

# RETROZINE

Two Fandom  
Elders,  
One More Time!

Summer 2025 \* Issue 14

## In This Issue:

"A Gift to the Ages" by Morian Blackwell

Part 2 of "Seeing Double" by Fara Shimbo

And a new novella, "Mithras" by T. E. Hodden



# RETROZINE 14

<https://retrozone.net>

On BlueSky [@retrozone.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/retrozone.bsky.social)

Print and online layout, *The Adventures of the Trouble*, © 2024, 2025, Retrozine

Editor: Germaine Swanson

Geek Girl: Fara Shimbo

*Retrozine* is a labor of love. Nobody gets paid except in the satisfaction of a job well done. It will always be free to read on our website, or to download, print, and read on your couch.

---

Got questions?

**Contact us!**

For submissions (we love and welcome submissions!) and letters of comment: [editor@retrozone.net](mailto:editor@retrozone.net) or [submissions@retrozone.net](mailto:submissions@retrozone.net), your choice.

For technical/web issues: [techinfo@retrozone.net](mailto:techinfo@retrozone.net)

---

**THE DEADLINE FOR NEXTISH (No. 15, Autumn 2025) is July 21, 2025**

---

**COPYRIGHTS and Credit Where Credit Is Due:**

ORIGINAL AUTHORS/ARTISTS RETAIN ALL RIGHTS TO THEIR OWN WORK.

Illustrations by Fara Shimbo using [Blender](#), the [GIMP](#), and [Midjourney](#)

# In This Issue:

Passive Consumption  
by Fara Shimbo

---

## ***Retroactive*** (Original Fiction):

### A Gift to the Ages

by Morian Blackwell \_\_\_\_\_ 4

### Mithras

by T. E. Hodden \_\_\_\_\_ 9

### Seeing Double, Part 2

by Fara Shimbo \_\_\_\_\_ 94

### A Letter From the Editor

by Germaine Swanson \_\_\_\_\_ 103

---

The [Adventures of the Trouble](#) will return nextish! This ish is probably long enough!

# A Gift To The Ages

by Morian Blackwell

When I was a little kid, I entered a contest. The idea was, if you could send a message to folks living at the end of the universe, what would you send?

The other kids in my class said things like, “I would send them all the love!” or “I would send them peace.” Face it, we were in kindergarten. But I started to wonder: if *I* lived at the end of the universe, what would *I* want? So I thought about it. What would there be at the end of the universe anyway?

I asked around. I asked real people and cyber-people. The cyber-people showed me the way. What would there be at the end of the universe? There would be no way to tell anything at all about galaxies other than yours. The good old Island Universe hypothesis; what goes around comes around. There would be no way to see the Cosmic Microwave Background, that information couldn’t catch you up. At the End of the Universe, there would be no way to know *how the universe started*. And I thought, okay, it is up to me to fix that.

The cyber-people thought I was onto something. The real people thought I was out of my mind.

Naturally, I didn’t win the contest. You know who won the contest? Somebody who suggested we send them puppies, so the Last People wouldn’t be lonely.

That kid grew up to be a race-track tout. The second-place kid’s now a nun in a silent order.

I became a scientific illustrator. I went to space and painted—in space, wasn’t that a thrill—and made lots of money. And then I started publishing books. And then, I started talking up my childhood idea, of sending the Last People something to let them know what the Universe was like when you could still see it. The idea caught on. I had to come up with a plan.

I and many of my groupies decided that what we would do was take our best telescope pictures, and holographically etch them into silica-glass cubes. (Silica-glass being most likely to be least effected by the interstellar medium.) We’d make hundreds of copies of the 64 best of them, and put them in silica-glass boxes, and put them boxes in heavily-shielded probes, and then shoot all those probes into space, hoping that one of them would survive. We sent them toward K-type stars because those are long-lived, and let’s face it, you have to aim at something, right? All this took years and years, of course. But we got it done in the end, politics, infighting and other setbacks notwithstanding. And then we all sat back, blissful in the knowledge that we had done what we could before we died of old age.



I wonder if any of them ever made it to anyone, ever....



“My Leader, object off the port bow.”

“Object? I thought we’d cleared out this section of space!” The Leader, who elsewhere would have been called the “captain,” rubbed his eyes. His hand still hurt from all the paperwork he had had to sign in the last ... he’d forgotten how long it was ... assuring the Empire Navigation Council that he had, indeed, done the work he and his crew had so obviously done.

“Yes, My Leader, it was declared navigable last month.” That was the whole point of this ship; to clear away all objects within the Sokele star system that could pose a danger to speeding spaceships. It didn’t necessarily work, and the whole system was unbelievably bureaucratic, but it was a living, of a sort.

The Leader dropped his head. “I don’t want to have to do more paperwork. And the ship is too badly in need of an overhaul that I don’t want to get stuck out here! I hereby declare whatever it is to be a hazard to navigation. Blow it up.”

His unusually bored second-in-command turned to him. “Are you certain, My Leader? This isn’t a natural object! Perhaps we should—”

The Leader leaned forward. “I have done more paperwork in the last week than the Empire has done in the entire millennium of its existence! If I don’t know what it is, I don’t have to log it. Blow that sucker up! Now!”

The gunner turned back to his station and fired. He liked the new system. Instead of punching a bunch of numbers into a console, one fired a “laser” gun toward the window, and the window told the console where the target was. Infinitely more viscerally satisfying. The probe exploded. He took some time to blow up the remaining fragments. The spacelanes were—according to the rules of the Empire anyway—clear once again.

He forgot all out the object.

The Leader ordered the ship to stay on course for home, and some decent food for a change.



The Priestesses of Numbered Accounts descended into the crater that the impact of the Not-A-Meteor had caused. A few of their robotic servants went into the crater, well armed and ready to defend the Priestesses and carry out their every slightest order, went with them. Far away from the impact site, the Priestesses of the Actuarial Tables stood and, in



the way of their kind, wept. The Not-A-Meteor had landed on their most sacred spot, the Lone Tree of Chartered Accountancy.



To begin with, the Priestesses of Numbered Accounts only stared. This was a message from the gods, surely; but what was the message? Certainly that the Actuarial Tables should be crushed. But for the benefit of whom, exactly?

The crash site was full of glass, mostly broken. Some of the bits were marred by spiral scratches.

The elderly Blessed Astrologer approached the High Priestess and asked her permission to wander around the site for a while. He circled the scene of the damage several times. Finally he stood back.

“Our blessings will soon spiral,” he declaimed. He had the voice of someone who was punched in the throat once by someone wielding a bag of

bricks. “Some of those blessings will be broken, but some will resist. The gods have crashed glass into this sacred tree. This signifies that we have been too transparent about our dealings with the other priesthoods.”

“So what shall we do?” the High Priestess said.

“Now?” The Blessed Astrologer made one more circuit of the damage. “There. Do you see? Those pieces of glass form the constellation of The Mint. The gods decree that the Mint is our enemy. We should prepare for war.”

Everyone murmured agreement.

“And this?” the High Priestess said, gesturing to the debris.

The Blessed Astrologer shrugged.

The High Priestess considered for a while, and finally said, “Bury it. And plant a new Tree.”



Enchothrappenat was preparing to start preparing his land for a new garden, when he found the first cube. Pretty, he thought. And an unusual shape for a crystal; squares were very uncommon in nature. It was probably a broken piece of a larger crystal. What a sight that must have been, if this was only a piece of it. It'd make a nice accent to the plantings. He'd always wanted a nice garden. Now that he was retired from farming, he could concentrate on one. The next generation could supply him with food. After all, what else were they for?



As Enchothrappenat began turning the soil, however, he found more and more of the crystal cubes. One alone, he could believe, was just a fluke. But several of them—all perfect cubes at that, and with their edges rounded and polished—did not happen by accident alone.

Nobody on Cshripshefessel knew how to actually make crystals. That much, he knew. He was certain. So? What about these?

Enchothrappenat gathered up the cubes and brought them into the house. He needed several trips, but finally, he got them all.

Then he noticed that almost—no, make that all—of them had impurities. In some just one speck. In some a few specs together. In some...

Enchothrappenat laid out all the squares in front of him and began arranging them in order by the number of specs each contained. Then he tweaked his arrangement, noting little discrepancies here and there, until he had the squares all in a line just as he wanted them. The whole process took at least two hours. Enchothrappenat was a perfectionist that other perfectionists could only regard with awe.

Soon he had them all arranged, from a single dot to a “constellation” of dots to clouds and then swirls and groups of swirls. A constellation... the dots could be stars, right? Was this—were these—crystal cubes trying to tell him something?

From under the table came a “PRROW!” of a hungry, or perhaps just bored, biroshnogherit. He picked up his pet, set it outside the door, and closed the latter soundly.

So. A single star. More stars. Okay, his sky was full of stars, that was fine. Then spherical groups of stars. Well, of course. Everybody knew that the universe was filled with a single, huge, spherical, or perhaps elliptical, group of stars. Then, several of these groups. Well, that wasn't possible, was it? Then something caused them to develop arms. Like little oboboboboba grubs that grew into beetles, right?

Well, a group of stars growing arms like a grub, that couldn't ...  
... could it?

Ages ago, there were other civilizations on this planet. People who could bother studying them said there were legends about messages being sent to them by beings on other planets, whose civilizations were even older than their own.

Was this such a message?

Was some extraterrestrial race trying to tell him that the Universe was about to grow legs and split up?

There was the message. The message was clear.

He ran out the door, all flustered, to find someone, anyone, to impart this hidden knowledge to. The Universe was going to split up! We must all be prepared! He must show them the evidence.



And just as he closed the door behind him, the biroshnogherit slipped in. It jumped onto the table, and carefully examined the spheres. So shiny! So bright!

And they made such a lovely THUNK as one by one, the biroshnogherit pushed them onto the floor.

SS ELEGY: DISPATCH ZERO: 5 APR 25 / 01:10 SHIP TIME  
CAPTAIN REVIEWING WARDROBE \*STOP\* PREFERS VELVET FOR OBLIVION \*STOP\*  
JAZZ CONTINUES \*STOP\* SHIP NOT SINKING ONLY REMEMBERING HOW





by T. E. Hodden

### Season One: The Defence Of The Realm

MITHRAS is the United Kingdom's Sigma Security Agency, tasked with protecting the nation, and the world, from super-powered threats, beyond the scope, understanding, or capabilities of the regular authorities.

The Rapid Action Teams maintain a permanent overwatch, ready to respond to developing situations. Their members include super heroes, military veterans, and specialists in a variety of fields.

- **Data Files**
- **RAT Three.**

Rapid Action Team Three is one of six RATs that remain ready to respond to Sigma class events at any moment.

They are based in the MITHRAS London Headquarters, known as the 'Iceberg', currently housed in a repurposed Apocalypse Bunker System beneath Whitehall, since the original Headquarters (and many other government buildings) were destroyed by the supervillain Maelstrom, less than a decade ago.

Like many of the New Government Projects, the bunker system has been fitted with future-tech capabilities, reverse engineered from alien spacecraft.

- **Duty Roster**

**Overseer: Sir Clifford Briggs (Lionheart).**

*Throughout World War Two, and for much of the Cold War, Lionheart was considered Britain's greatest superhero. The Atlas Crown, the source of his powers has been destroyed, Clifford Briggs has a new role, forging a new generation of heroes...*

In the early days of World War Two, archaeologist Professor Clifford Briggs was recruited into Project Merlin, a top secret intelligence unit, tasked with finding artefacts and magical weapons that might counter the threat posed by the demonic Doctor Maelstrom, whose army of zombies and wraiths were siding with the Third Reich.

Briggs travelled to the Norfolk coast, where, following an obscure on a full moon, he recovered the Atlas Crown from the lost town of Hogben Bay, and in doing so assumed the mantle of Lionheart, Britain's champion and protector.

Briggs served as Lionheart throughout the war. In 1952 he was one of the first superheroes recruited into MITHRAS, and remained one of the services best known operatives for over three decades, until his Crown was destroyed in 1988.

**Recent History:** In the years since, the influence of the Atlas Crown has faded. Although Briggs does not look his eighty something years old, his hair is starting to silver and thin, he has taken to wearing glasses, and his injuries left him reliant on a cane.

Briggs does, however retain an 'afterglow' of his once incredible powers and remains superhumanly strong. Over the course of his long career, Briggs has developed an encyclopaedic knowledge of all things magical, alien, and otherworldly.

**Appearance:** Briggs is a broad shouldered, straight backed older man, a gentle giant with the build of a wrestler, and somewhat old fashioned good looks. He dresses conservatively, favouring tweed suits, in varying shades of grey.

**Team Leader: Major Andraste Ryleth (Minerva)**

*Astronaut Andraste Ryleth is one of the last survivors of a mission to investigate the ancient Celine Ruins on the moon, where she was inadvertently bound to a 'symbiotic psionic weapons system', granting her incredible strength and powers, limited only by her willpower and imagination.*

Andraste Ryleth was already a veteran pilot, with a distinguished record, when she was seconded to the United Nations Space Exploration Agency. Excelling in her advanced training she was quickly selected for the 1983 moon mission, to explore a ruined city on the dark side of the moon.

On the flight home, she was inspecting one of the relics recovered from the ruins, what the team believed to be a simple crest albeit one with an usual silver gemstone set in a frame of black metal. The 'crest' was a symbiotic computer, containing a powerful psionic weapons system.

The Crest bound itself to Andraste, its roots weaving themselves into her nervous system, and every organ. It has granted her incredible strength, and durability, enhanced healing, telekinetic flight, and the ability to manifest 'holographic' weapons and armour, forged from her psionic energy.

**Recent History:** Andraste joined MITHRAS shortly after gaining her powers, and has been with the Rapid Action Teams for almost a decade. In that time she has more than proven herself capable, and has recently been promoted to team leader.

**Appearance:** Andraste is tall, dashing, and athletic, with mahogany skin, a dark brown buzzcut, and something of the lioness about her dark eyes and handsome features. When not wearing her RAT Field Suit, she favours a form fitting turtleneck, dark jeans, and a leather jacket.

**Lieutenant Marius St Germaine (Durandel)**

*When Lieutenant Marius St Germaine volunteered for the Excalibur Process he was forever transformed, becoming more than a soldier, and more than a man. A mixture of alchemy, cybernetics, and alien technology has made him the ultimate weapon.*



Lieutenant St Germaine was one of seven Royal Marine Commandos selected to undergo an experimental procedure in 1970, intended to be the UK's own 'super-soldier' programme. He was injected with a swarm of 'alchemical nanites' reverse engineered from alien technology salvaged after the Thelos Invasion of 1968, and adapted for use on humans through alchemical means.

St Germaine's humanity is an illusion that is skin deep. Internally his body has become a 'living machine' a cybernetic entity that is constantly adapting to his environment and needs. His bones have been infused with alien alloys, and his muscles and organs have become 'bio-cybernetic mechanisms', his senses have been augmented with a number of high powered sensors and scanners. and the augmentations to his brain allow him to 'Mesh' with bespoke weapons and armour systems.

While wearing his cyber-armour, his (already superhuman) strength and speed is multiplied ten-fold, and he is capable of supersonic flight. His weapon of choice is 'Daisy' a heavy assault cannon fuelled by a reservoir of alchemical mercury, effectively providing it with limitless ammunition.

St Germaine was the second in command of Scimitar Squad, known in the press as Britain's 'Very Special Forces'.

In 1981 he was one of three Excalibur Marines seconded to Project Pathfinder, Britain's failed attempt to create stable and permanent doorways to parallel dimensions, which was heralded as the 'new age of exploration' by some, and hoped to become Britain's 'new Empire' by others.

**Recent History:** St Germaine has served in MITHRAS since Project Pathfinder was closed in 1986. Over the years, as he has learned to operate his cybernetic systems more effectively, and is now completely at home with them.

**Appearance:** Outwardly St Germaine appears human, in his late forties or early fifties, with a slick of receding black hair, hawkishly handsome features, intense eyes, and neatly groomed beard flecked with silver. He tends to dress in conservative, dark colours, usually in a suit jacket, and a dark sweater, over black jeans, or in a dark three piece suit.

In the field, he wears a suit of cybernetic armour whose camouflage patterns constantly adapts to his surroundings. The armour grows bulkier and more aggressive looking in proportion to his needs at any given time.

### Robin Wren (Songbird)

*For every generation there has been a champion, a powerful sorceress chosen to bear the Reynard Cloak, to stand against the dark and demonic powers that haunt our world, and to police the veil between realities. These women are known as the Arcana, and they are guided by the spirits of all who wore the cloak before...*

Robin Wren was still at school (or rather she was supposed to be at school) when she was chosen to be her generation's Arcana. A talented explorer, musician, and intuitive magician, she spent many of her days eschewing school and other responsibilities, in favour of exploring the magical nooks and crannies of the world, the unseen places, and the doorways to other realms.

At first reluctant to become a hero, Robin quickly learned that she was not capable of standing by and doing nothing, if she had the power to do *something*.

Robin intuitively magic as music, and manipulates the fabric of reality through a variety of instruments and other technology, augmented and adapted with psionic arrays and harmonic crystals, preferring to carry her electric guitar, although she has a motely collection of 'pseudo-staffs' ranging from penny whistles, to violins, to electric keyboards.

The enchantments in the Reynard Cloak can either render Robin invisible, or they can grant her a force-field like protective aura, but not both at the same time.

At sixteen, Robin was taken under the wing of Professor Sidney Sylvester (better known to the public as the Australian superhero Jack Of Wands) who agreed to train her in the ways of magic, on the condition that she took her A-Levels and volunteered for MITHRAS.

Now in her twenties, Robin considers her role as a superhero, and as a member of MITHRAS as her true calling.

Robin has an unwavering and uncompromising moral code.

**Recent History:** The Daily Halberd has recently outed Robin as a trans woman, and has begun a campaign suggesting she somehow dishonestly obtained the cloak, that should have been passed to a 'real' woman.

**Appearance:** Robin is an elfin, puckish trans woman, with dollish features and a swish of hair that changes colour to match her emotions. She usually wears a denim jacket, and plaid shirt over a pleated skirt, tall socks, and steel toed boots, often favouring clothes in varying combinations of blue, white, and pink. Her jackets are decorated with safety pins, and badges for a variety of progressive campaigns and causes.

The Reynard cloak is black when she is invisible, or silver when she has her forcefield up.

### **John Bardiche (The Tawny Guard)**

*Drawn by the tides of magic, and guided by prophetic dreams, John Bardiche became the last of the Tawny Guards, a demon slayer and hunter of the undead.*

Discovered as an infant on a station platform, the young man who now calls himself John Bardiche spent much of his childhood bouncing between foster homes and care facilities without ever setting down roots, or finding a family, in part because of the number of supernatural events, and strange coincidences that always haunted him.

From a young age John was aware that he was different from others, not just because of his unusual orange eyes, or prematurely silver hair. John does not sleep, instead preferring to read or meditate. His senses are unusually sharp, especially his vision, but he is also unusually sensitive to light and often has to wear tinted glasses or goggles, even at night. Once he hit puberty he became aware that he was supernaturally strong (with the same strength as a champion weightlifter, despite his scrawny build), and fast (he can match the speed of a champion sprinter, and maintain that speed for the length of a marathon). He has an innate talent for acrobatics, gymnastics, and free running.

As a teenager, he ran away, and embarked on a long pilgrimage to uncover the secrets of the Tawny Guard, and to learn their ways, mastering archery, alchemy, and several forms of close combat. During this time he operated in secret, battling the supernatural monsters and beasts that crossed his path.



Since learning the Tawny Guard's meditation techniques, John has begun to experience prophetic visions that have helped guide him on his career.

Despite being only twenty one, John has a wisdom far beyond his age, and in many respects is the 'older brother' to the rest of his team, always available to offer his team mates a pot of tea, a sympathetic ear, and some sage advice.

**Recent History:** John is one of the youngest trainees to have passed out as MITHRAS field agent, but has also achieved some of the highest scores. Nevertheless he is keenly aware that he is the youngest, and least experienced of his team mates.

**Appearance:** John is six feet tall, but with a wiry, scrawny build. He tends to dress in practical, earth-toned clothing, usually a field jacket, hoodie, and cargo trousers. As the Tawny Guard he also wears a hooded gilet. His enchanted leather messenger bag contains a vast armoury of antique weapons, magical relics, and alchemical weapons he has built himself... But he prefers to use a compound bow and alchemically treated arrows.

#### **Analyst: Prof. Sidney Sylvester**

Formerly the hero known as Jack Of Wands, Professor Sylvester is an expert historian, and occultist, with a wealth of knowledge of the folklore, mythology, beliefs and legends of many cultures and civilisations, human or otherwise, from Earth and beyond.

It has been many years since Sylvester was a superhero. Now he is an old man, who relies heavily on his walking cane, but his mind is as sharp as ever.

**Appearance:** Professor Sylvester is a gnomish little old man, with rubbery features, and thinning white hair that is receding from his brow but growing wild behind his ears. He usually wears a light jacket over a yellow and green (Australian cricket team) polo shirt.

#### **Analyst: Talia Tillinghast (Tinkerbell)**

The daughter of one of the richest families in the world, Talia Tillinghast is a genius polymath, and an academic jack-of-all-trades (but master of none) with degrees in a broad spectrum of scientific and engineering disciplines. Forever curious, and always excited to see something new, she urged her Uncle (a senior Home Office civil servant) to pull strings and help her find a role in MITHRAS in the hope that it would pose a suitable challenge to her intellect.

Tinkerbell's spina bifida largely confines her to a wheelchair, and her computer station. Although she rarely travels physically into the field, her virtual reality goggles, and an army of Puck Drones allow her to carry out forensic inspections, and scientific surveys remotely, and she will 'appear' in the field as a hologram projected by the drones.

**Appearance:** Talia is a cherubic, full figured twenty-something, with owlish eyes, and a smile for every emotion (from thin, sad smiles, to big cheesy grins, to flat, dangerous, angry smiles). She usually wears a brightly coloured hijab as a counterpoint to her smart, conservative clothing, usually skirt suits, or trouser suits, in tasteful neutral tones.

**Other Personnel:****Director: Lord August Azrael**

The Director of MITHRAS is Lord August Azrael, a Vampire who has had a long career as a spy, having been recruited into military intelligence shortly after he was 'turned' during the war of 1812.

Azrael is incredibly strong willed, and has never fallen into the thrall of Alucard, the Vampire God. As such he is classified as a Freeman Vampire, and has remained in command of his own faculties. However, fearing that one day he may give in to his vampiric appetites, and allow Alucard to take control of his thoughts, during the reign of Queen Victoria Azrael was placed under the watchful eye of his 'secretary' and bodyguard The Widow, an undead wraith.

**Bobs 1-99**

Attempts to clone Colour Sergeant Robert Ludgate of the Scimitar Group were a strange failure when it was discovered that Bob's single soul and awareness. Bob is now effectively immortal, churning out new, younger, fitter bodies whenever one of his number passes.

However, because of the mental and physical toll this takes, his clones have not replaced Scimitar Squads, but have instead been utilised as the security officers for the Iceberg, the Mithras headquarters.

**Other Organisations:****The First Family**

In 1962 Doctor Richard First, his fiancée Professor Dyani Dosela, and the daring helicopter pilot Jack Hartnell were the last survivors of Project Theseus, an attempt to breach the reality barrier, and tap into the unlimited energies of the Elemental Vortex that separates parallel universes.

The three were exposed to elemental energies, and forever changed.

For the last thirty years, they -and their growing family- have been America's unofficial guardians, acting as freelance problem solvers for the US Government, and for any nation or peoples who have asked their help, drawn into countless exciting adventures around the world...and far beyond.

Doctor Richard First (Odysseus)

Professor Dyani Dosela-First (Athena)

Jack Hartnell (Ajax)

Artemis Dosela-First (Selene)

Alexander Dosela-First (Priam)

**UNSEA**

The United Nations Space Exploration Agency is a multinational organisation, that has pooled the resources of many member nations, to push the boundaries of space exploration, in the name of peace. The UNSEA has managed incredible feats of



exploration, that no single nation could have achieved: permanent settlements on both the Moon and Mars, as well as experimental mining operations in the moons of Jupiter.

UNSEA also maintains a number of automated listening posts around the solar system, that act as an early detection system for potential alien threats.

### **VOR-Tech**

Based in Neo-Jorvika City, USA, VOR-Tech is one of the world's most prolific multi-national technology companies. VOR-Tech created the X-Cell, a very long life battery based around a genetically modified bacteria, that has been widely adopted in cars, hand held electronics, and most notably in the space program, where it reduced the weight of electronic devices so much, that it is widely (if not entirely accurately) credited with making permanent colonies viable.

The company has a controversial history.

Although it has (so far) avoided any legal consequences, it is an open secret that VOR-Tech, and it's CEO Lucian Alexander, have engineered a number of coups, civil wars, and regime changes in African and South American nations, to access mining rights for rare minerals.

On top of this, the journalist Hank Wessex of Halberd News, has shown clear connections between VOR-Tech and the criminal underworld, with no less than twelve major supervillains to be using weapons and technology developed by the company, or to have at one time been an employee of the company. He has further shown, over several reports, that the organised criminal syndicate known as Baphomet has been arming its foot soldiers with ordinance from VOR-Techs 'Experimental Warfare' division, especially when it comes to the syndicates ongoing war against the heroic First Family.

### **Ouroboros**

A small island nation, that wields a disproportionate power and influence on the world stage, Ouroboros is under the 'protection' of the tyrannical super villain Doctor Abyss. The island has become incredibly wealthy as a marketplace for weapons, and technologies that are forbidden elsewhere in the world, and a haven for supervillains who need to retreat out of the reach of world authorities.

### **Maelstrom**

The true identity of the supervillain known as Maelstrom remains a mystery. He is currently being held in the Pacific Acheron Facility, a super-maximum security prison in the deepest Pacific ocean trench.

Some years ago Maelstrom attempted to hold the entire world to ransom by taking control of the global communications and computer networks, hypnotising thousands of people into his thrall, and using them to unleash chaos around the world , but most notably in the three cities he 'made examples of': London, New York and Moscow.

Maelstrom appears to be a hunched and frail old man, but has shown himself to be capable of acts of incredible strength and fortitude on the rare occasions he has been faced in direct combat.

He also appears to have an uncanny ability to know somebody's deepest and darkest secrets just by looking them in the eye.

---

## Episode One: In The Court Of The Thrice-Dead King

November 1992

Prelude

### The Transantarctic Mountains- Antarctica

Danny Taylor's heart stuttered in his chest, and his stomach turned, as the helicopters plunged out of the churning blizzard, and into the twilight shadows of the narrow canyon.

From a distance the vast cave had looked like a lightning bolt, a jagged crack running through the sheer wall of the mountains. Even as the three helicopters manoeuvred into single file, nameless and shapeless misgivings had weighed heavily on Danny's soul. They were the same, nameless fears that had haunted him as a child, on the nights when he had lain still in his bed, too terrified to breathe, out of the certainty that there was *something* watching him from the darkness, some unknown horror lurking beneath his bed, or hiding in the closet.

It was the same shapeless dread that he had felt in Vietnam, in the sweltering jungle, moments before the crack of a sniper rifle had shattered the silence, and a high velocity bullet had zipped past his ear.

"Hey!" Straker, the pilot, barked over the headset. "Swing that light around. There's something ahead."

Danny heaved the side door open, bracing himself against the wave of biting, howling cold that crashed into the helicopter. He grabbed the spotlight, and brought it about.

The pool of light revealed one of the twin statues that stood guard over the tunnel. Each had to be as tall as the statue of liberty, carved into the rock of the mountainside itself.

The figures were stood upright, and wore the breastplates, skirts, and helmets of an ancient Greek, or Roman soldier. One brandished a kite shaped shield, the other a barbed trident. But both had proportions that were too squat and broad to be human. Their body shape, webbed hands, and webbed feet, suggested something more akin to a frog or toad than a human. Their head was more like that of a deep sea angler fish, overflowing with needle teeth.

Shadows moved within their hollow eyes, giving the impression that their gaze followed the helicopters, as they flew past.

"What the Hell?" Demanded Parker, the youngest and freshest of the Fire Team.

Each of the helicopters carried a Fire Team of twelve hardened mercenaries, most of them professional Henches, all of them wearing body armour, over scarlet leather great coats, and crimson battledress. Their helmets had mirrored visors, and built in respirators.

Parker was an experienced soldier, and had been a mercenary before, but... he wasn't a hench. He hadn't been prepared.

Nobody was prepared for their first time.



Danny buried his own misgivings down deep, and pasted his usual thin, grim smile over them, as he turned to glare at Parker, touching his headset. “Do we have a problem, Mister Parker?”

“That....” Parker flinched. “Was that an alien?”

Danny shrugged. “I don’t know, and I don’t care, and neither do you, Parker. Do you understand me? If you want the big money for being a Hench, then you learn what not to know, and learn what not to care about. If a man in a clown mask is paying you to fill parade balloons with nerve gas, it pays not to know, or care, how many people are taking their kids to the Thanksgiving day parade. Those are the questions that get you in trouble, or get you dead. So, yeah, the statues are weird. The lost city in Antarctica is weird. Is it alien? I don’t know. I don’t care. I care about getting the job done, and getting the cheque.” He leant closer to Parker. “Do we have a problem?”

“No,” Parker said.

Danny patted his shoulder. “Damn right.”

The narrow canyon opened into a vast rectangular cavern, bigger than any sports stadium that Danny had ever seen. At the far end was a pyramid looking structure, with vast, high tech vault doors, that were both ancient, but futuristic.

