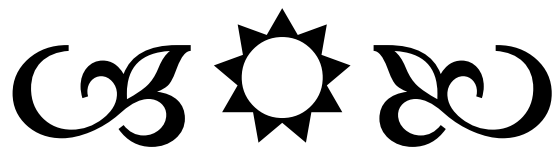


WINGED
ARTEMIS

INTREPID INDIGO
BOOK TWO

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BY DEREK IAN CANTWELL



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Winged Artemis

Intrepid Indigo Book Two

By Derek Ian Cantwell

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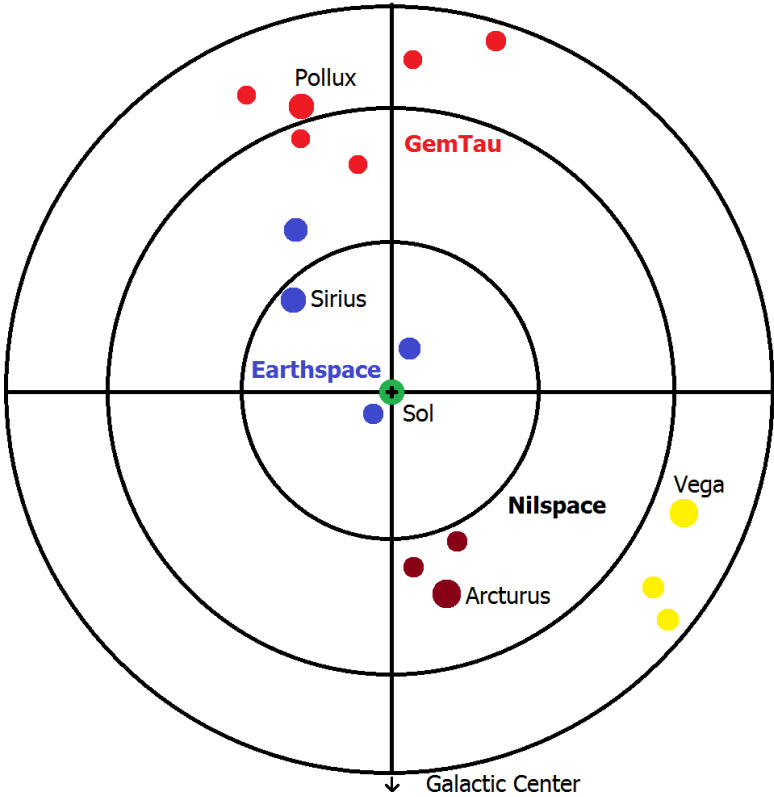
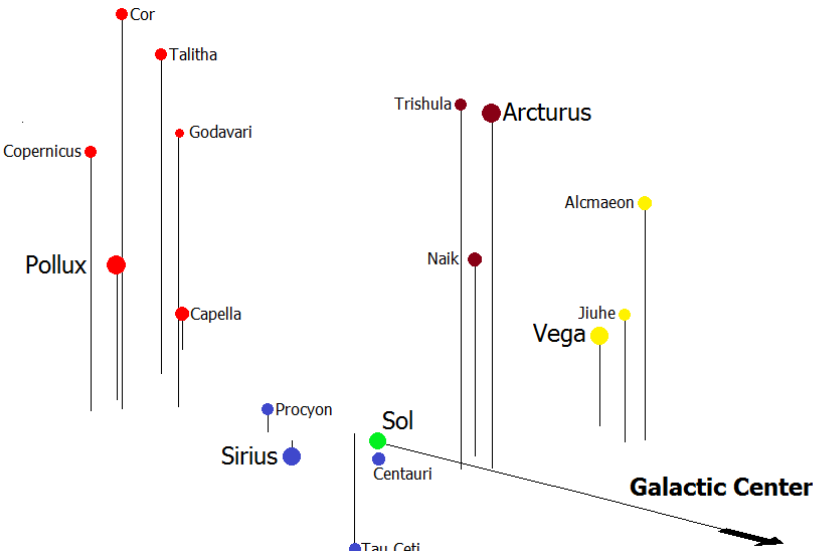
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For Grandma Sandy

Standard Stellar Maps



Approximations courtesy of the Three Kings Port Authority

Prologue



The sun crested over the mountaintops. Ausar had been away for too long. He drank up the sights and smells, knowing it would be the last time with them. The sunrise warmed his face, throwing a golden glow across the serene fortress. Watching the tree in the courtyard sway in the morning breeze, Ausar heard the door behind him open. The house's new steward walked onto the balcony, black hair tied in an elaborate ponytail.

"How is the outside since you've last been home?" Sophia asked softly.

"Earth continues to march towards oblivion, despite our best efforts." Ausar turned to smile at Sophia. She smiled warmly in return. Sophia had been a cheery young lieutenant when he had left, now she was a stressed leader with bags under her eyes. "How have you acclimated to your new responsibilities?"

"I'm certainly evolving. The job didn't exactly come with a manual. Olympian made it look so easy..." Sophia let out a sigh and shrugged. "I'm putting his lessons to work on a daily basis. I just wish I had his confidence."

"You will get there, in time." Ausar wished he had that kind of confidence too.

"Bahlam and Jester will be down any moment, they'll meet you in the main hall." Sophia checked her wrist computer. Her eyes glossed over as she began to read reports in her 3Eye. "I have to get back; I just wanted to welcome you back. It's good to see you."

"Good to be home." Ausar gave her a brisk hug. "I only wish I could stay longer."

The fortress' main hall was dominated by a long dining table. Ausar walked along it and dragged his fingers across the oak wood. His mind fluttered amongst fond memories that still echoed between his ears. A hidden door slid open near the head of the table and from it strode his mentors, each with grins upon their faces.

"We're delighted to have you home, Ausar." Jester held Ausar by his shoulders.

Bahlam nodded, which was not a common courtesy of that powerful matriarch. Her eyes were as cold as the day she had rescued him from his uncle. Her respect was never granted easily, and though her gesture was subtle, Ausar beamed.

"I admit that the totality of my knowledge is a drop in your ocean. I also know that there are reasons why I'm not need-to-know." Ausar addressed Bahlam and Jester respectfully. "But I take pride in knowing what our enemies whisper about. They have your daughter's name on their tongues."

"You've always been my most trusted Paladin." Bahlam was no flatterer.

"We know your heart is true." Jester added.

From Earth to the furthest fringe world, Ausar had fought the forces of darkness with unrivaled discipline. At every step he had hoped only to receive but modest recognition for his efforts. The moment was almost too much to bear for him.

"I have become aware that Isisa defeated a Hunter Seeker on Pollux Max. You know that I stand before you without a request." Hoping to keep his poise, Ausar continued as he had planned. "Clearly, because our enemies know she has left Earth, I too must go. I will find her and protect her with my life."

"Don't follow her blindly." Jasper warned.

Bahlam nodded and echoed the sentiment. "Expect her to make mistakes."

“I love her.” Ausar swallowed dryly, he had never uttered the words.

In his entire life, Ausar had never been sure of anything as much. He had spent his youth far away, living amongst the dredges of society. Although Bahlam had always done what she could to protect Ausar, his place was amongst the worst people. He pretended to be a sour soul looking for wicked deeds. But seeing Isisa even for one day made every mission worth it. Ausar had counted the days without wanting to.

“We know.” Bahlam smiled with Jester. “Even more reason to stand guard.”

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“My mother taught me to think.”
~ Emperor Elsu

“My life hangs in the balance, Ibis,” Isisa shivered in the cold air of her starship, the Atlantean. The Priestess and her A.I. were light years from Pollux Max. At the edge of what Earth considered “civilized space.” Owned and operated by Triton Engineering, the Godavari System was a backwater. Isisa had spent the journey in suspended animation, conscious only from within the ship’s computer. She looked over at the holographic bird perched on the throttle. “Keep the Tablets safe while I’m away.”

“We are approaching the drop point.” Ibis sounded anxious.

The sentient program and Isisa had formed a bond while marooned inside the ship. Ibis chose to be represented by the bird of her name. The sprite had made every effort to make Isisa feel comfortable. They would relax together in a digital forest.

“Vrity is a backward-facing corporation...” Isisa pulled on her suit and checked the seals. She had forgotten the metallic taste of the recycled air. That was one sensation her digital friend would not understand. “Just remain hidden. You carry precious cargo.”

Isisa unconsciously shot a glance toward the safebox beneath the pilot’s seat. Inside were the Emerald Tablets of Thoth, her family’s greatest treasure. The memory of losing them made her stomach twist into knots. The Hunter Seeker had stolen them and had almost escaped the Pollux system. Isisa could not lose them again.

“How will I know when to retrieve you?” Ibis asked cautiously.

“After I’ve had a word with those poor souls down there...” Isisa had read plenty about Vrity while in stasis. The small moon of Kanci tended to be a dead end for most everyone who joins. She hoped to help those still living in the nightmare. “I only need a moment with them. We need to set those minds free.”

“How should I arrive?” Ibis sounded as if the program wanted to impress Isisa.

“Like lightning,” Isisa smiled, “with thunder.”

“What if I lose contact?” Ibis was sentient now, and Isisa empathized deeply. Being alone for the first time is always a confusing experience. The bird flew from the throttle to the floor beside Isisa’s feet. “What if I can’t find you?”

“Search your heart, act with love as your compass.” Isisa stepped into the Ovum escape pod. It was only large enough for her to fit inside. The door sealed shut three inches from her nose. Isisa took a deep breath. “Launch when ready.”

Isisa closed her eyes and repeated her sacred mantra: “As above, so below.”

“Come back to me, my Lady.” Ibis prayed as the Ovum launched into space.

Through the small circular window was Kanci. The gray moon had no atmosphere but a sprawling domed cityscape. Hanging among the stars was the orange gas giant of Cybele. Dark red swirls stormed across Cybele’s atmosphere.

“Success is what we teach.” Vrity’s prominent advertisements would declare confidently. “Our secret formulas help every problem known to man!” Isisa discovered most to be bogus nutritional supplements exported to Pollux Max and the Colonies. Vrity

courted prominent celebrities with unmatched effort. Then Vrity would turn around and use their faces and names for advertising. With those endorsements they claimed that “Vrity alums are galactic stars!”

Isisa wondered just what their definition of success was. She surmised they specialized in training people to have unquestioning loyalty and dangerous subservience. Those lucky enough to escape spent decades putting their lives back together. Some committed suicide after the public shaming poured in from former “Vrityguru” friends.

The city was broken into two prominent sections along Kanci’s equator. Between the sections lay a central railway and entertainment complex. The south side of the moon was reserved for women, being called “Dianza” and the north side reserved for men, referred to as “Arieza.”

Isisa was on course to fall on the men’s side. The practice field for the Cube team was the chosen landing zone. Everything shook as the pod bounced on the surface. The whole chassis rattled as it rolled to a stop. Isisa heard herself breathing heavily.

The pod’s door made a hiss sound and opened into the vacuum. Her suit flashed warnings about the lack of atmosphere as she got her bearings. Isisa climbed out and dropped onto the dusty ground. The Vrity complex lay beyond a wide desert.

Isisa saw movement from the corner of her eye. A rocket careened toward her. She flipped into the air. Her body floated in the lower gravity. As the rocket passed below Isisa punched the jockey in the side of his helmet. His hands came off the handlebars.

The jockey tumbled into the dust and the rocket was sent flying upward into space. Isisa landed softly but felt a dread in her heart. A rocket slammed into Isisa’s shoulder and sent her hurling. Stars above and grey dust below melded into one. She tumbled into a sand dune.

The rocket that had hit her made a wide turn for another pass. Isisa could see a dozen more rockets in the distance. *The team must’ve just started practice*, she thought as she held her arm. Nothing broken, but she was sure it would leave a wicked bruise.

Ignoring the pain, she sprinted toward the charging rocketeer. He flew low and accelerated, kicking up clouds with his exhaust. Isisa jumped and kicked with her left foot. Her boot connected square in the jockey’s chest. The rocket ran aground in a plum of slowly falling sand. The jockey fell backward like a sack of garbage.

Her first attacker was getting up, holding his head. The other rockets were closing in quickly. Isisa put her hands up and took a step backward. The other jockeys landed nearby and ran to help their teammates. They did not appear to be providing any triage.

The smallest player ignored his teammates and approached Isisa.

“Where did you come from?” The radio broadcast the voice of a young boy.

“Pollux Max. I’m a refugee, seeking the self-help paradise.” Isisa said sheepishly.

“You’ve found it.” She could hear the boy grin.

“She attacked us!” The jockey holding his head barked.

“And ruined our rockets!” The other attacker pointed furiously.

“Don’t forget you tried to spear her when she landed.” The youngest waved his hand dismissively. He gave a small bow to Isisa. “My name is Benny. My great-great-great grand uncle founded Vrity and settled here on Kanci. Welcome home.”

“She’s an illegal!” Another team mate screamed.

“She’s a person.” Benny tilted his head curiously. “A special person, aren’t you?”

“I’m here to escape poverty on Pollux Max.” Isisa put her palms up.

“Do you carry the torch of the Founder? He was a great man, capable of miraculous things, do you know him?” Benny leaned in. Naive blue eyes stared out of the visor. The others became still. For a moment, it seemed the boy had their attention. “He told everyone he would return. It would make sense that you are a signal for his coming. He always used women as messengers.”

“I don’t know what any of that means.” Isisa shrugged.

“Get out of the way, Benny, we’re gonna take her.” A taller boy pushed Benny and looked Isisa up and down. “That suit looks advanced. I want it.”

“You will do no such thing!” Benny ran between Isisa and the older team mates. He put his arms out in a needlessly dramatic way. “She is a champion for our hero, messiah and lord. You will treat her with respect!”

Olympian walked through the crowd toward Ausar. As Olympian passed he pressed something into Ausar's hand. They made no sign of recognizing one another and both blended into the crowd. Nessus crossed the street and ducked into a restaurant.

Ausar felt the object Olympian had given him and recognized it as an earpiece. Nessus crossed the street and stopped inside a ritzy restaurant. The marquee read *Blue's Flavor Country: Best Wine Cellar in Cedar City!* Ausar doubted Nessus planned to eat.

Entering the restaurant Ausar was greeted by the host at the door. Ausar thanked her and asked to see the menu. As he glanced over the digital projection he put the earpiece in and smiled apologetically at the host.

"Hi honey, I'm at Blue's," Ausar pursed his lips and made an appearance of liking what he saw available. "Should I make a reservation?"

"I'm happy to see you aboard Three Rivers," Olympian responded on the other end. His dry delivery was not endearing. "You won't see Nessus take a table. He's being brought to a quiet location. I'd like you to listen in on our conversation. He'll be sent back. I expect you to follow him and check on his response."

"So you're thinking about another place then?" Ausar pointed to his ear and pretended to be embarrassed. "Still I'd like to come back and buy a cake for the hotel room, would that be alright?"

"He doesn't know who he is dealing with, but he will." Olympian continued with a deadly serious tone. Ausar smiled reflexively. "If he betrays her name I want him dead before his lips stop moving."

"If you'd like that instead, I won't argue." Ausar waved a goodbye to the hostess.

Olympian cut the line.

Ausar found a small café with a wide window across the street from Blue's. He sat in a corner booth and ordered a meal. He waited for Olympian to make contact again. When the notification arrived, it came with a video feed. Ausar allowed the earpiece to stream the visuals directly into his 3Eye.

Olympian sat at a table in a blue walled room. The table had only one other chair. Nessus appeared and shook hands with Olympian. He chuckled and pointed to the walls.

"I've never taken a meeting in a secret room before." Nessus threw a thumb over his shoulder. He had a big grin across his face, like a man comfortable at all times. "I've been to the bar but I never knew they catered!"

"Allow me to apologize for the discretionary measures. We cannot afford any unscheduled eavesdropping." Olympian tried to sound accommodating, but it was not particularly believable. He motioned to the craft table against the far wall. "There is water and muffins, as well as an assortment of alcohols."

"What is it that I'm here for?" Nessus walked over and poured a cosmicopolitan.

"We want you to synthesize a cure for the recent virus outbreak." Olympian wasted no time; Ausar always appreciated that. "We are currently working on procuring organic materials for you."

"That outbreak is already out of control. I wouldn't be surprised if the Council just non-contracts Three and cuts off the air." Nessus chuckled as he took a drink. "Transporting more aboard isn't just illegal, it's patently stupid."

"You'll be in the debt of a very important person." Olympian offered.

"I already am for more important people." Nessus strolled back to his seat.

"Not likely." Olympian said ominously. "I represent Bahlam's daughter."

“For a favor from that bloodline,” Nessus’ eyes went wide. “I’d do anything.”

“Good to hear. We should have the materials back soon.” Olympian passed Nessus a datachip with the information from his bioscan of Isisa’s viral infection. He pointed to it and looked Nessus square in the eye. “You best start analyzing what you can and preparing your lab for the work.”

“I want a promise of my own lab.” The doctor took the datachip and loaded it into his wrist computer. Nessus grinned with newfound prospects. “A corporation where I hold one hundred percent control. My own Board of Directors.”

“Fine.” Olympian nodded. “Our condition is that the cure is distributed freely.”

“That’s insane. You’ll be sued by the Council itself.” Nessus waved his hands in total disagreement. Excitement took over and he leaned into the table. He was grinning from ear to ear. “I know someone who could help distribute it if you don’t want to shoulder the task. You could stand to make quite a bit as well.”

“It will be freely distributed for the greater good.”

“They’ll continuously dispute that in court, holding up your profit rights all the while. You don’t want to deal with those people, or their lawyers,” Nessus waved his hands and leaned back with a sigh. He seemed to be already counting the credits in his head. “I know people in Big Pharma who could help.”

Ausar’s server returned with his plate and a glass of water. Ausar dropped a dissolving tape into the water. The tape turned the water brown. Ausar cocked his eye brow and pulled out his pocket food snooper. It analyzed his salad and potato. The screen turned red and flashed several warnings.

Ausar clenched his jaw and scanned the room.

Someone means to poison me, he thought.

“Big Pharma will hear nothing of this cure,” Olympian argued with a tone that told Ausar he would rather the conversation end there. “You’ll tell no one who you’re working for nor what you are working on. That’s a condition of your continued breathing. Is that crystal clear?”

“Is Bahlam’s daughter foolish enough to tangle with the virtues of our time?”

“She does what she must do; you should not question her ability.” Olympian leaned in and pointed at Nessus. “Your life depends on your discretion.”

“I’ve built my brand upon silence in matters such as these.” Nessus smirked and leaned forward again. “I only wonder why she would reveal herself on behalf of these huddled masses... perhaps the heir is afflicted also?”

“Know your place, Nessus.” Olympian’s tone was cold. “I would not wish to contact a competitor and discuss with them the manner of your disposal.”

Ausar’s server came back and looked at the uneaten food and brown water.

“Is everything alright?” The server was genuinely concerned, eyeballing the glass.

“Where did this come from?” Ausar pushed the glass to the table’s edge.

“The tap. That’s the water everyone drinks.” He swallowed nervously.

Someone means to poison everyone, Ausar reflected.

“I think I’ll need to check the water treatment plant, thank you.” Ausar stood up. He had left payment for the entire meal and a generous tip on the table. Ausar could not bring himself to smile. “You’ve been excellent, but I think your leaders poison you.”

“You can count on me to give you the cure you seek,” Nessus said. He had forgotten his alcohol. He was leaning back already daydreaming. “I look forward to seeing the proposal for my new company.”

Ausar caught a glimpse of Nessus leaving the restaurant. The doctor made a quick trip into the alley and vomited in a dumpster. A huge billboard displayed a local news report about the virus spreading in Section Three. In large bold letters the news billboard proclaimed: *REMAIN CALM! Authorities have the situation under control.*

Tailing the doctor to the office of the Bureau of Diseases and Contagions, Ausar kept back at the curb. The marbled walls and tall columns were out of place in the metallic forest of skyscrapers. Nessus was met at the door by a blond woman wearing an expensive dress. She wore diamond earrings.

Ausar’s facial recognition program named her Marla Remington. She was a pharmaceutical representative charged with convincing doctors to use her company’s drugs. Her job consisted of one part sales and two parts bribery. She greeted Nessus with a kiss and a long hug.

Bahlam’s paladin pulled two tiny metallic ostrich feathers from his pocket. Ausar locked his eyes on his two targets. The feathers flipped in his palm toward Nessus and Marla. Ausar blew on the feathers and they sprang into the air.

“My father always said that the future of investments was in prescription medicine.” Nessus laughed as the first feather stuck in his suit neck. “You make something as cheap as dirt and sell it for more than gold.”

“Good health is worth everything else in the universe.” Marla smiled as the second feather burrowed into her left heel. “Did you have lunch yet?”

“No, actually, tell me you’ve brought those hoagies!” Nessus rubbed his hands together in anticipation. The feathers transmitted two visual feeds to Ausar’s helmet. An elevator brought them to a lavish lobby. They walked past leather sofas and oak desks.

“Two are in your fridge.” Marla handed the doctor a list of prescriptions.

“You’re the best.” Nessus bounced down the hall in delight.

Ausar kept an ear on their conversation, but called Olympian through his 3Eye.

“What a perfect couple.” Olympian delivered as salute. “So what do you know?”

“I know that she’s out in the open. What’s that about?”

“Our Priestess has determined that humanity is at a crossroads. She has ordered the veils lifted and the chains broken. The aeon of shadows has ended. Even you will be allowed to practice your trade openly.” Olympian let out a long sigh. The old man held the house on his shoulders. Olympian was not used to things spinning out of control. Ausar wondered where Isisa was. “Please try to be discrete, my heart can’t take it. Her crusades have attracted too many of the wrong kinds of eyes already.”

“It has indeed, and shall continue to. Two more Hunter Seekers have been deployed, together known as the Cleansers,” Ausar uploaded his intelligence reports on the assassins. “The first is Vanguard who will attack her directly. The second is Prudence, who will do everything to destroy her foundations.”

“You’ve trained your whole life for this. It’s no secret that Bahlam kept you on a tight leash. I remember the last freshwater lake.” Olympian was somber. Ausar remembered the tongue lashing he got from Bahlam. “We’ve all said things we regret. Now you have your day to make good on your promise.”

“It’s the reason my heart beats.”

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“The information broker’s secret is silence.”
~ Dejon Martin, Former President of Pollux Max

A large one-way window dominated the wall across from Isisa. Beyond the glass were five men questioning her motives and origin. Over her shoulder Isisa saw the bright orange “V” of Vrity on the wall. A pile of processed sweets sat unappetizingly on the plastic table. They were covered in artificial glaze and cancerous sugar dust.

The door to the holding cell opened hastily. A breathless man in a military uniform entered nervously. He held a tablet in his hand and turned off the screen awkwardly. He sat down on the plastic chair between Isisa and the observation window.

“I’m Fleet Officer Cadet Donnelly. What’s your name?”

“Orthia.” Isisa said sheepishly. The Cadet sat down with a tablet computer.

“Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you’re in?” Donnelly swallowed.

“I’m just a refugee trying to find my path to success.” Isisa shrugged lightly.

“Don’t lie to me. Refugees don’t come here the way you did.” Donnelly shook his head and wagged his index finger. He had practiced these lines. “That escape pod was very advanced. Where did you come from? Who sent you?”

“I’m from Pollux Max. I grew up on Cypress street two blocks from the Section tree.” Isisa bit her lip nervously. Her tone was uncertain and reserved. “My auntie told me I could find success here. She said she knew people who had learned a lot from Vrity.”

“There are proper channels for immigrating.” Donnelly squinted his eyes.

“I didn’t have credits for the trip. I snuck aboard a mining ship.”

“What mining ship is equipped with a suit like yours? No mining ship would have an escape pod like that.” Donnelly stood up as though he meant to leave. Isisa noted it was a farce. “You’re an illegal immigrant. Why don’t I just let you rot?”

“I stole the suit from a black market arms-dealer.” Isisa lowered her head and let her shoulders sink. “I don’t know about the escape pod... I heard an engineer say it was part of a pilot program. Some new Port Authority regulation.”

“You’re a thief and a liar!” Donnelly smacked the table. One of the pastries tumbled off the plate onto the floor. He ignored it. “What are you here to steal from us?”

“I just want to join.” Isisa let out a sigh.

“We don’t just let anyone join us.” Donnelly looked to the one way glass.

“I’ve seen the commercials...” Isisa shrugged and pointed at the logo on the wall. “Vrity is the greatest place in the universe. I want to be a part of it.”

“We’ll see about that.” Donnelly left the room abruptly. He returned with a middle aged woman holding a clipboard. Donnelly motioned for her to sit. “This is Mary. She is your only hope now. Begin the application exam.”

“Do you have any regrets?” Mary didn’t even offer a handshake.

“Yes.” Isisa genuinely sighed. “Many.”

“Have you hurt other people?” Mary made a mark on her clipboard.

“Yes.” Isisa looked over at Donnelly as he stood beside the door.

“Do you have ruins?” Mary looked over her clipboard for the answer.

“Yes.” Isisa looked past Mary at the one-way window.

What followed was a hundred of the same three questions.

When the questions ended Mary looked up from her clipboard.

“The test has concluded that you have a lot of really dark shadows looming over you. I can already tell... you’re gonna need *a lot* of guidance.” Mary forced a smile and leaned into the table. “But don’t worry! Vrity can fix anyone’s score. We’re going to help you become a more complete person.”

“Is that code for something?” Isisa smiled. “Like, how complete we talking?”

“We’re going to start orientation.”

The wall to Isisa’s right lit up. A smartly dressed man stood in the center of an empty stadium. He walked with an ornate cane. He smiled into the camera. Mary looked at him with an unhealthy reverence. She seemed to mouth his words automatically.

