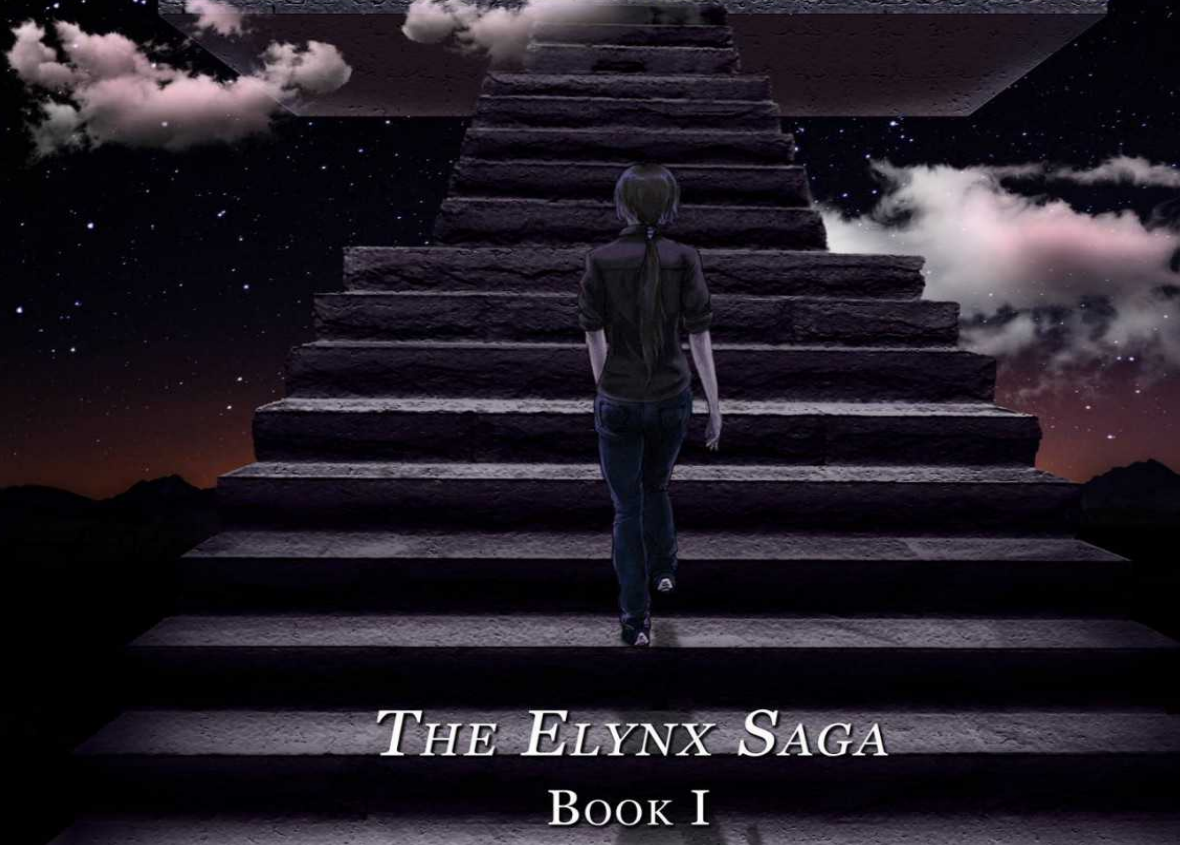


Nicola Bagalà

# THE FALL OF THE GODS



*THE ELYNX SAGA*

BOOK I

Nicola Bagalà

THE FALL  
OF THE GODS

*THE ELYNX SAGA*

BOOK I

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Translated from the original Italian by Nicola Bagalà

Original title: *La Caduta degli Dèi*

Cover art: ©2016 Nicola Bagalà and Anna Simoroshka Kruglaia

*The Fall of the Gods* - second edition published in 2017

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## CHAPTER 1

### **London, September 4, 2008.**

When Yuki stepped off the plane, she inhaled deeply, taking the first breath of a new and hopefully exciting chapter in her life. She was finally free, even if it did come with a little jet lag.

She walked out of the Heathrow Airport baggage claim area dragging along a black trolley and looked around until she spotted a man holding a sign with her name among the waiting crowd.

“Miss Yuki Kashizawa?” the man asked with a markedly Irish accent as she approached him.

“Yes, that’s me,” she answered with a tired but cordial smile.

“Welcome to England,” the man went on, stretching out his right hand. “Conor Doherty. I was sent to drive you to the Deverex Tower.”

“Thank you,” Yuki said, shaking hands with him. “Pleased to meet you.”

The driver nodded and smiled, then insisted she let him carry her baggage.

“Pardon my curiosity,” the man asked as he placed her trolley into the cab’s trunk. “Aren’t you by any chance related to Mr Yutaka Kashizawa?”

“Yes,” she nodded, slightly embarrassed but amused. She had been asked that same question several times as of late. It felt a bit like being related to a rock star. “I’m his daughter.”

“Ah, there you go. I thought so. I mean, you’re so young, and given your family name and that you’re going to the Deverex Tower...”

“You guessed right,” Yuki confirmed, getting in the cab. She didn’t think she was all that young at the age of twenty-five.

The cab driver got in too, then he hastily rubbed his hands and turned the engine on. “So, your father is the heir of the famous scientist Edwin Deverex, isn’t he?” he said. He had struck her immediately as a very chatty but likeable man. “I bet you everyone in the world envies him! I mean, he got millions of pounds, mansions, houses, steel plants, research labs—and

the Deverex Tower! The news of the inheritance travelled around the world.”

“So it did,” Yuki answered, not knowing what else to say.

“Forgive my lack of discretion, miss,” he went on as he drove away from the airport, “but I didn’t know Mr Deverex had relatives in Japan. In fact, I thought he didn’t have relatives at all—well, he was such a lonely bloke, no one really knew much about him, but—”

“Indeed he didn’t,” Yuki interrupted him. “Mr Deverex and my father weren’t related. They were close friends.”

“Ah, I see. I wish I had a friend so close he’d leave me such a fortune!” he said with a loud laugh.

According to what her father had always told Yuki, Edwin Deverex had always been lonely and reserved. He had only very few friends, and eventually, he had completely stopped keeping in touch with most of them. Yutaka Kashizawa was a physicist, and when he still worked in London, he had been one of Edwin’s professors. Young Deverex had shown extraordinary talent in a number of scientific subjects already as a child. He was as ingenious as he was tormented, and had been Yutaka’s protégé. Professor Kashizawa had always been very close to Edwin, particularly after his parents—Paul and Grace Deverex—were killed in a tragic car crash, leaving behind a vast industrial and financial empire. However, the only thing Edwin had ever cared about was his research. Unlike his father, Edwin was no manager and had left it up to an army of suits and ties to look after his wealth—the very same people who, four years after Edwin’s disappearance, would now continue managing the Deverex empire on behalf of its new owner, Yutaka Kashizawa.

“If I may, miss: What brings you to the Deverex Tower?” the driver inquired further, after a short pause.

“I’ll be living there for a few years,” she answered. “For the duration of my doctoral studies at least.”

“No kidding! You’re going to live in the world’s tallest building! Congratulations! You’re really lucky, miss!”

She was really lucky indeed. Yuki had applied for several positions as a mathematics doctoral student in several universities around the world. After long waiting, only Tokyo University and the London King’s College had accepted her application. Yuki’s mother, Misako, had lost more than one night of sleep at the thought of her ‘beloved child’—her only child—leaving



Japan to go and live God knew where and with whom. She had spent a few weeks pushing Yuki to accept the position Tokyo University was offering her.

A PhD abroad would have been the perfect occasion for Yuki to finally leave her parents' nest and test her wings, but for some time, she had been tempted to give in to her mother's plea. She could have spared herself a transcontinental move and all the troubles of living on her own, but then, unexpectedly, her father had inherited Edwin Deverex's entire fortune. As the new owner of the Deverex Tower, Yutaka had been able to arrange her free accommodations in the skyscraper, leaving her no more excuses to stay in her comfort zone and finally convincing her to accept the PhD position in London.

"Wow!" Yuki exclaimed in amazement, looking wide-eyed at the building from behind the cab's window. The car came from Parsonage Street, which led straight to one of the two vehicle entrance gates of Deverex Park, in the Isle of Dogs.

She got out of the car and was greeted by a waiting man with a big smile.

"*Mademoiselle* Kashizawa!" exclaimed the man with a thick French accent. "Welcome to the Deverex Tower! We were looking forward to your arrival."

"Oh... Hello..." she began, hesitantly. "I am—"

"*Oui, oui*," the funny-looking little fellow hastened to reply. "Your father has already told us everything—do not worry about the cab. We already saw to it."

"I see... Thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it, mademoiselle," smiled the Frenchman. He then waved briskly at the bellboy who had come with him and said: "Come on, come on. Get Mademoiselle Kashizawa's suitcases." He then turned back to her and continued to smile.

The bellboy, dressed in a blue uniform bearing the 'ED' badge on the chest and the hat, moved quickly toward the cab and started to unload the baggage.

"You don't need to," said Yuki, feeling a little pity for him. "It's not a lot of stuff. I can do it..."

"Oh, no, mademoiselle. That would be silly. Oh, but where are my manners? Allow me to introduce myself: I'm Louis Petrier, the *concierge*."

"My pleasure," she hurried to reply. She felt still a bit confused.

The bellboy had just taken her trolley when the concierge said, "If you

care to follow me, mademoiselle, I would show you your suite.”

“My suite?” Yuki asked in surprise as the three of them made their way along the path through the garden leading to the entrance of the Deverex Tower.

“*Mais certainement*, mademoiselle. Your father has made all the necessary arrangements to accommodate you in one of the finest suites of the Deverex Hotel.”

“He didn’t tell me I’d be staying in a suite. My understanding was I’d stay in a flat.”

“There are no flats as such in the Deverex Tower, mademoiselle. The only exception is the flat *Monsieur* Deverex used to live in. Most of the building is occupied by offices of big companies, shopping centres, pubs, cinemas, theatres, restaurants, car parks, sports centres, clubs... and our hotel, *naturellement*.”

“Well... Mr Deverex treated himself well, didn’t he?” Yuki observed.

“Truth to be told, mademoiselle, before Monsieur Deverex vanished, the building was practically deserted. He was the only one living here.”

“What on earth would he do with a place like this?”

“Nobody knows. It seems Monsieur Deverex was rather the eccentric type. He certainly did not intend to leave the Deverex Tower deserted forever, since it was actually designed to house everything there is now. However, he preferred solitude for as long as he lived here.”

“How old is the hotel and all the rest?”

“About two years old. Seven months after Monsieur Deverex disappeared, his staff decided it would be best to put the building into use rather than just leave it abandoned. It would have been such a terrible waste.”

“It would have indeed,” she agreed.

Deverex Park wasn’t just a garden, but rather two hundred and sixteen thousand square metres of sheer relaxation. It had flowerbeds, ponds, fountains, swimming pools, greenhouses, tennis courts, and children’s playgrounds. Cobbled and earthen pathways with benches on the sides ran through the garden. Here and there on the lawn, one could see small tables with sunshade parasols, around which people were relaxing, reading the paper and sipping icy lemonade. Everywhere around the park there were people strolling about, kids playing, people doing sports or sitting by a fountain and chatting. Elsewhere in the garden, some gardeners were giving a final touch to large hedges shaped as dolphins and other animals.

It was a beautiful sunny day. The sky was clear and the temperature



pleasant.

The Deverex Tower stood 835 metres tall in the centre of the park. It was built between 1997 and 2002, and counted a hundred and fifty floors above the ground plus ten underground. It had an essentially square cross-section and about four hundred thousand square metres of floor area—the exact number was unknown to almost everyone. The building had a soaring and streamlined shape, gently tapering toward the top and terminating into an eighty-metres-long mast. The huge, rhomboidal ‘ED’ logo, which was lit at night, was located right under the mast on the front façade.

The tower was an architectural and technological wonder. The entire building was managed by a powerful computer, by which one could control anything from the bathtub’s temperature to the elevators, the doors, the air conditioning, the intercoms, the security system—anything.

The DT had two panoramic elevators with glass walls installed in the shafts on the sides of the building. Wide and elegant black marble steps led to the skyscraper’s ground floor, two metres above the ground level, where the massive entrance stood. The entrance was floored with the same marble as the steps and was decorated with ornamental plants on the sides. The building could be accessed through three large doors arranged in an arc. All of the doors had the usual ‘ED’ logo painted on in white, and on the side of each of them stood several security guards.

Right after the entrance was the hall, swarming with people coming and going. There was a constant buzzing produced by the voices of the crowd, among which one could discern a feminine, synthetic voice giving directions and advice to the visitors using the many access terminals of the computer.

Yuki walked slowly across the elegant blue carpet, looking around. On her right, farther down the hall, was the reception desk. In front of it was a crowd of people waiting and others talking to some of the many clerks. The reception desk had a large sign, one of several others belonging to the many shops, pubs, snack bars, and newspaper kiosks. On the left of the reception desk were the security offices, and on its right were cloakrooms where other security personnel watched over belongings left by visitors. On both her left and her right, Yuki could see two large hallways full of shops leading to the panoramic elevators.

“This, mademoiselle, is the hall of the Deverex Tower. Over there is reception, which will help you with your every need. Reception assists both the hotel’s guests and the other visitors of the building.”

Yuki had heard him, but was too enraptured by the sight before her eyes

to pay attention to him.

“If you wish, mademoiselle, after settling down in your new suite you can take a guided tour of the building,” Petrier said, wearing another of his large smiles.

“I would love that!” Yuki replied. After some hesitation due to her wish to stay and enjoy the stylish hall a little longer, Yuki followed the concierge and the bellboy to one of the elevators. From there, they headed to the 150<sup>th</sup> floor where her new suite was.

\* \* \*

-----  
*HEXcellence – Automatic debugging and restoring system*  
*Debug status: completed. 30694 problems fixed.*  
*Interface status: 512 problems fixed. Projection system working normally.*  
*Recompiling... 99%. Time to completion: 58 minutes, 13 seconds...*  
*Automatic reactivation: enabled*  
-----

\* \* \*

Finding a parking spot had been a bit of a hassle, but now Ayleen Marker had finally found one. She could not park her car very close to home, but that was nothing new. She shut the door of her metallic-black Grand Cherokee Overland 4×4 after she got out, and walked toward the building on Hilddrop Lane, London, her home since February 2006. Robotronics Inc., the company she worked for, had opened a branch office on West India Avenue back in 2006. She didn’t mind Canada, but after having lived one and a half years in Ottawa, she had felt like going back to old England.

It was seven thirty in the evening, and the sun was no longer so bright one would need to wear shades. She took them off and hung them on her t-shirt sticking out from underneath her blouse. She noticed Doyle—the man who lived next door and apparently knew only one word—leaving the building.

“Hello,” said Doyle.

“Hello,” Ayleen replied with a nod of the head, keeping on walking. Not once had she said a word more, Doyle thought. She would really have been his type: tall, good-looking, deep green eyes. She had beautiful brown hair gathered into a ponytail falling to the back of her hip. In the front, it was shorter and hung over the sides of her face. Didn’t look a day past thirty. Kid included in the package, but hey, one couldn’t always have everything. That constantly pensive and apparently detached air of hers, though, had always seemed to say he needn’t even bother trying to go past ‘hello’.

Once she reached the entrance to number 27, Ayleen took her keys out of her pocket and opened the main door. She stepped into the elevator and gave herself a look in the mirror, then she patted her right sleeve to remove some dust. The elevator stopped on the fifth floor. She got off and inserted the key into her apartment’s door’s lock.

The door was only double-locked rather than quadruple-locked. Judy was probably home.

“I’m home,” Ayleen announced.

No answer. There was loud music playing. Perhaps Judy hadn’t heard Ayleen calling. It was amazing how no one had yet complained about the everyday eardrum torture the entire building suffered because of Judy’s music.

Ayleen went to her own room, left her briefcase on the bed, and removed her boots. She pulled her blouse out of her trousers, unbuttoned it, and rested it on the backrest of the computer chair. Then she went to Judy’s room.

“Judy, could you turn down the...” She stopped mid-sentence.

Blast. She had done it again. She swore the young girl would cause her to have a stroke one day, as impossible as it was.

