercept the one that mattered.

Reaching the first intersection, she came to a halt, and no sooner had she begun to walk back when a mid-pitch sound reached her ears—it was the same rustle and it seemed to be coming from a door on the left that bore the sign “TEMPORAL DISPOSAL (DO NOT OVERUSE)” above it. With gun in one hand and in the other the door handle, she entered, watchfully. The lights inside the room detected her presence and were automatically turned on, after which she sighed since she knew they’d still be on if someone else was there. She still had to find where the intermittent sound had exactly come from, and before long she found out that it was an almost dead beeper-module that was making it, carelessly tossed and left by someone beneath a stack of torn cardboards on a tall stuffed steel shelf. She turned it off and left the room, heading back to the Libroom.

As she entered it, she saw that no one was there either—the same prevailing silence that was now becoming unbearable to her. She left it, morosely. And scarcely had she made the first step outside the room than her muscles stiffened in a sudden spasmodic jerk, body nailed on the spot and alertness warning her of an incoming danger she had to choose between either turning into an opportunity or a reason to fear: it was Lester himself standing in her path, watching her with the same befuddled face.

Not even a moment had passed when he, to her surprise, turned and immediately ran off towards one of the corridor

intersections near the helical escalators; Amanda immediately went after him.

Rapidly shaking her wrist and activating the comms-ring, she spoke into it: “He’s wearing black trousers and a dark-blue sweatshirt. I think he’s heading for the exit.”

A contesting chase ensued throughout the floors all the way down to the helical escalators. When they arrived at the main foyer, Lester had already reached the exit doors when Amanda was just stepping out of the escalator, gun concealed. He’d been taking big leaps, bigger than hers, and there were no indications of him slowing down. He was now outside, running past the few parked police cars and giving all of his efforts in taking those few final metres that separated him from his aeromobile.

He was at least twenty metres away from Amanda when he placed his open hand on the window—the door swung open, and as he prepared to sit down, the sudden movement of a body appearing out of nowhere prevented him from getting in—a foreign supernatural presence whose existence he dreaded to admit to himself—and before he could manage to turn around, a hand took a fast hold of his forehead, gripping him hard against a physical shape that could barely be recognized as human, after which he felt a brief scalding pressure of a painful prickle on his neck making contact with his bulged veins; a moment later he fell unconscious. No one save Amanda had witnessed this.

Chapter III

Under the Red Neon

Since his identification card had been confiscated at the research institute, Collins was experiencing some difficulties with accessing the Intelligence Department while waiting in the crystal-polished entrance room. But soon the problem was solved after a brief video conversation with the security advisor who granted him a one-time pass.

All the Intelligence Department buildings throughout the country shared a strict unconventional style: everything was built in semblance to the entrance room, creating a sense of uninterrupted compatibility and practicability between the vectorial spaces: transparent ceilings and floors that seemed to create one big glass box which appeared higher than it actually was, tiles upon tiles of faint brittle bluish angularity warping in a constantly changing frosted perspective, a geometrical precision incorporated in a perfect state of impeccability. Only the central floor was of cold marble, the tunnelling sight above revealing the entirety of the building. Through that unending mirroring tower the feet of many people could be seen mutely strolling across the sterile surfaces, each body becoming smaller the higher the floors got but unable to escape the viewer's focal point below—one was visible within an all-side open vulnerability unless they moved further on from the centre.

On the main floor people with impassive faces walked past him with a stern, surreptitious gait; there was little to none talking, only a constant quiet movement that bore an air of precise discipline. He knew this was the way everyone behaved here—with trained integral professionalism that one acquired and unconsciously embraced over the years—for he himself had long ago accustomed his past habits to that established collective pattern, slowly, unwillingly, inevitably.

The Intelligence Department emblem was spread all over the smooth white marble—a bleached coating of dark curves and

split tips expanding on all sides. He headed towards the redirecting sections, not minding anyone he walked past as if they were absent to his awareness.

In each of the sections there was an outlined rectangular field against the main end wall, like a carved shallow door without a handle, and in it a rounded metal convexity perforated with large dots emitting a malleable, watery light that budded out. Standing before it, Collins' face was scanned by one of the dots which brightened for a second.

"Agent B75, identification number 780901, authority level five," a voice announced out of the convexity with an even intonation. *"Please, select a Flatdeck."*

"Flatdeck C, 15-E," Collins returned.

"Access granted. Please, remain where you are."

A shining violet circumference around him suddenly became alit, a strongly gleaming ring that easily permeated through the hard solid marble as though a perfect circular incision to its core. A vivid snap of light then flickered somewhere in front of him, and a moment later the entirety of the plate he was standing on began moving independently from the rest of the floor. Seconds later he was descending down a sparsely lit tunnel, a cold current rushing violently upwards from beneath him.

Slowing down and coming to a halt, the plate took on a new direction, attaching to and gliding along a rail that led to a perpendicular tunnel. Before long it came to another halt, and this time it was attached and enclosed within a movable platform, continuing along the same rail towards an opening in the distance that emitted unforced light. When the plate reached its final point, it didn't stop, but emerged out of it into a large open space where many other platforms could be seen moving along the same rails over a foggy empty space.

On both of his sides everything was nothing but congruent portal doors, many identical blocks placed next to each other in long endless rows that formed one big giant stack of monotone layers whose uncustomary lack of any differentiable signs or traits evoked

the misgiving of a pressing machine slowly closing in and grinding everything in between—save the staircases on each level, nothing significant could be made out of the two walls.

The platform carried him towards one of the portal doors on his left that were part of a larger subgroup consisting of four tiers separated from other subgroups by the space between their staircases. Presently, when his platform was locked into one of the crescent niches carved into the staircase, he got out, stepping forth onto a solid metal seamwork. Walking on, he stopped before a portal door where superimposed white phosphorescent letters read: “FLATDECK C, 15-E”. Bringing his head closer to an outward monacle lens, his iris was scanned flashlessly; he entered.

The semi-lit confiding carpeted corridor bent a turn after a couple of paces; the walls, as well as the indiscernible doors on both sides were moulded out of a darkened calcite substance that reflected a diluted polished gleam fuelled by two continuous bright-red neon sticks on the low ceiling: a ubiquitous bloody anamorphic shade that drenched everything in polarized malice. Elongated glass panels that curved along the entire corridor’s length were aligned with the black-red concoction, defying it unsuccessfully—what seemed to be a meek white light coming out of them was suppressed by a shielding backdrop that prevented one force from colliding with the other; thin flimsy bluish threads radiated imperceptibly down the floor, like ignited wicks burning infinitely in an unyielding dry murk.

He began walking on the soft carpet, not glancing sideways as he was already familiar with the place, his destination being the one room he was always loth to stand before, not out of fear or humility, but from what he feared to relive again that he so wholeheartedly resented and dreaded.

The room he was headed to was that of the Counter-Intelligence branch’s Chief.

He was finally alone in front of the ominous door, veiled in obscure red smog: the office’s glass panel was dimmed like the other panels with the only difference that it lacked the same intensity in light. But, peeking closely into it, he could still see and distinguish

who was inside, although faintly and unclearly—and before long he recognized that there was another person with the Chief, sitting before his desk, now slowly turning toward where Collins stood as though instantaneously pinning down his exact position. He intuitively backed off, despite knowing that such a reaction was completely unnecessary; he walked into the office, uninvited and in a manner implying serious matters to be discussed.

Stepping inside, all of a sudden he felt overwhelmingly naked and exposed to the man's intrusive scrutiny that was not amicable and well-intentioned at all: he, like his superior, was dressed in a typical formal suit, a black tie girding his rigid neck, his face—youthful and taut—almost a perfect example of that exceptional bureaucratic astuteness and unscrupulous inquisitiveness that was a rarity in the normal, outside world... *almost*, he thought, for there was something unusual and vilely twisted in his eyes—eyes that didn't blink not even for a second, visceral eyes that were the only thing that degraded his overly presentable appearance and twisted it into something more malicious, as if his skin, his body were concealing his true form and character. The Chief threw only a brief glance at the visitor in overcoat who had just appeared in the room, hastily returning to the man before him across his desk with an apologetic look.

“Excuse me.”

The man nodded to him understandingly; the soft white glimmer from above obfuscated his face even further, enshrouding it into an irreconcilable contradiction.

“I need to talk to you, sir,” Collins ventured to be the first one to speak, and after glancing over the Chief's shoulder at the seated man who didn't turn his back, but rather seemed to listen attentively without the need to move his head in any way, added, emphasizing: “Alone.”

“Is there a problem, Agent Collins?” asked the man with the furrowed face who had recognized his subordinate from the beginning; the wrinkles on his cheeks and forehead enlarged and then contracted when he carefully half-turned in the direction where Collins had just glimpsed at a moment ago.

The latter, provoked by the Chief's persistent interest towards the mysterious person at the other end of the room, decided to change his attitude and act more straightforwardly:

“Not exactly, no. But I think it'd be better if we discussed this matter in private, sir. If, of course, you would allow.”

The man before him hesitated for a second, then said, his voice free of any irritation or vexation, but rather sounding placid and good-tempered:

“Wait outside.”

He went back to his visitor who, in the meantime, had been carelessly messing around with one of the Chief's pens as if he had all the patience in the world; Collins stepped outside, and he saw his superior leaning over his shoulder and talking something into the man's ear.

The circular door behind him slid back, closing, as if it were a hefty stone seal of a small sacred temple which only a few chosen initiates had access to. The two men were now immersed in the luridness of the red neon, and for a moment the air felt heavy, unable to be breathed, suppressing every sound and word.

“Sir, I didn't come to you without a reason,” spoke Collins stolidly, his voice firmly tranquil. The authoritative man's face before him listened, deep prolonged red overcast covering and erasing every dimple and crease on his face. “It's about Edgar Shunningan, the ‘Harthongate’ case. Or, more specifically...”—he slowed down for a second, throwing a surreptitious glance at the sitting man behind the dimmed panel—as far as he could tell, he hadn't changed his position since his arrival—and continued, starting again from the last uttered syllable and trying not to make the interruption seem too obvious: “...about the investigating team appointed to it.”

He couldn't be one hundred percent sure on this, but it seemed to him that the Chief had looked at him with an untrusting, almost reprimanding expression that had lasted just enough to be noticed, but not disentangled. He went on:

“I would like to make an official disclosure request for the identities of the other four Agents that are currently working on the

case. I know that what I'm asking goes against the law, but considering the current situation and the slow progress, a personal meeting with each of them, be it in person or through a video correspondence, would help me determine whether any of them has been..."

"Yes?"

Collins found himself hindered by a sudden reluctance to speak out the most important part of the sentence—it was a kind of a spontaneous premonition that told him to stop right there, to turn around and leave as if nothing had happened. Nevertheless, he continued, the words coming out forcefully:

"...withholding or sharing essential information with undesirable third parties."

His superior's face remained the same—unperturbed and meditative.

"You think that the professional integrity of some of them might have been, so to speak, compromised?"

"To an extent, yes. Something somewhere doesn't fit in, it's as if I'm purposefully being shunned and led astray from what's really been going on—never before in my whole career have I had so unsuccessful and unfruitful case. I just couldn't help but notice this tendency, that things aren't as they seem to be."

"But wasn't it exactly *you* who caught Shunningan at the hotel that night? I think this could be considered a fairly significant progress."

"Yes, but let's not forget that I was led to him by chance, a pure luck that happens one in a million. Which, ultimately, doesn't matter, since he's out in the open again and I don't think that I'll be presented with another opportunity like this ever again."

A semblance of forced pity and sympathy seemed to emanate from the Chief's face; but it was a fake and disingenuous one, Collins remarked to himself.

"Don't underestimate yourself, Agent, and especially don't underestimate your colleagues' work. It is true that what happened that night was a really rare occurrence for the type of high-profile targets we deal with, but this doesn't change the fact that it has

shown us that Shunningan, and probably the rest of the organization's leaders, are susceptible to overlooking things, just like any other human being, no matter how hard you prepare and overthink the different possible outcomes—no one's insured against mistakes, whether they are yours or someone else's."

Collins noticed that the costumed enigmatic visitor had gotten up; he couldn't tell when that had happened. Standing before some bookshelves, he was picking up some titles in the same lackadaisical manner with which he'd played with the pen.

"I just want results, that's all," Collins added, unenthusiastically and with a feigned trace of ennui.

"We all want results. Look," his superior began, somehow in a semi-autonomous tone as if what he was about to say had been repeated over and over again to many others, "it's not something unusual in our profession to feel like you're standing at a dead end, hopeless and out of options, like you right now. In fact, I can assure you that this is happening more often than you'd think, and most of the time it ends up in our favour. It always does." He looked down, as though thinking what his next words should be, then lifted his head again and said: "As much as I'd want to, unfortunately I cannot see to your request—the Commission would want a solid, justifiable reason in order to resort to that drastic decision—that is, disclosing an operating Agent's identity during his participation in an ongoing case. If I were to reveal to you the names of even one Agent before the case has been officially closed, the repercussions for me would be beyond grave, as I would be committing the equivalent of treason. You know why the penal punishment for this type of offence is so strict."

Collins nodded.

"You're aware of the various advanced psychotronic techniques for extracting information—the human brain is helpless in situations like these, that's why we take these matters seriously."

"Yes, sir, I understand."

"As far as your concerns for the other Agents' credibility go, I will personally take care of it and investigate into their affairs.

Until then, I expect you to continue with your work on the ‘Harthongate’ case.”

“I will, sir.”

Collins saw that the man in the room had returned to the Chief’s desk, this time not sitting, but simply standing over it, with hands inside his pockets and head fixed onto something on the bare wall; he wondered what he could be looking at.

“Thank you for your time,” Collins said, his mind completely preoccupied with the man with insidious eyes.

He turned away and started towards the other end of the saturated with suffocating red corridor.

“Agent Collins,” he suddenly heard from behind; he stopped and turned around. “Don’t underestimate yourself.”

He wasn’t sure whether he’d nodded, or had just sent a confirming blink that was probably left unseen under the dark glow; he started again until he finally reached the portal door, no one around him save his quiet, unimposing presence.

Stepping out, he headed back to the platform which had brought him down there, not knowing what to expect from now on; he knew, however, that this would be the last time he visited the Intelligence Department.

A couple of blocks away from the Police Department, on the rooftop of a tall building where the advancing night could be seen taking over the pricking gritty cityscape, a voice was transmitted over a private frequency line along the predominant networking sprawl:

“The hare’s in the cage. On top of Lonnen building. Disband.”

And Amanda broke off.

Save the few aeromobiles on the parkpads, the rooftop was otherwise empty, having the appearance of an unattended place, and yet offering a handy concealment where one could be hardly noticed. Amanda, Cassidy and the recently joined them Gregory

waited for Collins, and near them, in his own car, carefully placed on the back seat and in a sedated sate, lay the unconscious Lester.

A resplendent view was opening before them over long and wide stretches of concrete disarray, a view of the slow, gradual vanquishing of the day by the crawling of the night's unleashing overlay: sequences of kindling spangles of premature sheen, like closely gathered punctuating dots of aquarelle lustre glued over a discoloured space, giving it a life of an ever-burning glister that multiplied in number and force; then, at high heights above it, disjointed and dismantled threads made out of many jittering specks were beginning to take over the fading October sky, comingling with the earthen shimmering vicissitude which had the varying qualities of wet gilded rust. Down in the streets the reverberating murmur went on as before, the silent motor buzz fading away and then rising up again in concordant coexistence with the district's clamour; all of the main roads were lit by halogen rod installations placed under the curbs on both sides of the sidewalks. Distant echoing sirens tolled and then quickly died out in the gloomy vastness; festering sewer fumes could be occasionally seen exhaling from beneath and dissolving, clouds of smoke of unknown origin easily evaporating in the sheer expanse.

"No one saw us, as far as I could tell," said Amanda as Collins was peeking through the window across the backseat of Lester's car.

"I see that you've knocked the angels out of him," he said, curiously watching the unconscious man. "How long will he stay like this?" he asked, turning to Cassidy.

"One shot of meronalpoziadetone and he'll wake up immediately," said the blond cyborg. "He might be a little shocked at first, but otherwise he'll feel just the same as before he passed out."

"And the girl?" he turned to Amanda.

"Couldn't find her anywhere. Probably wasn't at the Department at that time. Anyhow, I think he alone will suffice. By the way, did you get hold of Michael?"

“No, he was nowhere to be found,” Collins answered, eyes askance; he was lying. For the second time she noticed that reluctant look, that intonation which had something hidden from her, something she couldn’t yet understand.

Cassidy suddenly grew alert, which was not expressed by her face, but rather by a single twitch of it that went unnoticed by the rest.

“Patrols,” she said, looking far away into the unreachable dappled distance.

The three immediately started, quickly mobilizing, Collins getting into Lester’s aeromobile, Amanda and Gregory taking his in return; Cassidy ignited the engine of her phaeton. As a mark of their presence nothing else was left save the dying delay of the combustible engines’ roaring.

Chapter IV

Cloaked in Mortality

Everything in the room had melted down, the walls crushing in from all sides while he was standing beside the bed. When he received the call earlier that day, he thought that he'd somehow entered into the unreal state of someone else's unreal life—it was as though he was in the middle of an inexplicably significant event, himself being a mere receiver of something he didn't have control over and couldn't alter, yet had to endure and let pass through before he could fully realize the sudden occurrence and real scope of the event.

He felt a thick layer of darkness overcovering his heart, grabbing it and forcefully stopping its beating; his mind was going through an existential downfall which he perceived as just one of his many previous such moments of self-inflicting anguish, but this time something was different—this time it was *serene*. He loathed himself for admitting it, but he was *glad* that her pain was over. And yet the loss of her killed him from inside in a silent, irreversible manner, leaving a big emptiness within him never to be filled again, pushing him to the edge of fully accepting it which was equal to suicide for him.

Kneeling and burying his head deep into the white, fatal sheets he wanted everything to end right then and there and to once and for all cease to feel that insufferable torment that was tearing him apart in millions of pieces, the torment that was the only thing he could feel right now and the only thing he was ever able to sustain. With his last remnants of strength he was desperately clenching at the white ethereal blanket that outlined the body like a beautiful virginal divine apparition, and hopelessly prayed that death came upon him at this very moment, yet knowing that this wish of his wouldn't be granted, at least not now.

Everything suddenly resumed its initial form, the walls not encroaching on him anymore, and the light around him clearing up

again, casting a sharp recognition over everything. The windows as well as the apparatuses reappeared, the big wooden drawers at the other end and the one acacia plant next to them imperceptibly becoming visible again. A gentle hand touched his shoulder from behind.

“My condolences, Mr. Riverstone,” a woman’s silent voice was heard.

Coming to his senses, he stood up and, for the last time, looked at the covered, still like stone body, leaned over it and gave the cold forehead one long, final kiss through the white-glowing blanket. The nurse next to him stared at him compassionately, after which they left the room.

Outside he watched the gliding stretcher pushed on by the accompanying orderlies walking away down the corridor and at that moment he wanted nothing more but to hide somewhere where he could never be found.

“Her belongings,” said the nurse timidly, presenting to him a big yellow envelope with some things visible at the bottom of it. “Are you sure that you’ll be... fine?” she added then, after a brief uncomfortable silence.

“I’m okay,” answered Michael with a shallow, dull voice, taking the envelope.

“She... went through a lot of things,” the small-complexed nurse tried to search for the hazelnut-haired man’s face, but it seemed that he tried to evade any sort of eye contact, desolately looking at the empty row of seats by the wall. Nevertheless, she continued to talk, feeling somehow obliged to initiate any form of conversation: “I’m sure you were aware of her continuous reluctance to get out of bed and try to walk once in a while to prevent degenerative tissue atrophy... we tried everything we could, but unfortunately it only became worse—as you might already know, after some time she refused to eat as well, and this left the doctors with no other choice but to put her on a systemic venal nutrient transfusion—up to that moment she’d already lost thirty kilograms. Unfortunately that didn’t help either—her health had begun to gradually worsen with each passing day, no medicaments or treatments seeming to

help her in any way. We managed to retard her weight loss to a certain level, but regardless of that and the kinesis shock therapies the psychological pressure she'd been subjected to had already made its permanent adverse impact on her. She barely spoke, and she also had occasional fits and ravings that were often followed by an uncontrolled euphoria marked by a sudden and rapid change of her emotional states—especially during the last few days when the severity had reached a critical point and when no tranquilizers were able to relieve her.” She stopped, wondering whether her words were actually being heard and comprehended by the man beside her. She went on: “Mr. Riverstone, I could only imagine how hard life must've been for you and your wife since your son's disappearance, and I wouldn't even dare to guess the pain you're going through right now, but I sincerely implore you to at least consider my advice to talk with someone about this—I know some very experienced professionals who could—”

“Thank you for your concern,” he suddenly broke out, finally looking at the nurse with a deadened lack of emotion in his black-pocketed eyes, “but I'll be fine,” he continued with a dry, gruff voice. “I appreciate that you did everything you could for my wife.”

The nurse was staring at him concernedly, hesitating: she'd become apprehensive of him, yet, out of compassion, she asked:

“Is there anything else I could do for you?”

To this question Michael was struggling to find a coherent answer, to find any meaningful consolation, however insignificant it might be; but nothing came to his mind in the end, his heart having been left devoid by the fact there was nothing he could do to bring back time: he had to face it that she was forever gone and that from now on every futile attempt to prolong this self-deluding struggle would only make things worse.

“No, there isn't.”

Holding the envelope in one hand, he started off down the corridor.

Chapter V

The Interrogation

Amanda and the rest were led into another adjoining room she failed to notice the first time she and Collins arrived there. The neighbouring second room was more like a storeroom with naked abraded walls, the scarce light giving them an interesting unaligned texture of colliding and merging blotches of dark-shaded blue and green patterns. In the farther right corner, Amanda recognized, was a sleep-inducing hibernation module, in pristine condition compared with the room itself.

Looks like someone's an incorrigible insomniac, she thought. Nearby the module rested a box-like metallic device with a siliceous covering layer that had a row of several small buttons on it and just as many small keys on another below them, and between them a black strap of a different kind of hard substance separating them and which appeared to change its opacity depending on the angle view. Two transparent double cables stuffed with silvery studs were plugged into the box, with pliers attached to the end of each one.

Picking up a chair, Collins placed it right in the middle of the room, after which Cassidy appeared with the knocked-out Lester carrying him over her shoulder, putting him in that same chair.

“Drop-dead like an OD'd fiend,” remarked Miles as he closely gazed at the man whose drooped head seemed unresponsive.

“Let's get to work,” Collins said, whereupon Miles promptly went to snatch the box-shaped device at the other end of the room, returning with the pair of pliers dangling over his feet. Leaning over the sedated man and taking the two pliers, he snapped them at his wrists, not too tight but not too loose either.

Placing the device close to the chair, he reached for its surface and pressed one of the keys on the first row. An immediate bombilating static sound began to vibrate out of the box, after which he typed another combinative command by tapping on the keys of

the lower row, which in turn caused the black strap between them to start flickering in different varieties of the green spectre. He turned towards Collins and Cassidy and gave them a sign that everything was now set up.

The cyborg, pulling out of her belt a small opaque vial, stepped forth toward Lester and, putting it against his bare neck, pressed it with her thumb, injecting the substance. The effect took place almost immediately, for the man in the chair came to his senses with a rapid thrust backwards, taking a long-suppressed breath, his stare full of shock and his eyes wide open with petrification as if he'd been brought back from the dead.

And just as he instinctively began to rise up from his chair, Miles was quick enough to press one of the keys on the metallic box and prevent his attempt of getting up—a pink square lightening on the strap, followed by a strong electrical current made the man in dark-blue sweatshirt fall back and remain still after his body had been put under a numb painless paralysis. His body inert, he tried to say—scream—something, but the paralyzing effect had already taken a firm hold of him, and the only thing he could do was to stare at them.

Moving closer and squatting before him so it could be easier for Lester to look straight at his face, Collins began by asking the first question:

“Lester O’Donnell, is that right?”

Of course, he was unable to open his mouth, so he gave an inclination with his head towards Miles who in turn pressed the same button again right away, the pink square on the strap dying off and the static noise subduing. He didn’t show any resistance, and it seemed that he had no more strength left—the initial shock current had numbed down and exhausted his neuromuscular system to a significant extent.

“Your name,” Collins asked again. “Are you Lester O’Donnell?”

“Yes...” the seated man answered, mumbling, making incomplete circumferences with his head as he lolled from left to right, his eyes slowly blinking like a drug addict.

“Are you an officer at the Orton City Police Department?”

“What... Yes.”

“Do you know where you currently are?”

“No... Oh, shit...”

He made a brief jerk with his head, feeling his neck stiff and prickly.

“Good. Now, there is a reason you’re here right now, and a very justifiable at that.” Collins stopped, wanting to make sure by looking continuously into the man’s eyes that he was in a good enough physical condition to assimilate what was being said to him—and he was, as far as he could tell, at least mentally-wise. “First, I want you to know that you’re attached to a cognigraph stressor, as you can very well see, which, in case it still hasn’t rung a bell, serves as an axonal paralytical shocker—which means that in a minute you’ll be like an open book and that every time you decide to do something stupid, you’ll be hit by the same current that will stupefy your entire body before you’ve even realized it. You try to scream, you’ll get hit—it’s that sensible that even vocal utterings above a certain decibel level also get detected. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“I want to know what exactly you and Gloria have been secretly doing in and outside the Police Department, why and for whom. Speak.”

“Fuck... Around a year ago,” the man ensconced in the chair, to Amanda and Gregory’s surprise, almost immediately began, with a reluctant and diffident drag, yet his words coming out securely, “me and Gloria were approached by Beckard Simawvire and hired as informants for him and his organization through a liaison. Our task was to keep an open ear to every event that took place in the Department that could possibly pose a real threat to him and the people from his close circle. Generally speaking, our task consisted of nothing more but to report in and give as much details as

possible about things directly related to them. Things were going really smoothly, and the payment was more than one would usually get for this kind of job. At least not until..."—here Lester's speech suddenly slowed down and became convoluted at the end, but eventually going back on track, prompted by the cognigraph stressor—"...not until we were handed over a task that was nothing like the assignments we were used to do."

"What was that task?"

"At first it seemed a simple and innocuous undertaking, but in reality it turned out to be something that wasn't worth the risk. Of course, it goes without saying that the payment exceeded the usual fee, but still. What was required of us was the following: at a certain time we had to gain access to one of the Police Department's public or private computers, no matter where. A third party, whose name wasn't told to us, would in the meantime get hooked to the main server below the building; they would then notify us to connect a device that was given to us earlier that day by our liaison—whose name we also aren't aware of, by the way—to that same computer. The device was a small black lozenge with a short cable that apparently served as some sort of a cryptic data receiver that only worked if the input source was on the same network grid as the output one. If I recall correctly, it was around 8PM. We chose to do it on one of our Division's computers. We waited patiently, and when Gloria finally received the message on her player, we plugged the device into the computer and waited. A window of an unidentified software program then appeared; the whole transfer took no longer than a couple of minutes without us doing anything. When everything was done, we unplugged it and promptly left the room. What kind of data it was, we weren't told, nor did we dare to ask—we did our part and nothing further concerned us. Shortly after we gave back the lozenge device to our liaison."

"And when did that happen?"

"Around a month ago. At the end of August, I think."

Amanda stirred, unpleasantly worried that her conjectures were becoming true.

“And while you were waiting for the transfer to be completed, was there any kind of electrical disruption on the floor?”

Lester thought for a moment.

“I’m inclined to think so. Yes, as far as I can remember, the lights were unstable for a second.”

“Have you ever heard the name *Christopher Dinkston*?” Collins proceeded with the questions, directly and straight-to-the-point.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, he’s the third party you were in combo with. That same night, after you’ve done your part of the hijacking, this Dinkston guy who’s been a cop in the Department for several years happened to disappear, or to put it plainly—he covered his ass. Now, according to the full report that’s pending to be publicly announced in the next couple of days, besides the three of you there’s allegedly been another person, this time from the upper echelons, who was also involved. Tell me the name of that person.”

“I don’t know who that person might be. Nothing was ever mentioned to us about a fourth person.”

Collins stared at him for a couple of tedious moments, as if drilling right through his eyes, but he knew what he was saying was true—there was no way one could get their way around the cognigraph stressor, it was practically impossible. The rest continued to silently watch the ongoing interrogation.

“What can you tell me about Beckard or the Grouzers? Something more confidential and exclusive that isn’t well-known?”

Lester, who had hitherto been painstakingly enduring the colossal pressure in addition to the acute imposing presence of the female cyborg with emerald patch-like eyes, felt uneasy for a second, then quickly resumed calmness and spoke out:

“Not much. At the first meetup with our liaison, apart from the promise for secure payments in exchange for our insider services, we were also presented with the possibility for a ‘career push-up’ in the Police Department upon the condition of giving satisfactory results of what was expected of us, however strange that might

sound. As I said, what was asked of us was to only keep track of the developments and updates on anything related to them, you know, giving them all sorts of titbits here and there.”

“What kind of titbits are we exactly talking about here?”

“Well, you know, snitches and witnesses willing to open their mouths when they shouldn’t, targeted venues of the organization, anything of that kind. It was a two-sided cooperation that basically always kept the Grouzers several steps ahead.”

“Something else? I want you to tell me anything you might’ve thought unusual at that time.”

It didn’t take long before he began once again:

“One day me and Gloria had an appointed info-dump meetup with our liaison at one of the grind-and-thresh facilities for hornsern crystals,” he started after a brief mulling. “The meetup took place in one of the quadrants where the crystal material is grinded and transferred for vacuum condensation—it was the usual job-related stuff, nothing abstract. But suddenly, as we proceeded conversing, some enormous cylindrical containers transported on a multiple-wheeled carrier appeared through an entrance across from us. I couldn’t say for sure, but it looked to me that there were nine or ten of these, each around two metres in diameter and five in height. But there’s more—what really struck me was that they shone in a peculiar way: whatever was inside those cylinders, it was of a bright blue colour, and it looked like it was more of a liquid substance, but still, I could be wrong about that part since they were also partially covered. I didn’t ask what those things were.”

“When was that?”

“Three months ago, give it or take.”

Presently, Collins slowly got up to his feet and looked at Miles who was standing next to Lester.

“Does this speak anything to you?”

“That’s the first time I hear about such containers,” Miles said, “and without claiming to have a professional technical expertise in the field, I’m ninety-nine percent sure that no other additional materials are included in the cyclical processing besides some quasi-

freon stabilizers that are usually sprayed over once the crystals are purified from the death-mass residues, but they don't glow and certainly aren't contained in such transparent vessels."

Collins stared down with his hands akimbo, mute.

"Anything else?" he then asked, looking back at the indisposed man in the chair.

"No, that's all."

"Do you know where's your partner right now? When did you last talk to her?"

"A couple of hours ago. She didn't say where she was, only that she was busy and that she couldn't speak right now. I asked if it had something to do with our side-job, and she told me that she'd call me later."

"Are you aware that I almost died out there because of your friend, you piece of shit?" Amanda suddenly stepped forward from behind, getting closer towards Lester's face with swollen rancorous eyes dipped in tangible rage; Lester, however, showed no signs of intimidation at all, unmoving and not changing his expression in the slightest.

"Calm down," Collins said to her, talking her into backing off. "And?" he continued with the interrogation, turning again towards him.

"Shortly after that I was summoned to join the emergency search units because of Shunningan's prison break; two hours later I got a call from her, and she said that the two of us had an appointment for eight tonight, at the same grind-and-thresh facility. She refused to say what it was about, only that it was very important."

"And that was the last time you talked with her, I assume?"

"Correct."

"Any suggestions what the meeting tonight might be about?"

"Couldn't guess."

Collins, his face not revealing whether he was satisfied or not—an indifferent ambiguity stamped on it—began walking leisurely around him, watching him closely under strict observation.

“I want you to give me the exact location of the quadrant.”

The module’s lid was closed, after which Miles dialed in the new settings, making the final preparations on the machine to make sure everything would work as intended.

“Hibernating process starting in 3... 2... 1... Initialization: successful,” a voice came out of its speaker. *“Reawakening schedule in: one week.”*

A roguish smile was drawn on his face as he heard the beeping sound.

Chapter VI

Last Reckoning

In the main conference room of Elzeron Tower around a dozen men in expensive, custom-tailored suits were gathered around an ostentatiously sized elliptical table, in the centre of which a black dull glossy ball was peeking out halfway through, eleven small flecks glistening onto and out of its surface; a hologram display was projecting in front of each of the eleven seated at the table men, showing the colourful sheen of moving real-time financial statistical tables, diagrams, and other quantitative illustrations and graphics. Cosy and comfortable, with the occasional cigar smoke wafting up between and around them, they were all exchanging remarks about the end of the day and talking among each other about the usual business matters, a toned-down conversational amicable chatter sweeping throughout a quiet and secure room.

There was a completely open view to the expansive landscape of the megapolis through which the neighbouring skyscrapers appeared majestically grandiose and fearfully alive from that vantage; it was as though the wide-angle panoramic view relinquished complete and unequivocal power over the city, inspiring in the person gazing through it a feeling of immeasurable freedom and self-grandeur. At one end of the room there were many redolent plants of different tropical and equatorial sorts placed in artificial troughs along the edges, varying in shape, palette, and fragrance, and there were also several imperial-sized bonsai trees in indigenous hand-craft clay basins at the other end that were surrounded by a bubbling warm-blue pool carved into the floor, with a couple of koi fish from at least three different breeds flapping beneath its lighted surface and shining in million splendid glitters, reflecting red, gold and blue diluted glistening shards onto the high ceiling through the foliage of the gathered trees hovering over them.

The conference room was dimly lit by a dark-blue emittance coming out of behind the rear corners of the floor and the ceiling,

the natural premature light of the recently risen moon and the city glint filling the rest of the predominantly dark part in a pleasant surreal combination.

Suddenly, the artificial inconsistent bluish light became brighter, killing any foreign interception and stripping the room off of its atmospheric ambivalence, the big panoramic window screen's transparency having been turned off, becoming instantly dark, the widespread city nightscape no longer visible, the blue saturation becoming even more accentuated. All conversations ceased with a hush, only the pool's effervescent bubbling at the far end indistinctly audible amid the overhung strained silence.

At that moment a man entered through the main door with calm and confident steps, trimly clad in an official twill suit and bearing undisputable authoritativeness alongside his resolute gait, followed by other two men, also neatly dressed, in identical white expensive suits and silvery-grey shirts and black ties; they were physically lookalike as well, despite having different haircuts and despite one of them having a deep-cut scar passing through his cheekbone. The man leading them respectfully greeted the eleven present men with due cordiality.

“Gentlemen,” the man at the end of the table began, with a voice clear and loud enough so that everyone in the room could hear him distinctly, “once again, good evening. Thank you for assembling so quickly at such an otherwise unfashionable for everyone time, and please allow me to sincerely express my apologies beforehand for the inconveniences I might have brought upon you with my unexpectant call. Due to my limited and shrunken time, as well as yours, I will try to lay out what I have to say as tersely as possible.

“As you already know, earlier today our highly esteemed partner and valuable friend Mr. Shunningan has managed to get out of captivity—as most of you are very well aware, the relentless efforts of the local law enforcement and the state judiciary system in the last couple of years to bring him to a trial have been a constant nuisance for our business dealings, for our company, all of this leaving nothing but bad stains on our reputability. Yes, the nature of some of our private corporate dealings are undeniably illicit in

regard to domestic and international laws, but don't forget that yours aren't either—yes, I am thoroughly familiarized with each one of your endeavours on the side, and the kind of people you maintain dealings with.” He paused, glancing individually at everyone for a moment. “Let's face it, gentlemen, right now every single one of you at this table, without exception, deserves to be put behind bars the moment he steps out of this room. Including me and the men beside me.” Again, a transient pause. “We are criminals, gentlemen, and nothing in this world will ever exempt us from this fact.

“Nevertheless, allow me to remind you that despite the unpleasant aforementioned statement, we currently hold 36% of the entire redistribution of hornsern crystals nationwide—more than any other private enterprise in the sector—and let's not forget that we are also a major player in the technological development in the telecommunications sphere, with exclusive contractual agreements binding our advanced satellite technology with some of the biggest private space companies in the world; we should also be proud of our significant contribution to the fields of Cybernetics, Bionics, and Genomics, being among the leading pioneers in what I like to call the Revolutionary Scientific Utopia. Yes, my esteemed gentlemen, we are not to be underestimated in this merciless competition for presence and power, especially now when we've finally gained our much needed representative advantage in the Tribunal Council.”

Here the black-haired man with Iberian-Mediterranean unrelenting looks and strong outlined cheekbones rose up from his chair and began to slowly walk around the seated men, gesticulating with his hand as if reciting a long-forgotten epic of old.

“And now, as is only natural to proceed from this point on, you might ask yourselves: ‘Now what?’, and of course, I'd immediately provide you with an answer: Headlong forward.”

A couple of approving nods followed from different places at the table.

“Yes, as every organism with a vigorous and enduring metabolism, we need to continue to feed, we need to keep on growing, spreading. But stop right there for a second and think about it not without consideration: is it worth continuing in a progressively

dehumanizing race for power if the body itself, upon which we feed, is sick, rotten? Is it worth to risk our very own existence without even paying attention to and looking at the most obvious problems that stand before us? Has greed made us so blind and indifferent that the real reason thanks to which we are here in this very room tonight is no longer of interest to us? Have we become that uncaring that we no longer realize the imminent collapse from within that awaits us right next door if gravely needed and appropriate measures aren't taken on time?"

"What'd you mean, Beckard?" a voice asked.

"Yeah, what the heck are you on about?" a second one joined in.

Presently, Beckard halted, waited a little for one tedious moment, then continued walking on the same circular route.

"Gentlemen! But is it not plainly obvious?" And as he pointed his hand with a sudden waving movement in the direction of the turned-off panoramic window screen, it was once again turned on again, revealing the innumerable strobing high-sky floating flakes surrounded by inert stardust lights engendered by the buildings and aeromobiles of the early-evening Orton City. "This! *This* right here is the problem. We created it, and we must destroy it, after which we will build it again, this time impeccable and flawless. It is our duty, our *sacred* responsibility."

Confused exclamations resounded in the room, then quickly faded away.

"What?" someone ventured, nonplussed. "The city?"

"Not only the city," Beckard looked at the person before him at the opposite side of the table, "but its very people as well."

Everyone save the two men in identical suits stared aghast towards the man, unable to grasp what he could've possibly meant by this, then looked back at each other, exchanging puzzled faces and unable to process in what direction the conversation was heading.

Noticing this further confusion in the businessmen's faces, the standing orator went on with the same unemotional, but eager and honest tone:

“Allow me to explain, gentlemen.” He returned to his seat, now once again in the same all-encompassing vanguard spot. “If there's anyone who best knows and truly understands the inherent constitutive principles and traits of the human nature, that would be me. Man, my esteemed gentlemen, before everything else is an animal led primarily by its instincts, like every other living creature on this earth. Yes, his intellect and unique sentience—all acquired rather serendipitously—have elevated him from the miserable cavernous confines to the conquering of all lands, sea, and air, placing him on top of the food and evolutionary chain, putting animal and nature on their knees and subjugating them by easily moulding them of his own accord.

“But—and here comes that painfully predictable but nevertheless extremely important and valid *but*—he still remains by and large a mere animal: inside us the gene of the animal is still lurking. Of course, without that gene we'd still be living the life of an ignorant savage and we most certainly would've gone extinct by now; the instinct of self-preservation, that is, of practicing avoidance and applying solutions to constantly befalling us dangers and challenges was the main reason for our survival, our perseverance throughout the ages, as everyone knows. But, alas, we have now come to the much dreaded point of solipsistic conclusion that that very gene which has pulled us out of the swamp of wretched inferiority thousands of years ago has now, ironically or not, become our last and final obstruction that stops and prevents us from our further developing, from our further evolving, inhibiting us on the way to bringing ourselves one step closer to the only goal that matters: that is, the ultimate goal of merging with the transcendent and immanent—a collective apotheosis and ascension of a harmoniously breathing organism beyond what is believable and real for the common human mind—an absolute and definitively vital interconnection, each of us living day and night for the next person, *existing* for the next person, and vice versa, without which none one of us could properly

function and ensure his survival in the upcoming new world, new habitat, in the upcoming Golden Age; it is exactly those resilient leftovers from our past, the gene of the animal—our boon and bane—that stand in our path to godlikeness.

“And, naturally, in return you would probably say that this isn’t true, that for the last one hundred years the world has developed and changed so much, has went through such a technological advancement of such a grand scale, that there shouldn’t be even the slightest drop of doubt about the way and direction we’re headed to. Now, I, as a man of science, am in no way denying this retort, nor trying to refute its rational foundations: we will continue to develop at faster and faster paces—and I don’t think there is anyone who’s inclined to think otherwise. But, unfortunately, this development is only directed outwards, not inwards.

“Man, gentlemen, is unhinged by nature. He is rebellious. Even during the most peaceful periods and ages, he always finds a way to destroy everything created and built upon in countless of successions only to bring back society to a state of anarchy. Or, in simpler words: people in general are incapable of truly appreciating what they think for granted.

“In order to have their justified cause for that—for that reversal of the system—they need to constantly create and maintain their own made-up enemies, often in the face of exactly those who are the most concerned about the greater good and prosperity of their fellow human beings. And since man is also a masochistically ignorant being by default, he doesn’t fully realize the extent of the consequences he may foment by such inconsiderate actions, and because of this more and more people around him start to appropriate and share the same ideas and indomitable rebellious beliefs with the false certainty that they are actually capable of establishing a better social and civil order and a better moral system than the previous one. This kind of ideological virus, gentlemen—yes, this is what I like to call it—an *ideological virus*—once sown, it will inevitably grow into an epidemic, and that epidemic will then cause such disastrous damages, that—as history time and again is apt to show us—in some cases recovery from them would take entire centuries.

“And it is exactly at this point when the time for people like us to step in approaches. We, as the supreme separated spectators—the onlookers of civilization—have the exceptional privilege of observing at close the social trends and strivings of the day. And as such, we automatically become the guardians of the sacred bases that keep the world from falling apart. Yes, as I’ve stated before, some of our activities aren’t one of the most honourable ones, but, as one very prudent man has once said—*the end justifies the means*. And our end won’t be disingenuous or incomplete this time, and neither will be our enemy—it may be invisible, but it is altogether very real, more real than my very flesh and bones, and the future of humanity solely depends on our decision whether to fight it or not. It is time to put an end to the cyclic transience and once and for all usher in the beginning of an everlasting peace through interdependence.

“The whole point of the message I am trying to convey to you, and also the sole reason I called this meeting, is the following: standing right here before you, I have the pleasure to proudly announce to you that a way for us to keep our frigid society in order and harmony and from regressive self-destruction has finally been discovered.”

As he finished speaking those last words, the silence was right away unexpectedly broken by the sound of the opening of the main door; another man had entered—a humongous-figured man in overstretched dark-blue tuxedo, with white shirt and vermilion tie that seemed to describe a long way down from neck to chest: it was Edgar Shunningan.

Not saying anything, nor resting his look on anyone in particular, with small, slow steps and a slight tilt from one side to the other he dragged himself up to and sat near Beckard.

“Ah, yes,” started Beckard again, smugly, looking at the newcomer, “it was about time—our deeply valued and respected partner and friend Mr. Edgar Shunningan.”

Shunningan nodded at him.

“Do you see, gentlemen,” continued Beckard, “this man is the living proof for the masses’ inability to think rationally, as well

as for their rabid determination to bring down and destroy everything built with sacrifices and hard work by us. This is what lunatic reasoning and unchecked animality lead to. Yes, we helped him to escape from prison, but not because he's an important figure with a major role in the company; oh, no, not at all—we helped him because he is first and foremost innocent. *Innocent*. He is innocent because he's one of the few ones I personally know who are ready to give away everything they have without hesitating for a second in the name of the wellness and prosperity of our society, in the name of our future. But he—we—are ultimately powerless, notwithstanding our efforts and the means we resort to, as long as the other side remains blind to our goals and aspirations.

“Which returns us to my initial point: yes, my esteemed men, I have finally found the way—the path—to our solution. For some this solution might rather seem too unconventional, too harsh if you will, but for me it's exactly the opposite—for me this is a golden opportunity that will finally justify the means of keeping the people on the right path and permanently curing them from their worst pathogen: themselves.”

“And what is this solution?” someone asked.

An enigmatic smile appeared on Beckard's face, an odd creeping fissure under the eerie mixture of lights.

“As much as I'd want to reveal to you my greatest accomplishment, gentlemen, unfortunately at this very stage I cannot do it. But fret not—for soon you'll have the possibility of witnessing the single most important event in modern human history that will forever change our lives and the way we perceive things.”

A multifold murmur rose yet again in the room.

“All I want from you”—continued Beckard, after the noise subdued—“is but one thing. And I ask all of you to carefully consider what I'm about to share with you, and I really hope that common sense will in the end prevail and that you will make the right decision.”

The Mediterranean-featured man was standing before them in such a way as if firmly convinced that there was no force on earth

right now that could possibly move him even an inch from his spot; the men at the table seemed to share the same impression as well, watching him carefully and following every single move of his body.

“What I want from you is a very simple favour.”

Suddenly, the holographic financial graphs and tables projected in front of the eleven businessmen changed and transitioned into more simple displays, some text and numbers, together with an empty divided field with a flicking underline, showing up instead.

“In order to extend this project globally,” Beckard went on, “I’m going to need your unprecedented, crucial help. Your assistance will be of an extreme importance to my endeavour and its respective realization.” A pause. “I’m asking every single one of you, gentlemen, and also by counting on your collegiality and indubitable professionalism attested by your being proven sagacious investors, to transfer 90% of all your shares of Elzeron Incorporation and other companies to my name and fund. I assure you that this great sacrifice of yours will serve as the needed foundation—”

“What?” one of the men at the far left end of the table exclaimed incredulously.

“Have you gone nuts?” another cried out, almost standing up from his chair in disbelief.

“What’s the matter with you, Beckard? Are out of your mind? This is preposterous!”

In a few moments the tumultuous clamour caused by the eleven men filled the room like never before. The men began to nervously move in their seats, stupefied expressions once again meeting each other and then eagerly redirecting towards the end of the elliptical table; this time Beckard was having a hard time calming down the ecstatic tide.

“Gentlemen, please, gentlemen... Let’s not give way to delusive emotions and—”

“Delusive emotions? You’re insane to even think that we’d ever agree to something like this! Least of all trying to convince us

with some saccharine babble about humanity and the greater good and whatever you were spouting moments ago!”

“Mr. Hallman, please, just listen to me. Everyone, please.”

Now that Beckard saw that everything was again under control, he continued without hesitation:

“I know that my request might sound like something crazy and suicidally foolish thing to do, especially to the ears of men of high intellectual capacity and reasoning such as yourselves. But what I was about to say and which you didn’t let me finish is that in the long term, your investment returns from this project will be far greater than all the riches in the world that have been combined throughout history. That is,” and here he began walking around the hologram-lit table again with sure, brief steps, “after everything is done, our influence around the world will have increased to such an extent that literally entire governments—even continents—will be unquestioningly at our disposal. We will set the beginning of something great, something no man has ever before thought of, something that will bestow upon us power of tremendous heights and possibilities: an absolute ruling power. Again, I am painfully aware that for you to undertake such a giant step without even knowing what you’ll be wagering your wealth on is a hard thing to do. But it is precisely here that I’m hoping that our longstanding partnership and paved by nothing but success history will weigh in in regards to the final outcome. I hope that with those considerations borne in mind you will be able to clearly see through me, through my lens, through my dreams. Put your faith in me, and I will promise you a whole different world—a world where you will have the final say.”

One or two surreptitious whispers followed amid the occurred silence; and no sooner had some time passed than a voice finally broke out:

“I am sorry, Beckard, but I simply cannot agree to your proposal. You can’t demand from us to just hop in like that on whatever ambitious project you’ve planned without even willing to tell us what the project *itself* is about.”

“He’s right,” another voice said, “your keeping us in the dark here won’t really help convince anyone to give away his

fortune without solid guarantees. That partnership you're talking about, it just isn't enough. You know how things stand in our world—money before everything else. It's what brought us here in the first place.”