“Welcome to the paradise Earth never was. I’m Herbert Reginald Lewis. Today we’re going to get on the path to a more independent and rewarding life.” He smiled like a good salesman always does. “I’ll tell you a secret... I didn’t start off filling stadiums. I started like you: with empty seats. No one knew my name. No credits in my pocket. No success to call my own.”

Herbert looked into the camera somberly.

“I started from the ground up, networking with family and peers. Then I realized that there was a lot of creds to be made through teamwork.” The scene around the Founder dissolved into a busy warehouse. Vrity workers ran in all directions. “Everything that went wrong for you was your fault. Everything that goes right for you is because of your networking skills. You’ll remember this as the day you started having success.”

The camera flew into the air and showed an idealized view of Kanci. Trade ships were coming and going, recruitment vessels landed gently. When the camera returned to the stadium the Founder stood on stairs between empty seats.

“Focus on filling just one seat. Then you get that person to invite his friends.” A man materialized in the seat he pointed to. Then others beside him until they filled the row. “And before long you’ve filled the stadium. You’ve probably heard someone say that only the first people in the program can benefit, but that’s just not true. This won’t come to you on the couch; you have to be constantly working. Your success is dependent on building a network of contacts and developing relationships.”

The crowd began to cheer their support for the Founder.

“Before you can join Vrity we have to know that you possess the skills to succeed. We’re going to be connecting you to a call bank on Pollux Max. We keep a detailed list of potential customers. It’s your job to get them to buy something. Don’t be too aggressive, the trick is to get to know them. Steer the conversation toward products they will naturally be inclined to buy. Give them lists and let them pick what interests them. Let them guide you to what they want to buy.”

Herbert raised his cane. His eye twinkled as he smiled. “Good luck!”

The screen switched to a spinning Vrity logo. Mary smiled.

“I love your look,” Mary gently touched Isisa’s hand. “I think you could be a pageant queen one day!”

“I think I’d rather learn to ride those rockets.” Isisa grumbled.

“Oh, No! Those are for the boys. We do fashion shows before their games but women don’t play Cube.” Mary giggled to herself as though it were ludicrous. Isisa knew dozens of women in the Hall of Fame. “A lady could get hurt playing a rough game like that. We’ve got to look good and find one of those jockeys to start a family with.”

“I’m not good with family.” Isisa felt herself getting frustrated.

“You’ll want a family soon. The only way to get a green card is by finding a man to marry. Not just any man though, we don’t want your pretty face stuck in the nose bleeds!” Mary grinned with her teeth. “The only way you get better seats in the Coliseum is by marrying a celebrity, like a captain or coach. Those seats are coveted.”

Mary loaded a visual map of Kanci on the monitor. She pointed to one side.

“This is Arieza, where the single men live. The practice field over there is where you were found. That’s strictly off-limits for women.” Mary zoomed in on the rocket garage. She waved her hand dismissively at the team barracks. “We wouldn’t want the boys to get distracted. They practice all week for the games and they are discouraged by the sight of a womanly figure.”

“Oh, a woman’s freedom gets restricted because men can’t control themselves.” Isisa rolled her eyes. Vrity was rotten head to tail. “Maybe if we kept predators in cages we would be better off.”

Mary ignored the commentary and pointed to the opposite end of Kanci.

“This is Dianza, where the single women live. You’ll spend your first few years there, learning talents and preparing for the pageants.” Mary clasped her hands together. She grinned encouragingly. On either side of the train tracks were high rise apartments. “This is where couples live. Everyone wants to find their soul mate and live there. You’ve got the look already... so you’ll be a queen soon.”

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“When you are good there is always someone who wants to help.”

~ Priestess Weeta

Isisa was brought to a large warehouse stocked with beauty products. Makeup and clothing crates stacked from floor to ceiling with little discernable organization. Clothes were hanging over railings. Powder and melted lipstick stained the floor. Brushes and empty boxes littered the walkways.

“This is where we teach our new members about the products that lead to success. We test them on one another so we become better salespeople.” Mary smiled at Isisa. She motioned to the wall where a leader board listed everyone’s names. “But it’s also important to use the skills to work toward pageant eligibility. No one gets into a pageant without looking their best.”

“So you test these products all day?” Three dozen women were testing at vanities.

“That would get expensive!” Mary laughed. She shook her head and sat down at a desk. A table with mirrors ran the length of the room and had three panels with lights below. She tapped a small computer in the center panel. “You buy each product you test, the cost is deducted from your commissions.”

“Is all our income commission based?”

“Of course! That’s how Vrity gives us unlimited earning potential!”

“Sounds like unlimited work for a minimal salary.” Isisa tossed a box of cosmetics across the table dismissively. The other women in the room seemed deeply offended. A little girl ran up and picked up the box gently. “It’s medieval.”

“You can’t expect support you if you don’t support those above you! Don’t you understand? They know better!” Mary yelled. She tossed a chair onto the ground in anger. No one else moved. “Nothing is ever free! Ever! You work for your food.”

“How much time per day will we be earning commission?”

“We get into the office to do group exercises and training for about three hours. After that we start working the call boxes.” Mary thought for a moment, breathing normally again. She picked up the chair and slid it under the table. “Calling takes anywhere between seven and ten hours, depending on how invested you are.”

“Working a third of your day for free seems legit to you?”

“We’re being paid with knowledge that will lead us to success. We’re being taught valuable skills during those meetings.” Mary began to whisper. “We earn more credits by applying our lessons. You’d better be careful with your words Orthia...”

“I need to use a restroom.” Isisa only wanted to see the rest of the facility. She had assembled a map in her mind, learning which hallways led where. She hoped to find a quick way to the other side of the moon.

“Down the hall. Just make sure to empty the vomit bucket if you use it.”

“Vomit bucket?” They accepted horrible conditions without question.

“Yeah... you’ve no idea how often I find that thing still full back there.” Seeing the revulsion in Isisa’s face, Mary continued. “I mean you have to shed those pounds somehow. No one walks the pageant without a little vomit.”

What a horrible place. Isisa walked down the hall briskly. She saw the bathroom and passed it into the outer hall. A guard was slumped up against the wall with her legs crossed and hands in pockets. When she saw Isisa she straightened up and pointed at her threateningly. “This door leads to Arieza, cardless! You aren’t allowed!”

Isisa punched her in the nose and tore the lanyard from her neck. Isisa used the card to open the door and dragged the guard through it. Holding the guard in a sleeper hold, Isisa scanned the hall. A sign at the other end was marked *Boy’s Gym*.

Beyond the gym door was a line of lockers. The room smelled of unwashed loins. Old blood stains caked the floors. The medical equipment was rusted at the hinges. A furnace in the corner had been haphazardly painted. Airflow vents were clogged with paint and dust. Isisa was horrified at what she might find if she truly looked.

Beyond the benches and lockers were showers. Black mold ran the length of the baseboards. A door at the other end of the showers led to the gym. The tiles were chipped and discolored. Piles of dirty jerseys crowded the corners.

Cleanliness next to success, eh? Isisa thought. The young boys standing in the middle of the gym weren’t one bit alarmed by the unsanitary conditions. They heard the door open and turned in sudden panic. They had guilty looks on their faces.

“You’re not allowed in Arieza!” One yelled. “How’d you even get in here?”

“I was told you might be able to get me one of those cool cards,” Isisa chose to only address Benny. She walked toward him slowly. “I wanted to see if that was true.”

“I could ask my uncle... he could get anything!” Benny felt important, she smiled and stood up straighter. “My Uncle’s the best. He’s still loyal to the Founder, so I know he would help one of his messengers.”

“She’s no messenger you dolt! She’s a rat. She’s breaking the rules.”

Isisa warned them. “All of your lives depend on me getting one of those cards.”

“Don’t you see? This is what He talked about in his Last Days!” Benny looked over his shoulder at the others. “She’s come to signal the end times! Our Second Migration is at hand!”

“We don’t have time to get into the specifics,” Isisa didn’t like using Benny’s faith against him, but she needed his help. “Can you convince your uncle?”

“Of course I can,” Benny put his thumbs in his belt. “I’m his only nephew.”

Despite his young age, it seemed as though Benny was allowed through any door with Isisa in tow. It was another cultural oddity she had taken early note of: children were in positions of official power. Everyone seemed to take it as regular order. Even the guards to Joel’s home allowed Benny in without a question.

“This is his penthouse, where he and my aunt live, but sometimes he lives here with other women from Dianza in need of special training. He is very successful; he gets to have parties with all of the celebrities.” Benny pointed to several pictures on the wall of Pollux Max pop stars. “He’s the one who makes them feel comfortable when they visit. He has his own chef who can make anything they want. He has his own yacht to take them places.” Benny glowed with pride. “One day I’m gonna live like him.”

Benny turned on the holoscreen and a Pollux Max news report filled the wall.

“But Councilor, ninety-eight percent of Earth scientific institutions signed onto that report. The report says that the last two decades of runaway temperatures is the beginning of the end.” The reporter looked down at her notes. “They predict the mass extinction of the lower biosphere in a matter of months.”

The holoscreen panned out to show a man shaking his head with disappointment.

“This is preposterous; the science is not in on this. I’ve got family still living on Earth. They say nothing’s changed at all. They’ve even seen snow in the mountains!” Councilor Bulgae straightened his jacket and smiled into the camera. “This is a political move by the last nation-states. They want people to panic based on manipulated findings. Let’s wait until we have all the facts.”

“People don’t live like him without pushing down the rest of us.” Isisa said softly.

“The Elders live this way because they learned the secrets of the universe,” Benny turned off the holoscreen and became very serious. He lowered his eyes in practiced shame. “We know nothing next to the Elders. They’ve mastered success and teach us the way forward. Our path is holy.”

“What way is this?” Isisa asked sincerely.

“The only way is obedience. I see Benny has defied it.” A deep voice said from behind them. Uncle Joel stood in the door with a scowl across his face. “Why have you brought this decadent woman into my home?”

“She’s the Founder’s messenger.” Benny pleaded with clasped hands.

“I very much doubt that. I’m disappointed, Benny. This recklessness could ruin your name. How could you believe the tongue of one who is untreated? She could be a corporate spy or an agent of exile.” Uncle Joel turned to Isisa. He looked at her in disgust. “That’s why recruits are properly isolated and judiciously deprogrammed. Each person must be remade for the Founder.”

“Philosophy is a circular staircase, we come back to the same issues with slightly different planes of perception. Progress is made, albeit slowly.”

~ Professor Kramerton, University of New Ithaca

“Today we’re going to be making your file. We’ll start with your full name.”

The room was barren and cold. Isisa had no idea where she was on the moon. She had been moved frequently and the halls rarely had windows to the outside. Isisa thought it a very inward-looking society, so self-conscious and egotistical.

“Orthia Orwell.” Isisa shifted in her seat. “I’m surprised I’ve been here this long without a file already. What happened to all those other test results?”

“That’s a different department.” Mary leaned in. “What’s in your credit account?”

“My parents are dead.” Isisa said somberly. “They left me nothing.”

“Do you have friends with credits?” Mary tilted her head to one side.

“I wasn’t allowed friends.” Letting out a sigh, Isisa wished it wasn’t true.

“Your entry application could take weeks if we don’t find credits.” Mary looked down at her computer and bit her lower lip. For a moment she looked pained at a thought. “There has to be someone you know. Some man you dated. Anyone, really, or even someone willing to give you a loan. Did you have a personal banker on Pollux Max?”

“I’ll wait as long as it takes.” Isisa’s gut wrenched. *Time is not a luxury.*

“Why did you leave Pollux Max?” Mary folded her hands over the keyboard.

“I became a non-contract. There’s nothing for me there.”

“We get a lot of you people... no one else will take you in.” Mary leaned into the desk. She waited a beat before speaking. “Non-contracts don’t get inside quickly.”

Isisa let silence fill the room.

“Vrity will make your life better, but nothing’s free. You have to fight for everything you get.” Mary forced a smile onto her face. She swallowed and took a deep breath. Her voice shook. “It saved me. Vrity changed my life. Vrity gave me a purpose.”

“How do I get a purpose?” Isisa asked.

“First we need to find credits. But in the mean time you’ll be taking the Vrity Standard Personality Survey. It’s designed to discover everything about you through your answers.” Mary busied herself with the computer while she spoke. “Just please be honest. The Survey will know if you’re lying, and if we get a lie positive we have to start over. No one gets in with a lie positive. Where was your family from?”

Isisa shrugged. “Earth.”

“Well of course but where?” Mary sighed.

Isisa put her palms up. “My ancestors were inclined to migrate.”

“We want to make sure you’re a good fit. Your application depends on your results today.” Mary pointed to the computer. She whispered across the desk. “We have to find some source of credits. Otherwise your file will sit on my desk.”

“Can’t we just bring it down the hall?”

“Files don’t move without money. Your file is permanent. Without liquid assets it’s also immobile. It’s the single most vital thing to improve your success.” Mary put a hand on Isisa’s and spoke with genuine compassion. “Every class you complete adds value to your file.” The woman squeezed Isisa’s hand and sighed motherly. “Punching guards and sneaking off to Arieza only threatens file progression.”

“So I guess I’m already working from a disadvantage.”

“We all start with red marks.” Mary waved her hands and tried to find some new things to type on her keyboard. “You just need to do your course work and it will improve. I know that my divorce added a lot of red ink to mine.”

“Why?” Isisa shook her head. “How?”

“Divorce is a sign of weakness and failure. If my husband and I had known the secret to success... our marriage would have survived.” Mary’s voice became mournful. Her shoulders were heavy, but Mary forced a professional smile. “Maybe one day my file will look the way I’d like. But let’s talk about improving yours.”

“By selling products, I’m guessing?”

“That’s the easiest way to earn credits, sure, but don’t forget the mind work. Before you can have sales success it’s important to have mind success. That starts with ignoring the lies about Vrity you’ve heard.” Mary put her hands over her ears. “We know there is a concerted effort to discredit and demonize us. We know there are many rats out there who seek to smear our image and discourage our recruitment efforts.”

“I’ve heard the rat term used but no definition.”

“A rat is a Radical Anti-social Terrorist. Someone who seeks to undermine the progress of humanity. A person against the salvation provided by Vrity.” Mary spit the words with rehearsed hatred. “Liars and manipulators only serve their own interests. Rats destroy everything good and just.”

Isisa rolled her eyes. “They sound pleasant.”

“Do not ever compliment them! Not even in jokes. They are to be feared and despised only. The first rat was during the Founder’s lifetime.” Mary held up a finger in the air. She sounded scared even speaking of the event. “He spoke out against the Founder’s teachings and rejected the Vrity lifestyle. He was exiled after he could not complete his rehabilitation.”

“I should think he was the first among many.”

“The second rat was the Founder’s own daughter. She wrecked massive havoc on the fleet before her exile. She was vain and selfish. They built the Elder’s bunker because of her treason.” Mary shook her head in solemn disappointment. “The third rat came soon after the Founder’s ascension. That rat was a brutal and hate-filled man... full of spite.”

Mary clapped and brought out her best forced smile.

“Now let’s look to the future. Based upon your blood tests you are eligible for the best marriages... you should count yourself very lucky.” Mary nodded. She spoke reassuringly. “You’ll have a lot of men fighting over you, once you lose some weight. I can’t wait to see who gets approved to become your husband!”

“I don’t choose my husband?” Isisa was certain that she did.

“Well that’s part of it, but the Elders always reserve the right to forbid marriage proposals.” Mary saw the objection in Isisa’s eyes. “It’s a very important social safeguard against unnecessary polluting of the precious bloodlines. Maybe you don’t understand such things. A bloodline like yours is sought after. It would do no good to waste it.”

“All bloodlines have equal worth.” Isisa pushed back.

Mary replied flippantly. “The Elders disagree.”

“We are from the same source. To the same we ultimately return.” Isisa knew that she was the beneficiary of a great deal of elitism, but she could not agree with the concept. She and her mother had argued for days at a time over the subject. “To apprise out worth based on lineage is primitive and insulting.”

“You’d best keep ideas like those to yourself if you hope to have any success.”

“Staying in the dark was my mother’s game, not mine.” Isisa shook her head with fury. She couldn’t stand all of the madness around her. Societies were being built upon fallacies. Lives were being dedicated to trivialities. “Do you really think all this is for the benefit of humanity?”

“It’s the only thing that will save mankind. The Founder was explicit.”

“How did he defend choosing who marries whom?” Isisa held her hips.

“Marriage is for the purpose of creating children to carry the torch of Vrity. My sister Jari is working on having kids. She says a future without children is no future for anyone.” Mary stood up and walked around the desk. “Children should have the best blood flowing through their veins. Love fades but blood is forever.”

“I assume the Founder was above such restrictions?”

“Well he married his first wife before the Great Migration. But when she died he took his second wife from the best of bloodlines available. She met with a tragic death. The Founder’s third wife was also approved by the Elders. He held himself to just as high a standard as any of his followers.”

“How much red ink was in his file,” Isisa raised her eyebrow. “I wonder?”

“He worked very hard in his last years to earn a perfect file record.”

“Perfect?” Isisa scoffed unconvinced. “Psh.”

“Immaculate. Believe it without question. The divinity of the Founder is not up for debate.” Mary shook her head resolutely. “He was the most perfect man on Earth when the Migration began. He was a perfect man when he left us. Committing this fact to your mind is the first step on the road to Vrity success.”

“Democracy is the only weapon against tyranny.”
 ~ Last Jat Historian of Earth

Section Two was populated by the most disenfranchised people Ausar had ever seen. It was one of the most overpopulated Sections on Pollux Max. The census didn't count non-contracted persons, who were reduced to wage slavery for the corporations. Even those who were fully contracted “citizens” were subject to gross negligence.

Of the hundreds of mass media outlets aboard Pollux Max not one had ran a story about the iron content in their water supply. Zero reports had been filed regarding the cancerous contents of the food consumed everyday by the masses. Not one public service announcement of the health effects thereof.

Media, Press & Market Automation was the largest mass media company on the station. Their headquarters was located across the street from the Section Two administration buildings. Ausar wore his identity mask which replaced his eyes with a red ribbon and left the rest of his face void.

The man before him was a paper pusher from the administration's legal department. He had been helping the protest movement by leaking important documents that showed Section officials had been actively ignoring the presence of iron in the water supply. Although everyone still had their jobs, they all feared the people in the streets. Worse still, the investors weren't happy about the public relations firestorm.

“You don't ask for my name and I won't ask for yours.” He said first. Ausar knew his name already: Ronald Mesina. His eyes darted to the corners and his head was constantly in motion. The man had bags under his eyes and he clearly hadn't been eating enough. Ausar nodded in agreement.

“Who is most responsible for the iron in the water?” Ausar asked.

“They like to say its cost savings, but the reality is... they make their decisions with horrifyingly precise purpose. I don't know how long you've been on Pollux Max, but you'll find some pretty good water on the skydecks and in the government buildings.” The informant stopped to eye the exits. Ronald tossed a pill in his mouth and quickly swallowed. “It's the lower castes. It's the poor Sections. Targeting their most undesired voters. They let their malice decide all things. Don't you understand? They know what their doing. In private they laugh!”

“Our friends in the Clean Water Committee are ready to march again.”

“It won't matter! Especially now that President Collins has declared martial law. They'll all get thrown in jail. Too many of my friends are serving in Six already.” He wiped his eyes and put his hands in his pockets. “They defame and deface activists at every opportunity. What they care about is power and riches, they certainly don't care about the people they claim to work for.”

“Might be time to clean house.” Ausar shrugged.

“Don’t get me wrong, I want that too, but I just don’t think this is capable of being fixed anymore. Too many people have tried already.” Ronald shook his head warily. “This is a dangerous power that will not be toppled so easily. Every day I fear...”

“Why are you still trying to do something, if you think it hopeless?”

“I wish I could say it was for justice... or that I’m only doing the right thing. But... it’s just personal. My niece...” A tear ran down Ronald’s cheek. “She... we lost her to legionnaire’s. The doctor says she didn’t have a chance. I can barely stand to be in the same room as the monsters who did that to her, but do what I can.”

“While you still fight,” Ausar empathized, “you have a purpose for your pain.”

“I fear that nothing can be done to stop them.” Ronald’s voice began to crack and tremble. “Everyone who stands up is struck down. Perhaps this is a battle without hope.”

“The most important struggles have all known dark nights and harsh reprisal.” Ausar put his hands together with an unsaid prayer. “Take heart, for it means you stand on the right side of history.

“I only wish I could do more than scurry in the shadows.”

“Mayhap you still can. I don’t know anyone as close as you.” Ausar produced a generic-looking datachip and held it out to the informant. “Just plug this into any of their networked computers. It will do the rest. Security, recovery, delivery, cleanup, all of it.”

“They’ll trace it to me.” Ronald worried.

“It’s a remarkably quiet program, they won’t know until it’s too late, and the program removes itself after it does it’s work. They’ll never know when, where or how it got in. By the time they find out about it at all you’ll be furthest from suspicion.”

Ronald shoved the datachip into his pocket. “What will it do?”

“It’s better for you to find out with the rest of them.” Ausar knew that nothing would be gained by him knowing in advance. Especially with prying eyes and a public face. “Rest assured that the outcome will be to cast sunlight into dark places.”

“Look I want to trust you... but...” Ronald shook his head, checking his exits.

“How can you?” Ausar let out a long sigh. “I feel that too. But we have to try.”

“So many of my friends have been silenced.” Ronald wiped his eyes.

“No one will silence me.” Ausar lifted his chin defiantly.

Ronald straightened his back. “How will I know if it worked?”

Ausar chuckled. “When everyone knows what you know.”

After his meeting with Ronald, Ausar decided to visit the Station-sanctioned news broadcast building. Ausar pulled his mace from his belt and pressed the power button. The ball at the end of the chain began to spark. Arches of electricity flared around it as it transformed from a smooth ball into a spiked one.

He walked calmly through the main doors and entered the corporate lobby.

“I would like to have a meeting with the director of programming.”

The building, as expected, immediately went into lockdown. Enforcers surrounded the lobby and the building’s residents and employees were promptly evacuated to the streets below. Ausar hacked through security doors with his Mace, most security personnel decided it better to retreat to a safer location.

But in the control room, a lone producer stood in front of the broadcast booth. He held his hands up. “Are you here to silence us?” He barked. “Did the Council send you?” When others had evacuated, this old codger wouldn’t be scared off. Ausar admired that.

“I’m here as a servant of the people.” Ausar responded curtly. He walked past the producer and loaded a datachip into the main computer terminal. It would soon begin transmission on all channels to every computer on the Station, copying data pulled from various primary sources to compile a report on the current state of affairs on Pollux Max.

“That program is going to make a great deal of information public domain.”

“What kind of information?” The producer leaned over, suddenly interested.

“The widespread abuse of human dignity, in general.” Ausar let his head sway side to side. He watched live feeds from the ground floor. Enforcers sent scout drones up the elevators and took up positions on the stairwells. Another team was landing on the roof. “But the iron content in the water supply, in particular.”

“Wasn’t all that accidental? Yet another bureaucratic disaster?” The producer took a few steps backward. He waved the idea off with both hands. It was almost an allergic reaction. “They couldn’t be systematically poisoning the whole station...”

“Would you be surprised to know that the only publicly available potable water is located in the Council chambers?” Ausar pointed upward. Enforcers were nearly on the other side of the door. “Isn’t it odd that the highest echelons of Pollux Max insist on drinking water from Earth?”

“It’s a status thing.” The producer quipped.

“That’s true. It’s apparent that their status includes the right to clean water.” Ausar looked the man in the eyes. Enforcers barked orders on the other side of the door. The older man suddenly became more concerned with the enforcer’s shouts. He worried they might think him an accomplice. “Do your children drink from the tap? Do their schools serve them that water? How much of their food is prepared with it?”

“Leave my children out of this.” The man became deadly serious.

“Your children are already in the middle of it. They will be dealing with the effects of this far longer than you.” Ausar pointed at the monitors. He backpedaled toward the newsroom. “The whole Station will know soon. Do your job, reporter.”

Jumping through the window behind the news desk, Ausar saw an enforcer siege force below. Before careening into a skydeck tower, Ausar’s boots and jetpack fired and sent him through the sky traffic. His exhaust melted the paint on a number of aircars as he skirted by at top speed. The drones that had flagged his departure could not keep up.

“The loudest voice is rarely the most strategic.”
 ~ Duncan Markowitz, Colonial Armada Admiral

Isisa vomited into the bucket. Her stomach cringed as she retched. She tried to breathe but only felt curdles in her mouth. She spent too long dry heaving. The projectors continued to paint the walls with their brainwashing imagery. An audio beam was set to maximum volume. The words became seismic splitting between her temples.

“You have guilt that must be removed from your file. You have red ink and must atone for it.” Isisa remembered the virus on Pollux Max ravishing the populace. She spit into the vomit bucket. The projectors continued. “Your file is your life. Vrity is salvation. The Founder is god. Your Vrityguru has the answers. Your filework shall free you.”

Another young girl entered her cell with a glass of niacin water solution. Isisa had been given a new dose every half hour. She saw the glass and fell beside the bucket. She shook her head and raised a hand with exhausted resistance. Her strength was waning.

“A clean file begins with a clean mind. A clean mind begins with a clean body. Do not resist your cleansing.” The audio continued. The pictures on the wall were sappy photographs meant to elicit depressing thoughts. One was a half beaten child. Another was a tearful woman. Another slide was a picture of a wounded bird. “It’s best to cleanse the body and soul at the same time. Purge all of your evil at once. Give up the things in your life you regret. Let go of the ruins in your past.”

“I’ve hurt people. I’ve disobeyed my parents. I’ve brought suffering to innocent people. Killed people who did not deserve death. I have resisted the teachings of the Founder since I arrived...” Isisa dry heaved. Sweat ran down her forehead. Her words came without a filter. She cursed her own lips. “I am death incarnate!”