The problem wasn’t really that Judy had gone out without a word or she had left the music on and the windows open. The problem was, if she had gone out without a word, leaving painfully loud music on and a trail of open windows behind, it could only mean one thing. Her skateboarding equipment was missing from her room, confirming she had indeed gone again with her friends to try to break her neck. She would also probably ask one of the boys to let her drive his motorbike—for which she didn’t have a driver’s licence. Judy would probably have maintained all one needed was skill and she had it. However, pulling back hard on the throttle of a vehicle Judy could technically not even drive wasn’t exactly a way of proving her ‘skills’ that Ayleen approved of.

Judy was undoubtedly a rather forward and spirited fourteen-year-old girl with an innate ability to get herself into trouble. She had already cost Ayleen a couple of fines, some reprimands by police officers who had surprised her driving a motorbike, and a few scares per month.

Ayleen turned the music off. She grabbed her mobile to try to call Judy, but the phone rang in her hand.

"Hello Floyd," she replied calmly, "do you mind if I call you back? Judy has vanished again. I was trying to reach her."

"Relax," the man replied. "She's here with me."

"With you?" she asked, fearing something might have happened.

"Yes. I called you to let you know. I'm taking her back home."

"Why is she with you?"

"Let's just say I bumped into her along the way..."

Ayleen sat down on Judy's bed, held her forehead resignedly with her right hand, and rubbed her eyes gently with her fingers.

"C'mon, Floyd, spill the beans. What was she up to this time?"

"Nothing to worry about, Ayleen. A few scratches, that's all."

"There you go. I knew it," she said, shaking her head. Though the accident annoyed her, she was relieved to hear it wasn't too serious.

"We'll be there in twenty minutes or so."

"Okay. See you in a bit."

Ayleen hung up with a sigh of endurance. Well, at least this time she didn't have to rush to the hospital.

\* \* \*

It was like waking up all of a sudden, after a slumber of centuries. He didn't really know what waking up was like, but the comparison was appropriate nonetheless.

It took him an infinitesimally brief moment to sort himself out, then he had a look around.

Darkness. No one around.

*Mr Deverex?...*

No answer.

He turned the lights on and saw everything was just like always. Nothing had changed since last time.

*Hang on...*

That wasn't quite right. Nothing had changed *there*. However, it looked like something *had* changed everywhere else—everything, in fact.

It looked like he had ‘slept’ for quite a while. Wasn’t it supposed to be just a few weeks? One or two months tops?

*Anyway, he said to himself, I love what he’s done with the place!*

He decided to go and have a look around in person. Nobody would notice him anyway.

*Yeah, I’d better take the elevator, though, or you bet they will notice me.*

## CHAPTER 2

Yuki had just completed her guided tour of the Deverex Tower and was now admiring the splendid landscape from the windows of her luxury suite on the 150<sup>th</sup> floor. The suite faced South and East, and on its south side one could enjoy a beautiful view of the Thames. It consisted of two bedrooms, a large kitchen, a living room, a spacious bathroom with a Jacuzzi, and a study; its total surface was about two hundred square metres.

She had already unpacked her things. It hadn't taken too long, since she had brought with her only the necessities for a week. All the rest was already on a plane and expected to be delivered the next morning. It all seemed like a dream to her. She had a fantastic apartment in the world's tallest and most luxurious building, and it was at her full disposal for as long as she wished. She had stood literally open-mouthed when her father had told her he had inherited Edwin Deverex's extraordinary fortune. It had probably been history's most conspicuous bequest.

All Yuki needed right now was to try out the Jacuzzi and then get a good night's sleep—she was rather tired after her visit to the DT. It was a really remarkable building, a true city within the city. The first floor was where Deverex used to live and wasn't open to the public. Even though the police had already fully inspected it, the administrators of the building had thought it was best to leave the first floor closed, and her father had agreed. On the floors from the second through the twenty-fifth, she could stroll about shopping centres, jeweller's shops, interior design shops, cafés, expensive restaurants, and gastropubs. On the floors from the twenty-sixth through the fifty-seventh there were concert and dancing halls, art galleries, and clubs, while from floors fifty-eight through seventy-one, one could find sports clubs, indoor courts, cinemas, and theatres. The floors between the seventy-second and the seventy-fourth were basically stupendous gardens, with relaxation areas, small playgrounds, and pools. On the seventy-fifth floor, one could find branch offices of big companies of all sectors: technology, finance, real estate, industry, customer support, public administration and lawyer's offices, and a newspaper office. On floors 121 through 134 there were again shops, restaurants, beauty centres, and other services for well-

being and relaxation. The last sixteen floors were entirely occupied by the Deverex Hotel and its casino, which were intended only for the richest and most distinguished. Apparently, Yuki Kashizawa was now a member of that club too.

\* \* \*

“Thanks for bringing her back home, Floyd,” Ayleen said.

“Don’t mention it. My pleasure.”

“I’m sorry she took up some of your valuable time. I know you’re quite busy lately.”

“Come on, it’s nothing. I saw her as I was driving along Pancras Road. It took maybe ten minutes to bring her here.”

“Wanna stay to dinner, Floyd?” Judy suggested, popping out of her room. Ayleen wondered if she was trying to postpone the inevitable discussion to follow.

“What do you say, you feel like it?” Ayleen asked.

“Thanks girls, but I can’t tonight. Lisa and I are going out...”

“Uh-huh. I see.”

“...and I think you two might need some time alone to talk.”

“Indeed,” Ayleen confirmed, casting a rather eloquent glance at the young girl.

“Yeah, sure...” Judy commented in a whisper.

“Well,” Floyd continued, after clearing his throat, “I’d better be going, or I’ll be late.”

Ayleen saw him out, and once outside he turned to her. “Don’t be too hard on her, Ayleen.”

“Too hard? I’ve never been hard on her. Not my style. I try to appeal to people’s better judgement. You know that.”

“She’s a teenager. You should expect this kind of behaviour from her sometimes. Nothing bad happened anyway.”

“Not this time, but last time she came home with a sprain, and the time before with a broken finger.”

“She’s quite the untameable type, isn’t she?”

“Believe me—you have no idea.”

“Do you think she’s always been like that? I mean, even before she came to live with you?”

“I am not sure. I basically didn’t know her then. Anyway, the early days with her were really difficult, and I think she was much less exuberant at the



time.”

“It might be her way of venting her feelings. It couldn’t have been easy to go through what she went through.”

“I know, and her mother couldn’t have picked a worse guardian than me for her. But she was a friend, and I couldn’t refuse.”

“Don’t be such drama queen now,” he joked. “You’re a great older sister.”

“Come on, Floyd,” she replied, shaking her head.

“Why? What do you think you lack to be a good sister to her?”

“You talk as if you didn’t know me, but we all know what it is I lack. I’m not up to the task.”

“Oh, please. Judy loves you very much, and she’s more than happy to have you with her. Surely you, of all people, won’t deny the evidence?”

“I won’t indeed, but whether or not Judy loves me doesn’t make me any more capable of raising her like her mother or father would have.”

“You think so? I doubt anybody would grow fond of somebody who can’t understand her and help her.”

Ayleen was about to say something back, but Floyd opened the elevator’s doors and continued. “Think it over. I’ll see you around. Just give me a call if you need anything.”

Ayleen barely gave him a smile and went back in.

\* \* \*

Yuki wasn’t feeling so sleepy after her bath. All the turmoil of the day had made her forget to have dinner, so she decided to go and have a bite to eat. The Deverex Tower offered an ample selection of excellent dining places, but she had already been out all day and would rather just have grabbed something quick and simple. Thus, she opted for going a few floors down and getting something from one of the many snack bars. She got dressed and left her apartment, making sure she had her key card—all doors in the Deverex Tower were opened and closed with magnetic key cards, no exceptions.

She headed for the nearest elevator and waited for it to reach the floor. Somebody was already in the elevator.

“*Mademoiselle!*” commenced Louis Petrier when the elevator’s doors opened. “I was just looking for you.”

“What can I do for you?” Yuki inquired.

“I would be delighted if you accepted a free welcome dinner offered to

you by restaurant *Chez Bernard*. I cared to bring you the invitation *personnellement*.”

“Oh... Well... I’ll be glad to, thank you,” she replied, even though she’d been thinking to get just a sandwich and a drink.

“*Très bien*. If there are no impediments, you are expected for dinner at 21.30.”

The concierge took the elevator and went back downstairs, while Yuki returned to her apartment to change into something more appropriate for an elegant place like the *Chez Bernard*. A lot of people seemed to know about her arrival and to care to be particularly kind toward the daughter of their new ‘boss’.

Yuki opened her new wardrobe to choose what to wear. At the moment, Yuki had only rather sporty and casual clothes with her, so she thought the best she could wear for the occasion was a black shirt and black trousers. She took off her spectacles and put them momentarily on a shelf in the wardrobe, and then began to change her clothes. She buttoned her shirt up and pulled her hair from under the collar. Her hair reached almost to her waist, and on those dark clothes, it was almost invisible. She wore her trousers, leaving her slim-fit shirt out, and observed her 1.7-metre-long figure in the mirror. She put her spectacles back on and thought once again the combination of her black eyes and pale complexion made her look like a ghost.

Being in London again felt somewhat unreal. She had lived there for a few years after her birth, before her father went back to work in Tokyo, and she only had some vague memories of that time. It was strange to think, for the first time in her life, she had the chance to be *really* independent and to finally live like an adult. The thought had frightened her a little at the very start, but not enough to make her give up on the opportunity.

After about fifteen minutes, she was ready to go and enjoy her welcome dinner at *Chez Bernard*.

\* \* \*

Leaning her shoulder against Judy’s door, Ayleen began: “So. How about we have a little talk?”

“Come on. Just give me another lecture about how careless I am, and let’s get this over with,” Judy said resignedly.

“I don’t want to lecture you, but indeed, I do not approve of your

carelessness.”

“It was nothing, Ayleen. Just a scratch.”

“But it could have been worse. What if Floyd hadn’t seen you and brought you back home, for example? Do I need to remind you how you broke a few bones already because of your acrobatics?”

“Minor setbacks. You can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.”

“Judy, I’m not asking you not to have fun or not to do what you like. I don’t object to your skateboarding, but tonight you tried to jump across a four-metre-long line of massive sewer pipes. Had the fall been worse, I doubt you’d have only a few scratches now.”

“Yes, but the fall *wasn’t* worse!” she replied, emphasising her words with a gesture of her hands. “So why worry?”

Ayleen sighed. “You really don’t understand, do you?”

“No, *you* don’t understand! I enjoy risk! Where’s the fun in attempting easy jumps anyone could do?”

“And just how fun is it to break a bone?”

“It isn’t, but I didn’t get hurt more than a handful of times!”

“Next time you could break your neck, Judy.”

“It’s never gonna happen. I’m very careful.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Ayleen commented, staring at the cuts on Judy’s arms. Judy didn’t say anything and just turned the other way, sighing.

“You could at least let me know when you’re going out, couldn’t you?” continued Ayleen.

“Had I told you where I was going, you’d have made a fuss about it.”

“I would have anyway. You had to come back home at some point, after all.”

“Unfortunately,” Judy replied, without really meaning it.

Ayleen approached Judy slowly and sat next to her. She put an arm around her shoulders and said: “Listen, Judy. I promised your mother I’d take care of you, and I intend to keep my word. I also care very much for you, and I don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

“I know,” Judy replied, after a short silence. “I’m sorry I make you mad all the time, Ayleen.”

“C’mon, you know I never get mad.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Judy said, thinking about how strange and unusual her situation was. Who else could say they had a bigger sister like Ayleen?

“Look, we could try to come to a compromise.”

“Hmm?”

“You promise to try your best to keep out of trouble, and I promise not to

make a big deal out of it when you'll have got into trouble anyway."

Judy chuckled. Ayleen could be witty in her own way.

"I will hold your proposal in due consideration."

"That means you mustn't try to drive your friends' motorbikes again, you know that, right?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Judy protested. "I didn't do that today!"

"It counts as 'getting into trouble', though."

"Ayleen, you know I'm nuts about motorbikes!"

"But you can't drive one yet. You're too young, and you don't have a licence. I have nothing against you driving a motorbike when you're old enough to, but for now you can't."

"But..."

"Being fined all the time for speeding and dangerous underage driving won't make it any easier for you to get a driver's licence once you hit legal age. I don't think it's worth the risk."

"Blast..." Judy only said.

\* \* \*

Okay, the place was neat and there was a nice crowd, but everyone was behaving a little strangely, really. He had only asked a simple question, and what had he received in return? A few perplexed looks, a bunch of "Sorry, I'm in a rush," and even a couple of "No, thank you."—"No, thank you"? For what? It wasn't like he was trying to sell anyone anything! Somebody had been nice enough to say, "Look, buddy, I don't know," although they still had a kind of 'somebody-take-this-looney-away-from-me' look on their faces... Well, at least the last girl he had asked had had a good idea: the reception desk! Of course! Surely somebody there would know something.

## CHAPTER 3

It was about midnight, and the Deverex Tower was emptying. All the offices had been closed for a while now, as well as the sports centres, clubs, and most shops. Some restaurants were still open but would close in two hours. On the contrary, some other places, like jazz clubs and pubs, had just opened and would stay open all night. Gardens, art galleries, and cinemas were all empty or they would soon be.

Reception—or *conciergerie*, as Petrier would call it—was obviously open at all times, to satisfy any need of the hotel's guests. One strange individual, though, didn't come across as a guest at all, and by the way he acted, one would have said he had never set foot in the DT before.

"*Excusez moi, monsieur*, I am afraid I do not quite understand," said the puzzled concierge, in truth a bit annoyed by the strange gentleman who was standing between him and his well-deserved rest.

The young man blinked slightly, probably wondering what was so difficult about the question he had just asked.

"I said I'd like to know where I can find Mr Deverex."

"Monsieur Deverex? You mean Monsieur Edwin Deverex, the former owner of this building?"

"'Former owner'? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I beg your pardon, monsieur, did you know Monsieur Deverex?"

"Of course I know him. So, do you know where he is?"

"I'm afraid not, monsieur," Petrier replied, incredulous.

"Well, thanks all the same. Perhaps somebody else..."

"You see, monsieur, I doubt anybody else can be of assistance..."

"Why not?"

"Probably, monsieur, you're unaware of the fact Monsieur Deverex vanished over four years ago... Nobody knows where he is or what happened to him..."

"Say what?" the stranger shouted. All bystanders turned their heads, to the concierge's embarrassment. "T-that's preposterous..."

"I am deeply sorry, monsieur, but..."

"Vanished?... Sorry, but who are you?"

"*Moi?* I am Louis Petrier, the concierge of the Deverex Hotel..."

"Hotel? Since when do we have a hotel here?"

"For about two years now, monsieur..."

The man definitely had a screw loose, Petrier concluded.

"So... Who opened the hotel anyway?"

"It was a decision made by the administrators of Deverex Enterprises, monsieur... Initially, the hotel's name was *Hotel Île Des Chiens*, but Monsieur Yutaka Kashizawa, the current owner, changed it to honour Monsieur Deverex."

"Why is this Kashizawa guy the new owner?"

"I don't know the details, monsieur... I believe Monsieur Kashizawa inherited the DT from Monsieur Deverex..."

"Well, I'll be..." said the man, holding his left hand on his side and scratching the back of his head with his right hand. "Looks like I need to be filled in a little, eh? Well, thanks a bunch. Gotta go."

"Pardon me, monsieur... Are you a dear guest of our hotel?"

"I... suppose I'm not..."

"Then you are probably one of the many visitors we receive every day." While saying that, Petrier looked him up and down. Young, about thirty years old. He wore a petroleum-green shirt and trousers, and blue trainers. His shirt was opened, and underneath was a light-grey t-shirt reading 'Genius at work – simply *Hextraordinary*'. He had brown eyes and straight, ruffled dark-brown hair of medium length.

"That's right," the lad nodded after a short while, "a visitor. Indeed."

"*Très bien*, monsieur, then may I ask you to show me your visitor's pass?"

"My...what?"

By now, Petrier was fully persuaded he was dealing with a lunatic of some sort, so he patiently took his own pass out and showed it to him.

"You see, monsieur? It is a small magnetic card like this one. On this corner it reads 'visitor', 'staff', 'employee'... depending on the holder's reason to be here." Petrier struggled to pull out his most patient smile. "In your case, it'll say 'visitor' and will have a wee number identifying the card."

The young man looked the card up and down attentively, then said: "Ooooh... *This* pass. Of course." He chuckled briefly, promptly imitated by Petrier. Then he stuck his hand into his shirt pocket and pulled a valid visitor's pass out of it.

Petrier was quite amazed he *actually* had one. What took him so long to take it out?