To this, the man standing before them didn't say anything; he only released one prolonged faint sigh. His eyes were pointed down at the table.

“Well, gentlemen... I am very sorry to hear that.”

Then he raised his head, taking a good look at everyone in his sight, and then he smiled—an unfeigned, genuine smile, but also a smile that had no meaning behind it.

“After all, I must say that in the end, with or without your consent, gentlemen, all of your stocks, funds, and offshore accounts were already put in my name five minutes ago.” Here he stopped, relishing everyone's confused physiognomy. “As you said, in business matters money stands before everything else.”

Suddenly something happened: almost in unison and before even fully realizing Beckard's words, all eleven men around the table made rapid movements, slapping themselves on the neck as if something had just bitten them.

“What the fuck is th—”

Presently, the skin of one of the men at the other end of the table began to lose its colour tone, quickly turning pale, then grey and sickly as his body was simultaneously becoming limp, until he dropped on the floor unconscious and lifeless with a dull thump. Everything took no more than a couple of moments.

Before long the same befell the rest of the unsuspecting men: having no time to react and say anything at all, quickly and one by one, like unfixd listless bodies detached from a loose peg, they all fell sideways on the ground, some bumping their heads against the table without showing any signs of life; a few seconds later and all of the eleven men were dead.

It seemed as if Beckard had enjoyed watching them go one after another, his smile remaining just the same on his face. At that instance someone entered the room.

Her red, viscously tensile bioarmour with constantly folding and unfolding white recesses couldn't be mistaken even from afar, together with the two irises that were aflame in incandescent crimson glow from within. The two slanting lines that started from the ears and ended toward the crescent of the lips made a horrifying separation of the entire lower jaw, two thin but bright enough curves demarking a boundary of deep blue sheen. The short flossy dark-red hair and superficially rigid yet lithe body were complementary attributions to the female cyborg's deadly charm who, with her unnerving look, pierced through everything with psychical discomfort.

"Masterful performance, as always," Beckard said to her. "Please, would you be so kind as to clean up this ugly mess? And after you're done, wait for me where I told you for further instructions."

The red-haired cyborg proceeded to disposing the bodies without saying anything. Meanwhile, one of the white-suited men stepped up to Beckard.

"What were you thinking?" he whispered in his ear, voice apparently emotionally stirred. "They were our partners, for god's sake!"

The man with Mediterranean traits looked at him with his profound inquiring blue eyes, the contradictory eyes of a blood-thirsty conqueror and a fanatically-devoted ascetic.

"Lofty causes require lofty sacrifices, Billy. Never forget that." And he started walking towards the door, not turning around; Shunningan followed him.

"C'mon," said the other man in white suit to Billy, propping his shoulder. Taking a final look at the lying and stiff bodies near the table, they also left the room.

Chapter VII

The Energy Mecca

The nights here came and ended in a different, peculiar way unakin to anything else in the world. Here was the place where the stubborn mechanical whumps and thuds of persistent workings materialized from mere vibrations to palpable air strokes that didn't leave one alone once they submerged in them—and for some this was part of the charm of the whole manufacturing process, a place where there was not a moment of peace, but rather a ritualized way of life that was the rackety, sanctified environment itself.

Unlike the rest of the city's many industrial zones, this one differed in that all the nine state processing facilities of hornsern crystals were located in this one place, in Meakton District, owned and operated by no one else but the Grouzers—their most lucrative business of all, rightfully called the Energy Mecca.

The hour was 18:40 and the sparks, the violently diffusing shimmering dust that had invaded the whole area of metal, as well as the simmering hot rigidity produced by machines and heavy tools enriched and supplemented the dusky sky, suppressing the smeared moon and putting over an illustrious sheet of redly blazing specks throughout.

“Don't you think we'd be better off if we had some backup with us? Just in case,” said Amanda through her comms-ring: it was an almost invisible metallic wristband made of thickly enmeshed microwire threads that were attached so lightly to the skin that they made the owner forgetful of its presence.

“Don't worry,” answered Collins on the triple-encrypted frequency, “I've already taken care of it.”

Cassidy could also hear everything that was said on the private comms line, being able to send voice messages as well, her own telecom cord-receiver integrated into the auditory cortex and ending at the glabella now being tuned up to the same frequential waves

that were being briefly shown on an ocular dynamic display when the quick neuro-transmitting setup had been completed.

“We’re approaching the place”, Collins’ voice broke out along the shared radio frequency. “Cassidy, report to me for any human presence in the vicinity, both indoors and outdoors.”

Besides her telecom cord-receiver, the cyborg’s body was also augmented with infrared and positronic radio penetrative modular lenses that were sensitive enough to capture and warp all the surrounding light from both right and oblique angles, constructing three- and four-dimensional visual schematic canvases in real time. A digital four-dimensional schematic image of a sealed facility was now cast onto her sight, the place where the meeting between Gloria and Lester was supposed to happen soon.

“There’s some moderate activity in it, but none outside,” the cyborg reported, meticulously processing the live data imagery.

“We’re going to land next to the storehouse southeast of it,” Collins said as he surveyed the ground-level tectonic mass of tumultuous workflow below.

Descending, they landed close to the rendezvous place.

Warily, they split and slowly began traversing the area in different directions, at the same time maintaining reasonable distance and keeping close attention to every light, flash and whizz they happened to see and hear. They already knew that there wasn’t any human presence, but they still had to check for anything unusual they might’ve missed out.

They gathered again by the storehouse’s high bespattered walls, near the grind-and-thresh facility where Gloria and Lester had met several months ago.

Everyone was standing their ground at different places in the dark corners of the empty undesignated landing space in trepidation, suppressing breath and heartbeat. Cassidy was holding the compact dart-gun drenched in shadow, at the same time not stopping her penetrative scanning of the place, her artificial eyes’ emerald glow put down to a minimum—the one thing she didn’t have full control over.

It was now past seven o'clock and save for the stale sulfuric fumes and reverberating heavy clanking, nothing else could be made out of the whole speckled, cloaked air. Suddenly, after a couple of more minutes spent in waiting, a female figure appeared from behind one of the moving cranes' groundwork in the distance, coming right towards them, alone.

"Do you see anyone else?" Collins asked through the comms-ring.

"All by herself... Wait." As Gloria got closer, the cyborg now noticed in the form of a faintly outlined digital shape another human object behind her—it appeared to have come from a different direction than hers, and it was now catching up to her with quicker steps, the unidentified lucid form on her scanning display beginning to fill up with colour and brightness. "I see another person with her, at about 50 metres behind her and getting closer. Probably a male, headed our way."

"That has to be their liaison Lester was talking about," said Gregory, who could see with more clearance a moving silhouette approaching at a fast pace; his, Amanda's and Collins' positions created a wide enclosing triangle towards which the two were now going and were about to fall into.

As Gloria was just entering the triangle zone, the four were also keeping their eyes on the approaching third-party man. Halting, she began to look around in the semi-lightness, searching for Lester.

The confused expression she began to show translated the growing suspicion and misgiving she was most probably dealing with now, when finally a brief spasmodic look on her face gave out her striking realization that something was definitely out of place—but it was too late, as the cyborg wasted no more time and pulled the trigger of her dart-pistol, a miniscule needle resting right on her back, easily going through her clothes. She fell almost immediately on the ground, unconscious. Collins and Gregory instantaneously jumped out of their dark hiding spots into the lighter area, revealing themselves with an onrush toward the man who's been exposed as well.

"Pin him!"

Next second he was down on the ground, prone, not having time even to draw whatever weapon he had hidden beneath his jacket.

Amanda and Gregory were in the meantime leaning over the fallen girl on the other side, her dimly lit body lying slackened on the hard rocky ground.

“What’s that in his hand?” Cassidy said, reaching for the man’s clenched left hand that appeared to be holding something small.

“Damn it, too late!” immediately signalled Collins to the others the moment he saw the familiar device which turned out to be a long-range emergency transceiver.

The sounds of violently creaking in the open sky jet engines grew louder, multiplying every second in force and intensifying the cold air with a trembling that was being absorbed all the way down below: a swarm of hauling dazzling glitters surfaced out of nowhere in the dark misty sky, becoming bigger as they spread over the whole section of the Energy Mecca, inducing imminent peril.

Swiftly, Cassidy lifted the body and placed it over her tensile but durable slim shoulders, halting where Gregory and Amanda had just put Gloria in a resting position by one of the cars. Amanda was aimlessly looking in all directions above and near them, her heart overtaken by terror from the unknown danger that was hovering over them as well as by its unpredictability.

The numerous flickering tiny blotches across the fuming, uneasy sky were presently revealed in their entirety—not what initially Collins thought them to be, they dispersed and reassembled with precise synchronicity, aerial autopiloted tactic manoeuvres that could be ascribed to only one thing.

“Hoppers!” he shouted, at the same time a multitude of fiery shots beginning to pour down at them.

The first wave of onslaught was unsuccessful, but the second passed so close by them that Gregory nearly got hit by a highly charged spurt of blast shots, hot air engulfing them and blazing rings burning everywhere. Each second the flying tactical combat

machines pressed on them, incessant napalm-like drops of thermalized bursting beams wrecking devastative havoc where they could detect any kind of movement at ground-level, whole sets of stark-bright cobwebs unfolding into a multitude of hissing arrowy elongations hanging in the sky for a moment and then quickly turning into explosive balls, dropping down with full force.

Presently, when any chances of escape seemed almost non-existent, another wave of dazzling aerial shockwave simmered above their heads, but this time they noticed that there was something quite different in the trajectory of the flashing bolts that left trails of white-blue recesses: they weren't aimed at them, but at the Hoppers instead. One by one, the crossers began falling and crashing with a final loud explosion until, preceded by a brief two-sided gushing exchange of haphazard fire, nothing was left but another thick layer of misty smoke.

Gregory was perplexed, Amanda no less than him as she followed with her eyes the spread-over various directions and places diminishing lines of grey in the butchered sky.

At that moment a distant ringing jet sound began to grow louder and louder, something that had no visible source to it. Soon, a spark transformed into a constant flicker became bigger as it shortened the distance between itself and them, until finally an unidentifiable sort of an aircraft escaped out of the dusty firmament's darkness and quickly approached them, perched in midair and with visible sophisticated equipment consisting of various weapons along its corpus.

"Comrade, a tad too close, huh?" a grunt man's voice was suddenly heard on the shared radio frequency; an unrestrained laughter then followed, sending Amanda and Gregory into a state of an even bigger confusion. Stepping out in the open, the two met and joined Collins and Cassidy; the aircraft was now initiating a landing, creating a whirling vortex amid an empty disturbed ground.

"Clear out, guys!"

Slowly descending, the impressive airship with slanted wings touched the ground with a light thud, causing Amanda and Gregory to cover their eyes from the dense whirl of dusty particles

that was sweeping everything away; Collins was now heading towards it.

When the opaque cockpit window was finally opened, a black-haired man of a sturdy, but normal-sized build came out of it, with black sear moustache that hid the upper lip, roughly formed facial outlines and eyebrows of the same colour that aligned well with the boundary between the forehead and the widely open, profound eyes; his thick pullover had a long collar that covered just about the entirety of his stubbled neck. Small ringlets of smoke began to be puffed out at fast intervals as soon as he headed towards them.

“Comrade!” he shouted out joyfully with hands spread out, a vivid smile on his face. “Got yourself into some serious stuff as far as I can see, heh? Heh-heh! Haven’t had that much fun in a very, fucking very long time. Can’t get enough of this kind of open seasons, I’m truly tellin’ ya.”

“I’m forever indebted to you,” Collins said to him.

“Phah, enough of it! Who are these young folk over there?” asked the man with the mustache, his voice gruff, noticing the blond girl and the young man behind Collins. They followed him with extremely curious looks, then slowly stepped up to him. “A pleasure, young fellas. Mikhail Goranov. But you can call me Goranov,” the Russian said, exchanging handshakes with them and smiling smugly under his moustache; only when they grabbed his hand did they see that he was missing half of his right pinky and ring fingers.

Gregory couldn’t get his eyes off of the fighting aircraft that stood a couple of paces before him, firmly set on ground and imposing dreadful admiration—he was completely engrossed by it and the way it was so perfectly proportioned in terms of weaponry and aerodynamic efficiency further emphasized by its precisely crafted shape. Never before in his life had he seen anything like this, with such a rich and impressive arsenal consisting of several plasma weapons underneath the wings, double-barrelled missile discharges on both sides of the corpus, and an enormous and solid cartridge-running machine-gun coming out from right beneath the fuselage.

“Like it much, huh? I can tell by that look of yours that you dig it, indeed!” exhilaratingly and with a note of pride exclaimed Goranov, taking a deep drag and exhaling the smoke with pleasure. “High-speed *Sallen P-300* Chaser. Modified, of course.” Again, that same smile of self-complacency appearing on his face. “I call her *Nastasya*.”

Presently, Collins said:

“Gregory, Amanda—you two take Gloria and the man and go straight to Miles. Me and Cassidy will take a look at those cylinders Lester was talking about, and Goranov will stay here on a notice to guard the perimeter.”

As soon as he finished the sentence, that same growing buzz was heard again, with the same moving lights appearing in the sky and continuously forming in various phalangeal positions.

“Damn them, these bugs!” ecstatically proclaimed Goranov.

Not wasting any more time, he hurriedly went back to *Nastasya* and, reaching down in the open cockpit, he pulled out two big and lengthy blaster rifles, shining and smooth like wet charcoal and reflecting a weak silvery sheen. He tossed them at Cassidy as she just appeared from behind.

“You go,” the Russian said, disposing of the cigarette and squishing it. “We’ll hold the front for as long as it’s necessary. Now off with you!”

Without waiting for an answer, the moustached man got inside the aircraft and, starting the engines with a down-to-high-pitched propelling roar, he lifted off steadily and then accelerated towards the incoming swamp of Hoppers.

“Go,” said the cyborg, already aiming at some of the CDCCs; the next moment the two rifles were blasting furiously, her augmented senses sharpened to maximum alertness.

The three stepped aside.

“Change of plans: Amanda, you’ll take Gloria and the man to Miles,” Collins shouted amid the deafening booming sounds of plasma guns at work. “Gregory, we’re going to sneak inside one of

the buildings nearby to see what's happening—we don't know whether they've already begun evacuating, but we'll nevertheless split.”

After that each one went in different directions, Amanda heading for the aeromobiles as she was constantly on the lookout for an imminent danger from above—so far Goranov was on a successful killing spree, and with the help of Cassidy they kept that part of the area clean, with occasional burning debris dropping and lighting up the sky with briefly dying tails—while the two men moved close by the sidewalls of the big grind-and-thresh processing facility no more than a hundred metres away, trying not to expose themselves. It was not until she'd reached the parked vehicles when Amanda noticed that the two bodies were gone; she doublechecked, but there was no one in proximity save some half-charred corpses of the men who'd rushed at them.

After the necessary reconnaissance of the building was finished, Collins and Gregory halted and stood behind their respective corners by the only entrance's side. Hurrying steps were heard several times coming from the other far end, but nothing could be discerned, so they decided to back off a little, stepping lightly on pebbles and other rubbishes the ground was sparsely covered with, eyes steadfast. The doors were guarded by two armed corporate sentries, and they seemed—at least for now—completely unaware of them. There was no other indicative presence near them, so they decided to act quickly and without further ado: Collins, however, suddenly heard something coming from behind and told Gregory to temporarily abort their actions.

“Don't shoot,” a faint voice on the private comms was heard—it was Amanda. Soon she appeared out of the dark, gun in hand. “They're gone,” she said, whispering, coming closer to Collins. “Someone's snatched Gloria and her liaison, they're nowhere to be found.”

Just in time, Gregory appeared as well.

“You sure?” Collins asked, amazed.

“Yes. Not a trace of them.”

He remained silent for a while, from time to time keeping a watch on the two guards who now appeared to receive messages on their radio transceivers.

“Scrap them,” he said, turning to them, “we need to get going.”

He then made a sign for them to cover him. Quickly, he darted forward and with the first shot killed one of the sentries; the other was taken down by Gregory right in the head, dropping his weapon as he fell on the ground. Hastily, the three began ransacking them, and before long Collins found a small rounded access keycard that changed transparency under different angles. Placing it against the board slot, it flickered in bright white and the huge steel door opened; they entered.

It was the same place where Gloria and Lester had their meeting with their liaison, and by the size of it it appeared even more impressive than from the outside. An incessant mechanical noise coming from at least five different places interspersed at regularly recurring thuds. There were all sorts of hydraulic machines, conveyers placed at different levels, and silos with content stat displays on them; heightening metal catwalks, ramps, and staircases were everywhere alongside the walls, with several transport cages on railways beneath them. The work here seemed to be going on in full force, but the fact that there wasn't a single person to supervise all the processes didn't make any sense to them. Soon, though, they were proven wrong: as they advanced, they suddenly caught a glimpse of a couple of helmeted men in green uniforms, talking to each other by one of the silos not so far away. Quickly, the three sneaked in next to what appeared to be a generator linked with many cables sliding out of the floor and which were also connected to other nearby machines, being sufficiently broad to conceal them entirely.

“Don't forget to keep an eye for anything that glows in blue,” Collins said, trying to ignore the surrounding machines that piqued his attention.

Above them the conveyers were working non-stop, coming out from one end and going through the other where they

disappeared behind square gaps, carrying many black metal crates inside of which the still raw hornsern crystals were to be transported into the next room.

Collins indicated to them with his head towards a wide, reinforced gate, about 30 metres away from them on the other side.

Extremely cautious, they sought for the right opportunity while the workers in green uniforms weren't faced in their direction, after which they quickly scuttled to the gate with silent steps. Collins, taking out the keycard he'd pilfered from one of the sentries, put it on the board slot, but nothing happened—it seemed that the slot was made for an entirely different type of card.

“I think I know where we can get ourselves an access card,” Gregory suddenly said. And he pointed with his finger at the exact same men in green uniforms they tried to evade a minute ago.

They decided to ambush them, so they split.

“Put your hands where I can see them and don't even dare to move!” Collins shouted, aiming his blaster at the whole group of five workers who at the moment were shaking and visibly frightened. From this close, they looked more like engineers or superintendents than regular black-collar workers. Amanda and Gregory held them at gunpoint as well.

The green-uniformed helmeted men pleaded not to shoot at them—most of them were in their 50s and 60s, well-groomed and professionally presentable.

“Shut up!” At this the five men calmed down as much as they could, but it could be told that they were still affrighted nonetheless. “This is what we'll do now—one of you will give me his access card for that gate over there, after which you'll leave this facility immediately and without raising any alarm. Understood?”

“Yes, yes, just don't shoot!”

The next moment one of the men slowly stepped forward and, reaching into his pockets, pulled out a small monochromatic plastic keycard; he handed it over to Collins.

“Now leave the premises,” he then said to them, after which the five men subserviently hurried towards the entrance.

At that moment several blaster shots from an unknown source were heard, and one of the green-suited men was seen falling on the ground, dead. Before long dozens of armed men began to appear on the metal staircases and catwalks above, starting a gunfire at Collins, Amanda, and Gregory from all three sides; this time they were nothing like the sentries outside.

The three immediately took cover behind what bulky machinery they could find, storming crossfires scratching walls and floor with penetrative force.

Amanda was the first to return the fire, followed by Collins and Gregory, after which a handful of the congregated by the front and side walls men were killed; Gregory, who was standing not so far off from Collins and Amanda by one of the silos and warily looking for a clear-cut point, took down half a dozen of them, some flipping over from the staircases and meeting the ground. Presently, Collins decided to change his position, sprinting up to the front wall and finding a new place right under a ramp whence he took down two unsuspecting men; he was now being shielded by a column wall from one side and by a thick lofty residual container from the other. However, he was quickly running out of options to get out of there.

No matter how much they resisted with counterfire, it was as if their number kept steadily growing. Their attack was becoming persistent, until at one point a shot almost caught Amanda in the arm, boring a hole in the floor. Seeing the futility of the situation, she began to slowly retreat.

Gregory followed her—although the farther they got back, the less protection they had.

Seeing a couple of barrels near the staircases and catwalks, Collins decided that the risk was worth the shot: completely unaware of their content, he aimed directly at one of them. Seeing how Amanda and Gregory were on the verge of their capabilities, he aimed and shot for the second time, after which a yellowish green fire rapidly spread and destroyed everything in a nearby radius, demolishing the whole staircase, dead and alive bodies engulfed in flames dropping down with screams, some of them maimed by the blast and some fatally burned.

Amanda and Gregory, seeing what Collins was trying to achieve, also began shooting at the barrels which were plentiful enough to cause a collapse of the whole surrounding staircases and walking structures; a moment later and several other subsequent explosions caused such a tremor that even *they* were affected by it, for a moment laying down on the ground due to the harrowing impact from the shockwaves. In the meantime, as everything was in a total obliterated and chaotic state, Collins took advantage of the moment and darted straightforward towards the other end.

“Come on!” he shouted, a mix of machinery hubbub and continuous cracking from the burning wreckage muting everything around, his bloodshot eyes revealing that he was no less inflicted by the devastative explosion.

The three were now heading to the high gate not so far away—Collins didn’t know if the substance the barrels contained was poisonous or not, so he quickly took out the access card and put it on the board slot. This time what they were hoping for worked, and after the gate opened they found themselves in another, smaller room; it then immediately closed back.

It was way darker in there, and instead of being properly lit, the entire room was covered in blacklight that threw off mostly blue and purple fluorescent hues on various spots and undistinguishable paraphernalia, with some areas emitting brighter and more colourful shades like green, red, and orange. It was an unusual sight to gaze upon amid the over-imposing dark space, but something else now seemed even more peculiar as they soon noticed four stacks of big glowing cylinders placed in two rows in the middle of the mysterious room.

“Are those the things Lester was talking about?” straightaway asked Amanda, pointing at the massive and most probably extremely heavy cylinders that shone in bright yellow light, but then quickly lowered her hand as she realized that Collins and Gregory probably couldn’t see her pointing at them. From the distance they stood the cylinders with their bright unchanging gleam looked like self-sufficient power sources—or rather like giant naked batteries—that could perpetually charge the entire city.

“Probably. With the only difference that the colour of the ones he described was blue, while these are yellow,” said Gregory.

“That’s not their real colour,” Collins hastened to correct him. “This here is a fluorescent reaction made visible by direct exposure to ultraviolet light—see above?” Amanda and Gregory looked up and saw that there were actually many elongated, dimly-lit violet lights on the ceiling. “It shows and reveals objects in different shades of the visible spectrum.”

Stepping forward, he began to closely and thoroughly inspect the newly discovered objects. Slowly and cautiously, doubting whether to do it or not till the very last moment, he felt for and touched with the tip of his fingers the surface of one of the cylinders, then quickly withdrew his hand. Before long he repeated the same thing, this time placing his entire palm onto the gleaming surface and holding it like that for some time.

“It’s cold,” he said. He then knocked on it several times and added: “Glass. Thick glass.”

Amanda and Gregory walked up to him. The yellow light dazzled them with its sharp fluorescent brightness.

“But what in the hell is this?”

“I don’t know.” Collins then began to walk around the cylindrical vessels.

At some places there were small puddles of unknown liquid on the floor that appeared as if left accidentally—the apparent thought then flashed in their minds almost simultaneously, but soon they figured out that this couldn’t have been the same substance as in the cylinders, since their colour was green and not yellow. The variety of fluorescent tints in the room and their rich luminant patterns and forms bore an ingenious kaleidoscopic effect on a massive, real-life scale, and the sight of it was as attractive as it was elusive.

The three went on perambulating around the vessels.

“What do you think is inside them?” Amanda asked as she started walking in another direction.

“Wish I knew.”

The three met again at the same spot.

“It looks to me like they’re sealed with something as durable and secure,” Collins said, raising eyes and looking at the top of one of the cylinders—they were capped and gasketed with fasteners.

Collins, fixated upon the idea of discovering some leading signs or insignias, began circling around one of the cylinders again, this time focusing on the carrier they were stacked on, stooped and then glided his hand along its wheels and corrugated metal body. It was unusually quiet where they were.

“What are you doing?” Amanda wondered what he was up to.

“Looking for something that could guide us. Morsels.”

No sooner did he walk a couple of steps than he suddenly halted, squatting; he’d felt something. Squinting, he moved his face closer, trying to discern something, but he could still not see anything despite his efforts. He then slowly began to feel the surface again, this time with more careful precision.

“What’d you find?”

“There’s something here that I can feel, something inscribed...”

The two watched him in expectant silence.

“C-R-O-D-I-T-E...” he began whispering as if by himself, letter by letter, “...70.”

“*Crodite 70?* What could that be?” asked Gregory.

“Don’t know. But it’s still something.” Collins stood up.

“There must be some way to open these things, to grab a sample or something,” Amanda suggested, the yellow watery light deepening the underlying shadows on her face.

“I don’t think that’d be a good idea. I don’t think we should be even standing this close to them,” Collins said. “We don’t know how dangerous their content might be, whether it’s radioactive or not.”

“By the way, where’d you learn this... trick?” Amanda asked him curiously.

“What trick?”

“The letter reading.”

“It’s a long story.” He headed for the gate with carefully calculated steps.

Amanda and Gregory followed him. Harsh lightness from the outside was cast onto them, which in turn directly exposed them to the belligerently incited looks of the group of armed men readily waiting in storming positions and carrying blaster rifles, holding them at gunpoint.

The first shots of the immediate shooting that followed caught some of the big cylinders as the three ran away as soon as they saw what was behind the gate, and some of the vessels were shattered to pieces with liquid spurting out of them onto the floor. The entirety of it was quickly covered with it, whereupon the outspread pool began to rapidly evaporate and soon dense fumes filled the whole room in no time.

“Imbeciles! Stop the fire!” someone suddenly shouted, after which the plasma beams ceased.

The thick haze inside the room was spreading so profusely to the point that nothing could be discerned at more than a meter’s distance.

Collins, Amanda, and Gregory couldn’t see anything; they had a hard time standing on their feet without swaying back and forth all the while the fuelling smoke causing burning pain in their lungs; their eyes were so full of stinging tears that they could no longer see properly, everything becoming one smeared cloudy mass of a barely lit poisonous whiteness. As Collins was desperately looking for the two amid the smoke, walking and stumbling like a crippled old man, his eyelids felt as if suddenly burdened by his entire weight, irritatingly twitching due to the intoxicating air he wasn’t able to ward off, each intake of which was fatal. At some point he finally gave up and fell on the ground.

In his final fugue-like moments shortly before he was about to pass out, he was able to catch a vague glimpse of an unrecognizable brief flash that for a moment had made a hole through and outshone the irregular whiteness that had encroached his field of vision.

He couldn't hear anything; dark blankness was overthrowing his senses, an indefinite nothingness impossible to be escaped. The last thing he felt was someone grabbing him and his body slowly being lifted up by an invisible force.

There was no way to tell the duration of all that was happening right now—he was floating, but couldn't feel, nor see or hear anything around him. After some time the hovering sensation was gone, or at least so he thought, after which a sudden urge to move his eyelids made him aware of his volition, and no sooner had he finally opened his eyes than two unclear and sporadic, but somehow eerily familiar faces appeared before him. It was Amanda and Gregory.

“He's back!” he heard what appeared to be Amanda's voice.

It was hard to tell how long he'd remained unresponsive, but he was now conscious and his awareness was restoring its sharpness and sobriety.

“Comrade, you scared me shitless in there for a moment!” a well-known voice was heard from a distance. As his vision further cleared out, he saw that he wasn't in a building, but rather in some sort of an aircraft that was currently airborne, and at his side Gregory and Amanda watching him regaining his senses with noticeably tired expressions. They offered to help him to get up.

“Give me a minute.”

He then looked to his right, towards the pilot's cabin that was partitioned and whose peep-window was open; Goranov was piloting.

“How long?”

“No more than a couple of minutes. The kids weren't as badly affected as you, they were still conscious when I arrived. Had to blow off part of the roof, though. Good thing is none of you were standing in the way. I had no other choice, comrade—had to move fast while those scoundrels were gathering outside, having surrounded the building like cockroaches and all.”

“What about...”

“She’s okay,” Amanda said, guessing what Collins had in thought. “She’s flying next to us. She and Goranov did a pretty good job,” she said, smiling. From their feeble looks on their faces he could surely guess that they were still recovering from the intoxication. “We got lucky, though.”

Collins nodded.

“Yeah.”

He noticed how the incessantly glimmering city lights spread by the thousands onto the outlandish, yet familiar landscape were fighting against Goranov’s silhouette on the frontal windshield.

Chapter VIII

Priorities

Amanda's playger suddenly buzzed.

She was excited to finally get in touch with him, trying to keep herself calm and not let her emotions pervade. Their conversation was fairly brief, and during it Michael explained that an unexpected urgency had prevented him from calling her earlier that day. He also shared with her that he'd come across some important details related to the Police Department breach back in August, and that they had to see each other as soon as possible. The place where he would wait for them was the same site where she, him and Gregory had initially planned to meet in the upcoming week—the abandoned former office building of “Krauman Kinetics”.

Throughout the whole time Amanda couldn't wave off that premonition of hers concerning Michael, that something bad might have happened to him, or something disturbing he'd been considering whether to disclose to her or not. Hanging up, at first she was left confused, expressionless and appearing as if her eyes were frozen, but soon after that she returned to her normal state and said to the others:

“Michael's found something important about the Police Department accident and the data theft. He said he'd be waiting for us at the old ‘Krauman Kinetics’ building.”

“That's our new destination,” Collins turned to the Russian before him. “You know where it is, right?”

“Sure.”

And, switching to his comms-ring, Collins spoke: “Cassidy, we're taking a different course—the old ‘Krauman Kinetics’ building.”

They all suddenly felt Nastasya banking a turn, now heading towards one of Orton City's depopulated and desolate zones.

The time was 20:30, and the night sky was just entering into a yet another stage; it was getting colder by the hour and there was a certain metamorphosis happening in the air during this early evening and especially in the midst of places like that where the silence wasn't dead and devoid, but rather overwhelmingly alive to the extent that it could be actually felt sneaking in between the nearly empty buildings and badly lit streets.

Dropping the three nearby the location for the arranged meeting, Goranov was prepping up for an immediate take-off.

"Sure you won't need me?" the Russian asked Collins.

"I'm sure, we've got the transportation means for now. If anything were to happen, rest assured you'd be the first one I'd call."

"You're damn right I'll be! Heh-heh." Whereupon he reached for the button for the cockpit window, and the next moment he was already taking off, the Chaser's airfoils blasting off a loud rev that continued to reverberate for a long time even after he was no longer visible in the sky.

Amanda, Collins, Gregory, and Cassidy started off toward the old, forgotten and unmaintained office building, and soon they were already standing at the front main side. Everything around them was quiet and yet unstill, with only a few weakly flickering streetlamps blurringly revealing the speaking emptiness and the torn at many places chainlink fence that surrounded most of the colossal building across the vast sandy field. Suddenly, Collins heard someone's voice—it had come from his comms-ring:

"I think I've found something you might be eager to hear about," Milles had reached out to him. "It's not a whole lotta much, but I hope it'd be enough."

"I'm all ears. And put it on mutual so the others can hear it too." They looked back at him, suddenly, watching him in perplexity.

"*CRODITE 70* is actually a codename for a recently disbanded top-secret military biochemical project. Very sentimental so far, I know. Conducted in the span of four years, the project was officially commenced in 2081 for the sole purpose of creating some

sort of a stabilizer for—hear me out—thermonuclear weapons. And no, I'm not exactly sure what this 'stabilizer' is. So, this 'stabilizer'—which is very likely to be the same glowing liquid you saw at the Energy Mecca—is also, ironically, a very unstable substance that undergoes a transformative process by concentrating and 'tightening' all the kilotons of energy released by the chain reaction into many more, smaller quantities or, quote-unquote, *beads*, which in turn allows for a more controlled and evenly distributed destructive power. For unknown reasons, *CRODITE 70* was shut down at the beginning of this year, and it remains unclear whether the project has seen any practical implementation and for what purposes it's been given the green light in the first place."

"And here we are now, with more than three dozen containers of that same substance being stored in a grind-and-thresh facility in one of the most vital places in the city," Collins remarked.

"You've come across an interesting trove, man."

"For the better or worse." And the connection was ended.

The four went on walking again. Next to the office building of "Krauman Kinetics" there was another, smaller one, and they were both covered in undissolving darkness, their many broken windows gaping and as if leading to an even darker place; the wide alleyway between them was also lacking in visibility, and only but a small part of the pathway could be made out.

"Amanda, it's me. I'm here," someone's voice was suddenly heard, but before the person had even spoken, Cassidy had already switched on to her 4-dimensional modular vision and described what looked like a male figure standing in the alleyway.

Amanda immediately recognized the voice—it was Michael's—and, unhesitant, went towards him.

Before long Amanda noticed that there was something wrong about the way he looked at her, something worrying which she'd detected in advance back when they had the conversation on her way there.

"I'm so glad to see you again," she began unconfidently, continuing to seek for an explanation for his uneasy look. *It's so*

apparent, she thought. Then, she decided to ask him straightaway: “Has something happened? You look a little... indisposed.” She had a hard time forcing herself to utter those last words.

The tall, brown-haired man in topcoat didn’t provide her with an immediate answer, despite his desire (which Amanda also couldn’t help but easily notice) to speak out whatever was troubling him.

“Nothing’s happened. Don’t worry,” he said with a voice the weakness and uncertainty of which—in spite of the immense efforts he put in—he couldn’t hide either. His eyes was what betrayed it the most, she thought, as if he was strenuously forced to look at her; the whole situation was getting disturbingly weirder, but she still tried to push it to the edge and see where it would end.

Collins also saw that, and so did the cyborg: he couldn’t stop looking at him with suspicion, his intuition telling him there was definitely something inexplicable and inauspicious about him, and that they had to be extra cautious from here on.

“This is Agent Braduer Collins,” she began, alternately looking at the two men with uncertainty. “You might know him since both of you work for the Intelligence Department.”

“Yes, I know him,” Michael said, who’d impulsively started for a handshake, but at the last minute had refrained from stretching out his hand. “We’re old colleagues.”

Collins nodded at him cordially.

“Glad to see you again. It’s been many years,” he said.

“Me too.”

Way before Amanda approached him Michael had immediately taken heed of the tall blond cyborg, her gleaming emerald-lit eyes attracting his attention from the very beginning. He was profoundly impressed.

“This is Cassidy, she’s a friend of Collins and she’s with us,” Amanda introduced her to him. The cyborg was just standing there staring at him with an undecipherable look.

Michael didn't say anything, and the outwardly lack of emotions in the tall cyborg suppressed any reactions coming out of him in addition to his awe of her unusual appearance.

"You won't believe the things we went through during the better half of the day," Amanda said. "But first tell us what you've been up to, what you've come across. Where've you been? Your absence was unusual." She tried to act as normally as possible, curious to see the way he would narrate his story.

"I had to take some measures on my part." Again, she heard that same indisposition in his voice, and not only that, but as if there were also a certain irritation hiding behind the pronunciation of his words that didn't bode anything good. For a moment his look was hanging on to Collins and the cyborg, watching the two in a peculiar manner.

"Well?" Amanda was becoming more and more nervous, sensing the growing unbearable tension that affected her badly.

All eyes were now on Michael, and everyone was already aware of his uncertain stance he wasn't even trying to conceal anymore. He looked as if pondering over something.

"What is it?"

"You need to let go of it," he finally said, this time his eyes steadily affixed ahead of him.

For a moment there Amanda thought she hadn't clearly heard what he'd said. Then—gradually, painfully—she realized that the uttered words were very real and genuine.

"What?" She was struck almost speechless, nonplussed, her voice trembling in disbelief.

At that moment Michael's unquivering face was as if replaced by a mask cast out of steel, and for Amanda he no longer looked like that old good-hearted friend and colleague of hers she knew or at least thought she knew. Now, before her, stood no one but a mere stranger, a person whose overall bearing unnerved and frightened her.

"I'm sorry, Amanda. Please, forgive me," he suddenly uttered. "But you have to understand that he promised me! He

promised me that he would find him!” His entire composure was now ruined—or rather thoroughly changed—and his eyes were as if belonging to a madman. “And I believe him. He *will* find him! He has the means. He will!” He was beside himself.

Behind him, near the end of the dark alleyway, an unidentifiable light seemed to come out and disperse the darkness: there was a dim flicker of red and blue and a regular light as well, all merging and becoming brighter and clearer, as well as a rising engine’s roar echoing from a distance. Several seconds later and those same lights passed over them, with more coming out of the alleyway and advancing and stopping right behind Michael: before long they were all surrounded by numerous police patrols that expelled heavy exhaust as they landed on the dirt and gravel.

“What the fuck, Michael?” Amanda turned to him, completely flabbergasted and in shock as she watched the police officers get out of their cars and pointing their guns at them. Michael remained mute, unmoving.

“Son of a bitch!” Collins shouted, his blood boiling from anger and contempt. “You’re in cahoots with them!”

“Keep your hands above your heads!” one of the police officers had commanded through a drone-speaker. They had no other choice but to obey.

No matter how much Amanda forced herself into believing otherwise, in the end her reason and logic superseded every other emotion and convinced her that Michael was no longer the same person she’d known for those past couple of years.

“Why...” she whispered, sensing it was already out of the question for him to reconsider his choice. He was apparently ignoring her now, looking down sullenly and unheeding of everything.

The police cars’ xenon red-and-blue lightbars had been turned off, but their headlights were still on. Their intensity was then reduced, after which they could clearly see every single face that had surrounded them.

“Commissioner Rowlan... is that you?” Gregory suddenly said, squinting and trying to focus on the solidly built man with

eyeglasses and scarred from exhaustion face. He and Michael were presently standing shoulder to shoulder.

He, like Michael, also pretended not to hear them—he'd taken out his blaster and was now holding it in his hand, pointed down at the ground.

“You're coming with us,” Michael suddenly spoke, finally breaking his long silence. “If you show even the slightest sign of resistance, you'll be shot on spot.”

He turned around and calmly started towards one of the cars in the alleyway.

As he did that and as some of the police officers began closing in on the four, commissioner Rowlan suddenly raised his blaster and pointed it at Michael's back.

But just before he pulled the trigger, there was at first a deceptively silent glimpse of flash that went right through his head, boring a hole and causing his entire body to instantaneously drop dead on the ground, his gun falling from his hand and landing futilely next to him. Michael didn't have enough time to react, so when he turned around to see what had happened, he saw nothing but the already neutralized Commissioner. He stood there watching him with open, unflinching eyes, after which he shifted his gaze onto the police officer who, thanks to having stood next to the assaulter the moment he was about to shoot, had reacted just in time and had thus prevented the latter's intention from being realized.

Amanda, Gregory, and Collins remained stupefied, especially Amanda who was staring aghast at her now deceased superior who only moments ago was standing on his feet. A pond of blood had formed around his body, and there was a big gaping hole in his temple.

“Take them away,” said Michael, who resumed walking towards one of the police cars.

Time for her seemed to be dragging, and before long she realized that someone was yelling at her and holding her at gunpoint. They waited for her to throw her weapon away after the rest had already done that, including Cassidy who had tossed her katana and

belt. They had magnetronic handcuffs put on them, and around the cyborg they fastened an auto-restraining razorhoop for extra precaution. They were escorted to the police aeromobiles, each one in a separate car accompanied by three guarding officers; Amanda couldn't recognize any of them when she looked into their faces on her way to the vehicles: it appeared to her that they were all strictly following what seemed to be a carefully planned procedure. No one said a word, and they had no other choice but to obey and see where they were about to be taken, not having the slightest idea why they were still kept alive. The cars took off.

She was thinking about his last words, how *he'd promised him that he would find him*, and tried to find some logical explanation behind them.

His son, his son's in the centre of all this, she thought. *Beckard's recruited another valuable asset.*

Presently, she was being tortured by the recent horrific image of commissioner Rowlan's dead body, the beam hole in his head and the dark blood he was sunken in—a memory which was as vivid as if it were happening repeatedly before her very own eyes at the moment.

She was afraid; she couldn't hold back her fears that persistently tormented her, and she always thought about the worst possible case scenario when the time would come for them to land. Or would they ever land again? She didn't know, nor did she want to.

Sitting between the two guarding officers, she was despondently watching through the windshield before her which revealed the dark, but full of flickering activity cityscape, thinking of nothing, only visually contemplating the charm of an otherwise dreadful night.

I'm going to die, she thought all of a sudden as if in an already resolved indifference. She only hoped that everything, whatever they had in store for her, would pass painlessly; there wasn't much anything else she could pray for.

The red and blue lights of the adjacent patrol aeromobiles were on, silently switching between the two colours in the cold tenobrosity. Suddenly, there was a reflection of light showing up from somewhere ahead—it passed quickly and neatly, the motion of a rapid thrust of a long blade that shone only once in the darkness and then ended up deep into the throat of the driver, his lower jaw immediately starting to gush out blood, some of which being splattered onto the windshield. At the same time the officer on Amanda's right suddenly pushed her down, drawing out his gun and shooting the other guard on her left that in turn wasn't even given the opportunity to catch up to what was going on. And no sooner had the driver begun chocking in his own blood and losing control over the hand-wheel—his hands gripping at the wound while his body convulsed as if suffering a severe fever outburst—than he was kicked out of the car by the police officer next to him, who in turn moved over to his seat and handled the driving.

Amanda was still lying low, and during that time the guard next to her reached over and opened the door, pushing down the second dead police officer, after which he closed it; there was a burnt hole left in the mostly shattered window, the air suctioning through it and bringing in a cold gust.

She was taking deep breaths, the whole bizarre situation leaving her without words. The two remaining officers she was left with didn't say anything, and their faces were just as stone cold as they had been the moment they took off, as if nothing had happened at all. She was still handcuffed, and her wrists were beginning to hurt.

Hardly had she remembered the other cars than she saw faint, faraway flashes of what she recognized to be blaster shots sparkling inside several of the flying vehicles: bodies then began to be tossed out, and she quickly lost sight of them as they disappeared in the darkness from an altitude of several hundred metres. As she was trying to futilely recognize some of them, a patrol aeromobile flying ahead suddenly came on fire, smoke coming out of its hood as it gradually began to descend, careering through dozens of other

nearby civilian aeromobiles and nearly crashing into one, until it was left behind falling freely.

Amanda thought, terrified, whether Collins and Gregory might've been hurt, beginning to fear the worst that might have happened to them. No one was trying to reach out to her through the shared frequency the comms-rings operated on, and she didn't even dare speak anything either.

Watching out of the window she saw that the escadrille of police aeromobiles was heading downtown. Assemblages of lights which crawled up and illuminated the skyscrapers formed a pulsating mass that appeared from above as if having a functioning organic purpose.

She already guessed what their final destination was: the Gettledome Building was easily discernible from afar, and one's attention could definitely be provoked by the unconventionality of the seemingly frail style and structure but also the finesse with which it was entrenched amid an open and boundless space that allowed it to freely exhibit its innovative architectural brilliance and aesthetic puissance. Presently, the four aeromobiles initiated a rapid descent, tilting a little towards the building where, thought Amanda, their fates would be put at stake and decided.

She was watching eagerly through the window the enormous, faintly shining in yellow-green glassy sphere, constructed of many triangular mosaic fractals and put on a solid undulatingly curvy base that reached sky-high above the other surrounding, more modest buildings. The sphere's merging colour tones that seemed as if flowing inside out with their luminant gentleness stood out like an incredible peak of an even more incredible and attractive construction: it was one of Lyancast Global Networks' administrative centres and Elzeron Incorporation's ground-orbit telecommunications daughter company.

The more they got closer to the mistily glowing sphere, the more Amanda felt lost in its vastness. They were hovering over it, and just when they were near enough to the surface to the point that the fiery blazes from the vents were reflected back at them, a big part consisting of several dozen other smaller triangular mosaics

began to separate themselves from the others by slowly unfolding and ultimately turning into one big triangular opening. The four cars entered the sphere, one after another.

The same yellowy green luminosity was ubiquitous and more vibrant inside the quaint structure, the light being emitted from the triangular mosaics themselves in such a way that it was actually hard to guess whether they themselves were the actual lighting source. They were in the sphere's upper half; the space around them was nearly empty and at the same time mesmerizing in its abstract geometric simplicity.

For a moment Amanda had forgotten her perilous situation and was quickly snapped out of it when the two officers got her out of the car.

"Greg..." Amanda whispered, glad to see him alive, as the police officers led her to them. Before long all four were gathered in one place.

Before long a long-haired man in white suit and a scar on his face stepped out of a glider, followed by two armed bodyguards; they immediately recognized him.

Walking up to them with an impassive gait, he got close to and stood before Collins, peering into him continuously with special attention, his bravado already starting to show off.

"If I wanted you dead, you'd be decomposing in some acidic container by now," Billy McCarter said to them indifferently, yet condescendingly. "I mean you no harm, but I want you to promise me that you'll behave."

Amanda and Gregory looked at each other in surprise, and at that moment Collins was more mistrustful of everything than ever.

Presently, their magnetronic handcuffs were taken off, Cassidy released from her auto-restraining razorhoop.

"And as a demonstration of my good intentions, you can have your weapons back," said the long-haired man, now standing in the centre in front of them with his hands clasped behind his back.

The police officers handed over to them their blasters; by now it had become perfectly clear that they were crooked policemen.

“What’s all this for?” Collins asked irritably, holding the man before him under tight scrutiny.

Billy McCarter looked at him, his face having adopted complete seriousness and genuineness.

“Skipping the empty talk and cutting it straight to the chase: me and my brother think Beckard’s up to some shady stuff that might put a lot of people in danger. And by *a lot* I mean civilians as well.

“For the past several weeks me and John have been watching you and following every single step you made—especially you, Agent—because we hoped this might help us figure out Beckard’s intentions. What you’re investigating at the present moment is exactly what me and my brother are also trying to untangle. And so far things have been turning out way more complicated than we’ve ever expected.”

“I’m listening,” Collins said, who still looked at this whole situation with suspicion and doubt.

“Everything began a couple of months ago,” started Billy McCarter, “when there was something about Beckard’s personality and behaviour that was transitioning into something else, it was as if he was becoming another man before our own eyes, a man who zealously hides something and keeps it only to himself, like a mad dog. We didn’t know what could possibly be the case with that gradual change of mood and with all that secrecy and untrust he’s been showing towards everyone—including us—but we thought it must’ve definitely been something important enough not to even reveal it to me and my brother. In other words—he was becoming a pathological paranoid in his own way that only those closest to him could notice, since, as you might guess, he’s a person who doesn’t spend much time with outsiders.

“At first me and my brother thought it to be something fleeting, inconsiderable, so in the beginning we didn’t pay much attention to it; but we ought to have known better, since he began to skip

business meetings and appointments that were of vital importance for the company—at least until the last week or so. As far as our other partner Edgar Shunningan goes, we came to the conclusion that we can't trust him.

“This was the moment when me and my brother decided to commence a small investigative initiative of our own, which would overall consist of closely following Beckard and every single move he made, and at the same time being vigilant enough so that we wouldn't give him the smallest reason to doubt us. Unfortunately, and as expected, keeping a very powerful person under a constant surveillance was a very hard, if not impossible, task: access to bank and offshore accounts, asset flows and stock fluctuations, contracts and binding clauses, wiretapping, tracking devices—all this proved to be very challenging—and on top of that especially risky—when applied to someone as keen in their business and personal dealings as Beckard. Still, it could be said that we had some semblance of success.

“There is one thing of a particular interest, though, that recently got reported back to us—around two weeks ago Beckard was intending to send out one of his people to Junkhood and pay a visit to a local Chinese man named Tsin Dzi. According to my sources, the old man was supposed to hand him over something of which I don't have any info yet. Strageris Mapilton is the name of the guy Beckard sent, and he's one of his closest goons. Yes, Agent,” the long-haired man turned to him seeing his altered expression, “I know that those names are familiar to you. Because I was the one who sent you the cyphered message that day. We'll get to that part in a minute, don't worry.”

Here Billy McCarter snapped with two fingers at one of his bodyguards behind him, after which the stout thick-necked man with dark sleeve and suspenders to which were attached two holsters pulled out a pocket-sized projecting device from his trousers, wherefrom a holographic still was presented: the image showed two men in a dimly lit surrounding captured in motion, one giving a small receptacle to the other, the quality distorted.

