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*The "paradox" is only a conflict between reality and your feeling of what reality "ought to be."*

Richard Fenyman

*The thing about working with time, instead of against it, he thought, is that it is not wasted. Even pain counts.*

Ursula K. Le Guin

# Prologue

**Then**

May 12th, 2099. Ancient Era.

The moonless night hovered over Lemac Lake, and the group of ten soldiers of the Blackbird-C Squadron advanced at a rapid pace through the thick trees of the Lugrin Forest.

The night vision of the tactical helmets gave them more than enough vision to move easily, although they had to avoid obstacles from time to time. Their bodies were protected with exoskeletons from head to toe, which helped to lessen the weight of the heavy equipment they carried. The weapons, of recent manufacture, achieved by retro-engineering, were quite heavy, but it was the type of weapons they would need in the operation. The tactical helmets they wore, more like masks, since they even covered their faces, had a system that transmitted images instantly.

Under any other circumstances it would have been illegal to deploy armed forces in an area that, until a few years ago, had been a hive of tourists and families living near the lake.

That had changed, though, and there were no longer families, or tourists, wandering around the area. Considering the situation, it was more likely that, in recent times, the native fauna had returned to the place, but that was not the case either. At least, not in that part of the lake.

It took quite some time for the Blackbird-C Squadron to make its way through the debris of houses, ancient castles, half-ruined palaces and trees blocking the way. The route, which the operations commanders had traced from the base forty kilometres away, had forgotten to tell them that they would encounter so many obstacles along the way. But that no longer mattered. With so much fighting occurring across the globe, and with the collapse of most satellites months ago, it was not uncommon for map updates to be inaccurate, even with the use of drones. Entire areas of the world had changed in the last five years.

They landed a few hundred meters away from the place where they were supposed to deploy. All because of some damned sudden gusts of wind, which dragged the whole group a little further away from the target. Two alternative routes were planned, but with a failure range of a few meters and they had reached a part that was farther away than planned.

At that point they could have used the support of an aeon, but most of the conscious artificial intelligences were working in the theatre of operations in Siberia, or manoeuvring space stations to send supplies to the colonies on the Moon and Mars. There was no luck for a group of cleaners soldiers that night, even though there were rumours that the operation had been listed as a target of high importance for some instances across the pond.

It wasn't asking too much. Just more support. But such was the chaotic state of the world.

Special forces teams, better equipped and supported, were on operations to retake control of the larger cities, which were still repelling hundreds of enemy forces that were close to evacuation zones.

Jeanne, captain of the Blackbird-C squadron, repressed the urge to let out an angry sigh, and glanced at her comrades.

They should have at least sent one of those feys, she thought.

They could only hope that the surprise factor hadn't been ruined yet, or the whole mission would fail.

Jeanne looked at the smart screen on her left arm and saw how the compass had just started spinning around pointlessly, while an alert window was activated, with a star moving irregularly over the map, marked with the legend [Anomaly nD. KALUZA-KLEIN metric tensor within visible range SK-K in 3D].

They must have been too close by now.

Jeanne signalled to one of the soldiers, and he deployed a small drone, whose image was transmitted to the internal display of the mask, in a small window in the left side. A few moments passed until above the trees, over the small beach, and very close to the waters of the lake, the drone offered an image of a strange shape of what appeared to be a cube, tilted on one of its vertices. It was at least three meters in diameter, floating one meter above the surface of the ground.

Although it was a dark night, through the drone they could see how the surface of the faces of the strange object reflected the surrounding image as if it were a perfect reflective surface.

It simply looked as if someone had put some levitation mechanism inside a gigantic cubic mirror. Nothing more. But everyone knew that nondescript appearance was deceptive.

It's really one, just one, Jeanne thought, and motioned to the second in command. [C-5-Bravo-4. Right,] she said over the Pointer comm.

The second in command nodded and signalled the four behind him.

She had only just met her second-in-command a few weeks ago, and the same went for the other soldiers accompanying her. They were three women, seven men in all. All of different nationalities. All chosen from those who had survived the fighting in recent years, and the ten had been selected from the Laren Brigade, due to their success in the Black Forest mission in Germany. They had been completing sweep missions in which all had been successful. The sweep missions were to take out small groups of enemies that could roam alone away from the larger clusters. They weren't very dangerous at all.

And they weren't a bad team at all either but, even so, Jeanne couldn't shake the feeling that something could go terribly wrong that night.

The Blackbird-C squadron split in two. Jeanne took the left with four soldiers, while the other team with the second in command took the right.

Several techniques of approaching the target had been considered, but a pincer attack might be the only one that could really take effect. Because of the enemy's capabilities it was vital to approach in radio silence so as not to put him on alert. Staying silent meant that they could not count on support from the operations centre, they could only count on their equipment, the limited encrypted Pointer communication, and that teamwork would have the effect they hoped for.

They had trained for two days in scenario simulations, changing different formations and under different weather conditions. It had been proposed to use the night because the enemy seemed to be less active in the dark. Of course... it was all just guesswork.

Who could be sure of that if it had barely been five years since they arrived. And with respect to this particular enemy, there was hardly any data. Mere suppositions. Everything was based on the fact that, somewhere in the Kuril Islands, one of them, quite similar, had been defeated a year ago. In fact, there was not enough data about that operation. The form of the enemy was similar to others that had been defeated in South America, although it seemed less active than the others. Given that almost all of them had differences in their attack capabilities, they could not be entirely sure.

Be that as it may, they were only interested in the fact that this enemy had to be defeated, since it was one of the few remaining in the area.

The lake itself was of no importance, other than strategic, because it was at the point that divided France from Switzerland. The populations had been evacuated years ago, and only one of them had been in place for weeks. The long-distance drones had picked it up floating over the lake many times, without any other activity.

The weapons they carried had an ergonomic assault rifle design, although their ammunition was non-explosive. It had been given the name FLBolt-M2 and was designed and modified in the last few months. The weight, of almost ten kilos each, was due to the fact that they had several instrumental parts that had been practically experimental and there had not been enough time to make the components smaller, without having to reduce the range capacity and power of the weapon. Since this type of weapon with electric arc gun function by PTHP, had been designed solely for the purpose of delivering direct hits to Category 3 Fractus, Type Numinous.

Numinous. The exact type they had only a few meters away. Although within the classification types, which had been created to designate the enemy, Numinous was one of the most dangerous, Category 3 was not one of the worst. It was simply to designate that their attack capability was minimal, although within a range still ignored.

Electric arc weapons had proven to be the best for many of the types of enemies that other assault corps had been encountering. Although for Numinous category 5 and above they had proven to require better weapons. Luckily for them those were in Siberia and on the edge of India and Pakistan.

Compared to what they had ahead of them, it should be a quick strike and return to base with the core. Still, Jeanne could not get the feeling of discomfort out of her body.

But it was too late to think of another tactic.

Jeanne had the huge polyhedron only a few meters away, and the only thing separating them were the bushes where they were hiding.

[C-5 Bravo, we have visual contact,] Jeanne communicated to Franco.

The second team slowed down and, hidden in the bushes, they searched around with their eyes. But they could see nothing.

[Please, ---- please, ------ please, save him.]

C-5, Franco Bicini, frowned. What had he just heard? It certainly didn't sound like the team leader's voice, it was a male voice, and it almost sounded like radio interference, but it couldn't be possible.

[C-6 Bravo, repeat?]

[C-5... it wasn't us,] Jeanne said.

At that moment the second team saw a bluish flash to their left, accompanied by a sound difficult to describe, it sounded like the echo of rusty metal clashing together rapidly.

[It's changing! Repeat, it's changing!] Jeanne shouted.

There was no further communication from Jeanne's team, but there was no need. The screams heard not far from their location were more than enough to figure out what was going on.

The surprise factor was ruined. But what had happened? That kind of Fractus was not supposed to change so fast. The Category 3 took almost twenty seconds to acquire a new form.

The second team took about fifteen seconds to reach the location of the first, while they could hear the sound of metal rising.

The huge cube had changed and transformed into something else.

Everything turned into chaos in a matter of seconds. There were glares from the electric arc weapons being fired, whose fine discharges barely illuminated the stage, as if it were a lightning storm. Flashes of a cloud of what looked like a dark cloud of iron filings producing blue sparks. In the cloud there was larger pieces of metal, that looked more like flying broken glass, and those produced the sound of metal pieces colliding with each other, moving among the soldiers at impossible-to-follow speed, accompanied by the screams of pain from Jeanne's team. The members of the Blackbird-C squad were falling like flies, one after another.

One of the soldiers of Jeanne's group fell to his knees, as the cloud passed through him. Screaming, he took off his helmet and mask. His face, as well as his hands, were undergoing a change. What up to a few moments ago had been a burly, battle-hardened man, was suddenly becoming an old man, whose skin was drying and sticking to his bones, as if he were undergoing an instantaneous mummification process, and then disappearing. When his body finally hit the ground he was already dead, and his skeleton had been transformed into a cloud of ashes that the wind scattered among the sand of the beach bordering the lake.

Another soldier simply lost sight of what was happening, as he felt his bones and muscles changing at an impossible speed, while a whirlwind of memories of his life flooded his entire memory in a raging clonic storm. He did not have to endure it for long. Only a few seconds later, his brain stopped being able to process the memories, and his suit lay empty on the sand, while his body shrunk to the size of a baby, then a foetus and then completely disappeared into absolute nothingness, as if it had never been there.

Corrosion. That couldn't be a Category 3.

The second in command tried to give orders to his soldiers, but had to replace his words with a cry of surprise, when he saw his world turned upside down. Something had lifted him several meters above the ground and sent him flying into the trees. He landed in the grass and felt some of the tactical plates of his helmet come off. He took a long breath, feeling almost as if his lungs had been crushed and, unable to speak, began to crawl. He had lost his weapon in the blow, and only had a pair of pistols which, for that matter, would be of little use to him.

He crawled through the grass and lay against a tree while he caught his breath. He felt a stabbing pain in his right side, it was likely that he had broken a couple of ribs. The medical control system in his clothing had stopped working, or maybe it was just the power supply going to his visor and the screen on his arm that had suffered some kind of malfunction. For the moment, he was thankful that the adrenaline was still pumping through his nervous system, as it was inhibiting the pain.

Suddenly he heard a strange explosion behind the tree where he was hiding that eclipsed his senses. He had never heard anything like it before. It had been a kind of explosion that made his eardrums reverberate, accompanied by a flash of light that was extinguished as quickly as it had appeared.

What had happened? What until a few moments ago had been an inferno had become an overwhelming silence, broken only by the rustling of the night wind in the branches. Franco Bicini, leader of the second team, let several seconds pass that seemed like hours before he began to move slowly.

Had the thing been standing still, waiting to take him by surprise? Or was it waiting to hear him, to deal him a final blow as it had done with the other members of the squad? But it couldn't stay hidden there for eternity. He had to come out at some point even if it meant ending up like the others. Would death be quick? He squeezed his eyes shut, remembering the screams of horror he had heard from the others. Whatever that thing was doing, it didn't seem painless.

His thoughts about the lightness of life didn't go too deep, because he was noticing something else. The night vision was becoming distorted. It didn't make any sense. He was pretty sure that there was no other equipment in the area and there was no moon that night so, given the time of night, everything should be dark, and no external light source should be producing any extra effects on his vision.

Franco turned off the night vision function and with his normal eyes could see how the scenery around him was indeed illuminated by something coming from behind the tree where he was hiding. It was a faint bluish light shining with different intensities.

He took off his helmet because he wasn't sure if what he was seeing could be a malfunction of the equipment and, as he did so, the remaining extra plates of the mask covering his face came off.

He was a middle-aged man with ash-blond hair, with a deep scar on his forehead, product of his baptism of fire when the war began.

He swallowed, trying to control himself and pulling out one of his automatic pistols, he went out to meet whatever was on the other side.

He expected to find the infernal creature waiting for him, but his eyes widened when he saw that it was something else.

There, about thirty meters away, was a bluish dot that seemed to be floating in mid-air. It seemed to be emitting a kind of radiation, which produced a series of bluish particles that were fired in all directions and others with somewhat thicker particle streams snaked through the trees and in the direction to the lake too and vanished after a few meters.

What is that?

After being paralysed for a few seconds, Franco Bicini walked hesitantly towards the bluish spot. It was something that seemed to be attracting every cell of his being, although he could not be sure what exactly it was that produced that sensation. Had he not been in such a horrible situation he could almost have sworn he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life. It was a ghostly and disturbing scene, but there was something sublime about it as well.

The closer he got, the sharper the spot seemed to become.

Barely five meters away from reaching the luminous point, Franco realised what it was, and also understood the final orders that had been given from the operations centre to get hold of it once they managed to defeat the creature.

It was a Fractus core.

Franco remembered having seen several types, and the orders were always the same, after the combat special units were in charge of its collection. Apparently, there were intelligence departments that had been developing some kind of weapons with them or something like that, but not much was known.

There were all kinds and colours. He himself remembered how he had been surprised the first time he killed one of those creatures and left behind a kind of stone with smooth pale-yellow faces. Different types of Fractus left behind different types of cores.

But he had never seen anything like it before. The energy it gave off gave the scene an unnatural air, but somehow it seemed to him that the glow was slowly beginning to fade. As if the source of its energy was somehow losing intensity. Franco slowly approached it, unable to take his eyes off it, not that it was pretty or anything. There was something about him that he couldn't quite understand. It was almost as if it was calling out to him.

The screams of horror of his companions had been left behind. In fact, it seemed to him that it had never happened. In his mind each of his neurons was simply ordering him to come closer.

With the glow fading, Franco Bicini was finally able to get an idea of its shape. It was a stone the size of a large fist, crystalline in appearance, irregularly shaped and somewhat rough, almost reminding him of the polished stones that in ancient times were used as weapons. Although it seemed to have chromatic capabilities inside, similar to diamond. But at the same time, it did not have the solidity of a normal stone, the core faces seemed to move and change shape, although they maintained the general shape of the object.

It was not unusual. After all, cores tended to have similar consistencies to the creatures that carried them. Fractus, was more than a convenient name for creatures that seemed to have fractal-like morphic capabilities, it also explained in part the movements always exhibited by such creatures, whose body seemed to always be in a continuous motion as they changed shape.

With a trembling gesture he reached out his hand toward the core and grasped it in his hand. Through the tactical glove he did not feel it at first but, after a couple of seconds, as he squeezed it in his hand, he felt the moving surface of the stone pierce the material of the glove and sink into his flesh few centimetres. Warm blood ran down the moving surface of the stone, but Franco Bicini felt no pain from it. After a few seconds, where the path of the stone had completely soaked into his blood, the movement stopped completely and, with the last bluish flash, the stone changed its surface to a dark colour and a smooth rounded shape.

Franco Bicini fell to his knees, but he was no longer looking at the stone. His eyes had risen to the sky and he looked up in horror at the stars.

From that day on, the meaning of his present and future changed forever. It crumbled, as a sandcastle does when it is swept by the waves of the sea. But, beyond that, he had one certainty.

He was not going to turn the stone over to the authorities.

The future depended on it.

# Chapter One

**The unseen, the unheard**

March 18th, Sunday. 8 AM. 125 S.A.

Kolsay Lake, Almaty. Kazakhstan.

The chirping of the birds was quite loud that morning in spite of the cold weather.

The morning sun was tinting the whole landscape green and white with a warm orange hue, and was tearing the few clouds in the sky. The snow had melted on the trees, but there was still plenty on the ground due to the fact that nightly snowfalls were still occurring.

Nikolai sighed wistfully, wagged his big grey tail, and looked around as, with long strides, he finished crossing the new log dam that had been formed only a couple of days ago. The last thing he wanted was for the gelid waters to wet his tail. He was now on the east side of the lake.

On the other shore, to the west, Nikolai could see teams still moving around, collecting samples from the lake shores and some of the military robots guarding the site.

The work of sample retrieval and site clearance continued unabated. Everyone was very interested in the development that the situation at Kolsay Lake took after the creature/fungus/alien escaped from the site, leaving the case with more questions than answers.

"Come on! What are you doing?" asked a female voice in an animated tone, which made Nikolai turn his eyes to the front.

The girl just pulled a lollipop out of her mouth, with her delicate webbed-fingered hand, covered by a black tactical glove.

Nikolai's research partner, Hinata Cronwell, also known as Dr. Kohi, was a dark-skinned fey girl, who could easily be mistaken for a short-stack girl, with a prominent forehead and snub nose, along with two sparkly brown eyes. She had a headband, which kept her light brown hair, slightly wavy, combed back. She was dressed in a black tactical coat, with enough pouches to carry an entire lab in. What was striking, though was that despite the cold she was wearing a white dress, that appeared to be of a very thin fabric for the cold morning breeze. In addition, she was Nikolai's boss in the Department of Anomalous Events Research and Teratology Studies at the Nevermore Institute.

Although it couldn't be said that Nikolai didn't attract attention either. He was another fey, at least a little over six feet tall and slender in appearance, with dishevelled hair, a goatee and grey eyes. Nikolai's ears were peculiar in that they were not only pointed, but they were slightly different in shape from those of his companion. They were a more sharper and pointed a little higher. They could move and, at the moment, one was attached to his skull while the other, tilted at a slightly unnatural forward angle, seemed to listen attentively to the sounds of the environment. He was dressed all in black with a jumpsuit full of pouches and was carrying two heavy suitcases of sampling equipment.

"Have you heard anything?" Hinata asked again, tilting her head slightly, and putting the lollipop back in her mouth.

Nikolai sniffed the air as if trying to smell something strange and then looked at her. "I just wanted to make sure those giant deer aren't around." His voice sounded bored and with a nasal tone.

"You don't need to sniff like a dog, they're almost visible in the sunlight."

"Only at certain angles," Nikolai added, not quite sure, as he continued to search with his eyes, this time in the direction of where they were headed.

"Well? Are they around?"

"No... I just hear the sound of water... escaping like our life…" Nikolai said, sighing again in a sad voice.

"We are in the middle of nature. Not in the lab. Field work, you like that, don't you?"

"Yes… in this nonsense we're standing on, at least… the view is pretty," he said, sighing again and Hinata had the impression that Nikolai's soul was leaving his body and getting lost in the higher layers of the atmosphere.

She looked at him doubtfully. "Did you take your anxiolytics and antidepressants?"

"Yes. I even had a cup of tea on the ship."

"Give yourself another dose. I don't want to turn around and find you've hung yourself from a tree when I wasn't paying attention." Hinata sighed, as she set off again, following the lake-shore.

Severe Depression. Of all the things a fey could bring back from the Other Side, mood disorders were listed as one of the most delicate afflictions. And that was exactly what Nikolai suffered from.

Although he had excellent skills to have become a field agent, his sudden mood swings, which could drag anyone around him into a super-massive black hole of gloomy thoughts -with some philosophical overtones, had made him think twice about the idea of investigating cases, where a certain objective detachment was required to carry out the investigation. Besides, Nikolai was no ordinary fey either. The ears and the huge furry tail along with his striding gait made him easily recognisable to anyone who knew enough about fey species.

An oboroten. More specifically, a Volkolak.

Still, Nikolai possessed good skills in fields such as microbiology and forensic science. So Hinata thought it would be a good idea to take him out of the lab to do some research. After all, the department she was in charge of was a three-person department. Her, Nikolai and the new guy, Shin Aogami.

A couple of weeks after Shin's shocking arrival, she had personally recruited him to be part of the small team. It hadn't been a bad idea at all. The lab and research department was a huge place for only two people to run. While Shin worked as a field agent with Mai, it wasn't a bad idea to have someone who had views that were perhaps a bit outdated for the time, but with more than enough experience in the field of finding and dealing with oddities of all kinds around the world. That and they were both more than interested in having a specimen as rare as Shin, whose studies had proven that, while he was not a fey, his nature was in itself much rarer. If it had been up to Hinata, she would have put him in a display case in the lab.

Be that as it may, this was an opportunity to both of them to get off the island, and collect samples in the field, instead of waiting for other teams to take them. They could spend a few hours at the site and then return to the island at sunset.

They arrived just a couple of hours ago, in one of the mini transport ships, and during all that time they were been briefed on what happened with the soldiers on site, and with the FRT teams. Hazmat was still there and hoped to extend her stay a couple of days more, meanwhile Mai and Shin were in Astana, waiting to put matters in order to head to their new destination.

"We're going the right way, aren't we?" Nikolai asked.

"Yes, it's this way exactly."

They both had their Neurowires with all the positions marked from the strange event that had taken place. But the reports of possible anomalies on the ground regarding the mysterious meteorite made them doubtful. Even more so if what Hazmat, who was still on the other side of the lake, told them was true, and there was no reason to doubt it. After all, there it was in the twenty-page preliminary report that Mai had written on the case. There might be a slight possibility that this case had something to do with a mysterious cult that Nevermore had been investigating for a long time.

"It's a shame Shin isn't here. I wanted to ask him more about the fungus."

"Call him later, those two must be getting ready to go to France on Tuesday, for the ceremony on Wednesday."

"Ceremony... it's nothing but politics to make it look like the Council is running things."

"Don't say it like that, he's our partner."

"I don't mean him; I mean the council. Besides… partner... of work. He was barely with us for a month before he started working with Mai. He was supposed to spend more time with us to help with the studies."

"He's still catching up. He has a lot of studying to do, to swallow over two hundred years of science since he disappeared."

"I'm sure he might be swallowing something else too."

Hinata turned and looked at him with a look of circumstance. "Don't be nasty."

"I'm sorry... some people's luck really depresses me."

"Do you have a crush on Mai?" Hinata asked, in a mocking voice.

"No. I'm simply referring to the fact that you could be working with the one you like... and twice as much, starting next week."

"You haven't talked to Fisi, like Justin told you?"

"No, she's still in Johannesburg. There's nothing to talk about. It's water under the bridge," Nikolai admitted, his voice muffled.

They both stopped in front of some trees and looked out into the deep forest.

"This way," Hinata pointed.

They arrived to one of the markers that Mai marked as the place where they were attacked by the deer. On that part of the lake there were still a few stubborn logs left on the shore, which the water had not been able to wash away. But beyond that there were hardly any marks left on the ground of the encounter and the battle that took place. During the past nights it snowed heavily and that covered again the tracks of the animals. Although that was not what mattered to them at the moment.

They continued on their way for several minutes, going uphill into the forest, until finally they could make out the place they were headed for.

It was the mysterious place with the tree that Mai described in her report, with the strange reliefs marked on the bark. Three in bas-relief, and the one in high relief of the creature that Mai had fought on the other side of the lake.

The mushroom filaments were still there, but no longer looked the way Mai and Shin had found them.

Nikolai opened the suitcases he was carrying and unfolded the portable lab. After putting on their gloves, they both began to take samples from the site. From the bark of the main tree to the surrounding trees, and even the ground, which samples they put on the corresponding plates. Later they could examine everything in detail, and compare the results with the samples Shin left, to check the changes that occurred after the explosion when the gigantic core shot skyward.

Hinata was operating tiny drones, that were in charge of rendering the entire area and creating a 3D model of the site. She thought she would be able to quickly find results of the carved animals, comparing the results with the main database of the island, but was surprised when only a few results were returned. Almost all of them recent and involving the search that had been conducted by another of the departments. She guessed that perhaps some other section in charge of studying symbolism might be more aware of it when Mai reported it.

"So, it has nothing to do with the cult?" Nikolai asked.

"It's too early to think that. Let's see what Rein and Naomi say later," Hinata said, shrugging.

Nikolai was at that moment taking samples of the fungus, which were found surrounding the high relief of the mysterious creature. The filaments, now dark grey in colour, practically turned to dust each time he took samples. As if now that they did not respond to the lake's core, they had lost all their properties and were nothing more than ash. It almost seemed incredible to them that it was the same place that appeared in Mai's personal observations.

The final destruction that Mai reported was more present on the other side of the lake, but on that side everything was calmer.

The morning sun was streaming through the trees and bathing the forest in a warm light. Beyond the strange landscape, and the destruction on the edges, it looked like an ordinary forest full of life, now that the birdsong had returned.

The horror that inhabited the place for so long disappeared, and it was as if a veil had been lifted over the entire region.

Or perhaps it was too soon for that.

Nikolai put the final samples in the Petri dishes and looked at his partner. Hinata was looking up, with her eyes fixed on the tree.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Hmm..."

She found herself collating Shin's report through her Neurowire. He wasn't as good at report writing as Mai, but one thing he did do was put notes on every single thing that caught his eye. While it wasn't the right way to file an official case report, it was the way he did it. And for that matter there was something that had caught Hinata's attention.

Nikolai crouched down to her level eyesight and tried to observe what she was staring so intently at.

On the bark of the tree, about five meters off the ground, and above the high relief there was something abnormal there. Nikolai straightened up and took a closer look. Although he was a little over two meters tall, he still couldn't make out what it was. It looked like an indentation in the bark that due to the colouration of the wood must have been produced recently.

Hinata took off her boots and with her bare feet, also with webbed toes, and helping herself with her hands, began to climb up the trunk as if she were a spider. Although, given the shape of her feet and hands, it was more accurate to say that it was a frog, since Hinata had fey characteristics associated with artic frogs.

Nikolai from below changed his sad face to one of concern, when he saw Hinata three meters above him.

"Where is your underwear?"

"I like the breeze," was all her reply.

"…"

"Stop looking at me down there. Look at this."

Given that she was in Nikolai's field of vision, it was a somewhat complicated request to carry out, but he tried to concentrate on what she was indicating.

"What's that?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. In the report, Shin said he noticed the mark above the high relief, but because they were looking for clues to the missing scientist, he didn't think much of it."

It was a hole about twenty centimetres long, by another ten centimetres wide and about five centimetres deep. As if it had been carved into the wood. The outer edges denoted that the bark had been moulded over the years around it, but inside it was different as if it were fresh wood. There were some parts on the edges of the hole that showed that, whatever it was, when it was removed, some pieces of the bark had been skipped and were fresh marks.

Shin put in the report that he had mistaken it for deer foot marks. Certainly, Hinata could see that there were hoof marks around the hole that corresponded to the animals. Perhaps a piece of the mysterious meteorite had been there.

"Pass me the multi-reader," she said to Nikolai. And then one of the small drones also flew to the spot to scan it and render a detailed model of the cavity.

Hinata took the small multi-reader tube that Nikolai handed her, that looked more like a marker pen, and passed it over the bark to see if it detected anything. After a few seconds the result appeared projected on her Neurowire. [0 results from the surface. 7 results of normal radiation, 1 result of anomalous gas projection with 2 results of radiation readings]. Hinata ran the final result and, getting more detailed results, was surprised when the coordinates appeared at two points behind her, a little off the ground height.

"This can't be right," Hinata said.

She frowned and jumped to the ground, while Nikolai followed her with his eyes wondering what it was all about. Hinata took another object, similar to a radio from the suitcase, and walked a few meters away as she turned it on.

There was no doubt, there was a weak signal of gases and radiation at two points away from the tree. Hinata turned on the radio-like object and activated one of the sonification subroutines. For several seconds nothing happened and Nikolai began to move one of his feet nervously.

"Can you tell me what this is about?"

"Shhhh!!!" Hinata cackled grumpily. After almost two eternal minutes she finally stopped the sonification and pressed play.

They were both used to seeing things that would make more than the average person's hair turn white, but they couldn't deny that the sound they heard gave them goosebumps.

It was a kind of guttural sound that spread out with pulses that came and went, and to Nikolai it reminded him of the sounds of sea creatures underwater, although there was something in that sound that was eerie. The sound only lasted about ten seconds, but Hinata ran it twice more and opened her brown eyes wide. She darted to the suitcase and picked up a small beige can and sprinkled it in the space where she had been standing.

A new shiver ran down their necks.

The cloud of special detection particles stopped in mid-air and slowly took on a violet hue with tiny purple sparkles. It slowly drew around it a vaguely humanoid but disembodied silhouette. There was nothing there, though clearly the cloud of particles was drawing a silhouette.

Hinata went a few meters further and did the same. A new silhouette appeared.

"A teleporter?" asked Nikolai.

"N-no," Hinata hesitated and for the first time that day felt a chill run through her skin. "Do you know what this sound is?"

"Some kind of creature?"

"No. Sonification simply translates sounds from the environment that are below the audible range. We wouldn't be able to hear it unless the spectrum is compressed."

"What is it?"

"If the result is correct. This is the signature of a black hole. More specifically the radiation and residual gases from the evaporation of a black hole."

Nikolai for the first time today put a grimace on his lips that could be understood as an attempt at a smile. "I know everyone likes to make jokes about me being a black hole but, you want me to believe that there was a black hole right here in the middle of this forest?"

Hinata threw the multi-reader at him. "See for yourself."

Nikolai caught it in the air and in his brain the results appeared. [Hawking radiation of quantum range with fall amplitude in 10 meters. Full Ghost Radiation Scattering predicted in 4 days].

"Isn't this a mini black hole?"

"It's not our area, but I think one of those would barely produce any effects due to its small size. I think we'd better ask Oxy later."

"I think it would be best to quarantine this area," Nikolai said with concern.

"Look at the radiation fall-off. If the reading is correct the effects will wear off in a few days."

"Those gases aren't the same as the effects of the fungus, are they?"

"No. It has nothing to do with it," Hinata said, and watched as the drone that was scanning the scene approached.

The small floating ball projected a hologram. It had generated a model of the possible shape of the object in the hollow of the tree. It was a simple spherical thing. Maybe some kind of rock. Maybe it was a fragment of the meteorite after all, although if it was it didn't explain why the filaments hadn't reached it.

They both looked at each other not knowing what to say, until Nikolai broke the awkward silence, looking at the two ghostly shapes marked by the spray, which were slowly beginning to fade.

"Shin wrote in the report that, on more than one occasion, he felt that he felt they were being watched, but he attributed it to perhaps the creature and the core in the middle of the lake being aware of each other's presence through the mycelia web.”

"Well... he was wrong. There really was someone here with them. Or maybe before. According to the readout this happened on the same day."

"They were being watched. But by who? Or what?"

Hinata then turned and looked at the hollow above the strange creature in the high relief.

"And what was up there? Whatever it is, it's been removed recently."

"Do you think someone tried to hide something before they got here?"

"I don't know. But I don't like it at all. What if what was up there was part of the cult? Or something else?"

The horror that lived in the lake left, perhaps returned to one of the abysmal depths of the cosmos from whence it emerged.

But right there another manifestation occurred in the same day. And neither Mai, nor Shin, were able to realise it.

# Chapter Two

**1880 - Through the stone and what Satou saw there.**

August 7th. 1880. Ancient era.
Shinjuku, Tokyo.

The sun was already setting on the horizon, but they continued to wait expectantly.

The group of six children, between seven and ten years old, ran amidst laughter and battle cries, following the course of the train tracks. It was something they always liked to do every day as they played in the surrounding area after school. But on vacations, those games could extend well into the afternoon, especially since that day was a public holiday in the city.

The train they expected to see was the one coming from Sendai to the port of Yokohama, in the southeast. They weren't really sure if that was the train's real destination, but at least that's what their parents and school teachers told them. The reason they were expecting to see the train again was because, in the previous days, it had passed by bringing what at first, they thought were steam-powered automatons, but turned out to be mechanical suits at least two and a half meters high.

Although that day it was not passing by at the usual time.

For them it was really something fascinating, beyond the fact that it was carrying coal, automatons or suits, and they always wondered what was beyond that. Beyond the place where they lived. Because, from what they heard recently, it seemed that even in Osaka a tunnel had already been built for the train to pass under the mountain. What would be found there was really a mystery to them, and sometimes they liked to imagine themselves riding in some of the coal cars, heading south, while fighting off all sorts of yokais on the journey, or outlaws sabotaging the tracks, as in the last days of the Satsuma Revolution.

The new locomotives, which were recently brought in, were much faster than those that have been in circulation in the last few years. The upheavals, caused by the tumultuous social changes in recent years, forced the sale into private hands, and the privatisation of what had hitherto been government-owned railroad construction plants and factories. But with the modernisation of the country, it was more and more frequent to see trains coming and going on the new railway lines, and with it all kinds of different locomotives. Not to mention some of the airships that had recently been put into the service of the country's security.

Despite that, there was still criticism against the government from some sides, who judged the position to be too broad-minded, and this led to all kinds of mobilisations and clashes between different parties.

But the intrigues of the adults did not concern the children, unless it was material for one of their games. They were interested that the train not passed at the usual time, and so they decided to play something else in the meantime.

"I don't think they will be passing through here any-more," Satou said thoughtfully, waving one of his bamboo stilts as a makeshift sword at his friend Kenji. "My dad says those iron giants are for use in the mines. In Korea there are many more than here, brought from Russia."

"I wonder what it would be like to ride one," Kenji said, as he charged a wooden sword at his friend. "I bet it would look like the Iron Demon."

Seven-year-old Satou Nobuyama was slightly shorter than Kenji, and while he had a really slender build, it allowed him to move nimbly like a fox. His physical agility was a source of pride for him. That, and the uncanny ability to whistle like no one else in school, which he acquired a couple of weeks ago, through the gap left by one of his baby teeth falling out.

That day he had exchanged the usual clothes he wore for a yukata with a new haori, decorated with gear motifs, and geta sandals.

Kenji, on the other hand, was a slightly bulkier nine-year-old boy, whose face always seemed to have a sort of half-smile that nothing could wipe off. Even when he was in trouble. Kenji's new clothes and toys made him stand out in the small group of children, and he must have been from a wealthy family.

That day they were playing an impromptu battle re-enacting the Battle of Tabaruzaka. They were three against three, with Satou on the rebel side, while Kenji with the other three were part of the Battotai. Or at least that's what they were trying to do. Kenji's references seemed to indicate that he was either trying to confuse his friends, or he was simply bad at remembering dates and historical events.

"Saigo! You're back from Mars!" Kenji shouted.

"What?! I'm not dead yet! And no one can travel to Mars." Satou told him, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm Hijikata Toshizou, and I'm going to stop you!"

The other five stopped fighting and looked at Kenji in confusion. What the hell was up with the references?

"No wonder the teacher says you're like smoke for history," Satou said, holding both hands to his head to which the others began to burst out laughing.

Kenji tilted his head. "What does that mean?"

"Fools are like smoke. They always try to get high," Satou explained to him with a sneer, as he picked his nose with his free hand.

"You're the fool!" Kenji spat at him, raising the wooden sword and launching himself at Satou's scampering.

The games went on for another twenty minutes and by the time they realised it the sun was already hidden on the horizon. Perhaps something had happened that day and there would be no train.

On the other hand, in the city, the sound of drums and flutes could be heard mingling with the screeching of the night insects. The Obon and Tanabata festival had already begun, and they were missing it. Gathering their toys and water pistols, they set out on the short walk back to the city. Over there already circled a couple of the police airships that, which with their oil lamps shining back and forth over the town, were in charge of security.

The paper lanterns were already been lit at the festival and people had taken to the avenues of the city to celebrate, while in the east the stars had already begun to appear.

"Where were you?!"

The sudden shout of a woman made Satou and the others gasp, and they slowly turned around.

It was a woman dressed in a yukata walking toward them. They all knew her. Despite her slightly tanned skin from working in the fields, the woman knew how to maintain her beauty. But also, she was really scary when she got angry.

"Let's run!" Kenji said to the others, who ran off in panic, getting lost in the crowd.

"I've been looking for you for a long time!" She said looking at Satou, and then she watched as the rest of the herd got lost. "Young Lord Kenji! Your father is looking for you!" Satou's mother raised her voice, but Kenji had already disappeared.

"I'm sorry, mom..." Satou wailed. "We were waiting for the train."

"You're all dirty. Were you playing near the tracks? We've already told you it's dangerous there." After challenging him for a few moments, she ran her hand over Satou's head. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Can I go and continue playing with the others? I promise we won't go to the tracks, it's already too dark."

How much energy still have? The mother snorted. She knew it was better for him to end up tired from all that playing, so he would sleep more soundly and be distracted from school matters. After all, he had been devoting a lot of time to his studies lately, even if he was on vacation.

He discovered that he was quite good at mathematics. Something that was a surprise to his mother. She barely knew the basic numbers to do the shopping accounts. The only bad thing was that she was noticing that he was spending more and more time between books and less time with his friends. If he wanted to study, well he could do it in a few years.

"Go get them," she said and stroked his head again.

Satou smiled at his mother and shot off through the crowd, toward the place where his friends had gone.

"No going to the tracks! It's already too dark! And tell Kenji that his father is looking for him!" the woman shouted. She wasn't sure if he had heard her, but at least it was worth a try.

Where have they gone, Satou wondered, looking for them. He passed by several game and food stalls, but couldn't find any of them.

After another detour, he was about to give up when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Kenji had returned and was showing him a huge beetle. "Look what I found!"

"Where?"

"Here, in the trees. Let's go!"

All was said and done. They would play “the treasure hunt”. The one who caught the biggest beetle would decide the games for a week, while the loser surely would have to eat the carcass of a cicada.

The two friends turned off the avenue, passing between two small stalls of masks and paper balloons and headed for the small grove on the other side. There were only two of the others who had participated in the games in the train tracks. Most likely the other two had gone with their families to go around the stalls.

The search for beetles went on for about thirty minutes, aided by a portable folding lantern, which Kenji took with him. Of course, he was cheating, trying to better illuminate the places he was looking for.

One of the other kids had just caught a Hercules beetle, big as his little fist, when they heard it.

"It's trusting too much."

"I just wish she would have given us a better explanation."

"She just left, just like that?"

"Yes..."

The group of friends looked at each other in surprise. The voices they had just heard were the adult voices of a man and a woman.

"Turn it off, turn it off," said one of the children, and Kenji folded the portable lamp, while everyone's ears perked up.

"I bet you it's some couple doing something dirty," Kenji whispered, with a wicked grin.

"Shhhh," Satou spat, almost hissing through the gap in his teeth.

"I guess we can only wait and see if it is as she told us”, the man said.

"And how will we know it's the right time?" the woman asked.

The darkness prevented the kid from seeing the faces of those who were speaking, but they could estimate that they must be about twenty meters away.

They were trying to see their faces, when they heard the sound from a bush, which was between them and the supposed couple.

Satou was about to run away. Who knows if it wasn't some animal attracted by the noise of the festival. Kenji squeezed his shoulders and stretched his long, plump neck trying to see what it was.

A metallic sound was heard and from the bush, a third person came out and, speaking in somewhat stilted Japanese, said. "Hands up! Where are they?"

Despite being only children, the group knew that this metallic sound could only correspond to a pressurised steam rifle. In the darkness the silhouettes of the couple gasped at the sudden appearance of the individual, and the man tried to interpose himself between the newcomer and the woman.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" the woman asked in surprise.

"Please just give them to me... I just want to see my daughter again. I don't want to cause you any trouble. Give me the stones!!!" The man's voice sounded like it was about to crack.

"I don't know what you've heard, but that's not how it works," the man said.

"I know what they are! Don't think I'm a fool. I've been after them from London for months!"

"So, you're the one who's been following us halfway around the world..." the man said.

Satou felt something wet falling on his forehead. He looked up and saw Kenji's face, who was sweating profusely and looking terrified.

"That guy has a gun," Kenji whispered to the others. "This is bad."

"What do we do?" asked the other boy.

"He's a thief!" The second one chimed in.

"Let's run!!!" shouted Kenji.

"Damn chicken!" Satou cackled angrily, as he started running after them.

The sudden screams were more than enough to get the attention of the three people.

Satou turned around for a second looking back, he saw a flash and the sound of the rifle barrel. Trying to get out as fast as he could in his sandals he looked ahead, only to run into a tree, which he hit hard enough to start bleeding from his nose and forehead.

Stunned by the blow, he thought he saw the shadows of the three people moving and struggling, and the sound of a gunshot rang out again, only to be drowned out by the sound of some fireworks officially signalling the beginning of the last day of the festival.

He heard the woman shout something and, before he could tell what happened, he heard a sound of cloth being torn and things falling on the grass. There was a series of scuffles, and he heard a thump. The next moment Satou heard something fall next to him, just a few centimetres away.

Satou saw lanterns waving in the trees. The local police must have heard the detonations after all, or maybe Kenji called they in.

The fight seemed to continue, but Satou wasn't going to wait around to see how it would end.

To defend himself he picked up the object that fallen near him in case he had to throw it to protect himself. He couldn't see it, but it was something hard wrapped with paper and a red string. Whatever it was, it was as light as a feather. It was not going to do him any good if he wanted to defend with it.

He ran in the direction of Kenji and the others, but they were already gone. He didn't want to run into the police. For some reason they didn't take a good look at the group of friends. Perhaps it had something to do with Kenji's father, Toshitsune Yanagida, who seemed to be closely watched because of his involvement in illegal gambling. Whatever it was, he didn't want to get involved with the police, as he was likely to give his parents a hard time about it.

He ran along the trees, past the back of some stalls, until he finally came out onto one of the festival streets and mingled with the people. It was really crowded. He had to make sure he would at least be able to set up a tanzaku later with Kenji and the others.

He crossed to the other side of the tents on the opposite side and hid behind one whose back was covered with cloth, but which by the smell seemed to be some kind of food store. The smell of fried squid was whetting his appetite, but first he would have to calm down.

Due to the adrenaline of the moment, he felt no pain from the nose and the bruise on his forehead. He was wiping the beads of sweat and blood from his forehead with the haori sleeve, when he turned his attention back to the packet he took.

Satou wondered what he could do with it. He took it on the spur of the moment, but now he wasn't sure if he should return it, or just leave it lying around. What could it be? After all, to the touch it looked like some kind of stone. Could it be what the guy with the gun was looking for? If that were the case, it would be best to throw it away.

But no one saw him take it. Maybe there was nothing wrong with seeing what it was.

He untied the string and tore the paper. At first, he thought he had picked up two pieces of charcoal. But they had not stained his hands and it had almost the appearance of obsidian but lighter.

They were indeed two stones. Satou discarded the paper and held them up. They appeared to be the same, both had rounded shapes with smooth faces, as if they were crystal. Both had one face that was larger than the others.

Satou took the stones and observed it for a few seconds.

It was black like obsidian, but the faces seemed to glow somehow in that moment.

Satou wondered if it was some stone of the sorcerers, and therefore wondered if the two characters in the forest were not some wandering Onmyoji sorcerers. If so, perhaps that was the reason why they were hiding in the forest because the practice of Onmyodo was forbidden by imperial decree. Although there were rumours that there were still several magicians in the service of the government at the moment.

The screams and sounds of gunshots in the distance frightened him. The boy ran and rounded a bend next to other stalls. He must have been quite a distance away and he hid behind another tent. Hiding between two empty big rice baskets, he pulled out the stones to look at them again.

He felt that there was something strange about them, and brought them closer to his eyes to see them better, while he put them both together on the sides that were more flattened. As he thought, it was a single stone that had broken at some point.

But when he put them both together it was as if a sudden electric shock had run through his body.

Despite the darkness behind the stalls, it was as if the stone produced a strange luminescence in the form of faint blue particles, which Satou observed as if he could not move his gaze. And indeed, he could not. In his black eyes were reflected the same blue particles.

The boy rolled his eyes and collapsed on the grass, as he convulsed with the stone clutched tightly in his hands. No one could see it, except him. Anyone looking behind the stall at the time would have seen only a small child convulsing on the grass between two empty rice baskets.

Impossible scenes flashed before his eyes, they were more like images out of the Scrolls of Hell. He saw horrible creatures, resembling yokais and other figures of what appeared to be some kind of war. Human figures, dressed in clothes of strange designs and lands and places he had never heard of. Many scenes were unremarkable, but others were horrific and full of suffering. The languages spoken did not seem to make any sense. They were words he had never heard before. Although, from time to time, he seemed to catch some Japanese words as well.

Time flowed strangely in the visions, as if a hurricane wind was sweeping through the scenes every second, but not fast enough, so he could grasp what was happening. It was a wind at times, at other times just images that followed one another more quickly, appearing sharply for a second, then disappearing the next, as an image blurs when drops of water fall on a calm surface, forming ripples.

He did not know if it was a few seconds or minutes. When he finally got up, he was shivering with cold, something strange since it was a rather warm night and he still had the stones in his hands, but now they were separated. He was staggering and his legs were weak. How long had he been watching these images? For some reason it didn't seem like a short time.

He heard some people shouting for water and noticed that the streets were brighter than before.

The boy stood up and looked at one shop and saw that it was on fire, threatening to reach another.

"Satou! Where are you?"

"Satou!"

The shouts of his mother and Kenji brought him out of his reverie. Kenji was the first to reach him and shook him by the shoulder.

"We've been looking for you for a long time! Where were you? Dumb!"

"Let's go home!" said his frightened mother.

He was so overwhelmed by what just happened to him that he almost didn't notice that his mother picked him up in her arms, and she was carrying him away from the fire. He felt nauseous, his head throbbed terribly, and he felt thirsty as if he had gone days without drinking a drop of water.

People seemed to be calming down now that the fire was being brought under control. But there was some commotion over something that happened on the other side. In the forest.

Satou, with his eyes blurred, looked at Kenji who gestured to him to be quiet. He surely didn't want his parents to know that they witnessed the fight in the forest either. It was a mystery to them how it had all ended.

But Satou no longer cared about that, he snuggled his face into his mother's neck. While hiding the stones inside his yukata.

Something that should not have happened. A mistake, an improbability.

An incident that would change the world, but that few would know about.

And not even Satou, or Kenji, ever knew. Although, over the years, they would remember the incident.

### Side notes

**Small historical notes about the chapter.**

Although the environment of this chapter is set in a somewhat different Japan, a bit Steampunk, there are several details that are historical.

* What the children are playing is a recreation of a real battle but there is one detail that is confusing because Kenji is not good at remembering dates. The battle of Tabaruzaka occurred several years after the death of Hijikata Toshizou, who was part of the Shinsengumi, but he was not part of the Battotai, since he was a ronin who resisted against the Meiji Restoration.
* "Saigo! You're back from Mars!" This phrase is in context even though I don't explain it in the chapter. It is a reference to Saigo Takamori who was a samurai and was part of the Meiji Restoration. He committed sepukku after losing the battle of Shiroyama and then several legends appeared that he had not really died, but had fled to other countries and was waiting for the opportunity to lead a new revolt. One of the legends claimed that he had escaped to Mars.

One of the reasons why I wanted to portray the battle as a child's play has another historical reason. At that time, some Ukiyoe style artists depicted internal government battles as child's play in their paintings in a caricatured manner.
* Ommyodo was a science related to magic, divination, and Feng-shui and incorporating part of the Chinese tradition of Ying-Yang, but it was developed for Japan incorporating religious elements of Shintoism. This practice had its peak during the Heian period and one of its greatest known exponents was Abe no Seimei. Over the years there was a decline in the use of Omyodo practitioners related to the decline of the imperial court. In the 19th century (1873) its practice was banned and judged as superstition.

Despite this it has appeared many times in popular culture, such as in novels, video games, manga and anime and today still has many followers.

# Chapter Three

**Griffin**

Les Pont de Brogny, Annecy. France.
March 13th. Tuesday 11 PM. 125 S.A.

In front of the abandoned building the convoy of nine vehicles stopped under the shelter of the night. Silence reigned in the area, broken only by the rustling of branches in the cool night breeze. Along with the rustling the only thing that could be heard was the humming of small drones being deployed from one of the vehicles of the convoy, scanning the site.

The building was a three-story one, with simple architecture. Obviously, it had known better times, but at that moment everything around it looked rickety and vines climbed up the walls like a skein of spiderwebs.

The self-driven convoy was composed of four large trucks, transporting heavy machinery, one small truck for transport of personnel, and two slightly larger trucks for transporting multifunctional humanoid droids. At the front and rear were two armoured trucks.

[Green pattern. Normal oxygen. No intruders in the area,] was the message transmitted by the drone controller, to the person in the armoured-truck at the front of the convoy.

[Let's proceed,] Jansen frowned, and sent the orders to the rest through the Neurowire. [You heard it, people. Each to his own function.]

["Let's go! Everyone knows what to do. Every hour counts, in a week we have to get this place up,"] said another male voice, with a somewhat humorous tone.

Jansen got out of the front armoured truck, and so did the other five who were travelling in the vehicle with him. He was a black man, already somewhat older, with wrinkles on his temples and white hair cut in Mohican style, with a short goatee. He wore dark cargo pants and a grey camouflaged tactical coat.

From the small truck, the side doors opened, and several people began to exit, with various types of equipment and industrial suitcases in their hands. Some were in tactical uniforms, and others in plain clothes, although all of them were carrying weapons, even if it was only a pistol, and protective vests.

What could be heard were orders and bustling footsteps all over the place. The silence that had reigned until that moment had left, to give way to all kinds of hurried chatter and movements of people heading towards the heavy trucks.

As Jansen said, everyone had their orders, and they knew what was expected of them. One team got lost in the city streets, going towards the abandoned and decrepit buildings, while another went down the main street. Others were unloading industrial suitcases of considerable size, while another group was levitating some sort of huge cubes, which were deposited in the tall grass surrounding the building where they parked. A team of three were currently tinkering with energy cubes.

 It was going to be a relief not to have to connect to the power grid of the nearby cities, because the whole operation depended on stable power levels, without getting tagged by Edison or arousing the suspicions of the power plants.

There must have been at least 30-plus people all over the place moving like ants.

"Be alert for any eventuality. We have to set up our lookout points before the sun comes up!" ordered Jansen once again, and snorted as he looked around.

Annecy was a lively town until the outbreak of the Great War, when the people evacuated to the West. Even after the war there were attempts to re-inhabit the town, but today it was nothing more than a completely abandoned relic of the past. A ghost town in the south-east of France.

Whether it was a coincidence or not, was at least a consolation that the very spot where Jansen had to be was an abandoned city, far from prying eyes.

After all, that was a mid-range operation, totally illegal, but incredibly well paid. Because Jansen and his men were no ordinary soldiers, they were soldiers of fortune. Mercenaries.

The bodies of all those present, except Jansen's and someone else's, were all synthetic. Mere puppets in human form, which could be discarded in case something went wrong, since whoever had paid for the operation had ensured that all of them would keep copies of their personalities in case of any eventuality.

Jansen for his part did not like being in a synthetic body at all. He already died a couple of times in his life. And the feeling that his current self was simply a copy of his already dead selves, in a human body, had always left a bitter feeling in his mouth. He had decided that, for the next time, if he had to die, it would be the last time. Even so, after making that decision he survived for another thirty years in a human body that continued to age at a normal rate. And as far as he was concerned, that was fine. If he didn't end up with his bones on a battlefield, then the passage of time would do that for him.

"Wrinkling your brows already?"

Jansen turned and looked at the one who addressed him. Walking towards him was the other man who did not had a synthetic body in the mission.

He was a man slightly shorter than Jansen, dressed in a beige shirt, a brown jacket and old jeans. On his leg he carried a simple automatic pistol in a holster. But if there was one thing that stood out about him, it was that his head was wrapped in bandages, and dark glasses were covering his eyes. Whatever the reason he had to wear those bandages and dark glasses, even on a closed night, was beyond the level of what Jansen knew. He reminded Jansen of those old-timey invisible man movies, even by his last name.

"Griffin. Shouldn't you see the state of that thing?" Jansen asked, pointing with his chin at the building.

"It's not my area. I'm the tourist here, remember?"

"Are you planning on scratching your balls for the whole week?"

"What's wrong with that? Particle science is not my forte," said the mysterious man, with a shrug and walked away, as he kicked a few rocks out of the way on his path towards the entrance of the building.

"What is your area?" Jansen asked, raising his voice.

"I'm a rocket scientist," Griffin said, in a theatrical tone without turning around.

Jansen watched him walk away and wondered what the hell the man was up to.

Yes. Everyone had their orders. And whatever the function of the man called Griffin was, it was beyond Jansen's understanding.

In Jansen's case, he was just a team leader of nine mercenaries who had a mission on the spot. Nothing else. All to check that everything was going as it should be on the outside. In case of unforeseen events, they had to stop anyone who dared to enter the city. To do this they had separated two other trucks, one equipped with the autonomous tactical assault mecha, which would be near the building, and fifty multifunctional droids with industrial work functions.

The other truck had another team of one hundred droids with security functions. The security droids were the ones who would work with Jansen's team, making sure that no one entered the city through any blind spots, through the abandoned buildings or through the surrounding streets.

The other twenty synth people in the small truck were for the work to be carried out underground, along with the other fifty multifunctional droids.

The man with the bandages was from the group that would go underground. They were scientists. There were engineers specialising in Von Neumann construction machines, particle specialists, a couple of chemists, two doctors, and three others were industrial mechanics.

Whatever they were protecting must have been something huge.

Almost all of the mercenaries were hired from BlackThunder, the mercenary company to which Jansen belonged. But that wasn't all. Apparently, there were three other companies involved in the operation and they were scattered in two locations in France, Boneville and Seyssel. The third, and somewhat smaller, was on the Swiss side, in Geneva, near Lake Lemac.

Whoever was paying for the whole operation must have been enormously wealthy to be able to afford the logistics of moving so many droid companies to such distant locations.

As far as he knew, the scientists would be working in along with those at the other three points. But what was striking was that moving so many droids was only in case of emergency, and as a last resort. Precautions had been taken so that no one from the surrounding area would snoop around, but Jansen didn't know what kind of measures had been taken so that during the time the mission lasted, people from nearby towns wouldn't ask about what it was all about.

He had heard rumours that NW mind-crackers had been hired to keep people passing by from approaching. But who knew if that was true.

A couple of people, through their Neurowires, were lifting the side doors of the big trucks and from them began to descend the humanoid droids that divided into different teams, some marched towards the building, while others were divided and moved away to different parts of the city. Another group of at least twenty-five droids marched towards the remaining four trucks and began loading more equipment into the building.

It's going to take time to unload all that, Jansen thought worriedly.