“V-very well, monsieur... Then I wish you a nice stay...”

“Thanks! So, what’s up?”

“*Pardon?*”

“I mean... Is there anything nice to do at the DT, at the moment?”

“Well, monsieur... I think only cinemas and nightclubs are open at this time of the day... Perhaps even some shops, but—”

“What a great idea! I think I’ll go to the cinema for a while... Then I’ll be off.”

“*Comment vous préférez, monsieur.*”

“Very well. *Au revoir!*” greeted the young man, without noticing he was mocking the concierge. He then put the pass back into his pocket and patted on it lightly. The concierge nodded and smiled as usual.

The eccentric headed to an elevator muttering under his breath, “...the hell is going on here? I can’t turn my head for even a moment, can I?”

\* \* \*

Ayleen’s eyes opened all of a sudden. The room was completely dark. She had just woken up. Her clock said it was 02:45, just like the clock on the night stand.

Another of those strange dreams.

She got up and went to the kitchen to fix herself a chamomile tea. She wasn’t unsettled—and even so, chamomile would have no effect on her—but thanks to Judy, she had found that drinking chamomile right after one of those dreams helped her interpret it. In truth, though, it wasn’t like she had ever got much out of the interpretation of her dreams.

Judy woke up, probably because of the light coming from the kitchen, and came out to her.

“Let me guess. Another of your dreams, right?” she asked.

“Right,” Ayleen replied, dipping the bag into the cup of boiling hot water.

“More infinite castles?” the young girl asked. Ayleen shook her head.

“No? Then maybe *The Fall of the Gods* again?” she suggested further, referring to a recurring dream.

“No castles and no falls. This is new stuff.”

“Really? Awesome! C’mon, tell me!” Judy said, sitting down.

“It’s three in the morning. You’ve gotta wake up early tomorrow. We’ll



talk about it another time.”

“No way. It’s best to talk about it while it’s still vivid in your mind.”

“It’s not like I’m going to forget it.”

“C’mon! I’m tired of begging you!”

“Alright,” Ayleen grumbled. She sat down as well and rested the hot cup on the table. Then she started the telling.

“So. I’m pacing slowly along some sort of transparent floor. It behaves kind of like a sheet of water. Concentric waves form when I put a foot on it.”

“Cool!”

“I’m wearing unusual clothes. It looks like I’ve got just a long, black cape on, wrapping from my shoulders down. I’m barefoot and my hair is loose, like in the dream about the fall of the gods.”

“Look out fantasy world! Sexy dreamworld Ayleen is back!”

Ayleen darted a sarcastic glance at her, then went on, “All around me there’s a starry sky with soft, cyan clouds. In the background, far away from me, there’s the top of a really high mountain. Its feet are on the land below, which seems to be tens of kilometres away from my position. It’s a land of luxuriant vegetation.”

“What are you doing in place like that?”

“Atop the mountain there’s something that looks like a Greek temple. I think it is the home of the Greek gods, Mount Olympus. I’m going there.”

“See? I told you it was about the gods.”

“Mind if I continue?”

“Okay, okay. Sorry. Go ahead.”

“The Sun and the Moon are high up in the sky. They’re stylised versions, with eyes, nose, and mouth. Much like in heraldic symbolism.”

“Uh-huh, got it.”

“The sun and the moon alternate slowly in the sky, moving jerkily, as if mechanically controlled. As soon as the sun is at the highest point, the sky turns blue, the stars disappear, and the clouds become white. The surface I’m standing on flips over, and I end up again on the side where it’s night. I can see through the transparent floor it’s daylight on the other side. On the same spot as me, but on the day side, there’s you, dressed in a cyan cape with long, loose hair, like mine.”

“Same colour as yours?”

“No, I told you, it’s like in *The Fall of the Gods*. You’re blonde as in real life, but you’ve got much longer hair and blue eyes instead of green.”

“Hmm... I wouldn’t mind blue eyes... What happens next?”

“I bend down to the floor and touch it with an index finger. The surface

shakes and wrinkles again, as if I had thrown a pebble into the water. You bend down to look at me, and then I woke up.”

“Neat. What do we call this one? It looks like it may be important. I’d suggest...” She pondered for a moment. “*The Sky Goddesses*.”

“Modest, aren’t we?” Ayleen said, taking one last sip of chamomile.

“Well, there’s the house of the gods and there’s the sky. Need more?”

“I wonder what this one means,” Ayleen said.

“Well, let’s see, here... I was struck by the fact the two of us are somehow kept apart... When one is there, the other one is not. And when you tried to reach for me... *puff!* You woke up. Looks like we’re two opposites, much like day and night indeed... Why did you crouch to touch the floor? If your destination was Olympus, why didn’t you just go there?”

“I just felt like it. I was intrigued. Anyway, I had a feeling I’d never get to the mountain temple, even if I walked forever.”

“That’s so unfair!” Judy sighed. “You always have lucid dreams, whereas I have only had maybe two or three in my entire life...”

“They’re not all that great for me. Normally, when one has lucid dreams, one can change them around the way one wishes, but I can’t. I’m conscious and I can make my own decisions alright, but if I got tired of Olympus and wanted a beach instead, I couldn’t change the scenery.”

“Still better than nothing... Well, at any rate, it’s clear we represent two opposites in your dream. You were on the... ‘dark side’ of the floor, and as soon as it was day, everything flipped over and you fell back into the night. You can’t be in the daylight.”

“That’s clearly not the reality. It must symbolise something, and I wonder what.”

“Hey, it’s your dream. Any ideas?”

“No,” replied Ayleen, after thinking for a moment.

“We also need to take into account how we were dressed, and—”

“We need to take into account,” Ayleen interrupted her, “that it’s three twenty in the morning and tomorrow we need to be up at eight. C’mon, let’s go.”

“Don’t tell me you need rest?”

“I don’t. *You* do, though. Scram.” She pointed at the kitchen’s door.

“Alright, alright,” Judy grumbled. “I’m going. You sure you don’t want me to hold your hand until you fall asleep again?” she said, mockingly.

“No thanks, but feel free to get me a teddy bear for my next birthday.”

## CHAPTER 4

The next morning, the same young man who had pushed Petrier's patience to its limits was now strolling about the gardens of the seventy-third floor, looking around, amused and intrigued. Sure enough, he had already seen everything there was to see—like, literally everything—but going around the so-renewed Deverex Tower was fun.

After talking to the concierge the night before, he had run some quick checks on the Internet. There was no doubt. The funny, moustached, reception bloke had told the truth. The Kashizawa guy he had been told about was a Tokyo professor, and apparently he wasn't around at the moment. Blast, he really needed to have a chat with Kashizawa, but he had a minor impediment. He could not leave the building. Sure, he could send the professor an email, but would Kashizawa get back to a total stranger asking about a missing man? Not a chance.

At any rate, he really had to shed some light on Mr Deverex's disappearance, because if any one at all on Earth had the right—and, *let's face it*, he said to himself, *the necessary skills*—to find him, he did. Granted, being unable to *physically* leave the Deverex Tower had the potential to be a serious hindrance, since it meant he couldn't search quite *everywhere*.

And, blimey, Kashizawa certainly had to know a thing or two. The concierge had said Kashizawa and Mr Deverex were friends—Edwin had never said anything about him, though—so the professor could definitely have some useful information. Being the new owner, sooner or later Kashizawa had to come to the Deverex Tower, and he only needed to wait until then. Hmm... But what reason would Kashizawa have to trust him? Never seen him before, and no way to prove to him he *really* knew Mr Deverex. No *uncompromising* way, anyway.

Bummer.

\* \* \*

Ayleen Marker was on her lunch break with her colleague Philip Black, at the Robotronics cafeteria. Talking about this and that, they had reached Judy's last act of bravado.

"But luckily it was just a few scratches," Ayleen concluded.

"Not to poke my nose into your business, Ayleen, but... did you try to talk to somebody about her behaviour? Psychologists, educationalists...?"

"Judy never wanted to see anybody. I can't force her. At any rate, I think her behaviour is a way to vent her anger and sorrow for the loss of her parents."

"That's a possibility... What happened to them?"

"Her father died of cancer when she was four. Her mother, Lucy, was a police officer, and her job didn't leave her much time to spend with her daughter. The effect this had on the child was bad enough already, and of course things became even worse after Jack's death. Then, one day six years later, Lucy was on the team that foiled a robbery at a research laboratory in Canada."

"A research lab... Industrial espionage?"

"Perhaps. Anyway, Lucy was chasing one of the criminals alone. What happened exactly is not clear, but Lucy was found dead, covered by third-degree burns on her chest and abdomen."

"Jesus. What did he do to her?"

"No clue. From what I gathered, there were no traces of bullet or knife wounds. The burns killed her. How he managed to inflict them is a mystery."

"Maybe it was a chemical lab. He could have used some kind of acid, and—"

"No, it wasn't a chemical lab. It was a high-tech company."

"Didn't they find the murder weapon?"

"Her murderer managed to escape, and he took the weapon with him. The other two who were with him vanished the moment the police arrived. He was the only one left behind. Lucy ordered her colleagues to chase the fugitives down while she was taking care of the one still inside."

"Did they manage to catch the other ones at least?"

"No. To the best of my knowledge, the case is still open."

"How come you were granted the child's custody?"

"Lucy's and Jack's situation was a bit... complicated. There was no one else who could look after Judy, and after Jack's death, Lucy told me she wanted me to take care of her daughter, if anything ever happened to her. I didn't think I'd be right for that role, but I really couldn't refuse."

"You must've been really good friends."

“Yeah. Lucy made the necessary arrangements for custody after Jack died. Eventually, when she died, I was appointed Judy’s legal guardian.”

“I suppose one reason Judy doesn’t want to talk to a psychologist is so she doesn’t have to bring up her parents’ death’s story again.”

“Maybe. After Lucy passed away, Judy never wanted to talk about it with me. I tried to take her many times to see a specialist, but she always refused.”

“How do you get along?”

“The beginning was rather tough. I’ve never had much to do with children, and she was only ten when she came to live with me. It was really difficult for me to understand how to behave with her, particularly because I’d seen her only a couple of times before I got custody. She was peevish and short-tempered, and she certainly didn’t like the fact I was taking her mum’s place. It took time, but we learned to get along, and we found out we have things in common... But that’s a long story.”

The man nodded in silence. After a short pause, Ayleen stood up. “Well, Phil, we’d better get back to work.”

\* \* \*

Yuki got back to the Deverex Tower around one thirty-five. She had left at about nine in the morning headed to King’s College to sort out some bureaucracy about her PhD. At that very moment, her baggage from Japan was being delivered to the reception desk.

“I’ll take them upstairs right away,” she hastened to say.

“Do not concern yourself with it, *Mademoiselle* Kashizawa. One of our bellboys will look to it!”

Somebody poked his nose into the conversation.

“Kashizawa?” a stranger with an odd t-shirt asked. He looked rather interested.

“Not you again!” Petrier bawled. Then he quickly corrected himself: “Er, I mean... You are visiting us today too, *monsieur*?”

“What can I say? I really can’t keep away from the Deverex Tower...”

“I see,” the concierge replied, smiling but casting a freezing cold glance at him.

“Anyway,” the young man went on, talking to Yuki, “I understand your name’s Kashizawa. Am I right?”

“Yes...” she stuttered, looking questioningly at the concierge who

replied by just raising an eyebrow.

“Isn’t that the new owner’s name?”

“That’s right... I’m his daughter.”

“Ah!” he exclaimed, joining his hands with a loud clap. “What a fortunate coincidence... Any chance you could get me in touch with your father?”

Yuki turned again toward the concierge, growing more confused by the second.

“Please, monsieur, I don’t think this is the appropriate—”

“Just a sec, Poirot...”

“Petrier!” the concierge snapped, annoyed.

“Whatever. You see, miss, I’d need to have a word with your father. I’m an old friend of Mr Deverex’s, and—”

“Excuse me, monsieur,” Petrier intervened, trying his hardest to keep smiling. “Mademoiselle Kashizawa has just returned and must surely feel a bit tired. Also, there’s her baggage to take care of... I’m sure you’ll have a chance to talk to her later.”

The strange lad seemed to be pondering for a moment, then he replied: “I see. In that case, I will not disturb you further, miss. I wish you a lovely day.” He then departed, headed to an elevator.

“Who was that?” Yuki asked, perplexed.

“I frankly have no idea, mademoiselle. I met him last night, too. He had a visitor’s pass...”

“He said he knows Deverex?”

“*Oui*, mademoiselle, but I wouldn’t be too quick to trust him... Last night he didn’t come across as particularly... sane.”

“You think he’s... nuts?”

“Well, nothing you should worry about, mademoiselle. We’ll see that he does not bother you. Call me if you need anything.”

“Right...” Yuki said, a bit hesitantly.

“Lad!” the concierge called. A few seconds later, the bellboy arrived and started to take care of Yuki’s baggage. She walked to an elevator on the opposite side of the one taken by the strange fellow. Every now and again, she turned back, trying to make him out among the crowd.

The thought he might look for her again made her a bit uneasy, but then she concluded that was exactly the kind of rubbish that would cross her mother’s mind, and stopped thinking about it.

## CHAPTER 5

Since Pierrot—or whatever the funny-looking concierge's name was—didn't seem too willing to let him talk with Kashizawa's daughter, it seemed best to wait until he left her alone, and then try to talk to her. The girl seemed to be the helpful type.

For the time being, Rupert—the name he thought to introduce himself with—was just sitting on his favourite swivel chair on floor A. It looked like Yuki was now having lunch in a pretty little bistro on the twenty-third floor. He could pop around right now... No, maybe not. Rather, it was perhaps best to first try to do some research on his own and just keep an eye on Yuki. If he really had to find help, there could be no secrets between him and his new helper, so he had to choose this person really carefully.

\* \* \*

Ayleen's mobile phone rang around four thirty in the afternoon.

"Floyd! What's up? Wait—if Judy attempted again to jump across the Grand Canyon blindfolded on her skateboard, I don't want to know what's up," she joked.

"Relax," he replied, chuckling, "nothing of the sort. I was just wondering if you'd like to go to Yaxcochamut to eat after work."

Ayleen approached the window of her office in Canary Wharf and looked at the grand skyscraper dominating the view.

"The Deverex Tower?" she said. "Why not? It's been a while."

"Awesome! Listen, I came on foot today. I thought I could come to your office, and then we could go in your car."

"Sure. Let's say at... seven here in Robotronics?"

"Okay. I'll be waiting for you in the car park."

"Perfect. Catch you later, Floyd."

"Later it is."



Unfortunately, the investigation ‘Rupert’ was conducting on his own was destined to stall rather soon.

One of the main questions was *why* Deverex had disappeared. Had he left of his own accord? Had he been kidnapped? Or, worse, was he dead? He had said it would be a matter of a few months, and yet it had been four years! It was vital to reconstruct Deverex’s movements between January 25 and April 15, 2004, particularly to find out if anyone had seen him and where. Yeah, but *who* could he interrogate? And *how* would he interrogate anyone at all?

He had half a mind to peep into the police databases and look for the file on the case, but even though he wasn’t afraid to be arrested, he thought he should try a more discreet approach at first.

For the time being, Yuki was not home. Rupert decided he would go and take a look to learn something more about her. The apartment was locked, so nobody would see him, and he would disappear at the slightest sign the girl was on her way back. Easy peasy.

*What a lovely, cosy flat*, he thought once he was there. The entrance led immediately to an ample living room, on the north side of which was a rather modern-looking kitchen, while on the south side was a study. Next to the study there were two bedrooms. Yuki seemed to use the one facing South and East. In front of the bedrooms, on the east side, was the bathroom, equipped with all the best comforts.

*I must get myself one of these, someday.*

*So... Let’s see... Let us see... Dozens and dozens of mathematics books on the shelves... Logic, topology, mathematical analysis... More science books. Good. As a rule of thumb, science equals broad views, which may come in handy. Let me have a look at the drawers... They’re still empty. She probably didn’t have the time to put everything away yet. There’s a map of London on the desk and a couple of papers about King’s College... She’s studying for a PhD. Hmm.*

*Bedroom... Didn’t even unpack the stuff she got this morning yet.*

*There’s stuff in the wardrobe, but not much... A few stuffed dolls on the bed, some literature on the night stand... ‘Animal farm’, by George Orwell. I’ve read it already.*

*What about this bag? Oh, look, one of those minor-league, motorised abacuses going by the name of ‘portable computers’... Maybe her dad’s number is in it... Well, I’d have no use for it anyway.*

*Oh, the girl's leaving the bistro. Let's see where she's going.*

\* \* \*

The Grand Cherokee with Ayleen and Floyd on board had just turned from Stebondale Street to Deverex Park. The garden was crowded as usual, and there were the regular comings and goings at the elegant entrance of the building. The off-road went through the vehicle entrance gate and followed the inner road to the rear of the building, and the entrance to the underground parking areas. They left the car with the parking attendants and headed to the main entrance, where the security personnel were paying close attention to whomever passed through the metal detector and the sensor network. When she and Floyd passed through without triggering any alarm, Ayleen smiled in slight amusement.