“It was taken the day Strageris Mapilton visited Tsin Dzi, two hours before you,” the ponytailed man turned to Collins. “One of them is clearly Beckard, while the other—even though it’s hard to say from this angle—is Strageris Mapilton himself. We have all the reasons to think that it was exactly for this box that he was sent. Unfortunately, we still don’t know what it serves for, or what’s in it.

“Now, to return to the encrypted message I sent you. You might ask why—well, the answer to that is very simple, which gets us back to what I said earlier about that little investigation of yours: I wanted to learn more about Beckard’s plans through you, of course without your knowing it.” The white-suited man stopped for a second, curious to follow Collins’ reaction to this. “Alas, this didn’t lead to anything. But I didn’t lose hope in you—in fact, I was further compelled to move on with my close observation of you and your buddies, because I believed and I still do that you could be of some use to me to learn more about the business my dear colleague and friend Beckard does behind my back, in spite of the fact that in any other situation I would’ve most probably killed you.” Here his eyes were especially accentuated onto Collins. Presently, he moved and stood in front of the blond-haired girl in dark-red leather jacket. “You, young girl,” he said in a half-mocking voice, “was entirely justified in your suspicions from the very beginning. And I have a special appreciation for people who question everything.”

Right then the holographic image was replaced by another one: it showed the faces of Gloria and Lester.

“I’ve always admired the female intuition... And so instead of going through the unnecessary trouble of using my own people in the Police Department, I used *you*, my dear one, *cost-free*.” His eyes were focused intently on her. “You did a pretty good job by confirming my hypothesis about Beckard’s interest in the city powerplant, and I am thankful to you for that.” He now turned to all of them: “I don’t doubt that you already know that the stolen data from the Police Department contain comprehensive information about the blueprints, security protocols and whatever else you might think of that might be related to the city powerplant.”

Billy McCarter then went silent for a moment, a provocative smile itching on his face.

“What do you know about the stolen powerplant data?” Collins asked.

“Me? Enough to cost me and my brother’s lives if Beckard were to learn about it.” He started strolling from one end to the other. “You see, during these last couple of months in which me and John kept track of his mischievous doings, we successfully compiled enough intel to point and guide us in the right direction. The information was partial and fragmented, so most of the time it didn’t make any sense—like in the Chinaman’s case—but interestingly enough, everything so far led to the same thing in one way or another: powerplants, hornsern crystals, and bootleg, dark-market tech, mostly experimental, untested stuff. Naturally, this prompted *me* and my brother to focus on the Energy Mecca and the city powerplant.

“I believe that the stolen data in question—blueprints of the whole building, statistics, processing configurations, security protocols, and so forth—is focal to whatever Beckard plans to do. As I already mentioned, the activity he’s involved in includes experimental bootleg tech as well, such as customized constructions and devices of various applications that require large amounts of energy in order to properly function. But this doesn’t end here—another thing worth mentioning is that once these constructions or devices are assembled together and connected with each other into a whole, they create an entirely new system compiled of different remote parts that function in an intricate and extremely complicated way, the nature of which we are yet to fully grasp.” The long-haired man looked at them intently and with eyes wide open: “The latest report from my sources indicate that whatever Beckard has been working on, it is already completed and ready for use. And judging by the way our last meeting with him went, my guts tell me that he won’t delay it much longer and that he’ll probably launch it tonight, or tomorrow morning at best.”

Gregory, Amanda, and Collins listened to him with ears pricked up; the cyborg, on the other hand, was analysing every

single move of his as well as his body temperature so she could later determine the veracity of his words.

“Now, as you might be aware, the local Orton powerplant provides electricity not only for the city, but for the whole state as well—and this makes it not only the biggest power source on state territory, but also the most dangerous active bomb—theoretically, of course—if someone decided to use it as such. Lately, me and John have been noticing a certain tendency in Beckard of meeting with world-leading scientists from different spheres and branches, the most prevalent ones being hornsern energy specialists. Most of the constructions and devices I told you about were either entirely built or integrated into other already existing structures by exactly those scientists and their teams whose background Beckard has most probably carefully checked in advance before putting his trust in them. Nevertheless, me and my brother failed to bug them due to their being constantly watched and surveilled.

“But in spite of that, my people, like I already mentioned, successfully managed to obtain some raw intel about the preliminary plans regarding what Beckard’s prepared, hence how I know about it. I dare say with certainty that we have some idea of how the thing Beckard has built works, its compound nature and its different constituting parts’ approximate location. But since the intel is incomplete, it appears that there’s one missing component in the prelim plans, and according to my men this could very well be the main crucial part—the *enabler*—however obscure it might sound.” Here the ponytailed man assumed an even more serious stance. “We think that this last component is integrated into the city powerplant itself, hidden somewhere in it which could mean that only a handful of the workforce there know about it, and it’s only a matter of time before it gets released. All in all, we’ve reached to the conclusion that the total number of interconnected constructions or machines is five, the fifth potentially hidden in the Orton powerplant.

“Now, there’s one more thing: half an hour ago it was reported to me that apparently Beckard has made an appointment with an unknown individual at the ‘Extravaganza Erotica’ nightclub for half past ten tonight. This makes me think that if he has an arranged

meeting at such a late time prior to the launch of whatever he's built, then it must be a very important one without which his assembled structural system probably wouldn't work. It is likely that an important deal will be made there, an important deal out of many others Beckard's made, and that it might also be his last one. I advise you to start from there. Keep in mind that he usually brings a whole retinue of bodyguards with himself on such occasions, a lot of muscle.

"In regards to the particulars of Beckard's creation, we're kinda short of time here, so everything's being sent to your reclusive pal Miles as we speak."

"Hold on a minute," Collins spoke out, "what exactly is it that you want from us?"

"But I thought you'd already guessed by now—I want you to learn what exactly Beckard's been doing, find out more about the five scattered across the whole town constructions. It's important that he doesn't end up dead before you've obtained enough information from him, so your best choice is to try and entrap him alone, as only then he'd be vulnerable and helpless without any of his goons by his side, but nevertheless for only a short period of time, since it's almost certain that he's got a tracking device of some kind or another put into his body—so make sure you do whatever it takes that'll make him talk once you've taken hold of him. Me and my people will keep you updated if anything important comes up. Oh, and watch out for his gem Tech-a-Raya, she's not entirely human and could prove a real challenge, just like her," here he glanced at Cassidy, sardonically.

"If you really think we'll take orders from a criminal such as yourself," Amanda cried out, unleashing her long-suppressed anger and disdain towards the man untroubledly standing before her, "you must be hopelessly delu—"

"Please, spare me your annoying prattle, little girl," Billy McCarter cut her out with a noticeably irritated tone, stepping up to her and getting his face close to hers at an intimidating distance. For a second Gregory had reacted to that, but then retreated, as he saw the police guards behind them moving in and reaching for their holsters. "Let's not spoil our otherwise fragile relationship, shall we?"

He stepped back, retaining his calmness. “I thought that my saving you from sure death would have been a clear enough statement of my benevolent and amicable intentions. Beckard intended to get rid of you in some toxic waste depot, where your piteous remnants would be decomposing to the last bit, no traces left. Who I am and what I do is irrelevant at the present moment for your sake—for everyone’s sake. We’re facing a possible disaster of a grand scale and the only thing we have to focus on right now is the person named Beckard Simewvire. I, for one, know that you want to stop this man too who’s clearly lost control over his wits, just as badly as myself. Or am I mistaken? I guessed so.”

They didn’t say anything, but soon Amanda, emotional and her voice all shivering—that same earlier feeling of terror returning again—spoke out:

“Commissioner Rowlan’s blood is on your hands, bastard! And probably Michael’s too! That car, I saw the fire and how it started to lose altitude...”

At first Billy McCarter looked at her confused, but then, remembering who the person she was talking about was, said:

“I don’t know if the person you talk about is alive or not, but from what I was told it’s very unlikely that he’s survived the crash. I tried to check in with my people who were present with him, but their lines are dead. As far as your Commissioner goes, he wasn’t shot by my men, but by one of Beckard’s, and the Agent has been playing for his side, for at least quite some time now; he was recruited by him four or five months ago. I’m sorry for your loss, you seem to have been quite attached to him. But still, that doesn’t change the fact that he betrayed you and nearly got you whacked.”

So it’s true... Amanda thought, dolefully.

“What about Beckard?” Gregory suddenly asked him. “Won’t he eventually find out what you’ve done to his people?”

“It’s already been thought of it,” Billy McCarter answered him suavely, smiling in a satisfactory way. “I’ve prepared an alternative account of the events which even Beckard will bait. Besides, I’m sure he’s got way more important things on his mind right now.”

The man in white suit looked at his wristwatch.

“Time’s running out, so I ask you to be quick and give me a long story short of your discovery at the Energy Mecca.”

No one dared say anything. Ultimately, Collins spoke out:

“Dozens of big cylindrical glass containers, bright blue substance inside them. Later found out it’s some kind of a thermonuclear stabilizer, a disbanded top-secret military project under the codename *CRODITE 70*.”

“Intriguing. We didn’t come across anything like that in our intel. Now,” the long-haired man started with a semi-serious, semi-excited voice, “if there’s nothing else left to be straightened out, I think it’s time—“

“Wait a second,” Collins interrupted him, stepping forth for the first time since they were brought here, standing face to face with one of the men to whom he’d dedicated most of his life only to see him put behind bars once and for all. Billy McCarter remained temperate, making a sign to his people that everything was okay. “You’re just going to leave all the dirty work to us, with no assistance, no help, nothing?” it was hard for him to utter these words, but he knew he had to. He was trying to pressure and intimidate him as much as possible.

“Without my assistance? Yes, of course,” the long-haired man said with an ironic smirk. “Do you really think I’d risk my and my brother’s skins by directly providing you with personal manpower? You’re too naïve, Agent. The information I’ve given you is enough. Besides, I didn’t say I’ll simply stand from afar with crossed hands—I’ll do whatever my capabilities allow me to and will share with you anything important that pops up. However, this won’t be cooperational, in the traditional sense of the word.”

“You’ve really thought of everything, haven’t you?” said Collins, wrestling with the fact that they were all on their own now. “Your own life before everyone else’s. But why should I be surprised that a piece of shit like you should act this way? We’re completely different animals after all.”

“Now, Agent,” Billy McCarter smiled again, pretending not to have heard Collins’ insults, “I know this is a hard bite for you to swallow, but sometimes you have to get by with whatever means are at your disposal. Anyways...”

He started walking towards one of the police cars, his men following him.

Sitting in the backseat and holding his door open while the engine was being ignited, he added:

“I wish you all the luck in the world. And don’t worry—your Slavic buddy’s already on his way. Farewell!”

The four police aeromobiles filled the semi-dome with hot ignited air and loud reverberating roar, lifting off from the ground and skirting out through the same triangular opening.

The four were now left alone in the glowing yellow-green mosaic structure, and soon they began to catch a distant glimpse of the arriving lights of Nastasya.

Part 4

Chapter I

A Relic Out in the Open

After the unexpected meeting with the “McCarter” clan’s ringleader the four were duly picked up by Goranov just as told, the clock striking a little after nine.

Sitting in the back of Nastasya where they were silently trying to assimilate the night’s events, Amanda and Gregory couldn’t help but overhear the conversation that was going on between the piloting Russian and Collins. As far as they could tell, they were recalling and discussing the events that had happened during the last couple of hours.

“The slick rat!” Goranov was heard exclaiming in disbelief; their topic was Billy McCarter and everything that had occurred a couple of minutes ago. “So he offered you no help whatsoever?”

“Well, not exactly—he supposedly assured us that he’ll provide us with more info on Beckard’s superstructure and plans, but you’re overall right—he’s in it only because of his personal business investments in the city, nothing more. However, I’m still not completely sure whether to believe the honesty of his words. Cassidy put him on a scan, but didn’t detect any deviations.”

“What about those construction things you mentioned?”

“Miles said he’d already received the raw data package by an anonymous sender—that is, by Billy McCarter. He’s currently going through the files and will later let us know of their contents.”

The place where they were about to land was an empty parking lot near one of the communal complex zones in Sundan District. There were some half-ruined playgrounds with broken, unworking lampposts around them, as well as a couple of old garages in two long L-shaped rows that took most of the abandoned space. Several

cars were scattered amid the gloomy parking lots, the ground cracked and filled with weeds and moss springing out of the recesses; some of the vehicles had been staying there abandoned for a long time, having become nothing more but mere scrap metals with flat and torn tires. The loud exhaling sound coming from Nastasya's heavily working jet engines made the air tremble and the silence disturbed. Just as they were getting out of the Chaser, Cassidy's phaeton appeared in sight, also landing next to them. Presently, Amanda and Gregory had the assumptive feeling that they were the only ones currently kept in the dark.

Presently, they began walking after Collins, whose assured gait made it look like he obviously knew the place by heart, and probably many more things about it, better than any one of them. They were heading towards one of the crumbled and derelict cars, which, interestingly enough, were not aeromobiles, but rather already out of use internal-combustion vehicles. They failed to recognize most of their respective brands despite the fact that some of them still had their emblems intact; but there was one particular car whose appearance Gregory instantly recognized, and that was a '20 Honda Accord that was still in good and preserved condition. In spite of its anachronistic design and severely worn-off paint and rustic bodywork, for him it was nevertheless an one-of-a-kind opportunity to get his hands on so rare a relic that bore the remarkable and ingenious retro spirit of another distant time.

Opening the driver's door, Collins reached for the steering wheel to sound the claxon; and even though it didn't produce any noise, he kept his hand on it while simultaneously steering the wheel in seemingly random variations as if trying to figure out the combinations of a safe. Scarcely had several moments lasted when a slowly screeching heavy noise was heard coming from one of the garages not so far from them: its corroded door had begun to roll up.

It was mostly empty inside—save some scattered mechanical appurtenances on the floor and on the wall like screwdrivers and spanners, a small worktable with some other rustic tools on it, and some junk accessories like a pair of pierced gloves, two rimless crusty tires and several empty paint cans, the place didn't offer much

useful tools and from the looks of it it seemed that it hadn't been used in a while, given the dust that had practically covered everything as well as the dry, stagnant malodorous smell of oil and paint; the shady ochre-light was coming from a lone netted luminescent lamp.

At that instance the entire floor began to vibrate, becoming loose and eventually starting to detach itself: Gregory and Amanda saw how it began to lower at a steady pace, feeling its being pulled down controllably.

“What is happening?” Amanda had asked perplexed, looking at Collins who'd expected that kind of reaction from them.

“It's an entrance platform, the garage's just a cover.”

They were already below ground-level and Gregory noticed how smooth the rectangular pit's walls actually were—it was becoming darker the further they got down, only the dim ochre luminousness from above remaining their sole light source that diminished as they descended.

Before they could get farther down, the separated floor suddenly stopped, having led them to and left at the middle of a dark space.

Collins, being the first one to step out, immediately had soft yellow-orange spotlight drawn upon and around him by small circular flat emitters ingrained in the ceiling, and immediately after that Amanda and Gregory noticed the many other identical ones that were evenly spread throughout all of the visible part of the ceiling. And no sooner had they stepped out of the moveable floor than they were also spotlighted, the flat emitters detecting their change of position and lighting their way from above wherever they went.

Despite the increased visibility that was afforded them, they still couldn't discern much of the wide extensive space, only noticing in the faraway distance something that resembled a separate cabin-room, its semi-transparent door giving off a stronger reflection of the ceiling lights. There were a couple of glossed screens on a stand-by mode at the same far end, together with what looked like

some furniture next to them, and some lofty cases stacked in the corner opposite the cabin-room.

“Uninvited and armed,” a female voice was suddenly heard. Turning around, they saw that another spotlight had appeared, and soon they found themselves in the company of another, sixth person.

“Glad to see you, Clara.”

She was an attractive black woman in her early thirties with an athletic, fit figure, wearing a sport blouson with a slim dark-blue turtleneck under it and black cargo trousers that aligned well with her long and sturdy legs. Her face had prominent, yet delicate features, her eyes calm and yet determined, touching with their deep, inquiring tenderness. Her long intricate braids that were bundled together fell down over her shoulder.

“Long time no see, old man,” the black woman then turned to the Russian.

“Guess you’ve already heard the news?” Collins said to her.

“I heard about it way before they broadcasted it. Anyhow, from what I see I reckon you’ve got yourselves into some deep trouble. C’mon, after me,” she added, “Darren will join us in a minute.”

At that moment everything around them was unexpectedly revealed when all manifold flat emitters on the ceiling were turned on and shone in a simultaneous regular, not too bright tone, a multitude of brilliant star-buds that changed their opacity in concordance with the alterable mirror-like effect they produced in synchronicity with the walls and floor as if they were alive; all of this inclined to a pleasant visual atmosphere as though the place had a natural daylight of its own. There were more cases similar to the ones they saw earlier at the other end as well, with some towered toolboxes near and on them, and there was also what appeared to be some kind of a rectangular reservoir with glowing indicating strokes by the right wall that had hoses coming out of it passing through the same wall. All four walls were resurfaced with what might seem layers of special soundproof material, which under those lights unancedly changed their beige contrast depending on the activity throughout.

They continued to walk on, and just before they were about to sit down, they heard the sound of working automatic hinges that came right out of the cabin room with the semi-transparent door: before long a tall black man of a well-fit build, in his late thirties, with short hair and exceedingly large eyes stepped out of it, looking at the people gathered at the table with pleasant surprise. He was wearing military-style trousers whose ends were tucked in rigid combat boots, a black sleeve and a tweed vest that was neatly outlining his trapeziuses; as he was walking up towards them, Gregory happened to notice that there was something around his neck he was fixing and hastily putting under his sleeve, something resembling a corded garment that had a small article attached to it but which he couldn't clearly see.

“Speaking of the devil,” the black man said, turning his head towards Collins. Save his noticeable African accent, he nevertheless spoke out the words articulately and with great care. “And who are they?” he asked as he looked at the two young strangers.

After Amanda and Gregory presented themselves to him, they all sat down save Cassidy, who remained standing next to them and from time to time scanning the stacks of cases.

“Well,” began the black man, “I don't know what to say, man, fuck.” He laughed. “Please, do tell, I'm eager to hear what you've been up to all these years.”

Judging by their friendly and familiarized conduct, it had become clear to Amanda and Gregory that everyone here had been knowing each other for some time, and that there was perhaps some established connection between them, the result of a long-time cooperation in some undisclosed to them circumstances.

Collins, aware that time was pressing them on, began retelling everything to Clara and Darren from the very beginning, trying to be as concise as possible, starting from the “Harthongate” case he'd been working on and Shunningan's apprehension at the “Rickman” Hotel a week ago, up to their recent out-of-the-blue meeting with one of the McCarter brothers. Throughout the entire time the couple listened to the recollection with sharpened curiosity and sometimes in complete amazement, hearing every important aspect

of it that was worth mentioning, not interrupting him even once. And having reached the part with Billy McCarter, they were all the more stupefied, and once they realized what it was all about, they completely gave up on any attempts to rationalize the incredible story.

“So now you understand how grave the situation is, and why we need all the help we could get,” Collins said, concluding.

Clara and Darren didn’t utter anything for a moment, still trying to look upon the bizarre picture in its entirety. Then, after a while, the black man turned to him:

“Well, shit, man...”—and, turning towards Clara, smiling—“we’re definitely sold. But one thing I have to ask you: do you really trust Billy McCarter on this? After all, we’re talking about someone who deserves nothing more but slow and painful death.”

“Of everyone here present,” Collins began, “I’m the one who craves the most to see those bastards buried. I’ve been after them for almost ten years—more than any other Agent has ever spent on a target, and no matter how much I hate to admit it, the situation seems hopelessly dire. The threat is real, and the mere fact that Billy McCarter needs someone to do his dirty job—someone on the other side at that—shows how much things have spun out of control.”

“And yet,” the black man said, “the coward won’t lift his finger and’ll only play it safe.”

“That’s the way people of his breed survive, it’s in their nature.”

“Well, then,” the black man started who, together with his female mate, bore the likeness of soldiers having straightaway come out of harsh and challenging conditions, as Amanda and Gregory judged by their mannerisms and composure, “what are we waiting for, then?”

Suddenly, Collins’ comms-ring signalled an incoming private-channel call.

“Well,” Miles started, “I say I’m fucking impressed with the content. First of all, the stuff—”

“Not now,” Collins interrupted the enthusiastic young man, who’d just begun acquainting them of the data materials he’d received. “I wanted you to know that we’ll be heading for that night club Billy McCarter told us about, where we’ll confront Beckard there. I want you to be there at 2200 sharp and do a full expo-scanning of the building. We’ll join you there.”

“I’ll be there then.”

The connection was disbanded.

“We’ve less than 40 minutes to prepare and get there,” Collins said to everyone, standing from his place. “We’ll have to load ourselves heavily for this.” And he turned towards Clara and Darren: “I know you’ve got the means.”

“Hell, yeah,” the black woman said, “anything you wish.”

And going up to the stack of hefty green cases in the corner and stooping over the lowest one, she entered a numerical code on a small invisible LED keypad that had sensorily turned on the moment she’d reached for it, after which a drawer came out of it, and in it some kind of an automatic weapon—a rifle—in a nearly pristine condition.

“Remember that?” she turned to Collins, handing the heavy weapon over to him. Collins, curious and impressed, was holding it in such a manner as though he were reading every minor detail that was incised onto it.

“How could one forget such a state of the art?”

Upon entering a different code, this time onto the upper case, she took out another weapon similar to the previous one, an even heavier and bigger rifle entirely made of a rare austenitic type of stainless steel alloy. She continued to go through other identical, but different in size cases one after another, and after handing them some more military-grade weapons and firearms, as well as presenting to them some explosives like ultrasensitive catcher-mines, as well as hallucinogenic grenades and a set of nanofiber decapitating cords, she turned her head around facing them, and with an elated—almost maniacal—face said:

“I know you’ll want to see this.”

And going over to a solitary case that was put apart from the rest of the stack, she tapped onto it, a drawer then noiselessly sliding out of it. What Amanda and Gregory saw thoroughly impressed them, as it was something they could hardly compare to anything they've seen before due to its staggeringly impossible shape and form: it seemed to be assembled out of many and different, totally incongruous parts—it had a long and wide barrel that didn't taper out, as well as what appeared to be a storage compartment that had some intricate mechanics outside it. Of all things, however, the most unique and eye-catching part was probably the trapezoid box similar to a projector, behind whose protective glass something unrecognizably small and delicate was sticking out.

“Nowadays it's become practically impossible to get your hands on something like this, let alone own it,” Clara said, seeing the growing interest in their eyes.

“Is this really what I think it is?” Collins turned to her. The plaited woman nodded.

“Is its hardware properly set up?”

“Yep.”

Collins looked at her pleasantly surprised.

“What does it do?” Gregory asked, pointing down at the drawer.

“It's a neural-latent discharging paralyzer. Hardcore shit right here.” She grinned.

Chapter II

“Extravaganza Erotica”

It was a little after ten.

Despite the rapturously lively streetwalking in the cold night, mingled together with a numerosity of nearby popular entertaining venues and other such places in the unchaste heart-centre of Orton City, there was one nightclub widely and recognizably famous for its grandeur mixture of experimental magnetizing music, hypnotizing strobe effects and, most of all, seducing attractiveness that engendered unrestrained lascivious perversion—that attracted only the most extreme types, being the reserved dominion of temptation for the highlife stratum where one could fully satisfy their lustful ecstatic desires.

“Extravaganza Erotica” was also a place where rare and niche drugs were freely procured, shared, and consumed, offering only the strongest aphrodisiacs, psychedelics, and additive stimulants to those who wished to experience something beyond their psychic comprehension, and which were often combined with open orgiastic participations that even further upped the most daring and unscrupulous cravings. At one point, everything there sooner or later reached and transcended into one big symbiotic state of cheap nirvana, an elevated state of a mutually intimate exchange of debauchery pleasures and sensual vices.

A couple of blocks away from the infamous nightclub, standing on the rooftop of a medium-sized apartment building with a patient observance of it, Collins was gazing at the entirety of all that expansive city background of multifarious bright colours in the distance whence also came the rhythm of a pulsing hard-bass music that reverberated dully in the night.

“Where’re we at?”

Next to him, crouched by the edge of the rooftop and with unrelenting eyes fixed on his portable workstation stood Miles, evidently working on something with a fixed attitude and zeal.

“87 percent. Almost done.”

Flyby cars were constantly hovering over the area, and down in the streets the surrounding murmur of voices was unceasingly spreading throughout every part of the cold sprawled vicinity. Between the tall and lofty business skyscrapers with their white, yellow and dark fissures crawled the lower and more insignificant buildings, thickly spread in the open spaces at their foundations and, alongside them, shinningly reflecting the holographic advertising projections that swarmed near them with enchanting luminosity, filling in the spatial emptiness over all heights, creating and forming an extraordinary malleable light spectacle of many nuanced undertones and contrasts.

“95 percent.”

Gorarov, Amanda and Gregory were standing behind them, attentively and expectantly participating in the night vigil. The high-spirited Russian had in the meantime lit a cigarette, occasionally taking a brief stroll by the corners of the rooftop, evenly puffing out the warm, colour-absorbing smoke. Nearby them the cyborg was doing her obligatory surveillance as usual, exploring and calculating with maximum precision the area’s different structural settings and markings that her positronic penetrative modular lenses presented to her.

“100 percent,” Miles reported in, getting up. “We’re good to go.”

The four-dimensional mapping of the nightclub was completed, and everyone except the cyborg—who didn’t move from her place, continuing with the scanning of the territory—now gathered around Miles by the edge of the rooftop, gazing at the glowing computer screen which had just shown the finished digital architectural schematics.

“A standard venue,” the lean man in slicker began conveying the presented image on the screen while everyone looked at it, “not many hidden rooms and side entrances. Except here—do you see this area with the small backrooms enjoined by a corridor, and the paths to which these curving stairwells lead?” he pointed and described with a finger an area at the back of the nightclub, the clear

white lines which constituted it revealing out of themselves four close to each other rectangular sections. “Those could very well be potential places for Beckard’s rendezvous.”

They all saw the clearly outlined four rooms converted into a simple digital grid against a black background—which compared to the rest of the modelled elements were of a significantly smaller size—and noticed that they didn’t lead to anything external but were rather entirely enclosed by a single exit door.

“There are only two options to get to those rooms: either by the two side stairwells—most probably guarded—or through those ceiling passages on the upper maintenance level.”

“But why would Beckard choose such vulnerable places?” Clara joined in. “They’re too overt.” Then she leaned over Miles and pointed on the monitor: “What’s this?” she asked, her finger indicating at something and involuntarily making the whole grid sketch move and enlarge as she barely touched the display. Miles manually selected the area and typed in an image refix command, after which some of the multilayered walls and blocks began to rearrange, decolour and refold. Presently, what appeared to be an underground room in the east part of the nightclub was demarked and highlighted—the program showed it to be divided in two parts.

“That might be just it,” Miles said at long, adding some other enhancements to the digital blueprint that now revealed the entrance to the narrow underfloor way which led to the two-sectioned room.

“That place looks more suitable for the purpose,” Collins agreed.

“What are those ‘miths’ you talked about back there?” Amanda asked Collins.

Miles, overhearing the question, eagerly turned towards her as if he’d been waiting for that moment all day long.

During the exporting of the nightclub’s uncompressed scan results to Miles’ portable workstation, Amanda didn’t have the slightest idea what the two small blinking specks she’d seen up in the sky were, hovering over their heads at several hundred metres’

altitude and so unlike anything up there that moved around and kindled, the pair of pin tops being so indiscernible at that distance that she could've hardly noticed them amid the aerial traffic's sprinkling lights. And now, as her ears grew more sensitive to the crunching sound and began to catch up to the steadily approaching noise of the metallic steam-rev, no sooner had she realized that the two things had already landed so softly, so imperceptibly behind them, than she turned around in alarm caused by this so strange an occurrence.

Before her eyes stood two cylindrical objects, each having a sharp, conically shaped protruding spike coming out of both sides, and with it their total length came to be about one metre, with a diameter of no more than 40-50 centimetres roughly. As Amanda was gazing in awe at them, she recalled how she thought she'd seen for a fraction of a second a similarly shaped silhouette back at Miles' apartment earlier that day, when it had immediately crawled back in the darkness as though having sensed her awareness of itself. And now, in the midst of those unusual circumstances she had the possibility to look at them more closely and continuously, examining them as best as she could: she reckoned that their bodies—or at least their surfaces—were made of some kind of a solid black alloy, from which she could make out some faintly gleaming lights at their ends along the circumference, as well as a few lineal protrusions and crooks; their two-side conical spikes seemed to be divided by a thin incision that made them look like two enclosed mechanical maws which once fixed onto something, they'd hardly let go of. To her they appeared both disturbing and irresistibly remarkable.

“Don't worry about them,” Miles presently said, seeing her becoming somehow precautious and intimidated by the myths, “they're semi-navigable and AI-processed and they could also be operated directly, that is, via pre-applied logarithmic block-compositions...” here he stopped, realizing his discombobulating technical rant; hastening to reiterate in simpler terms, he continued: “What I'm trying to say is that they're semi-autonomous and could function only under my direct control—that is, only through this computer.”

Amanda and Gregory walked up to the latent operable machines and upon touching them, they were surprised to find that their

surface was lukewarm and not hot at all. The more they stared at them, the more impressed they became by their elegant self-efficiency.

“It’s time,” Collins said, rechecking his holster.

The next moment they were already mingling with the civilians down in the lighted and coloured streets, walking towards the nightclub, Clara and Goranov dragging a little behind them. Cassidy, unnoticeably and masterfully moving from rooftop to rooftop, was the first to reach the nightclub, waiting for the affirmative signal to enter through the emergency hatch. Miles remained on the same position with his myths in full readiness, expecting the moment when he would shut down the security cameras, while Collins, Darren, Amanda, and Gregory were getting closer to the entrance.

Beckard had arrived at the meeting place at exactly 22:28. As always on such occasions, he was surrounded by nearly a dozen armed men—his most reliable personal bodyguards—and was calmly and patiently waiting for the other interested party’s appearance. Slowly and noiselessly, and wholly sunk into serenity and undisturbedness, he gazed at the door before him, through which the person he expected would enter.

Half of the room was occupied by his entourage who, just like him, had their eyes steadily fixed on the door. Save his sips, a complete silence and a certain stillness of assurance reigned. Presently, the door was opened, and someone came in.

With Collins and the rest approaching the nightclub, the heavy kicking of the electronic bass music was getting louder and crisper. They passed by many people and many people passed by them, as they assiduously held and concealed their weapons beneath their clothes.

Most of the people who passed by them had a veritably eccentric appearance—they were cosmopolitan types who were the primary force that moved and stirred the downtown life, inhabiting its more appeasing and unconventional places and dwellings and

bringing in more libertinage that peaked throughout most of the night. Extraordinary and rare piercings, glowing contact lenses and dissolving pheromone-imbued tattoos of peculiar shapes and forms, as well as gaudy haircut styles were their main attributes by which they fully embraced that nameless underground subculture that had neither rules, nor anything particular to be adhered to.

“We’re just outside the place,” Collins had reported on the comms, already standing near the entrance.

The large, brightly shining in dense purple “Extravaganza Erotica” and right beneath it—in vigorous ruddy red and cursive—“Night Club” neon signs lured the visual senses irresistibly with their accentuated fullness and vividness amid the inconstant frigid cityscape, the wriggling and coiling eely holographic striae animating the impressive big letters and contributing—together with other lightning effects in similar linear motifs—to the entire expressive aesthetic of the venue, its walls animated by gradations of indistinct palette shades.

Amanda, suddenly and by chance looking up at the bespattered with colourful erratic smudges night sky, caught a glimpse of the same two familiar blinking dots that were once again describing parabolical paths, and immediately recognized Miles’ myths.

“The cameras are temporarily zapped,” Miles’ voice was no sooner heard on the shared radio frequency.

Upon which they all started for the nightclub’s entrance, escaping from behind a corner and sneakily and without much hesitation striking the four bouncers as they slowly walked up to them.

Scarcely had one of the bouncers detected the small gun pointed at him when he was neutered by a miniscule dart that was immediately dissolved in his body; the other three men were just as quickly put down.

“You’ve got 15 seconds left before the cameras restart,” Miles’ voice reported again, having them on a close aerial surveillance and at the same time checking the vicinity for any change of movement.

As soon as they got a second confirmation by Goranov and Clara, the four entered the nightclub; stepping in, they were quickly overwhelmed by the loud and bone-shattering music which nearly bled out their ears.

Her presence was almost immediately felt, overturning the room's subdued atmosphere, her influence which reflected her mature charm and lust manifesting upon them. Upon her entering, the strong fragrant scent of her perfume that carried on with itself the full embodiment of vulnerable innocence hit their sensual appetite, but despite her evident frailty and helplessness, Beckard very well knew that her appearance was contrary to what she really represented—he was aware of her nature which was just as ruthless and insatiable as his.

Being the first to show up in the room, the excessively attractive creature with long and elegant linen dress, cream-coloured velvet gloves and delicate, almost ephemeral scarf that was so fittingly wrapped around her thin neck, walked up to Beckard with slow and well-composed steps as he was just getting up. She was holding something in her hand—a long metal briefcase partially covered in translucent black on both sides. He was contemplating her beautiful and round blue eyes, his attention diverted for a moment from what he'd come for. He invited her to sit down.

Just like him, she was also accompanied, the whole room feeling more full than necessary.

When Beckard was about to start the conversation, one of his attendees preemptively interrupted him over his shoulder, whispering something in his ear. Beckard didn't say anything, but rather had his eyes fixed onto something outside the periphery of where the woman in linen dress stood; everybody remained in a temporary impasse, awaiting the first words to be spoken out.

Suddenly, without turning around, Beckard made a sign with his hand—a seemingly innocuous gesture—which was performed so fast that it was scarcely noticed by most of the group of people in front of him. Something then that had hitherto seemed to be totally unaccounted for emerged out of a dark corner in the back

of the room, a dim luminary redness passing along with it: it was a female specimen, yet not entirely human, whose body was a versatile bioarmour whose scales coiled and recoiled at every movement, the eyes two pink-red embers emanating pure fierceness. Leaving a profound impression on the woman across Beckard, it was hard to tell the exact moment the cyborg had left the room, the sound of the shutting door subduing while the strong sensation of her presence still lingering among them.

At first the tremorous gritty electronic music was severely disruptive to their concentration, which was even further worsened by the excess of visual rapidity and seizure-inducing dynamics of the elaborate and garish lightshow: the whole space was under a constant bombardment by innumerable beams of light of many and different colours that affixed themselves into a multi-layered abstract grid that stood afloat for only a bit of a second, then reappearing again in sporadic combined fractals of wobbling intensity; panels of furbished backlit minimalistic art depicting promiscuous faceless female figures were extending over the two sidewalls of the nightclub, and with each rhythmic thud they were disintegrated and turned into big equalizer holo-waves that shot outwards toward the raving public.

The nightclub had incorporated elements of both exhibitionistic and private brothel lounges, as well as strip teases and other sensual offerings. Everything that happened in that one crammed to the brink enormous space proceeded to a profuse degree of unstoppable hectic dissipation: the commotion, the lights, the music, the open sexual acts and unscrupulousness—everything swooned one's senses the moment they were exposed to it. The trancelike enraptured crowds were as if isolated from everything happening outside of those walls, everyone being submerged in their own resonating with the pounding music world, and at the same time letting themselves being carried away along with everyone else in one mutual euphoric unleashing that oscillated between the energetic and the sedated.

“Any activity in the four backrooms?” Collins had shouted into his comms-ring as he, Amanda, Gregory, and Darren dragged on further through the drugged-up and insensitive crowd.

“Yep, especially in the second one,” Miles reported. “Can’t say what’s going on beneath your feet, though, too much accumulated activity.”

“Cassidy, you got the same problem?”

“Can’t make out anything that’s below ground level either.”

Presently, the four split, Collins and Darren heading towards the west stairwell as planned, Amanda and Gregory remaining alone; before long Gregory, having taken a good look around himself and having oriented in the haphazard surrounding, started for the east end of the nightclub, while Amanda backed off a little in search of a more convenient spot on the elevated floor near the entrance.

Wading through the headbanging and phlegmatic masses and pressured against the outskirts, Darren and Collins were quickly approaching the short open entrance that led to the narrow stairwell. Before long the two finally reached the open stairwell whose red curtains were gathered at the sides—they were finally sheltered from the disorienting lighting effects’ acute strobes.

“It’s unguarded,” Darren said to Collins—they were surprised to find no bodyguards posted at the draped entrance.

At that moment the music was undergoing yet another transition, becoming heavier with speeding up and arpeggiating scratching electronic wobbles. On their way up to the stairwell several lascivious girls had already tried to seduce them, their eyes and behaviour an accurate indicator of the recently consumed drugs that were about to kick in soon. Everywhere was reeking of commingled sweat, alcohol, and sex.

A certain suspiciousness began to creep in, but in spite of that they kept moving. It was a long red-satin hallway with burgundy walls and four doors on one side, just as Miles’ scan sketch had accurately shown. Already inside, the violent bass music was becoming muffled.

“Need an update.”

“Unchanged. You can proceed.”

Having advanced a little further, they assumed a position on both sides of the door, each holding a shock-hallucinogenic silvery grenade in preparation while remaining steady.

“Ready?”

“Always been.”

But scarcely had Collins reached for the handle when a ruckus began to seep out of the room. Looking at each other, they were at a loss. Before long an entire throng of young men and women barged out, giggling and fooling around in high spirits, some of them half-naked and holding bottles of liquor they spilt as they ran down the hallway, none of them seeming to heed the two armed men standing by the door outside.

They checked out the room—it was empty.

Amanda, holding her position at the back ends of the nightclub, was trying to carefully observe every face she came across as much as possible, changing position time and again and trying to blend in with the crowd. It reeked of cigarettes, and her movements were more or less constricted by the pressing bodies. Before long she caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a commotion in the distance, and trying to make her way through with difficulty so she could obtain a better view, she soon saw that Gregory had entered into an altercation with an unknown burly and hard-looking man who'd grabbed him by the shoulder with one hand, and with the other pointing down at his bowels what appeared to be a gun; however, no one around them seemed to have noticed this.

Her heart beating rapidly, she suddenly lost sight of the two, while at the same time throngs of swinging people were beginning to block her way until she lost sight of the place where Gregory had stood, losing both perceptibility and perspective. After a couple of strenuous attempts, she finally managed to break out and gain an open passage if only for a couple of seconds, but this time neither Gregory nor the man were anywhere to be seen.

After some minor hindrances Gregory finally found the entrance to the underground room between the orgiastic lounges and the tables by the east side, a sign indicating the V.I.P. access in weak blue neon letters. Seeing that there were no bouncers by it, he headed towards it.

It was not until he'd reached it when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder from behind, grabbing him and not letting him go; turning around, he found himself in the presence of a man of lofty stature who was watching him indifferently. He also noticed the blaster he'd just pulled out, holding it pointed down against him.

The man with deep, fat forehead furrows and steely jaws made him turn around, and beginning to push him forward while firmly holding the gun against his waist, made him walk in another direction, moving away from the padded door. Reaching a sidedoor with a light-green hollow tint coming from under it, they slowly walked up to it; it was personnel-only. He had no other option but to comply, when he suddenly thought he'd heard a strong crash coming from different directions. In a moment everything was turned into a flare of upheaval.

Cassidy was reconnoitering all possible sectors and vectors within the underroof passages that extended over the entirety of the nightclub, moving among electrical and cooling grids in the east central maintenance base.

Starting off towards the north part, she halted, suddenly noticing an unexpected figure at the other end that was currently advancing in her direction. Zooming in and focusing her augmented optical irises on the unknown subject, she could descry to the very last detail every curve of her varnished red bioarmour, her expansive and puncturing eyes that were a-flame with crimson glow and which were the first thing that peeked out of the concealing darkness, as well as the gleaming demarcation of her jawbone that outlined her hybrid skull.

Her blade was bleeding with an unadulterated gleam; when there were less than twenty metres left between them, the red-armoured cyborg reached for her waist, unpinning something akin to a small, sharply jagged disc: the impressive skill and speed with which she hurled it with a spun parabolic trajectory caught Cassidy off guard, but she successfully parried it by pulling out her katana and cutting it in two, hot sparks being produced from the friction.

But something wasn't quite right.

The moment she'd sliced the tossed jagged disc, its two halves, instead of falling down, continued to whirl around and bounce off the walls erratically and uncontrollably, returning numerous times back at her like boomerangs and unceasingly ricocheting all around and over her, scarring her black matte covering and damaging it every time the two pieces hit her back. No sooner had she realized the way those things worked than the cyborg jumped at her with her sword taken out which—it being a mere solid bronze handle at first—unfolded at once, becoming a lengthy, slim blade with blazing miniature fringes, brighter at the edges and blurring the air as it swung. Deflecting the first strike, she counteracted the attack by swinging her katana with full force. A lengthy series of offensive blows followed that met her sword instead, while at the same time the two bouncing discs with self-adjusted circular form continued to assail her on an unyielding inertia.

She had to carefully measure when and where to dodge the unceasing spinning discs, simultaneously examining her opponent's fighting patterns in motion, her brain actively remodelling the multiple variables that were sporadically received under the form of predictable constituents.

The blades' incessant friction appeared ethereal: they were spouting abundant trimming flashes of sparkle and fizzle, two purified metals testing their durability to their utmost limit through swift and heavy strokes while the bouncing discs continued to persistently assail and cut at her. She tried not to lose ground while on the defensive, but it became harder for her not to be pressed backwards until she had nowhere to back off to.

At some point she lost balance, but managed to get up, whereupon the crimson-eyed cyborg—relentless and indefatigable in her assaults—did something which Cassidy had hardly anticipated, when with no more than two quick swings which went almost unnoticed she split each of the bouncing discs into smaller halves, becoming four in total as well as rapider.

Upon parrying another additional series of blows, she skilfully evaded and passed behind the red-haired cyborg and, grabbing and taking a firm hold of her slender trunk, with all her force she pushed against the wall and forced her way through the opposite one, both finding themselves falling down.

The man behind him had suddenly disappeared; a whirl of consternation had enveloped the venue, throwing everybody into a disorderly frenzy caused by a series of tumultuous breaking noises and fired shots that exceeded the bearable threshold. Gregory strongly felt that rapid change and was no less confounded by the surrounding chaos that had ensued.

In the chaotic commotion some were caught in the crossfire, while many others were too dazed from the drugs to decide what to do. Regaining himself out of the situation, Gregory began to look out for the rest.

Meeting with nothing but havoc on his way, he happened to see the first fallen civilians who had been rushing to find a safer place. Deadly beams vanished and then reappeared out of the uninterrupted holographic lighting show with a bright flicker and scorching smoke, and it was then when he came across Amanda who'd been engaging in the shootout, or so he thought. The comms-rings' signal had for some reason been disrupted, and he could neither receive nor send anything to anyone. He started off towards her.

Halfway along the way he accidentally caught sight of Collins and Darren as well, no farther than Amanda than he was from her, also shooting at someone. The venue was rapidly being cleared out, and he gained a better view at what was really going on, blood and bodies being scattered at his feet. Turning around, he accidentally recognized Cassidy's dim outlined shadow, grappling with

another cyborg as green and red shimmer coalesced into hazy smudges.

He heard Amanda shouting at him, not realizing he'd been standing in the middle of the crossfire, the incessant noise and strobe light obfuscating his senses.

But as soon as he hastened to run up to her, someone had suddenly barred his way; he was, however, quickly dragged away and among the din and frantic lights, seeing how one of Miles' miths had taken a strong grip of his leg, mauling it and dragging the body along until it disappeared somewhere in the darker corners away from the altercation.

He heard and saw Amanda shouting and beckoning to him again. And scarcely had he taken refuge next to her behind one of the two-level strip daises, at the same time taking out his gun, than he once again witnessed the same thing happening to several others on the opposite front side: they'd all suddenly fell, collapsing on the floor, and with hapless screams were spun and dragged out of their way.

“What the fuck just happened?”

“Need to get the fuck out of here,” Amanda said, pointing westward towards the entrance that led to the backrooms.

Gregory, glancing in that direction, saw two men standing beside it; signalling to Gregory, the two darted and rushed onwards.

“Get inside!” Collins said after the two had successfully crossed over to their end. “Mince them!” he then shouted into his comms-ring.

To Amanda and Gregory everything seemed as if fast-forwarded, the events accelerating too quickly for them to comprehend and experience what they were going through. All of a sudden a loud explosion erupted, the walls bending for a moment and the ground trembling—more smoke began to gradually enter into the entrance room, as well as a fetid smell of burned coal and mortar. Gregory, peeking in through the dimness in which the broken hololights simultaneously faded away and then redounded with sharpened glitter, caught sight of two murky figures at the other end, and right next to

them nearly the entire south wall of the building destroyed and parts of it flickering in residual flames, cold draught entering inside the nightclub. The loud music had stopped; he then saw Clara and Goranov emerging out of it, behind them the working engines of Nastasya audible.

Cassidy was nowhere to be seen. Instead, more men came crawling out of the back of the nightclub, reappearing from side entries on the main levels and armed with guns and rifles; Miles' myths were also gone.

"What's next?" Amanda asked.

"We wait," Darren said.

Gregory saw Goranov carrying his automatic rifle, but he couldn't make out what was in Clara's hands which she held with an unusual effort: it most certainly wasn't a firearm, and it was pointed down at the men who appeared to be unawares of their presence.

When the smoke had mostly cleared away, Amanda saw Clara standing on the edge of the upper circular floor, propping the lengthy device on the encircling sill and making some adjustments to it.

It had happened rapidly enough that she couldn't estimate the approximate moment of the bright spark's inception: a robust static firebolt of highly charged electrical current was discharged out of the wide end of the device, growing into a translucent unstable dilution that covered the entire space; the produced impulse made her back off, and when she peeked out again she saw that every single armed man outside had been thrown into a suppressed, twitching state, hardly moving, with crazed eyes wide open and muttering some unintelligible grunts from the bottom of their throats.

"*Matryoshki!*" Goranov suddenly shouted from above, his cigarette's glowing tip visible in the semi-darkness.

Immediate fire was opened at the mummified targets.

Both were trying all possible ways and techniques to strike the decisive blow, constantly changing position and seeking the

most optimal spot that would allow them immediate dominance. The tension was growing, and exhaustion was beginning to crawl up Cassidy's limbs—never before had she been involved in such a numbingly exerting combat, wondering whether her opponent felt the same way: the more the final outcome was protracted, the more the exhaustion turned into weakness, and the weakness—into pain.

Clashing and whetting their primary weapons into one another and throwing themselves heads over heels and stumbling and falling and getting up again, they left everything behind them in a disorderly and unrecognizable condition: the slightest mere movement of theirs damaged the closest thing that stood nearby, overthrowing expensive and luxuriant furniture and embellishments and tearing down and breaking whatever stood in their way.

At one moment both of their blades were flung away in different directions, so intense was the clash that they lost grip of them. At one point Cassidy stumbled and fell back, and at another she found herself being pressed against a table while trying to reach out for one of her blasters. As her breath was being taken away by the weighing force of her opponent's piercing elbow, she managed to take out her gun and point it directly at her. But just before she could pull the trigger, her adversary's reflexes proved to be faster and her gun was forcefully tossed away, at the same time her other hand being blocked by the female cyborg's knee.

She was suffocating. With her other hand she attempted to free herself, trying to push away her, but it, too, was held fast to the table.

Worming herself out, she tried to escape this death trap, but so far everything was futile. She then focused on her legs, finding out how to use them in such a way as to force herself out by either lifting her high enough or hitting her in some vital spot. Her vision was becoming hazy, and she was losing consciousness. She tried to invoke all of her strength, being aware that she probably had only one opportunity to get her way out of this.