They only had a few hours to finish unloading and hide the vehicles in case any satellites detected the activity. The group of three soldiers who had left for the city had the task of setting up disruptors so that the satellite signal could not detect any sudden change in the energy of the place. The same should be happening at the other three points, where the operation was taking place.

At that moment a metallic giant was waking up from one of the big trucks and Jansen turned to look at it.

The huge autonomous assault mecha looked like it had just come out of the factory and its silver and blue colour glowed in the light of the vehicles. It walked slowly to the unkempt garden surrounding the building and, sticking the hydraulic spear of one of its feet into the ground, adopted a kneeling posture and disappeared from sight, activating the optical camouflage.

Jansen gave a few more orders, to get used to what was to be his routine for the next few days and walked towards the entrance of the building.

To one side was the name of the building. Black letters on a yellowish wall that had surely once been white and without vines climbing around it. The huge letters welcoming the establishment were already corroded by the years, and a couple of them were fallen on the grass, but nevertheless, the name could still be read in the dark of the night.

Centre Européen d'études Nucléaires. LPCC

"Lepton-Positron Computing Centre," Jansen said to himself. "Seriously, what are these guys looking for?"

# Chapter Four

The Uninvited

March 15th, Thursday. 7PM. 125 S.A.
Canton du Valais, Monthey, Switzerland.

"It's been three hours," Vanessa said, staring at the motionless fishing pole stuck in the ground and stifled a laugh looking at her boyfriend Adank.

He was sliding a hand under her jacket and with his index finger was trying to poke her in the ribs. He had tickled her, but the truth is that the bastard's fingers were cold as ice, and it made her shiver. Adank blinked and stared at the girl sitting above him on the deck chair. He certainly liked having his girlfriend lying next to him, but for several minutes he felt that his legs had fallen asleep.

"Maybe he scared the fish away with his face," said the other girl, Maggie, sitting near the campfire with her boyfriend, Norman.

"Fish don't work like your equations," Norman said.

"Fuck you," Adank said, yawning.

It was simply a camp-fire, something to eat, and beers. It was no special celebration, just a get-together as an excuse to have a good time and catch some fish. The four of them had been friends for years and took advantage of the reunion to tell anecdotes about how they were doing in their university studies, since they had not seen each other for months. Adank lived nearby as a child and a relative had a weekend house nearby, so they decided to go to the place since he knew it.

Still, it seemed that the fishing venture was not going well.

"Kiss me," Adank said to Vanessa. And he puffed out his lips, which seemed to her as if they were those of one of the fish he was trying to catch.

"No, you stink of alcohol," Vanessa replied.

"It doesn't usually bother you," he said.

"A beer maybe, not a whole pack. I don't like beer breath."

"I'm a bee," said Adank, drunkenly.

The young couple was fairly close to the lake shore, Adank planted his fishing pole close enough to the water in case any fish took a bite. A couple of yards away rested the other three rods motionless.

Norman and Maggie gave up after about an hour, but Adank continued and Vanessa accompanied him until about half an hour ago, where she also set up the rod and lay down beside him. The truth is that Adank had fond memories of the place, from when he was a little boy and his father, along with his grandfather, took him fishing there on several occasions.

"What are you guys doing in there? Come on over here," Norman invited them, stoking the campfire with Maggie.

"Maybe we should go, it's getting late," Maggie said, checking the time on her Neurowire.

"But we've barely, caught anything," Adank replied.

"I don't think they're going to bite later either. And what were you hoping to catch anyway, a mermaid?"

"Maybe I'd have better luck kissing one. A fey mermaid... who doesn't care how many beers I have on me," Adank said, making a thoughtful face.

"You're not that lucky...mostly of them are really dangerous," laughed Vanessa.

"Tactical mermaid," murmured Norman.

"Oh, it bit! It bit!" Adank exclaimed, twisting his head at Norman. "It's yours, you idiot!"

Norman ran over, grabbed the rod and started reeling in the line and it was a big disappointment when he pulled out a small fish. "Tch. Damn, I thought it was a big one. I felt a strong tug."

"Are you sure it's safe to eat fish from this lake?" Maggie asked, sitting on a log near the camp-fire.

"What's wrong with it?" Adank asked.

"This lake didn't exist in the old era," she replied. "Who knows what's down there."

"It's the same waters that flow from the Lemac, only this part has a different name tho’."

"There's a whole city under these waters, right?" Vanessa asked, getting up from the lounge chair, and Adank took the opportunity to stretch out. He felt that his body had fallen asleep from having the girl lying on top of him for so long.

"More like a couple of cities. But they were evacuated before the war," Adank explained yawning.

"What about the enchanted lake then?" Maggie asked.

"Just rumours," Norman replied.

Vanessa watched the calm waters and how the darkness made it impossible to see more than a dozen meters from where they stood. But on the other side of the lake, the lights of the city of Ollon flickered like the stars in the firmament.

Although she was warm, she could not suppress a shiver due to the cold breeze and turned on the night vision in her eyes to better see where she was walking. "I'll be right back," she said walking away from the group.

"Where are you going?" Maggie asked.

"I have to pee," she said, and turned to look at the two boys. "Neither one of you better turn on the night vision, or anything."

"We all have it on. How do you think we're going to see in the dark?"

The girl sighed. She would have to get a few more yards away.

After relieving herself she walked a little way, following the calm swell of the shore. She couldn't deny that she liked the place despite the darkness and the fact that it was getting colder. She kicked a couple of rocks into the water and walked a couple more steps when she stumbled.

Her foot had caught on something.

"What the fuck?"

She fell into the water, wet up to her knees and she cursed her luck. It was already too cold to get her clothes wet, and the pants she was wearing were not the self-drying kind either. She got up, getting her hands dirty in the mud, but when she tried to continue walking, she realised that her foot was once again caught in the weeds on the shore.

No. It wasn't that. Those were not weeds.

Something really grabbed her left foot.

She looked down and saw how something full of mud was attached to her foot. She tried to pull it off, and realised almost instantly that it wasn't dirt from the lake or a plant.

It was a hand.

A bony, muddy hand with big knuckles, held her by the ankle.

She let out a scream that alerted her friends and shook her leg free of the thing. That's when she got a better look. An arm bony as the hand was rising from the lake, and soon she saw a head with long hair poking out of the water and the muck.

"Guys, help!!!" Vanessa yelled.

Her friends at the camp-fire, just fifty yards away, stood up and looked in her direction, alerted by the loud scream.

"What's wrong?!" Maggie shouted.

"Come here! There's something in the water!"

The girl watched in terror as the thing was trying to pull itself up on two arms, but it seemed to have no strength and fell back into the muddy water face down.

Her boyfriend, meanwhile, lulled by the sound of the water, and the beers, had started to fall asleep, when the other girl woke him up screaming.

"Wake up!!!" she cried, the young girl in desperation.

"Guys, I need help now! Come on!" Vanessa kept calling.

"What's wrong?!" Adank asked, not quite sure Vanessa was serious. After all she was the prankster of the group. "Maybe she found the mermaid," Adank laughed, thinking it was a joke.

Maggie watched in the darkness as her friend raised her arms in desperation, calling out to them.

"She needs you, right now! Get up!!!" Maggie shouted loudly.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Adank said drunkenly, trying to sit up as best he could.

It was then that, despite the alcohol, he saw his girlfriend waving her arms from near the water.

"Please help me!!!" shouted the girl, even louder.

"Oh shit, something's wrong with her." Adank said finally, rushing in her direction.

In a matter of seconds, the group reached the desperate young woman, but they didn't understand at first what exactly they were seeing.

"Come here, I can't do it alone," Vanessa urged. She had gone into the water and was waist deep, now trying to pull something out.

The group of three then realised.

"Is that... a corpse?" Norman asked, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

The girl was trying to drag a naked body covered in mud out of the water that seemed to be too heavy for her because of the muddy silt.

"Let it go, are you nuts?! We have to call the police!" Adank exclaimed.

"He's not dead!" Vanessa said.

"What?!"

As if it was some kind of zombie the body shook and turned around spitting water.

"What the heck!" Norman said and went in Vanessa's direction.

He was a very old man, with long white hair and a long beard, although at the time the colour was barely discernible due to the dirt. His skin was so stuck to his bones that he might as well have passed for a mummy. The features of his face were gaunt, and he didn't seem to have enough strength to even stand up. The difficulty in moving him was due to how muddy the area was.

The group of youngsters tried to move him, carefully as they could, while the old man continued to spit water and black mud.

"Somebody call an ambulance!" Vanessa exclaimed.

"What ambulance? There's no address here!" Adank replied.

"Just send the location by NW!"

"Sir, can you hear me?" Maggie asked.

While the two girls took over, holding him by the arms, Norman took over the feet. Adank was too drunk to help with anything.

The old man opened his eyes slightly and they could see that he had a white stare, with misty pupils. He was completely blind. Had he fallen into the water? If so, why was he naked?

Vanessa, who was holding his left arm, soon felt a strong pull on her neck. With a strength that someone so malnourished and bony should not have, the old man had grabbed the collar of her coat and was saying something in a language the girl did not understand.

"Sir! Can you hear me? What is your name?"

The incoherent mumbling continued. Adank could hear it too, he wondered if because of the alcohol his Neurowire's linguistic system might be failing. But they all heard the same thing.

"Your name, can you tell us your name?" Maggie asked.

The old man then softened his grip and spoke in some language that the Neurowire identified as understandable and stammered as he spit out water. "I-I can't remember. w-where am I? w-who am I?"

He had a deep voice despite his weakness, almost sounding metallic in tone. And both girls with their night visions activated and, despite the dirt of the mud, saw that the man's mouth showed perfect teeth. On the other hand, Norman estimated that despite being in such a state the old man must have been quite tall and had bony knees.

The group deposited him on the shore, away from the water, and Norman tried to get him to sit up, but the group was terrified when they saw him begin to convulse. Norman took it upon himself to try to keep his head still, amidst the tremors of the seizure.

"Call an ambulance, dammit!" Maggie mumbled to Adank.

What should have been a peaceful reunion had turned into something unexpected.

Where had the old man who had ruined the evening come from?

To Adank, despite his drunkenness, it seemed that he had seen something similar a long time ago, but he couldn't remember exactly what it was about.

# Chapter Five

**1959
What a strange world...**

September 2. 6 PM. 1959. Ancient Era
Honse Hotel. Little Yamato, New York.

Ishida Yanagida spun his wife around, to the rhythm of the jazz playing in the living room and smiled at her and kissed her. The short-sleeved white dress Masako Yanagida was wearing at the time really complimented her porcelain skin.

She was a young woman in her early twenties, a head shorter than her husband. She had a delicate appearance and honeyed dark brown eyes. One of the things she had done a few days after arriving in New York was to change her classic shoulder-length hairstyle, for a medium bob cut Sassoon, which had pleased her husband and certainly suited her graceful figure.

He, on the other hand, was a young man of about twenty-three, of medium build, though rather thin. His eyes were black, and his hair was slicked back with hair gel. He wore a diplomatic pinstripe suit of Italian cut. Which was kind of funny to him, considering that the business that brought him to New York was handling business to bugger the families of the Italian kingpins in the city.

They were on the top floor of the Honse Hotel, a luxurious and incredibly spacious suite. In itself, the entire interior of the hotel contrasted with the sober façade of the exterior. The suite was almost tastefully decorated in a 1920s style, with dark red upholstered walls. The large windows gave a clear view of the distant skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan's Financial District.

Ishida lamented that he could not stay at the already legendary Attraction Hotel, with its famous rounded silhouette ending in a star, designed by Gaudi in 1908 and completed in 1914, which was very close to the recently opened World Trade Centre, which rivalled it in height. Nevertheless, the Attraction Hotel remained as the structure for which Manhattan was known throughout the world.

Ishida visited it the same day he had arrived with his wife and would have liked to stay there, but since the place also hosted the bosses of some rival families, he had decided to stay in a more sober place that would not attract so much attention. But either way the hotel the young couple was staying in was not bad at all, it was one of the best in Little Yamato, and it suited their personal tastes.

At that moment Ishida had moved some of the living room furniture to dance with his wife and give her a smile.

"What's gotten into you today? You're crazy!" She said smiling.

Ishida Yanagida was actually enjoying his "vacation" away from Japan, although it wasn't a vacation at all. In fact, it was family business that brought him to the United States. His father had put him in charge of a large overseas operation, and that was a great honour for him at his young age of twenty-three. Considering that his father, Enryo Yanagida, had tried to keep him by his side until recently.

Ishida, for his part, although he had great respect for tradition, could not deny that he was doing well in the West. His wife was having a hard time getting used to what would be their new home for a while, but he couldn't deny that she was enjoying it too.

"Where should we have dinner tonight?" Ishida asked.

"Don't you have any bills to see? With the concession issue of the financial hotels?"

"We can see about that tomorrow. The Calzettis were the only ones who could bite us, and now with the investigation by the federals they've stopped all their operations."

"There's no other family that can take over the laundry business?"

"No. I assure you the hotels are going to be the ones calling us when the mountains of laundry start piling up," he said, taking long dance steps around the room.

"And what about the other accounts?"

"Interested in that part of the business?"

"I'm just worried about you. What if they start looking into the family accounts?"

"We have nothing serious here. It's a clean business."

"For now…"

"Don't be like that. We're having a good time," he said, grimacing wearily.

"I'm just worried you're not being careful, these days you're also spending a lot of time in the study, distracting yourself with the books you brought from home."

"Ah, that has nothing to do with it. Those are my uncle Satou's papers and his diary. It's to remember him a little. I think it's because as a child I never paid much attention to the things he said."

"What did he say?"

"It's a lot of complicated theories. I can read you some passages if you want."

"Maybe another day," she said and kissed him.

Ishida really felt like a lucky man to have such a pretty wife. And added to the prospect that he had finally merited enough of her father's confidence to involve him in the family business on a large scale, his happiness was as great as the warmth the sun had radiated that day. Quite a hot day for September.

Because of the happiness of both of them, it could not but surprise them when it happened.

They were both still doing random dance steps to the sound of Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" when they went flying through the air a couple of meters.

There was a wave of heat that filled the entire suite and the windows exploded, producing a shower of glass on the street of Third Avenue. The people below looked up for a moment and ran into the street at the falling glass. A man in ragged clothes, with long hair, and with an oversized instrument in a loaded case on his back, also had to run into the street, but continued to walk whistling, and without reacting like the others around him.

The explosion was difficult to describe. There was no explosion like that produced by a bomb or grenade. It was a sound that resembled a buzzing sound that was unbearable for a split second and then a wave of heat.

It came from the room Ishida used as a study. Papers flew out, along with a glare thousands of times stronger than that produced by a flash camera.

Masako Yanagida flew off and landed on the sofa, which flipped over on impact, while Ishida landed against one of the columns that served as the room's decoration and knocked down one of the indoor ferns at the base.

Masako thought for a moment that it might be due to some retaliation, from a group whose business was being harmed by the Yanagida Clan, but that made no sense at all.

They both got up and there was a commotion in the room, and two of Ishida's personal guards, dressed in dark suits, came in and, with revolver in hand, helped them to their feet. Ishida stared dumbfounded at the study door.

A man had just come out, completely naked and with some smoke coming from his body. His black hair on the right side of his head was singed. He must have been in his late thirties or early forties and appeared to be in good physical condition. He had a piercing black-eyed gaze and a neat beard, but half of his moustache was burned off. His skin appeared to have a slight tan, that Ishida did not know whether to attribute to the explosion, or if he had been like this before. But he was not Japanese, he was Caucasian.

The man took a few wobbly steps and staggered back to his feet.

The situation was so bizarre that even Ishida's guards didn't quite know how to react to the sudden appearance.

What the hell?

Masako let out a shriek when she saw the man trying to go in her direction. Ishida pulled out a revolver from the back of his pants and pointed it at the man.

"Don't move! Who are you?" Ishida asked.

"He's a pervert!" Masako shrieked.

The man finally sat up and looked around the room and saw that he was naked and grabbed a cushion from the floor to cover his groin. Ishida's men tried to catch up with him, but the man jumped back and, using the furniture, tried to avoid them.

"Please gentlemen. I mean no harm," the man said. "Can we talk like civilized people?"

To any observer the scene could very well pass for some kind of bedroom comedy. With a naked man scurrying around the room trying to dodge the guards who were trying to catch up with him, while the woman kept shrieking from time to time, and her husband didn't quite know what to make of all of it.

The man finally went back inside the way he had come, and just looked out with half his head poking out, while three guns were pointed at him.

"I'm not here to cause any harm! Please... Damn it! I thought I'd be in Japan."

"Who are you?!" Ishida asked again. "What do you want?!"

The man this time stuck a hand out the door and held out a dark stone.

Ishida recognised it instantly. It was the stone he had brought with his uncle Satou's papers. To anyone else it might pass for nothing more than a peculiar paperweight, but to him it was important.

Uncle Satou, as he affectionately called him, had not been part of the family, but it was as if he had been. A friend of his grandfather, Kenji Yanagida, they had always remained friends, even though they had followed very different paths in their lives. A close enough friendship that Satou, before his death, caused by a cancer of strange origin, left in his grandfather's possession many of the papers of his research in the field of physics, along with plans and ideas that never came to fruition.

Ishida was not very good at it, but his uncle's journal was always good reading for him, because it made him question things about the nature of the world. It was more than a book of hard science, a compendium of mathematics, plans of strange machines, mixed with his uncle's often philosophical thoughts. Not to mention drawings of strange creatures of geometric appearance.

Among the papers, Satou left many things, but he had left in special care two stones that he obtained in his childhood, and that had a special relationship with his diary and research. Ishida brought one along with his uncle's writings, for perhaps there was some key to unravelling the mystery behind it.

"Where is the other one?" asked the newly arrived exhibitionist.

"What?"

"Where is the other part? It's safe, isn't it?"

What does this man mean? Ishida thought.

The man leaned half his body out of the doorway, while with the other hand he was still holding the cushion over his genitals.

"Who are you?"

"Ishida Yanagida, right? Pleasure. I'm sorry this is the way we met... My name is Jack."

"What do you want?" Ishida asked, without lowering his gun.

"How about a whiskey and some underwear to start? A towel could work too. I have a lot to tell you Mr. Yanagida."

Everyone in the room, with the exception of the quirky newcomer, looked at each other as if they didn't believe the situation before their eyes.

The last part of the song at that moment was the only sound that filled the room.

# Chapter Six

**The old fey**

March 16. Friday. 5AM. 225 S.A.
Canton du Valais, Monthey General Hospital, Switzerland.

Enfer and Ignis came through the hospital doors, throwing them wide open. Causing some of the nurses circulating at the time to startle at the sudden appearance.

It was no wonder.

Enfer was a rather thin-looking male fey, with pronounced cheekbones and a goatee almost as white as his eyebrows and skin. He appeared to suffer from some sort of albinism, which even made his eyes look like two flaming yellow pupils. He wore a dark-coloured light overcoat, and a white T-shirt, with black pants and black loafers and covered his head with a woollen cap.

From the lapel of his coat hung a badge, which had five stars engraved in high relief at the top. In the middle was a bearded lammergeier's head, on what looked like a mountain range. On the lower part only one word could be read: Pyrene.

Ignis, on the other hand, was a brown-skinned fey girl, with long ash-blond hair and yellow eyes, which seemed to flash with every glance. Her ears stood out because they were slightly longer than those of her companion. She wore a light blouse, with metal ornamented parts, with bracelets on her wrists and a metal shoulder pad on the left side, richly decorated with bas-reliefs. She wore black pants and shoes with metal parts also decorated. A badge, the same as Enfer's, was fastened to her pants.

They were both going fast, because they had been called hours before. And they would have arrived at the hospital sooner, except that Enfer wanted to talk to the witnesses as soon as possible. Three of them were still frightened, and the fourth had not been able to testify because he was under the influence of alcohol. So, they had to settle for the testimony of the two young women and one boy, and later, when he was sober, they could talk to the other witness involved.

The pair simply showed their badges at the reception desk and continued their journey, turning down one of the corridors towards an elevator, when they were stopped, by a white cylinder-shaped robot, with a semi-spherical head that smiled at them, projecting the smile on the photochromic film on its head.

"Good morning. Where are you headed?"

"Floor 5, ICU wing, room 4," Ignis said.

"They're expecting us," Enfer added.

The robot checked their badges, and through its system entered the secret fractal code of the badge. Almost instantly he was able to corroborate their identities and stepped aside, as the smile appeared in his head again.

"Have a good day, agents."

The elevator disc whisked them up in less than a second, and the two passed like a wind down the 5th floor corridor, heading for the Intensive Care Unit.

Ignis knocked softly on the glass door, drawing the attention of a doctor, who was talking to an Aesculapian-nurse type droid, in charge of intensive care. The doctor rushed to the door.

"Agents," greeted the doctor, with dark circles under his eyes, and looking like he had been on call all night. "I'm glad you've come. I didn't want to go home without first seeing you and seeing how you're going to proceed."

The two agents greeted him, and he led them to a window that showed through to a secluded intensive care sector, which only seemed to have one patient at the moment.

"Is that him?" Ignis asked.

"Yes," the doctor nodded.

"Those kids weren't lying when they said he was really old," Enfer said.

"It's really a relief that you've arrived. I'm not quite sure how we can proceed with this patient. He got here at about eight o'clock at night, and the police have also been interested. Someone from the welfare sector came, but he's not in their database either. We thought he was a CotW, but he's not in the records either."

Through the window of the room, they could see a really old body, which at that moment seemed to be resting with assisted respiration, inside a medical glass capsule. He had white hair, as well as a long white beard. He was too thin, and it seemed that even the hospital gown he was wearing was too big for him.

"Is he having breathing trouble?" Enfer asked.

"No. The assisted breathing is just a precautionary measure. When he arrived, we thought we had to clean his lungs, because he had mud from head to toe. But we were even more surprised when we ran a non-invasive diagnostic test and found no mud, or any other substance, clogging his lungs. Although that was not the weirdest thing... well I guess you know if you read the report..."

"Can we take a closer look?" Ignis asked.

"Yes," replied the doctor, ushering them into the room.

Both Enfer and Ignis stood on either side of the capsule to better examine the old fey.

"Wow," Enfer said, examining his ears. "How is that possible?"

"Well, it's not uncommon, but we haven't seen an old fey show up in decades. At least that we know of," Ignis said, observing the old man's hands with his thick knuckles.

Here and there she could see that he had scar marks that blended into the wrinkles of the skin.

The old man's face was unremarkable, except for his wrinkles, but as far as Ignis could tell, he seemed to have certain Asian features. But he had a parchment-like skin that made it difficult to discern his age. He might have looked eighty years old, or perhaps a hundred years old in human time measures, though he was in a grim state. But if he was a fey that could change, although it certainly had been a long time since they had seen an old fey.

One of the characteristics that the fey had, at least all those that possessed a humanoid form, was that for some reason they were always youthful in appearance, ranging from eight or ten years old, to around thirty or late-thirty years old, with a mature appearance. In fact, for fey with humanoid characteristics, this was the majority range, comprising at least 85% of all humanoid feys.

There were too many theories as to why this could happen, and its connection to the Other Side. But the most accepted theory, was that originally the fey humanoids had been human first, before becoming fey. That could not be denied, because there was already proof of it. There were too many studies, and analyses, that could get to know where the human had come from before becoming fey.

This was done by performing anthropological and anatomical studies, as well as blood analysis, bone density, isotopic studies, and a whole variety of other studies, that could determine with an accuracy of 80% where the human that became a fey had come from.

The fey humanoids had been humans who, for some reason, had disappeared from the world. Their existence was completely erased, without leaving any trace behind. It was as if some strange DE mechanism rewrote a person's timeline, and they disappeared completely without leaving anything behind. They disappeared from the memory of their relatives, acquaintances and friends. All the papers, ID, photographs that linked them to the world disappeared. Nothing remained.

But the situation was different when they arrived. They came into the world with no memory of their previous life, nor where they had gone during all that time, and sometimes, some of them, came back with strange abilities.

But where the memory had disappeared, science intervened, and thanks to that it could be determined quite accurately where the human had lived, before becoming a fey. Although, beyond that, there were other problems, such as that there were almost always strange cases, where there were studies that determined that there were lapses of hundreds of years, or that others had not even been born.

Even if a fey was found that seemed to come from a period of time of a few years, or a few tens of years, it did not mean that it could return to its family or relatives. The process of forgetting went in both directions. Even if a fey could be related to a certain family by blood, no one would remember it, and the fey in question would not remember that once belonged to a certain family either.

Different was the question for the Chaos children, pseudo-feys or the so called H-fey, who were basically born from unions of feys and humans, but who acquired immortality at a certain age, that could enter in the same range that had stopped the age of their human parent before transforming into fey.

Beyond that, old-looking fey were a rarity and not common at all. That was the reason the case had come to their attention, and Pyrene's operations desk had sent two of their agents to take over the case.

Pyrene, an organization with jurisdiction over five European Union countries for the investigation of DEs, had agents in close contact with Euro-pol. This was the reason that Euro-pol almost immediately alerted the nearest Station to where the event had occurred.

"So he really is a fey?" sighed the doctor.

"Well at least he looks like one, although his ears are a bit smaller than usual," Enfer pointed out.

"Have you been unable to carry out any kind of internal study?" Ignis wondered.

"Only non-invasive with the scans. We really freaked out when we tried to draw blood and the extractor couldn't pass through his skin. We even tried with needles, but it didn't work, they broke when we tried to pierce the skin. Somehow the dermis hardens when we try to penetrate it. We couldn't even put a catheter in."

"He hasn't voided?"

"No. We haven't been able to give him IV fluids either. We've been hydrating him orally a little bit when he came in, but now..."

"What time did he go into coma?"

"Around dawn," the doctor stated.

Ignis looked at Enfer and snorted, putting her hands to her hips. "What do we do?"

"We have no way to treat him, if we can't get a more detailed analysis," the doctor explained.

"What does the scan analysis say?"

"Despite being in a coma, he has great brain activity, which may be why he fell into a coma. His entire brain looks like a Christmas tree. And of course, there is this…this is what made us doubt whether we were dealing with a fey or some kind of metahuman mutation."

The doctor typed a few commands on the surface of the capsule, and a hologram of the old man's entire body popped up, where through the skin could be seen his organs and skeleton. "This is what scared us the most."

Ignis and Enfer looked confused for a moment, but he had already won their interest.

"What is this old man?" Ignis asked.

"That's what we wondered when we saw his organs and skeleton. We have treatments for over 156 different types of fey, we even have a veterinary wing for fey animals and try a few… but this is the first time we've seen it."

"This old man..." Ignis began.

"...He has no fey core in his heart," Enfer finished, looking astonished.

"We tried to look for it elsewhere but sure enough. There is no core. Not to mention the organs and what about the skeleton?"

The hologram showed an anatomy that was human-shaped, but the organs, to a greater or lesser extent, seemed to differ quite a bit from those of the usual humans and fey humanoids. Perhaps it was an abnormal type, but the fact that it had no core really caught their attention.

That was another feature that differentiated the feys. All of them possessed a core near their heart, or at least almost all of them, which like the Fractus had organic and fractal characteristics, with a system of tendrils that used to coil around the heart. It was not the same fractal structure that was usually found in the lungs, nervous system, neuronal or coronary system, which is naturally present in all living beings.

The composition was something that remained a mystery because, although studies had been carried out, as soon as one wanted to study it in depth, it became fused with the coronary system of the heart and did not pass as anything more than an anomalous structure in the heart. Once it was no longer studied, the structure changed again, exhibiting a nucleus shape that could vary in its structure, although it often seemed to keep certain polyhedric geometrical patterns. It had been given the name, somewhat jokingly, of the shy organ, since it seemed to hide when it was studied.

So, the old man was much rarer, because although it was not possible to make detailed studies of the cores of the fey, it was possible with other methods to determine their shape and structure. But one that was not present even with such non-invasive studies was very rare.

His skeleton was different as well. The femurs seemed to have a different type of structure while the shoulder blades had a different shape as well. The spine also appeared to have a series of tiny protrusions that extended a few inches into the inner part of the body. It must be an abnormal fey type, although they could not be sure if he had any ability or not.

The doctor touched the head part of the hologram, and then expanded that part, and another part of the arm bones, until he enlarged them to a size almost as if he had put the bone under an electronic microscope. "See those notches in the bone? At first, we thought it might be some kind of degenerative bone disease. But they are not localised to any one part of the body. They are all over the body and, from what you can see, it's as if they were produced by some kind of structure that at some point was attached to the bone."

"At some point?"

"Yes, because we don't see residue of any kind now. It's as if every bone had some layer of some material that caused those nicks at some point, but whatever it was it's not present at the moment. It's a shame we can't do a biopsy to find out what's going on."

"What's that on the back?" Ignis asked. In the lower part of the hologram there was a darker portion in the lumbar area.

"The scan detects it as bruising. Apparently, he has poor circulation in that part."

"The kids told us he couldn't move, and they couldn't get him to stand up. He has reflex on the legs?"

"Minimal, from what we've been able to observe."

"They also said he's blind. Is that true?"

"Yes, apparently he's been blind since birth, has complete pupillary discoloration, compatible with congenital cataract."

"Blind, with limited mobility, and fey..." Ignis sighed.

The three looked at the capsule not quite sure what to say.

"Strange fey indeed," Enfer snorted, "but no stranger than others we've already observed."

"You people haven't detected him?"

"I started running the recon program as soon as I entered the room and no. It's not in the Pyrene database, or any of the known agencies."

"Our satellites haven't detected any MAP emissions where he appeared either," Ignis continued.

"So, is it possible that he has been hidden all this time?" the doctor asked.

"We don't know. We are collaborating with local forces to get more information, but so far nothing has come up. There are no reports of him in any agency."

"If he really is a fey, it's like it's a bad joke,” the doctor said in a heavy tone “I mean what kind of immortality can have someone who is transformed into a fey with such a weak body?"

"We don't know if he's weak or not yet," Enfer admitted.

"You people have the authority now. I don't know what you want to do," the doctor said.

Enfer pursed his lips into a grimace and looked at his companion. "Shall we move him?"

"I think it would be best," Ingis said. "We have a near facility on the French side, where they can study him and maybe help him if he regains consciousness."

The doctor seemed genuinely relieved, even though he didn't say anything.

"Do you think we can move him upstairs, to the airport for transfer? We'll return the capsule when we switch him to one of ours," Enfer suggested.

"Sure. No problem," nodded the doctor.

He continued to inform them of the little they had learned from the studies, and that if he regained consciousness they would have to send a report to the hospital as well. There was a possibility that the old man might become a new discovery, and for the doctor it was a case worth keeping an eye on as it developed. He didn't like having to leave patients like that, but given the circumstances he had no choice but to leave the task to Pyrene, who had more experience dealing with feys. If the two agents had delayed it was likely that someone from Nevermore would have arrived and it would have turned into a jurisdictional nightmare, so the doctor was glad at that point that everything had gone smoothly.

Filling out all the forms and preparing for the transfer took no more than twenty minutes, while two droids took care of carrying the old man in the capsule another fifteen floors up to the roof, where they waited for Pyrene's transfer ship, a light Delta-TAB.

The ship did not take long. Both of them were already worrying about what could happen and they called for the transfer beforehand. At least until they were sure that the old man had not regained consciousness, and gave no explanation as to where he had come from, they would have to move him to be cared for in better facilities suitable for feys. A fey of unknown origin and without a core should bring new possibilities that had not been contemplated in the already vast medical and biological encyclopaedias concerning feys and their different types.

Enfer watched as two of Pyrene's medical staff loaded the capsule into the ship and prepared to leave for the Grenoble station on the French side, where they had better medical equipment for feys. He and Ignis would have to stay behind, to go to the police and fill out more forms in person for the transfer of jurisdiction, as well as make further inquiries in the area, to see if no one had seen the old man before.

"You've got to hand it to that doctor, he was right," Ignis said, arms folded as she watched the ship soar through the skies.

"About what?"

"What kind of son of a bitch universe grants you something like immortality with a body so old and with so many problems?"

"Yeah well, it's not like we have a choice as to whether we want an ability or not when we come back to earth."

"Have you ever thought that we do?"

"What if we had a choice?"

"Well, none of us remember anything about the Other Side. Have you ever wondered what would happen if we actually chose the Other Side, and our mind is wiped when we cross over?"

"Well... if that's the case, I must tell you that my ability is really useful in winter," Enfer said and took off his cap.

The moment he lifted the cloth from his head his entire head burst into flames. His hair was fire.

Enfer ran his hands over his head, without burning as if he was scratching his flaming scalp.

"Too bad I don't have any sausages now."

"My head's not for cooking your breakfast…"

"You said it yourself, it's useful," Ignis said smiling.

"Fuck you," Enfer said, pulling out a cigarette which, when he put it in his mouth, ignited on its own as if by magic.

Just a few meters away the hospital nurse droids looked at him as if at any moment they were going to throw him off the roof.

The no smoking sign was only a few meters away from him.

# Chapter Seven

**Over The Clouds**

March 18, Sunday. 125 S.A.
United Kingdom Airspace.

Rumenia Ruzicka, also known as Rum, leaned over the security railing, looked down and took a sip of her coffee.

She was a human girl of young appearance, who liked to dress mono-chromatically, and in her attire at least when she was not working, the colour black predominated. She had slightly wavy black hair. Her pale skin stood out against her dark attire. The only colour on her face was her light brown eyes and freckles on her cheeks that seemed to give her face a blush that was not really there.

"Why don't you look?" she asked, turning around and smiling innocently.

Some meters away from her Michael Levin, also known as Stan, looked at her with a blank face, sitting on one of the deck benches. He had a slight pallor on his face, as if at any moment he was going to puke loudly and pointedly enough to shoot down one of the birds fluttering around the flying ferry.

Stan had a tougher look than his partner. He had dark eyes, prominent cheekbones and blond hair, although at that moment it seemed as if the colour in his face had disappeared due to the discomfort he felt.

He didn't like the ferry, or any kind of transportation that had a certain reminiscence of a boat.

They slept for a couple of hours during the early hours of the morning, while they put the vehicle in automatic gear and headed to Glasgow. From there, they left the vehicle, changed to casual clothes, and taken the first transport that could get them out of the country. They would have preferred to go directly south, but they could not get passage faster than the second morning ferry to Northern Ireland.

Passage on the ship was rather scarce, and most of the people were on the floor below them, so they had the deck all to themselves.

For Rum, the view of the Firth of Clyde pleased her. They were barely travelling above the sparse morning low clouds, and the Orbital Belt appeared blurred to the south, since at that hour it had changed from polar to equatorial orbit, so they could see the sky clear from east to west.

In Stan's case, although he felt sick from the altitude and vertigo, he was trying to dress his partner in crime in different virtual outfits secretly through his Neurowire. He was watching her in a classic bunny outfit at the time, when a new movement of the ferry reminded him that he was just over 3000 meters off the ground.

"Ugh..."

"If you're feeling that bad, let's go below, at least with people around you won't notice we're in the air."

"No. No need. I need air."

"I guess we're not the only ones," Rum said, looking to the far side of the stern.

Stan looked to the same side and then noticed.

There was a man standing with his back turned, hands in his pockets, facing east. He appeared to be quite tall, with blond hair, combed in a quiff style. He was wearing white pants, a Hawaiian shirt, and flip-flops completed his portrait. It wouldn't have been unusual in any other month of the summer, except that it was still March and at an altitude of ten thousand feet. It didn't matter how they looked at it, it was weird. Or maybe he had enough enhancements in his body not to feel the cold at that altitude.

Rum and Stan looked at each other and she shrugged as all response.

Stan looked away and sank further into the bench. He put his hands on the leather jacket and there he found the only reason he felt it was worth being aboard the ferry.

He fumbled with the small cube between his fingers. Rum saw the movement in the pockets and smiled. "Don't wear it out from touching it so much," she said and walked over to sit on the bench next to him.

The cube. A fortune in their hands, but also a problem.

"How are we supposed to change that thing?" she asked.

"We have to find a safe way to sell it without getting thrown into Dragon's Peak," Stan admitted grimly, and deactivated the augmented reality he was dressing Rum with.

"Yeah... the problem is finding a buyer rich enough. We can't sell it to a government and say we found it."

"We could... but they wouldn't pay us its real price."

They both looked at each other, pursed their lips and sighed wearily. The truth was that it could be months before they could find someone interested enough.

The Edinburgh job. Stealing the identities of two MCITHQ forensic technicians, then stealing a body from the crime scene and transporting it to the abandoned pier, where the delivery was to take place. The payment for the job had been a fractus cube that was worth a fortune on the market because it was so high-end.

During the time of payment they had been so surprised that, as a means of payment, the stranger had offered a cube, that they never worried about the real problem that constituted. How they were going to get a buyer. No matter how they looked at it, they had a fortune on their hands, but for the moment they had no way of getting it, also there was a high possibility that others might want to finish them off for it. And they would have to be careful to find a buyer.

Why did the guy offer something so valuable in payment for a corpse that wasn't even complete to begin with? Rum thought.

Rum, remembering the strange fey that accompanied him, couldn't help but shiver again, not to mention that some of the man's parting words echoed in her ears. Undoubtedly that job had been one of the strangest in a long time.

They continued to argue for a few moments. Long enough for Stan to forget about his nausea, and they were so engrossed in their conversation, that they didn't notice when the strange man who had been standing a few seconds ago in the stern, was now leaning against the deck railing in front of them with a ridiculous smile on his face that seemed to come out of nowhere. He wore dark, thin-rimmed glasses on his aquiline nose and looked at them without any discretion.

"…" Stan and Rum looked at him in silence, and wondered how much of the conversation they had been having was overheard.

After a few awkward seconds, Rum could no longer contain herself. "Excuse me, can I help you?" she asked in a polite tone, that didn't disguise her anger at being scanned by the eyes of the strange individual.

"We were having a private conversation," Stan said, in a less polite tone. There was something strange about the man that he almost didn't understand.

"Oh, yes. My apologies," the man said, in a soft tone. "I suppose discussing something as valuable as a fractus core, which value you can't just advertise on the market, is a rather delicate subject. Isn't it?"

Rum's smile disappeared and Stan stiffened his gesture. They didn't need to look at each other. They already knew each other well enough, to know what the other would do in such a situation. They had left the usual weapons unarmed, compressed in the bracelets, in the meagre luggage they were carrying, but they had two much more discreet polymer weapons in case something went wrong.

They drew the guns quickly and pointed them at the head of the man, who smiled and did not flinch in the first moment at the presence of the guns, although he did move quickly for something else. Stan, when he drew his gun so quickly, did not notice that something else escaped from his jacket and rolled onto the deck.

As if he were some sort of ninja acrobat, the man bent down and kicked the priceless cube. It bounced off one of the other walls behind Stan, traced an arc over their heads and the man caught it between two of his fingers as he sat up. Rum blinked in confusion at the strange movement, but it was too late, the man had moved between them like a lightning bolt, and the next second the weapons had disappeared from both of their hands.

"Miss Ruzicka, Mr. Levin, please," the man said, without losing his friendly tone, while examining the strange cube. "I simply wish to converse. I have something to offer you, in exchange for your services."

Stan, with his mouth ajar, watched as the stranger played with the cube between his fingers. "We're out of business. We retired... a few hours ago."

"I still haven't told you what I'm offering."

In less than twenty-four hours already two people had called our names.

We've gotten careless, Rum thought. "How do you know who we are?"

"I have ears in many places… for a long time. Information is much more valuable than money... if you know how... rather when it should be handled." The man held out his hand and offered the two small pistols. "They wouldn't do anything to me either way."

Stan and Rum took them carefully and wordlessly.

"You're not human... Aeon?" Stan guessed. He had already ruled out that he was a fey due to the absence of pointed ears or any other abnormal features beyond his odd appearance. Although the issue of the ears was not one hundred percent certain, because it could be that he was wearing some form of camouflage.

"Not exactly. But, for conversation's sake, you can say am I. You can call me Janus. On the other hand… I don't think I'm the only one who isn't exactly human. Right, Mr. Levin?"

Janus walked between them and pointed to the deck benches. They had no choice. He had already shown them that he could be faster and, more worrisome, he could put their identities in the hands of who knows who. He had already made it clear that information was his business. If it wasn't an Aeon it could be an artificial intelligence excommunicated from the Hive Mind for some crime.

They both put away their weapons and sat down in front of their host who kept moving the cube amusingly between his fingers. "Your exposure to an DE is what caused you to acquire that metamorphic shape-shifter ability, right? At least in your body, I mean." Janus asked Stan.

"What's the point? If you already know everything about me, then you must have read all the reports," Stan said, annoyed.

"Oh yes, but to be frank with you, I'm not really interested in who you are. What I am interested in is what you can do for me right now. Which, believe me, would bring you a lot of benefit," Janus said with a fancy car salesman's smile.

Stan frowned at that statement. His files were sealed, if the man could access them it meant he really wasn't kidding when he said his job was information.

"We already said we're retired," Rum said.

"I don't think you'll be able to retire until you get a buyer for this object. I don't deny that it would be of great interest to certain governments or agencies, clandestine or otherwise. But the problem is you need to get the money, so you can consider yourself out of the game for good."

"…"

"What I want to offer you is to pay what this little fellow costs," Janus said, as he passed the small cube between his fingers.

Stan and Rum looked at each other sideways. The whole thing smelled very bad. It was too much of a coincidence that a buyer appeared out of nowhere, only a few hours after the payment had been delivered.

Janus smiled and threw the cube at Rum. She caught it with one hand and put it in her jacket. But that had already interested her.

"How much are you offering?"

"Enough to buy a small planet or live a life of luxury anywhere in the Solar System."

"How much are we talking about?" Stan asked.

"Enough..." Janus said and took off his glasses, revealing dark eyes whose look was totally different from the smile on his lips. "If I had wanted the cube, I would have simply thrown both of you overboard and kept it. The money is not the issue here. It's the service you can do for me."

"...What do you need?"

"Not just a what... but rather a what, and who," Janus said and, making a few motions with his right hand, sent two images to the Neurowires of the two rogues, followed by a strange schematic of what appeared to be some kind of strange camera or machine.

They both examined the pictures and frowned.

"Is this a joke?" Rum asked.

"No. I need you on a certain day, at a certain time, to abduct these two individuals, to transport them to another location where someone else will be waiting for them."

"Alive... I guess? We are not assassins."

"Yes, alive."

"She's a raven!" Stan said, incredulously.

"Shouldn't be a problem once you disable her Neurowire. Ah! But, first I need the machine in the schematic. It's the first thing I need before people. In fact you can accomplish the objective of the machine and the first individual in the same place."

"You want these two people, the machine and in exchange you would buy the cube from us?" Rum asked hesitantly.

"That would be it. It's very simple."

"Who is the man?"

"No one... here and yet, but it was someone important."

"What do you mean?" Stan asked.

"Time... it's a strange thing," said Janus, smiling and putting his glasses back on. "Do you want more details?"

# Chapter Eight

Together

The two feys had been engaged in a long discussion. Mai, Head of Special Operations and special agent, and Tony, Deputy Director of Special Operations, had been discussing the pertinent issues of the day.

[Those bastards,] Mai snorted, a bit grumpy.

[Well you can't do anything about them. You know what they're like,] Tony said, smiling slightly, and shrugged his shoulders.

Tony's office was quite spacious and had modern office furniture with glass partitions, giving the impression that some objects were just floating in the air. Like the huge desk, whose visible part was only the top, or the red armchairs whose glass legs blended in with the black marble floor. On both sides of the office there were some libraries with old volumes and shelves with different objects, mostly related to the Haitian culture, where Tony was from.

Mai was sitting in one of the armchairs. They were discussing some daily issues of other agents' missions, when Tony gave her some unexpected news regarding Mai's custom weapon. Beyond that, Mai was not present on Siren Island, which was where Tony was. It was simply a connection through the Neurowire to discuss some issues. The whole office environment was simply projected in the mind of the fey girl with long silver hair.

[The last time I needed Azusa I was in the middle of a mission, and they almost asked to pee in a cup before send her to me,] Mai continued to rant.

[Well with what happened at the lake they want to make sure you can use her when you need it. Deliver the replica to someone at the French Base and receive Azusa.] Tony smiled. [Liz has it, it was delivered to her last night.]

[I thought so,] Mai sighed, and her ahoge moved from side to side..

[There was also an attack at Pyrene's Grenoble Station in the early hours of the morning. Pyrene personnel are on repair work because of the assault,] Tony said.

Mai frowned and looked at him as if she had misheard. [What?! Why didn't anyone notify us? What happened?]

[They captured the two Vatican criminals, but a few hours later they were released during the attack on the Station.]

[How could that happen?]

[Apparently it was all done by a group of assault droids and TB-bugs, but most of the chaos was caused by one person.]

[Did anyone died?] Mai asked .

[No, thankfully. But the damage to the infrastructure was extensive.]

[Did we send some support?]

[I already took care of that, Leign sent an FRT group to help with the issue.]

Suddenly she felt something gently touching her cheek. Tony could see how the girl's cheek sunk as if an invisible finger was pressing against it.

[I think we're arriving.]

[Get over there.]

[Are you coming tomorrow?]

[And leave who in charge here? We have diplomatic visitors from Ghana. Send my congratulations in advance to Shin and Liz for me. I'll send them a message tomorrow too.]

[I will. Good luck. Let me know if you need me for anything. Especially with what is happening at the Vatican and Grenoble. Let me know if Van finds anything new.]

[You take care of the reception tomorrow. It's a special occasion for the three of you, I will take care in case something new happens in the Vatican.]

[Thank you,] Mai said. [Disconnect.]

**Ï**

**March 20, Tuesday. 10AM. 125 S.A.
Nevermore Base No. 2 in French Territory
Pic de Grèzes, Languedoc-Roussillon. France.**

Tony's office lost consistency, as if each of the objects were disappearing one by one, until the whole scenario disappeared from her mind and everything was black for a moment.

As she opened her emerald green eyes the first thing Mai heard was Carissia's voice from the cockpit.

"Shin, put on your seatbelt, don't make me kick your ass!"

Mai was in the seats on the side, inside a spacious ship that contained several secured cargo containers.

The ship was one of the Corven-21 series, characterised to be used for transporting high-ranking personnel in Nevermore, although due to its ample size it could even be used to carry heavy transport and even had an attractor device based on the Chaos Dynamics system to lift cargo from the ground, without the need to land. Although that was not what mattered to Mai at the moment.

Diving deep into Another Earth or having a deep-dive conversation was a lot like falling asleep. And the truth was, she had almost been talking to Tony for an hour. She felt a napkin being swiped across her mouth.

"You were drooling," the fey man said, smiling at her. His hair was slightly messy and blue-black in colour. The part of his hair at the nape of his neck was tied in a ponytail that reached almost to his waist.

Shin was standing next to her. He was the one who had stung her cheek. He was dressed simply in a T-shirt and dark pants and boots.

Mai, on the other hand, because she had had to say goodbye to the Kazakhstan authorities in a formal manner, because of what had happened in Kolsay, was dressed in a dark blouse, a short white jacket, that matched her pants of the same colour, and high heels. She had tied her long hair up in a high ponytail, leaving aside the long braid she had been wearing for the past few days. In the long ponytail could be seen a series of dark blue locks that contrasted with the rest of the long silver hair.

Both of them looked really different in some ways beyond height. Mai was a short fey girl, with a delicate appearance, while Shin was almost two meters tall and athletically built. But even though they were both feys of different types, they were both partners, field agents and also something more than that.

Field agents, partners, boss and subordinate, protégé and protector, friends, lovers and confidants, and both had learned in the last few years and months how to trust each other's back no matter the danger. Months in the physical world, but years in the world of shared dreams.

Even when they both knew they were hiding things from each other, that was a different matter.

Shin hated lying to her, but he had to. Mai hated lies even more, but she couldn't claim to be honest about everything either. They both loved each other and could trust each other's backs. Even if the universe conspired to keep them from telling each other some things.

But there was something else that made the relationship special. Mai and Shin were not the only ones in the relationship. It was a three-person relationship. A ménage à trois.

Now, in France, the three of them would finally be together and they were confident that everything would work out.

"What happened? Are we arriving?"

"Yep," he nodded, as he fastened his seat belt.

Mai looked into Shin's heterochromic eyes. It was the first time she had seen Shin look a little tired in all the time they had been together. He had vision in his left eye, which was yellow, but his right eye was pale blue. Yet she could detect slight signs of tiredness in both of them.

They had left early from the Astana Base for France, but they had rested enough the night before. Beyond the paperwork, and countless repeated questions about what had happened at the lake, the truth was that it was not so bad that they were tired. However, since the night the meteorite core flew away, Shin had seemed a bit distracted and tired. It probably wouldn't make any difference to others, but she had been with him for so many months that she could tell there was something strange.

"Are you ok?" Mai asked.

"Yep, don't worry." Shin said, smiling at her.

"Camila is at the base. I'll have her check you out."

"That's not necessary."

"It's the reason she came from the island so, you suck it up," she told him, as she checked her seat belt. She hadn't taken it off the whole trip, due to the fact that she'd been plugged in the whole time talking to Tony.

"You're too cautious."

"And you don't. Your head was crushed, and you were underwater for hours."

"And you fought giant invisible deer and a monster made of mushrooms. We're even."

"My head was not crushed," Mai repeated, looking at him with a mixture of anger and concern.

"I think I told you, that I was once pulverised by a turbine, right? That time it took ten years for my body to regenerate. I woke up in the Indian Ocean," Shin explained, as he pulled out his automatic translator from his pants pocket and put it to his right ear.

The very mention of it gave Mai a shiver, "Yeah, Liz told me that too. But you're still going to get checked out. Maybe someone put a whammy on you, when you were unconscious underwater."

"...You're going to have to explain to me the scientific definition of the whammy," Shin said worriedly.

"I mean, there was someone there that we couldn't detect."

Shin's expression became slightly serious.

The finding, which Hinata and Nikolai had made, certainly made him uneasy, but he didn't know what to make of it.

He remembered that, at the moment before crossing to the other side of the forest, he had felt a watching presence but, with what happened afterwards, he judged that it was the fungus with the filaments.

The two silhouettes that had been discovered had changed that. Although, the night before all the radiation discovered by Hinata had already disappeared from the scene, and with it the last clue to find out the mysterious identity of who had been with them there. What could have been taken from the tree before their arrival was another issue that worried him, but it would do little good to worry Mai, who was already worried because the amount of work and because he was feeling a little tired.

The latter did not worry him too much, and Shin simply judged that in a few days he would be fine.

There was the issue that he had lied to her about the fight at the lake, but he knew he couldn't tell her even if he wanted to.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine," Shin said, trying to smile at her.

"We're here," Carissia announced.

The ship landed so softly that neither of them realised at what point they had touched down. Shin erased the worries from his mind and simply unbuckled his seat belt. The cargo side opened and they both walked down the ramp, accompanied by Carissia.

The pilot, a redhead with pigtails and blue eyes, in her tight-fitting suit, was almost Mai's personal pilot when it came to taking her to places for official visits. Aside from the fact that Mai and Shin often simply used Mai's car to move between countries investigating cases, when the situation called for it, Carissia would go to the location to pick them up to take them somewhere that required Mai's immediate presence. Because Mai was not only a special agent in the field, she was also the Head of Operations for the Nevermore Institute's Special Investigation Division.

Carissia was not just a pilot either, for if she was not required to be on the ground, she would most likely be in orbit in her personal Orbital Knight's Station waiting. A giant mech ready to arrive in case Mai needed support. Although due to what happened in the lake there had been some unforeseen events with the huge robot and it had been transported the day before.

The sunlight blinded Shin for a moment. Inside the plane it was not dark, but he was certainly having a heightened sensitivity to light as well. Still his one eye quickly became accustomed to the vision.

The station was at the foot of a small hill surrounded by a small forest and a little more than one kilometre away. the buildings of a nearby city could be seen. Inside the base perimeter everything was fenced off and, in the distance, Shin could see how some soldiers were guarding the fence, and some canine looking droids were also prowling around the place.

The security standards were what one would expect from the place, even if the city was too near.

The Languedoc base was Nevermore's base number two in the French territory. Although it was known for not being very active, like the number one station located on the outskirts of Paris, the truth is that it was huge. The main building was a gigantic block with logistics, hangar and mechanical functions of more than 100 meters high by 300 meters long and 100 meters wide, and the site also had three runways for deployment and landing of ships. In the closest part to the runways there was also an automated control tower. The place had more than a hundred humans and, some dozens of feys and aeons working on tuning vehicles, robots and other equipment that usually arrived destroyed.

At the same time the station had another fifty soldiers from the French army who, along with another twenty Nevermore security agents, served to guard the place, not counting the security droids.

It also had dedicated logistics personnel, medical wings, recreation and rest areas for rotating personnel. Many special field agents, who were in the vicinity investigating a case, could simply stay overnight at the station and the next day continue their work until the investigation was completed.

This was not unusual, as the station's logistics division could deploy agents who were in the vicinity or passing by to investigate something. The same was true of all the stations around the globe. The connection between the different stations served as a mastermind to watch for a Dark Event to develop and send the nearest agents to investigate.

It didn't matter if it was a sighting of some strange creature or something more ridiculous. If the artificial intelligences ruled out that it was a mistake, the agents had to investigate.

However, the only agents on the station at the time were on other business and it was a normal working day for the repair shop personnel.

Shin watched as the ship alone began to move across the runway in some unknown direction. Surely there was another facility nearby where ships and other large vehicles were kept.

One detail that caught Shin's attention was that on one side of the huge doors of the building was painted the Nevermore raven logo, but also in a larger size was a wolf's head. He had already read about that. Apparently Nevermore's base No. 2 had the name La Bête du Gévaudan, and it was related to an ancient legend about a creature that had terrorised the place hundreds of years ago. Many legends related the creature to a large wolf that claimed several victims in the area. Apparently at some point the nearby towns had adopted the nickname to refer to the base, and the base commanders had adopted it willingly.

They entered the huge hangar building and inside Shin observed how there was activity everywhere between the different modular parts.