*The Deverex Tower knows me very well.*

*Yaxcocahtmut* was a nice Mayan-style place on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor. Ayleen liked it very much because of the different shades of green light with which the place was suffused.

They sat at a table and had a look at the menu. After a while, a young waitress approached them.

"Hi guys," she began in a friendly manner, "can I take your order?"

"Yes please," Ayleen said. "I'll have a *Poc Chuch* and an *Uxmal*."

"...and an *Uxmal*. Okay. And for you?" said the waitress, typing on a small tablet computer.

"I'd like a... *Halac Winic* and an *Itzamná*."

"Okay. Anything to drink?"

"Two pints of Guinness," Ayleen answered, closing the menu. The waitress took both menus with her and went back to the bar.

A few moments later, the waitress came back with their beers and reassured them their orders were on their way.

"Have you told Judy you're going to be late?" Floyd asked after a sip of beer.

"Yes, right after your call."

"You could have said nothing and made her worry a little... You know, give her a small taste of her own medicine..." Floyd joked.

"I'd better not," she replied, not at all amused. "Judy has already had enough to worry."

"So..." Floyd said after a short pause, changing the subject. "How long

since your last time here?”

“You mean the DT? I came a couple of times during the first six months in London.”

“And... nothing?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“What do you think might have happened?”

“I don’t know,” was all she said, shaking her head. Maybe it had gone worse than expected.

The waitress brought them their food. The interruption resulted in a new change of topic.

“I had one of my usual dreams last night,” Ayleen began, having a taste of her salad.

“The recurring one?”

“No, it’s a new one, but that doesn’t make it any less puzzling.”

“Go ahead. I’m all ears.”

\* \* \*

*I’m so bored. She’s been shopping for hours. At least she has visited mostly bookshops. She bought herself another stuffed animal. And a coffee-papaya ice cream...*

*She’s walking around in the gardens now. I thought a PhD student would be more busy than this?*

*Talking on the phone. Her mum. “Yes mum, all fine, blah blah blah...”*

*What books did she buy again? Hmm... Something about Fermat’s last theorem, then a couple of ‘Peanuts’ and ‘Calvin and Hobbes’ albums.*

*She seems to like sporty clothes. And judging by her physique, she must have played sports a lot. She’s thin and athletic.*

*I wonder what she knows about Deverex?*

*I changed my mind. Let’s have a look at her computer... Hm-hmm. Her email address is yuki.kashizawa@fastmail.net... So banal... Well, I’ll try to get in...*

*So, her password...*

*Oh, look! She’s going to a clothing store. Who’d have thought it?*

*...is 4e8uJvx!p3qY. Who better than a mathematician would know to choose a long, alphanumeric password? Sure, I found it right away, but on the other hand, I’m me.*

“Interesting,” was Floyd’s comment. “ ‘The Sky Goddesses’. When you dream, you dream big, eh?”

“I’m not sure if I had it better when I couldn’t yet have dreams. I hoped interpreting my dreams would give me more answers, but I only find more questions instead,” she said.

“Well, not all your dreams must necessarily be of importance. Maybe this one isn’t.”

“I learned to tell important dreams from unimportant ones, and this is not one of the latter. Although...” She stopped.

“What?”

“Judy... Of course!” she exclaimed.

“Bullseye?”

“Almost. What is Judy to me?”

“In what way?”

“Come on, Floyd! It’s evident. Judy is my adoptive sister.”

“Yes. So what?”

“So, this must be connected to the dream about the infinite castle. Do you remember what the old man said?”

“He said many things, all of which were rather mysterious and prone to subjective interpretation...”

“Particularly,” Ayleen went on, a bit annoyed, “he told me about *my sister*. He said I’d find my sister inside the castle, although it didn’t happen in that dream. Judy must have been a symbol for the sister the old man was talking about. It’s obvious. Even in *The Fall of the Gods* Judy is explicitly referred to as my sister. Initially, I thought that was just because that’s how I see her in real life too. I thought it was just a detail from everyday life... I hadn’t thought of this link.”

“Do you think we’re talking about an actual sister? Maybe even the word could be just symbolic.”

“Maybe. But I do think whatever ‘my sister’ means, her appearance in the dream must be important. Just like the fact she symbolises the day and I the night.”

“How about the fact Judy’s an adoptive sister? Does that mean anything?”

“Yes,” Ayleen replied, shaking her head, “it means it’s good you’re a lawyer and not a psychologist.”

\* \* \*

*Emails to friends and relatives... Well, it's a personal address after all. She receives a few newsletters and she is on some discussion boards... Science, comics, one about martial arts... Let's have a look at the science ones... Look at this, this one's got a topic about Mr Deverex. Blah blah blah... a new Einstein and even more... Blah blah... Shy and solitary... Hm-hmm... Vanished into thin air... Yep yep...*

*Whoa!*

*Occasionally seen in the company of a young woman... Her identity is unknown.*

*She must be the one in the pictures I found.*

\* \* \*

Around nine thirty, Ayleen and Floyd had left the Deverex Tower and were now walking along the Thames Path, by the bank of the river. There was nothing romantic to it. They were just friends, and anyway, Floyd already had Lisa to take for romantic walks alongside the Thames. At any rate, taking a stroll with Floyd in a place like this was something Ayleen would never have done back in the days of their first encounter.

They stopped for a while at the Island Gardens to chat. The place seemed to be completely deserted.

Not far from their location, two mean-looking bums were observing them with considerable interest.

"Look at the love birds over there," one said, rubbing his right hand under his nose. "The chick's a hottie, ain't she?"

"Dandy's not bad either," the other one replied, gulping the last drop of shoddy beer from the bottle.

"What the hell are you talking about?" the first grumbled. "I've always said you're some sort of fag." He turned his greedy eyes to Ayleen's silhouette again.

"I was talking about his money. Judging by his clothes, he's gotta be rich."

"You're always so materialistic. Well, have it your way. At the moment, all I care about is satisfying a different kind of need, something more spiritual than a rough beast like you can understand," he concluded,

exploding into laughter.

“Then let’s do something. First, we beat the hell outta him. Then, while I take him to the cleaners, you get to bang the girl. That should keep you from drooling over all the women we run into, at least for a while. I’m tired of cutting crappy figures because of you.”

“Shut it! I come across as a faggot because of you! Get a move on, you had a good idea for once.”

\* \* \*

*Oh, there she is, coming back. Everything is back in its place with a margin of error of point zero one millimetres. Unless she’s got a portable microscope in her beauty case, she won’t notice I searched through her things.*

*Did I fix her email account’s last-accessed date? Yep, it’s the same as before I logged in.*

*What is she doing? She’s changing clothes... Better to look elsewhere. Nonsense, I know, but I’m very well-mannered.*

*Is she done yet?... Whoops! No, she’s not!*

*Okay, now she’s done. She exercises? Hmm... Some tai chi positions for relaxing and meditation.*

*According to her posts on the martial arts forum, she’s a karate black belt, too.*

*All in all, she’s interesting.*

\* \* \*

The two bums approached Ayleen and Floyd from behind. When they were about five metres from them, Floyd turned around and saw them. “I think we’d better go, Ayleen,” he said.

“Agreed,” she replied calmly, after having looked them up and down for a moment. They began walking toward the Saunders Ness Road, pretending they didn’t see the two men heading directly toward them.

“Look at her!” the one with the empty bottle started to shout. “I mean, look at her! Isn’t she a true wonder of modern architecture?”

He pointed at the Deverex Tower. Meanwhile, his friend chuckled like an idiot.

Ayleen and Floyd tried to ignore them, but the drunkard grabbed Floyd

by the arm and continued, “However, that wonder is no place for me and my friend, ladies and gentlemen! They wouldn’t let us in! We aren’t their types.”

Floyd cast a perplexed glance at Ayleen, who stood impassive.

“Now, is that justice, I ask?” the extempore speaker went on. “Solely based on the looks of me and my hereby friend, they decided we are too filthy for the taste of the moneybags guzzling up there.”

“A true injustice indeed!” the other one added, as he kept leering at Ayleen. Her breasts, her legs. He was almost drooling all over her, like a hungry hound.

“Don’t you agree with me, miss?”

“Leave. Now,” Ayleen answered coldly.

“Don’t make the same mistake, my dear miss!” the bum continued undeterred, closing in on Ayleen. She could smell the awful alcohol stink exhaling from his mouth. The last bottle he had emptied certainly hadn’t been the first of the night. “Do not let appearances deceive you! Beneath these drunkard’s rags lies a philosopher and a clever speaker, as you certainly have noticed!” Then he suddenly smashed the bottle against a lamp post nearby, breaking it in half. Floyd startled at the sound of the breaking glass.

“Despite appearances, my dear miss,” he went on, “my friend, here, is a true Latin lover... Allow him to show you personally while your cavalier and I talk business.” He then moved closer to Floyd and pointed the broken bottle to his throat.

*Oh, the poor things,* Floyd thought.

Ayleen’s right hand tightened around the aggressor’s armed hand like the jaws of a steel vice. Her grip was so strong the bottleneck broke—probably along with some of his bones. The drunkard cried in pain when the glass shreds stuck into his palm. Ayleen kept on crushing her opponent’s hand and pushed him away from Floyd, then she swiftly slammed him down to the ground. She then proceeded to wring his arm, which the bum couldn’t move any more. All he could do was scream in pain, looking at his bleeding hand.

The other man had witnessed the scene aghast and didn’t manage to react in time when Ayleen grabbed him by his worn-out rags and knocked him down. She was holding him down with his right arm bent behind his back.

Both bums were screaming now.

“C’mon, Ayleen...” Floyd said, feeling just a little bit sorry for them. “I think that’s enough. No need to hurt them further.”



“Don’t just stand there. Call the police.”

The police came within minutes, and once the situation was clarified, they handcuffed the two bums and pushed them briskly into the car, while they were still screaming things along the lines of “My hand! Jesus! Look at my hand!” and “She’s possessed! Listen to me, mate! Keep away from her! She’s Satan himself is what she is!”

Both Ayleen and Floyd arrived home a bit late because they had to go with the police for the crime report—she wasn’t going to just let it go. Had some other woman been in her place, things would probably not have ended well at all. In a best-case scenario, they would have raped her and beaten and robbed him.

After the report, Ayleen drove Floyd home and went back to her place, where Judy was still up, waiting for her.

“Why are you so late?” the young girl asked her.

“Floyd and I went for a walk. We were talking about this and that and didn’t notice how late it was. I’m sorry I didn’t let you know.”

It wasn’t necessary to get Judy worried over nothing. There was no point in telling her what had happened.

“Okay,” was Judy’s unconvinced answer.

“I’m having some iced tea,” Ayleen said, opening the fridge. “Want some?”

“No, thanks. I’m going to bed. See you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

“G’night.”

\* \* \*

*She’s sleeping now. I can hardly believe a mathematician-karateka sleeps in pink pyjamas with tiny hearts hugging a huge teddy bear.*

*I might just ask her to lunch tomorrow. Hmm, no, not a good idea. Getting rid of what I’ll have ‘eaten’ isn’t too big a trouble, but I should be the one paying for the food. It’d be rude to have her pay for everything, and I’d rather not make a lousy first impression. The problem is, I haven’t got two pennies to rub together.*

*I should have asked Mr Deverex to open a bank account in my name.*

*Let’s say I’ll just ‘happen’ to bump into her right after breakfast, as if I*

*had just finished eating in the same place she has.*

*I just hope not to have Parnet in my way. Wait, was Parnet the concierge's name?*

\* \* \*

Ayleen was lying on her soft bed, letting her mind wander. Sooner or later, though, her thoughts would always come back to the questions that had always haunted her. This was more or less what she meant when she said to Philip she and Judy had something in common. Judy had lost both parents, while Ayleen didn't even know who her own parents were. In addition, Ayleen had lost a person dear to her, the only person who had been like a parent for her—at least for a while. She had also lost a very special friend, from whom she had heard nothing for years.

Initially, Ayleen didn't intend to reveal any of these things to Judy. Revealing them would have implied either telling her *all* the truth, or making up some cover-up story—at which point she might just as well have pretended the whole story didn't exist and tell Judy nothing. Floyd, one of her closest friends and the only one aware of the facts, had advised Ayleen not to tell Judy anything. However, Ayleen had concluded she couldn't lie to Judy forever. Sooner or later, Judy would notice some inexplicable incongruity. How could they establish a connection based on mutual trust, as it was supposed to be between two albeit adoptive sisters, if Ayleen kept secrets from her?

So, one fine day a little over two years before, Ayleen had resolved to tell Judy everything *really* worth knowing about herself.

It had taken a while for Judy to learn to accept Ayleen for who she was, but as Judy herself had admitted some months after the revelation, what Ayleen was like didn't really matter to her. What really mattered was Ayleen had proved to be the sister Judy had never had, who had spared her a life of orphanages and let her lead a normal one.

A teenager had ultimately proved herself better than so many adults. While many people couldn't set aside even very minor differences—like skin colour, for example—Judy had learnt to not only accept, but also appreciate, Ayleen's profoundly different nature.

## CHAPTER 6

Saturday morning. The second day of Yuki's long weekend.

She had just finished her breakfast: a cup of coffee, scrambled eggs, and a marmalade croissant. She got up from the pub table as the waiter came to clear it, then she reached the cashier. Not too distant from her was the strange guy she had seen the other day. The one with the petroleum-green clothes, who was putting his wallet back into his pocket. She pretended she didn't see him.

"Miss Kashizawa!" he started. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Oh! Good morning, Mr...?" she said, feigning surprise.

"Howards. Rupert Howards," he replied, as they promptly shook hands—he was strange alright, but she didn't want to come across as rude.

"You seem to be a regular here at the Deverex Tower, Mr Howards."

"Definitely. As I was trying to say during our last meeting, Mr Deverex and I were good friends, and when he was still here, I made a habit of coming here often... A habit I have not broken yet."

"That's odd," Yuki observed, leaving the cashier together with Howards. "I heard Deverex was a loner."

"True, but there were some people he liked to be with... A few close friends."

*I wonder what on earth makes this guy one of those 'close friends',* she thought to herself.

"Deverex was a scientist," Howards went on, "so he was more than happy to discuss science matters with whomever gave him the opportunity. Like your father, for example."

"You know my father?"

"I've heard of him. He is a professor in Tokyo, correct?"

"Yes, indeed... I guess even rocks have heard about him after the news of the inheritance," she joked.

"True," he chuckled, "but I had already heard of him. The scientific community is a small world where everybody knows everybody, at least by reputation. I've read some of the papers he published."

"You're a scientist, too?"

“In my own, small way...” Howards replied with palpable hesitation, as if playing modest was a monumental effort for him.

“So what do you do, Mr Howards?”

“Well, computer science, electronics... *mathematics*...”

“Indeed?” Yuki asked, now more interested.

“True story,” Howards replied with a self-satisfied smirk.

\* \* \*

That morning, Ayleen had decided to leave the car at home. She, Judy, Floyd, and Lisa, went to spend one day surrounded by nature. They got off the Piccadilly Line at Hyde Park Corner at around a quarter past nine and then continued along a path through the park, parallel to South Carriage Drive, toward the Diana Memorial Fountain.

They continued walking for a few hundred metres more. They laid their large picnic blanket in the shade of some trees not far from Broad Walk, near Round Pond.

“Ayleen,” Lisa said, “you should sunbathe a little. It’d be good for you.”

“I know,” she replied, “but I’d rather stay in the shade. I never get a proper tan anyway.”

Unlike her boyfriend and Judy, Lisa was unaware of Ayleen’s little secret. As somebody had once told Ayleen, the fewer people knew about it, the better.

For the time being, they were all either sitting or lying down, quietly enjoying the sun or the shade. A warm breeze was gently moving the leaves and the grass blades, and all one could hear in that peaceful morning was the twittering of the birds, the buzzing of some insects, and other people’s voices. The perfect setting for thinking.