The helicopters touched down on the flat cave floor.

“Okay!” Danny barked. “Hustle out, and fall in!”

The three teams formed parade ground ranks at the entrance to the pyramid. Only when they were neatly spaced, and standing at attention, did Lord Khyron emerge from the third helicopter, accompanied by Miss Hades, his lieutenant, and the man who called himself Dagon.

Lord Khyron was a lumbering hulk of a man, completely clad from head to foot in space-aged battle armour, that was stylishly art-deco, with just a hint of the medieval about it. His flowing cape fluttered in the wind about him.

Miss Hades was sinewy and feline, with hour glass hips, and delicate, ageless features. Her bald scalp was decorated with a laurel of tattoos, that continued down her spine. She was wearing a shearling leather trench coat over her jet black, armoured bodysuit.

Danny had seen Khyron rip the door from a bank vault with the tremendous strength granted by his armour. He had seen Hades kill a man with a single, rattlesnake fast punch.

But... it was Dagon who truly scared Danny.

Dagon was dashing and handsome, with a long, narrow face, and a van-dyke beard. Apparently unaware of the deathly cold around them, he wore a shiny tonic blend suit, a pair of leather gloves, and a pork-pie hat. An ornate, ebony cane was tucked under his arm. It was decorated with scales and gills, to suggest an eel, whose open mouthed head formed the grip.

SS ELEGY: DISPATCH ONE 5 APR 25 / 03:17 SHIP TIME  
 UNUSUAL CALM \*STOP\* CHAMPAGNE CHILLED \*STOP\* STARS FLICKER AS IF UNCERTAIN \*STOP\*  
 ENGINE ROOM REPORTS "A HESITATION" \*STOP\* CAPTAIN REQUESTS POETRY

It was the way he carried himself that scared Danny.

Everything about the way Dagon spoke, the way he moved, the way he smiled and the way he looked at people was... too precise... too calculated.

He looked to Danny like somebody who had learned to smile by mimicking the behaviour he had seen on films, rather than through experience. His humanity was thin veneer, that did not run skin deep.

The three came to a stop, and Lord Khyron studied the doors.

Dagon gestured at the pyramid. "This is the last remnant of a civilisation that rose, flourished, declined and fell, millions of years before your sun was born. It is their last refuge. A...lifeboat... of sorts. Within you will find a great terrible weapon, one capable of cleansing this earth. One that will make you, my lord, the sole arbiter of who lives, and who dies. Of who is allowed the privilege of continuing to draw breath." He paused. "The weapon that will make you master of this Earth."

Khyron tapped at the computer built into the vambrace of his armour.

The doors of the pyramid hissed open.

Miss Hades gestured to the Fire Team.

As one they clicked their heels and rushed forwards, entering the pyramid in a tactical formation, their guns held ready.

Khyron and Hades followed close behind.

Danny tried not to notice, or care about Dagon's smile.

Within the pyramid was an airy chamber whose walls, ceiling, and floor were all clad in white marble. They flowed seamlessly into each other, as though the whole chamber had been carved from a single block of stone. The room was well lit, but Danny couldn't work out where the light was coming from.

Khyron tapped at the computer on his arm again.

A hologram flickered to life over the far wall. It was a cloud of words, written in a language that appeared utterly alien to Danny.

The doors hissed closed and sealed behind them, forming another seamless marble wall. The room shuddered and began to descend. The elevator plunged down so fast that Danny felt like he had left his stomach behind. His ears popped.

They descended for several minutes, deep down into the bedrock of the earth.

Eventually it slowed to a halt, and the far wall folded open, onto a vaulted passageway.

“This way,” Dagon said, stepping past the Fire Team, to lead them down a labyrinth of passageways.

Lord Khyron gestured for the Fire Team to follow him.

Danny forced himself to walk on, his gun held ready, as he checked each of the alcoves in the wall, looking down the iron-sights of his rifle.

The feeling of being watched, of unseen eyes upon him, was growing stronger and stronger. The *monster under the bed* sensation was pounding in his heart, and burning in his veins.

Dagon paused at one of the alcoves and stepped forwards.

He touched the marble, and the wall at the back of the alcove rippled open.

Within was a domed chamber, so big it could have swallowed not only Danny’s apartment back home in Miami, but maybe even the whole building, with room to spare. The dome had the smell of a hospital, of disinfectant about it. The stonework suggested a temple, or a cathedral, but there was...machinery of some kind that suggested a laboratory.

In the centre of the dome was a tall glass cylinder, full of a cloudy, nebulous liquid that billowed and swirled in constant movement.

Hades cocked her head, and scowled. “Is this... the weapon?”

Dagon walked into the chamber, and crouched to his knee before the cylinder, bowing his head. “This is Alastor. He is weak now, his powers diminished by the aeons of his imprisonment, but... in time... He will have the power to exterminate entire cities, entire nations, in the blink of an eye. Thousands, millions of souls reduced to dust and ashes in the space between two heartbeats.”

Khyron approached the cylinder. “How?”

Dagon thought for a moment. “I intend to transport him to a city, somewhere nice and populous, perhaps London, or Paris, or New York. I will care for him, and help him build his strength, until he is ready to feed. And then... He will rip the souls from every living being in the city, and absorb them all...”

Miss Hades nodded. “How do we transport it?”

Something moved in the cylinder, emerging from the cloudy darkness.

Danny’s first impression was of a worm he had once seen in an aquarium, the kind that lived on the seabed, lurking in the silt, or the cracks between rocks, waiting to lunge out and snatch a passing fish. The thing was... the size of a dinosaur. Thick bristles and barbs grew between the bony plates that armoured its heaving body. At the top there was maw full of dagger teeth, with pincer like feeders.

Danny took an involuntary step back. In the corner of his eye, he saw Parker quivering on his feet, his gun pointed at...whatever the thing in the cylinder was.

Dagon closed his eyes, and held his hands up in a theatrical gesture. “He will be capable of transporting himself. He just needs a little energy. Twenty lives will be enough, but I bought him thirty eight, just to be sure.”



“What?” Miss Hades demanded.

Lord Khyron grabbed Dagon by the shoulder, and hurled him across the dome, sending him sprawling. “Kill him! Kill him n—”

Khyron staggered, gripping at his helmet, as a cloud of black smoke billowed from the vents in his helmet.

In a moment, Miss Hades had dropped to her knees, and was clutching at her throat, as black smoke plumed from her mouth, her nose, her ears and her eyes...

One by one the Fire Team fell, gurgling and thrashing on the floor, as smoke billowed from the respirators in their helmets.

Their bodies melted away, leaving only empty uniforms.

Danny tried to bring up his gun and to take aim at the cylinder, but there was a sudden burning pain in his chest, a bright white agony that threatened to consume him, even as he choked on rubbery black smoke.

His knees buckled, and Danny toppled of balance, crashing to the floor, as his senses blurred into darkness, and his awareness crumbled into oblivion.

## • One

### London – The United Kingdom

Robin Wren stood in the reception area on the forty eighth floor of Lloyd George House (better known as the New Government Building), sipping her coffee, and staring out the windows over the rooftops of the City, as the rainstorm swept over the streets.

London was in the midst of change, evolving once again.

It was five years now, since the Maelstrom Incident, and although the rubble and ruins had been swept away. Westminster, and the City of London, the two cities-within-the-city of the great Metropolis, were still scarred with a patchwork of building sites, fenced off behind hoardings, squeezed between the surviving buildings.

Wilberforce House (the new Cabinet Office building) and Wellesley Tower (the new Home Office HQ) were metal skeletons and raw concrete, a long way from completion.

What remained of the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben’s clock-tower were still held up by scaffolding.

According to this morning’s headlines the motion to build the memorial garden in the hollow shell of Parliament had passed through the New Commons with an overwhelming majority.

Work in Vauxhall and on the Embankment was more or less complete.

The VOR-Tech building (more commonly known to tourists as ‘Cleopatra’s Needle’) dominated the new skyline, as by far the tallest of the skyscrapers that now loomed over the Thames. It passed a vague resemblance to its namesake, the ancient Egyptian obelisk, half of which still stood on the Embankment, at least if you squinted, and used a lot of imagination. The tower’s glass skin shimmered all the colours of the ocean, all at once, each pane shifting through shades of blue or green, depending on how the changing light caught it.

By comparison the New Government Building was squat, and stout.

The fifty something floors of Lloyd George House contained the new Assembly rooms for the Commons and Lords, the offices for the MPs, the Cabinet Office, the Home Office, and a number of other government departments. Everything was a bit squished and cosy at the moment, but more space was being freed up as new buildings were completed, and departments could gradually move out.

“So...” Tinkerbelle said over Robin’s earpiece. “Why don’t you think you look good in your Sunday best? You look amazing!”

Talia ‘Tinkerbelle’ Tillinghast spoke with the kind of crystal-glass annunciation and Received Pronunciation that could only be forged in the most expensive schools, and the most exclusive universities, but was somewhat softened by her boundless ‘Jolly Hockey-Sticks’ enthusiasm, and good humour.

Another voice interjected. This voice was soft, and warm, with an Australian accent. It belonged to Sidney Sylvester. “She never said she didn’t look good. She said she didn’t like wearing it.”

Robin straightened the jacket of her black trouser suit. She was wearing it with a striped pink and white shirt, and a baby blue silk scarf. As long as she could concentrate, she could keep her swish of hair blonde. “It’s the suit I wear for funerals and job interviews. It never feels right.”

“But...” Tinkerbelle began to protest. “Oh! Hello! He’s on the move with his hat and coat, and the Close Protection Unit are bringing his car to the front. He has a meeting in Downing Street, then lunch at his Club, which should be plenty of time, but the chances are he won’t be back this afternoon.”

“Understood,” Robin answered, hoping her tone didn’t sound too *‘thank the Fates for that!’*

“Here he comes,” Tinkerbelle said, “in five, four, three, two...”

The doors to the left of the reception area flew open, as a huddle of men and women strolled to the lifts.

Most were dressed office smart, with lanyards that suggested they were stationed down in the busy open plan office space.

The hawkish man with the shaven scalp and the slightly old fashioned way of dressing was the Permanent Secretary to the Department Of Civil Logistics.

The man at the centre of the huddle was Harrold Digby-Dawson, the MP for Arden Vale, and the current Minister for Security and Intelligence; an open faced, forty-something, with a contempt for the dress code, and painfully fashionable hair that he probably thought made him look half his age. He was wearing a khaki blazer over a striped rugby shirt.

After a few moments the doors to the lift dinged open, and the crowd bustled in.

Robin finished her coffee and set it on the table.

The elevator hissed closed and whooshed on its way.

“Right then...” Sid said, in the tone that suggested he was adjusting his glasses. “Shall we?”

Robin produced a pass card with a magicians flourish, and used it to buzz through the door, into the warren of corridors and offices.

Digby-Dawson’s office was in the back corner of the building.

Robin tapped her pass card to the door, and the locks clunked open. She stepped inside, and closed the door firmly.

Like many of the offices in Lloyd George House, it was decorated in modern, neutral, tones, but tried to preserve the heritage of the Government institutions by furnishing the room with venerable old antiques, and austere old oil paintings from the national collection.

Robin sat at the desk, and powered up the computer.

While the boot screens chattered away on the monitor, she flicked open her handbag, and released Puck drone, a small spherical robot, the size of a cricket ball, with one glowing blue lens, and a segmented, chromed shell.

The robot bobbed in the air, as a serpentine cable spooled out of its shell, like a tail, and plugged itself into the computer.

A password prompt flashed onto the screen.

The Puck chattered for a moment, as it bypassed the password, and unlocked the computer.

Tinkerbelle chuckled. "Hey Presto!"

A taskbar appeared, amongst the countless icons, as the Puck began copying files.

Robin took a tuning fork from her handbag, and tapped it on the window sill. The fork rang out, not with one note, but with the soft, warbling melody of a spell, rolling in a perpetual cycle.

She moved around the room, waving the tuning fork over the desk, the filing cabinets, the stack of computer disks, and the wall...

The framed Monet rattled.

Robin smiled and swung the painting open, to reveal the safe behind. She touched the tuning fork to the outer door, and watched as the dial span through the combinations, and the two keyholes both turned.

The door to the safe swung open.

Robin took the files from the safe, and flicked through them. There were receipts from a dozen different metal works and fabricators across Europe, made out in a dozen different names, for a dozen different companies. There were shipping receipts for containers sent to the island nation of Ouroboros from all across Europe.

Robin rolled them up and stuffed them under her jacket.

Outside, thunder rumbled, and the rain grew heavier.

Some miles away, John Bardiche was cycling through the rain.

He wound his way through the quiet backstreets (or at least, quiet by London standards), to avoid the worst of the traffic.

John was rangy and lean, wearing an olive drab field jacket over a sand coloured hoodie, and khaki cargo trousers, with scuffed boots, and a pair of mirrored goggles. Despite his heavy clothes, and the pounding rain he was effortlessly flying down the streets on the cusp of the speed limit. Despite the length of his ride, he had not broken a sweat. Although John was barely in his twenties, his feathery hair was taupe turning silver.

MITHRAS Headquarters, known affectionately in Intelligence Circles as the Iceberg, was on Totter's Lane, in Vauxhall, some streets back from the riverfront. The portion visible to the public was a small, ugly, office building. It was the kind of brutalist, functional concrete monstrosity, that the nineteen seventies thought the future was going to look like.

John pulled off the road, and whooshed down the ramp, out of the rain, down into the carpark beneath the building, the brakes on his bike squealing in complaint as he approached the gates.

A burly, jowly, man with a buzz cut and a face that fell easily into a frown, wearing a navy blue windbreaker over his khaki security-guard's uniform. The ID Badge on his breast identified him as Bob Ludgate (24).

Bob 24 folded his arms across his chest. He spoke in a no-nonsense Cockney accent as thick as treacle. "Who goes there?"



John flicked down his hood, and produced his lanyard from under his jacket and hoodie. “John Bardiche, clearance Journeyman Four.”

Bob 24 glanced over to the little security hut, within the gates, where another guard, another Bob Ludgate, identical in every way, except for the number on his ID badge (16), was studying a security scanner.

Apparently satisfied, the bobs both broke into friendly grins, rubbing their hands in anticipation.

John flicked open his battered leather messenger bag, and reached down, impossibly deep, down to his elbow, to retrieve a heavily laden carrier bag, from the Gaslight Frier. “Large haddock and large chips, two saveloys and large chips, two battered burgers, mushy peas, pickled eggs, a bottle of cola, and...” John reached back into his satchel for another hefty paper bag. “One pound of jelly babies.”

Bob 24 grinned. “Lovely.”

The gates rumbled open, and the Bobs set about devouring their lunch.

John rode down through the car park, and left his bike in the corner. He swiped his ID to buzz himself into the building.

Bob 45 was stationed at the desk in the small lobby, by the lifts.

“Was it that girl behind the counter?” Bob 45 asked, with a dour expression. “Because she’s been skimping on the salt and vinegar again. You might need to be a bit more assertive with them in the future. Tell them I want my lunch mummified by salt, and drowning in malt.”

“I’ll try,” John promised, as he stepped into the lift.

The doors hissed closed, and the lift whooshed on its way, deep down into the bedrock of the city, beneath the subways, sewers, the deepest basements, down deeper than London’s buried rivers, and wartime bunkers.

He emerged into a vaulted corridor that, apart from the regularly spaced concrete pillars reinforcing the walls, and the complete lack of windows, might have been in any government building. Something about the manilla paint, and cheap furniture, suggested they had been picked from a corporate catalogue.

He paused at the frosted glass door to one of the offices and knocked on the door.

The glass in the door turned transparent, revealing Andraste Ryleth behind her desk, deep in a conversation with somebody over a video-link on her computer.

Rapid Action Team Three’s Team Leader was a strikingly beautiful woman, tall, lean and athletic, with a military poise and bearing, mahogany skin, and a buzz cut. She wore form fitting turtleneck under a blue-grey blazer, with a small collection of pin badges on her lapels, one for UNSEA, one for the Army Air Corps, and three different Blue Peter badges.

She waved John in, without missing a beat of the conversation. “So... How can Mithras help?”

The voice that answered was instantly familiar to John, even without seeing the screen. Doctor Richard First’s voice carried as much gravitas and presence as his stout, burly, appearance. He had a distinct Mid-Western accent, with just a hint of the boy next door.

“Whatever caused those readings is deep within the Antarctic Preservation Zone,” First explained. “To investigate, I need permission to enter the zone, and... Well...” On the screen he was a broad, brawny ox of a man, with a square jaw, beard, and a cascade of springy black curls. Behind his wire framed glasses, his mercurial silver eyes were full of troubles. “I can’t anybody in Government over here to listen.”

Andraste nodded. “You think VOR Tech are throwing their weight against you still?”

First sighed. “What I think and what I can prove are...two different things. Besides, even if I could cut through the red tape, it would take time. However, Britain has always maintained exploration platforms in the Zone, and it could be argued that if this was dangerous, it would be in your interest to know.”

John’s Instinct quivered. Something about First’s words buzzed and resonated in John’s soul, heavy with a significance he didn’t understand.

He looked at Andraste.

She glanced up at him, and nodded. “Send me your readings. I will take them to Sir Clifford, and... we shall see what I can do.”

First brightened up. “Thanks Minnie. If you could try, I would really appreciate it.”

Andraste tapped off the call and looked up at John. “Hey. So... What Al-Desko delights do you have for me today?”

John shrugged, and reached down into his satchel, retrieving another carrier bag, this time from an Italian bistro. “Penne Mariana, spinach and mushroom tagliatelle, and bruschetta. With an elderflower spritzer, and caramel cheesecake.”

Andraste grinned. “Fantastic. So... When you get changed, to look a little less like a drowned rat, you might want to dress warm.”

John looked back at her, as he headed out. “Yes Ma’am.”

Two more Bobs flanked the large double doors into the Operations Floor. John flashed them his ID, before tapping it to the scanner. As the door locks clunked, Bob 07 nodded John through.

The Operations Floor was a vast airy space, that reminded John of the Mission Control rooms he saw on TV during the early days of the Mars missions. The desks formed a horseshoe around a large holographic display, with several virtual ‘screens’ of tactical information.

At the moment many were displaying CCTV footage within, or around, Lloyd George House, as well as feeds from a Puck Drone, some showing reams of virtual data harvested from a computer, and some showing the Drone’s view of Robin Wren, as she snooped around an important looking office.

Robin was about John’s own age, give or take a few years. She was an elfin, feline young trans woman, in her early twenties, with a dollish, impish kind of beauty about her, pierced ears, a swish of hair clipped short on the back and sides, and mesmerising eyes. Usually her hair was radiant and colourful, and she wore studs and rings in her ears, nose, and one eyebrow, but today she was suited and booted, looking office smart.

Three of the desks around the Ops floor were occupied.

The closest was Tinkerbell’s desk. Talia Tillinghast, one of the team’s two Analysts, was a curvy, full figured kind of beautiful, all dimples, rosy cheeks, and smiles, wearing a plum purple hijab with a retro-chic herringbone skirt suit, black tights, and tall riding boots.

On the Ops Floor she was open and warm, with a constant puppy dog enthusiasm. The few times John had seen elsewhere she had tended to shutter herself away behind an aloof snobbishness, at least until for a while.

Tinkerbell was engrossed in her work, leaning forwards in her wheelchair (if that was the

SS ELEGY DISPATCH TWO: APR 25 / 09:40 SHIP TIME  
BREAKFAST SERVED LATE \*STOP\* GRAVITY STUTTERED DURING TEA  
\*STOP\* BOTANIST WEEPS OVER WILTED ORCHIDS \*STOP\* NO WORD  
FROM NAVIGATION \*STOP\* MORALE: WELL-DRESSED, INCREASINGLY  
UNMOORED

right word for something with caterpillar tracks) to study the documents spread about her multiple computer screens.

John quietly set lunch on the desk beside her (smoked salmon and cream cheese sandwiches from an up-market delicatessen, with selected antipasti nibbles from an entirely different delicatessen) and backed away, receiving a quick blink of a nod and a smile by way of thanks.

Sidney Sylvester, the other Analyst was sat back in his chair, staring up at the holo-displays in deep thought, over a mug of tea. He was an older man, long overdue for retirement, his white hair, and fingertips, stained by tobacco. He wore a tan jacket over a gold and green polo shirt, and buff slacks.

He sat up and gestured to his desk. "What have you got for me Johnno?"

John rummaged in his satchel for a supermarket carrier bag, and set it down on the desk.

Sid opened the bag, and inspected the crunchy salad, two apples and cooked chicken breast. He whistled. "Two meat pies, prawn cocktail crisps, a can of cola, and... What's this? A four pack of iced doughnuts? Truly, the lunch of champions."

Robin sighed over the comms-net. "I know that's a joke, Sid."

"Is it?" Sid asked. "Maybe Johnno and I have an...understanding?"

Robin tutted. "No. John wouldn't dare disappoint me, now would you?"

Tinkerbelle looked up from her work. "Cliff. That's everything copied."

Sir Clifford Briggs was stood at the Overseer's Desk on its raised platform. He was a towering giant of a man, square jawed, and matinee idol handsome, even after his features had been weathered by a long career in the field, and his mane of hair was streaked with grey. He wore a waistcoat, his shirt sleeves rolled up around arms like tree trunks. "Wren, it's time for you to pack up and leave. As soon as you are ready we are going to trigger the Tripwire on Digby-Dawson's computer and let him know you were there."

"Hang on," Robin said, shuffling some of the papers in the desk drawer. "I just need to make sure everything looks disturbed enough."

"We're standing by," Cliff said. "Marius?"

"I'm in position," Marius St Germaine answered over the Comms-Net.

Cliff gestured to John.

John produced one last carrier bag from his satchel. This one contained a ham and cheese sandwich, a sausage roll, and Chelsea bun, all from a bakery a few streets away.

Cliff looked John up and down. "John... Would you mind trying to...ah... drip less on my Operations Floor? There's a good chap."

Tinkerbelle looked up from her work to giggle into her hand, as John trudged away.

"Ready," Robin said, as John reached the door.

Cliff pointed to Tinkerbelle. "Light the fuse."

## • Two

### Neo- Jorvika, The United States of America

It was a little after six and the evening rush at the Aloha Grill at the Founders' Park Mall was just starting to gain momentum.

Cassie Navarro was lost in her work, toiling away over the hot plates.

Her roomie, Flip was leaning against the counter, supping at a supersize milkshake, apparently oblivious to the whirlwind of activity and the cacophony of noise around her. She gave Cassie one of those doe eyed, pleading looks. "Look, I think things with Paulie are heading to a good place, and I just need a little privacy for a few hours. You know I would do the same for you, if... when... you know..."

Cassie concentrated on her work, to help keep her temper even. "And... What am I supposed to do with my one night off? Instead of resting?"

"A Friday night?" Flip said, with a grin. "I dunno? You could go see a movie, or have a meal, or hang at a bar and meet somebody new. Literally anything!"

Cassie was petite in height, and cuddly in build, with an open, friendly face, dark eyes, and raven curls tied down beneath her bandana.

Flip was taller, and effortlessly beautiful, with high cheek bones, winsome eyes, and a halo of golden hair.

Both had moved to the city a year ago, to attend Neo-Jorvika University's Pre-Med programme.

Cassie dared not look up, but could feel the look that Flip was giving her.

"Please?" Flip said, in that way that made her voice waver.

Cassie's heart sank, and her shoulders sagged. "Fine, but you owe me. Right?"

Flip nodded. "Of course! Anything you need, any time..."

Jerry, the supervisor strolled past on his round. He gave Flip a look.

Flip flashed one her patent 'argument stopper' smiles. "What's up Jerry?"

He looked at her, and pointed to the trash can that was in danger of overflowing. "I thought you were taking care of that?"

Flip shrugged. "I will. I'm on my fifteen minutes."

Jerry pinched his nose. "Cass? Once those are done..."

"Yeah," Cassie said, the world weighing heavy on her voice. "I'm on it."

A few moments later she was dragging the trash can out the back door, into the murky, foggy, cold of the night.

The service road behind the mall was still and quiet. Velvet thick shadows hung over the loading bays of the larger department stores. The bulkhead lights painted the drab concrete an autumnal orange. The dumpsters were corralled in a long, deep alcove.

Cassie wrestled the trash can and emptied it into the dumpster.

She was about to step out the alcove when she was aware of somebody bursting out a loading dock, in a blind charge.

For the briefest instant, as she first glimpsed the figure's wild mane of hair, and gorilla like build, top heavy with slabs of muscle, she thought it was Paulie, Flip's best friend, and on-again-off-again-more-than-friend.

He even had the same strong jaw line, and similarly angular features.



As he sprinted through one of the pools of orange light, she recognised him as one of the 'Lift and Throw Bros' who ran demonstrations and workouts in the Mall's central plaza, encouraging moms and grandmas to shed pounds, tone their muscles, and sign up to an extortionately priced subscription plan for neon coloured vitamin drinks. He wore a brightly coloured soft shell tracksuit top over a tight white tee, and dangerously tight shorts.

His eyes were wide in a terrified panic.

Cassie ducked back into the alcove, out of his way, as he stampeded past.

Some...instinct, some sixth sense sent a cold shiver down the back of her spine. Cassie pressed herself into the shadows.

Somebody was following the fitness Bro.

He was rangy and beaky, maybe in his late teens, or early twenties, but with the hardened features of a military veteran, a shock of white gold hair, and a cruel smile. He wore a skin tight body glove, and a tactical gilet with lots of pockets. His chunky goggles had a mechanical aperture that looked like the swirly gun barrel at the start of a cringey British spy movie. They whirred as they adjusted to the darkness.

He was holding some kind of steampunk cross between a heavy pistol and a crossbow, made from a dull, dark metal.

The gangly man stopped still, and took careful aim with his crossbow.

A bold, too big to be a dart, but too small to be an arrow whooshed through the air, and hit the fitness Bro in his back, between his shoulders.

The fleeing muscle-man slammed to a halt, arching like he had been hit by wrecking ball. He wheeled around, thrashing at the air.

His chest glowed bright orange, beneath his tee shirt, so bright Cassie could see the silhouette of his ribs. Black smoke poured from his mouth, nose, and ears, as he dropped to the floor. He looked like he was trying to scream, but couldn't. Then... Then his whole body turned to smoke and sparks, and it was a charred skeleton, in the scorched remnants of his clothes, that fell to the floor.

The gangly man lowered his crossbow-gun. The arms folded in, and he tucked it beneath his gilet, as he turned and walked away, with an eerie, terrifying, calm.

Cassie pressed herself into the shadows, screwed her eyes shut, and tried desperately to remain silent, despite her galloping heart, and the ice cold terror burning in her veins, and churning in her stomach.

She held her breath, and covered her mouth to muffle her whimpers.

Seven miles away, at the southern end of Founders' Park, Artemis Dosela-First was sat in the booth at the back of Kirby's Diner, staring out the window, watching the fog as it ebbed and flowed through the park, and between the towering skyscrapers of the city.

A yellow taxi pulled up outside, and Hank Wessex heaved himself out, leaning back in to say something to the driver, before he closed the door and looked around.

Artemis waved at him.

He waved back, breaking into a big cheesy grin, as he hurried inside, and helped a beautiful, much older woman out onto the sidewalk.

Artemis was twenty one, poised and graceful, with the elegant build of a ballerina. Her white-silver hair hung down just shy of her shoulders, and was dyed lilac on the tips. Behind her tinted Windsor glasses her eyes were the colour of embers, and were incredibly sensitive to the light. She was wearing a black dress, with a white peter pan collar, and a silver necklace.

She had been drinking her peanut butter milkshake slowly.

Hank was renowned for his somewhat flaky and unreliable time keeping.

He was a journalist acquaintance of Artemis' parents, maybe thirty years old, and built like a grizzly bear, if a little more clean cut. His long raven hair was tied back from his Byronic features into a ponytail.

The older woman was bald and olive skinned, with lots of tattoos creeping out from the collar and sleeves of her tunic waisted dress. She moved with a elegance and purpose, as she followed Hank into the diner.

Nervous butterflies swarmed in Artemis's belly.

"Hey, Arti!" Hank said, as they joined her in the booth. "Are you okay?"

The woman offered Artemis a long, elegant hand. She spoke with a soft, purring accent that Artemis could not quite place. "Hello. My name is Grace."

A waitress tottered over on her high heels. "Hey Hank."

"Hey Billi!" Hank said, with one of his bright smiles. "Could I get steak and eggs, with hash browns? And a strawberry shake?"

Grace smiled. "Black coffee, please." She looked at Artemis. "Hank tells me you are...something of a mystery?"

Artemis nodded. "I've been trying to find my birth parents. I... asked Hank to help. He has helped my parents solve some far bigger mysteries in the past."

Grace held Artemis in her gaze for a moment. Her dark eyes were mostly midnight blue, but with flecks and swirls of silver and gold, that seemed to whirlpool down into infinity. Artemis had the terrifying feeling that they could see all the way down into her soul.

"Indeed?" Grace said. She released Artemis and turned to give Hank a look.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, yeah. I mean... We have a lot in common. I was adopted too. I remember the one thread, at the back of my mind, that always had questions and doubts..."

Grace nodded. "And what have you found?"