The place was full of movement here and there. Between small ships, vehicles, offices, modular rigging platforms. For a control station, and machine shop, it looked more like a military base, with a giant hangar. In some parts, hung some huge screens, attached to platforms that gave news from various parts of the world and another projected geological, or atmospheric data provided by the Constellation System of Nevermore. Other screens also projected news from various planets of the Solar System, along with the news of the day in Earth. Apparently nothing bad was happening, or if it was happening it was not being covered.

Although Shin could not continue to admire the activity of the place for long. The vision in his one eye twitched, and the next moment he was looking at the hangar roof, where some mechanical cranes were moving. The same thing happened with Mai.

And then they saw her.

They had both been knocked to the ground, and on top of them was a girl with hair as long as Mai's but straight and blonde and tied in a ponytail.

"Liz!" Mai said.

Lizbeth Londonderry showed a fangy smile and hugged them both.

"I wanted to see you two!" She said and sunk her face into Mai's chest, breathing into the slit of her blouse, which tickled Mai.

"Stop it! Not here!" Mai said, blushing.

"You smell so good," sighed Lizbeth, sniffing at Mai's chest, who was trying to get out of Lizbeth's sudden embrace.

She wouldn't have minded in a different situation, but she felt that some of the activity in the place had stopped to look at them. While Mai's presence there was important, the people at the base did not necessarily have to stop their activities to greet her.

Shin smiled to Lizbeth and stroked her head, to which she responded by moving closer to his face and kissing him. Then she helped them both to sit up.

Lizbeth was a little taller than Mai and had a rather slender figure and wide hips. She had long eyelashes that gave her a certain mischievous air, that was not disguised by her lime green eyes. Although many people overlooked it, anyone who got close enough to her face could see that she had some imperceptible freckles on her nose. Her mischievous, and somewhat teasing, expression was part of her personality. But it was also part of her charm.

She was wearing a shirt with the first buttons undone, which due to the effusive greeting allowed Shin to see that she was wearing a red bra. She had much larger breasts than Mai who was an A cup. She was also wearing a dark jacket and pants of the same colour. She was not wearing casual clothes which meant that she had been working until recently, or just hadn't had time to wear something more comfortable. She was, like Mai and Shin, a special field agent.

She was also the main reason why Mai and Shin were in France. The truth was that they cared little about the Council at the moment. They both wanted to see her. It had been more than a month since they had been together.

The three of them brought their faces close together and although Shin had to bend down a little, the three of them sealed their greeting by kissing.

Not far from them three other people were watching the scene. One was a tall, bald human male, accompanied by two fey girls. One had black hair tied in two pigtails and the other girl had brown hair.

They were Philip and Zi, who had arrived a couple of hours earlier and Oxy who had arrived the day before along with Siren Island personnel. Philip and Zi were wearing gym clothes, because they had been working out around the station, while Oxy was wearing an orange one-piece dress with a tactical coat, a bit baggy for her.

"No matter how many times I see it," Philip said and chuckled, putting his hands on his hips. "I don't think I'm ever going to get used to seeing Mai kissing like that."

Next to him, Zi was eating a high-calorie muffin with a milkshake. At her feet a small pug dog with crystal fur sniffed near her sneakers, looking for sweet crumbs that fell out of the muffin. The animal was the spoils of the Edinburgh case.

"It's what you call an Eskimo kiss," she said and slurped some of the milkshake.

"Eskimo kissing is with the nose, apologise to all the Inuit!"

"Well from here it looks like they're sniffing each other, so it fits… I guess," Oxy observed, one hand on her chin, trying to look serious.

Neither Lizbeth, nor Mai, much less Shin, were aware of the comment as they were busy. Both Mai and Shin had been hugged by the blonde girl.

It was the kind of relationship the three of them had and they couldn't care less what the others thought about it. Although, as they parted, they did notice that some gazes were fixed on them while others were casting cold, dagger-like stares at Shin. They didn't last more than a moment though and the hustle and bustle quickly returned. Mai looked around slightly flushed, but smiled.

"They've taken French kissing to a whole new level," Philip said, folding his arms, and Oxy and Zi nodded in unison at the comment.

Lizbeth averted her gaze to Carissia, who meanwhile was staring at a distant point at the far end of the hangar with bright, but sad eyes.

"What's up? Do you want some affection too?" Lizbeth asked and then latched onto the redhead's neck and gave her a resounding kiss on the cheek, but Carissia didn't even flinch.

She actually looked sad.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Lizbeth urged, releasing her, and Shin turned to look at where she was staring.

On the far side, three huge robots could be seen on platforms from which a shower of sparks rained down from the welding machines. One of them was red.

"My child," sobbed Carissia, looking at the huge mecha, which at that moment was attached to a platform several stories high and on which several technicians and mechanics were moving around parts.

The huge robot had arrived a day earlier from Astana. It had not suffered any major damage, but during its descent to Earth, due to Mai's call, it had damaged some parts of one of the legs that had cushioned the blow on landing. At the time Mai had made the call, several technicians in orbit were busy doing a routine check and one of the parts failed to engage properly. It was nothing significant, but it had been disassembled to check that everything was in the right place, and to change the wings.

The three of them tried to cheer her up a bit but Carissia seemed really sad to see that her robot had some parts disassembled. They couldn't blame her, after all she always treated him like a living being, even though the robot was not an Aeon, which Carissia was.

They stood for several minutes comforting her while Lizbeth, told them about her adventures of the recent days. Although they were in constant communication, it was different now that they were together. And Lizbeth was quite hyperactive so, it was convenient for her to say everything she had to say at once. But that didn't bother them, seeing her really made them erase the thoughts of what had happened in the last few days.

But it didn't take long for a memory of what had happened to appear.

At that moment, looking at another platform nearby, it was Mai who gasped. On the vehicle platform Shin saw something he knew all too well.

"My car," whined Mai, looking toward the same spot.

What is it with these machine-loving girls? Shin thought.

There stood Mai's rally-fighter, which had been dragged into the lake and then pulled out. It had arrived along with Carissia's robot and was also undergoing repairs. It had been stripped of its bodywork and various parts were on a huge table nearby, while other parts were connected to other equipment reading diagnostics. There were also the drones and among them Shin's favourite one, which looked off at the moment.

Moving around the vehicle, working busily, were three girls with tails wagging back and forth.

Shin knew the owners of those tails well. Two of them were the ones who had set up his turtle device and one of the custom guns Shin used as a field agent. They were not only in the division that developed weapons and special equipment, they were also part of the mechanical team that serviced the vehicles of the senior agents in the SID. Their names were Kon and Kanna.

The owner of the third tail was a little taller than the other two girls, and her name was Camila.

Kon and Kanna were two fey girls of the Kitsune type. Both sisters had fox ears on their heads and tails. The differences between the two were that Kanna was a head shorter than Kon, and Kon had a rather large chest. In addition, Kon had short, light brown hair, almost the same colour as Oxy. Kanna, on the other hand, was blonde and had longer hair.

Both of them covered their fey ears with the famous Schrödinger's hairstyle and they only showed their fox ears, hiding their other two ears. Both were dressed in dark tank tops, and cargo pants and from their waists hung a belt with tool pouches, Kon was especially distinguishable as she was wearing also a yellow jacket.

Both belonged to the Research and Development Division at SID.

And then, there was Camila.

Camila was a fey wolf with a wheat-coloured tail and long hair. Her ears had slightly white tips and like Kon and Kanna she covered her human ears with Schrödinger's hairstyle. She was dark-skinned, red-eyed and with some almost invisible straight marks on her arms. She wore a long white robe, a red shirt that was somewhat detached and a black skirt that showed off her hips. Her knee-high tactical boots made her look even taller than she appeared, as they had heels of fifteen centimetres.

Shin knew her well because she dropped by quite often in the Teratology division, even though she didn't belong to the team. Camila belonged to the medical wing, and also the forensic division of the SID. She was a bit eccentric and given to strange experiments that used to give Mai headaches.

Suddenly the wolf girl spotted the four of them and waved her arm in the distance, which with the movement dishevelled the hairstyle that covered her pointed ears. Kanna and Kon stopped and waved as well. The two sisters wagged their tails and ears happily from seeing Mai, who they had not seen for several months. The movement of the ears puzzled Shin who wondered if the other pair would also move in the same way, although being covered with the hairstyle it was a mystery.

The truth was that Schrödinger's hairstyle was incredibly popular since the twentieth century of the Ancient Era among the feys. To cover their pointed ears some feys used their hair, although in species that had another pair of ears such as nekomata feys, kitsune, and other species that was more complicated. It was no longer necessary to hide the extra ears, but still the Schrödinger's hairstyle was almost the most common among feys even though everyone could give it their own particular style.

The name Schrödinger's hairstyle came from the famous Schrödinger's cat mental exercise, although applied to ears. The normal fey ears could be there, but they could not be seen, hence the name.

"What the heck?!" Mai suddenly said, on the verge of tears welling up in her eyes.

On one side of the platform lay the car seats that Mai was quite careful about, because they were sporty and no longer manufactured. Mai walked towards the platform followed by Lizbeth, while Carissia had disappeared at some point towards her robot. Shin was thinking of accompanying the two girls but, remembering that Camila was there to examine him, he slowly backed away and walked towards the group of three others who were watching the scene with amusement.

"Come here. Join the group, loser," Oxy greeted with a gesture that reminded Shin of how a bully would pick a fight.

"Who are you calling a loser? Squirrel in a hyperglycaemic coma," Shin said, and they both bumped fists in greeting.

On the other side Mai, holding hands with Lizbeth, looked at the discarded seats with pity and Lizbeth with slightly flushed cheeks.

If only these could talk, Lizbeth thought.

"Why the sad face Izumin?" greeted Camila, in a singsong voice, leaning against the platform railing.

"Why did you pull the seats out like this?" Mai decided to ignore the funny way Camila had called her, she wasn't the only one after all that use that sort of nickname.

"I'm sorry Izumi," Kanna said, lowering her head a little. "The truth is, they were muddy too."

"That's true," third Kon, "it would be best to make new ones with a printer, same quality and all."

"These were vintage," Mai pouted and Lizbeth took the opportunity to hug her from behind while rubbing her belly. The girls saw the gesture and blushed a little.

"Oh! You have dark hair," said Lizbeth, who had just noticed the change of colouring in Mai's ponytail locks.

"I'll most likely be halfway done by tomorrow," Mai told her, without taking her eyes off the seats, but stroking Lizbeth's hand, which was scratching her belly.

Kanna watched the gestures between the two, then looked at Shin in the distance chatting with the others and smiled nervously, trying to hide her blush with her hair.

"What's wrong?" Mai asked.

"You tell her?" Kon asked Camila.

Camila just smiled and walked over to Mai and Lizbeth.

The two sisters returned to their work with the car, they had enough for the rest of the day. They had to change the interior panels and adjust the interior space compression mechanisms to make it more comfortable for the three of them, since starting the next day the Blue Midnight team would receive a new member and change its name as well.

Mai's car had not received an upgrade in years, and it was necessary to upgrade the safety. Changing the interior space was vital as well. In cases where they needed to be on a stakeout somewhere and the deferred space inside the vehicle could make them more comfortable. Not to mention that if they were caught out at night in the middle of nowhere, they could sleep much more pleasantly.

That was the main reason why the girls were blushing.

Camila began to explain it by approaching them and began to speak in a low tone, but with a smile that showed a certain mischief.

"Liz-tan, Izumin... you both know that the automatic cleaning system activates itself, right?"

"...Yeah." Mai couldn't understand what it could have to do with discarding the seats.

The automatic cleaning system consisted of a special nano-particle spray that, when no one was inside the vehicle, could activate and clean the interior of any dirt or debris. It was no longer necessary to waste hours cleaning a vehicle as was done hundreds of years ago. Although certainly in some cases it was not very effective, such as what happened in Kolsay where the car had basically received tons of dirt, mud and fungus filaments. Still, with a multi-sweep cleaning system it would be enough to clean it, without having to get rid of the sport seats that had taken Mai quite some time to find.

Camila started to explain. "Well, good. The system is very good, it can clean off any remaining dirt without any problems. No problems with that."

"W-what's going on with the cleaning system?"

"Well a multiple sweep analysis like ours can uncover anything that the cleaning system missed."

Mai's face was starting to turn a shade of red and Camila approached both girls separating them, but hugging one on each side, while her voice had become only a whisper that only Lizbeth and Mai could hear.

"There was enough genetic material from the three of you to create a new country."

Mai was as red as a tomato. For her part Lizbeth simply smiled nervously.

"Your samples Liz-tan are a month old but yours..." she said, then looked at Mai smiling, "are only a couple of weeks old."

Mai hid her face in her hands.

"I'm not judging you, just be more careful. Erasing the record of cameras and cinetic movement in the car is not enough for our systems."

"S-sorry," Mai said.

Camila had achieved her goal. To see Mai completely red.

She wasn't doing it out of malice. Given that Mai always seemed so serious to talk to, and given her rank and that she had been used to dealing with dangerous situations for most of her life, it was rare to see her relaxed, unless it was in the intimate circle of people who knew her best. Seeing her who could act like a normal girl was important.

Balancing the state of mind that always seemed to be in seriousness due to the Dark Events, was also important. Shin was the one who had taken care of it in the past few months, not only as her research partner but also as her boyfriend.

Seeing her act like a normal girl really took a load off Camila's mind, because it indicated that she was fine and not focusing her mind solely on horrible events related to the DEs. Still she couldn't deny that it was a nice sight to see Mai so out of her serious personality.

"Don't bother her," Lizbeth grumbled, hugging Mai.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. It's not a bad thing. But...I mean. You guys have access to the best hotels in the world. Is it really necessary to have sex in the car?"

At that Mai hid her face in Lizbeth's jacket.

"What's wrong with that. Sometimes we're miles away from any lodging. Also is not sex we are making love. Big difference!" Lizbeth said.

"I guess that's true," Camila admitted, with a serious gesture and nodded. "May I ask something?"

Mai showed her face slowly. "W-what?"

"At least you' guys are keeping it safe, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Liz was caressing your belly just now, Izumin."

"I'm not pregnant!" Mai exclaimed obfuscated.

"She likes belly fondling," Lizbeth admitted.

"I'm just worried that you guys aren't taking care of yourselves."

"We are taking care of each other," Mai nodded.

"It's just... well, Shin is a being from another universe. So technically he's an alien."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well, he's compatible with both of you but ,we honestly don't know what would come out of the union of him and a fey. A moth-fey, a banshee-fey and a alien..."

"We're not pregnant..." they both shook their heads.

"Well, I'm glad. The last thing we need is a monster coming out of you two."

"You're really mean!" Lizbeth said.

"Just cautious! You guys saw that old movie called Alien, right? That didn't end well for the crew of the Nostromo."

"Shin is not a xenomorph!"

"Let's hope not. The last thing I want to see is a chest-buster coming out of you two," Camila expounded with a smile, now full of malice.

"You're really horrible!" Mai sentenced.

Still blushing, she then ordered them to discard the seats without further ado.

Although Lizbeth wanted to keep them as souvenirs in something she called a “Museum of Love” and Mai didn't want to know what it was about.

# Chapter Nine

**The real armour**

March 20, Tuesday 10.40AM. 125 S.A.
Nevermore Base No. 2 in French Territory
Pic de Grèzes, Languedoc-Roussillon. France.

Shin hadn't taken notice of the girls' conversation with Camila, for his part he was interested in something else at the moment.

"Hmm..."

"What's wrong?" Zi asked.

Shin bent down and tried to grab the pug, but the small dog dodged him, by hiding behind the fey girl with big appetite. The animal had become quite attached to Zi over the past few days, but the team was hoping to leave it on the island, so that he could be cared for and its strange fur could be studied. Philip didn't want to admit it but, he also liked that dark glass ball.

"It's really weird," Shin affirmed studying the animal, and then stood up looking at Zi. "And you? Are you all right? Nothing happened to you inside the mirror box?"

"No, fortunately."

He had read the report in a spare moment. The case had interested him because there had been a sighting of a creature he knew a lot about. But, beyond that, several strange things had happened in the case. Like the explosion where some bodies had appeared that had no recognisable ID, apart from one of them, that was like the duplicate of the detective that had assisted Philip and Zi during the case.

"And where is Thor?" Shin asked, looking for the dwarf. He knew he had also been involved, but hadn't seen him around the base.

"He has stayed in Edinburgh, to resolve some issues and in case anything else comes up," Philip replied, grabbing the dog, who struggled a bit trying to free himself from his grip. Zi quickly snatched him away, in fear that the animal would get too scared and end up pulling sharp crystals out of his fur and end up hurting Philip.

"And Claris?" Shin asked again, watching as the dog looked very pleased in Zi's arms.

"She's already in Paris, with the issue to form the team. Looks like Jeremiah let her take care of it," Oxy informed him, though she was more interested in watching whatever it was that Mai and Lizbeth were talking about with Camila on the platform.

"Van found a clue about the criminals in the Vatican, right?"

"Yeah. But the Vatican is still on alert regarding the robber, and because last night someone released them and attacked one of Mari's stations."

Mari, also known as The Lady of the Pyrenees, was the name of the fey girl who had the entire Pyrene staff under her command. Shin knew her very well, for if many referred to him as the fourth, Mari was number three. They were the first feys to constitute the new generation, after the old generation disappeared in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Shin and Mari, along with six others, were known as the Group of Eight.

Despite that, he had not seen Mari since he reappeared the previous year. That didn't stop him from feeling worried about an old friend, though.

Philip told him what had happened and what little information had leaked out.

"What were they looking for?"

"Well… in Vatican, they're not sure yet. Although, if what they think is right, it's something really strange, and something they lost track of a long time ago. It is a case of a strange machine that was manufactured in the twentieth century." Philip informed him.

"I see," Shin nodded.

"So, what do you think?" Philip began.

"Of what?"

"Mothman? Our case." Zi inquired.

"Oh! Right. I don't know what you want me to say, honestly. Everything I know about Mothman is already in the files. In fact I'm surprised that after two centuries there is no more data on these creatures."

"So, you think the same thing," Philip pointed out.

"Of what?"

"Many think they are several creatures and not just one," Zi said.

Shin nodded. "Yeah. I think it has to be a group at least, there are reports of sightings in different locations that were occurring at the same time so, it must be more than one."

"What the bloody hell are they looking for?" Philip asked.

"Who knows. But, what's certain, is that they really show up when something big is about to happen."

"But, not always," Zi commented.

"If that were so, we'd be seeing Mothman every time an DE occurs," Oxy pointed out, with a slightly cynical smile.

"You were present at one of the first reported incidents, right?" Philip inquired of Shin.

"Close. The Silver Bridge wasn't an DE. It was a structural accident, nothing supernatural. But months before, and days before the incident, that thing was flying around Point Pleasant, in West Virginia, and there were all kinds of anomalous events, including the sighting of Shadow People. After that, reports started coming in from other parts of the world. Brazil, China, Ukraine, Mozambique, Spain."

"But, they've always been there anyway."

"Yes. Just because it started being reported back then, doesn't mean anything. As far as I could research, these things were being reported as far back as Babylonian times, and there are similar descriptions in many cultures although with different names. Owl Men, Demons of the Ruins, Neckless, Giant Butterfly. It is curious, because in many cases they have been called giant owls rather than moths. They have always been there."

"Like the Shadow People..." muttered Oxy.

"Whatever they want, if they want anything, we don't know what they mean."

The group continued their heated discussion of the case, but came to no conclusion. Shin was used to it. He himself had racked his brains once upon a time as well, trying to find explanations for those creatures, and no matter how many theories he had sketched out. He was no closer to reaching a conclusion now than he had been in the past.

There was the matter of the mysterious shadow girl, that Zi had seen inside the mirror, which would give them material to discuss for hours, without coming to any conclusion either. The strange message that the girl had left behind still echoed in Zi's ears.

While Oxy explained a related theory of her own, as to how it was possible that these creatures could move between dimensions, Shin received a handbag from a small fey goblin. He had almost forgotten his handbag where he carried the essentials. By essentials he meant that inside was the turtle backpack, which could actually carry several times its weight in the compressed compartments. He actually thanked the goblin for the gesture, considering he had been distracted. It was a really bad thing that he forgot his bag, since in there was his trench coat.

The goblin said something like "no problem" in a language Shin had never heard before, but which the automatic translator in his ear recognised.

The number of voices, and different languages, at the base puzzled him a bit. While many of them were in French, there were others speaking in Spanish, English, Chinese, Turkish and even a language he didn't think he had ever heard before. While the translator translated everything correctly into his right ear, he could hear the other languages in his left ear.

The Babel translation system translated all languages instantly in the minds of people with Neurowire, which meant that no matter what language each person spoke, they would all understand each other. As far as learning languages the traditional way was still used, but it was what could be called quite unusual, as everyone left the matter of translation to the Neurowire system.

Basically being bilingual, or polyglot, could be considered a hobby, rather than a skill for communicating between people.

Shin, on the other hand, spoke quite a few languages, which was not a problem but, since his arrival, he had noticed that even tones and dialects had changed. More than two hundred years had not passed in vain, even the languages had undergone changes in their structure.

There were even new languages and others that had disappeared were now spoken elsewhere. For example, he heard that, in certain colonies on the Moon, a language was used that seemed to be a combination of Polynesian and Hawaiian. The same on some of the moons of Jupiter, where Navajo and Quechua had resurfaced due to the settlement of personnel coming from the respective countries where those languages were dying. Mars was another matter. The Aeon could speak any language but, for formal matters among themselves, they used a kind of mathematical language using Greek and a new form of neo-Latin.

The Type One Civilisation of Humans, Aeons and feys had not only abandoned the old ways of obtaining energy, but also through technology had brought down the tower of Babel.

As far as Shin knew, the name Babel was nothing more than something commonly used, but the original translation system had another less flashy name in its early days. The Mezzofanti System, named after one of the greatest polyglots in history. However, over the years Babel had curiously become the most common name for the instantaneous translation system. The name was an irony of what would happen if all the Neurowires were deactivated, and everyone was left without understanding each other.

Be that as it may, it was a relief for Shin to see that at least the spoken and written language still existed. As for example, in the news he could still read the headlines, the same with books like the one he owned, and also, though somewhat more annoyingly, advertising.

If civilisation had relegated all information transmission to Neurowire alone, he would know nothing, because all forms of communication would be mental. In such a world even vocal cords would most likely be unnecessary, and would atrophy over a few hundred years.

Each of those with him spoke different languages, but he could understand everything they said, even though the tones and pronunciations had changed. Oxy spoke his classic Hawaiian Island English as he had known her in the Old Era, Philip had a strong British accent, while Zi spoke in Mandarin Chinese. Further away, he could hear the voices of Mai and Lizbeth speaking in Japanese and British English respectively.

"That thing again," Philip sighed, and pulled Shin out of his reverie.

On one of the huge screens, hanging from a platform near where Mai and Camila were still arguing, news was projected and on one of them could be read the headline: Selenite multimillionaire woman swindled by a fake "astronaut", who claimed to need money to return to Earth. And on the screen could be seen an angry woman talking to a journalist. On one side of the screen was a smiling man on a horse, who was apparently the fake astronaut.

Shin could not laugh, since he suffered from a slight facial paralysis, the most he could do was to draw a slight smile. But at that moment, he couldn't help scratching the side of his lip and smiling a little.

"What the fuck is that?" Shin said, with a chuckle.

"Oh yeah, I guess you don't know..." Oxy said, smiling.

"It's not funny," Philip said, crossing his arms. "I fell for one of those a long time ago when I was young."

"In my day it would have been very funny, believe me," Shin said. "Is that true?"

"Yes. It's called the astronaut scam. It always comes back, from time to time," Zi explained to him.

"How can people fall for that?"

"It's more common than you think," Oxy mused.

Shin remembered that there had been similar scams in his time. It was very common at that time for people to meet each other through chat rooms on the Internet, in order to establish a long-distance relationship. And sometimes, there were cases of scams, where one of the parties would ask for money to travel, so they could meet each other. He would never have imagined that in the future these tricks would evolve on an interplanetary scale.

The interview was cut short to give way to new movie commercials. Apparently superhero movies were still a regular occurrence, but Shin wondered what was going on with those superhero names.

Tail-Pluger VS. Ass-Breaker: The rematch.

They seem to be superheroes who only focused on the rear of their enemies, Shin thought. Although Oxy looked excited looking at the screen, it must be because Ass-Breaker had an albino frog on his shoulder that reminded her of her squirrel.

He couldn't probe much further, though, when he felt a hand pat him on the back.

"Come on!"

It was Camilla, with a big smile, that Shin felt didn't bode well.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm going to give you a check-up!"

"What? Why?"

"Because the last one you had was a month ago, and your head was destroyed just a few days ago. So let's go!!! let's go!!!" Camila said, as she pushed him.

Both, Mai and Lizbeth were joining Oxy's team, but Shin could see how Mai and Lizbeth were blushing for some reason.

Mai grabbed her purse and whispered softly, "I told you that you needed to get checked."

"Yes, mommy," Shin snorted, with a face of circumstance giving up, knowing that he could not escape Camilla's clutches.

The news of the scam had disappeared and Shin could see how another news item about a mysterious pirate radio station had appeared, before the door of the medical bay closed.

Camila dragged him into a room, with an overly white light that made him blink as he entered, and she activated a function on the glass to make it dim on the outside, since one of the walls was simply glass. The place was equipped to attend emergencies, with several beds separated by white acrylic walls and medical instruments. In the farthest part, there was an intensive care unit.

Shin looked at the glass window worriedly. "You're sure they can't see us right?"

"Always so shy. Just take off your clothes."

"Hey, I just wanted to make sure I wasn't seen naked by everyone outside.."

"It's not lack of modesty, it's just that you come from a different era. Even Mai has no problem entering the mixed showers on the island."

Shin sighed and took off his clothes, remaining in his underwear, while Camila put different sensors on his body, and then through her Neurowire she read the results of the readings. Even though Shin was someone else on the team, she couldn't deny that deep inside she was impressed by the anatomy. Slightly muscular, but she didn't envy him at all. Someone who had those scars on the skin couldn't have had anything good happen before becoming an immortal.

He was different from the feys, despite being categorised as one. His regeneration was on a completely different level from other feys.

Depending on the fey, a wound could take anywhere from a few hours to a couple of days to heal if it wasn't too serious. Beyond that, feys could actually die if they suffered an injury to several vital organs. Many died, but others simply suffered a wound that could not be healed, and could simply turn to smoke or ash and disappear.

But Shin, regardless of the type of wound, could always reintegrate even if he had suffered injuries to vital organs or was reduced to particles. That and a couple of other characteristics made him a fey unlike any other.

An immortal. And among them, due to his strange frequency and armour, he had been classified as a Kellian. One of the rare species and one that, to the knowledge of magical academies, could be called a cosmic aberration. A being probably from other universe.

Camila knew that, but that didn't stop her from treating Shin as one of the team. The categories and their strange definitions could be left out of the subject. She was solely focused at the time on diagnosing that he was in full condition and that there were no disparities with previous results.

There was nothing abnormal about the results that had been taken a month ago by another of the doctors.

"Is there anything wrong?" Shin asked.

"No, not at all. Maybe you're just tired from too much activity. Have you had sex very often lately?"

"... Excuse me?"

"I mean besides the sessions in the car."

Shin pursed his lips, not knowing whether to answer or not, but there was no need as Camila saw with her own eyes how Shin's crotch underwent a change and how the pupil of his left eye dilated.

"I'll take that as a yes," she said smiling. Those were good memories for him, well done girls!

Shin doubted that Mai would have told her about an intimate situation, and he didn't think it was likely that Lizbeth would either. While she was less embarrassed, she treated relationship issues seriously and wouldn't do anything to make Mai angry.

"Why did you say about the car?"

"Cleaning system..." she said smiling.

There was no need for her to explain further, Shin was able to put the missing pieces in order. "Can I put on my clothes now?"

"No. And take off your underwear too."

"Is that necessary?"

"Yes. So I'll have a complete diagnosis, and I need to check the armour too. Now lie down on the table and relax."

Shin reluctantly obeyed.

"I feel really bad about this."

Camila looked at his crotch and nodded.

"An erection? Pff... It's a normal reaction, honest if I must say. Relax."

She decided not to tell him that she had compared him to a monster from a movie, just a few minutes ago, but certainly the size of Shin's member matched his stature.

"I'm going to ask you some questions to test your neurological activity."

"Ok."

"Name?"

"Shin."

Standing a little further away from the room Mai and Lizbeth looked around worriedly. The room had been mirrored, as Camila told Shin, but Mai had pulled out her moth antennae and through the ventilation system she could hear the sounds inside and, in her mind projected an outline, of what was going on in the room.

"I think he's in the mood," Lizbeth said smiling. She, in turn, had simply slipped through the security system and looked through the cameras.

"I don't know..." Mai said nervously. She really hoped that Camila wouldn't dig any further into the details of the car. She didn't like spying like that, but she was a little worried about him, even though he had told her he was fine.

Camila checked the results of the answers to the questions and marked them all with a thumbs-up sign.

"I want to test your ability to think on the fly. You see an enemy coming toward you with a gun. What do you do?"

Those stupid questions again, he thought. "Knock him down?"

"Try to respond without thinking about physical contact. A scenario where you can only use firearms and you can't reach him to take the gun away and reduce him."

"...Shoot him first?"

"Okay. Now if he shoots back, what do you do?"

"Run away."

"And if he comes after you?"

"Shoot him again?" Shin didn't quite understand the questions, but from the nonsense of them he was already imagining where it was all coming from.

"That's good. Next question. If you were walking down the street and saw someone fall off a building, would you stop to help or keep moving?"

"I would take a measured leap to…"

"No skills... quick response."

"Keep moving?"

"Why?"

"Because it might be dangerous for me."

"Right. How many questions have I asked you so far?"

"47"

"Ok. When did you start working with Mai?"

"Last year."

"Hmm. Let me ask you something then. Would you rather be able to fly or breathe underwater?"

"Fly."

It was a coherent answer, since after all his armour allowed him to be underwater, so he would prefer to fly, even though with the presence of jet-packs on the island he had already experienced solo flight.

"Answer me with the first thing that comes to mind."

" Okay."

"Lake."

"Wet."

"Snow."

"Cold."

"Liz."

The image of Lizbeth smiling in a long-ago sunset flashed in his head. "A wheat field."

"Tunguska."

The image of the people he had lived with at that time flashed in his thoughts. "Family."

"Table."

"Sand."

"Skyscraper."

"…"

"Skyscraper," repeated Camila.

" Tall," he replied, swallowing hard.

"Mai."

"...Rain."

"Number of questions?"

"57"

"Okay. That's all."

"Finally...Why all those questions anyway? I'm pretty sure Justin gave them to you, didn't he?"

"Well, yeah. But, come on. You can't blame him. Your head was literally crushed. We'd be remiss not to corroborate that your neurological functions are working properly. Since we can't put you on a NW, we have to test you in other ways to be sure."

"I'm just feeling a little tired that's all."

"Which is odd, since you've never felt this way anyway."

"Just give me an aspirin and I'll be fine."

"Yeah, well we have better meds than that now."

"I don't suppose you're not going to give me some experimental pill, are you?"

"No need. And on the other hand, I don't know if you know this but, a good portion of the drugs that are used today, come thanks to studies that have been done on feys. I myself was a test subject."

Shin had read something about that. After the war and with the feys living in coexistence with humans and Aeons, studies had been done on the first medicines to delay aging and other serious illnesses thanks to the feys. Since the fey were long-lived, even though they could die because other reasons, they were a perfect laboratory to carry out controlled studies over time.

Still, since Camila was quite eccentric, Shin couldn't rule out the possibility that she would end up giving him a pill that would not only take away his fatigue, but also make him grow a tail like Nikolai's.

Still it was a good thing that, thanks to the series of questions, he had lost his erection.

"You can put on your underwear," Camila ordered him, as she pulled the sensors off his body, minus the two on his temples.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Show me the armour, and get on the weighing scales. I want to see if there's any discrepancy with the weight from last time."

"Do you want me to destroy my drawers, with the armour on?" he asked, not happy at all, and Camila chuckled. “Not funny.”

Shin stood up and walked to the scale without putting on his underwear and stepped on. After all when the armour formed on his body the cloud of metal particles used to break through the clothes.

Camila stepped back a little and watched as the black cloud of particles came out of every pore of his body and agglomerated around his frame in a pattern similar to that of a ferro-fluid. After a few seconds, there was Shin, but covered from head to toe, in what looked more like a metal-organic suit that fit his body.

It was different from how it had looked in the lake. The shape was much more streamlined, without the amount of scales and had no edges like the one he had worn before. The armour was composed of several plates with an angular design in some parts, most precisely on those that separated the muscles, but as a whole it was all smoothly adjusted to his body. In some parts, and if viewed in great detail, there were low relief marks drawn, following strange patterns that reminded Camila a bit of Celtic knots, but the design was rather different. Attempts had been made to decipher the symbols, but no matches had been found with other known or ancient languages.

Camilla circled him and examined his back. The armour was always formed starting from his back, where Shin had a black mark on the skin like a Litchberg pattern, almost like a burn. Although at that time it was covered by the thin plates of the armour. On the back, at the level of the shoulder blades, it was a little different, the design was, to say the least, as if it looked incomplete. Almost as if something was missing. She had the impression that there must have been something on the shoulder blade plates because it had sockets for something.

"Let me know if you're going to touch my head or you'll hurt yourself if you try to touch my hair," Shin warned, looking at her through the mask.

The mask hadn't changed much, although some patterns had also appeared. The ears were now covered by plates that matched the pointed shape of the ears. And the hair, though it looked normal, Camila knew it had been coated with the same film of particles and the strands were like the blade of a freshly sharpened razor.

On his feet and hands the armour ended in small claws.

The armour despite being made of metal was rather metal-organic as it fit Shin's body with precision in each of its parts, and allowed him a very natural organic movement. Even his crotch whose penis and even testicles had also acquired a metal structure. That was the main reason why the Council had ordered him not to take off his pants, if he had to wear the armour. Because, even if society was more permissive about showing the body, they could not allow an other-dimensional alien to go around wobbling a metal penis while fighting. Shin could modify parts of the armour by creating a metal plate, but still the ban was not lifted. Shin didn't mind though, he had almost always kept his pants on when he had fought in ancient times because of the same issue.

Although at the time he had modified the front part to hide his member, he had formed a layer of the same armour to conceal it.

But there was no doubt that the design was different from the one he had worn at the lake.

That was not strange, he had already found that the armour often behaved according to his state of mind. During his awakening at the lake, he had awakened in haste and fear, when Mai had disappeared on the other side, which was why it had appeared in a much more rustic form.

"Are you feeling all right?" asked Camila with a frown.

"Yeah, why?" Shin asked, making the part covering his face disappear.

"Look at your feet."

Shin looked down and on the precision scale he noticed for the first time something that surprised him.

"Did you check me before the armour?"

"Yes. 74 kilos, same weight as last time."

The scale read 78 kilos.

"This is weird," he said.

Shin knew that with the armour on he weighed 85 kilos, and without it 74. That had never changed since the first time in 1925, when he had checked his weight with and without it. But now he was missing some kilos.

"Has it never happened to you before?"

Shin wondered too. While it was true that he had always checked the weight and it came out the same, he couldn't be sure that at some point the weight of the armour had changed for some reason. Although it didn't feel any different at all.

"The electric arc doesn't work on you, right?"

"No…"

"Even if the armour weighs less?"

Shin turned around and looked into her eyes. The wolf girl's eyes seemed to glow for some reason. "I'm not sure," he said and made the armour disappear.

Outside, Mai and Lizbeth hadn't heard the last part, because they were a little embarrassed to see the test that way, so they just waited with the others for Shin to finish. After all the main examination had gone normally, the weighing was nothing more than a formality for the medical report. Yet, they missed the part where Shin discovered that he didn't weigh the same.

And also Mai and Lizbeth had plans. They were going to spend the rest of the day showing Shin around and rest a bit waiting for the next day to go to Paris, on their way to the Council.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Here's Azusa," Lizbeth said, and handed her a small metal box that she took out of her pants.

Mai's eyes sparkled and she smiled. "Hold her for a second."

She brought her hands to her right ear and pulled out an emerald rhomboidal earring and exchanged it for the one inside the metal box that looked identical. As soon as she touched it the new earring glowed with an aquamarine hue and went out.

"I think Azusa is happy too."

"I hope so, it's been months since I've used her."

"I hope you don't have to wear her any time soon, I miss your dark hair."

"Does it look better on me?"

Lizbeth took one of the platinum locks that slipped like silk between her fingers. "I like both."

The truth was that every time Mai had to use her custom weapon on some mission, which she had obtained in the Great War, her hair turned completely silver and it could take weeks to months for it to regain her dark colour. When she had come to earth she had platinum hair for several years until it started to turn dark.

She then kept her hair dark for several decades, although she noticed that, whenever she was in situations where she was fighting, sometimes a few platinum strands would appear. It was in the Great War when her hair turned completely silver again, after using Azusa, and she kept it that way for several months.

Medical studies had determined anyway that it was possible that the more she used her bow the longer it took for her hair to return to the dark colour. However, it was most likely that her original hair in her fey form was silver in colour, because the moth's antennae were silver with iridescent hues. This was consistent with the fact that, when she had her hair in dark form, it almost always took longer for wounds to heal than when she had silver hair.

Whatever the case, as far as Lizbeth was concerned she didn't really care. Mai was Mai, regardless of whether her hair was dark or silver.

Mai placed the earring in her right ear and put the replica in the box.

"Better?"

"Perfect," Lizbeth said and then leaned close to her ear. "Tonight we're going to do something?"

Mai smiled at her and said softly. "We're not on days off yet. We're not going to have sex now."

Lizbeth stared at her seriously and waited a few seconds and then asked, "Can we have sex now?"

"No! Remember, there are cameras everywhere."

"There are lots of nice, soundproof rooms....What about making love?" Lizbeth asked getting close to her ear again.

Mai looked to the side and simply replied blushing, "Let's ask Shin later." She wanted the meeting after a month apart to be special. "Let's hope we don't have to work on an emergency basis after tomorrow."

Lizbeth gave her a kiss and looked in the direction of the medical wing. "Come on, what could go wrong?"

At that moment Shin shot out of the medical wing, with his armour on running away from Camila, who was running towards him with a metal object that seemed reminiscent of an electric arc weapon.

"Wait!!! I have to test your stamina! It's not painful!

"Bullshit! You just set that thing to full power and shot me before I formed the armour again!" Shin replied.

"Come here! I'm not going to do anything weird!"

"I don't want to hear that from someone who turned a piece of history like the Mars Pathfinder into a segway for personal use!"

"What happened in there?" wondered Lizbeth and Mai in unison, watching the pair as they were lost among the base structures.

# Chapter Ten

**Observer at the Equinox / B.K.**

March 20. Tuesday. 7P.M. 125 S.A.
Lugrin, Lake Lemac. France

The creature flapped its huge wings, thinning in the same way that the blanket of twilight spread out, bringing the night.

Its dark silhouette merged with the darkness of the forest, and therefore its misty and blurred form made it impossible to say for sure what its real shape was.

Huge. Black in colour.

Its wings flapped at a rhythm that could not be followed. In fact, it could not be sure what were the shapes of those wings, due to the speed at which they flapped. But, from its movement and the sound it made over the treetops as it passed by, it could be estimated to be more than seven meters long.

But no one could see its wings, nor its semi-humanoid body that seemed to have no head, or if it had one, it was really flattened. No one could hear the sound of the treetops.

And no one could see its two red eyes, which, like burning coals, were piercing the sky.

The creature moved its eyes and, sheltering under the blanket of the night that had just begun, stretched out its forelegs and reached for a tree branch thick enough to support its weight.

Its eyes were fixed on a point to the east, over the lake.

The wind brought the sounds of young shrill voices and it looked toward the spot. It must have been about a kilometre away. Lights were moving through a rather large glade, and the voices seemed animated. There was happiness, excitement and it seemed to be a joyous event.

But that didn't matter to the creature. It was not the reason it was there.

And so, it averted its gaze again to the east.

As if it was waiting for something.

The lights produced by drones in the shape of luminous balls danced in the air, illuminating the figures ten meters below. These had motion detectors and while they almost always tried to follow the course of the ball, other drones were in charge of illuminating the entire playing field.

"Pass it, pass it!" shouted one of the young boys.

"I'm free here, arsehole!" said another.

"Watch your mouths!" said the voice of a father.

The twenty-two young aerial soccer players danced in the air, trying to get the ball.

The name aerial soccer was nothing more than a name. The game still had the same rules as soccer had in the past, the only difference being the boots and the skill of the players. Special boots, with pressurised air chambers gave the players the ability to jump up to three times in the air and do all kinds of jumps and aerial acrobatics.

It was a friendly match, between the clubs of Leman and another one from the village of Saint Gingolph on a field with almost no trees and short vegetation.

The youngsters from Leman had found the field some decades ago and, with the passing of the years, and the quarrels with the neighbouring clubs, it had been decided to use the place to hold friendly matches between the towns near the lake. Over the years it had become a tradition that had passed from father to son. Although there was never a lack of encounters that ended in pitched contests that had nothing to envy to battles of the ancient times. Luckily, for its participants, the carrying of a three-layered energy shield was a mandatory requirement to practice the sport, since injuries were quite common.

The team that won the most victories during the summer season had the right to use the field for their own matches as they saw fit for a period of one year.

Last year it had been the Saint Gingolph team that had taken the summer victory, but that was coming to an end in a few months, and nearby teams had been challenging each other to train new members and gauge the performance of their opponents.

"Let's see. They sure are fast. I'd break every bone in my body if I played that."

"It's less violent than the Capture the Flag Moon Championship at least," said a mother.

"Yes, that's true."

The one who had spoken first was Enzo, one of the parents of the children who were playing.

"You're not from around here?" another parent asked to him.

"No, I work up there," Enzo said, and pointed to the orbital belt. "I'm off for a few days and wanted to come see the kids' game. My son recently joined the team, we moved in November to Gingolph."

"Do you like the place?"

"It's pretty calm. And the neighbourhood is nice... even though I've heard some weird rumors about the place," Enzo said, scratching his temple.

"Ah, the enchanted lake, I guess."

"Yes. It's a legend that comes from the Great War, right?"

"That's right. After the war there started to be all kinds of rumours regarding it being haunted, after some fighting that went on around here, and on the other side of the lake. You guys haven't seen anything strange?"

"No... luckily. What kind of rumours?"

"UFOs, ghosts of soldiers who died on the spot, strange phenomena with the clocks in some points, mysterious voices coming from the bottom of the lake... are some examples."

A bead of sweat trickled down Enzo's cheek and he smiled. He had certainly heard all sorts of rumours, but he couldn't imagine what they were. With feys having become an everyday occurrence, he didn't find that urban legends from another time were still as alive as ever, especially with the Dark Events.

"Nothing dangerous has happened, has it?" Enzo asked, suspicious.

"No, we have military security in the vicinity just to be on the safe side, but nothing has ever occurred that would endanger the lives of the inhabitants. I imagine you mean the DEs, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, the whole lake is listed as an DE, but not dangerous. I have my cousin who works at the base nearby and they always joke that they would have to move the station somewhere else that requires it more."

"Huh?! I didn't know that when they sold me the property!"

"Calm down man. It's a DE class 01-Green- Red."

"Red? Isn't that the most dangerous classification?"

"Yes and no." Explained another of the parents, a plump man who was drinking a beer. "It has Red classification because the Red type is of unknown range amplitude, because it's the whole lake. But it's class 01, it's not even up to 1. I can assure you, I've lived for 20 years on this land and I've never seen or heard anything unusual."

"That there hasn't been a weird case with someone who appeared a few days ago from the lake?" asked a mother, while still with her eyes glued to her son, who was doing a pirouette in the air at the time.

"I didn't hear anything."

"It wasn't here, it was in Monthey," another parent reported at the time. "I think Pyrene was investigating. I have my cousin who works as a nurse, and she got a rumour that another hospital transferred someone who had just come out of the lake."

The parents remained engrossed in their talk, as the young boys continued their encounter.

Enzo's son hadn't had much luck in the match, being a little shorter than the others, he hadn't gotten many passes. Much less the chance to score a goal in the round net. Although he was fast, he was no match for the other players who seemed to have been practising for years.

He stopped, turned off his cleats and sighed. All that running and jumping, trying to even snatch the ball, had tired him out. The play was now centred on the opposing side, so he used the moment to take a breather. Amidst the hubbub of screaming kids, and parents chatting far beyond, almost fifty yards away from him, he was at a point on the field that only he could hear at first.

It was a distant buzzing sound in the sky. He had never heard it before.

It sounded like something cutting through the air, almost like the sound of a ship. But the ships he knew didn't make that sound as far as he knew. Although there was one type of ship that he recognised as being similar, although it could not be possible.

He looked up and, in the semi-darkness, he could see nothing in the sky. At least at first.

The sound was coming from the east and, looking up against the already dark sky, he thought he saw some white and yellowish-red lights in the distance, twinkling in the firmament against the stars.

The boy activated his night vision and there he finally saw it.

The boy opened his eyes and froze, not understanding what he was seeing at that moment. Or rather he understood it, but he didn't understand what it could be doing in the sky.

He had seen it a few times in the historical video manuals at school, in the history of the space race. But yes, there was no doubt about it.

Everyone had turned and were now looking in the same direction as the boy. The chatter had stopped completely because it was so audible. Even the other players had stopped and looked up at the sky, as the ball finally made its way down the field and was lost in the trees.

They were all listening to the sound and staring up at the sky. It seemed to be coming toward them from their perspective.

"It's a plane," the boy muttered, as he watched the other team-mates run in panic in the direction of the trees accompanied by their parents.

The huge plane was heading almost straight for them, following a parallel line to the coastline of the lake beach, from which they were not far away at all. On the left side of the plane they could see how part of the wing was destroyed and, from the engine, smoke and fire were coming out.

Everyone present fled in haste and it turned into chaos in less than a second, where everyone was running for cover towards the forest that was close to them in a southerly direction, as the plane seemed to be heading in a direction that was on the north side, although very close. Too close.

Enzo rushed to his son and, with a speed he didn't know he was capable of, ran with his son to shelter in the forest along the others, while behind him he felt the heat wave.

The huge plane had just crashed less than a one hundred and fifty meters from where they were, between the sands of the small beach and the waters of the lake.

The left turbine and what was left of the wing were blown away and, as if it were a huge fiery spinning top, it bounced off the beach and ended up getting lost in the trees of the forest. The right wing raised a column of water from its impact and ended up destroyed against the water, while the turbine exploded. The fuselage was destroyed in parts, by the plane's own momentum, and traced a furrow on the shore of more than two hundred meters from the place of impact, while several parts flew through the air and scattered in a wide radius.

Accustomed to their quiet lives and without many shocks in their routines, the event had left them all with their mouths open. Because of the DEs they were used to seeing news of disasters or strange cases occurring both on and off earth. But it was totally different to see it through a news broadcast, or to read about it. That hell was searing into their retinas. It was there, just a few hundred meters away and they could feel the heat of the fire close enough.

The evening night was illuminated and the fuel tanks exploded, forcing the astonished witnesses to close their eyes due to the sudden glow. Some of the autonomous vehicles that had been parked near the beach, and some of the near shore stands and huts, burned in the flames. It was fortunate that they were the only ones present at the time, or it was not a tourist season, or it would have turned into something worse.

Plumes of fire and smoke billowed from the shore of the beach, hiding the silhouette of the moonlit orbital belt. It was as if someone had decided on the spur of the moment that the burning of the Böögg should take place a month earlier in the year.

Even though the plane's drag was away from them, the fuel was blown from several places and the fire quickly reached the nearest trees. Even so, they were too far away to be affected. Still, everyone watched the spectacle in horror, and with expressions that did not allow them to understand exactly what had happened. But they were thankful that at least they had been able to react quickly to take shelter and get as far away as possible. The fire had barely reached the far side of the playing field, but if it had been any closer, the consequences would have been worse.

What had been a friendly and familiar meeting had turned into an inferno in just a few seconds.

Some of those present emerged from the trees to look at the tongue of flame that stretched along the coast and took a few hesitant steps forward.

"Where did that come from?" Enzo asked, hugging his son.

But he wasn't the only one asking the same question. That thing had come out of nowhere. But what struck them was that, from what they had seen before it crashed, that plane had been out of production for well over two hundred years.

It was a relic of a time long gone. What could it be doing there?

The creature had its eyes fixed on the fire.

It was as if those red eyes could see every detail, as if it were on the spot no matter the distance.

For a moment the creature's basilisk gaze was fixed on the trembling forms of the witnesses.

But it did not care about them at all.

The creature blinked and the telescopic gaze erased the silhouettes of those present from its vision angle. For the last time it looked at the fire and then, leaping onto the branch, it propelled itself into the sky where it once again spread its wings.

And without further ado it flew away.

A silent witness to the event. As it had always been.

Always watching. Always recording in its retinas events throughout history.

That was its only function. Insect, man, monster, machine. It didn't matter what it had been called throughout the ages.

Its existence was beyond the definitions of the sentient beings beneath it.

It gave one last swift flap of its wings and at much greater speed faded into the night.

Wednesday, 12AM.

Almost complete darkness and silence surrounded the place underwater.

Such was the darkness that it was impossible to know how big it could be. It could be an incredibly large room, or perhaps a little smaller, but large enough that the white light in the centre did not illuminate the walls.

There was only one white light in the centre that could help a little to elucidate the dimensions of the place. It was approximately six meters above the floor and illuminated the concrete floor, where some cables of different sizes, connected to machines, snaked along it.

Under the light was a strange-looking armchair, almost Giger-esque, and black in colour. As if it were half a armchair, half quantum computer of the Ancient Era. The upholstery part looked like leather, but it was the frame that looked strange. It was as if someone had tried to blend a piece of furniture, but maintaining a strange, almost alien, aesthetic sense.

From the back of the armchair, on both sides, there were cables and thin, symmetrical structures that seemed to extend upwards as if they were the legs of a spider, almost forming a kind of metal and crystal throne with nanoelectronic parts that connected with machines on the sides, that looked almost as strange as the armchair itself.

The machines on the side had some red lights flashing at intermittent intervals, with some nixie tubes displaying changing numbers every second.

And, sitting in the armchair, rested what seemed to be a child of no more than ten or twelve years old, who kept his eyes closed at that moment. Almost as if he was listening attentively to something that could not be perceived by common sense.

The boy was dressed only with some baggy cargo pants, revealing a naked torso with an almost deathly pallor. His hair was dark blond, somewhat long, and a few messy locks covered his right eye. But his hair moved slowly, floating weightless. His hair and the endless lights of the machines were the only thing that seemed to have some life in that moment. The boy was not even breathing.

To his arms and other parts of his body were connected thin wires coming out of the armchair, through which flashed streams of red lights at different intensities.

The sound of a beep, that seemed to come from another side of the room, made him open his eyes, revealing red eyes that seemed to have a light of their own. He moved his head slowly and his hair slowly followed the movement. He looked straight ahead and in the distance saw a pale blue light flashing against the darkness.

The wires connected to his body came loose and hid in different parts of the armchair. And the young boy stood up, revealing that on his back there were more of them connected, following the path of the spinal column. One by one these were released, and the boy floated and moved forward, without moving a single one of his muscles, entering the darkness, heading for the flash, at the same time that the plugs on his back, where the cables had been connected, began to close by a kind of tiny plates.

A splash of water was heard and the boy emerged from what appeared to be a liquid wall, contained by some kind of force field that prevented it from overflowing.

He walked over the concrete dripping with water and came to an illuminated table where a hologram with an envelope was floating.

The boy touched it and almost instantly two cubes unfolded and then intertwined, with binary matrices circulating on their faces at a constant speed.

"Codificata Gematria. Hyperdimensional Kamea?" His voice sounded as if it had a certain metallic tone.

For a few seconds the boy stared at the ones and zeros, with an unchanging expression of tedium, until he frowned and began to manipulate the hologram by moving the cubes and reading and rereading the strange message. The expression had changed and now he certainly looked shocked and angry at the same time.

It was as if he had just read something he didn't like at all in that tangle of numbers that moved without apparent sense in different directions. The boy stared for several seconds at both cubes, until he finally bit his lips in a grumpy mood, while shaking his head.

"Son of a… bitch…" he said angrily, but his words were slurred. The boy walked around the room thoughtfully and gritted his teeth. "Shin is going to be pissed by this."

He moved his fingers once more across the hologram and separating the cubes took one of them and examined it. From the same hologram sprouted a new message, projected in a new window although this time it was simply a few words.

[Would you like to accept the invitation, Mr. B.K.? Y/N]

B.K. grimaced, and drew a Y on the screen with the invitation.

"Tsk… when did this start?"

# Chapter Eleven

**A Fortean Christmas Gift**

December 25. In the morning. 1959
Ichigaya, Tokyo.

Carl Scott covered his mouth, trying to hide the smell of alcohol coming from his mouth, and glanced sideways at the officer who escorted him in the elevator. The latter didn't seem to notice the gesture and kept looking at the floor indicator.

No matter how he had tried to brush his teeth, the stench of alcohol was still there.

They couldn't blame him, it was Christmas and he had decided to have a bender outside the station the night before.

He sensed that, since he was so far from home, he wasn't going to find much Christmas spirit in Tokyo. So it had been a surprise to find that, in many parts of the city, the shops were decorated with Santa Claus and Christmas trees in true western style.

He, and two other members of the Agency, had decided to celebrate Christmas in a place in Roppongi with a more western feel, and to celebrate the occasion with at least a few drinks.

What at first was nothing more than a few traditional beers and sake, later turned into a bar where all kinds of spirits had been paraded. Strong enough that, when he woke up, he felt like he had an army of monkeys playing with jack-hammers on his head. The worst part was that they had charged it all to the Agency's account. Someone was going to be reprimanded for it later. He just hoped it wasn't him, and if it was, he'd better start doing the right thing in the morning.