Raising her pressed torso as much as she could and at the same time spasmodically flinging her legs which were the only part of her body that had any significant freedom of movement, she

gained enough leverage at her hips to start kicking her feet right into the nape and head of the other cyborg, and after only a couple of seconds the endeavour finally gave results, as it only took one brief moment to disbalance the rigidity of her composure and allow herself to make that one jolt which in turn freed her and gave her the opportunity to flip over and apply the same pressure she was locked by seconds ago. Immediately drawing out her second gun, she pointed it at her, but yet again was hindered from pulling the trigger. Before long she dropped the weapon and, pushing down and locking both her wrists to the table, began to furiously knock her head into hers, continuously and repeatedly, feeling no pain whatsoever save a blunt shattering in her forehead. On the verge of collapsing, she stopped, and seeing how the red-eyed cyborg was temporarily stunned and her reactions impeded, she grabbed her lower jaw with one hand and her upper one with the other. Desperately squeezing her wrists that were holding her tight, the red-haired cyborg's defensive attempts were insufficient to gain a prompt advantage—Cassidy knew this, so she began to pull the jaws in opposite directions. Before long the curving blue-glowing line that separated them started to diminish in brightness, flickering, until—limbs aggressively palpitating, body frantically thrusting—the lower jaw was straightaway torn out, fringes of skin hanging loose and blue goo spurting out of artificial veins and capillaries.

Her muscles restrainedly throbbing and her neck pulsating, Cassidy, holding in her hand the lower biomechanical spattered jaw, began to repeatedly slam it into her opponent's maimed face, slashing bone and tissue with the prosthetic piece until a gape of considerable size was formed, obliterating skull and cartilages alike. Contorting, the body she stood on no longer responded to the hits, the incandescent crimson flame in the eyes fading away.

They all started off towards the underground floor's entrance where Gregory had been formerly surveying. They tried to get in touch with Cassidy, but there was no response from her.

“She's alive, don't worry,” Miles had assured them. “I'll send in the miths while you're down.”

Entering through the thin but extremely durable wrapping door and going down the spiralling stairwell's irregular rhombic steps, they heard a dim murmur coming from below.

Descending, at last they found themselves in a lit passage-way; it was distinctly quiet there.

Coming closer to the door Collins took out of his pocket two silvery shock-hallucinogenic grenades. Caught unawares, the door-knob was spun, their eyes meeting with those of the man standing at the threshold. For a moment Collins was mulling over the peculiarity of his appearance, but then the posteriorly recalled image was almost instantaneously fixed in his mind, and he realized that this could be no other but the visitor who Tsin Dzi had described to him that day when he was in Junkhood.

Strageris Mapilton.

It was exactly as the old Chinaman had described him: bald scalp, with two poking-out plaits from behind, scorched markings on his neck and around his ears; his plaits possessed an unnatural bluish lustre and appeared hard and stiff, with concentrated white glitter around their roots. As he looked closely into what appeared to be his burning scars, he could see a mesh of thin red and blue wire compressed into them. The eyebrows too were as though not organic, his entire face lacking wrinkles and furrows as if it were shaped out of wax.

He was unarmed, his hands defeatedly raised.

Collins tried to peek over Strageris Mapilton's shoulders and see who else was in the room. He couldn't see anyone from there, and the pressure in his bones made him want to shoot the man with bluish plates, sensing a possible trap or an ambush. Everyone had their guns fixed on the figure that stood in their way.

"He wishes to see you," said the unconventionally looking man. "He was expecting you, or at least anticipated your intervention. He's inside."

"I think you severely underestimate our sound judgement," Collins said as he made minor contortions of strained patience that passed on along his blaster. "We know for a fact that he isn't alone

in that room.” He turned his blaster’s burst-fire knob halfway; the weapon emitted a charging fuzz. “Cut out the bullshit, or there’ll be nothing left of your snobbish mug.”

“No, Mr. Collins,” they suddenly heard someone’s voice coming from inside the room, “I do not underestimate you at all. Oh, no, heaven forbid—on the contrary, once again you asserted your ambition and undaunting spirit—qualities that are seldom met nowadays in a world that is so undeserving of them.”

Strageris Mapilton retreated several steps with his hands still above his head, just so he could enter into the room again where presently someone appeared from behind him, that someone turning out to be Beckard himself. Collins thought he could still see that same complacent smile from the last time they faced each other, when he was shackled and confined within the walls of the research institute without knowing what was coming for him.

Their weapons were immediately pointed towards where the man in dark-violet elegant suit and his subordinate stood. Whereupon, in a toned-down and engrossing voice, the former said:

“Please, I implore you to put your weapons down, as they are useless and no longer needed.”

Neither Clara nor Collins or anyone else for that matter took him seriously—they thought it was an insultingly blatant bait.

“I think we’re not quite on the same page here,” Collins said, having the blue-eyed man on his aim. “Tell your men to drop their weapons and to show themselves, or else I’m putting you down together with your buddy boy. It can end very quickly for you.”

Beckard’s prevaricating smile widened, which made them even more irritated and suspensive. But then, at that very same moment, it was most unexpectedly effaced, a grave face staring at them in the most morbid way imaginable.

“Put your weapons down,” he repeated Collins’ words, and at the same time beginning to unbutton his jacket.

Collins and the rest remained undecided till the very last moment, when Beckard, taking off his jacket, revealed wearing something external over his shirt, something that wasn’t exactly a

cloth but rather some sort of an additional covering of a translucent gelatinous contexture fragmented into many embedded capsules each of which appeared metallically furbished, reflecting strong and liquidous light as if filled with impure mercury; the layer covering his body's upper half had also something crawling and branching beneath its surface that resembled an intricately conflated microsystem of thousands of thorny interlaced needle-vessels that glittered in black.

"Yes, you're probably asking yourselves what that could possibly be," he started. "Let's just think of it as a ticket for my way out." As he said that nearly a dozen costumed and armed men appeared behind him in the room, but their weapons were pointed down; just like him, they were calm, or maybe too calm, as Gregory assessed.

Meanwhile Clara, noticing and glancing into a small mirror near one of the two big cushioned armchairs inside, caught something lying on the floor in the far left unlit corner—it appeared to be the body of a woman, but she was still uncertain. She was unable to take a better, second look when her view was blocked by one of the men, remaining unsure of what she'd just seen.

"Don't try me, fucker!" Collins exclaimed hot-bloodedly, his want and intention to shoot the man so brazenly standing at his gunpoint growing by the second. They all knew he was secretly mocking them.

"Please, calm your temper, Agent," Beckard answered politely; Collins was getting closer to pulling the trigger, but he quickly realized that they needed him alive in order to obtain the necessary information about the five interconnected structures scattered across the city, and for that reason he wondered whether Beckard was deliberately stalling them, having expected a situation like the present one. "You really want to know what this is? Let me put it this way, then: I'm currently hooked with enough detonating power to destroy this entire building, rendering *me*, you and everyone nearby to nothing but a heap of dust." And lifting up his hand, he revealed to them a long needle between his forefinger and thumb, after which he stabbed his open palm with it, a circling of blood

swelling. But there was something else that had happened while he did that: the moment he punctured his hand, a red luminous light was released beneath the whole gelatinous covering, giving it a brisk flowing saturation of colour before fading away. Looking at their faces and eager to hear a response, he frowned, yet somehow ironically. “If you haven’t guessed by now, the detonator—which as you see is absent—isn’t really a detonator in the common sense. It is a pain-trigger decentralized mechanism that sets off when the transmitted spinothalamic signals evoked by pain stimuli pass a certain threshold set in advance. It could be triggered upon lethality as well, which, as I assume, is automatically excluded as an option for you.”

He wasn’t bluffing. Only now did they see the sheer mad resolution behind his unflinching eyes that convinced them to reaffirm the situation in an entirely different light.

At that moment one of his men handed over to him a long metal, silvery briefcase. Collins looked at it and thought he must’ve seen it somewhere else.

“This is what’s expected from you: we’ll go back upstairs, forgetting any hostile feelings for a while, during which time you’ll refrain from doing anything immature that could potentially endanger your progress of staying alive so far. Me and my men will leave this building, as I’m very much inclined to believe you will remain in until we’ve parted our ways. I think it’s needless to warn you that the present situation is very tricky and delicate as it is, and that the probability of getting what you want out of it is almost non-existent.”

He was right, Collins thought—the risk was too high and it just wasn’t worth it to push their luck. But there was another thing—somehow, he had learned (or guessed?) about their intentions and the reason for their presence there. *Somehow*. Were the McCarter brothers at play here? He was again assailed by his old doubts.

“Well...” Beckard began, “after you.”

Circumspect and loth to obey the absurd instructions, the six nevertheless started to back off, their weapons still pointed at Beckard, but none at them.

They were keeping a short distance apart from each other, and before long Gregory and Amanda were the first to come out of the underground entrance into the nightclub's main floor. There were the numerous dead bodies lying just the same as they had last seen them, the hololights still flickering across and through a hypnotizing dreadful silence. The night streets and the nearby buildings were visible through the main wall's gaping ruins, a windy coldness having entered inside. Approaching sirens were reverberating in the distance, and several onlookers had gathered in groups outside the nightclub wondering what had happened there.

Beckard, taking a deep breath and looking around the leftovers and wreckage in the luminous darkness, made a sign to his men to regroup; whereupon they half encircled him, lifting up and pointing their weapons at Collins and the rest.

"Alas, in the end fate does what she pleases with us," he presently said. "You can neither force your way in, nor out, and there are no roundabouts." He smiled musingly. "Me and you, Agent, seem to be inseparable. But I hope for not very long."

"Is everything alright? Should I send the miths?" Miles' voice spoke over the comms-rings again. Collins' face was filled with bitterness because there was no way for him to communicate with Miles at that very moment without jeopardizing themselves.

"Your friends, Braduer—if you permit me to call you by your first name—do they know that you're dragging them down with yourself to a sure death? Do they know how embarrassingly futile and insignificant your actions are compared to what is to come?"

The sirens were getting closer and louder, and Beckard was aware of that. A sudden clank was vaguely heard from above beyond the ceiling—it was Miles' miths.

"I know that you're not that stupid to follow *me* or any of my men and cause an even bigger mess than the one you've already done here." He turned around and started walking towards the opening above, both companies pointing their guns at each other.

Following them with their eyes, they watched them getting out, slipping past the demolished wall's remnants. When the group of men were no longer visible, they heard the ignition of several engines.

"What do you suggest?" Clara turned to Collins.

He looked at her but didn't provide an answer. Instead, he contacted Miles:

"Commence a tracing initiative on the cars that are just taking off."

A short reactive wheezing uproar was heard from above, and several seconds later they saw the sharp ends of two concurrent white stripes washing out in the dark hollow sky.

"We need to beat it," Darren said.

"Where's Cassidy, though?" Clara asked.

They heard someone coming out of one of the siderooms with a metal click; they turned in the direction of the two green-lit spheres that had just appeared, surrounded by some glistening dark liquid on the cyborg's face.

Blue and red lights were beginning to reflect themselves glaringly onto the windows of the buildings outside, the murmurous noise of the growing crowds reaching to their ears. They hastily left the nightclub.

Chapter III

Subject-85

“I hope we don’t lose them,” Amanda said, her eyes intent on the red dots that were additionally encircled by a blinkering indicator, still on the move.

It was half past eleven.

Soon three of the four dots split, only one continuing to maintain its course—according to the map, this happened northeast of the city’s centre, in the direction of the Krebernek Area.

“Miles,” Collins started on the comms, “take the two cars that are headed north; Clara, Darren—you keep a close eye on the one headed east, and make sure you don’t lose them. Report the moment they land. Cassidy, you’ll stick with us.”

Before long the three deviated flicking dots disappeared from the screen.

“Kill the lights and shorten the distance,” in the meantime Collins had turned to the piloting Russian, the cyborg following behind the aircraft. “I have a feeling he might be in this one.”

Several minutes had passed when the aeromobile in front of them began to slow down and descend little by little, taillights visibly aglow in fummy darkness, until finally anchoring on a parkpad on Allonow St. Remaining in the air for a while and maintaining a stable altitude over the vicinity, they also began to descend, the big aircraft being neatly put within the crypts of a blind spot at a corner next to a housing project and close to the already landed car that was a little bit farther across the street.

Coming out of Nastasya they saw Beckard, together with Strageris Mapilton and another one of his men, entering into an aquarium shop which was already closed. The rest of the building was an apartment block that had an ongoing bilateral advert integrated into its façade.

They were no longer in their sight.

“Cassidy?”

“There are three more people inside,” the cyborg shortly returned. “Can’t tell you much else at this point.”

“He’d taken off his bomb vest, which is good,” Collins said, perusing the dead board signs over the small shop. Presently, he took out two dappled copper sticks out of his overcoat’s inner pocket, looking at them indecisively; their ends were faintly simmering. “I hope this’ll work, and if not”—he turned towards Goranov by his side—“make sure you’re sound and ready here.”

“Aye,” the Russian returned, smiling dryly; the rest started off towards the aquarium shop.

The cold-lit streets were almost barren of any form of life. Just then, and not having made it even halfway to the other end, an uncanny thin splutter coming from at least two directions made them halt in the middle of the road. The noise was similar to a bubbling radiator, only that it grew louder with its fermenting voltaic redound, making their skin buzz with goosebumps the more they lingered there. They began to look for the sources that produced these shockwaves and soon noticed four bent over blocks, each put on a rooftop; they could also see a stark blue sheen heating up along the apparatuses, the sound becoming vehemently and unnervingly prickling as the light from afar increased.

Realizing they might be in danger, they immediately began to walk away from the road, but almost instantly felt their limbs palsy and becoming insensitive when they were forced to slowly lie down as the spasmic pains they felt rendered their motor functions involuntarily unpredictable. Goranov saw what was happening in the faraway distance, and scarcely had he gone back to Nastasya when shots were fired at him from different places, causing him to take cover under the aerial vessel after nearly getting shot by one of the hot plasma beams. He was caught in a deadly stranglehold and, much to his frustration, wasn’t sure for how long he could keep it up this way.

Over the other side he could vaguely descry them; they were in an even more helpless state, their torments seeming to sharpen every second. Collins was semi-consciously observing the aquarium

store's front end as he lay on the hard surface, out of which Beckard and his men presently came out, indifferent to their struggles; a tinge of malice was perceived on his confident face as they were presently walking up to them.

The air around the four was turning seemingly hotter and steamier, beginning to warp the light from outside the field of electric haze into a shattered blurriness as everything became harder to be descried and distinguished with clearness. To some extent Collins could still make out Beckard's approaching figure, and the closer he got the more distorted the edges of his flesh appeared to him. He also noticed that there was something changed about him, and he didn't know whether to attribute that visible transfiguration to a real phenomenon or to his overly exacerbated senses.

Putting in all of his efforts to reach for and grab his blaster, and at the same time trying to retain some control over his paralyzed arm, he finally got a firm grip of it, and as soon as he released it from the holster he aimed at Beckard. But hardly had he pulled the trigger when an electrocuting current went through his hand, making it drop the weapon, the blaster's affixed battery-mag giving an indicating light of temporal malfunction.

"I hope your current indisposition won't prevent you from fully appreciating this moment when you see your green-eyed friend for the last time," Beckard said, standing right before Collins' gaze and turning his attention towards Cassidy.

He began to walk up to the cyborg with slow, heavily constrained steps as he crossed through the fuzzy and smeared boundaries of the distorted field. Approaching her, he then grabbed her neck with one hand with an unnatural strength and easiness, and as he lifted her up the two remained like that for some time, each looking intently into the other's eyes.

"You shouldn't be even alive," he said, indifferent whether she heard him or not, her body being alternately assailed by paralytic spasms and forcible thrusts. She couldn't release herself from the strong hold despite her sensing with precise estimation each suppressing joint and muscle of the grip as they worked around her larynx with exceptional control, the flesh not entirely human but

something more. Beckard, in the meantime having pulled out a small tube with a sharp protruding tip, pointed it close to her face, retaining a stable balance in spite of the magnifying pulsating currents that required a challenging effort to keep his concentration intact.

At that moment Collins realized that blood had begun to drip down from the crevices of his eyes, from his nose, ears, and mouth, and turning his head to look at the others, saw that the same was happening to Gregory and Amanda. The wrenching pain they were undergoing continued to gnaw at their bodies and minds, and they felt their heads as if about to burst out.

Goranov, remaining under the aircraft in a disadvantageous position, decided to act and do something about it before his chances were completely diminished. Touching his holsters, he saw that he'd dropped his two blasters some three metres away from him beyond the safety boundary where plasma shots coruscated off the cold ground, shedding hot burning splinters that stung his face.

Reminding himself of the aircraft's controller, he began to hastily and haphazardly search for it, and no sooner had he found it than he accidentally clicked the hard-switch for igniting the side thrusters as he pulled out the device, upon which the hot draft immediately started to be felt out of the gained propelling force to the point of producing unbearable heat. Not thinking it over and covering his face, he reeled the small scroll wheel to the end until it stopped, and knowing that so sudden an ignition would cause a dangerous outburst that could possibly fry him alive, he nevertheless grabbed firmly for one of Nastasya's legs and slowly began to be lifted along with her. Poking at the controller, he then pressed and held another button, activating the machine gun beneath the front of the aircraft, and careful not to turn it towards him, directed it with a semi-circular movement of his hand, the weapon deafening his ears and bringing down a couple of men standing on the surrounding roofs of the buildings above.

Not releasing his thumb off the button as he was carried up engulfed by the scorching flare, at one point the shots coming from

the slowly elevating Nastasya reached the four blocks in the distance that created the electromagnetic haze around Collins and the rest, whereupon glimmering at first, turned into white cobaltic dust that quickly vanished in the broad night horizon.

It was as if something had been torn apart in the very last moment with remarkable precision, intervening in the short timeframe when Beckard was about to stab the metal tube's pointed sharp tip in her neck while she was holding and deflecting his hand, half-strangling in the air. He couldn't fathom why and how this had happened so unexpectedly, but despite the persisting question he didn't allow any doubts to enter his mind at that moment, continuing to counterpressure with redoubled effort the short needle towards her. As each one was trying to redirect the balance to the opposite side, the pulsating air-warping field began to gradually dissolve until its neutering effect was completely negated and the whole bubble vanished. Cassidy, immediately sensing the restoration of her strength and willpower and the realignment of the nanothreads around every tissue and cell, swiftly released herself from Beckard's hold. He didn't expect that either.

Near them Collins and the rest recovered more slowly, the surrounding environmental stimuli bringing back their awareness not without unnecessary side effects. In the meantime Strageris Mapilton and the other man had run off to the other side of the street the moment they'd heard and seen the intermittent distant shooting that had destroyed the four blocks, but as they were reaching Nastasya the two realized they were already too late to stop it.

"Make sure he doesn't get into that aircraft!" Strageris Mapilton instructed the other. The shooting continued above their heads as the latter tried to temporarily shelter himself.

But scarcely had he gotten near the building above which Nastasya hovered than he was lethally hit when the aircraft began inclining inconsistently and endangering everyone's lives in the surrounding and distant spaces, almost killing Strageris Mapilton as well who, as if sensing what would happen, had managed to take cover just in time.

A couple of hundred metres across the street Beckard and Cassidy were still trying to overpower each other at the foundation of an unfinished low-rise naked building, struggling on a chalky cold ground of moonlit concrete where each kept standing their ground laboriously and in a deadly grip, not bulging and at the same time threatened by the random sporadic faraway fireshots. Having almost fully recovered from the catatonic state and no longer within the distorting magnified field's range, Cassidy could finally see the reason why Beckard was able to match her strength and durability in a direct one-on-one fight: possibly an exoskeleton of a custom-made origin, it was unusually thin and slackened and its scale-like composition, she could see, was somehow inextricably adjoined to his skin and clothes without actually impeding his movements and agility in any way: in fact, overcoming him and taking him down seemed to her just as challenging a task as the crimson cyborg from the nightclub proved, partly due to her still fuzzy condition and mind and partly because of the lightness and ease with which he defended himself and then struck back. It was as though he was born merged and in perfect coexistence with that protective, cleanly shaped layer of mechanical augmentation, extremely shock-resistant to her katana swings. The exoskeleton made his body look as if not belonging to himself, being submerged under an unknown number of evenly corrugated layers of delicate, yet abnormally rigid shells of interspersed iridium nodes of living metamaterial tissue.

His forearms then began spitting out an incandescence of short intransient curls that played along their length, taking on a more aggressive approach, which in turn made the cyborg warier as she began to painstakingly avoid his swings at her. Boldly lunging forward, each swing towards her produced a crunching, sizzling sound that was being almost instantly materialized into sparks of dim blue heat; the moonlit gravel at their feet was a dank reflection of their embodiments.

As metal was crossing against metal, Cassidy had to back up two or three times, fending off plummets that failed to hit her; and whenever her blade met Beckard's forearms, an immediate heavy sting was sent up to her arms, the recovery from it getting

slower with every subsequent clash. Unfastening one of the blue dodecahedron articles from her belt, she threw the small glassy angular device at Beckard, attaching to the metal scale-plates of his light exoskeleton with a subsequent faint static glimmer. However, that didn't make any change.

“Come on, you can do better,” Beckard, feigning bemusement, looked at her with a condescending grin. He detached the small device off his chest.

She felt a sudden piercing pain a little above the waist that caught her unawares, and no sooner had her eyes focused entirely on Beckard's face than he put a forceful kick in her stomach, sending her far behind towards the darker areas. Beckard knew it was Strageris Mapilton who'd aimed and shot at her from a concealed spot, after which he went to the place where the cyborg was lying.

Presently, Strageris had just caught up to them, and with a pointed blaster at the lying cyborg opened fire for a second time. But shortly before he had the chance to pull the trigger, someone else seemed to have gotten to him first, as a few bursting plasma beams almost went through both his calves and shoulder, erasing a good chunk of them and leaving burned lukewarm flesh.

Quick semi-burst shots were fired at Beckard; in turn, Strageris countered them by shooting blindly in Collins' direction, forcing him to take a covering position behind an aeromobile just outside the building. During that time Cassidy had managed to get up and push away Beckard from herself; light was barely falling over them save the cyborg's emerald eyes and Beckard's luminous, freely moving raised forearms that deceivingly taunted her with feinting attacks.

“Tell me, who made you?” Beckard, as though truly enjoying this provocative attitude of his, asked her; the electrostatic flicker glowing over his face was in concordance with his malicious visage.

Realizing she wasn't carrying her guns, she prepared her blade for a conclusive blow.

“The people who maimed you and turned you into a freak, sapping everything that is human away from you?” he went on, the veins of his face accentuated by the condensed light wavering. Presently, and almost simultaneously, each of them bolted at the other with their primary assault means, neither of them relying on any kind of strategic planning, but rather being guided only by an impulsive spontaneity. The only place that made Beckard vulnerable was his exposed face—and Cassidy, having already come to that assertion, threw in everything she was capable of at that moment.

“It must be unimaginably hard for you to not know your parents, to not remember the homely scent of the place where you last felt real and true,” he continued, grabbing the blade of her katana with his two hands and not letting it go. “All your life bearing the burden of an outcast rejected by society, it must feel really lonely and frightening to be forever imprisoned in your own repulsive world.”

Beckard’s words had accomplished their goal—it took less than a moment for her to give way to his domination over her, allowing him to twist and bend the extremely rigid blade held on the verge of an unsteady breaking point. The familiar experience of losing control over the situation took hold of the cyborg once again for the second time tonight, a similar mindset set against hers as if disintegrating everything within her, this time in a way more tenacious and unacknowledgeable manner—an unyielding influence that eviscerated everything into multiple parts long before the actual damage was done.

Losing her ground, Cassidy was now feeling with acute sensibility the intensifying sting that went up from Beckard’s elaborately alloyed forearms whose electric incandescent curls were advancing to and touching her face, reversing from a distinct burning heat to an actual pain and sometimes harming much more than the last time. Her whole body was slowly but surely bending backwards, and her limbs were beginning to shiver under the amplified voltage.

“Subject-85, what is your descent!” he suddenly shouted at her, his face appearing full-blooded in fluctuating rage and also wickedly enjoying the pain and suffering he inflicted on her.

She couldn't hold on any longer—something inside her brought down whatever insignificant remnant of resistance kept her on her legs, and as she fell on her knees with her sword still in her hands, the durable force that was working against her took full control over the blade for a second and deflected it behind her, causing her to drop it. A several times stronger and more powerful aftershock than all the previous ones combined, she felt her shoulders being ripped apart by two invisible and incredibly sharp deadly strikes.

The word—or rather the name—Beckard had uttered had awakened in her confused and disturbed feelings of a hidden and long forgotten origin, sensing as if something inseparable from her was insidiously used against her. It was something that contained an unapproachable selflessness she'd been repressing all those years, forcing herself to detach from everything that could lead to that exact same utterance that brought with itself nothing but an ever-alienating renunciation of her being.

It had once again resurfaced despite all the invested efforts and self-discipline that had been forged over time with the sole purpose of permanently eradicating it, knowing that it still lurked in there on the verge between total annihilation and ultimate freedom, and soon that night in the desert twenty years ago came back to her in a new, more frightening form—and just as then, she was incapable to stop it.

Her katana was lost somewhere in the darkness, and for some reason her enhanced vision could hardly readjust back to its default settings. Presently, an excessively painful kick bashed her face which almost caused her to completely lose consciousness, whereupon she was grabbed by the neck with a crude grip, hanging several inches from the ground.

“Subject-85, what is your descent!” the shouting of the same untiring and unrelenting voice reached to the very depths of her vulnerable mind.

She was once again being strangulated by the unyielding pressure of the cold semi-mechanical assembly of a hand, losing

visual foreground focus. All of a sudden, then, she was hurled away as if weighing less than a withered leaf, again meeting a hard, this time broader surface; not knowing what part of the surrounding space she occupied, she could only hear approaching steps that seemed to take their time in untroubled delight. She could barely move.

“Subject-85, what is your descent!” And she was again grabbed by the neck, feeling a certain crunch which she couldn’t tell whether it was her windpipe or the hand’s working components.

Before long her body began to be repeatedly pummelled against what she perceived to be an infinitely expanding wall, every following thrust making her more senseless and unresponsive to the painless contact. Two psychotic, frenzied eyes were vaguely staring right through her.

“Subject-85, what is your descent!”

She was again yanked against a plane of hardness the boundaries of which she couldn’t see, leaving a shattering and chipping sensation whose estimation was in contrast with reality.

“Subject-85, what is your descent!”

The strong thunderous multitude of harrowing implosions kept her simultaneously alive and dead—on both sides of the thin line between life and death her futile efforts of resistance almost made her faint. She stopped hearing the repeating words, only a bleak soundlessness that went on forever.

She felt she’d passed into the extremities of an all-encompassing lethargic existence reachable only to her furthest corners of awareness. Desperation was beginning to coalesce with the infirmness of her willpower, and in turn a crying self-forgetfulness served as an unconscious guide for the only part of her mind she was forbidden to ever think of, let alone approach: an entirely different and novel perception of her altering being, made up of and built upon nothing but abominable nightmares that could never be entirely repressed.

Beckard’s vociferations accomplished what he most desired out of the encounter with the cyborg, and now he only had but to

wait and witness the fruition of his efforts: the depersonalization he was looking forward to and its result he was about to see were not only a challenge to himself, but to his whole system of beliefs he lived by, a testament to his ideals and a reaffirmation of his every past, present and future action.

Never before acknowledged fragmented memories completely overwhelmed her as foreign belligerent phenomena as a result of the engulfing stasis of misplacement of her psyche: this was what she was unconsciously and unwillingly seeking as she fought an already lost battle with a made-up enemy—her never-to-be self.

It was actually a mere memory, and it frightened her because it kept unveiling as a single perpetual manifestation of overlying undistinguishable episodes. Slowly, she began to feel the closeness to it, conceptualizing it as something inseparable from herself, something that was put back to its place but at the same time behind which stood an image—another being, a stranger—she wanted to stay away from as far as possible.

As though directly projected out of another entirely different and incomprehensible reality, two faces—those of a man and a woman—were suddenly brought up before her: they appeared to be stranded in one place, possessing a deadly, grave appearance and yet looking ostensibly alive; they flickered through a cinematographic sequence of vivid alterations between blackness and whiteness, and little by little were transformed into a parallel to this world rendition. All those multiplex captures, nearly identical yet creating something entirely different during the procession of overbuilding upon one another, she then realized were making way for a third person, a relatively old man in bespattered whiteness who was holding the previous two images in his stretched-out hands before her face. It took her only a fleeting moment to identify him—it was the same person she'd been meeting with on a daily basis while living inside... someone else.

An insurmountable impulse broken loose upon her pushed her inner self back to beyond the perceptive and in its place came forth something thoroughly antithetical to it. Her blood—boiled up to a point of tearing down and gnashing at her restrictive flesh—was

reenacting and tempering a prolonged balancing between two opposite entities. She began to feel and embrace the advent of the imminent change that was about to throw her out of every strata of realization, creeping up to and occupying every single cell of hers, furthering its feared and unwanted influence. Finally, what sprang out of her found its way up to the outer world, assuming a real, but invisible form in a host that had served way too long as an abating prison. She was no longer the same.

Still being tightly gripped by her neck, and after a succession of ferocious hits against the wall without even feeling the slightest motion, she regained consciousness in the span of a few seconds during which her psyche had reestablished new biochemical pathways and rearranged the previous ones in accord with them. As Beckard began to feel her body being brought back to life, he prepared for yet another bash that this time he would make sure to be the last one. He immediately sensed that instead of finishing her off right there and then, the thrust in which he'd put all his force triggered what he thought an undesirable reaction: her eyes suddenly changed their emerald, nearly extinguished colour, adopting a ray-bright orange tint instead which, going through all her protective covering, filled its many intercrossed recesses that delineated her body with the same reduced in intensity hue.

Gradually, it became harder for her body to be kept still in one place, and before long Beckard found himself in a completely reversed situation, his two hands that held her above the ground against the chaffed and cracked wall being locked by the cyborg's which were now slowly applying unhuman pressure onto them to the point that they began to give way under their strength. Her face—before seemingly defeated and hopelessly depraved and now fomented with ravenous unpredictability—began to break in spasmodic and contortive involuntary expressions of mixed emotions that went by fast enough that they seemed not to possess any discernible trait of cognizance.

Suddenly, not expecting it to happen that soon, he felt his wrists being partially crushed, his exoskeleton giving away a brief electric buzz along both of their bodies, an indication for localized

damage—the altered cyborg began to free herself from his weakened grip, pushing down his arms together with his whole body until he was completely subjugated beneath her, his hands clenched together and divested of any freedom of movement.

There was no doubt, he thought, that she'd become something astonishingly better and perfected, something worthy to be admired that had reached its own kind of apotheosis beyond anyone's expectation or comprehension.

At first he felt a strongly palpable contraction down his leg, and then a painful breaking of his foot's bones that even its shock-resistant layering couldn't prevent. And yet, as his body was tormented with its protective shell literally crumbling over him, his temper couldn't have been more ecstatic and his spirits—over-thrilled: a new milestone of an infinite potential had been reached, the previous horizons of opportunity broadened and having finally become obsolete. He was rejoicing.

At the same time the cyborg's rapidly growing anger became more unstable and extreme as she was now tightly locking his crushed hand as well as his stiffened neck. Slowly bringing him up while breaking his neck in several places, he was expecting a quick death, but just then something intervened in that solemn for him moment, a split sheen of plasma burst directed at his executor that nevertheless missed her, going over her head in a random direction.

Seeing the failed outcome of his rather rushed-up attempt, Strageris Mapilton kept on running toward them with his gun still pointed forward, and reluctant to use it again he threw himself with his whole weight over the cyborg in a frantic fashion that resulted in her dropping Beckard down and grabbing him for the neck instead, his trained reflexes not being fast enough to even pull the trigger the moment he got within her range. But that wasn't his primary intention, as the next second he reached for one of his plaits and instantly pulled it out to the point where he ripped it off to the root, now holding his own lustrous blue braid in his hand which had become spattered with a simmering malodorous excretion coming out of its end; blood travelled down his neck from the dark hole surrounded by gleaming parched edges. Suddenly, he shoved the end of the grimy

bundle of hair right into her body, producing a limited flashwave reaction.

The cyborg let go of him, but she was barely affected in any noticeable way except for the brief state of disorder of her vestibular apparatus, and scarcely had Strageris gone up to the lying Beckard than she got to him again, pushing two fingers inside his eye sockets and then lifting up his entire trunk, his body which tried to fight back hanging on thin metal he couldn't take out; he died before he even fell on the ground.

Collins saw this happen, concernedly looking at the mauled face of one of Beckard's most trusted men who, on the other hand, didn't seem at all intimidated by the unpleasant sight. He shouted at the cyborg with the hope to snap her out of whatever condition she was in, cautiously advancing towards her.

But she didn't heed his exclamation, and everything about her pointed to the much terrifying possibility that something had made her lose her mind, eerie lines of glow having inextricably appeared on her body—something he'd never seen and never considered possible before.

She picked her katana from the ground, came back to and stood right over Beckard like a summoned demonic tulpa.

“What's all this about?” in the meantime Goranov had come in together with Amanda and Gregory who seemed to have already fully recovered. Collins warned them not to approach the cyborg.

In the meantime Beckard had demonstratively stretched out his hand which held something small enough to be hidden withing his palm.

Collins, breathing heavily, much to his distemper guessed what that could be—he had completely forgotten about the explosive jacket which was most probably intentionally left by Beckard in the car outside.

Opposite them Beckard's entire exoskeleton suit was suddenly engulfed in dispersed smoke created by tiny openings adjoined in the lower part of it, the thrust sending him off away out of the building's range. Right after that came a loud burst of fiery hail

behind them that made every concrete structure around slacken and eventually crumble over them.

A significant part of the three-floor unfinished building was immediately gone, and Collins, Amanda, and Gregory didn't have enough time at their disposal to run away and escape the disastrous direct impact, a terrible premonition that they would perish at any moment looming over them. Before long not even the dimmest shade could be made out among the tenebrosity the torn off blocks and chunks of plaster and concrete had filled the empty space with, and only a ray of pale moonlight not so far off showed their spatially undetermined position.

Collins was the first to get up from among the clusters of grinded debris, beginning to look out in the constricted darkness for a discernible sign of life. He then heard a movement on his right, and before long Amanda reappeared whose silhouette was revealed by the unsteady dusty moonlight.

“You got something broken?”

“I don't think so, no.”

Immediately after that another voice was heard, raspy and sneezing: the short, stocky man stood in front of Collins, and the latter could barely see that he was petulantly searching for something in his clothes.

“Damn me, no *sigareta*.”

It was not until then when they noticed a certain persistent daunting feeling of a slithering presence.

The three were somehow at a loss as to their exact position relative to the entire wreckage that offered no easy exit whatsoever; the direction in which the moonlight penetrated its way through seemed the only way out. Amanda called for Gregory, but there was no sign of him, so they immediately began an extensive search, overturning and moving hefty leftovers from the partially collapsed structure around them. As they did that, the ominous feeling that there was another foreign presence among them never ceased to

remind them of itself; the comms were temporarily shut down, and they had no direct contact with the outside world.

All of a sudden they heard heaving, gasping sounds, and going to the place where the noises came from they discovered Gregory lying on a slope of rubble, his body partially covered in dirt, his leg evidently having been stuck in between some ruins. His breathing intensified as the dust particles were being abundantly overspread, which in turn made his pain harder to cope with.

“You okay there, boy?” Goranov turned to him through a dry smoke; he saw that he was holding himself for the right thigh.

“It’s manageable.” But shortly after that he gave up on concealing his painful gasps, releasing a single loud groan through grinding teeth; his hair was dishevelled and, just like his face, smeared with residual chalk.

Collins and Goranov immediately saw to getting him out of there, but the moment they touched him he cried out in pain again. They tried to come up with something while the air was becoming harder to breathe. The foreign presence was crawling close enough to them that their senses were still able to detect the subtle manner in which it goaded them; Amanda was beginning to sense the impending tension.

“I think I’ve got something in—”

At that moment the lurking presence finally actualized itself into something tangible.

There was not enough space where they could back off to due to the concrete remnants that stood piled on each other in the likeness of close hillocks that gave deaf and mute aggrandizing quality to the whole place. The two felt the presence again lingering somewhere behind—or inside—the self-erected blocks, and for a very brief moment they thought they saw a weak orange light that disappeared almost immediately.

Collins was receiving inauspicious notions about what could’ve happened with the cyborg.

It was at that moment when the two men’s attention was directed to an unidentifiable noise coming from their right that was

immediately followed by a heavy blow that knocked Goranov down, sending him where Amanda and Gregory were. The two glowing eyes were now staring back at Collins with profound and unrestrained cold abandonment, craving to cause nothing but pain and eliminate everything they deemed unfit to live: it was a sort of neurotic possession he felt so strongly and compulsively as if being almost contagious. Hesitating to shoot, the next moment he found himself on the uneven, grating ground and saw that his head was bleeding. He was quickly grabbed for his collar and thrown away outside the enclosed space.

“Don’t do it!” He knew that his efforts were in vain. He tried to lift himself up as the cyborg moved up to the others.

Amanda, seeing the impending peril that was directly headed towards them, left Gregory who was still lying with his injured leg and pointed her blaster at the approaching entity.

Her threats were to no effect.

The first couple of shots barely scathed her body, and the several last ones she skilfully evaded as she set forth towards her only in the end to brutally haul her with propelled force; Amanda remained on the ground curling in pain and feeling her entire jaw shattered.

Scarcely had she looked at the cyborg than she glanced at the sheen of her naked katana under which she was prepared to fall first. But before it had even got to her, she saw that there was someone approaching from behind her. Suddenly, at the right for him moment, Collins threw himself over her, stabbing her nape with what appeared to be a combat knife and having just enough time to thrust it deeper before he fell on the ground together with the cyborg whose body, after convulsing for a while, hardened and completely stopped to move.

Chapter IV

Night's Deathly Face

Montpellier, France, six years earlier.

It were as though a strange transition of time had occurred between two interchangeable, yet inherently different realities that had their own equal share in the ongoing cyclical spin of the spirit of their respective eras, when near the quivering twigs and branches and leaves of the resplendent vegetating life in the Jardin des Plantes botanical garden and in the middle of the rise of the awakened nocturnal winged habitants' enticing night call, the plucking sound of someone's pacing steps over the narrow cobblestoned street was heard, a street like many others in this part of the town that had just been laid with the ornate streetlamps' ethereal soft light against an olive-blue April sky. The anachronistic streets' open vulnerable stillness with their preserved authentic unimposing buildings and ingenious architectural patterns was intruded upon exactly by that stroll which, with its loud enough tapping against the fragmented stone, attracted the bestirred attention of the nocturnal creatures who, in turn, made the cold air livelier with their chiming and chirping.

The walking went on up to the stately and elevated with its sharp-pointed spires famous cathedral which, despite not emitting any light from within like most of the surrounding structures, was put in a nicely accentuating spotlight that added along its high length a picturesque gradient shading. Bas-reliefs and swirling sculptural mouldings were particularly present over the main gated entrance as well as elsewhere along the heightened walls and their deep crevices and dents. A wide stairway leading to it also partook in the self-reflecting luminous outlook, and on the east side of the building there was another entrance to which a shorter one was connected that remained in complete natural darkness.

Carried throughout the air, the echoing steps could be heard ambling towards that side-entrance, and after a couple of moments

that passed unnoticedly the slow shutting of heavy doors caused some of the nearby trees' crowns to shiver in alarmed abruptness.

Getting through the partially damaged by time elaborate brazen fence, Collins stepped through a murky doorway and into a room at the end of which a barely visible flicker was left exposed by ajar doors. Cautiously approaching them, the smell of fresh incense from inside immediately invaded his nostrils, and so did the odour of something eternally lasting he perceived to belong to this place alone and nowhere else.

He'd entered into the sacristy, and as he continued onwards in the dim brooding darkness, he came upon what he made out to be the altar. Going slowly round it and then standing before it, he looked to his left and right, at the two arms of the transept, but there was no one there. After a couple of more steps undertaken cautiously and probingly, he was now standing in between the nave's empty rows upon which several antique candlesticks of considerable size shed a minimum amount of light. There was no one there either.

Suddenly, he heard approaching resolute steps, the person coming probably not being aware of the outsider given their fast pacing that gave away a custom of obligatory routine walkarounds. Pure brilliant moonlight enlivened the latent stained-glass windows, casting through them multicoloured blurry smudges that remained afloat in the air.

"Turn around!" a male voice shouted.

Collins understood the sentiment of that peremptory, albeit perturbed, warning in French, and so he turned around with his hands lifted up, standing face to face with the just emerged priest who had an old carbine pointed at him. He could only see his shadowed figure but could easily guess by the way he'd handled the situation that this was something he was accustomed to.

"Stay where you are," he shouted again, this time in a calmer tone. *"And drop the weapon! I said drop your weapon! Take everything out of your pockets."*

“Let’s not get too rash, father,” Collins said, trying to reason him out, holding his blaster in one of his lifted hands. “I’ve come here because you know something most don’t.”

“Drop your weapon, I said, or I’ll shoot!” the man switched to a heavily accented English.

Collins didn’t comply.

“We both know you won’t shoot me, and I haven’t come here to hurt you either; I’ve no reason to.” He could sense the ongoing hesitation the undistinguishable figure before him struggled with. Stooping down, he calmly left the gun on the ground. “Here, I did what you asked me. Now, will you stop pointing that thing at me and step aside to talk?”

The priest lowered his carbine, but didn’t bulge from his spot for some time, still somehow reluctant to trust the intruder. His present doubts remained strongly fixated, but little by little, sensing the unusually tranquil air about the man and his temperate unhurriedness, he made the first step towards him. A moment later, the two were already sitting on one of the long wooden benches, the scarce light coming from the candleflames submerging everything in ubiquitous ominousness.

“Who are you? And what have you come here for?” began the priest in dark, seemingly preserved vestment whose bronze lustrous cross hanging across his neck occasionally reflected and threw off a gloomy gleam.

He then noticed that the man next to him had begun searching for something in his pockets, after which he produced a small sketch.

“I don’t understand. What is this?” the priest asked, peering into the ruffled drawing as he moved it under stronger light so he could see it better.

“I think you needn’t pretend, there’s no point in it.”

The sketch had apparently been hastily scribbled, but one could still make out the overall shapes and rough-edged lines that, viewed from a certain distance, formed an unordinary tall female figure that could easily be taken for something entirely different

than a mere human. He left the piece of paper on the bench between himself and the priest.

“I am sorry,” the latter started in an apologetic tone, his voice beginning to lose of its familiarity, “I don’t know what this is. Again, who are you?” He threw a brief involuntary glance at the short carbine next to him, an act that naturally didn’t escape Collins.

“My name is Agent Braduer Collins from the Orton Intelligence Department, North American Domain.” He showed him his federal ID card that for a second dissolved a limited space of murkiness out of its stark blue-glowing letters; strangely for Collins, the priest didn’t show any sign of surprise or interest at this introduction.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think I can be of any help to you, Mr. Collins. Now, if you are kind enough to—”

“*Unfortunately*, I see we’re not on the same page yet, but this will change.”

Suddenly, the priest saw Collins’ left hand make a furtive move, not too abruptly, so that the barrel of his blaster came out to be pointed directly at him.

“The individual I believe you easily recognized on the sheet has violated various international security laws. My country in particular is burdened with the main task of solving this problem. She was last seen here, in France, and every gathered piece thus far leads to you as the final fringe of the thread. I advise you to stop beating around the bush and tell your tell, because I believe you’re a man of common sense and that you will carefully weigh out your options.”

He began to read in his eyes the inception of a maleficent loathing overlaid with hostility and antagonism which he tried to conceal, something which was no longer possible.

“I said that—”

He got closer to the priest, further intimidating him.

“Listen to me now,” he began in an authoritative and assertive voice, “people more unpleasant than me will come enquiring about you, and you can count on my word that I’ll be the first and last one who’ll be this kind to you. Now, I’m aware of the several

contacts you two have recently made, and I know that you've been giving her bits and pieces about certain undesirables she later tracks down. Of course, at the end of the day I see nothing wrong on your part, you did what you thought was necessary and I applaud you for that. Your luck just didn't last long, that's all. Give me her whereabouts, and you'll be left alone and you won't see me ever again."

Visibly disturbed and anxiously overwhelmed, the priest didn't answer. He moved his eyebrows and lips obsessively.

"I did what was right! Every single one of them deserved it!" he suddenly exclaimed. "It was justified!" Grabbing his head, he coiled down over the front bench and repentantly muttered something in French.

"Tell me where she is, and I'll be on my way out at once."

"No..."

"Enough!" He stood and, grabbing the back of his frock, pulled him closer to him with his blaster pressed against his ribcage. "I won't hesitate to take your life! Speak!"

Almost broken down mentally and crying in a self-admonitory manner, the priest, with a whimpering voice of resignation, spoke out the following words:

"The garden... she abides there..."

Getting closer to the imperceptible borders of the sunken in uneasy black dullness Jardin des Plantes garden, the multivocal songs of nightingales, mockingbirds, and herons, hidden in the trees' dangling crowns, heralded a prolonged night.

Walking deeper into the territory of the wide and far botanical garden, he was cautious and watchful, giving especial attention to zones submerged in complete darkness where he could possibly lose control of the situation—and this was something he definitely wanted to prevent. The birds' incessant incantations helped him to blend in with the otherwise barely visible objects and illusions startled by the light wind.

All of a sudden, within less than a hundred metres, he heard a sound that was made by anything but an animal. Walking away

from the main path, he ran in the direction where he thought—hoped—he would stand face to face with what lurked behind the dishevelled curtain, trying not to diverge too much from it. He then heard it again, and this time there could be no doubt that it was a genuine human scream, the scream of someone who had nowhere to run.

Hiding behind the thick trunk of a beech as he tried to blend in as much as possible with the stationary vegetation that didn't seem quite listless under the present silver moon rays, he saw not so far off from where he stood a slouched to the ground man next to a vast hothouse who seemed to him to be in a state of great perturbation, muttering broken and suppressed outcries while his hands appeared to be bonded behind his back. Next to him keeping a watch over her pray was a tall female figure whose eyes glistened in a scarcely noticeable manner, holding a long intimidating blade whose edge rested calmly and patiently on the bespattered with blood neck. A few dead masked bodies lay on the grass nearby them.

“Don't.” Collins came out with his blaster pointed up, realizing he might not be able to handle the situation accordingly—during the entire time he was conscious of the fact that what was about to happen next would probably not go the way he'd intended. “Lay it down.”

Hearing the speech of another human being, the curled black-haired man lifted his head, panting heavily and now having regained some sense of hope.

“Don't let her do it, please!”

Violently grabbing his hair, she further pressed the sharp edge of her sword against his neck; her beaten and bruised victim began whimpering.

“Don't make it more complicated for us both! Do as I say!”

But she refused to do it: not even once did she send a glance towards him, but continued to hold her gaze down at her victim, ready to slice him up every second now. He was on the verge of shooting, having aimed at her head. But suddenly something was revealed to him when he'd peered more carefully into the weeping

eyes of the kneeling man: the man was not a random thug, but a high-profile member of one of the biggest human trafficking organizations on the continent. He knew him from old cases he'd only briefly and superficially familiarized himself with. The person who currently knelt helplessly before him caused his body to become weak and as if entering into a realm of limbo, his hands gradually becoming unable to hold the gun steady.

The barrel slowly beginning to be lowered down until it remained fixed on its new target by some indifferent steadfast force that didn't originate from him.

The weapon was fired; someone had pulled the trigger. The released sound caused an instantaneous surging uproar coming from the top of the trees. It was done.

The man who'd just a moment ago so desperately clung to life no longer had to keep fighting: he lay there, eyes closed, the last breath leaving his body.

His hands remained frozen, yet throbbing with full vitality.

Chapter V

Resuscitation

They had to be on the lookout for certain glinting street signs describing a hardly noticeable delineation in a gossamer arrangement in the mostly forsaken Valenidge Kinsley suburbia—an impoverished low-cost zone of living meant to be a contamination enclosure. It lacked proper infrastructure and had no zoning parts, and the housing usually constituted of cheaply made and unsymmetrically placed next to each other hut units which for the most part lacked a stable electrical grid; clean tap water was a luxury there and it was usually traded for other commodities or even drugs. There was zero traffic in that part of the city, both terrestrial and aerial, and because of that the sky above was always undisturbedly pristine, revealing a broad view to the celestial plainness that sometimes was the only thing worth to be gazed at there.