Artemis hesitated a moment. "Nothing that I did not already know. My parents adopted me when I was still an infant, because I had already shown signs of being... different from others, and... They felt I would need special care. At the time they did not believe they could have children. A few weeks after the papers were signed, Mom learned she was pregnant with Xander. I was discovered at a supermarket, in an abandoned trolley in the cereal aisle. I wanted to know what happened, why I was left there, and who my birth parents were, but..."

Hank gave Artemis a sad look. "The police files have been lost. Any traces or clues I might have followed are gone."

Grace produced a deck old metal Portent cards, apparently from nowhere, and began shuffling them as she spoke. "You understand my dear that such questions are not asked lightly. Magic has a way of... extracting a cost for its answers, that might not be immediately apparent. You must be very sure, before we do this."

Artemis nodded. "I am sure. I can see no other way."

"Very well," Grace said, placing the deck on the table. "Shuffle the deck."

SS ELEGY DISPATCH THREE 5 APR 25 / 14:06 SHIP  
 TIME MARCONI ROOM SILENT, SAVE STATIC \*STOP\*  
 PASSENGER IN STATEROOM 12 DREAMS OF FOGHORNS  
 \*STOP\* CLOCK HANDS SPIN BACKWARDS DURING TOAST  
 \*STOP\* SHIP DRIFTS, ELEGANT AS EVER

Artemis took the cards. The cards were as thin as paper, but were made from a copper coloured alloy that was warm to the touch, and prickly to touch as she shuffled them, like the static on a television screen. The backs were engraved with a pattern of woven thorns,

vines, and roses, that matched Grace's many tattoos.

"Good," Grace said. "Now, cut the deck once to show me whence you came."

Artemis placed the deck on the table, and split it.

The revealed card was etched with a skeletal horseman in plate-mail armour riding a pale horse. In the background was a blighted forest of skeletal trees.

Grace considered the card. "The Thirteenth of the Major Arcana does not always literally mean Death. It can mean great changes, or new beginnings. It represents a cycle of renewal and of the changing seasons... Of one age passing to another, and new generations inheriting responsibility." She moved the card to a position on the table. "Close your eyes, place your finger to the card, and tell me what you see."

Artemis took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and lay two fingers upon the card.

In her minds eye she saw...

"A burning city," Artemis whispered. "An old city. The buildings are... medieval. There are gargoyles in the gutters, and the streets are like cloisters. The whole city is ablaze..."

She could feel the dry heat of the flames, and hear the rasping, thunderous roar of the inferno. She could smell soot and ash. The air stung at her eyes.

Grace lifted her fingers from the card. "Do you know the city?"

"Yes, it's..." Artemis shook her head. The name had been on the tip of her tongue, but now she tried to say it, it was slipping away, and as she tried to think of it, she became more aware that there was a hole where the name should be. "No. I should know it. But..."

"It's okay," Grace said. "Shuffle the cards again. This time we will see where you are headed."

Artemis shuffled the deck, and cut the cards once more, this time revealing an elegant woman in the robes and amour of antiquity, sat on an ornate throne. She was armed with a long staff, and short, harp-like bow. Her crown was laurel of holly and mistletoe.

Grace slid the card from the deck, and positioned it on the table. "The Queen of Wands is a protector, confident, courageous, and determined. She guides us to unlock our full potential, to... embrace our unique talents, and to consider all we can do for our community, our family, and those around us. I see... much of her in you."

"It doesn't sound like me," Artemis whispered.

"No?" Grace chuckled. "But we can work on that. Now, this is important. You wish to know of your origins, of your blood before your family. You must hold this thought in your mind, to concentrate on it, as you shuffle the deck. This time, whenever you feel you are ready, you will deal a hand of four cards.

Artemis did as she was told, shuffling the deck, repeating one thought over and again: *Who were my birth family, before I was adopted?*

After a few moments, she peeled off four cards and dealt them onto the table.

Grace turned them over.

The Jack Of Wands, The Jack of Swords, The Jack of Coins (upside down), and the Jack of Cups.

Her lips curled into a smile, as she slid the first card across the table. The Jack Of Wands was a somewhat dashing, and androgynous knight, wearing plate mail armour, decorated with holly and mistletoe, with a quiver of arrows on his back. They were riding a rearing shire horse, and were armed with a long stave wrapped in mistletoe.. In the background was a wintry scene of skeletal trees.

Grace tapped the card. "This... This I think is you, or at the very least it is the person you choose to be, the part of you that is Seline, of the First Family. The Jack of Wands is a gallant warrior, driven by a strong heart, and strong ideals, to change the world for the better. This Jack is creative, artistic, and empathic, keenly aware of the wrongs in the world, to which they will bring their light." Her eyebrow raised. "It is a good card. Choose another?"

Artemis frowned a little. "Is it... unusual to have four cards so alike? It seems...improbable."

Grace chuckled. "If we were playing poker you would have every right to be suspicious. But... patterns like this are not unusual in magic. And you were looking for connections."

Artemis pointed to the Jack of Swords. For a fleeting moment, she felt... as though there was somebody she missed, very much, even though she did not know them.

The Jack of Swords was a knight in shining armour, riding a horse in a galloping charge, through a bountiful wheat field. His shield had the motif of an owl upon it.

"This one," Artemis said.

"Ah!" Grace nodded. "The Jack of Swords and the Jack of Wands are... complimentary travellers, that often resonate together. One is of the Winter, one of the Harvest, one is driven by their heart, and by their ideals, the other by knowledge and learning. But they are also alike, in ways that matter very dearly. Both are portents of great change, and both fight for that change to be for the better. Both are rebellious and courageous, and both are protectors and guides. The Jack of Swords is faced with terrible challenges and terrible decisions. They must act in an instant, seizing opportunities and leaping into action, so they arm themselves with knowledge and learning. Where the Jack of Wands looks always to the future, the Jack of Swords is a creature of the past, they...understand history so they can forge a better path to the future." She slid the card to Artemis. "They are close to you in more ways than one. Still a stranger, but... drawn to you. Soon your paths will cross. Who next?"

Artemis considered the two remaining cards.

The Jack of Cups was an androgynous figure in the finery of a nobleman, riding a horse festooned with spring blooms. The Jack carried an ornate chalice, and had a falcon resting on their raised gauntlet. Foxes ran beside the horse, like the hounds of a hunt. In the background were trees laden in blossom.

Grace hesitated for a moment. Her smile suggested she knew more than she was willing to speak.

"Ah," Grace said. "I believe this is the family you will choose for yourself. Your once and future soulmate. I think... Your souls have touched many times in lives past, and will touch again. They will not look it on the outside, as they armour their heart too well, but they are kind and devoted, artistic, and creative, with a powerful light within their soul. They are creatures of diplomacy and influence, and will appreciate your wisdom and advice, but are their own person and can be...headstrong and unwavering. Something, I think, you admire of them."

The Jack Of Coins was hooded figure, riding a hooded horse, armed with a crossbow, and holding a coin marked with a pentacle. They rode through a vast field amongst rolling hills.

"The Jack Of Coins," Grace said, tapping the last of the cards, "is a student, a young person of great potential, on the cusp of becoming somebody of great importance. They are ambitious, loyal, and practical, connected to their homeland, and to their people. But this... This one is lost to you. They have turned their back their duties and promises. Ambition has become twisted to greed and avarice. Their hunger for power can drive them to acts that are great, or terrible."



Hank cleared his throat. "So... What happens now?"

"Now?" Grace smiled. "Now you have asked the questions. The Fates will take their payment, and in time, they will play their hand. I can give you no more satisfying answers now. In time, the meanings of the cards will reveal themselves to you. All I can do is warn you that now the game has begun, it will not stop. The answers will come, wanted or not."

Artemis bowed her head. "Thank you."

Grace nodded. "In two weeks we shall meet again, here if you like. I would like to know what you may have discovered. If you—"

Hank's watch buzzed. He tapped it and read the message that scrolled across the LCD screen. His brow wrinkled. "I have to go. There's been a murder over in the Mall." He dug out a billfold and left a wad of cash on the table. "Miss? Could I get my food to go?"

Grace looked up at Artemis. "You should go too. That is going to be important."

"What is?" Artemis asked.

As if to answer her, the micro-computer strapped to her wrist chimed, the screen lighting up red as a First Family Alert flashed across the display.

## • Three

### London- The United Kingdom

Marius St Germaine was waiting at the bus stop, when Robin hurried past, sheltering from the rain under her umbrella. She glanced at him, with a sideways look, on her way past.

A few moments later Mister Scythe followed on her trail.

Scythe was grizzled and gaunt, with a hard face, severe eyebrows and a shaven scalp. He wore a green plastic bomber jacket (the kind with a bright orange lining) over a white tee shirt, skinny jeans, and steel toed boots. He didn't look much like he was particularly bothered about the rain.

Marius's sensors saw more than just Scythe's outward appearance. They could detect the unusual density of his flesh and bone, the alloys and ceramic of his three false teeth, and the web of metal pipes and micro-needles embedded in his skin, with their reservoirs of battle drugs and performance enhancing stimulants.

*Beware of him*, the part of Marius's mind that was meshed to the computer, the part of his psyche that appeared to him as the woman of his dreams, whispered. *He is dangerous. He is...more than human.*

"Is he on my tail?" Robin asked, over the Comms-Net.

"Oh yeah," Marius said, stubbing out his cigarette. "He has your scent."

"So?" Robin said. "Ready?"

Marius flicked up the collar of his peacoat, and followed after them.

Marius St Germaine (call sign Durandel) had not been entirely human for many years. On the outside he was a hawkishly handsome man, with receding black hair, and a dash of silver in his beard. He was wearing a peacoat over a black suit, and charcoal sweater.

Under his skin, he was a complex cybernetic entity, with metal bones, and bio-mechanical muscles. He still *felt* human, but could also feel the movements of air currents, he could see temperature differentials, and radio waves, he could hear ultrasound and infrasound. He was capable of effortless feats of superhuman strength.

Ahead, Robin stepped off the rain, and down the steps into the station. Scythe followed her.

And Marius followed them both, weaving through the crowd to keep up with them.

They joined the crowd on the Northbound platform.

Robin leant against the curving wall of the tunnel, and Mister Scythe watched her from a way back down the platform.

A rumbling cacophony, the squeal of brakes, and a billowing gust of dusty air heralded the arrival of the train. The crowd shifted forwards as the train emerged from the tunnel and lumbered to a halt in the platform.

Robin followed the crowd forwards, and Mister Scythe moved forwards too, stepping aboard at the far end of the same carriage.

Robin reached the doors as they were beeping their last warning.

She stepped back.

Scythe leapt off the train at the last moment.

The doors hissed closed and the train rumbled away, leaving the platform nearly deserted.

Scythe smiled at Robin and clicked his fingers, summoning nasty looking stiletto bladed dagger. "Time to say goodnight."

Marius grabbed Scythe by the back of his neck. "Good night."

Scythe was human, more or less, but had had muscles and bones that were strengthened by a series of high-tech stim-plants down his spine.

Marius measured his actions carefully.

He slammed Scythe forwards, past Robin, throwing him at the wall so hard, that when Scythe landed with a thump, he cracked a whole bunch of the tiles, leaving a vaguely human shaped dent.

The assassin and enforcer slumped to the floor, moaning.

Marius stepped over, and gave him one last, stomping kick, just to make sure he out for the count. He looked at Robin. "Are you okay?"

She answered with a confident smile, one that probably would have fooled anybody else.

"Good girl," Marius said, as he crouched to secure Scythe in omni-cuffs, strong enough to contain pretty much any supervillain. He tapped his earpiece. "Well, we have the Honourable Member's blunt instrument. We are bringing him in." He plucked out Scythe's ear piece, and scanned it. "Looks like they are operating on an encrypted channel. I am sending the details...now."

"Understood," Sir Clifford Briggs answered over the Comms-Net. "Good work. Scimitar Team move in apprehend the primary."

Robin rubbed the back of her neck. "I knew I was in safe hands."

Marius nodded. "Of course you did."

Elsewhere in London, two unmarked transit vans were moving through traffic, boxing in a big black, luxury saloon, and forcing it to pull over.

Sergeant Nigel Hobbs pulled down his goggles over his balaclava as he leapt out. Like the other four members of the Royal Marines Scimitar Squad he was wearing camouflaged body armour, over a charcoal grey jump suit, and armed with a nasty looking sub-machine gun.

'Yeti' Smith stepped in front of the car, watching the driver and the security types down his iron sights, as Hobbs wrenched open the back door of the car, and hoisted Digby-Dawson out into the rain, securing his wrists with cable ties.

"Get off me!" The Minister barked. "You can't do this!"

Hobb dragged the MP, kicking and screaming to the van. "Bollocks to that Sir," he snarled. "You saw the demonstration at Exton. I think you know we can."

Within seconds the team were back in their vans, with the MP in custody.

Hobbs read the MP his rights, as the van squealed away into the afternoon.

The elevator whooshed downwards.

Andraste Ryleth adjusted her blazer. "How much trouble do you think we are in?"

Sir Clifford chuckled. "Not as much as we would be if we let Digby-Dawson carry out his plan." He pursed his lips. "You really want to take the boy on your little jaunt?"

Andraste smiled. "John isn't just a boy, and frankly, he can do a lot more for the team than make the tea and pop out for sandwiches."

"Fair enough," Cliff said. "Put him on the field, and see how he plays. But... If he drops a clanger..."

Andraste shrugged. "We all had to step off the bench sooner or later."

Cliff sighed. "It was different in our day. We had already proven ourselves."

Andraste smiled. "He's been fighting ghosts, ghouls, vampires and monsters since he was twelve. He has experience."

The elevator slowed to a halt, and the doors hissed open onto the outer office of the Sanctum at the very bottom of the complex.

The Widow was at her desk.

Lord Azrael's personal secretary was a birdish woman, dressed entirely in black, in an old fashioned manner, with a hooded cloak, and a net veil, which utterly disguised her features. Her hands, the only visible parts of her flesh, were withered, grey, and leathery.

She pointed to the large, jet black doors, directing them into the Sanctum.

Andraste braced herself as she stepped into the domed office.

Lord Azrael was sat in his swivel chair, staring at a holographic display. He was an aristocratic older man, with a shock of white hair, noble features, and a young-old face. He wore a white tunic, and over white slacks.

Cliff and Andraste made a polite point of not noticing his lack of reflection in the mirrors that hung, where other offices would have oil paintings.

He leant forwards, and looked at Sir Clifford with a frown that was not unkind. "Ah! Briggs! I understand you have placed a Minister, of Her Majesty's Government under arrest. I hope you have a very good reason!"

"I do," Cliff said, as he dropped a pile of papers on Azrael's desk. "Harrold Digby Dawson has been a very naughty boy. He has ordered the manufacture of a dozen pieces of heavy engineering, all across Europe, to be

delivered to Ouroboros Island. Individually they may seem innocent enough. The manufacturers believe they were producing high pressure parts for a desalination plant. However, when combined..."

Azrael nodded. "When combined they make an Icarus Cannon, capable of launching warheads into the stratosphere, with the range to hit anywhere on the world, and nearly undetectable to either the American or the Russian early warning systems."

"That's right," Cliff said.

"And we can prove this is what he intended?" Azrael asked.

"We have his encrypted communications," Andraste said. "Although, with Tinkerbell's help they did not remain encrypted for very long. We can show that not only is he aware of what he was doing, he is... enthusiastic about the opportunity it will afford him. He has rather childish notions that if Russia and America are reduced to rubble, then he and a cabal of investors could sweep in, profit hugely from rebuilding those nations, and in doing so, make Britain some kind of new super power on the world stage. It would be Empire by some other name."

Azrael raised an eyebrow. "And he do doubt considers it a bargain, at the cost of a few million lives?"

Cliff nodded. "I am sorry not to have acted in haste, but... We could not be sure whom we could trust, and if we took official channels..."

Azrael nodded. "He would be tipped off and all evidence would have been deleted. I understand, and as far as any paperwork is concerned, I signed off on this at close of play last night. In the future, however, you *will* have to trust me." He cocked his head. "What is your plan now?"

Cliff stroked his chin. "We have shared our intelligence with agencies across Europe, and they should be taking action, but... I am concerned about the ammunition. It is already on its way to Ouroboros. I want to dispatch a Scimitar Squad on an Orca, to intercept."

"Done," Azrael agreed. "Make it happen. Now, Miss Ryleth, you wish to mount an expedition to Antarctica?"

Andraste nodded. "The First Family's satellite network detected some unusual psionic energy signatures in the Transantarctic Mountains. The Americans aren't doing anything to investigate. I think John had one of his...er... feelings about it too."

Azrael pondered it. "What do you need?"

"Clearance to enter the restricted zone, an Orca, and John." Andraste shrugged. "We're not needed on the raid. And the Firsts will fill out our expedition."

Azrael looked at Cliff. "You approve of this?"

"I do," Cliff said. "I hope those readings are nothing, but... If they are something, we need to know about it. There is a possibility that the Americans are mounting an expedition, but keeping the Firsts out the loop. However, until we get confirmation on that, we have to consider this unactioned intelligence."

"Agreed," Azrael said. "Miss Ryleth, your operation is designated Snow Globe. You may begin as soon as is prudent. Mister Briggs, you will continue with Operation Sunrise. If you require additional resources, RAT Two and RAT Four are at your disposal." He paused. "Oh, and one more thing. A new Minister is being appointed, probably within the next few hours. They will expect a full briefing on ongoing operations to bring them up to speed. They always do."

Cliff drew a long breath. "As you wish, Sir."



SS ELEGY DISPATCH FOUR 5 APR 25 / 18:22 SHIP TIME SWAN MOTIF IN DINING SALON NOW  
 BLEEDING RUST STOP BARITONE SANG "AUTUMN LEAVES" UNPROMPTED \*STOP\* STARS ALL RED NOW  
 \*STOP\* FIRST OFFICER LIGHTING CANDLES IN THE CORRIDOR

The MAG Train hurtled through the deep tunnel, past flashing lights.

Robin stretched out on her seat, glad to be out of her trouser suit, and back into something that let her feel a little more herself: Beneath her orange and white cloak, she was wearing a a denim jacket, plaid shirt, and tartan skirt, with tall socks and canvas pumps, all in varying shades of blue, white, and pink.

She felt better armed this time too, with a collection of tuning forks tucked in her belt, and her favourite electric guitar sat on the bench beside her, the one enhanced with an array of harmonic crystals, and a psionic projector.

Nigel Hobbs and his team were riding back to the barracks with the RAT.

The Scimitar Squad were Royal Marine Commandos, permanently seconded to MITHRAS operations. They were dressed for action, in their charcoal jump suits, and armoured tactical vests, their guns held across their laps.

Their base of operations, the Medway Facility was a heavily fortified, ultra-modern complex, built on the industrial wasteland that sprawled along the banks of the river for which it was named.

The youngest of their number, Terry Smith, known as 'Yeti' to the squad, for reasons Robin did not understand, was plugged into his headphones.

They glanced at each other.

He smiled.

Robin reached up, and toyed with a loose strand of hair, as it bled from pink to scarlet.

Yeti looked away.

Across the aisle, Marius and Andraste shot Robin knowing looks, without breaking their conversation.

They too were both dressed for action.

Marius was Meshed into his cybernetic armour. The bulky robot suit was currently camouflaged in shades of white, grey, and cream to match the train's interior.

Andraste was wearing a the same heavy duty grey jumpsuit as the Scimitar Squad, with an all-weather anorak.

John was sat on his own at the front of the carriage. He was wearing different clothes than when they had all clocked in that morning, but other than the hooded leather gilet (whose scales of leather were dyed in all the colours of autumn) it was yet another combination of field jacket, hoodie, and combat trousers, in khaki (the jacket), olive (the hoodie) and sand (the combat trousers).

He was a strange one. Although John was only a few years younger than Robin, sometimes it was difficult not to see him as the baby of the team, wide eyed and curious, but at other times, when he stared into the distance, he seemed so much older... He looked like somebody who had seen far too much of the world.

Not for the first time, Robin wondered what was going on behind his tinted goggles, behind that deep furrowed face of his.

The train emerged from the tunnel at the Medway Facility.

There were two Orca Transports outside their hangars ready to fly.

Hobbs looked around his squad. "Okay, boys and girls. Let's go make some trouble and save the world. Again."

The Scimitar squad gathered their guns, and hustled off the train, and up the loading ramp of the nearest Orca.

Marius put a hand on Andraste's shoulder. "Come home safe."

Andraste smiled. "I'm not the one raiding a ship carrying super-weapons."

Marius frowned at her. "I know how much trouble I am headed for. You don't. That worries me."

Andraste kissed his cheek. "I will be fine. You come home safe."

John stepped over to Robin, as they walked off the train. "So... You might want to tell Yeti that you want to go see a play."

Robin chuckled. "Might I?"

John shrugged. "He likes the theatre, and he likes art galleries. But he doesn't like talking about it with the others, as they give him a hard time. If, on the other hand, he was just being a gentleman..."

Robin cocked her head. "Yeah. Well... We will have some time on the flight. So, who knows what will happen?" She looked at him. "Are you going to be okay?"

He nodded. "I think... I think I have to go see this."

"Oh." Robin cocked her head. "You think it's something bad?"

He nodded. "I don't know. But I think it's something important." He shifted uneasily. "Good luck. I hope it goes okay."

Robin patted his arm. "You too."

John let her and veered off, hurrying up the ramp to the other Orca.

Robin stepped up into the hold of the transport.

Yeti pointed her to a seat. "Ma'am?"

She sat down, and he helped jack her headset in. "Thank you Terry."

He tapped on his headset. "Is this working?"

"Yeah. Hang on." She put a hand on his wrist. "Before you go and plug yourself into your music, can I ask a favour? Look... I really want to go see *Death Of A Salesman*, but I don't want to be the girl at the bar alone, and... I don't suppose you could spare an evening from your weekend?"

Yeti nodded. "I think I manage that, ma'am."

The ramp and loading doors folded closed, as the engines powered up, with a banshee whine, and the Orca rose up into the sky.

### Neo-Jorvika, United States Of America

After an hour or two, his patience was rewarded.

The man who called himself Redcap sat on the edge of a rooftop, eating southern fried chicken, and watching the apartment on the fifth floor of the building across the alley.

Recap was rangy and beaky, with white gold hair, and a cruel smile. He was wearing a set of bulky mechanical goggles, a skin tight body glove, and a tactical gilet.

The building across the alleyway was pretty typical of the Narrows. The bakery on street level was a pretty little boutique, clad in brown stone. Above, it was a densely packed apartment building of smog-stained red brick, with an iron fire escape. The alley between was scattered with litter, and newspaper, overflowing from the dumpsters.

A yellow taxi pulled up.

The target climbed out the taxi, and hurried around the taxi to hold the door for his date.

The target's name was Zack Tanner, an investment banker. Like all the targets on Redcap's list, he was classically handsome with a body builder's physique, a square jaw, and long dark hair.

His date was Candy Milton, his secretary.

They hurried into the building, arm in arm.

Redcap drew his alchemical crossbow from its holster. The arms folded out with a soft whirl of internal mechanisms. He took aim, and watched the window to the apartment down the iron sights of the crossbow.

Tanner stepped into his apartment, and flicked on the lights.

Candy stepped over to the couch, as Zack strolled to the kitchen.

Redcap steadied his breath, waited for the gap between his heartbeats, and pulled the trigger.

The bolt shattered the kitchen window, and struck Tanner in the side, punching between his ribs, and into his heart.

Tanner died, creaming in horror and pain, as the alchemical tip of the bolt ignited, burning out his organs and flesh, in a few terrible moments, reducing him to ashes and sparks. The scorched skeleton dropped to the floor, in his unburned clothes.

Candy collapsed, terrified, onto the sofa, her eyes wide with horror.

Redcap put his crossbow away, rose to his feet, and walked casually away.

## • Four

### Ouroboros Island

Hawksmoor straightened his black tunic, and squared his shoulders before the elevator hissed open, onto the throne room.

Two of the Praetorian Guards barred the doors of the lift with their billhooks. They moved with a mechanical precision that was not entirely human... But then they had not been human for quite some time.

Hawksmoor tried his best to look past the guards, hoping not to see the few slithers of mottled, decaying flesh visible between the collar of their dress uniform tunics, and the mirrored visors of their helmets, or the cuffs of their sleeves and their leather gloves.

He tried not to smell the sweet tang of rotting meat that lingered in the air, amongst the chemical musk that clung to the guards.

Doctor Abyss, the ruler of Ouroboros Island, sat at the far side of the cathedral sized chamber, in the ornate throne carved from black marble. They were reading an ancient leather bound book, from the piles of yellowing books stacked around the throne.

Abyss was an unusual figure, even by the standards of the super villains and would-be tyrants who inhabited the island.

Beneath their flowing silk robes they wore a glossy black bodysuit, that merged seamlessly with their black-mirror helmet. There was something unnerving about the way Hawksmoor could feel Doctor Abbys's gaze upon him, even without seeing their eyes.

"Yes?" Abyss asked. They were soft spoken, with a genteel Edinburgh accent.

Hawksmoor clicked the heels of his boots together. "I am afraid I bring bad news. Operation Ballista is in grave danger. Digby-Dawson has been arrested. His officers were searched. Within the hour agencies across Europe have begun intercepting the Icarus cannon components." Hawksmoor steeled himself. "With your permission, I will contact the ship carrying the Low Profile ammunition, and-"

"No," Abyss said. "The cells are unaware of each other. Order Flintlock and Musket to protect the ammunition with their lives."

Hawksmoor hesitated. As far as he was concerned, the ammunition, as expensive as it had been, was not worth the battle, but... he had learned to trust the Doctor's orders, and knew how dangerous it could be to question the ruler.

Abyss chuckled, as though reading his thoughts. "Yours is not to reason why, Hawksmoor."

Hawksmoor bowed his head. "As you wish."

The Doctor tapped at the blank faceplate of his helmet, as though licking their finger, to turn the page on their book. "Oh, and did your agents obtain the disc?"

Hawksmoor nodded, and took a small computer disc from the pocket of his tunic. "Yes. We uncovered one of Maelstrom's old lairs. This is the code that allowed Maelstrom to take control of the world communications network."

Doctor Abyss held his head in a way that strongly suggested he was smiling behind his blank visor. "Very good Hawksmoor. Very good indeed."

### **Neo-Jorvika, The United States of America**

Cassie sat in the corner of the booth, at the back of the Aloha Grill, trembling, cold and numb, wrapped in a foil blanket, clutching a coffee, but unable to make herself drink it.

The same few moments kept rushing through her head, over and over, on an endless loop, haunting her, chilling her blood and knotting her stomach. She kept hearing the way the fitness guy screamed, and smelt the way his body burned.

Those sensations were going to be seared into her memories, into her nightmares.

First she had tried to tell Flip, as she stumbled back into the kitchen.

Then she had told the uniformed police officers, and the nice paramedics.

Now she was going to have to tell the detectives.

The Aloha Grill was empty, but for the handful of staff who were still giving statements, and a number of police officers. There were forensic technicians, in white overalls and surgical masks, working out in the alleyway.

Lieutenants Anderson and Richards sat on the other side of the booth, watching her patiently, sipping their coffees.



Anderson was the short, heavier of the pair, with kind eyes full of sorrows. "It's okay, take all the time you need."

Richards nodded. He was quiet and studious, taking constant notes.

Cassie forced herself to sip a little of her coffee, and heard herself repeating her experiences once again, stumbling to find words as she explained how she took the trash out, the Bro running from the shadows... and the man who was following him.

And...

And...

She stopped and rubbed her face. "He burned," she concluded. "He burned away, gone."

Richards looked at Anderson.

Anderson tapped his lips. "A crossbow?"

"Yeah," Cassie whispered. "It was like a pistol, but a crossbow, and when the dart hit the guy, he burned..."

Richards looked up from his notes. "From the inside out."

Cassie winced. "Yes."

Anderson nodded. "Well, it sure sounds like another."

"Another?" Cassie spluttered.

Richards scowled at Anderson.

Anderson nodded, slowly. "Yeah. We've... We've been getting a lot of calls like this."

There was a sound outside, a sonic boom like a thunder clap. Something flew down through the mall, in a flash of white and red. The blur resolved into a heavily built, muscular man, with a mane of black curls around a poet's face, and a lantern jaw. He was wearing a crimson, space aged gambeson over a white jumpsuit.

Cassie's heart leapt into her throat.

Doc Horus had long been one of Neo-Jorvika's best known heroes. The superpowered guardian of everything the City and America hoped to stand for.

He greeted the two uniformed officers standing guard at the door like old friends, before he ducked under the yellow tape.

The superhero's presence seemed to fill the room, as he stepped over to the table. He looked down at Anderson. "You asked my help?"

Richards grinned. "Actually, we asked the First Family for their help, but... Apparently they are busy."

Doc Horus glanced at Cassie. "Are you okay?"

"No," Cassie said, before she could stop herself.

The superhero held her in his gaze. His eyes were deep, dark, and full of sorrows. "I'm so sorry. Please... If you would mind waiting here while I inspect the...er.... Well... I would very much appreciate the chance to speak with you soon." He looked to Anderson. "With your permission?"

The detective nodded.

Doc Horus rose off the floor, and drifted through the restaurant, out to the back door.

There was a shrill electronic tone.

Richards excused himself from the booth, and stepped away, digging a mobile phone the size of a personal cassette player from under his jacket. His brow furrowed, as he spoke to somebody, urgently.

Anderson stepped over and joined him in the conversation.

Cassie didn't catch everything, but she was sure Richards had said '*There's been another*'.