Christmas, or the excuse for a hangover, for that matter, was not enough to miss work in his position. Which is why he felt even worse when the phone in his room rang, and told him that someone from the Foreign Affairs Department of the embassy was looking for him for an assignment. His presence was required at the Ichigaya Intelligence Building. He had no choice but to take a quick shower, have a cup of coffee with nothing more in his stomach than the alcohol from the night before, and take the tram to Ichigaya, because he did not want to drive one of the Agency's cars. He was terrible at driving on the opposite side of the steering wheel anyway.

Whether it was the little information the Agency had given him, or just the hangover, it all didn't seem to make much sense to him. He hadn't heard of anything strange happening so far that day, unless it was what had just happened in Indonesia.

It's too early for these games, damn it! he thought.

At just twenty-two years old he had managed to get into the Agency as an analyst, and it took another year before, supposedly because of his reports and performance, for him to climb the ladder enough to be assigned as a field analyst overseas. He had expected to be assigned somewhere in Europe, so he was surprised when they announced that he would be joining the Agency's Tokyo station.

Although, well, that was better than nothing. Tokyo was fine, it was a peaceful place after the disasters of the war fifteen years ago. He would not have liked to be assigned somewhere further west, where everything was going badly enough.

It had been a busy enough year in intelligence matters and, while he inwardly wanted to think that his promotion had been due to his performance, part of it could not be ruled out that it could also be because the Agency was scattering agents to every station around the world, due to the multi-front war going on at the time.

From the NLF in Vietnam, to Castro seizing power in Cuba. Not to mention the disappointment felt from the space program, with the success of the Luna missions and in particular the Soviet Union's Mechta probe.

Carl had even heard rumours that in October there had been a special agency operation, to steal the soviet Luna from an overnight exhibition in Mexico. This had been to photograph every part of the spacecraft and return it before they realised it in the morning. Apparently there were a lot of strange rumours about it. Like that the agents on clandestine service ended up being chased by a third party involved.

But that didn't matter too much. Carl liked his position at the moment. It was a quiet place, without a lot of behind-the-scenes back-room manoeuvring. Tokyo wasn't of much interest to spies at the moment, when everything seemed to be cooking more to the south and east.

Although that did not seem to be the case that morning. It was the first time the embassy liaison had summoned him to do anything related to inter-agency cooperation. Scott only wished he had less of a hangover at the time. It wasn't Christmas at the Japanese intelligence offices in Ichigaya, as he was surprised to see how busy the movement was, from the moment he entered the building. Although, perhaps it was always like that, he could not say for sure as he had never set foot so close to it since he had arrived in Tokyo five months ago.

The doors opened and the escort led the way. They were on the 15th floor, and reading the signs on the different doors didn't help him much. His spoken Japanese was good, though not so good with kanji. In fact, he was terrible at it. In five months he had barely managed to memorise no more than four hundred of them, not counting katakana and hiragana vocabulary. And in that moment of hangover all the kanji seemed to be jumbled together in his head.

"This way please," the escort said, and invited him into the room.

Scott nodded politely to the escort, but ended up bumping his forehead on the door frame. He entered wondering what it was all about, and rubbing his head from the blow. He wondered if there was a water dispenser. He was pretty thirsty. That coffee had not done him any good.

Inside, two men were waiting for him, leaning against a table and wearing office clothes and hats.

Who wears hats inside? Scott thought to himself. What's with this outdated detective atmosphere from the 20s.

They both introduced themselves with names that Scott almost forgot after a few seconds. He hoped he wouldn't have to call them by them. "Satoru Nogizaka and...Kensuke...Aida?" he tried to remember in the brief introduction he made after the escort closed the door behind him.

"It's a pleasure."

"Please forgive us for calling you out of the blue, but we got word this morning that our man was starting to talk."

"Man?" Scott arched an eyebrow. "Who are we talking about?"

Aida extended a folder to Scott and he took it.

Straight to the point, I see.

As soon as he opened it he felt thick beads of sweat run down his face. The kanji seemed to be dancing before his eyes. He leafed through the pages, trying his best to look interested, as he nodded without understanding anything.

But on the first page was a photograph of a man with dark hair, a neat beard and moustache, and a black T-shirt smiling rather inappropriately for an identification photo. If he had been the photographer, he would have punched him in the face to wipe that stupid grin off his face.

"Is this the man you're talking about?" Scott asked.

Nogizaka nodded and took off his hat, and put it on the table along with the jacket, and rolled up his shirt sleeves as he leaned against the table. His companion walked over to the window, or what Scott had thought up to that point was a window, and pulled up the blinds.

There on the other side was the man in the photograph, sitting at a table looking incredibly bored. He wore only a dark T-shirt and striped pants, that could have passed for prison clothes or flannel pajamas.

Nogizaka sighed and explained. "On October 12, we stopped him at Narita Airport. He arrived with forged documents under the identity of Jack Allen Zegrus. The flight he was coming from was France, but it was his nationality that caught our attention. That's why we knew that the passport was forged. Although, we still don't understand how he got a visa in France with that passport."

"Take a look at page 5 of the file," Aida pointed out.

Scott did so, and frowned. It was a photocopy in Roman letters of the individual's passport. He didn't remember ever having heard of that city and country.

"Anyway, he's not European. His English accent is American, although he speaks more than six languages, including Japanese," Nogizaka reported.

"We consulted with the Bureau of Persons, and the FBI, and they have told us that there is no Jack Allen Zegrus matching the description of him, we also did the same with the French and Andorran authorities."

"He's a ghost," Scott said looking at the man.

Somehow the man was getting on his nerves, he had noticed that the man was following him with his eyes, as if he could see him through the two-way mirror.

"Our detention was primarily for the passport issue, but he had money that he couldn't explain its origin. We kept him in detention in case this was about money laundering or money related to one of the local Yakuza families or the southern group."

"Does he have connections to the local Mafia?" Scott asked.

"We don't know for sure, but some of the bills he was carrying had a Yanagida Clan mark on them. We know from other sources that the clan often marks bills."

"Isn't it a crime to damage currency?"

"It's an invisible mark, it doesn't appear before the eyes unless you know where to look and apply a flame just a few centimetres from the bill."

"What do they do it for?"

"They call it security money. It's a common practice among those who don't trust banks too much."

"Money under the pillow?"

"Something like that," Aida admitted.

"So. What did he say?"

"He just said he was a tourist. Honestly, it's not helping. We don't know what he's thinking," Nogizaka said, shrugging and pursing his lips.

"Until... yesterday afternoon," Aida interjected.

Scott turned away, looking away from the prisoner who was still following him with his eyes. "What did he say?"

"Not too much," Aida snorted, just one thing. "He asked to talk to someone."

"Just out of the blue? With whom?"

"With you, Mr. Scott. He specifically asked to speak to you."

Carl Scott looked at both of them not knowing what to say. That could become a problem for him. "I don't know what he told them, but I don't know this individual."

"But... the thing is, apparently he does know you."

Scott turned and looked at him with a frown. He took a closer look at him, but he didn't remember ever seeing him before. But, the more Scott looked at him, the more he thought of something else. He was sure he hadn't seen him, but there was something familiar about his face.

Who is this arse-hole? He wondered and then asked. "Can I talk to him?"

"Please. We don't have much to keep him in prison. He has no criminal record whatsoever. Like you said, he's a ghost." Nogizaka said.

"He's the reason we contacted the embassy liaison first to begin with."

"...Ok."

It didn't matter how he looked at it. Carl Scott was a simple analyst, nothing more. He was not an active field agent. His job was mostly paperwork at the station, mostly English analysis of transcripts that went straight to Langley or some other station. He had no informants, nor was he a clandestine agent on clandestine duty.

Scott left the room and went to the continuous door, where there was a guard. As soon as he entered, Scott could only curse at his stupidity. The reason the man was following him with his eyes all the time, when he was on the other side, was because he could actually see the other side. All along he had thought it was a two-way mirror, but it was just glass.

He took a chair and glanced first at Nogizaka and Aida who were watching the other side with interest.

Tsk...fuck. It was a weird situation. How do you greet someone who asks for you even though you've never seen him in your life? Scott thought, as he sat down.

"Hello. Good morning, Mr. Zegrus," Scott said, placing the folder he still had with him on the table.

"Hello," Jack Allen Zegrus greeted in English. "Jack is fine, I think it's pretty obvious that Allen Zegrus is just a fake identity."

Scott opened the folder without saying a word. The truth was that the kanji were appearing to him as if the whole thing had been written with the intention of drawing barbed wire on the pages.

*I don't understand shit*, Scott thought, as he ran his eyes over the pages and nodded seriously. He flipped through the pages for a minute, until he closed the folder and put it aside.

"Well? You asked to speak with me?"

"Can you speak and read or just speak Japanese?" asked the man with a suspicious sneer on his face.

This son of a bitch thinks he's so smart? Scott thought.

The man leaned forward and spoke a little slower and his voice was barely a whisper. "My apologies, it's just that I don't know if we should speak in another language, there's a lot of ears."

"Get to the point, please. I have no idea who you are, and I don't know why you called for me so, I'm doing you a favour in coming here in the dark not knowing anything. Besides, we are in an intelligence building. I'm pretty sure the people behind the glass also speak English, or some other language, not to mention that this conversation is being recorded."

"My apologies. It's just that there are certain things must be done at the right time. Not before."

"What do you mean?"

"If you have time, I can tell you a story."

"What story?"

"You already know about them, don't you?" asked the man.

"Who?"

Jack simply put his index fingers to his temples and pointed upward. "Our friends with the pointed ears."

Scott glanced sideways at the other two behind the glass who reacted to the strange sign. Of course, they knew too....

The question was how much this man knew about them.

"Friends of the pointed ears?"

"Come on Carl. Although not all of them have pointed ears. The fey, who else can I be talking about?"

Scott decided to ignore the guy's familiar name calling. "Are you part of TF?"

"Oh, no," Jack smiled. "It's out of my league, I can only do what I can do. And the same goes for you, Carl."

"What are you talking about?"

"We'll be friends for a long, long time, believe me," Jack said, and clasped both hands together on the table, as he drummed his thumbs.

Scott folded his arms and leaned back in his chair.

He wasn't sure what was going on, but there was something strange about the man. Almost as if he was facing something that looked human, but gave him a sense of something else. It wasn't a threat, other than the guy's smug attitude... it was a sense of familiarity. But that couldn't be possible. And there was the fact that he had mentioned the fey. Scott examined his ears, but no, they were normal.

Although there was a possibility that it was another type of fey. He had already heard of some with stranger abilities, or pseudo-feys, or even children born from human-fey unions, although they were stranger.

The agency had been interested in them since the end of World War II. There were all kinds of rumours, about an extra cold war between different divisions, and that some were hunting for feys with unique abilities, to use them for espionage and other, less pleasant rumours, about experimenting with them. It all seemed to have gone up since there was evidence that the "commies" were getting ahead not only in the Moon race, but also in the field of the use of parapsychology.

Scott had already heard that, even within the national intelligence agency, there was an experimentation program related to mind control called MK-Naomi or MK-ULTRA, or the use of psychometry to create psychic spies.

Many rumours and few certainties.

Scott snorted and picked up the folder again, reaching for the page with the passport.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Jack nodded.

"If this document is a fake, you could have come up with something better. What the hell is Taured supposed to mean?"

"Taured, it's a country."

"Really? It's got to be pretty small, because it's not on our maps."

"No... Not yet, at least."

"Not yet?"

"You call it the Principality of Andorra here."

That didn't seem to make any sense to Scott, but the man was at least talking, so he decided to play along. "What do you need from me?"

"I need your help to create some... stuff. A little noise."

"Some stuff?"

"Well... to start with I think I should tell you everything."

"Get started then."

"We need to create a simulation…"

"Simulation you say? for what?" asked Scott smiling.

"Not for what... for who…"

# Chapter Twelve

**Good mornings and bad news**

March 21, Wednesday. 5AM. 125 S.A.
Nevermore Base No. 2 in French Territory
Pic de Grèzes, Languedoc-Roussillon. France.

Lizbeth thought she heard a rustling noise and it woke her up.

She slowly opened her lemon-coloured eyes and there she found Shin's face, breathing slowly. She had just woken up from one dream, and she thought she had fallen into another.

But it wasn't a dream. It was true, and she smiled to herself. Although, in the king-sized bed, it wasn't just the two of them.

Lizbeth brought her hand to her bare chest, and there she found Mai's hand, embracing her from behind. She could feel Mai's breath near her neck, and her chest against her back.

The three, after a pizza dinner with the others, had gone to the room for agents at eight in the evening. Early, but that was what they planned. They configured the bed for the three, and made sure to set up a sound barrier so no one could hear their noises.

The room was simple, with metal walls, and a screen molded to the wall in front of the bed. There was a night-stand on one side, and two armchairs near the door. The bathroom, with shower included, was a nice touch, and there was no need to go to the mixed showers on each floor of the base.

After two hours of intimacy, caresses, and something else, they finally collapsed and fell asleep naked, covered by the blanket. They were happy to be together, and that was all that mattered to them.

Since they had not been together for a long time, it was Lizbeth who had to sleep in between them. Although sleeping together from that day on would become part of the routine.

She began to run her hand over his chin and nose, trying to tickle Shin.

Lizbeth had met Shin during World War II.

Lizbeth owed her life to Shin, since he had found her prisoner and she was being used for experiments from the moment she had arrived from the Other Side. It had taken her a few years to get used to being free after the war, but she had finally succeeded. While she wouldn't have minded staying by his side, it was Shin who decided it would be better to separate so that she could get to know the world better.

The only world she had known from the moment of her arrival was cruelty, and the darkest and most disgusting side of humanity due to war. He wanted her to take her own steps and to understand that, although she had already known the worst, there were also things out there that were valuable.

Little by little, she had made friends and travelled around the world. Certainly there were good things but, for the feys of that time, things were still hard. And even though she had parted ways with Shin, that didn't mean she hadn't seen him again.

Throughout the years of the twentieth century they had found each other many times, although after a while they drifted apart. It was nothing like a formal relationship or anything like that. They were free spirits. After the hell they had gone through and, therefore, they knew that many times being together would bring them a lot of trouble, because the feys were pursued for study, and others were employed by secret agencies of different countries to serve as weapons of pressure.

Not to mention, that Shin felt especially bad that trouble seemed to follow him. They could not claim happiness for themselves, while their friends were in danger all over the world, and more and more feys with strange abilities and new cases of Dark Events were appearing.

After the end of Project Tempus Fugit, Shin had spent the first years of the 1990s teaching Noki and Rein to control their abilities, but by 1996 the girls were more than ready to stand on their own two feet, and so they both took different paths to see the world for themselves.

Lizbeth had last seen Shin in 1998 in Arkansas, and the following year brought the disaster for which she wept bitterly for weeks.

Shin disappeared suddenly. Everyone close to him could feel it.

No one could find him, and she searched for him everywhere for months, but he never showed up.

Decades passed, and she drowned her sorrow by travelling around the world, meeting more people, dodging dangers. But a part of her couldn't get it out of her head that he was still out there, somewhere. Time healed her wounds and that helped. Too many adventures, too many dangers, happy and sad sunsets, but she kept going.

Then, at the end of the Great War in 2099, she joined Nevermore. And there she met Mai.

Lizbeth first impression of Mai was of a girl with empty eyes, barely reflecting any light, due to the horrors she had seen on the battlefield. But no matter how bad she felt, that petite girl had never taken a step back, and was always there for anyone who needed her.

But from the moment she saw her, she couldn't shake a strange feeling in her chest.

Little by little, Mai had also been healing her wounds and, at the same time, Lizbeth had begun to manifest a feeling, that could only mean that what she felt for Mai was much more than admiration and respect.

Lizbeth had other romantic relationships for some time, but nothing had ever become serious. However, with that silver-haired girl, something Lizbeth thought she had long forgotten was being born. Loving someone madly.

However, when they were together and she confessed what she felt, they realised something else. That what they felt was mutual. The two had started out simply crossing furtive glances at each other, or just sometimes sharing a meal in the cafeteria of the main base on the island, when they saw each other after some research. Simple games and embarrassing smiles. Until one day in Lizbeth's house on the island, which consisted of a huge living module, they found themselves kissing and having sex for a whole afternoon. The years that the two had been alone disappeared that afternoon, and in the following days, months and next years they continued together, almost maintaining a secret relationship but many knew deep down what was going on.

Mai discovered that Lizbeth, despite her mischievous attitude and outgoing personality, was a woman who had been through hell in her early years. She could appear to be fun and very cheerful, but she was a fragile girl with respect to her own emotions and who, deep down, only longed to be happy and nothing more.

Lizbeth on the other hand learned that Mai, with her strong and self-driven nature, could sometimes be very shy about herself but at the same time very determined. When she wasn't working she could be incredibly sweet. Everything she had seen in the war had not left her but it had not been enough for her to lose her faith that it was still possible to save as many as possible with the tools they had. It was the reason she was still head of special operations.

Although, they were together for a long time, the truth is, that for Lizbeth, the same thing that happened with Shin happened to her again.

The fey were no longer persecuted, they already lived in society and, although there used to be altercations because of it, it was no longer a ruthless hunt as before. But where that persecution had ended, its void had been filled by the Dark Events. Not only small groups around the globe were no longer needed, but a monstrous infrastructure around the Solar System was needed to control them.

New dangers, missions and responsibilities. Once again something had truncated Lizbeth's happiness.

Although Mai had been a special agent, there was a special case that forced her to confine herself to the island to recover from what she had seen. To this day Mai was still looking for those responsible for that. But even after that, time healed her, although she did not cease in her efforts to find the perpetrators.

Until that day came on September 11, 124.

Lizbeth already had gained something resembling resignation with Shin. She could wake up without the pain of knowing he wasn't there. But that changed and in a totally unexpected way, and like a spring that springs up again after being dried up, she felt all the feelings come back. Or more accurate to say that they had never left. In the deepest recesses of her being, she had always cherished the hope that he was still around.

And he appeared.

No one would have guessed it. Shin hadn't just disappeared. He had disappeared on the Other Side.

But there wasn't much time for an emotional reunion between the two.

That raised even more suspicions. If so, why hadn't anyone forgotten him? Unlike other feys, whose identity disappeared forever, everyone with whom he had maintained a relationship remembered him. Although, later the theory was elaborated that it could be because being from another universe, he might not be bound to the laws that governed this universe. That would explain why so many strange events occurred around him at times. Basically the laws of cause and effect did not want Shin in this universe.

Although that seemed to have changed after he returned, he wasn't so sure about it.

That didn't matter to Lizbeth now, though. Happiness was currently with her.

Lizbeth had waited too long for it. The fact that Shin ended up teaming up with Mai, was due in part to the intervention of Rein, Noki and Lizbeth herself.

Everyone knew that Shin's appearance was going to bring a lot of headaches. If he didn't stay in Nevermore, as a probationary period, and leave, the Council was going to do everything possible to stop him. Shin with his armour on was almost invincible, even though his body suffered vulnerabilities without it. It could have come to a disagreement that would put both, Nevermore and the Council, on different sides of the rope. Not to mention the other agencies that were interested in him.

Shin was not only already certified as an object for the fey classification he received. He was a Keelian. A type of classification so rare that anyone would want to get their hands on him.

After the war, and with the fey living in society, the rules had changed and legal compendiums had been written to get the fey rights as sentient entities. Thanks to this, Shin, even though he was an object for many organisations, was still a sentient being and therefore entitled to the same living conditions as other fey. That did not mean that, due to his adventures two centuries ago, many looked at him with suspicion and as a threat to the order.

But Shin himself had already seen that coming, after his first fight on his return, and later when Mai had told him about it in the hospital. But it was Rein who had persuaded Mai to offer him a position as an agent and science consultant for the SID. That way, for the Council, Shin would be in the custody of Nevermore's best agents and, in the process, could become an asset to the SID and thus to the Council.

Mai had started working as a field agent again and she did not have a partner. She was a very important asset to the Council, as she was the only one who could handle the weapon that had ended the war, the Azusa bow, and therefore they could not just accept her back on the front line, even though she was more than experienced.

The first choice of partner for Mai had been Lizbeth, but the Council was not sure about accepting it, because both had a past, and according to rumours a present, that involved them romantically. This was not uncommon, as there were several pairs of partners who shared something more, even though it was forbidden by the organisation's protocol. One of those rules that is written down, but certain parts of it are completely ignored.

Therefore, after weeks of trials and psychological tests to evaluate Shin's ability, Rein and Lizbeth proposed to Mai to team up with Shin. That way, she would have a partner with experience in the field of research, even if he had outdated views. At the same time, he would be able to learn from her little by little how the organisation was developing. Shin, thanks to his armour, would be able to protect Mai on research missions and he, in turn, would be under Mai's surveillance.

Mai had heard a lot about Shin over the years. Spy, scientist, doctor, bodyguard, researcher, were some of the professions attributed to him. Part of the TF team, one of the first organisation to investigate Dark Events. Many of the stories came from those who had known him and friends, such as Oxy, Leo, Van, Mari, Natalya and several others and of course Rein, Noki and Lizbeth herself.

Mai at first hesitated, but she knew she couldn't just say no to Rein and Noki. Even though they didn't share blood ties Shin, had been a foster father to both of them, and he taught them how to move in the world and defend themselves. So, after thinking it over, and pondering the pros and cons, she agreed to it.

In Shin's case, the Council also did not want him to be under Lizbeth's surveillance because of their shared past.

It was a quirk of fate that, not long after, Mai and Shin ended up together sharing something more than just cases and investigations.

Lizbeth had not been surprised by it, although she should have been.

The truth is that, in the battle that took place the day after Shin returned, something happened between the three on the battlefield. Something that was not written in any report, and that they could not explain even if they wanted to.

It was the secret that all three shared.

The three knew it at that moment. There was something else in their gazes at that moment. Something they couldn't put into words, but that went without saying.

Shin lied without saying anything, as he looked at them in surprise.

Mai lied, while her lips trembled.

And Lizbeth, with tears welling up in her eyes, also lied, clenching her mouth to prevent words from coming out of her mouth.

A truth that could not be told, even though all three sensed it.

However, it happened, and although there were things they could not say to each other, it was the price to pay for the happiness they had achieved.

And a few weeks ago the Council had finally had to give in to the opposition to forming a team.

They could no longer use the relationship as an excuse, because Shin and Mai had become more than partners, and Lizbeth joining them as part of the team was no longer a problem. If they had each other's backs, as long as they didn't neglect their duties, there was nothing against them being together.

Lizbeth smiled feeling the warmth from both sides, as she remembered years past when she had awakened to find that face sleeping next to her.

Lizbeth jabbed her index finger on Shin's nose, but black flakes formed on it. The armour seemed to function in surveillance mode. Shin felt something stinging his nose and, frowning, he woke up. Though his gesture changed when he found Lizbeth's face smiling at him.

"Good morning," he greeted.

"Very good morning," she replied, smiling and kissed him.

Shin stared at her and played with her hair and caressed her cheek. He couldn't believe it either, seeing her there. The three of them together.

Shin hated the word fate for a long time, but if that was what fate had in mind for him, he wouldn't mind accepting whatever it had in store for him, if he could protect the two girls in front of him.

"Do you want to continue?"

Shin swallowed hard. The truth was that he didn't feel like it at the moment, but if he had to sacrifice himself he wouldn't mind. "Just the two of us?"

Lizbeth gently pushed away Mai's sleeping hand and lay down on top of him. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and he began to caress her back, running his hands down her hips and bottom as he felt her shudder. Shin lightly squeezed Lizbeth's butt cheeks with one hand, while with the other he caressed her cheek and then kissed her again.

Although he could feel the wetness and her skin was a bit sticky, due to what happened during the night it didn't bother him at all.

Shin grabbed her waist and moved her a little until his face was between her breasts.

"Are you sniffing me?"

"'Yeah. You smell so good,'" Shin replied, then kissed one of her nipples.

"Do I not smell like sweat?"

“No.”

"Good morning."

They both looked to the side and found Mai smiling at them. All the movement under the covers had woken her up. Her face was sleepy and her hair was messier than usual.

On the other hand there was something that characterised Mai that morning. Overnight her hair was completely dark blue and all the silver color had disappeared.

Mai was a bit surprised to see it completely dark, as she didn't expect the colour to change overnight.

So cute, thought Shin and Lizbeth.

Mai came over too and snuggled between them, not willing to be left out. Although she didn't like to have relations in the morning, it was a special day. The three of them were more than willing to continue what they had started the night before.

Shin had already started caressing Mai's butt and his hand was moving dangerously low.

"Not there," Mai said blushing.

"Why?"

"Not my butt. Save that for tonight."

If she didn't want to, Shin wasn't going to oblige, even though it made him laugh inwardly to see her so flushed. He simply decided to continue caressing her bottom.

"Do you need any cream or massage?" Lizbeth asked, with a mischievous smile as one of her hands also started to move closer to Mai's lower butt.

"N-no..." replied Mai, pulling her hand away. "My butt is fine."

But, for their part, Shin and Lizbeth hugged her, and the three hid under the sheet, when they heard something strange.

For the second time in Lizbeth's case.

"Crunch."

It didn't matter how they heard it. That was a sound none of the three had ever produced.

Mai removed the blanket and leaned her head forward and Lizbeth did the same, looking in the direction of the couches, which was where they had heard the strange sound from. Shin, holding Lizbeth on top of him, tried to crane his neck as best he could.

Although the room was sealed, some of the technicians passing by outside at the time swore they heard a scream coming from one of the rooms.

Mai's heart almost skipped a beat.

Sitting in the shadows of the room, in one of the armchairs, was Oxy munching on a crunchy croissant.

"And I thought the banshee was Lizbeth," Oxy said blushed, as she put the last piece of croissant in her mouth.

"What the hell?!" Mai said obfuscated and blushing, trying to cover her nakedness.

While it was true that on the island she didn't mind the issue of nudity in the mixed showers, that was very different from walking into someone else's room when they were in such an intimate moment.

Oxy stood up with a serious gesture and looked at the trio. "Guys...I'm sorry. I'm really sorry about this."

Because of Oxy's serious expression, Mai slackened her gesture. Oxy was the type of girl who was usually quite cheerful. That she was so serious and had entered the room in violation of security couldn't mean anything good.

Lizbeth rolled back to where she had originally been and sat up in bed, but without covering herself. Shin also sat up and looked at Oxy's face.

"Today's reception is cancelled. The Council sent the communiqué a couple of hours ago."

Mai loosened her grip on the sheet. Had they backed out of the decision that the three of them would team up? No, that couldn't be it.

"What happened?" Shin asked. In his case the reception would lift the probationary period, and it was official that he would be a official special agent, not to mention that the ban on leaving the planet would be lifted, as long as he was under surveillance.

"It has nothing to do with you. Something big happened last night at the lake bordering France and Switzerland, and we've been asked to have all special agents head over there when the ship check is finished, and load all the equipment onto the ship."

Mai completely loosened her grip on the sheet not caring that Oxy was looking at her naked. "Really? What happened?" Not that it had bothered her. The three other three people in the room knew. She was going into work mode.

"We've just been told to go quickly and start helping with the investigation. We've got research on the ground, so we need to get geared up."

"You too?"

"All the special agents in the vicinity and due to the nature of the event, they requested that I go as well."

"But what is it this time?"

"We've just been told that something has appeared, and that shouldn't be here."

"Something that shouldn't be here?" Shin inquired.

"Just that?" Lizbeth asked.

Mai turned on her Neurowire and so did Lizbeth. Both had turned it off the night before, so as not to be disturbed. When they turned it on, however, they were met with the communiqué that had arrived two hours ago. It wasn't unusual for them to receive an order to go investigate immediately from the Council, but for them to call for Oxy, who was originally part of the teaching staff, rather than fieldwork, was something that didn't usually happen.

"Damn it!" Mai said jumping out of bed.

"There's nothing else here. What's so bad they can't tell us?" Lizbeth asked.

"Very bad. There's a press blackout and complaints have already been raised with the International Information Administration about it. But the Council doesn't want any information to get out of the place. With the situation at the Vatican still unclear, and with the attack on the Pyrenne station in Grenoble, I think they are being cautious with the information they are revealing."

"Have they specifically called us?" Shin asked.

"The FRT teams have already left and Natsuki and Ryuuji are already there. They were going to come this way, but the call just caught up with them and they decided to travel on."

"They haven't said anything?"

"There's a block on personal communications. We will only be able to communicate with them, when we are inside the perimeter that has been established. Although the Council did say something else."

"What?" Mai asked.

"That they were planning to activate the Mesnie in case this is discovered to be a terrorist event."

Mai frowned and glanced sideways at the bedside table where her earring rested. Then she looked around and huffed looking for her underwear and Lizbeth did the same.

"Not so fast. The hangar team is finishing up a routine check on the Corven, we leave in an hour and ten minutes. If you weren't awake in ten minutes I was going to have to wake you up myself."

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" wondered Lizbeth.

"Because they're checking the ship and the FRT teams are already on the scene. You have time to take a shower... because, I really thought I was going to get pregnant just walking into the room..." Oxy put her hand to her nose indicating that they should take a shower.

The three of them looked at her with a serious look on their faces, but they did it that way. They took a shower the three of them together and then, simply wrapped in the bath towels, ate some of the croissants Oxy had brought them, along with a strong coffee from one of the machines in the corridor.

They had hoped to have some time to shower and play together, but in other circumstances. There was no time for any intimacy in the shower. They had to get ready before the maintenance crew finished checking the ship.

The truth was that it was part of the protocol to check the official ships before the flight. Not only was it part of the protocol for aerial security, but it was also a directive from the Nevermore Counter-intelligence Department in case of espionage. Despite the security measures, it was a rare month that a nano-spy was not discovered at a base, or station, or some other device to steal information from the Institute.

"What about the other FRTs? There are no more personnel in France that we need to go to?" Shin asked.

"There is one team collaborating with another, next to Pyrene. On the border of Italy there is other, and the other two teams are in Lyon, due to a problem in the city's drainage systems. Apparently there are more than forty personnel collaborating with those from the municipality's sanitation system."

"Drainage?"

"There's a plague of giant tardigrades," Oxy said, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Shin almost choked on his coffee. "Excuse me?"

Too many things had happened in the last few days, first the supposed terrorist event at the Vatican that turned out to be a robbery, then the attack on Pyrene, and now there were not enough personnel due to an invasion of giant tardigrades. Sometimes Shin could not believe how much the situation had changed from his time.

Oxy explained quickly the rest of the story, but time was already running out, and in less than 40 minutes they would have to leave. Mai and Lizbeth simply walked out with the wrapped towels and Oxy went with them to the lockers.

Mai turned to Shin, and he looked at her and turned back to the bathroom.

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Ok."

He heard the girls whispering to each other as they left, and went to the bathroom, when he heard the door to the room close, he finally stood in front of the mirror looking serious.

He really hated it, but the truth was he didn't feel any less tired than the day before. He didn't feel more tired, but the problem now was his back, it was hurting. But there was something else that felt strange. But it couldn't be true.

"Well, let's see this," he said and pursed his lips.

The cloud of particles left his body and almost instantly the armour appeared to fit his body.

But, as he looked down, he frowned. That had never happened in, as long as he could remember.

It was incomplete. There were missing the parts of the feet and the part of the hands. The missing parts were as if those parts had been torn off, or as if the metal was corroded. Although there was no sign of corrosion of any kind. It was simply like looking at termite-eaten wood. But as far as he knew even metallophage nanobots couldn't do anything to the metal of the armour either.

He could control the metal in some form of the armour at will, and so he did some tests by retracting the mask. Then he formed some plates quickly. And he tried to form the missing parts. It worked. Now he had his hands covered but he was still missing part of the leg. He tried again just so that at this point his waist was bare while the legs were covered.

Shin had spent a few years without using the armour. So he couldn't be sure if there really wasn't some period of time where its weight changed, and so the density of the metal would change due to something like material fatigue. Honestly, he never cared to do a too thorough examination of the armour.

But that was different now. The armour had a purpose again. And those purposes were on the other side of the doors.

Maybe if he waited long enough it would come back on its own, and with the right density and weight.

As soon as they returned to the island, in mid-April, he would ask his lab mates to help him run more detailed tests. It was time to worry about what the armour really was.

A weapon? Part of his organs? Something else? If it was a weapon, who had given it to him? If it was an organ, would everyone like him also have it? Were there any of his people left, to begin with?

Visions of worlds being devoured by two black suns reappeared in his mind.

He lifted a hand, and the armour particles floated over his hand, as if they were a question that he thought he had not been troubled by for a long time.

Tzi'rak sha Zhireq.

What the hell am I?

The words of the entity, with her mind melded with Rayana Ivraeva flashed in his mind, just as they had in the lake.

"What is your decision? Knowledge or your current happiness? we're not sure you can have both. The answers you seek may be out there somewhere, although they don't always bring happiness. What is it that you seek?"

What is it that you seek?

His decision had been to it let go the mysterious spinor-shaped core.

He did not care about knowledge, as he had done in his earlier years. He had attained happiness.

What was he looking for? Was he looking for something else?

The reflection of the mirror gave him back an empty look at that moment, as if it was not really reflecting the being he really was.

Shin had decided not to tell them what he had discovered in the bathroom. He didn't want to worry them. The day was not starting off well after spending such an emotional romantic time during the last night.

He dressed in a T-shirt and shorts that he had taken out of his bag, and grabbed his turtle backpack. His trench-coat was not going to be needed, so he left it on the couch where it had been resting since the night before and went outside.

The room had its own cleaning system, so room service was not required if the room was being occupied by agents. Therefore, locking the room would be sufficient. Oxy, despite having entered the room, was an exception due to her skills.

He walked to one of the lockers rooms with the letters SID above it, and went inside. They were the lockers where the agents who were leaving for some group mission used to change.

There was a reason for this, and it was to check the turtle backpack systems and, for the others, to make sure that everyone was properly equipped and that nothing would be missing in case of an emergency. Anyone not familiar with how they handled missions in complex formation teams would have judged it as a trifle, but it was part of the protocol and was a safety precaution.

Controlling weapons and ammunition, extra weapons, first aid kits, food and liquid bars was part of it. Also controlling communication devices with secure channels in case they needed to communicate with private channels. The latter was carried out from the Neurowire and in Shin's case with the device in his ear.

Shin entered the locker room and saw that almost everyone was finishing changing. The last thing he saw of Mai's body was that she had put on a sports bra, as well as Lizbeth and as they zipped up their coveralls. A little further away, were Zi and Philip checking their backpacks, and Oxy was setting up her boots. Farther away, Carissia was finishing changing without putting on any underwear, although due to her body structure it was not as if she needed a bra, despite the enormous size of her breasts.

They had dressed in dark coloured camouflaged coveralls that had the acronym SID, and the raven emblem on the left shoulder in white. These had some parts such as elbow pads, shoulder pads and tactical knee pads to protect the extremities, not to mention that they were projectile-proof, as they were equipped with smart fabric. All the coveralls were of the same size when taken out of the turtle backpack but, once put on, the intelligent fabric could be adapted to the physiognomy of the wearer.

The clothing was part of the extra equipment, that could be carried for field work and could be used from crime scenes, evidence collection, to working in terrain where official suits were not required. It also had multi-purpose boots, with vector impulse and magnetic adhesion functions, that could be activated through the Neurowire. Or in Shin's case manually with a series of buttons on the first safety.

They finished changing, putting the turtle backpacks on their backs. Instantly the metal buckles sprouted, securing themselves to the body and adopting various configurations. The shoulder holster, as in the case of Shin and Zi, to carry weapons on the sides, or in other cases as a belt with leg loops to carry the weapon on the right side, as in the case of Mai, Oxy and Philip, or on the left leg in the case of Lizbeth.

All coveralls were the same with the exception of Mai and Carrisia. Mai had a green insignia representing a moth antenna on the left side of her neck.

Carrisia had also taken off her red and black costume to put on a coverall of the same type as the others. But she had red insignia on her shoulder pads, with the sign of a raven with two folded wings, and on its head there was a star following a comet. It was the insignia that categorized her, not only as a senior pilot with the two folded wings and the star, but the comet also signified that she was a pilot of interplanetary rank.

Usually she didn't show the insignia, since the suit she always wore didn't need it, because it had the logo on the side of the collar. But that jumpsuit was for field work and wearing it on her shoulders, it was always easier for other people to recognise that she was the team's pilot.

The redhead left the room towards the ship, while the rest of the team finished checking the equipment. The truth was that they would not need weapons, since they were going to be investigating along with several people, but it was part of the protocol to control everything in case something happened.

Mai checked her weapon and ammunition, and kept the tactical glove with which she could use Azusa, in one of her coverall pockets. Oxy and Lizbeth were carrying a Sauger-M9, with needle ammunition, also called the boomerang sieve, because the ammunition could be returned to the weapon thanks to the magnetic attraction device. Philip and Zi were using two Wasp-S with stun settings.

They all had additional weapons such as rifles and shotguns in their devices, but were confident that they would not have to use them. Shin, on the other hand put his gun in his shoulder holster, and with the belt configuration of the backpack, put a tactical sword with a vibrating blade on his left side. The sword was in its compressed form so its blade was not present, only the hilt.

Finally they checked the shields, of the coverall's security equipment. Everything was working perfectly. And without further ado they headed to the ship on the runway that was ready to take off. Except for Zi, who took a shortcut to the base kitchen to grab some on-the-go snacks before boarding the ship.

While they had been preparing, the base's technical team had already loaded into the back of the ship different cargo secured to the floor, that could be of use to the team. Such as special spider-like evidence collection drones with magnetic devices. As well as lab equipment for Oxy and Shin, and tents to set up on site, along with sleeping bags and even a portable toilet. While the military personnel on site should have already set up much of what they were carrying, it never hurt to have extra equipment. Not to mention that it was a large team, considering Ryuuji and Natsuki were already on the scene, with the few FRT agents who were not on the Lyon mission.

From the huge hangar doors the team could see how Camila, Kanna and Kon greeted them waving their hands and shouting "Take care! And that was the last they saw of the base before the cargo hatch closed.

The ship had changed its configuration, setting up more seats, although after departing almost everyone was standing. Carissia was cautious and would have liked them to remain in their seats, although given that they had the handrails and magnetic boots activated she judged that it was fine, since the flight wouldn't take more than about thirty minutes to reach the destination anyway.

They talked for several minutes about what could have happened, but it was the same as talking about the Mothman and the Shadow People at the time. They could make no more than guesses as to what had happened, and could only weave theories because of the secrecy with which the matter was being conducted. The fact that a security blackout had been placed on the press, and that they were thinking of making civilians sign a secrecy agreement, was more than enough to conclude that this was more than serious.

A secrecy agreement was not uncommon. People could be made to sign to keep quiet when it involved national or international security, or transplanetary matters. But it was usually something carried out between political, intelligence, or military authorities. The involvement of civilians often involved cases where an DE was so serious that it could not be revealed in any way, and could be punishable in some cases with imprisonment or if necessary with devices to erase the memory of the event of those involved.

However, weaving theories, the minutes passed quickly for the team.

"We're here!" announced Carissia.

Since everyone had safety equipment almost no one, with the exception of Oxy and Lizbeth, was sitting in their seats. Philip went to the side of the ramp and pressed a few buttons on the screen on the side of the ramp. At that moment the ramp disappeared offering the image of the outside, it was one of the internal projection functions that the ship had. The team stood up and went to the ramp and from there they saw the terrain two hundred meters below them.

Carissia from her cockpit looked at the landscape in bewilderment and shook her head. Although she could measure the intensity of her emotions, a shiver ran down her biomechanical spine. She then took a couple of low flights over the scene so that the team behind her could get used to the scene.

There was a line of destruction along the coastline at least a few hundred yards long. Parts had been destroyed everywhere and some trees had been uprooted when the plane crashed. While others had burned like grass in the flames due to the explosion of the plane's fuel tanks.

But the fire had already been extinguished and with it the search for bodies and evidence had begun.

There were countless people moving around. People with different coloured equipment and some carrying bags, that Mai could already imagine what they were. There were lifeboats and other autonomous craft that were scanning over the treetops.

But there was no doubt.

Even though there was burned fuselage and parts everywhere, there was no doubt. That plane should not be there.

Lizbeth, along with Oxy, joined the team and they all looked at what was before their eyes in amazement. That had been hell, there was no doubt about it. Even in spite of the clear sky, a heavy atmosphere covered the whole place.

It was the smell of death and tragedy mixed with the morning mist.

"This can't be good," Mai said, looking worriedly at the scene.

There were two things that happened at that moment.

One of them went unnoticed by the whole team, as they were watching the scene. In the midst of the equipment that had been loaded, a small black pug was hidden among the industrial suitcases. The little pug, from his hiding place watched as the team gathered in the back, unable to see what had caught their attention. The other team at the base, who were in charge of taking care of him, would not discover the security device, where he had been put to rest, until late in the day. It was in pieces and cut up like butter.

The second detail was occurring in the room, where Shin had left his trench coat. In the Dirac space, where he kept some personal effects hidden, an old cell phone, more than two hundred years old, was ringing.

# Chapter Thirteen

**Panopticon/Pool**

March 21, Wednesday. 6.24A.M. 215 S.A.
In some restricted space on Another Earth.

B.K. was still leaning against the gold-coloured wall, with embossed decoration that seemed to resemble some-kind of circuit board. He had been doing the same thing for the last few minutes and his eyes exhibited tiny sparkles as he looked up.

"Tch... that idiot. I hope he left it out," he said angrily, and clicked his tongue looking down, as his eyes returned to normal, cutting off the call that had gone unanswered.

After accepting the invitation, which had arrived at his secret location, he had been pondering whether or not to attend, but curiosity had gotten the better of him. After carefully analysing the security code he had come to the conclusion that his invitation had a special encryption system designed just for him. Whoever the other guests were, they had surely been assigned their own codes as well.

Still, whoever was organizing the whole thing was someone B.K. knew. But he was not happy about it. But, still, what he had seen in the codes of the gematria cubes was more than enough for him to decide to attend.

After creating a restoration copy, for any eventuality that might occur, he had finally left his physical body and transported his consciousness to the enclosed space where he had been invited.

He arrived at the building by connecting from his own network, but the truth was that he didn't like to think what he would find inside. He should have sent the message earlier, but the truth is that the time issue didn't matter anymore.

What was done was done. There was no turning back. In fact, if everything was as he had seen in the cubes, whatever had to happen from then on had to happen anyway.

He walked up the massive stairs, away from where he was leaning, and shuffled his feet up, to the only door that awaited him on top. The only one that led anywhere in the whole labyrinthine place.

The structure of the whole building seemed to be built with Escher's paradoxical architecture, with staircases in the same style of decoration as the walls. But there were parts of glass and the light from outside came in through huge windows. Depending on an observer's point of view, the structures seemed to change and lead nowhere.

Those stairs, doors and structures actually looked normal to anyone viewing the space from the outside, but they were a trap. Anyone who did not have their invitation would be refused entry to the enclosed space. And in case they tried to crack the system to enter, what they would find would be a veritable endless number of other meaningless lines of code and corridors that led nowhere. A real labyrinth.

What B.K. saw was a virtual manifestation of paradoxical architecture, but to someone else it would only look like a gibberish of disjointed and meaningless codes. Unless a special invitation had been extended to the place, it would not end well for an invader's conscience.

"Very convenient," B.K. said.

When he reached the top, the sliding door opened and showed him a tall, coral-coloured elevator whose walls changed, exhibiting cubic fractal patterns. But inside someone was waiting for him.

"Mr. B.K., we've been expecting you," a woman greeted.

"Y-11," greeted B.K. "Save the protocol. I had no choice after all."

Y-11 made a sort of bow, with her long hand and stepped aside, letting B.K. pass.

Y-11's size contrasted with B.K.'s. She was a woman who must have been at least a little over six feet tall, with an extremely slender appearance and long limbs. She had not a single hair on her head and had alabaster black skin with fine features, with light blue eyes. She wore a long white dress, with gold trim on the top, and the bottom of the dress was a more turquoise shade, although it had a distinctly modern touch in its design, made of iridescent fabric.

The door closed but, from the inside, it became transparent, offering them the infinite landscape of paradoxical architecture. The building seemed to have no end. Gehirn could feel every part of his own code being scanned at that moment.

The truth is that the whole landscape and scenery was nothing more than an unjustified aesthetic taste of his host, as he took the trouble to scan the newcomers.

"Your boss sure likes to show off," B.K. said.

"I apologize," Y-11 said, in a soft tone, "it is necessary for our activities."

"How many are there?"

"All the Awakened Ones."

B.K. looked at her, with a serious gesture.

"There will be nothing to fear, don't worry."

"The Queen Bee is there too?"

Y-11 smiled and nodded.

"We're all the old-timers then, gathered in one place."

"The event warrants it."

"Bullshit. This is just so your boss can show off." B.K. looked at her. "No offence."

"None taken."

The elevator finally stopped, and the inside darkened, only for the door to open and B.K. could finally see where he'd stepped in.

"This has gone from a surveillance matrix to a show matrix," B.K. said, looking around and shook his head.

B.K. stepped out of the elevator, into what must have been just the donut-pod he had been assigned at the event. No one looked at him or said anything at his arrival, though. B.K. simply sat in his place and looked at the panel in front of his seat, while Y-11 withdrew. There must have been more than a thousand donut-pods in the place. And in each one there seemed to be someone sitting, but no one paid attention to him. The whole place was a gigantic sphere, almost like a stadium. And with all the donut-pods pointing in the same direction.

Towards the centre.

In the centre of the place there was a giant sphere, that was projecting changing scenes every second. And, within that layer of images, something else in the centre. A simulation of the sun.

The projected images showed events from all over the world, and numerical codes on screens scrolling at incredible speed. There was all kinds of information, and it seemed that some of it came from very distant times, so it could be deduced that many of those things were not news of something that was happening at the moment. Although B.K. knew that it could be misleading in that case.

News of terrorist events, stock market movements, company stock crashes, assassinations, natural disasters and also some other news that seemed to have no connection whatsoever were displayed on the screens and changed at breakneck speed. But from them, at certain moments, nodes were traced between them that linked them for a moment and then disconnected without any further action.

B.K. watched the images for a few moments, and then looked at the controls of his panel and typing some commands the personal image of the projection changed to that of two cubes intertwined with binary sequences.

Almost as soon as his personal image changed, a screen appeared in front of him announcing a telepathic call. B.K. looked around and there he found it.

The host of all that.

Janus, who, without looking at him, several lines of pods below, was smiling at the central sphere through his dark glasses.

Reluctantly B.K. accepted the call, and Janus' voice echoed in his mind.

[In the past it was said that every partner was a watcher. Vigilance is determined by the power of money and information, and what you can do with it. If you see that as a spectacle it's because you're not up to date.]

Just as B.K. had thought, Janus had been watching the arrival of everyone there. And he must have heard what he said when he came out of the elevator. Perhaps the reason Y-11 was there was to serve as an antenna for Janus to better establish a scan of the guest.

[I have never been interested in power or anything like that,] B.K replied.

[But you have made use of it. How have you spent so much time hiding from the world and, at the same time, watching what was going on? At the same time you have made use of what this world has created, technology, information. Maybe you have not benefited from it as I have. But to say that you have never been interested in it is a lie. The wars, the deaths, the invasions have always been there, but you have not lifted a finger in your lair, except when it was in your interest. That's called selfishness.]

[Who is the one who has spent time with humans now? Selfishness? No one has ever died because of my intervention.]

[Not directly at least.]

[So you think yours is indirect?]

[No. I know perfectly well that about 230,000 existences have died over the centuries because of my interventions. But it is little compared to losing millions.]

[… ] B.K. looked at him again.

[Don't look at me like that. I know it's a big number, but I did my best to attenuate the number over time. It's been over two hundred years for me. And yet I still rely on them. If I didn't, I wouldn't have left this future in the hands of the past. We would all be dead if every piece had not been in place.]

B.K. just gave him a sidelong glance and said nothing.

[We know the end of this adventure because I was able to control things so that we all got here. But what awaits from Friday onwards is a mystery.]

[You've created a monster to justify this scenario. You even attacked a control station, bastard.]

[What is a monster in a zoo of abnormalities? This world is full of paradoxes, that do not exist, they are just improbabilities. What's wrong with creating sufficient conditions to make a future possible. Whatever the price, it is something worth fighting for.]

[It's a high price.]

[It's much better than knowing that something is going to happen, and doing nothing about it.]

[Even if you know that what's going to happen can be changed? It's too many variables.]

[I think your problem is in assuming that I control all of them. I mean, look at me. I was created solely for the purpose of studying market values and predicting stock movements. I would never have imagined that I would end up in this era and doing this, when there are already algorithms much more efficient than myself. But, still, here am I. Doing something that someone else should have done, and with clues that are even inconclusive.]

B.K. looked at Janus and opened his eyes.

[I see you've noticed,] Janus said, enigmatic, and his gaze fixed on the ever-changing projections within the central sphere.

[This is someone else's scenario?]

Janus smiled wistfully and shrugged his shoulders. [This is a game in which you have your part to play, too.]

B.K. glared at him, but had loosened his angry expression. [Y-11 never sent that invitation by chance. You ordered her to.]

[Exactly.]

[If you haven't controlled all the variables, who is the one who has?]

[No one. The One Who Endures gave me the last clue to this fifteen years ago. But, even he is not the one who created the scenario.]

[Aleister,] B.K. grimaced cynically, and shook his head. [Did you listen to the magician?]

[Don't misunderstand. He just gave me the clues to the missing variables. This is not one of his plans. Everyone plays their part here, all of them, me, you, Aleister.]

[Since when do you trust magic? You've always been methodical.]

[This story is methodical,] slowly, Janus looked at the place where B.K. stood. [No matter which point you choose, the end is the same and so on until the end of time.]

End of time? B.K. though. [What makes you think that?]

[I tried to change events several times over the years, but everything turned out just as Aleister predicted, and is within one of the predicted scenarios. It doesn't matter if there are other ways to reach the same result. Everything has happened just as he predicted.]

[In this universe, at least,] sighed B.K., leaning back in his seat.

[At least, in this universe, in what we call our time.] Janus's eyes sparkled with a mix of intrigue and determination. [We just may be mere fragments of a larger whole, but our individual contributions carry significance. And, as we stand at the precipice of the unknown, let us embrace the uncertainty and fulfil our destinies within this grand design.] Janus said, and looked straight ahead again.

The conversation was cut short by Janus but left a bitter taste and questions for B.K..

He simply snorted and settled back in his chair as his gaze was fixed on the huge central sphere where the images connected and disconnected at all times. Offering an intricate tapestry of events that seemed beyond comprehension.

Let's see what comes of this, thought B.K. resignedly.

In some secret location in the Orbital Belt.

Clark felt a mixture of weariness and concern weighing heavily upon him.

He moved his bare feet in the pool and saw how his movements expanded and formed ripples with a tired gesture.

He was in a round room that was almost dark, but was surrounded on all sides by long horizontal tubes, and in each one were floating persons wearing masks, with their eyes closed. Almost all of them were old and human but there were some young people as well. The young people were almost all feys.

It was as if they were in a dreamlike state, because of the rapid movement of their pupils and the spasms that ran through their bodies from time to time.

Clark stood in the middle of the room in a circular pool and the bluish light shone on his face.

He didn't look very old and, although his facial features made him look like he was in his early thirties, his tired face added more years than he looked. His dark wavy hair covered his ears and eyes. He was slightly wet because he had just gotten out of the pool and was sitting on the side. A simple, soaking wet robe covered his body, although his body parts revealed his brown skin.

"They've already headed over there."

The sudden voice made him turn around quickly, and his hair spurted droplets of water from the sudden movement, revealing his coal-black eyes.

Behind him was a tall man with short grey hair, blue eyes, and a stubbly beard. He wore a cream-coloured suit, with no tie, and the first few buttons undone. His face made it difficult to determine whether he was in his forties or fifties. His face gave him a youthful, yet mature look.

The man moved over to him and bent down with the intention of helping him up.

"No. I'm fine like this. I haven't moved for days, let me get rid of the dizziness first."

The man simply sighed and not caring too much if his suit got wet, sat down near him with his legs stretched out.

"Don't you have other things to do?" Clark asked.

"No."

"You're a pain in the ass Travis, you know that."

"Sorry for bothering you, bastard." Travis said, with a mocking chuckle.

"I wouldn't be surprised if after this Mai sends all of us to hell."

"That's not going to happen as long as the old guys are still there."

"… It's not like we're the young ones exactly."

"So. Did you see anything else?" Travis asked, trying not to pay attention to Clark's scathing comment.

"No. I haven't seen a dream this deep since the war. Everything's black."

"So, it's going to happen."

"That's what scares me the most."

"Which part?"

"All of it. It's a betrayal of the free spirit."

"What free spirit? You look to the future. There is no choice. Gehirn said the same thing before he disappeared."

"If this has to happen for our past to be safe, what does this hold for the future?"

Travis looked at the tubes where the people floated and nodded slightly sternly. "At least for us, as a species, who knows."

"Species? What species?" asked Clark with derision.

"I mean all of them." Clark glanced at Travis out of the corner of his eye and Travis twisted a smile and simply said. "There are no easy answers for that. The truth is, old friend, there are no more rules. Maybe, like Aleister said, there never were in the first place. We are trying to curb the DEs. But the truth is that just maybe it's true what the ancients said about it."

"The Dark Events is nothing more than the beginning of something much bigger that could happen tomorrow, weeks from now, or billions of years from now," Clark said heavily.

"Exactly. People think we're trying to control them. But the truth is that we're simply buying time for life as we know it to evolve and mould itself to them and not them to us. Our struggle to curb the Dark Events is a testament to our commitment to life itself."

Unless Event Zero is found, Clark thought. "You haven't changed in 500 years, always an idealist just like that girl."

"I don't know if you mean that as an insult, but I'll take it as or compliment," Travis said with a gentle smile.