The niacin and virus worked together to sap her strength. Her body began to give in. She could feel herself losing track of reality. In a flash she was alone at the edge of existence. The material universe at her back, Isisa saw open void: endless possibility. Her eyes ached for a light in the darkness. Her heart longed for a glimmer of love.

“Death incarnate! That’s a new admission,” a male voice boomed in the downward spiral to unconsciousness. Isisa forced her eyelids open and saw Uncle Joel standing over her. His face was blurry through her tears. He sounded victorious. “A man could find that very useful, if true.”

“I’m delirious...” Isisa slurred as another dry heave leapt up her throat.

“We all get talkative during cleansing. The trick, is giving oneself over to their Vrityguru to overcome. I’m here to offer that mercy. Say the word and I could be your master. I can save you from this.” Joel smiled. He motioned to the glass on the floor beside her. “Unless... you prefer to continue... New recruits are not given this honor, so do not miss the opportunity. It will not be offered again.”

“Yes. Please. Release me.”

Joel smiled menacingly.

“Get her washed and bring her to my office. At first I thought you were just Benny’s pet. Now I see you’re a woman of action.” Joel’s eyes gleamed with pride. He felt confident with his advantage. He took in a deep breath. “There is much to discuss. Prepare a contract for her and have it on my desk.”

Isisa was brought to Joel’s quarters. Joel sat at his heavy desk with a curled grin. Joel pressed a button under his desk. The door slammed shut. Joel waved his hand and a video appeared on the wall. It was footage her fighting the guards outside the barracks.

“When I saw this I instantly knew you could be useful. Now that I know you’ve taken lives I see why your skills are so refined.” The playback stopped and Joel shot a penetrating stare at Isisa. “You’re highly trained.”

“I’ve fought my share of brutes.” Isisa warned.

“Brutes play Cube. I need brains.” Joel leaned forward. “You in?”

“What am I agreeing to?” Isisa still felt her gut rot.

“Entrance to Vrity at a premium rate. It’s the deal of a lifetime.” Joel plucked a piece of lint off the arm of his jacket. He threw it onto the floor behind him. He licked his lips. “The chance to become a guard. Maybe even an Elder, if you improve your file.”

“I’m interested.” Isisa nodded.

Joel’s eyes twinkled. “First tell me about the suit you came here in.”

“I stole it.” Isisa shrugged and put her palms up.

Joel was not sure. “From who? What merchant?”

“A very nice military surplus outfitter from Pollux Max.” Isisa considered her own fake memory. She had practiced the details, she had a lie-memory for every part of the store. She swallowed timidly. “I still feel guilt for stealing from him. I took advantage of his trust for my own chance at success.”

“I would kill for my own success. That’s one of the reasons I see value in your skill set.” Joel stroked his chin. He seemed appeased by her sadness. He lowered a cautious look putting his index finger in her face. “How do you unlock the suit?”

“I don’t have any clue. He put it on... I told him my father was rich.” Isisa let out a long sigh. She paused with a guilty look in her eyes. “He was very nice... he talked about his daughter. I decked him in the jaw and ran as fast as I could.”

Joel lifted an eyebrow. “Did Benny tell you any stories?”

“He told me something about a Great Return and a Second Migration.”

“Only children are taught such myths. You can learn the truth one day, if you stand by me.” Joel began to whisper. “Knowledge that only a small portion of humanity holds could be yours. So long as you honor me as your Vrityguru.”

“What exactly does a Vrityguru do?” Isisa assumed she already knew: nothing.

“Act as an extension of the Founder in your life. The Founder created the first Vritygurus, and ever since we have maintained an unbroken line of initiation.” Joel pointed to a series of paintings along the wall; each with a pale face and sad eyes. They all wore military uniforms. “Sometimes a Vrityguru will act in a way that you can’t understand, or else do things you think deplorable, but he always acts in the interest of his student. A Vrityguru is beyond morals or laws, above even the highest ideals. He dispenses his wisdom indiscriminately. I will lead you on your path to salvation, but you must trust me without doubt in your heart. Follow without any hesitation in your step. Believe in me as you would believe in the Founder Himself.”

“You said this is a rare honor...” Isisa looked Joel in the eye and saw a blank stare returned. He was a man out only for himself, she was sure of it. “Why me?”

“Because you are special. The rarest bloodline ever seen on Kanci.” Joel laughed and pointed to his computer. “I have enemies that need to be dealt with. Your kind of skill and pedigree will not be wasted here.”

Joel placed a pen on a stack of paper and passed it across the desk.

“This is your contract, we all sign this prior to being taught the secret to success. We all agree to uphold the tenets the Founder set forth.” Joel closed his eyes. The top of the stack was titled *100 Billion Year oath of fealty to Vrity*. “Signing this contract, you swear to do the Founder’s work for this and every next life. A hundred billion years is a blink of the eye in the scale of human potential.”

Uncle Joel’s face was solemn and deadly serious. His eyes had glazed over with a devoted zeal that Isisa regarded as uniformly dangerous. He stared at her with cold indifference. He smiled only when Isisa signed *Orthia Orwell* at the bottom of the page.

“What would my Vrityguru have me do?”

Joel’s lips curled wickedly. “Kill Benny.”

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“Don’t talk: walk.”

~ Jester

Bahlam floated above a mighty pioneer of earth. Her toes almost kissed the snowcapped summit. The Himalayan Mountains: her heart’s home. Her nostrils drank the crisp air of the last valley where herders knew the mountains by their ancient names. Bahlam could feel her family asleep in their beds. She knew it was really them.

A double flash of light overran the terrain. Bahlam felt the earth shake and the mountains vanish. The small monastery, beds and all, instantly vaporized. Her family extinguished in heartbeat. Everywhere Bahlam searched: no life. The valley became a glowing crater. The only sound was falling rock.

Bahlam opened her eyes. A brown face with freckles looked back anxiously. Through all her years of remote viewing, Bahlam had never accidentally been on the wrong side of the planet. The woman in front of her was a captain of the environmentalist rebels. They were huddled under an aircar garage in San Salvador.

“So did you see the guards?” Naomi asked. “Where should we fire the rockets?”

Bahlam knew time was against her. She closed her eyes and counted out to eight. Bahlam saw a jungle, a sea of canopies. Smoke and death besieged the trees. Bahlam flew higher and saw four enormous clear-cutting vehicles at the jungle’s edge. They harvested the trees with no regard for the life and habitat within.

Beneath the canopy Bahlam sensed a powerful presence. She blinked and was on the noisy ground, the sounds of the machines booming. There was a thin cheeked man leading a herd of animals away from the impending saws. Despite his proximity to certain death and the horror which he led his party from, he had a smile on his face.

Opening her eyes and seeing Naomi attentively waiting, Bahlam pointed to four locations on Naomi’s holographic map. The areas lit up in red and then the display shut off. Naomi nodded and listened to her ear piece. A smile crossed her lips.

“Confirmed hits. It’s the most amazing thing to do this from the office. Thank you,” Naomi grinned. She packed up her things, preparing to pull anchor. “Really could’ve used you when I was an enforcer, would’ve made things a lot easier.”

“I only hope that you can stop them before they destroy the last rainforest.” Bahlam thought of the man with the animals. There was a person who understood the worth of life. “Who was your scout out there?”

“Some local, he never came into the city to meet with me. An alchemist. My people rarely saw him.” Naomi shrugged. She began to pull her disguise together. They would part ways soon. Bahlam knew it would be the last time they worked together. “Locals say he looks after injured animals. Some think of him as a medicine man. Why?”

Bahlam had never seen an aura like his before. “Seemed like an honest man.”

Returning to her safe house, Bahlam gathered her weapons and bags. Her family’s enemies could be close already. If Bahlam had obeyed her mother she would be dead too.

Bahlam stopped at the window overlooking the lights of San Salvador. It was almost dumb luck that had saved her. They had been caught flatfooted.

“Your parents were the first but not the last.” Two voices said gently.

Bahlam spun around and saw two black women wearing hemp loincloth.

“Who are you?” Bahlam saw that their auras were compassionate and helpful.

“We are the Lyrans.” Both women bowed. “Our name is Aouk.”

“The two of you are one?” Bahlam had never heard of true Lyrans.

“We are all one. We represent the Gardeners. Even as the Garden dies, Earth’s seedlings may yet survive. Set has begun the end of the world. He started with your family.” Aouk closed their eyes somberly. The Lyrans put their hands together in a sacred sign of love. “We will stand with you until your last breath. We will die with Earth.”

“We can save it!” Bahlam pleaded. “We have technology and our intellect.”

“Both have brought us here.” Aouk grimaced. “Neither shall save this world.”

“We still have the Tablets.” Bahlam touched her backpack instinctively.

“Relics do not save you from the maw of death. Don’t hang your life on material artifacts! Thoth created those Tablets as a joke!” The Lyrans laughed in unison. They clasped hands in apparent levity. “Undeniably a fountain of creativity, but no shield against the end of everything you know.”

“We have other worlds...” Bahlam hoped as her faith slipped.

“None can replace home.” The Lyrans sighed deeply.

“We will save Mother Earth!” Bahlam felt her heart beat frantically.

“The youth in you has your tongue. We will return at the end of your days.”

Bahlam left the hotel determined to prove the Lyrans wrong. She would save the Earth from destruction. One flight, two buses and a taxi later she stood in a thick jungle. It was the last bastion of Earth’s biodiversity. A shadow of it’s former glory, Bahlam had known jungles only through videos. Bahlam could feel the sickness looming over everything, an invisible cloud hugging all life to death.

Without much effort she found the Alchemist’s camp. He sat on a fallen tree holding a snake in his hand and chanting in a deep state of meditation. When his words fell silent the snake slithered into the brush. He looked at Bahlam with amused surprise.

“What’s your name?” Bahlam considered his work finished.

“Jester,” he smiled and leaned back on the log. “People don’t just find me...”

“You’re a trusting person, but I’m not. You don’t get to learn my name yet.”

Bahlam gestured with her chin toward the overgrowth. Jester was gingerly touching the broad leaves of a fern. “Why do you do this?”

“We don’t have many animals left...” Jester’s smile evaporated.

“Why fight so hard, why give up the luxuries of our time... to do all this...”

Bahlam had never aired her anxieties aloud. Her parents had been totally against her environmentalist ambitions. “Why try to hold back the tide of death? How do you keep your sanity when up against the world?”

“No matter the crisis,” Jester spoke somberly, “it’s best to be with living souls.”

“Some would say that Earth is already a lost cause...” Bahlam raised an eyebrow.

“I am not of that some.” Jester shook his head curtly, appalled by the idea itself.

“If we give up so easily... perhaps we deserve losing it. I will not and would not.”

“My mother didn’t want me to try to help... She thought it would bring open conflict with our enemies.” Bahlam sat down next to Jester. “Now they’ve killed her and everyone else. I have to go into hiding, and I can’t trust anyone.”

“But why trust me?” Jester leveled a skeptical look.

Bahlam chuckled. “You don’t know my name, so don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Name or not, you’re here talking to me. Now why?”

“I’m not sure I can do it. I’m not ready. I don’t know how to be the head of household.” Bahlam was not used to voicing her feelings, but Jester’s aura was receptive and supportive. “How can I carry the torch? I don’t know how to be the survivor.”

“Don’t forget they are always with you, just as the stars in the sky. Their strength is yours and your path is bright.” Jester leaned in and looked serious. He placed his hand on Bahlam’s. “They would want you to survive and flourish. Do the work your soul is here for and make them proud.”

“Where are you from?” Bahlam felt he had been sequestered in his youth.

“I grew up with ancient tomes and high towers. My masters had hoped I would continue their work. They continue to leverage the end of Earth. As though the last days of our homeworld were some lump of iron to be made into a golden necklace.” Jester’s nose flared. His aura turned a darker shade and began to beat like a drum. “I would not accept their values. They tried to force them upon me. Their draconian punishments did nothing to end my disillusionment.”

“If you come with me, you’ll have to leave your home. Everyone you know.”

“I have no home to leave. No friends to miss. I came here because I wanted to make a difference. I haven’t been able to accomplish anything.” Jester let out a long sigh. He looked over at Bahlam and a grin spread across his lips. “At least if I follow you, my life won’t be a total waste.”

“You’ll follow a woman whose name you don’t know?”

“I know her heart,” Jester shrugged and smirked. “And I think she has mine.”

Bahlam felt a flutter in her chest. It surprised her so much that it broke her concentration. She looked over at a wide-leafed fern. Her hand found the bark of the log she sat on. Feelings of attraction filled her with doubt and fear. *Danger*, she thought.

The trees blurred into the horizon. Her projection burrowed through the earth. She came to a stop in dry, musty air. Bahlam saw two men and their shadows on the wall. Their auras were red tempests flitting back and forth as they spiraled in the small chamber. Bahlam felt the Great Pyramid above her head.

“You’ve brought dishonor to our household!” Frall, the older brother, flexed his fists. Bahlam was looking in on the house of her enemies. Frall moved to put himself between his brother and his throne. “You are no longer welcome here.”

“I did what you were too weak to accomplish.” Set’s rectangular ears perked up.

As the two crashed into one another Bahlam let go of her projection.

Jester raised an eyebrow. “Where did you go?”

“To see if you were part of their plan. I’m not known to trust easily. I had to be sure your name wasn’t on their lips.” She stood up with purpose. Bahlam began to make her way to the waiting aircar in the jungle. Jester followed her silently. She liked him even better that he would not pry. “There is infighting there. We must move while they are distracted.”

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“Think now, act now.”

~ Yogi Uni

Isisa woke to the sound of Ibis’ alert message in her 3Eye.

{ Alert: [Data intercept] Encrypted message reads: [Vanguard engaging] }

“Ibis, can you hear me?” Isisa whispered.

“Yes, my lady.” Ibis responded excitedly.

The air was heavy. “Where is my suit?”

“In the primary weapons lab in what they call Fleet Tower. They’ve had no luck breaking the hermetic seal.” Isisa’s 3Eye displayed the scene. Men in lab coats yelled at one another. Joel stood in the corner with his arms crossed. “They are still trying to analyze the major components and material composition.”

Isisa summoned the strength to get out of her bunk. At the door she saw a guard in the hall beyond. The guard slumped against the wall. Her eyes were closed and her chin was against her chest. *Overworked and underpaid, just like their sales kin*, Isisa thought.

Quietly opening the door, Isisa relieved the guard of her badge. Isisa stepped lightly and made it to the door at the end of the hall. It was locked with a card reader. On the other side were two guards at a desk. It was the only exit from the barracks.

“Detonate my suit.” A deep rumble shook through the corridor. Isisa keyed the door and was through it before the rumble ended. Alarms began to sound. The two guards were glued to their computer screens. Isisa leapt across the desk and landed a kick to the face of the first guard.

The other sprang to his feet with an electric baton. Isisa attempted to dodge his swing but her tired muscles betrayed her. An electrical jolt ran down her arm and into her chest. She heard herself yelp. She fell hard on her shoulder. The guard raised the baton above his head. Isisa pushed off the ground and extended her foot into the guard’s knee.

The guard’s knee snapped. He dropped his baton and collapsed onto the floor. The man screamed in agony as Isisa grabbed the baton and flicked the settings to maximum. The first guard tried to tackle her, but Isisa cracked the baton against his neck and he dropped. She took both of their cards and exited into the hall.

Isisa found Mary in the recruiter’s office. The old woman was cowering in the corner with her hands over her face. Isisa gently lifted her hands off her face and helped Mary to her feet. Isisa looked her square in the eyes and spoke sternly.

“Take me to the lab where your sister works. Her life is in danger, so is yours.”

“What’s happening? What are the alarms for?”

“The alarms are meant to wake you from your slumber. It’s time to move on. It’s time to break the chains that bind you.” Isisa pulled Mary through the door. The lights in the hall were flashing. “You and your sister must resist the tyranny being imposed upon you. Now take me to the lab.”

“We don’t have access.”

“Yes we do.” Isisa held up the stolen guard cards. Mary seemed flabbergasted. “Now led the way, I promise you’ll be freed.”

Mary reluctantly led Isisa toward the Pioneer Labs.

“Stay in your room until this emergency has been resolved.” An automated message rang out over the intercom. “Do not attempt to help. Security has this in hand.”

Once inside, Isisa saw a long medical bay with two young men. When the door opened they both jumped around, clearly terrified of a visit from management. Both noted the women and scoffed. They looked at one another quizzically.

“Who are you? You two are not allowed in here!”

“On official security business for Uncle Joel, he has instructed me to retrieve some of his weapons for him.” Isisa lifted her baton in a threatening way. “If you don’t want to incur his wrath you’ll sit quietly along the wall

“Jari!” Isisa turned to see Mary threw her arms over her sister. The young woman, like dozens of others, laid on a medical table with dozens of tubes connected to their brains. The women were in medically-induced comas. “Jari?”

Three doors led to small bedrooms. The first held a sleeping boy covered in dried feces. The second room was empty sauna, damp, leaking water from the ceiling. Beyond the last door was a barren room with no lights. A little girl, obviously overly-medicated, sat in the corner on a pile of bed sheets. Her green eyes shifted from side to side. She was clearly unaware of her surroundings.

“What did you give to them?”

“The blue pills...” one of the technicians offered, “its part of their file work.”

“What are in those pills?” Both technicians shrugged.

“What was the dosage?” Isisa grew frustrated. “What are the known side effects?”

“We...don’t... get told any of that.” One technician looked guiltily at the other. They both put their palms up in defeat. “We were transferred here from the call center.”

“Do either of you have former medical training?” Isisa knew already. They shook their heads. Not a single decision was being made with any long-term planning in mind. “This entire moon is a sham. Vrity is an unmitigated deathtrap.”

Isisa ran through the patient dossiers. Test subjects were having their organs harvested to be sold on Pollux Max. Black market buyers don’t typically test for drugs. Vrity’s human organ harvesting operation was extensive. Isisa doubted that was in their charter. Files slated for organ recovery were marked “expendable.”

One of the files so marked was Mary’s sister. Jari had survived several rounds of supplement testing when she transferred to Pioneer Labs. She had completed every course with shining colors. But apparently Jari was late to work and marked expendable.

Vrity scientists were testing new biological weapons in the adjacent lab, upon subjects they did not expect to survive. Those subjects were marked as “excessive exhaustion” which was their term for “harvest complete, dispose of body.”

“They’re testing blood thinners and permanent birth control on her.”

“Birth control? No that can’t be right... Jari wanted children!” Tears streamed down Mary’s cheeks. Isisa could tell that she had wanted to be an aunt. “She wanted to get married... she transferred here to get the credit on her file. Why would they do this?”

“Being a Pioneer subject grants the highest credit to your file!” One of the techs yelled from the wall. He tried to sound confident, but he only repeated propaganda. “The only way forward is through sacrifice.”

“How much credit do you get for being expendable?” Isisa felt anger drip from her words. Vrity coaxed loyalty out of their people. For their loyalty the people were abused, body, mind and soul. Isisa found a well of contempt in her heart.

The technicians looked at one another.

Isisa heard herself growl. “Where are the bio-weapon samples?”

“Why would that concern you?”

“My Vrityguru is Uncle Joel. He sent me on this mission.” Isisa shook her head and pointed at the door. “I think Uncle Joel will concern *you* if I don’t get an answer.”

“Back there, tell him I helped you. Please, let him have mercy,” the other tech pointed back at a cooler. “Take my card, don’t let him throw me in the cellar.”

“Ibis set the Atlantean on approach,” Isisa grabbed three samples that were marked on her 3Eye. She placed them gently into a biohazard satchel. When she returned from the cooler the technicians were trying to pry Mary off her sister.

Mary held onto her sister as only loved ones can.

“Wake her up! Get her out of this place! Wake up J!” Mary cried out. Tears dripped off her jaw. She had her arms wrapped around her sister’s restraints. “I know you don’t want it this way! You would never live this way!”

“She signed her contract!” The less helpful tech sneered. “She chose this!”

“Maybe file credit isn’t worth it.” Isisa pointed her baton at the techs. Both seemed ready to run. “Let her go or I’ll break every bone in your face.”

The unhelpful tech let go of Mary and stepped back. “She sounds like a rat!”

“And you like a worm. You’ve done nothing to help these people.” Isisa cracked him in the temple and pointed the baton at his partner. “Help her sister regain consciousness, then wake up the others. Seal this lab. You’re done harvesting organs. You will be migrating again soon.”

“What does that mean?” Mary looked around the room wide eyed. She turned to the standing tech and glared at him with realization. “What does she mean harvesting organs? What have you been doing in here?”

“They’ve been taking advantage of your people for their own profits. It ends now. I will be sending someone with a cure. Help him distribute it.” Isisa saw all the necessary tools in the room. Humans never lacked the resources to do the right thing. They always found reasons of their own not to help one another. “He will lead you out of this hell. You can still be part of the survival of mankind. Staying here will only bring you misery and death. Leave Vrity here and forget everything you’ve learned on this moon.”

“How are you not a rat and say such things?” The tech on the floor groaned.

“I’m your only chance for survival!” Isisa hollered. “Remember that.”

Both technicians eyed her suspiciously. The one still standing crossed his arms. The other nursed his bleeding head from the floor. Kanci was still ruled by a dead man. People were born, married and died never knowing another god. The two technicians were the product of their environment. Their environment harbored no mercy.

Isisa made her way to the exit. Mary looked up from weeping over her sister.

“Where are you going?” She asked, holding her sister’s hand tightly to her breast.

Isisa had already wasted too much time with diplomacy. Isisa turned and made her way to the hall. The door slid open to reveal the Hunter Seeker known as Vanguard. Isisa felt his aura pour into the room. Fiery anticipation and honed hatred burned inside the assassin. He had the advantage and Vanguard knew it.

Vanguard slammed his fists together. Plasma sparked down his arms and made a current between his fists. A bright ball formed in an instant and flew toward Isisa's head. She ducked and took two wide steps backward. He charged for another attack.

Isisa put her hand up and closed her eyes. She projected herself beyond the moon to Godavari hanging in space. A warm orange glow fell upon Isisa's heart. The sound of the star vibrated off her ribcage. She pulled Godavari to her and recited an ancient mantra in her mind's eye: *Gange cha Yamune chaiva Godavari Saraswati.*

In the palm of Isisa's hand, a vortex of transmuted air became a metal handle. Extending out from the handle a shield flowered, glittering like a silver moon. Vanguard's plasma beam struck the shield and bounced at an angle into the wall to Isisa's left. The wall panel melted in a perfect circle.

Vanguard brought his fists together again. Isisa spun and delivered a roundhouse kick to his visor. He staggered back as she charged. His arms sparked again and fired two smaller beams of plasma at her. The first beam Isisa ducked beneath, the second she deflected with her shield and a flick of her wrist.

They exchanged punches and body shots. Isisa kicked his kneecap and slammed her shield into the side of his helmet. He backpedaled into the wall. Isisa closed her eyes again and pulled a shiv into existence with her other hand. Godavari's grace was the only thing keeping her from the end.

Vanguard pushed off the wall toward her. She sidestepped and drove the shiv into one of the plasma channels. A wail escaped from inside his helmet. Isisa left the shiv in his arm and kicked him in the chest. He flew back into the laboratory. From the floor he fired another plasma beam from his working arm. Isisa deflected it with her shield and it burned a hole in the floor. She turned and sprinted down the hall at full speed.

At the corner she saw Vanguard dropping the shiv onto the deck.

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“Rhetoric is a catalog of the soul.”
~ Emperor Elsu

Ausar was dressed in Enforcer Breach gear. He held a submachine gun with a gas canister launcher under the barrel. He sat in an unmarked airvan with eight other men armored head to toe. Ausar yanked at his harness and checked his helmet straps. The man who belonged in Ausar’s seat was tranquilized in his apartment bathtub.

The pilot descended onto the street and parked on the sidewalk. The breachers disembarked from the rear door with precision. They were surrounding the main access road for the Sisterhood Hotel. Two other enforcer airvans touched down on the street corner. Three teams sprinted their way to the entrances.

Gas canisters blew through the windows on every level. Ausar’s team broke down the kitchen door leading from the alley. Dishes were piled high, garbage bags were heaped over the trash compactor. A red-headed woman with hands in the suds gave out terrified screams as the door burst open.

“Everybody on the floor, now!!!”

The enforcers poured into the dish room and made their way into the kitchen. The enforcer who had been sitting next to Ausar in the airvan grabbed one of the red-headed women from under the dish sink. He threw her to the ground and tossed her hairnet on the floor. A lock of red hair fell on the wet floor.

“Where is Artemis?” He screamed at the weeping woman.

“I don’t know, I don’t know, she never comes here! Please let me go!”

“Leave her alone, she washes dishes,” Ausar tapped the man on the shoulder. “You really expect her to know anything?”

“Who asked you?” he shoved Ausar away angrily. “Get cuffs on the other one!”

“Why are we arresting these people again?” Ausar said as he gently beckoned another woman from the garbage room. She complied and he carefully put the cuffs on her like an obedient enforcer. “What crimes get committed taking out the garbage?”

“They’re terrorists. End of story.”

Ausar followed the other enforcer in silence, leading the cuffed women outside. The airvan was being loaded with prisoners. Many of the women were cut, bloodied and bruised. Ausar approached the ranking officer who stood next to the airvan’s cockpit.

“Sir, I’d like to report several incidents of violations of the use of force regulations. These people were subject to illegal actions during their arrest.” Ausar pointed specifically to the woman bleeding from her scalp. “I’ve seen some of the wounds myself. They will require immediate medical attention.”

“Are you serious? Get out of my face, Mendez!” the officer pointed at the door leading back into the hotel. His eyes turned to fire and he raised his voice in anger. “Get inside and come back with some shiny forfeiture! Just for your stupid textbook rant you’d better find me something I can give to the wife!”