Apparently, in the dream of the sky goddesses, Ayleen and her unknown sister—who certainly could not really be Judy—were both walking to the abode of the gods. She was the night goddess, while her sister was the day goddess. Ayleen had always wondered why her dreams, the meaningful ones, frequently made use of mythological symbolism. In her particular case, this was almost an oxymoron. A sharp contrast between her nature—based on logic, rationality, and science—and the fanciful, irrational nature of mythology.

Ever since she could dream, Ayleen had had around a few thousand different dreams, only very few of which seemed to be of real importance.

She wasn't sure about it, but she had a feeling that particular kind of dream was about her repressed and forgotten past, which she had in vain tried to recover for the previous ten years, since the moment—in 1998—her present life had begun. The very same moment when her previous life, whatever it had been like, had come to an abrupt end.

Judy was right—who knew what would have happened if only she had continued walking toward Olympus? Aileen decided she would try to find out that very night. On second thoughts, maybe it wasn't a very good idea. It meant forcing a dream to start from a specific point rather than letting it develop in a 'natural' way. Well, there was no harm in trying anyway.

\* \* \*

"I must say, Rupert," Yuki said, strolling about the gardens inside the Deverex Tower with her new friend, "your knowledge is really impressive! My compliments!"

"Now you're flattering me," he said. Now that he was on more familiar terms with her, everything had just got much easier.

"No, I mean it! Your scientific knowledge is astounding! It's no surprise Mr Deverex enjoyed your company so much."

"Speaking of which..." he began. "As I was trying to explain yesterday morning, I need to talk about Edwin with your dad, if it's not too much trouble."

"How so?"

"You see... I'd like to shed some light on his disappearance. The story was never too clear. The police investigated the matter, but I think they got nowhere. Edwin was never found and nobody talks about the case any more. I couldn't go and ask the police what they found just on the grounds of my friendship with him, anyway."

The real reason he couldn't go to the police was a different one, but it was best not to talk about it just yet.

"I appreciate that, but... I fail to see how my father could help you."

"Well, since Edwin chose him as his only heir, I thought maybe your father might know something. Maybe he was in touch with him more than I was."

"I doubt it. You said you used to come here a lot, while my father has been back in Tokyo for years now. He must have paid a visit no more often than a couple of times."

"Maybe they talked on the phone frequently, or they wrote emails..."

“It could be, but I don’t know... My father always talked about how Edwin was reserved and solitary, so I don’t think they kept in touch very much. They were very good friends, but I’m sure your experience of Mr Deverex tells you he was a bit of a queer fish... From what I know, even the few people close to him didn’t hear often from him.”

“I’ve read somewhere Edwin had been occasionally seen with a young woman.”

“I’ve heard about it, yes. Nobody really knows who she was or if they were dating, though. Anyway, it may have been just gossip. Perhaps they just saw somebody who looked a lot like Edwin. Or, if it really was him, maybe he just happened to be there with her by chance. They say he wasn’t the dating type.”

“So you don’t think your father could help me?” Rupert said, preventing a possible change of topic.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think so, no. I could ask him if he knows anything else, if you like, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

“I appreciate it,” he answered. He was a bit let down, but nowhere close to giving up just yet.

Yuki checked the clock. “It’s almost lunch time. Would you like to go for something to eat?” she suggested.

“I’d love to, but unfortunately I am supposed to be somewhere,” he apologised. “Actually, I’d better get going, or I’m going to be late.”

“Okay. How do I get in touch in case my dad has some news for you?”

“Yes, of course. How to find me?” Rupert answered, happy to see the girl was showing some interest. “I’ll find you. Are you going to be very busy in the near future?”

“As a matter of fact, starting next week, I’ll be at King’s College from Monday to Friday, almost all day...”

“I see. Then let’s say I’ll drop by tomorrow evening? I mean, do you think you’ll have spoken to him by then?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Great! I gotta run now, see you!”

“See you soon!”

Rupert went to the elevator.

“What a peculiar guy...” Yuki said in a quiet voice to herself. She probably didn’t think Rupert could hear her, but he could.

\* \* \*

Ayleen, Floyd, and the others were finishing their lunch at the Tennis Centre Café, south of the park on South Carriage Drive. They had also reserved one of the courts to play some tennis later on in the afternoon.

“Ayleen,” Lisa said, taking a teaspoonful of her ice cream, “Floyd told me about how you gave a good beating to two guys who tried to assault you yesterday night.”

Floyd choked on his ice cream. Ayleen had been adamant he not tell Judy, but like the idiot he was, he had blurted it out to Lisa, forgetting she couldn’t keep a secret to save her life. The young girl turned her head toward her adoptive sister. The look on her face revealed how upset she was Ayleen hadn’t told her anything. Ayleen looked back at Judy first, then at Lisa, and finally said, “Not a big deal, really. Just two drunkards looking for trouble.”

“Indeed,” Floyd hastened to confirm. “Nothing serious.”

“Well, one of them held a broken bottle to your throat, and the other one was about to jump Ayleen! I wouldn’t say it was ‘nothing serious’.”

A withering look from Floyd made Lisa understand just how inconvenient the topic was as Ayleen maintained the two drunkards probably had more alcohol than blood in their veins and therefore weren’t really dangerous.

There was an awkward silence. Shortly thereafter, Floyd managed to change topics, while Ayleen was ordering four coffees.

Later, as they walked to the tennis court, Lisa apologised to Ayleen. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea Judy wasn’t supposed to know,” she said. Floyd and Judy were already on the court, warming up for the game.

“Don’t stress about it. It’s not your fault. It’s Floyd’s.”

“I’ve really done it, haven’t I?”

“I think Judy is upset with me,” Ayleen sighed. “The other day, I scolded her for sneaking out and being so reckless she’s likely to break her neck on her skateboard.”

“And since you didn’t tell her about those two bums attacking you, she’s going to think you don’t practise what you preach.”

“Precisely, but that’s not all. Judy is constantly afraid something might happen to me, that I might die and leave her, just like her parents did.”

“That’s because she loves you. You should be glad.”

“I am. But I don’t want her to worry more than is necessary.”

“Well, things could have gone really awry for you, if only those two had been a little more sober.”

“You’re right. Well, the past is in the past. Let’s go and play now.”

*Not a chance*, Ayleen thought. Things *could* have gone really awry, but only for the two bums.

\* \* \*

Rupert was walking along the corridors of floor A and thought for a split second about Yuki Kashizawa. Even assuming her father had news—which he doubted—it would hardly be anything to help solve the puzzle. Furthermore, Rupert wouldn’t have been able to use the information on his own anyway.

At any rate, there *was* news. Rupert had popped over to the first floor of the Deverex Tower where Edwin had lived before disappearing, and... Well, he had found something interesting to work on. Popping over to Sevenoaks, too, could be a good idea. The scientist had spent a long time there, in his mansion, before the DT had been built. Of course the problem was always the same. Rupert could not go there. Okay, there was no avoiding it. He needed help, and at this point, he had to turn to Yuki. She looked like a nice person, and who else could he ask anyway? He didn’t know anybody else, and involving more people was probably not a good idea. He wasn’t sure Yuki would accept, but one thing he had learned about her was she loved a good mystery. And sure enough, the disappearance of Edwin Deverex was a pretty damn good one.

He had made his mind up. It was time to play detective.

\* \* \*

In the evening, Ayleen and Judy were in Hilldrop Lane again. They hadn’t talked much until Ayleen finally tried to go back to the awkward subject of the afternoon.

“Okay, Judy, you’re right,” she began. “I was wrong not to tell you anything. I’m sorry.”

The teenager said nothing.

“Are you going to wear a frown for the rest of your days?”

“You blame me for my recklessness,” Judy burst out after a moment, “but what about yours? You complain I should let you know when I go out. Well, shouldn’t *you* let *me* know when you go and get into fights with drunkards?”

“I didn’t say anything because I knew you’d take it badly.”



“That’s what I told you yesterday, but apparently it wasn’t a valid reason in *my* case! How convenient!”

“Judy, it’s not my fault if those two were looking for trouble. We were walking along the bank, and they came out of nowhere.”

“But why would you go alone late at night to a place like that!”

“Seriously? It wasn’t even ten in the evening, and that was no slum, was it now? They just happened to be there.”

“Of course, they just ‘happened’ to be there! And one of them ‘happened’ to almost jump you!”

Ayleen chuckled. “Do you *really* think that guy could’ve raped me?”

That wasn’t just unlikely. It was downright nonsense. Judy knew it.

“Something could have happened! You think you’re invincible, but what if you’re wrong?” She paused. She cried.

“I don’t want to be left alone again...”

Ayleen moved closer and wrapped her arms around Judy.

“It won’t happen. I promise nothing will happen to me.”

“How can you be so sure? You almost died in the desert,” she said, referring to the accident that had cost Ayleen her memories.

“And yet, here I am, alive and well.”

“But if you hadn’t been found by—”

“Even then,” Ayleen interrupted her, “I’d have been fine anyway.”

Judy stayed silent, while tears were streaming down her face.

“It’s not so easy to get rid of me,” Ayleen joked. Judy hinted a smile.

As she uttered those words, Ayleen thought again about one of her dreams. It wasn’t easy to get rid of her... *And yet*, she said to herself, *it looks like the gods have already fallen...*

## CHAPTER 7

The dream began. She resumed it from just before the moment she bent down to touch the transparent surface of the floor.

Ayleen looked around. The sky, the sun and the moon, the clouds. This time, though, Olympus was closer, right in front of her. Atop the mountain was the temple, with its big doors shut. Incised on the doors, in the middle, was a worn-out, low-relief figure of some kind of key. The bow of the key was a large circumference with three pointy protrusions on top, and a small, filled circle in the centre. The stem of the key was long and pointy. She had never seen it before, and it didn't seem to tell her anything.

Ayleen moved closer to the doors and started to push them slowly.

The doors opened.

Ayleen walked through the entrance to the temple, but what was standing before her was clearly not the inside of it. She immediately turned toward the doors, but they were gone. A wharf was in their place, shrouded in the mist.

She was different too. She was no longer a 'sky goddess': Her hair was tied in the usual ponytail, and she was dressed normally.

It looked like she was at a port that had obviously seen better days. The mist blocked the view almost entirely. The sea was barely visible, but she could clearly hear its loud rumbling. The sky was completely covered by big grey clouds.

Ayleen advanced slowly on the dusty quay swept by a mild wind. On her right were the docks, where some old boats were anchored. All of them were made of inlaid wood. Their sinuous shape was decidedly unusual for boats. Their sails were old and torn, and the planks of their hulls appeared to be partly rotten. What was most curious about their appearance was a soft, yellow light coming from the inside of each of them, as though they were lamps floating on the water.

On the left was some sort of small town consisting mostly of wooden shacks, some of which were covered in iron sheets. The mist made it hard to see if anybody was around, but in the distance she could see some figures moving.

Ayleen breathed in deeply, inhaling the salty smell of the air. Moving forward along the quay, she thought she could see a light much like those coming from the boats. This one, though, was moving slowly in her direction.

An old man was holding up the moving light. Judging by his appearance, he seemed to be a fisherman. He wore a red, woollen cap, a rather warm-looking sweater, and jute trousers covered in stains—possibly paint stains. He held the lamp with his left hand, and his beard was long and grey. As he saw Ayleen, he hinted a smile and took his worn-out pipe out of his mouth using his right hand.

“Hello, child,” he said to her. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

So the fellow knew her. It didn’t surprise her, and reminded her of the old man she had met in the dream of the infinite castle, who had proved to know a thing or two about many things.

“Who are you?” Ayleen inquired.

“I take care of the port. It’s mine.”

“The port is yours?”

“Sure. With all that comes with it.” He pointed at the ruined boats with the arm holding the lamp. He drew on a pipe while Ayleen was still looking at the boats, then he added: “I made them, after all. Who else should take care of them? Every now and then, though, somebody comes along, likes one, and takes it away.”

“Do you live there?” Ayleen asked, pointing at the line of shacks.

“No, I live here at the port. Other people live in the city.”

“Who are the ‘other people’?”

“Other people without an affiliation, like me. They live both in the upper and lower town.” The old fisherman pointed at two flights of stairs made of stone, this time using the hand holding the pipe. One flight went down, while the other one went up and seemed to lead to an earthy, rocky terracing.

“The one you see here is the upper town. The lower town is downstairs.”

“What about the other stairs? Where do they go?”

“Doesn’t matter. You can’t go there anyway.”

“Why not?”

“The lords of the castle don’t want us to go there.”

“The lords of the castle?” Ayleen asked. It was a link to another dream. She seemed to be on the right track. “What castle?”

“That one.”

Quite high up, behind the city, stood a mountain which Ayleen hadn’t noticed before. On its top was the rear of a castle well familiar to her.

“Can I go there?”

“My child,” the man chuckled, “you already are there!”

She expected that. The very same thing the other old man had repeated ad nauseam.

“You mentioned ‘others without an affiliation’ a moment ago. What did you mean?”

“You’re talking as if you, of all people, weren’t up to your neck in it.”

“You see, I suffer from memory loss.”

“Oh, I see. Well, the lords of the castle have servants. Lots of them. You and me, for example. The servants are many and have different purposes, so they were split into guilds. Each of them does a certain job. But some of us—those with no affiliation—belong to no guild. They live in the city.”

“What about the others? Where do they live?”

“Beneath the city. There’s another town where they live and work.”

“What’s my guild? If I belong to one.”

“Same as your sister’s. Nobody’s in it but you and she.”

*Excellent*, Ayleen thought. More clues about her.

“Do you know where I can find her? I need to talk to her.”

“You certainly do! You look quite confused! Who knows, maybe she can do something to soften your character a bit—you’re always so serious! You’ll find her at the tavern, at the other end of the city. It’s by the parliament. You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you for the information.”

“Don’t mention it, child. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to do some work on a boat.”

The fisherman reached one of the boats, took out some strange-looking tools, and started working on the hull.

Ayleen was in a hurry to go to the tavern, but first she thought she could try to reach the area where, according to the old fisherman, one could not go. She moved closer to the stone stairs and observed them: just a dozen steps. She slowly climbed up them, but it didn’t prove to be as easy as she thought it would be. As she was climbing up, the steps grew in number: She started running, in an attempt to reach the top of the stairs as soon as possible, but the top kept moving away, and each time she turned around she could see she hadn’t climbed more than just two or three steps.

She decided to give up on the idea. She jumped off the stairs and turned to look at them. It was just an absolutely normal flight of a dozen steps again.

*Blast.*

Ayleen took the stairs leading to the lower town, trying to get there quickly. Already, in a previous dream, she had missed her chance of meeting

her sister because she had woken up too early.

The lower city seemed to be populated by artisans, buskers, and other people busy with manual labour of some sort. Contrary to what the fisherman had said, it seemed those people could very well belong to a guild, since everybody was engaged in an activity, but she didn't yet know what he actually meant by 'guild'.

Finding the tavern wasn't difficult. It was a very big place, far bigger than a real-world tavern, frequented by numerous people. Some groups of individuals were all dressed in the same way—Ayleen thought they had to be members of the same guild—and many of them were unquestionably dressed as police officers.

In the tavern, there was a large counter and several tables filled with patrons. They appeared busy playing card games or other games, reading, writing, but curiously enough nobody was eating or drinking, which was rather strange for a tavern. Not far from the entrance to the tavern was a small jazz orchestra playing a quite fast version of *Oh! When the saints go marchin' in*.

She felt silly doing it, but she turned to the man behind the counter and told him the old fisherman said she could find her sister there. The man nodded with a smile and pointed her to a billiard table.

Ayleen tried to move closer to the table, making her way through the crowd. There were a lot of people around the table, and she could barely make out a blonde player—Judy, in all likelihood—striking a few balls. The crowd around the table seemed to grow larger. Actually, it was more like they were intentionally trying to bump into her. She repeatedly asked them to let her pass, but the sea of people kept apologising and pretending to make room for her without really letting her pass. Just like it had happened with the top of the stairs, the billiard table appeared to move farther away, and slowly, the crowd began to change too. The people all became identical and dressed in bright white. There was an infinite stream of them flowing onto her, as if they were trying to bury her. The music had become deafening, repetitive, and confused, and the outlines of things around her were blurred and warped. She tried hard to find her way out through the crowd, or even just to oppose the strength of the herd sweeping her away from the table.

But she couldn't.

When Ayleen opened her eyes, the clock showed one thirty-five in the morning. She switched on the bedside lamp, sat in the middle of her bed, and passed a hand through her hair. Rather than making her usual chamomile tea, she decided she would rather go out to the balcony to get some fresh air

and watch the stars.

