

Interlude

The scrape of the chair leg betrayed the man's impending swoon.

His mouth opened and closed and his eye jolted backwards and his chest seized up and the back of his chair hurtled towards the floor. A quick grasp by the pair of navy-clad Agents prevented the fall.

The six conscious people in the oval room showed no signs of surprise at this sudden turn.

The prim lady near the door sniffed and turned towards the Agents with a look of inconvenience. "Is this really necessary? We're going to be here all week if every hour this...*poison* kicks in and he pulls this fainting spell. I fail to see how he's any threat strapped down, surrounded, and unarmed-"

The Agent on the right spoke, unrelenting. "Government orders, ma'am."

"And what's more, am I the only one worried that this added mutation of the Adevarateum strain will interfere with the main, and might I add, much more *important* purpose of the drug?" the lady interrupted. "It's all very well and good if he is knocked out on the hour in the off chance that he *somehow* was able to overpower us all but what if it causes the compulsion to speak truth to wear off? As I understand it, there is some margin of error that exists here."

And with this she passed a withering glance towards the member of the gathering seated the farthest from the strapped man. The recipient was a slight man in an ill-fitting white coat, silver glasses, and paranoid plastic gloves. He started.

"T-the ah-ah-ah-ah-ah Adevarateum has been tested to 99.6% accuracy in lab dogs and Lamed newborns, ma'am..."

He trailed off, confused, but the tall, slender man at the top of the table came to his rescue, waving a placating hand over the gathering. "Ease off Jessica, no need to give the doctor a panic attack," and he smiled with his mouth only. "I might remind you that you are not the one in charge of these decisions and you should be well pleased that you've been included in this meeting. Seeing as we can't hear the rest of our friend's tale at the moment however, I propose we take a break and reconvene in ten." He stood up and his neighbor, a shorter, girthier man, followed suit. "Gentlemen," the tall man nodded at the two Agents and, "ma'am," at Jessica, as they left the room.

His geometrical opposite followed him through a long, sleek windowless hallway that tapered up into a drab dimly lit windowless room. The room sheltered a round metal table, a transparent container that held a colorless liquid, and a collection of choice cutlery under the container. They sat down opposite each other and the taller man snapped his fingers and the smell of hot coffee filled the room.

"He's insane," the taller man spoke.

It was not a question, and his companion did not treat it as one.

“Still, Jessica *is* right—it’s counterintuitive to the point of near ridicule that we have to deal with all these safety measures. If anyone outside the Government hears about this, it’ll make us look like scared old men, scared old men who see ghosts around every corner.”

“Nobody from Outside will hear about it.” The resoluteness was etched in every chewed-off syllable.

“I know they won’t, it doesn’t matter. The rubric for judging such a move shouldn’t be based purely on the end results. We’ve caught King Kingpin himself and we can’t advertise it to any of the stupid Lamed goats because we’re worried the Zayins will try to launch some kind of desperate rescue mission. As if his continued absence is expected to go unnoticed....” He broke off to sip at the coffee that a pair of hovering cups had levitated towards their table. He was quick to accept his friend’s offered packet of sugar. “And this of course only adds to the sentiment in the eyes of the Lameds that we can’t control the Zayin Insurgency or their threats...and in the eyes of anyone in the *Government* that finds out about it. Yes, even our own fellows will be convinced we can’t control it if they find out about the exaggerated way we’re treating him. I mean, absolutely asinine. Drugging him every single hour? What would he do? What could he do? Are you absolutely—”

The man trailed off. His eyes seemed to bulge at the sheer ludicrousness for a second and then a second too long and then another second and then his mouth opened and emitted a terrible screeching search for air.

His comrade stared almost bemused at this sound, a sound that seemed to swirl and fill the room with pain and betrayal and affront until it seemed to congeal into the hard marble. His gray eyes were calm beneath a veneer of focused distaste. He moved at the last second as the taller man pitched forward and slammed into the marble. A trickle of blood fell from his mouth and pooled on the floor.

His geometrical opposite clapped once, twice and a peeling siren ripped through the air. He paused, showed his fallen companion one more glance of disgust and left the room.

His steps were brisk, belligerent, boisterous and carried him back down the hallway quicker than he had walked up it.

Jessica’s prying eyes were on him as soon as he stepped back into the oval room. His eyes said yes but conscientiousness obliged him to elucidate.

“You were right. Sir Martin did have a nasty streak of anti-Government sentiment. I doubt that he is *the* Zayin rat but his tendencies may certainly have been swayed down the road. He was a dangerous man and I applaud you for being the quickest to notice it. Your adeptness shall be passed on to the Duhovnic.”

Jessica’s cheeks colored with pleasure.

The murderer turned to the two Agents, pillars of obedience. Their heritage was evident in their temperament and talent, their smooth alabaster features belying the limited intelligence desirable in men born into subservient positions. “Administer the antidote; we are ready to continue the man’s tale. I will call up to the Duhovnic’s office for another confessor.”

And with that he sat down and turned his whole, undivided attention to the continuation of the Injer’s tale.