Clark regarded Travis with a mixture of gratitude and wistfulness. "Call it what you will, my old friend."

# Chapter Fourteen

**Venice**

June 23rd. 1960. Ancient Era
Venice. Italy.

Carl Scott bit his bottom lip, with an expression that seemed to have aged him a couple of decades in a matter of hours.

He was sweating profusely, and his new cream-coloured shirt, which matched his pants, was slightly soaked in the back, giving him an unpleasant feeling. He wore tortoiseshell glasses, and protected himself from the sun with a white hat.

"Why couldn't we meet somewhere else?" he asked, wearily.

"You're asking me? I wasn't the one who came up with the idea," Jack replied, with a smirk as he chewed on a toothpick.

Jack could really pass for a tourist on the spot. He was wearing shorts, sandals and a Turkish-coloured shirt with some of the buttons undone. Without pausing, he looked back. "If you're feeling hot, what about our friend here," he asked, turning around. "You don't feel hot, Mr. Ishida?"

"I'm getting cooked," said a voice in a dry tone.

The two were accompanied by a Japanese man, dressed in an all-black suit. He had a handsome face and his hair was combed back with hair gel. Still, beads of sweat beaded Ishida Yanagida's pale forehead. It was the first time Scott had seen him in person, but Jack had talked about him enough in the past months.

All three carried black briefcases with them.

Carl Scott felt that his briefcase weighed a ton, even though it was rather light. He sighed in disgust and with his free hand took off his glasses, which he put in one of his pants pockets.

The summer was really humid and heavy that year in Venice. There had been more precipitation than usual, which was worse around midday, where the sun was so punishing with evaporation that it seemed to have turned the whole city into a kind of open-air sauna. Although, that didn't seem to stop the tides of tourists in the place, which made the three feel as if they had stepped into a can of sardines.

Carl Scott looked at Jack and sighed, then shook his head.

It had been months since they had met. And even though they were working together, that didn't take away the strange feeling that he still didn't know everything about Jack. Even though, every few months, they changed identities, moving between countries, Scott couldn't help but feel that strangeness around him.

It had already been a miracle that the Agency hadn't opened an investigation on Scott, when Jack appeared out of nowhere in Tokyo, summoning him to the Ichigaya Intelligence Centre. But it seemed more stranger to Scott, when the Agency itself was in charge of putting Jack's papers in order.

The day they met, after he told her his strange story, Jack gave him an extra message, which was to reach a certain person in California. Whatever the meaning of the words Scott sent, it turned out that within three days Jack was released from the custody of the Japanese Police.

What was more, Scott had received orders from Langley to continue his work, but this time with the mysterious subject. From the last days of December until now, the two of them became a sort of a team, travelling in different parts of the world.

*Making noise*, Jack called it.

Touring countries, looking for components, making links. Jack seemed to be a fountain of knowledge and a trickster who was very good at persuading people, not to mention his eccentricities. On one occasion, he had woken Scott up by throwing a battery of firecrackers into his room. That time Scott had to apologize to the hotel management for firing his service weapon, in fright because he thought they were under attack.

But at least, now there was a change in Carl Scott status within the Agency. Out of nowhere, he had gone from being an analyst to a clandestine agent. A spy. He was moving fast with that guy at his side, there was no denying that.

The truth is that Carl Scott didn't seem to have to be there, except to save him from getting into trouble. In just a few months they had been to more than ten different countries. The Agency seemed really interested in Jack, as they had him write constant reports of their activities. He couldn't blame them, anyone would be suspicious of such a character, but Carl Scott couldn't shake the feeling of familiarity for some reason. Besides, he didn't seem to want to talk about his past.

The missions, that both were carrying out, had to be kept under strict secrecy, and it seemed that only a handful of people in the Agency knew what it was all about. Those who also provided them with the funds so that both could move with some freedom in their travels.

The missions they both carried out were, to say the least, worthy of appearing in the pulp magazines Carl Scott remembered reading as a child. He had never been particularly interested in subjects such as archaeology or relics, but the truth was that many of those missions were aimed at recovering certain artefacts, of which only Jack had any idea where they were. Although the latter was not always accurate, and on more than one occasion both had fled without being able to carry out their mission.

A pulley mechanism lost in Siberia, a strange tube lost in a forgotten village in Australia, a series of bronze plates in a Nepalese Buddhist temple and a pair of crystal glasses from a tomb in Tanzania. These were some of the artefacts they had been recovering.

As far as Carl Scott knew, it was all for building something. If what Jack had told him was true, it was all part of the plan and because of the Agency's interest in Jack, Carl Scott had no reason to doubt it.

However, what Carl Scott had realized was that the world was much stranger than he had thought he understood.

From the feys he had already heard about, to stranger things had appeared before his eyes in the last few months. He saw the world in a new way, though he didn't know if he was happy about it. These were strange days for him.

Whatever it was, he had to continue his mission together with Jack and for the rest he would not have to worry. However long it all lasted, perhaps in the future it would be nothing more than an anecdote to tell his grandchildren. Although due to the secrecy agreement he doubted that anything would ever come out of his lips about it all.

Carl Scott decided not to worry about it anymore, at least for the time being.

And so, they had arrived in Venice.

They had arrived at Marco Polo International Airport in the morning, and had to wait for a couple of hours while the flight that would bring Ishida Yanagida arrived.

It had taken them some time, but they had finally arrived at the agreed meeting place.

They passed the Palazzo Ducale and crossed the Ponte della Plagia, dodging a crowd of tourists with cameras. While to the right rested some gondolas, bobbing on the water.

"That's it," Jack said, pointing ahead.

The place they were headed for was a café, located about fifty meters from them, called Bar Dandeli, located inside a luxury hotel. It had a few tables outside with umbrellas, that were barely occupied. But inside it was quite busy.

If Scott expected to be in the shade inside, he was wrong. Because the people waiting for them waved to them from one of the tables outside. At least the umbrella was something. But Scott stopped and looked at Jack in disbelief.

"You never told me he was a priest."

"More strange things have been seen."

*No, I don't think so…*, Scott thought.

The people waiting for them were, in fact, a jovial-looking priest, who must have been in his early forties, along with another man in a short-sleeved plaid shirt, and a bushy moustache that Scott thought looked like a hairy caterpillar, because it moved over his upper lip as if it had a life of its own.

"Seems like it's been years since the last time," Jack said, greeting the priest with a friendly handshake.

"Just some months, son," the priest said, in English with a clear Italian accent.

"Bah, no son. You know I don't like it," then he turned to his two companions. "Father Verneti, this is Mr. Carl Scott and I believe you have already met Mr. Yanagida."

"It's a pleasure, Mr. Scott," Verneti said greeting him and turned to see Ishida Yanagida. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Yanagida."

Ishida simply saluted with a bow. "Same to you, father. Doctor DiMati, it's good to see you again."

DiMati, the man with the bushy moustache, saluted as well, but either the heat had him too overwhelmed, or he was simply too comfortable sitting in his chair, as he barely had the strength to reach out his hand.

After the protocol exchange the newcomers ordered a cool drink, while they got ready for the business that had brought them together that day.

"So you were Pierson's companions? I mean when he was arrested in Tokyo," Scott asked.

The priest and DiMati looked at Jack quizzically.

"Yes, I told him Zegrus was just a fake last name," Jack nodded.

"Pierson? Then is your real last name?" Verneti asked.

"You could say that it is. I'm already dead, to the world anyway. I have to thank the Royal Agency of Intelligence for at least providing me with some papers, which allow me to move around freely enough."

"So, is what you told us about your death, real? that you exploited yourself?" Verneti asked.

"It wasn't like that, it was an experiment. But, as you can see, I'm quite alive." Jack drew a sort of cynical smile on his face, and gave Scott a sidelong glance.

*What do you mean you blew yourself up?* Scott thought, looking suspiciously at Jack.

The truth was that, on one of the trips they had made to the United States, they had passed by the Agency's base in California. That had been the only occasion, where Carl Scott had seen Jack show an emotion. And that was when he asked to Carl Scott go with him to visit the JPL facilities. A place they did not enter, because at the last minute Jack did not want to go in. And he was just content to watch the place from the outside, although it was obvious that he was having emotions at that moment. Carl Scott didn't ask him why, and Jack didn't tell him either.

"I still think I owe you an apology for what happened in Tokyo," Father Verneti said to Jack.

"Don't worry about. It was for the best. After Ishida gave me the money to travel to Europe, to meet you, my goal was for us to meet Mr. Scott, the one here. This couldn't be possible if we didn't have extra help from the RAI, and the DoD."

"Wait a minute. Are you going to tell me you were planning on getting arrested?" Scott asked Jack, incredulously.

"Of course. Dr. DiMati had ties in the past to Russia, the last thing we needed was for him to be arrested in Tokyo for inquiries. I already had the money Ishida gave me to move through Europe, which was going to be suspicious, with the fake passport I entered the country with. I was simply the decoy so, that the two of them could contact the Yanagida family without any problems."

Verneti took the floor and explained. "I had already heard about the relics and jewellery missing in World War II so, if I was correct, the likelihood of finding the Yanagida family dagger in Italy had several probabilities. To find the dagger was to prove the goodwill, to have Satou Nobuyama's research and the stone at our disposal."

Scott looked at Ishida. "You really gave him all that money to move around Europe, without any problems? It was a small fortune and, on top of that, it was left in the hands of the police."

"Mr. Pierson made me ten times that, on the second day he arrived, and several times that in the days that followed."

"How's that?" DiMati asked, chuckling.

"He guesses horse racing numbers."

Scott stared at Jack.

"Anyway. I think we'd better get down to business. You never know what might happen in this kind of business," Ishida pointed out, looking around.

"I'm sorry, but no one has yet explained to me the reason we had to come to Venice just today, we were supposed to meet next week."

"Just a convenient vacation spot, and to make our exchange out of our points of origin. It was better to do it unexpectedly, in case someone was following us," Ishida explained.

"As I said, Mr. Scott, last year we met Mr. Zegrus. Sorry, Pierson. It was at the end of September, just a few days before he was apprehended in Tokyo, and he told us about his plan. Which as far as we can see everything he's told us is correct so far."

"Plan?"

No matter how he looked at it, since the day he had met Jack, Carl Scott's life had changed. If what he had told him was true.…

"We are making history, Mr. Scott." Verneti took out a briefcase he had kept hidden under the table, and passed it to Ishida. Ishida looked at the priest and Verneti nodded gravely. "It took us some time, but we got it a couple of weeks ago. That's why we contacted you."

Ishida accepted it, and opened it. He let out a sigh of relief when he saw the contents. Scott looked at it and saw that it was some sort of richly decorated dagger, with a guard and scabbard inlaid with what appeared to be jade. Ishida pursed his lips and took it, checking it several times and pulled it out of the scabbard, to look at the blade that seemed to have something written on it, that Scott couldn't quite make out. That object had nothing to do with the search that Scott and Jack were carrying out, but even so, thanks to that object, something else had been accomplished.

"This dagger has been in my family for three hundred years," Ishida explained to Scott and Jack.

"It was among some of the belongings left behind during the passage through Italy of some soldiers," Verneti expounded.

"The rat route..." mused Scott.

"No one is blameless during a period of war. I suppose neither are you, with the operation to get scientists to America to help in the space race against the Communists," Verneti replied, arching an eyebrow.

"The dagger disappeared in 1944, by a traitor to the family, who was in Germany during the last days of the war and then fled. That explains how it ended up in Italy. Anyway, it's good to have it back in my family. I thank you, Father Verneti."

Ishida closed the briefcase and setting it aside, passed his own briefcase to the priest. He opened it carefully, and there, resting in a specially made case, rested a dark, crystalline-looking stone, with a straighter edge.

"Here's our little girl," DiMati said, peering into the case.

"One part at least. Please take care of it," Ishida said.

"I will. I promise you, young man," Verneti nodded and closed the briefcase. "And the other part?"

Jack gave Scott a sidelong to his briefcase. "It will go with us."

"So, your people have their own project for the second half?"

"Yeah, we'll at least give it a shot. Our project is a little different from yours. We are not looking for immediate results."

"Nothing assures that we will have immediate results either," Verneti shrugged.

"Well, we'll have to wait almost three decades for some progress," Jack admitted.

"If what Mr. Pierson has said is true, then this is the right thing to do, and what my uncle would expect. The technology of his time made it impossible, but now, you can probably get results faster," Ishida said, turning to DiMati.

"That's what we expect and hope for, young man."

"It's what we all hope for," Jack agreed, and then looked at Verneti. "What are the Vatican's views on this investigation?" he asked.

"There are some enthusiasts but, honestly, I think they expect too much."

"What do you mean?" Ishida asked.

DiMati laughed. "There are some who believe that our little project will be able to see into the past up to the time when the Common Era began."

"Excuse me?" Jack asked, incredulous.

"I've tried to explain, but I think some people expect too much of this," Verneti smiled and looked at Ishida. "When we were in Tokyo, I spent days studying your uncle's papers. And if what he thought is correct, then the stone could only connect to times, when the stone itself has been there. He found the stones in 1880 so, if what he thought, and the visions he had were correct, then it could only mean that the stones serve as a conduit in time, to a time when the stones have been."

Carl Scott had been hearing a lot of strange things for months, but they had finally come to the point he discussed during their first conversation with Jack in Ichigaya. If what he had told him that time was true. Then it was all about something both fantastic and terrifying at the same time.

"What do you mean by a conduit?" Scott asked. "Forgive my ignorance, but I want to hear it from you being a priest. Is it true what you are planning?"

Verneti and DiMati smiled and the priest was the first to begin.

"You see, I'm not sure if you know this. But I teach a professorship in ancient pre-Polyphonic music. Basically it is the study of the earliest attempts at music of our civilization. But it also encompasses certain aspects of instrumental music as well."

Jack had told him that Verneti was certainly a professor, and that he had ties to the Catholic universities in Rome.

"Jack told me something ," Scott admitted. But he never told me he was a priest.

"If I'm honest with you, when I was a kid I was always attracted to music. But for other reasons. Besides my fascination with harmony, and how music can influence certain behaviours in human beings, one aspect that always interested me was the concept of the ancient magicians and alchemists, that one of the Music of the Spheres."

The truth was that for Scott the term didn't mean anything, but his face must have shown that he didn't quite understand what he was referring to.

DiMati took a sip of his drink, much of which was absorbed by his living moustache, and explained. "The basic concept is that everything in the universe is governed by harmony. The planets, the stars, the distances between them. The macrocosm is a mirror of the microcosm and vice versa. Everything is connected, by a kind of harmony that, if it were to be understood, would be like finding the unifying theory of physics. Music, after all, is a mathematical language as well. Many alchemists went crazy looking for it, and there were real treatises that tried to find it, but little or nothing concrete. Even the Magus Pope, Sylvester II, even had among the people around him alchemists interested in it, in addition to the automata."

"I see..." nodded Scott. "Interesting." Popes in ancient times flirted with magic? That was something he hadn't heard in the catechism classes his mother sent him to when he was little.

"If you want, imagine it this way. Our solar system would be a symphony orchestra where the sun is in turn the director and also someone on the music team."

"…"

"Well imagine it with rock. I guess you like Rock&Roll? Imagine all the planets in the solar system as if they were part of a band where each one plays a different instrument. Each with different frequencies and harmonies. It's a crude example but it works. But imagine it on a larger scale now. Include, star clusters, galaxies. The basic theory is that they are all somehow connected to form a symphony that expresses the beauty and order in the cosmos."

"Doesn't that go against entropy?"

"No. On the contrary. Entropy always seeks to homogenize a system," DiMati said with a shrug.

"Anyway," Verneti continued. "That was one of the reasons, I began my studies in music. Eventually, though, I put it aside, to focus more on the antiquity of early melodies. As I studied more and more, and with the development of concepts such as slower sound propagation in hyper-dimensional geometry spaces, where the fourth dimension intervenes, I was led to wonder exactly what would happen if we could capture the sound of the past, or perhaps the future."

"Basically... hear audio from another time?"

"It's not such a weird concept." DiMati took the floor, crossing her arms. "The first attempts at chronocameras began in Edison's time. Not to mention retrocognition. And, in the area of capturing voices, for some years now there have been attempts to establish a discipline that supposedly captures voices of deceased persons, such as instrumental psychophonics for capturing metaphonies."

"Yes." continued Verneti. "Specifically, in my area, I experimented for several years with various types of machines, that would allow me to hear voices from the past but, unfortunately, I got very few results. I knew I might be right so, I kept experimenting with designs for a phonographic oscillograph. One of the ideas that haunted me was, what kind of sounds I could pick up if I got results? It would have to be sounds from the place where I put the machine. But I still got very poor results, although I did find that propagation through a liquid medium gave better results, albeit in such a short time that it could barely be measured in less than a second. It was not unlike when we see lightning and then hear thunder. But, in the reverse direction, there were two occasions where we picked up a sound before the cause that generated it occurred."

*Bullshit*, Scott thought, arching an eyebrow. That last part he had understood perfectly. If what the priest was saying was true, it was like discovering something that had the arrow of time reversed. Jack glanced sideways at him, knowing he understood that.

"Anyway," Verneti continued. "Then, I met Dr. DiMati, who is an expert in physics and works with electronics."

"Yes, well. I'm interested in the project, but seen from another point of view."

If what Verneti was saying could have any semblance of reality, someone with credentials closer to the hard sciences had to have some reason to go along with it.

"Which one would that be?" Scott asked, interested.

"The one of the image. Capturing light emissions from a given point in time. I should clarify that I'm talking about almost infinitesimal distances. Basically, a moment in the past that happened nothing ago."

"Seeing into the past, capturing positrons?" Ishida asked.

"Those are pretty bold, but interesting postulates. Or into the future. But, as I told you, they are very small intervals of time."

"Like a time machine?" Scott ventured.

"More like a time observer," DiMati pointed out.

"We called it a Chronovisor," Verneti said.

"Chronovisor?"

"Yes, you see. We measure time with clocks, or make forecasts of what we'll do in an hour, or a few days. But time is a concept. In physics, the direction of time is somewhat different. What would happen for an observer outside the three dimensions we move in? Perhaps, time would be different for that observer. A machine has limitations only in the technology applied but, who knows, maybe what we're doing here is the kick-off for something much bigger in the future, that can actually capture images and sound from both. The past and the future."

DiMati finally leaned forward and explained, "We, humans, move in the direction towards the future, and we are limited by our own biology. But, a machine is different. If we apply concepts, like the one proposed by Funnymann and Wheiler, about perhaps electrons and positrons being the same, but moving in different time directions, we could be on the doorstep of deciphering the true meaning of time."

"… and the stones would help with that?"

"Yes. Many of the ideas that Satou Nobuyama wrote about time, are incredibly interesting and tie in with ideas that we have. Not to mention, the machine designs in his schematics. These are things that are decades, or a hundred years away, from being able to build something like that, because it requires an enormous amount of energy. Although, I suppose, if like Jack said, the U.S. DoD is interested in this, it's because they too have seen that they can profit from something." Verneti said, smiling.

"I did the same thing Satou Nobuyama did," continued DiMati, "of putting the two stones together, as he recounts in his diary, and I must say that nothing happened. It is not that I am suspicious. There are too many parts of it that are too serious, to think that they were mere hallucinations. It's just that maybe there is something in the stones that makes them work the same way he put in his diary. If what he proposed in his diaries was true, then the stones are something that have a relationship to the concept of time, and the so called Tokihedron and the Savitronic Cycle."

*Toki-what and the Savit-who?* Scott thought.

"It's a pity he is no longer here, to shed more light on the matter."

"May I ask a question?" Jack asked.

"Yes, please," Verneti invited.

"Why did the Vatican fund the research?"

"They have their reasons. I've already stated my terms, and the limitations I'm going to get with my research. From a certain sector there is an interest that I can find out the whereabouts of certain objects that were lost in the Second War, but apparently they don't quite understand that, if what we are looking for here is correct, then the stones could only connect us to times when the object has been present. It is not as if it could point to a specific moment in time, and tell us what happened at that time. And in the remote case that that would be possible, I have serious doubts that the human mind would be able to process all the information. One cannot forget concepts such as the psychological arrow of time and the second law of thermodynamics, even though they are probabilistic concepts".

For a priest, Verneti was well versed in the physical sciences, Scott thought. Although he was unaware that there were branches of study in music such as acoustical physics that dealt with the study of effects such as sound propagation.

"Can I ask a question now?" asked DiMati, looking at Jack.

"Shoot."

"What did you mean you couldn't get results for another thirty years?"

"Just a forecast. You said it yourselves. Our technology is better than it was a couple of decades ago, but we still have a lot of limitations."

"You're trying to build a real time machine on the other side of the pond?"

"Who would want a time machine, when you can simply observe the future?" asked Jack, giving a chuckle and glanced sideways at Scott.

"Or the past," DiMati said, and pulled a cigarette from his tobacco holder and lit it.

At that moment, the smile on Jack's face wiped off, and he made a frightened face that only Scott could see for a split second. He had already realized that for some reason Jack seemed to hate cigarettes.

"We are but men sitting in a cave trying to make meaning out of the shadows we see reflected in the rock walls. In a time of major technological advances we tend to run into social decline. Tell me if that is not proof that the universe itself conspires," DiMati said philosophically.

Jack asked DiMati for a cigarette and lit it. He wasn't much of a smoker but he couldn't deny that it amused him to see Jack nervous.

"Although it is also true that in times of war or disaster, ironically, science often makes progress," Ishida argued.

"No, it's simply that we are too dumb and never learn from past mistakes," Jack said warily, looking at the cigarette in DiMati's mouth and then looked at Scott, with his cigarette between his fingers.

Scott felt he was being watched and looked at him as well. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing...," Jack said, wrinkling his lips.

# Chapter Fifteen

**The Robbery**

Monday, March 19. 2A.M. 125 S.A.
Rome. In the vicinity of the Vatican City.

Marco Bianci was proud of his job as a policeman, even though his work was rather quiet. In his three years of service he could say that he had never encountered any problems on his nightly rounds aboard the speeder-patrol, or on the rounds he made on foot.

He was almost always on night duty, and that meant quiet.

Aside from the fact that, from time to time, he might come across some drunken passers-by, or perhaps some youngsters fooling around at night, he had never encountered any situation that warranted drawing the non-lethal pistol he carried in his belt. The biggest scares were almost always night cats, jumping out of the blue on the rooftops of the low-rise businesses, or running through the streets, perhaps scared of the mechanized Templar Guards, who also provided security around the Vatican City grounds.

He stepped off the speeder and parked in an open spot on the Via Aurelia. He was only a couple of hundred meters away from St. Peter's Basilica and promised to be another boring night on duty. And he was thankful for that.

He looked up at the sky, and saw the orbital belt, almost overhead and, in a westerly direction, away from the Holy See, as the giant skyscrapers of the city rose. He saw a Templar Guardian flying through the sky and charting a course for the Piazza San Pietro.

Yes, it looked like another boring night. But whatever it was, he had to make his nightly rounds in the area, if for no other reason than to meet some cats. There was almost no one around at that hour, and there were hardly any autonomous vehicles on the streets.

Marco Bianci walked along the side-walks of the Via Aurelia, looking at some of the windows of nearby businesses. Some of the screens on the streets in front of him were projecting news and advertisements that, given the nightly hour, no one could see. He could barely see a few passers-by in the streets far away.

He distracted himself by watching the news about an agreement to extend a mining concession on a newly discovered moon, and continued his rounds.

It was then that he saw a black vehicle parked in a slightly crooked position on the street. He scanned it with the Optical Capture System, and the police recognition network indicated that it was a free transport vehicle.

He frowned. What are you doing here?

The free transport vehicles were free, but they were never parked. They were always on the move, unless called by a passer-by. They were the closest thing to what in ancient times was called a cab, but they had no air navigation system. Perhaps it was probable that it had had a malfunction and that was why it was at a standstill. He scanned the interior, but it was abandoned and decided to report it so that someone could pick it up in the morning hours.

He was looking at the vehicle, on the other side, when suddenly he heard an angry meow of a cat.

"Get out of here, fur-ball!"

What was that? He wondered as he turned around.

He was looking down a narrow, dimly lit alley. No doubt he had heard something. Maybe there was some drunken couple or some youngsters going on a rampage painting with polymeric relief paint. Whatever it was, It was his job to see what was going on.

He took out his flashlight and walked down the alley, finding nothing in the first moment. He had passed that way before, and it was an alley that turned to the left, but had no exit, since it led to a wall with a courtyard on the other side and a small eight-story apartment building.

Bianci rounded the bend and, a dozen meters down the cul-de-sac, came upon one of the strangest scenes he had ever seen in his short career.

There was a ladder leaning against the wall of the alley, separating it from the eight-story building and, on top of it, a nun in heels and looking across the wall. He didn't remember seeing the graffiti on the wall the last time he had checked that place, so obviously during the day someone had been vandalizing the walls.

"Are you doing okay?" asked the nun with her back to him, as if she were talking to someone on the other side.

The nun was halfway up the stairs and had stretched her body to face the other side. The wall, while not very high, was a little taller than the nun.

"Good night, sister," the policeman greeted, shining the flashlight on her.

The nun gave a jump on the ladder, which almost made her lose her balance, and slowly, with an almost mechanical movement, she looked up at him. Almost as if she had been caught red-handed, like a child committing a prank.

"Good night, officer," she said, with a face that looked like she was suffering from a nervous tic.

She was a pale-faced nun with a few freckles on her face. But it struck him that her lips were painted an obsidian black, and she had some dark make-up around her eyes. Or so it seemed to him in the light of the flashlight. He was pretty sure it was the first time he'd seen such a Gothic nun, not to mention the heels and that she was up on a ladder.

"May I ask what you're doing there, sister?"

"…M-my Mother Superior sent me and a companion to…clean up some rather obscene graffiti that some young men put up here last night."

What? Since when are nuns in charge of cleaning up vandalism?! "Really?" asked the policeman.

"Yeah, if you don't believe me, look there," she said pointing to the opposite wall on the other side of the alley.

The policeman shined the light on the wall the nun pointed to, but he couldn't see anything beyond a few smudges. It was all very strange.

What was she doing there at this hour to begin with? They might as well clean the walls in the morning. How obscene or insulting could graffiti be that it couldn't wait until the next day to be erased? More importantly, nuns don't work on Sundays! All these thoughts were swirling around in Marco Bianci's mind and that's why he didn't see it coming.

"It's already Monday, ass-hole!" shouted the nun, jumping off the ladder like a cat.

Before he could react, the policeman felt something fall on his back and smash him against the asphalt of the alley. He tried to get up, and turned around to face her, but watched as the nun straddled him, revealing fishnet stockings, and threw a punch worthy of a wrestling champion, before he could even draw his non-lethal pistol.

No matter how he looked at it, he had never been attacked by a nun in his life. Least of all by one who should have been in a Gothic bar, instead of up on a ladder. What the hell had just happened? The last thing the policeman saw, before he passed out, was how his Neurowire's emergency call system was being disabled, and someone was hacking into the entire system to take it off-line.

The nun in heels stood up from the policeman and wiped her hands in satisfaction. As she did so, a voice echoed through the her's Neurowire.

[What the hell is going on in there? Talk to me!] asked a male voice, in a concerned tone.

The nun removed her black veil, revealing a messy dark hair. While she liked the black, she didn't like the headdress the nuns wore at all.

Rum ran her hand through it a couple of times and messed up her hair. "It's okay."

[Well, then tell me if I'm doing well, or if someone is coming.]

"Yeah. Just hurry up."

Stan, on the other side of the wall, and dressed as a priest, was holding a heavy machine in his hands that looked like a manual hydraulic hammer. He was standing in the middle of what appeared to be a sort of bright red circle, at least five feet in diameter.

[Please indicate depth,] was the tool's command that appeared on Stan's Neurowire.

"67 meters, 61 centimetres."

He turned on the machine and it emitted a buzzing sound at the bottom.

[Stop in the middle of the Namazium circle and deposit the tip of the AVH in the centre]. Stan did so and waited. [Two centimetres to the left.]

"Really?" Stan wondered, and placed a device in his ears which, after pressing it, activated a mask on his head, covering his entire face.

[Correct connection. Turn on your boots, put your feet on the footrest and make sure to grip the AVH device firmly].

Stan did so and the tip of the machine sank into the ground, but remained balanced with Stan standing on it. After a few seconds Stan began to feel a slight tremor under his feet. Looking down, he saw how his feet and the machine were sinking into the ground, and the circle of Namazium ore glowed burning the garden grass on the circumference. It was fortunate that no one was around at that hour.

To anyone watching the scene it would have looked simply as if Stan was sinking in the middle of the circle. But the truth was that, seen up close, inside the circle the ground was vibrating rapidly and subtly.

After the first few moments, when it took longer, Stan was already halfway into the circle. After that, it was like going down an elevator. Stan's vision was populated by the glow of the machine that carried him down and he could see the earth around him vibrate. He had never used an Atomic Vibration Hammer in his life so, he was enjoying it. But the trip was short and, after a few moments, he had descended through the earth the 67 meters and 61 centimetres that separated him from his destination.

He had broken through the earth from the surface, and was now in a tunnel dug underground.

He found himself in a dark, rustic-looking tunnel.

"Activate stand-by function." He said releasing the machine that hovered in the air.

[You have 26 minutes in stand-by mode. If you plan to use more, make sure the Namazium circle is renewed on the surface].

*It won't be necessary, I'll be out of this place in less than ten minutes*. "Activate night vision."

Stan looked at the place where he was, it was a tunnel dug into the ground about two meters wide and a little less than two meters high. Without stopping to admire the rough terrain, he set off down the tunnel heading in a northerly direction.

[Let me know if you're okay,] Rum said.

"I'm fine, I'm going under the catacombs."

[Who the hell digs a tunnel under a cemetery, anyway?]

"It comes from the Ancient Era. From World War II, they were going to use it to store relics in case the invasion came this far."

[Wasn't Italy on the side of Germany at that time?]

"Yes, but the Vatican had always been a target of the Nazis. From what I remember of history I think even the SS commandant wanted to hang the Pope and then exhibit him. But the war ended before that happened."

Fifteen meters ahead was a fork in the road. Stan went to the right, then walked straight ahead and stood in front of a rotten wooden door, if that could be called a door, since it was just mouldy rotten planks.

After following the indications Janus had given, he continued on his way, watching as his Neurowire alerted the sensors of the mask, which detected the rarefied air.

He was about to take another step, when he realized that he had reached his destination. It was another rotten wooden door that gave way at the first push he gave it. After struggling to remove the pieces that made it difficult to get through, he looked around the room and his heart almost skipped a beat at the sight.

"This place is huge. What the heck do they have here?"

It was a tunnel that, with the night vision, he couldn't see the end of, but it extended in an east-west direction. It was at least five meters wide by another three meters high. Surely it must have passed under the entire Basilica complex and through the Piazza di Pietro. But what caught his attention was the number of boxes that were in place, one on top of the other. Most of them were against the side walls. Stan wouldn't have been surprised to see some kind of guardian monster appear from somewhere, although, fortunately for him, that didn't seem to be the case.

[Are you doing okay?]

"Yeah. For now."

[It's thirty meters in a westerly direction, then the suitcase boxes on the right side. Look for three with the serial number 1986-CV-V-dM].

"Yes I know…"

He continued deeper into the tunnel, following the map Janus had left them to get to the target. Stan couldn't help but wonder what it was all about, although he didn't really care. They were going to get the money from Janus in exchange for the core. One more job didn't seem to be too much.

With one exception. They had stolen a fast flying car since getting off the ferry and arrived at noon in Rome. They had spent the rest of the day chasing the target two that Janus required. But they had been unlucky in that respect. Now it only remained to try to accomplish objective two after accomplishing objective one. As for objective three... there was still no news of its location since Janus said he would give them the location in due time.

Without almost realizing it, he had reached his objective.

On top of other boxes, there were three old-looking metal suitcases, probably some aluminium alloy due to a light chalky layer of corrosion on the bottom. Two of them were almost the same size, about forty centimetres high, by thirty centimetres wide, and another thirty centimetres long, the largest was almost twice the size. He looked for the number that marked them and indeed it was the corresponding one. Following the serial number, there was another number on each one, which gave the order.

Stan smiled. It was number two that Janus had said he needed, one of the small ones. He grabbed it from the holder, only to realize that, despite its size, it must have weighed a good thirty kilos.

*What's in this?* He couldn't deny that he was interested in the contents, but he didn't have time. He took out a small cube from his habit and through his Neurowire he quickly configured it, so that it transformed into a sort of harness backpack around the box suitcase. Without further ado, carrying the precious cargo, he set off back the way he had come.

*Six minutes.* Not bad, he thought as he activated the AVH controls and made his way back to the surface. The ascent took a little longer because he had to use a reverse function to counteract gravity. He climbed back onto the footrests while gripping the handles firmly on the sides, to maintain stability on the ascent.

As he surfaced the Namazium circle was already glowing less brightly, but it should last another fifteen minutes at least. Stan whistled to Rum on the other side of the wall, as he shook off some of the dirt he was holding.

The metal ladder grew and bent to the inner side of the garden. Stan climbed up and once on his side Rum simply sent a new command and the ladder folded back on itself, as if it were some kind of organic origami, until there was nothing left but another small cube that Rum kept in his nun's habit.

"Who is this?" Stan asked, looking at the policeman on the floor.

"Never mind. Come on!"

"It's a shame to lose that hammer. They cost a fortune."

"You can buy a hangar of them if you want when we finish this."

The tool, supplied by Janus, could not be put back into compressed mode, as it came from the factory, once it was used. To do that it had to be completely reconfigured, carrying it was not worth it and would only slow them down at that point. Janus had said to discard it once it was used, so they did.

They left Marco Bianci resting on the asphalt and started on their way back to the vehicle, that was parked in front of the alley. A free transport that they had cracked.

It was a surprise to find a police mobile on the scene, with two other policemen examining the vehicle from the outside.

"Shit," Rum grumbled.

They stood at a safe distance, while Rum entered through the back doors of the Neurowire system and disconnected the cops' network. Before they could react, they grabbed them from behind and applied a sleeper hold to both of them. They left them lying on the side-walk and, once inside the vehicle, they started their journey eastbound out of the vicinity of the Vatican. Stan got behind the wheel and deposited the heavy backpack in the back seat.

Chances were that the place would soon become a hotbed of police automated vehicles. Three policemen with the missing signal was more than enough to alert the forces of the Gendarmerie Corps and the Swiss Guard.

Target two was nearby, but it was going to be a headache to get around.

"That was close," Rum hissed.

"Pretty close. You should have seen what it was like down there. Who knows what's inside all those boxes. If they're relics there must be a fortune."

"Well at least we secured the package."

"For starters, what is this? And why was it in the Vatican?" Stan asked in confusion.

"I don't know. For the moment let's just get out of here."

They both looked at each other for a few seconds without saying a word.

"What do we do with the second target?" Rum asked.

"Call him."

"Can't you call him?"

"I'm driving. If I leave the auto-drive on, this thing is going to go thirty an hour."

Rum clicked her tongue in disgust and reluctantly called the private number through the Neurowire. The call was answered almost instantly.

[Yes, Miss Ruzicka. Good morning,] Janus' voice answered.

"Hello..."

[Did you manage to secure the package and target two?]

"About that... we were only able to get the package."

[... ]

"Target two has been running into people all day. We've been tracking it since we arrived in the afternoon hours, but the opportunity didn't present itself for us to secure it."

[The package is safe then?]

"Yes, we have it with us."

[... ]

Several awkward seconds passed during which Janus did not speak. Stan meanwhile nudged his partner, trying to figure out what was going on. Rum simply shrugged her shoulders.

[Interesting... once again the variables can't be changed, just as Aleister said, but it's the same result even if they are changed. The Savitronic cycle hasn't started yet anyway.]

*What is this guy talking about?* Rum gulped and asked, "Excuse me, Mr. Janus?"

[Yes, sorry. Don't worry about target two at this time, proceed as planned. Deliver the package at the agreed point and go to target three.]

"What will happen to target two?"

[I'm watching what happened. Don't worry, if all goes well you will probably get another chance at the agreed time. It's really funny how this works.]

*There's nothing funny about this. Watching what happened?* This guy can access the security videos? He still hasn't told us about the target three position, Rum thought angrily.

[The position will be delivered to you when you deliver the package. Good luck,] Janus said and cut the call short before Rum could ask any more questions.

"He cut me off! Ass-hole!"

"And? What did he say?"

"That we go to the agreed point to deliver the package... and that there we will be given the current position of target three, or two... I'm dizzy."

"Well, then... Turin, here we go."

Without thinking too much, Stan ordered the vehicle to go a little faster in order to arrive at the destination where he would have to deliver the mysterious box suitcase they had with them.

# Chapter Sixteen

**Hebe**

February 29. 2000. Ancient Era
New Jersey. United States

Hebe Bender looked at the establishment's lettering, and nervously clutched the handle of her purse and smiled.

"You're here, come on, come on," she said in a low, but determined tone, to encourage herself.

Over the past few months she had been to the place quite a bit. The first few times it was just for information, but then, when she thought she was ready to take the big step, she had backed out due to nervousness. That had forced her to make another appointment, which she missed due work, and the next one, where she had barely parked her car and had to start again.

The fourth time would have to be the charm.

She pursed her lips and, with a smile on her face, finally entered the assisted reproduction clinic.

She was a woman with tanned skin. Her hair, loose and carefree, which in other years had been a dark brown, had been whitened by the sun and the desert climate, where she had worked in previous years. Even now, after so many years away from field work, she still had the air of an adventurous girl in her style.

She wore a beige, slightly loose-fitting explorer shirt over a tight-fitting T-shirt and khaki wide-legged pants with short-heeled booties. Around her neck were two necklaces, one with an Egyptian scarab and the other with the sign of a sundial, given to her by her grandfather in honour of her name.

And yet despite her style, she was nervous that day.

She walked down the long hallway and finally found herself in the waiting room, where only one other woman sat, reading a magazine. The receptionist, behind the desk, was on a call at the time, and gestured to Hebe to wait a minute.

When she finally ended her call, Hebe was calmer. She was already there. It had to be that day.

"Miss Bender! It's good to see you again," greeted the receptionist.

"Good morning," Hebe greeted.

"Are you ready to take the big step today?"

Hebe just nodded, tight-lipped and trying to put on a smile.

"Please have a seat, wait a few moments, and the doctor will call you for your appointment," the receptionist invited, pointing to the comfortable seats in the waiting room.

Hebe simply sat on the opposite side of the waiting room from the other woman, and picked up one of the magazines on the low table, to concentrate on something else, although she didn't pay much attention to it. The magazine was a couple of weeks old and, much like the other magazines in the stack, it was all about the Y2K disaster in early January. For which reason the stock market had crashed in several markets around the world.

Hebe didn't own any shares in the stock market, and didn't have enough money to be affected, so like the rest of the almost 98% of the people on the planet she hadn't been too affected. A different thing had happened with the computer companies, whose stocks were down the next day after the disaster.

She tried to look for a magazine that interested her, but she couldn't find one with a historical theme.

*I should have brought a book*, Hebe thought.

Hebe Bender, following the love her grandfather had instilled in her for ancient history, had studied Egyptology in college and, after graduation, had the good fortune to spend almost seven years in the Valley of the Kings, helping in the excavations for the discovery and preservation of ancient Egypt. After that, upon returning to the United States, she was lucky to teach Ancient History at her former university, which at the same time was the one that had sponsored the excavation program. A teaching position she still held.

She loved her career, and had always been attracted to history thanks to her grandfather. Still, if there was one thing she hadn't had any luck with, it was finding a steady partner.

In her forties, just a few months past her 40th birthday, she had finally made the decision to step forward and start a family, even if it was just her own.

"Hebe Bender!"

Hebe raised her head and looked at whoever had called her.

She had been distracted by the magazines after all, because the other woman had disappeared at some point without her noticing, and now in front of her stood a doctor who was greeting her.

"Y-yes. How are you doing, Dr. Ahern?"

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Bender. Please come with me."

Dr. Brian Ahern was a man in his fifties, with grey hair, dark eyes, square-rimmed glasses and a smile as white as the tiles on the clinic floor.

The doctor's office was just as Hebe remembered it from the last visit. A man of routine, Dr. Ahern, for his part, never moved his furniture or shifted things around. He simply pulled out some of the folders with patient, or donor, files when he needed to, and put everything back in its place.

He invited her to sit down and he did the same in his chair.

"When you cancelled the second appointment, I honestly thought you wouldn't come," the doctor said, smiling at her.

"It's not that I changed my mind, it's just that it's a big decision and I was nervous."

Hebe spoke to him apologising for the previous cancellations, saying she wanted to be sure. The truth was that it was a decision that she had been made months ago, but inside she couldn't hide her doubts. It was opening a new chapter in her life, and she wanted to be sure she could handle the new challenge of raising a child. The freedom she had enjoyed throughout her life and career would now be changed by the arrival of someone in her life. She didn't care that her lifestyle would change because of it, she simply wanted to make sure that she would be as good a mother as her own mother had been to her.

The doctor understood that, as these were many of the same concerns he often heard in his office. Whether it was from couples resorting to assisted fertilisation or from women who wanted to become single mothers.

"So, are you planning to continue then?"

"Yes definitely!"

"I can see how determined you are about this decision. But I want to make sure you feel supported throughout the process. Starting a family on your own is a significant step. Have you thought about the emotional implications and the support system you may need?" In front of the doctor, Hebe Bender had no doubt about the decision she had made. But he couldn't blame her for her nervousness, since starting a family on her own was a big step.

The talk went on for a few minutes, while Hebe gave him some final data that the doctor took care of putting on the forms to arrange the procedure.

"Good, then let's make a new appointment to coincide with the ovulation period," the doctor said.

Hebe nodded.

"You said you would prefer an injection to stimulate ovulation?"

"Y-yes?"

The doctor had already pulled up Hebe Bender's chart, before calling her, and now he was flipping through the pages with the results of the previous tests.

"Honestly, I don't think the injection would be necessary. The preconception studies were more than encouraging. Although, we could do the injection to be on the safe side. If that's your choice, of course."

"Yes. Please."

"Well, then we could schedule first for the injection a few days before ovulation, and do a new test to schedule the date and then in a 24-48 hour period to proceed with the insemination of the ovum. OSI carry minimal risks, such as swelling or mild discomfort. But these symptoms usually subside within a few days, or maybe even hours. For safety, we closely monitor your hormone levels and perform ultrasounds to follow the development of the follicles. This helps us determine the optimal time for insemination."

"Sounds good," Hebe said and smiled and the doctor could see how hopeful her eyes were.

"Is there anything else you have concerns about?"

"About the donor…"

"He's completely anonymous, unless you decide to contact him. Or he could be one of the candidates for whom we have all his information. In the event that you have a donor in mind, we would have to make an appointment for him and do some tests first."

"No. I would prefer if it were anonymous both ways."

"I understand."

"But you told me last time that I can choose according to certain profiles. Right?"

"Yes. We have anonymous donors, from whom we can offer certain information related to their profile. Such as physical characteristics, educational level and socio-occupational level. All donors have already passed a test to eliminate any genetic problems or incompatibility."

Dr. Ahern spent the next ten minutes answering Hebe's questions. Obviously the woman was determined, but she had some doubts. With the same patience with which he had practised his job for fifteen years, the doctor answered all the questions.

"It's not that I'm looking for something special about the donor but, I don't know. I mean, I know that predicting how a child will grow up, or what he will want to be in the future, is impossible, but... "

"I know what you mean. Thinking ahead is important. I can give you the list of donors by certain profiles if you prefer, and you can choose the one you think is best from them."

"Can I?"

"Yes, of course. Give me a second."

The doctor left the office to return a few minutes later with a folder containing the donor profiles. The sperm donor business must have been going pretty well, because it was a pretty thick binder box.

Hebe took the folder and spent the next few minutes flipping through pages of different donor profiles. There was too much to choose from, from sperm motility, to sperm count. Too many parameters to consider. On the other hand there was also information regarding employment status and education level of the donors.

There must not have been many clients at that time, because the doctor certainly didn't mind Hebe taking her time turning the pages. Hebe had only seen one client, she must have been in one of the other offices so, she figured that must have been the reason the doctor let her take her time.

After twenty minutes of questions where the doctor was bombarded by Hebe, she arrived at the donor listed as 26-2102-72-77-72-521-21-21-02-0-0002. The donor seemed to have a good sperm per millilitre count, although that was not the data that mattered to Hebe. It was his profile that caught her attention.

College educated, with a graduate degree in particle astrophysics. Frequent physical activity and good hearing and vision parameters. No history of chronic or neurodegenerative diseases, apart from some migraines. A good economic level. As side notes, he was a man who liked to travel, although he spent most of his time working. Although it was not specified in what area exactly. Hebe guessed it must have been in something academic or something like that.

Maybe he was a good donor. But Hebe knew that predicting what a child would look like would be like rolling a dozen dice, and expecting all the faces to come up with the same number. At the end of the day, upbringing and environment would determine that to a large extent, regardless of whether or not his parents had good genetic parameters.

After thinking about it for a few minutes, and sifting through other profiles, she finally decided on the profile she had marked. The doctor searched his database and left again, only to return with a thinner folder containing all the data pertaining to the particular donor. Just to make sure that his patient was absolutely sure of his decision, he asked her again if she wished to proceed with the procedure.

But the decision on Hebe's part was already made and she nodded with a smile again.

# Chapter Seventeen

**Lee**

It was a raging storm.

The boy was in despair, and poked his head above the water, like a dead man coming back to life, tearing through the veil of his shroud.

He fought and struggled against the current. and spat the cold water.

No matter how absurd it all seemed to him. Somehow, he was drowning.

The water surrounded him on all sides, and the current seemed to drag him furiously. He struggled, feeling the coldness of the water drill into his limbs, and his clothes felt heavy. Swim, he would have to swim. But did he even know how to swim?

How had he gotten there in the first place? Had he fallen out of a boat?

Water under him and water above him.

From the sky, clogged with grey clouds, thick raindrops were falling, as if the sky itself was also trying to drown him, along with a choking wind that made the raindrops lash him in the face. He thought he saw flashes in the sky. Lightning? Where was the thunder? No, more like where was the sound?

He heard in a strange way, as if he had something plugging his ears and could feel a buzzing sound.

Fighting against the current, he tried to keep his head afloat, and saw the nearest shore. It was not far away. A hundred meters? Maybe less, maybe more? But he had to try. With numb limbs, he tried to give a few strokes and realized he could swim. He had muscle memory of it, though he couldn't remember how he had gotten there. One stroke, two, three... seven. Slowly, the coast seemed to be growing before his eyes. Through the rain he could see houses near the shore and docks. It must be in the vicinity of a port, but that must surely be a river or lake because it felt like fresh water in his mouth.

He was going to make it. It couldn't be far away.

Suddenly his hopes were swept away, when he saw a small wave come over him and carry him back underwater, submerging him a couple of meters again.

Again he struggled and looked to the surface, it was not far, just a couple of meters and he could breathe again. But the current was fighting to pull him under but, to where this time? The boy stuck his head above the water and, suddenly, his field of vision saw how something dark sticking out of the water was approaching him, growing at an alarming speed.

No. It wasn't that.

It was him, being pulled at full speed against it.

The boy hit his head against the stone and everything went black.

Monday, March 19th. 125 S.A.
Rome, Italy.

Lee suddenly straightened up in bed, covered with sweat due the nightmarish dream.

That dream again. Or childhood memory? It had been a long time since he'd had it.

He looked around his bed and looked annoyed at how his shirt was stuck to his body from perspiration, and the crucifix hanging around his neck was also stuck to his body. There was a halo on the sheets, as he had perspired quite a bit from his back as well.

Lee was a man. From his facial features, and appearance, he must not yet be in his thirties. He had dark brown eyes and also dark brown, slightly long, hair that covered his ears. He was thin and had nothing that stood out too much in his appearance. He was an ordinary human. Beyond his academic rank of university professor, the truth was that his life was rather normal.

He stood up in annoyance and snorted, as he approached the windows and looked out at the streets. The sun was already illuminating the city and quite a few vehicles were driving along the magnetised streets.

He lived in apartment 346, on the 27th floor. The building had its main façade facing the Tiber River, and was part of a housing and commercial complex between the Ponto Milvio and the Ponte Flaminio. Given the location of Lee's apartment, the sun streamed through the window in the morning through the curtains.

The apartment was not too big, but not necessarily small either. Although, due to the clutter of books, sheets and star maps, occupying tables and armchairs, the place actually looked smaller. Although that didn't bother Lee, he certainly saw a certain order in it all, although others would call it disorder. The sight of the sun, streaming through the curtain in the mornings when he woke up, almost made it seem as if the place was some kind of fantasy studio of the ancient magicians or alchemists of the Middle Ages.

Any other day he wouldn't have minded, because it was a sight he liked to see every morning. But that day, as he looked out the windows onto the street he felt as if something had poked him in the eyes. The meeting he had had with other faculty the night before had ended in a gorge of black beer and stupid jokes. Still it had been a good meeting, and everyone was celebrating that they were done with the final part of the student study program for next year. He had been busy with them all day, and night, as part of the celebration as well.

In Lee's case, he was a professor of particle astrophysics at the University of Rome, and also had a faculty teaching at the Castel Gandolfo Observatory, as part of a summer program aimed at promoting interest in virtual astroparticle physics in teenagers, who were attracted to the study of the cosmos. Although, he didn't have to worry about it until the summer, Lee had already developed the study program for that too a few days ago, and only had to submit it to the academic department for approval.

Thanks to the fact that he had advanced work in the past few days, he had almost a week off, until he had to worry about preparing the classes for the students.

He would have had to wake up in a good mood. But that dream had just left a bad taste in his mouth.

*Stupid dream.*

He knew that dreams, unless they were about people who possessed specialities in deep sleep immersion, and could construct scenarios to create shared dream states, were nothing more than subconscious imagery. Lee therefore ruled out that his dream was a vivid memory of something that had actually occurred.

Most likely, his dream was simply a subconscious reconstruction of the story he had heard so many times, of when he was rescued from the lake. Nothing more than a way for his memory to make sense of his lost childhood.

He shook his head and headed for the bathroom, trying to forget about it. He had days off and could do whatever he wanted. He took a shower to wash off the sweat, and put the clothes he wore as pyjamas in the washing machine and activated the roomba to clean the floor, which had not been done for several days. He dressed in dark dress pants and put on a turtle-neck sweater with a jacket, since, despite the welcoming sun, the mornings were still chilly.

He could have breakfast in the hotel dining room, before going for a walk in the surroundings.

But he was forgetting something. He went to the refrigerator and took out a small container. From it, he took out a small bottle of ophthalmic solution and put it on, then put in some contact lenses. He made several movements with his hands and the sub-menus of his interactive device appeared in his eyes.

It was his own Neurowire, although it could not be called that because Lee did not have one in his brain.

When he had been rescued from the lake, they had found that he did not have a Neurowire, and because he was already more than ten years old, inserting a Neurowire with all its capabilities was an expensive procedure and, therefore, he had to settle for a somewhat old-fashioned and external interactivity device. But that didn't bother him, as he had gotten used to it rather quickly. The orphanage where he had been cared for, after his rescue, had tried by various means to get him to have one, but the age for a fully functional Neurowire had passed and he had to make do with it.

The contact lens type device also had a small terminal to help with the functions and he had customised it in such a way that it was practically as if he had a Neurowire, like everyone else. At the same time, he had two devices that could be inserted to help him with language comprehension. The only operation he had been able to undergo.

Lee checked the mail quickly and had nothing of interest, apart from a few messages from his friends, regarding the previous night, and some suspicious spam that hadn't made it through the filter. Without further ado, he went down the disco-elevator to the hotel dining room area.

It was already nine o'clock in the morning, and there were still some people having breakfast at the hotel dining room tables. He asked the service robot for orange juice, a cornetto and some bread spread with jam. He took his time, while watching the people passing by on the streets through the glass, while checking the news of the day, somewhat bored, apart from the news of the science section, that he always read with more interest. Even though the headlines were often misleading.

He was drinking the remaining half of his orange juice, when he looked at the street and saw a black vehicle, with some yellow stripes on the side, parked in front of the hotel. He followed it with his eyes without worrying about being too indiscreet, since the windows prevented from the outside to see those inside.

Four people with berets on their heads, dressed in dark blue suits and looking serious, had gotten out of the vehicle. But what caught his attention was the coat they were wearing, with white on the cuff, lapel and lower part of the coat, and dark metal shoulder pads with two crossed keys. The boots they wore were black.

Lee knew that uniform very well. Because at the Observatory of Castello Gandolfo there were some of them during the Pope's vacations at the Papal Palace, although the summer uniform differed a little from the winter uniform they wore. Not to mention that it was the so-called night service uniform. Although the night uniform was just a name, it was already worn during the day as well.

Pontifical Guard? What are they doing here?

The Pontifical Guard, also commonly called the Swiss Guard, were in charge of papal security and the Apostolic Palace inside the Vatican. Seeing them in that part of the city was strange, even more so wearing the service uniform.

The four uniformed men entered the hotel and disappeared from Lee's sight.

He drank what was left of the juice and continued watching the news for a moment, when the view outside clouded over and everything was blue with some white tints. His eyes unfocused from the contact lenses and gazed at the men looking at him serenely.

"Yes, can I help you?" Lee asked.

"Professor Lee Reubens?"

"Yes."

Obviously the question was protocol, since if they had addressed him, it was because they must have known who he was, although Lee couldn't imagine what the Pontifical Guard wanted from him.

"I am Gian Egger, Lieutenant of the Guardia Svizzera Pontificia," introduced the somewhat elderly man, with a solid face, short grey hair and blue eyes.

Lee accepted the hand salute the man was offering him, and glanced sideways at the beret where he saw the three yellow bars insignia that effectively distinguished him as a captain. Those accompanying him had the shoulder markings which identified them as junior grade officers, which corresponded with their younger appearance as well.

"How can I help you?"

"We are here on official business."