## CHAPTER 8

The investigation into Edwin Deverex's disappearance was about to be over before it could even begin. Dash it! It seemed they had committed the perfect crime!

Rupert had taken a look at the police databases, but there was nothing to get excited about. They didn't know if he was dead or alive, and the last person who had seen him was the mysterious woman whom he was allegedly dating—it appeared they were both at the airport when she had left the country in early January 2004. The woman maintained she hadn't heard from him since, and the person to report the disappearance was Yutaka Kashizawa, on May 2 that same year. Clearly, on April 15 Edwin was already gone, since Yutaka—as the professor himself had told the police—had gone to see him that very day, and Edwin wasn't there.

*Given that until January 24 Edwin was with me, Rupert thought, he could've vanished at any point between January 25 and April 15, 2004.*

And then there was the woman. She just had to be the one in the pictures. Apparently, she was such a close friend to Edwin that he had filled entire photo albums with pictures of her and the two of them together. She even used to have her own room at the Deverex Tower. Despite all of that, she hadn't heard from him again after her departure. How could it be?

He had a feeling this Ayleen Marker wasn't telling the whole story.

Maybe there was more about her to be found in the mansion in Sevenoaks. According to the woman, she and Deverex had lived there together for some years.

It was time to ask Yuki to help him out *for real*.

\* \* \*

Judy normally slept in on Sunday mornings, and this one was no exception. Ayleen liked to get up early, regardless of the day. The only time she had ever overslept was when she had had her first dream, and that time she had been very surprised at how she hadn't noticed how long she had

actually been sleeping.

Around nine, Ayleen was already jogging around Hildrop Crescent. It was neither about staying fit, nor about exercise being good for one's health. She just liked moving around. However, she had never really got used to the idea of sweating, which she gladly avoided every time she was sure nobody would notice.

Her dream from the previous night had possibly given her some new clues. In the castle dream, the old man had said inside the castle there were plenty of people—*all* of them, in fact—but the last dream was the first in which she had seen crowded places like towns and taverns. All those people were split into guilds, and apparently she belonged to one too. The fisherman had also said everyone in the guilds was a servant to the castle lords. Which was odd, because the old man in her first dream— unquestionably one of the lords—had made it very clear she and the other inhabitants of the castle were their *offspring*. He had never said anything about servants. Naturally, 'offspring' could be a metaphor, and so could 'servants', after all. At any rate, the most important thing was if these other servants represented other, real creatures, they had to be like Ayleen. If not, there would have been no point in distinguishing between the servants and the other inhabitants. In particular, Ayleen's sister—whoever she was—had to have a special connection with her, since they were the only members of their own guild. She wondered which guild it was. Ayleen was positive at least one guild was represented by the police. The guards of the castle, perhaps? So was this an actual, organised society, that had even a parliament—whatever that represented? An entire society of beings like her? It was certainly interesting, but then where were all the other members of the society? Or perhaps she was the last of her kind? After all, as Judy had pointed out, Ayleen had already risked her life ten years before, so it was possible the other ones hadn't made it. *Maybe the other gods had fallen.*

Then there was the port. Sure, assuming the mysterious society existed for real and lived in some actual place, there could be a port there. But the fisherman had said the port was *his*, all of it, and it wouldn't make much sense unless the port was a metaphor for something else. And what lay in the unreachable zone atop the stairs? It wasn't just forbidden to go there, it was downright impossible. Whatever they were hiding there was clearly very important.

That area wasn't the only elusive element of her dreams. Her sister was one, too. In *The Infinite Castle* dream, Ayleen could not find her, while in this last one she had found her, but she was prevented from approaching her.



She had to have something important to tell Ayleen. But how could she be an *actual* sister to Ayleen? Or was she a symbol as well?

Those were all just conjectures, but it was undeniable her dreams—the important ones—had too much in common that couldn't be explained away as simple coincidences.

\* \* \*

Around eleven twenty, Rupert Howards arrived on the 150<sup>th</sup> floor of the Deverex Tower and was headed to Yuki Kashizawa's suite. As Rupert knew perfectly well, she had got up at twenty-five past nine, had had her usual breakfast, had gone down for a walk in Deverex Park, and now she had been in her apartment for about half an hour, lying in bed on her stomach, reading *Animal Farm*.

*Who could it be?* Yuki wondered when somebody knocked on the door. She did think of Rupert, but she hadn't told him where she lived, so it couldn't be him. Perhaps it was the concierge.

"Rupert!" she began, a little surprised.

"Hi! We agreed I would drop by eventually. Remember?" Rupert asked.

"Yes, of course... Please, do come in."

She showed him in, and he entered looking around.

"Nice place," he commented.

"Despite the mess of all my stuff scattered all around?" she asked, drily.

"So," he said, changing the subject, "did you have a chance to talk to your dad?"

"I did, but as I expected, there was nothing he could tell me. He knows nothing more than what we already talked about. And, of course, he asked me why I was so interested in the issue..."

"What did you tell him?"

"I didn't think it was necessary to tell him everything... I just said I was curious and wanted to know more."

"Good..." Rupert replied, looking somewhat relieved.

"Rupert, do you mind me asking something?"

"Not at all."

"Don't get me wrong—I don't mind you coming here, but... How did you know where I live? I don't think I ever told you." The explanation could be simpler than she thought. Rupert could have asked the concierge, for

example—even though, judging by what Yuki had seen, the concierge would probably have swallowed his own tongue rather than talk to him again.

“Well... It’s one of the things I’d like to talk about, in a way...”

“What things?” she asked, intrigued.

“It’s still about Mr Deverex, but...”

“But...?”

“There’s something I’d like to show you, but... You see, it’s quite... confidential. You have to promise you won’t tell anyone what I’m going to show you.”

“If you wanted my attention, you’ve got it...” she replied. “But it depends on what we are talking about.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if you found out what happened to Deverex, then we have to tell the police!”

“Nothing of the sort, unfortunately... But anyway! Do I have your word you’ll keep it a secret?”

He didn’t come across as if that promise was really all that important. He was a funny guy, Yuki said to herself. He was probably just joking.

“Alright,” she conceded, raising her right hand. “I promise!”

“Excellent! Now, if you care to follow me...”

He and Yuki headed to the west service elevator, normally used by staff only. Rupert looked quite pleased with himself, while Yuki was quite puzzled and asked him if they were leaving the Deverex Tower.

“No, no,” he replied, stifling a chuckle as if Yuki had asked a silly question.

“Then where are we going?”

“Under the garages.”

“Under the garages? But there’s nothing there!”

He looked at her with his arms folded. “Think so?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Either there was more than met the eye about him, she thought, or the concierge wasn’t wrong about his mental health. She feared for a moment that following him could prove to be a terrible mistake; however, she was more curious than intimidated and told herself she knew how to defend herself if necessary.

Yuki was more than convinced the elevator would stop once it got to the last garage on floor -10. The thing was, no one had pushed any buttons or given vocal commands, so theoretically the elevator shouldn’t have moved at all. Maybe somebody else had called it? At any rate, Rupert was apparently correct: Right after passing floor -10, the elevator display

showed the letter A.

Yuki stared at Rupert, baffled. The elevator doors opened and he got out, followed by Yuki. She was looking all around herself, astounded.

The doors shut behind her, reassembling the usual 'ED' logo engraved on them, and the elevator returned back up.

"Welcome to floor A, the first of the Deverex Tower's five secret floors, where Mr Deverex worked on his science experiments and, as you may guess, spent most of his time."

The west service elevator led directly to the centre of a long, horizontal hallway; this was crossed by another one, also crossed by many other ones parallel to the first. They divided floor A into several closed rooms, all provided with sensor-controlled, 'ED'-marked doors that slid into the walls. On the walls there were many touch screen displays showing a lot of different data; some of these data were incomprehensible, while others seemed to be related to the Deverex Tower.

"On these floors," Rupert went on before Yuki could say anything, "you can find chemistry, physics, computer science, and mechanics laboratories, and a lot more stuff. In Princeton's finest tradition, there are blackboards in every room—Mr Deverex was a mathematician, too, and as such, he loved being able to write down an idea as soon as he got it. And believe me when I say it was no rare occurrence."

"I bet..." she stuttered. "Rupert, how... How do you know all these things? I mean, nobody knows about this place, right?"

"Nobody except Mr Deverex, me, and now you. Nobody can come here unless I want them to, and the elevator we took is the only one in the entire Deverex Tower that can take you here. How do I know all these things? Well, who better than I should know all about the Deverex Tower? I *am* the Deverex Tower."

Despite the decidedly incredible scene lying before her, Yuki stared at Rupert as if he were a few sandwiches short of a picnic.

"And on the subject," he rushed to clarify, "Rupert Howards is not my real name." He held out his hand. "My name's *Hexagon*. But you can call me Hex."

Yuki was rather confused. She leaned on a wall for a moment, minding not to touch any of the screens. Then she rested her forehead on her hand and began: "Let's start from the beginning. The purpose of this place is clear enough, and for an eccentric guy as Mr Deverex certainly was, it wouldn't be all that strange to have a 'secret laboratory'." She air quoted those last two words for emphasis. "What is not at all clear is, what the hell do you mean *you* are the Deverex Tower!"

“Well, I am in a manner of speaking.”

“How is that?”

It looked like she was on the brink of hysteria, Hex thought. His memory contained an exhaustive list of all known causes of hysteria, but ‘discovering the person you’re talking to is in fact a building’ didn’t seem to be among them.

“I’m an *artificial intelligence*, created by Edwin Deverex. I am able to interface myself with every system in this building... The building is the ‘body’, I am the ‘mind’. Simple,” he replied.

“Trivial,” she said sarcastically, starting to feel quite dizzy.

“What’s so difficult to understand?” Hex asked. He looked a bit annoyed, as if all he was saying really were trivialities.

“You see... *Hex*,” Yuki began, playing along. “It’s not about it being difficult to understand, but rather difficult to *believe*...”

He had to be a loony who had somehow managed to break into Deverex’s small, underground realm. There was no other explanation. Well, he had proved to be a seasoned scientist, though... Okay, then, perhaps he was a loony with a billion magna-cum-laude degrees, but a loony nonetheless.

He didn’t seem dangerous, at least.

“Difficult to believe?”

“Yeah... I mean, the fact you’re some sort of robot who—”

“I never said I was ‘some sort of robot’,” the other replied, seeming to be a bit offended by the remark. “I said I’m an AI.”

“Then would you care to explain *who* the body in front of me belongs to?”

“To me! Who else could it belong to? It’s my *solid* holographic interface.”

“...‘solid’,” Yuki nodded, feeling a bit lost. A loony who had watched too much *Star Trek* was what he was.

“It’s true, ‘hologram’ isn’t quite the right word, but it conveys the basic idea. And you’ve seen it yourself it is solid. You shook my hand.”

“I’m not questioning it being solid, but...”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. You’re a Doubting Thomas. Hold on...”

Hex’s figure became rapidly transparent and appeared to be shrinking and slightly warping. Eventually, it disappeared entirely with an electronic hiss.

Yuki changed her mind. If anyone there had lost her marbles, she had—not him.

“Are you satisfied?” the voice of Hex asked. Yuki looked around, but there was nobody there. The voice seemed to come from above, probably through a speaker.

“Where the devil are you?” she stammered.

“Right here.” The figure of Hex reappeared on the side opposite of where he had disappeared, with the same special effect played the other way around. “Is this sufficient proof of what I say?”

“I guess so...” she said hesitantly, after a moment. “Because if it isn’t, then I must be completely crazy, and I like to think I’m not...”

“Now you’re talking! So, let’s make ourselves comfortable, and I’ll fill you in about all you need to know. Or would you rather go and get an energy drink first?”

## CHAPTER 9

Yuki decided to get a drink first. She and the hologram went back up a few floors and stopped at a quiet pub, where Hexagon gave her a few more explanations—for example, he told her floor A contained his ‘brain’ and gave her a few more details on the holographic technology of his interface and his abilities. Hexagon wasn’t just able to control every single system in the Deverex Tower: His creator had made him capable of connecting to any satellite orbiting the Earth using the skyscraper’s mast, which was in fact a huge, multipurpose antenna. His clock frequency was several billion billion operations per second, making him the most powerful computer in the world. He was also completely invisible and inaccessible from outside the DT. He was protected by an extremely advanced cryptographic system. Hex spent most of his time browsing the Internet, and there was no public or private resource he could not access, making him the most well-informed being on the planet.

And yet, he had no clue where Edwin Deverex was.

According to what Hex had said, he had been activated for the first time in mid-2003, but there had been a serious malfunction that had irreparably wiped his memory and damaged his holographic interface system. Consequently, Edwin was forced to ‘shut him down’ to fix the damage. Eventually, Hex was back up and running for two weeks, after which a new problem made it advisable to deactivate him again. Initially, the scientist had thought it would be a fairly short, simple maintenance task, and he had told Hexagon it would take no more than a few months before his reactivation. Unfortunately, Hex woke up again four years later, after Mr Deverex had vanished. As Hexagon had determined, further complications after his second deactivation had required his code to be run through a meticulous, automated debugging process followed by a complete rebuild. All those operations had been carried out by diagnostic software Edwin had created with that very purpose in mind, but the work had taken much longer than estimated. At least, the second time there had been no data loss and there were no other problems to be expected—nothing the hologram couldn’t take care of autonomously anyway. Once the diagnostic was

terminated, Hex had been automatically reactivated.

“Isn’t it illegal to spy on anyone you want?” Yuki asked in a whisper, looking around warily.

“It is, but I’m not a voyeur! Generally, I only browse publicly available information, but I can go deeper if needed. I don’t spy on people on the street using satellites! I only do what I need.”

“But why would Deverex design a system like this? It reminds me of a certain novel by George Orwell...”

“I don’t think Edwin had dictatorial yearnings...” the AI commented. “It’s certain, though, he was quite the megalomaniacal type. If he knew he could create something grand, he would do it without worrying too much about the consequences.”

“How do you know him so well? You were with him for just two weeks.”

“True, I have known him for a short time only, but artificial intelligences learn quickly. I interacted with him personally, I saw how he lived, ate, worked, spoke. I read on the Internet all there is to know about him and his family, I read his works...”

“God, do I envy your learning abilities...”

“Speaking of learning...” he said gravely. “Now that you’ve learned all of this, you do realise I have no other option but killing you.”

Yuki felt a lump forming in her throat, and only for a fraction of a second she wondered what kind of a moron would kill her because she knew things he himself had insisted on telling.

“Nah, I’m just teasing you!” he exclaimed, laughing his head off. “I’ve been wanting to play this joke on somebody for ages!”

Yuki held her forehead with her right hand and mentally sent him to hell, while he kept on laughing and repeating that she should have seen the look on her own face.

*I’d have loved to see yours, in my place!*

“Is that your idea of a joke?”

“Yep!”

She gave him a dirty look, but she was more curious than angry or scared, so she asked, “You still haven’t explained why your name is Hexagon, Mr funny guy.”

“To be honest, I have no idea.”

“Really?”

“Edwin never told me. I suppose after reactivating me he had more urgent priorities. And he had only two weeks anyway.”

“It’s still strange.”

Listen, why don’t we go back downstairs? Like I said, I have something to show you.”

“You mean there’s more?” she uttered, as if she hadn’t had enough surprises for one day.

“Of course! This was just a necessary preamble to the rest!”

“Great... Well, what can I say?” Yuki replied, getting up. “Let’s go...”

Yuki and Hexagon were again on floor A in the main control room. The hologram—sitting on his favourite chair—told her about his investigations into Deverex’s disappearance and the only lead they could follow for now. She was now examining the photographs Hex had found in his creator’s apartment. They showed Edwin in the company of a young woman called Ayleen Marker.

“I don’t know,” Yuki said, flipping through the pictures. “From what I can see, Edwin and this Ayleen seemed to be rather close. Are you sure they weren’t dating?”

“I’m not, of course,” the AI replied. “I had never seen her before finding the pictures, and Mr Deverex never said a word about her. The little I know comes from police databases.”

“You hacked a police server?” she asked in astonishment.

“Easy peasy: I got in, I read, I copied, I got out.”

“Do you know you can be jailed for something like that?”

“If they can handcuff me and make sure I can’t break free, then they deserve to catch me.”

“Okay... Forget it. Rather, tell me—why is there a file on her? Did she do anything wrong?”