Lucian Alexander swirled the brandy in his glass, as he emerged from the elevator into the black glass pyramid that crowned the VOR-Tech tower.

He was a heavily built, Falstaffian figure, with an operatic presence, dressed in a suit that hinted at, rather than suggested, something of the cowboy about it. His full beard and twinkling eyes had earned him a reputation for being 'Neo-Jorvika's favourite uncle' (a reputation he had carefully fostered and nurtured over the decades).

Charles Dagon, the brilliant young architect and engineer, was waiting for Alexander, in the gloomy darkness of the pyramid, basking in the ice-blue light of the dozen or so holographic displays that were scattered across the floor of the pyramid.

Much of VOR-Tech's success, in the current generation of micro-electronics, super computers, and telecommunications was owed to Dagon's genius. Although he would never take credit for inventing any of the technology, he alone had made them viable, and more importantly: profitable.

Dagon's expertise was in metallurgy and the creation of alloys. He could look at anything, from a circuit board to a space shuttle, and see ways of vastly improving the life expectancy and efficiency of the device by altering the materials. This often required a considerable initial cost, but paid for itself over the length of the production.

The tower in which they now stood was one such example. Others had drafted plans to match Lucian's grand vision, designing a tower that stood in the ocean, connected to four of the city's great islands by a web of bridges and walkways. They designed a tower that stood twice as tall as any other in the city, a building that would include not only the head offices of the company, but one of their factories, and a major distribution hub, whose rail depot and harbour would be *seen* to distribute VOR-Tech technology around the world (even if, in reality, it was only responsible for a fraction of the output of the twelve other plants scattered around the nation).

Dagon had spent a day with the plans, then...

Then he had shown Lucian the orbs of rare-earth metals laying on the sea bed, waiting to be harvested. He had shown how by using these metals, blended in the right quantities, the struts and supports, the metal skeleton of the building could be heavily reinforced, making the girders thinner, and lighter. He had shown how the supercomputers that ran VOR-Tech could be better integrated into the building, offering Lucian personal control over every single function. He had shown the board how the exterior skin of the building could be Smart-Glass, wrapped in holographic displays, meaning the entire city would see their advertising and messaging.

And Dagon had seen how new materials could be used to shield the building from any and all means of surveillance, to protect VOR-Tech's many secrets.

The expenses of the building had been repaid twenty fold, within a few short years, as investors, shareholders, and board members had seen the value of Dagon's work (or rather, the value of Lucian Alexander fostering and nurturing the very best and brightest engineers). Now VOR-Tech ran a dozen deep ocean mines, and every other company in the world was scrambling to play catch up, to source the same alloys and materials... all while VOR-Tech vehicles, home computers, and televisions were growing lighter, stronger, and cheaper.

Lucian Alexander sipped his brandy. "What do you have for me?"

Dagon strode through the holograms, making them glitch and shimmer about him. He was a handsome young man, in a dashing, old fashioned kind of a way, wearing a shiny tonic blend suit, a black satin shirt, and a

black tie. “The documents you leaked to British Intelligence have had the desired effect. In the last few hours raids have been ordered in Britain, Germany, France, and Norway. I believe that MITHRAS forces are on their way to intercept the ammunition.”

Lucian smiled. “See that the Press gives this the attention it deserves. I want every outlet asking the right questions: *if* our competitors knew what they doing, and if not...*how* could they not have known? Tar them, feather them, and drive them to the edge of collapse.... Then buy them.”

Dagon continued: “Five of the seven cartels have now agreed to your terms. They have...wisely agreed to pay Baphomet to protect their routes into the country, and for the privilege of being allowed to do business in any of our cities. You earn five cents on the dollar for their entire drug trade in the US.”

“Excellent,” Lucian said.

“And the other two?” Dagon asked.

Lucian smiled. “Make it look as though they eliminated each other.”

Dagon nodded, and gestured to another column of data. “Richard First has found a way around the blockades you built in Government. He is calling in favours from other nations. Australia is now backing his solar power campaign, Britian has granted him permission to access the Antarctic Preservation Zone, and Germany are-”

“Wait,” Lucian said, holding up a hand. “What does First want in Antarctica.”

For an instant, just an instant, Lucian swore he saw something fleeting behind the younger man’s smile, the distinct satisfaction of one who had baited a hook and snared a prize winning fish.

“First’s satellites identified an unusual energy signature.”

“Alien technology?” Lucian asked.

Dagon shrugged. “Perhaps. I believe Lord Khyron recently obtained helicopters and a ship adapted for Antarctic travel.”

“Find out what Khyron was after,” Lucian said. “And bring me everything First knows of this. Is there anything else?”

Dagon paused. “A spate of unexplained killings. Men with a distinctive build and general appearance are being killed.”

Lucian nodded. “So I see.”

“You have speculated that your enemy, Doc Horus, protects his identity with a glamour of some kind? It would appear the killer believes the same. He is... eliminating suspects one by one.”

Lucian chuckled. “A sound plan. Either he will find Horus, or Horus will move to stop him.” He thought a moment. “Monitor the situation, and report to me.”

Dagon clicked his heels. “As you wish.”

Lucian paused before he turned away. There was something about Dagon’s smile that felt... *wrong* to Lucian. It stirred those primordial instincts that had always served Lucian well. He did not let his suspicions show in his own smile.

### CS Unicorn, The South Atlantic

Raymond ‘Flintlock’ Verona stepped down from the walkway onto the vast, open, football field, created by the stacked shipping containers. Raymond was tall, dark, and boyishly handsome, with a crop of black spikes on the

top of his head, and the back and sides sheared close, to reveal his cybernetic augmentations. Behind his aviator sunglasses his eyes were dull orbs, in the same gun-metal grey as his cybernetics.

He wore a varsity jacket over a suit of light weight, but heavy duty combat fatigues, and his personalised body armour. The leather holster at his hip held a pair of antique duelling pistols.

Out on the precarious, rain slick tops of the containers, Bobby 'Musket' Mallard was practising his swing, placing golf balls on a tee, and driving them far into the air, with his pitted and dented club.

Each swing set a ball soaring into the swarming, wheeling maelstrom of gulls above the ship, and dashed the life out of one of the birds sending them tumbling into the merciless waves of the ocean.

Musket was short, stout, and goblin like, with a grey-green skin, hair like iron wool, and a thoroughly unpleasant smile of half rotten teeth.

He wore a safari style jacket over a tie-dyed shirt, cargo shorts, and flip-flops.

The stocks of elephant guns and various rifles were poking out of his bag, amongst the golf clubs.

"Mister Hawksmoor has been in touch," Flintlock said.

"Has he?" Musket asked, putting another ball on the tee.

"The British are sending their marines to raid the ship," Flintlock said. "We are to--"

Musket swung his club in a scything blow, that hit the ball with a thwack, and sent it to the sky.

Another bird fell into the waves.

Flintlock sighed. "We are to defend the shipment with our lives."

Musket grinned. "Good." He dropped the golf club back in the bag, and drew out his double-barrelled elephant gun. "This should be fun."

## • Five

### The Transantarctic Mountains, Antarctica

"That's them," Jack Hartnell said, as he brought Manta One down over the desert of drifting snow, towards the craggy, gnarled mountains.

Something shivered on the edges of Artemis's instincts, as she leant forwards for a better view out of the canopy. She had the all too familiar sensation of the fates pulling her towards...something.

The British Orca class stratospheric transporter was blunt nosed, bulbous and ugly compared to Manta One's sleek, chrome, flying wing design. It was stout, and heavily armoured.

Artemis's father, Doctor Richard First was concentrating on the navigation console. He was rugged and handsome in a fatherly way, with hair that always looked blow-dried, eyes that betrayed a razor sharp intellect. He wore a blue plastic windbreaker over his white and silver hazard-suit.

"The readings are coming from inside that cave. Set us down as close as you can."

Professor Dyani Dosela-First touched her earpiece. "Orca transport, this is Manta One. Please set down close to the entrance of the cave, and we will...rendezvous before we begin our investigations."

"Manta One," Andraste Ryleth responded over the radio, "we understand, and are setting down. It's good to see you again, my friends."

"Likewise," Dyani agreed. She was a handsome, and regal, with dark brown eyes, and high cheek bones. She wore an apricot headscarf and a white anorak with her Hazard suit.

Jack Hartnell glanced over his shoulder, to smile at Artemis. He was a beefy, hefty man, with an open, expressive face, a little scuffed and worn by his many adventures. He wore a leather aviator's jacket over his Hazard Suit. "Hey. How are you feeling like this?"

Artemis closed her eyes, and reached out with her thoughts.

A faint echo of something...alien... called her towards the cave. It sent butterflies swarming in her belly.

"I don't like it," she admitted.

Alex, her brother gave her one of his teasing looks. "So... If something happens, its your fault?"

Artemis nudged him with her elbow.

Alex was wolfish, and good humoured, with spiked hair, and an easy grin.

The engine wash from Manta One stirred the snow into a whirlwind blizzard, as it set down. The Orca circled about, and came down close by, with a banshee howl of engines.

Alex tapped open his holo-display, and put on his glasses. "Okay, the temperature outside is a brisk minus seventy degrees Celsius. In the cave it is a little warmer. Minus fifty. Your Hazard Suits are all functioning, and should automatically adjust to keep you warm." He glanced at his sister. "Well, those of you who need it. I'll do my best to stay in touch, but... I am worried the mountain is going to block the signal."

Richard rose to his feet. "Okay then. Let's do this."

Dyani raised an eyebrow at her husband. "Once more into the breach?"

They shared one of their brilliant smiles.

Alex rolled his eyes at Artemis.

She groaned teasingly at his joke, as she pulled on her lightweight trench coat over her Hazard Suit.

Jack gestured at the coat's pale moonlight grey colour. "You might want to change that to something more visible. This is not an environment that we want to lose sight of anybody."

Artemis tapped at the credit-card sized controls on her cuff, and dialled through the coat's colour schemes, to a bright red, that matched the Hazard suits. "How's this?"

Dyani cooed. "See! I keep telling you that the red suits you so much more than that drab grey! Look at that!"

"Mom!" Artemis complained, much to her brother's delight.

Richard rubbed the back of his head. "Well, I hate to break it to you kiddo, but your mom is a smart woman, and when she's right...she's right."

Dyani shook her head, as she flicked up her hood, and made her way down the loading ramp. "Whan? I am always right. It's you agreed to marry me."

"Asked!" Richard said, following her down the ramp, into the dazzling sunshine and snow. "I asked you to marry me."

"Yes," Jack said, patting his best friend's shoulder. "And you probably still think it was your idea."

"Et tu?" Richard scoffed. "Okay, does anybody else want to pick on me?"

"I have some thoughts," Alex said, over their earpieces. "Can everybody hear me?"

"Yes," Dyani, Richard, Jack and Artemis all said at once.

"Comms are locked in," Alex said, tilting his chair back. He put his feet up on the console and dug his Gameboy from his satchel. "Have fun everybody."

Artemis glanced back at him, from the top of the ramp. "Stay safe."



His big smile didn't quite cover his worries. "Hey, you are the one who is going out into the frozen wasteland that literally wants to freeze you to death."

"And you are the kid brother," Artemis said. "Stay safe."

He nodded. "I will."

She stepped out down the ramp.

The Orca's pilot was leaning on the ramp, smoking a cigarette.

Andraste Ryleth, codenamed Minerva, *the* Minerva emerged from the Orca. She was taller than she looked on the news, and a little broader across the shoulders, but every bit as graceful, and powerfully beautiful, as Artemis had always imagined.

She was wearing a grey, one piece jumpsuit, reinforced against the cold with holographic armour, apparently hewn from a shimmering, ethereal blue light.

The superhero broke into a bright grin. "Dyani! Richard! It is so good to see you again! Jack! Hey!"

Jack bowed his head a little to her. "Hey Minnie. It has been far too long."

Andraste nodded. "It has. And you must be Arti! Hey! Last time I saw you, you were..." Her voice trailed off, and her eyes went wide. "Oh..."

Artemis felt the shiver on her Instinct again.

Richard stepped over. "Minnie? Is everything okay?"

"It's strange..." Andraste whispered. "I didn't see it before. I didn't even *think* of it before..."

"Mom!" Alex spluttered, over the Comms-Net. "Mom... there are two of them!"

"Two of who?" Dyani asked, before she saw the young man who was stepping down from the Orca.

Artemis stared at him, her heart stuttering in her chest.

He seemed to be about her own age, her own height, and shared her sleek, dancer's build. His features were perhaps a little sharper, and drawn taut, and his hair was more grey than white, but...the resemblance was undeniable.

Like her, the guy seemed utterly unbothered by the cold. He wore a scaled leather jerkin, with a deep hood, that gave him a somewhat owlsh appearance, over a drab field coat, and lightweight fatigues. His breath did not form a silver mist.

He was carrying a recurved composite bow, and had a quiver of arrows hanging from his hip.

Artemis would have bet her favourite mix tape that he was hiding orange eyes behind his tinted goggles.

For a moment John stood, staring right at Artemis. His face contorted as it tried to process too many different emotions, all at once. Then he went... rigid. His expression stiffened, and turned starched.

"John..." Andraste said. "These are my friends, Jack Hartnell, Richard and Dyasi First, their son Alex is on their transport, and..." She cleared her throat. "And this is their daughter Arti. She was adopted too."

John shifted awkwardly. "Yes, well... Clearly we will have a lot to talk about, but... I don't think now is the time, or the place. We have a long way to go, and I do not believe time is on our side. If you will all excuse me, I would like to scout ahead."

Richard and Dyani shared a look, and glanced at Andraste.

Jack folded his arms over his chest. "Good idea. We should move out."

John nodded, and trudged through the snow, to the mouth of the cave. He hesitated a moment, to nock an arrow, before he ventured into the darkness.

Artemis hurried after him. She took her TEK-bow from her belt, and flicked it out to full length. The bow was made from white plastic and stainless metal, with an angular, futuristic recurved shape. The 'string' was a thin beam of scarlet light. When she touched it, a 'holographic' telekinetic arrow formed at her fingertips.

She caught up with John, and fell into step with him, as they moved quickly and carefully into the cave, checking the nooks, crannies, and dark corners, for threats and monsters. He moved with the same precision as her, the same measured steps. His eyes seemed to have adapted to the dark as easily as her own.

John glanced at her. His shoulders sagged. "Do we have to do this now?"

"What?" Artemis tried to hide her butterflies behind a smile, that looked a lot more confident than she felt. "You said yourself that we have a long way to go. Do you really want to spend it in silence?"

John shrugged. "Would that be a problem?"

"Yes!" Artemis spluttered. "I have a thousand questions, and I don't know what we are going to find. I want to ask them *before* something might happen. I know I have a chance now."

John's expression softened. "Very well, what would you like to know?"

Artemis opened her mouth to ask... and suddenly all the questions that had been whirring in her skull fell silent. Suddenly she couldn't think of a single one. "So... Erm..."

"I was found as an infant," he said, his tone was matter-of-fact, as though he was keeping the words at an arm's length, to protect himself from them. "I don't know who my parents were, or how I came to be in a carrier bag, in a multi storey car park. I've always been all kinds of weird. Not just how I look, but... I'm strong, I'm fast, I don't sleep, and my head is full of stuff I never learned."

"Like how to shoot a bow," Artemis said. "And all kinds of physical stuff. How to run, jump, climb and tightrope walk, and... stuff like that?"

John nodded.

"So..." Artemis grinned. "Tell me about your family."

John shrugged. "I...don't have any."

Artemis frowned. "There must have been somebody?"

John sighed, and shook his head. "There were foster homes, and care facilities, but I didn't stay anywhere too long."

"Oh." Artemis hesitated. "Did you ever... Wonder where you would belong? If there were others like you?"

John shook his head. "Stuff happens around me. Often dangerous stuff. Some people blamed me for it. Others were hurt by it. I thought being a Tawny Knight might help me solve that. When it didn't I tried joining MITHRAS. Looking to find other people seemed... irresponsible."

Artemis nodded, remembering how her parents had always told her they adopted her because her abilities required special care. She wondered what life might have been like without superheroes around her.

She wondered what it would have been like to face any of the villains, monsters, vampires, zombies, or killer robots of her childhood...alone.

"There are three of us," she said.

John looked at her. "Really?"

"At least three, maybe four," Artemis admitted. "I asked a Magic-Whisperer for help finding my birth family. She described four people. One was me, two were like me, and one... I think one is the person I will fall in love with."

John shrugged. "Well, I think we can rule me out of being the last--"

He stopped in his tracks, and fell silent, as he looked up at the two monstrous toad-man-giant statues that stood guard over the cave.

Artemis felt a cold dread in the pit of her stomach. "What are those? Are they monsters?"

"Cephus," John whispered. "They weren't monsters, any more or less than anybody else. They were just... People."

Artemis huddled herself. She had a sudden urge to turn and walk the other way, as quickly as her feet could carry her. "I don't like this..."

John touched the stone of a webbed foot the size of a shipping container. "Yes. It is a bit strong isn't it."

"What is?" Artemis asked. "I... don't think you should touch that."

Andraste's voice rang out through the cavern. "The magic spell, imbued in those statues. You must be able to feel it, pushing you back, driving you back?"

The others had caught them up.

Andraste flashed John a smile. "So... who are these chaps?"

"They were Nomads," John said. "They passed through the Veil and sailed on the tides of the elemental vortex between realities. They had some settlements on Earth, for a few million years, long before humans evolved. These way-points are warnings, like danger signs, telling their nomadic tribes to keep well clear."

Jack put a protective hand on Artemis's shoulder. "What were they afraid of?"

Andraste stepped forwards. "Well, that is quite the question, isn't it?"

### Orca Three-Six, The South Atlantic

Howling wind filled the Orca, as the loading ramp folded open.

Marius stepped down onto the ramp, and stared down at the ship, that was a speck, just visible down on the horizon. "That's it," Marius reported. "The ammunition is in a container buried three layers deep in the stack, but it's there." He glanced up at Robin. "Some cover would help."

Robin rose to her feet.

Yeti gave her a worried look, but she answered it with a confident smile.

She unslung her guitar and stepped down onto the ramp. Her heart was hammering against the inside of her ribs, but she hid it all behind a smile, as she opened her mind, and touched her fingers to the string.

The tide of magic flowed through her.

Robin began to play.

The spell started small, a circling melody of strumming chords, but even that made her soul feel lighter. A warm glow filled her chest, and made her feel weightless and...powerful. It filled the smile on her lips, and showed in her eyes.

She let the melody grow, adding more layers and nuance, adding more complexities

Power resonated around her fingertips. She could feel the effects of the spell reaching out. It drew power from the very air around them, changing the humidity and temperature, drawing in clouds and fog. Drawing lightning from the clouds.

The storm and the fog rolled over the CS Unicorn, covering their approach.

“Okay!” Marius said, his voiced raised. “Take us in!”

Aboard the Unicorn, Musket was whistling happily, as he took some hand grenades from a burlap shopping bag, and set them on some plastic practice tees.

Around him a silver white fog rose up from the ocean, and overhead ink-blot clouds filled the sky.

“It’s too little too late,” Musket whispered, as he chose a heavy headed driver from his golf bag. “I know you are there.” He waved the club at the sky, and roared at the top of his voice: “Come and get me, sky pigs! Come and have a go, if you think you’re hard enough!”

Musket tapped his foot, and whistled impatiently, for what felt like forever, until the Orca *finally* soared down on its approach.

Then he stepped forward, aimed his shot, and whipped round in a savage swing, and smacked the first grenade far into the sky. It whistled away, into one of the transports engine intakes.

The grenade exploded with a flash of orange flame, and the engine belched black smoke. The Orca belly flopped onto the stacks.

Musket stepped to the next grenade, and aimed at the open maw of the Orca.

He swung the club, and felt the chime of connection, as he sent the grenade sailing through the air, hoping it would land amongst the Scimitar Squad.

Durandel stepped out the Orca, and swatted the grenade away, out over the ocean.

The super powered soldier was clad in robot armour, with heavy armoured plating. He charged out across the deck.

Musket grabbed his second favourite elephant gun, and fired it from the hip.

The two shells exploded against Durandel’s armour, but didn’t leave a scratch, or slow his charge.

Musket grabbed the bag full of golf clubs and rifles, and leapt away, just as Durandel threw himself into a wrecking ball punch.

The armoured fist whistled through the empty air where Musket’s head had been, close enough to part his hair.

Musket whooped and laughed, as he bounced away, doing his best impression of a cartoon rabbit, as he emptied both barrels of a sawn down shotgun into Durandel’s visor. The blast wouldn’t hurt the armoured hulk, but might distract him for the split second it took for Musket to leap away, onto one of the raised walkways, with a superhuman bound.

“Musket,” Marius muttered over the comms-net, making the name sound like a swear word. “Robin, can you do something about him?”

Robin let the tune she was playing change, and gravity loosened its grip on her. Her hair and clothes billowed out like she was floating under water, as she drifted up over the deck of the ship. Her songbird cloak turned moonlight silver, as it surrounded her in a forcefield.

She could see Musket, the unpleasant little troll of a man, drawing a VOR-Tech rocket launcher from his golf bag.

Musket whooped one of his ghoulish laughs as he extended the launcher to full length, and flicked out the sights.

Robin added a new riff to her melody, another layer to the spell, that made the crystals on her guitar crackle and spark.

Overhead, the soup thick clouds rumbled with thunder, as Robin drew down a bolt of lightning, and drove it into the walkway.

Musket tried to leap away, but the lightning forked to catch him, snaring him in a corona halo, brighter than the sun, so bright his cybernetically augmented skeleton and skull were visible, for a fragment of a second.

Muskets limp body belly flopped onto the cargo containers.

Too late, Robin glimpsed the other figure, up on the control tower by the bridge.

Too late, she recognised Flintlock, and the enchanted duelling pistol, engraved with demonic icons, that he was aiming at her.

The gunshot *shrieked* through the air, a bolt of blue flames, shaped like a serpent with its jaws open ready to strike.

It tore through Robin's shields, and struck her in the side, with a searing, terrible, pain.

Her concentration, and her spell were broken.

She tumbled from the air, and the sodden deck of the ship rushed up to meet her with a crunch of wet, red, pain.

Marius watched in horror as the serpentine fire bolt hit Robin, exploding in a cascade of blue sparks, that sent her tumbling down.

He sprinted to try and catch her, but she bounced off the deck before he was even close.

Up on the bridge tower, Flintlock was taking aim with his second pistol, lining up a killing shot.

Marius kicked the bag full of golf clubs, grenades, and artillery from the floor, and hurled it like a javelin.

The bag smashed Flintlock in the side of the head, knocking him from the gantry. He landed on the walkway, in a crouch, already pointing both guns at Marius.

"There's a good chap," Marius muttered, as he dashed forwards, weaving and ducking around the serpentine fire-bolts, one blue, and one orange, that shrieked past him, exploding the cargo containers beneath his feet.

The Scimitar Squad fanned out from the Orca, finding what cover they could, and opening fire on Flintlock, driving him back towards the tower, and into cover.

Marius leapt up onto the walkway, and landed a punch on Flintlock.

One punch was all it took, an uppercut that sent Flintlock off his feet, and into the ocean.

Marius snatched the guns as Flintlock dropped them, and crushed them in his hands.

"Robin?" He demanded.

"I'm okay," she grunted on the Comms-Net, before yelping in pain. "Well... alive but not okay."

Marius turned and looked down. Yeti was already crouching over Robin with a trauma kit. He pointed to another two of the Scimitars. "Get Musket in dampening restraints, and keep him secure." He raised his voice. "Ops, this is Journeyman Two, opposition pacified, and I am searching for the ammunition, now. One hostile overboard, will need rescuing and containing. One in custody." He ran a brief scan of the ship. "No other life signs. The ship is fully automated."



---

- Six

### Neo-Jorvika, The United States

Cassie Navarro was pretty sure that she would never sleep again.

Flip had, of course, not been in a romantic mood, after the events of the evening. She and Paulie (her swaggering hunk of a boyfriend, with the body of Hercules, the long black hair of a rockstar, and the personality of a geography teacher) had spent the whole night on the sofa, staring at the TV, trying too hard to be happy, and finding the sit coms far too funny.

They had fallen asleep under their blanket, during one of the late night shows with a comedian behind a desk.

Cassie flicked the channels, trying to find something that wasn't an infomercial.

She paused on a local station's late news bulletin.

The segment that was playing had been recorded earlier in the evening, while the city's night life was flowing at its full tempo. Hank Wessex was stood outside NJC-PD's Precinct One, while First Street was still full of traffic.

Hank was big, broad shouldered, and handsome, just like Paulie... Or just like Doc Horus, or...

Cassie's stomach knotted, as she tried not to let herself think *just like the man I saw die*.

"There have been four victims," Hank said, into the camera, "unrelated except for a passing resemblance to each other, slain in the most terrible of ways..."

Cassie jabbed at the remote control, and jabbed at the buttons, switching to a station that was running music videos. She left the music playing low, as she poured herself a coffee from the French press, and stepped out of the kitchen window onto the fire escape.

The city never slept, but it was late enough for the city noise to be at a low ebb.

There was a whoosh noise, and a flash of red.

Cassie looked up.

Doc Horus was hovering over the alley, his arms folded over his chest. He had a sorrowful expression on his face.

Dimly, at the back of Cassie's mind she was aware that she should recognise Doc's face. There was something familiar about it. The thought wouldn't quite connect. When she tried, it melted away out of reach.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I...saw you here, and wanted to make sure you were safe."

Cassie nodded. "I'm safe, but..." Her fingers trembled on her mug. "I... couldn't do anything. There should have been something I could have done."

Doc sighed. "It is not an easy burden to carry, knowing that you did all you could, and others still died. I can't change the past, but... I will ensure there is justice."

Cassie stared into his eyes. "How can I help?"

He looked her up and down. Thoughts churned behind his eyes. "How well did you see the killer?"

"Well enough," she whispered. "I would know him if I saw him again."

Doc tapped his lips. "Tomorrow morning, I would like you to meet some friends of mine. I think you could help them learn a lot about our murderer." He smiled. "Do you know the diner on the Southern end of Founders' Park?"

### London, The United Kingdom

Talia Tillinghast rubbed her face and sat back in her chair, watching the holo-display, as Marius effortlessly tossed cargo containers off the ship, peeling away the layers of the stacks, until he revealed the suspect container.

"With your permission?" Marius asked.

Talia looked up at Sir Cliff.

He nodded, and touched his headset. "Go ahead Journeyman One."

Sid sat forward, sipping his tea, watching intently.

On the display, Marius heaved the container to the top of the stack, and snapped the locks away. He pulled the doors open, and rummaged past the soft toys in plastic bags, and pressed to release the false back. It swung open, to reveal a rack of angular warheads, clad in a honeycomb pattern of matte black stealth tiles.

Sensor data revealed the inner workings of the shells, showing they were dormant and safe. Their priming fuses were stored in padded cases nearby.

Sid let out a long, relieved whistle. "Okay, Journeyman one. They are safe for transport, but... I wouldn't kick them around or drop them."

"Understood," Marius answered.

Talia cleared her throat. "Journeyman Three?"

Robin grunted. "My side is killing me, but... I am in no immediate danger." She paused. "Any news from Journeyman One?"

Before anybody could answer, Bob52 stepped through.

Cliff straightened up. "Bob?"

The Bob offered him an apologetic look. "The new Minister for Security and Intelligence is here."

Sid puffed out his cheeks. "Well, they choose their moments don't they?"

Cliff gave Sid a warning glare. "Show them in." He lowered his voice a little. "Everybody on your best behaviour."

A few minutes later Bob13 showed a prim, dashing handsome, youngish looking man, in a shiny, tonic blend suit, a black shirt, and a black tie, onto the Ops floor.

Charles Dagon offered his hand, while a thin, mercurial smile spread across his lips. "Hello. Benjamin Adams, MP for Loamshire... And you're new Minister for Intelligence and Security."

"Sir Clifford Briggs," Cliff said. "Welcome to the Iceberg. I am sorry sir, but usually we would have time to prepare a briefing. However, given the circumstances..."

"Yes," Dagon said. "I'm rather afraid a wire's been crossed. I am here to brief you." He stepped forwards to look at the holographic display. "Stealth warheads? I assume this is the fruits of my predecessor's arrest? Well, I don't suppose there is any way *those* could be part of a water treatment plant."

"No, Sir," Cliff said.

Dagon cocked his head, and waved another window of data to the fore. "And you have agents in Antarctica?"

"Yes," Cliff said. "Information was passed our way that could be a potential problem. We were obliged to investigate."

Dagon nodded. "But of course. And... I will be briefed on this too?"

"Yes," Cliff said. "As soon as we have compiled our data."

"Excellent." Dagon looked around. "Look old chap, I assume you have an office here? Somewhere more... private that we can talk?"

Cliff nodded. "If you would be so kind?"

Moments later they were across the corridor, in Cliff's office.

Dagon dropped himself in Cliff's chair, and glanced over the framed photographs on the desk, mostly of his family, a few of old teammates and colleagues. He reached under his jacket for a box of cigarettes, and lit one. "Look old boy," he said, putting his feet up on the desk, "here is the simple truth of it. As soon as my predecessor's arrest hits the news cycle he is going to become a national embarrassment. Now, it's fantastic that you have already dismantled his scheme, but... Even if we spin that as a win, faith and trust in the Ministry is going to be damaged. I have to be seen to be making changes for the better."

"Changes?" Cliff asked, giving him a hard look. He stood tall and rigid. "What sort of changes?"