Ausar stood still as he yelled. *This is how they view their mandate.* He chose silence and returned inside as ordered. Enforcers were busy tearing through the bedrooms. Baby toys and laundry filled the halls. Everything was being turned over and pulled inside out. Jewelry and electronics were placed in evidence bags. Credit chits and legal tenders were pocketed. Everything else was smashed.

Enriching themselves at the expense of those they swore to serve.

Making a swift exit, Ausar made his way to the Section Enforcer Headquarters.

Still wearing his breach uniform, Ausar's face was obscured by a holographic mask of a brown-eyed Asian woman's face. The guards tightened up and eyed one another when they saw the Director of the Oversight Committee walk through the door. No one wanted to be the person to address her, and everyone looked for an officer.

Dominating the lobby was a granite statue. Five men held hands in solidarity. The plaque called them the "Red Ruiners." Ausar noted that the burning families and crying children were not shown on the memorial. Only victorious were those stone faces. Ausar made his way to the elevators uncontested.

Once in the Chief Enforcer's Office, Ausar's face changed into a red stripe.

"You're the lunatic that hacked the Section Eight News!" Bahadur's upper lip began to quiver. A vein formed on his forehead. "Do you work for Shadow Mirror? Where is my Ekaterina? I was promised her! You will bring her to me now!"

"When I saw your people being poisoned, I immediately thought to alert the proper authorities. I had thought you could be reasoned with. See the evidence and spring into action to help your people." Ausar let out a heavy sigh. He tilted his head and lifted a finger in the air to stop Bahadur from interrupting. Bahadur began to fume. "Then I saw how your enforcers interact with their communities. Then I spoke to the people who live in your Section. I am here as their messenger."

"You have no authority!" Spit flew from Bahadur's lips.

"You serve by the will of the people, not at will over them." Ausar shook his head slowly and advanced. He walked with a sureness of step. "This is the rule of Jatlatsat. We are many. You are few. We assemble and choose our leaders. You are being removed from power by the will of the people."

"The Council won't stand for this." Bahadur snorted.

Ausar sat down casually. "They have their own marches to accord with."

"This is unlawful!" Bahadur screamed across the desk.

"You oppressed your own people. Now atone for your broken oaths. Your world is crumbling around you. I know what that's like. Just realize that you're about to learn a great deal and remember it for a long time." Ausar nodded sympathetically. "People you called allies have abandoned you. People who feared you will smile in their sleep. Your sins have come home to roost."

Bahadur drew his heavy pistol and aimed it at Ausar. The pistol's trigger chirped.

Ausar smiled. "You'll realize now that you're under investigation for treason."

"You have nothing!" Bahadur flung the pistol. Ausar dodged it with a head tilt.

"I actually have everything you've ever communicated, unencrypted and tied to your fingertips. I've also got quite a laundry list of unlawful arrests tied to your leadership. Some very interesting witness reports from your enforcers and a stack of files the Oversight desk just hadn't had time to investigate. I sent them a detailed file for you and it turns out that they are just as angry as those people in the street."

“That’s... a lie...” Bahadur shook his head to convince himself.

“Think as you will, but I will have your extended list of associates. We’re going to hash out everyone you worked with.” Ausar dropped a holodisk onto the Chief’s desk. A holographic list of names and badge photos floated between the two men. Chief Bahadur strained to breath. “I want to know who was happily abusing people’s rights, let’s start with them. But I also need a list of people who were out to get you. I’d say they need promotions and decent raises.”

“Get out now before you die.” Bahadur bared gritted teeth.

“I’ve been disheartened by your station’s culture. Many of the enforcers under your command are good men. Many do their job honorably. Most want to help the Section citizens, but good will has been stifled under your watch.” Bahadur pulled another pistol from under his desk. Ausar sat down in the chair in front of the Chief’s desk. “You’ve given psychopaths free reign, turned a blind eye to apparent corruption and egregious and unlawful acts. I shall not abide your dereliction of duty any longer.”

“I’m sure you’re new to Pollux Max, so I’ll give you one pass. I could shoot you dead right here and leave the blood to dry. This Station is not your precious Earth. It’s not your brainwashed country!” Bahadur chuckled and reached for his flask while keeping his pistol trained on Ausar. He took a long pull from the flask and leaned into his desk. “No heroes of the people. No messengers of gods or men. Who in the hells are you? I should just shoot you.”

“I’m the shadow you’ve cast onto these decks. I’m the result of your heavy hand and your hardened heart. When I found iron in the water I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt,” Ausar saw recognition in Bahadur’s eyes. The pistol’s muzzle began to shake. “I planned on coming to you so that you could help arrest those responsible. But then I visited your luxurious accommodations here and in your home. No iron in either place. The Council has favorites and it shows in what runs from the faucet.”

Bahadur pressed the pistol against his chest. He pulled the trigger with his thumb. Slumping back in his chair, the pistol fell to the floor. Bahadur’s blood gushed onto the floor. A wisp of smoke trailed upward from the entry wound. Ausar noted that the pistol had been illegally modified. The desk was filled with other weapons, similarly modified. They had been manufactured for Station officials, but every one had the serial numbers removed. Ausar lamented that the Chief had been selling weapons that could easily be used against his own enforcers. Bahadur knew that he wouldn’t have been able to survive legitimate scrutiny.

Joel had been close when Isisa's suit had exploded. His eyes leveled a hate-filled stare at Isisa. The crowd was so quiet Isisa could almost hear her heart beat.

A cataclysmic crash boomed above their heads. Metal, glass and debris rained down onto the field. The guards fell on their bellies. Joel flinched and cowered. The Atlantean glided over the crowd, sparks of lightning crackling on the ship's underside. Ibis landed the ship softly beside Isisa, shielding her from the line of fire. Screams and shrieks accompanied the atmosphere escaping from above.

Lightning arced in all directions from the Atlantean. The crowd scrambled for the exits. Isisa dropped into the cockpit. Ibis got the Atlantean immediately off the deck. They flew through the hole in the dome at full throttle.

Isisa saw Cybele through the windows. Fiery red streaks parted pink storms across the looming gas giant. Isisa wondered if her words had been heard below. When minds build walls they become atrophied in isolation. Isisa was only a rat in their eyes.

"I'm glad you made it, my Lady, but please return to the stasis pod." Ibis' disembodied head floated above the controls. Her feather tips were touching her beak in an apparent attempt to appear worried. "I fear the infection has begun to overwhelm the nanoimmune systems."

"Vanguard wasn't on that stage, which means he'll be giving chase." Isisa poured power onto the engines. The horizon of the moon fell away. "Run a full sensor sweep."

The Atlantean's proximity alarm blared. "Strike craft detected."

"That's what I thought." The Atlantean screeched as two beams of energy grazed the hull. Isisa put the ship into a spin. "Deploy decoys and tether mines."

Isisa banked side to side. Beams of plasma flew past the window. Each twist and turn brought the Vanguard closer. Isisa maneuvered but could feel the danger rise with each passing flash. Three volleys finally hit their mark. Her controls shook violently.

Sirens rang out. Multiple panels in front of Isisa turned red. Others flashed warnings. "Atlantean main chassis has sustained multiple hits." Ibis reported calmly. "Hull integrity warning. Nanobots have deployed to three critical hard points."

"This ship wasn't designed to dogfight, Ibis, transfer auxiliary power to the engines." The hair on the back of Isisa's neck stood up. Her fingertips tingled. "Warm up the Phase Coils. Power up the Mandelbrot."

"Warning: You are within Godavari's gravity well." Ibis sounded suddenly surprised and obviously worried. A system map popped up with a red line indicating the closest location for a ship to safely Tunnel. The red line was still far a field. "Transition this close to a stellar mass is extremely dangerous."

"We have no choice. Prepare the Atlantean." Isisa bit her lip as she avoided another volley. "I can't keep this up, and we aren't in good shape."

"Hull integrity is below recommended Transition limits."

"We won't have any integrity much longer." Isisa took a deep breath.

It would be her second time Tunneling. Her first navigating out of stasis.

"Phase Coils prepped." Ibis reported dutifully. "Mandelbrot primed."

Isisa didn't hesitate. She punched the Transition Execution button. Simulations did not prepare Isisa for the overflowing joy that burst through her heart. Flight instructors had warned about falling into a listless or ecstatic state. Such loss of control could doom any journey. The Mandelbrot drive synched to Isisa's brainwaves. Her very thought could destroy the Atlantean.

Isisa breathed in her traditional cadence.

Godavari was a bright churning ball above. It radiated waves of light that bucked against the Atlantean. Stars caused massive interference during Transition. Isisa breathed out and attuned herself to the star's frequency. The oncoming waves seemed to lift her. Isisa looked out-system, toward a small gray dot in the sea of stars.

Closing her eyes, Isisa imagined holding a bow in her hands. She pulled the bowstring back deliberately, imagining that her tiny ship was the arrowhead. Isisa focused every mental fiber on the Atlantean amongst the infinite expanse of space. She breathed out and let it fly.

Pollux Max, Isisa thought. Suddenly, Three Rivers Station lay before her in a sprawling cloud of interstellar traffic. Isisa heard the Phase Coils powering down. Isisa opened her eyes to see the cockpit. She let out her breath in relief.

"Main engines offline. They suffered a direct hit as we entered Transition." Ibis displayed a diagram of the damage. Nearly every system was flashing red. "The Mandelbrot drive has melted into an unrecoverable state."

"Has that ever happened before?"

"Damage of this type has never been reported." Ibis continued listing damaged systems. Isisa saw her controls light up again. "I am recovering sensors now."

Their trajectory was projected onto the window. Collision alarms began to blare.

"We are in the flight path of an incoming freighter." Ibis reported frantically. "Adjustments cannot be made to avoid impact. Prepare for ejection."

"Ibis, transfer yourself to *Pollux Max* Central Mainframe. I need help getting through the outer airlocks without attention." Isisa gripped the handle below her chair. The hatch above her snapped open. "Disable cameras along my path. Disguise yourself and await further orders."

The next moment Isisa was ejected into the vacuum of space. The Atlantean slammed into the side of a rusted freighter. The explosion sent debris in every direction. The freighter was thrown into an uncontrolled spin toward *Pollux Max*. Both ships vented atmosphere. Bodies spilled out into the void.

Isisa sailed over the destruction in tearful silence.

12 ๓ ̄ i i ̄ ๓

“Nothing is accomplished without determination.”

~ Emperor Elsu

Isisa floated alone in space. Her heart sunk into her stomach. Pollux Max stretched out before her. Silver hull dominated her vision. So many people called the station home, but she couldn't sense any of them. The vacuum had swallowed her and cut off her senses. A bleak shroud enveloped her, grasping her heart with silence.

She instead tuned into the endless drip of hate-driven talk wireless.

“Artemis supporters are terrorists! They have unleashed a wave of violence we've never endured before.” The gray-haired Councilor Bulgae yelled from a pulpit. The crowd in Section Two had been chosen to support him. “These people need to be brought to justice. They must be punished!”

“Artemis terrorists are now thought to have been responsible for the passenger starliner that crashed into the docks of Section Four,” A reporter from Section Four said from an airvan. The camera showed a riot below the news airvan. “The local populace is frustrated that no one has been arrested for the attack. The Russian Quarter is still reeling from a serious spike in gang violence following widespread fire damage.”

“I have no doubt that the Artemis Syndicate is responsible for the virus that now afflicts our citizens.” A security advisor told the camera in a prerecorded interview. He spoke with vitriolic disdain. “They've declared a biowar on us and we don't even know where to start looking for them.”

Isisa passed a docking starliner. Tugboats aided the coupling of ship and station.

“Artemis insurgents are anti-Council. These anarchists should be treated as war criminals against Pollux Max.” Another news channel had a panel of experts. They all were red in the face and uncomfortable with each other. “These dogs shouldn't even be given a trial! They could spit vile ideas and warp the minds of our children!”

“Those that I've interviewed just want to give themselves a better life.” A woman from the other side of the panel interjected. She winced at his response. “Many have been taken advantage of this station and want to be treated fairly.”

“No! It's a carefully constructed cover story! Don't be naive; these people are threatening our Station!” The big man pointed across the panel angrily. “These are barbarians who want to destroy civilization!”

“I think Artemis supporters should hang from the dock pylons!” The third panelist said with a grin. “Sad stories aside, they want to ruin everything in civil society!”

“No greater scum than those Artemis witches.” The other female panelist nodded.

Isisa switched to the business news.

“Tesla Future Technologies was raided by elements of both Section and Investor Enforcers. The factory was burned down with all data and products. A reporter stood on a subdeck outside Isisa's factory. She smiled with practiced form. Investigators discovered that the company had violated patents held by Pollux Power Incorporated. What more do you have on this story, Bradley?”

“Council agents found ample evidence of corporate espionage and prototype theft when they broke down the doors behind me. The automated 3D printers that you see as charred remains were loaded with intellectual property owned by the Pollux Power Corporation.” A thin cleanly shaven man in a suit reported from the street. “Officials from the victimized company have not completed their internal review. But everyone I’ve talked to says they will definitely sue.”

Isisa could almost hear Olympian’s *I told you so* in her head. The power companies would not so easily concede their monopoly. The Council would not see a valuable form of leverage be taken away. The people of Pollux Max were economic slaves in the eyes of the ownership class. Olympian had warned her about attempting to upset their precious control.

“Angela Tesla could not be reached for comment, but sources say she only recently moved to Pollux Max.” Bradley held up damaged reactor housing he picked up off the curb. “Records show that her company had not yet gone into full production.”

“So you’re saying that Ms. Telsa stole her debut product line?”

“Investigators are not giving many details. Several sources say that the evidence is still being combed through.” Bradley pointed to enforcer airvans being loaded with boxes. A line of enforcers stood between the factory and the camera crews. “Enforcers have said every product will now be considered contraband.”

Isisa cut off the feed and took a moment to center herself.

“Archimedes, how many of my people are still living in a cell?”

“Nearly all of them, I’m afraid. Held on anarchism charges: not subject to release. Most have been transferred to the Super Max Prison in Section Six.” Olympian reported dispassionately. “Decima and Nona are in solitary confinement. Ekaterina was at a food shelf when the raid took place.”

“And she’s safe?” Isisa suddenly had a cause for hope.

“For the time being,” Olympian was never one to rule a thing out.

“Patch me through to Ekaterina.”

As she neared the hull of the Station Isisa fired small thrusters imbedded in her boots. She angled and twisted herself until she found an engineering hatch. The access panel was green. In the corner of the control panel was ancient Earth documentary featuring a flock of Ibis. Isisa smiled and pressed the button to unlock the airlock.

“Is it truly my lady?” Ekaterina said gleefully when the connection was made.

“Indeed.” The High Priestess flew inside the airlock and initiated the process of pressurization. The hatch behind her shut and a loud hiss announced the arrival of atmospheric conditions. “How my people are doing?”

“It’s wonderful to hear your voice again, some of the others feared the worse.” Ekaterina smiled through a wince. Isisa was sure there were many detractors especially those sitting in cells and cuffs. “I knew better. You’re the strongest woman in the galaxy. I never doubted your return.”

“Thank you for your trust, but how are my people responding to all this?”

“We remain steadfast, what is said on the news does not give us pause. We know it’s all lies. We know your intentions.” Ekaterina looked away for a moment then whispered into the microphone. “Some think you’ve become involved with extremists. The same who didn’t think you’d return. Many are working with Morta.”

“What about those in jail?”

“I believe they are loyal. My worry is that they will be broken over time.” Ekaterina became sad and contemplative. She remembered her father throwing his priestly attire into the garbage. “They exact horrible punishments on those they degrade from humanity. When my father was arrested they destroyed the light behind his eyes.”

“I know. Send them good news and hope. Tell the children that Artemis is coming home. Tell the adults that we must be united to fare this storm.” Isisa hoped that the young woman could help keep morale up despite the losses at every corner. “Stay positive. Do not give in to fear or anger. Remain peaceful in your resistance.”

“Yes, my lady.” Ekaterina sighed with renewed purpose.

“Ekaterina, my messenger,” Isisa smiled brightly. “Put wings on my words.”

13 ๐ ĩ ĩ ĩ ๐

“Years turn idealism into pessimism.”
~ Enforcer Jonn Robertson

Ibis had disabled the cameras on the route to Nessus’ lab. Foot traffic was sparse. The airplanes above Isisa were empty due to the declaration of martial law. Enforcers were bogged down with unrest on the docks. Several refugee encampments were attempting to break out of their locked warehouses. Groundcars and dumpsters burned on every corner.

The lab’s door opened to reveal Nessus at his desk. Isisa fell to the floor in the threshold. A red light flashed, indicating the door’s blocked status, but with each blink was fainter than the last. Nessus leapt out of his desk chair and ran to help her. The sounds of his feet were muffled and seemed far away.

“You have the look of death already! How you made it this far is quite a miracle in itself.” He spoke through a heavy biohazard mask. “We need to get you into stasis!”

Isisa surveyed the lab. Computer terminals lined one side of the room. The opposite side wall was lined with displays and holoprojectors. A rotating hologram expanded and highlighted the structure of the virus within her. She was dragged into a Lagrange chamber at the far end of the lab.

“I’m quite impressed that your nanoimmune defenses lasted so long,” Nessus helped her off the floor. “You’ll have to permit me to analyze them one day.”

Once she was floating inside the door shut quickly and sealed tight. She could not move a muscle in any direction. It was as if she was being held in position by invisible restraints. The anti-gravity emitters hummed.

“I think it best to start treatment immediately. I’m still wondering if this will work, especially given your extended exposure.” Nessus laughed unconvincingly. “I suppose this is the best chance any of those poor rags have at surviving the outbreak!”

Isisa remained silent. His crass dismissal of the plight on the docks angered her.

A robotic arm extended from the chamber ceiling. It inserted a syringe into Isisa’s arm. The plunger depressed and the arm retracted in one motion. Isisa felt the air grow cold around her face. Ice crystals formed on her suit and the chamber’s glass.

“Now that the cure is in your body I will be cryogenetically freezing you to allow it to work. It’s designed to work in any condition,” Nessus boasted with his chest puffed out. “At least the virus won’t replicate while you’re sleeping. I’ll wake you once I am sure the cure has worked. I don’t think you’ll wake again if I fail.”

He might be rewarded either way, Isisa thought before losing consciousness.

“My lady, please wake up.” Ibis’ voice boomed inside Isisa’s skull. Her eyelids were frozen shut but she could always see Ibis in her mind’s eye. “Nessus has betrayed you. I have begun shutting down the Lagrange chamber. Please be ready to fight. Enforcers are en route.”

Isisa focused on regulating her breath. She could hear Nessus through Ibis’ patched security camera. He was gloating. He was paging through a list of vacant office buildings, undoubtedly for his proposed corporation. He spoke to someone in his headset.

“No, she’s on ice, as easy to remove as you like. The cure worked on her, but I’ve no intention of waking her.” Nessus tried to play a cool hand, he came off as ridiculous. “Not if Saturn Interstellar is offering royalties on the distribution profits. You can guarantee that? With the bonuses we talked about?”

“You will be handsomely rewarded for your effort. My men are on the way now.” A raspy disembodied voice responded, patched to her from Ibis. Isisa knew it was Prudence. “I’ve also sent one of my hopefuls. You will receive your payment only after she has arrived safely. You lose your commission if she dies.”

Nessus strolled over to the Lagrange chamber. He spoke through the glass to Isisa’s face. “You’re going to fetch me quite a payday.” Isisa opened her eyes and starred back at him. He backpedaled to his desk. “How are you awake?”

The Lagrange chamber opened with a sharp hiss. Every muscle in Isisa’s body felt stiff and unforgiving. She gritted her teeth and rushed Nessus. The scientist lifted a pistol from his desk and extended it toward her. Isisa twisted his wrist and took the pistol.

“No! Please! They forced me!” Nessus threw his hands up and closed his eyes with a grimace. Isisa grabbed him by the windpipe with her left hand. “Gah! Pl—ee”

“I wanted to keep you alive.” Isisa shook her head, feeling her nose flare.

Isisa put Nessus’ own pistol to his forehead and pulled the trigger.

“Ten enforcers are about to breach the door. An airvan is waiting for you at the loading dock.” Ibis said cheerfully. She updated Isisa’s 3Eye with waypoints. “I have the fastest route plotted. Note incoming hostiles. Deploying distractions.”

The wall of holoprojectors lit up and the room became full of holographic armed assailants. The door was blown open. Isisa ran past the Lagrange chamber and through the service corridor. Enforcers opened fire on the holograms behind her. Flame suppression foam exploded from packets along the walls.

At the loading dock an armor-clad Apprentice Seeker blocked her path. The assassin held a rifle with both hands. Isisa slid to the right under the plasma blast. She fired four rounds from Nessus’ pistol. The Apprentice Seeker crumbled to her left, blood gushed from between helmet and chest plate.

Another life taken, Isisa thought sadly.

14 ໓໓໓໓

“Always be ready to escape.”

~ Bahlam

Since Bahadur’s cowardly escape from justice, Ausar had set his sights on one of the Chief’s primary political enablers: Councilor Bulgae. One hack of the politician’s email gave Ausar everything he needed to know. Bulgae was the most prominent supporter of slowly murdering his own people. The so-called “*Reduction of Water Costs Act*” was designed to privatize the Station’s water supply.

Ausar walked onto a private prison compound wearing a guard’s uniform.

Guards scrambled to their emergency stations. Ausar made his way to the loading dock as though it were his assignment. The subdeck loading bay was filled with tall stacks of boxes. Beyond the receiving dock were three parked patrol aircars. A luxury airlimo sat running beside the dock. Twelve prison guards and four of the Councilor’s bodyguards kept watch.

Ausar retrieved a tracking feather from his belt and let it fly. The feather dutifully attached itself to the underside of the airlimo. He made his way back up the stairwell and made his way toward the interrogation wing. Walking down the hall Ausar saw Councilor Bulgae and two of his bodyguards.

[{ Incoming: encrypted visual link | From: §4: Olympian }]

On a 3Eye overlay, Ausar saw Tekla and a handful of henchmen pour out of her subdeck bar. They climbed into a waiting aircar flanked by riflemen. Section Four had deteriorated into a war zone. Rival deck gangs spilled blood on every corner. Innocent citizens were caught in the crossfire. Enforcers had discontinued patrols.

“Councilor! You must be warned!” Ausar hollered down the hall. The bodyguards immediately spun around with their weapons drawn. Bulgae turned with an irritated look over his shoulder. “Tekla and her thugs are on their way here!”

“Warden?” One of the bodyguards looked ascense at his partner.

“My boys brought in one of her lackeys about an hour ago.” Ausar’s holographic face had taken the shape of the warden and his voice was being altered similarly. “My best interrogator got him talking. Says she’s out to get you, sir.”

“How did she find out we were here, warden?” Bulgae bared his teeth.

“I’m looking into that as we speak,” Ausar pointed to the exit. “But given the circumstances I think it best if you boys got to a safe location.”

“Not before I see my prisoner.” Bulgae turned and continued down the hall.

Ausar followed. Down the hall at the last solitary confinement cell, the bodyguards took up positions on each side of the door. Bulgae and Ausar entered to see a naked man crouched against the wall. The cell was tall enough to stand but not long enough to lie down. Dried blood stained the wall. The smell of urine was overwhelming.

Bulgae pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and covered his nose.

“Leander, come now, you’re on death row. This is the end of the line.” Bulgae leaned over the crouched man to appear more menacing. “I want to give you an out. I offer a full pardon.”

Leander sat in defiant silence. He stared up into Bulgae’s eyes blankly.

“Do you think I returned without knowing where I’d end up?” Leander said with condescension. His eyes traced the tall ceiling and moldy corners. “This is pretty much where I expected to be.”

“So you’ve given up on life, then?” Bulgae scoffed into his handkerchief.

“I’ve just accepted where I’ve brought myself. My karmic balance evaporated the moment I took a credit to kill.” Leander leaned back and looked thoughtful. “Maybe it’s all poetry. A life of violence has a violent end.”

“You could live out the rest of your days in luxury.” Bulgae gave a crooked smile. “All I need is your unique services one last time before the election.”

“Trust a politician’s promise?” Leander rolled his eyes. “No, thank you.”

“The great Leander, even with gray hair, still knows no humility!”

The old assassin squinted with newfound disgust.

“Let me tell you something novel you may benefit from. Your flock of ‘yes men’ hold daggers at your back. They don’t care about you, or your ambitions. They have their own. What I’ve always hated about politicians is that you only think in terms of elections. You’re here, asking me to kill to win a stupid election.” Leander leaned forward. His chains clattered as he lifted his hands. He stared into Bulgae’s confused eyes. “What can you bribe me with? I’ve had it all already. Credits, bottles... the wrong women... nothing satisfied. But you’re in power. Fame and fortune still lay heavy on your forehead. You know nothing of value. You have nothing to offer me.”

Through his 3Eye Ausar saw a live feed from the jail’s main gate. Tekla’s aircar stopped for inspection. The gate guard stepped up to the driver’s side window. A shot blew his brain matter into the guard shack wall. One of Tekla’s men, leaning out of one aircar’s window, fired a missile into the gate. The jail’s alarms began to blare.

“Councilor, we must go.” Bulgae’s bodyguard said from the door.

“Warden, how can you also be in the control room?” The other bodyguard said as Leander’s cell shut. He pointed his pistol at Ausar’s temple. “Who are you really?”

Bulgae began to sprint down the hall, tossing his handkerchief to the floor. Ausar swung his Flail. Blue arcs of electricity sprang from his Flail and shocked the bodyguards. They crumbled to the floor. Before Ausar took his next step the wall to his right exploded. Tekla stepped in through the hole in the wall. She pointed at Leander’s cell door. Two men followed her and began working on the lock.