“No, no. Her criminal record is spotless. I read the transcripts of her interviews with the police after Edwin disappeared. She maintained to know only what I already told you, which is nothing. She saw Mr Deverex for the last time when she was leaving to go back to Canada, on January 3, 2004, and then nothing. Apparently, they haven’t kept in touch since.”

“That’s odd. They come across as very good friends to say the least. They don’t kiss in these pictures, so perhaps they weren’t a couple.”

“Yeah, and isn’t it strange two such very good friends don’t keep in touch for months?”

“Well, it can happen. Maybe they had an argument.”

“It’s possible. I’m still not convinced, though.”

“Do you know if the police examined the computers used by Edwin?”



“Yes, he had some sort of war surplus of a few thousand megahertz he used in his apartment,” Hex replied, making no mystery of how little consideration he had toward his ‘ancestors’, “and you can bet they checked them out. All the hard drives are missing, and if they didn’t return them... You know what that means, right?”

“They found something of interest?”

“Either that, or *they aren’t sure of what they have found*. For instance, there could be inaccessible data, and since they don’t know what those data could be, they can’t return the drives. I’d exclude they found anything, otherwise it would be in the file I checked.”

“What kind of ‘inaccessible’ data could there be?”

“Do you mean how could they be inaccessible or what could the data be about?”

“Both.”

“Well, if Edwin could design a cryptographic system like mine, it would be no problem for him to create and use an equally good one for his data. Perhaps not exactly like mine, but a very hard one to crack nonetheless.”

“Cryptography isn’t exactly my specialisation, but if I’m not mistaken, trying to brute-force a file with that level of encryption would take thousands of *centuries*.”

“Exactly. As you know, brute-forcing an encrypted file boils down to trying all possible passwords. It’s kind of like having a door with a single, very complicated lock to open, several billion different keys available, and trying them all one by one to see which of them opens the lock. A better approach would be trying to recover the file’s cryptographic key instead—it’d be a bit like trying to remove the lock from the door. Either way, with their level of technology, the police would never get through it.”

“Could you decrypt them?”

“Hard to say. If they have been encrypted with an algorithm close enough to mine, that might be an edge. I could try. Even if I had no option but resorting to brute-force, I’d be a lot faster than they could ever be. There’s still no guarantee of success, though.”

“Not to mention the hard drives are in their possession, not ours. And even assuming such files do indeed exist, what are you hoping to find in them?”

“Anything. Maybe Edwin was in touch with those who got him, for some reason, and those files might contain information on those people. Even an address, with some luck. Or perhaps some more data on this Ayleen Marker.”

“I’ve got a feeling you don’t like her very much,” Yuki guessed.

“Well, I do have a hunch she might have deliberately lied on something when she was questioned.”

Despite her passion for science fiction, Yuki had yet to get used to the idea of a computer having a ‘hunch’.

“Can’t we find out more on her? Maybe I could look her up and ask a few questions...”

“Hold you horses, detective. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but it’s a crazy idea, regardless of her involvement. First of all, you have no authority to ask her any question on a case you’re technically not supposed to know anything about. Secondly, in a worst-case scenario, if she did kidnap or kill Edwin, putting a spoke in her wheel might result in your ending up just like him.”

“True... Well, any other idea?”

“I could try to access some other database. The general registry office’s, for example. Any information on her would be useful.”

“Do you really think she’s involved? Judging by those pictures, she looks like a nice person.”

“You can’t base a serious investigation on that kind of a premise,” Hexagon said. “I know it looks like I am already pronouncing her guilty, but I’m not. It’s just that, for the time being, there is no other lead to follow.”

He had turned so very serious all of a sudden. He almost didn’t look the same as the hour before when he was making fun of her.

“Okay... But how can I help you?”

“Well, there *could* be a way...”

“I’m all ears.”

“As I learned from her depositions, Ayleen Marker declared she lived with Edwin for some years. Initially they lived in Kent, in a mansion belonging to Mr Deverex; but then, after the DT was completed, they moved in here, and after a few months she went back to Canada.”

“Right.”

“I’d like to take a look at the mansion. We could find something more about her.”

“Do you want to back up her version of the story?”

“I don’t think she lied about living with Edwin. All these pictures showing her with my creator are sufficient evidence of a bonding between them. If she were guilty, it wouldn’t make much sense to admit a closer relation with the victim than she indubitably already had, and if she were innocent, she’d have no reason to make up stories that could get her charged with obstruction and false testimony.”

“Correct,” Yuki nodded.

“What I want is to understand who this woman is, and to find out if she’s actually hiding something.”

“Even assuming she *is* hiding something, we can’t simply go and ask her about it. You said it yourself.”

“Maybe we could discover what she omitted without asking her anything. At any rate, we’ll take one step at a time. That’s why I’d like to ask you to pay a visit to the Deverex Mansion, in Sevenoaks.”

“Well, that could be a bit... complicated.”

“I assume the place is your father’s property now.”

“Yes. Edwin left him basically everything, but that’s not the point... What reason can I give for ‘paying a visit’ to the Deverex Mansion? I certainly don’t have the keys, and I don’t know what I could come up with to convince my father to give them to me!”

“Well, you’d just have to pick a few locks, that’s all...”

“Are you nuts? It’s private property!”

“Yes, your father’s!”

“Exactly my point! If they caught me lock-picking—which I don’t know how to do, by the way—my father could be informed about it! What would I tell him?”

“Well, nobody would see you if you went there at night...”

“What happened to the rational, calculating hologram in you? I would have to go burgling *alone*, at night, in a tiny town outside London? It could be dangerous!”

“Alright, alright, we’ll find a way. For now, the matter is postponed. I’ll try to hack my way into the registry office’s databases to find out some useful information about Ayleen. By the way...”

“Yes?”

“If this Ayleen gal was in such a close relationship with Edwin... I wonder why Edwin didn’t choose *her* as his heir over your father... No offence.”

“We don’t know if Edwin was closer to her than to my father,” she objected.

“Come on, how many pictures of your dad and Edwin have you seen? There are tons with this chick.”

“Either way we don’t know enough to say if she should have been the heir or why she wasn’t, don’t you think?”

“Yes, that’s true. We’d better wait for further developments... Oh, on the subject...”

“What’s the matter?”

“You said your weekdays are going to be quite busy.”

“Indeed,” she nodded. “My PhD.”

“Great... We are going to be weekend detectives. Well, I’ll continue my research and keep you posted.”

“You might need to give me a call when I’m not at the Deverex Tower, right?”

“Hmm... You never know. You can give me your number, if you like. I already have your email.”

“Hmm? How did you get it?”

“Well...” the hologram tried to justify himself. “You know, I had to study you a little to decide whether or not I wanted to involve you... So, to know more about you, I looked at your laptop...”

She stared at him with her arms folded, a bit annoyed.

“What kind of a look?”

“Well... Discussion boards and newsletters... Your email account... That sort of thing.”

“I don’t suppose you had problems finding my passwords.”

“Not really, no... I found your password database in your personal folder... It doesn’t really use very strong encryption... Are you upset?”

“I should be... It’s not nice to poke your nose into other people’s business... But given the circumstances, I’ll forgive you.”

“I’m sorry I searched through your stuff... But I’m sure you understand I had no other option.”

“No, I suppose you didn’t. Well, it doesn’t matter. Write this number down.”

Yuki gave him her phone number, which the AI called right away for testing purposes.

“How do you call without a phone anyway?” she asked.

“Do you think I connect to satellites just to enjoy the sight of Earth from above?” he replied sarcastically.

## CHAPTER 10

A few days after the dream of the tavern, which Judy had named *The Lost Town*, Ayleen was pondering on something she both wanted and did not want to do.

She wasn't sure accepting the job in Arizona, in the very desert where everything had begun, would help her to put more pieces of the puzzle back in place. If it did, though, there could be consequences. The truth could turn out to be unpleasant. Ayleen needed to decide what was more important now: Her new life, or the old one and her efforts to discover more about it? Whatever that old life had been like, it sure had been quite eventful.

Ayleen was intent on staring at a golden pendant she had received as a gift a few years earlier. A capital letter Y, with a short horizontal bar right before the bifurcation. Or, at least, that was what it looked like.

"A penny for your thoughts," the teenager said.

"Hmm?" she answered, looking away from the pendant. "Nothing special."

"Yeah, right." Judy glanced at the pendant. "You're always thinking about 'nothing special' every time you look at that pendant."

Ayleen put the jewel back under her shirt. She always had it with her.

"You're thinking about Arizona, aren't you? The Sonoran Desert."

"You've guessed it," Ayleen sighed.

"Why don't you go, Ayleen? Enough with the hesitation. It's clearly important for you."

"I'm not really sure I want to do it."

"Come on, what are you talking about? It's possibly what you care about the most. Don't miss the chance. I can stay at Floyd's while you're away."

"I thought you'd want to take advantage of the occasion to manage on your own for a while, and perhaps to get yourself into trouble undisturbed..." Ayleen joked.

"Yes, I entertained the thought, but I thought we had an agreement. I'll try to stay out of trouble, and you won't stress me out so much about it when I do."

Ayleen chuckled.

“And I know you’d rather not go than leave me here alone anyway. But I think you need to. You might be one step away from the truth about yourself. Would you really miss the chance?”

The chance was very good indeed. Ayleen had the occasion to examine the remains of the explosion—the very remains her saviour couldn’t take with him. The wreckage ended up in a military base in Arizona, and many scientists had carried out fruitless research to establish their origin ever since. Now they had selected a new team of experts from the best mechanics, physics, and electronics research laboratories, and Ayleen Marker—perhaps Robotronics’ finest cybernetic engineer—was part of it too. The Americans had got in touch through the main branch of the company, in Washington. Maybe they would have preferred to keep the matter within their national boundaries, but ten years of unanswered questions had been enough to persuade them to accept Robotronics’ suggestion to turn to Ayleen, at the London branch. She had been informed some ten days before, and now she had a week left to decide whether to join the team. In that case, she was supposed to be in Phoenix on October 3, and from there they would take her to the base where the remains were kept. The job was supposed to last three, maybe four weeks.

Technically, Ayleen didn’t know what the Americans wanted from her. Robotronics had only told her they needed an expert in cybernetics and electronics to examine some things they had. However, Ayleen knew it couldn’t be anything else but that wreckage. She deduced it from the fact they talked about Arizona and that, according to some leaked rumours, the ‘things’ had been examined by many experts who had got nowhere. Had she been wrong about it, it was still a good opportunity to go back to the Sonoran Desert and conduct some research on her own.

“That pendant...” Judy said, interrupting Ayleen’s train of thought. “I mean, the symbol it represents... You said you had a similar one when Edwin found you.”

“Yes. But I believe it was destroyed with the rest.”

“Any idea what it could mean?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Ayleen replied after a moment. “My name, the name of the place I come from, or perhaps my *guild*,” she emphasised, referring to the dream of the lost town. “It could mean anything.”

“Have you ever seen it in dreams?”

“No.”

“What if it was that sort of key you saw on the temple doors, instead? Do you think it could be?”

Ayleen shook her head.

The problem with the puzzle of Ayleen's previous life was certainly not one of lack of pieces. The problem was she couldn't find a way to fit those pieces together, or even figure out what picture she was trying to complete.

\* \* \*

"So," Hexagon began, looking at Yuki. He had a distinct feeling she wasn't listening to him at all. "I completed my research on Ayleen Marker."

"Hmm! It smells delicious!" Yuki exclaimed, smelling the aroma coming from the pizza box she had just got from *Mario's Pizza Lounge* on the 131<sup>st</sup> floor. She was about to enjoy her dinner while comfortably sitting on her bed.

Hex cast a glance on her pizza. The topping seemed rather abundant. Then he looked at her friend. She was thin as a rake. Evidently, he thought to himself, she belonged to the set of those odious individuals who didn't put on an ounce regardless of how much they stuffed their faces. Well, they could be odious to other humans, perhaps. He didn't have to worry about his figure.

"Just out of curiosity, what's the topping?"

"Mushrooms, bell peppers, and hot pepperoni. Extra large."

"You're one light eater," he commented sarcastically.

"What were you saying again?" Yuki asked, taking the first bite from her dinner.

"I was saying I peeped at all there was to peep at about Ayleen Marker. All one can find via the Internet, anyway."

"Right. And what did you find?"

"Ayleen Marker doesn't have a birth date. According to London's general registry office, on November 14, 1999, she was 'exceptionally' granted British citizenship after presenting tons of paperwork and thanks to the intercession of Edwin Deverex. He maintained the woman suffered from memory loss before they met. It seems he had her visited by specialists, and indeed there's a signed certificate in the records attesting she suffers from grave amnesia."

"Where did they supposedly meet?"

"Unspecified."

"This whole story strikes me as bizarre... I'm definitely not an expert on legal matters, but I don't think these procedures are very... regular."

"They certainly aren't. Mr Deverex probably had a few friends in the right place who owed him, or something like that."

“I suppose they don’t know what caused her amnesia.”

“Correct. Assuming she really suffers from memory loss, I thought maybe she left the place she lived in or got lost before meeting Edwin, so I checked all possible missing people reports between 1990 and 1999. If she’d been missing for longer, I thought, somebody would have found her before Edwin could. I found nothing, so I extended the search range to the last fifty years. I still got nothing. Apparently, nobody’s ever looked for her or even heard of her.”

“She looks more or less thirty years old in the pictures we’ve got, and they were taken between 1998 and 2003... Perhaps Edwin met her in 1998.”

“Possibly. Her age was ‘set’ to 29 upon her registration, and just for the sake of having a birthday she picked May 19; she also chose her own surname, whereas her name was chosen by Mr Deverex.”

“What else do we know?”

“In July 2003, Ayleen—who in the meantime got a master’s degree in cybernetic engineering—left England to work for Robotronics Inc., Ottawa, Canada. She came back to London in 2006, where she currently lives on Hilddrop Lane, together with a teenager by the name of Judy Taggert.”

“She’s in London? Great! But why does she live with this Judy?”

“I browsed through some documentation on a few Canadian servers and I found out the girl was Jack Taggert’s and Lucy Penn’s daughter. They all lived in Ottawa. It looks like Judy’s mother was widowed. According to the death certificate, Taggert died of lung cancer. Lucy was a police officer and was killed by a criminal during an attempt to stop a theft at a research lab. Obviously she must have named the legal guardian for Judy beforehand, in case something ever happened to her. This guardian was Marker herself.”

“You must have hacked a number of servers to find about all of this...”

“Registry offices, universities, some of Robotronics... But some information was publicly available. Lucy Penn’s death, for example. It caused quite a sensation.”

“How so?”

“Her killer didn’t go easy on her. She died of burns and nervous shock. There was no sign of bullets, or knife wounds, or anything else. In fact, it’s not even sure she was killed by the man she was chasing. If he did kill her, he must have taken the murder weapon with him, and nobody’s got a clue what the weapon could be. It was one of the last of a long series of thefts at several research labs. Nothing we care about anyway.”

“Did you try to hack into Ayleen’s email account?”

“Yes. There’s nothing special in her work email, and if she’s got a



personal address I don't know what it is."

"Hmm. You found nothing else?"

Hex gave her a look. It wasn't like they had nothing. Sure, what they had seemed little and inconsequential, but it was better than nothing.

"Not much, actually. Ayleen is still working for Robotronics here in London. She must be on West India Avenue, since they have no other branches here. The teenager who lives with her is a British citizen too, now."

"Hmm... She doesn't seem like a kidnapper or a murderer to me," Yuki commented.

"Let's not jump to conclusions. We need to know more."

"More? We know this woman's life inside out. What else do we need?"

"It's clear Mr Deverex must have exerted all of his influence to help her obtain her British citizenship, and judging by those records, it looks like they didn't ask too many questions. This means there was something to hide that might be of interest to us, and it might be in the mansion in Sevenoaks."

"You're dead set on sending me over there, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. I have noticed something odd about her, and perhaps we could find an answer over there."

"What is it?"

"The pictures showing Edwin and Ayleen together span five years. One can see Mr Deverex ageing in them, albeit slightly, but Ayleen always looks the same. I could be wrong, and that's why I'd like to have a more recent picture of her. Comparing it to one shot in 1999 should reveal bigger and more evident differences, if any."

"How could we get a picture of her?"

"I thought I could localise her through satellites, and then you could try to take a picture of her. We could follow her to Piccadilly or something. You could pretend to be a tourist and take a picture of a monument or whatever and make sure she's well visible in it."

"Sorry, but... isn't this a waste of time? Many people look a lot younger than they are for a long time. What do we care if she found the fountain of youth?"