Dagon held up a finger. "Well, first of all, there are questions about your operative codenamed Songbird. Some people just don't trust her. They think she has usurped her mantle from...well... a *real* woman."

"Some people say that," Cliff said. "Those people are called *bigots*."

Dagon shrugged. "Oh yes. They are terrible, ignorant sorts. But they are a vocal minority in a public I need on my side. I want her to cede her position to a more...suitable candidate."

"It doesn't work like that," Cliff said.

"Well..." Dagon blew out a plume of smoke. "She shall have to consider if perhaps it will work like that. If she hands over the cloak to somebody on my shortlist of candidates, she can take a new codename and continue to work here. If not, she will black listed, and out on her ear along the other chap."

"Other chap?" Cliff enquired.

"The new boy. Codename Tawny Knight. He has a bad history, operating outside of our control, interfering like some kind of monster hunting vigilante--"

Cliff shrugged. "He is the Tawny Knight. His duty binds him to act, if we approve or not. It is far better to have him within the fold."

"So..." Dagon smirked. "He will do his job if we pay him, or not? And on the outside, we can be seen to haul him in, if we ever need to? It seems to me, that if we look at it from any angle, we lose little by cutting him out. He is by far the least valuable asset on your team. We could replace him with a dozen other super types tomorrow."

Cliff tensed, his jaw setting. "With respect sir, are you punishing my team for costing one of your friends their job?"

"God no!" Dagon laughed. "Digby-Whats-His-Face is an insufferable little toerag, and utterly useless. Even at school he was barely mediocre, and was always so offended that the History Master made him try to learn, rather than just gifting him passing grades. No, you did Queen and country a favour."

"Then," Cliff said, "why are you burning two assets from a team that are doing good work? We are not the ones who have brought trust into question."

Dagon gestured with his cigarette. "Oh, I know, old chap. I don't expect you to like it. But like it or not, politics is a game we have to play, and somebody has to be seen to take a fall, for a greater good."

Cliff stared at him. "I will fight this. You must know that?"

Dagon nodded. "But of course. You have to be seen to try old boy..."

### Neo Jorvika, The United States

The mirror was the one antique in a thoroughly modern space, a stark, industrial space. The walls and floors were concrete, painted a thick, glossy white. The ceiling was divided into squares of frosted glass, each of which glowed with a crisp, sterile light.

An imposing throne, carved from a craggy, ancient boulder dominated the far end of the chamber. In the middle of the floor was a pool, the size of an Olympic swimming pool.

The full length mirror was mottled with age, and housed in a gilded frame.

The surface of the glass rippled, like raindrops hitting a pond.

The reflection distorted, into a shadowy, vaguely human form, as the surface parted and Charles Dagon stepped through, emerging into the space he called the 'Court'.

He took off his jacket, and hung it from the frame of the mirror, before he straightened his waistcoat, and presented himself to the deep pool in the middle of the floor. At first all was still and the pool appeared empty, other than the emerald waters and the carpet of fine, silty sand.

Dagon put his hand over his heart in a salute.

Something stirred beneath the silt and sand.

Alastor rose out of the sand, rearing up like a serpent preparing to strike, with a mournful cry, like millstones grinding. Water cascaded from its maws, as it loomed over Dagon.

Dagon smiled. "I know you hunger, Alastor. I know you long to begin your conquest... To feed. To make this entire city sacrifice, but... You must be patient. There are those who could yet stop you. I am working to ensure they can not. Some I will eliminate, the others will require... a distraction."

Alastor lunged forwards, opening its maw. It reached out once more, and tried again to burrow its way into Dagon's mind.

Dagon tutted. "I will serve you, my beautiful Emperor. I will gift you this world, to harvest. But I am not your slave." He flicked his wrist, and produced his black eel-like cane, with a magician's flourish. "You will stop that, now."

Alastor slammed its thoughts into Dagon trying to burn him away.

Dagon pointed his cane at Alastor, and pushed his will down through the dark wood, in the form of a spell.

Alastor thrashed and writhed, howling in pain and torment.

Dagon shook his head. "This is not how I want our...relationship to be. You do not have to make me do this. You simply have to understand the terms of our... partnership."

Alastor sank back into the pool.

Dagon crouched to the water's edge. "Do not try that again."

### The Transantarctic Mountains, Antarctica

Artemis stood, frozen in horror at the horrors that awaited them, as the cave opened into a cavern. There were three helicopters, surrounded by red and black paramilitary uniforms that looked empty at first, until she was close enough to see the fine ash and dust that spilled out from within the clothes.

Richard scowled, like he smelt something rotten in the air. “Lord Khyron’s militia.”

“What happened to them?” Artemis whispered.

John frowned. “I don’t know.”

He reached into his satchel and took out three Puck drones, that he set flittering about, scanning the area.

“Cute,” Artemis said, not meaning the word to sound as sharp or angry it came out, twisted by her fears.

Andraste stepped past Artemis to crouch over one of the uniforms. “I can’t get a clear connection to the Comms-Net, so the drones can’t link to home, but they should record everything, and maybe our analysts will work something out from the data.” She lifted the helmet away to look at the layer of ash inside. “Dyani, how can a person burn hot enough to reduce them to powder, without burning the clothes.” She plucked something small and metal from the inside of the respirator. “Or without melting the fillings in their teeth?”

Dyani put a hand on Artemis’s back.

It was a simple gesture, but it meant everything. It didn’t make the horrors shrink away, or the world seem any safer, but it let her know that no matter how bad things were going to be, no matter what they were about to face, the family would face it together.

It made her feel less alone.

Dyani’s nose wrinkled when she was trying to solve a good mystery. She dabbed her finger in the ash, and tasted it.

“Mom!” Artemis squeaked.

Dyani smacked her lips. “Interesting. It looks like these poor souls were exposed to highly focused, and highly concentrated psionic energy, of an incredible strength. It shattered their molecular bonds and... consumed... their being. The residue seems to be some of the trace elements and minerals of their bodies.”

“So...” John said. “The bits of them something couldn’t digest?”

Richard’s expression grew heavy. “That would not be... entirely inaccurate.”

John rose to his feet, and marched towards the pyramid.

Artemis kept pace with him. “So... is that Sea-Fuss or is that what they were warning against?”

John slipped his bow into his satchel, and rummaged shoulder deep (in a satchel that was far too small) until he pulled out a box of safety matches. “I don’t think this is Cephus. I think this is what those warnings were about.” He brushed his hand over the glass smooth stone. “I think this is an Eternity Ship.”

“A what?” Artemis asked.

Her dad had a way of sensing questions, like a shark smelling blood in the water. He appeared at her shoulder, and started running his hand scanner over the black stone of the pyramid. “They are... A legend of sorts. For thousands of years, all around the world, there have been Mythosian cults, who believe that sleeping gods from



before time guide humanity in their dreams. According to the cults, the Mythosian Gods existed before time, and survived the Big Bang in... Eternity Ships."

"Alien Gods," Artemis said, "space ships, and the Big Bang. Okay then..." She paused for a moment. "Earth isn't a first generation star system. I wonder why they wound up here?"

"Nobody knows," Richard admitted. "There was a theory that it was because Earth is a nexus in the flow of magic. That an Eternity Ship would ride on the currents of magic."

"Are they dangerous?" Artemis asked.

"They are incredibly dangerous," John said.

He had lit a match, and was wafting the flame over the smooth surface of the stone.

Artemis looked over his shoulder. "How so."

John shifted away from her. "According to the records in the archives of the Tawny Knights, the cults in the thrall of the Mythosians were preparing the world, the herd of humanity, for the day that their masters would rise, and cleanse the world."

"Cleanse?" Richard said, as though the word tasted of pot-ash.

Lights flickered within the stone, forming a complex sigil pattern.

John pressed his hand to it, and the doors of the pyramid rumbled open.

Within was a large chamber, clad in marble.

John looked around at the others. "According to the cults, the Mythosians would burn away human civilisation. Most of humanity would be sacrifice, their...life energy consumed, drawn to power a spell or ritual, to rip open the sky, and allow their whole civilisation to tumble through, to escape the end of their universe, to invade ours, and spread out, from Earth, finding new worlds, and new peoples to harvest." He paused. "Those humans who survived, who were spared, would be the new breeding stock, and slaves, ruled over, of course, by the faithful cultists."

Jack Hartnell strolled over. "And... You think what we are seeing is a harvest?"

Dyani stood up from the uniform she had been inspecting, and studied the ash on the finger of her glove. "It would make a certain amount of sense. If Khyron somehow woke up one of these sleeping gods, an alien with who knows what kind of psychic potential, then... It would need to...Is feed the right word? It would need energy."

Richard pointed his scanner into the pyramid. "This is an elevator. The source of the psionic flare is... about eighty storeys down."

Andraste nodded. "Then we better go and take a look."

- **Seven**

### **London, The United Kingdom**

The Widow stepped to block Cliff, as he emerged from the elevator, down in the Sanctum.

“No,” Azrael said, over the inter-comm. “Allow him through.”

The Widow stepped back, and tucked a stiletto bladed commando knife back into her sleeve.

Cliff straightened his jacket, and stepped past her.

Lord Azrael was sat at his desk, taking on blood via a transfusion, jacked into the thick black veins of his wrist.

“Can the Minister do this?” Cliff asked.

“Unfortunately he can,” Azrael confirmed. “And until we can prove he has an ulterior motive, we will have to be seen to obey. Wren will have to be seen to quit MITHRAS, rather than hand over her Mantle, and Bardiche will have to be fired. I will see they are put on the Black Ledger. I have a...job for them. But, that will leave you shorthanded, for the time being, until I can put the two back where they belong.”

Cliff nodded. “It will.”

Azrael closed his eyes, and breathed deeply. “Who do you want?”

Cliff hesitated. “I can think of one name. He has worked with us before, but I...do not know if he would work for us.”

“Fox and Dusk?” Azrael asked.

“Yes.” Cliff said.

Azrael smiled. “I believe they are in Neo Jorvika these days. Horus has swept them up in his little entourage.”

### **Neo Jorvika, The United States**

Lucian Alexander stepped out of the elevator, flanked by six members of his personal security, trusted, professional men, whose loyalty he could be sure of, through fair means or foul.

The pyramid, at the top of the VOR-Tech tower was still, quiet, and empty.

Lucian tapped his watch. “Control, lock down elevator access to the Pyramid. Nobody is to enter or exit until I authorise it.”

“Understood,” the computer responded. “And confirmed.”

“Good.” Lucian walked to the middle of the room. “Tint the glass and activate holographic displays. Show me everything that Dagon has been looking at, for the last seven days. Everything. Override any security protocols he put in place, under my authority.”

The holographic displays flickered on.

Lucian began to sift through the data.

A word stood out amongst the stream.

“Control,” Lucian said, quietly, “show me Project Schism.”

The files opened, displaying large and intricate blueprints.

Lucian began flicking through the documents, his brow furrowing, as he read.

“Are you sure about this?” Flip asked.

“Not even a little,” Cassie admitted, her heart bouncing around inside her chest.

They were hurrying through the park, on their way to the diner at the south end, where Doc Horus had instructed them (or rather had instructed Cassie, and Flip had insisted on coming too) to wait in the booth at the back.

Horus had only told them Cassie that she would be meeting some friends of his.

The diner was busy, with an early morning crowd. Some were fresh faced and dressed for the office, on their way to work. Some were shift workers on their way home.

One of the waitresses looked up at them, as though recognising them. “Hey,” she said. “Did the Doc send you here? And tell you to wait at the back booth?”

Cassie nodded. “He did.”

The Waitress smiled. “Well, his friends are waiting for you.”

Flip looked at Cassie, her eyes wide, and mouthed: *His friends?*

Cassie shrugged and walked on, down the length of the diner.

A scruffy, unremarkable man stood up to greet them. He was maybe in his mid to late twenties, with reddish-brown hair swept into a side parting, and a face that was pleasant and characterful rather than handsome, pulled askew by the scar that ran across his eye, and down his cheek.

In theory, he was smartly dressed, in a peacoat, sweater, shirt and tie, over blue jeans, and Chelsea boots, but the overall impression was...unkempt.

There was a woman slouching in the far corner of the booth. She was beautiful in a girl-next-door kind of a way, and carried herself with a capable, competent kind of way, and was dressed like a cowgirl, with a leather hat, denim jacket, and plaid shirt, over short shorts, wool tights, and boots. Her eyes were blank orbs of a bronze coloured metal, but her smile was warm and friendly.

Cassie stared at the scruffy guy’s offered hand.

Flip folded her arms across her chest. “So... Who are you meant to be.”

“My name is Dusk,” he said, in a soft, warm, Welsh accent. “And this is my friend Fox. Which of you is Cassie?”

Cassie nodded, and waved a little. “I’m Cass. This is my friend, Flip.”

Dusk gestured to the booth. “Can I get you anything, while we wait?”

Flip remained fierce and protective. “Doctor Horus said you could help her?”

Dusk shifted awkwardly. “Actually, it is Grace who can help. I’m here to... Well... I’m here to keep you safe.”

Cassie shook his hand and slipped into the booth.

Flip sat beside her. “Okay. Do we have time to order some pancakes?”

Dusk looked out the window, as he sat down. “I don’t think so.”

Cassie followed his gaze out of the window.

Perhaps the most beautiful woman Cassie had ever seen was climbing out of a taxi. She was olive skinned bald, and heavily tattooed, with a look in her eye that made Cassie's heart stutter in her chest, and a smile that burned bright.

She was wearing a long herringbone overcoat, and a shirt waisted, retro-chic dress.

The woman looked straight up, into Cassie's eyes, and her smile widened and brightened.

Cassie made herself look away.

The woman walked like a lioness, as she paced down the length of the diner, and leant over the booth. Her smile softened around the edges. "Dusk!"

"Grace," Dusk said. "Might I introduce you to Cassie and Flip?"

She held each of them in her gaze for a moment. For a split second, as she looked into Cassie's eyes, and her smile broadened, showing her perfect teeth, Cassie felt weightless, like she was in freefall.

"Hello," Grace said, producing a deck of Portent Cards from nowhere. They were made of metal, as thin as paper, and engraved with intricate patterns.

Cassie watched Grace's long, slender fingers as they caressed the cards.

"So..." Grace said. "I should begin by telling you who I am, and what I do. My name is Grace, and I am... considerably older than I look, and I am very talented in certain arcane arts. I can help you understand what happened to you, and who the mysterious killer is. But I have to warn you, doing so will mean remembering the events of last night, vividly, and powerfully. It is not something undertaken lightly."

Cassie drew a deep breath. "Will it help stop this man, before he kills anybody else?"

Grace shuffled her cards. "Very likely." She looked at Dusk. "The information will come at a price."

Fox sighed. "Doesn't it always?"

Grace held Dusk in her gaze. On the surface her smile remained pleasant, and charming, but it had a dangerous undercurrent, a riptide quality to it. "Dusk..."

Dusk glanced at Fox.

Fox sipped at her coffee. "What's one more trouble, in the scheme of things?"

"I will take on the debt," Dusk said, solemnly, and a little regretfully.

"So be it," Grace whispered. She lid the deck of cards to Cassie. "Shuffle the deck, and think of the man you saw. Try to think of every detail you can remember, to see them in your mind."

Cassie did as she was told.

The memories flooded back, unbidden, in far too much detail.

The cards prickled against her fingertips.

"Do you have him in your mind?" Grace asked.

"Yes," Cassie whispered, picturing the tall, thin, ghoulish man, with the strange crossbow.

"Good," Grace said. "Now, cut the cards."

Cassie split the deck.

Grace put her fingers on the card. "The Jack of Coins, inverted." Her tone wavered, as she whispered: "It's you again, isn't it?" She gestured to Cassie. "Now, place your hand on the card."

Cassie reached over, and put her fingers on the card. The metal seemed to ripple and shimmer like a liquid, beneath her touch.

Grace looked at Dusk.

He put a finger on the card, beside Cassie's, but not touching her.

Grace put her hand on Cassie's.

The touch was gentle, and surprisingly cool, but it sent butterflies fluttering in Cassie's belly.

Grace looked into Cassie's eyes. "Close your eyes, and tell me what you see."

Cassie closed her eyes, and... A blizzard of images unfolded in her mind, glimpses of another life swirled about her, too fleeting to make sense of. A cacophony of thoughts and voices babbled around her.

The chaos collapsed and shrank into focus. She saw the killer... For a brief moment, she *knew* the killer.

"He..." Cassie tried to order the cascade of information in a way that she could put into words. "He used to be called Kitzbuhel, but that name was never his, it was...imposed upon him when he was growing up. He was a soldier once, but felt it was beneath him, to toil in the rank and file. He believes, he *knows*, he is...superior." She felt a shiver of disgust at the certainty of that thought. "Now he is a mercenary, but that is only a means to an end, on his way to...power."

Grace stroked Cassie's hand with her fingers. "If he is a mercenary, why is he doing this? Who could possibly profit from it?"

Cassie concentrated on the question. "He is being paid. Somebody wants Doc Horus dead, and it doesn't matter how many die to achieve it. They are but a handful compared to what will happen when Moros comes."

Flip scowled. "Who is Moros?"

A sudden flurry of images overwhelmed Cassie, and threatened to sweep her away. She saw worlds beyond number, wars fought across countless stars, weapons that set the sky afire, in a conquest of empire and slavery.

"The Moros showed Redcap what he was, what he could be, what he...was... It awoke in him what was once hidden. It promised to make him a Prince, a ruler of Earth, on behalf of..."

Something shifted.

A...presence moved between the visions. A mind that was countless minds, chattering like a swarm of hornets. A mind that was far, far, bigger than a person, a mind like a burning sun.

*We see you...*

Grace snatched Cassie's hand away from the card.

"What happened?" Flip demanded. "What was that?"

"It saw her," Grace said. She looked at Fox, then at Dusk. "It will send its agent to eliminate her."

"We will be waiting," Fox promised.

Grace looked at Cassie. "So... Would you girls want to come see my place?"

"Yes!" Cassie said, too quickly. "Yes please."

The limousine pulled off the road and onto the bare dirt beneath the freeway overpass.

Lucian Alexander stepped out the car, and straightened his jacket. He was followed by his flank of six security men, each wearing bullet proof vests, and carrying submachine guns. They kept pace with him as he marched to the rusting metal service door, in the bulkhead wall of the bridge structure.

Lucian pointed his watch at the electronic lock. "Control?"

His watch chirped, and the keypad beeped. The locks clicked open.



Lucian gestured for his guards to follow him, as he ducked through the doorway, into an elevator. The inner doors closed, and the elevator descended down, deep beneath the foundations of the bridge.

### **The Transantarctic Mountains, Antarctica**

The elevator in the pyramid rumbled on.

Something prickled at Artemis's instincts, a warning shiver prickling at her spine.

She placed her fingers to the string of her TEK-bow, and an arrow manifested, shimmering with a low hum.

In the corner of her eye, she was aware that Andraste had tensed, a holographic sword and shield forming out of her armour. John's body language had changed too. He was holding himself taller, with squared shoulders, and a straight back, an arrow nocked on his bow.

A few seconds later, Richard, Jack, and Dyani all tensed too, as their auras activated and their skin transformed.

Dyani's skin was suddenly covered in fine scales of a copper-like metal.

Richard's flesh turned to a grey-blue stone, with the mottled texture of a crocodile hide.

An aura of white-blue plasma ignited around Jack, covering his entire form in a film of liquid flame, that crackled with fingers of electricity.

The elevator lurched to a stop, and the doors hissed open, revealing a vaulted corridor.

Artemis's instincts tugged at her thoughts, drawing her towards the open doorway in one of the alcoves.

### **Neo-Jorvika, the United States**

The elevator hissed open.

Lucian stepped out into the Court, vast space, haunted by echoes, with crisp sterile light from the frosted glass ceiling panels, a throne at one end of the chamber, carved from a boulder, and an antique mirror hanging at the other, with a swimming pool sized fishpond in the middle.

The guards spread out.

Lucian walked to the edge of the pool, and stared down at the carpet of silt and sand that covered the bottom of the pool.

As one of the guards approached the throne, a series of holograms blinked to life.

Lucian skirted around the pool, and studied the holograms.

They were far more advanced than VOR-Tech's own technology. The computer monitored hundreds of government computer systems, satellites, and media channels, from around the world. There were virtual screens filled with text in languages that Lucian didn't recognise.

Lucian heaved himself into the throne, and sat back, to read the holograms. "Well mister Dagon, what ever have you been hiding from me?"

### The Transantarctic Mountains, Antarctica

Artemis followed Andraste into the domed chamber, the size of a sports stadium. There were a handful of remains scattered about the floor. Lord Khyron's armour, Miss Hades' clothes, and a few of their henchmen. There was a shattered tank, surrounded by the puddle of dark fluids it had once held.

A complex, snowflake-like pattern had been scorched into the floor.

There was a mirror hanging on one of the columns, an antique mirror in a gilded frame, but far too human to belong here.

Dyani crouched over the scorch mark. "A displacement pattern. Something teleported here. It would explain the energy flare we detected."

Jack kicked Khyron's armour. "Can they do that?"

Richard rolled his eyes. "Let's assume that the alien gods from before time, can do pretty much anything, shall we?"

Jack grunted. "Oh, I really hate it when the bad guys do that."

Dyani laughed. "Really? I always thought you liked the challenge."

A sound reverberated through the chamber, seeming to fill it, a low, warbling whale-song note.

The sound burned on Artemis's instincts. She let an arrow form at her fingertips, the energy of her bow prickling at her skin.

Richard, Dyani, Jack and Andraste all froze a moment, and slowly stood, their expressions turning slack and emotionless. Their eyes went out of focus. Their breaths synchronised, in the same near-mechanical rhythm.

John drew back on his bow, and took aim at the wall. "Whatever you are doing, stop it."

Artemis twisted, and took aim at the same spot on the wall.

Except now she looked, there was a man stood there, a dashing handsome man, in a shiny tonic-blend suit, carrying a black wood cane carved like an eel. He had a slick of hair, and a van-dyke beard. His eyes and his smile were painfully cruel.

There was something about the man, something she should know, something she should *remember*.

"Lower the weapons," the man said.

Artemis held him in her aim. "Let my family go."

The man smiled, and clicked his fingers.

Dyani stepped over to Jack and took hold of his wrist, squeezing it in her metal-clad fingers, until his bones cracked. Jack's knees buckled, and he sank to the floor, but he did not scream. He wore a serene smile, fixed on his lips.

Dyani smiled too, as Jack's protective aura burned at her hand.

Their lips smiled, but their eyes were full of horror and pain.

Artemis dissipated her arrow, and lowered her bow.

John slackened his bow, and lowered his aim to the floor.

“Good,” Dagon said, backing towards the mirror. “Now... I am slipping away, and... If you would be so kind as to just die with your friends, that would be...so very helpful.”

Dagon slammed his cane to the floor. It struck the stone with a resonant chime, that rattled Artemis’s teeth in her jaw.

Reality flexed and rippled in the doorway. Three creatures appeared there, each roughly the size of a lion, with leathery flesh, powerful muscles, and dagger like fangs. There was as much of the iguanodon about the three beasts as there was the wolf and the big cat. Their black eyes shone with hunger.

The creatures ran launched into galloping sprints, straight for Richard and Andraste.

As Artemis turned to aim and shoot at the closest of the beasts, she was vaguely aware of Dagon leaping through the mirror. The glass rippled, as he passed through, and shattered behind him, as though a door had slammed.

### Neo-Jorvika, The United States

Lucian flicked through the holographic screens, as he tried to make sense of Dagon’s secrets.

The mirror on the far side of the room rippled.

Lucian hopped to his feet, and gestured to his guards.

They turned to face the mirror bringing up their submachine guns.

Dagon stepped through the mirror, holding a strange, black cane. He smirked, as he swept his gaze across the guards, and stared at Lucian. “Do you mind? This is private property.”

Lucian adjusted his cuffs. “Apparently, I built all this, and gifted it to a British Member of Parliament, which... came as quite a surprise. I don’t remember signing off on any of this.”

“But you did,” Dagon promised. “Nobody could forge your signature.”

Anger burned in Lucian’s chest, as he deduced the truth. He tried not to let it show in his voice, and almost succeeded. Almost. “You were in my head... Manipulating me. You bleached my memories, you...”

Lucian’s words trailed off as he became aware of the noise that was radiating from Dagon’s cane. It was a low, mournful sound, almost like whale song.

The guards all stood to attention, dropping their guns. Delirious smiles spread across their lips.

Something rushed into Lucian’s mind, a presence that crashed into his thoughts like a tidal wave of black water. It closed in around him, and suddenly his whole body felt numb. His arms dropped to his side, like lead weights. A smile crept across his lips, of its own accord.

Lucian roared in his mind, thrashing and screaming for control, but his body ignored him.

It was Dagon’s will that marched Lucian to the edge of the pool, that made him kneel and stare into the waters.

Something worm like, and serpent like rose from the silt and sand at the bottom of the pool. Something as big as a school bus.

The guards placed their hands to their chests, in a salute.

“My Lord...” Dagon called out to the worm thing. “These men come to your sanctum, of their own free will. Their souls are yours. A gift.”

Lucian’s head turned.

Dagon did not let him look away, as the guards dissolved away, into clouds of thick black smoke.

“Get out.” Lucian focused all his willpower, and managed to force the words through his faux smile and set jaw. “Get. Out. Of. My. Head. Or... I will...”

“You,” Dagon said, “will do as you are told. You will forget this, for a while at least. And when you start to remember, or start to work it out, do you know what you do then? What you always do then? You watch people die, you pretend not to be terrified, and you make meaningless threats. Over and again.”

“I. Will. Kill. You.” Lucian seethed, as darkness closed in around him.

### **The Transantarctic Mountains, Antarctica**

Artemis’s arrow hit the lion-o-saur between its eyes, exploding in a shower of sparks. The creature did not slow or stop, and although it roared, its thick hide was unmarked.

John’s first arrow bounced off the creature’s shoulder, the arrowhead crumpling and the shaft shattering under the force of the strike.

Both Artemis and John came to the same decision in the same instant, rushing to drag Richard and Andraste away from the three lion-o-saurs’ snapping jaws.

“Sorry!” John said, as he heaved Richard away, with less than a second to spare, and tossed him across the room. Richard flopped and landed like a ragdoll, still in a trance, still smiling.

The beast went to leap after Richard.

John landed a lightning fast kick on the creature’s snout.

It wasn’t interested in Richard any more.

John moved like he was dancing, ducking and weaving, landing a few kicks, just enough to keep two of the dragon-things focussed on him, as he tumbled and skipped out of their reach.

Andraste went limp, as Artemis hoisted her over her shoulder in a firefighter’s lift.

Artemis darted away, in a sprint.

The third lion-o-saur was close on her heels.

With a lurch of horror, that turned her stomach, Artemis saw that Dyandi was still holding Jack’s wrist in a crushing grip, the metal scales of her hand glowing red hot in burning aura.

“Mom!” Artemis whispered, her voice cracking. “Sorry Andraste. But... That armour of yours is near indestructible right?”

She stopped and wheeled around, kicking the lion-o-saur away, with all her might. She twisted on her heels and pitched Andraste, sending her flying. Andraste hit Jack and Dyani, knocking them apart, and scattering them.

Artemis had hesitated for a fraction of a second, just long enough to ensure her mom’s hand wasn’t being burned any more, but it was too long.

The lion-o-saur leapt at her.

John was moving like a whirlwind, avoiding the other two. He nocked an arrow, while dodging, bobbing, and weaving.

The lion-o-saur slammed Artemis to the floor, under the talon claws, pressing down on her, as the head lunged forward, to bite down on her face.

John's arrow hit the monster, punching through the creature's eye, and deep into the skull.

The creature became a dead weight, and toppled aside.

Artemis rolled out from beneath the monster, and flicked out her TEK-bow, already taking aim. Now she knew the monster's weakness, it was the matter of seconds to steal the lives from the other two.

She made their deaths quick and merciful.

When this was over, she knew she would be haunted by regrets, by the heartache of taking a life, even that of a monster.

For now she push those feelings down deep beneath the surface.

She knelt over Dyani, cradling her head, and squeezing her hand. "Mom?"

Her mother looked at her, her eyes full of pain and torment, in defiance of the plastic smile on her lips. The metal scales that armoured Dyani's hand were charred and badly burned.

Artemis looked up John. "We need to break them out of this...trance. During the Maelstrom event, Dad found a way to break through to sleep walkers with high pitched sound. Maybe we could..." She shook her head, as though trying to catch an idea. "Maybe...."

John dropped his bow back into his satchel, and groped around inside the impossibly-deep bag. His hand came up, holding a personal attack alarm.

Artemis grinned. "Great minds think alike."

"And so do we," John said, with a disarming smile. "Did you want to cover your ears?"

Artemis stepped back, and put her hands over her ears.

John pulled the pin from the alarm and a painfully sharp note filled the air.

Artemis braced herself against the pain of the noise, as it made her teeth ache and her bones rattle, as it struck her like a pickaxe to the head.

The others sat up, yowling in pain against the noise.

Richard snatched the alarm from John's hand, and crushed it in his fist.

Blessed silence rushed in to replace the shrill note.

## • Seven

### Orca Three Six, The Atlantic Ocean

The transport soared above the ocean, so high that Robin could see the world curving away over the horizon.

She was laying on a gurney, strapped in place, with fresh dressings over the terrible burn in her side. The painkillers from her drip had kicked in, and had made her discomfort fuzzy, distant, and out of focus, but had not removed it.