It was already past midnight, and there was no one to be seen down in the wastelands except for a couple of abandoned, nearly quenched trashcan bonfires.

“Where to?” asked Goranov, switching off from semi-autopilot to full manual control.

“Continue headway until we get to the far end over there.” Collins pointed out the two farthest and outermost columns of distinctively arrayed rundown huts illuminated by the scarce yellow light of bent unmaintained lampposts. “Enter the telemetric frequencies and see what it’ll bring out.”

The numbers previously typed in by the Russian were inserted into the broadcasting inductor for defragmentation, one of the small monitors on the dashboard showing a processing bar with lines of error vertically poking out of it.

The display indicated that the converting process was finished, but still nothing happened—the only thing that exited was white, residual noise.

“Try tilting it.”

Advancing at a minimum speed towards the outer edge, the Russian began to turn the Chaser left and then right, then attempting entirely different courses and manoeuvres that caused a far too greater deviation from the supposed checkpoint than expected. Suddenly, at one point, the continuous white noise in the background became unstable, the aircraft's computer registering specific waves that automatically realigned with the ship's operating frequential signature.

"I think I got the gist of it," Goranov assured Collins, the noise now becoming crispier and louder as he balanced the aircraft within the invisible narrow corridor they'd entered in. On the small monitor the red bar's numerous thin diagram error lines began to disappear one by one, some reappearing again, but usually only once; the sound was gradually transformed into a stretched trans-communicative tuning with prolonged delays of overlapping blips.

All of a sudden, a holographic overlaying visualization was prompted to be displayed on to the windshield, and after Goranov had pressed one of the keys on a separate control panel, glowing data textures and routes appeared on the glass surface: it was a simplified digital map of the suburbia, and according to it they were close to the only marked checkpoint that said:

UND-HANGR-VOMP 305-H5-80

Relocation Incomplete

"What does this stand for?" Goranov, his interest aroused, inclined his head toward Collins.

"It's an underground facility—or rather a multisectioned facility of underground hangars. There, anchor it down there."

They began descending over a wide terrain in the middle of a desolate plain flatland, Nastasya's lights revealing a circle of emptiness intruded by occasional plastic hut units that seemed to be dead inside. They got out, alert and listening to the pervading grave silence after the aircraft's engines had been put out.

Following Collins, they walked up to that same hut unit that looked ostensibly unwelcoming to any outsider that happened to accidentally find it. The most interesting thing about it, they thought, was that it had no entrances of any kind whatsoever, the only present windows not being windows at all, but only two cheap shattered circular glass pieces fixed onto the plastic walls.

“What’ll that lead us to?” Amanda asked, curious.

“To a safe place.” Whereupon Collins stood before a tiny red chipped crystal into the front wall, and, stooping down, grabbed a fistful of soil; dispersing the dirt in the air, a red laser beam was immediately revealed for a second through the diffused cloud, perpendicular to the ground and reaching indefinitely into the far, imperceptible distance; the red streak the crystal dot emitted was so meagre that one had to stand as close as possible to it in order to notice it.

“Throw another one,” he said to Amanda. After she did what he’d asked her, part of the dim red laser stripe was shown again; he went on moving his hand against it in a peculiar, cryptic manner, fingers pointed still.

Ceasing, he waited for a couple of moments until the plastic hut’s fake windows started to bubble with peculiar incandescent light that then died out shortly after the red crystallized dot ejected itself out of its socket, procuring itself as some kind of a stick with nothing discernible on its surface and whose tip was divided into ten small branches of each of which had the numbers from 0 to 9 glowing. Getting closer to it, he proceeded to folding them back self-absorbingly.

When he was done, he carefully pushed the stick back into its hole, the red dot completely fading out the moment they heard a click.

Before long the bogus hut unit started to move on its own, making brisk noises, and with it the whole ground then began to quake sensibly enough that they instinctively grabbed for the aircraft’s legs; the next moment the whole rocky and parched ground thereabouts was undulating, as though as if releasing a long-suppressed storage of energy out of the earth’s depths. Soon they saw

that a considerable part of the terrain was beginning to separate itself from around the hut, pebbles and dust spreading and fumigating in abundance throughout. The first rays of light came out of the open space beneath the ground that had just been exposed to the outside world, and they could see the whole hydraulic structure in action lifting tons of weight of ground material above it, a complex, sophisticated hidden entry in the middle of nowhere. After everything was quieted down, Collins began walking towards what pretty much looked like an entrance to an unknown underground habitat.

Getting closer to it, they saw that an armed civilian of high stature stood right at the edge of the separating line one step below the ground, and to Amanda he appeared as if he'd already expected them, prepared and instructed to escort them to a place only Collins seemed to be aware of in advance.

There were faceless people that had surrounded the body-adaptable operating table under sharp white light, actively participating in tasks equally important as the next one. Life-sustaining systems and apparatuses were working incessantly, all wired to the same data processor that regulated them within precise mathematical computations. The room was painstakingly isolated; no one was to be allowed until the job was done, for an undetermined time.

They began by putting her on artificial ventilation by inserting the necessary microslabs that would be melting down in her upper respiratory tract over the span of a couple of hours, proceeding with the first four vertebrae that had sustained the most aggravated injury. Every second mattered, and every minor intervention in the wrong place could directly lead to severe complications and a possible death. Of all things, it was important to stop the uncontrolled release of cerebrospinal fluid, which was done by sealing the localized damaged fissures with silicious vascular bond-stems.

After the circulation had been brought back to normal and the damaged vertebrae successfully restored, a complete replacement of the badly affected ocular sensory tissues was to follow.

"I don't think I've seen anything like it," one of them remarked as they examined the unorthodox artificial eyeballs beneath

the black matte plates that were comingled with the flesh. One of them was irreparably damaged and so a complete replacement of the pair was necessary due to the dual-set interferential adjacency. He then moved on to the semi-organic, biomechatronic limbic prostheses: skeleton-like body parts whose unique custom-made build invoked astonishment not so much because of the material quality or perfected locomotion, but because of the successful, long-term anastomosis that had taken place as a series of complex biological syntheses between cells, neural and synaptic pathways, as well as the metamaterials the prosthetic limbs were made of.

Their attention was currently absorbed by the metal hands and feet, and they followed from close a detailed microscopic view of the cellular structure alongside the edge where the inosculation process had been going on through their AR goggles that automatically readjusted the output imagery in real time according to the changing environment on a microlevel.

“See there?” the same person exclaimed again, who wore the same fully enclosed outfit and visual equipment as the rest, making prompting movements in the air that were detected and registered as gesticulating commands triggering a miscellaneous composition of mechanical arms with different applications that hovered over the operating table. “These here are self-constructing nanodopters—notice the present sign of quasi-molecular subsistence on the amino acid pattern map. The interpolative data doesn’t lie.”

“Yes, it is indeed an interesting evaluation. According to the data so far, the alteration grade on a biomolecular scale is over seven decimals per quantitative sample, which for the most part makes them purely synthetic, of course.”

“But the most striking feature of it is the inosculation itself, the symbiosis between body and prosthetic limbs is so complete and flawless that the metamaterial nanodopters have practically been developing and growing over time in proportional accord with the rest of the body’s biological rhythm.”

“So, she’s been like this since pre-adolescent age?”

“That’s what I get out of it. She’s priceless in terms of novelty, but, as we can see, the psychological burden eventually comes

back at you. Your mind can't possibly handle all the trauma she'd certainly gone through in her formative years, and I can only imagine how hard it was for her to keep it up like that during her entire adulthood. Prepare one of our spare ocular sets."

Gregory was lying on a self-regulating mucous-based foamed as his body absorbed the needed restorative nutrients and other homoeopathic compounds. He'd just undergone a successful and relatively innocuous surgical treatment of his leg, and it was a matter of time before he could get up and walk again.

"Where do you think we are? Some sort of a hospital?" He was mindfully watching through the window of his small room the narrow empty corridor with plain, almost bleak walls; everything about the place seemed to him too repetitive in an obtrusive way.

"Dunno. Collins hasn't shown up since we got here." Amanda was currently leaning back in a chair by the bed. The room was murky, the lights' intensity regulated to calming levels. The results from their blood samples had just come back, and they were within the norms—Collins had explained to them that it was advisable to make sure whether the exposure to the electromagnetic field they'd been caught in had any long-lasting adverse effects on their bodies.

"Not a word from Darren and Clara either?"

"Probably have something important to share with him. They were chasing those other cars, remember?"

A short pause followed.

"I hope she's okay," Gregory spoke out, turning expectantly towards Amanda. She merely nodded, appearing to contemplate something that had suddenly grasped her attention.

Someone's steps were heard approaching; the door was opened.

"We were just talking about you," Amanda said to Darren. "Where are the rest? We were considering checking you out on the comms."

“Clara’s with Collins, she’ll come back shortly.” He fetched himself another chair and sat himself on the other side across Amanda beside the bed. “Where’s that old crazy russkie? I’ve got a platonic yearning for him.” He chortled.

“He said he’s checking something on the aircraft, or whatever that thing is.”

“Ahh, of course.” And then, turning towards Gregory: “Hurt much? Doesn’t look that bad.” He was gazing at the leg whose lower half was enfolded in a seemingly thin, translucent material that added extra hardness to it.

“Yeah, it doesn’t. I feel great, actually.”

“How’s she? Is she... alive?” almost immediately after that inquired eagerly Amanda, turning to the native African man across her.

“Fortunately, yes. They said it was a whole miracle she survived. Mere millimetres separated her from death. She’s now recovering. In fact, I’m just returning from there. Clara and Collins are with her, she’s more than responsive.”

For a brief moment they were all silent.

“I just can’t wrap my mind around what happened back there... she just...” stopping, Amanda couldn’t find the right words to express the incident she’d witnessed. It was what kept her occupied with during the last two hours or so, trying to rationalize what she’d witnessed.

“Yeah, since Collins introduced her to me and Clara some time ago we’ve always known her to be a frosty professional who never lost her temper or anything. But apparently, they’ve discovered something very strange implanted in her brain, some kind of a cutting-edge chip that triggered some biochemical reactions in her body. They aren’t sure how long she’s been living with it.”

“A chip?” Gregory turned to him, intrigued.

“Hm. Wild stuff.”

“By the way, what the heck is this place? No one bothered to explain,” asked Amanda, thoroughly bemused.

“To tell you the truth, I’ve never been down here before either, but if I recall correctly, there was this one time when Collins did mention something—he was talking about how in the past the Intelligence Department was operating all these semi-legal underground interrogation facilities throughout the country and which many years ago were outlawed by the Tribunal Council when unofficial reports of human rights violations came to light. After that they were forced to seal and shut them down, but some were readjusted for military purposes. A few of them, however, were written off the books and sold out during closed-door bids, and guess who reappropriated them? Collins had apparently managed to convince his superiors to lease them to an acquaintance of his under the pretense of conducting black-ops shit related to his cases. Of course, he had something entirely different in mind—he’d turned it into some sort of a joint scientific enterprise where an acquaintance of his could work on developing their own experimental biomechatronic, bionic or whatever stuff related to their respective medical fields. The only condition he had was that in times of emergency their services had to be available to him no matter the circumstances. Since then, I don’t think he ever got the opportunity to use them... at least until now.”

It was as if the ensued silence parted each of them into their own temporal individual space of oblivious recollections.

“Tell me,” Amanda broke out with an entirely different tone, “how did you come to know Collins and the rest? You and Clara I mean.”

She saw that the African was caught unawares, even if he only showed that for a second.

“Well, about Brad... let’s put it this way: Brad showed us how to start looking at things from a whole different angle. The influence he’s had on our lives was definitely a game changer for both of us—somehow, he already knew who we were and what our causes were, and it happened so that his interests aligned with ours. Only that he was the bigger dreamer of us and his ultimate goals bolder than what common sense would usually permit. At first we

thought him to be a desperate man desiring the impossible, but step by step he proved to us that it was not quite so.”

“Causes?” she interjected.

He was silent for a moment, but she couldn’t guess why.

“Ever heard of the FAC Guerrilla Movement?”

“The Free African Congregation movement? Yes, but don’t know much about it. They were fighting against the regime of the African Vassalage, no? If I’m not mistaken, the movement ended up unsuccessful because of the World Seat of Nations’ military interference.”

“It was something that won’t happen ever again, or at least in the near future—much disinfo has been spewed out portraying the Movement as if its members were the real oppressors, while this couldn’t be any farther from reality. When I first arrived here, I was left dumbfounded when I saw for myself the extent to which the public opinion’s perception had been warped regarding the events that took place across the whole continent—and what was worse, it turned out that for the rest of the world what were years of bloodshed and sacrifices was nothing more but a trivial and insignificant period of ‘unrest’ in the eyes of the average person.”

“Wait,” Amanda interrupted him, “you were part of the Movement?”

“Yes, and so was Clara: we were commandants of the 10th Platoon in Dakar, Senegal—my homeplace.”

Gregory and Amanda looked at each other in surprise—they knew that by only conversing with a member of the Guerrilla Movement—and a high-ranking one at that—they were immediately committing a felony and could be charged for treason on grounds of one of the International Integrity Laws decreed and upheld by the World Seat of Nations. The brief involuntary uneasiness their eyes expressed didn’t escape Darren, but he already knew that if Collins could trust them, so could he.

“Anyway, one of the biggest lies is that we allegedly failed due to the direct counteroffensive undertaken by one of the World Seat’s peacekeeping corpuses, which isn’t true—we were simply

infiltrated by spies and undercover officers, and the prolonged oppressive skirmishes artificially created and funded by the African Vassalage's pseudo-militias didn't make our situation any easier. We learned—although too late—that we'd been compromised since our inception as an impactful cohesive organization: for years important and valuable information of all sorts had been fed to our enemies, mostly locations of paramedic camps, freshwater wells, ammo and food stock hangars. In the meantime our enemies had been waiting patiently for the definitive blow, until the day when the mass attack would ultimately sweep across the whole continent. You can imagine how unprepared we were, although we were aware of the possibility of something like this. However, catching and identifying rats was not an easy job. The whole Movement was overturned and annihilated in less than 24 hours like a straw house.

“Many members perished, including innocent civilians who had nothing to do with the conflict, and some were taken away and never heard of ever again. That day hell was broken loose upon us, and many friends of mine were slaughtered like cattle...” his voice broke up, and Gregory and Amanda could sense the fermenting animosity and fierceness that raged in his ivory-hardened eyes. “...It's something that marks you for life, you never forget it.”

He straightened his voice, and continued:

“We were there, witnessing everything in the middle of the massacre... in the headquarters of our platoon. We were there when it happened. The sounding of the alarms out of nowhere, the panic that had erupted and all the screaming preceded by terror and desperation, besieged by one of the World Seat's infantry branches backed up by the Vassal's main auxiliary army. There were also series of airstrikes we couldn't possibly resist; it was just too much for us to handle, and there was no aid either because it happened all at once, not leaving us any room to breathe... We were like meat and nothing more, it was an extermination zone.” Then he got up from his chair and stood with his back turned to the two, head slouched.

“It wasn't only because we'd been compromised that led us to this fatal outcome, though. During that time I couldn't afford the luxury to speculate, to consider the possibility of betrayal from

within our ranks—some had their suspicions and actively tried to uproot the weak links, but were left disappointed in the end.” He turned around facing the two; Amanda and Gregory thought as if they now saw an entirely different person from just a moment ago. “Ouloto Malick—one of the General-Commandants and also one of our best military leaders—began to act rather suspiciously the day before the mass attack. At first I didn’t pay any serious attention to his behaviour, and I don’t know if there were others at that time who had the same doubts, but when I finally decided to approach him and see for myself, he’d already left his tent, and then the alarms went off. It turned out that the fucker had been on G’Noto Ket Nasha’s payroll, the continent’s puppet Vassal-President.

“Michell Avanganoto, another General-Commandant... and my best friend then... he was killed because of him. Because of Ouloto... I saw him dying in front of me.”

At that moment, with gentle and overly precautionous carefulness, he took something out of beneath his shirt that’s been hanging on his neck: it was a sort of an ivory bone—or rather a serrated fragment of it—cracked and scratched at several places whose unshapen edges were of a faint, luminous sky-blue sheen that made it an otherworldly item with invaluable properties.

“This was a gift from him.” He held it out in the open for a brief moment for the others to see, then immediately tucked it back. He returned to his chair. “Me and Clara, as well as a handful of others, were fortunate enough to escape the meatgrinder. We were one of the few survivors, one of the few remaining first-hand enemy witnesses to make it to another continent.” He stopped, his face smoothened out and clear of any creases, making it harder for any emotions to be read. “That’s how a great dream ends, kids.”

It was only now that he acknowledged their presence in the room since he’d begun talking, whereupon he looked at them somewhat sternly, not because he’d divulged too much, but rather because, they reckoned, he was punishing himself for some reason. Then he smiled.

“You probably think that we’re some kind of bloodthirsty savage terrorists, or some petty wanna-be peasants whose purpose

is to loot and hoard and demand things for themselves. Yes, that's how we were presented in the people's minds, but I don't hold any grudges against the average person." He sighed, emotionally and mentally exhausted. "Even to this day they still mention us as if we were the biggest 'evil' to have ever roamed upon the continent, how the 'darkest period' in the history of Africa was finally put to an end, a period marked by constant 'fearmongering', 'marauding', and 'extortion'. But the truth, I tell you, was completely inverted and smeared with disgusting lies and manipulation: that evil was not us, but G'noto Ket Nasha's puppet regime that was handed over to him on a silver plate by the World Seat of Nations, as if it were a mere boardgame. For centuries we've been robbed, crushed, and humiliated, and the sad thing is that I don't see how this will ever change in the next 50, 100 or 1000 years. From time to time they pretend to care about us by entangling the populace in dishonest and hypocritical aid programs that are nothing but a show-off for the rest of the world to make it sleep better at night and keep its conceited illusions alive. But we were long past falling for their make-believe games and it was only a matter of time before things had escalated to the point of no return.

"One thing that has always impressed me was that the Movement didn't entirely consist of native African members—no, a good portion of our ranks happened to be enthusiasts just like us from around the world who were capable to see beyond the pile of bullshit and recognize the common threat for what it really is. Anyway, my people lost, and they won—nothing inspiring about that." He chuckled after he finished, but they knew that this was just a way of accepting and coping with a defeat—an ironic, yet tragic tale that was mostly forgotten and lost.

"What happened then?" Gregory endeavoured to ask, seeing signs of tiredness appearing on his face.

"With the help of Clara I sought out and found home here," he went on, his voice unaltered, "in the North American domain. She took quite the risk to get me here. At first I was reluctant to this; I wanted to head south, but she was persuasive enough to convince me that this was our safest bet, one of her arguments being that she

was born in this country and knew how things worked here. To this day my name is still present in the wanted list of dangerous terrorists, and so is hers, so we decided to use different names just in case—my real name is Rhana Elsu Monoye, and hers is Jacqueline Roberts.

“At first it was hard to keep a low profile, but eventually we got used to it. Since then we’ve been living like ghosts, outside the system’s reach and entirely on our own. Of course, Brad was of enormous help to us, often offering us financial opportunities by hooking us as incognito affiliates on his various one-time assignments by the Intelligence Department, without their knowing our real identities, of course, which was the sweetest part of it. Oh, now I remember that you asked how we met him, no?” He smiled at them. “Well, after the end of the Guerrilla Movement, we were barely making our ends meet. We had to learn to survive on crumbs and move from place to place until we could find a better alternative.

“As we roamed through a number of cities and metropolises, I inevitably became exposed to their more impoverished parts that awakened in me nothing but a feeling of disgust and resentment at the way millions of people fought every day for their right to merely exist. This was probably what pushed us to become what we are today—basically, we raided small underground players by taking their dough, and then took care of ourselves as well as of those in the most lamentable condition. We knew what we were getting into, and we were aware that many people would be after our assess.

“It met him for the first time some three years ago. By that time we’d already become more skilled and proficient at what we’d been doing, and gradually began targeting something more than just lowdown warehouses: we were tempted to go big, when one day our attention was directed towards one of the biggest food processing facilities—the amount of product that was getting in and out on a daily basis was 8 tons, one fourth of which were drug parcels. We were aware from the general street gossiping that this happened to be the biggest distribution centre in the region, it was apparently handling 30% of the entire traffic in the country, part of a giant drug

network between three continents that functioned in a decentralized yet cooperative way. They were sleeky bastards.”

He made a short pause, then went on:

“We planned the hit one week in advance, and thought that the best way to do it was to just burn everything down, this way making enough noise to attract the law enforcement agencies. We hoped that this would at least lead to some preliminary investigations on a local level, sort of hinting where to start, you know what I mean? You got to understand that the scope of this network was something not even our minds could grasp at first when we started to go down the rabbit hole—it extended way beyond anyone’s reach and required nationwide proactive measures in order to get some substantial results. But this was Clara’s way of thinking, though, not mine: I said to her that she was being overly optimistic in hoping that anyone would do anything, ever. I kept repeating to her that everyone was playing for the same team, the government and those criminal organizations. Everything boiled down to mutual long-term interests, the big guys were just too valuable for them. But whatever.

“The way we would do it was by planting explosives we’d been procuring over time from different black market sellers—and believe me, it’s not an easy thing to get your hands even on nitroglycerine these days, let alone on something pre-made.

“So, that night we were standing outside the storehouse—a big facility. Everything was prepared, the bag with the explosives and the wireless detonators, all that was needed to temporarily sabotage their process. But as we were about to rush forward, someone stopped us at the last second—it was Collins, as you might already guess—having somehow managed to creep in unnoticedly next to the fence wall.

“Our first thought was that we were busted, which meant game over for us, so we quickly drew out our guns. Clara was the one who was more eager to shoot, but after seeing that he was unarmed, we were reluctant to do it out of pure curiosity—we had to know who the guy was first. His first words were something I’d never forget—they astonished us with their frankness, their straightforwardness, and their firm conviction. He said that... what we were

doing was pointless.” Here the Senegalese laughed. “He said that this company, just like many others in the city, was a Grouzers property. And that we shouldn’t count on neither the police, nor on any federal body to step in and do their work simply because... everything was rigged from the start. To me, this didn’t come across as something shocking or revealing, but it had a different influence on Clara. Of course, we already knew who the Grouzers were, but never thought they were *that* powerful.

“We were just standing there while he was explaining to us who he was and what his objectives were, no knowing what to do in this situation. Finally, when the man told us our real names, where we were born and who we were and what we’d been doing abroad all those years—this was what made us think that this guy was for real.”

Here he stopped and threw a more inquisitive glance at them, gauging their attention and the genuine interest he’d provoked in them.

“Hearing him talking like this, by that point we were pretty much freaked out and still didn’t know what his endgame actually was. Clara got closer to him and the barrel of her gun was almost right in his face—we couldn’t afford the luxury of making any assumptions, it was like stepping on a minefield.

“But eventually—and thankfully—common sense prevailed: Brad identified himself as an actively working Agent from the Intelligence Department, and said that we’d been on his radar for quite some time—apparently, he’d held us under close scrutiny, the places and the cities we moved to, our ‘hits’—everything—as part of a protocol assignment. It also turned out that he knew the truth—the real truth—about the Guerrilla Wars, everything that was happening behind the smokescreen, the subversion—everything.

“*‘We’re very much alike,’* his words back then, *‘we have way more in common than you actually think, and our goals align. I won’t interfere, but this I’ll do—I’ll give you two options: I can walk away, update my report file with false claims like I’ve been doing since the start, this way steering you off the radars, or... you can join me and help me make a difference, however insignificant it*

may be.” Here Darren smiled. “Hell, tell me—how can you send away a man like him whose words weigh more than gold? We were just standing there, waiting for something to happen, but then we quickly realized that it had already happened.

“Afterwards we learned that he wasn’t working alone, that there were others on his side—gifted people with potential like us, as he said, with hearts. They were just trying to make things right, to mend and to heal. Yes, that’s what we were also pursuing, but the thing is that they did it in a more organized and, so to speak, *advantageous* way—they had the sort of information that was almost impossible to get from the outside—*actual* information with real impact. They were aiming at the red circle, and we dug that. But...”

“But what?”

“Brad gave us to understand that this path was not an easy one, and that we needed to arm ourselves with a lot of patience. A year later there came a moment when the Grouzers—our imperative—got better at concealing their footsteps and the dirt they left behind until they became practically untraceable and unfindable and we were left empty handed. Well, after some time we lost contact for a while, at least until a certain significant event occurred.”

“The hotel operation?”

“Yeah. From then on things have been developing too rapidly, even for us.” He laughed.

Before long someone entered. It was Clara.

Outside the room the conversation Collins had with the red-haired woman had almost come to an end—she had a naturally complacent look to her pale face and was speaking softly as her big expressive hazel eyes muted the words themselves. She had a slight indisposition because of her leg prostheses.

“Now you understand why her recovery will take a little while,” she was saying to him. “Even with her fast metabolism, the injuries she’d sustained would require a proper care and a 24/7 medical supervision.”

Collins didn't question the integrity of the words in any way; he nodded in the affirmative.

"I'll explain it to her and will make sure she doesn't have to worry about anything. Thank you, Caroline, for everything you did for her."

"We've always helped one another and you know that you can count on me for anything," the red-haired woman said, turning her head for a moment towards the room's translucent window. "You know that if it weren't for your father I'd never be here standing with you."

There was presently no one walking by them—in fact, Collins had forgotten how compact this place was yet how spatially ample it sometimes seemed.

"Here, take this"—Caroline handed over to him a small plastic envelope whose content was a very miniature item—"she can keep it as a memento if she likes. Or she could just throw it away." He took it, curiously examining it in his hand.

"So you say that your people can't figure out the origin of this thing?"

"Unfortunately and to my biggest regret, no. Whoever made this, they did a brilliant job at achieving a prime copy of what we call a *transneural inductive stimulator*—it's something that's very hard to engineer and which requires resources and equipment that are almost impossible—if not entirely impossible—to get. We had to go through the cranium three times with the sub-myelin spatial scanner to localize it, you yourself can see its meagre dimensions. The only thing we know for sure is that this chip is the product of extensive experimental quantum mechanical trials, and it's the reason for her sudden psychical and physiological change. It was already thoroughly burned—literally—when we removed it, like a piece of chalk, which brought a lot of disappointment to them, but, hey—you can't have everything in this world, can you?"

"I see. Once again, thank you. I am much obliged to you."

They parted ways, and Collins entered the room.

“I’ve got something that I think’s worth the look.” He stretched out his hand and showed to her the little envelope.

Having two transparent tubes attached to her neck inside which sparkling liquid slowly circulated, Cassidy’s black flexible body layer was almost entirely covered by an undulating rigid blanket onto which light impulses followed the general blood flow at different speeds—her entire extra- and endo-vascular system was shown as one murky red silhouette that faded in and out according to her heartbeat. Above her there were a manifold long hanging bristles swaying to and fro in different directions and occasionally reaching down to her to infuse nourishment compounds by directly diffusing small dosages of the material into her nostrils.

Collins got closer to her and gave her the envelope just when she was feeling her nape with the other hand. She began to examine it. Her old emerald biomechatronic eyes were gone, and now in their place were two normal-looking eyeballs whose irises were a natural bright-blue, and whose ingenuity, exquisiteness and the peculiar way in which they reflected and refracted light impressed and at the same time surprised Collins who’d never expected to behold the complete human look of her face—to him, she was no longer the same person he’d been used to see, at least externally.

“It turns out that my biggest fears...” she began with a slow, exhausted and dry voice, “...have been kept in there the whole time... And I thought I’d got rid of them for good.”

The slightest movement that occurred on her face presented itself as something entirely alien to him—yes, he thought, she was finally free of her biggest enemy: herself.

“They took away the only precious thing I had... It was a brief memory glimpse... but still a glimpse nevertheless... into the only thing I’ve ever truly known... without ever realizing all those years I’d lost in...”

He thought he saw her crystal-bead eyes become moisturized, glaring—the only part of her body that was incapable of emotional suppression.

“If only... If only I knew. I wish I were dead.”

“You aren’t like this, and I know it better than yourself. Don’t dwell too much on things you know are lost for certain.”

What Collins took for an involuntary twitch at first was actually a smile he only recognized moments later—a diminutive, faint smile that radiated with the full warmth of rebirth. Although it didn’t last long enough to be properly examined, it still left an assertive mark and an image to be contemplated long after it had occurred.

Chapter VI

The End of a Bloodline

Stepping into the elevator with three of his closest bodyguards accompanying him, he typed in the number of his office floor which was inaccessible to regular personnel. He liked it when the building was mostly empty at around that time and free of the irritating general murmur, although this didn't happen very often. He had to sign some contracts left on his desk that couldn't be delayed any longer, which was something that has more or less always annoyed him when it came to any sort of personal involvement in mundane legal affairs.

Stopping before his office, he waited, as always, for the security protocols to confirm his identity.

“Call Janet and tell her to check—” he was saying to one of his bodyguards as he went up to his desk, when he suddenly saw them in the far opposite corner. He looked at them unpleasantly surprised.

“It couldn't be a more delightful evening, now could it, Billy?”

He didn't say anything.

Beckard, together with Edgar Shunningan and a few other men, were observing him in a mercilessly indifferent manner; he felt forebodingly unwell in the guts. He also noticed Beckard's bad physical condition, one of his legs having a fixed bracket-immobilizer and his left arm being bandaged and stiffened in suspending slacks; in his other hand he held a cane for support. They watched him persistently, intrusively—yet, it was that unremitting, voracious look of Beckard that always came across as if secretly conveying hidden messages of malevolent sort in a bold manner. Among them there was also a face which he'd spontaneously recognized, ready to bet his life that he'd seen the person before—it was that Agent, Michael Riverstone, whom Beckard had taken under his wing and who was supposed to have died in the crash a couple of hours ago:

it was reported to him that he was a deadman for sure, that his automobile had caught fire and that it was seen spinning and plunging down, and yet here he was, standing before him with only minor bruises his face had suffered.

“Billy, man, get the fuck out of here!” he suddenly heard a whimpering scream he could never mistake.

Lying on the floor and hidden by the main window’s enveloping curtains, two of the men lifted up and brought the tied man who was beaten up to such an extent that he was left hardly recognizable: entire parts of his suit were torn up, and he was abundantly covered in blood with most of his front teeth knocked out.

“They’ll fucking kill you, Billy!”

But as soon as he said those words, he was gunned down by that same Agent who, during the entire time, had been holding a blaster behind his back in readiness. A single shot was all that was needed for his body to drop on the ground and wriggle in its last throes. He did it just as Beckard had instructed him beforehand who, at that moment, was in an ecstatic mood and whose dilapidated pupils were entrenched at the sight of the dead body, yet trying to contain his sadistic excitement to a certain minimum. Billy was stupefied.

It took him a second or so for the initial shock to pass away, after which, uttering a loud cry and then some unintelligible words, he began to pull out his gun. But what escaped him was that one of his men behind him had already swung his blaster, its rigid handle landing on the back of his head which caused him to fall prone before he’d even realized it. His vision temporarily blurred, he made an effort to stand up again, but all of a sudden found his head pressed against the ground, the same man having stepped on his head.

“16 years, Billy. *16 fucking years,*” Beckard said as he began to slowly walk up to him. “To think that it took me that many years to find out that you and your brother were nothing but a pair of pathetic, detestable weaklings.” He didn’t come any closer to him, but rather stood where he couldn’t see him anymore, panting heavily. “You’re not even worthy to look at me; your mere gaze fills me with repugnance. You are a pest to society and everything I stand

for, and so was your pathetic brother. You disgust me.” He turned even farther away. “And yes, it does hurt. But it hurts nowhere as near as it’s about to hurt *you*.”

Suddenly, one of the men next to Shunningan stepped forth with a machete in his hand. Billy saw him coming towards him and then halting just within his sight.

“Fuck you and go to hell, motherfucker!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. Several moments later, a drastic and unexpected euphoric change seized him, and he began to laugh hysterically, to the point of nearly choking. “You think *they* will let you get away with this? Huh? Oh, you’re in for one hell of a surprize!”

Beckard, turning around to behold him for one last time, smiled innocently.

“They already did.”

Just as he was about to say something again, what were high-strained vociferations quickly turned into gargles of drowning suffocation that ceased after the third and final cleave. The carpet beneath him absorbed all the blood that was expelled.

After a prolonged moment of quiet stillness, Beckard was yet again reminded of his pressing matters.

Part 5

Chapter I

Readjustments

It was 01:45 AM. After everyone but Cassidy had left the medical facility, they had to go back to the same place not so far off the “Extravaganza Erotica” nightclub where Miles—having already become irritably impatient—awaited them. There was rainfall and the wet streets had become as if polished and emblazoned by the moderate precipitation and the disarray of excessive artificial colours.

Throughout most of the major streets a barely audible ambient plucking of a disorganized monophonic melody imbued the moisturized air with its ethereal and mitigating sensitivity, the complex walkway and road sensory module slates ingrained into the surface reacting to each separate raindrop that in turn produced a series of notes within a limited octave range, each one morphing and accruing in intensity, and each one resembling the sound produced by a harp. At some places where the rainfall was stronger the harmonics was perceived more loudly and distinct, and at others where it barely drizzled the sound effect was deadened.

Gathered on Nastasya’s convertible stepping platform, they were probing the reliability of their position on top of the building close to the nightclub where the police and the firefighters had already cleared out, just as Miles had assured them. At that moment’s Nastasya’s stealth mode was turned off.

“We didn’t know we were made,” Clara was summarizing their stakeout when she and Darren had split from the rest. “He knew we’d go after him right away like rabbits chasing a carrot on a stick, it all played out just like he’d intended.”

According to her words, the car they were after never really made a landing, and after spending some time in the air going nowhere and in circles, they finally figured out that they'd been duped.

Miles' myths, however, had apparently not been taken into consideration by Beckard's men, which allowed the former to track the two cars' full route.

"As soon as the four cars took off, the first thing I noticed," Miles said as he showed them an elaborate 3D map on his portable workstation of the two myths' aerial imprints with some other unknown patterns and delineations, "was the detection of a weak radioactive signal surrounding one of them; the other three didn't emit any radioactivity. I triplechecked and although it could be barely registered, there could be no mistake about it."

"Radioactive signal?" Clara asked in disbelief.

"Yep. I thought it might be a malfunction or some minor error in the analytic transferal circuits, but it wasn't—10 to 20 roentgens on the variable, might be a little higher considering the distance. See here," he pointed the clearly defined pulsating line on the map, "this was their route's endpoint—approximately speaking—and it can be traced all the way back to the nightclub."

"What was the two cars' final destination?" Gregory, still recuperating, asked Miles.

"For some reason it happened to be a dead zone," he began zooming in as he moved away the redundant topographic elements, "broadcasting went haywire and nothing could go in and out of it. It's why I said it was the aeromobiles' approximate endpoint—they vanished off the radar the moment they crossed it, after which I had to pull off the myths."

"But this is one of the city's repository sites," Amanda joined, nodding at the screen, "what business do they have there?"

"Well," Miles began, again with the already familiar to her and Gregory gloating self-satisfactory expression, "there actually is a reasonable explanation for this." He started typing on the keyboard, bringing about a decrypted file under the name *COMP~PACK_501229/2341{17}*. "Billy McCarter's special gift to

us. I hope you haven't forgotten about it?" smiling, he turned toward Collins. "I went through all of it, and what I found after discovering the dead zone was that that area coincides with the location of one of those four constructions our chap Billy mentioned and included in the package. Here the visualizing codec shows that it's this very same repository site."

They all stared at the selected space on the small monitor; the rainfall began to gradually weaken.

Miles then began loading another file from the same folder, a compilation mount of the whole data presented as a navigable mapbox.

"Wait till you see the scale and the intricacy of the whole thing. And to think it's only a raw fraction of the actual complete file."

Billy McCarter's data package contained the following: the confirmed location of each of the four Constructions, an incomplete blueprint of their structure, and unconfirmed demo trials of their functioning and interactions with one another, which were nothing but thousands of lines of analytical numbers that didn't mean anything to them.

Scattered at even intervals, their positions formed a perfectly symmetrical rhombus, each one being named according to their respective position, namely the Northern, Eastern, Western, and Southern Constructions. The distance between each of the four Constructions was exactly seven kilometres, and its centre—just as Billy McCarter had divulged to them—happened to be the city powerplant.

The information about the South Construction was the most comprehensive of the four and it consisted of a mere piece of hardware already implanted into the Orton State's Regulatory Infrastructural Network Centre. It was a sort of a small angular integrator, Miles showed to them on the display. Technical details about its functioning and mechanism were missing in the file, the only thing that was known about the way it worked being that it somehow redirected part of the absorbed input traffic stream that circulated throughout the entire state's territory and which ended right at the

Regulatory Infrastructural Network Centre during a 12-hour periodic intercrossing window. The graphics also showed that it was one of the Centre's main regenerating cores into which it was inserted, and the only way one could possibly get through to it without the 5-step authorization hassle was by the emergency maintenance tunnel.

"Here Billy's included the confirmed identities to which the cores' maintenance task is assigned," Miles said. "Three of them have shortcut access privileges, so we only need the *courtesy* of one of them to get in. Good thing that we have a secured access to the first two levels out of three, the third being the control section where both the cores and the maintenance tunnels are. However, the problem with the security guards and god knows how many cameras remains, it might be a flip-coin with this, so whoever goes in there should watch their six; I'd gladly help, but their security system is too sophisticated to breach it for such a short time."

The Northern Construction was the alleged checkpoint of the two cars Miles' myths had followed. It was one of the several Recycling Depositories in Orton and its web-tangled underground pipe system spread out far into the city and back, suctioning and disposing of the waste matter gathered for processing. There were 4 main exit outlets that were under the control of the Main Centre which, according to the data package, were a crucial part of the proper functioning of the Construction. Miles pointed out that he would handle that one, since—after a thorough acquainting with the whole waste complex's details—there were a couple of water-cooling steam valves through which the myths could slip in and make their way through.

"It's worth mentioning by the way," he remarked, "that one of the pipes is directly tied to the Energy Mecca."

"Where we found those glowing cylindrical reservoirs," Collins recalled.

"The thermonuclear stabilizer."

"That metal briefcase that Beckard carried with him at the nightclub, it must've been the same radioactive source you detected." He suddenly remembered that there was a reason for his thinking back then that he'd seen it somewhere—the one they found

in Shunningan's car at the 'Rickman' Hotel had the exact same look, only that it was empty.

"Metal briefcase?"

"He carried something like a briefcase when he got out of that room. And now that I think of it, another one was found a week ago inside Shunningan's crashed car outside the 'Rickman' Hotel. That one was empty, though."

"Well, that's news to me. But it doesn't do much."

"What, you think they dump radioactive material into the Recycling Depository?" Darren suggested, turning to Miles and Collins baffled. "Hornsermium?"

"They technically do it by default," Miles riveted his head halfway around. "After the threshing process, the residue material which is called *scrabshells* is left out for a reuse. After a second threshing a lesser substance they call *chaffsilk* is left out as a result of that separation—basically a useless dreg with no further applicability—which in turn is sent through the waste pipe directly to the Depository. But the whole amount of *chaffsilk* produced for a month, let alone for a day, is so insignificant and meagre, that even though it still retains some minimal radioactive qualities, it can't be used for anything practicable and useful, so they pack it and ship it off to some wasteland. However, they might be mixing the stabilizer with it."

"But what's stopping them from putting in hornsermium as well?" Amanda turned to him eagerly. "I see the pipes as the easier means of transportation than taking the unnecessary and troublesome risk of doing it at intervals by air."

"They can't—the suction force can trigger an atomic splitting. Besides, while you were gone, I scanned for radioactive activity throughout the entire pipe's length and found nothing."

"As far as I get it," Collins said, "they transport it by air. So the element in question cannot be hornsermium?"

"Like I said, very unlikely. Seeing the powerplant being the culminating centerpiece, it doesn't make much sense to apply one and the same substance to the end-product from two different

sources and expect a reaction. Still, we can only speculate at this point—we don't and probably won't know until the very end what exactly we're dealing with, it might be a different—although weaker—element like uranium or polonium or something entirely novel they've been working on behind closed doors. But the latter remains highly unlikely.”

“Hey, kiddo,” Goranov suddenly rasped, coming closer to them and then stooping over Miles' shoulder, “how're you going to send your little golems and navigate them from afar when you yourself said there's a blocking field that prevents you from doing so?” He smiled, prodding his arm in an irksome manner.

“In theory it could work, since they are operated semi-autonomously. But of course, there are some downsides that can't be avoided and which could quickly lead to a fuckup: for example, the correct running of the pre-written commands can be guaranteed insofar as there won't be any unanticipated or, likewise, unincluded codelines that could lead to a debug crash. Every command codeline is in and of itself a prescript manual that the more guidelines and predictive simulative events it recycles, the more successful and prolonged its task completion can be. For that matter, the encounter with even an unincluded wall or other object could hinder their task-run—that is, the more unanticipated objects they face, the more the chance for a total clusterfuck grows. That doesn't mean there aren't ways to insure yourself, though, and in order to make the running of the codelines as impeccable as possible, I can load a predictive software that is based on the interpolation and multiplying of many different derivative combinations that would be obtained as the miths advance; Billy's package contains nothing regarding the number of personnel or loops in the security system, but I'll see if I could extract something from the state database depending on the time we have. Once I gain access to the control centre's servers, the miths will load a cold-booted malware, which shouldn't take long to come into effect.”

The Eastern Construction was, to everyone's surprise, located on the territory of one of the busier and crowded parts of the city: the Orton International Airport was an entirely different case

that required a careful and diligent approach, as flights from all major parts of the world, including from the country, took place by the hour with thousands of passengers moving in and out of the airport. Billy's information stated that the unique aspect of the East Construction was that it wasn't an already in-built machinery, but rather a moveable object concealed amid aircrafts and people alike, ready to be used at the right moment when it would be transported to a specified spot—technical specifics were absent from the package, only that it was a kind of a resonating technology that employed the workings of dual-counteracting electromagnetic toroids that unleashed a strong energy discharge. It wasn't known at what time exactly it would be moved or smuggled in, only that the Construction would be hidden inside a regular passenger airplane that would blend in with the others.

"Whoever has an itching for this one," Miles said, loading on his workstation a comprehensive visualization of the entirety of the airport, including a live tracking of each of the departing and arriving aircrafts, "they'll have to think of a quick and efficient method for discovering the right plane." At that time there were about 9 planes simultaneously on the move, and many more in the hangars.

"I can only imagine what it would really look like if something went wrong," said Gregory. "There are probably several thousand people right now, to say the least it's a pretty big responsibility."

"You betcha."

The Western Construction was situated inside the already abandoned "Thespian House" Theatre where, according to the data package, there was an easy way by which the whole thing could be sabotaged directly—albeit manually: all that was needed was the typing of one particular verse from a 19th-century English poem in the control panel hidden in an unknown place somewhere in the building. Of course, not a small number of Beckard's men were expected to be overlooking it.

"At first glance it might seem reasonably doable without being much of a gamble, but in all honesty I wouldn't consider it a

walk in the store either. At least the theatre affords some discretion though, judging by the area where it's at—it's a sparse and usually calm neighbourhood."

After a quick discussion and an evaluation of the matter at hand, it was concluded that the South Construction be assigned to Clara and Darren, the Northern—to Miles, the Eastern to Goranov, and the Western to Gregory and Amanda.

"Comrade," the Russian turned to Collins with a serious voice, the heavy accent adding to it an even graver impression, "it's not a one man's job to dive in so recklessly. You sure you can handle the powerplant?"

"Yes, you needn't worry about that."

The rainfall had ceased and at that moment Collins could feel all over his hardened body the cold damp air meeting with and evaporating his skin's sweat under his clothes; he had turned his attention to the city powerplant and his mind was preoccupied with the wishful possibility of finally putting an end to this, a subliminal undercurrent of some strong unnameable force dragging him further and deeper away into something he'd sooner or later have to stand against, the odds and outcome uncertain and misleading. Although it no longer rained, a certain sensuous pulverization kept stinging at his shoulders.

Suddenly, they felt a weak earthquake. They stepped out of the aircraft.

"What was that?"

Immediately after Amanda's question a second, stronger one, shook them and the surrounding buildings. As they began to look around and down at the streets, a deep overarching murmur gradually started to pick at their ears, increasing and growing louder and denser and as if it were coming from every side thoroughly resonant and ominous. They could barely hear each other because of it, and at one point, as it had just reached a deafening apex, it seemed to them that it would dislocate and bring everything about down, including the sky itself.

It didn't take long until the booming noise began mellowing out, and soon, its palpable tensivity decreasing, it finally died off. Gregory then felt something cold on his cheek which had immediately melted into a water droplet, and by the time he reached for his face another instance of the same tingling had occurred, this time on the tip of his nose.

“Is it snowing?”

“It can't be. During this time of the year?”

Everyone was dumbfounded at the unexpected snowfall as it whitened the murky dark sky, incredulously watching the multitude of sparse snowflakes falling on and covering for a brief moment their heads, faces and clothes. And just like the preceding loud sound, the snowfall slowly began to decrease until it completely ceased away.

Chapter II

All or Nothing

It was a little after 2AM.

The state's Regulatory Infrastructural Network Centre was a massive pentangular building and from within its walls antennal towers, bandwidth conductors and synchronic stators thrust out and were elevated on high in a seemingly unorderly fashion. Outside its confines Clara and Darren were heading toward its entry barrier which was the first security level out of three.

"What's next?" Darren turned to her as the aeromobile remained hovering at a near-ground altitude in front of the entry in the designated holographic markings for authorization scan.

Suddenly, they saw two small buzzers appearing out of their nests and beginning to encircle them procedurally; each one had lighting scan indicators equipped on their bodies, and no sooner had they tried to figure out what was happening than they realized they'd become eligible for access, the buzzers returning to their lock-nests; before long the entry portal was suddenly opened and they entered.

Landing, they stepped out of the car and went for one of the many transporters. They selected the main floor which also served as the redirecting place to all other parts of the Network Centre, including the control section whence they would get to the cores.

When the doors unfolded and the two stepped out, the first persons they met were two janitors and a clerk who passed by them without even looking at them. They began walking in one direction in search of an intermediary door that was supposed to lead them to Level 2.

"Found it," Darren whispered surreptitiously.

It was a hard-graven text that read:

SECTOR 2

ANALYSES & DATA RETRIEVAL

Unsure, Darren pressed the button for retina scanning, a single dazzle going through his vision; but the door remained closed.

“Let *me* try.”

Trying for the second time, right after Clara’s eyes were scanned the door opened.

“How the hell did Billy got himself a high-res sample of your retina?”

They went in.

“I assume from the archived civilian database, after all I was an Orton citizen before they officially deemed me ‘deceased’ for political purposes.”

The place they entered was radically different: save the appearance and every other superficial detail, here they right away noticed that there were considerably more camera units fixed on to the ceiling corners, including an increased security personnel put at watch-stations. Immediately after showing up, one of the guards seemed to have been attracted by their presence, throwing at them looks of untrustful intentions.

“Already got some admirers here,” Darren hinted to Clara of the security guard’s being aware of them, which in turn caused them to start walking in the opposite direction with the hope of blending in with the others.

For a while they kept a passive gait until they lost him, whereupon the began looking for the intermediary door that led to the innermost third Level.

“I lost count of the cameras, they’re literally everywhere.” They tried to come off as nonchalantly as possible, realizing their own intrusiveness. “We’ll probably have to make a showcase.”

They went on as their time ran out. In the meantime Clara kept her player open, looking out for the person that would match a semblance with one of the three facial identities Billy had included in the package.

“That one,” she turned to Darren furtively.

Slowing down, Darren stepped up to a tall 30-something-year-old man wearing protective goggles pulled back over his head who was just about to enter through a Sector 3 door. Taking out his blaster carefully and warily from his tweed vest, he pointed it against the man.

“Shout and I’ll smoke you. We go in together.”

After having moved to a more solitary and isolated place where he wouldn’t be disturbed from the street noise, Miles was applying final corrections to the malware script his miths would load into the Recycling Depository’s operating system, which was the most delicate and mind-absorbing part, as the intended effect was not to bring about a total breakdown of the system, but to temporarily halt it without causing devastating damage that could shut down half the city for days.