Ausar’s holographic disguise dissolved into a standard black cloaked figure with a green face. He held his hands in the air. Tekla took note of him and stepped up as her men set about their work. Tekla lifted an eyebrow while looking at Ausar.

“What’s with the vegetable look?”

“I’m a priest of Mother Earth. The oldest god of Sol. We wear the color of her gift upon our faces.” Ausar slowly kneeled. “Now our Mother is dead. We have no home.”

“A priest in here?” Tekla looked over her shoulder at the cell door.

“I was protesting the government.” Ausar lied. “They arrested me for sedition.”

“Say no more.” Tekla lifted her hand in dismissal. “Do no more and you’ll live.”

The locksmith laughed and the cell door sprang open. Ausar heard the boots of approaching guards echo through the corridor. Tekla cut the cuffs from Leander's wrists carefully. Tekla gingerly lifted him from the floor. Her associates each took one of Leander's arms and lifted him on their shoulders.

"These gentlemen are about to take you somewhere safe, relatively speaking." Tekla shrugged. "Honestly you'd better just get off the Station again."

"Come with me this time." Leander pleaded.

"Not my style, honey. I've lost everything already. Rivals rule my decks. Lost my best trophies in the worst ways..." Tekla stopped and kissed Leander. Then she turned away and eyed the open wall whence she came. "But I won't let them take you. Not without a fight."

"Please don't do this." Leander knew that Tekla's associates do not disobey her.

"You have always listened to me." Tekla chided, looking back at him.

"And you've always known why." Leander smirked.

"Now go." Tekla smiled. She pointed at Ausar. "You too, priest man."

Gunfire ensued as soon as Ausar passed through the opening. Ausar followed Leander and his minders through a hallway of dead or dying guards. Tekla's locksmith pressed a thumb to his detonator and another wall blew open. When the smoke cleared an airvan pulled up. The men inside were well-armed and eager for a fight.

"No offense, green bean," Tekla's driver yelled. "We only offer rides to friends."

Ausar waited for the airvan to leave. Guards fired rifles but it seemed that competent marksmen were not employed on the towers. Ausar leapt into the air. He felt his drone catch him in midair. Wings sprang open from the drone and harnesses wrapped around Ausar's chest.

Locating the airlimo on his 3Eye overlay map, Ausar angled himself toward the convoy. Guard patrols took off after Leander's airvan. Councilor Bulgae's airlimo had three escorts, each with four man crews. Gliding between the skyscrapers and layers of air traffic, Ausar made his way toward his target.

One of the Councilor's escorts broke off in a defensive turn. Gunfire began to pour toward Ausar. Twisting and dodging, Ausar landed on the roof of the escort. He swung his Flail and the plasma strands tore the aircar in two. With a flick of Ausar's thumb, the nanobots reordered themselves from strands into three claws. Ausar heaved the claws at the second escort.

The claws dug into the metal frame of the aircar and pulled Ausar with it. Bulgae's airlimo sped away. The third escort pulled up behind Ausar. Men hanging out the windows fired on Ausar. He tossed two bombs and the aircar exploded.

Using his Flail as a catapult, Ausar launched himself onto the roof of the airlimo. The claws turned to spinning blades before returning to his Flail. The blades wrecked the last escort. Ausar pulled a short nosed pistol from his belt and fired into the airlimo's cabin twice. The airlimo began to descend abruptly. Ausar opened the door, pulled the driver's body out and took the controls.

"Sorry about the turbulence, Councilor Bulgae." Ausar said into the intercom after slamming the door shut. The dashboard had a video feed to the back seat. Bulgae sat low gripping the crash belts. "Your people have demanded your resignation, and I'm here to accept it."

"You're an anarchist!" Bulgae's voice cracked. "This is insanity!"

“On the contrary, I believe that governments are necessary. Every plant needs fertile soil, just as civil society needs common law. Both plant and government needs to be periodically pruned and repotted.” Ausar let out a long sigh. “Anarchy is the domain of the naïve and the trusting. I am neither. I know what men do in shadows. I have seen the absence of law. Your resignation shall be the first of many. The ones with the final say are those who you promised to serve.”

Bulgae screamed. “You will not succeed!”

“Success is the long march toward liberation of all people in all places. This is no simple skirmish amongst shields and spears. We have no pet dreams or idyllic expectations for human behavior. This is the maintenance of justice.” Ausar piloted the airlimo toward a designated safe house. “All that you promised now stands against all that you actually achieved. Your story will be taught to children so that they stand vigilant. After you’re forgotten, another traitor will teach a new generation that virtue.”

“Yours is a lost cause...” Bulgae began to weep. “A fool’s errand...”

“An endless struggle against the forces of greed and intolerance, yes, but a lost cause it is not.” Ausar laughed. “You’ll be no martyr or saint, just a ruined politician.”

“You have no authority.” The Councilor tried to stiffen. “You’re a kidnapper.”

“I have a petition for your removal, barring you from public service forever.” Ausar tossed a holodisk through a small window. It began to project its contents into Bulgae’s eyes. “Signed by more people than voted in the last three elections.”

“This is not legally binding!” Bulgae kicked the holodisk away from him.

“Your people are the law, Councilor.” Ausar shrugged. “You’ve been fired.”

15 ๓ ĩ ĩ ĩ ๓

“Never underestimate the power of a few eyes over a shoulder.”

~ Thom Lu, Director of Security for Three Rivers Station

Unrest continued in large demonstrations in Section squares across the Station. Isisa watched several different live feeds from her office. Olympian was working on getting the factory floor working efficiently. It was the most uncomplicated puzzles preoccupying his mind. Isisa also knew that having news programs on upset him.

“Please turn that drool off.” Olympian would ask every time he would walk in and see it. He would not manually turn them off, but he would often purposely stand in the way or openly mock the analysis. “There’s an inspector on his way.”

“You don’t think seeing their spin helps us understand the common people?”

“We have bigger concerns.” An alert went off on Isisa’s desk. A camera feed showed two men making their way toward her office. “Only the Council could hand out their orders. I only just heard of it.”

A man stepped into the office wearing a leather jacket. A skull tattoo on his neck was visible above his shirt. He spoke with a French-Canadian accent that Isisa recognized immediately. He must have grown up in Oceania on Earth. He arrived with a brown haired man in a hoverchair.

“I’m Detective Kent Osmond, this is Detective Rodrigo Hernandez, we are Agents of Oversight.” The two men flashed badges. Osmond shouldered past Olympian and stood at the office window facing the factory floor. Rodriguez scanned the room with suspicion. “We’ve been sent on behalf of the Council to inspect this production facility.”

Olympian decided to remain silent. Isisa followed his lead.

“Given your past indiscretions and illegal activities, we thought it prudent to make a full unannounced audit. It’s our understanding that your company is preparing to distribute a cure for the recent viral outbreak. Is this true?”

“We’re providing our employees with healthcare!” Isisa snapped.

“You’ll find an official injunction has been filed at Three Rivers Central Court. Adhere to it or risk your corporate contracts.” Osmond waved a hand dismissively at the licenses along the wall. He stopped to look out at the factory floor and smiled. “I strongly advise you against public distribution as that could incur prison time for you and your entire management team.”

“It amazes me the difference between the people who rot in prison,” Isisa glared at the agent. She could see Olympian give her a disapproving sideways look. “And those who walk free on Pollux Max.”

“The Council takes cases of intellectual property very seriously.” Osmond crossed his leathered arms and cocked his head to one side. “You’ve made name for yourself, Ms. Tesla. It seems your profits are based on unscrupulous activities.”

“You’re sure of that? And you don’t think Council resources could be put to better use considering current affairs?” She thought of all the death and suffering on

every deck below. “You think suppressing a benefit to public health is an effective use of the Council’s powers?”

“We’ve been in contact with investors from the Vrity Corporation, apparently they are missing a sample of biological material. We found some of that material in the late Dr. Nessus’ lab. The poor man was shot in the head, execution style. Would you have any idea why someone would do that?” Osmond smiled at Isisa. “Maybe to take his vaccine. Perhaps to hide evidence of corporate theft. In any case, the cure is owned by Triton, and they won’t be sharing it widely.”

“I saw his name in the news, I heard he was a good man. Sorry to see him taken before his time, but I had never had the pleasure of meeting him.” Isisa pursed her lips. She walked to the bar opposite the window. “What did security feeds show?”

“You killing Nessus and taking his life’s work. But unfortunately they’ve been summarily erased. Hackers shut down the cameras before the murder took place.” Osmond took a deep breath and stood upright. “What do you know about the Artemis terrorist organization?”

“Only what I’ve seen on holonews,” Isisa said dryly, pouring herself a tumbler of cold mead. She pointed to the collection of bottles, offering. Both agents shook their heads. She shrugged. “They sound dangerous.”

“They mean to destroy the entire Station. Council intelligence has determined they’re fundamentalists, but I think they’re anarchists.” Osmond leaned in and cocked an eyebrow. “You wouldn’t happen to have any anarchist connections, would you?”

“I believe common law and democratic governments are necessary.”

“I’m sure you understand why I ask, after all, the hotel you owned was known to be harboring Artemis supporters... and your factory was poised to overturn centuries of corporate tradition...” Osmond wave his hand in circles. He stepped closer to Isisa. She raised her glass and took a deliberate drag. “You have an apparent disregard for the Council’s injunctions. Your disdain for regulations is quite common knowledge. Can I be blamed for thinking you might harbor allegiance to Artemism?”

“My business is to create jobs and reduce the plight of poverty.” Isisa took another sip from her tumbler. She let it sit on her tongue for a moment. “What you mistake for anarchism is a sincere desire for societal progress.”

Osmond showed teeth. “Progressives are known for their disruptive nature.”

“Are my political opinions on trial?”

“I question your dedication to the maintenance of capitalism and our Station’s way of life.” Osmond turned away from her and walked along the window, looking out at the factory floor. “Your views on redistribution of resources are quite similar to those of the anarchists you pretend to have no affiliation with.”

“I simply don’t believe that the majority of the people aboard Station should be subjected to cruel conditions that keep them in perpetual bondage.”

“Oh but they clearly deserve it. They are lazy... sinful. They live in a constant state of squalor because of their hedonism.” Detective Osmond pointed to the street. Isisa sensed a particular prejudice against subdeck people. “If they were to only lift a finger and provide for themselves, they wouldn’t need your handouts!”

16 ໐ ັ ັ ັ ັ ໐

“Diamonds require pressure.”

~ Vihad Shvad

Set’s army marched across the desert dunes to the west. Halftracks and tanks rolled through the streets of downtown Cairo. Bahlam saw exploding plums of smoke from artillery and rockets. The sound of gunfire echoed off every corner of the city. Bahlam watched her enemies brutalize civilians under a starlit cloud. Her projected body blinked away as Bahlam opened her eyes.

She stood in the secret catacombs beneath the Great Pyramid. Ausar sat on a granite throne with a sword laid across his lap. The boy’s seat was like a mountain and he but a headstrong climber. His eyes were green wells of fury. His aura was a swirling cyclone of colors, as if a tornado had captured his heart.

“It’s time to leave. Set will be here soon.” Although Bahlam had come out of hiding to save him, Ausar had insisted on being as stubborn as his father. “You know he’ll kill you. He killed your father in this very room. Why must you stay?”

“We have always guarded the holy heart. Set will surely release the beast. How could I forsake my duty now?” Ausar shook his head. He jumped to his feet. He swung his sword in evident frustration. “Would I forsake my father? No! Set can kill me but he cannot take my honor.”

“The world will end if you die now. He will unleash a terrible plague upon the animals!” Bahlam began to yell as time ticked away. “What good is your honor if the world burns for it? Would you destroy your own people over pride?”

“How can he be so reckless? He knows the ancient seals protect the world.” Ausar searched for the words. “Ahrmaket isn’t to be awoken. How can my uncle be so vile?”

“Hate is a lonely path.” Bahlam let out a long sigh.

“Can he be stopped?” Ausar raised his sword. “If we run?”

“Not today. Not by us. But yes.” Bahlam started toward the door. Ausar gave a final longing look at the throne before following her. He caught up and matched her step in the corridor. Bahlam continued with a serious tone. “For now we prepare. We strike when we can. We play the longer game. Let him be the reckless one, not us.”

“What if he awakens Ahrmaket?” Ausar noted that she knew their secret exit.

A roar echoed through the hall. “He already has.” Bahlam moved faster.

They reached the ancient door and exited the eastern side of the pyramid. Bahlam pointed to a waiting aircar. The horizon to the southeast glowed. Violent flashes lit up the sky. Blue arcs spread out from the Sphinx enclosure. *Set is inside*, Bahlam thought. Another roar shook the ground and summoned dark clouds overhead.

A sandstorm suddenly appeared and enveloped Bahlam and Ausar. Their legs were buried with each step. Sands rose to trap them up to their chests. The aircar disappeared under a dune. From the direction of the Sphinx enclosure a twisting pillar of sand closed the distance in a heartbeat. Set appeared from the dust devil and the storm

died out. Set's eyes were those of a maniacal tyrant, each filled with a demented bonfire. He beamed at his acquisition.

"Bahlam, so good to see you... I heard you had a spawn. Perchance you brought her and your rusted husband?" Set's forked tail moved back and forth like a metronome. He licked his red lips at the thought. "I heard a dirty little lie that you had died."

"Be gone you merciless plight," Bahlam spit into the sand at Set's feet.

"Ha! The audacity of the conquered! Even my unmatched power cannot tame that beast," Set growled as he looked back at the Sphinx. He sighed and bent his knee to lord over Ausar. "Tell me the trick to pacifying the guardian and I'll let you live, boy. Help your uncle and I'll even let your friend leave, too."

"The Sphinx speaks only to those it deems worthy. I would not help my father's murderer." Ausar responded piously. *His father would be proud to see him so poised*, Bahlam thought. "If claws cut and teeth bite, please search your heart for the cause."

"No familial loyalty these days..." Set raised his arm to attack.

A blue-tinged beast appeared between them and clamped teeth around Set's torso. Set exploded into a cloud and surrounded the electrical lion's mane. It swatted with claws and stabbed with its scorpion tail. Bahlam and Ausar made a break for the cityscape. The battle unfolded behind them with deafening thunder.

"That will deplete them both," Bahlam knew that Set had launched a simultaneous attack on her holdings worldwide. He would not have her come out of hiding without taking full advantage of her absence. She had known that helping Ausar would invite that upon her. "Now our trouble truly begins."

A camouflaged and heavily armored airvan landed with Olympian at the helm. Bahlam and Ausar leapt aboard and Olympian took them airborne. The horrifying carnage below was undeniable. Bodies lined the streets and houses burned everywhere Bahlam's sight landed.

"Report... my friend." Bahlam said with more hesitation than she was used to.

"Near total losses across the board, my Lady, every operation we've been running has been adversely affected today. The news has already reached the fringe elements of our enemies." Olympian had not approved of her mission to save Ausar. He had no qualms about making it known even after the fact. "Ground forces and intelligence agents have been decimated and scattered. Nearly every safe house has been compromised."

Nearly, Bahlam sighed in relief, so Jester and Isisa are still safe.

17 ໐ ັ ັ ັ ັ ໐

“Victims often get branded as villains.”

~Priestess Isisa

“I have issued orders to revoke the contract of any person who has tested positive for the Artemis virus.” President Collins clenched his jaw. His address had interrupted all scheduled programming. “It is imperative that we reject anyone with this incurable contagion. These measures were not taken lightly and our survival depends on making good on them.”

The Presidential seal covered every broadcast. Section News took over.

“Many fear this could be politically motivated to keep the President’s party in power. Medical officials we’ve spoken to do not support these measures.” Sonya Bella, a red-haired newswoman shook her head. She threw her hands up in irritation. “It will drive those with symptoms into the black market. This will not help end the epidemic.”

The camera panned out to reveal a panel of corporate-sanctioned experts.

“This clearly plays to the President’s political agenda. He’ll be able to round up countless political rivals,” Mark Hedges, a media mogul, looked at each panelist in turn, clearly concerned about his own investments. “He could arrest opposition voters through these measures!”

“He had no choice! People are dying in the streets! Take a look at those dirty Earth immigrants clamoring on the Willow skydecks!” Paul Gaits sat at the end of the panel and garnered wide eyed looks from his peers. “They don’t deserve housing or employment! All they’ve brought with them is disease and crime! Those people who brought that virus aboard in the first place! We should jettison them all into space!”

“Those Artemis terrorists are from Earth! We don’t have this kind of violence in the Corporate Colonies.” The mogul pointed at the table as though his point was made. “This anarchism comes out of humanity’s cradle, not humanity’s future!”

“President Collins said new contracts for migrants and refugees would be put on indefinite hold.” Sonya held up the transcript. “This throws many families into limbo.”

“I need to see those people. I’ve been away too long.” Isisa thought of the youngest ones, how they must view her absence. “I have to let them know that they are not forgotten in the hearts of all.”

“It might even soften your public image.” Olympian chided unconvincingly.

Every business news report had promptly displayed the recent visit by the Agents of Council Oversight. The rumor mill was abuzz with every manner of conspiracy theory and ill-conceived righteous anger. The entire station’s media infrastructure was using their influence to grind *Angela Tesla* into dust.

Nona, Isisa and Olympian traveled to a dock warehouse being used as a makeshift refugee camp. A sea of people stood in the musty old building. Injured and sick children huddled around medical tents. Malnourished babies and scores of elderly lay in rows. There was no space to stretch, and most were forced to sleep while seated.

A young man in a dirty jumpsuit saw Isisa and Nona arrive with interest. He pushed his way through the crowd. His hair was oily and his beard was patchy. There was sadness and fear swimming in his eyes. Some people held out their hands as Isisa walked by. One young man held his hands together in prayer.

“I’m Nikolai Kutasoua. I’m looking for Vladlena Smirnov.” He was disoriented and frantic. Mumbling, “She’s my love. She’s here alone. I have to find her!”

“Why’d she leave Earth without you?” Nona tilted her head to one side.

“I was a fool... I didn’t believe she would really leave. I never thought she would leave the forest. She loved the trees.” Nikolai was lost in a nostalgic memory. He had taken a leap of faith for a woman he couldn’t find. “There aren’t forests out here! I don’t even know where to look! I have to find her.”

“I only know one Vladlena... she was at the docks hospital...” Nona put her hand on her chin and frowned. “She has been whispering the name Svetlana in her sleep.”

“Svetlana was her sister!” Nikolai’s eyes were excited. “Where is Lena now?”

“The starliner she was on crashed into the docks. She was one of the few who survived...” Nona shot a worried glance at Isisa and swallowed uncomfortably. “She is not responsive. She was badly injured.”

“Take me to her now!” Nikolai beseeched. “Please!”

Isisa called for her aircar. Nikolai sat in the back. Isisa piloted while Nona navigated them to the Masica Hospital in Section Two. The parking lot was overwhelmed. Even emergency vehicles didn’t have places to park. The lobby was packed with patients awaiting their name. Vladlena shared a room with five other victims of the starliner crash. Vladlena lay in a full body cast. The other five were on life support.

“No, no, no!” Nikolai fell over her and began to weep. Nikolai kissed her forehead tenderly. “Please... wake up my love... please don’t leave me...”

“The doctors don’t know if she will ever wake up...” Nona let her head fall to her chest. “They said they can’t treat her until she has a valid contract.”

“Is this a curse? Is this a nightmare?” Nikolai turned back to Vladlena. Tears streamed down his cheeks. “Lena is half-dead... Earth dying... how is this happening?”

“If it were a curse it upon all of humanity...” Isisa sighed and put a hand on Nikolai’s shoulder. “It’s not a curse. It’s the result of our greed and the chains we built with materialism. Vladlena is a victim of senseless violence, but she still lives. Stay with her, she’s still listening.”

“I helped fell the forests... She told me it was an evil business... I didn’t take her seriously.” Nikolai didn’t take his eyes off Vladlena. “She was right. We ruined our own home. We were meant to be stewards... instead we were villains. Where is her voice now? How can I show her how sorry I am?”

“I will get her medical help.” Isisa squeezed Nikolai’s shoulder in support. “Stay by her side. Your voice is a welcome vibration in her eardrums. Lend her your energy.”

“Mental health is as fickle as mother nature.”

~ Provost Benin

Ausar rolled his strike ship counter clockwise. He had piloted the *Pegasus* to the Colonies on many occasions but never to the off-route Godavari. The moon of Kanci appeared over the orange gas giant named Cybele.

“We have no Port Authority scheduled visit.” The tower responded.

“Manifest reads: one agent of Three Kings Port Authority.” Ausar responded with a bored tone. The stack of documents he transmitted would take weeks to sort. “Official Mission: inspect facilities for sustainability. Transmitting credentials now.”

After a long silence from the tower, Ausar was directed to land on the government side of the moon. Opposite of the main arrival center, the Vrity fleet was parked in hangers and on landing pads. Ausar piloted his ship through the colony’s dome and landed. The *Pegasus* was greeted on the deck by a squad of customs officers. The officer with insignia on his shoulder spoke behind a space helmet.

“We’re surprised by your arrival and hereby question your intentions.”

“You’ve gone over a decade without an inspection. I don’t want to hear anything except phrases I like. A few I enjoy most are ‘yes, sir,’ ‘here is what we have, sir,’ ‘right this way, sir,’ am I being clear with you?” Ausar shook his head in apparent disgust. He stepped past the men. “You guys have work to do, I’ve got mine.”

“We- we were assured by the parent company-” the officers scampered behind Ausar in a confused attempt to detain him, “inspections would be accompanied by an early warning and a list of pertinent standards.”

“Hate to say it but the old way of doing things is over. Earth is now on the extinction list, the company doesn’t give a damn about you. They only care about two things: security and sustainability. I’m here to evaluate both.” Ausar pointed to the ships lined up near the pilot’s barracks. “I’ll start with those starships. We need to figure out which ones will be worthless now that Earth is gone.”

“What happened to Earth?” The agents looked at each other quizzically.

“Humans happened to Earth.” Ausar stopped for a moment and let out a long sigh. “You won’t be able to rely on supplies from Sol anymore.”

“What does that mean?” Vrity citizens didn’t have any source of outside media. They were all probably interpreting the news through very warped lenses. Ausar continued toward the ships. “Why wont Sol send us anymore supplies? Are they withholding what we need because they are jealous of our success?”

“It means sustainability readiness is the only thing worth a damn now.” Ausar nodded up into space. He saw the stars through the trusted dome. “The survival of our species means getting on without Earth.”

Ausar insisted on inspecting each and every vessel. Citing illegal transponder usage in the sector, Ausar was able to implant a command-control Trojan virus on each flight system. It would ensure no ship would leave without his approval.

When he stepped off the most luxurious ship, Ausar was met with a man wearing a clear helmet. His face was burnt on one side. His eyes were bloodshot. His posture was aggravated and annoyed. A vein bulged on his forehead.

“I’ve never known an inspection to trample on our rights like this! You’ve grossly overstepped your mandate!” The man barked and waved his arm. “I should demand to your head right this instant for desecrating our holy moon!”

“Demand whatever you like, but impede my investigation at your own peril. The Port Authority has no sense of humor in recent days. They’re invested in inspecting every rock and station this side of Sol.” Ausar leaned in and whispered. “They’ve been dissolving corporate charters left and right. It might be in your best interest not to tempt them. They would likely absorb your little operation here.”

“I will never allow that! This ends now!” Joel pointed at the guards. “Take him into custody and search his ship! Vrity can never be divided! So sayeth our Founder! Those who seek to divide us are forever rats!”

“No one is above the law.” Ausar cautioned.

“Vrity is the law! Our Founder spoke often of the evils of governments!” Joel pointed accusingly at Ausar. “I think your objective here is to levy new taxes upon us through false allegations!”

“Extra taxes might be the least of your worries...” Ausar grumbled.

“Taxation is the worst of all problems! That’s why rats like you seek to destroy what we’ve built! Our corporate structure has been under attack even while our Founder was on Earth! I won’t allow his legacy to be tarnished by agents of evil.” Turning to the guards, Joel made a fist. “He is a demon from the Bank of Oceania. Sent by the unsavory twelve psychiatric patterns we have been battling for decades. We know his work. We won’t let him poison our well. Take him away!”

Ausar was handcuffed and led to a holding cell inside the Admiralty Tower. It stank of sweat and blood. The halls echoed with the voices of inept wardens. Stainless steel walls were bare. There was only a single metal bed and a toilet. The cell was located near the outside wall of the Tower. Turning his hands in his cuffs, Ausar pressed three fingers on his left wrist.

On the landing pad outside, the *Pegasus* ejected Ausar’s Mace. The nanobots on the tip of the Mace bore through the wall of the Tower. Ausar saw a blue-white hot glow on the wall to his right. The Mace flew from the wall between his wrists and dissolved his cuffs. The nanobots pulled the Mace into Ausar’s freed palm. Nanobots rolled around his fingers and made a blue-white hot plasma ball at the end of the Mace.

Standing up, the cuffs fell to the deck. Ausar twirled his Mace toward the cell door. The Mace’s nanobots extended out into three long streams and melted the door away. Beyond the door was a plastic guard desk. Atmospheric alarms began to sound throughout the Fleet Tower. He heard blast doors slam shut in the hallways.

Swinging the ribbons of plasma over his head, Ausar laid waste to the guard computers. The guards ran in terror, and cowered behind a large sign that read *Reeducation Center*. Ignoring them, Ausar cut through the door and entered the hall. He found the room around the corner marked *Watchers*.

The mass surveillance center was empty due to the alarms, but the screens were still live. Ausar saw camera angles in bathroom stalls and in dressing rooms. Cameras

were trained on showering Cube athletes and pageant queens alike. Ausar carefully placed explosives on each of the servers.