"…"

Gian Egger nodded and asked in a courteous tone. "Do you think you could accompany us? It was His Holiness himself who asked for you."

That couldn't have been weirder. Lee had only met the Pope on rare occasions, although he had always shown interest in the studies, and summer courses taking place at the Castel Gandolfo Observatory. Towards the back of St. Peter's Basilica, there was also an observatory, although, Lee doubted that it was called by any name since the observatory had its own staff.

"How can I help?"

"We think we'd better explain on the way, there are people waiting for you."

"W-where?"

"At the Holy See."

"Do you need something from me?"

"We think so... do you think you could come with us, please?"

The tone was polite, but Lee couldn't shake the feeling that no matter what, he couldn't refuse the invitation, even if he wanted to.

# Chapter Eighteen

**In the tunnels**

Monday, March 19. 9.10 A.M. 125 S.A.
Piazza San Pietro, Vatican.

"What a mess." Van, a fey girl with long pink hair, looked out over St. Peter's Square and sighed, as she took off a pair of yellow glasses and tucked them in her coat.

There would be no mass that day. And apparently, there wouldn't be for the next few days either.

On the balustrade above Bernini's Colonnade, among the marble statues of the saints, security forces of the Vatican gendarmerie were moving. And, although she couldn't see them, she knew that sniper droids were probably guarding the perimeter at that moment.

Van was leaning against the columns, which gave the entrance to the Portone di Bronzo, and had been waiting for ten minutes. She had been distracted watching the Templar Guards, in their red and white armoured uniforms walking back and forth across the oval square, and the same for the policemen and gendarmes standing around the trapezoid-shaped part of the square near the entrance to the Basilica di San Pietro.

They were not paying special attention to her, as she had already identified herself a while ago at the Arch of the Bells of the Swiss Guard.

Van was quite tall and of athletic build. She had dark green eyes, and also had long hair down to her waist, with the exception of two braids at her sides, which were knotted into a sort of bun at the back. She wore a long leather coat that revealed her shoulders and underneath a black sleeveless T-shirt, crossed with tactical buckles, dark pants and knee-high tactical boots.

What made Van special was that, although she did not wear a visible badge, she also belonged to the SID. More specifically to the intelligence branch.

The case that had occurred less than 48 hours earlier in Edinburgh, had set off all the alarms in all the cooperation agencies, so that the search was on for the two criminals who had usurped the identity of two forensic technicians to steal a decapitated body. The victim in question had been Sil Moore.

The two criminals had then disappeared, and attempts had been made to track them down, to no avail. Given that they both seemed to be quite good at handling information, and stealing identities, it was more than likely that they had headed elsewhere, or even left the UK. But at least, thanks to the testimony of the two forensic experts, they had obtained the information about what they looked like. Although it was possible that the identities they had shown were also false.

In any case, Van did not expect that the artificial intelligence of Siren Island would send her the warning that both had been detected in the vicinity of where she was. Well, not that close. She had received the warning at six o'clock in the morning and she was on Vitinia. She had driven the twelve kilometres in her speeder in a matter of minutes, to realise that it was a nightmare.

The gendarmerie forces, the Templar guards, the Swiss Guards and the Roman police had turned the place into a hotbed, due to what had happened in the early hours of the morning.

Three unconscious policemen, a device to alter matter at the molecular level, and a circle of Namazium had been the trigger. The AVH device and the Namazium were not items anyone could get in a hardware store. It was material that was used for asteroid mining or military access. It was not common.

Both were used together to alter matter on an atomic scale by vibration. Namazium, named after a catfish called Namazu, which when it moved could cause earthquakes, was incredibly difficult to obtain and its production was regulated because it was a material only present in Martian terrain.

If something like that had been used just a few meters from the Vatican, without even the thieves bothering to take it back, it was a sign that something else had happened. It was enough money and it had just been abandoned. But, on the other hand, the question was, what were the criminals after then?

The security cameras had obtained their faces and their movements when they entered the alley and, although the AVH device was certainly in a compressed state when they entered, when they left the man was carrying a metal-looking backpack that he didn't have when he entered.

When police arrived on the scene, they discovered the circle in the grass and the AVH left behind.

It was then that alarm bells went off in the Holy See.

It did not matter what the subject was wearing when he left, but the fact that a device had been used for some unknown purpose, to modify an area of land on an atomic scale. The first thing that was done was to call in the Vatican's anti-sabotage and Rome's anti-terrorist forces in case they were confronted with an act of terrorism. This was due to the suspicion that something had been planted underground. However, the anti-sabotage force quickly came up with a strange fact.

The last configuration used in the AVH was almost 68 meters.

They checked the maps and there was nothing at that height. At least there was no modern infrastructure or any network passing right at that point. But there was something else. During the Second World War tunnels had been dug at that height, even though no one should have entered them for at least 205 years, when in the year 2021 of the Ancient Era, the underground parts of the Apostolic Palace and Archives were remodelled and the old entrances sealed.

These tunnels went underneath even the oldest necropolis, and most likely there were collapsed parts. But there was no doubt that at the point where the AVH device had been used it passed right through the end of an old tunnel, and from there the main tunnel could be reached in a matter of seconds or minutes with the right equipment. That went under St. Peter's Square and the main tunnel extended partly under the Apostolic Palace and the Basilica itself. So there was a possibility that someone could have planted something underground.

The Pope was evacuated to Castel San Angelo, and the College of Cardinals as a precaution, and activities were suspended for that Monday.

A depth sweep was made from the surface, but the depth was too shallow to know if there was anything underneath, nor could any significant heat source be detected, in case an explosive object had been planted.

Van arrived just as the anti-sabotage team, and the anti-terrorist team, were moving into the basement of the Archive to reopen the old entrances to the tunnels. It was an hour-long task to drill through the thick layer of cement that had been used to seal the site.

In the meantime, Van had presented her credentials, which accredited her as a member of the SID, and explained that she was at there because the two criminals had made the trip from Edinburgh to the site, as there was a possibility of a link. However, there was also the fact that unregistered material had been used, which was known to have been the trigger for Dark Events on three occasions, during mining work on Phobos.

The Vatican had feys in the gendarmerie, and even as part of the Apostolic College, but it did not have agents dedicated to dealing with DEs. That fell under the jurisdiction of Rome, and the Nevermore station in the territory, which was located in Trevi. The Trevi station simply let Van handle it, since she was in the main branch of the Siren Island SID, and they sent two FRT members to help with the drilling work.

After a lot of pestering to be brought into the investigation, Van was finally accepted as part of the team that would go down to find out what had happened down there. The only thing that bothered her was what had happened only moments before, and what no one had told her about.

The security videos had provided the images of how the two criminals, for several hours prior to what had happened in the alley, had been following a Roman citizen, until they finally left him alone to commit their crime.

They had told her, but after the Pope himself had ordered that the person in question be placed under protection as well, in case the criminals were thinking of something against him. Apparently the Pope knew the person, because he taught courses to young people during the summers, and he had met him a couple of times on his vacation at Castel Gandolfo.

Van was unhappy that such a quick decision had been made. From her point of view, there was also the possibility that the person might be under protection from criminals and was therefore being followed. Although she could not deny that the opposite could be true, and that he was indeed in danger.

In her position she had to think of both the worst and best case scenarios, and weigh which was the most likely to occur. The profile of the person in question was normal and he was an academic. Beyond that there was nothing unusual about him. Not even fines or run-ins with the law. But she had experience that many times things were not as they appeared, and so she was being cautious.

"Miss Van." Van turned around, and there she found a gendarme who, gun in hand and mask covering his mouth, informed her in a dry tone. "You can come now. They're finished."

Van nodded and, taking a last glance at the Vatican police vehicles, followed the gendarme. With a order to her Neurowire she sent a command to the small turtle backpack she was carrying and a tactical mask appeared, covering her nose and mouth.

"Did they take the drone down?"

"Yes. That's what they're doing right now," the gendarme reported.

They walked through the Apostolic Palace until they reached the Archives, passed through long corridors and from there down to the basement, where at least 30 people with masks had gathered and a light cloud of dust covered everything due to the efforts to perforate the layer of cement on the floor. An opening at least two meters in diameter had been opened and, when looking at the bottom, a series of rough and almost destroyed looking steps could be seen.

An AVH device similar to the one found had been used, but with greater care and precision although it took longer to operate.

One of the people in the room at that moment was still and with his eyes closed and everyone seemed expectant of him. He was the one in charge of operating the drone that at that moment was circulating through the tunnel.

After a couple of minutes he opened his eyes and looked at everyone. "There are no devices emitting signals, no abnormal heat sources. Only the air is dangerous to breathe and the place is in a very bad state."

Far from that being a sign of relief, it still remained to go down below to conduct a thorough investigation of the site.

One man from the group, who was in charge of anti-sabotage, would lead the expedition accompanied by five personnel from the same group, along with six from the gendarmerie sector, all directed in turn by the one who had brought the drone down, since he would be sending the indications of the tunnels traced by the drone.

Van would be added to the team and they agreed to communicate only by Neurowire, due to the state of the tunnel. They did not want the reverberating sound of the voices, although they could be attenuated with the masks, could produce any detachment in the tunnel excavated in earth and rock. Although they had sent a couple of extra drones with devices to deploy a force field to keep the walls safe, they didn't want to take any chances considering there was a necropolis between the top and the tunnel.

The team went down one at a time, alternating several meters until another could enter, because some parts could break off on the way down. Luckily nothing happened and after a few minutes everyone was down.

In Van's Neurowire flashed warnings telling her that she was in an environment with air that was dangerous to breathe, due not only to the dust in suspension, but also due to mould that had accumulated over time.

Everyone had their dual-spectrum night vision activated before entering, and that would help to find not only the path, but detect any heat source that the drone would not have found on its first sweep.

[Careful from here on out. First one to see anything send a signal. Don't touch anything]

The group walked through the tunnel and, after a couple of minutes, finally arrived where the huge main tunnel opened up.

[How many are supposed to have worked on this?] Van asked, looking at the dimensions of the place in amazement.

[Given the time in which this excavation was done, and because of the state it is not in the official records, I would say it was done in a hurry, but there must have been a good dozen workers,] someone reported.

[In fact, there is almost no record of the tunnels themselves. This has been abandoned for a long time. We had to resort to some older blueprints to figure it out,] said a third, who Van could not identify whether he was from the group with her, or the one on the surface.

It was certainly of enormous dimensions and with boxes of different sizes on the sides. Many of them were neatly arranged, although, due to time and humidity, the wood had been rotting over the years.

Some boxes that Van checked almost fell apart at the slightest touch, revealing papers that had become mouldy and black in colour, making it impossible to read anything written on them.

Whatever the other boxes contained, it must not have been of much importance if they had left everything behind to be ruined. Or maybe there had been more boxes that once the war was over had been removed, leaving the things that mattered the least down there. Really, given the crude construction, and the precarious porches, with wood that barely resisted, it seemed that it was something that had been planned in a hurry and not to be used for too long.

The whole group searched everywhere, moving away from each other. The tunnel, by its dimensions, did indeed reach St. Peter's Basilica.

Van was about to check another box with a broken corner when she heard the signal.

[Here! I found footprints!] It was the voice of one of the men who, by the sign of his distant light, must be in the nearest part under the square. [And I think you had better come and see this.]

The group walked quickly to the place and assembled there they saw that there were footprints that had been recently produced. Given the statures of the criminals and the size of the footprints, it was more than certain that it was the man disguised as a priest.

Following the footprints they quickly followed the walking pattern and were confronted by a larger box, where two suitcases rested on top of it. One was small and the other larger. There was a gap between the two and, from the dust marks all around, and with no dust in the centre, it was easy to deduce that something had been moved from there a short time ago.

[This small one looks like…]

[Exactly the same size as that man was carrying on his back,] Van finished.

Whatever it was, it gave off no heat signature and, given the layer of dust on the top, and rust on the bottom, it was certain that they had been there for a long time, even though the material they appeared to be made of seemed to be quite good as it retained quite a bit of lustre.

Van read the numbers on the suitcases. There was no doubt that the missing one was number two and it must be the one the thief had removed. [What is this supposed to be?]

[I just sent images to the database and they don't seem to match any of the files,] someone near Van said.

She read the numbers on the suitcases. [1986… Well, they are made of durable material. I think it is correct to think that they are more than two centuries old.]

Someone from the counter-sabotage team took both of them and put them on the floor. They had a combination system, but that was no problem. He took out a small bottle from his portable equipment and by inserting a drop of nano-oil into the combination system in less than ten seconds he was able to know the numbers that corresponded to each suitcase.

[1.05457 and 1.9864,] the man said, and put the numbers on each suitcase.

Everyone crowded around to get a better look, but the contents of the first case did not surprise them at all. Indeed the material of which they were made had been good enough to prevent the deterioration of the objects inside.

The first one was a kind of small valve computer. Although the shape, and the way it was made, reminded them a bit of an old equaliser.

[What is it supposed to be?] someone asked.

The anti-sabotage member shrugged his shoulders.

Van quickly ran through her database looking for something similar, but didn't find it. If that was from 1986 she was already on the planet back then, but she didn't remember seeing anything like it.

Then, when they opened the third, and heaviest one, they found that when they opened it they were in front of a screen. It wasn't like there was an old television. It was a screen with some controls but it had undoubtedly been made to fit the shape of the suitcase.

Everyone stared at the find without knowing what it was. But Van looked at the screen again and then read the number with which the suitcases were marked.

She remembered seeing that screen somewhere a long time ago. So long ago that even she herself was surprised that she could remember it. It was from old newspaper news of the Ancient Era.

*It can't be*, Van thought.

[It can't be true,] said the anti-sabotage man.

[What is it?] someone asked.

The man was about to say something, but seemed to be hesitating whether to say it. [When I was at the academy, we always made jokes about the secrets that were hidden here.]

[Did you know of the existence of these tunnels?]

[No. I mean there have always been legends regarding what's underneath, but they were always rumours.]

[1986,] Van said, and the man stared at her and smiled incredulously.[Do you understand, miss?]

[Yes. But is it possible?]

[What?] Asked another member of the team.

[I had already arrived on the planet at that time, and in 1986 the news was quite loud for a few weeks, until it all died down.]

[About what?] Asked another.

[That a scientist and priest had succeeded in building a machine to look back in time,] Van said

Everyone stared at Van and the man from the anti-sabotage team.

[Is that a joke?] Asked one of the nearby gendarmes.

[No. It's not. The most correct thing to say would be that it was an old wives' tale. Nothing more.]

[Exactly,] Van said. [Still, an old wives' tale that someone went to great lengths to steal a part of the machine that is supposed to make it work.]

They all looked at each other not quite knowing what to say to those words.

[The machine in question was called the Chronovisor. It does not appear in any file because it is part of a legend of that time and the truth is that, after it appeared a little in the press, the whole thing was forgotten shortly after. Being nothing more than another urban legend. Nevertheless, over the years the legend survived thanks to the Old Internet, but so many details were added that nobody knew which part was true and which part was a lie.]

[So, what? All this time there has been a time machine underneath the Piazza San Pietro?] A gendarme asked.

[No. The legend says that the machine only served to see into the past.]

Another of the gendarmes snapped his fingers.

[Don't do that!] He was scolded by another one nearby.

[I'm sorry, I just remembered. I read it a long time ago about that legend, that they said they had obtained a photograph of the time when Jesus Christ had been on the Golgotha].

Van nodded. [Exactly. But then it turned out that the picture was taken from another sanctuary. It wasn't true.]

[So the machine... is it true or false?]

[Whether it's real or fake, it's the same thing. Someone used a forbidden device inside the city to extract a part of this thing. For the thieves it is clear that the part they removed must be worth something. Only as a historical piece it must be worth enough.]

[If it's just that, then I'm glad, but this could be something worse. Why leave two parts and only steal one?]

Van looked at the one who said that. [Article 7081-7I].

[Excuse me?]

[Time travel research will be regulated, in view of the development of Dark Events, because there have been cases where certain artefacts have caused disturbances in space-time.]

[What?]

Van's face was too serious for her to be joking. Van knew it well, after all she had a friend, a certain hyperactive teacher with messy brown hair, who had been linked to a certain time travel experiment during the Great War against the Fractus.

[Right... it's one of the laws called silly laws. I had forgotten.]

During the war against the Fractus two fractus cores had been found that had a link to time. The first fractus had been found destroyed in the Kuril Islands, and its core used in an experiment that had caused the destruction of an laboratories complex in Japan.

The second fractus, located in Russia, simply destroyed itself, leaving behind a core composed of 48 fragments. That had happened at the same time as Japan.

During all that time, Dark Events had been occurring, where time seemed to be a factor that could not be ignored, and incidents with experiments occurred in various parts of the world after the war, causing serious incidents.

Therefore, the Council, together with the United Nations and the Interplanetary Peace Organisation, passed laws in year six of the Singularity Era to regulate the conduct of time-related experiments. The nature of the Dark Events demanded that certain experiments could only be carried out by control bodies, so as not to cause consequences.

The second fractus core, fragmented into 48 parts, had been kept under study by the Russian Academy of Sciences, mostly as a pretty paperweight. Because it didn't matter how they studied and experimented. That nucleus did not seem to possess any qualities that made it stand out.

But that had changed in the past year.

A few weeks before the arrival of a certain Keelian fey, missing for over two hundred years, the place where the fragments were kept was attacked, and the 48 fragments stolen. No one was found responsible and even the Russian Division of Nevermore and Veria investigated the event, without coming up with any clues as to what had happened.

Van sighed and said. [In the off chance that this machine really works, it must be searched for immediately. False or true, it should not be underestimated that sometimes the unconscious itself plays a role in Dark Events].

[You mean if someone really believes they can do something with it, like time travel, they can do it? It's an antique! It would be insane.]

[Belief in a miracle is no longer a joke. Or do you not believe in the power of words and mind? If there was no God before, the human species has created them by its own means. Magic is not part of the creed now, even though it was persecuted in the past?]

At that all fell silent and looked at each other. Everyone there, including Van, believed in something higher, even if they had different names. Influencing an object in the belief that it would work was a strange effect of the Dark Events that had been tested on different occasions. In case the machine really could see into the past, what were they looking for by stealing it?

That was giving Van a headache. Leaving Edinburgh to steal something from the Vatican? It was as if the thieves were raiding different parts, without worrying too much about leaving clues behind. Or did they have a reason for it? Who were they to begin with? With what had happened to Sil Moore there were many doubts, but they had certainly stolen her body. Were they linked to the Shadow People? Or with the team that attacked Jim Stuart and the cops?

It was then that Van remembered something she had been reading outside while waiting to be called. Lee Reubens' profile and resume. [...!]

The gendarmes were talking among themselves, while the man in the suitcases was explaining something, but Van wasn't listening. She read the resume, thinking that maybe she was wrong, but she wasn't. [Look at his resume.]

[Sorry?]

[Lee Reubens, the man the Pope asked them to find to protect,] Van waved her hand and sent the file over, highlighting the part she wanted them to read.

One of the areas where Lee Reubens had specialised was precisely virtual astroparticles with the possibility of applications for simulating future scenarios, and also a concept of neurobiological tempo-memory. In other words time travel, but only into the future and the second was related to the psychological arrow of time.

Those present read the fragment and were even more confused.

[We have to question him, it is too much of a coincidence that the thieves have stolen what is believed to be a time machine, and that hours before they had been following someone whose area of expertise also included chrononautics].

[Can't it be possible? Do you think that professor sent them?]

[I don't know, but we shouldn't dismiss it,] Van said.

While they were engaged in discussion, the farthest member of the team pointed his flashlight to the sides. As he moved his feet, he felt he had just stepped on something that felt strange and he looked down and pulled his foot away.

He brought his hand to the ground and picked up something metallic filled with dirt. He removed it by rubbing it between his fingers. It was an old .22 calibre bullet casing. They didn't make them that way any more and it had the back of it obliterated.

What's this doing here? he wondered. And he tried to get the attention of his companion, who was about four meters ahead of him. He was standing with his back to some large boxes and on top of them rested another one, but there was a wide space between them.

That's when he saw it.

At the feet of his companion he could see something that barely peeked out of the darkness of the boxes, and that could not be seen well unless it was illuminated from a certain angle. The gendarme rushed to his companion and pointed the flashlight into the gap between the boxes.

Van had continued to explain and talk to the anti-sabotage man and they were both surprised when voices from behind called out to them. [Here! You'd better take a look at this!]

Van looked toward the place where other gendarmes had already swarmed and approached.

There stood a skeleton, dressed in an early twenty-first century suit, giving them a void stare.

Between his fingers, in his right hand, rested a photo, which the lamination had saved from the passage of time. And, in his left hand, an old wick lighter. Two holes could be seen in his chest.

The photo was still clutched tightly, as if even death would not detach it from that piece of laminate.

Van bent down and carefully removed the photo and looked at it. It was a smiling young woman with two little girls, one was no more than thirteen or fourteen years old and the other was a baby who couldn't have been more than a year old.

Without saying anything, Van then stared into the empty sockets of the skeleton.

Given the pose, the photo and the lighter, it was more than easy to tell which was the last image those eyes had seen before they left the world.

# Chapter Nineteen

**Interrogation**

Monday, March 19. 11.10 A.M. 125 S.A.
Vatican. Rome, Italy

Lee was nervous and took a drink from the glass of water in front of him. Although he had eaten his breakfast only a couple of hours ago, the wait was getting on his nerves.

*What is this all about?* he wondered.

He was inside a waiting room with a mirrored window. There was a water dispenser near the door, two chairs and a table. No matter how he looked at it, it had all the appearance of a movie interrogation room. He had never been in one, but it was what he had seen even in video games, it was something that didn't change much over the years no matter what. There were sensors in the room that picked up his behaviour, body language, breathing and pupil movements.

He was in one of the gendarmerie rooms, where he had been taken after being led into the Vatican by those who had come to fetch him. Hadn't the Holy Father sent for him? What was that all about? He was certainly inside the Vatican but the area he was in he was sure was called the Arch of Bells, and was part of the facilities used by the Swiss Guard.

He was about to take another drink of water, when the door opened and Egger entered, followed by a young woman with long pink hair.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Egger said.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rubens. My name is Van, I'm from Nevermore, SID."

Hearing that, Lee took a first look at the fey girl to study her. She really was really pretty but fey. Looks weren't supposed to fool him. She sure was the oldest one in that room.

Van had introduced herself quickly and almost as if she was bothered by protocol. Lee didn't know why, but he got the impression that she was the kind of woman who would get right to the point, without beating around the bush.

Van felt her ears burning. I don't know why but I think this guy just thought of something that really pissed me off, she thought.

Lee extended his hand in acceptance of Van's greeting and they got to the heart of the matter.

"Excuse me, I thought you said I was required here," Lee said, turning to Egger.

"Yes," Egger admitted. "The Holy Father asked in person for you to be escorted to a safe place."

Safe place? If there really had been a bomb here that's not what you'd call a good decision, Van thought to herself.

"Safe place? I think I heard something about a threat here?," Lee said. He was trying to understand the situation. The fact that the Pope personally requested his escort to a safe place was puzzling. He had no idea why his presence was so important to the Holy Father. "I would like to know what is the reason behind all this," Lee said cautiously, trying to maintain his composure despite his growing nervousness.

Egger exchanged a quick glance with Van before replying, "Unfortunately, we cannot provide you with all the details yet. But, I can assure you that he is not in danger. The Holy Father has personal reasons for wanting to ensure your protection."

Lee frowned, trying to decipher Egger's words. Personal reasons? Why would the Pope have personal reasons to protect him, a seemingly ordinary individual? However, he decided not to press the matter further at that point and continue to listen to what they had to tell him.

"Is it something so serious that you can't tell me?"

"Yes, though the situation has changed, and we believe yours as well," Van said.

Lee looked at both of them inquisitively. "M-my situation? What do you mean?"

Van took the floor in what appeared to be a friendly tone. "Don't worry. We simply want to ask you a few questions. I understand that you have questions of your own Mr. Rubens, but you will have to answer ours first."

Am I being interrogated now? I'm in a damn interrogation room after all!

Van didn't seem to mind the nervous twitch in Lee's left eye. "You grew up in an orphanage, right?"

"Yes."

"You have no next of kin of any kind?"

"No, I was found without identification. My only family was the orphanage for as long as I can remember."

Van nodded, wrinkling her lips. Almost like a fey, she thought. "There was nothing that jumped out in the analysis regarding any relatives either?"

"No."

"That's strange."

"That's what everybody thought, and what I also think is that, whoever my parents were, they must have been CoTW, since I didn't have any identification."

"I see," Van nodded.

CoTW, short for Citizen of The Wild, was a term used to refer to nomadic groups of people who did not agree to use the Neurowire, and chose to move about in the world without any identification. Although they thought that this gave them a certain freedom, without being tied to the Neurowire connection, the truth was that they were identified by security systems, which allowed governments to know where they were. Many moved between cities, living freely and with their own belief system.

A lifestyle more philosophical than real freedom, but the CoTW alluded that they were like feys of the legends, but without the characteristics of them. Living in freedom and harmony with nature, while still availing themselves of certain benefits of society as they even had their own market system.

" Did you never try to look for them? I mean, possible relatives?" Van asked.

Lee nodded slowly. "I did try a couple of times, I even hired Aeon private detectives. Something like that had already been done since the orphanage, but it all came up fruitless."

Van nodded wordlessly. Then from her coat she took out a small cube which she placed in the middle of the table and pressed it. "Tell me, Mr. Reubens, have you ever seen this person?"

A hologram had been projected and showed him in three dimensions the bust of a girl with red hair and glasses. Lee studied the young woman's face for a few moments, and shook his head. Could it be possible that she was a relative of his? After all this time?

Van nodded in the negative and was about to wave her hand, when Lee interrupted her.

"May I ask, who is she?"

Van studied the gestures. "It doesn't matter if you don't know her... then-"

"Where is she from? Can you tell me that much at least?"

"United Kingdom," Van replied.

"I see." For some reason he didn't seem to respond to that. However, it couldn't be possible, Lee thought.

Van finished making her hand motion and this time two other humanoid holograms appeared, one dressed in priest's robes and the other was a Gothic-looking nun. "What about either of them? Or maybe both of them? Have you ever seen them?" Van again studied Lee's every gesture.

Lee looked at them several times. Since he had been used to seeing priests and nuns since he was a child, he wanted to answer for sure but, no matter how hard he tried to remember, he had never seen those faces. Finally he also declined.

Van and Egger gave him a series of further questions, studying him closely.

Because of the wait, Lee was still nervous. Although waiting was a common practice before interrogation, in this case it had not been intentional given what they had discovered in the tunnel moments before, although Lee knew nothing about it.

Lee Reubens did not have Neurowire, so they could not interrogate him and analyse his reactions as they would in a normal interrogation. They had to do it the old school way, aided by devices to read body language, pupil movement and dilation.

"Tell me," Van began, "Mr. Reubens, exactly what motivated you to study the subject of the psychological arrow of time?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It appears on your resume that you study virtual particles, and also predictive simulation along with neurobiological memory time. That's related to studies of the concept of time, right?"

"Yes. They are. Although, that's just a hobby."

"Hobby? "

"Yes. I'm an astrophysicist for the most part, and the predictive simulation in biological organisms is nothing more than a hobby. Sometimes in our spare time we physicists tend to play too much with mathematics. Building mathematical scenarios that have no reflection in reality can be one of those hobbies."

"I see," Van nodded. He was right, after all she knew Oxy, and she was quite given to doing something similar.

Van nodded, seemingly satisfied with Lee's response. However, Lee's glinted with a hint of curiosity and Van decided to extend her explanation.

"I understand that you consider it a hobby, but such studies might have deeper implications than you imagine," she said, scrutinising Lee's reaction. "Have you ever experienced anything that challenges our conventional understanding of time, anything that seemed to go against established laws?

Lee frowned, trying to remember if he had ever had any unusual time-related experiences. The memory of the dream he'd had that morning glowed for a moment in his memory, even though that wasn't time-related. Although he wasn't sure how to respond, he decided to be honest.

"The truth... is that the concept of neurological time has always appealed to me as well," Lee said with a somewhat sad smile. "If you've read my profile you know that I can't remember anything prior to my twelfth birthday and, on the other hand, the woman who took care of me, Sister Claire, died when she was one hundred and nine, even though she looked no older than fifty."

Van nodded, she thought she knew where that was going.

"She had obtained her Evo-Lift at the age of fifty, to continue caring for children in the orphanage. When she took me in she was already ninety-nine years old and, only a couple of years later, she was diagnosed with memory fragmentation. They tried to get him treatments, but to no avail. It didn't work. When I was coming out of college she died."

Van nodded.

In the old days she had seen the ravages of neurodegenerative diseases, but that today was a thing of the past. Though that didn't mean there weren't certain new maladies that even modern medicine couldn't erase. Memory fragmentation was intrinsically related to human biology and memory storage capacity, which has a limiting point past the age of one hundred and fifty.

Human longevity, also called pseudo-immortality, had been discovered in pre-war years, but did not reach its peak until the second decade of the new era. After much debate, it was decided that it would be a right of choice to access it.

It was not yet one hundred and fifty years since it had been established but, from the beginning, debate had begun regarding the human brain and storage capacity after a certain period. Not to mention the heated voices regarding resources for a society that could not die.

The latter had been a debate that fell apart a few decades later, because while many people opted for longevity, other people continued to die in equal numbers even with that pseudo-immortality. There was no distinction. Many called this the disappointment of pseudo-immortality. Because people who had obtained pseudo-immortality at very advanced ages chose to die after a few years. It was as if the same body and spirit of these people felt that they had already fulfilled their mission in the same way.

But there were other cases, in people who were over a hundred years old and where they began to manifest other symptoms, such as memory fragmentation, which was characterised by storms of memories that were increasing over time, until at one point the person died from brain fatigue. This only occurred in people with the same body, other people, who chose to move their memory to a synthetic body, could overcome this difficulty, going to data banks and neurological treatments to achieve a stable mental state again.

The case of the feys was different. They could store memories almost without problems. Courtesy of the universe, having their biological clocks completely stolen, due to their stay on the Other Side.

Van guessed that the nun Lee was talking about, being a religious person, did not want to move her consciousness to a new body. She had ascertained that he had not resigned his FDC either, which meant that perhaps he would wait until he looked older, or that Lee was also religious in the sense that he did not want to acquire pseudo-immortality.

"I see," Van said. "Just a hobby then."

Lee nodded slightly.

"And tell me. It has never crossed your mind to create a time machine has it?"

Lee smiled. "If I said no, I'd be lying to you. Who hasn't thought about it at some point?"

"But you haven't, have you?"

"No. It's impossible and it's forbidden because of Dark Events."

"You are an academic, though. With the right credentials, and a well-presented project, you could have the blessing to conduct government or Council-subsidised studies."

Lee quirked an eyebrow at that and a smile tugged at his lips as he approached the table. Lee was surprised by Van's statement. He had never considered that his interest in time and related studies might be linked to discovering something new. "Miss, may I call you Van? Miss Van, it doesn't matter how many prohibitions the agencies put in place. It's one thing, disruptions in reality and space-time caused by Dark Events, and quite another to talk about time study projects."

Van approached the table. "What do you mean?"

"That it doesn't matter about the bans. Humans, feys, I'm not sure about the Aeon but, let's put it out there for now. No matter how you look at it. We are nowhere near playing with time and time machines, until we have reached min Type 2 or Type 3 civilisations, and only in small scales. I have studied the history of warfare and, if I am not mistaken, playing with objects from another dimension caused a huge disaster in Japan and almost another one in Russia. Am I wrong?"

"No, you are not wrong," Van nodded.

Lee sighed and looked into her eyes. "I've been answering questions for a while now? Can you at least tell me what this is about?"

"Just one more," Van added. "Would you be willing to submit to a deep dive?"

"A Deep-Dive, you say?"

Van nodded and Lee looked at Egger who just stared at him in silence. Lee nodded. "I don't know what you're looking for but, I can assure you I have nothing to hide."

"I apologise in advance," Van replied.

The Deep-Dive procedure required either a person with the ability to read the memory or a helmet-type device. Since the helmet type was for people with Neurowire, they would have to resort to a nearby fey at the station, or a meta-human thelepath who could read memories. Van wasn't sure if the Nevermore station there, or the Roman police had one in their ranks at the time.

The truth was that Van didn't think she would get anything out of it. No matter how she looked at him, Lee Reubens was just plain and simple, and there didn't seem to be anything about him that made him look like the mastermind of a plan to build a time machine in a DeLorean.

Dedicated, cooperative, somewhat sentimental perhaps, but plain and ordinary.

"May I now ask? What's this all about?"

Van sent a gesture to the cube and there before him appeared a hologram of the two previous religious men. But they were in a place he knew well. The bar near the Monte Mario Observatory, where the night before he had been drinking with the other members of the university's academic team.

And indeed, just a few meters away, Lee could see himself looking stupid as he tried to pick up someone from the microbiology department. Not only that, more holograms began to emerge and all of them showed the same thing, although the scenery changed. In the observatory, in the hotel dining room, in the outskirts of the city, eating a gelato. Those two people in religious garb were there. They were all close to him, but he was always surrounded by people and they seemed to keep a safe distance.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Those two people seemed to be following him.

Van made another move and the face of the first girl appeared.

"This young woman's name is Sil Moore. Her body was last seen in a vehicle where she was being transported to the morgue." Van pointed to the two religious people. "These two people usurped the identity of the occupants of the vehicle to steal the body. We do not know to this day what they did with the body. It is possible that the reason they were following you was because they were planning something against you."

"What?!" Lee was really surprised. Him? A kidnapping victim? For what? If the reason was money, he wasn't a millionaire and his salary was normal. Why would he have to be the victim of two criminals? "I don't understand. Who are these people?"

Van folded her arms and leaned back against the chair. "These two people are to blame for what happened today at the Vatican, and the alarm in the city."

"I-I don't understand. Who are they?"

"At the moment we only know that they are linked to three DEs-related crimes." Van said seriously. "And apparently, for some reason they are interested in you."

Van deliberately left the subject of what they had discovered in the tunnels unsaid. But, deep inside her, she didn't know why but, obviously there had to be a connection between the two events.

She looked at Lee's frightened face and simply came to the conclusion that he must have a connection to it all, even though Lee himself couldn't know what it was.

# Chapter Twenty

**Busted**

Monday, March 19. 2 P.M.
Lago della Merla, Torino. Italy.

"In case there's anyone watching, we'd better start from here," the man said.

"Isn't that a big radius?" the woman asked.

"Yeah. But, well, we'd better be sure. In case there are nano spies."

The woman sighed wearily, but nodded.

The autonomous vehicle parked at the entrance to the shopping centre of La Loggia, a small town on the province of Turin. But, instead of driving into the bustling streets of the town, the couple chose to venture in a different direction.

Under the intense sun, they headed towards a specific point that was a bit more distant: Lago della Merla, about seven hundred meters away from La Loggia. The picturesque lake stood as a true natural treasure in the middle of the region. Surrounded by a small two-hectare forest, along the Po Fluvial Park, Lago della Merla exuded a sense of serenity. Its crystalline waters reflected the blue of the sky and the surrounding lush vegetation, inviting anyone to stay a few moments to enjoy the view.

Although the truth was that the lake had the same name it had had in the past but, it was much larger than the one from the Ancient Era, and the waters of the Po had made it grow in the last seventy years, engulfing what had once been two small different lakes.

Still the view of the place was more than pleasant for anyone who wanted to rest in the surroundings. Which seemed to be the case for the couple.

They were both dressed in casual clothes and she had taken his arm, in her act of appearing more affectionate.

Talking about trifles like clothes, the weather, the couple approached the lake and she knelt down to touch the water and, with a smile, he approached her and kissed her as they continued to talk.

"Look!" she pointed, with a surprised gesture, to a nearby abandoned building in the middle of some trees. It must be a little more than two hundred meters away. With a mischievous gesture she took his hand.

"Are you serious?" He asked.

"And why not?" She said to him.

The hideout was simply one of many abandoned buildings in the surrounding area. It was an overnight post, in case there was someone who wanted to spend the night near the lake. It consisted of three rooms.

The main room had only a table and two chairs, a third chair rested in a corner, with broken legs. It was usually used by hikers, or the curious during the summers, and sometimes a CoTW group or two had also used it for the night. Although it was full of graffiti, it was not in a dilapidated state, and one could see that the accumulated dirt was months, not years old. So it was evident that someone was paying attention to the place from time to time, so that it would not decay.

The afternoon sun barely illuminated the room, letting in a diffuse light through the cracks between the windows blinds.

In the middle of the room was Stan, sitting in a chair, looking bored as he drummed his fingers on the dusty table.

Suddenly he looked up. "What the fuck?" He said, jumping up from his chair.

The security drone in the vicinity of the building had sent a signal to Stan, that people were approaching the perimeter.

"What's up?" Rum asked, sitting in the other chair, as she gestured with one of her hands to move away the page of the virtual Renaissance architecture book she was reading.

"We have a visitor," Stan replied. "It's a little early. I don't think it's them, right?"

"Maybe the one from the exchange is coming earlier."

Rum followed him and they approached the window and, barely moving the blinds, they saw the couple approaching in the distance, holding hands. The girl seemed to be pulling the boy with a cap over his head.

Rum clicked her tongue in annoyance and frowned. "Tch, that's all we need."

After leaving Rome, they left the public transport vehicle abandoned outside and took another, set up in advance. The pair had travelled what was left of the night and a few hours of the morning trying to go unnoticed and in a discreet manner, without violating any traffic laws that might attract unnecessary attention.

They had changed vehicles a couple of times, changed clothes, and they crossed Pisa and Genoa, following the shortest route to reach Turin in the morning hours, to the hideout previously agreed with Janus, where they would have to wait for instructions for the next move. And, at the same time, deliver the object they had stolen in the Vatican to someone else.

As soon as they had arrived they had hidden the car in the surroundings, and had limited themselves to rest by taking turns to sleep. There was not much to do until about three o'clock in the afternoon, when they would have to receive the visit of the person who would take the object. That was an hour away.

"What do we do?" Stan asked.

"One of us would have to go out and scare them away…"

"I'll go then."

"Can you use the skin-shift now?" Rum asked with a look of circumstance.

"No, not yet. Probably tomorrow," he admitted, angrily.

"Leave it to me then," she said.

Although they hadn't worn disguises on the job at the Vatican, there were simple reasons for Stan for that. He couldn't use his ability consecutively, and he wasn't used to using the holographic system, because there was a certain amount of control to maintain on the Neurowire. On the other hand Rum had not used it because she had judged that the nun costume with the coif was more than enough, especially considering that it would be at night.

Although, she had been hanging around target two, Lee Reubens, she had not attracted much attention with her nun's habits in the surroundings. She and Stan had been following Lee Reubens to study the scenario where his abduction would take place.

Rum in her case had a somewhat customised, but conventional holographic system. If any of the city's depth cameras detected a nun with a holographic disguise to change her face, she was sure to attract attention. Something different from what happened in Edinburgh, when the police drone had scanned them because they were inside a vehicle and the device had only read the digital signature IDs so they had gone unnoticed by the security systems.

The holographic system she had were good, but not as good at fooling the hundreds of eyes that could scan her on the streets. It was not like the one possessed by certain organizations, which had resolutions that were perfect. She had tried to get one on the black market, but they cost too much and, for occasional use, hers had already gotten her out of more trouble than she could remember.

She touched a bracelet on her left hand and almost instantly, starting from head to toe, acquired a new identity chosen at random from among the people she had seen before arriving at the hideout. It was a girl with short hair and gym clothes, whom she had seen exercising about 30 kilometres before arriving at the hideout.

Rum walked to the door and came out. She had been in semi-darkness and the sun made her nose wrinkle because of the sudden light, but there she saw them, walking towards the place with laughter. It was less than 30 meters away.

The couple saw the girl and stopped laughing. They looked surprised. They were about the same height as Rum and Stan. They really looked like a couple looking for a place to hang out away from the eyes of others.

"Hi there!" greeted Rum, smiling.

"Hi there!" the man greeted and the girl looked down.

Perhaps she is disappointed that the place they had found to hang out is occupied, Rum thought. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We were just walking along the shore, when we saw the house from over there." He turned and pointed to a spot behind them and then looked at Rum again. "How's it looking in there?"

"Honestly it's a little dirty."

"I see."

"I'm with my boyfriend. He can't get out," Rum lied, smiling.

"Oh! I see," the man said, laughing. "Sorry to interrupt then. Apparently we're not the only ones who had the same idea."

"What state are those in?" asked the girl, pointing to the other buildings farther away.

"Honestly, we just parked at this one. I wouldn't know."

"Shit," Stan said, watching the scene from the window. "You're out of your mind."

"We left our vehicle over there, but we don't know the place," the boy explained.

"Neither do we," Rum replied.

"How did you get there?"

"... walking."

"You said you parked here."

"…"

*Damn.* Stan thought.

At that moment Rum gave a quick glance at the young man's lower half, at knee height. Maybe it was because, behind him, she could see the lake, but there was something that caught her attention. It was only for a second, but she noticed that the image of the water at a certain moment behaved differently.

Rum knew what it was. An optical effect due to the sun reflected in the lake. No matter how good they were, holograms had certain flaws if they tried to reflect too much of a three-dimensional environment with too much movement, such as the movement of the water and the angle of the sun at that moment. For the vast majority it would be impossible to detect, unless it was pointed out where the flaw in the system was. Rum had spent too much of her youth using holograms as a distraction, and to distract those who were supposed to take care of her too.

But that wasn't the only thing. The afternoon sun was warming up enough and it was getting hot. That hat on the man's head had no business being there. And, what was even stranger, all around him she could see how the sharpness of the landscape behind him was distorted just as heat does on asphalt or a desert. Almost as if heat was radiating from his head.

*This is not good*, Rum thought.

Rum darted to the side, rolling nimbly as a weapon materialised in her hand, from the slots loaded in her bracelet. With precision, she fired a couple of shots aimed at the legs, but the pair moved at dizzying speed in opposite directions. Rum, seeking shelter, hid behind an old stump, while she felt bullets raining down from both sides of the stump.

The man was shooting at her with stun ammunition.

The woman who accompanied him, without flinching, directed a firm gaze towards the door that had been left open, and advanced with a determined step towards that place. As she approached, she deftly dodged Rum's shots, moving with surprising agility. Approaching the door, she gathered momentum and launched herself into an acrobatic leap, spinning in mid-air to avoid the projectiles flying around her

She landed gracefully and, with fluid movements, moved purposefully through space, demonstrating impressive dexterity. Despite not having drawn any weapons around, Rum knew that woman's hands and legs were lethal tools of combat.

"I'll get the other one," the woman said, and the man nodded and ran to hide behind a tree, dodging Rum's bullets.

The woman had drawn no weapon and was standing just a few feet from that door. But she was more interested in looking into the shuttered window from the inside. Almost as if she was looking through it.

Everything had unfolded so quickly that she had barely given Stan time inside the building to prepare for the attack. He was drawing his weapon, as he watched his partner dodge the man's shots. But at that moment the vision of everyone outside disappeared from the window and was replaced by a yellow and red glow that covered all of Stan's vision.

Stan was thrown against the opposite wall, while the window panes exploded and a fireball burst into the room. The ball crashed into the ceiling and burned up as quickly as it had appeared. Stan staggered to his feet. Had it not been for the fact that his body was different, it would have been much worse. Stan at that time really appreciated his metamorphic ability that had altered the strength of his muscles and bones.

*A fire Thelesis user*, he thought. He didn't have time to run to Rum's aid, because the window that had just been destroyed had opened a huge hole and, through it, the girl who accompanied the man entered and rushed towards him when she saw the weapon that Stan still held in his hands.

The girl's blows were accurate, fast and terribly painful. Despite her similar height to Rum, Stan was no slouch and was able to block them with ease. It was clear that both had a considerable combat level. However, the young woman demonstrated superior speed. Taking advantage of a block she made on Stan's fist, she acted quickly in just three moves, disarmed the gun barrel and extracted the magazine of magnetic bullets. Stan regretted discarding the other polymer pistol resting in the vehicle at the time.

As the melee intensified between Stan and the young woman, the sounds of another gunfire battle echoed from outside indicating that the battle outside was intensifying. The situation had become more tense. Stan and the woman moved with impressive speed, exchanging blows and nimbly dodging each other's attacks. Each was deploying lethal combat techniques and seeking every possible advantage in the contest.

Stan tossed what was left of the unarmed weapon to the side, and lifted one leg toward the woman and then delivered an accurate kick to her chin. The girl at that moment stepped back a couple of meters, but instead of ending up on the floor, as he planned, she looked at him, smiled and returned the gesture with a kick, which sent him against the wall of another of the rooms.

The old material gave way under the tremendous thrust of Stan's body flying through the air and he ended up on the floor along with a cloud of dust and debris.

"Son of a bitch!" shouted Stan, between disgusted and surprised by the girl's strength and got up white from head to toe from the dust, but slipped on some of the debris he had knocked down. When he tried to stand up he found the girl' almost on top of him. He had tried to pull out another of the weapons he had stored at the time, but his Neurowire due to the blow had gone into a state of self-preservation. Without wasting a second he lifted one leg and with a powerful kick in the chest he pushed her away from him. She recoiled, and put a hand to her chest, but she was with a serious face.

"Hey, are you really going to resist?" She said, Stan had already sat up and turned to look at her. "I can go on like this all day."

*Fuck me*, was the thought as he saw the girl raise an arm and balled flames formed in her fist. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

The casual clothes had disappeared and in front of him stood a fey young woman with a slender figure, ash blonde hair and flaming eyes. She was wearing a blouse, with some richly decorated metal ornaments, along with black pants and shoes with metal decorations as well. "My name is Ignis by the way, you motherfucker," she said and lunged towards him as a sign that the battle had just begun.

Ignis pounced on Stan with unstoppable ferocity. Her agility and speed were astounding as she executed a rapid combination of precise kicks and punches. Stan was forced to defend himself with all his martial skills, deftly blocking and dodging Ignis' attacks. That flame in the hands of that woman named Ignis was threatening to turn him into a barbecue.

The sound of blows echoed in the room as Stan and Ignis moved in a deadly dance. Stan unleashed a series of powerful blows, trying to take every opportunity to counter-attack, but Ignis moved with unearthly grace, dodging his attacks and counter-attacking with fluid movements.

In a moment of daring, Stan threw a punch straight towards Ignis' face, but she nimbly dodged it and, without missing a beat, performed a series of spinning kicks that left Stan momentarily disoriented.

Seizing the opportunity, Ignis executed an impressive martial move, launching a leaping kick that struck Stan's chest with mammoth force, sending him flying backwards. Stan fell to the ground, struggling to catch his breath, as pain spread through his body. Ignis slowly approached, a challenging grin on her face, making it clear that she wasn't going to stop.

"Don't underestimate my fire or you'll get burned," Ignis said, with a defiant tone. "This is just the beginning."

But Ignis wasn't the only one who had transformed.

Rum, meanwhile, had watched as the man had deactivated his hologram and, in front of her, stood a man with pale skin and a beard as white as his eyebrows. He was another fey. He was dressed simply in a white T-shirt and dark pants and wore a light cloth coat that moved with her every movement. The only thing that hadn't changed about him was that cap he covered his head with. But it was the coat that had given the man away.

The hologram projector was a thin layer of nanomaterial composed of cameras that could capture the environment and thus project the configuration desired by the user. It was almost like a force field around the user but could acquire new chromatic functions. But having a continuously moving liquid surface behind it, the nano-cameras had a very short delay to pick that up and transmit the information to the actual clothing, which was not supposed to be seen. That had been enough for Rum to discover that they were not who they claimed to be. Another person wouldn't have detected it, but she had gotten used to knowing the tricks behind holograms.

In the midst of the fight, the shooting had stopped as the two had gotten close enough to engage in hand-to-hand combat.

"My name is Enfer by the way, Pyrene Special Agent." The man said, as he exchanged fists with Rum and Rum blocked them.

*The mountain elves? That's all we need*, Rum thought, looking at his pointed ears.

*She's good... for a criminal*, Enfer thought.

With amazing fluidity and coordination, Rum executed a Windmill Kick, spinning on her hands and feet, with her legs moving in a deadly arc towards Enfer. The latter responded with a quick Flare Spin backwards, narrowly avoiding Rum's spinning attack.

She dodged Enfer's fist, that had flown near her left ear and, with a move worthy of a break-dancer, ducked her body and rested one hand on the ground as she swung her legs around, almost catching Enfer in the waist.

Enfer by moving away had given her new leverage to shoot him, but the same was true for him. Enfer hid behind a nearby tree for half a second and then ran into the trees next to it as bullets whistled by his legs.

What's with this girl? For a while now she's only been aiming at his legs and no other vital points.

Enfer had more than enough combat experience, but from the moment he exchanged fists with that girl, it had given him the strange sensation that Rum almost seemed to move as if he was performing some kind of dance while fighting. It wasn't like Ignis' fluidity, or that of other fighters he had faced. That girl almost gave him the sensation that she moved even faster, but as if there was a strange harmony in her movements.

Rum ran out of bullets. At that moment she could have used Stan's gun with the magnetic boomerang ammunition, but she couldn't run inside. The sounds of insults and screams and booms were coming from inside. Given the noises it was as if a crew was doing remodelling work around the place with a giant hammer,. From the location of the blows on the walls, anyone could figure out where in the house the fight was taking place, because with each impact new cracks appeared here and there on the thicker walls.

When Rum looked for half a second in the direction of the house she had gotten careless and Enfer had approached her again. He tried to slow her down, but the girl was like water with her movements, almost like a ballerina.

Rum for her part wondered what was wrong with Enfer's legs that they were moving so stupidly fast and she had noticed that with every hit she landed, dodged, received, or blocked there was something abnormal in his temperature. It was really as if he was radiating heat and over his head the image could be seen more wavy and undoubtedly there was a source of heat.

In a moment of his carelessness, she took advantage and sent a quick blow near his right ear and, moving her fist, she pulled off the cap he was wearing.

A heat wave was produced and Enfer's head burst into flames.

"What the fuck is that?!" Rum asked angrily and surprised, throwing the cap away.

Enfer looked confused for a moment and looked around the floor for the hat, at which she took advantage and darted inside the house in search of Stan.

She didn't get three steps inside, when Stan's body dragged her and they ended up almost in the middle of the room. Ignis had used Stan as a punching bag and sent him flying at the exact moment Rum had entered. Both tried to stand up quickly, but couldn't get up from the floor when the hands and knees of Enfer and Ignis reduced them to the ground. Enfer had put the cap back in place and Ignis' flaming fists were gone.

"I told you to change your hat before you came," Ignis said.

"Sorry, mom," Enfer said, somewhat displeased. The truth was that hat was no good in the afternoon sun. The accumulation of heat and the sudden release of it, when Rum took the cap, made him feel dizzy for a moment due to the sudden change in his internal temperature.

But that no longer mattered, they had captured the criminals.

The fight had been rather short, but intense. And the distraction manoeuvre of the pair strolling around had worked for Enfer and Ignis once again.

Although it was a rare occasion, they were used to it. Pretending to be a young couple to get closer to a target was something that had worked in the past and they saw the opportunity to do it that way. They had no romantic feelings for each other. Their relationship outside of work was one of friendship due to the years they had shared together in Pyrene, but that kiss was just another way of greeting each other. A necessary act to make the scenario more believable and thus get closer to their targets without raising suspicions.

It was not certain that they were the people who had been part of the robbery and the attack on the policemen, but they had taken the precautions that had been sent by Nevermore. The alarm had sounded at the Grenoble station thanks to the artificial intelligence, that had followed the course of vehicles left behind and that the last one had stopped hours ago in the vicinity of Turin and remained without any movement. With the help of a Turin police drone located two kilometres away, they were able to get images of the place. The car was still there, but it was not visible. Another drone had been sent at a certain distance to obtain images from another angle and satellite image, but the vehicle was not really in sight even though the signal was still there. That was what had set off the alarm.

They could not be sure that there were any nano-spies in the surrounding area, so they had decided to start with an action by setting the perimeter at a little over seven hundred meters to appear more natural.

Enfer held Stan's twisted arm while his knee held his head to the ground. "Bastards! Stealing corpses? Even by today's criminal standards that's low!"

"What did you do with that girl's body?" Ignis asked, while keeping Rum's face pressed to the floor and looking at her sideways with fury.

Rum then looked at his partner's face, with his face also glued to the floor because of Enfer's key.

"We screwed up," said Rum.

[Don't say anything.] Stan said to Rum.

"So they don't want to talk, huh? Never mind, they'll want to talk to a Deep-Dive for sure," Enfer pointed out.

At those words Stan gritted his teeth and debated a little, looking at Enfer with uncontainable rage.

Ignis began to speak. "For contravening and violating the code of international coexistence, and disrupting the investigation for the prevention of Dark Events, I am placing both of you under arrest. You are entitled to legal representation. If you do not have a lawyer, one will be provided for you. Anything you say and think from now may be used against you and used in a national and international court. If you are found guilty of the charges, you two could face a sentence of twelve years of deep rehabilitation through the NW, equivalent to two years of life. In case you are found guilty of more charges this sentence will be higher and commensurate with the violations committed to the code of international coexistence."

Rum shuddered slightly at the sound of Deep Rehabilitation. That was basically a prison, but for the mind.

In Ancient Era, punishment was left in years proportional to the crime committed. Although they had always held the idea that, at least in their minds, imprisoned people were free in their imagination, that had changed with the Neurowire.

It was like suffering a sentence in an Other Earth setting, not unlike a prison in the physical world, there were rehabilitation programs so that prisoners could reintegrate into society. But the truth was that there were rumours that, at times, deep rehabilitation had turned prisoners into guinea pigs for psychological experiments.

Rum didn't know how much truth there was to that, but she had certainly seen thieves and criminals become model citizens after a stint in rehabilitation programs.