Wireless file transfer complete appeared on the screen and immediately after that a partial vectoral indicator gleaming against the cylindrical machines’ bodies made a confirming sound.

A distinct steam-rolling expulsion was suddenly heard from somewhere close: the jet vents had been ignited and accelerated, and the live-tracking program was put on full screen as he saw two long dim trails curving northward before they eventually faded out in the dark sky.

As the two flickering circularities approached the boundary of the Northern Construction’s muted zone, they began to slowly disappear from off the screen, their shapes becoming irregular and liquified until finally disintegrating into digital dust.

Soon the miths came to an aligning point with the Depository’s water-cooling steam valves and, shattering through their fragile meshwork and plunging deep down the line as intended, they prepared for firing their back-rolling harpoon grapples. Exiting the narrow steam tunnel, they released their harpoon grapples just before diving into the water basin, whereafter they began to drag on as the airborne pressure fuming from their engines stirred and left a bubbled path behind them. Unhooking their harpoon grapples after

coming out of the water and entering another tunnel opening, they continued according to their pre-written course to one of the many sprawling points.

It didn't took them long to reach their penultimate destination, and having detected the vent side-opening which they were about to enter by default, one of them began drilling it with its conical spike maw; they passed through it when the last piece was shredded out.

Beginning to hear a strange forced noise coming from above, the small group of engineers who were on a night shift immediately called for armed assistance as per instruction. A few civilian men then came in, pointing their automatic weapons up at the ceiling where the drilling grew louder and more aggressive.

Contrary to their expectations, the thing—or rather the things—appeared at once without prolongation nor freefall, bursting open a wide portion of the thick ceiling and creating a haze of grinded hard elements and engine steam that made the firing at them troublesome and dangerous. Before even approximately estimating their size or shape, several of them fell under their cutting spinning maws which in turn created a friendly fire, the few left alive brought down gravely wounded and bleeding quickly.

After having compulsorily meandered several times in circles due to their unalterable pre-programmed attack runtime, the two cylindrical machines glided up toward the Depository's control room.

Surrounded by thousands of arriving and departing on-the-move passengers, Goranov was patiently and almost leisurely moseying through the gigantic airport complex, moving from one terminal to another hardly disturbed by the excessive commotion. Having decided to take a short break and stop for a moment to gain a wider perspective and get used to the massive scale of the terrain, he was now leaning against the main terminal's aberrantly undulating widespread glass panel whence he'd adopted a clear vista of most of the things outside: the runways and the corridors between them locked in an enhanced self-regulating checkpoint system

together with some of the landing and taking-off sharp-pointed planes that were visible in the far distance along the covered jet bridges exiting deep into the plain concrete land distinctly lit by the oneiric lighting system that amplified the spatial immersion where automatized cargo motorcars and forklifts and tottering safety personnel seemed to be lost, looking completely alien to the place.

He was thinking about Nastasya at that moment and the place where he'd stashed her, about the present distempering situation and how everything could more than easily take a 180° turn before he could even realize it—something had to happen, he thought, nervously tweaking his moustache—*anything, anytime*.

After a couple of more minutes spent in irresolute restlessness, he decided to step in over to one of the relaying gliders that would carry him back to the southeastern terminal, but before going halfway through the way the accidental subliminal impression of something outside was strong enough to bring him back to the glass panel. As he got closer to it the accidental impression was instantly turned into a good enough reason for him to consider a more staunch approach, marking that one special airplane that was the only one positioned differently among the rest in the stand-by zone.

Stopping a security officer nearby, he said to him in an urgent voice:

“I think I saw a suspicious guy in the stand-by zone. You should immediately send—”

The security officer cut him short crassly, his attitude becoming antagonistic and authoritative as soon as he heard Goranov speak.

“Please, follow me,” he said almost threateningly, standing beside him and grabbing his elbow, his other hand demonstratively put over his holster as he was careful enough not to cause any disturbance. Goranov complied.

Along the way two more officers joined them, the group now heading towards the checkrooms and interrogation rooms out of everyone's sight; no one said a word. Entering one of the

windowless interrogation rooms and closing the door, two of the security officers began frisking him; they found nothing.

Endeavouring to assess their mood, Goranov spoke, but the second he opened his mouth he was arrogantly and hostilely told not to say another word, two of the officers then handcuffing him and putting him in a chair where he was not to get up. After that the three men left the interrogation room, and he remained alone looking at the camera over him wherewith he was most probably surveilled at the moment.

Soon a representative of the airport security administration entered, a man in his late 50's whose feline-looking eyes permeated through obscured, brown-tinted glasses. His identifying badge read: *Neil Fitzpatrick, Airport Security Director*. He remained standing next to the table two steps away from him, acting as if trying to deliberately intimidate him.

“Mister...?”

“Goranov. Mikhail Goranov.”

“Mr. Goranov, would it be wrong on my side if I said that I needn't even ask you for an ID-plat, since you never had one to begin with?”

“No. You're quite correct in your assumption that I don't have an ID-plat.”

“I'm glad we're standing in agreement so far. However, our facial recognition system says that you *do* have a temporary permit for the state of Orton, though, issued by the Intelligence Department... that had expired a year and a half ago. What happened, Mr. Goranov? Time seems to fly slowly in this part of the world?”

Goranov was beginning to enjoy it, but he had to speed things up: resting his foot on his knee as he tried to make the movement come across as naturally as possible, he carefully reached for his boot and unpinned something; the camera was facing him from the opposite direction, which was something he didn't have to worry about. He pressed the button, put the controller back inside his shoe, and now all he had to do was wait.

“I was just about to take the first flight back home.”

The security director looked at him disdainfully.

“Your cynicism won’t lead you anywhere.” It had become evident to Goranov by then that the man didn’t care about following any obligatory professional conduct—rather, he already knew who he was as well as his shady intentions which had been revealed to him in advance, and the Russian was contently aware of that.

“Zero fucks given, huh? Even when there might be an explosive planted somewhere in the airport? I know where it is. Aren’t you supposed to take claims like this seriously here?”

“I’ve had enough of it.”

Stepping back, the security director looked towards the camera after which he left the room. Soon two officers—this time different ones—appeared; one of them took out his gun and was about to point it at Goranov if it wasn’t for the alarm activation that threw them into confusion: the crucial moment Goranov depended on had come, if belatedly.

For a moment the two men seemed to be at a loss and undecided of what to do. Eventually, both walked out of the interrogation room in a hurry.

Just as Goranov had hoped, the door remained unlocked due to the fire alarm.

The old “Thespian House” was a long-time abandoned theatre engulfed in darkness and teeming with dust day in and day out, the building itself having become an indistinguishable part of the drab empty streets of the still underdeveloped neighbourhood, remaining merely a bygone architectural residue against a shallow depravity. The area was mostly empty and scantily lit by the few working corroded lampposts which made visible what was left of the courtyard’s unmaintained and overgrown greenery. Nearby it Amanda and Gregory had just stepped onto the sidewalk across the street towards the beat-up stone steps that led to the two-storey building. In that late hour the only thing they heard was the lonesome noise of the splatter they made as they walked.

“How many do you think there are inside?” Amanda turned to Gregory as the two stood in front of the silent theatre, waiting behind a poplar.

“More than a few, that’s for sure.”

They began feeling an unbidden tension spiralling down their legs, thinking how vulnerable and exposed they were as they feared that the whole area might be under a watch at that moment. They were both looking at the same indistinct shape on the ground near the fence and eventually decided to go and see what it was all about.

Getting closer, they saw that it was actually a makeshift plastic shelter wherein three homeless men lay down, dozing. Their clothes were all tattered and crusted with dirt, their beards and hair unkempt and tousled; a strong odour hit the two as soon as they approached them.

“What’re you doing?”

But Amanda quickly understood what he was planning to do.

Leaning down and stretching out his hand, Gregory began to slowly pull out something next to the homeless with draped winter gloves who was snoring loudly. Taking what he needed, he and Amanda then stepped aside and went back.

“It reeks,” Amanda said, looking with revulsion at the old and patched at several places towel.

“No second thoughts, you understand?”

Going up to the iron fence and fetching some mud from the elevated courtyard, he then began to thoroughly smear his face and hair, after which he put on the dirty towel. Amanda sunk into amused disbelief.

“You really intend to do it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s just... absurd. I don’t think you’ll fool anyone.”

“You need to trust me, okay? Come on.”

Although unwilling, she assented without saying anything, since she knew there was no better alternative at that moment.

As he started going up the wide stairs of the theatre with the towel wrapped around his shoulders, he suddenly halted, seeing an empty tin can on one of the steps; he took it. He proceeded to climb up the stairs, at the same time feigning a lurch. Reaching the double-door, he first tried to open it, but as he'd expected, it was locked from inside.

He then began to persistently knock on it and to shout unintelligible implorations, not long after which a cracking sound came off from the other side before one of the doors was opened.

"You lookin' for problems? Get the hell outta here," a visibly angered man stepped out from across the doorstep.

"Please, some water will do..."

"Didn't you hear what I just said?" getting closer to the bum, the man slapped the tin can out of his hand. He began to shove him back.

"Don't be like that, sir, please... water... please..."

But the bum persisted and didn't give way that easily, which surprised the man, seeing how he had a lot of stored physical vigour for a homeless.

During this time Amanda was giving an ear to everything that happened a couple of metres away from her, waiting crouched under one of the outer windowsills and preparing to get in. The voices got louder, and at the onset of the altercation she heard hastening steps passing by her and going in the direction of the entrance door. She jumped over, making no noise at all.

Expectedly, it was darker inside; the air was stagnant and a whirl of dust had surrounded her. It was a big acting hall and most of the seats were carved out with their upholstery ripped off, remnants of long discoloured draperies hanging from on high and entire wooden planks missing from the floor; not so far off there were parts of the opposite wall that were scorched black, possibly from a fire many years ago, and as she tried to accustom her vision to the barely lit building she'd already entangled herself in a number of cobwebs.

With the help of her blaster's small LED battery indicator, she successfully walked out of the acting hall until finding herself standing in the middle of what she thought was the main hallway. She could still hear the mingled voices and the ruckus just outside down the entrée, but among these Gregory's voice stood out the most, making her feel beyond uneasy and thus even more compelled to quickly find the control panel. Still not able to distinguish things very clearly, she began walking and at the same time holding her blaster in front of her as she tried to sneak into some other room as stealthily as possible.

Gregory. The control panel. The construction. The poem lines. Those things, as well as the other men in the theatre made her experience a brief overwhelming episode of constriction followed by a shortness of breath.

Suddenly, she saw a very dim blue gleam creeping out of one of the rooms along the hallway; entering, she immediately came across two glowtorches glued to the wall that provided a sufficient enough light for her to see and discern what was in the empty gathering room. There was a row of a couple of overturned marble busts right next to her except for three which were still upright, one of those turning out to be the bust of the person named George Gordon Byron—the author of the poem that contained the key lines for the Western Construction's control—his birth and death dates inscribed below.

But before she could even begin to examine it, all of her hopes were suddenly thwarted by a gunshot she heard in the direction of the entryway; another one followed, and at the third and final one she ran away and headed for the entrance door.

Chapter III

“The Night is Ours”

Everyone who passed him by dismissed and outright ignored the man sitting on the bench all by himself without even minding his abnormally undisturbed and stupefied state and lividly pale face in the overly crowded public space. The only thing they saw in the man, if only in a brief glimpse, was the visage of a tired, desperate man whose condition had further deteriorated as though he were left without a choice or chance to mitigate his situation or simply escape reality. But none of the passers-by had even the slightest idea of what was actually going on, of what was to come and of what they were about to go through soon: at that moment each one of them, as well as every other person in the city, was carrying on with their lives as usual without even realizing that their fates and those of their loved ones hanged on a very loose thread. What was at stake, what was gambled as a collateral was currently carefreely and listlessly walking by right before his eyes, life as he'd known it continuing with its steady, ostensibly predefined current as if forever fortified from any danger or deviation whatsoever, yet all the same the likelihood of a sudden demise—the sudden annihilation of that same life he'd been partaking in—heavily resting on his troubled mind and giving him not even a moment of peace.

While Collins sat there perusing the unchecked flow of his scattered thoughts that struggled with his own circumstantial existence on an even more circumstantial night, it seemed to him that the barrier between himself and ten million others had started to grow more and more, the gap between them widening at an incredibly fast rate.

It finally caught up to him.

Standing up and beginning to mosey around, something suddenly stopped him, ferociously and inexorably.

*Don't jump into the abyss... they're already all doomed...
you can't save them... don't jump into the abyss...*

Confused and almost on the brink of having a raving fit, he turned around dizzy and disbalanced to see where the voice came from, but at the present time there was no one near him: the voice was in his head, and it wasn't his own; yet, it were as if he himself had spoken it.

Gathering himself and putting his thoughts back in order, he resumed his walk.

Within several kilometres there wasn't anything other that surrounded the city powerplant save the encompassing it 6-metre-high spikewall and the several interconnected transfer substations placed throughout the entire naked area. All the while there was a series of minor static spark actuations whose random and hectic frizzling dissolution along the wires covered and stretched out over the whole space as a result of the constant cycling power and its current alteration.

He was approaching the building at a rapidly accelerating speed, keeping a straightforward course within maximumly adjusted check-values as the blipping sound messages of several cautionary indicators on the dashboard went off the charts. He was aiming for the narrow glass indentation which was the second one out of three—the only openings towards the outside world.

Suddenly, at the last one hundred and fifty metres and already having brought the car to a low altitude, he pulled the break exhausters, after which a loud grating noise rebounded throughout the whole vehicle, the car itself beginning to spin around its axis for a brief time before it broke through the hard narrow glass and, lifting a cloud of singed smoke, hit against an inside wall. Dizzy because of the crash, he slipped over and got out of the aeromobile, stumbling and lurching and heavily disoriented while still leaning back against the vehicle trying not to collapse before making it out of there.

All that he heard was a continuous suppressive implosion of discombobulating noises that belatedly got to his ears, and having vaguely discerned some of the machinery and computer boards mixed up with an intermittent ubiquitous red tint, he recognized it

as the alarm while following with his eyes the very few remaining people who were running out of the hall. Before long he realized that there was no one in the damaged room except him, whereupon he pulled out his blaster and began walking up to the exit door with painful effort where he could already hear the multitudinous racket of contagious panic.

Walking out, he was met by two armed security guards approaching him from the other end, their weapons already pulled out. He saw that they didn't dare to shoot yet, at least not before they had a good view of him. Wishing to evade a direct confrontation at all costs, he started off in the opposite direction where a large group of technicians had gathered trying to fix some urgent circuitual malfunction.

Trying to swiftly and adroitly evade anyone who followed him and at the same time keeping his gun in readiness beneath his overcoat, he managed to escape—if only for a while—after having attempted many intercrossings between different corridor sections, each of which were getting progressively more confusing. At long last he found himself in an empty space the lightning installation of which didn't work, and in front of him there was a wall-ladder reaching up into the ceiling where there was some sort of an emergency iron hatchway.

On the same wall and next to the small ladder he could plainly read a warning phosphorescent text that prohibited any entering of what was supposedly a *prioritized emergency access*.

At that instant the circular hatch began to unfold, preceded by muffled voices coming from the other side, upon which he immediately went into the closest side room along the corridor where he hid himself behind the ajar door, expecting someone to come down at any moment. Before long a man in a dull-grey workers suit who carried in his hand an analytical device showed up, and right after him another one wearing the same clothing and carrying a foldable workbox. The two began exchanging seemingly offhand remarks which Collins could scarcely hear from his position, and shortly after that two uniformed men appeared out of nowhere, joining them: they were security guards, possibly part of the same group

that had chased him moments ago, who appeared to have been assigned the exigent task of keeping a watch over the hatchway.

The technicians were now gone, and the sudden subliminal upsurge of unanswered questions made him unable to think in practical terms and deal with the situation accordingly.

He looked around in the small dark room, skimming through what he thought to be almost full wastebins and other plastic containers where similar clothing was disposed together with other supplementary items. He kept the door nearly shut, allowing only a minimum amount of light to come through the small recess, still keeping an eye over the two security guards standing next to the ladder in mute silence, gripping the warm steel of his blaster and holding the doorknob with the other hand while he tried to evaluate whether they were quick enough to draw out their guns before he could establish a dominant position.

“Don’t push your luck!” he burst out of the room trying not to raise his voice more than was necessary. But one of the security guards, sensing Collins’ presence a fraction of a second earlier than his colleague and who happened to have his hand resting on his holster, had already begun pulling out his blaster when the shot foregone by a quick intermediate flash went through his chest, killing him instantaneously.

The other guard’s only reaction was a silent and compliant affright, immediately putting his hands above his head after having thrown his gun at the man’s feet as ordered who, in turn, was visibly injured and distressed, having an unhealthy look to his face.

“Open it!”

“I can’t, I’m only—”

Another flash of a thermal-ionized beam ruptured the air with a diluted yellow hot waver, passing less than ten centimetres from the guard’s head and leaving a big mark on the wall. The sound of scurrying steps and a multi-voiced murmur was then heard coming from the floor’s close quarters, but Collins seemed to be more preoccupied with the matter at hand than with the approaching steps.

“Please, I’m telling you the truth! I can’t open it, others can!”

“What’s up there?”

“It’s an emergency access... don’t you see?” the guard turned around his head indicatively toward the white phosphorescent text behind him.

“Access to what?”

“I don’t know, man!”

Whether the uniformed man spoke the truth or not didn’t matter to him anymore: he couldn’t afford any further tarrying so he backed off after having picked up the guards’ guns and went ahead of the men who were speedily coming after him, moving from one place to another and making several turns without stopping until he thought to have temporarily evaded whoever was after him. His struggle to keep balance was becoming more and more evident.

Reaching what he thought to be a remoter part of the building—although completely lost by now and having no idea how much he’d advanced—which appeared like the beginning of an exit way and where there was no one around, he followed the vivid holographic signs on the wall until he eventually emerged into an open space where there was a small empty emergency lift between the third and second floors. Along the edge of the ramped square stand there were signalling lights that showed its exact boundary; stepping forth, he measured that at that moment he was standing at about 70 metres above the ground.

Right then he began to hear once again the not so distant advancing multitude as well as the command shouts given by leading men, but instead of going back on the same route he entered the lift which began to carry him down after the doorlid was locked and a scarce light was turned on. All the time he was aware that the cameras which were all over the building had already composed an instant facial print, and no matter how much he ran and mixed in with the others, his position would always be known and fast-tracked and his next move algorithmically predicted even before he himself knew it. His personal blaster’s battery level was critically low, and

he didn't have any spare battery-mags, however, the gun he'd taken from the security guard had more than enough to get him through whatever followed next.

Shots were suddenly fired at him.

He knew that those were the same people that were after him—they'd never lost track of him, and he was now preparing to face the consequences of the risk he'd taken. The fire was unceasing, and the lift's reinforced steel was beginning to melt and its roll-spinners giving way while red-heated splotches appeared on the roof; he reckoned it was very likely that he would not get far enough before the whole cage either stuck due to malfunction or straightaway detached from the suspending rails.

He could already sense the molten heat and sulphurous smell that wafted through and around the lift. It began to give signs of inability to keep itself steady as it skipped through the railing jags on a freefall and then abruptly stopped and slowed down, each consecutive leap giving the impression that it would be the last one. There were still some ten metres left until the next stop, but he knew that the lift wouldn't handle another sudden skip, seeing how some of the railing holders were also damaged from the plasma shots and were practically attached to nothing: the whole cabin were as if left hanging on a single loose bolt while perniciously hot sooths of liquified metal were being spewed out; he no longer returned the fire, being entirely focused on keeping himself safe from the assaulting thermal-ionized onslaught whose colour in the dark still air drew in around itself a blue-tinted haze. Not knowing how, he fell.

As he fell along with it, the only thought that occurred to him was that his body would be later found smashed on the ground pressed under the lift, but by some chance the time it took for him to meet a hard surface was way shorter than expected. Having landed on his right arm, he got up, the falling cabin bumping between concrete walls, already completely detached from the railing and attracting with itself the last shots that came from above.

Waiting within the concrete recess and considering his limited available options, the open emergency exit next to him letting a warm tempting air, he saw a small flying object in the distant veiled

sky taking a slow turn towards him and then getting nearer at a faster pace, like an expanding inanimate firefly.

Cassidy's sub-reactive phaeton made a soft and precise landing on the square stand, producing a loud stridency due to the three violently hissing churning motors through which the sucked air was being expelled from six different exhausters.

"You weren't supposed to be here."

"Neither were you." Without shutting off the engine, the cyborg began stationarily forcing the vehicle. "Cops are coming, just so you know."

"Doesn't matter," Collins said as he jumped over behind the cyborg, "I already know where to go."

They took off with the same easiness the phaeton had fixed itself with, and it was only a matter of time before they caught sight of the first red and blue glimmers across the meticulous star-filled cityscape. The central courtyard where the powerplant's energy transfer grid system was kept tightly sealed under a vast dome perforated by an arrangement of outstretched interlaid cables was seen like an infinitely dense matrix infused with a polarizing force that was harnessed by an elaborate setup of electrifying machines in perpetual motion.

"Can you make a quick scan from here?"

"I'm already on it. But there's too much ultraviolet intensification from the centre affecting it, and the accuracy of the electromagnetic spectrum might be a little off."

The frosty tempest swiping against Collins' face was beginning to sting his eyes and lips.

"There's something like a leak originating in the dome and ending in a place nearby the intermediary floor southeast of it."

She pointed to him the exact area her new, recently transplanted dioptric scanners highlighted through a high-res matching vision.

"The hatchway."

"What?"

"I need to get there. I need to go back inside."

Collins insisted they returned to the same open ramped square platform where the lift cabin had almost dragged him down with itself. Naturally, a thorough 4-dimensional scan of that part of the building was conducted, making sure there weren't any security guards there.

"We have to be mindful of the security cameras, they've got my facial and gait construction. Getting in will be easy, but getting out—not."

The phaeton's spurring engines flexed on to a backwards motion as the vehicle was coming down from a sharp angle, the cyborg initiating a landing. They entered through the emergency exit door.

Cassidy gave him the affirmative that they were good to move on, hastily going back the same way Collins had memorized. They found no security guards so far, although on one occasion they'd mistaken a clerk in a similar outfit and had almost shot him. A minute later and they were already standing by the ladder and under the same hatchway Collins didn't have the opportunity to delve through.

"People are coming," Cassidy warned him, "from both sides."

"Can you open it by force?"

"I'll try."

Resting her feet on the fourth step of the ladder, the cyborg grabbed the metal handle and began pushing it. Scarcely had she applied some force to it when the circular lid began moving on its own in a silent, automatic way, only now noticing its unworking fingerprint moduler.

"Would you look at that," Collins said bitterly; he started climbing. The sound of multiple and simultaneous thumping steps had just begun reaching his ears when they closed the hatch.

It was a strait musty passageway that felt comparably colder and damper, whose walls had a dull corrugated texture which appeared more sharpened under the insoluble dark-matte glow that

was unyielding to any other source of light until all the way to the end where another ladder was distinctly encircled by a luminous yellow-green ray. They headed up to it.

“Total signal breakdown,” the cyborg said. “Whatever’s causing it, it’s right ahead of us.”

They were beginning to hear and feel an impulsive rupturing struggle between manifold imploding forces that became more overwhelming as they randomly touched the dense trimmed walls which conveyed those same energies with a purer, unadulterated palpability. Going up the second solid metal ladder, they found themselves in an even shorter passageway at the end of which a light flimsy drape made of plastic fibres covered an entryway beyond which lied something of a much vaster expanse: a warm current dragged out of there before they even got close to it; the temperature difference was once again reversed.

They stepped over a thick grate floor that appeared to be reinforced with limpid heat-resistant fillings, and beneath them, through a dimming filter in the filling material, they perceived a topaz-tinted brightness saturated with a sheer amount of green density that formed and deformed itself into an intricate pattern of subtly conjoined inversions: a struggle both visible and invisible to the naked eye and distilled by its own emitting of unreachable energized fountainhead.

It didn’t take them long enough to realize that they were standing over a fermenting pool of purified, sharply cut hornsern crystals each of which comingling with another into pairs of blossomed thorned double-sided flowers only to be separated again and re-joined into a new one. They didn’t know what to make of the grimly looking surroundings that were revealed in a darker blue-green shade by the immense depth and overabundant contrast of the hornsern crystals’ active state below, the room they were in resembling a cylindrical outer shell in the middle of which a one-metre-wide cylindrical conduit was put through the grated floor and ended beyond the tall circular shadowed ceiling—it didn’t let any light out, and yet it looked like something was moving within it, being extremely hard to determine the consistency of its lukewarm polished

surface. They were both trying to grasp the purpose and design of the whole place.

Within seconds they found a seemingly misplaced electronic desktop with an old active interface, wired into the curving wall by a recently placed converting enabler for compression of rapid data accumulations. Save the murky pillar and the panelled computer, there appeared to be nothing else of significance there.

“The crystals beneath us is what causes the wave spectrum disruption,” Cassidy said, still held in amazement by the surreal dazzling sight.

“Not only that,” Collins said as he tried to get into the computer’s operating system, “but this is probably the critical point where Beckard’s intentions are actualized, where everything begins and ends. Everything will be unleashed right from this place.”

“We must bring it down then.”

“I can’t seem to get in,” he said after a while, unable to log in the menu’s command-prompt window that had some initialized letters on the lower bar he didn’t know what they stood for. “It requires some sort of a hardware pass insert.”

However, only now did he begin perusing the view-only text in the menu, and what he read struck him as incredible. Among the selection choices were:

- PHOTOVOLTAIC DEVAL. CONSTANT / CURRENT 1
- PHOTOVOLTAIC DEVAL. CONSTANT / CURRENT 2
- PHOTOVOLTAIC VAL. CONSTANT / CURRENT 1
- PHOTOVOLTAIC VAL. CONSTANT / CURRENT 2
- DISLOCATING OPTIMIZATION / SUPPRESSIVE STRATOSPHERIC FIELD
- VALUE PAR1 / FISSION CELLS
- VALUE PAR2 / FISSION CELLS
- ROOM TEMPERATURE SETTINGS
- ANALYTICAL AND STATISTICAL DATA / CENTRIFUGE

—ANALYTICAL AND STATISTICAL ATMOSPHERIC AND METEOROLOGIC DATA

“What now?” Cassidy turned to him. She was becoming suspicious. Although she was sure Collins had been dealing with the same conundrum in his mind, he appeared to her as if somehow lost in his thoughts, in himself, and not thinking with his full capacity. “If we stay a little longer, they might catch up to us.”

Leaning on the computer machine with a blank stare at the TFT monitor, before him was the intact mental image of the Chinaman—now probably dead—whom he’d visited a week ago, preserved as if he’d just returned from his workshop in Junkhood.

The enacter, he thought. The required hardware insert.

The rupturing noise was impairing his introspection: the unabating tremor was becoming louder, and it seemed to them that the boiling just a couple of feet below them was very close to reaching its apogee. Concurrently with that, the air temperature was becoming hotter with each taken breath and they figured out that it was the tall thing in the centre that heated everything, despite its relatively cool, insulated surface.

“There’s nothing more we can do here,” he said, turning towards the cyborg and having realized that the only thing that might grant him access to the computer was in Miles’ apartment. They went back to where the flimsy drape was, passing through it again.

At that instant something unnerved their bodies and they stopped and turned around for a moment, as though a certain gravitational tectonic force pushed them out in a waning series of overwhelming momentous spikes that were but a transient precursor to something much bigger and unstable to endure. From the end of the passage they could see the growing intensification with which the hornsern crystals’ yellow-green radiance began to approach them within the walls as a transfiguring fuelling substance that made them aglow, the walls giving off a positronic prickling to their skin.

They resumed their evacuation at an even quicker pace, trying to outrun what was coming after them though they were unsure

what exactly it was. But one thing they intuitively guessed right—that whatever had been triggered, it was now beyond the point of trying to stop it.

The words Collins had read were starting to make themselves manifest just like the vivid imagery of the Chinaman a moment ago: *stratospheric field, fission cells, atmospheric and meteorologic data*: one hundred possibilities popped up in his head and one hundred speculations passed through him and assailed him. The sound of an impending disaster and terror overpowered his sobriety.

Nearing the hatchway, a flashlight left a small scratching protuberance mark in the wall next to Cassidy as she just passed by: Collins pointed his gun toward the opening in preparation to shoot where he thought he saw a shadow showing up and then quickly hiding again.

“They’re expecting us down there,” he shouted at the cyborg as the two were deafened by the outreaching uproar that had a tangible transformative effect on everything around them; nevertheless, they were steadfastly keeping their pace without turning back.

Collins was considering halting for a second since he was certain there’d be men ready to open fire at them on sight, but before he decided to stop and perceive the possible option of a surprise attack, Cassidy was already holding in her hand her last piece of crystalline teal-blue dodecahedrons. Throwing them down the open hatch, it clinked along the way.

They jumped right in without even using the ladder, and immediately began discharging their blasters in the ceiling as a warning to the seven security guards who had enclosed them with naked hands and about to rush at them.

“I hope you’re not dumb enough to even think about it,” Collins threatened them, the two having pointed their guns at the unarmed men who were rubbing their wrists as if from a recent shock. “Get the fuck out of here.” The security guards were willing to comply, and when no one was left they headed back to the emergency exit.

Going back through the emergency exit, they were about to get on the phaeton when just then, all of a sudden, the lights throughout the whole powerplant went off all at the same time after which the whole area sank into darkness. The cyborg revved up the engines, and soon they could see from a high altitude the pervasive sunken dreariness the whole space had succumbed to, only the red-and-blue glimmers of the police cars futilely opposing the devouring dimness. However, when they got a little farther and already out of the powerplant's boundaries, they saw how through the entire roof of the central building an incandescent molten patch was beginning to be made visible as though boring from within. At the same time, Collins began to witness something from amid the horizon's condensed cloud line beginning to reveal itself in a preternaturally appealing way, and before long the same thing occurred from three different places in three different directions, beholding them in clear sight.

But they very well guessed what might be the cause behind this anomaly, and it wasn't long before they were affected by the commencement of what they could hardly escape, being temporarily blinded by a brilliant ray they didn't see coming in their way and whose heat Collins felt as though his face were burned with livid fire, the phaeton's electronics left damaged after the encounter and now falling steeply down the barely lit emptiness.

They were helpless; nevertheless, Cassidy didn't give up on trying to revive the engines by manually pulling the charge handle, and little by little they began to regain some of the velocity they'd lost, yet continuing to descend at a dangerous and uncontrolled speed.

Before Collins realized they had hit the ground, he was almost shoved out of the vehicle by his own weight when for a second he thought he'd lost grip of his seat. Then he opened his eyes and saw he was lying in the middle of an empty street surrounded by cheap vacant blocks.

Shortly before he got up, he was unable to gauge his position, whether he was standing or lying or sitting on the stone-cold

curb; he finally staggered up to what he likened to Cassidy's phaeton.

It was a skidrow; the rustic streetlight the lampposts gave off pained his sight and even the wounds his face had previously got.

The cyborg had just unfastened herself from the phaeton. She didn't seem to be hurt at all.

He had a paranoid look. He was surveying the street and buildings and everything that could be discerned from there.

"Stratospheric field..." he then murmured, unawares.

"What?"

He was beside himself; the cyborg thought he was experiencing a minor shock.

"What I read on that monitor... I don't know."

They both then looked up as though the same realization had occurred to them simultaneously: a considerable section of the sky was brighter than normal, whistling the same tangibly sharp buzz they'd earlier heard and felt on their way out of the passage in the powerplant. They discerned the bright ray of light crossing the sky from one end to another, unable to be fully followed and measured as it seemed to pierce and at the same time circumvent the horizon far beyond it.

As they stood there in awe looking at the sky that had become a verging state between phenomenal interchanges, they began to make out another similar, but dimmer ray that this time was shaping up vertically in the powerplant's direction—in fact, they could now clearly distinguish three other such rays that met at the same point, coming from afar off and dispersing a certain vague sheen across the entire firmament. In Collins' mind the picture of the computer screen never left him—but most of all the meaning of those words which he knew were coming true before his eyes.

He tried to contact whoever might be able to receive his messages through the comms-ring, but there was no answer from all sides.

“Any ideas?” Cassidy turned to him. “We need to come up with something.”

She could tell by the unhinged way he gazed at her that he was keeping something to himself—some terrifying and burdensome speculation he didn’t even want to think of—but which he also desperately wanted to share with her yet for some reason couldn’t. But at last having overcome his short-lived stupefaction, the only words he managed to speak out were telling enough of his internal torment.

“He’s cleaving the sky.”

They thought they’d heard someone approaching them: against the positronic humming buzz an alternating hard clink slowly entrenched itself into the ground after each successive regular step, being unsure where the repetitive sound came from, and seeing there was no one thereabouts, they scooped up to the closer alleyway across where a single neonstick over a broken backdoor was ostensibly heating up the air; there was no one there.

A door slam made them prick up their ears, and as they hastily retraced their steps they saw a man standing below one of the lampposts the slothful tinting orange of which extracted the sharpness out of his cheekbones and laid down a certain benevolent look over a wicked equanimity. Immediately after that they heard the muted awakening of a car engine and the forcing revving draft that followed it; an aeromobile then appeared from behind the block opposite them taking off in the air until it was completely gone.

“You won’t find me in company here,” Beckard said to them with a gleeful smirk. His left arm was immobilized with a splinting reabsorbing material and his right leg was put in an orthopedic bracketing boot. He tapped once with his metal cane against the lamppost as if out of boredom.

Cassidy had her blaster aimed at him from the start.

“Oh, of course.” Slowly and unhurriedly, he unbuttoned his satin shirt beneath the warm sports jacket he wore, revealing the tight copper-pale skin of his naked chest. “No bomb vests, nothing treacherous this time.” He buttoned his shirt back.

Collins was holding his weapon down without saying anything.

“Swallowed your tongue?” Beckard turned to him, his voice peculiarly aligning with the continuous buzz. This provoked Collins and he finally pointed his gun at him too. “You *are* impressed, aren’t you? No need to tell me, I know you are.”

“What now?” He was restraining his impulses from pulling the trigger. “You’re going to eradicate the entire city and everyone in it, including yourself? Is that what this was all about?”

“No, you don’t get it—there’s more to it.” He began to get closer to them, but before long was compelled to stop as Collins warned him not to proceed any further. “I am very disappointed that we don’t share the same enthusiasm about this colossal event. Cheer up, Mr. Collins!” that last inflection of his voice resounded with a great force through the humming and hissing. The two felt that at some point the temperature had lowered significantly, only now realizing it.

“Is it stoppable?”

“But why should it be?” again, he tapped his cane against the desolate ground. “Because hundreds of thousands, if not millions will perish? Is that why?” He leaned back against the lamppost once again. “Yes, the death of those unlucky enough will be a grievous tragedy, but the ones who’ll survive it will have made it worth it in the end.” For a moment there he noticed Collins’ eagerness to pull the trigger, manifesting itself through the condensation on his face. “I’m afraid my intrinsic inability to candidly express what I have to say has perhaps made you a little impatient concerning the matter at hand, and I deeply apologize for this.”

“He’s playing you,” the cyborg forewarned Collins. “If you want, I can make it very painful for him.”

“I’m happy to see that you’ve finally pulled yourself back out of your hell,” he said to the female cyborg. “And changed, at that.”

She didn’t say anything to him, nor react to his teasing—she was sure that soon he would be dead.

“Mr. Agent, your biggest mistake here is that you see this”—he turned his head towards the five rays’ crosspoint—“as a simple act of destruction, which I very much assure you isn’t. You, just like everyone else, don’t understand the important significance of the legacy I am about to bestow upon humanity for its own good, a legacy that will be carried along with time till the end of the world.”

Collins was beginning to feel the extreme agitation he was easily being submitted to, an agitation that Beckard further stirred up for the sake of winning more time—or not? Yet, there he was—standing in complete vulnerability and at his mercy, despite that both he and Cassidy knew he had the upper hand at the moment and that killing him wouldn’t solve a thing, nor make their situation any easier.

Another metallic tap against the lamppost.

“The system, the order, the harmony, that invisible cohesive substance—or whatever you want to call it—that has been keeping everything together for the last seventy or so years, without it we are doomed to fall back into a reversal down the evolutionary ladder and start all over again as fragmented primitive societies warring against each other time and time and again, tearing and devouring ourselves like rabid animals over many and various different ignobly trivial causes, be it in the name of dogma or territorial expansion, out of vainglory or out of fanaticism. The moment this uniting force acquired with many efforts and built with much turmoil disappears or progressively wearies down, we cease as a civilization, and possibly as a species depending on the circumstances and outcomes. Yes—I am speaking the very truth despite that everyone already knows it deep inside themselves... especially her,” he indicated at the blond cyborg with an ingratiating, cheerful glance. “Inner peace, orderliness of thoughts, soundness of mind—those are things vital to the sustenance of your existence, aren’t they?”

Collins was about to shoot; Beckard knew his time had come.

“Deviation is the number one enemy of mankind, Agent; it should be dreaded and suppressed at all times and at all costs. And

people like me are the gatekeepers of civilization: in order to do what was necessary for its preservation and prolongation, I had to take on the burden of stepping up and making a final, permanent change of its constituents—that is, *us*.”

The rasping sound the blaster made was followed by Beckard’ dropping down on the cold moist pavement under the same lamppost; however, he was still alive.

The white gleam the sky was full of became brighter, and the aerial rays more quivering in their concentrated pathways; it was almost as if dawn.

The skyline was becoming eerily dimpled and the gathered clouds began to bifurcate into smaller ones. A critical mass towards the city powerplant had been reached, heralding the dispersion of the dormant amount of energy concentrated throughout the atmosphere.

But suddenly—and after a succession of delayed eruptive reverberations—the humming buzz and its intensity were drastically lowered and deadened—the lightings in the sky becoming unstable until they were eventually broken up, they rays becoming more and more murkier as they gradually disappeared; before long they saw that everything was back to normal.

There was an explosion coming from the direction of the powerplant that could be easily spot from afar off, a fugacious destructive storm that sent far-reaching golden-yellow markings across the sky which, in the span of a couple of moments, stayed there and then vanished. Multicoloured foggy stripes appeared in their place, slowly diminishing and not leaving a trace of themselves.

Collins’ first thought was that they did it.

Grabbing Beckard for his collar, he dragged him up to and put him against a wall in one of the alleyways. His leg was bleeding.

“Everything ends right here for you.”

He pointed his gun at his head. Yet, he still couldn’t do it: for some reason, the insidious smile on his face prevented him from accomplishing what he’d earnestly desired for years.

“What?”

He was silent.

“What, you motherfucker?”

“Why don’t you just pull the trigger and call it a game? It’ll be finally over for you in a heartbeat—I know that this has been your wet dream for years.” He was taunting him.

All of a sudden, the same markedly imposing sound reached their ears again, at first a barely audible monotonic hum, and then a persistent abrupt quavering returning to its previous impetus of tangibility, only this time as it were way far up and away.

Beckard was relishing the awkwardness of their confused faces.

“As of recently my trust in people—close, dear people—began to wane,” he turned to both of them. “I had to sacrifice connections and make unbelievably hard decisions to guarantee that my great project wouldn’t fail. And it didn’t,” he said, insouciantly and self-assuredly as never before. “The night is ours, and it couldn’t have turned out any better.”

Somewhere amid the broad and infinite North Atlantic ocean, on a small and forsaken rocky island, the first of the four sparks was ignited: it made its way through the open inky October sky, creating a rippling reflection stretching out hundreds of kilometres across the waters before it reached the mainland.

The second spark was initiated just in time, moving above other populated cities and awakening many from their lying slumber.

The third spark came from a hillside around which nothing but the disturbed animal noises proclaimed its approach, which would soon reach its predetermined destination unhindered.

Lastly, the fourth spark was also on its way, all four shots activated with perfect accuracy only in the end to meet each other and thence head straight upwards.

Collins and Cassidy directed their gaze above them, their watchful eyes not believing what they saw: again the same filling glimmer, moving clouds and dimpling of sky, only this time the point where the four lightning rays met being elsewhere.

“Your father would’ve been very proud of you,” with the same mocking intonation Beckard turned to Collins. “Just like him, you did your best.”

What Beckard just uttered was enough for Collins to drop all inhibitions which until now had been keeping him back from taking his life, and without rethinking his decision for a moment, nor Cassidy trying to stop him, standing over the impaired man he began hitting him with full force and savage fierceness: after a while his face was a senseless mess of blood, and after a couple of more hits his eyes became so swelled that he no longer seemed to see anything, so Collins left him on the ground motionless.

“You did him good,” the cyborg said to him.

Chapter IV

Initiatives

They were in one of the subsection control rooms where several people had been ordered to lay down on the floor, among which was the same tall man with protective goggles who only seconds ago was forced to let them in—he was one of the three authorized maintenance supervisors with direct access to the Infrastructural Network Centre’s regenerating cores.

“Expect no harm from us,” Clara said with her blaster out, intimidating them, as Darren was standing by the door keeping a watch, “if you keep it quiet and do what we tell you.”

Neither she, nor Darren wanted things to go down like this—they didn’t expect more than a handful of persons in the room, and when they barged in they had to threaten everyone they saw into compliancy.

“You, stand up.” She ordered the maintenance supervisor with the goggles to come up to her. “James Calahan, am I right?” The man nodded timidly. “I want you to get us through the shortcut to this subsection’s core. *The shortcut way.*”

Right behind a protective triple-layered window was the subsection’s inner zone with all of its supplementary compositions such as antennal towers, conductors and stators bundled as if it were into one mini-city of monolithic data boilers handling an immense amount of input traffic.

James Calahan remonstrated with an empty, non-confrontational look.

“You don’t want to go there.”

“Yeah? And why’s that?”

The maintenance supervisor didn’t respond to her question.

“Core number 8, and if you make us wait another second, you’ll get one in the foot.”

He sighed, overtly discomfited by what was required of him.

“There’s no other way to get to it except by a tunnel. You’ll find one in the room next door.” Seeing their faces’ reaction, he added calmly: “I assure you there’s nobody in there. You’ll be all by yourselves.”

“Shall we trust him?”

“Hate to say it, but we must.”

“What about them?” Darren pointed at the still lying men who’ve been uneasily waiting out the hostage situation.

“They’re too scared to attempt something they’d dearly regret. Can you block the general access to this subsection?” she asked the maintenance supervisor.

“I can. But it won’t win you much time.”

“Do it.”

The man with the drawn-back goggles walked up to the control switchboard and, entering a simple command into the mainframe, put the subsection under lockdown.

“Good. Now show us the tunnel.”

Steadily keeping his hands above his head, James Calahan stood before the smaller alloy-covered door that was at the other end and, having his eyes and fingertips scanned, he went inside.

“What about you?” Darren turned to Clara, surprised, seeing her standing at the threshold.

“You need someone to watch your six, don’t you?”

Having entered the neighbouring room, the maintenance supervisor stooped over an inclined lid in the corner below the window panel and proceeded to open it; he took out something out of his pocket: it was a dull-coloured cross-key and he inserted it into a small opening. No sooner had the small window panel with a view to the outside been saturated with a lighting yellow tint when a protocol-instructive text was shown on it, after which the tunnel’s circular seal was opened and out of it a sleight-like board was ejected; it had a safety belt.

“What’s that?” Clara asked from across the threshold.

“It’s how you’ll get to the core,” the maintenance supervisor answered.

“I can’t see the end of it,” Darren turned to him, peeking into the tunnel.

“You asked for the tunnel, you got it.”

“Is there something else I have to be aware of?” He lay down on the moveable board and began buckling the belt.

“You have about an hour and a half until the next traffic stream reception. You also can’t spend more than 30 minutes down there, otherwise the operating broadband frequential signals will begin to affect your neuroimmune system and you might quickly pass out. Other than that, there’s nothing else to add.”

“You sure?” The black man threw an incredulous glance at him. “Maybe you’re forgetting about an extra device—an integrator—hooked up directly to the core? Wanna tell me about it?”

“I don’t know what integrator you’re talking about.” The African scoffed at him.

“Give me that fancy headgear and move away.” Putting on the goggles that had five different visual modes, he turned to Clara as he was preparing to slide down: “If he tries to act cute, shoot him—*lethally*.”

Pressing the button for activation on the sleight’s controller, he began to be carried down the narrow maintenance tunnel with an ever accelerating speed.

Scarcely had less than 15 seconds passed when he found himself in a moderately lit by a hazy sea-blue tint place.

Unfastening his seatbelt, he got up, at the same time trying the goggle’s different visual modes.

It was a containment spherical room and walking without lunging proved more difficult than he’d thought. In the middle of it a slowly rotating mechanical arm kept enclosed within its axis a parallelepiped surrounded by several fastening rigs, passing by him just above his head. Cautiously coming closer to the core, he found carved into the outer body of the structure recesses, wherewith he

carefully and diligently started to climb up, watching out when the rotating arm was about to get near him.

Successfully stepping onto the 5-metre-tall structure into which the parallelepiped core was kept in a constant synchronous connectivity, he stood over it and curiously observed the not so big intricate processing box that also served as one of the several receptors and conductors of the entire internet and communications traffic in Orton. He could already feel his body being subjected to the frequent radiation of an unthinkable amount of generated traffic that made his skin crawlingly numb and his head aching.

“Should’ve told me about this, damn him!” he cursed.

The core itself was an inordinate confused mass of a specific, peculiar kind of transmissive-processing technology one might think to have no other functioning quality save that of a hypnotizing contraption: it was built of multifaceted blocks encrusted all over with glittering strings of miniscule electronics, the whole body appearing soft and malleable by the reflective coating it had been embellished with.

Meticulously examining every side, he found nothing that might match the description of the supposed attached device Billy McCarter forewarned them of. Was it the wrong core? he asked himself, knowing that something had to be done quickly.

Taking out from the small pouch across his back a small double-switch adhesive mine he’d prepared from the beginning, he set up the timer to a five-minute mark and activated the magnetic attacher as he put it on the core. As he did that, he got accidentally electrocuted by a strong current that went throughout his entire arm and left it insensitive for a couple of moments; he then hastened to get down, and shortly after he’d put on his safety belt, everything became black and deadly quiet to him: he had fainted.

Not fully understanding how he’d brought himself to do it, he somehow managed to press the reverse button, and as the tunnel’s wriggling lights guided him back to consciousness, he was astonished to see fire blazes sealing the opening of the core’s containment room below him.

Something had triggered it way too earlier, he thought.

At that instant he found himself stuck a couple of feet away from Clara who was now concernedly peering down at him.

“The sleight, it stopped for some reason.”

“Can you creep up to me?”

Unfastening his seatbelt, with a great effort he began to climb the sloped narrow tunnel, grabbing and resting his feet on whatever extrusions he was fortunate to step on. Without the least anticipating it, a strong earthquake ensued after a wave of boilingly hot air had engulfed the space around him; trying to reach the other end as fast as possible, he almost slipped at the final step, but Clara’s good timing allowed her to pull him out by the hand.

They quickly darted for the subsection’s exit after ordering the maintenance supervisor to unlock everything.

A company of security guards—among whom unidentifiable armed civilians—happened to stand in their way apparently expecting them, but when the people that were held hostages dashed out running and shoving whoever stood in their way, Clara and Darren used the moment and the impetus of the tremor to mingle in with them.

They were fired at, but in a second they no longer had to worry about it as all the lights suddenly went out; it was the perfect opportunity for them to stealthily continue down the hectic emergency halls.

The next sequence in the miths’ pre-programmed tasking was to insert the malware script into the operating system. But because it couldn’t be entered without the use of crude physical force, seeing as the gate had been automatically blocked by the emergency protocol, the two crafts began boring through it, the command for which written in advance by Miles into their backup containers. In the meantime more armed men had arrived, covering both sides of the passageway and waiting for the next orders as they watched the two hovering machines turning one third of the durable metal gate into smithereens.

“They don’t seem to notice us,” one of the guards said to another.

“Put your gas masks on,” was the first command given to the two groups.