Ausar made his way past the ruined Fleet Lab. Through the porthole on the doors he saw fire damage on every wall. The explosion had left debris and equipment strung about. He knew that Isisa's suit had done the work. As he admired the scene, he triggered his own explosives behind him.

Ausar turned his attention to the mass of humanity trapped on the small moon.

19 ๓ ̣̣̣̣ ๓

“We’re told boys will be boys, but I prefer professional adults.”
~ Sonya Bella, *Pollux News Network*

The Max Othello Theatre had original bones from the First Era. Isisa could smell it in the rust. Olympian was eying the audience of reporters and photographers. He was uneasy and frustrated. *So many eyes get you killed*, Isisa’s mother would say.

“I don’t like how in the open you’ll be,” Olympian raised a hand in warning, “nor how this announces further conflict with the Council.”

“Your advice has been noted and appreciated, old friend. But there’s no point in working with them any longer. The systems they’ve built up only serve their interests.” Isisa leaned over Olympian’s shoulder to scan the faces. She noted the rivalries in the crowd. “The politics they’ve encouraged separates people into factions. We saw what those values did to Earth. Humanity must start a new chapter of civil society.”

“What in your estimation is different between now and any other time?” Olympian tilted his head to one side. It was clear his frustration was boiling into his tone. “Your diagnosis would be just as accurate a century ago in any country.”

“The difference is we’ve killed Mother Earth. Holding the reins of traditional power is no longer an option. Centralized control must give way to personal responsibility.” Isisa reminded herself that she was included in that axiom. The music on the stage behind Olympian changed. “Each of us bares the mark of a dead world; it rests on each of us to make the best of our time amongst the stars.”

“Your mother would have you utilize every avenue until blocked by the Law.”

“This entire Station stands against the Law! The only hope is to take better care of the new worlds we settle. Corporations have no concept of a universe outside of profit. A new paradigm must be at the heart of public policy.”

A voice boomed from the stage: “Miss Angela Tesla!”

Olympian dutifully stepped aside as Isisa walked by. She stepped up to the podium in the center of the brightly lit stage. Lights from every direction poured onto her. The faces dissolved into an ocean of endless cameras. Isisa flared her aura with compassion.

“The companies that founded and incorporated Three Rivers Station have only sought to empty your bank and raise their stocks. We are different. We represent a new kind of corporate model.” Isisa smiled. She sensed total confusion from the gallery. She sensed that few people believed her. “Our mission is the liberation from curable diseases. The common good is our only stock. We are the Amrix Fenix Corporation. Our first product is the Unicure Auto-Clinic. Automated triage drones will begin flights in Section Three, starting in the hardest hit neighborhoods.”

A drone the size of a couch floated from backstage. It landed gently next to the podium. Four hand scanners unfolded from the cardinal sides. Isisa stepped over to it and placed her hand on the scanner. It took her picture and reported her vaccinations were current. She stepped back to the microphones.

“Auto-Clinics will scan your fingerprints and retinas. This allows us to log your results and apply you for recontraction. We will remain on a given block until every resident has been cured.” Isisa looked directly into the cameras. She put her hand on her heart. “To eradicate this scourge we must come together as a community. Help your family get cured or request help. Be thy brother’s keeper and our house shall not fall.”

Intentionally avoiding questions from the gallery, Isisa left the podium empty. Determined not to make her face or name the story, she let the marketing team handle the curious reporters. The engineers gave detailed explanations of each Unicure function.

Once the alternative voices caught the story it became a rhetorical talking point.

The corporate news outlets were hate-filled, but independent radicals were ravenous. They were obsessed with feedback loops and monetization. Although they said they were speaking up for the common people, but they spent their time selling products and their perspective more than anything else.

“I’m not ingesting anything that demon woman is selling! I don’t care if it’s free!” A woman wearing sunglasses and a *Bishops* jersey told one reporter. “She’s poisoning us! She is an Artemis supporter! She is just handing out new viruses.”

“I’m not letting them give my babies autism!” A blonde haired woman yelled.

“This so-called ‘cure’ turns us into zombies!” Two men held a sign between them.

“They’re just creating a database for eugenics!” A ranting boy spit and stomped.

Isisa powered off the screens angrily and made for the door.

“I’m beginning to think I’m a fool for trying at all.” *It’s like they don’t want things to get better, Isisa’s eyes began to well with tears. Why the categorical distrust? Why lie to your own detriment?* “They burn the only bridges they have.”

The people of Pollux Max were swayed more by hyperbole than science. They increasingly looked toward leaders who relied on intolerance. Elected officials simply took one of two equally repugnant positions. Even amongst the petitioners and protestors, the population at large held absurdist conspiracy theories in dangerously high regard.

Olympian was laughing with a young man in a Station Enforcer uniform at the end of the hallway. It was not normal for Olympian to bring visitors into their personal hallway, and Isisa did not recognize the dark-skinned man. His aura was clear and calm.

“Getting that man to chuckle is no small feat,” Isisa offered her hand to the man.

“I just love meeting people who actually take down bad guys!” Olympian smiled.

“My name is Ken Temu,” Ken shook her hand firmly. There was pain under his pupils, but he produced a smile on his face. “I’m here to offer my services.”

“We saw you on the news,” Olympian grinned. “Decorated Agent of Oversight.”

“Are you providing oversight here? We had a couple of your compatriots come through and they weren’t very nice.” Isisa spoke softly, as if still shaken by the experience. “How can we be of service to our humble Station?”

“I resigned after I finished my job in Six. I’ve seen the poison of racist nationalism.” Ken shook his head solemnly, looking Isisa in her eye. “I cannot continue to uphold an unjust system. I shall stand against it.”

“You quit working for the Station after winning a landmark case that would ensure a long and rewarding career...” Isisa squinted. “Could this be infiltration?”

“My family is no longer considered citizens. I came to Eight to speak out. I came to warn the public about the corruption and injustice behind these brutal measures. The President’s actions have brought about my resignation.” Ken set his jaw. His eyes were

serious and unwavering. By tone alone the matter was settled. "I will not serve a man who sentences my mother to die."

"I won't fault you there." Isisa knew what she would do for family.

"Do you mean what you say?" It was Ken's turn to squint skeptically.

"Yes." Isisa nodded lightly.

"Then I mean to believe you." Ken pointed at the news. "I'll defend your work."

Ken proceeded to throw himself on Isisa's media grenade. Calling himself a supporter and spokesperson for the people of Three, Ken debated every pundit and conspiracy theorist on air. No matter how ridiculous the opponent, he kept a cool head.

"These assertions are categorically false and scientifically unsound. The reason Unicure is free is for the common good." Ken pleaded on all the morning shows. "Ask the people who have already been cured. Let their voices color your opinion. My own family has been saved by Unicure."

"Several Auto-Clinics were destroyed today as riots broke out blocks from the Section Six courthouse." Mark Hedges, the prodigal son of the network, spoke with a skeptical tone. "Don't you think that's a sign that people are rejecting your efforts?"

"People react irrationally without facts." Ken took a breath. "Truth is freedom."

"We've assembled a panel that might give us perspective." Sophia Bella grinned.

Ken and Mark sat together at the main newsdesk in Section Eight. The panel was staged to the left of the cameras. Ken was immediately bombarded with every manner of heckle. They yelled over one another, frantically spewing whatever they had been told. The producers made no attempt to bring them to order.

"The Council wants to take our guns! They took our judge and now they feed us poison!" A hefty man pointed accusingly at Ken. "The Council does not represent us. We will rise against this tyranny."

"We want our Section back!" A blonde woman in the back yelled.

"Send all the refugees back to Earth!" The vilest one shouted gleefully.

"You're being purposely played against your fellow citizens. Remember that they did the same thing during the Red Revolt." Ken waited for one of the men to stop shouting, then continued. "They turn us against one another so the Council can do whatever it wants. They've made a business decision to cull the population of Three Rivers Station. Pollux Max is being liquidated."

He has the patience I need... Isisa thought.

Public shaming had become a cottage industry.

Isisa turned off the holoscreen and stood at her office window. The rows of 3D printers were producing Auto-Clinics on the factory floor. As the assembly continued before her, Isisa thought of Ken. He was being subjected to a factory of sensationalism.

"Hostile activity detected, m'Lady." Ibis chirped.

Isisa ducked. A beam of plasma cut through the window where her head had been. Instinctively heading toward the exit, Isisa punched a button on the wall that would erase all the hard drives. Another beam bore through the ceiling as she leapt down the stairwell toward the factory floor.

The far wall exploded and sent debris into the warehouse air. A bomber drone launched targeted missiles into each 3D printer. The bomber began to spin while sending flames into the shipping boxes and crates. Flamethrowers engulfed everything. The fire

suppression foam was not going to cut it. It wouldn't take long for the inferno to take the building down.

Sprinting through the burning wreckage, Isisa kicked open the door to the landing pad. She saw blast marks where missiles had hit. Auto-Clinics lay strewn about, a mess of parts and fluid. Flames were crawling out of every window. Isisa worried how the virus would be fought without a factory.

Olympian pulled up beside her in an aircar. Isisa jumped inside and they raced toward the curved horizon. Her efforts had been thwarted at every turn. *Shadows are your inheritance*, mother had told a younger Isisa. Her mother's authoritative voice boomed. *They will never allow your work to go unchallenged.*

20 ㊦ ̈ı̈ı̈ ㊦

“Pawns who are too sick to stand will never rise up.”
~ Brody Mitchell, *Fifth President of Pollux Max*

“We stand against all systematic oppression aboard this Station. The Council has taken illegal actions against us for doing what is right. Our Unicure facility has been destroyed.” Isisa spoke into a camera. “These attacks are against you and your children. A legal injunction forbids me from creating or distributing Unicure again.”

“Alas, I am resolved to remove the barriers of commerce entirely. I have founded a non-profit for those affected by this virus. In order to avoid further attacks on our persons we will be both decentralized and entirely open source.” Isisa knew that her servers would be a target for corporate hackers. “Our advocacy, outreach and aid will be coordinated to protect people. All of our products are now free for distribution. We will be giving away free wireless network emitters and free 3D printers. That should accommodate public access.”

Isisa ended her web broadcast and stepped into the hallway. The children’s crèche was bright and spacious. Each chair and table had artistic curves and bold colors. A bowl of fruit sat on a table along the wall. Isisa took a Clementine and began to peel the skin off. Sitting down on her cushioned seat, she ate two pieces.

“Our priority is the discovery of new worlds to colonize. Pollux Max is a leaping stone. The Colonies have been strip-mined and abused. The entirety of known space won’t provide long-term solutions. We need capable navigators and willing settlers with a long term vision.”

“Noble explorers will ensure the future of humanity. More than just planting a flag into soil,” Isisa paused as she considered the history of human expansions. “We need a culture where our children are responsible stewards of each new world.”

Olympian brought Isisa to an old hanger on the dock deck. Two enormous bay doors on the far wall led to open space. Both were in lockdown, covered in yellow paint. Two repair and recovery shuttles sat dormant on the left near the bay doors. A third shuttle was in pieces scattered on the deck.

“This hanger was used as a launch site for prototype exploration ships. Bankruptcy forced its closure. No one really ever cared about it’s contents. It passed between a few corporate entities during the Recession, mainly tied to other more lucrative properties.” Olympian shook his head whimsically. “I’m not even sure it’s been inspected since. Maybe once or twice to dump excess inventory.”

The two walked between hundreds of crates stacked to the hanger’s ceiling. Tall boxes and small, their stacking and positioning was both hazardous and hapless. Isisa felt as though she were in a forest of discarded merchandise. Olympian ducked behind a particularly worrisome stack. He chose to stand between the danger and Isisa.

“I introduce you to the *Verdant Lodestar*, the last exploration vessel constructed on Pollux Max.” Isisa saw a beautiful ship in a grove of garbage. The ship had a soft nose which housed the cockpit. On either side were astronomical and geological sensor

modules. “It had one successful mission before being put on ice during the Great Recession. Most navigators migrated to the Colonies looking for work. It will be hard to find capable crews.”

“This is what our youngest can dream about. Let’s promote and encourage students to learn about as much science and engineering as they can. Cultivate the awe and excitement of exploration.” Isisa walked the length of the vessel. Near the rear it became larger to accommodate two biodomes and a modest engine assembly. She had seen many models of exploration ships, but Olympian had found the best. “Start recruitment immediately. Distribute educational materials for in-house training at every position. I want at least one sister on each vessel.”

Inside, Olympian showed her the secondary bridge on the dorsal spine of the ship.

“This was designed so that the forward section of the ship can deploy and perform duties independently.” Olympian pointed out the window toward the neck connecting the front section of the ship and the rear. Isisa could see latches and safety locks. “The biodomes can benefit from free sunshine while the explorers do their work in the system. It also acts as a backup when inevitable damage comes to the main cockpit.”

“The *Verdant Lodestar*... you will be the mother of many other starships.” Isisa whispered into the control panels. “You will carry humanity to our new home. You will light the path.”

“I am glad you approve.” Olympian smiled warmly.

“Thank you.” Isisa took a deep breath and smiled back. “My spirit is lifted.”

21 ㊦ ̄̄̄̄ ㊦

“Societies inevitably become kyriarchies.”

~ Queen Lex

Isisa’s was stuck in traffic between two skyscrapers. The skyways had continued operating during the unrest below. Isisa looked down and saw two other congested airplanes. Her eyes scanned every rooftop and balcony. Bumper to bumper traffic had made her a sitting duck.

Above her was another lane of air traffic flying over the skyscrapers. One aircar descended abruptly leaving its legal lane. It angled to hit Isisa’s driver’s side panel. The aircar accelerated toward her. Isisa turned her aircar nose-to-nose with the dive-bomber.

The aircars smashed into each other nose to nose. Isisa saw Vanguard bring his fists together through her windshield. Sparks flew from his arms as the blast of plasma shot from his knuckles. Isisa ducked as the beam tore through her rental’s roof. As the roof peeled away in the wind, the two aircars fell apart. Isisa’s aircar fell end over end.

Tumbling backward, the traffic fell away. Isisa instinctively knew that she had a few more rolls before impact. Out of the corner of her spinning vision she saw a balcony. She timed her jump and launched herself out. Isisa fired a grappling hook from her forearm. It lodged in the concrete corner of the building. Isisa swung herself over the marbled rails of the balcony.

Isisa fell onto a table full of food. A man stood up and cursed as plates flew.

A dozen drones filled the café and began firing lasers at Isisa. The patrons began a chaotic scramble for the exits. Isisa shot two drones down with wrist darts. The Priestess sprinted through the café dodging bodies and laser fire. Two explosions echoed from the street. Isisa tried not to think about the dead or injured below.

Through the kitchen with drones in tow, Isisa made it to the service elevator in the back hall. Vanguard stood in her path. He fired a beam of plasma. Isisa’s shield belt absorbed the blast but flickered unsteadily. She knew it wouldn’t stand up to another direct hit. Isisa grabbed Vanguard’s right arm and kick his jaw with her left foot.

Isisa fired three venomous darts into Vanguard’s chest. The Hunter Seeker’s body hit the ground with a thud. As she turned to the elevator doors, a drone slammed itself into Isisa’s left shoulder. Clamps latched on and dug through her suit. Claws buried themselves into the skin below, slicing into her flesh.

A hologram timer projected off the plate. A speaker on the side of the drone blurted out the voice of Prudence. It was a raspy and condescending, “I’m going to destroy the powerdecks. You will take the blame.”

Isisa used a blade to slash the taunting module off her shoulder. She fired an explosive dart into it. Leaping into the air, her rocket jets fired and she flew toward the Pylon. She pulled the claws one by one from her shoulders. She weaved through traffic, flying between aircars and the concrete dividers. She headed skyward, toward the powerdeck that sent electricity and atmosphere down to the Sections.

Total control of the powerdecks was the Council’s greatest political leverage.

The Pylon air traffic ceased beyond the skydecks. Isisa noted that the access routes were closed off. The main access was left wide open. Normally, the access was protected by Council guards. Instead, a cloud of drones floated above the entrance. The walls and ceiling were crowded with automated turrets.

None of the weapons were native to Pollux Max.

Isisa slowly landed on the deck. The air smelled of rusted iron. The main entry hatch slammed shut behind her. A hologram of a stern face gave Isisa her first look at Prudence. The shaved head floated above a row of power generators. Prudence's eyes followed her every move.

"Today your treachery will be on display for all." Prudence laughed. "Anarchist."

"Your schemes will not overcome my work." Isisa eyed the military hardware.

"Your work is already undone." The assassin smirked. "Your life wasted."

"Light will prevail." Isisa realized that none of her tools could adequately deal her situation. She ran a finger through her shoulder wounds, checking for claw debris. There was nothing in her wrist launchers that could deal with the drone cloud and the turrets all at once. "Light becomes something new."

"Your line goes extinct today." Prudence smiled down at her. There was anticipation in his voice, something like a vulgar fetish. Hunter Seekers were chemically dependent on victory. "I didn't think Bahlam's runt would make it this far."

"I live to surprise my enemies." Isisa floated and closed her eyes. As she inhaled Isisa felt sparks within her lungs. Every cell in her body began to shine. Her atoms burst open like supernova lotuses. Light washed over the powerdeck.

The circuitry inside the drones melted. The targeting systems in the turrets overloaded. The power generators shrieked. For a brief moment even Isisa saw an ocean of stars. She opened her eyes and gently dropped to the floor. The hair on the back of her neck continued to stand on end as her skin became corporeal again.

"We'll destroy this whole station to kill you." Prudence's voice boomed.

Section Two's generators exploded. Section Four's erupted in flames beyond the curve. Prudence had wired explosives and each exploded in sequence. Fires licked the ceiling in every direction. Isisa sprinted to the maintenance access. The hatch was locked. She fired explosive darts into the hinges.

Isisa wondered why she was allowed to leave so easily. It didn't take her long to surmise the reason. Broadcasting across every channel on the Station was a live report detailing the attack on the powerdecks. Every screen showed a hooded figure with a lower chyron of: *an Artemis anarchist*. Panelists and pundits argued over talking points.

Every channel agreed the hooded figure should die.

22 ㊦ ̄̄̄̄ ㊦

“Don’t forget what you are and who you will be.”

~ Jester

The subdecks spiraled into lawlessness as news of the power shortages became public knowledge. Everyone from the street down knew that they had little chance of getting power and atmospheric without the consent of the skydecks. Those at the bottom tiers of the social ladder began rioting in despair. Entire neighborhoods were being pulled “offline” in order for the Council to conserve energy during the crisis.

But to see the media portray the conflict, you had to view it through celebrities.

Isisa had seen very few stories about those people who no longer had water and power. Every hour of the day was spent interviewing people who were happily fed and slept soundly inside of high-rise condos. Their stories were emotional tabloids, meant to predispose the public to certain arguments.

“I knew Dr. Nessus for years... I knew him well. But to learn he had been murdered because of his love of public health... simply shameful. How do we live with ourselves, allowing anarchists to roam free?” Marla touched the tip of a napkin on a tear. “These Artemis insurgents are the single greatest threat to our station! The Doctor confided in me that the plague was started by Artemis supporters. He was working on a cure when they killed him.”

“What do you think needs to be done?” The cheery newswoman asked.

“Artemis anarchists need to be hunted down. We can’t afford to let any of them survive. They would corrupt the worldview of our most vulnerable children.” Marla shook her head and her lips quivered. She looked into the camera as she spoke. “These are people that abduct and indoctrinate kids to be militants against the Council and the Charter. These people only deal in death.”

“Would you call for the death penalty?” Sonya asked.

“Make them pay for the lives they’ve taken.” Marla clenched her teeth.

Isisa stood up and wrapped her hair in a combat knot. *And I wanted to spare her,* she thought sadly. Isisa stretched and opened her gear locker. Her muscles felt stiff. Her heart felt low in her stomach. Anger surged into her fists. *What about the lives taken by your precious off-label prescriptions?*

“Thank you for your time today. What an illuminating story, what a fascinating man. We are all sorry he was taken from us too soon.” The voice of the newswoman echoed between the Priestess’ ears. Isisa heard less as she made her way to the garage. She donned her Shadow Mirror hood. The last line she overheard was unrivaled embarrassment for humanity. “Up next, are immigrants really considered people according to Station Law? Stay tuned!”

The High Priestess took a deep breath. She stepped into the attached garage and pressed a secret button on the wall. A hidden door opened above and a black airbike dropped to the deck. The engine roared to life as Isisa saddled up.

Isisa found Marla hiding out in an empty fifth floor warehouse near the Media Towers in Eight. She landed her airbike on a balcony that overlooked the back alley. Instead of trying to escape, Marla stood at the window watching Isisa approach in her Shadow Mirror disguise. Isisa saw two military bi-pedal mechs flanking Marla, one red and one yellow.

“I’m here to arrest you for your lies. Please power down your mechs.”

“I was an agent of Eurafica long before I worked for the Cleaners. This station is about to be freed from corporate rule. My country is coming to Pollux Max.” Marla shrugged and threw her arms out to the horizons. The cyberbots displayed their weapons. “Capture her. Don’t be too delicate.”

The red cyberbot stabbed its sword-arm at Isisa. Her personal shield hissed as it parried the blade. Isisa was thrown into the yellow cyberbot. It backed away. Isisa pulled her Sun Disks from her belt and let two fly. One Sun Disk fired on the sword-armed cyberbot, the other attacked the retreating cyberbot. The red cyberbot swung to no avail.

Isisa fired explosive darts and hit each of the cyberbot’s legs. The explosive tip broke one leg’s joint armor. The Sun Disk fired a beam of plasma into the joint. Isisa shot into the sword-arms and it collapsed. The Sun Disk flew over the cyberbot’s spine and fired into its critical systems. Isisa turned and saw the yellow cyberbot stomping on the other Sun Disk. It fired heavy caliber rounds into the Sun Disk tearing it apart.

An orange cyberbot stepped in through the door with flame-licking arms. Two plumes of fire poured in both directions. The Priestess retreated and launched all of her Dragonflies. The swarm scattered along the walls to avoid the flames. They settled inside the orange cyberbot’s fiber optic network. Analyzing it’s chances, the cyberbot triggered a self-destruct. The explosion blew out the windows.

“Kill her now!” Marla screamed as she made a break for the exit.

Isisa aimed and fired a dart into Marla’s left thigh. Marla collapsed quietly and Isisa felt her shield belt deactivate. The slight shimmer in the air evaporated. The hairs on her skin stood upright. Her suit had been hacked. The yellow cyberbot began firing on her with both gun-arms.

Options being what they were, Isisa chose the window. She dropped a remote bomb and flung herself from the building. As she fell the cyberbot tracked her from the window. A thumb to her detonator ended that. Isisa ignited her jetpack. The cyberbot tumbled past her toward the street below.

Ibis flagged a new media broadcast. Screens Station-wide switched to it.

“Attention citizens of Pollux Max. My name is Jeremiah Mandela; I am the President of Eurafica. This is the darkest day humanity has ever known. Earth is dead before our eyes.” Jeremiah’s green eyes were stoic, but his voice was solemn and remorseful. “We have dissolved the corporate contract of Three Kings Port Authority. All holdings are henceforth nationalized. You all now live in New Eurafica.”

When the broadcast ended every screen on the station switched to an image of President Collins sitting in his office. Behind him was a holoprojection of an idyllic summer day, breeze rolling through a field of green grass. He gazed into the cameras with an amused smile. He waited a moment before speaking. When he did it was calm and condescending.

“Three Rivers Station Council is not eligible for dissolution. We have rejected this intended annexation with every legal measure available. Eurafican starships are not

to dock. Any vessels that re-supply the invaders will be considered an enemy of the Council.” President Collins allowed the threat a moment to hang in the air. That designation led to ships being torn to shreds by turrets. “Mr. Mandela wishes to treat us like citizens, but we are a corporation. Our rights are inalienable. We left Earth in order to free ourselves from flags. Nations shall now be considered pirates.”

Anti-piracy laws on Pollux Max were some of the most draconian on the books. Isisa shook her head at the proverbial pissing contest. Two men fighting over what they could no longer control. Each without the resources they needed to accomplish their goals. Both tied to systems in decay. Leaders lost consumed in egotistical grandeur.

“Don’t let this tragic attempt at nationalization worry you, our fleet is already in position to defend the Station if the need arises. We will continue to be free and independent.” President Collins smiled. He leaned back comfortably. “Please continue to live normally. Go shopping, go to work. Continue supporting the Council you elected. I get all of my strength from voters like you.”

Every display showed the Presidential Seal for two minutes then repeated.

“I’m picking up two Eurafrikan transponder signals. No, make that fifty-seven. The largest are the *EUS Johannesburg* and the *EUS Cape Town*.” Olympian reported with splash of annoyance. Military operations would only make everything more difficult. “That first broadcast was transmitted from the *Johannesburg* in an encrypted packet. Someone on Pollux Max had to have fed it into the media outlets.”

Isisa shook her head. “Marla wasn’t a lone fifth column.”

23 ॐ ĩĩĩ ॐ

“In law the nation is god.”
~ *A Brief History of Earth*

Cygnus Stadium was overflowing with starving and dying people. Everywhere Ausar’s eyes landed he saw suffering refugees. Dozens had joined Ausar’s resistance against the Elders, and they now passed out rations and medical supplies. Reserves were depleting fast. The Elders had retreated into their Holy Bunker.

Ausar sat on a bucket, sweating in his suit. Many of Kanci’s celebrity population had escaped below the surface with the Elders. Loyalist security forces had set fire to Arieza. The entire apartment complex had been evacuated. Those security guards who had defected told Ausar that the Elders had a secret weapon below.

Tomin was a former high ranking security officer. Ausar had sat him down to learn as much as he could from the young man. Barely old enough to drink on Earth, Tomin had once personally guarded the door of the Bunker.