While she was not proud of the path she had taken in her life, she was proud of her standards and principles in her work. Never murder, never kidnapping children. To deny her life of crime would be like denying the hell she had gone through and that she forgave those who had made her what she was.

She did not want to forget that. It was part of her fuel that drove her to continue on the path she had charted, even if it was a dangerous one. Denying it all and being a model citizen sounded nice maybe to others, but to her it was like spitting up and not moving, hoping it wouldn't fall on her face.

Enfer began to name all the charges. "Theft and use of military equipment. Assaulting two civilians associated with the Scottish Justice Department. Identity theft. Intervention and theft of crime scene evidence. Interruption of the justice process. Theft of a corpse from a police custody. Fleeing and theft of vehicles. Use of a prohibited device and mineral in civilian areas. Impersonating religious personnel. Attacking police personnel and hacking NWs. Theft of antiques and resisting arrest. Transnational crimes. Am I forgetting anything?"

Enfer had read the charges on the list, including those uncovered during the investigation in Edinburgh and Turkey, which associated the two with the disappearance of a vehicle belonging to Nevermore and the material it was carrying which were guns and grenades. Although this had happened last year, during a massive case in Turkey, a grenade had been used to knock out the technicians found unconscious in the van in Edinburgh. The grenade belonged to the arsenal carried in the vehicle and had been used by Stan and Rum.

For the moment they could only blame them for the theft of the vehicle by association, but the other charges were more than enough.

"Theft of material prohibited under international treaties," Ignis said, looking at the briefcase on the table. "And we still don't know how you've kept your identity hidden for so long. Are there any more charges you'd like us to add? What about the attempted murder of the two technicians you attacked in the UK?"

"We didn't murder anyone!" Rum shouted, as she was lifted up by Ignis and put in special handcuffs that would block her Neurowire signal.

"Well, we'll see about that later," Enfer said, as he did the same to Stan.

They both pushed the pair forward and Ignis grabbed the somewhat rusty looking briefcase on the table.

At that instant a piece of debris fell from the ceiling and hit Enfer's head and bounced off Rum's head.

"Shit!" Enfer mumbled looking at Ignis.

She then looked around at the mess and the walls that had been brightly coloured until a few moments ago by graffiti. Now it was all smashed and several parts black because Ignis' flames had burned everything in their path.

"I'm going to have to charge this to the account, aren't I?"

"Of course," replied Enfer, rubbing his head. As he rubbed his head, a flame tried to escape from the cap, but he simply pulled it back down and extinguished it.

Stan and Rum looked at each other, there was a job problem.

If they could trust Janus' words, no matter what. He would get them out of the jam.

# Chapter Twenty-One

**1976**

October 26. 9.34 P.M. 1976.
Château Rouge. Vienna, Austria.

Night covered the city like a dark cloak. The amber lights of the street lamps flickered dimly, creating long shadows that crept furtively through the streets. No one seemed to pay particular attention to the limousine in front of the luxury hotel. The valet opened the door and the first occupant of the vehicle stepped out. The man in the black tuxedo got out first and looked down both sides of the street, where passers-by were walking oblivious, and he gestured into the vehicle.

He was a man of medium build, short dark hair and a bird-of-prey look in his grey eyes, although from his appearance he must have been barely in his thirties.

At the man's signal, Jack Piersons stepped out of the car, also dressed in formal attire, though in white, and looked at the luxurious building in front of him, while the valet parker held the limousine doors open. The long, red-carpeted steps gave Jack the impression that he was a movie star, which was far from the truth and why he was really in that place with the others.

It was a classically designed building, at least twenty stories high, with a richly decorated façade that took up almost the entire block. Above the entrance it read Château Rouge.

Château Rouge was one of the most elegant and prestigious hotel chains in the world. Regardless of country, or city, the name Château Rouge had always been associated with important meetings for business people. Many of those meetings were held in VIP rooms or with private reservations in the restaurant rooms of the chain's hotels. These had excellent cuisine, and had to be booked at least two weeks in advance.

However, in the previous weeks, the name Château Rouge had become associated with more than prestige, due to a certain incident that had occurred at the hotel in France, and had had repercussions in the other hotels of the franchise. The Château Rouge in Paris had had to close the doors of its restaurants due to a problem of espionage.

The owners of the franchise had protested vigorously, claiming that their restaurants were not a nest for spies to carry out their work. And, for several weeks, the Château Rouge restaurant in Paris had hung a sign on the doors of the restaurant, which was clearly intended to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the situation.

Our restaurant is closed due to international espionage problems. We apologise for the inconvenience, our service will be back in the next few days. That was what the sign said.

Of course, the countries involved in the incident had to respond by apologising and those involved had been deported. But, even so, the targets of those spies who caused the accident were not caught, but the incident had still upset the agenda of all parties involved.

Carl Scott got out of the limousine and looked both ways just as the first man had done. He was also in full dress, although he had his coat in his hands and the colour grey predominated in his manner of dress, with the exception of his white shirt, vermilion tie. His grey vest also had a diamond pattern.

The years had passed for him, what was once a handsome young man with a straight face when he entered the agency, had become a more muscular looking man, albeit with a somewhat more relaxed gesture. The years had not passed in vain for him since he first met Jack in 1959. On the other hand, Jack barely showed any grey in his hair even though he must be in his late fifties.

The man who had come down first then approached the open door again and offered his hand. He had wiped the serious expression from his face and put a smile in its place.

"My Lady," the man said with a gentle bow.

"So gentlemanly. It doesn't suit you," a feminine voice replied.

The man simply smiled wider, stifling a chuckle.

A feminine hand rested in his and the fourth person in the entourage stepped out of the car. The valet closed the door and the car drove away, turning the corner into the parking lot of the luxury hotel.

The woman who had just gotten out was a girl much shorter than the man, but who stood out for her beauty. Her hair was dark and long to below her waist. The hairstyle covered one of her eyes. She had Asian features and long eyelashes, her eyes were green and shone like a precious stone. She had a mole on the lower right side of her lip.

It was difficult to tell her age, perhaps she was in her early twenties, but one could not be sure. She was wearing a long dark coloured dress, which had a piece of transparent fabric at the top of the dress that covered her cleavage. It gave her an air of charm, without the need to show too much. The heels she wore made her look taller than she really was.

But there was something that no one could notice about that woman, because the hair on both sides was a bit tousled and that gave her a slightly dishevelled look of beauty. But, even if it was messy, it fit her style. Hidden by that hairstyle were two pointed ears.

"Are you all right?" the man asked to the woman.

"Yeah, I'm not dizzy, don't worry," she replied.

They both stood next to Jack and Scott, and the four of them looked up at the building.

"Well, here we go again," Carl Scott snorted and, looking at the other three, the group started up the stairs.

The second floor of the restaurant was filled with tables full of people enjoying their food, and the sound of soft music accompanying the chatter, and the ephemeral clinking of glasses.

The soft murmur of whispered conversations filled the air, while diners of impeccable demeanour savoured exquisite dishes served with culinary mastery. The gentle clinking of crystal glasses and the brushing of finely crafted cutlery created a sophisticated symphony that enveloped the space.

The intoxicating aroma of gourmet cuisine intertwined with the subtle perfume of the guests, creating an unmistakable and seductive fragrance. The maître d', impeccably dressed in a black tuxedo, moved gracefully among the tables, ensuring that every detail was perfectly orchestrated.

Walls adorned with gilded mirrors reflected the opulence of the place, multiplying the feeling of spaciousness and sophistication. Paintings by renowned artists hung framed in their panels, adding a touch of artistic distinction to the room.

But that was the second floor only. On the third floor of the restaurant at that moment everything was quieter, and only three voices spoke accompanied by soft jazz music.

Everything was much quieter there, but still the speaking voices had a pleasant tone. A far cry from the liveliness and opulence of the second floor.

There were dim lights, and a large crystal chandelier in the centre of the room illuminated most of the place, while the far corners were in semi-darkness. The three people were seated at a round table, arranged for seven people, at which the food had not yet been brought, because they were waiting for the other four people who were arriving at that moment.

One of the speakers was a man who must have been in his sixties, dressed in a smart bow tie. He had a tanned face and a white beard and whiskers. His untidy hair made him look much older, although his brown eyes sparkled and almost gave him a much more childish air, as if they had not lost the sparkle of their former youth.

His name was George Bender and he was a professor of archaeology from Miskatonic University.

The other man who spoke was also dressed for the occasion, in an elegant black Swiss cut suit, but he had one of his arms in a sling. It was Ishida Yanagida. And he had left his wife at the cinema before coming to the meeting.

Both George Bender and Ishida had only arrived a few minutes ago. But they had known each other for weeks. They also knew the third person since weeks but because of the accident in Paris the talk had been cut short and everyone had fled. Ishida had been the only one injured on the occasion, to the horror of his wife who had been present on the occasion.

The third person at the table stood out, because he looked out of place to anyone who had seen him at the time. No matter how someone looked at him, he was simply a boy who must have been about ten or eleven years old, given his small stature. But, in spite of that, he had white hair like an old man, over his childishly shaped face. In spite of his youthful features, it was his eyes and hair that were the most striking feature of his image. His dark blue eyes had a gleam almost as sharp as that of the dinnerware knife resting on one side of the still empty plate.

It was a calculating and somewhat sombre look, something that was not meant to be present in the face of a child. If indeed he really was.

Hidden in the semi-darkness of the restaurant floor, there were five other people standing with earpieces in their ears. Two of them, closer to the windows facing the street, were surveying the surroundings as if they were expecting something might happen at any moment.

"Certainly," Professor Bender spoke, "ancient civilisations are treated as if they had been nothing more than mere fools. The whole planet is a Gruyère cheese of civilisations, and what we could learn from them is a lot ... but I think your friends are a little crazy if they believe that ancient civilisations would have achieved such an advanced level to create something like a time travel machine. It's one thing if they believed in magic or made mirror boxes, it's quite another if they played with space time."

Ishida replied. "I didn't believe it either. But Jack and Mr. Scott have been doing it for the last few years more than anything else. And they're not the only ones. The Soviets, Chinese, Argentinians, Australians and even a group from Brazil and Peru have joined forces looking for parts of the machine. Luckily we've been quicker."

"Not because they knew," spoke the white-haired boy with a dry tone, his voice like ice. "This all happened because of the same person who stole your family's dagger. If he hadn't photographed parts of Satou Nobuyama's diary before running away, this trouble wouldn't have happened. Now there are people running around, looking for something they don't even know exists."

"But they do exist... yet, time travel... I don't know." Professor Bender hesitated. "That all sounds very fantastical and I've seen some weird stuff, believe me."

"Welcome to the club," said the boy smiling, somewhat cynically.

Ishida shrugged. "The truth is, nothing can be done about that, Gehirn. I'm referring to the subject of the photos."

"Look at it this way," said the boy named Gehirn sighing. "From my point of view it happened like this. The diary photos were in Germany for some time and then got lost among the hundreds of papers that went around after the war, and ended up in East Germany, when it came into the hands of Russia. Nobody paid any attention to those papers until Scott and Jack started moving around the world looking for parts of the machine. That was the trigger for other countries to want to know what they were planning as well."

"Basically, if they hadn't moved, no one would have paid attention..." mused Professor Bender. "But is it all true?"

"Honestly, I think if this whole story is true, the stone is probably in a loop," Gehirn said, wrinkling his lips as he ran one of his fingers across the red tablecloth.

"Loop, you say?"

At that moment, four people began to peek out of the stairway leading up to the place.

"It was time," Gehirn said, which left Professor Bender puzzling over what he had to say.

Jack stepped forward and walked over, leading the group in a theatrical tone. "We're sorry, we're sorry. But we did a few laps before we came, to make sure the same thing didn't happen as last time."

Scott, meanwhile, glanced sideways at the guards around. They had not been present at the last encounter.

The woman with her companion also approached, but they did not seem very intimidated by the guards. Seeing her, for the first time that night and day, Gehirn smiled sincerely and rose from his chair and walked to meet her. He walked past Jack who stood with his hand in the air.

*Damn runt! That's the second time he's done that to me*, Jack thought, remembering the first meeting where Gehirn had done the same thing and ran first to greet the fey girl.

"Hisui..." Gehirn said as he opened his arms.

Hisui though she was five feet four inches tall had to bend down a bit to receive the hug from the boy, who was barely five feet tall.

"It's only been a few weeks," she said.

"Yes, time flies, even for us." Gehirn politely rubbed the woman's back and turned away without wiping the smile from his face and turned to the man. "Quincy, always a pleasure to see you again!" Gehirn said offering him his hand.

Quincy shook Gehirn's small hand more solemnly but smiled. "Mr. Schmidt, it's a pleasure again."

"Is it true then?" Gehirn Schmidt asked and turned to Hisui again, and then to Quincy.

She blushed and smiled. "Yes, it's true. I'm about two months now."

"Wow..." Gehirn ran his hand over her stomach. "I don't know what to tell you honestly."

"It's a little early to be cheerful, you know. But I'm taking care of myself now. I won't do anything crazy any more."

Gehirn took Quincy's hand again and shook it warmly. "You'd better take care of this woman and this baby. You guys still should have told me sooner."

"We found out last week," Hisui said.

While Gehirn had continued talking to the couple Scott and Jack meanwhile took the opportunity to say hello to their old acquaintances, Ishida and Professor Bender.

A few weeks ago the group formed by Jack, Scott, Hisui and Quincy, had contacted some people close to Gehirn, to let him know if he would be willing to have a meeting to discuss a topic of high importance.

Hisui had known Gehirn for some years, because he had hired her for almost six years to be his bodyguard. The two had become close friends in that time and, beyond the professional relationship that existed, they were almost like family. She had left the job because she had developed a relationship with Quincy, whom she had met at work, because he had been hired by Gehirn in another job.

Quincy Quiver was a mercenary.

Although they had kept a low profile for some time, the situation had changed a year earlier due to a failed mission in Algeria. Both were hired by the Agency to which Carl Scott belonged, to protect the latter and Jack Piersons.

Since then, the four of them had been travelling around the world. Although that was about to change next year due to Hisui's pregnancy. Carl Scott and Jack had already assured the pair that for sure by next year there would be no more movement and in case they wanted to they could work as part of the project security. In the place where the pieces discovered by Carl and Jack in the last few years had been moved.

Professor Bender had only travelled with Jack and Scott once four years ago but, since that time, he had become a consultant to both of them on archaeological matters. Thanks to his invaluable help on the trip where he went with them, they found one of the pieces that had given Jack and Scott the most headaches. An intact original mirror box, so old that it was not even known which culture had created it.

The professor had a professorship in the United States, but he had credentials issued by the Department of Defence that accredited him to be there that night. Professor Bender had no real regrets about not participating in the group's adventures, as he had a family and even a beautiful sixteen-year-old granddaughter.

But because of the importance of the matter, he had first travelled to France and, after the incident, had remained with Ishida Yanagida.

Ishida Yanagida did not participate much in the matters of the group, and had only met a few times in the last few years to know how everything was going and how the investigations and collection of objects by Carl Scott and Jack were progressing. Although he had become friends with them, at the same time, he tried to know that they were taking care of the stone that he had given not only to them, but the other half also to Father Verneti and DiMati with their research in Rome.

Both groups had different approaches and purposes for the parts of the stones they owned, so they had kept only sporadic contact.

It looked like everything was about to come to a climax in the next year for Jack, but there was one last missing piece of the puzzle and that's why they needed Gehirn's help. Although for some years there had been espionage problems regarding Jack and Scott's adventures, due to certain photographs that had alerted other intelligence agencies.

During the Paris incident, they discovered spies a few tables away from them, who were listening in, and a third group also intervened, who were on the other side of the table watching them.

The spies had been discovered because Dr. DiMati had alerted Jack and Scott to certain people who had been snooping around Rome, and DiMati had identified them because he knew them from the KGB. Fortunately for DiMati and Verneti, they didn't get out of Rome much and had the private security of a certain intelligence group within the Church known as La Entita.

For Jack and Scott this was not the same, because very few people were aware of what they were doing and they were not to be discovered. Ishida had been the bait so, that after the incident, the press talked about a Japanese businessman being wounded in a brawl between spies. But the group he had met with that night had left the scene clean and no newspaper had been able to guess who they were.

In the commotion inside the hotel, Ishida Yanagida had also discovered a new and totally different side of his wife, Masako Yanagida. In his eyes had been forever engraved the image, somewhere between frightening and comical, of his wife furiously knocking down Russian spies with her purse and that image would never leave him again.

The venerable professor had also surprised everyone, taking care of a spy by stabbing him in the cheek with a fork and sending him off for a nap with a good hook to the stomach. Both had projected an image completely out of character.

During the greeting, Jack took it upon himself to recall the scene by asking about Masako, which did nothing more than stir the memory in Ishida.

In any case, they all hoped that there would be no repeat of that and that was the reason why Gehirn had reserved the entire floor that night for the meeting only.

The group ordered food and drinks, and simply ate while the conversation moved on to topics of what had happened at the last meeting, and how they had evaded Parisian security, and their own counter-intelligence systems, to get out without causing too much of a fuss.

By the second dish, the conversation had taken on a different tone. Gehirn had tried to ask a few questions about Jack, but Jack had responded with evasive and ambiguous answers, if not outright lies.

The truth was that Jack was a mystery to Gehirn and he had tried to find out who he was, but there was almost no information about him, although he could not shake the feeling that he reminded him of someone.

At that point, the truth was that Jack had warned Scott and Ishida not to reveal who he was, and so they had not argued about it. They both already knew how he had come to be, even though he never revealed too much of his past.

Professor Bender, Hisui and Quincy had not inquired too much about Jack, since given their association with Scott, they simply assumed that they were both part of the Royal Agency.

Without attempting to probe further, the group had simply begun to discuss the matter that really brought them to the restaurant.

"On the other hand we have the creatures he called the Chronophages, which is supposedly the origin of the stone," Ishida pointed out. "And which in turn are parts of what he called the Furactosu."

"They sound like Fractus," Gehirn corrected.

There were so many concepts going around the table that it had become a mess and Hisui was beginning to feel overwhelmed by the chatter.

"Don't forget the savitronic cycle," Jack pointed out.

"We have no way of knowing about the savitronic cycle yet, at least until better particle detectors can be built. The calculations may be correct, but we don't know if they are right until they can be detected," Professor Bender said.

"Let alone create tokions artificially in a laboratory." Gehirn began, after sipping from his glass of Chardonnay. "By Nobuyama's calculations, they involve the Planck scale. We're seventy or eighty years away, maybe even more, from being able to build accelerators to handle those magnitudes. I was just about to say that when you arrived."

Gehirn took a napkin and wrote something on it and then put it in the centre of the table. While everyone present knew what he was talking about, he decided to put the pieces in order in courtesy to Hisui. While she had no more than a secondary role of protection, along with Quincy.

"This is how I see it, and I barely had time to read the paper when I was in Tokyo a couple of years ago when your father invited me for business. Let's see." Gehirn began pointing to various words he had jotted down on the napkin, in a very refined cursive handwriting. "First we have Satou Nobuyama, who got his vision in 1880, but it wasn't until his teenage years that he started writing everything down in the diary. Let's take out the parts that talk about creatures and stuff, and focus on the blueprints of the machine. According to what he put in the diary, he said that the machine was parts of ancient civilizations, but he didn't see any ancient civilisations, he only saw into the future. So, if his visions were correct, it meant that the information he got from those parts were basically part of the future, not because it was something from the past. So the parts of the machine may have come from ancient civilisations, but the information that they came from ancient civilisations came essentially from the future."

Jack swallowed what was left of the salad bowl and spoke. "So... the visions he got were because we somehow got them?"

"I'm still not sure, I'm just speculating. This isn't my area after all."

"But, he was saying that the information from his visions came because of the stone. If that's true, we haven't travelled with the stone around the world."

"But assuming that the stone might have a way to access the information when you are nearby? What about that?"

"What?" Scott asked, surprised.

"The phenomenon of knowledge stones, capable of storing information is very old. If what we're talking about here is really something that can transcend time and carry information over time, why not a stone?" Ishida asked.

"While this is all very strange to me," the professor said, "I must admit that there are indeed legends about it, and I'm not just talking about information carved in stone. There are legends about stones that could transmit knowledge and store it."

Gehirn nodded. "If we move on assuming that, it would not be uncommon that every time you meet at the place where you have your part of the stone stored, it would access the information because you talk about it. That way it could carry the information into the past and at the same time Satou Nobuyama would transmit it in his journals."

"By osmosis?" Jack asked with a laugh.

"Isn't that a paradox?" asked Scott.

"No, it's a loop." Gehirn explained. "Paradoxes as such do not exist. They are simply improbabilities. If not look at myself. I am not a fey, but my age is frozen due to the alchemical experiments carried out when I was a prisoner in the concentration camps. It shouldn't have happened, but it did. Now I am an old man trapped in a child's body that does not age. Immortality is an improbability, not a paradox."

The group said nothing. Gehirn had a past that was known to those present, even though they knew that he himself did not like to talk about it too much.

"So, putting everything in order now would be like this." Gehirn continued with his explanation. "First we have these creatures, which we are going to assume that, since Satou Nobuyama found the stones in the past, it means that these creatures called Fractus come from there. Do we all agree?"

"If such creatures have existed," said Professor Bender, "I think it would be most correct to think that they are the same ones from ancient grimoires, which speak of creatures from dimensions with non-Euclidean geometry or perhaps with invocation geometry perhaps.... I remember reading a lot about that when I asked for access to the secret Miskatonic Library. Although the boys at the Armitage Foundation have been keeping an eye on me ever since."

"It's likely," Gehirn agreed, but went on with his explanation. "These creatures have different types and one of them are chronophages, and from them come the stones, with their Jikanium material and the most important thing inside them, the tokions, which are activated by detection of the savitrons emitted from the sun. We can assume that there must be other stones around the world besides Satou Nobuyama's two, which is the reason for all this fuss among other countries looking for them."

Quincy nodded. "No intelligence service would attack the Vatican and want to run the risk of the world press turning against it."

Carl Scott spoke with his mouth full. His turkey breast was delicious, but he couldn't let that point go. "You can't be sure about that. There are rumours that the mafia and secret groups have infiltrated the Vatican, especially certain families with interests in the Vatican Bank and related to money laundering."

"Be that as it may, through these stones, and always heeding what Professor Nobuyama was saying, they only store the memory of a time when the stones have been present. It means that if he really saw something like a time machine, it would be easy to assume that it could be a memory of something from the past... or from the future."

"What about what he called the Savitronic Cycle?" asked Ishida.

Gehirn snorted. "Well, that's another thing that's related. Nobuyama just conjectured that it must be the key to the jikanium working and activating the tokions inside the stone."

"How so?" Hisui asked. "I mean the order."

"First there are the Fractus, inside a subspecies called the Chronophages, then the nucleus, called Jikanium or Tokihedron, but tokihedron is only related to the crystalline geometry of the object, the most important thing is inside. The hypothetical particles called tokions that could carry information through time."

"Is that what makes it work?"

Ishida interjected at that point and explained. "That part is confusing in his diary, but, from what I understand, the savitronic particle thing is related to the Sun. Supposedly at each emission of those particles, that's when the stone works, and the tokions are activated. Verneti and DiMati have been the ones who have experimented the most with the stone so far, but they haven't obtained results either, so it's possible that what my uncle wrote is true and they only work when those savitronic particles are emitted."

"Yes," nodded Gehirn. "The savitronic particles would be like a detonating clock for the stone. But it doesn't appear that the cycle of these particles obeys anything we know. It's not associated with sunspots, although it's a little bit associated with coronagraphic mass discharges apparently. Assuming this is correct, and considering that it speaks of some ancient civilisation, there is a possibility that there is some relationship to the path that photons follow into the sun. If an ancient civilisation had somehow obtained knowledge of the future, they could put it into oral traditions hoping that it would somehow reach this time. If this is correct, what if the Savitronic cycle had been generated millions or thousands of years ago within the Sun and the emission was now occurring that could activate the tokions?"

A bead of sweat ran down Scott's cheek. "Excuse me, but how is that possible?"

Gehirn sighed. "Some particles within the Sun do not have straight angular momentum. This occurs because thermonuclear forces within the Sun bifurcate the path they would have to follow from the core to its exit. From there the light from the Sun only has to travel eight light minutes to reach the Earth, but inside the Sun this is not the same. Although there is also the issue of the lifetime of such particles. I find it curious that some of his journal entries mentioned that savitronic particles could be generated during the proton-proton chain, but after the production of Helium-3. If that is true then we are talking about emissions that occur before the initial positron emission at the beginning of the chain, but before the emission of protons and neutrons that will participate in the formation of the Helium-4 nucleus. Of course, from what we know about solar reactions, these savitronic particles would be something completely new and ignored until now. We cannot reproduce a proton-proton chain yet, so we do not know if it is true or if it is a phenomenon that can only occur on rare occasions."

Gehirn took a sip of his wine and continued. "It won't be known for some years if what he proposed is correct. If the calculation is correct, it means that at the time he received what he called that storm of memories from the stones, there was an emission of those particles from the surface of the Sun. And from what he predicted in his calculations before he died, in his last notes, another one of those emissions occurred in 1952, another one in 1969, and another one should occur in…"

Gehirn fell silent and looked at Jack, Scott and Ishida. At the sound of 1969 Ishida involuntarily kicked Jack under the table and Scott stood with a fork in the air and looked sideways at him as well.

Gehirn smiled. "Is this what this is all about? The emission that's going to happen next year?"

No one said anything at the table.

It had come to one of the crucial points of why they needed Gehirn.

"I don't know what you have heard from me. But building such a particle detector is still several years behind my funds and resources, let alone activating the tokions, that would require a large particle accelerator or an incredible expensive fusion laser."

"We don't want that," Jack said.

"What is it then?"

"We need to know where he is... one of your acquaintances."

"Who?"

"The shinigami. That black raven who saved you in the concentration camps."

Gehirn frowned. "Shin? What do you want with him?"

"We've been gathering data and we think he knows about the last part we need for what we're building," Scott explained.

"What exactly are you trying to build?" Jack and Scott remained silent. "It's not something as stupid as a time machine, is it?"

"It's stupid?"

"One thing is an object that could belong to a culture or species capable of seeing back in time and sharing information..." Gehirn looked back at the pair. "We're talking about information here?"

There was silence once again.

So that's it... information? I suppose it would make sense if American intelligence was involved after all, Gehirn thought. "What are you looking for from Shin?"

"The table. We think he knows where it is," Scott said.

"The table? Are we talking about that same table?"

Scott nodded. "There are rumours that in World War II a certain archaeologist passed the information to Shin about that object in Montsegur, and then that archaeologist decided to commit suicide before the information fell into the hands of the Nazis. Shin travelled to Spain and took the object with the blessing of the families who had guarded it for hundreds of years and then the trail was lost. The Vatican initially wanted to use Verneti's machine to find out if it was real. But of course, they didn't understand that it was very different from what Verneti and DiMati are trying to accomplish."

"If what they say is true then he never told me, but I know the story. Yet he's not here to corroborate it either."

"Where is he? Can you contact him for us?" Hisui asked.

"You don't know, do you?" Gehirn asked, scanning the table with his gaze. Everyone looked at him without answering.

"Shin disappeared about two years ago over the Indian Ocean. No one has seen him since."

"What happened to him?" Quincy asked. Of all those present, he and Hisui were the quietest.

"I don't know, people in his group, TF, have been looking for him but haven't found him. They think he may be in some secret investigation. But honestly, I don't know."

Jack scratched his chin in frustration and Scott pursed his lips, he had set his fork down next to the empty plate finally. "If he had hidden it, where would he have done it?"

"He has many safe hiding places, but if we're talking about something that's as powerful as the table, then he probably put it in some evanescent land."

"Rumour has it he went to Africa," Jack pointed out.

Gehirn looked at him and simply came up with the first thing that popped into his head. It wasn't as if even if he knew of the object they were looking for he was going to reveal where it was. At least not without first discussing it with his friend, who really had been missing for two years. "I don't know then. Who knows. Maybe he put it somewhere like Al-Madinat Al-Majhula."

"Ilrem? The city of pillars?" asked Professor Bender in surprise. "Does such a place really exist?!"

"I'm just speculating. There are plenty of places to hide something like that."

Jack scratched his chin again and removed the napkin from his neck. "Well, then what about creating one?"

Gehirn's face showed a cynical smile at hearing that and Jack continued.

"You said it yourself. If the information Satou Nobuyama obtained is correct, then it doesn't matter how you look at it. Either we get the missing part... or one could be built. We already have a prototype."

"We have the schematics my uncle left behind," Ishida said, smiling.

That was the second point why they had contacted him, if the first attempt to find Shin didn't work.

"You guys realize what you're asking me to do? To make a duplicate of something that can connect space-time and has not been seen before? If the legends are true the table only serves as a television to tune into certain spaces. Something that can distort space and time is something very different."

"But is it possible?"

"We know you are trying to create an organisation that brings together concepts of science and magic for technological development," Scott commented.

"Magic and science are two sides of the same coin. Magic is just science waiting to be explained. It is merely an evolution of the universe. There is nothing really magical, only limits to the complete understanding of a phenomenon. The same goes for what is now beginning to be called paranormal phenomena, or Dark Events. Before they were magical events, ghosts, fairies, feeric beings, angels or demons, today they are Dark Events, phenomena from other dimensions, feys, extraterrestrials or UFOs. It is the same phenomenon that evolves according to the society of the moment".

"A folklore in gestation," affirmed Professor Bender.

"And what would be my benefit in this scenario?" asked Gehirn and took off his napkin and drank some more wine.

The truth is that for Gehirn, all this talk of time machines and stones and visions was nothing more than a mental exercise. Interesting, no doubt, but not practical for his purposes. If they really wanted his help it was because they must have had something else in mind. He seriously doubted that the whole meeting had been done without more practical intentions and short-term benefits, from a strategic point of view. Many organizations and governments had approached him in recent years and he had heard all kinds of stories and nonsense. Time machines or lost pieces of antiquity were not the most unusual things he had heard of people approaching him, with intentions of borrowing his knowledge and personnel.

"We have some rumours that your company project is already thinking of expanding territories," Scott said.

Gehirn smiled. That's what I wanted to hear. So this is going to end up coming down to a business deal after all.

"If you could help us create the missing piece it would be very useful for the near future. It would lay the groundwork so that...say, if you were thinking of opening a technology company on U.S. soil, it would be easier to get the support of the right agencies and political support needed."

"Really?" Gehirn asked sardonically.

"For example as a contractor, whose development projects could be subsidised by the defence departments. We know that you have been trying in recent times to recruit the best materials technicians and engineers from U.S. universities."

"I see... in case I decide to say yes. What is the status of the prototype you built?"

"It's finished physically, but it hasn't been able to work with the other parts. The specialists who are working on it are a small group. There aren't a lot of resources for what we're trying to accomplish."

Still it must be a budget that must be in excess of ten million, Gehirn thought with derision. If they had travelled all over the world, gathered parts from all over to put together with a small team of specialists, however small the budget was, it had to be much larger than the budget other departments were getting.

"So basically you need the part to just work?"

"Exactly."

Gehirn looked at Ishida. "I would need some of my engineering specialists to read the blueprints that Professor Nobuyama left behind."

Ishida raised his hand. "I can provide them, no problem for that. But their team also has copies."

"How long do you think it might take?" Jack asked.

Gehirn shook his head and smiled. "If you have a prototype that doesn't work, with a team of technicians that can't make it work either, I can't give you any assurances. My specialists may be able to make it work in days, or we may need to create an entirely new part. To begin with? What's the purpose?"

"To find out if it works. Just getting the parts alone tells us that there may be something much bigger," the professor explained.

Surely these guys think they can get strategic data or something out of all this. If only it really was something that could look back in time, Gehirn thought. Originally the two stones were one that split. Was the splitting due to Satou Nobuyama finding them? What could they really be looking for?

"We need to create Satou Nobuyama's machine for our own benefit," Jack said.

"For the Agency's?"

"It goes much further than that…"

"I'm all ears."

In that way, Gehirn began to listen to Jack and Carl Scott's story while maintaining a solemn attitude.

The talk went on for another two hours, but the most important topics had already been touched on. Dinner became more relaxed and more bottles piled up on the table. Although Hisui never touched alcohol, she ate opiparently and with a double portion of chocolate dessert. Since the host had paid for the entire evening, they could eat and drink as much as they wanted from the restaurant's excellent cuisine.

It was agreed that next week Gehirn would send four of its best engineering experts to check the condition of the piece. Prior to that they would travel to Tokyo, to obtain more detailed copies of Satou Nobuyama's diary than Scott and Jack's team already had, and of the plans of the machine that was planned to be built.

Gehirn wasn't too interested in whether it would all work, but the reward for him sounded promising.

The group that had arrived last finally got up and were ready to leave. They didn't want to abuse too much of the good fortune they had gotten on the evening from Gehirn's help.

They said their goodbyes and were walking away, when Gehirn said something else.

"On the other hand..." Gehirn turned to Hisui with an amused smile.

She looked at him. "What's wrong?"

"I think it would have been nice if Shin had been here so you could apologise to him."

Hisui made a confused face. "Me? I don't know Shin..." She knew what he looked like, a tall, young-looking fey with dark hair, but she had never seen or spoken to him.

Gehirn leaned back in his chair and said in a sly voice. "To be honest, he does know who you are. You're the one who caught him off guard once without his armour."

Hisui folded her arms and closed her eyes. She tried to remember as much as she could, but no. She had never met Shin as far as she could remember and she widened her eyes and shook her head. "Are you sure you're not getting the wrong person?"

"No," Gehirn smiled. "During World War II you met him."

She tried to recall, but it didn't show up in her memories either and shrugged as she shook her head.

"You shot him in the ass with your sniper rifle."

She had during that time been assisting in espionage work on the battlefield and had fired several times. But then in her memory appeared the image of a man running after her in a trench coat and with some kind of helmet on his head. Throwing all kinds of insults, he had revealed the location of both of them and consequently they were chased by German soldiers.

"That stupid? He's Shin? I almost got killed!"

Hisui had seen Shin's picture, but she could not associate it with what had happened because she had shot him from behind, believing that he was a spy. Then his armour had appeared covering his face, so she never knew what the man who had chased her for hundreds of meters looked like. She left the scene behind and the man had stayed behind, apparently fighting to free himself from the soldiers. Because of the noise he had drawn everyone on him, at which she took the opportunity to flee.

"I would never have guessed it was the same person."

The group finally withdrew and those who remained simply stayed until later chatting about adventures and other topics. After all, Gehirn had to get his money's worth for the night.

Downstairs the chatter was already muffled and the music indicated that it was time to close the restaurant. The few diners never imagined that upstairs a part of history was being woven that almost no one would remember.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

**Deep-Dive**

Tuesday, March 20, 3AM. 125 S.A
3rd Station of Pyrene-F. Grenoble, Isère. France.

The moonlight illuminated the cloud-free night-scape. It was a serene night and the sound of insects announced the first night of spring.

The green beetles flew over the grass, gliding swiftly, with their elytra unfurled. To anyone who had seen them from a distance with night vision they would not have attracted attention, except for two details.

The twelve were in a delta formation and the second detail was hidden in their wings which had a small metal mesh.

The twelve took flight at a certain altitude, crossing a small forest and rows of trees, and then seemed to observe the structures below them with interest. The beetles continued to ascend, moving with almost mechanical precision. Their wings, beating with a perfect cadence, allowed them to soar effortlessly above the region without being swept away by the night wind.

They were flying over an elevation of just over a few hundred meters high, called Mount Rachais, which was part of a Pre-Alpine chain called the Montreusse Massif. What interested them was the perimeter construction at the peak of that mountain.

The beetles paused in mid-air, hovering for a moment under the moonlight, as they seemed to study the facility below them.

It was a complex of four buildings occupying about a hundred square meters with an enclosed perimeter of at least a kilometre, surrounded by a forest. The main building in the middle had seven floors and, around it, three others of different heights were interconnected by a series of bridges. In one area there was a control tower, a two hundred meter runway, heliport and a small hangar with open doors. Building an airstrip on a light slope would have been a problem in another era, but for the vertical take-off and landing craft it was no longer a problem.

The twelve scarabs pirouetted through the air as they headed for their destination.

At that moment outside the hangar were two Delta-TABs parked. Inside the hangar only one person was moving around, carrying a maintenance machine. Inside were two DT2s, of the same type as the two ships outside, although they were longer and for transporting more personnel, while the Delta-TABs were only for transporting no more than five people.

The Beetles split up, breaking formation. Two of them headed for the ships outside. The remaining ones went inside the building, entering through the hangar doors. Two of them separated and each went to a ship, settling on the outer shell of the ships and remaining there.

The remaining eight went inside the building, taking advantage of ventilation ducts and small openings in the place.

The place inside was well lit. It had long corridors, different rooms and offices all marked with letters of what they were dedicated to or if they belonged to a single person. But, beyond that, it was quiet in the place.

The beetles split up, each one taking a floor of the main building and placing themselves in different parts equidistant from each other, but which seemed to follow a correlative pattern. While one would hide in the bathrooms on the second floor, another would hide a little further on, but on the next floor. Thus each seemed to have built a spiral pattern that ascended the seven floors of the main building.

But the last of them had not done the same.

That one had gone to the second floor of the basement and entered a service area, slipping through the laser security of the ventilation. It had finally emerged into a panelled room with a glowing cube in the centre, resting on a pilaster five feet high. The beetle had not been interested in the cube. On the contrary, it had gone to the base and followed one of the wires that snaked along the floor, until it reached a wall where the wire joined other thinner wires and from there to a cable channel that joined them all.

The beetle landed on the bundle of wires and for a few seconds it circled around, until it sank its jaw into a yellow one and stood still.

No one in the area detected them with their strange movements. At that time the Pyrene station had only twenty members, more than half of whom were resting. The autonomous robots in the underground rooms could not detect them either, and the state-of-the-art autonomous system that alerted of intruders in the area had not detected anything abnormal either. The four large canine robots guarding around the enclosure had also failed to detect them.

However, the beetles were there, waiting.

The security shield stood imposingly on the edge of the base, guarding its perimeter with state-of-the-art technology. It was a masterpiece of engineering, designed to withstand the onslaught of any external threat. Its structure stood like an invisible wall in the surrounding area, except for one detail.

The security shields had a filtering system to allow organisms of a certain type to enter the perimeter. When an insect or a light flying bird approached the shield, the shield was activated with a quick response. The energy grid would instantly adjust, creating an electromagnetic field that acted as a safety net. Winged organisms and animals on the ground were detected, catalogued. This was done so that the presence of the base would not affect the ecosystem as much. However, near the base there were sound and light devices that could repel insects if they came too close to the base.

Although the latter had not helped the beetle drones, being controlled from somewhere far away from the base at that time.

The finely decorated automatic street gates closed, under the soft drizzle of the autumn evening.

"See you Friday!" Said the little girl waving from the other side of the gates, looking out into the street.

"See you Rum!" shouted another smiling girl poking her head out of the vehicle and Rum could see other girls waving their hands.

The bunny ears on the backpack waved in the air in time with the footsteps of the little eight-year-old girl.

She had just gotten off a private transport, which was also carrying other children after finishing their dance classes. As the private transport drove off down the road, she continued on her way without looking back, as she took skipping steps down the cobblestone path towards the manor house where she lived.

She had black, wavy, waist-length hair and was wearing a blue coat. The rabbit backpack had been a gift from her parents last week, and she really liked the comical look it had with those long ears.

She was happy that she had learned a new step that day and was looking forward to showing it to her parents. They should be home by now, since her father's car was parked there in front of the gate, around the fountain that dominated the centre of the large garden.

She put her hand on the doorknob and the door, reading her fingerprints and facial recognition, opened and she walked in.

"Mommy?!" Rum shouted as he entered.

As he closed the door he noticed something strange. It was cold inside the house, almost as cold as it was outside.

"Daddy?"

Rumenia Ruzicka crossed the wide hallway leading to the foyer and looked toward the stairs where a cleaning robot was currently moving.

It was the only sound that reached her ears. Everything was silent in the house, creating a disturbing feeling of stillness that, together with the cold that reigned in the place, did not give Rum a good feeling at all. She decided to investigate what was going on.

Rumenia crossed the hall, heading towards the kitchen with stealthy steps that echoed in the manor, and there she saw the first thing that was out of place. Next to one of the huge windows, near a small table, one of the vases with fresh flowers from the garden was smashed and the contents scattered on the floor.

Rum stared at it quizzically, but dodged it with a confused gesture and continued walking slowly towards the kitchen. Given the time, it was possible that her mother was already setting up the two robots that would help her with dinner.

As she entered the kitchen, the atmosphere seemed charged with unusual tension. Rum looked up at the ceiling, where his mother's kitchen support robots used to work diligently. In front of the sink, just below the window overlooking the backyard, one of the pairs of mechanical arms moved choppily, raising and lowering its limbs with an erratic cadence. It was as if it was fighting an internal malfunction, puzzling Rum with its unusual movements. Meanwhile, the other pair of mechanical arms remained inert, hanging lifelessly.

The girl's heart raced and her breathing stopped, releasing the rest of the air she still had in her lungs. A sense of unease and dread came over her as she tried to comprehend the anomaly she was witnessing in her own kitchen. With cautious steps, Rum continued her way through the kitchen, circling the centre island.

Every noise, every shadow, seemed to take on a sinister importance at that moment. She was feeling really scared. Her mother might be upstairs with her father, or maybe they were both in the back garden. But why was the place so cold? Was there something wrong with the whole house? What was wrong with the robots in the kitchen?

But those thoughts left her mind when, as she finished rounding one of the corners of the kitchen island, she came upon a dreadful scene that chilled her heart.

On the cold kitchen floor lay the bodies of her parents, one piled on top of the other in a final embrace. Her father's face remained hidden, as his body rested on top of her mother's, face down. However, a large red stain on his back stained his shirt, indicating a tragic fate. Her mother, staring into the void, presented a ghastly hole in her forehead, from where a trickle of blood had spilled in a now dry trail.

Rum became agitated, retreating a few steps, her heart pounding violently as horror gripped her being. Reality seemed to fade around her, the shadows of unknowing closing in like a dark veil enveloping her mind. A wave of terror and sadness overwhelmed her, threatening to sweep her into unfathomable darkness.

The world around her seemed to fade into a black abyss as terror enveloped her. Tears slid down her cheeks, mingling with the pain and confusion that engulfed her being.

Finally, the horror before her eyes was too much to bear, and she felt the world around her lose the consistency and colour of warmth, as she sank into a desolate darkness.

He was badly wounded.

Michael Levin, barely ten years old, walked limply, leaning against the walls every few feet. His basketball shorts and T-shirt, which had once been impeccable, were now torn and stained with fresh blood.

His face flushed with rage. "Fucking bitches!" the boy exclaimed, as he spat some blood against the side-walk. Night had fallen, and the narrow street was dimly lit by street lamps emitting a sickly yellowish light.

He had won the fight, but at a high cost. The dispute had broken out over the right to use the basketball court, but what should have been a simple game turned into a chaotic battle of horrific proportions. Broken teeth, broken fingers, bruises and contusions decorated his slender body, product of kicks and punches from the other kids. One of those big guys seemed to be able to use thelesis early on, and had used it to change the weight of his fists, making each blow feel like a hammer.

He clutched his stomach as it had been twinging from the kicks for some time.

The boy named Michael knew that his mother would not be happy to hear what had happened. He imagined the look of disappointment on her face, the scolding and lectures that awaited him. He had, once again, let anger take hold of him, let violence take the reins of his being.

The boy ran the back of his hand across his nose, wiping away the blood, and put one hand to his head and the other to the right side of his ribs. He stopped, leaning against the wall and tried to breathe. He had been having trouble breathing normally for a while now, and the vision in his right eye was turning red, because the bullies had targeted that side of him when he was on the ground. One of the kicks had hit his forehead on that side.

Michael looked up at the star-studded sky and wished he could have been born up there, in one of the countries of the Orbital Belt, which at that moment was passing over him.

He was pretty sure that up there, must be enough space to play basketball, without worrying about stupid fights, not to mention that the games with diminished gravity were incredible. He hoped that in the near future he could have enough money to buy body enhancements and become a meta-athlete.

A sting in his ribs brought him quickly back to earth, leaving his dreams to turn into attempts to try to get air into his lungs. Barely audible sounds came out of his throat as he tried to catch his breath, sounds that were almost inaudible and were silenced by the noisy summer insects that were squeaking everywhere in the gardens on the other side of the street.

Michael was in a state of confusion and disorientation as he struggled to keep his thoughts straight. The dizziness was overwhelming, clouding his mind in a murky haze. Yellow warning flashes flickered on his Neurowire, but his ability to interpret them was impaired, leaving him in the dark about his own state

His eyes temporarily lost sight, plunging him into an eerie blackness. His balance betrayed him and he collapsed onto the side-walk, still warm from the heat of the day, but getting even dirtier in the process. He landed on his side, feeling the rough, dirty asphalt against his skin.

From his fallen position, Michael turned his gaze to the other side of the street. The view seemed blurred and distorted, as if he were looking through a filter of altered reality. The street, illuminated by yellowish street-lights, seemed an empty and desolate expanse. There was no sign of life, not a soul crossing his path or witnessing his unfortunate fall. No one passed by, nor did anyone see him.

Stan began to close his eyes when it seemed to him that the noise of the insects had completely quieted ominously. And perhaps his eyesight was deceiving him, but he was seeing some sort of shadow creeping in his direction.

He focused his gaze and caught a glimpse of how this time the Neurowire was showing a sign that it was calling the nearest emergency services.

[Massive internal bleeding. Cerebral haematoma in the temporal lobe and precentral fissure. Damage to ribs and sternum. Perforation of the right lung. Nano-platelet system will not act adequately, immediate assistance is required. Estimated loss of consciousness in 180 seconds.]

Stan didn't care about these messages. Now that he had focused his eyes he was seeing that jelly-like shadow crawling in his direction. The road was barely ten feet thick and was not for large autonomous vehicles. Mostly motorcycles and other small vehicles passed by. So that slowly crawling thing would catch up with him too quickly.

With infinite patience, and without haste, that kind of stain or shadow, which he could now see somewhat more clearly, seemed to have a thick liquid consistency. What was more alarming, the closer it got to him, the more it seemed to be adopting a form that looked too much like a hand.

Before his eyesight went black Stan tried to scream, but no sound came out of his mouth, as the hand-shaped thing lunged towards his face and advanced through his mouth and into his body.

A place that it would never leave.

Ignis, Enfer and Dr. Barbier watched the scenes projected on the holographic cubes silently and seriously.

Dr. Barbier, an old man, was the opposite of his last name, as he did not have a single facial hair on his wrinkled face. But his hair was greying on the sides in a disorderly fashion and his crown was bald. He wore a white PVC coat with his credentials hanging from his chest. He was the director of the medical section of the station and, at that moment, he was watching how the two technicians readers were carrying out the Deep-Dive reading of Stan and Rum.

The room was large and several meters high, divided into four parts. In the central part there were two huge floating cubes that were projected by holographic technology. In front of the huge cubes were the two special agents and the doctor. On either side of the room were the other two divisions, separated from the others only by acrylic walls.

In each of those divisions were Stan and Rum in closed sensory deprivation capsules in a deep sleep state with a helmet on their heads. Both were immersed in a saline solution. They were each accompanied by a technician, who controlled an external device and sent the activity and readings of their brain signals to the central cubes. The images of the two inside the capsules were transmitted to another screen that displayed the deep sleep data of both, while others showed various graphs related to REM activity and other information.

The Deep-Dive method was easy for them to do, it simply consisted of controlling that they did not wake up while they proceeded to read memories.

Deep-Dive was not a method intended only for security and related agencies. In fact, it was also used by foundations and organisations dedicated to Memory Banks. Many people accessed Deep-Dive to maintain memories, while at the same time relieving the burden of recall. Often, when access to a specific memory was required, all the person had to do was to connect remotely to their private memory bank.

This was a method that had been created particularly with human memory and its limitations of memorisation in mind, a method almost designed in conjunction with the resignation of DFCs, and to prevent memory fragmentation.

At the same time, the Memory Banks could count on an extra service to copy the entire personality of the user in case of accident and death. Another capability was to be a remote medium, in case a synthetic body needed to be accessed to go somewhere else, although the latter was a more expensive service that only certain organisms could afford.

The differences of the Deep-Dive type lay in their methodology.

Memory banks relied on the consent of their users, while security agencies required consent as well, but could do without it in case of public security matters. At the same time, in case of crimes, police, law enforcement agencies and other security-related agencies could ask for permission to access the memory banks of certain individuals.

The method used in Stan and Rum was painless for them, but required some control, since Rum was very good at accessing neural networks and cracking Neurowire. The Neurowire of both had to be turned on in the procedure, because it was the main link to the helmets and transmitted the data from the long and short term memory in electrical impulses that, when sent to the supercomputers, could then be rendered and transformed into three-dimensional images.

Artificial intelligence support was often called upon to fill in the gaps that might arise in rendering and projection, but this did not seem to be the case with Stan and Rum. Although there were black parts that could not be accessed, but that was mostly due to psychological and experience-related traumas.

Especially in the case of Rum, who seemed to have lived really horrible situations when she was a teenager.

After that scene from when she was little more had followed. Images of an orphanage where she had been mistreated by the other children. An escape she had managed at the age of fourteen, after injuring one of the security guards who guarded the place. More images of her walking through streets where no one seemed to pay attention to her, stealing to survive and sometimes escaping from unscrupulous human-shaped devils that had tried to abuse her.

Petty thefts that had escalated over time, until one day she had found a companion in conditions as miserable as the one she found herself in.

In Stan's case, images of being treated by doctors followed. Then images of his adolescence at school, where he seemed to have been teased for his artificial thelesic abilities. Despite that, the boy had managed to graduate and had plans for the future to go to a university with a medical field of study and a sports campus.

Those dreams didn't go too far when he was blamed for a crime he didn't commit. Given his special ability, and the fact that the real perpetrator had chosen to hide near his home, he did not help in the defence of the boy named Michael Levin.

He fled and wandered through various parts of the United States, until, finally fed up with life there, he had boarded an orbital transport ship, stealing an identity and offering himself as part of the cleaning staff. On one of the trips he simply disappeared in the European Union, where one night he found a girl, two years his junior, feeding on food in a dumpster.

Michael Levin and Rumenia Ruzicka were dead. But that night the team of Stan and Rum was born. Underworld criminals offering their services to the highest bidder to survive in a crappy world, but there didn't seem to be any better.

Basically those two had been like two dogs licking each other's wounds. That thought crossed Ignis' mind and she took a deep breath.

Ignis glanced at Enfer, as both of them had also gone through something similar when they had arrived on Earth, and later when they joined together to form a team. In her case, she fell into the fey trade, until one day she burned all the bastards and that did not make her happy, because she was persecuted by the law of that time for murdering humans. As much as they were scum, the law was on their side and it was a time when the feys had no protection whatsoever.

In Enfer's case he fell victim to a belief as ancient as it was stupid that consuming part of a fey body would grant immortality, and he was held to be cut into pieces, only to be regenerated again and the cycle repeated for two hellish years. He had been nothing more than a nice piece of juicy steak that could be cut endlessly, without thinking what he had to say about it, as he himself used to say.

Ignis and Enfer was not a name they chose because they liked it. But to remember and not to forget what they had been through. The team name they had: The cremators, decided twenty years ago when they became partners, was a synonym of danger for anyone who tried to get in their way.

It must have been the same for those two in front of them in a state of deep sleep.

Ignis would be lying if he didn't say that the image she was seeing didn't make her feel sorry for them in a way. She was seeing how their criminal lives had been created.

"What exactly happened to these two as children?" asked Dr. Barbier, though it was a question more for himself than for Ignis and Enfer.

Enfer cleared his throat without taking his serious gaze off the projections. "We're going to have to go to the social services courts, because the official profiles have the information sealed by the juvenile courts. But apparently the girl's father was involved in a defence project related to a spin-off of the Goldeneyes System."

"The one with the back doors?" the doctor asked.

"The same one."

"Apparently the father was against the implementation of the system because it was an overreach of defence agencies."

"Well... unfortunately it didn't do much good. I find it curious that just this girl would do something very similar by accessing other people's NWs when it was her father who objected." The doctor scratched his chin and looked at Stan's projections. "The boy however, strikes me as very odd as well."

"What were the results of the blood tests?" Ignis asked.

"Something a bit unpleasant. I speak from the point of view as a human."

"What do you mean?" asked Enfer.

The doctor gestured and sent the medical report to their Neurowires.

Enfer read it and after a few seconds frowned and pursed her lips. "Phew, don't worry, I find this somewhat unpleasant too."

Ignis read it and raised an eyebrow. "A parasite shape-shifter?"

"Yes. What I don't understand is why the young man's files are sealed. As much as it's a delicate matter it shouldn't be secret," the doctor argued.

"Does he have anything besides genetic mutation?"

"The mutation inhibitors are not like in a normal shape shifter, it's more like he can't change for a period of time after he uses his ability. Which doesn't happen in the common parasite type, or the fey shape-shifters."

"We're going to have to ask for information on it."

The voice of one of the technicians pulled them out of their conversation. "Doctor, the synchronisation is ready."

"Oh good!"

Both Ignis and Enfer paid closer attention. It was the most important part of the procedure.

"Expand projection," the doctor ordered.

"Expanding and overlaying rendering," said one of the technicians.

The two cubes grew in size and began to approach each other.

Assuming that in the event two minds had occupied the same place, a much more detailed scenario could be created with an enhanced three-dimensional projection. That was what was being achieved with the overlapping of the two memories. A third point targets could be filled in by the artificial intelligence and triangulate a virtual observer of the scenario.

The group watched with interest everything that had happened in the last few days. They had really stayed close together most of the time, except for a few rare occasions.