Before long a few round plastic balls were thrown at the machines, creating a thick mercuric vaporized smoke that began to coagulate the air around the miths, temporarily crashing their electrical circuits which in turn made them stop boring for a couple of moments. Incessant fire was opened at them, and everything was enshrouded in smoke again.

A ceasefire followed, and the sound of heavy drilling was no longer heard.

After the view was cleared up, they found nothing save two big holes carved in the thick metal gate. Several men rushed at the same time toward it, but couldn’t open it because of the malfunction the machines had caused to the mechanism.

“They’ve got inside, fuck,” one of them shouted, warily peeking through the holes: one of the miths was currently connected to a control server by some sort of an outstretched input stick. “I don’t see any human presence in there.”

Scarcely had the next order been given when the tumultuous sound of not so far a blast stiffened everyone’s legs and necessitated them to instinctively regroup. A strong quake was forced through the walls, and they began to retrieve and look for the shortest way out of the Main Centre whose total breakdown was imminent.

The malware copying was complete and the remaining part of the command lines were about to be executed—which was to be a harder challenge as they entailed a retracing rerun of the initial ones.

The airport employees were unsuccessfully trying to conduct the concourses of thousands of panicked people out of the different terminals in an orderly custom—from all sides a general fast-spreading tension could be felt affecting everyone and everything in the enclosed areas, and it was around that time when Goranov

managed to unnoticably leave the interrogation room and head towards the evacuating gangway shortcuts that would get him on the tarmac.

He encountered only one security clerk who had remained behind a desk providing update assistance on the radio channels, and when the latter saw the Russian freely walking around the check-point-designated parts, he ventured to detain him. But hardly had he got closer to him than the latter started running towards the temporarily available evacuating gangway where he right off jumped down and landed heavily on the rough surface, scuffing his palms.

Running away, he was eager to see the damage he'd intentionally caused by Nastasya, and looking around the whole inner part of the airport complex, except for a minor demolition of the western boundary wall and patches of smouldering grass outside it there was no major destruction he might have accidentally caused when he was inside the interrogation room. Beginning to seek for the one airplane in the stand-by zone that had earlier left an impression on him, at the same time he was tempted to call in the airship.

There were some men with flashing reflective suits running on the tarmac and skipping across the various demarking ridges who were guiding a couple of airplanes to clear out some space. Supposing that because of this something was about to happen soon, he distanced himself from the central parts and tried to hijack a luggage motorcar that was close to him. Getting on it, he immediately drove off to the same spot where he was sure Beckard's construction was stationed.

Several men who didn't seem to be part of the official airport staff were standing near the passenger aircraft and going about something he was not quite sure what it was.

Stopping a little farther from them and creeping up closer by foot, he pulled out the remote control and pressed the button for target-positioning call. He hadn't brought in any guns because of the airport's metal detectors, so there was little to none he could do while waiting for the Chaser's arrival.

As he surveyed the ongoing activity throughout the visible part of the airport from behind a stash of luggage crates, he began to

notice something strange happening with the supersonic aircraft: the entire fuselage was beginning to unclose from both sides, revealing everything inside the plane including the cockpit. What was interesting to him was that there were no passenger seats, and in their place there was something else which was beginning to spread out over the airplane—it consisted of several compacted ringlike parts, bearing similarities with a sort of a powerful light projector with a big menacing dark lens in its centre. It began to slowly rotate until it stopped fixed at a specific angle facing one of the hangars nearby.

Before long the doors of the same hangar were rolled out, out of which another airplane came aligning with the first one, its fuselage also undergoing the same transformation until an identical projecting device rose out of it, both simultaneously rotating once again until they were perfectly synchronized.

The same men were hastily tending to the airplanes, performing tasks and operations he couldn't make anything out of; soon the projector-like devices' outer rings began to spin, acceleratingly gaining inertia, and with them the rest being activated as well. Following this initialization, both airplanes' most outer rings acquired a pale-blue, diamond sheen that spread to the rest of the circles, forming a turbulent pair of lustrous air-warping, fractured flares bound to each other as though one inseparable ethereal chain.

A lighting strike then flashed out of the first plane, and immediately after that from the second: the same occurrence was repeated many times, each time more rapidly, two-sided opposing shining blasts that gradually began to acquire a toroid shape. Bright, consistent, and impossibly fast, the lightning strikes were sent from one end and absorbed into the other, and vice versa, going faster to the point of morphing into a reverberating path of steady concentrated energy streams.

The sight impressed him so much that he'd almost forgot about Nastasya, which had already landed near him; seeing no other option but to retrieve to her, he climbed into the cockpit and lifted off.

As he was ascending from the tarmac, his eyes beheld another captivating effect—out of the same dazzling stream that lit the

whole airport and even beyond it another one was beginning to be separated and redirected from a small angle towards the nocturnal firmament, a refraction being created and sent far off into the city.

As this happened Goranov came to be inevitably noticed by everyone down there, including the group of men that had put in motion what was now undoubtedly proven to be one of Beckard's four Constructions. Hardly had the Russian concluded that he had no other choice but to destroy the two airplanes from there than two artillery discharges were sent towards him.

Through her detecting receivers Nastasya's missile defence system was triggered, eluding the two discharges safely. Retaining his sobermindedness, the Russian, with sharp perceptibility, fired two K20L mini-rocket stingers in return towards the two airplanes.

The destruction he caused had a more long-lasting effect than he'd imagined: he was blinded for a while as he instinctively moved the aircraft away with a rapid pull and wrench at the handles; looking out of the window, he saw a peculiar smouldering leftover amid an otherwise intact airport.

Gregory knew his impersonation was about to be compromised.

"Get him the fuck outta here," said the man who'd smacked him on the nose.

A third man came out, but before they got the chance to get near the lying Gregory, each of them was taken by surprise when the latter drew out his blaster he'd hidden beneath the dirty towel. The same man who'd knocked him aimed at him but missed, and in return a third body was added near the doorstep. More people were coming.

"Who the fuck are you?" angrily exclaimed the solidly built armed man with rough and intemperate facial features who, having fixed his eyes on the girl, immediately pointed a triple-barrelled shotgun with a lit target-marker fixed to it.

Two fire shots were produced at one and the same time; the man dropped with a mortal wound. She heard a couple of more gunshots coming from the theatre's entrance again.

Returning to the poet's bust she began looking for the control panel that would supposedly stop or in some way affect the functioning of the Western Construction, but couldn't find anything around indicative of it. She'd shot one of their own, she thought, which had made things even worse for her. She closed the door.

But hardly had she done this when it was opened again by someone who, at first, she couldn't exactly identify because of the poor lighting. The person had feminine proportions and face.

"What does it feel like to be a bootlicking lapdog?" Amanda turned to Gloria who had a gun pointed at her; she was caught unawares and refrained from lifting up her weapon.

"You'll die here, tonight."

"Tell me where's the control panel."

The black-haired scrawny-faced girl released a derisive laughter at the request.

"You're a crazy bitch," she said. "I won't tell you shit."

"Drop it," someone's voice was at that instant heard from down the hallway.

Gloria's hand remained steady and fixed towards Amanda.

"Fuck you too, asshole." But before it was too late, Gregory shot her first as he sensed her intention to kill Amanda. They checked if she was dead.

"I don't feel any pulse," Amanda said to him. "Did you handle them? Your nose's bleeding."

"Trust me, it was worth it."

"Couldn't find the control panel. Had to deal with them first," she nodded at the two bodies.

"Who are these people?" Gregory asked as he gazed upon the gloomy marble busts through the glowtorches' blue dimness.

"Poets, playwrights, artists—you name it. And this fellow right here"—she indicated to Gregory the sculpture of the English

Romantic poet—“is probably where the missing piece is hidden. Or at least may lead us to it.”

The solid bust didn't give off any signs of hollowness, nor did it have additional carvings or etchings on it—or any other irregularities for that matter—that might have been potentially modified. They began searching elsewhere.

Just then, Gregory realized that he had accidentally stepped on a loose board; leaning over it, he tried to take it off, dislocating it with his fingernails.

“Look,” he beckoned to Amanda after having removed it; it nearly fell apart in his hand.

What was hidden in the small space was a covering capsule made of steel that was impossible to remove without a numerical combination.

“Watch out,” Gregory warned her, and before long he shot with his blaster right at the small box. Blowing away the smoke, he carefully began pulling the lid through a notch.

The molten steel had already left some minor damages on the control panel, but upon giving it a second look, it was still functioning. Amanda then took out her playger, but having opened the digital copy of the author's magnum opus, her spirits were quickly lowered when she realized that she didn't know the exact verse that was required to be spoken as a password.

Undulations of a harsh grating sound were suddenly forced through the walls, multiplying their magnitude in several successions: their source came from the second floor.

“We gotta hurry,” said Gregory.

Amanda kept trying to remember something important—perhaps a clue—that might facilitate her understanding of the verse's nature and its place in the text. Gregory was getting nervous.

“Wait, let me try this once,” she held him back, beginning to enter the keywords into her playger's search field, remembering Beckard's words when she and Collins were entrapped in the scientific institute.

There was only one approximate match found in the text— stooping over the control panel, she began typing out the verses:

*“He who ascends to mountaintops, shall find
The loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow;
He who surpasses or subdues mankind,
Must look down on the hate of those below.
Though high above the sun of glory glow,
And far beneath the earth and ocean spread,
Round him are icy rocks, and loudly blow
Contending tempests on his naked head,
And thus reward the toils which to those summits led.”*

By the time she managed to get up, Gregory had already lifted her up when he saw that the ceiling was about to topple over them; the two ran out of the gathering room as fast as they could, seeking the entryway.

The ensued pandemonium and the precipitation of an imminent disaster almost stopped them short of reaching the doors down the hallway, but eventually they got out moments before a grandiose lighting devoured from within the whole theatre: at first an explosion, and then an implosion obliterated most of the building, after which a thoroughly spread profusion of cold lit steam wrapped the entire area.

White saturated acrid mist descended upon them.

Michael was one of the many who’d been intentionally kept out in the dark. Very little had been disclosed to them, and the information they’d been provided with pertained only to their perfunctory duties and was for its most part extremely fragmented and insubstantial.

He was now looking outside the window at the finalization of what Beckard casually referred to as the *gamechanger of human civilization*; and he did not have the faintest idea of how everything

would end up. It happened not so far away from where he stood, fully beholding something so awe-inspiring and yet so dreadfully intimidating. He couldn't believe that this was actually the product of human thought: now that he thought about it, it was a truly terrifying sight, and its seemingly limitless scope which could hardly be estimated only attested to that unstoppable natal drive in humans to achieve the impossible and to attain the unthinkable.

It occurred to him that what he witnessed was a deliberate act of self-destruction.

The room's lights had been turned off; the five dazzling rays continued to shed light inside. He was holding the miniature model of the Boeing B-17 plane in his hand, and during this brief moment of mental solitude the thoughts of his late wife and their life together skipped past him and vanished without leaving a single lasting trace. He was also thinking about his son, but the hope that he was still alive and that soon they would be joined again changed everything for him and the way he looked at his current state.

He was in one room with members of both Beckard and Shunningan's clans, including Shunningan himself. The overweight and clumsy businessman and ostentatious crime boss had gathered the men around, giving them last additional instructions and making sure that everything was clear to them. Having finished the debriefing, the corpulent man who that night wore a straightened double-breasted dark-blue tuxedo with a vividly white flower showing out of his breast pocket slowly walked up to Michael, his gait reluctant and his stare somewhat incredulous.

Michael looked at his extensive, puffy face with an unapologetic indifference—he never liked the man nor respected him and under any other circumstance he would've most probably killed him at the first opportunity. Before long he turned towards one of his men and gave him a sign. The latter soon appeared and passed something over to his superior.

"You're to remain in this room until the next order," Shunningan turned to Michael with his heavy imperial bass voice, giving him the procured item: it was a keygen enacter in a safecasing.

“Keep this with the cost of your life—and he’ll make sure to keep *his* part of the deal.”

Reluctantly, he walked out of the room.

Staring at the enacter and at the miniature model, he realized he was holding two faiths in his hands—that of his son, and that of potentially millions of others.

Chapter V

An Unborn Friendship

It was one of those standard assignments that were directly forwarded through the Intelligence Department's secondary back-channels—he expected it to be just like any other except this time he would have to do the work with a temporary co-operator. He'd made sure to reduce any risk to the utmost minimum, as well as to take the necessary precautions by solving every possible factor and unanticipated entanglement in advance. However, there was one variable he hadn't taken into account—a mistake he would remember till the rest of his life—and this was precisely the human one.

Michael Riverstone was included in the assignment at the last moment by a prioritized order for unknown reasons. Before that he and Collins didn't know anything about each other as was typical for all Agents.

It was not until the accident when Collins learned about the tragedy Michael and his wife had recently gone through—that is, the mysterious disappearance of their son Benjamin—which was later unanimously decided as the motive for his actions and as an unpremeditated cause for temporal suspension; in spite of that, however, he never returned to his former position.

That night was to serve as a perpetual reminder to Collins of the extreme frailty of the human psyche and the easiness with which one could cross that separating line—a line which in reality was way thinner than most people thought—between compassion and rationality and those darker, never acknowledged corners of the mind, and turn into something else that was anything but human. He had witnessed a merciless and desperate act of brutality done by a professionally trained and none the less experienced Agent like himself; he had never expected that something so repugnant and despicable would remain deep-rooted in his memories and in his life.

The assignment's objective was to procure a visual and auditory record of a rendezvous between human traffickers who were

representatives of two different syndicates. According to the preliminary intel a supposed double-Agent who for some time had been selling inside information to them was going to be present at the meeting, and incriminating evidence needed to be extracted in order for the allegations to be confirmed before a decisive action was taken.

It was a humid summer night in the county; the location was an old storage lodge.

They'd climbed up a wooden crossbeam support by one of the walls outside to get a better view of what was happening: the men down there were already having a discussion, nearby them a van-truck having been parked halfway in; the driver was standing next to it, waiting for the final negotiations to conclude.

"I'm releasing them," Collins whispered to his co-operator, after which the two put on their earbuds.

Reaching for his pocket, he pulled out a small plastic receptacle together with an oblong compact monitor. Pressing a button on the slim device, out of the small receptacle two miniscule flipping spy-bugs separated themselves without making a noise, heading down through the wall's opening and already having begun recording and transmitting a live picture from two different angles; a video image was at the same time transcoded and displayed on the compact display.

"I can hear them," Michael informed him.

"I think that might be our guy." Collins pointed on the live picture at a light-skinned civilian man of a humble frame; at that moment they were chatting about some irrelevant matters.

At length the topic of their conversation gradually changed course until the double-Agent eventually became the focus of it: they were negotiating his payment.

A couple of minutes later a mechanical noise began to rattle the entire crossbeam support below them. The crossbeams, however, had remained as stable as before, after which they found out that it was the revving-up of the same van-truck on the other side of the storing lodge.

Before long the entire rear part of the van-truck was opened, and what they saw was about sixteen boys and girls walking out of the vehicle one after another by pairs, ambling and lagging along as if they'd been drugged or made docile beforehand; they were told to halt by two of the trafficking men. They were fastened at their legs to each other by light binding shackles and their faces were gravely rid of any emotion and reaction save that of mute despair. The members of the trafficking group who appeared to be the purchasing party began to check the condition of the goods they'd paid for up-front; they seemed to be content.

"They're children!" Michael exclaimed as he watched the minors being escorted back to the van-truck; he almost blew their undercover.

"Stay down!" Collins tried to hold him back as the cross-beam support was swaying and cracking again under their weight, but he sensed that something had definitely happened with his co-operator which had seized over his wits. Michael was beginning to lose it.

The van-truck was now gone, and the meeting near to its conclusion.

"Don't!"

Michael had already opened fire at them when he jumped out over the wall and landed on a pile of old torn mattresses and rags; Collins had to cover him and before long he joined him as well, both opening fire at the remainder of the traffickers who were unable to hide themselves in time. The others immediately began firing back at them when they saw that it was only two men who'd taken on the assault, approaching them slowly and tactically without feigning for a moment.

Collins and Michael had nowhere to retreat to; they were trapped and were unable to do anything else but carry on with the shootout. Standing up, they began firing again at one and the same time at the men who weren't prepared for such a rapid attack.

It was over, but not quite so: one of the traffickers had remained alive by a fortuitous chance, lethally injured, lying on the

ground as he was bleeding out vast amounts. Michael walked up to him.

“People like you don’t deserve to die in peace.” His voice was changed, and its fervid coldness foreshadowed a precipitating act of insanity. Collins saw him drawing out a hunter knife.

“What are you doing?” Trying to grab his arm, he was immediately shoved away and put at gunpoint.

“Throw the gun away, back off twenty steps and lie down,” Michael threatened him.

Collins was befuddled—he thought that his partner was out of his mind to endeavour something like that. He complied.

At the sight of the blade the wounded man tried to crawl as far away as possible, but the only thing he was able to do was release a couple of gasping and gurgling sounds while chocking on his own blood.

Collins was about to say something to him again, but Michael only made a hushing sign with his finger.

Slackly holding the top of the knife’s handle and loosely swaying it over the terror-stricken man like a premonitory swinging pendulum, he stooped down, his face aligning with that of his helpless victim.

He began thrusting the knife right into his face without excessive rashness, slowly and temperately, not too deep and not too straight, just enough to start peeling it off centimetre by centimetre, striving for a precise and impeccable surgical cut without making too much mess around. The body he’d suppressed and immobilized with his knee was violently contorting and trembling with each following movement of the knife, the agony at first deafening, then becoming mute.

Without having noticed when, Collins had managed to stand up and get his blaster back after which he pointed it at him.

“Enough!”

Michael stopped, restless and insensitive; for a while he was in a state of unpredictable torpor, but in the end he put down both

his gun and his knife. The trafficker whose face was already maimed seemed to be dead.

“Enough!” Collins exclaimed again, only now realizing that Michael had already done what he’d ordered him.

Chapter VI

Orton Beyond

It was as if no place was safe enough for anyone at the present moment: no one could escape it, but also no one wanted to. They were all engrossed and inflicted by the harrowing sight on which each of them lay and fixed their eyes, witnessing something spectacularly terrifying emerge out of the very centre of Orton City and pass through the sky. No one could say exactly what it was or how it had happened—all that was known—or rather forebodingly perceived—was that they were both individually and collectively powerless to stop it.

It was 03:15 AM and the last throes of the city were nearing their end.

Collins and Cassidy were already on their way in the direction of where the four rays joined, the fifth, upward one spearing the firmament and causing a steady dissolution of the entire atmosphere. Multifarious and multicoloured smudgy dapples had begun to appear all over the sky, gradually increasing in brightness and size. There was no doubt anymore that the new conductor and main part of all the assembled and interconnected Constructions was the highest and most prominent building in the city—Elzeron Tower, the Grouzers' consortium headquarters.

They had no other choice but to land about a kilometre away from the boiling point due to the phaeton's damaged injection combusters. Before them the building was like an insatiable flaming torch, at the top of which the four combined rays sent off the fifth one into a straight path up through the sky. Everything else around it seemed dead and pale in comparison with the dreadfully destructive force wielded and directed against both the earthly and heavenly realms.

"We're in the underpass on Madison Boulevard 91," Collins informed everyone on the shared comms. Only Miles didn't respond.

Throughout the city mass uncontrollable panic had ensued, worsening and spreading like wildfire by the minute: many people were scrambling haphazardly in the streets contracted by the general commotion, as the civil unrest had already reached critical levels precipitated by the looting, burning and damaging of a number of private and public properties; gunshots were heard, drowned in commingled bursting sirens.

Above them the fear that had taken over Orton and which had also suffused the air with unrestrained belligerence was made tangible to Collins and Cassidy—it was unlike anything they’ve experienced or saw before, and they were unable to grasp neither the magnitude nor the direction of the events that were happening at that moment and at the centre of which they had brought themselves up. It was quite unbelievable to Collins that Beckard had finally achieved the unthinkable.

“Can you see something else happening around the building?” Collins turned to the cyborg, the two being dazzled by the five rays’ painful brightness.

“Hoppers. At least fifteen of them.”

The thought of the enacter was pestering his mind.

“We need to find a way to get inside the building, but... Miles... Damn it!” Everything started to fall apart again.

“He’s got the enacter, right?”

Collins nodded; they decided to wait a little more; the ongoing chaos, however, was far from abating.

What happened next didn’t require special ocular augmentation: at one moment the Hoppers—protractedly blurry flakes swarming around the skyscraper—seemed to have begun rearranging themselves in seemingly unconventional formations, and at the next one a multitude of glistening cobweb-lights started to appear mid-air, disappear and then appear again at different places. No one could guess what exactly they were doing, only watch the entire building attracting to itself a sort of illusory protective guise.

Miles' faint voice over the comms reached Collins' ears, and the same was transmitted to the cyborg as well—he'd got the enacter, and soon he would be with them.

Some civilian aeromobiles hovering around Elzeron tower had suddenly begun to fly towards the building almost at the same time, only in the end to explode in mid-air as if an invisible force had been leading them to unavoidable self-destruction: they couldn't pull themselves away from the protective gossamer field generated and maintained by the Hoppers, and instead were only enflamed for a second, whatever was left of them being lost in the obscurity of the agitated medley.

"We couldn't get in touch with you guys either," Amanda was recalling to them; everyone had gathered in an underpass a little farther away from the epicentre and listening to the incessant mingled din of shouts, engine sounds, and sirens that had a more sinister reverberating effect there than on the surface. "Had to walk more than a mile before we could finally catch a good signal. Goranov was the first to respond, and he picked us up."

"What's that thing you have there?" Darren turned to Collins; the latter was examining from close the small rigid device he held in his hand, and which Miles had been keeping in his pocket during the entire time.

"It's a keygen enacter, and I think this might be our only chance to end this madness."

"The entire communication infrastructure's crashed," Miles said, checking up something on his portable workstation. "That's why we had difficulties connecting with each other on the comms."

"Figures," Clara remarked. "The entire Regulatory Network Centre's blown up."

"We were made fools once again," exclaimed Goranov as if to himself. Then, turning towards Collins: "I hope that bastard's dead for good."

Collins didn't react to him nor paid any attention to what they were discussing: it appeared that all that mattered to him at the

moment was the small enigmatic piece of plastic as though it were the only thing of actual value that was left to him in the world.

“How will we do it?” he finally heard someone asking.

The deep hum from earlier that night had been resumed for some time now. Amphibious forms had begun to be morphed out of and back into dimpled blue-green-and-yellow crests, and in between them many dark-violet openings were absorbing themselves, in the midst of which irises of an even darker auroral shade were being revealed, enlarging and amassing in depth and inescapability.

They left the underpass and went back in the open as more and more people had started to come down and pass by them. The streets and everything around them had plunged into an even worse disorder and everything seemed to be on the brink of collapse.

“Can you open that manhole over here?” Collins turned to Cassidy, showing her a manhole he’d come across next to the sidewalk. The cyborg broke the lock and removed the lid without a problem.

“You sure this will get us straight to the building?” Miles asked him.

“I think it’s worth the try. Don’t you?”

“Can’t get a good scan from here, but I might get a better and more accurate signal underground,” the cyborg said. She and Collins began to descend.

The rest went after them without tarrying too long.

The septic smell and defiled unctuous walls made their passing unpleasant and challenging, the air filled with phenol expulsions further inflicting their lungs; the bare darkness that accompanied them all throughout didn’t help either, so Goranov and Clara took out their flashlights which in turn revealed an even more repellent view.

“Where’d you left her?” Collins asked him, turning around; he was referring to the Russian’s aircraft. “Because soon we might need her—we might need everything available that could offer us some aerial advantage.” He turned inquiringly towards Miles next to him.

“I left her two blocks away from here,” answered the Russian. “Getting her won’t be a problem.”

“Same goes for the myths,” said Miles, “although one of them has some minor damages in its navigational chipset.”

“We’re on the right path,” Cassidy told them, her eyes, which were now a shade or two brighter, delineating their fullness of glittering minutiae workings. “The sewer has an exit opening right next to the skyscraper. No human presence.”

Even from down there they could still hear the imposing hum that had continued to persist ever since the five rays had been shot towards the city and matched along a seamlessly calculated trajectory. A faint leftover of the external public pandemonium was audible, too. Gregory suddenly told them to halt: he thought he’d discerned strange sounds and movements from above. They all lent an attentive ear to them, listening to the disturbed acoustics of the sewer which was as though a receptor of lesser, far-off noises. Cassidy then assured them that there was nothing to worry about.

At length they got to the exit opening leading to the megalithic skyscraper.

“Is it safe?” Collins turned to her.

At first she was uncertain as to whether it was good for them to proceed. They all waited patiently.

“No,” she finally declared, “six—maybe seven of them are now standing right around the manhole. A few others nearer the building, might be more at other places. It’s getting harder for me to maintain a stable signal.”

Collins turned around facing Goranov:

“Can you use Nastasya as a decoy?”

“One can’t know for sure until he tries.”

“Someone should stay with him until we get confirmation that the building can be entered,” Collins said to the others. “Miles, I think that should be you. Besides, we might need your assistance as well regarding the Hoppers. It’s them that I’m most worried about.”

The latter unfolded his workstation to check out if he was able to summon them from there—after running a quick precursory diagnostic check-up, he gave an affirmation that the two ground-operated aircrafts were good to go. The rest were preparing to get out as fast as possible, waiting for the sign.

Goranov, having taken out his Chaser remote controller and with the visual help of Miles' miths' live broadcast, began to painstakingly press and scroll the various buttons while watching Nastasya manoeuvring from an altitude of about 140 metres; the picture was a little shaky, and only one mith was presently broadcasting it.

“Will it work?” Collins asked him, waiting in suppressive agitation.

Goranov, his impenetrable eyes fixed onto the small monitor, responded with a singular grunt; however, that grunt was, Collins knew, a positive one. He, Cassidy, and Gregory were already on the ladder, expecting the unexpected.

For a moment they thought they'd heard a series of exploding sounds and a prolongation of some other unidentifiable ruckus that went on for quite a while: the men who guarded the skyscraper, they reckoned, as well as part the Hoppers had surely been encountered by Goranov's heavy-loaded airship, for which the Russian no sooner gave confirmation:

“The guys above us are gone for good, but those darn Hoppers are still circling around and it's driving me crazy. Might be the right moment to go for it, might be not.”

“Now's the time,” Miles suddenly said to them determinedly, his face looking contortedly serious and frantic from the cast screen glow. “They can't catch up to all the three flying objects, so they're beginning to clear out from this side.” He turned towards the Russian: “Keep em' steady like that.”

Cassidy was the first to come out, followed by Collins and the rest: the first thing they were met with was a burst fire of thermal-ionized beams which had passed way above their heads than they'd initially thought. The main southern entrance was less than 50 metres away, so they began running towards it while having their

guns out and watching out at every second and at every step the absolute state of warzone that's been going on everywhere.

Untamed brightness of the red, white and blue variety was beset on every way and in every direction they turned, what was seen as an indiscernible confusion of light warps and undetermined chased and chasing objects actually being the unleashed onslaught of the compact fighter automatons and of Goranov's "Sallen" P-300 Chaser serving as a distraction succoured by one of Miles' myths. Looking up at the fortified skyscraper, they could see the remainder of the Hoppers still grafted onto each other, keeping the attracting gossamer network steady; however, they weren't strong enough to cause any influence on Nastasya, who operated nearby it.

Another loud assail of blasts urged them on to start running towards the entrance.

Hot fumes had begun swivelling in the air from beyond the perceptible line of the static Hoppers: something which they couldn't see but feel was being dropped down at them in large quantities. They were still relatively far from the building and had suddenly experienced a strong withdrawal of energy and willpower.

Gregory was the first to saunter, lunge and fall down.

"Fuck, can't move any further," Clara gasped, unable to hold her legs straight and as if a giant sledgehammer was smashing her down and suppressed her movements.

Losing sight of one another, yet still being able to recognize distinct shapes, outlines and colours, they couldn't tell whether they were moving or not—it was as if they were cast out of their bodies, viewing themselves from out of their bodies.

However, that was only temporary: before long they were back on their feet, speeding again towards the entrance and occasionally endeavouring to look up and see the glistening hailstorm of scuttering objects and the fine white brightness of the joined rays atop the building. Everything had become especially murky and opaque to them as though having found themselves in the middle of an abstract, surreal environment in which they were infinitely helpless and dependent.

Amanda and Collins were the first to barge in, followed by Cassidy, Clara, Gregory, and Darren. A stunted background noise was left behind them but it was still ostensibly perceptible, and no sooner had they realized where they were than the whole floor was enclosed within heavy grid-walls so that every possible opening was sealed and blockaded. There was no way out, not at least from there.

The buzzing hum, now louder than it could ever have been, felt as if progressively encroaching on them with eviscerating effectiveness.

Cassidy's scanning abilities were completely disbalanced; they were unable to contact Goranov and Miles. All lights were suddenly turned off, and instead a strong vivid green tint eclipsed everything.

They moved on alertly along the entrance hall. They couldn't rely on the cyborg's augmented vision anymore, so they didn't know whether there was someone in the building right now and if there was, whether they would perchance encounter them. Everything was murky and hard to make out from a more considerable distance, the only exception being the bright luminous bundles of red rods put at different places and corners in an upright position, their ends reaching and touching the tall ceiling but not going through it.

"What's with all those things?" someone said. "It doesn't look natural."

"A modification of some sorts."

At length, they stood before an imposing elevator which appeared to be dysfunctional at the moment; the digital counter was off, and what the green tint revealed was only one large twofold door that was closed. They tried to call it, but the button remained dead as well.

Fortuitously, Darren noticed not so far away another elevator across the hall which appeared to have a working counter with the number 46 on it in crisp yellow. They headed that way, and upon pressing the button the display plate began to count back while

gradually coming to the realization that another, new kind of tacit silence had been adapted to their ears despite the fact that it was actually the same constant hum altered and appropriated by their minds no longer as something foreign.

No sooner had the door opened when they entered the spacious cabin.

A little before they reached the 46th floor they were strongly shaken by a colliding force from above, and the next moment the entire elevator came to a gradual halt, a friction being produced in the short intervening time until it finally started to fall with a lag. It was hard for them to stay immobile as their bodies were tossed under the influence of the waggling force within the cabin while the floor number on the counter went down without giving any indications of stopping.

Alternately, the elevator began to slow down, stop, and then resume it's falling again. A remote thumping noise could be discerned amid the overwhelming confusion as if it were someone or something repeatedly struck and pulled them down in a frantic way. They didn't know whether they would be let on a freefall altogether or gradually and safely be taken back to the ground floor, realizing there was little they could do to escape and come out of this subsequent entrapment unharmed.

It was at that moment between two verging extremes when they saw Cassidy attempt something they would've otherwise thought for pure madness.

“Get back!”

Unsheathing her katana, she thrust the blade from an aslant angle with a single movement right into the now slightly widened recess of the elevator door. Loud screeching sounds ensued, and as she cinched it in the right position while the elevator continued to drop down at multiple leaps, a sudden grating rupturing wobble seemed to almost crush them from within before they convinced themselves that the cyborg had actually managed to wedge in her blade through the door and temporarily stop the entire elevator, all the weight resting on a single piece of metal in the upper corner of the cabin.

“There’s a lid above you,” the cyborg said to Clara, pointing up at the ceiling right above her.

“Who’s gonna be first?” Gregory asked.

They remained steady without the elevator cabin being subjected to external heaves; the floor counter showed 38.

Darren turned towards Clara next to him, assuming a crouching position and making a foothold with his hands. It was uncertain how much longer Cassidy would hold on.

Stepping on his hands, the black woman immediately got hold of the lid, whereupon she was handled the emergency key fixed to the wall and used it to open the panel. Pulling herself up, she got out.

“What are you seeing?” Collins said, her blaster precautionary drawn out. From inside the elevator all they could pick out were the two lines of emergency lights stretched out throughout an infinity of sheer darkness.

“Nothing. So far.”

Amanda was next, and after her Gregory was the third one to make his way through.

“C’mon, Brad,” Darren signalled to Collins. For some reason, though, he was hesitant.

“Can’t leave you here,” he said to the cyborg, who was beginning to show signs of giving way under the enormous pressure she had to maintain. In the meantime the rest had managed to open the previous floor’s elevator doors by spreading them far and wide enough so that a person could pass through, the cyborg’s wedged blade being of an important help by the gap it had created from inside.

“Get out before it’s too late,” she said to him, her katana significantly bent to the point of shattering. “I’ll make it through, it won’t fall as fast as you think.”

Gregory, Clara, and Amanda were already outside the elevator shaft.

“What’s happening down there?”

Collins, reluctantly convinced, got out with the help of Darren's support.

Now that everyone except the cyborg had made it to the 39th floor, they had to ensure her safely getting out of the cabin. She was still inside and all they could see was a small part of her katana blade which had passed through the elevator cabin and shaft and ended fixated a little above the ground, barely flinching. They had no idea what would happen if she let go of the sword, whether it would remain there or quickly slip off and no longer holding together the platform.

They could tell by the swaying motion of the cabin that followed that it would soon plunge regardless of the blade; she had to hurry.

As Collins and Darren stood at the very edge of the elevator and waited in dreadful anticipation the appearance of the cyborg, all of a sudden a diluted blotch descending fast towards them made them aim at the unidentifiable object and shoot at it. The railing structure began to make snapping noises as soon as the platform was detached and—at first imperceptibly, then acceleratingly—headed straight down the lengthy shaft with sputtering clamour. They immediately moved away, and in the interval between a short-lasting conscious observation and focusing their eyes on the dark open space before them a bright sizzling flash was manifested out of there and was almost simultaneously succeeded by the ethereally agile figure of Cassidy; no sooner had she made herself present when the freefalling inflamed object that had moved past them and escaped their gaze crashed into the platform, annihilated without having been seen.

“A Hopper,” the cyborg said undisturbedly, looking at them with her peculiar artificial eyes while putting her barely damaged katana back into her sheath. “I can hear more of them coming.”

They began hastily climbing up the stairs walking by empty offices and weakly lit wide corridors where everything seemed to have been long ago abandoned. A sudden dislike for the place and an unmitigated presentiment for being there had caused Amanda to experience something like an outburst of torporific anxiety: she was

keeping herself whole and steady, yet an unremitting poking at her intuition hindered her determination to some extent. The others had also begun feeling something similar, touched by a common self-preserving factor that was still in an underdeveloped condition.

They were bent on their decision not to use the elevators anymore, seeing them as an extremely pernicious risk that was not worth it. After a while they got to the 71st floor, and they were yet to encounter a living person. The more they ascended, the louder the humming buzz became—an unrelenting sound as if already having become part of their biological organisms. There was no signal there, and all the communication and telemetric frequencies had been suppressed. Soon, upon reaching the 75th floor, they found themselves in a slightly different, better lit environment—concrete and other kinds of dust were scattered throughout the long network of passageways, along which holes in the walls the size of a thumb seemed to have been drilled for unknown purposes. Walking on and inspecting the place, they discovered that hot air came out of the holes and that the temperature of the entire floor was, in fact, way higher than was supposed to be.

Farther on across the corridor a four-foot stand that bore three small adjacent containers filled with unknown liquid and out of which a pair of opaque tubes passed and were inserted into the ceiling was suspended in a facing position towards them, around which glinting micro-threads seemed to be sewn onto it as an after effect. Gregory was about to check out what exactly that strange contraption was, but before even making the first step he was immediately deterred by Collins.

At the other end of the corridor a giant granite-like plate taking up two-thirds of the space was placed, and they found out that by its sides several small generators were hooked up to it that were currently active. Having become inveterately oblivious to any external noises except that of the ominous hum, they were too distracted to perceive the figure that had come down from the next floor—a figure that at the moment was holding something small in its hand stretched out towards them in a surrendering manner. He was

unarmed, they noticed, but soon they would come to the realization that so were they.

He only gazed at her in remorseful silence; Amanda couldn't possibly believe it was him who was now standing in the flesh before them.

Clara, Cassidy, and Darren had already intuitively pointed their blasters at the unexpected man whose withered face struck them as though having lost its essential features due to a long and lasting exposure to harsh conditions. Mistakenly or not, to them he was an unpredictable and perfidious threat, yet completely standing on his own against them and as if fallen into a cathartic state.

"Can't use them here," were his first words; they didn't know what he meant. "The weapons. They're within the detracting field."

They right away understood that the mysterious granite plate down the corridor was causing this effect—and it was true, their guns were unusable at that moment.

Amanda, befuddled and at the same time amazed, was still unsure whether it was just a figment of her imagination or a hallucination caused by the distorted electromagnetic fields that she was seeing Michael a couple of feet away from her, whose stare occasionally met hers yet not as she used to remember it not so long ago. Collins recognized the small thing he was holding in his left hand—it was another enacter.

"Here," he proffered the small piece to Collins, "take it. I don't know what it is nor what it does. Only that Beckard would kill me without hesitation if he saw me giving it to anybody." Collins slowly walked up to him and took it. The two men stood face to face gazing at each other with absent animosity and ill-temperance.

"You better start explaining what's going on here."

Collins' threat felt genuine and convincing to them, and so it did to Michael.

At length he turned towards Amanda, his face appearing as if that of a dead man. He was again facing Collins: "Beckard thought that he could trust me, that I could be reliable because of my blind

grief. Even I myself believed that at first—I believed that he would find Ben in exchange for my loyalty, he exploited that as much as he could. I let him take control over me. I shouldn't have allowed him to do it.”

The memory of the torn face came back to Collins; he could never forget that. Before long the cyborg sensed something which promised nothing good.

“We can't stay here,” she warned them. Collins and Michael looked back at her, seeing her feeling the walls with her prosthetic hand with a cold-blooded attitude.

Amanda was the only one who didn't pay attention to it—rather, she was expectantly clinging to Michael's words and what he had to say. She didn't need anything at that moment besides an unequivocal explanation and answers to her questions, questions she'd never let go of since she saw Commissioner Rowlan getting killed earlier that day. She was speechless, and in spite of her terrible urge to turn to him and confront him, she felt that, after all, there might be nothing to be said or reckoned with.

“What do you know about all of this?” Collins asked Michael, now holding in his hands the two enactors and comparably scrutinizing them without blinking.

“Barely anything. Not even his closest and most loyal circles had any idea what was going on, not even Shunningan or the two brothers. All he did was assign various tasks to his people at different locations and at different times without them knowing their purpose; mine in particular was to keep this thing with myself and not disclose it to anyone until I was further noticed.”

A minor earthquake disturbed the lights for a moment; the whole building felt unstable.

“How long have you been here? And is there anyone else in this building?”

“I got here half an hour ago on my own, just before they activated the defence system—the Hoppers and the ground floor sealing. Don't know if there are others here, but I had to off some

people before that, I was supposed to stay and wait in another building close by, but changed my mind at the last moment.”

“Why?”

“Because I was hearing how they were having some unanticipated problems at different sites. I immediately knew that it couldn’t be anyone else but you, that you were messing with them.”

“Brad, up or down?” Darren was eagerly trying to get his attention.

Out of the same holes black smoke began to suddenly fill the corridor and the entire floor, the temperature continuing to rapidly rise while many mini-earthquakes followed without cessation. Collins, like the rest, was unable to think out an even remotely right decision and course of action; it were as if most of his attention was diverted at the two enactors and their exact application while he had to simultaneously deal with the fact that they were in grave peril right now. They proceeded to climbing the stairs in silence.

Going up through the semi-darkness, they realized that the more they went up, the worse the conditions of the different floor sections became—most of the walls, floors, ceilings, and furniture had sustained significant damage due to the previous strong tremors that had surprised them underway, without much appeal left to a once illustrious place. They constantly kept their eyes and ears open to any sudden attack without leaving much to chance like they did with Michael.

Michael, Amanda thought morosely while she gave a brief inspection to the surroundings, that same old Michael would never come back—he was gone long before the whole thing had fallen apart, before he’d met Beckard and probably even before he’d met her.

They shuffled into different areas, evading mostly ruined spaces and laboriously watching over their heads towards a blotted out column of impenetrability at the end of which either quick or slow death lay. They were met with hot air every three or four storeys, coming out of the same bored holes what were arranged in an

identical pattern; they were also encountering the same four-foot stands with their glinting threads around them in almost identical positions. Desperate to try something, they opened fire at one of them.

As one container exploded so did the rest, and if they hadn't backed off in time they would have surely been caught by the tremulous wave and scorching blaze that nearly brought one third of the floor to ruins. Several big cavities had been opened up across them which opened a view to the lower parts of the building; suppressed violet-blue fire was raving at the far end of the corridor, while expelled smoke quickly reached up to them and almost immediately made their breathing harder. Moving out of there, they got farther down the spacious but dark hallway and entered an empty office room with windows letting in the light produced by the static and grafted Hoppers' network of interwoven gossamer shields.

Neither Goranov's aircraft nor Miles' myths were anywhere to be spotted amid the plethora of erratic entanglement of lights and the overarching luminous brightness ejected from the skyline-crossing rays. The blue-green blurred crests and the dark-violet self-absorbing openings throughout their midst gave a staggeringly transformed appearance to the sky with its entire pattern having re-emerged as something entirely marvellous and unseen of.

At the moment they were on the 61st floor—not even half-way to the top of the building—struggling and unable to decide what to do next. Collins, moving from one end of the room to another and trying to think of something while dazzled by the lights outside, gave them an impression of unresolved doubt. They, too, didn't have a clue what they were doing there.

“Where are you going?” Collins turned to Michael, seeing him leaving the room and continuing down the now branching-out corridor. He followed him, and so did the rest, while Amanda yet again found herself unable to confront him.

Because there had been a rapid temperature increase even in that part of the floor, they—especially Cassidy—determined that they'd have to move on—or, more precisely, up. However, they couldn't go back since a good chunk of the staircase and most of the

ground around it had been blown up. But, as Collins suspected, Michael wasn't looking for another staircase, neither for another working elevator.

"The kill switch must be inside this building," he said to Collins as the two went on along the obscure hallways. Stopping before a faintly outlined glass casing in a general waiting section, he pressed the button for activation: a simple holographic schematic of the building's structural parts was emanated out of it; he studied it. "Beckard would often mention 'the place' at random whenever he talked to someone on the phone and give strange orders that made no sense."

"Do you have any idea where that could be?" Clara, behind him, asked.

"Could be anywhere."

Collins, also looking at the map of the building, glanced something which Michael might have also seen simultaneously.

"The conference room, one of the very last floors," he turned his head around and then towards Michael. "The Grouzers' offices are also near it."

"It can't be that simple," Michael said, "it's too predictable of him. Way predictable."

"Don't have much of a choice left," Darren said, looking around himself. "It's a pretty big building, to say the least, and I'm not sure if we could even make it alive out of here. Got only one shot, can't waste it."

Time wasn't at their disposal to deliberate—instead, they got back to one of the elevators to see if it worked. In the meantime, while passing by an open office with a view to the outside and whence the direct light from a ray crossed and reached the corridor, Collins and Clara felt their skin being burned after a very brief exposure to it.

"Fuck," he exclaimed, rubbing the front of his hand; the burn was bad but it didn't hurt too much. Still, that was another cause for alarm and a sign that the ubiquitous rays had probably

become lethally deadly to anyone exposed to them, especially those in the streets.

The elevator they'd just a minute ago walked by seemed responsive to their call, and before long the door opened. Cassidy, the last to enter, felt reluctant about it, but in the end joined them.

It looked differently than the former one, with improved dialling box and enhanced quasi-interactive troubleshooting detectors. No sooner had their summed weight enabled the whole system when they selected floor number 148 and the doors closed with a confirming sound. They could hardly feel any movement although the elevator unit seemed to be working just fine. However, it was when they got to the 143rd floor when the first problems occurred.

"Why did it stop here?" Gregory asked moments before the doors opened.

A spazz of electrified shockwave went before their eyes and in a second or two condensed acidic gas began to be sprinkled in the dim corridor, diluted with heavy particles—it was a biohazard booby trap, and with it another lethal aerosol agent seemed to have been dispersed at the same time. Amanda immediately dialled a random floor number, rapidly fainting as she involuntarily imbibed on the toxic gas. The doors closed, and they were led several storeys below.

Stepping out, Collins descried the ambivalent glowing orienting signs along the corridor's shady walls—most of them were cryptic in nature as they constituted letters of unknown origin that perhaps wouldn't be called letters at all if it weren't for some familiar latinized variations. At one point geometrical forms of an even obscurer nature had begun to appear in an evenly arrayed custom along the entire length of the interspersing passageway, hardly indicating anything intelligible.

Cassidy tried to bring her augmented vision to use again, but with unsuccessful.

"Can't make nothing out of it," Gregory said, marvelling at the mysterious meaning behind the ciphers.

From that point on towards the end the ciphers merged into one continuous blue candent line that had interesting alterable characteristics when viewed from different positions. Collins, Michael, and Amanda began to follow them.

It was a dead end—however, what stood in their way was rather a compilation of mechanical apparatuses that seemed to work in synchronicity and extract some kind of energy via many cables that kept it going and whose stats were shown on two separate monitors. There were an uncountable number of gimmicks and keys and their exact purpose was impossible to be figured out at first glance; yet, for some reason they found some of the same indicating signs and symbols on its build of compacted and assembled metric, converting, and processing analogous devices that blipped incessantly and exchanged more and more data values between each other. What they conjectured was that the whole thing was somehow connected with the glowing symbols on the walls, resonating with them as it soon became apparent by their changing shades.

Cassidy seemed particularly interested in the devices' structural design and the way the symbols were linked with each other.

"Seems familiar?" Collins asked her, also intrigued.

"Kinda. I know I've seen one of these before, but somehow I can't remember exactly when and where—as if from a dream that's never been completely forgotten."

"Should we go for it and destroy it?" Gregory asked.

"Last time this approach didn't end up very well," said Collins, "so I wouldn't try that. Maybe tamper with it in some way, but..."

"It's a high-grade enforceable conducting system of neutronic charges," the cyborg said, touching with her crudely looking, yet far exceeding in deftness, fingers. She was flipping some circuits and plugging in and out various different dangling cables, switching their places and setting up values that didn't speak anything to them.

Hardly had she begun messing with it when the whole electronic system began acting strange and no longer keeping up with the synchronous operation—it was precisely then when the lights

began to flicker and the humming buzz change its tone. Another of a series of small quakes followed, the walls and everything around them being affected in an unpredictable way. They backed off, noticing the blue signs and symbols on the wall beside them taking on different colours.

“What’d you do?” Collins turned to the cyborg, watching from afar how the assembled system behind the corner had suddenly gone up in flames.

“Lowered the raw value of transferrable data and redirected the rest to a different input back channel. Whatever that system is handling, it must be something that can’t be measured by a standard deviation model—the power hold is too unstable, that’s why they’ve designed it.”

They decided not to go back to the elevator, and instead were to get on the 148th floor by foot—the floor where the conference room was located. They were wary not to pass by an open view to the rays outside, and whenever they saw a muddied bright reflection, they would either evade it or shield themselves with their clothes.

On the 143rd floor they came across a strange modification—all of the intersecting corridors had a similar glowing, stamped on every wall on both sides and creating a variable opalescent haze through an even warmer air. They knew they were close to the top.

“There’s got to be someone here, there’s no way we’re the only ones in the building.” Clara’s impatience, surged by the intimidating prospect of their being permanently locked up inside alone, was becoming evident; Amanda and Gregory were also beginning to feel the same way.

The next couple of floors had more of the previous signs, and it was not until the 146th one when they heard a shattering sound coming from a nearby office room which prompted an immediate reaction by them by repositioning and aiming their guns in that direction. It happened so that no sooner had Collins and Cassidy decided to approach the office with caution when its door was rendered to splinters by a careening and swirling Hopper dashing itself

against the walls and floor and finally dropping down inactive and defused; their shots, however, weren't what had brought the machine down—it had already sustained damage from something else, which they thought could only be caused by Goranov's offensive against the aerial defence.

Going near the enflamed object, they halted, coming across a burning ray out of an opening. The compact combat machine was irreparably damaged, black melted goo churning out of it, the strong acrid smell giving them a bitter taste in the mouth. They stepped aside while from the outside the humming buzz redounded with louder intensity; many mingled noises further added to the confused and frantic atmosphere.