Marius and Yeti were sat close by, taking it in turns to hold her hand, and try to keep her spirits up. Yeti wasn't used to being helpless, and wasn't pretty bad at hiding how scared he was. Marius was a seasoned professional, with a well honed poker face, and an industrial strength stiff upper lip.

Robin drew her fingers away from Yeti and reached up to touch her earpiece. "Hey Sid."

"Go ahead," Sidney Sylvester said.

Robin sighed. "Have you heard from the others?"



The pause that lasted the next few moments was all too telling.

Marius tapped into the conversation. "What did they find, Sid?"

"Trouble," Sid said, hesitantly. "Two of the First Family were hurt. And... well..."

Robin sat up, as far as she could before the pain stole her breath. "Sid?"

There was a note of resignation in Sid's breath. "Somebody has found a Mythosian, and brought it out of hibernation. They fed it Lord Khyron and his militia force, to give it enough power to teleport... somewhere."

Marius scowled. "What's a Mythosian."

Robin's entire body turned as cold as ice. "The harbinger for the end of everything. If one opens a doorway, they will invade, a legion of gods who will swarm through creation like locusts..."

Yeti puffed out his cheeks. "So... Pretty bad then?"

Marius nodded. "Yep."

Robin sighed. "I knew I should have been keeping an eye on John. Otherwise he finds all kinds of trouble."

"Yeah..." Sid said. "It...gets worse."

Marius rolled his eyes. "How? How exactly does this get worse?"

### Neo-Jorvika, The United States

The taxi pulled up at the mouth of a narrow alley, between two buildings, in the Cobbles, the oldest part of the city, where most the buildings were clad in stone, and haunted by gargoyles.

Grace hopped out, and held the door for Cassie and Flip.

Flip gave Cassie one of her *'Are we doing this?'* looks as they followed Grace into the shadowy twilight of the alleyway.

The noise of the city faded away, muffled into the distance, the moment they stepped into the shadows.

The wall at the back of the alley was covered in many layers of graffiti, in many different styles.

"Well," Grace said. "This is it."

Flip looked around. "Sorry?"

Grace chuckled and placed a hand to the painting. "It's me. I bring friends."

The many layers of paint and images...moved, slithering away, like a parting tide, to reveal the image of an ornate, vaguely art-deco doorway. The two dimensional, painting of a doorway opened, and... Grace stepped through.

Flip stared, slack jawed.

Cassie took her friend's hand. "Come on!"

"But..." Flip gestured at the painting. "That's not normal. That's not...possible? Is that possible?"

Cassie grinned. "I know! It's brilliant!"

She dragged Flip through the door.

There was a moment of blinding white light...

### Eternity Station, Nowhere.

...And they found themselves stood on the concourse of a railway station, hewn from a pale, fossil-rich stone, on a grand scale unlike anything Cassie had seen in her life. The platforms were long, and most were empty, but a few had long strings of elegant carriages lined up, sleeper carriages in a style Cassie had only seen in old movies.

It took Cassie a second to see past her bewildering first impression and notice the elements that were *alien*. The sky beyond the glass canopy was tangerine, with umber clouds. The trees that grew in the decorative planters had silver leaves, and scaled fruit.

What Cassie first thought were birds up in the canopy, were small winged lizards.

Grass spread her arms and did a theatrical twirl. "This is the Eternity Station, a little splinter of another reality, that got washed up against the Veil, the barrier between worlds. It is home to Doctor Horus's Foundlings. Some of us live in the sleeper carriages, and some of us have tents on the platforms. We have a kitchen, for family meals, a well-stocked library, and...We have movie night on Tuesdays."

Flip rubbed her face. "I must have banged my head. None of this is real. I'm suffering a concussion."

"It's real," Cassie whispered. "It's amazing."

"Hello!" Doc Horus called out, as he floated down one of the sweeping stairways. "And welcome. You will both be quite safe here, I can assure you. My Eternity Station is the safest place on Earth, because...well...It isn't." He rose from the stairs, and flew down to greet them, clapping a friendly hand on Flip's arm. "Don't worry. My Foundlings have all proven themselves to be more than trustworthy. While you are under my protection, you will be under *their* protection too. You will miss out on classes for a while, but... I think I know some people who will help you catch up. In the meantime, make yourself at home."

### Neo Jorvika, The United States

Redcap drove round the block three times, before he was sure it was safe to proceed.

He parked his satin black muscle car outside the apartment building, and plugged a buzz-box into the cigarette lighter. The crystal in the box glowed bright, and hummed with a spell that didn't so much make the care invisible, as to blur perceptions so it faded into the background and went unnoticed, leaving no imprint on anybody's memories.

His Instinct buzzed.

The girl who had witnessed one of his strikes was in there, up in her apartment.

Redcap stepped out of the car, and walked briskly into the building, and across the lobby to the elevator. A few moments later he was stood in the corridor at the front door.

He put one of his goggled eyes to the peephole in the door, and stared in at the open plan room beyond.

A short, curvy, bubbly young woman was sat on the sofa, reading a pre-med text book, and scribbling on yellow sticky notes, and marking passages with a neon pink marker.

Redcap smiled to himself.

He stepped back, drew out his crossbow, and let the alchemical mechanisms fold out, with a whisper of metal on metal. A drop of liquid metal from the glass reservoir formed a small but deadly bolt in the breach.

A single kick tore the door from its frame, and sent it flying into the apartment.

Redcap stepped inside, and fired his first bolt, within a heartbeat.

It rippled through the hologram of the curvy student, and scorched the back of the sofa.

Anger flashed in Redcap's soul.

That should not be possible. A hologram could not fool his Instinct. He *knew* she was here.

He reached down into his Instinct, and could her presence... To his left, in the kitchen.

There was a flash of movement. A rusty haired scarecrow, with ugly scars and a peacoat, was lashing out with a high-tech metal bullwhip, aiming it at Redcap's wrist, trying to disarm him.

Redcap wheeled around, and ducked back, out of reach of the whip, already drawing a bead on the scarecrow. He found his moment, and drew the pressure from the trigger.

The bolt fired, a second already forming in the breach.

A gunshot rang out, the bullet punching a hole in the window, and knocked the bolt out the air, with a pop of sparks.

There was a woman on the rooftop across the street, a cowgirl in short shorts and a fedora. She was armed with an antique looking revolver with a long barrel.

The whip snagged Redcap's crossbow, and tossed it out of his reach.

Redcap dashed forwards, and leapt into a flying kick.

The scarecrow was fast on his feet, and ducked aside, lashing out with the whip, snaring Redcap's ankle with a white hot flash of pain. He twisted his whole body, swinging Redcap into the wall.

Redcap landed with a dull thud, that left a person sized dent in the wall. He managed to grab a meat cleaver from the magnetic rack, as he flopped down onto the counter. With a dangerous smile and a grunt of effort, Recap found his feet, and came up hacking,

Another gunshot rang out, and another bullet hole appeared in the window.

The bullet hit Redcap in the hand, sending the knife, and two of his fingers, tumbling to the floor.

He pushed through the pain, burying it away

In an instant the whip cracked again, wrapping around Redcap's throat. He tried to pull it free, but the scruffy scarecrow hoisted on the whip, and slammed Redcap's face into one of the cupboards.

"It's him," the Scarecrow whispered.

"We could kill him," a voice on the Scarecrow's earpiece said. "We could end the Cascade before it begins."

The moment of hesitation, of indecision was telling.

"He's going to jail," the Scarecrow said. "It's over."

The world blurred out of focus, and as Recap lost his grip on reality he was dimly aware of being rolled onto his chest, and his hands being cuffed behind his back.

### Orca Three Nine, Entering American Airspace

Andraste sat forwards in her seat, and looked up at the hologram of Doc Horus that loomed over the middle of the hold, his arms folded across his chest.

“My friends have captured the Assassin,” Horus said. “And he is in the custody of the FBI at their Omni-Max facility. My concern is of the words that Grace used to describe him... Being in the thrall of the Thrice Dead King. Does that mean anything to you?”

Andraste shrugged. “No... But I keep having this odd feeling that it *should*.” She stroked her chin. “There is something... blurring our perceptions. I have known both John and Arti for a long time. I don’t understand how I can’t have seen their...similarities, unless something was...”

“Exactly,” Doc Horus said. “And... This man you saw? The politician?”

“Benjamin Adams,” John said, quietly. “We see him in on Antarctica, apparently in league with the Mythosian, on the same day he goes from being a back bencher from an obscure constituency, to one of the most important front bench roles in the cabinet.”

“And...” Andraste added, with a nervous smile, “not only do we clear his predecessor from the board, we also seize all the parts for a gun that could well have posed a threat to a Mythosian? The way I understand it, they are not easy to kill.”

“No,” John said. “No they aren’t. According to legend they already tried to conquer other realities, and escaped their doomed universe. It sparked a war, fought across countless parallel universes, across countless stars, and many centuries.”

Andraste smiled at the hologram. “We will meet you at The Braddock Building shortly. Whatever we have stumbled upon, the endgame is near, and I have this...unshakable feeling it will be played out in Neo-Jorvika.”

“I will see you soon,” Doc Horus said.

The hologram flickered off.

Andraste could feel the way John was looking at her, his eyes full of concerns beyond his years, even before she glanced over her shoulder at him.

“How are you holding up?” He asked.

Andraste smiled. “I’m bloody terrified, that something is about to eat the world. So... about the same as always.”

He nodded. “When did you last eat?”

She gave him a playful frown. “Why? Do you want to swing past a drive-thru on our way?”

His smile softened. “Because you need to eat.”

“I don’t know...” Andraste rubbed the back of her head. “Breakfast?”

John reached into his satchel and pulled out some bottles of cola, and bags of crisps. He tossed some to her. “You need to eat.”

Andraste nodded, and opened the bag of prawn cocktail first. “Okay. Okay...” She grinned. “You know you have a family now. You don’t need to mother-hen me, you can go peck at them?”

Something changed behind his eyes. His smile wavered.

“Oh?” He said, *trying* to keep his tone light, but there was a turbulence beneath the surface. “Are you in a rush to be rid of me?”

“No,” Andraste said. “But... I thought you would be a little more excited. Arti is a lovely girl, and she wants you in her life. She went looking for you. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Perhaps,” John admitted. “But... These things always get... complicated. Then they fall apart.”

Andraste stepped over to the seat beside John, and took his hand. "John... Stuff happens in life, and especially in our life. And yes, sometimes it is...dangerous for the people we care about. But shutting the world out isn't the answer. None of us can do this alone."

He looked at her.

Andraste smiled. "I know it's a big leap, but... having somebody who understands something of what we do, has to be worth taking a chance on?"

He let out a long sigh, his shoulders sagging. "What if I'm not?"

Andraste pulled him into a hug. "You are. If you don't believe in yourself, believe me, because you are."

John pushed her away. "Now, hold on..."

Andraste scowled. "It's a hug. You look like you need one."

"No. Don't you feel it?" John said. "We're being watched."

### **London, The United Kingdom**

Orca Three Six touched down at the Royal Creighton Hospital, its engine wash billowing over the landing pad.

Sidney Sylvester followed the medical team out from the elevator, and across the landing pad, wrapped against the drizzle in his anorak, even as the ramp of the Orca was folding down. He pushed past the others to meet Robin's gurney as Yeti brought it out.

"Bobbie?" He said, taking her hand.

She looked up at him. "I'm okay," she promised. "It was just a glancing blow."

He scowled at her. "Can you even sit up?"

Robin shook her head, with one of those guilty little smiles she always wore, when she tried not to let him worry, but got caught out. "Not... so much."

Marius ducked down the ramp, carrying Robin's guitar. "Hey."

Sid took the guitar. "Are you okay?"

Marius smiled. "She did good. Make sure they look after her."

Sid nodded, then paused, and looked around.

The gaze of unseen eyes prickled against the back of his neck.

### **Loamshire, The United Kingdom**

Dagon withdrew his thoughts from the crystal ball that lay in the palm of his hand, and vanished it with a flourish of his fingers. He rose from the deep, quilted leather wingback and strolled out of the lounge.



Loam Hall was a once-grand old stately home, that had long been sliding into disrepair, since the Loamshire Adams had made some poor investment choices. Spiderwebs hung from the high ceilings and the chandeliers. The grim faced portraits that overlooked the grand stairway were caked in dust. Mould and mildew speckled every wall.

Dagon made his way up to the old nursery, at the very top of the house, in the eaves of the loft space. The room had been used as storage for decades, with old furniture stacked against the back wall and covered in dust sheets.

A near skeletal figure on a mattress on the floor, gaunt, withered and sickly, its pale flesh caked in sweat, its bloodshot eyes yellowing, its bleeding gums withdrawing back from its teeth. It stared up at Dagon, whimpering slightly, and holding out a hand in a feeble gesture.

Dagon looked down at the figure.

What little remained of the original Benjamin Adams, of the *true* Benjamin Adams, had been consumed from the inside out, but the long, eel-like that coiled and slithered beneath his skin. Only the crested head was visible, as it emerged from Benjamin's mouth.

Dagon crouched, and lifted Benjamin's head, ensuring the young man's eyes focussed on him.

"Sorry old chap," Dagon purred. "Looks like I've... Or rather *you've* been rumbled. I can't live as you any longer, and will have to go lie doggo in another life. The good news for you is that this is almost over." He reached under his jacket and produced a bomb, with a brick of plastic explosive and an electronic timer. "You will get your blessed release just a little while before everybody else."

Adams gurgled, trying to say something.

Dagon chuckled. "No need to thank me, old chap."

He rose to his feet, and whipped the dust sheet from a freestanding mirror.

### Jorvika County, The United States

Hank dropped from the sky, and landed in the car park of the Omni-Max security facility, the federal prison, fifty miles up the coast from the city. He landed in a crouch, dissipating the force so that he didn't leave a crater in the black top, or set off the alarms of all the staff's cars.

As he rose to his feet, he put aside everything that was Hank Wessex, of Halberd News, and let himself become Doctor Horus.

His alter-ego was far more than just the clothes he wore. It was the posture, the air of authority, and the confident smile. It was his code of honour, acceptance, and kindness, and his duty, to protect his city, and all the peoples within.

It was the soft, homely tone to his voice.

He marched towards the entrance to the building, where Lieutenant Richards was waiting.

"Is it him?" Hank asked.

Richards nodded. "It looks that way. Your friends did good. I don't suppose you can bring me the witness to ID him?"

Hank sighed. "When I am sure I can protect her, it will happen. For now... shall we see what we can learn when we shake his nerve?"

A few minutes later, they were past the security checkpoints, and approaching one of the visitation cells. Fox and Dusk were waiting outside.

Fox stubbed out her cigarette and flashed Hank one of her big grins. “Hey Boss. So... Are you sure you want to be here?”

“People died,” Hank said, “because this man wanted to kill me. I want to look him in the eye.”

### Neo Jorvika, The United States

Andraste couldn't help her smile.

John's eyes widened, as they approached the city. His jaw hung open. Apparently, for all the things he had seen in his life, all the wonders and horrors, he was unprepared for the size and scale of Neo Jorvika.

“Yeah...” Andraste chuckled. “It got me like that the first time too. Of course, it was much smaller then. Now it's something close to twenty million residents, and who knows how many passing through. That, is the VOR-Tech tower. People say they added that pyramid on top just to make sure it was taller than the Kneale Building... That's where we are headed, the home of the First Family.”

She pointed to the Kneale Building, but there would have been no mistaking it. The elegant spire stood head and shoulders over the surrounding skyscrapers. Most the tower was leased office space, for companies around the world. The Firsts' laboratories, foundry, and living quarters were all contained in the buildings top six floors, the distinctive 'flying saucer' that crowned this building, and three others they owned across the United States.

In reality, most the actual building of space ships and super-technology happened in their New Mexico compound, a former nuclear testing facility they had purchased from the government.

John looked stunned. “So... That's... their house?”

Andraste chuckled. “Yeah. It's all a bit...much isn't it?”

“We are cleared for our final approach,” the Pilot informed them.

### Ouroboros Island

Hawksmoor's quarters were high in the Eastern Tower of the Imperial Palace, overlooking the ramparts and fortifications, to the turbulent grey ocean. The quarters were clean and sparse. The furniture was elegant, and luxurious, but... impersonal. The room might have been a suite in any of the top tier hotels, in any major city.

The only item Hawksmoor himself had added to the furnishings was the antique mirror with a gilded frame that dominated one wall.

Hawksmoor, the *real* Hawksmoor lay on his bed, skeletal and withered by the eel-like parasite that was worming beneath his skin. Unlike Adams, Doctor Abyss's trusted lieutenant had given up struggling months ago. There was no spark left in his eyes, and he stared, blank and empty, at the ceiling.

The surface of the mirror rippled.

The man who sometimes called himself Hawksmoor emerged from the mirror.

He was dashing handsome, with a van dyke beard, and dark eyes, that suggested wisdom far beyond his apparent youth. He took off the jacket of his tonic blend suit, and hung it neatly, swapping it for the high collared tunic he preferred when donning the guise of Hawksmoor.

Dagon considered his appearance in the mirror.

Satisfied, he turned and marched out the door.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, Dagon knew he had been discovered. The Praetorian Guards flanking the lift had their billhooks slung across their backs, and were armed instead with compact, Phased Energy Projector carbines. So were the four who currently surrounded the throne.

Doctor Abyss was hunched forwards, in a far more deliberate pose, apparently studying the papers in a manilla file.

"I am not angry," Abyss said, his voice infuriatingly calm, and scarily good humoured, "but I am very, very, angry, Hawksmoor. I have been looking into our situation in London, trying to understand how and why our asset in Parliament turned against us, and... I have found evidence that you tipped off the authorities. Why?"

"Oh, there are a few reasons," Dagon said, strolling past the undead *things* in their Praetorian armour and battle dress. "I needed him out the way, so that somebody more suitable could take over as Minister. And... I needed to be that nobody had weapons of capable of killing the Mythosian, when it rises. You might try to defend yourself. Or worse, somebody competent could have claimed it from you." He gripped his lapels. "And I could not simply depose you and claim your throne. A coup too early in the game would have drawn the wrong kind of attention."

"Kill him!" Abyss whispered.

The Praetorians did not move.

"Kill! Him!" Abyss repeated, in a roar.

The ghouls still did not move.

Dagon mimed a gun with his hand, and pointed it at Abyss. "I am the Thrice Dead King. I ruled the sun that died so Earth and its solar system could be formed from the dust. I ruled empires, while humanity was still in the trees, picking fleas from their fur. Do you think I can be threatened by a petty warlord who learned some rudimentary necromancy?"

The Praetorians turned, levelling their weapons to take aim at their master.

Abyss gave Dagon a long hard stare. "What are you?"

Dagon tutted. "You have a slippery mind. You keep finding ways around your programming. I'm afraid I can't take that risk. Not now. Not this close..." He held out his cane. "Eliminate yourself."

Abyss's right hand reached towards the holster on his belt. His left hand grabbed his wrist, and fought against it. He tumbled from his throne, and rolled on the floor, as he wrestled against himself, trying to turn the gun away.

Dagon watched, with a morbid fascination, as Abyss struggled, thrashing and kicking, trying to stop himself from placing the muzzle of the gun to his own chin.

A single shot rang out, and his struggles stopped.

Dagon stooped and took a small computer disc from Doctor Abyss's pocket. He slipped into the computer built into the arm of the throne, and tapped a few commands into the keyboard.

The throne-rooms main display lit up, and showed the world's communications network unfolding, and opening to Dagon.

He cracked his knuckles, and set to work... bringing about the end of the world.

## • Eight

### London, The United Kingdom

Cliff stood on the Operations floor, staring up at the holo-display, his fingers wrapped around his mug.

Tinkerbelle was sat back in her chair, dunking biscuits, and tapping her foot impatiently.

Two Orcas were circling above Loam Hall, deploying Puck drones to begin their sweep.

Cliff glanced over the various feeds, as the drones dropped from the sky, onto the roof of the stately home, some scuttling down the walls, to pry their way in through windows, some down through the chimneys.

One of the drones was at the window for the room at the very top of the house. It looked to once have been the nursery, but was now full of furniture, most of it covered in dust sheets.

Tinkerbelle scowled at one of the displays on her chair. "I'm getting weird readings here." She tapped through sensor modes. "There's some weird reality flux around that mirror."

"Wait." Cliff said. "Over there..."

The drone closed into the mattress on the floor.

Tinkerbelle tapped some furious commands. "Oh god... He's alive."

"Who is that?" Cliff demanded.

Tinkerbelle frowned. "According to his dental records, that's... The Right Honourable Benjamin Adams." She retched. "What that is in his mouth... I have no idea."

"Journeyman Two," Cliff said, touching his earpiece. "You have a new priority, secure and medi-vac."

"Wait!" Tinkerbelle squeaked. "Cliff, is that..."

The drone was looking at something sat on a dolls house. A brick of plastic explosive.

"A bomb!" Cliff snapped. "Orcas, pull back. Pull back!"

The feed was lost in a blinding white flash.

### Loamshire, The United Kingdom

Marius braced himself as the Orca pulled back from the house.

A searing white fireball tore through Loam Hall, ripping the stone and brickwork apart, engulfing the entire building in an inferno.

The pressure wave hit the Orca, bombarding it with debris.

"Dammit!" Marius growled, as the Orca levelled out. "Sorry Sir, but I think our search will have to wait."

### London, The United Kingdom

Cliff rubbed his face with his hands. "Suggestions?"

Tinkerbelle shrugged. "My drones are scrap... But it's going to be hours before the fire brigade have that inferno out, so I guess we have time for the Scimitar boys to come pick up a fresh batch." She tapped at her

keyboard. "In the meantime...I will see what I can make out of the few seconds of scans we got for Adams, or that mirror, or the bomb..."

Cliff nodded. "Do what you can."

Robin lay back, adrift in the hazy, cotton candy bliss of the pain killers. She was vaguely aware of the drip in her arm, the dressings that now covered most of her side, and Sid, holding her hand, as he sat beside her bed.

There was talking.

It sounded so far away, muffled and distorted.

She opened her eyes.

Sid had his head tilted, as he listened to something on his earpiece.

Yeti was sat in the corner of the room. He looked at her and smiled.

Sid frowned. "Wait... Did your Pucks get a reading of the mirror in Antarctica, when Adams used it to teleport. If you have both readings we might be able to work out where he has been going."

Robin squeezed his hand.

Sid sighed. "Give me a moment. I need to go get the computer from the car." He looked at Robin. "Sorry. I will be right back."

Robin smiled. "Yeti can look after me."

"I can," Yeti confirmed with a nod.

Sid grinned. "I will only be a few minutes."

For a moment the room was in near silence.

"So..." Yeti said. "Is there anything you want? Or you need?"

Robin glanced up at the TV. "Anything good on?"

Yeti stepped over to perch beside her on the bed, and started flicking through the TV channels, until he found an old movie.

"So..." Robin said, dreamily, "is this how you pictured our first date?"

The TV glitched and distorted.

Yeti jabbed at the remote, but the interference followed them across all four channels.

"Huh," he said. "Want me to wiggle the lead?"

Robin stared at the screen, as it distorted into the blizzard of static. For a moment, there seemed to be something in the static, a shape, or a pattern, something far more than interference.

The telephone by her bed, her earpiece, and Yeti's headset all started wailing the same high pitched melody.

"Some kind of jamming signal?" Yeti asked.

Robin frowned. "I think it's a spell."

Across London, as with every other city in the world, all methods of communication failed. TV channels went dark, radio stations went silent, computers crashed, and telephones began singing, as all of them succumbed to the trilling feedback wail of the Pattern.

Across London, as around the world, the military defaulted to high alert as all forms of communication failed. Roads jammed as the traffic signals failed. The railways slammed to a halt, as the signals failed. Airplanes circled over airports as they lost contact with the air traffic control.

In the Iceberg, the Operations floors for each RAT went dark, as the holo-displays went blank.

### **Neo-Jorvika, The United States**

Lucian Alexander paced restlessly around his office, with his shirt sleeves rolled up, holding a tumbler of whiskey and ginger, the ice rattling in his trembling hands. There was something *wrong*, something he needed to remember, but... it eluded him. Whenever he tried to focus on it, his train of thought derailed.

An alarm sounded on his computer.

Lucian stepped over and tapped open the display. Something was wrong with the VOR-Tech communications infrastructure. His satellites, and relay stations were locking out, one by one, falling under somebody else's command. An instant later his phone began to...sing, trilling out in a warbling note.

Lightning flashed outside his window. First one bolt, then a sheet, then a continuous pillar of blazing white energy.

No... It couldn't be lightning. Lucian sipped his drink and tapped at his watch, running a scan on the lightning. It was psionic energy, powerful enough to warp reality.

Lucian had no intention of waiting to see what was coming.

He marched to the corner of the room, and opened the concealed door, revealing his personal transporter pad. Drawing a breath, he stepped onto the pad, activated the controls, and phased out of reality.

The lightning solidified and took form.

Alastor materialised in the ocean, at the foot of the tower crowned with a pyramid. It writhed and coiled in the cool freedom of the sea water, breaching the surface with a long cry. It could feel the life beating in the great metropolis. It almost drowned in the cacophony of so many souls, each rich and vibrant, with flavoursome emotions.

Alastor reached out, and fed.

### **Jorvika County, The United States**

Redcap sat back in his chair, and smirked.

Hank loomed over the desk. "So... How many people did you kill? How many died because you thought they might be me?"

Redcap narrowed his eyes. "Clearly not enough."



“Why?” Hank whispered.

Redcap flinched, trying to swallow back his answer, even as it slipped past his lips. “Knowing one is superior is not enough. Hercules was a god, but would be forgotten, would be nothing, if not for his twelve labours? I have to...” He grimaced and fought against the words. “I have to prove myself, to take power.”

“You were paid?” Hank asked.

“I will be.”

“Who hired you?” Hank demanded.

Again, Redcap struggled, trying to keep the words inside. “The Moros.”

“Who is that?” Hank asked.

Redcap held Hank in his gaze. This time he didn’t resist the influence of Hank’s aura. “He showed me what I was. What I could be. He opened my eyes to my past and helped me remember what I once was, in another life, what I still could be.”

“Why do they want me dead?” Hank whispered.

Redcap smiled. “It fears you will be in the way. Your kind fought against it once before.”

The lights flickered.

There was a high pitched noise that Hank couldn’t quite identify.

Redcap looked suddenly worried. “Well, that’s troubling.”

Hank gripped Redcap’s shoulder. “What have you done?”

Redcap shook his head. “This is not us. When Moros reaches Earth, we will all see their warships filling the sky.”

There were muffled screams in the distance. Hundreds of dying screams.

A wave of psionic washed over Hank, and tried to pull him apart.

His aura crackled as it protected him.

Fox and Dusk were waiting in the staff cafeteria at the prison, sipping coffee and reading newspapers.

Dusk looked up from his paper, misgivings weighing heavy on his brow. “Do you think we should have been in there with him?”

“Doc knows what he’s doing,” Fox said.

Dusk rubbed his neck. “I know... But... Even so...”

Fox chuckled. “You are such a mother hen.”

Dusk rolled his eyes. “Is that a bad thing?”

“Not bad... Just...Annoying.”

“Oh.” Dusk sighed. He dug a bag of sweets from his pocket. “You want me to stop?”

“No,” Fox said, with a grin, as she took one of the wine gums.

A shrill wail broke out through the cafeteria, as a dozen guards’ walkie talkies let out shrill cries of feedback, that warbled and trilled.

Fox shrieked in pain.

She, and all the guards, and the cafeteria staff collapsed to the floor, grasping their throats.

“Fox!” Dusk rushed to catch her, as she toppled from her chair, and cradled her in his arms.

Fox's cry became a gurgle, as she belched black smoke from her nose and mouth.

Around them the guards were on the floor, thrashing and kicking, as they too exhaled the tar thick clouds.

"No!" Dusk gripped Fox.

He was helpless to save her, as her body melted away into a black cloud, leaving only dust, and her empty clothes.

Within seconds, the cafeteria fell silent.

Dusk glanced around him, too horrified, too numbed by shock to speak.

It happened in a few seconds.

One moment Artemis was laughing and joking with her family. The Manta was hovering over the landing pad, about to descend down onto the Kneale Building, to arrive home. The next Mom, and Dad, and Jack were screaming and thrashing.

Her earpiece howled, a high pitched, warbling whistle. She tore it from her ear.

Alex ran to Mom. She was closest. She was belching black smoke.

Artemis took Mom's place at the controls, to land them safely. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Alex said. "Her heart is racing, her temperature is..."

"Alex?"

He had collapsed too, and was gagging on a column of the tar thick smoke that suddenly filled the cockpit.

"Dammit!" Artemis gasped, as she touched the manta down. "Hold on Alex! Hold on!" She tapped her earpiece. "Hudson! Medical emergency aboard the Manta! I need medical drones up here now!"

"Understood, Miss Artemis," the Kneale Building's computer answered, in the plummy, slightly hammy voice that Alex had 'borrowed' from his favourite actor.

Everything the computer said was stitched together from hundreds of hours of movies and TV shows (especially that weird British spy show that Alex, for reasons that defied all logic, was pretty much addicted to). The Frankenstein words had an odd cadence, and inflected in all the wrong places.

Artemis stepped from her seat and turned to Alex.

He was gone. Mom was gone. Dad was gone. Jack was gone.

Their clothes were empty. There was a smear of dust, and the wisps of that black smoke.