“It was always planned by the Founder to protect the corporate leadership from a potential governmental attack. It’s the first time we’ve ever opened it since his passing. Inside are the original Golden Copies of the Vrity Teachings.” Tomin, the security guard who had told Ausar, took a long breath before completing his thought. “They have a thermonuclear bomb the Founder brought from Earth. He told people that if the government ever tried to pry him from below ground, he would destroy the whole colony.”

Ausar imagined that if he tried to evacuate the people from the moon, the Elders would set off their bomb still. He couldn’t be certain that they didn’t still have eyes inside the colony. Without a re-supply Ausar knew everyone would starve. But the sight of a re-supply ship might spook the Elders into mutually assured destruction.

The weaving streets of the government district were empty and quiet. Ausar walked toward the Holy Bunker’s entrance. His Priestess had given him a direct order. “Save the people, end the tyranny.” That mission was in jeopardy. Ausar would not fail.

He arrived at the elegant and decorated entrance to the underground bunker. Ausar laid his Mace and Flail on the ground at the end of the hall. He walked slowly with his hands up to the halfway point and sat down, legs crossed. “If you can hear me, Elders, I wish to negotiate, send your representative!”

Several minutes passed in silence. Ausar chose to use them to mediate. Then the bunker’s blast door hissed. The door slowly opened to reveal a small boy. He bounced as he walked, excited by his important role. He bit his lip and gripped his belt nervously. He stopped five feet away from Ausar and gave the traditional Vrity salute.

“My name is Benny,” The boy kicked the floor. “I represent the Elders today.”

“Odd to send a child, isn’t it?” Ausar smiled warmly.

“The Founder often used children in his work. He believed that we all had an important job to provide, no matter the age. Today mine is to deliver the Elder’s demands. Will you hear them?” Ausar nodded. Benny swallowed and began again, trying

to puff his chest out as much as he could. “One: You are to leave immediately. No exceptions. Two: The people are to go back to their jobs. Most of them are very behind schedule. Three: You promise there will be no more Port Authority inspections.”

“And if I am unable to agree to any of those demands?”

“Then my Uncle will use the power vested in him by the Founder to destroy Kanci. You will be destroyed with us. If I return without an agreement it will be our end.” Benny slumped suddenly and looked up at Ausar pleadingly. “I don’t want to die. And I know my Uncle doesn’t want to die either...”

“Can I ask you a question,” Ausar whispered, “and get the truth from you?”

“Yes, sir.” Benny crossed his heart. “I don’t want the red ink of lies.”

“Were you sent,” Ausar asked with a knowing smile, “out here to kill me?”

Benny nodded slowly. He produced a pistol from behind his back.

“Are you going to kill me?” Ausar truly wondered. Benny’s eyes began to well.

“No.” Benny tossed the pistol onto the floor. Tears ran down his cheek.

“Then we can be friends.” Ausar clasped his hands together graciously.

“But Uncle... wanted you dead...” Benny’s eyes bounced from corner to corner.

“Bring this to your uncle. It will help him understand.” Ausar handed the boy a small box. Benny turned it over in his hand. “It won’t hurt anyone. Just give it to him.”

The door opened and Benny returned to the bunker. The door closed quickly and a few heart beats allowed the box to be brought to the command center. The EMP detonated in Joel’s hand. The cameras and projector all lost power. Ausar stood up. He retrieved his weapons and walked up to the door confidently.

One swing of his Flail and Ausar ripped through the bunker door. A spiral staircase led down to an intersection of halls. The guards had retreated and aimed their rifles up. Ausar called down for Benny to be sent back. The boy slowly walked up the stairs. His hands were held high in surrender. Ausar tussled Benny’s hair playfully.

“Put your hands down kid, you’re alright. Thank you for your help.”

“He says I betrayed him.” Benny had a pink slap mark on his cheek.

“He lied to you. You saved a lot of people today. A lot of them are in the Cygnus Coliseum.” Benny looked up and Ausar gave him a compassionate hug. He threw a thumb back toward the colony. “Head over to there now. They’ve got hot food. Tell the people we will be leaving soon.”

Ausar made his way down the stairs and found the Elders and their guards prostrated. Food dispensers lined one wall. A shower and bathroom ran along the opposite wall. An ancient nuclear warhead sat behind the cultists below a portrait of Herbert Reginald Lewis.

“Why send a child to do your dirty work, Joel?” Ausar leveled an eye at the Supreme Elder. Ausar shook his head disapprovingly. “At least look me in the eyes. If you wanted me dead then use your own hands!”

“You are truly the one.” Joel pressed his nose into the deck. “Mercy.”

“You would rather destroy your people than rescue them?” Ausar taunted.

“First, I thought you were a corporate heathen. I thought you devoid of honor and piety.” Joel turned the burned side of his face up at Ausar. “Now I see the truth that you are the Founder’s reincarnation. Take pity on me and let me live as your servant.”

“If I let you live will you end this cult?” Ausar thought he knew the answer.

“We must tell the tale of your return.” Joel said. The others nodded.

“That’s a damn shame.” Ausar flicked his wrist and plasma ribbons sparked beside his knee. Joel and the Elders were dead with a swing and an electric crackle. Ausar took a moment in the room their cult had built for them to die in. “Afraid of losing your control, you would sacrifice everyone who followed you.”

The walk out of the bunker weighed heavy on Ausar’s heart. Had it truly been Port Authority, every last person would have been lost. He imagined a natural rebellion, finally gaining the upper hand, only to be ended by a crazed tyrant. Their only saving grace was that Isisa had demanded their survival.

“You’re leaders would’ve had you to die on this cold rock. Some of you are resistant to the exodus at hand. I will force no one to leave against your will, but know that to stay is death. That death would be a penalty for blind loyalty.” Ausar announced to the stadium of refugees. “Everyone has the right to a flight out. We’re leaving.”

“Are we going back to Earth?” A young girl with a crutch asked.

“Earth is dead. There is no other world nearby with water and sky like Earth.” Ausar pointed at the hole that the Atlantean had made. “You’ve lived your whole lives inside this bubble, being delivered the goods of your homeworld to keep you sustained. Now those shipments are at an end.”

“This is the migration of your species. Those who cling to dead rocks join them. Your twin suns have set. Humans have left many homes for want of food and water. Now we must search for any source at all.” Ausar paused to let the gravity of his words sink in. “Earth was abundant and generous with us. We took advantage of her like this corporation took advantage of you. We must break with old modes of thinking. Become what you know is your true selves. Be the leaders humanity needs.”

“Are you the Founder Returned?” Many voices asked in unison.

“No. I’m just a man. Free yourself from the chains of this place. Do not allow another man’s dogma to control your body or mind.” Ausar looked over the crowd with pleading eye contact. “You rule your own life. There are no files that contain you.”

Ausar led the ships off the moon in the *Pegasus*, controlling each remotely.

The small armada of obsolete civilian ships came out of Transition together. The silhouette of Three Rivers Station hung in the corona of Pollux. The fleet’s communications were also being routed through the *Pegasus*. Three Kings Port Authority beacons immediately pinged the fleet to request friend-or-foe transponder codes.

Through the cockpit’s hud he saw a ribbon of small silver hostile starships surrounding the station. Ausar saw the two largest ships, the Eurafrikan flagships, patrolling in opposite directions along Pollux system’s the red line. The smaller ships in the fleet were spread out across the system.

The Eurafrikan blockade didn’t waste time beginning their intercept maneuvers. The patrols began a coordinated hail to all Kanci ships. The closest battleship began a wide turn to bring its weapons to bear on the fleet. A small boarding vessel disembarked from underneath.

“You have entered the sovereign space of New Eurafrikan. You are hereby ordered to shut down engines and prepare to be inspected.” The military announcement came as stoic as it was deadly. “We reserve the right to fire upon any vessel that fails to comply. You will surrender all manifest and crew logs through immediate transmission.”

“This is captain Tomlinsin, I speak for our beleaguered refugee fleet. The majority of our ships are without operational communication towers. We are transporting

women and children, many of whom are sick and starving. We request passage so that we can seek medical care on Pollux Max.”

When the boarding vessel got close to the *Pegasus* it began to decelerate. Just as it fired four tow cables, Ausar rolled his ship counter-clockwise. The magnetic cables bounced off the hull as his strike craft throttled away. Jamming the communications for the boarding vessel, Ausar fired an EMP missile into the ship’s cockpit.

Ausar commanded the rest of the fleet to make a break for Pollux Max while he turned the *Pegasus* toward the *EUS Cape Town*. The battleship opened fire, filling the space in front of Ausar with bright explosions of flak. Missile lock alarms rang out.

Ausar deployed flares and electronic decoys. A torpedo flew by within arm’s length from Ausar’s face. It ran along the side of *Pegasus* and exploded on a flare. Missiles flew into several ships, flak began peppering every hull. The crowded people within the armada had no context for the violence. When children and mothers were suddenly hurled into deep space, neither those lost nor remaining understood why.

Bringing the *Pegasus* to bear on the battleship’s bridge, Ausar fired a series of plasma bombs into the critical systems of the *Cape Town*. The bombs had been programmed with the battleship in mind. Ausar had several opportunities to scan and analyze the Eurafican navy while traveling through Earth space.

As the *Cape Town* began to drift unresponsively, a new message was broadcast.

“This is Admiral Oyama Lowell, you and your fleet have committed a crime against our countrymen!” The Admiral had to know that he didn’t have enough resources to bring in his patrol ships quickly enough. He resorted to fear tactics even whilst facing defeat. “This is your final warning to power down or be destroyed.”

“This armada is filled with refugees!” Ausar snapped back, plotting the best order for the ships to enter local Pollux Max traffic. “You have committed war crimes today!”

“Pollux Max is under martial law during a state of emergency.”

“We do not accept your authority.” Ausar spoke slowly. “Earth commands humanity no more. We are free to explore the universe, and move as we must.”

Ausar cut the channel, jamming the frequency. The *Pegasus* led the fleet to dock.

24 ㊦ ̣̣̣̣ ㊦

“Science has been and shall be humanity’s sole source of entertainment.”

~ Jules Vanderbilt, First Councilor of Section Eight

Earth choked beneath Bahlam’s feet. The jungle beyond her castle walls was one of the last places where wild animals still roamed free. Candlelight danced on ancient stone walls. Bahlam allowed herself a moment of indulgence. She closed her eyes and peered into space. Finding the heart of her daughter, Bahlam felt profound joy. Seeing the Cleansers circling gave her a pit in her stomach.

“Inbound missiles have been detected!” Sophia touched Bahlam’s hand and interrupted her projection. The young steward still did not accept their situation. “We need to move underground. The legions have reported contact with the enemy.”

The highland valley stretched out in front of them, one of the last natural places on Earth. Bahlam fortress was backed against a peak. A gentle spring rolled downhill. The walls were dominated by three towers, each packed with defense robots.

“We hide no more, Sophia.” Bahlam whispered. “There is no where else to run.”

Three legions of Set’s forces advanced along each bank of the mountain stream. On the right flank artillery batteries and missile launchers flashed in the twilight. Shells fell into the courtyard and blew apart several robots. Missiles burned across the sky and slammed into the walls.

Sophia’s voice was beginning to crack with fear. “Priestess you must leave!”

“I am not the Priestess anymore.” Bahlam looked over the balcony.

The eastern wall began to crumble from below. Set’s sappers had done their work. Missiles had blown a hole in the wall near the north tower. Shadowy soldiers fought with the robots, exchanging lasers and explosives. The invaders traded ten men for each yard.

The Lyrans appeared abruptly beside Sophia. They looked at Bahlam with pleading eyes. They clasped olive branches and thorny roses. Sophia could see them in their radiant bodies of light. Bahlam smelled the leaves and the pedals.

“*Fight on,*” Aouk said in harmony, “*flame of light.*”

Bahlam retreated into the bowels of the fortress. Jester held the door open for her.

“How’s the weather?” Jester asked brightly.

“Storm’s coming.” Bahlam pulled her husband close and kissed him tenderly.

The walls shook. Dust fell from the ceiling. Another explosion was closer. Sophia and Jester took up positions of either side of the door. Bahlam stood facing the door flanked by the Lyrans. She closed her eyes and projected herself outside.

Set’s men were setting a charge on the door. A breath later they were all dead, bleeding from their necks. Bahlam exhaled and opened her eyes in the safe room. She leapt to her left. The door exploded and flew across the room.

Each one of Set’s men that entered was dispatched immediately by either Sophia or Jester at the door. Bahlam tried to project herself further but found herself restricted. Every time she tried to project her astral body, Bahlam felt overpowering pressure across her entire body. Her heart began to fill with despair. Claustrophobia set in.

Set stepped into the room causally. Sophia launched herself at him. Set raised a hand and incinerated Bahlam's new steward. He looked over at Jester and Bahlam silently. His tail swung back and forth. The angry eyes flickered with red hot fires.

"I had hoped for Olympian," Set licked his lips. "Maybe before I kill Isisa."

Aouk began to circle Set. They sped up and became a blur, swirling and enveloping Set in a glowing orb. Jester conjured a ball of white hot plasma. Bahlam projected herself with all her might. Her skin felt as though it was being torn away. Jester's the plasma was frozen against Set's chest. Her poison-tipped blade plunged into Set's heart. But then Bahlam realized she could not let go of the hilt. She could no longer move or return to her body. She had never been immobilized during projection before.

"Do you think these ghosts scare me?" Set swatted the air. Aouk was thrown backward. "Did you think your husband's parlor tricks would stop me?" Set took a step back, unharmed. He brushed his hands against his chest tauntingly. "Or yours?"

"How are you doing this?" Bahlam felt as though she were encased in concrete.

"I'm the lord of Earth." Set grinned greedily. "Soon I'll rule every star."

"A kingdom of ashes and ruins..." Bahlam scoffed "A long of none."

Jester and Aouk were frozen in time. With a flick of his wrist, the Lyrans exploded into fireworks. Bahlam felt their presence dissolve. Reaching out with her mind, Bahlam projected a spell into her husband's ear.

"Now witness your lover's death." Set extended a hand toward Jester.

Bahlam had watched Jester backwards and forwards through all time. He had been the first person she had ever wanted to know everything about. Bahlam saw the knowing and loving twinkle in Jester's eye. His plasma beam became a wild torrent. Light filled the room all at once.

Set was thrown into the wall and Bahlam was set free by the blast. Jester pressed the attack with all of his powers. Bolts of lightning erupted from the contact between them. Bahlam projected herself with a new poison and a new blade.

As she plunged the blade into Set's neck, he turned to look at her. She was frozen in place again. Every muscle was locked. Set's tail flicked the top of Jester's head. Fire spread across his handsome face. The fire consumed his body and sent sparks drifting into the air.

"I'm the master of all things, Bahlam." Set grinned. "Bow before me."

Set's tail stopped moving and the room filled with shadows.

"You're master only like a fire overtaking a home. Though you are responsible for the ashes, you cannot hold them." The former High Priestess reflected on what she knew of Set's future. "What you have accomplished is extinction for your line. You have condemned your name to be forgotten. You've burned our mother world, but you shall touch no others. Generations of children shall be born beyond your reach."

"You've wasted your life trying to save the world." Set laughed from his belly.

"I've changed my priorities on that." Bahlam closed her eyes.

"Oh? Old dogs!" Set patronized his prey. "Well? What's your revelation?"

"Save what you can." Bahlam let out a long sigh.

"And what have you saved?" Set mocked. He reached out his hand and wrapped his fingers around her neck. "What have you accomplished at all?"

"My daughter from you." Bahlam smiled. "My life's work."

Lifting her eyes toward Pollux, Bahlam felt her body die.

25 ㊦ ㊦ ㊦ ㊦ ㊦

“Fear alone accomplishes nothing. Hope alone can do anything.”

~ Abdul Maslow, *Metacosmology and everything else*

“The Eurafrikan fleet is staying outside of bombardment range. Station defenses have remained at their bases. Neither side wants to make the first move. Both have too much at stake.” Olympian briefed Isisa as they walked down the hall toward the children’s crèche. “I estimate the fleet has no more than a few months rations, and they will plunder any inbound trade ships. Pollux Max will suffer from a blockade, but the Council’s ardent supporters are praising this development.”

“They think they benefit from a foreign power attempting to annex them?”

“They hope that the blockade will deter refugees. Apparently talk wireless heralds Mandela as a prophet, though not their savior.” His tone implied Olympian considered it a grave matter. “Demagogues are whipping up serious nationalist furor out there. They say that Mandela is a prophet for the nation-state, but that their savior will be a man who brings Pollux Max a true country.”

“People tend to look backward when they are scared.”

“This is different. I think it might be another fifth column. From Oceania.”

“Why do nations think they can survive this environment?”

“Same reason you do: hope. People need something to believe in. We know the wider picture writ in blood. They remember a history of peaks. It’s an astonishing feat of the mind.” Olympian shook his head in pity. “The prospect itself remains an intoxicant. A fantasy of then and now that helps a person through hardships. Especially now, with the loss of Earth... many people wonder what we have at all.”

“Are you one of those people?” Isisa was worried Olympian was becoming jaded.

“I have my family.” Olympian looked her in the eye. He held his arm in the doorway toward the landing pad. “I don’t wonder what matters to me.”

The children’s crèche was located as far toward the skydecks as Olympian could purchase a property. It was in a relatively safe subdeck neighborhood, it had once been a private school for well-to-do subdeck families. It closed during the Recession, when those families moved to other Stations.

Campus was divided by a courtyard among three brick buildings. Isisa landed the aircar in the parking lot near the jungle gym. Two boys were playing with a yellow soccer ball. Christian, the younger of the two, waved at Isisa and smiled. Suresh picked up Christian and held him on his hip to watch the party arrive.

Isisa and Olympian waved and smiled at the boys as they passed toward the courtyard. They walked across campus toward the conference hall. Children had assembled in the hall to see the return of Artemis. There were sick and troubled families at the door holding their hands out as they made their way to the stage.

“Do you feel sad?” Summer asked from her seat on the floor before the dias.

“We all feel sadness during the course of life. The trick is to remember the big picture.” Isisa leaned in and put a finger up in the air. Her voice was coming out of

speakers in the hall. "Sadness is everywhere you look, but so is love. Make peace with the past. Learn your lessons from it. But never let yourself be defined by it. You awake a new person every morning."

"I have nightmares..." Chor, one of the teenagers in the front row, lowered her head in shame. "I don't know why... they happen every time I close my eyes."

Isisa stepped off the stage and gave the black haired girl a hug. As she turned back to the stage she put her finger in the air again. Her voice boomed off the walls, and the audience hung off her every word.

"Don't ever think you're alone. There are so many people experiencing the same feelings as you. So many of your sisters are dealing with the same issues. Don't hang your head. Straighten your spine." Isisa looked at a boy with hazel eyes and a girl with a religious necklace. "You're stronger than you give yourself credit for. Walk proud in your waking life and your dreams shall follow."

Christian and Suresh came in from a side door and sat down in the front.

"Now tell me, you there," Isisa pointed to a boy with crossed arms in the fifth row. He shifted uncomfortably when everyone looked in his direction. "What do you want to do with your life?"

"I want to be a doctor for animals." The boy said shyly.

"That's a fantastic idea! I promise the demand for that profession will only continue to rise in your lifetime. So what you to do is find a mentor sister. Ask her to help you get enrolled in some digital classes. I want regular reports." Isisa gently walked along the stage. Then she pointed at all of the younger children in front of her. "Once you have, I want you to help the others get enrolled in what they want to learn about."

"Yes, ma'am." A few of the older ones called.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Mandela sees you as potential citizens. Collins considers you employees. The Pylon owners view you as slaves. Politicians play you as pawns against one another." The youngest children didn't seem to comprehend, the older ones nodded. "Leaders tell you what you are. They seek to control you. The truth is you were born free. No one can tell you what you are."

"Mommy says only Euraficans will get food." A blond boy jeered from the back.

"No! That lady on the news said all Euraficans are going to jail!"

"My dad is Eurafican!" A girl pleaded from the wing.

"Then he's a traitor!" Another boy yelled from the back.

"Stop this." Isisa said forcefully. The children caught her tone and silenced their tongues. They all looked at her worriedly. "What your family comes from has nothing to do with your value. A society that cuts down one group to benefit another inevitably destroys itself. It is as useful as cutting off one leg to benefit the other."

Isisa thought about the comment Olympian had made. It would not be enough to point out the injustices. People needed more than anger to accomplish great things. They needed something to believe in, something bigger than self interest. Humanity needed more than self-interest without Earth. The trouble as Isisa saw it was that systems of every kind calcify their particular prejudices into a cancerous doctrine of superiority.

"No human system is free from the faults of human ego. Each and every organization needs social attention and pressure to stay honest. Societies exist only by the continued support of their members. Your generation will be responsible for saving

humanity from extinction.” The children exchanged worried looks. “Do not carry these duties lightly. Do not be distracted by petty rivalries. Do not fracture into sectarian disagreements. Don’t be ensnared by the false concepts of race and tribalism.”

“My family was once considered untouchable. We lived beneath the lowest caste of our society. Hierarchies naturally erode equality. Man’s lie of superiority over nature ended Earth’s plentiful life. Set yourself divided from no one and no thing.” Isisa looked over the back row where the jeers came from. “Recognize the truth in your cosmic unity. Pull down the vile barriers that keep you in bondage. Reject all that isolate you from one another. We are all one human family.”

“Despite the deep rooted and shameful traditions handed down to us by our forefathers, do not despair for even one moment. Instead lift one another up and carry your highest ideals into the street. Our grandparents may have destroyed Earth,” Isisa allowed the hall to fall into silence for a moment, “but your grand children will preserve her spirit in the stars. That future has no place for nations or corporations. No place for greed and intolerance. You will be the flag carriers without an enemy to fight. Your children must be voters free from an oligarchic veto.”

“How are we to do these wonderful things?” A brown-eyed adolescent asked.

“Build yourselves, invest in your communities. Learn as much as you can about the issues that affect your neighbors. Help bring food to the hungry. Bring medicine to the sick.” The room had become a time capsule, a generation of new leaders. “Build bridges between segregated communities. Yours is a Republic without borders. Yours is a movement beyond time and space. Your banner is human liberation. Your motive is universal compassion.”

“Think about where you came from. Be grateful for everything that patronized your existence. Thank your stars. Especially when you don’t understand things as they are. Seek out the answers. Stand in the way of tyranny. Elders might fight your peaceful protests. They may not understand your ways, but forgive them for their limitations. Remember that you too are capable of falling into similar patterns.”

“We will never go back to Earth. But we will go forward. Your children will spread out into the stars. Your nature is to be free. Your nation is the heart of love.” Isisa closed her eyes and hoped that they heard. “Your leaders should always serve you. But never take your eyes off them: for they represent you. They are an extension of your civic soul. If they break their oath, or turn against you, replace them.”

26 ☽ Ì Ì Ì ☽

“Humans single-mindedly divide themselves.”
~ Professor Dayis, University of Sirius Max

Since being brought to Pollux Max, Benny had rarely left the same room as his close confidants from Kanci. He had carefully isolated himself from the other Artemites. Benny was already known for his vocal disagreement over the coed nature of the Sisterhood. Several of the orthodox Vrity followers considered him the new Elder.

Chief among those followers were Jason, Floyd and Brian.

Ausar found him pontificating in one of the hotel’s storage rooms. He paced around a stack of empty pallets. His voice was attempting to boom but fell short. He breathed hurriedly. The boys looked up to Benny with cultish reverence. He was clearly terrified of losing their respect. Beneath his titular divine right, a spark of intoxication was in Benny’s eye.

“The problems begin with sex! Letting the genders live together is dangerous to our corporate structure! Without green cards and marriage approvals, how will we create the perfect future?” Benny let out an exasperated sigh. He sat down on a crate of soda. Ausar stepped into the door frame. Benny continued as though it were no intrusion. “How can we take seriously an organization who doesn’t know the first thing about human progress? We may have come here as part of the Great Migration, but this must not be where we settle. This cannot be how we live!”

“Know of a better place? You got a map? I’ve been to a lot of systems in the GemTau Corporate Territories. The Max Stations are unique for still growing real trees.” Ausar chided with a hint of boredom. He feigned interest in a rack of glassware. Ausar picked up a goblet and pretended to drink from it. “You had trees on Kanci but they were all fakes. Most corporations didn’t invest in trees. They were concerned only with imaginary credit extraction.”

“You’re tainted by the propoganda of Earth! Vrity can overcome any technical problem through the faithful application of the Founder’s words.” Benny stood up defiantly. He puffed out his chest in arrogance. “A dying Earth does not scare us as much as you because we’ve grown up outside of Earth’s long shadow.”

Ausar wished that he could expose Benny’s beliefs or otherwise show him how his cult was squarely in Earth’s tradition. Instead Ausar bit his tongue and allowed the young man to speak on matters he did not fully comprehend.

“As a man,” Benny pointed accusingly at Ausar, “you should be leading.”

“Artemis is the closest thing to a savior I have. If, as you say, she is a messenger of your Founder... then she is still my leader.” Ausar sounded resigned. He sighed, as though it had been long in his mind. “I cannot forsake the Founder’s wisdom.”

“Founder commanded us to be leaders in darkness. We must interpret our generation’s divine enigmas. I have a revelation to share with you all. I know now that the Founder has Returned.” Benny waited for the others to gasp and look at one another in awe. There was a curl at the corners of his lips. “Remember the story when the

Founder was on board a burning ship and everyone thought he was dead. He turned to his friend and said, 'I should return as a swan.' He made a prophesy that day."

"But the Founder didn't die that day!" Floyd rolled his eyes.

"I know that Jason! But he spoke words. His words were law."

"What's a swan?" Floyd chuckled.

"Ibis." Benny folded his arms confidently. He had been certain for days.