Continuing up to the 148th floor, they slowly crept on and along the brightly lit corridors with lofty intersections and concaved spaces where everything seemed untouched and unaffected in any way save a couple of cracks in the walls. They began traversing the floor not knowing what exactly they were to expect, especially wary of a possible security system and booby traps just like the ones they encountered minutes ago.

Michael and Collins looked up the floor's schematic map and pinpointed the large conference hall that was outlined in a different texture. Antiquated expensive paintings with other kinds of authentic works of art like sculptures and post-modern avant-garde enamelled panes elaborated the entire floor. Everything around them looked excessively garnished and refined, without many redundant elements. They proceeded with caution, Michael at the foremost, followed by Collins.

Reaching the entrance to the main conference hall, Darren was the first to discern the two doors' imperfect alignment, one of which seemed a little bit tilted as though loosely hanging. They noticed the way in which everything around them was arranged: part of the carpet was rolled up and moved aside, revealing a naked black marble floor pierced at many places in a similar pattern as the walls on the lower storeys. Out of them they felt the same familiar hot air reaching up to their faces and significantly warming up the corridor.

“Can’t open it,” Collins said, receiving an error message on the small keylock display; he tried to apply force to the doors, but they didn’t bulge. He looked towards Cassidy, who then stepped up and began spreading them with her hands.

For the first time ever she had to put in a considerable effort for something so seemingly trivial—she could hardly spread the two doors, leaving only less than a 3-inch opening. Kicking it didn’t do anything either.

“It’s a tough fucker.”

“What do you see?”

“Not much going on there,” answered Collins, who was peeking through the slit and trying to make out some discernible objects: all he could see were some murky manifestations of dimmed-out light.

The next earthquake that followed was the most violent so far, and knowing that they were literally just a dozen or so floors below the most intense point of the five fiery rays, they couldn’t stop thinking of the possibility of being burned alive there and then. The situation had gotten worse for them.

The air had become significantly harder to breathe, so they moved away. The air had acquired, some of them noticed, a malodorous quality and a yellowish tint. They hurried up to another intersecting corridor where they came across a distinctive modification of the entire floor.

A glossy surface had been installed over all four walls up to the corridor’s end, covering them and creating an unusual sight as the space they were in resembled an entrance into an embellished yet very fragile quarry. However, the more they advanced, the hotter it became, and they quickly went back as the air became more and more suffused with the unbearable pungent substance.

“I don’t think anyone was meant to be currently in this building,” Darren remarked, coughing.

They had a choice: either to leave the floor or continue down the polished obsidian corridor.

“Wait,” Gregory stopped Collins, who’d chosen the second option, “do you think it’s a good idea?”

“Does it matter at this point?”

Collins, Cassidy, and Michael were the first to dare cross the bare smooth hallway: as they passed, the heat weave was especially unsparing to the two men, but they nevertheless persisted and reached the end point where they took a turn and disappeared from sight. It was not long before Gregory, Amanda, Darren, and Clara went after them.

Arriving at a narrower hallway wholly layered with the same polished material, they saw several interconnected boxes on both sides whose design and the way they were arrayed was similar to the mechanical apparatuses from the floors below. There were some peculiar alterations here and there as well—a big transparent shielding glass divided the adjacent corridor, and on the other side suppressed glittering specs floated around emerging from several pipe openings in the ground; the other part of the corridor had the same dark glossy covering, except it was being heated and filled with incandescent ruddy nebulae that didn’t seem to increase nor change their property.

Warmth could be felt when touching the glass, clearly indicating that the temperature on the other side was at odds with the coolness they now felt. The walls, however, thought Collins, bore some resemblance with those of the city powerplant’s concealed passage to the hornsern crystal depository. In fact, now that he looked closer into them, he began to discern more and more similarities in the ridged and jagged details.

“Dead end,” Clara murmured disappointingly.

Collins, reading the same in Michael’s eyes, realized they had to go back. But immediately after that he changed his mind: what if they were closer than ever to the construction’s main switch? The similarity with the powerplant’s dark passageway might actually mean something, being not a mere coincidence but a follow-up or a duplicate design of one and the same structure. The others saw in his reluctance to go back a giveaway of uneasiness not yet disclosed to them.

“We’re close,” looking at them, he said at length. “Really close. If only we could pass through it...”

He was mulling over something—the pressure of having to stand there not having a clue what to do had a dreadful discomforting effect on his thinking: none of them were able to figure out where to even begin from.

He approached them, indecisive yet at the same time firmly convinced; Amanda tried to understand what he currently had in mind, what thoughts were so restlessly flipping in it. All of a sudden, to everyone’s surprise, he drew out his blaster and aimed it at the shielding glass block that divided the corridor in two.

The first couple of rounds did nothing save creating scorched smoke and leaving burned smudges on the glassy surface; Michael, followed by Darren, did the same, sharing Collins’ exasperation at the inextricability of the situation. It took several shots for the glass to begin to crack, but at this point the smoke was becoming too excessive and hard to breathe. They decided to try one last time, and this time Gregory and Cassidy joined them. The simultaneous thermal-ionized outburst that followed created a stupendous pressure onto the shielding glass, finally causing enough damage to it that at the end all that was needed was one big kick by Cassidy to completely render it to shatters.

Immediately they were faced with a sweeping upsurge of hot gust, exposed to unexplainable sporadic electric stings that reacted to every movement of theirs. Collins was once again reminded of the similarities and what he’d experienced back at the powerplant, now further emboldened by his conviction that they were on the right path.

The grainy tactile shock that was sent all over their skins was a persistent nuisance that vacillated between discomfort and pain; at one point as they kept walking flashes and small lightnings occasionally appeared not so far away from them, the slightest friction producing an electric discharge. All rooms seemed to be barred by some sort of sturdy polymethyl-based compound, and further on there was a staircase at the end of the passage, leading to an upper

floor or section of the floor. Towards the end they came across more of the same glowing ciphers.

Having hastily climbed up the stairs, they found themselves in an area of total darkness and of unknown dimensions, penetrated only by a peculiar seeping of light that came from above yet without a visible source. The light came down on them in the form of short, miniscule spears, and just like the electrostatic discharges, it left a tingling, albeit less intense, sensation.

At that instance an arrangement of swooping non-linear figures washed down the dark space, helping them to form an approximate estimation of the spatiality of the room, and hardly had they come to the realization that they'd led themselves into a control-operational room when the whole place was suddenly revealed as a peripheral part of the skyscraper with a nearly 360° panoramic outlook that opened a dimmed view to the vast cityscape: even with a reduced intensity, the two rays that happened to pass over them were having a deleterious effect on their sight and skin due to how close they were in comparison to everyone else below. They couldn't see much else nor whether Nastasya and Miles' miths were still circling around.

What they thought to be a mere shadow distortion was actually a transcribing balancer of circuitual positive and negative energy charges, composed in such a way that the refractions it cast everywhere were combined in ever enfolding spears of light; elsewhere there were containers with unknown substances protected by sophisticated security locks, and vessels being connected with each other via wide tubes than went through the floor and into the walls. At once the facial system detected them as intruders, but no alarm was activated. However, the door behind them was automatically closed, subsequently realizing it was a steel-enforced and electrocuting one.

As of now they didn't know what the equipment was all about, but they knew this was one of the key places that might actually facilitate the shutting down of the entire complex. They noticed that some components were duplicates of the computer device from

several floors below, which meant a coherent but decentralized working grid built to have as few weak spots as possible.

Suddenly, Clara realized that she'd been standing right within the range of a strong and sharp light concentrated into a distant dot that had blinked and changed its colour. Slowly turning around, she stood facing the others who seemed not to notice her disconcerted behaviour:

“Motion stringer.”

At first they didn't properly comprehend her words, until they finally understood what she meant and, shock-stricken, slowly looked at the unobtrusive concealed detector behind her ready to shell everything in its way the moment she moved away from its range.

Darren got close to her but was stopped by Michael lest he accidentally activated the booby trap.

“She moves, we become minced meat.”

At the same time a bright flash made them avert their attention to the windows for a second, seeing the sky starting to release even more intense and wider sunrays, percolating through a dappled black veil and setting different places on fire with an irradiating force. Intermittent tremors resumed in full magnitude once again, and Amanda and Darren were fast enough to hold Clara at both sides when they saw her almost stepping aside.

Collins began hastily checking out the transcribing balancers and the vessels one by one, hoping to find the two keygen enacter slots. It wasn't long before he gave up—just when the tremors stopped—seeing no possible way to insert them anywhere. At long he focused on Clara.

“When I move in front of you, I want you to immediately move away. Okay?”

“You sure? You know what you're doing?”

Collins nodded.

“Move away,” he said to Amanda and Darren. He stepped up to Clara, standing before her and becoming the sole target of the motion mine; at virtually the same time Clara had moved aside,

releasing herself from the deathly grip of the booby trap, leaving Collins in her place instead.

The few doors along the left side of the room led to empty, dark spaces; however, when Gregory checked out the last one, he was faced with a brief outpouring of scorching light which, had he remained there a moment longer, would have certainly burned his irises. Swaying backwards and a little dazed, he left the door ajar as strong brightness entered.

Michael and Amanda immediately went up to him, closing the door.

“What in the hell was that?” Darren exclaimed.

“Couldn’t see much,” Gregory said, “only felt a warm whiff.”

Cassidy, approaching the door and standing at its threshold, opened it. Shielding her eyes, she entered, and without being able to see much, the only thing that followed was a barely audible thud and a subsequent diminishing of the light. When Michael and Gregory stepped inside, they saw that a considerable part of the room’s ceiling had crumbled down, leaving a big gaping hole that led to nowhere in particular—it was pitch dark. However, the convertible window panels enclosing one third of the room had been put on a blocking shade mode just like the ones outside, presenting an even crispier view of the sharply delineated ray that was as if indefinitely prolonged from the skyline towards them.

“Guess it was worth the hassle,” Michael said to both himself and the cyborg, who at that moment had already begun tampering with the broken control board by the door.

Clara and Gregory stayed with Collins, who tried to remain as steady as possible under the extremely sensitive aim of the mine trap. The atmosphere had become noisomely distracting, and he couldn’t even turn his head around.

“What now?” Clara turned to him, she and Gregory alert and watchful of the pointing dot.

“What’d you find?”

Coming at him at that moment was Darren, holding in his hand a flat item of irregular shape that flickered in a monotonous colour.

“Take it.” Collins did what was told to him—he already knew what that meant. “You’re free to step away now.”

“I assume you got that from the room?” he said while looking at the now dead tracking dot.

“Cassidy did. We also found a lot of other stuff in there.”

Having headed towards the door the first thing they spotted was Amanda staring at the seemingly endless hole in the ceiling which was visibly cracked all throughout the room. A glacier-like effect was being produced by the reflective properties of the windows, and while the lighting appeared to be permanently blotted out, they were provided with enough visibility.

Collins saw Cassidy working on another control board device, trying to cause a shortcut damage. This time, however, it appeared slightly different, having additional modifications applied to it.

Collins, standing beneath the cracked ceiling, tried to figure out where could it possibly lead to.

“Can I use your flashlight?”

“We already did that,” Michael said, handing it over to him. “It’s as if it absorbs all the light without anything coming back to us.”

It was true: the flashlight was of no help whatsoever, unable to reveal anything that could help them gauge the proportions of what lay beyond. Walking up to the cyborg, he saw her attempting to break through the basic firewall level by disconnecting and reconnecting different cables and pin-reducers. Looking past the enormous window panel, his eyes were gazing straight into the firmament that had now acquired a violet-blue tinge and which seemed to be breaking apart in many places as though no longer able to enclose and hold the destructive solar rays from incinerating everything on the surface. He also glimpsed at the many buildings and places set

on fire, precipitating the inevitable fiery hailstorm that was about to wreck violent destruction of incomprehensible degrees.

“Can you lend me a hand?” Collins turned to Michael, who at first gave him an incredulous look. But after seeing what he meant, he clasped his hands together.

Succeeding from the first try, he got himself up over to the other side; the cracks multiplied, but the ceiling itself was still steady.

The moment he turned the flashlight on, what little he could see was enough for him to conclude that he was in some sort of an isolated low-humidity chamber with black rugged walls similar to those in the powerplant and in the corridors several floors below; the deep impenetrable darkness didn't go far up although it ended considerably high where he could scantily discern an ambiguous lighting alternation that appeared farther than it actually was. There were more of those same tubes, going through all the length up to the murky vastness where the flashlight couldn't reach. The mumbly noise here was much stronger, and the reverberating effect amplified its resounding with an almost excruciating deepness.

In the meantime Cassidy had managed to sneak in from behind him, not noticing when she did it. The rest had gathered under them eager to learn what they've encountered.

“It's both nothing and something,” Collins said to Michael. He wanted to join them.

“Quite the sight,” the latter remarked after he was helped to get over to the other side.

Collins and Cassidy moved away since that part of the ground was close to collapsing; everyone was currently exploring the strange zone they were in.

The lights were suddenly turned on after Cassidy found the switcher; the light was scant, yet it still made a significant difference and allowed them to trudge more confidently.

“We're nearly at the top,” Michael conjectured.

The sheer space wasn't quite as empty as they thought: rather, it turned out to be an unfinished part inside the skyscraper.

Once they could finally see what was really going on, they were left even more confused when at several places they came across various unfinished sections and objects like scaffolded walls, staircases, supporting pillars and other things. A certain feeling of stagnation was permeating the air, but at the same time and to no lesser extent something told them that there was some other, hidden purpose behind all of this.

Presently, Amanda made out a hardly discernible object that appeared to merge with the background and foreground sporadically, after which she pointed towards it for the rest to see: across them lay as though ingrafted into the floor an elevation or extension of it, and after having passed between several unfinished naked concrete walls and made their way around many openings and metal ropes, they saw that the unidentifiable object was a glass-like polished container with a keyboard on it. There were also a couple of fissures cut into it that pretty much resembled slots for standard flat transcoding plugs. From their current spot they could see different parts and sections of the floor below open to them, tracing also some more cables and tubes that clearly carried on something essential to the highest point of the building that served as a combination of integral conducive discharger and an amplifier.

“It’s not for the enactors,” Michael said to Collins, following his train of thought.

“I can see that. Look.” A little above there was a round enclosure similar to a compass, its three arrows pointing at different numbers from 0 to 200; all three were of a different colour, and each time they crossed each other they glimmered. None of them knew what that meant.

Amanda tried to connect to Miles or Goranov through her comms-ring, but all she got was repetitive static sound. Walking away from the group to see if there was something more to be discovered in this part of the skyscraper, she headed for the farthest visible point that wasn’t lit, stepping over moveable platforms and hopping from one stool on to the next. Gregory followed her.

“Don’t.”

They ended up standing over a sloping tenebrous narrow opening which seemed to be blocked by a thick iron gate that was entirely welded to the metal posts; it was some sort of a tunnel, and the gate didn't budge at all.

Collins advanced towards them together with Michael and Darren. He immediately saw the gate, and when he pointed the flashlight at it nothing else was revealed save a continuous passage down the narrow dark tunnel. At that moment Cassidy and Clara joined them as well.

The moment Cassidy pulled out the gate something happened which they knew was triggered by its removal: first, a strong wheezing gust flowed out of the sloped passage and almost thrust them out, prompting a series of rapid consecutive snapping noises that sounded like something was cut loose from its deep ends and was quickly approaching them; the second after effect took place without much delay, when they felt a small quake rising up from the very midst of the building and culminating at the place where they stood.

The first to go was Gregory: when the ground began to undulate and undergo a massive tearing transformation, a good chunk of it was set apart and began to quickly fall detaching itself from the entire plate; Gregory rolled down with it, and almost immediately after him Collins and Michael were thrown down as well. An energizing wave of turbulent crashes and flickering lights swept over the entire place and crated a disorderly havoc and din.

The three couldn't see anything and felt as if stuck amid an extremely limited space of nothing but broken concrete slabs and sharp protrusions.

"You okay?" Gregory asked while pointing the flashlight at them. He then pointed it around and above them and could only see parts of some demolished ceiling and of some kind of a tiled room.

Here they could barely hear each other due to the booming sound, but could still communicate with gestures. They began treading through the concrete slabs and crossing over irregularly built stretches of unfinished wall partitions. They wondered if the others had survived the quake and for some time they were preoccupied

with the most afflicting thoughts until they stood over a small intermediate storey cliff, whereupon they made out a big recess in the ground of a perfect circular shape.

They chose to go down and inspect it.

Slowly approaching it, however, they felt another earthquake of a lesser but still intense magnitude and halted on spot. They had a solid amount of grinded dust fall on them, anticipating that a similar collapsing scenario would happen again; after the tremor had quickly faded out, they walked up to the edge of the circular hole and pointed the flashlight down.

What they came across had the characteristics of a small caged box partially encased in concrete chunks that had clearly sustained surface damages during the series of earthquakes. They tried to pull it out, as it wasn't buried very deep, by grabbing its handles. But when they managed to move it a bit, they realized that the box had begun rising on its own with signifying lighting marks activated on its sides.

It was a precipitation to a more surprising event that occurred the moment the cage took on a self-sustaining mode of its own: when the light marks began to multiply and the remainder of the covering raw material was shook off by some sort of an integrated vibrating mechanism, a blast of sheen blinded them for a second without them being able to perceive its source or direction—it was as if everything before them was scrubbed off for a second, a blank foreground entirely displacing their vision before everything dissolved back to normal again. Michael had the remote feeling of having had his mind blazed, everything appearing disfigured and displaced for a while as if having been induced through a psychedelic or psychotropic trance. Collins and Gregory felt the same way, and when they looked at each other they could barely distinguish each other's features. Nevertheless, what really caught them unawares was how the caged box had begun exerting a pulsating rhythm of its own, a strange and unexplainable energy emanating from it.

Standing over it, Collins reached out to touch it, and when he made the first contact with it a strong electric current went up his arm, rendering it numb for several seconds. Repeating the action,

this time the copper-alloyed box felt so cold that his fingers were almost glued to it. There were different incisions and black plates all over it, none seeming to react to the touching.

All of a sudden the uneven and rocky ground around them began to tremble, another earthquake then followed until a misty shroud swooped up by a humid gust quickly filled the stale air. The caged box remained unchanged, yet still enclosed. When Collins took out the two enacters and put them close to the box, the box began to twinkle again but this time in a different and rapider way. At that instant the threefold-locked cage was spread out by itself, leaving the copper box affixed to the pole coming from the ground. Enormous boulders began to fall nearby and the three had to move away.

What followed was a series of the same bright-burning flashes whereupon they completely lost all sense of direction and orientation—and scarcely had they covered themselves when a small whirlwind was beginning to form across the other side of the ruinous hall, its two sides extracting a murky light that was probably the cause for the intermittent flashes from a moment ago. Opening their eyes, they found themselves standing amid a violent tempestuous gust accompanied by a louder booming thud and an increased volume of hot draught. The whirlwind remained, unabating.

Presently, the three were standing below the ridge whence they'd come, unable to think out what was the best thing to do. And it was when Michael attempted to get closer to the box again when the entire front wall was carried down together with the sweeping whirlwind: at first there was an uncontrollable fusion of searing heat and lightning sparks that at first distorted the darkness and then made everything visible again, and it was precisely at that moment when the three seized the opportunity to get to the box again; however, shortly after they left their spot, water streams began gushing out from the ground, huge vaporized smoke covering most of the area.

In the thick mist interrupted by lightning sparks Collins lost sight of Michael and Gregory; he tried to grab for something but that only made things worse, as the second he reached out for the box he

slipped and fell on his back, submerging himself in the achingly-cold water. He barely succeeded in getting up, and when he grabbed for the slippery box again he began to shout out and call for them without success—his voice was hopelessly lost in the chaotic pandemonium, not receiving any response. He was holding firmly for the copper box which continued to flash on its own, already halfway beneath the water. Everything around him was in motion and alternated between lurid imagery and silhouetted volatility.

The water continued to swell and drag in everything on its way and to rise little by little. It had already reached to above Collins' knees, so he had to decide if he was to stay or get out of there. The steam of fresh condensation had become all-pervading and prevented him from seeing clearly.

The only thing he could distinctly make out was the glinting box that was still sturdily affixed onto the bottom; while he tried not to fall in it, he accidentally kicked its elongated support, which triggered a different light pattern and caused the box's upper side to stretch out. In a couple of seconds the box changed its shape, extending and increasing its light intensification. Suddenly, Collins saw different markings beginning to circumscribe it, and the next moment the entire thing began to function in a confusing way as its upper half began to spin round a self-sustainable axis. Hardly had that happened when he saw that a receptacle had been pulled out as if it were a reloading container the inside of which was difficult to discern. Ultimately, however, he saw that there were some contents in it and, upon putting his hand in it, he instantaneously received a spazzing shiver across his arm and then his entire body.

He tore his hand away from it, the muscle pain not abating while he flexed it. His clothes were all drenched from the water and humid vapor, and his eyes were constantly contracting because of the moist that entered in them. He wondered if he was about to be swiped away by the rupturing whirling—the tempestuous currents continued to dash against his body, but due to the sundry erratic din there was no telling what was really going on behind the flickering white shroud of smog.

It was when he'd reached again with both hands for the rectangular box that he began to rapidly fall back, still holding for it and one moment drowning in the water, the other getting out to the surface. Somehow the box had detached itself from its elongated support, feeling its heavy weight rolling along with him to an unknown end. It wasn't long before he fell from a precipice down to another section of the storey where it was pouring like waterfall and where the water continued its path several levels below what he thought was a small empty office whose walls were soaked with glowing bright-blue liquid and where there was scantily anything save some broken lamp fixtures and a door leading to an outside corridor; only one lamp on the ceiling was intact, the room being barely lit with a shadowy tinge which made the blue liquid shine even more strongly. Pulling the rectangular box beside him, he studied the segmented part that had been extended and inside of which he found two empty sockets that were cooled by small nitrogenic fan capsules that were also electrostatic.

He felt his body exhausted and he saw everything through a murky lens; he went out of the room into the corridor and encountered nothing but more cracked walls and broken lights that were covered in fresh dust. Returning to the rectangular box, he picked up the two enactors from his pocket and began to align them within the extended receptacle's sockets. The first one he'd successfully plugged in activated a different set of lights, and after he inserted the second one an array of two-dimensional digital glyphs appeared and began to take on different sizes and shapes against the box's frontal surface.

Hardly had this occurred when he began to see some rudimentary and simplified graphics appear: there were blocks arranged into different shapes forming some kind of encrypted rolls and stacks of information that were impossible to be understood at first glance. Hastily, he began pressing them at random, each time different blocks being selected and others deselected, not exactly sure what was really going on. He could also rotate them and move entire sections consisting of several combined squares, although in the end nothing came out of it—he felt that this was it, that whatever could

be done was done. He fell into a state of total hopelessness, continuing to aimlessly arrange and rearrange the puzzle of digital boxes out of desperation.

The touchscreen suddenly went off—there wasn't much he could do to try to turn it back on. However, the moment he began to get up, his eyes caught a strange sight: turning towards it, he saw how the rectangular box had changed its indicating colours, its entire surface now imbued with translucent red that varied between different shades. Moving closer to it, he realized that the touchscreen's previous movable blocks had been replaced by something else—there were now several multiplied circles expanding and shrinking simultaneously as though confirmation buttons ready to be pressed. He pressed all of them.

For a moment there he thought he'd been swept away by an unsparing body-wrenching force that burst out of the rectangular device as if like a colossal lightning bolt: he was blinded and he felt that his heart had stopped beating for a moment, his body as if rent into pieces and his consciousness commingled with the infinite. The ground beneath him had begun to melt, or so he thought: he was being washed down a steep yet bevelled path each step of which pummelled his whole existence to smaller and smaller fractions of unsustainability. There was no end to it.

Different fringes of his time-being were cursorily plucked out and put back again in the wrong places; he no longer distinguished between the real and the illusory when he began to view the whole building from afar, yet eerily close and as though having a life beat of its own: its constantly throbbing system made up of confusingly entangled and glowing blue cells appeared vivid—and almost impossible to gaze at—with its five rays connected at its top, the fifth one continuing way beyond the visible and giving back a brighter reflection that seemed to have encompassed the whole world.

At each step of depersonalization he left behind a part of his being, as though his personal omnipotent visage was being erased from his own universe, leaving behind a listless wandering indefiniteness in an indefinite existence. Now before him there was only

one thing present which truly mattered—it was the reason for his being there at this point of time.

As if standing between two vastly different worlds he felt a burning surge of overabundant and exacerbating life force first across his arms and then spreading throughout the rest of his body. It was a kind of psychic regression to a more primordial state where the core of his existence was propping itself against a self-reflected antinomy. He could hardly tell whether the pain was real or just a mere illusion sprouted by his imagination, whether it was a long-lasting or an ephemeral one. He was aware during the whole time that he was holding on to something he wasn't quite capable of discerning; every single segment of incorporeal perturbation he was passing through was like an entire separate life he only briefly got to know.

The living building with its intricate cellular system returned to his mind: there wasn't much he could perceive from that same neutral point, but one thing which had made itself plainly apparent to him was that there was no longer a sky, something entirely different having replaced it. Embracing the new endless, infinite dome of various aerial layers, he was gazing at something which couldn't be entirely encompassed by one's mind, the dimensions of the firmament surpassing the ordinary human perception.

At one point, without knowing when or how, and when the discernible skyline was already gone, he began to be pulled towards and up the open uncovered horizon until he was quickly starting to be torn away from the earthly abode. He found himself not relying on anything material or immaterial, with nothing holding him back and steadily heading towards the infinite unlimitedness that was revealing itself as the ultimate abyss restricted by neither time nor space.

Suddenly, a strange elderly female voice, hauntingly whispering and echoing throughout the multilayered space-time continuum, declared the familiar yet never fully comprehended words:

Don't jump into the abyss... they're already all doomed... you can't save them... don't jump into the abyss...

It repeated itself an indefinite number of times, each word, each syllable and sound absorbing itself and at the same time asserting itself in the omnipresence of a sole existence. He convinced himself that he was in the centre—or rather *was* the centre itself—of both the beginning and end of everything, the cycles of existence repeating themselves forever and always. There was neither darkness nor light, only a frail figment that was to itself everything that has been, is and will be.

Don't jump into the abyss...

He jumped. He didn't know how, where or why, but he jumped—falling—or soaring up—in perpetuity.

It was a breezy and glumly grey day. It could hardly be told whether it had rained or not—the soil was dry, but at the same time there was something attractingly glittering on its surface, as though preternatural white pockmarks that weren't dew but which possessed the same aquatic quality. Looking further on across the green-stubbed plain everything was more or less the same: no trees, only a green carpet suffused with sparkling moisture. Yet, there was something else: there were lonesome stone monoliths, possibly gravestones, that were just as white as the wet specks and which were placed amid the endless lustre field with rays coming out of them and reaching out beyond the cloudless grey sky.

It was a graveyard.

Looking around he began to come across, one by one, the faces of strangers who had gathered around something not so far away from him. At some point, however, he found himself among the foremost of these people who, he just now realized, stood with their heads turned away in different directions, not uttering a word and for some reason their faces being hardly discernible as if there were something off with their features. They acted like statues that seemed to ignore his presence and even less the surrounding environment. Almost all of them wore black, but what he found was that there were also some men with official police uniforms mingled among the rest.

A priest was standing in the centre with a book in his hand and a crucifix around his neck that glimmered just as brightly as the gravestones. He was the only one who wasn't looking sideways, his face turned towards a seemingly bottomless pit out of which voiceless whispers reached out to him alone and to no one else. He got closer to it, but hardly had he made the first step than he backed away, alert; although the echoing words were unintelligible, there was something about their intonation that made him retreat.

When he wanted to look into the tens of faces around him he realized that they had suddenly vanished—he remained all alone and surrounded by the irradiant tombstones he felt to be attuned in consonance with each other in an inexplicable and perplexing way that prevented him from daring to approach them. Before him the pit without end remained the same as before with nothing happening in or around it, except that this time the priest had disappeared as well.

Whatever fear he'd been harbouring, it was now gone, deep meditative inner peace now beginning to take hold over him. But the moment he turned around something immediately caught his attention—across him two figures stood with their backs turned to him—a man and a woman—whose countenances and faces he determinedly desired to see. He felt that these people were his mother and grandfather, but was still unsure of their true identity—everything about the place was uncertain and unpromising. Before long he was engulfed by a strong emotion of having irreversibly lost something—or someone.

A dazzling ray of light had suddenly emerged from the pit before him, just like those from the gravestones themselves. It broke through the greyness with contrasting opposition, reaching far up into the heavens. Everything around him then disappeared, diving into nothingness save that single ray that continued to shine amid a colourless space devoid of anything but himself, his being. The ray was like a subliminal vision that didn't have precise proportions of its own—its both ends stretched out far into the infinite that was neither darkness nor light. The pit had also disappeared.

The pillar of unextinguishable light then began to rapidly expand, enlarging, thinking that it would soon reach and devour him, but, surprisingly enough, he remained an outside spectator who neither felt, nor heard anything: he was a mere observer of it, anchored in static nothingness. He had no choice, though, as he could neither move nor avert his eyes from the ever-expanding ray.

It continued to seemingly come closer to him, yet nothing happened.

Just then he felt that something touched his shoulder, a light, gentle touch. He couldn't move his head. Suddenly, something emerged from the ray of which it appeared to be a part—a figure, a man who was only outlined by the same light without any discernible characteristics. Soon, however, everything seemed to make sense now in a strange, unexplainable way—he knew who the man was and that sudden realization led to a sporadic and drastic change that took place shortly after the words were uttered for the first and last time. However, he quickly forgot them.

Everything around him was nothing but light for a second, and after a moment of brief evocation that same vivid light was everywhere over the whole city: neither the sky, nor the horizon or skyline could be seen anymore—everything had become a blended and comingled indivisibility of supernal brightness perfectly unstained from all sorts of matter and existence. Everyone was part of it and they could no longer escape it.

But afterwards it began to dissolve, everything returning back to its previous state and leaving behind itself nothing but dead silence.

The ground beneath him began to crumble in small undulating pieces. He was falling, the air that became colder and colder beating against his body on all sides. Never before had he felt so alive when the last thing he remembered were the faces of dear people.

“Should we tell him?”

“No. Tell the others to get going—I want that fucker’s head on a pike by sunrise.”

Shunningan was preparing to leave the building with his usual suite of three of his most trusted men. As he gazed through the oblong window at the remarkable sight that was open before him, he silently admonished Beckard for ever trusting such an unreliable and unhinged person as Michael—he didn’t like him not one bit from the start, hoping he’d finally have the opportunity to rid himself of that burden. That’s what he thought him to be—nothing but a burden, and probably a costly one at that.

Beckard couldn’t help himself yet again, he thought morbidly, the mentally insane have always been a liking to him.

He was notified that everything was clear and that he was good to go, so he headed for the door. But scarcely had he turned around than he made out a barely visible object that was quickly approaching through the unshaded window across him: it left a markedly distinguishable trace behind itself as it unsteadily swayed at mid-altitude yet getting nearer and nearer to them. There was a short, sporadic propelling of what appeared to be its combusted intakes, a purple-blue exhumation dragging along behind as the object was gaining on an ever-increasing momentum. He couldn’t exactly tell what it was, but he knew that there was a good chance that it was heading right in their direction.

At first he was hard pressed by a sudden urge to back away and get out of there as fast as he could; however, he wanted to wait a little longer and see what that thing was all about. He was mute to his men’s disconcerted voices who urged him to get away from the window, but this state of total numbness lasted for only a second when he finally decided to leave the room. Starting for the door, he turned around one last time, only to see the bulbous eruption’s final vestiges of blazing sheen touching the deceptive window moments before the unbearable brightness entered the room with a scalding whiff.

At the threshold he felt the blooming fire pass through and enter into everything around him, finally feeling it through his flesh and bones as well.

Chapter VII

Safe Haven

The light of the still unripe dawn entered through many recesses and crevices, shedding it throughout a swarm of unevenly dispersing dust, the weakened darkness gradually giving way as it diminished unnoticeably into the half-eradicated walls. The sky had acquired an unusual deformity while not a single cloud could be seen floating around—it was as if an additional layer sent off a stronger and more unfiltered light that gave everything a more distinct and invigorated look, the blues and greens and reds doused in a strong oily tinge that changed the way they converged and mingled into one another. There were still some remaining spots and ridges that had now become rather translucent, steadily fading away without leaving a single trace—their earlier predominance had come to an end, the whole sky now entering into a purer and cleaner state.

Glistening specks were floating all around and everywhere in the city, invading all possible free spaces and reflecting the morning sunlight with a most brilliant lustre. Most of the buildings and streets were partially scorched, withered and scarred in some way or another, and a certain carbonic leftover malodour could be sensed while being carried and spread by the wind. Many people were out on the littered streets, which in many parts were left completely blockaded and disarrayed after the disastrous events. The incessant humming buzz which had previously taken over the whole city was long dead, the current natural silence being occasionally interrupted by both distant and close siren wails and engine roars having now imposed themselves in its stead.

Amanda was sulkily looking everywhere for them; they moved together through the hallway whose partially destroyed wall faced the northern skyline whence the early dawn light sunbathed them without harm. Treading over the chunky debris and warily moving around and skipping past unstable sections of the slightly tilted floor she, Clara, Cassidy, and Darren hardly knew which part

of the building they were exactly in as they kept going through the burdensome leftover obstacles constantly standing in their way. Everything around them seemed on the brink of collapse, yet they were determined to go back to where they'd been earlier and continue with the search. Amanda had hopes that Cassidy's augmented modular vision, which she could now normally use again, would successfully pinpoint their approximate location, no matter how far away the three could be at that moment.

At several times there were brief instances of weak signals of thermal activity detected several floors below that quickly vanished only to reappear at different positions. Cassidy thought it was a bug caused by the interference of the still polluted electromagnetic field, but Amanda insisted on continuing to follow them, no matter how much they would have diverged in the end. Jumping off from a staircase, they got to the lower floor that was in an even worse condition.

"Four or five more," said the cyborg. "The return signal's still fuzzy, but I think one of them might be right below us."

It was darker there due to the electrical grid having been destroyed, and as they passed another storey the cyborg finally gave a positive indication. She told them that the signal emanated from a room two corridors away, and that it had remained static ever since they got there.

"There." Her ocular interfaced detection pointed with a stronger signal to the room, but when they tried to open the door, they saw that it was bargaged from inside.

Tearing the door apart, Cassidy was the first to enter into the semi-dark spacious office which had sustained major damage with most of its ceiling having collapsed. Clara and Darren remained outside, but Amanda entered with her.

At the same time Cassidy had discovered the source of the signal after having thoroughly conducted a scan of the room.

Gregory was lying propped against a separating wall at the other end of the room, his voice almost inaudible and raspy. She helped him stand up.

After they got out of the room and its stale dusty air, Gregory sat down to have a moment's fresh breath.

"Michael... he didn't make it. I don't know if Collins' still alive."

Amanda felt as if unable to show any emotional response from what she'd just learned. The only thing she did actually feel, though, were dreadful chills. At that moment she knew she was insulated from any and all possible emotions—she was dead inside, but not entirely.

"Where's his body?" she barely managed to utter the words.

"There was this water coming right at us from somewhere... The last time I saw him was by my side, breathless and cold. That's the last thing I remember."

"Where're you going?" Clara said, seeing Amanda going back into the office room.

Cassidy went after her. The images that flickered through Amanda's mind were hard to process—all kinds of scenarios, yet having the same ending.

"Can't detect anything here," the cyborg said to her. "The second signal is two floors below."

Everything was covered in acidic dust and dirt and there was nothing but concrete lumps left all over the room; she searched everywhere and under every ruin, but to no avail.

The moment she headed towards the door she got detained by Cassidy; she'd obviously found something, by the look of her face. Turning back, Amanda stood still as the suppressed din coming from the outside remained the only thing that kept her connected to reality. The cyborg was retracing the leftover signal that was now being rebuilt from the backlog and mapped against the room. Swiftly skipping several feet away towards the other end of the room, she began to remove a big piece of concrete slab that rested against a wall nearly torn off at a precipice leading to another office.

Laying there, covered in grey sticky dust mingled with his own blood that was of a tar-like colour, was the body of Michael: no response came from him despite Amanda's persistent and

invocatory supplications; he was dead-cold, and she was unable to elicit any reaction from his bespattered body. Next to her Cassidy confirmed what she already knew: his biometric results returned no life signs.

He couldn't get up, and he couldn't move either. It was as if he were stuck in an indeterminate shapeless confinement which he couldn't break through nor escape from. There was something about the way he perceived things that made him question if he was alive or still dreaming. Every attempt he made to break himself free from his current state of uniform stupor only brought him back to an even lower type of existence; yet, the more he tried to break free, the more his awareness grew.

Time seemed to have stopped for him. It was only when he made another attempt to reawaken that someone, or some force, snatched him out of the depths of detachment. When he opened his eyes, the giddy atmosphere prevented him from fully coming to his senses and from attempting any kind of movement; he was no longer enshrouded in darkness.

Suddenly, he heard a distant familiar sound that seemed to have been lost for ages someplace down in his subconscious memory repository: there was that notched sputtering which was more than an ordinary mechanical noise—it was a sign showing that he wasn't alone and that he wouldn't remain where he was for much longer. The noise actualized itself more loudly and clearly, yet at some point seemed to recede and finally cease, only to be revived again. This was repeated several times for a short while, and when the sound finally became consistent and the light began to warm his eyelids, he was no longer brooding in a lethargic state of disassociation but rather received an inadvertent vitalizing interference that helped him become fully conscious of his surroundings and condition.

No sooner had he gotten up than the partly lit wall grotto into which he'd hitherto been stuck was disturbed by the all-encompassing fizzing whose reverberation was so strong that he could feel it inside himself. Stepping out of the concavity, still dizzy and

confused, he fell again when the exacerbating bright sunrays rained on him in a way he'd never experienced before.

He didn't hear nor see the exact moment the small aircraft machine had landed not so far off from him. He began to discern the familiar shape and the specific sounds it made while it appeared to be sending some kind of a signal. His lips were parched and he felt the thick layer of dirt covering his eyelids and face. At some point he was approached by the machine as it glided past him until it halted, scanning him and the space around him. He remained unaware of the time that had elapsed when he heard at least two distinct voices who gave off a reverberating amplitude in his head—the louder they sounded, the more displaced and dissoluble they became.

“...let's move him out of here...” were the only words he managed to remember afterwards.

He woke up in a soberer, washed-out state, the first thing he saw being Gregory and Darren's faces; they seemed rather ambiguous at first, but no sooner had they been settled in his vision than he also came across Goranov, and next to him Miles.

“Comrade, welcome back.”

Save the faces everything around him appeared foreign. As he got up he tried to remember everything prior to his awakening and how much time had passed. He realized that they were in what appeared to have been an office room, no walls around them, upon which it immediately came to his mind that they were still in the very same building where everything happened. Now he remembered.

His dilapidated pupils shrank for a second the moment his face received a gleaming sway by a brief sunlight flash reflected by one of the landing myths that had just returned from another series of safety-scans of the skyscraper. The corridor was directly open to their sight, and the many heaps of ruins and entire obliterated sections across the ceilings and floors bespoke how much devastating the whole event actually was. He got up, his back painfully stiff and

his right knee sprained; at first he experienced difficulties moving his joints, having little to none freedom of movement and barely able to maintain a steady, upright stance. Goranov offered to help him, but he refused.

When he began to scrutinize the gazing at him faces one by one, he saw that everyone was there, alive and well. However, after quickly realizing this was not entirely true, his brain fog that that had been muddying his mentation began to dissolve little by little; he then realized that Michael was missing.

Across him filtered through an irradiated dusty background he met Amanda's inexpressive and seemingly faraway face who, sitting on the ground unvaryingly settled against a wide opening in the wall that peeked towards a markedly different strong-blue sky and with an array of sparsely enmeshed inner workings sticking out, was the only one who appeared to him truly changed and different. Looking further out into the extremely overstretched horizon partially gilded by stripes of dim sunlight, and hearing the cleared-up sound of miscellaneous noises echoing through for a long, continuous time, he thought he was gazing into an ever-expanding vastness from the innermost perspective of an insignificant outsider.

He began to wonder with evincible unresolvedness whether he, they—*everything*—that wasn't as perpetual and infinite as this horizon right now mattered in a world opposed to itself in a myriad of tentative instances. And as he glanced past the girl next to it, past the stacked and knit buildings and blocks and finally past the ambient grey skyline merging into a fresh turquoise hue—past everything distant and far he could see and couldn't see—he finally came to terms with the fact that everything could be relinquished just like that if one chose to.

Retracting from the uniformity of things, his eyes once again met those of Amanda.

It was surprisingly quiet and still around him when he regained consciousness—he never thought he'd make it through. Judging by the cold, corroding air and the scarce suppressed sheen he could tell it was during the early morning hours. He couldn't feel

his face, and the pain throughout his body was so excruciating and sharp that his mind rendered it into a post-shock numbness. He found himself lying on the moist ground, half of his body stifled by the cold; he could only move one hand, the other, which was broken, not reacting to anything. He tried to get up, but the most he could do was turn over on his back and gaze at the reddish grey firmament. His tongue and throat were swelled, making his breathing difficult and rasping.

He remembered everything to the very last detail prior to his wakening. But something wasn't quite right—he was still alive.

He felt neither anger, nor disappointment or embitterment, because nothing really mattered now—he'd done his part.

The brick walls of both sides of the alleyway were extending as though without end. He had the intimidating feeling of being trapped between two erected overarching barriers with only one possible path to walk. Something from his pocket suddenly made an off-key sound. Moving the cracked screen closer to his face, he read the notification that it was by an unknown sender.

He opened it. Musing at it for a while, at first he thought that it was a malfunction when he saw the screen go all blank and fuzzy. However, he soon discovered that an image had begun to manifest itself on it, becoming clearer and more intelligible as it went through a decoding.

The defragmented image turned out to be an insignia or a symbol, the meaning of which he very well knew—no, it was actually *more* than a meaning: it bore a statement of the profoundest nature, a definite and final message that only he and a handful of other people in the entire world knew what it meant. He put the mobile device down.

The only thing he could think of now as he lay there aware of his imminent destiny was how cynically expendable and transient everything was, how easily what little value remained to be appraised could be effaced long before the possibility of acknowledging it. Actually, what he'd done and achieved during all those years didn't have the slightest significance in contrast to what was about to take place. And yet, despite that he'd successfully accomplished

his task, that still wasn't enough for him to truly appreciate the grand and elaborately conceived plan he had the honour of being part of. He'd been desensitized from the very beginning, and from the very beginning it was made perfectly clear to him that he was just a mere participant in something bigger than himself.

Something suddenly bit his hand, just a little below the thumb's base; he had already seen the murky predatory figure menacingly dwelling in the distance and had already received a hint of what was to be expected next.

Inevitable. Necessary.

At first it was only a tickle that quickly passed into a tingling sensation, and finally into a frost-cold paralysis—he had already witnessed it a number of times before, having administered the same method himself. It was only a matter of seconds before it spread throughout the rest of his body, his limbs hardening with painful twists and his skin rapidly turning a lifeless blue-grey.

Physically and mentally benumbed, his last gulps of air were taken with a distorted smile on his shrivelled face.

3 weeks later

Just as he was coming down the stairs of the clinic facility after having undergone yet another examination in a series of long-run health state evaluations and monitoring, he responded to the phone call and said that he was on his way.

He hung up, got in and drove off.

He still couldn't get used to the overview of the streets in that part of the state—they always struck him as alien and out of place every time he passed over them, failing to establish connection with them unlike those in Orton. The counterbalancing force that constantly pulled him back towards the opposite direction kept him from wholly focusing on the aerospace corridors before him. He was absently looking at the navigational board as he slowly began to descend, his mind wandering and repeatedly losing itself amid its digital clicks and prefigurations. In the meantime, a sporadic reminder

of what was in his overcoat's pocket once again made him check inside that it was still there.

When he arrived, he saw that the meadow's green verdure was still unaffected by the cold temperatures. Getting out, he headed for the arching iron gate with the sign "ST. ANDREW CEMETARY" over it.

Walking along the narrow macadam path, he looked around in search of the place; it was under one of the many honey locusts whose nascently orange foliage juxtaposed against the overcast sky distilled the gloom with vigorous splendour. Someone was already standing under its crown.

"They're gaslighting everyone and have already begun to spin the story," Collins said to the tall blond figure next to the tree. "It's all coordinated, this. It goes deeper than we could've possibly expected." He gazed across the open dewy field and the numerous gravestones poking out of it that were so numerous one could easily get lost counting them; the mere sight of them vaguely reminded him of something the memory of which was still lurking in his mind.

"Did you manage to get something out of your infocircuits?"

"Nothing. Everything's still scrambled and in shambles right now, never seen such a data storm before—all the channels are either clogged or temporarily shut down. Also, I doubt they'll miss the opportunity to scrap out everything remotely connected to the event that's still under the public radar, including the small and non-essential bits that add up to the whole picture when put together. Got Miles the other day to do an extensive search through the back-domain database for *CRODITE 70*, it returned nothing. Tsin Dzi's blacknet dossier is also gone. We're talking about unobtainable by the public backlog here, they have no reason to erase what nobody besides the agencies knows it's there... well, *almost* nobody."

"People won't stop asking how the biggest skyscraper in the world ended up being a mass-scale geoengineering weapon, you just can't cover this up."

“Except they *can*, in a way—like I said, they’ve already started propping their own well thought-out version of the narrative: expectedly, they’ve scapegoated Beckard and some other big-time corporatists and market players for collaborating with ex-military *persona non gratas* in a joint mass-destruction experiment with the hopes of developing a *working* geoengineering weapon which they would later sell to third parties across the world. The fact that they conveniently forgot to mention that there’s just no way for both Elzeron Tower and the powerplant facility to have been modified into such weapons without anyone noticing it speaks enough that there’s definitely a government involvement in the whole operation. This had been planned, prepared and set way before Elzeron Incorporation bought the building’s property rights, and way before Beckard or the rest of the Grouzers could make any substantial fortune. The contractor that built the skyscraper some 30 years ago is a state-owned company that hasn’t had any major projects since then. When Miles checked out their info page again the other day, he told me that a lot of it had already been heavily edited or straight out deleted. You get the gist of it.”

“Do you really think they could get away with it?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know. But even if they could, the more important question still stands: why would they do such a thing? It doesn’t add up—every time I think about it, I get the chills.”

He stood there thoughtful for a second, under a lush foliage that presented everything in a more ethereal way.

“Here, take it,” he said to the cyborg, finally handing it over to her, at the same time thinking about the past and how everything had led to this moment, how it had begun and how it had ended, now the opportunities lying unknown before him. It was a Boeing B-17 miniature toy. “You know what to do with it.”

Walking away from the tree and leaving its serene and soothing influence, he began strolling towards the two figures in the distance who stood before one of the many gravestones amid an ever-expanding and unreachable field; Amanda and Gregory waited

for him, yet they still seemed not to have taken notice of him, and the closer he got, the more distant they seemed.

Epilogue

He had long ago become accustomed to the nightly landscape—it gave him more meditative freedom as he could easily reflect on himself and the memories he so eagerly clung to. He already knew what he was about to see, but it was something he still couldn't fully comprehend—it was a deception and at the same time reality itself. Every time he passed along the same path he felt the urgent desire to peek more closely into it, thinking that there was something more to it as though the mystery itself defined his whole existential meaning. It attracted him.

The city had changed, but only temporarily. Years from now, probably months or even weeks everything would be the same again, and most of the people that dwelt within it would probably act, feel, speak, and think the same. But he knew that he would not.

Way before the city's first distinctive lights intruded themselves upon the obscure horizon, it had already begun to unmistakably unfold itself across the star-studded firmament—and it outshone all of the nearby celestial bodies. He didn't know how much longer it would stay that way, whether it would gradually diminish and fade away, as all things did, or remain there outliving eternity itself. But that didn't matter. What was more important was that it *was* there, and that he could almost feel its gentle, careful otherworldly touches and caresses that defied and went beyond the simple and perceptible. *Well, almost.* Because it was merely a glow—the tentative, unobtained beckoning of the amaranth glow. After a while he finally lost sight of it, but that didn't really matter to him; the aeromobile went on.

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