Just like in Antarctica.

"No!" Artemis sobbed. "How... How did they find us?"

She hurried down the ramp and out onto the platform, just in time to see Andraste and John's Orca as it banked off course, and plunged down towards the street.

It took Artemis a moment of two to comprehend the full scale of what was happening, to see the columns of black smoke drifting out of the windows, and air conditioning systems of every building, rising from the empty clothes on the sidewalk. The clouds all met and wove together in a cloud, a river flowing into the ocean.

The Orca bellyflopped onto the street, ploughing through the out of control, driverless cars.

Something wailed in the distance.

Artemis forced herself to look away from the crash, to the bay, to VOR-Tech Tower.

For the first instant Artemis thought there was a second skyscraper in the bay, but then she saw the tower was moving, and it was *growing*. The worm-like thing was growing as it absorbed the smoke.

Within moments it was so big she couldn't see the VOR-Tech tower behind it any more.

There was something... familiar about the sight. Something that resonated in the part of her mind that was full of stuff she didn't remember.

Medical Drones, robotic gurneys on caterpillar tracks trundled onto the platform.

"Miss Artemis." Hudson's computer voice said. "Where Is The Patient?"

Artemis ignored the robots, and sprinted to the elevator.

As she burst out of the lobby, the streets were full of the noise of idling engines from stranded cars, and the howl of the engines of the Orca.

Artemis kept running.

The engines of the Orca powered down.

That meant somebody had to be alive in there.

The ramp folded open.

John's eyes were full of despair as he staggered down the ramp. His left arm hung limp and broken at his side.

Artemis grabbed him from the right side in a hug, resting his head against her shoulder.

## • Nine

### London, The United Kingdom

Azrael and the Widow swept onto the Operations floor.

The holo-display was full of blank screens, each stating the two words 'Signal Lost'.

"What the Hell is going on?" Azrael demanded. "Our Comms-Net is down?"

"Temporarily," Tinkerbelle said. "Somebody tried to take it over, the same way Maelstrom did. I had to shut down and restart to prevent-"

"Understood," Azrael said, sitting himself at Marius's empty desk. "When will we be back online?"

"Momentarily." Cliff assured him. "It's not just us. Every comms net was attacked... Just like Maelstrom, but... far, far more advanced. My best guess is somebody took his framework, and... built upon it, upgrading to overcome every defence we have developed since."

Tinkerbelle made some furious key strokes. "Okay, here we go..."

The holo-displays cycled, as one by one the satellites came back online, and their feeds were restored.

At once warning icons flashed on the display, pulsing red over North America.

"That's Neo Jorvika," Tinkerbelle whispered.

Cliff tapped his earpiece. "Journeyman One. This is Operations Three."

The link connected.

"Sir, this is Journeyman Four," John reported in. "You are okay? Has it reached London yet?"

Cliff drew a breath. "As best we can tell, the disruption is everywhere. Something hacked every communications system, and broadcast a jamming signal. We are restoring our networks now, but... Nobody was hurt here."

"You don't know what happened?" John said, his voice cold. "Can Tinkerbell access her Pucks? I need to know if whatever is happening here is still ongoing, or if it's been and gone. Maybe it's just the city for now, but when it feeds again... Who knows?"

"When what feeds again?" Cliff asked.

Tinkerbell tapped at her keyboard. "Okay, the Pucks are online, and... What the Holy Hell is that?"

The video feed from one of the Pucks was on the holo-display.

Cliff stared at it for a few moments, before he comprehended what he was seeing. John was obviously holding the Puck, and pointing it out of a window on an upper floor of the Kneale building. Beyond the city, out at sea, there was... a deep sea worm, bigger than a skyscraper.

Azrael muttered a prayer beneath his breath.

"That," John said, "is a Mythosian. And... As far as I can tell, it just ate everybody in the damned city."

"John," Tinkerbell said. "There is an afterglow of massive psionic energy around you, and I think it's ticking over, but... I don't think it's active now. You aren't in immediate danger."

"I'm not," John said. "But... I don't know how much air Andraste has."

"She's okay?" Cliff asked.

"I think so..." John said. "I didn't have much time. Her armour protected her for a second, so I... Well..."

### **Neo Jorvika, The United States**

John was in one of the First Family's laboratories.

Artemis was busy at one of the work stations, toying with a computer, trying to bring their own satellite network back online.

John turned the Puck so it could watch him, as he reached into his satchel, as deep as he could.

Andraste grabbed his hand, and he hauled her up, out of the bag.

She landed awkwardly, still clad in her holographic armour.

"Journeyman One!" Cliff cheered over the comms-net. "Are you okay?"

"I'm alive," Andraste reported. "What the Hell is..." Her voice trailed off as she stared out the window. "Never mind. I see."

### **London, The United Kingdom**

Robin sat up in her bed, as Sid worked furiously at his computer.

"You are right," he said, turning the screen round, so she and Yeti could see it. "It isn't just a jamming signal. It's a spell."

"Understood," Tinkerbell said over her earpiece. "What does it do?"

"It..." Robin frowned. "It creates a blanket psionic resonance field. I think... I think it's marking targets for that thing in Neo-Jorvika. Sharks are attracted to the smell of blood, or the sounds of movement? Well, this is doing

the same thing. When the time is right, when it is ready to feed again, the pitch will change somewhere, and somebody will be telling the Mythosian where all the juicy human souls are.”

“The question is,” Sid said, touching his earpiece, “if we can find the source. Now... If we look at the readings I got from both Antarctica and Loam Hall, I think... I think we can find them. The magic used to move through the mirrors, is...well... It’s from somewhere way way down the reality spectrum, down in one of the cold dead universes, the places where the stars are cinders, slowing decaying into entropy. I’ve never seen anything like it. In theory, if we can get some satellites up and running...”

Marius spoke up, on the Comms-Net. “Which we can’t do, until we stop the signal.”

“Well, yeah,” Sid admitted, “but if we could, then whichever mirror our man last arrived at will stand out like a tyrannosaur at a petting zoo.”

There was a slight pause.

“Well...” Andraste said, over the Net. “The First Family’s satellites detected the original psionic event. Tink, can you help us get them back online?”

“I thought you would never ask,” Tinkerbelle purred.

### Ouroboros Island

“Damn your eyes!” Dagon hissed, as a cluster of icons on his holographic display blinked from red to green. The First Family were reactivating their satellites. “I thought I killed you!”

More icons turned green.

MITHRAS was already operational.

“And damn your eyes too!” Dagon snapped.

He hurried to punch new commands into the computer, preparing the Praetorians for the attack that was now immanent.

An ominous thought nagged at the back of Dagon’s mind.

The Celeres had been together in Antarctica. The longer they were together, the more likely the third would be drawn to them...

“No...” Dagon whispered. “No! They are all too late. Far, far, too late!”

His words did not bolster his belief or confidence.

### London, The United Kingdom

Cabinet Office Briefing Room A was currently located in a secure, basement vault of Lloyd George House.

Cliff was the last to arrive, and swept his gaze over the assembled committee. Rahul Siddig, the Prime Minister was of course sat at the head of the table, with the Home Secretary, and the Minister of Defence, sat closest to him, followed by senior officers from the armed forces, a handful of senior civil servants, and Cliffs opposite numbers from the other security services.

SS ELEGY DISPATCH FIVE 5 APR 25 / 21:31 SHIP TIME MOON SEEN FROM STARBOARD WINDOW.  
 UNSCHEDULED. CREW AGREE NOT TO MENTION IT \*STOP\* SILVERWARE HUMMING AGAIN

Rahul gave Cliff one of his dour looks. “So... One Minister for Security And Intelligence arrested, and another exploded, within a week, Cliff. That has to be a record for you.”

Cliff nodded. “If only it were that simple.”

Rahul shrugged. “Explain it to me.”

Cliff slipped a disc into the computer built into the conference table. A holographic display powered up in the middle of the black glass conference table. Cliff tapped to select the Puck footage from Loam House.

“This,” he said, “was the real Benjamin Adams, the man you went to school with.”

“Dear God!” The Home Secretary muttered. “Then who was the man I had lunch with? Who was at my birthday party?”

Cliff opened a second screen, with the footage from the Puck in Antarctica.

He could see the reaction around the table, as brows furrowed, and expressions pinched in a conflicted confusion, both adamant that the man they saw both was, and absolutely was not, the man they knew.

Cliff gave them a moment, then continued. “What you are feeling, is your mind adjusting to a spell that is no longer in effect.” He tapped through the sensor data, from Loam Hall, until he found an image that best showed the eel-like parasite within Adams’ chest and throat. “This ugly little fellow is a psionic parasite. It comes from somewhere a good way down the Reality Spectrum from us, and... It appears to have the ability to warp and distort reality, blurring history, or our perception of history, enough for an imposter, a cuckoo in the nest, so to speak, to steal somebody’s identity. Not just to fake documents, but to make it so those who knew Adams, would know the imposter.”

The Minister of Defence raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t Auntie Hemlock do something like that in the sixties? She convinced the whole world that some pop star had popped his clogs? There are still people who believe it, and he’s released about nine albums since.”

Cliff played the footage from Antarctica.

Rahul stared at the holograms in confusion. “So... All those dead bodies? That was him?”

“Indirectly,” Cliff said. “We believe he used Khyron’s resources to reach the cavern, then he fed them to his prize...” Cliff tapped open footage from Neo Jorvika. “And this is where he brought the Mythosian. It appeared the same time the comms network was disrupted. The disruption signal is a spell. When focussed on Neo Jorvika it triggered the creature, this sleeping god, to feed. Somewhere around eight million people died instantly. We believe it needs to feed twice more before it opens a portal, and more of its kind spill into our reality. Our only advantage is that it takes time to process the energy it absorbs. We have somewhere between eight and sixteen hours before the next target is selected.” He opened one last screen, this time showing the distinctive magical signature radiating from the Palace on Ouroboros Island. “We believe this is where the comm-disruption originates. If we shut it down, we stop another city being targeted. We stop this happening again.”

Rahul nodded. “And the quickest we can restore communications, and redirect the fleet, or the air force? Can we get the Americans to help?”

“Twelve hours,” an Admiral said. “At best.”



Cliff stared at the Prime Minister. "I want permission to launch a response from the Scimitar Squad, and RATs One and Two. I have assets in Neo Jorvika who will assist in combating the Mythosian, any way they can."

"Granted," Rahul said.

Cliff nodded, and turned to leave. He paused. "And... I assume in light of what we have seen, I am to consider the orders from the imposter void? My team is secure in their roles?"

The Home Secretary went to say something, but Rahul spoke over him.

"Of course," Rahul said. "We can only assume he was trying to undermine your efforts. I will sign whatever papers are required after this is done."

Cliff smiled. "Excellent."

### Neo Jorvika, The United States

Artemis ran out onto the landing pad to greet Doc Horus as he swept down from the sky. He was carrying two people by their shoulder.

One was a scruffy young man, about her own age, in a peacoat, shirt and tie that should have been smarter than he made them look.

The other made her heart stop.

He was rangy and beaky, with white gold hair, tinted goggles, and a cruel smile.

Horus set them down, and stepped forwards to Artemis. "Miss First. Your family...?"

"They..." The words still didn't seem real to Artemis. She would mourn them later. She would have far too much time to dwell on it later. "They didn't make it."

Horus's face fell. "I'm so sorry."

The rangy one, the Jack Of Coins tutted. "Do we really have time for this...Hank?"

Artemis started at the word. It made the world shift off kilter. She looked at Horus, somehow seeing the most famous hero in her city, for the first time. And suddenly his eyes were all too familiar. "Hank?"

Horus waved the word away. "This one is called Redcap. He was in the Omni-Max Prison. I couldn't leave him there. He would have..."

"There was nobody else left," the scruffy one explained. His Welsh accent made his words sound kind and gentle. "I'm... sorry..."

Hank gestured to the Scarecrow. "Dusk. He's one of my foundlings."

Redcap strolled over and walked in a tight circle around Artemis. He smirked. "Well, Sister... Still drawn to the noble code I see. Is our little big brother here too?" He marched towards the door.

Dusk hurried after him. "You think we are leaving you unsupervised?"

Redcap laughed. "Oh please! Do you think I'm running away? I can't rule the world, if it all burns."

Hank shook his head. "A lot of people have tried to kill me, but I really hate him."

Artemis stared after the assassin. "He is not... how Grace described him."

Dusk walked to the edge of the landing pad, and stared over the city. He was staring without looking.

Artemis stepped over to him. For a moment she struggled to find the words, but there weren't any.

Dusk looked at her. "Hell of a day, huh?"

Despite everything, Artemis felt a smile tugging at her lips. "Yeah."

Dusk took a bag of sweets from his coat pocket, and offered her a wine gum.

Artemis plucked a red one from the bag. "I... don't know if I can do this without them."

Dusk shook his head. "I don't thin I can do this without her, but... You know we've got to try, right?"

Artemis nodded. "Yeah."

### Eternity Station, Nowhere

Cassie and Flip hung at the back of the crowd, as the Foundlings gathered beneath the station clock.

The hologram of Doc Horus that loomed over the concourse was looking haggard and defeated in a way that he had never been on television, or in the press. His eyes were...haunted.

"It's called a Mythosian," Doc said. "It killed everything in the city, and a good way into the county. My friends in the UK say that we have less than a day, maybe as little as eighteen hours, to kill this thing before it feeds again. They are going to target the source of the spell, we need to target the beast. So... I need to know how to kill a god."

One of the Foundlings stepped forwards, a Sikh man in a turban. "What about the First Family?"

Doc hesitated.

"Oh God," Flip said. "They're gone."

Doc nodded. "They are. For now, until this is done, I need you all to stay at the Sation. You are safe there."

The hologram dissipated.

The crowd split up, into smaller groups, talking quickly, and quietly, moving with a purpose.

Flip and Cassie were left standing there.

"Oh, Hell no," Flip said, her fingers curling into fists.

She marched across the concourse, hurrying after Grace.

Cassie did her best to keep up.

"Hey!" Flip shouted.

Grace paused and turned to face them. Her smile sent hot shivers down Cassie's spine.

"How do we help?" Flip demanded.

Grace stroked her chin. "However you can." She pointed to the various groups. "We have biologists, we have physicists, we have engineers, alchemists, and magicians..."

Flip nodded. "Okay. So what do we do? That thing killed my nanna, my Paulie, my neighbours, and... I want to fight it. Tell me how I help kill this thing."

Grace nodded. "Tell me what you can do."

Flip nodded. "I can kickbox..." Even as she said the words, she realised how it sounded. She sighed, and let the fury subside. "I can cook. I can make coffee. I can... help you guys keep going."

Grace pointed to the far corner of the station. "There was a restaurant, we use it as a kitchen."

Flip marched away, with determination.

Cassie wanted to follow, but couldn't.

Grace smiled at her. "Are you okay?"

Cassie stared at her. "I... want to learn to do what you do. The cards... Not now. Obviously. But, when this is done... Is it possible?"

"I would like that," Grace said, touching her hand. "We will make time."

Cassie turned and hurried after Flip.

For a while they worked in silence, peeling potatoes to make fries, and prepping the onions, lettuce, tomatoes and pickles for the burgers.

Then Flip drew a breath. "So... Is this why you never took a guy back to our place?"

Cassie shrank away. "What?"

"The way you look at Grace," Flip said. "Is that why you never brought somebody back to our place? Because... you're not into guys? You thought if I knew you were dating girls... I wouldn't be okay with it?"

"No. I just..." She chewed her lip. "I never met anybody. Or... I did, but I was always too scared to... Well... If I was wrong there were people who would not be okay with it. And if I was right, there were people at work, or at school, who were *really* not okay with it, and...What if I put them in danger?"

Flip nodded.

Cassie tried to smile. Tears burned at her cheek. "But... No. I never thought you would..."

Flip grinned. "Damned right."

Cassie chewed her lip. "But... You know just knowing, just living with me, there are people who are going to hate you, right."

"Good!" Flip brandished her knife. "Let them come. Because I have a whole lot feelings to let out, and I would love a target."

Cassie grinned through her tears. "Yeah. I know the feeling."

Grace sat crossed legged in her carriage, on a cushion in the middle of the magic circle she had painted on the floor.

She shuffled the cards without looking at them, focussing her thoughts, as she reached out into the tides of magic.

One by one she placed the cards on the polished wooden floor of the carriage.

"Why were they spared?" She asked.

Three Jacks and the Fool came easily to hand, but reality quivered under her fingertips, and... the cards were blank.

"It can't see them," Grace whispered. "Dusk's mind was shielded. The others must be protected too, somehow..."

Next the Hanged Man came to her fingers, but the Queen of Wands was stuck to it.

"Andraste was hidden," Grace said. "Oh, my clever little Jack..."

The Sun came to her fingers.

"Of course," Grace said. "Doc is not human. His power was too great, too bright to be consumed by the darkness."

## Neo Jorvika, The United States

Artemis lurked in the corner of the lounge.

John walked over, and put a hand on Artemis's arm. Just like her Mom used to. He didn't ask if she was okay, or holding up, he just let her know she didn't have to be alone.

For now it was enough.

Dusk was stood at the window, staring out at the monster on the horizon.

Redcap was at her father's bar, making himself a vodka martini.

Andraste and Doc Horus (Or Hank? That was a thought that was still reeling about her.) were in conference with a hologram of a girl in a robotic wheelchair with caterpillar tracks.

Redcap sipped his drink, and leant on the bar. "So... You two really don't know what you are, do you?"

John frowned. "And you do?"

Redcap smiled. "I was shown the truth. Or some of it."

"By who?" Dusk asked, without looking around.

"The Moros," Redcap snapped.

Dusk shrugged. "Oh, so an alien warlord from distant stars, who will one day invade Earth, to claim its resources in the name of their great and bloody Empire?"

Redcap gestured, enthusiastically. "Yes!"

Dusk sighed. "And... they contacted you via a psychic vision?"

"Yes!" Redcap said, his patience waning.

Artemis scoffed. "And how do you know they showed you the truth?"

"I *know*!" Redcap insisted. "I always knew I was more than human. You must have too! We were the Celeres, cosmic warriors, and leaders of armies. We fought for centuries, vanquished terrible foes, and conquered vast kingdoms. We were born to rule! And you two have cowered like sheep!"

John held his 'brother' in a stone cold gaze. "We became protectors. You became a murderer."

"A means to an end," Redcap said. "This..." He gestured at them. "This is all you think you should be? Do you have any idea what we could do if we took this world for our own?"

"Yes," Dusk said, as though the word tasted of ashes.

Redcap ignored him. "We could shape this world to our vision!"

"Oh yes," Dusk muttered. "You could have work camps, and slave labour, genocides and culls. You could let plagues eat away at the population, just to thin the herd..."

"And what do you know!" Redcap snapped, his face livid.

Dusk looked around at him.

Artemis could see the answer in his eyes. *He's lived it.*

Redcap cocked his head. "How dare you pretend you know me!"

Dusk stared into his eyes. "Am I wrong? Tell me I am wrong."

Redcap downed his drink. "Who are you, anyway? How did you survive?"

Dusk tapped his head. "My head was shielded against psionic attacks a long time ago." He looked away. "Fox was supposed to have been too, but it didn't take."

Redcap smirked. “Well, between that and your whip, I’m sure the Mythosian is quivering in his boots. What exactly do you plan to do to kill it?”

Dusk turned back to the window. “I was thinking that I would break into the VOR-Tech tower and use Lucian Alexander’s personal -highly illegal- teleportation platform to destabilise the creature’s grip on this reality. Then I was thinking we should drop some satellites on its head from orbit.”

The hologram of the girl in the wheelchair pointed finger guns at Dusk. “I like him. Can we keep him?”

Artemis squared her shoulders. “Will it work?”

Hank spoke into his watch. “Grace, I think we have an idea. I want the Boffins to tell me if its viable.”

### London, The United Kingdom

Cliff leant on his desk. “Is that possible?”

Tinkerbelle tapped at her computers, and scowled at the screen. “In theory, *if*, and this is a pretty big ‘if... If Lucian Alexander really has been breaching the Ditko Convention and building himself a teleport pad.”

Azrael steepled his fingers under his chin. “I would be inclined to trust Dusk’s intelligence. The question is if the technology can be used against the entity.”

Tinkerbelle drummed her fingers. “Well, in theory... The First Family’s satellite got a really good scan of the initial psionic event, so we should have a really good idea of the entity’s energy signature, and... Teleporters are all about converting energy from one form, to another, and broadcasting it away. The trick is to keep it stable and to get it to reform at the other end, but if we aren’t bothered about that, or I guess, if being *unstable* and *not* reconstructing the signal at the other end is to our advantage, then I can turn platform into a wide angle projector, and...”

“And?” Cliff asked.

Tinkerbelle frowned. “And I could invent a really bloody nasty weapon of mass destruction. But yes... This should hurt the...thingy. And yes, if we can weaken its grip, then a big enough shock, like dropping satellites on it, should...make it let go of this reality, and send it back through the Veil.”

“Sir,” Robin said over the comms-net, “I can give it a shock.”

Cliff rubbed his chin. “What are you thinking?”

Sid broke into the conversation. “The jamming signal is a spell. Instead of shutting it down we tap into it.”

“And,” Robin said, “I play a new tune.”

Azrael looked at Tinkerbelle.

She shrugged. “It’s... difficult, but possible.”

Sid chuckled. “Get me aboard an Orca. I will make it work.”

Cliff glanced at Azrael. “I don’t think we have time to run this past the PM.”

Azrael shook his head. “I think this is one of those cases when we can apologise when the dust settles and see who has the brass monkeys to try and condemn us for saving the world. Make it so.”

## • Ten

### Ouroboros Island

The four Orcas flew in low, so close to the ocean, they carved a wake through the waves.

They rose up as they approached the land, skimming the rooftops of the narrow, labyrinthine streets. The howls of their engines filled the sky.

Marius glanced across at Sid.

The little old man was wedged in his seat, clinging to his laptop satchel with white knuckles, looking like he was trying desperately to hold onto his lunch. His eyes were screwed closed and he was muttering under his breath.

“Are you okay?” Marius asked.

“Not really,” Sid admitted.

The gun emplacements on the Palace walls opened fire. Bullets and shells hammered against the armour of the Orca.

“Very much not okay!” Sid squeaked.

“It’s okay!” Marius said. “Yeti here is going to stay with you. When we have cleared the way, he will show you in.”

Yeti gave him a surprisingly confident smile. “I’ll keep you out of trouble.”

Marius turned to the others. “Okay, guys, give me a moment?”

The ramp lowered, and bullets sparked against the bulkhead.

Marius reached behind him and drew Daisy, his assault cannon, and held it at his hip. The electric motor spun up to speed, and lightning flickered in the glass reservoir of alchemical mercury.

The gun Meshed against his mind, and read his thoughts, unleashing a stream of high velocity bullets, guided by his thoughts. Marius felt their impact, as they tore through the defensive plating of the gun turrets, shredding the machines within.

Praetorian guards poured from a doorway, out onto the ramparts of the palace.

“Journeyman Two,” Cliff said, over the comms-net, “those are not human. They are abominations. Do not hold back.”

“Understood,” Marius said, leaping from the Orca.

He landed on the ramparts, and crouched low, bracing himself, as he opened fire again.

There was no blood as Daisy cut down the Praetorians. Their wounds bled a mustard yellow slime.

The Scimitar squad followed Marius out of his Orca.

RATs One and Two came flying out of their own Orcas, with Broadside, the Titanium Woman, and Claymore leading the charge, meeting the Praetorian forces in a flurry of combat, smashing through their defences.

“On me!” Marius shouted, pushing ahead, through the doors into the palace.

At the end of the corridor, a group of Praetorians crouched behind an overturned table, and opened fire with their carbines, targeting Marius with short, tight bursts.

Daisy tore them to shreds, and Marius ran on.



### Neo Jorvika, The United States

They approached the VOR-Tech Tower from the far side hoping it would block the Mythosian's view of them, if the Stealth Field didn't disguise it.

Artemis sat in her seat, trying not to recognise the hollow pit in her stomach, the sick sensation that it should have been Mom, Dad, or Jack in the pilot's chair, not Andraste. It should have been Alex beside her, not John.

Andraste brought the vessel to a hover, a little way from the windows of an executive's corner office, on the penthouse level.

Doc Horus flew past them, a flash of scarlet, that shattered one of the windows.

Andraste closed in, and lowered the ramp. "Okay," she said. "Let's do this."

Her holographic armour formed around her, as she grabbed Redcap, and shoved him ahead of her. "You can stay where I can see you."

"Of course," Redcap said, with a faux-gallant bow, brandishing a crossbow in his unbandaged hand.

Dusk gestured at the smashed window, as he leapt from the ramp, into the building. "Subtle, Doc. Real subtle." He ran a finger down the inside of the frame. "It triggered silent alarm."

Artemis hurried down the ramp, her TEK bow folded out, and an arrow shimmering at her fingertip. John was beside her, an arrow nocked in that compact little bow of his. They fell into step, and leapt the gap into the building together, hurrying out to sweep and clear the corridor beyond.

VOR-Tech security drones bobbed around the corner. They were blank faced cubes of black glass, with compact submachine guns hanging beneath them, as they floated in the air.

Even without saying a word, Artemis knew that John would target the two on the left with a single shot, pinning them to the wall. She took down the two on the right, with a pair of rapid bolts. It was if they had been training together, working together, forever. She was as in tune with him as she had ever been with her family.

They peeped around the next corner, and glimpsed the machine gun turret unfolding from the ceiling, ducking back before it could open fire.

Bullets flashed past where their heads had been a split second before.

Horus stepped past them, and marched into the corridor, acting as a shield. The bullets rained upon him, bouncing harmlessly away.

Artemis stepped out behind him, and fired an arrow, smashing the gun's sensors.

Doc Horus nodded his thanks, and marched on.

The rest followed behind him.

### Ouroboros Island

Marius landed at the bottom of the elevator shaft in a crouch, and rose to his feet. The Scimitar Squad whistled down the fast-ropes, landing beside him, their guns held ready. Marius wrenched the doors open, and they swept into the Throne Room, cutting down the waiting Praetorians in a couple of heartbeats.

The Ersatz-Adams rose to his feet, stepping through the cluster of holograms, his cane held out.

A low, whale-song sound filled the chamber.

Warning icons flashed in Marius's vision.

"Fools!" The man who wasn't Benjamin Adams roared. "Do you think you can stop me! Drop your guns, and kneel before Dagon, the Thrice Dead King."

The Scimitar Squad dropped their guns, and dropped to their knees.

The part of Marius that human, felt compelled to obey.

The part that was machine adjusted, blocking out the sound, and shielding his mind.

Dagon pressed his cane to Marius's chest. "I am the Thrice Dead King, and I *will* be--"

Marius drove Daisy into the man's chest, and opened fire. The gun thundered, and threw Dagon back, slamming him into the throne. He lay still, black tar bubbling from the hole where his chest should have been.

"Now you're four times dead," Marius grunted. "On your feet lads. Yeti! I need my tech support!" He folded out Daisy's tripod, and left it pointing at Dagon. "If that thing twitches, turn it into a puddle, using whatever force necessary."

### **London, The United Kingdom**

"Is it dead?" Cliff asked, stepping closer to the hologram, and staring at the body.

"Seems to be," Tinkerbell admitted.

The Widow bowed her head, and placed a hand on Azrael's shoulder.

"For now," Azrael said. "Not in the long run, but... Long enough for us to do what we must."

Tinkerbell looked at Cliff.

He gave her a helpless shrug, and tapped his earpiece. "Andraste, we need some good news."

### **Neo-Jorvika, The United States**

Artemis hesitated in the doorway to Lucian Alexander's office.

The armoured plates, and quivering bristles of the giant-worm-thing was right outside the window, blocking out the sunlight.

She tried not to think of it, of what it was capable of, and especially of a hole ripping open, in space and time, to allow a legion of those things through.

The teleport pad was in the far corner.

"Andraste," Sir Clifford said, over their earpieces, "we need some good news."

Andraste ripped the pad from the floor, and pulled out the machinery beneath. "I know! I know! I'm working on it."

Redcap dropped into the chair behind the vast desk, and started pulling open the drawers beneath. "By the way. How did you know that was there?"

Dusk shrugged. "It's called being clever. You should try it some time."

Redcap found a Phased Energy Pistol in one of the drawers, and tossed aside his crossbow. "If you say so."

### Ouroboros Island

Sid ripped open the access panel on the side of the throne, pulled a cable free, and jacked it into his laptop. He sat cross legged and started to whistle as he worked on his laptop, picking apart Dagon's spell, slowly, and carefully, until at long last it fell silent.

### London, The United Kingdom

Robin sat on the edge of her bed, with her electric guitar on her lap, as she jacked it in to one of Tinkerbell's Pucks. She closed her eyes, and opened her mind to the flow of magic. Disturbance and turbulence surrounded her.

### Eternity Station, Nowhere

Cassie saw Grace lurking in the doorway, in the corner of her mind.

A smile crossed her lips as she looked up at Flip.

"What?" Flip asked, her nose wrinkling.

Cassie wiped her hands. "You need to take out the trash."

Flip frowned. "I do?"

"Please?" Cassie said.

Flip glanced over and saw Grace. She broke into a grin. "I... will go find out where the trash goes."

She took the bag and walked out the back door into the service corridor.

Grace chuckled. "I like your friend. She has...heart."

Cassie flushed, her heart racing. "Hi."

"Hi," Grace said, stepping close to Cassie, wrapping her fingers around Cassie's apron string.