"That computer bird?" Jason stroked his chin.

"Yes. Think about how much Artemis relies on it. Artemis serves Ibis. Ibis is the Founder." Benny pointed upward. He smiled with a triumphant glint in his eye. "Observe our Founder! Projecting a swan so his followers will recognize him! We should be as bold and live Vrity openly."

"Artemis gave Ibis sentience," Ausar warned them, "don't assume their relationship is cast in the opposite direction. Our Lady is a capable commander."

"That woman, no matter what she has done to gain our Founder's reincarnated trust, must not continue to hold power. The Founder was very clear that women were good messengers and mothers. In positions of leadership they are reckless and emotional." Benny threw a bottle of dish soap to the floor. "We've been cautioned against such things through the banning of women's participation in power. On Kanci you saved us from the selfish madness of the Old Elders. Will you pledge yourself to saving us from the arrogant she-devil as well?"

"I'll do what I can to protect you. Your traditions will be safe. I pledge myself to the progress of the human race." Ausar looked at each young man in turn. He paced between stacks of banquet chairs. "I won't allow human survival to be jeopardized."

"Then you are with us. We must free Ibis from Artemis' cage. Our Founder must be given his voice to speak again." Benny put both hands in the air, as though accepting some message from beyond. He held a long dramatic pause. "He is the only one who will guide the Great Migration and save us all."

"Does that mean you wish to kill Artemis?" Ausar knew Benny would not prevail.

"That would only harm the Founder's work. Instead we must make ourselves useful and gain her trust. We get close to Ibis and ask the reincarnated Founder for his orders." Benny smiled at his own scheme. "But we must not make Artemis critical of our intentions nor our commitment to Vrity. I still believe Artemis is his newest messenger, even if she cannot be a prophet."

Ausar let out a long sigh. "Why are you so sure of that?"

"No woman can lead!" Brian laughed. "Not even the Founder's daughter!"

"I don't agree with you on that," Ausar got up and closed the door, "women rule."

"No! We must stand up and preach the Vrity Teachings!" Benny stomped his foot. He kicked a bottle of detergent under a stack of banquet chairs. "True followers of Ibis should be in charge. True believers in the Founder's path should command!"

"I'm not saying you can't teach people your wisdom, what I'm saying is that to sow division in our ranks at a critical time will hurt everyone's chances at survival." Ausar stood with his back to the door and his arms folded. The room fell silent for a moment. "Everyone might die. Humanity itself would be extinct."

"Do you think Ibis is the Founder reincarnated?" Benny sounded worried.

"We're friends, Benny. I never grew up with the Vrity Teachings. You did. If you say you know, I believe you. I respect your beliefs; I just have much to learn. Let's teach

each other what we know.” Ausar shrugged and sat down on the floor. The four other boys looked at each other in awe. “Ibis isn’t going anywhere. She’s just an artificial intelligence. And I grew up with artificial intelligences.”

“Mother Earth sent her children to the stars.”
~ Emperor Elsu

Isisa slumped down into her favorite faux leather couch. Her eyes followed decktrucks passing on the busy industrial street. Factories had continued with constant deliveries and pickups that jammed every corner with traffic. The new safe house was on the way to the Pylon Highway. Soot caked the subdeck ceiling lights.

Exhaust vents pumped smoke into the alleys. The High Priestess shook her head at the short-sighted agenda that poisoned the people around her. Even without a deadly virus running rampant, the Station was a toxic place to live during the best of times.

“Ibis, please bring up the cross visual of the major news networks and cycle through their audio.” Isisa began massaging her temples. The toxins being pumped into Pollux Max were not all chemical in nature. Sometimes psychological poisons were even more corrosive. “But mute any of the ones that scream all the time...”

“The people of Luna will finally have a queen! The Moon King and his bride will be wed in a lavish celebration in his New Manhattan Palace this coming weekend. The notorious bachelor has finally given in to the pressure and tied the knot.”

“Next.” Isisa grumbled.

“Eurafricans should be considered enemy operatives,” Even with her eyes closed, Isisa knew the woman’s scowling face from earlier panels. “Our President should deploy the fleet to deal with this threat to our independence.”

“This is obviously illegal immigration and a breach of the accords.”

“Next,” she sighed.

No matter where she looked, Isisa only saw sensationalism. People in front of the cameras had few logical arguments to say, much less contribute to the dialogue. They positioned themselves primarily to foster vitriol and combativeness. “Next.”

{ Warning: [Perimeter alert] Projected impact point: [Second Floor] }

“Initiate evacuation procedures.” Isisa leapt from her seat. A crash shook the building. Isisa opened her closet and began a mental checklist. *Vanguard probably just made his entrance, but where is Prudence?* “Fire up Shadow Mirror.”

Isisa stepped into the powered suit of armor. As it closed around her a bright beam of plasma erupted from the floor. Isisa pressed an emergency button on the wall of her closet. A circular hatch opened in the ceiling above her. She throttled her jetpack and flew through the hatch.

The power-armored Priestess screamed through the subdeck alley. Wings spread out from her jetpack. The hatch slammed shut below. Isisa flew between the buildings and red trim decktrucks. She accelerated toward the Pylon Highway.

Traffic was backed up on all the skyward lanes. Isisa entered the dockward side and began weaving between oncoming aircars. An armored tank flew up aggressively

behind her. Two machine guns began to pour metal. The main gun fired explosive rounds and hit the Pylon wall.

Isisa initiated counter measures, dropping flares and decoys behind her. The explosive cannon destroyed an innocent aircar. Spinning so that she was flying on her back, Isisa fired darts at the chasing tank. The darts bore into the armor and exploded. Tank pieces fell dockward, down the highway.

The Pylon highway yielded to bright blue sky panels. The deck traffic was bumper to bumper, horns blaring from every street. Main street was clogged with protestors holding signs. Enforcer skiffs circled the airspace. Isisa flew low and weaved through alleyways making her way toward a decoy safe house.

Isisa landed and entered. A yellow wolf sat patiently in the living room. A shrine filled with candles sat on the other side of the calm animal. It's knowing eyes reminded her of the red wolf that had led her to Morta. Her armor's sensors declared it to be a living wolf – though long extinct. Isisa's heart raced.

"My name is Tili. My mother united Kemet and Nubia to become Queen of both. I was once the speaker of the Sphinx." The wolf bowed gracefully. The candlelight bounced shades of red into her yellow fur. Tili walked over to the shrine. "Follow me, young one. You are only at the beginning of your journey."

"Where are you taking me?" Isisa recognized she had little time for questions.

Her plan was to make it to the secret tunnel under the subdeck.

"You've planned to detonate this building once your tail arrives and I would not stand in your way. I merely offer a safe place to go thereafter." Tili pointed her nose at a stone jackal at the center of the candles. "It is already secured by your helpful A.I. Simply place your hand on the statue."

The onyx Anubis statue stood proud on the shrine.

A flash of light and the Lyran sisters stood on either side of Isisa.

"Bed of lies be the tongue of a Sirian! They began the desertification of our garden! Sirians brought their iron against the Sleeping Tree! They burned the forests to feed their chattel!" Aouk screamed in unison. Two Lyran arms pointed at the wolf. "They chose to forsake Mother Earth! Taste not that fruit, Priestess!"

"Ignore the zealots and their rhetoric. They too have blood on their hands. I will not defend my own sins, but they forget their own reflection." Tili licked her paw. "We don't have time for petty squabbles. Set's minions are not far behind. Anubis will transport you to safety."

"How can we be sure you're not helping Set?" Aouk interjected angrily.

"Because he desecrated the Sphinx, and must be punished." Tili lowered her nose to the deck in remorse. The yellow wolf gave out a whine and turned around to eye the statue of Anubis. "We all contributed to Earth's damnation. Now all must unite for the salvation of her seed. None are blameless."

Aouk seemed surprised. "We are in agreement."

Prudence's Tank smashed through the wall. A cloud enveloped the room. Tili vanished. Light bent away. Space peeled apart. When her sight returned, Isisa saw a rack of dog food. The smell of wet fur and urine filled Isisa's nostrils.

"Where did you bring me?" Isisa did not recognize any corporate logos.

"One of the last places mankind still cares for animals. This clinic provides services for pet owners, zoos, and serves as a shelter for the unwanted." The cages fell

silent as Tili walked past them. Each animal appeared soothed and comforted by the Sirian's presence. "Now with Earth gone, these places become much more important."

"How did Set defeat you?" Isisa had always wondered. She had only heard vague recollections from her mother. "You had protected your nexus flawlessly until him."

"Dark forces enthrall his soul. His power comes from a higher plane than mine." Tili's yellow hair stood up along her back. "But though he banished my aspect, he has not broken through my locks, not yet. That is darkness for another day, until then he sows anarchy. He would preserve chaos and deny you firm footing in the stars. To that end... all that you see is his work. Even now, he infects the Station President with the virus."

"So that they will blame me for his death."

"To cultivate disorder. The less you have to work with the closer he gets to victory. Set has a lust for death, he revels in last breathes." Tili paced in a circle with tail high and flicking from side to side. "He does not see that his actions bring doom to his family too. He is blinded by the cloud of ego."

More chaos would delay her goals. The chirp of Ibis interrupted her thoughts.

"My lady, I've just picked up an encoded transmission. It indicates that President Collins has become infected with the virus. His security staff evacuated him from the Presidential Palace three minutes ago." Ibis sounded defeated. She uploaded an overlay of most probable locations in Section One. "I have not been able to locate him since."

"Ibis, call Leander. I have a feeling he would know."

It took a few moments for Ibis to establish a secure link.

"If Collins needs a cure for that virus," Isisa asked, "where would he be?"

"Presidents change, but this Station doesn't." Leander grumbled. "If he's sick they'll bring him to Gideon's Gate. They named it after the first puppet that died there." He chuckled. "It's older than most of the Station, but with modern luxuries. Couple times they never made it inside. Sometimes all they do there is funeral planning."

"Sounds promising, want to help me bring the cure to Collins?"

Leander was flabbergasted. "You're going to help that self-absorbed loon?"

"If he let's me." Isisa tilted her head. "I doubt he'll take visitors at this hour."

"You'll get a trigger happy welcome." Leander shook his head. "Don't bother."

"If I can get him to accept the cure, maybe I can convince him to distribute it."

"He's a man who would save his own skin and ban it from the rabble."

"Maybe he is more than that." Isisa hoped. "I have to give him the chance."

"I can get you inside," Leander lit a cigarette. "I don't have much faith in him."

They met at an abandoned refinery. Isisa landed in the shadow of dormant smokestacks. Leander arrived through the subdeck loading bay. The old assassin was dressed in combat gear, two pistols strapped to his legs and a combat knife in one boot. His face was clean shaven. "Politicians never gave me a job I felt good doing."

"How do you mean?" Isisa grinned. "You didn't enjoy your work?"

"I killed a lot of people for a lot of folks, some more tasteful than others some I had a lot of fun with." Leander shrugged his shoulder and checked his pistol. "At least sometimes I'd get to bury a bad guy. But politicians... they never gave me a good job."

Gideon's Gate was an old war hospital. The architecture was bland, the whole complex concrete and steel. Isisa thought it looked abandoned, but that seemed part of the charm. Her sensors picked up the President's motorcade in the basement garage. An incoming call from Ausar pinged.

“My lady, I’m tracking a seven-man Eurafrikan strike team that just boarded from Section Eight. They’re headed your way, and their target is Collins.” Ausar was clearly in pursuit, relaying vehicle markings and models. “They have two aircars and heavy weapons. What are your orders?”

“Let that play out. Leave the governments to themselves.” Isisa scanned the guard towers and service roads. Four patrol aircars roamed the perimeter. Sniper teams were atop every skyscraper in the area. If they knew what was headed their way, they would want to redeploy. “I wouldn’t mind a distraction. How effective do you think they’ll be?”

“Eyeballing it... they might have the tools. Mandela isn’t playing this with subtlety. They might just bring down the whole block to prove a point.” Ausar paused. Isisa could almost hear his brain running calculations. “This is more than an act of war. It’s the survival of their people. Those seven know they aren’t making it out.”

Leander led the way to a secret entrance one subdeck below the compound.

“We always called this the Manager’s Tunnel,” Leander pointed at the guard he had dropped with a single shot. “Only the officers have access. They mostly sneak prostitutes through, sometimes family members.”

Through his 3Eye, Ausar saw that the Eurafrikans had breached the outer wall and were attacking the armory on the far side of the compound. Leander and Isisa entered through the officer’s barracks, passing a small private mess hall with expensive silverware and china. The sounds of a gunfight echoed through the halls. Every wall had an emergency light flashing. Klaxons wailed at every corner.

Passing the bunks and equipment lockers, they came to an intersection. To the left Isisa saw the security checkpoint. It was the compound’s natural chokepoint, and where she thought she would have to come through originally. Across the intersection and down the hall was the armory. To the right was the executive operating room.

Leander started down the hall toward the fighting.

“Let me hold them off for you.” The gray-haired killer growled.

“Don’t you want to see if Collins is the one good politician?”

“I’m too old for fairy tales.” Leander thrust out his chin. “Keep your spunk, kid.”

They parted without another word. The presidential guard was dispatched quickly, each with a sleep dart in their necks. Isisa set to work giving Collins the cure while he lay in a suspended animation on the bed. The monitors and machines began to beep approvingly as the cure took effect. She pressed a screen next to his bed to wake him.

Isisa smacked the President of Pollux Max hard on the cheek, for good measure.

“Where am I?” Collins snarled as he regained consciousness.

“You’ve just been cured from the virus. I can give you more to distribute to the people.” Isisa lowered her Shadow Mirror face to the President’s nose. He had the look of a man who wasn’t sure what he saw. “I will not charge you or the government. All you have to do is give the cure away freely to your people.”

“Free is a dirty word on Pollux Max...” Collins was groggy but still indoctrinated.

“We can create a new Station where things are better than the old ways.”

“They’re not our people...” Collins giggled to himself. “They’re pawns.”

“I saved your life.” Isisa pleaded. “Will you do this for me?”

“Nothing’s free...” Collins grinned. “Pawns always pay full price.”

Isisa fired a poison dart into his neck and left unceremoniously.

“Politicians deservedly serve the economic elite. That’s the job creation.”

~ Mark Hedges, *Pollux News Network*

With President Collins dead, the right to choose his successor fell to the Councilors from each Section of the Station. It took them less than half an hour to deliberate. They made their decision without public input. They unanimously voted in President Li, the Councilor from Section Five. Although Li had been a member of the Progress Party, he had sided with the Pylon Party against the mass demonstrations.

Isisa watched the pomp and circumstance on the holofeed.

President Li addressed the Council in an elegant gown.

“Our civilization is under siege, my fellow employees. Although I am honored to take on this illustrious office, I cannot ignore the circumstances thereof. We have blood thirsty nationalists destroying the fabric of our freedom. We have a refugee crisis that threatens to overwhelm our ability to provide safety.” Li looked over the eight Councilors affectionately. “I am dismayed by the growing anarchist movement. Instead of coming together to combat our common foes, they sow discord in our ranks. They encourage infighting and this effort cannot be allowed to succeed. Those protestors still in the streets should go home.”

The Council clapped enthusiastically. Each member was beholden to the corporations in one way or another. They owed everything to the CEOs and investors from the smallest segment of the Station’s population. Their decision to install Li only reinforced their fealty.

“I will not allow anarchism to go unpunished. If you value your families, if you are thankful for jobs, if you still long for a better life, I urge you to give up this doomed effort. We made Pollux Max great through our independence from national sentiments. We have had constant growth and rising profits strictly because of our unity in the face of our differences. The corporations that founded our great Station knew that nations were toxic.” Li pointed to the camera. “Our success depends on a subservient workforce coupled with a respected ownership. I will stand for nothing else.”

The speech did not have the intended effect. Marches filled the main streets of every Section of Pollux Max. Protestors burned their Section Trees. A protest encampment sprang up outside of their local government buildings. Several refugee camps near the docks had begun to riot.

People began to demand access to the Council. The drumbeat for a call of no confidence was gaining support. Signs and speeches were made calling for President Li to step down. Activists demanded refugees be given proper care and food. Sit ins and boycotts were organized overnight.

With the tensions at their height, the Council Datalinks were the target of interest for Ausar and Isisa. They were housed in the ornately decorated marble digital library in Section One. The protests were occurring in the downtown-government square. Ausar and Isisa had taken different routes but arrived simultaneously.

They knew that Prudence and Vanguard would be there.

When they reached the server room, it was cold and quiet. The information for every citizen was stored inside, carefully crafted for particular voting needs. The Council had long used social media and internal Station propaganda to sell otherwise unpopular programs. Of all the Max Stations, Three Rivers was known for its backwards laws.

Isisa saw in the servers one reason why. But before she could lay a bomb onto them, Vanguard exploded from the wall. He tackled her, and they exchanged shots. Before Ausar could turn he was hit in the leg with a nanolasso. It wrapped around his thigh and pulled him down into the coolant access.

A server tower sparked as Isisa's back was slammed into it. She and Vanguard wrestled down the aisle. Isisa grabbed tight hold of Vanguard's wrists. Holding the plasma flowing from Vanguard's hands to just above her head, she delivered a kick into his stomach that sent him backward. Isisa aimed her wrists at each of Vanguard's thighs.

The two darts drained the plasma power cells of the assassin's suit. Each new beam from Vanguard's suit was smaller than the last. Isisa dodged until his suit ran dry. The Hunter Seeker had terror in his eyes. Isisa smiled, "Yes, you've failed your mission."

Isisa delivered a final dart to Vanguard's forehead. The nanites inside would ensure that he would be neutralized entirely. From the corner of her eye, Isisa saw Ausar's Mace tear through the deck. A large drone flew upward in two pieces. Then two small drones floated up carrying Ausar between them, blood running from his side.

Prudence came through the hole in the deck on mechanical legs. Isisa began to sprint. The last Hunter Seeker pointed his carbine rifle at Ausar. Isisa flung a Sun Disk and fired an explosive dart. Carbine bolt and Sun Disk met in the space above Ausar's heart. The barrel of Prudence's carbine blew into a hundred bits.

Grabbing the assassin by the throat, Isisa fired explosive rounds into the mechanical legs. Once on the ground, the High Priestess made sure to keep Prudence immobilized and harmless. A few paralysis darts into his limbs was insurance.

"You can't win." Prudence gasped. "Pollux Max will be your last stand."

"I see things differently. This Station was designed to fail. It incubated a culture of neglect and rewarded those with no foresight." Isisa tilted her head to one side. "Maybe it was all just an elaborate insurance scam! Or did the rulers of mankind truly squander their own survival? Perhaps it's time for the people to rule themselves."

"The more freedoms there be, the greater the demands!"

"They will govern themselves," Isisa smirked. "Your master will be overthrown."

"Masters are never overthrown." Prudence spit the words.

"Oh but they have been, and shall be again. As they always are: one by one," Isisa fired an electrified dart into the servers. The room filled with smoke as the computers melted from the inside. Sparks and flames cast dancing shadows on Prudence's bloody face. Isisa pressed her boot to his neck. "Oppressors wear many masks. Sometimes they are difficult to identify. Hard to beat the house at its own game."

Isisa fired a dart into Prudence's jugular. The lethal dose did not take long.

The High Priestess picked up Ausar and carried him to the waiting aircar.

"You'll feel better once Olympian treats that burn." Isisa tossed a medgel pack onto Ausar's lap. She piloted the aircar to the newest safe house at break neck speed. "Apply the whole pack. No self healing this time."

"I'd feel better if you weren't always trying to start wars." Ausar hated medgel.

“It’s now or never. We might not get another chance to save the human race.”

“You’ll be branded a nationalist...” Ausar gritted his teeth in pain. He would not concede his position in their argument. “They’ll call you a pirate... a terrorist.”

“The labels aren’t important to me.”

“We arise from chaos,” Ausar winced as he applied gel, “we delve into chaos.”

Isisa smiled. She left Ausar with Olympian and headed to the Section One Supreme Court building. It was her window, with her enemies still scattered. Protestors were still camped on the grounds. Reporters were huddled near the stairs. Isisa climbed them holding a holographic torch.

“What do you hope to gain by coming to the Supreme Court? Are you suing the Council for the property you lost?” The business newsman asked. He frowned as Isisa remained unresponsive. “What’s with the torch?”

“Do you intend to invest in another Max?” Another reporter called out.

Then the flood of questions came. “What have you told your shareholders?”

“I have an announcement that concerns every person aboard Station,” Isisa said.

Camera drones began to flock. Several protestors turned an ear in her direction.

“The people have marched. Their voices have been shut out. When given an opportunity to repent, the Council decided to increase their tyranny.” Isisa saw multiple cameras from the major corporate networks turn off and fly away. Several reporters shook their heads. Protestors began to gather. “I stand here today to declare a new government that will serve the people of Pollux Max. Henceforth every citizen will have a voting machine in their home.”

The cloud of camera drones trained on Isisa grew larger and denser.

“In times of great fear it is easy to fall for empty promises of the demagogues. Resist or resist the temptation of blaming others for our common struggles. We are all one human tribe in the vastness of space. Grant those you trust with power. Revoke all powers from those who abuse them. That is the contract when you cast your vote.”

The demonstration holograms displayed the process of casting a vote. A handprint and eye scan was used for identification. A display above the voting pad showed the list of candidates. Voting records, speeches, books and personal biographies accompanied each face. It would then carefully track the records and voting of the representative to produce a daily public report.

The screen showed current dockets and voting records. The ability to raise a vote of no confidence, or a petition for immediate removal from office, were available to every voter. A list of bills and appointees under consideration was available for every legislature on Pollux Max.

“A decentralized democracy will render the corporations obsolete. You have a right to freedom and self determination. You now have the printers and the power.” Isisa lifted her eyes to the artificial sky. She smiled sincerely into the remaining cameras. “You have ballot boxes and equal votes. You decide the future of us all. Help your neighbors and humanity may yet survive. We shall have a country without borders and a nation without flags. This is the Kairos Republic.”

Epilogue



Ekaterina heard her name echo from beyond. She felt her body asleep on a cot surrounded by the children of the refugee camp. Looking down at her own face, Ekaterina thought she must be dreaming. In all the years of lucid dreaming, however, she had never heard that voice before. The woman's voice was calm and reassuring. It beckoned her out into space. In a flash she was past the docks, beyond the Eurafican blockade, floating in a sea of space.

"Fear not, you are practicing your craft." The soothing voice whispered in Ekaterina's ear. "I am Bahlam, your teacher."

"Is this real?" Ekaterina heard her own voice without opening her mouth.

"The first thing you must do is halt the march of time. We cannot afford to lose any of it. I will grant you all I know about astral projection. Yet I do so with my final breath." Bahlam materialized in the vacuum of space with Ekaterina. Her eyes were filled with sadness, but her voice commanded a purpose. "I don't have any time left, but you have your whole life. You'll become an exceedingly powerful young girl, and you mustn't let that go to your head! Learn from me, but don't be too stubborn to change."

"How is this possible?" Ekaterina had no suit. Although she had been born on Pollux Max, she had never left the station. Ekaterina couldn't remember ever dreaming about being in space, either. Stars shined all around her. "I feel... whole."

"The edge between yourself and the cosmos is an illusion. The universe grows branches and time blooms." Bahlam folded her legs and took Ekaterina's hand. Ekaterina folded her legs likewise. "Every flower of space-time is one seed. Ignore this truth and you will achieve nothing of consequence."

"Are you one of the gods?" Ekaterina thought. *I must be dreaming... or dead?*

"Gods are silent to mortals. Give them your respect but expect no quarter in the material world. Astral ancestors may visit," Bahlam chuckled lightly, "but remember they are biased to their agendas. Trust only your heart. Do not seek other people for affirmation. Find answers in yourself."

"Then who are you?" Ekaterina saw the stars reflected in Bahlam's eyes.

"I am your Lady's mother." Pride was gushing from Bahlam's heart aura.

Ekaterina frowned. "Should I ignore even the counsel of your daughter?"

"Especially avoid any answers from people in power. My daughter is no exception. Search your inner depths. Nothing contains you." Bahlam pointed to her own heart, then Ekaterina's. "It is already in the same room with you. Learn from what you see but avoid holding onto anything. Your power will be the knowing, not the having."

"Why me?" Ekaterina lowered her head. "I am no one."

"If you are no one then so is the all. Saying we are no one is to say God is nothing. Do not insult the divine within you." Bahlam knew humanity still had a chance. The margin of error was razor thin. If only humanity could truly cooperate. "You have a pure heart and an iron will. Both will be needed in the days to come."

Ekaterina looked back at Pollux Max. "How do you think *I* can help?"

"Every atom in this universe is connected to every other. That Station, that star, your heart, all the same." Bahlam's eyes twinkled. Time bloomed and the two women

shared a decade together. “You are here because you are ready to make a difference. You only need to unlock your own mind to do it.”

A galaxy swirled within Ekaterina’s iris. “Thank you for everything.”

“This is the moment I die, and where I will leave you to your temporal reality once again. I have taught you what I can.” Bahlam let out a long sigh. She pulled Ekaterina close for a hug. “You are the First Artemite. Help her save the human race. Tell my daughter that I love her.”

Ekaterina smiled. “I promise to be a beacon in these dark times.”

“You are now Rina,” Bahlam kissed her forehead, “the knife in the wind.”

Intrepid Indigo Saga

Hunting Artemis

Winged Artemis

Artemis Uprising

Artemis Dynasty

Artemis Aeon

About the author

Derek Ian Cantwell

@CosmicalRabbit



I found this **idea**

It belongs to us *all*

The idea is **to be**

The order is *love*

Every **science** and *spirituality*

Looks up into the **sky**

Sees the same *moon*

Mind measures the same *divine*

Perspectives vary in *human* fashion

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