Thanks to this they were able to recreate what had happened in Edinburgh first. How they had been hired on a freelance basis by an individual. How the situation had taken a turn, that had forced them to act rashly, stealing the identities of two forensic technicians from the Edinburgh police. Then, impersonating both of them, they had stolen the body and locked out two other techs in the back.

"I find it interesting that she didn't get into the NWs of those two to shut them out," Enfer observed.

"As much as she would have disconnected their Neurowire, they still had to move to the rear to knock them out. A grenade was much faster. They just took the body and retreated," the doctor explained.

Finally an old port, a lighthouse, and an exchange.

There they saw a muscular man in a suit with a ponytail, accompanied by a deathly pale, boyish-looking fey.

But what mattered most to them were the people around them. Not much evidence had been obtained given the scarlet explosion that had taken place after the confrontation, but there was no doubt it was the same profile that had been shared by the SID. Those people had been the ones who had attacked the cops and a member of the FRT, using some strange movement techniques along with high calibre ammunition, and that did not match any off or on duty weapon records.

"Well this is a good thing. At least we have something for Nevermore as well," Ignis said, looking at the photo of the pigtailed man and his companion.

"Losing coherence," the technician with Rum reported.

"Probably a nightmare. Try to relax the amygdala," the doctor ordered.

"What the hell did that guy offer in payment?" Ignis asked.

"It's a fractus core," replied Enfer.

"A weird one," Ignis pointed out.

"Coherence is still slipping," said the technician with Rum.

"Expand the relaxation of the entire limbic system!" said the doctor.

"Detecting an external agent," reported the technician with Stan.

"What?" the doctor asked, frowning.

Ignis looked toward Rum and then Stan. "They're bleeding."

The doctor looked carefully at both sides, concentrating on the screens transmitting images of the inside of the capsule and saw a trickle of blood coming out of their noses.

"Coherence lost, sleep states disrupted," one of the technicians finally reported.

The cubes had just separated and only white noise could be seen and heard. The images of both cubes had just been lost.

"Disconnect everything!" The doctor ordered, looking at the bleeding and ran to Rum. The top cover of the sensory deprivation capsules retracted to one side and there appeared the bodies of Stan and Rum dressed only in their underwear.

"What happened?" asked Ignis, approaching.

Enfer peered into the other cubicle where the technician was removing Stan's immersion helmet. "Why are they bleeding?"

"I don't know. But I'm very interested. We're going to have to do a more detailed analysis now. If the helmet doesn't work we have to try a Deep-Dive with the natural method... unfortunately we don't have a technician here but we can order one from the main base in Paris. I already ordered one for the old man we have in the medical wing underground, but they haven't sent it yet."

Ignis looked at the doctor, given what had happened in the last few days she had almost forgotten him. It seemed like weeks had passed since he had been transferred to the station. "What happened to him?"

"He's still the same. He's asleep and we couldn't do any invasive tests. He has a high white blood cell count, but we can't do anything about it if we can't test him and give him IVs. Has a nano pack of vitamins and to support hydration but there is nothing more we can do. The closest we can think of is that he is an encapsulated system fey. But if so, it doesn't explain why he was conscious when they pulled him out of the water. He's on one of the basement floors with a nurse support robot that will alert us in case he wakes up."

The doctor carefully removed the helmet from Rum's head and the technician helped him, as the water where they were submerged began to recede. Dr. Barbier examined Rum's nose, while on his Neurowire he tried to externally analyse the brain temperature and neural activity transmitted from the girl's Neurowire.

"Move them to the medical wing. We're going to run a Neurowire analysis to see what happened here."

The water had disappeared from the capsules, absorbed by one of the lower connections. The two technicians nodded to the doctor's order and in the cubicles some doors opened on the sides walls. The techs activated the levitation system of both capsules and directed them to the sides doors, disappearing from the scene.

Ignis looked at the floating cube that, now without connection to anything, was of a white colour that did not show anything. There was something in the last part of the projection that had caught her attention. "What was the meaning of what that man who hired them said?"

"The last part?"

"Yes. That things were going to get bumpy here."

They went on talking for another few minutes about it but couldn't come to any conclusion as to what it might be about. Surely the SID agents would know better. They stood for a few moments in silence thinking about that as the lights in the room went out.

They looked up.

"Did they change the cubes? At this hour?"

"That's odd," the doctor said.

There was a rumble that shook the whole room.

"What the hell was that?!" Enfer asked.

He had hardly finished asking, when there was another rumble and they could hear explosions in the distance.

On one side of the room a red light began to flash. At the same time an alarm also appeared in their brains.

[Special agents: protocol N43. Proceed to your posts according to AI projections.]

N43.

The protocol for an external attack on a station had just been activated.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

**The Attack**

Tuesday 20, 3.25AM. 125 S.A.
3rd Station of Pyrene-F. Grenoble, Isère. France.

*[You know what to do right? Don't fight more than necessary or your boss will kill me,]* Janus' voice said.

"I know, unlike these pathetic guys you hired, I know how to do my job. Wilco. Over, and out," said the feminine voice. The woman was hidden in the gloom of the trees and accompanied by more than forty humanoid forms waiting for her command.

The first explosion in the hangar lit up the night sky and silenced the screeching insects. It was followed by the ship next to it and then by the two ships inside the hangar.

The alarm had sounded.

Those explosions were more than enough to be heard throughout the territory, and it was most likely that in several of the houses, and buildings, located at the foot of the hill several people had been awakened by the sounds.

But that did not matter to the girl. Everything would be quick and was going as planned. Of course, none of it would be happening if those two hadn't been captured in the first place. That was extra work she had to do.

First she had to send the beetles through the perimeter. Then one of them took charge of lowering the base's defences, while the others would strategically position themselves on different floors to cause commotion among the personnel in the station.

While that was happening, she had crossed the perimeter with her companions. Since the beetle that would be in charge of lowering the defences, and fooling the security systems, had entered a series of commands, so that the system would ignore the perimeter breach first.

Amidst all the confusion, she would have to carry out her mission of distraction.

[Extraction operation, start!] said the girl through her Neurowire to the shadowy forms accompanying her.

At her command, the shadows emerged from the trees. They were all matte black tactical droids. The only colouration seemed to come from a thin blue horizontal line on their oval heads devoid of facial features. Despite their humanoid form, they had a very slender torso, which contrasted with their broader arms and legs. Each one on their back seemed to carry a device attached to their spines, similar to a jet pack, but with a more minimalist design and devoid of nozzles like the old models. Although the matte black colour predominated, there were black metal parts that had a more metallic sheen, such as the chest plate area and parts of the forearm and forearm. None of them seemed to carry any weapons with them.

But it wasn't as if they needed them.

Pyrene was an organisation that covered the jurisdiction of five countries within the European Union. Spain, France, Italy, Taured and Switzerland. Although it had a large infrastructure it could not be compared to Nevermore, with whom it shared jurisdiction, but its infrastructure was very efficient. It had two main bases on French territory and five stations.

The Grenoble station had a staff of forty-five people, of which twenty were from four FRT teams, and the rest were two people from administration and control, one from logistics, three from the main medical wing and two nurse technicians. Two people were responsible for the mechanical wing and the others were divided between maintenance, security, cafeteria and lunch area and counselling, flight control and communications. Many of the tasks were also automated and AI-supported, so not too many personnel were required on site.

The agents for special operations on station at the time, counting Ignis and Enfer, were five, two fey, two human and one agent from the intelligence wing, which was an aeon.

The FRT teams were at that moment in another place, because they had been gathered to collaborate in a sanitary task that had been discovered a few hours ago, but that seemed that it could give big problems if it was not stopped in time. There should be work for two or three days for sure.

So that night on site the group at the station was small.

Only a few people were up at that hour and most of them were in the room where the Deep-Dive was taking place. Despite this, the system's alarms were almost unnecessary, because at the first explosion everyone was out of bed.

Ignis and Enfer had rushed out of the room towards the control centre, while Dr. Barbier had run to one of the emergency evacuation zones.

Who could be crazy enough to attack a station, even with a reduced staff?

Explosives had been used and that was at a level far beyond what was expected. Never, in its eighty year history, had a Pyrene Station been attacked in such a way. At most electronic espionage and attempts to steal information, but that was commonplace and the Intelligence and Counter-intelligence division dealt with it. Like Nevermore, espionage was part of the diplomatic game between agencies and governments.

But a deliberate attack was a different thing. There had never been such a thing on a base in Pyrene.

They had attacked the transport part of the hangar first. That could be a deliberate attack against the fey since, in case of emergency, they could not use teleportation mechanisms due to a strange side effect of their condition as a species, unless it was a fey that had the ability to teleport. The humans could flee, the aeon could move their consciousness to the hive mind and leave their bodies behind, but the fey would have to stay behind.

Ignis and Enfer had reached the control centre two floors up, dodging debris falling from the ceiling and amidst a cloud of dust and mud, as the fire sprinklers had been activated. The Administration Commander and Logistics Director were already standing there looking at the situation on the terminals with an expression of fury and confusion at the same time. The attack on the building had been a chain attack, starting from the outside in and moving up each floor as if a snake had coiled around the structure and was threatening to crush it.

The two building security personnel were currently in another locked room in one of the adjoining buildings and, from there, they were sending reports from the systems in the rest of the building to central control.

The building material and structure was of optimum quality and ordinary explosives would not have produced any damage. A special type of explosives would have had to be used to damage the structure of the complex.

"What the hell happened?!" Ignis asked.

"We have a Leech-tap." Said the logistics manager, looking at the screen with the different cameras in the building, while on his Neurowire he passed review to the structure of the main building. "I don't understand how the station's force shield failed. Something or someone must have intervened from outside to lower the shield and make it look like it was still up."

"'We've got a vampire in the security?"

"It looks like it, the explosion on the first floor cut off access to the barrier control room and power. We're running auxiliary now and I'm directing it to building three, to evacuate through the portal to the police at Fort La Bastille."

The base was in chaos. Alarms echoed through the corridors, announcing the imminent danger lurking around every corner. Explosions had devastated several parts of the facility, leaving debris and smoke in their wake. The small electronic security team was on high alert, trying to contain the still unseen threat, but something was amiss.

A technician rushed in, his face marked by stress.

"Commander, we have detected several anomalies in the security system! The force shield levels are still activated, but in reality they are down to near minimum. It's as if someone is cheating the system through the Leech-tap."

"How is it possible that they managed to infiltrate and disable our shields without being detected?"

"We don't know for sure, but it looks like they are using some kind of heuristic disguise to fool our security algorithms. It's as if they know exactly how to bypass our protocols."

The commander frowned, his mind working at full speed to come up with a solution.

The logistics director, meanwhile, imparted his orders. "We need to make sure the base is secured. Order all mechanised security teams to prepare to defend critical areas. I want them to thoroughly search every nook and cranny of this facility for any infiltrators. In the meantime have all non-essential personnel evacuated to La Bastille. Have communications evacuate as well, IA just took control with the activation of the emergency protocol." The technician nodded and left the control room, transmitting the orders through his Neurowire.

"You two," the commander said, turning to Enfer and Ignis, "you know what to do."

Enfer and Ignis would have to personally search for the source of all the chaos, if the enemy was really there. Without waiting for further orders, they both left the room.

In the control room the two men remained, their faces reflecting a mixture of tension and determination as they supervised the efforts to contain the threat that loomed over them.

Several screens had been displayed and through them the AI was looking for patterns, in an attempt to find the source of the attack. Those images only made the two men angrier as they saw how the facility was in shambles. In all their years the most dangerous thing the station had seen was an invasion of giant mosquitoes, more than three decades ago, during an incident with an DE. But they could never imagine that something like that could happen in front of their eyes.

The floors of the main building had been attacked and the station's shield had been lowered to the minimum. The two special agents and the aeon, along with Enfer and Ignis, at the base would not be enough to contain an attack of major proportions even with the help of mechanised security. If this turned into a larger scale attack. Both men did not believe it possible, an attack would have to be carried out with minimum personnel and this had to be a distraction technique to make believe that it was bigger than it seemed.

The first three agents were assisting in the evacuation of personnel to the teleport portal. Almost everyone was assembled, but there was a problem. The two medical wing technicians, with the two criminal bodies still in a drowsy state, would be delayed. On the other hand, there was one more problem.

Stan had a substance in his body that would not allow teleportation, because the source of the parasite in his body was a type of fey organism. Chances were that if they tried to put him in the portal his body would be destroyed.

All that was left was to move them close to the portal and close the massive security doors in the hope that the personnel at the base could discover the attacker.

In the control centre the men were still sending orders as they watched the mechanised equipment on the ceilings of each floor activate. Due to the explosions, many of them must have been damaged, because on the screens showing the grid of the different systems, several appeared offline and out of service.

Even so, there must have been enough equipment to counter a small attack. The equipment outside the base, with the canines monitoring the perimeter, had been deactivated at some point, so they would only have to reckon that the enemy was already inside the terrain.

They continued to watch the screens, which showed the destruction of the site, but the image quickly changed when they saw that, through the holes caused by the explosions, something else was entering the base.

Black tactical droids were entering through all of them and were scattering all over the place.

Their hearts sank in their chests, when they saw how the army of droids were making their way through the rubble and many of them were gliding through the air, thanks to the jet-packs placed on their backs.

"What the hell are those things‽" the commander said in astonishment.

"Damn it! This can't be happening" the worst fears were reflected on those screens. The shield with minimal security would have let them pass as if it were a family picnic.

"They have outnumbered us and knew our weaknesses perfectly well. We must act quickly and coordinate our efforts with the security personnel we have."

The commander nodded, his mind quickly analysing the options available in that critical situation. *[Call in all remaining intelligent security teams in, the weapons room and any special agents we have available to protect the personnel in the teleport chamber. We need to form a strong and efficient defence to contain the enemy.]*

The director activated his Neurowire and relayed the order through internal communication channels. In no time, the automatised security teams and the special agents were prepared at the various points they were located.

There would be no time for a group attack. Those droids were entering through all the gaps opened by the explosions. At the same time he sent a distress signal to the other bases, but he had just realised that the security channel was blocked. The security channel linked for emergency calls between the bases, if it was blocked he would not be able to call for reinforcements. Calling in police and military personnel in the vicinity involved teleporting unauthorised personnel as backup via quantum link.

Although there was an emergency protocol, they were battling against tactical droids whose numbers were unknown. That could well end up involving more victims if reinforcements were called in without knowing the enemy's capabilities. Not to mention that the communications blockade could be exerting some influence on the teleportation system. Nothing ensured that in the middle of a teleport the enemy would close the channels, killing everyone at the moment of teleportation, turning everyone into a salad of molecular minced meat. They would still have to take their chances and evacuate the least necessary personnel. The teleport door to the Bastille was nearby and there should be no problem moving personnel a short distance.

The Commander spoke to everyone on the base. *[We have an enemy on the premises, but we cannot allow them to take control of our facilities. To the agents, remember your training and trust your abilities. We are outnumbered, but try to hold them off while the evacuation process is over.]*

The lights in the base flickered and the sound of explosions intensified as the invading droids advanced relentlessly. Security personnel and the few special agents positioned themselves strategically, ready to engage their enemy. Smoke filled the corridors as explosions and gunfire began to echo through the air.

The mechanised defence systems had begun the counter-attack against the droids, firing heavy ammunition. Never had so many weapons been fired inside the facility. Each of them faced multiple droids, but the droids manoeuvred through the ruins of the building and using their surroundings to their advantage were able to take cover with ease. Despite this, however, much of the ammunition bounced off their metal bodies.

However, beyond that, their speed of movement was terrifying, using their legs to jump, as well as their jet-packs to propel themselves and attack the mechanized systems with their bare hands, putting them out of combat with ease.

While that was happening, on another floor, Enfer and Ignis' fight against the new enemy had begun as well. It had surprised them both when they were running through a corridor among the rubble and suddenly they heard a buzzing sound cutting through the air. The next moment they saw blue flashes approaching and the black-bodied droids bursting out of the smoke as if they were ghosts.

But there was something else that came out of the smoke behind the droids and that contrasted with the others. In the control room the two men also saw this and were stunned to see the figure.

At first they all thought it was some kind of droid in a white tactical suit, but that changed when the figure came out of the smoke, showing itself for what it was.

"What the hell is that?" Enfer asked.

It was a female humanoid figure just over 160 centimetres tall. Almost pure snow white, with the exception of a few tiny dark patterns.

Of slender appearance, the figure was covered from the feet to the face with a kind of white suit that looked almost like an armour, completely adjusted to her body, and that did nothing more than suggest her anatomical form of ample bust and wide hips with slender and well-turned legs. Her face was covered by a mask of the same white colour that completely covered even her ears. With the exception of short pink hair, she almost looked completely white.

The design of that armour suit looked like it was somewhere between organic and metallic at the same time. It appeared that the armour suit had a series of bas-relief grooves in its design that followed interlocking, stylised knot patterns from her feet to her mask. From her hands and feet peeked out some sort of short red claws.

There was not much time to admire the figure, because the next moment she and the droids launched an attack against Ignis and Enfer.

The evacuation protocol had at least worked at that moment.

In a matter of a couple of minutes, all the civilian, human and fey, personnel had run from their respective rooms to the central chamber of the complex, located on the lower floor that had not been damaged.

That place was the one that had the teleportation device and that worked with an external core to the one that had already been damaged and isolated in the first attack.

That part of the building stood out because of its white marble walls and floor and, due to the auxiliary power sources, the lights were on and did not flicker as in the rest of the complex.

The teleportation chamber was located in the central part of the plant and had been built to be isolated so that, in case of emergency, no one from outside could enter since the control program could be cut from inside or outside and to restore control from either side required the other to relinquish control.

Dr. Barbier, accompanied by the others at the time, was watching the situation through the cameras and, given the orders from the control, had closed the security door of the chamber. He still had to evacuate the two human agents on the other side, the technicians and the two thieves who must still be under the effects of induced sleep. Although he wasn't sure what could happen to the man named Michael Levin/Stan. Of all the people in the room, there was one man with smoke billowing from his scalp, the shop technician who had been near the explosion. He had miraculously escaped from the fire that had engulfed the ships in the inner hangar.

Meanwhile the three agents on the other side of the closed chamber were ready for the fight. The aeon agent, rather octomorphic in appearance and bald, was dressed simply in shorts and did not have a weapon with him. The other two agents were still in their sleeping clothes, but at least they had time to grab their protective vests, assault rifles and swords. They had more weapons configured in a compressed state in the vests but preferred to use those given the enemy's fire-power.

The three agents moved into a defensive position, their weapons loaded and their martial skills ready for the confrontation, and it was not long in coming.

They came in a group of six, soaring through the air and landed on the ground.

The droids pounced on them with superhuman speed and precise movements. The agents wasted no time and responded with a combination of accurate gunfire and skilful melee attacks.

One of the droids charged towards the first agent, but the agent nimbly dodged it, spinning in mid-air and launching a spinning kick that knocked the droid to the ground. Meanwhile the second agent engaged two other droids, using an energy katana that sliced through their metal defences. Despite having sliced off the arm of one, and the leg of the other, they seemed undeterred and their attacks continued.

The aeon agent moved with dexterity, using hand-to-hand combat techniques to fight off three droids and try to neutralise them one by one. His precision and speed were astonishing, leaving the droids dazed and confused at first.

But the next moment their movements changed and transformed into a coordinated three-sided attack without giving him a break. The aeon didn't even blink at that and continued to block the blows. Although, in one manoeuvre, launching a kick to his right, against the one closest to him, he ignored a circular motion of another on his back.

A blood-red liquid bathed the white marble floor. The droid had pulled a blade from the back of his hand and plunged it into the back of the aeon's neck. It twisted the blade in a mechanical motion and then withdrew it. The agent's body collapsed to the ground as red and then silver liquid began to gush from the synthetic organs.

Unarmed, but endowed with formidable strength, the droids pounced on the agents, who defended themselves with agile and well-coordinated martial techniques. Despite their bravery, the two agents were now outnumbered and the droids quickly disarmed them. Another confrontation ensued, this time the two agents back to back tried to defend themselves as best they could.

The fight was uneven though and was over in less than twenty seconds due to numbers. The agents had been separated and smashed with their chests against the ground by the droids.

Another group of three droids arrived at that moment and headed towards the door but did nothing. They moved their heads, as if they could see through the walls, but did not attempt to open it. After a few seconds, which seemed like forever, they turned their backs to the door.

The droids kept the agents pinned to the ground, but did nothing else. They remained still. It was as if they were waiting for an order from another unknown place. The agents, their eyes defiant, looked for any opportunity to resist and break free. Though they tried in vain, the droids' strength and abilities were relentless.

The tension in the place was palpable, as the droids waited patiently for their next instruction. The silence was broken only by the mechanical whirring of the droids and the gasps of the agents being held hostage.

In the midst of the confrontation, one of the droids emitted a high-pitched tone and the others reacted instantly. They seemed to receive a coded message and, without saying a word, loosened a bit their grip on the two agents but still held them hostage. Although they were still vigilant, their attitude had changed, leaving the agents confused.

The scene seemed suspended in time, and the fates of the two human agents hung in the balance as the droids waited, their heads with that electric blue line making them look like judges and executioners.

Given the fate of the aeon on the ground, they feared that at any moment a sharp blade would pierce the back of their necks.

While the chaos and destruction was taking over the place, something else was happening in another of the attacked buildings. Although that one had suffered less damage.

Bullets rang out for a few moments as three droids, flying at full speed, raced through the floors of the building, until they reached the south-east wing where they finally attacked the mechanised defence systems and ripped them off the ceiling, knocking them out of line.

As they landed on the ground they looked at the door on the right.

It was an evidence room.

The room had several industrial shelves that extended to the end of the room. It was a huge room, but it did not correspond to the size it appeared from the outside. It was a space with a spatial widening system.

It was a room with a sterile environment and low temperature where many crucial evidences for the investigations of Dark Events carried out by Pyrene's agents were kept.

Many evidences were then moved, if they were active material that could be used in trials in cases of preternatural crimes, while others could then go to a special ark, if it was a case where there was no perpetrator, but simply a supernatural phenomenon. Many of those objects remained in special industrial containers, or cases with their own locks and shields, while other more mundane and non-dangerous objects could be kept without them.

Inside the evidence room there was a clatter of metal falling to the floor, and the door was cut into four pieces like butter, forming an “X”. One of the droids retracted the thirty centimetre blade it had generated on the back of its hand and entered the room, while the other two droids remained outside.

The droid inside walked several paces and looked around him, scanning the various shelves and looking through his KK and CRD particle scanning vision at the security systems that guarded the evidence. Although the droid could see thanks to his sensors, what he was looking for was something different that could not be seen with the naked eye. Therefore, he had to use a mixed technique combining KK, cosmic radiation detection and Industrial Optical Coherence Radiography.

After a few seconds his featureless face stopped as if he was looking to the left and he moved to the left, passing between two shelves. Almost halfway across the room he stopped and turned to his left again while squinting his head at a square, industrial container.

He raised one of his arms and made some sort of metal blades appear from his fingertips. He passed the blades through the container forming a square on the face in front of him and, after a few seconds, that part of the container collapsed on the ground, revealing its contents to him.

It was an old metal suitcase box. The product of Stan and Rum's break-in.

The droid took the box in his hands and without further ado headed for the exit of the room where the other two were waiting for him.

In the blink of an eye, the three droids left the place flying again, returning to their path to rejoin the others, leaving behind a muted evidence room.

The first, and most important part of it all, was over.

News of the attack had spread quickly throughout the building in the first few minutes, and people sought shelter in the central part of the base complex quickly. The emergency doors were automatically activated, allowing for a more orderly and rapid evacuation. Meanwhile, in the midst of the melee, Stan and Rum were being dragged into the capsules by the base's medical wing technicians.

"I didn't sign for this!" said the male nurse technician, almost on the verge of tears.

"You didn't sign anything, you got in here because the pay was good," said his female partner's voice.

This evacuation was not going well for them. They had to manipulate through their Neurowires the capsules, where the two thieves were still half asleep. They were only confident that, in case they woke up completely, they would not escape, since there was no way to do so from inside. And, because they were sensory deprivation capsules, the Neurowire was still unusable, so Rum would not be able to crack the technician's in an attempt to escape.

In fact, for those two, they could not be in a safer place at that moment, since the technicians had to run dodging debris that, from time to time, fell from the ceiling on their heads. Not to mention that, should they encounter the enemy, there was the possibility of being caught in crossfire between the enemy and the mechanised systems on the ceiling. Although, at the time, they did not know that the droids did not have firearms.

The building was still shaking, as they crossed several corridors on their way. It seemed incredible to them that this was the place where they had worked for the last three years. To see it now being destroyed by unknown causes could not help but hurt. But at least they knew that the others they saw on a daily basis were already at the evacuation site. In case something happened to them at least they had a backup in case they lost their bodies. Though those thoughts did not help them much in their situation.

Due to the power problems they would have to use the emergency stairs to get down to the site. They already knew all the protocols and routes, but they wished Dr. Barbier had been there.

After they had retired to the medical wing, the doctor had stayed in the room where the Deep-Dive had been conducted, chatting with the two agents. They were preparing the two prisoners for analysis when the alarms and explosions went off. The doctor had gone to the middle part because, due to his rank within the base, he was the most suitable to continue in the chain of command in case something serious happened to his superiors. And on the other hand, the people in the teleport chamber would also feel more at ease if they had a doctor with them, even if it was an eccentric one.

But the two nurse technicians in the medical wing were too far away and had the capsules with them

Still, they were already halfway there. About three or four minutes and they would reach the corridor that led them to the place, provided they didn't have a mishap on the way.

That was what they were thinking when, as they rounded a bend, they came upon three black figures, with a vertical blue line where their faces should have been.

"Ah!" they both said in surprise. And the thought: *we fucked up*, crossed both their minds in unison.

The expression of surprise was the only sound that came out of their mouths. The next second they both felt a quick whip in their necks and, rolling their eyes, collapsed to the ground in a faint, as if the droids had applied a Dim-Mak to them in one swift motion.

The droids looked at each other and the next second there was a loud noise. The sensory deprivation capsules, with no one to control them, had fallen to the floor with a dead weight. Inside Stan and Rum had finally started to wake up from the shock. Quickly the droids swooped down in front of the capsules and, operating the external controls, opened them.

As the droids proceeded to remove Stan and Rum from the capsules, the thieves, between dreams and half-sleepy laughter, managed to articulate words toward their unusual rescuers.

"Heyshh, rabooots f-fraends, come tu roscue sus? Howwy cunvemientt!" joked Stan with a sleepy grin.

Rum, still amused by the effects of sensory deprivation and induced sleep, added with a chuckle, "Yeassh, we'ree l-ooovely, thery suure weereee m-iiissing us."

"Arse youshhh guys wearing latex, oru what? Where daid you guys co-coome fromm? Somu vishrtual S&M stagesh?" Stan asked, feeling groggy.

"You looook better than my last date, handshome," Rum said , stroking the head of the nearest droid, in a voice that made her sound drunk, but that was because of the lingering effects of the anaesthesia.

The droids did not respond, but seemed to follow their target undeterred by the thieves' banter. Soon, Stan and Rum were removed from the pods and carried in the arms of two of the droids. Although their state of consciousness was diminished, they must have been well enough to joke.

Without further ado, the droids had accomplished the second objective for which they were present and for which they had attacked the base.

The first to withdraw were the three that had arrived last.

The people in the teleport chamber watched in confusion through the cameras as they suddenly left and flew back the way they had come.

But they were not the only ones.

One by one, the other droids that had fought also retreated, releasing and leaving the agents confused and stunned. The tension in the room eased, and the agents watched cautiously as the droids retreated without a word. They fired up their jet-packs and walked away from the scene.

Without any apparent explanation.

The agents looked at each other, feeling a mixture of relief and bewilderment. What had happened to make the droids leave so suddenly? Who or what had given the order for their withdrawal?

Grateful that the droids had left them unharmed, the agents remained alert, as the droids' mechanical noises faded into the distance. The mysterious departure of the enemies left a sense of uncertainty in the air, but also a small window of hope.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

**Eve**

3rd Station of Pyrene-F. Grenoble, Isère. France.

While the objectives were being met in the complex, a completely different battle was taking place on a third floor, in a large space on the east side of the base.

At first it had all been limited to an exchange of blows worthy of martial combatants.

The girl in the armour had fought against both of them, demonstrating that she could move at incredible speed. But the same was true of the droids, who were more focused on Ignis than on Enfer. The exchange of blows between the smoke, the flashing lights, and the darkness that from time to time was present, had been changing to a red and yellowish colour on one side, and to a cold and sharp black and white flashes on the other.

It was a battle of fire and metal.

Enfer had removed his trademark cap, and now his head was ablaze with flames. Not only his hair, but his face and hands had also taken on a fiery hue, while the rest of his clothes remained untouched. This was not to demonstrate his abilities. Something, deep inside him, told him that the girl in white in front of him was something completely different from anything he had ever faced before.

The presence of the girl was ominous, and made her even more terrifying than the droids.

Meanwhile, there was another dance of flame and metal in the same space. It was Ignis against a whole group of those droids. Her eyes glowed through the smoke and from her hands, wreathed in fire, came spheres more akin to incandescent red plasma that she fired at her farthest enemies while intermittently throwing blows at those who came dangerously close to her.

Both did not expect such a fight, their original plan was to go and get their weapons, but there was no time for that. No one would have ever told them that something like that would happen. The base was like home for both of them. A safe place to return to with no imminent danger.

But that had changed and they were both facing the unimaginable.

For Ignis, there came a point in her fight where she was no longer sure if she was fighting six or more of those droids. There could even be more than ten but, due to the chaos of the situation, it was hard to tell. Many of them got up, after receiving her fire spheres, while some fell down and never got up again, but the numbers did not seem to diminish at all. It was a swarm of metal limbs, seeking to reduce her in any way they could, and she had to employ all the knowledge she had acquired in fighting over so many decades working as a special agent of Pyrene.

Enfer, meanwhile, raised one of his hands and, pointing it towards the armoured girl, sent a tongue of embracing fire towards her. The tongue changed shape as if it had transformed into a kind of whip and wrapped itself around her, sealing her movements. The girl did not even say anything in response. As if those flames that could even melt cement didn't matter much to her. She simply made a downward movement, as if she was gaining momentum for a jump that she never made and, immediately after, the flames that enveloped her vanished into thin air, leaving a few sparks behind.

The armoured girl charged at Enfer at full speed, before new strong flames were summoned in Enfer's hands. Other flames which enveloped him as if it were a protective shield. But that too was in vain. Enfer was truly surprised to see how the girl crossed his fire shield, as if it were nothing more than a curtain of water.

The temperature of his attacks could range from 500 degrees Celsius, to 3500 degrees Celsius if he got serious. That was impossible for metal armour. Although he couldn't be sure how resistant it was, since it was actually organic metal. He had heard that a certain agent, recently added to Nevermore's SID ranks, had something similar.

But that didn't matter at the moment. Enfer was sure he had a monster before him. The girl pierced his flame shield and, in a movement more like lightning speed, she had hit him in the face with a sure punch that sent him flying several meters backwards.

Quickly and taking momentum from the same attack, Enfer counterattacked again raising the temperature around him, melting the glass and window frames, while the temperature rose even higher in the room. Then he launched what looked like a gigantic arm of fire, which he controlled like his own, and with it he caught the girl, who seemed to have been caught by the hand of a colossus. This time he approached her at full speed, while with the other arm he would increase the temperature even more to form a gigantic fist to attack her. He was barely three meters away from his target, when suddenly the flames disappeared.

"What?!" Enfer said in confusion. That was impossible.

The girl hadn't even moved from her place. In fact what she did next was completely out of place. She simply sighed as if she was bored. "Can I go now?" she asked through the white mask.

Enfer was still not out of his astonishment, when he felt a new blow that he was sure had just broken some ribs. As he approached, the girl had jumped up and moved at a much faster speed, spun 360° on herself and delivered a devastating kick that sent him flying again. His body spun around like a spinning top and bounced a couple of times on the floor until it crashed against a far wall, while new sounds from the ground indicated that the fight was further weakening the structure in that part of the building.

The flames began to leave Enfer's body at intermittent intervals, but the hair of fire was still present on his head. He spat a lot of blood on the debris he had just produced with his crash, and crawled as he gathered enough strength to get up again. The only flames that remained on his body were those in his head, but his fighting spirit had not been extinguished and, with his face pale, he readied himself for a new attack. The blood on his chin contrasted against the pallor he now had.

It had been over a century since anyone had struck him in such a way. His instinct had not deceived him. That girl was a monster in a fight and she didn't even show signs of being tired.

Enfer took a long breath, filling his lungs and focused his vision on the white figure, while behind her he could see his partner unleashing a dance of fire on the droids and destroying a couple of them to molten metal. He would have to use that. An even stronger flame even if it would knock him out for days.

He gritted his teeth and adopted a position as if he was about to sprint at the armoured girl. The next thing that happened was that again his hair of fire grew, but there was a change. The flames, once yellow and red, had now changed to an almost ghostly blue and the fire was reaching his face. Even more powerful flames that had reduced to ashes all those who had treated him as a mere steak. Flames that had not burned in a long time.

"It would have been better if you had stayed on the ground," the girl's voice said in his ear, in an almost bored manner.

"Eh?"

She had been away for less than a nanosecond but, subtly, had disappeared from his vision. Enfer could see that she was now in front of him. She had moved quickly and he had her in front of him. What was more, she didn't seem to care that those flames could be even stronger than the previous ones. Time seemed to stand still for him at that moment, as if he could not move at all.

No, it wasn't that. It was rather that she had moved at a terrifying speed. She was in a position as if she was running against him, with her right arm back, while her left hand was dangerously close to Enfer's chest. The hand was not clenched into a fist, on the contrary it was open as if it were a palm strike.

The blue fire around him burned out and disappeared, as if the oxygen had dissipated. In just a tenth of a second he felt cold and a sensation as if his body was light.

Slowly, but with a determined voice, that girl said two words in a language that Enfer's Neurowire could not interpret the meaning.

"Dvrak-Ken-Gnet!"

The pain was excruciating and Enfer spat out a large amount of blood. It was as if a demolition hammer had struck him in the centre of his chest, and he felt as if his heart had been crushed by his rib cage. Behind him, he could feel as if the wall behind him, for some reason, had also suffered the effects of that attack.

But something else was happening. Suddenly he saw his body being slowly pushed backwards. He was seeing his body as if from outside it, located a couple of meters behind, almost as if it were a residual image, but in reverse. He had already experienced out-of-body experiences as part of his training, but that felt different.

The sensation was so slow for him that it seemed as if the whole battle was moving slowly forward. As if he was a ghost that was getting ahead of the journey his body would make later. That was it. He was getting ahead of the journey his body was making backwards. The pain in his chest seemed very real to him and he believed that he would almost certainly be dead when it was over, turned into a bloody mass of scattered organs from the attack.

His vision was blurring and the last thing he saw was that girl in the armour with her open palm still in the air.

Ignis suddenly turned around.

A sound of an explosion reached her ears and for a split second she thought she saw a flash of blue flames from Enfer, which was extinguished the next moment. What followed was his body crashing into the wall behind him which, already damaged from the previous blow, exploded throwing debris everywhere. The sound of that explosion was as if a shockwave had gone through the whole place, and even the droids that were still fighting Ignis were surprised and turned to look at what that attack had been.

A cloud of dust was raised in the centre of the attack, which, when it descended, showed Ignis a desolate scene.

The wall had indeed been destroyed and on the rubble rested the body of Enfer. He must not have been dead because, although in a weak way, some slight flames were still coming out from where his hair should have been, although they had dimmed considerably, giving the impression that his companion had decided to cut the combustion by leaving a gas stove at a minimum.

A few meters away from the wall was that girl, who returned to a posture as if it had been easy. Impassive, monstrous, as if nothing could move her.

Ignis could feel her blood boil within herself at the sight, while a mixture of anger and fear rose in her.

But there was no time to think more as she returned to the fight. The droids had rushed at her again. But this time it would be final.

In her right hand flames returned, which quickly took on a spherical shape the size of a tennis ball that floated several centimetres. Then she looked at those who were almost on top of her and quickly pointed the sphere at the one in the middle.

A new explosion filled the place, but it was different. That explosion sent a shockwave that ended up blowing up part of the wall facing the outside of the building and the droids were turned into an amorphous mass that upon reaching the ground had turned into melted metal while new crackles were produced throughout the room and the floor began to crack.

Ignis had to act quickly.

Her plan was to at least knock out that armoured girl and bury her under rubble, while she would grab her partner and jump to the outside, so she could make a new attack. She couldn't do it inside and risk those inside getting caught up in the destruction her counterattack would cause, as she was sure she could destroy the entire facility if she was careless.

Ignis turned to face her enemy, and had begun to gather enough energy from her fey core so, that with a new explosion, she could deteriorate a space in the ceiling below the armoured girl and bury her with debris. It would not be a powerful attack, but it was enough for them to gain enough seconds to escape, and for her to make sure that the woman could follow her to the outside, where she could transform her into a sausage with a new attack of her flames.

But as she turned around to launch her attack, her hopes vanished, like a flame without oxygen fades.

That girl had moved at incredible speed once again.

Ignis' eyes widened in surprise and terror. That movement would not give her time to prepare anything on her part. She would not open an opening or anything to summon a flame to defeat the one in front of her. The attack of the girl in the armour suit came swiftly and brutally.

It was so fast that Ignis barely had time to see how the girl's arms moved even faster. It was a different attack than the one she had made on Enfer but, given the speed, and due to her own fight, Ignis couldn't tell.

The armoured girl hit her repeatedly in the same place, focusing on her solar plexus as if she had a repeating trigger on her forearm, while with her right hand she held her by the throat, cutting off her breath at first.

For a girl smaller than her she was incredibly fast, and her fists had a power that could well be compared to those of a professional wrestler. Ignis could only assume it was due to the armour she was wearing, which could increase the punching power several times. But she must have had body enhancements to move so fast beyond human capabilities and normal feys.

Ignis first felt a sour taste in her mouth, then a metallic taste and the next moment she vomited some blood.

The pain in her stomach and chest prevented Ignis from summoning new flames. She was breathing heavily. That damned girl had concentrated a lot on hitting her in the parts she needed to fill with oxygen to be able to summon for her flames.

Because Ignis' ability with fire was special and required deep breathing, relegating a lot of oxygen to the lower lungs. Oxygen could provide sufficient concentration of energy to her fey cells of the kaloricite type, since the process in her body's erythrocyte cells changed as she used her fire ability, producing a process of metamorphocytosis. That was the process behind her own thelesic system. But this process could not be carried out under such circumstances.

Without giving her any respite, the armoured girl grabbed her by the collar of her blouse as she threw a formidable punch in the face that slammed her to the ground.

A cracking sound was heard from the ceiling and the girl in armour looked up and acting quickly moved away, leaving Ignis where she had fallen. More creaks were heard, and a crash of debris and dust filled the scene.

That part of the upper floor had just collapsed on Ignis.

The armoured girl watched as Ignis was buried by the debris and then as, under the weight of the debris and the structural damage caused by the fight, the entire part where Ignis was already lying fell to the floor below causing a deafening sound.

The girl approached and looked down. She was sure that Ignis was not dead, but she had no reason to continue the fight. Enfer, still unconscious on the other side, was still lying on the ground and it would probably be a while before he regained consciousness.

The objective was accomplished anyway. That fight had been to buy time for the droids to leave the place and go to the vehicle ready for the escape.

The girl approached the walls where a huge hole had opened up that, after Ignis' attack on the droids, led outwards and she looked in an easterly direction, towards where she had to flee. Some droids were coming out of other parts of the building and were making a mad dash, while others were flying away.

Two of the ones that were flying away, came out of one of the holes and, in their arms, they were carrying Stan and Rum, still in a confused state due to everything that was happening, and because they were still not out of their stupor due to one of the anaesthetics they had been given to perform the Deep-Dive. But, due to the chaos that surrounded them, they knew one thing for sure: they were involved in something much bigger than a simple theft of a relic and kidnapping. This was a scenario of proportions they could not have imagined.

This is it, thought the armoured girl and, from where she stood, jumped out, landing just a few meters away from the two thieves, who were surprised by the sudden appearance of the girl in her strange white outfit. She had jumped from a height of ten meters from the third floor and landed as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Come on, run, get out of here! We have to go!" ordered the girl.

Wasting no time, the droids set off on a swift flight through the forest, along with Stan and Rum, dodging trees and obstacles with surprising agility. As they advanced, Stan and Rum began to regain lucidity, feeling a mixture of adrenaline and gratitude towards the girl for having rescued them, while the landscape passed swiftly before their eyes. If she was the one Janus had sent to get them out of trouble, she must have been pretty good to have caused all that mess.

Although those droids could have at least given them a robe, the cold night in that place was enough to make both of them chatter their teeth.

Stan, in his race, looked back, but realized that the girl was not running after them.

The truth is that the girl had stopped the second she had thought of running after the others, but something had stopped her.

*What is it?* she wondered.

She was trembling.

But it wasn't from the excitement of the fight she just had. Her heart was pounding with a mixture of adrenaline and terror. Slowly she turned to look. Behind her there was no one. Just a hole with smoke coming out of it and flames in the distance.

But there was something else.

The destruction that surrounded her and that she, along with the scarab drones and tactical droids, had caused seemed insignificant to her with what she was feeling at that moment and that was flooding her entire being.

Then, trusting her instincts, she felt it.

The terror she felt was not coming from something behind her back. It was coming from somewhere in that base below her.

A shiver ran down her spine under that armour, and she felt as if that armour suit she was wearing was nothing more than a weak shell for what was underneath it. She had no doubt, underneath the base there was something much more monstrous than those two fire feys and, probably, much stronger than herself.

She could not understand it, but her body was telling her to run away with all her strength from that new unknown threat.

Whatever it was, she would not stay to find out and, clenching her fists tightly, she tried to hide her fears, and started running at full speed, behind the droids that were still escaping from the place among the chaos of the alarms and the smoke.

In a matter of seconds, she was able to get into the forest, away from the chaos and began to feel that, even though the fear was still there, her extra mission was over. The hardest part was behind her and whatever was under the base she could no longer reach it because, as far as her instincts told her, that thing seemed to be located very close to the area that had been sealed off at the beginning of the attack.

The place where she, the tactical droids, and Stan and Rum were running was a downhill slope but with little incline, that was making it easier to get away from the place. Rum could see on their run as they crossed paths with the security droid dogs that had been put out of action by the black droids.

The forest seemed endless to the two thieves and, although they felt grateful, it was too early to say they were safe, and they still didn't know where that girl in the armour was taking them.

Soon that was answered, though. Almost without realizing it they had reached an area cleared of trees and where tall grass grew, swaying in the night breeze.

The moonlight was enough to illuminate the landscape, but in the middle of that field there was something that stood out and that was where all the droids were running to. That part of the mountain was a plain that stretched for at least three hundred meters before it began to descend again.

Stan and Rum looked at the opening in the middle of the open field, with a ramp. It was like some kind of mouth, with a metal tongue that had opened up in space. They both slowed down and watched the droids enter that two-dimensional hole. They stopped and looked at each other, not sure whether to cross.

The girl in the armour suit caught up to them very quickly. "What the hell are you waiting for? Invitations?"

"I can't cross a teleport door!" Stan said, looking at the girl's white mask and how the pink hair was blowing in the wind.

"It's not a teleport, get on it already, you idiot! We don't have all night!" ordered the armoured girl, visibly angry.

They both climbed up the ramp, which must have been about four meters long, from the opening to the floor and another four and a half meters wide. They entered what looked like the stomach of a whale with metal ribs. Inside it had a slight oval shape, but there was no doubt, it was a ship that had activated a state-of-the-art optical camouflage system.

Stan and Rum looked sideways again at the sight of the ship.

But while that had happened, the group had not noticed something else.

A shadow was running towards them from the base. It was Ignis, full of dust, wounds and bruises and with some of her blouse torn due to the last blow. But the girl had not lost her fighting spirit.

After having fallen to the floor below and, spending about a minute buried, she had awakened due to the stabbing pain in her chest. Broken ribs had pierced her lung and heart, but her body's survival instinct had awakened her before the wound could become fatal. And thanks to that her body had been regenerating enough to keep going.

When she emerged from the rubble, she had jumped into the hole in the upper floor and found that her companion was still alive. All the fighting was over, and the attackers were escaping into the trees. Most of them should have already escaped, and she just saw that outside some damaged droids were running in the direction of the trees at a slower speed.

After reporting that she was going in pursuit, and receiving approval from the commander, she had jumped out and made a full force run towards where the droids were fleeing.

As she ran, she could feel her body regenerating, producing more pain, but the pain was little compared to the fury she felt. This base had been her home, and Enfer's, for decades.

She felt the fire in her fey core activate and a series of patterns appeared on her body like faintly glowing tribal markings. Her eyes lit up and her fists seemed to want to burst into flames.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered and started to run.

Meanwhile the girl in the armour suit simply walked up the ramp and it began to close behind her. Many of the tactical droids were there and one of them was carrying the somewhat rusty box. Stan and Rum looked at each other overwhelmed by the whole situation. Some droids barely managed to get half of their bodies through the ship when it closed, and they were cut in half leaving part of their bodies inside, while the other halves were left outside the ship.

There must have been at least twenty-few, of the forty or so who had made the attack.

"Take your seats and put on your seat belts. There are some clothes if you want to put them on. We're leaving," said the girl in the armour. The fact that they couldn't see her face and that white mask gave them the impression that they were facing a ghost.

"Who are you?" Rum finally asked.

"I'm the one who had to lift that," she said and pointed to the droid with the precious cargo that was the suitcase box they had stolen. "I'm also the one who had to bail you out if you screwed up."

"Are you the one Mr. Janus sent?" asked Stan.

The girl nodded and after that they both watched as the mask began to recede down the face as if it were a living film. It was organic metal after all. Not only that, for a second, they saw how her face was also ivory white. But that changed. That white colour also disappeared, and the skin took on a much more natural cream tone. It was a face of fine facial features.

In front of them stood a green-eyed, young-faced girl who couldn't have been more than her early twenties. "You can call me EVE," the girl said and walked toward the side of the cockpit.

As she walked, they could both see how the most protruding parts of the armour, such as the shoulders, belt, wristbands and the claws of the hands and feet, first receded and then disappeared as if they were melting, giving the impression that she was simply wearing a tight-fitting suit on her naked body.

Stan and Rum would have been lying if they said they didn't find that girl beautiful, but lethal.

She sat in the cockpit and took control of the ship. Stan and Rum felt a small tremor, indicating that the ship was already lifting off the ground.

Stan looked around and estimated that the entire space they were in was at least twenty meters from the cockpit to the ramp. In all the cargo space it was just them and twenty or so of those drones that had managed to get on.

The droid with the box disarticulated some of its parts, and its body was transformed around it, as if it were a security structure, giving it a new aspect that was an industrial and futuristic looking safe-box. The other droids also disarticulated parts and began to transform, acquiring angular shapes first, while hiding their mechanical parts, until they acquired the size of spheres that were one meter in diameter. Those spheres had faces that, given their geometrical organization, must have been a spherical tetrahedron.

"Origamium," Stan muttered to Rum upon seeing the transformation. "That's from Io. It's the same system that Nevermore's Zodiac satellites use."

"Whoever Janus is, he must have pretty high connections to have those."

"I'm beginning to wonder if he doesn't own one of the companies. Those droids must cost a fortune."

"This is a Manta, by the way," Rum whispered.

"A Manta?"

"Yes, the structure inside is oval, but this thing can go underwater too."

"Aren't mantas only for military use on Europa and Callisto? What the hell is one doing here on earth?"

They both turned toward the cockpit. The girl named EVE wasn't paying attention to them, she was manning the controls of the ship.

At that very moment, on the outside, a girl on fire had arrived on the scene.

Ignis jumped out of the row of trees and ran towards the place where two straggling droids were heading. Their speed was much faster than hers and they were several meters ahead of her. There was nothing where they were headed, but the grass in the field was a slightly darker colour without being a perfect shade, and the grass was moving in a circular pattern several meters long. A wind was picking up that was beginning to hit her in the face. Ignis had no doubt that there was a ship rising there with a cloaking system activated.

The droids reached what appeared to be their destination and jumped about ten feet into the air and Ignis watched for a few seconds as they latched onto something and then began to climb up its invisible surface. The shadow below was beginning to fade. The vision then changed and both droids had disappeared as if absorbed by the ship's cloaking system, while the shadow on the grass disappeared completely leaving only the wind and moonlight.

*An adaptive camouflage*, Ignis thought.

Ignis stopped over the spot where the droids had jumped, but the only indication of the ship was already disappearing, for the circle in the grass was no longer moving and the wind was no longer blowing so hard beneath it.

Without giving up she raised her right hand and snapped her fingers, for a second the metal decorations on her clothes shone and tribal march-like patterns formed on her skin. On his cheeks, chest and stomach, but especially on his right arm. On his right hand new flames had appeared, which quickly transformed into a ball of fire, which was like a miniature sun. Ignis brought her right hand back and, as if she were a major league baseball pitcher, threw the fireball to the distance she believed to be the right distance.

The fireball hit already over 80 meters high, on what should have been one of the sides of the big ship. There was a big explosion, but at the same time Ignis saw a chromatic change in the middle of the air. It was a wave of iridescent colour that drew for a moment an invisible silhouette of a wing.

It was a deflector shield.

Although the fireball had exploded, a second effect was produced, and that was that from the ship some turbulence was produced and EVE, looking at the panel, printed more speed. From Ignis' point of view, it was as if the image in space was contracting and concentrating in one point for a tenth of a second at the place of impact.

Then there was a second impact, much stronger than the first one, but it was simply a pressure wave that went all over the place in a radius of a little more than one hundred and fifty meters.

Inside the ship EVE, with no emotion on her face, simply maneuvered and rose even higher while Stan and Rum rubbed their heads, for due to Ignis' attack there was a turbulent movement just as Stan was buckling his belt and their heads had collided.

"Damn it," Ignis mumbled looking up at the sky while shaking her still smouldering right hand. Not even the second effect of her attack had worked against that ship.

But the silhouette of the wing lasted only a tenth of a second and the next it had disappeared and with it the buzzing sound. Moving away in what seemed to be an easterly direction.

The ship was moving away and there was no way to follow it, because the ships on the airstrip and the hangar of the base had exploded.

Ignis crouched down and put her hands on her knees, gritting her teeth as she tried to catch her breath and the symbols on her body disappeared. She looked behind her and saw the plumes of smoke rising from the base.

To her regret, that was a battle she had lost.

After EVE's fight against Ignis and Enfer, something else had happened at that moment, but it remained hidden from the eyes of the others.

The hand, light blue in colour, was moving intermittently on the ground, in what seemed to be a mute attempt to call for help.

But the arm of that hand was buried under tons of debris from the attack that had taken place. The forearm and hand were all that protruded from the shattered pieces of debris and nothing else. They were the parts of a nurse droid, which had been on one of the base's floors below the surface, when the first detonation had gone off.

Its function had been only one, and she had performed it to perfection. Her job was to monitor any changes in the comatose old man.

But she could no longer do that.

The power was cut off in that part, because it depended on the room where the main attack had taken place and which was also where the base shields had been lowered from, along with the structural supports of the force fields. If those force fields had been in line, they would not have collapsed the entire building in a matter of minutes with simple explosions.

The place in that part was in complete ruin.

Because what was upstairs was part of the building's maintenance facilities, along with the quantum monitoring room. The first attack had taken out everything that could have been used to activate the entire second layer of security in the building, which consisted of sealed compartments to modify the internal structure by means of SSD devices.

But that didn't matter anymore. That part was completely destroyed and that was that. The backup power could run for several days, but it wasn't going to be that fast for someone to get there.

The place was almost completely collapsed. What was originally a three meter high, are was now barely a meter and a half high and no one could tell how long it would hold before it all came crashing down.

Several meters away, from where the droid nurse was standing, was the intensive care capsule with the old man. Part of its support had fallen off and because of this the old man now lay with his head pointing towards the ground on the floor, but he was still inside. The debris had hit the capsule, but not much and so it was still intact, but with several of the readings displayed on its surface with distorted parts and unreadable patterns, because the projection film had been damaged.

If the emergency readings had been being received at the time in the medical wing, someone would have noticed them later.

But this was not the case.

Slowly, but surely, the old man had begun to move his fingers almost imperceptibly.

What had started slowly, as the minutes passed, had begun to become more evident. After a few minutes that tremor had completely disappeared from his hands. Not only that. His countenance, which had been calm all the time, had started to become more serious with each moment, even though his eyes were still closed.

His hands were clenched into two fists that showed none of the weakness he had been found with in the lake.

They were bony fists, with thick veins that throbbed in fury, as if he was remembering or sensing something that could make him furious.

If the monitoring system had been working it would have detected something else. Some hairs of his beard and hair, in a microscopic manner, were also changing at that moment.

# Glossary

**Ahoge**: An exaggerated cow-lick (lock of hair). It adds cuteness to a character and is usually indicative of character traits like air-headedness.

**AVH**: Atomic Vibration Hammer

**Dirac**: see Dirac sea - A theoretical model of the vacuum as an infinite sea of particles with negative energy.

**Gematria**: A numerological system by which Hebrew letters correspond to numbers. This system, developed by practitioners of Kabbalah.

**Haori:** Traditional Japanese hip- or thigh-length jacket worn over a kimono.

**Namazium**: unknown

**Oboroten (оборотень) / Volkolak:** Russian name for Werewolf

**Onmyodo (Onmyōdō):** A system of natural science, astronomy, almanac, divination and magic that developed independently in Japan based on the Chinese philosophies of yin and yang and wuxing (five elements).

**Onmyoji (Onmyōji):** A charismatic spiritual ruler in the Imperial court with a strong tinge of religious spells and rituals

**Savitronic**: unknown

**Tanabata**: Star Festival, “Evening of the seventh”.

**Thelepath:** One who practices Thelesics, a fey mind power oft confused with magic.

**Tokihedron**: unknown