Cassie's heart ran off in a panic, as she stared into Grace's eyes. "So... you have a moment to spare?"

"There is a plan," Grace said, "it is in hand. There is nothing I can do, but wait... And I kept thinking what I would regret not doing if the world ends. What I wish I would have done in the one moment I had... while I have one chance."

Cassie cupped Grace's cheek, and closed her eyes, welcoming the kiss that sent her entire existence into a weightless free fall.

### Neo Jorvika, The United States

Andraste slotted the last circuit board into place, and hefted the teleporter pad off the floor. "Doc, I need that window out the way."

Horus nodded, and placed his palm to the glass. The window shook, and shattered.

Andraste held up the pad, and took aim. "Power it up!"

Dusk pressed the control pad.

A cone of pure white light radiated from the pad, striking the Mythosian in its hide.

The reaction was instant, the god-monster howling and thrashing.

John touched his earpiece. "It's working! Hit it now!"

The worm thing turned and stared at the tower, at them.

Doc Horus nodded. "I'll keep it occupied."

"Good idea, Hank!" Redcap said, with a smile. "Don't get yourself killed."

"Go!" Andraste shouted, bracing herself against the pad.

Horus leapt from the window, and flashed away, striking the Mythosian in a barrage of battering arm blows, that made the whole building shake.

### **London, The United Kingdom**

Robin let the tides of magic guide her fingers, as she began to play, finding her rhythm and her melody. She played a song that captured the rolling of thunder, the crack of lightning, and the crashing of waves. The tempo rose, and the music grew urgency, gaining power and momentum.

The spell took shape, and echoed through the communications network, surrounding the entire world, singing from every telephone, every radio, every satellite and television.

### **Neo Jorvika, The United States.**

Artemis watched as a whirlpool of ink stain clouds filled the sky. Gale force winds whipped at the waves, driving them to a frenzy.

A finger of lightning flashed down and struck the Mythosian.

Then another.

And another.

And another.

The Mythosian howled and fell sideways, slumping against the VOR-Tech tower.

Another sheet of lightning struck the monster, this time burning a hold in its side.

Horus flashed forwards, and landed a titanic blow to the monsters head.

Another flash of lightning sent its flaming corpse falling into the ocean.

And then it was over.

Artemis stepped away from the window and fell into a chair, the weight of the days grief finally overwhelming her.

Dusk shut down the teleporter pad.

"It's done," John said, to his earpiece.

Doc Horus circled above the dead god for a few moments, before drifting back to the tower.

What happened next happened so fast that Artemis didn't even have time to hop to her feet, or draw her bow.

One moment Redcap was stood at the broken window, fixated by the dead Mythosian, like the rest of them, the next, his arm was held out, and he was firing the gun from the desk. A bolt of Phased Energy sizzled through the air, with a faint *pew* sound, and hit Doc in chest.

Doc Horus hung in the air, gripping the wound in his chest.

Redcap smiled like a shark, as he adjusted his air, and eased the slack from the trigger.

A split second too late, Artemis's TEK arrow blasted Redcap's gun into scrap.

In the same instance one of John's arrows hit Redcap in the wrist.

There was dull *thud*, and Redcap's expression went slack. He pitched forward, out the window, with a crossbow bolt jutting from the back of the head.

Dusk lowered Redcap's discarded crossbow, and let it fall from his fingers.

Horus stumbled his landing in the office, and slumped against the desk. "That one hurt!"

Andraste looked at him. "He was trying to kill you."

Horus smiled. "Fair point."

## • Epilogue

### London, The United Kingdom

The Home Secretary made Azrael and the Widow wait for a long moment, as he pretended to be busy with a file, before he finally looked up at them, and smiled. "Please. Sit."

"No, thank you," Azrael said.

"As you wish," the Home Secretary said. "Is this about Wren?"

"It is," Azrael said. "With full and proper respect, your request is denied."

The Home Secretary wore a dangerous smile. "I don't remember wording it as a request. Until a new Minister is appointed, I will be shouldering their responsibilities, and... as *distasteful* as I find the notion, we have to rebuild trust in the public. The campaign against Wren has a lot of support, voters we will need on side, before the next election. It will be sad to see Wren go, but—"

"No," Azrael said.

The Home Secretary glared at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"No." Azrael said. "I will not betray one of my agents, a fine young woman -do not dare say a word, I have seen into her *soul* and know what she is! I will not betray her to appease ignorance and bigotry, stirred by a butcher of millions. I will not fire her. Besides, the PM gave his word to my Overseer." Azrael leant on the desk. "Wren will be out of public view while she heals, and in a few weeks she will return to active duty, with your full support. You will agree to this, and in return, nobody at MITHRAS will set the record straight on those interviews you have given, claiming that *our* plan was *your* triumph, which would... somewhat undermine that public trust you hold so very dear."

For a few moments the Home Secretary was silent, then, at last he nodded. "Very well."

“Good.” Azrael turned to leave. “Now, be a good chap, and never, ever, treat any of my team as pawns to win an election, ever again. Our duty, Sir, is to the Nation, not the party, or whichever government happens to win an election. Good night.”

### Neo Jorvika Memorial, The United States

Robin was getting pretty good on her crutches.

She found John lurking at the back of the crowd, behind the press, and the public, wandering through the hundreds of marble monoliths that now filled two thirds of the park, studying the eight million names etched into the marble.

In the distance, there was applause, as Artemis Dosela First took the stage, to give her speech.

Robin smiled. “She’s good at that. The inspiring speeches. I caught her on the news. That appeal she made to Washington was amazing.”

John nodded, and stepped over to her. “Hello. Are you okay?”

Robin shook her head. “I am on so many pills I rattle. But it’s nice to be on my feet. I... won’t be riding the tube to hop an Orca any time soon. I’m going to be a Mission Coordinator for a while.”

“But not forever,” John said. “Good.”

Robin looked him in the eye. “What about you? Is what Tink said true?”

John shrugged. “That would depend what Tinkerbelle had to say.”

“That you handed in a resignation letter?” She asked. “That you won’t be coming back from your leave?”

John looked away.

“If it’s true,” Robin said, gently, “I want to hear it from you.”

“She doesn’t have anybody,” John said. “If there’s a chance I can be a brother to her, now of all times, then... She is most definitely worth taking the risk for.”

Robin kissed him on the cheek. “You will do fine. Keep in touch, okay.”

He cupped her cheek. “Of course I will. I’m... adding sisters to my family, not trading one in for another.”

Robin grabbed him in a hug, burying her head in his shoulder. “You idiot. What did you have to go and say that for? Do you have any idea what tears do to my makeup?”

He held her close. His hugs were rare, but, Robin decided, they were the best.

Cliff stepped away from the mingling crowd, and presented himself to Dusk.

The younger man shifted nervously. “Sir Clifford.”

“Dusk.” Cliff said. “I understand we lost your partner. I’m very sorry. Fox was a good soldier, and a good woman.”

Dusk sighed. “She was the best. She deserved better.”

Cliff paused a moment. “My understanding is that your mission is over. The once and future tyrant of the world is dead. The future you once knew is...avoided.”



Dusk nodded. His eyes were cold and dark, full of regrets. "History has already diverged from that which we knew."

Cliff nodded. "I don't know what future we will be able to build, but... If you want a role in protecting it, I have a vacancy to fill."

Duck shrugged. "Isn't that what I do with Horus?"

"Perhaps," Cliff said, giving him his card. "And if you want to remain a Foundling, I will understand. But... If you would consider my offer, I would appreciate it."

### **Lunar City One, The Moon.**

Lucian Alexander paced his office, staring out the vast windows, over the white marble pyramids and black glass cubes of the lunar city, to the endless ocean of silver dust, and craggy craters.

On his desk, the holographic screen played back the security footage from his office on Earth. It showed agents of MITHRAS, the First Family girl, and Doc Horus as they dissembled the teleporter platform, to build a weapon.

That in itself was...troubling, but he was confident his lawyers (and a few well-placed bribes) would ensure the accusations never saw a court room.

It was the words of the assassin, Redcap, that had Lucian vexed. "Good idea Hank! Don't get yourself killed."

Lucian wound the footage back.

"Good idea Hank!"

He played it again.

"Good idea Hank!"

He rubbed his head, a spell broke, and suddenly he could recognise what he had always been able to see.

## Seeing Double, Part 2

By Fara Shimbo

### Chapter Seven: The Prizes of Stupidity.

By the time Ranger returned, the two astrogators were still talking starships, but by now the talk had changed from “You should have seen this neat ship!” to “Are you kidding, I could have made that ship do that!” with a lot of interspersed “Oh, yeah?”s. The satamuri eagerly chimed in with “Feh! I could have built a ship that would have done that all by itself!” and were about to cast the most depreciating aspersions on everything—when suddenly Serai noticed the box of cat show ribbons on the table.

“Oooooooo!” Serai said, and the twins came over to look. Inside the box were satin ribbon in various colors and lengths, sparkly glitter, and “moon opals,” marble sized spheres, rods and “dumbbells” of olivine and fayalite. These shone in many colors due to fractures from micrometeorite impacts. Thobo alone knew exactly where to find them, and he tended to find them in great abundance. He never sold them (which would have made him rich indeed!) but gave them away, mainly because this behavior was considered extremely unselfish and irritating.

Serai picked out a really spectacular one and said “ungh!” and other chimpanzee like noises that Thobo, Ranger and Jon had long ago come to understand were indicative of imminent robbery. Thobo snatched the jewel from Serai’s paw. “You can’t have that. That’s a prize for the Cat Show.”

Serai looked up dubiously. “What’s a Cat Show?”

Thobo walked out onto his porch and yelled “BREAKFAST!!!” Four cats came racing up from all corners of the dome (only two of them were his).

The satamuri stared down at the things. “These are cats?” said Serai. “What do you show them?”

“You hold them up one at a time in front of someone who judges their merits—or lack of them.”

Serai huffed. “I could win a cat show.”

Thobo grinned, “Yes, but can you win a stupid cat show?”

Serai looked up at Thobo in horror. “Why would anybody want to do that?”

“To see who is so unfortunate as to have befriended the stupidest cat, obviously.”

Serai climbed up on the counter and said, confidentially, “You ... ah ... enter those little cats in this show, I hope.”

Thobo leaned back. “I had considered otherwise ... “

The twins growled.

“But I decided against it.”

Serai began hooting and growling. “That stone calls to me!” sahn whined. “What will you trade for it, sharethe maileiau?”

“Trade for it? Hah! You don’t have anything nearly valuable enough to trade for it.”

Serai’s hair all stood on end, which, since Serai only had hair on sahn’s head, looked ridiculous.

“Sorry, kid,” Thobo said, the stone held tightly in his fist. “If you want this marble, you’ve got to win it.”

Serai screamed, the twins cackled, and all the satamuri ran madly out the door.

When Thobo turned to Jon, the latter’s eyes were deep purple. Thobo shrugged and said, “Did I do something wrong?”

Jon said “AUGH!” and slumped in his chair.

SS ELEGY DISPATCH SIX  
6 APR 25 / 01:04 SHIP TIME  
BRIDGE REPORTS ALL MAPS  
BLANK \*STOP\* ONE PASSENGER  
VANISHED; GLOVES REMAIN STOP  
CHAMPAGNE RE-CHILLED \*STOP\*  
NO ONE ASKS FOR RESCUE \*END\*

A little while later, the Shift Change bells rang. The students had exactly fifteen minutes to load themselves back into their underground haunts, and at this point, Wargentín’s Permanent Residents took over their city with a vengeance.

Thobo began to wonder what one does when one’s friend is in town; that is, what one does when one’s friend is in town and one doesn’t want one’s friend mobbed by gawkers. He didn’t have to ponder for long; his phone rang, and on the other end was Jessikka Merritt-Isaacson, pleading with him to come and get the satamuri who were terrorizing her goat.

## Chapter Eight: Many Lifetimes Away.

The dome over Residential went to black, and the lights in Main Dome went dim. That meant evening, although there was still considerable light from reflections of the buildings on the inside of the dome. Most of the human population of Wargentín was now in the Underground, away from the dreaded Ionizing Radiation (for it was still daytime outside), watching *Mighty Joe Young*.

Maki, Reki Nahi and Serai Yodo, still up in the domes since they didn’t care a white about Ionizing Radiation, were at their peak. By the time they were worn out from swinging from tree to building and lamp post and several tall people, it was very, very late in the evening indeed.

They careened (a little slower than they had been) into Residential dome, where the tiny lake and tiny beach which sat between the three apartment buildings was deserted of human types. There were two dolphins there, though, and the satamuri dove in to join them. The dolphins, however, made it clear that they were engaged in something they were not about to share. They chased the satamuri out.

The lake was actually a medium sized pool with sloping sides, and the beach, because there was almost no room left for it, was made up of fairly steep dunes of sand. Norfolk Pines and potted palms grew on one side. The three satamuri played hide and seek among them for a while until some overtired resident threw a shoe at them.

"Touchy people here!" Serai said. "What do they expect you to do all night?"

"Either sleep or make noise elsewhere," Maki said. "Since I normally have to be awake during most of the day, I usually sleep too."

Reki Nahi was taken aback. "How can you stay healthy being awake during the day? How could you get enough light?" Nahi began rummaging through sahn's twin's coat, looking for signs of wear.

"I guess I don't most of the time," Maki said, lying down and taking advantage of a grooming done right for a change. "I try to make sure that I get to sit by a window."

Serai Yodo looked out the dome gloomily. "And the light you get here is just an awful color!" Sahn bristled.

"Everything you get here is just an awful color," Maki sighed.

"Your starship can provide you with the right kind of light," Nahi said, with just a hint of reprimand. "You know, we see Fa Chen so often that I wonder if you spend enough time in that light."

Now Maki bristled. Sahn growled and said, "I had no illusions as to what I was getting into when I came here."

"I still do not think you should have come," Nahi said. "It is a dangerous way to live."

"Life as a shauneh is quite dangerous," Maki said, chortling.

"Well, that's true, but I'm willing to bet it's a lot more fun than ... than just living here."

Maki sighed. "This is true, what you say. Sometimes."

"Then why do you stay?"

"Why?" Maki turned over and stared out the window at the stars. "Why.... Partly for the same reason I decided to leave you. I owed it to those who trained me for this work to actually do it."

"I know you well," Nahi said, "but you are still here."

"That's why I stayed initially. And now I stay because this work has made me very old and tired, and because, I guess, it is easier to stay."

"This is not right," Nahi said, stopping sahn's grooming suddenly and sitting back. "This is disgusting to hear you say! I am known as one of the worst and most loath some Roamers who ever lived, and when you were with us, twin, you shared that exalted reputation. And now listen to you!" Nahi made a very rude gesture at the universe.

Maki just sighed.

"Have you accomplished what you set out to do here?" Nahi asked.

"You were not mobbed when you came in," Maki said.

"I expect to be mobbed when I come in!"

"Yes, but by people who only want to kill you. You do not expect to be mobbed by people who want to take you apart cell by cell and cage you," Maki said, "or stick probes in your brain."

"And why hasn't that happened to you?"

"It almost did," Maki said, "but I yawn a lot, and besides, a very astute and open minded friend saw to it that I got put on the Peer Review board."

“The what?”

“Any research you want published in *The Wargentin Scientist* has to be reviewed by other Wargentin Scientists. Nobody’s stupid enough to think their paper will be reviewed favorably by someone after whose neurons you’re lusting after. Same thing with Thobo; they had to give him tenure to keep certain people at bay.”

“He is a firstling, I take it,” Serai said.

“Yes, but he manages much better than most firstlings I’ve known. That’s because his programmers were lunatics, I think.”

“And the silver one?” Serai said.

“Ranger is a slightly different case. After the investors saw that there was no controlling Thobo, they made sure there was, in Ranger, code that made him Stay and Obey.

“There was only one problem, some of his programming was done by the same woman who did most of Thobo’s, and she taught him how to whine and procrastinate. So every time they’d tell him to do something, he’d whine and kvetch and procrastinate to the point where after a while, nobody wanted anything to do with him any more. Then he came here and Thobo took out that code when he wasn’t looking, but he still whines and kvetches anyway because it annoys people.”

“That one has potential,” Serai chortled.

“They both have potential,” Maki said. “You should become acquainted.” Sahn looked direly at Serai. “Thobo tells worse puns than you.”

“Impossible!” Serai huffed.

Maki hooted and got up, and the two other satamuri followed. They made their way up the side of a building to Thobo’s terrace. The lights inside were out, but the door was open. Jon was not there. Thobo lay on his hammock, with parts of him faintly glowing from LED’s under his skin.

“OOOooooooooo!” Nahi said rather over loudly, but Thobo didn’t stir.

“What’s wrong with him?” This time Nahi spoke by the implanted radio all shauneh shared.

“Nothing,” Maki said, “he’s probably communing with the school’s network about the syllabus or downloading something to the spaceship shop or correcting papers or something. Of course, he may just be asleep.”

“He is *deoshaiqerau*?” Serai said (it meant a mostly organic construct).

“He is,” Maki said. Maki was very tired, and the temptation to cuddle up under one of Thobo’s arms, where sahn had spent almost every night for many years, was nearly overwhelming.

“That’s interesting that they made him to light up like that,” Nahi said. “Usually when one goes through so much trouble to make a maileiau so much after the old species, they would not do something so blatant.”

“These people are strange,” Maki said.

Nahi walked up for a closer look. “He looks very pale and washed out,” sahn said. “How can people stand to be the same color all over?”

Maki was perhaps too tired. “I have often wished those lights were at least different colors.”

Serai turned and grinned. Nahi did too. Maki knew that grin, and padded outside for a moment. Sahn returned with a box of Dr. Martin’s Dyes, famous on three worlds for their brilliant and spectral colors. “This one, for example; I’ve always thought this one should be green...” Sahn swirled a paintbrush in a little bottle of Emerald.

“If that one’s green,” Nahi said, “this one should be purple to balance it.”

Maki agreed that it was so and handed Nahi a bottle.

Serai reached for a blue bottle....

After a while, the three satamuri left and wandered back down the tunnel into Main Dome. It was well past midnight, and the students, who lived on the morning shift, were waking up. They oohed and ahed at the satamuri, who all climbed up into a small grove of apple trees, bent the branches into a large nest, and curled up to sleep in a heap.

It was good to smell someone else of your own kind, Maki thought as sahn dozed off.

## Chapter Nine: Dr. Jonathan B. Seales Gets His.

Jon Seales, Professor of Theoretical Biology (it used to be called “exobiology,” then “astrobiology”), got out of the bus and walked down the airlock into the spaceport, barely listening to the radio broadcasts from the shuttle he was in. He had not listened to the radio since he heard that the Dodgers upped and left for Hong Kong. It was the worst thing that could have happened. Now he knew how his Grandmother felt, talking about when the Dodgers left Brooklyn! She would spit and curse and after all these years she had *never* forgiven them. The only thing Seales could think of that was worse was if the Dodgers had gone back to Brooklyn, where the cops were still after him because of a couple of years worth of unpaid parking tickets.

Well, he had given his lecture at Medii and now it was back to teaching the undergraduates again. He sat in the Lobby and stared out the window, waiting for his luggage to be unloaded. He heard somebody mumble that they were sure they loaded it, but....

“You know,” he said to nobody under his breath, “Theoretical Biology was a lot more fun when it was theoretical.” Then Maki had shown up and sent his pedagogical world straight downhill. What do aliens look like? Like what you would get if you crossed a baboon and a hyaena. What do they eat? Pistachio ice cream topped with marshmallows, and, judging from their dentition, very large herbivores. Why, the thing had even gone through a reproductive cycle once, and where was he? At Medii, giving a lecture. He had never even known! By the time he got to see the produce of this production, someone had already sliced the egg up and gold-coated it for electron microscopy.

It killed him to have to give that person an A on her term paper....

And now, of course, Maki had been on the Peer Review board for the last year.

He had passed three of his own papers on Theoretical Biology through the board. All three were accepted without change.

This could only mean two things.

A. He was right.

B. He was dead wrong, and Maki wanted him to suffer for it in the years to come, because last year when sahn was taking one of his classes, sahn had become ill with a hairball he wouldn't let sahn leave the room to heave it up.



His T.A., Trinidad (who got that name because he was born on the highway outside Trinidad, Colorado, while his father argued the speed limit with a state patrolman), brought in his own luggage. “They still can’t find yours. Hey!!” he said. “Did you hear—”

“No, and I don’t want to.” He didn’t want to hear anything from Trinidad. Trinidad was a Yankee fan, and the news from American League fans was never good.

“But doc!” Trinidad squealed. “Your big chance!!”

“Oh, shut up, I don’t want a big chance. I want a shower and then I want to cancel my first class.”

“It’s too late for that,” Trinidad said, “your first class is in fifteen minutes.”

Seales said something vile and muttered and sputtered all the way to Campus Dome, completely forgetting his luggage.

He stopped by his lab on the way to the class.

Everyone was buzzing. “Did you hear?! Have you seen—”

“I DON’T WANT TO KNOW!” Seales screamed as he threw on his lab coat, without which he felt pompous and naked.

“But doc!! In your classroom there’s—”

“Sophomores,” he said, and stormed out.

There were sophomores in his classroom.

And there was the peculiar, spicy odor of a satamuri.

He closed the door behind him and walked to the head of the class. The odor was especially noticeable. It made him hungry. When he got to his desk he turned around, opened his mouth... and only “...merde!” came out.

There were two satamuri sitting in the front row.

They were identical.

“Now whose idea of a joke is this?” he said. Fa Chen, he knew, could make what appeared to be infinite numbers of mobile sensory units (imbi, Maki called them) and make them up to look like anyone or anything sahn wanted. This was another one of Chen’s tricks.

“Don’t you get it, Doc,” said Trinidad, who had come in the front door.

Off in the distance, a bell rang. “Ah,” said one of the satamuri, “If Thobo has slept all night, he will now wake up and make his way down the hall to take a shower.”

“All I get,” Seales said, “is that something rotten is going on here. And if all of you flunk the midterm, it’s because I don’t get to do my job today. Well that’s too damn bad.”

“But Doc!” Trinidad screeched. All the students chortled.

Clearly, they were all in on it.

Suddenly, faintly, from another dome, was heard the piercing, bonechilling shriek of a woman who had just been scared to death.

“Oh, that must be Lillian Neeth from down the hall,” one of the satamuri said to the other. “I guess the paint stayed on.”

“Now look,” Jon said. He tried to calm himself and be reasonable. “Why don’t you and your buddy here to just beat it for one morning?”

Then, faintly, from the same place, was heard a very familiar “AUGH!”

“It’s not easy being green,” one of the satamuri said.

“And blue, and purple.” The two satamuri chuckled and gagged identically and hysterically at each other.

Jon wished he’d stayed with his luggage. “All right, what the hell is going on here?” he said at last.

“Don’t you get it, Doc?” Trinidad said. “They’re twins! And there’s two more of them here!”

“Quadruplets?” Seales said weakly.

“No, just two other satamuri.”

“No there aren’t,” he said as he turned to the blackboard. He knew what was going on. This was just Fa Chen having fun with a synthesizer. Like last year at the science fiction convention, when Fa Chen entered the costume contest as 30 different people.

“And there’s a huge dark guy with them!” Trinidad said.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll fix him!” Seales said as he began to write his notes for the day.

“I don’t think so,” one of the students said.

Ha! He’d show them...



## Chapter Ten: What, Me Worry?

Serai Yodo was sitting placidly in a tree on the southern end of Goddard Avenue in Main Dome when Thobo came marching through. “*Adtakti, sharethe*,” sahn said politely as the android passed.

Thobo said stiffly.

“I want that gem,” Serai said, in Kwakyen, with great seriousness.

“I know,” Thobo glowered. In ten years at Wargentin, Thobo had become a really first rate glowerer.

The satamuri smirked. “You might as well give it to me now,” sahn said.

Thobo looked up pleasantly. “I told you, Serai, if you want it, you have to win it. Shalom aleichem.” He continued down the street.

Serai hissed...

Ranger met Thobo as the latter entered the spaceport lobby. "Having satamuri problems?" he said when he noticed that Thobo kept looking behind him.

Thobo huffed.

"That bad, eh?"

"I woke up this morning and about scared Lillian Neeth to death," he said.

"You?!"

"Me! It wasn't until I got to the showers that I realized that someone had painted me!" Thobo help up his hands. They looked gangrenous. "It seems to be Dr. Martin's Dyes."

"I see that. You look like you need a long rest."

"It was that little rat with the naked arms!" Thobo explained about the opal. "Say, whatever happened to the fourth one?"

"The red one? Last time I saw sahn, sahn had picked up a book and gone out the door," Ranger said, pointing to the door which led out of the domes.

"What book?" Thobo said.

"*The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes.*"

Thobo considered. "Why do I get the suspicion that I'm not happy to hear this?"

"Because you're paranoid, of course."

Thobo leaned against a lamp post. "No, this is worse. Do you remember Joe the Prophet?"

"Do I remember Joe the Prophet?!"

Joe the Prophet was an undergraduate who, every week or so, would climb on top of Wargentín's highest building and make some completely off the wall remark which would, unfortunately, eventually come true. He once said that Wargentín would vanish into a glory hole in the moon when androids and satamuri started fighting.

"Oy, oy, oooy!" Thobo said, beseeching the heavens.

They reached the spaceport and saw Dark Jon walking over from his ship. Thobo stared at the thing and decided that the only way it ever made it through hyperspace was sheer, idiot luck.

Jon came in and removed his spacesuit. His skin was now a deep, steel blue color. Everybody expressed admiration (on various levels) when they saw him.

He looked around and asked Thobo to explain two posters hanging over Erika Kaye's desk. One said "Visit Sunny Mercury" and the other, "Venerate on Venera."

"Jon, I gotta ask you something," Thobo said as he, Ranger and Jon left the lobby.

"By all means," Jon said.

"Should I worry?"

Jon stopped. "That's a ridiculous question, Thobo," he said.

"I have something Serai Yodo wants desperately."

Jon resumed walking. "Worry," he said. "What is it?"

“A gemstone that’s first prize in a Stupid Cat Show.”

Jon shook his mane. “I’d run for my life if it were me,” he said.

“I’ll show you where the classroom is,” Thobo said, leading them on.

# Letter From The Editor

by Germaine Swanson

The contributors to this issue have provided you, the viewer, some of their best work.

Letting them know how you feel about what you see would be delightful. We have a fan base outside of the United States. We would love to see what you enjoy, what you wish we'd change, and what you want more of.

[Send us an email](#) or write a comment on our BlueSky page (@retrozine.bsky.social).

I call your attention to the dispatches from the doomed spaceship, the SS Elegy. I am enjoying the ones here and those to come.

When I read them, I imagine myself a former passenger who got off while they docked at their last spaceport. I am waiting for them to return to take me home.

I'm curious about their trip and relieved that I am not with my shipmates. Before I embark on a voyage, I would like to know whether things will change and whether the walls and equipment are supposed to respond to passengers and crew in unusual ways. I wonder why they are so complacent. I hope to find out as future dispatches arrive. I find it more interesting than *Lost in Space* or other old TV shows and movies about lost and doomed spaceships. Ah, but are our Voyagers doomed? Where will this lead? I'm excited for future installments. I hope you will agree.

September 1980

Vol. I No. 4

Welcome, welocme! Four of these already, goshwow. Included herein are probably lots of extraneous stuff having to do with nothing. Also, since lots of people have been asking me if there is any Klysadel Filk, I have decided to answer this terrible question by including a couple of songs here. There is traditional filk, of which I have included two examples, and there are songs brought back from the Klysadel itself and translated (often terribly) into English, which I will included some other time if anyone is interested. This time there are also lots of locs, and Part Two, in its entirety, of The Asymmetrical Star.

## RAUGK'S BALLAD

to the tune of "the Irish Washer Woman" of course...

Well, I'm big and I'm scaly and high as a house,  
And on my best behavior, I'm still quite a louse.  
So come listen, my children, I'll tell you about  
That most wondrous of monsters, the Sokaigur Raugk!

I eat Critters for breakfast, and sandworms for brunch;

If a Dorsai should cross me, I'll have him for LUNCH.

He'd be washed down with Shogetil, which is a brew

About 12 x as strong as your Tullamore Dew!

Singin' yo, de-oh-doe, de-oh-doe, de-oh, day!

Yo, de-oh-do, de-oh-doe, de-oh-day!

Now some guys settle scores with a fracas or frey,  
But not me -- I prefer a more subtler way.  
Yet when subtlety don't work, I ain't far above  
Backin' foes to the wall, and then giving a shove!

All the Spurmen and Klingons, they quail at my name,

I've put Moties and Cylons and Daleks to shame.

But the one thing I'm finding is fun, oh, FAR more,

Is exposing young slavers as Gay Boys of Gor!

Singin' yo, de-oh-doe, de-oh-doe, de-oh-day!

Yo, de-oh-doe, de-oh-doe, de-oh-day!

Once I went to this planet, it was marked 'Forbidden,'  
If you think I heeded that warning, I didn't!  
This 'lectrical critter tried my head to squish,  
But my ego is no match for ANYONE's id!

There are Lensmen and Troopers who roam all of space

Hoping they'll get just one chance to flatten my face.

But if they (or you) chance to meet me, there's one thing I'll say,

I would rather have me for a friend any day!

Singin' yo, de-oh-doe, de-oh-doe, de-oh-day!

Yo, de-oh-doe, de-oh-doe, de oh day!