"I am not sure this detail is relevant. I just find it hard to believe she looks exactly the same at age thirty-three as she did at age twenty-eight. And if she were to look the same even now she's almost forty, then we'll have a very good reason to suspect her."

"Suspect her of what?"

"I'm not sure yet. But we're interested in anything odd about this case."

## CHAPTER 11

The temperature of those first September evenings was still pleasant. Floyd and Lisa were enjoying it under the starry sky on the tiny veranda of their flat in Kentish Town, not too far from Hilddrop Lane, talking about this and that.

“A nice trip,” she said. “During the Christmas holidays... On a tropical island on the other side of the world. How about it?”

“It’s a nice idea. But you know how conservative I am about certain things. I prefer a snowy December.”

“Conservative? You mean boring! And silly. Who would ever choose cold weather, wind, and three feet of snow, over exceptionally fine sand, the warmth of the sun, the crystalline waters of the ocean, the gentle sound of the backwash...”

“...sharks, tsunamis...”

“Damn! What a bother you are!” Lisa joked, hitting him repeatedly with a pillow. “You and your pessimistic attitude have ruined my holiday.”

“Speaking of holidays and trips, did you know Ayleen is very likely going to Arizona next month?”

“Arizona? Why?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” he said, “but it looks like Robotronics is taking part in a research project of some sort, and they suggested Ayleen as one of the experts to work on it.”

In truth, Floyd knew more than he was letting on. Ayleen had told him what she thought was the subject of the research. However, he thought it best not to enter into the details of it with Lisa.

“Hmm, you got me curious... I wonder what this is all about. Arizona, you said? Maybe they’re gonna send her to Area 51!”

“Actually, Area 51 is in Nevada, not Arizona.”

Lisa hadn’t got it entirely wrong. There was a military base involved.

There was a moment or two of silence, then Lisa asked, “How did you meet Ayleen?”

“What?” he asked, absently.

"I asked how you met Ayleen. You deaf?"

"Ah. Well... That's kind of a... peculiar story."

"C'mon, tell me!" she said, pulling his shirt's sleeve.

"Alright. Once upon a time..."

"Aww! Be serious for once!"

"Okay, okay! I was just trying to romanticise it a bit..." he complained jokingly. "So, we met when we both lived in Ottawa. My law firm and the Robotronics branch where she worked were in the same building, and I had a friend who worked there with her. Then like now, we took care of Robotronics' legal business, so I was often in their offices, availing myself of the opportunity to visit Douglas, the friend I mentioned. We caught up quite often, and so I got to meet his colleagues, including Ayleen. Later on, once Ayleen moved back to London, I also happened to be relocated here by my company, at the Canary Wharf branch."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

He couldn't keep a straight face when he was hiding something embarrassing.

"You're lying! It's written all over your face! What else happened?"

"Nothing, I'm telling you."

"C'mon! Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!"

"Aww... It's a bit embarrassing... Okay then. At the time, my way of making friends with people was a bit... pushy. Somebody had already told me about it. At any rate, because of that, Ayleen thought I was into her..."

"Really?"

"Yep! I wasn't aware of it, and she was looking for a way to tell me it wasn't going to happen. So she would often avoid me, wouldn't answer texts... That sort of thing."

"What happened in the end?"

"One day, Douglas told me Ayleen didn't know how to tell me she didn't appreciate my alleged courtship. At that point, I just explained to her she was mistaken and apologised for the misunderstanding... We forgot about the incident and became good friends."

"Tell the truth: You *were* trying to hit on her, weren't you?"

"No, I was not!"

"Of course you weren't... As if I didn't know you..." Lisa kept on joking. "Has Ayleen ever had a boyfriend, anyway?"

"Not that I know of..." Floyd replied, shaking his head.

"It's no surprise... She's one tough cookie. She probably scares men away..."

“That’s mean!”

“No, it’s the truth. She’s a real tough sort.”

“I can assure you she can be very sensitive and sweet too, in her own way.”

“Is she, now?” she said, feigning jealousy. “And just how would you know?”

“I can tell from her relationship with Judy.”

“Hmm... Well, yes, they get along after all. But still, I insist she’d better find a boyfriend. She’s thirty-eight and still alone. She should get a move on. She’s really pretty anyway. She looks much younger than she is.”

*She sure does*, Floyd thought. In her case, thirty-eight or sixty-eight wouldn’t make the tiniest difference. And who knew how old she actually was?

\* \* \*

On the morning of September 13, Hexagon, in quite high spirits, was going to pay a visit to his new friend—his only one, in fact. After making sure no onlookers were around, he materialised his holographic interface directly on the 150<sup>th</sup> floor, walked along a short tract of the hallway, and knocked on the door of Yuki’s apartment. The reason for his visit was simple. It was time the girl dropped in at the Deverex Mansion.

“I thought we were still trying to decide how I get there and how I get in...” Yuki objected.

“Those are no longer problems. It might take some time, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’ll be easier to just show you.”

“Show me *what*?”

“Just this... thing I found down at the laboratories. C’mon, let’s go and have a look!”

“Okay, I’m coming... I’m coming...”

She and the hologram left her apartment and waited a few moments for the rarely used west elevator to empty, to then get undisturbed to the secret floors, which they called the ‘laboratories’.

“What floor are we going to?” Yuki asked, since they were not stopping on floor A.

“The last one. Floor E.”

Yuki still had only a vague idea about what was in the laboratories, and not even the foggiest clue about what was in the last one.

The elevator stopped on floor E, and its doors opened. Yuki and Hexagon stepped out, and she started to look around. Immediately on the left was a wall covered in monitors and consoles, just like the one on the right. On the wall in front of her was a sensor door leading to another smaller room, which in turn led to a third and last room, taking up about half of the entire floor. All the monitors in the first room were on, but they appeared to be on stand-by. On each of them, just like on the doors in the room, there was a logo, although not the usual 'ED'; it was in fact a 'Z' between two rather flattened silver crescents.

"Maybe we should rename it floor 'Z', what do you think?" Hexagon joked.

"Hex, what is this place?"

"Well, all these consoles aren't any different from the other ones in the labs. You can access the immense database of the Deverex Tower, comb through the entire building, the planet, and anything satellites can reach in the observable universe. Cool, isn't it?"

"Was your creator a peeping Tom or what?"

"I'd rather say he liked to keep up to date. But I think the reason for this floor was something else. Come with me. What I have to show you will make you jump out of your skin."

They entered the next room. On the right was a long line of metal cabinets reaching almost the end of the room. On the other side, beside the door leading to the next room, there were different consoles connected to the large work table. The table hosted a metal structure that seemed to be designed to be a support for something. There were several cables terminating in unusual-looking plugs wrapped around the structure.

At the bottom of the room was what looked like another big cabinet. It had very thick interlocking doors marked with the 'Z' logo.

"What did Edwin do here?" Yuki asked.

"Well, judge for yourself," the AI replied, swiping a magnetic card through a reader by the large cabinet.

The doors moved forward with a mechanical clang and then split open, moving sideways along the cabinet. From inside it, a cold, neon light came out, illuminating the object on the sliding metal surface that quickly came forward.

"Wow!" Yuki exclaimed, standing open-mouthed. Things that looked like the components of a metallic suit of armour were hanging from a support on the sliding surface in front of her. There was a helmet, a cuirass, a culet,

vambraces, and boots. The armour was entirely black, and on the top of the helmet, near the rear, were two vertical, pointy, small, metallic wings of a curvy, streamlined, triangular shape. The helmet also had a black visor to cover the eyes and the nose. The cuirass bore the usual metallic-grey ‘Z’ on the front, in the centre. Yuki moved around the armour, continuing to observe it. Behind it, on a hanger, there was a black suit intended to cover the user from chin to ankles, with padding and protection on the arms, the abdominal and lumbar area, and the thighs. On the side there were two black knuckleduster gloves, and a large belt of the same colour with several pockets and compartments.

What was really interesting about the armour, though, was it was unquestionably designed to be worn by a woman.

“What... How...” Yuki began, tentatively.

“This is the *Zephyrus Armour*. An extremely powerful armour, from what I can tell, built of an ultra-strong and extremely lightweight alloy that allows the user to perform very fluid and natural movements. As you may have guessed, you put it on first wearing the black suit and then attaching the other components to it.” Hexagon pointed at some electronic parts on the suit that were meant to be the connection points for the armour parts. Evidently, there had to be some sort of wiring inside the suit, connecting all of the parts into a whole.

“Those cabinets,” the AI went on, “are full of spare suits and gloves all identical to these. There is also equipment to work on the armour parts—and to *build new ones too*, I think.”

Yuki was about to ask some questions, but the hologram anticipated them. “The devices on the table and all the consoles in the room are meant to test and check the armour, make sure it works properly, fix it, and modify it if necessary.”

“Hex, why on earth would Edwin create all this stuff?”

“I don’t know the exact reason. I found the armour—plus some other stuff I still need to show you—only yesterday night. I wasn’t aware of its existence. But I can guess who was supposed to wear it.”

“You’re thinking of Ayleen Marker, aren’t you?”

“Indeed,” Hexagon replied, showing her the rear of the helmet. “Look. There’s even a hole to let hair pass through—Ayleen’s long ponytail, no doubt. It’s only an hypothesis, of course, although a likely one. I don’t think Edwin knew many other women.”

“But if the armour was meant for her... Then she must know about the secret floors?”

“Not necessarily, but she was probably meant to know about them sooner

or later. If Edwin wanted Ayleen to use this thing, at some point she would have needed all the crap you see here, and I frankly doubt she could keep it in her wardrobe anyway.”

“Could Ayleen have used it while you were not active?”

“I doubt it. How would she get down here without being seen? I wonder if all of this isn’t related to Edwin’s disappearance...”

“You’re still suspecting her, aren’t you?”

“I have no reason not to.”

“Why would Edwin create something like this to give to somebody who’d eventually kidnap or kill him?”

“Let’s not rush to conclusions,” Hex said. “We’re not sure this armour was meant for Ayleen to use. Anyway, if it was, I do concede it could be evidence of her innocence, because Mr Deverex would hardly give a thing like this to somebody whom he didn’t trust completely. At any rate, if that were the case, we must still ask ourselves why on earth Ayleen would ever need to use such a powerful weapon.”

“How powerful?” Yuki asked, slightly worried.

“Well, it looks like there’s a directed-energy weapon installed on each vambrace,” the hologram replied, pointing at the protrusions on the forearm parts. “It seems their power is adjustable. It can be as low as it takes to just stun your opponents, or high enough to toast them.”

“Blimey...”

“Each of the arm parts also contain an ejection grapnel attached to fifteen metres worth of cable wrapped up on the inside. They’re electronically controlled: The hooks open and close on demand.”

“It’s extraordinary...” Yuki commented. “This is superhero equipment!”

“Pretty much. Now, if you’ll follow me, I’ll show you the rest of the ‘Batcave’.”

The hologram headed to the door leading to the third room, Yuki following close behind. The door closed behind them, producing noise considerably amplified by the size of the room—which was, in fact, a huge garage. Inside it there was a range of equipment, work tables, and mechanical devices. All of them were certainly meant for the maintenance of the two vehicles on the tracks in the middle of the room. The first one looked like a car and was completely black. It was very aerodynamic and about five metres long. Its central fuselage had a single-seater cockpit covered by a glass dome and had a big propulsor on the rear. A large aileron was on top of the propulsor, and there were two two-metre-long wings with the same crescent shape as the ‘Z’ logo attached to the sides of the cockpit. Two smaller propulsors were installed on the wings of the

vehicle, which had also four 'Z'-marked wheels.

The other vehicle was a streamlined, manoeuvrable motorbike with a single rear propulsor. Like the car, it was completely black and bore the usual 'Z' logo on the wheels.

"This one," the hologram said, pointing at the car, "is the *Thunder Eagle*. That one," he went on, indicating the motorbike, "is the *Fire Panther*. They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"Just 'beautiful'? Are you kidding? They're the coolest things ever!"

"Good. Then I'm guessing you'll have a great time driving them."

Yuki stared at him flabbergasted. "*What?*"

"Surprised? Why? We were looking for ways to get you to the Deverex Mansion safely, weren't we?"

"You mean I should... Are you out of your mind?"

"You wear the armour, take the car, and go to take a look at the mansion. It sounds like the perfect solution to me."

"Why the armour?"

You're the one who said it could be dangerous to go over there alone at night, aren't you? Well, the armour is bulletproof, and you'll be armed to the teeth with it. On top of that, the armour will make you unrecognisable. I can't think of a way to make it any safer..."

"Well, but—"

"I suppose I don't need to explain the need for the car, unless you were thinking to wear the armour and then take a bus."

"But I can't drive that car!"

"You can learn. I'll give you some driving lessons on the HYPNOS."

"The what?"

"Did I forget to mention it? *Holographically Projected Environments On Simulator*. It's a holographic simulator. It's on floor D."

"I bet Edwin was a huge *Star Trek* fan, wasn't he?" she said, somewhere between sarcasm and shock.

"Yes, among other things," the hologram said, hastily. "Come on, come on—we don't have a moment to spare. It's going to be easy peasy. Come, I'll take you to have a look at the HYPNOS, then we'll start planning."

Ever so perplexed, Yuki followed her holographic friend to floor D.

The HYPNOS was basically a large room whose surface was covered by the same holographic projectors that were scattered all around the Deverex Tower and allowed Hexagon to project his interface anywhere in the building. However, on the HYPNOS it was possible to recreate any



environment and act in it as if it were real, thanks to the same kind of solid 'holograms' used for Hex's interface. Of course, there were certain limitations imposed by the size of the room, but thanks to forcefields acting like a treadmill it was possible to create the illusion of an environment larger than the room itself. Inside the HYPNOS one could also recreate electronic devices and all sorts of machinery which behaved in the simulations exactly as their real-world counterparts would. The inner workings of the HYPNOS were a quite lengthy and complex topic, so Hexagon said he would just give Yuki a taste of the capabilities of the device by launching a simulation of the *Shifen waterfall*, Taiwan. It was like really being there.

"I don't care how long it takes to explain it," Yuki had exclaimed, enchanted by the landscape. "Tell me how this thing works!"

"It works perfectly fine, thanks for asking!" he cut her short sarcastically.

Thanks to the technological marvel, Yuki had been practising driving the Thunder Eagle for a few evenings. What Yuki was practising with was obviously only a holographic version of the real Thunder Eagle, but convincing her to get on it had been anything but easy—especially after Hex had made it clear it wasn't just a very fast car, but rather a *flying* car. It had been a bit like trying to persuade somebody who was very hesitant about going for a ride on a roller coaster. Yuki knew there was no real danger and was really tempted to get on it, but the simulation felt all too real, and her fear even more so. Besides, if Hex had managed to convince her to get on the simulated Thunder Eagle, maybe he could have convinced her to try the real one as well, and she was not at all sure she would want to do that. Getting used to an unexpected, sci-fi like situation had not been a problem for her. She had wished something like this would happen to her all her life and was very excited about it. However, she would have never thought it could happen *for real* and *to her*. Fantasy had turned into reality much too abruptly.

Eventually, Yuki concluded she was blowing it out of proportion. Perhaps she only had to set her uncertainties aside and try. It was, after all, only a simulation. She could decide later on whether or not to try the *real* Thunder Eagle. Unfortunately, setting uncertainties aside had never been Yuki Kashizawa's strong suit. Her past was studded with opportunities she had given up on merely because of her fear of being inadequate. Finding the courage to ignore her uncertainties and move to London on her own had

been one of the most important steps forward she had ever taken. Perhaps, she thought, accepting this new challenge could be her next step.

Anyway, the first time Hex had almost had to lift her bodily to get her on the holographic Thunder Eagle.

“Okay, Red Baron,” Hexagon joked. “Ready for another round?”

“Huh? Yes, ready,” she replied, coming back from her thoughts.

“Good. This time, though, try not to knock down too many London city landmarks, okay?”

“Ha ha, funny... I barely grazed that building.”

The AI had recreated the garage of floor E on the HYPNOS. Yuki was on the Thunder Eagle with the engine running and the console on. She pressed some buttons, and the glass dome—which was also a screen—showed a map of the area based on the data received by the sensors of the car. The Thunder Eagle could connect to the DT’s systems through the antenna on top of the building, thus it could interface with Hexagon and obtain satellite data as well.

“Engines on line. All systems working,” Yuki said.

“Very well. Same route: From the Deverex Tower to the Sevenoaks mansion and back.”

The hologram was standing behind the vehicle, inside the simulation of the garage. She could hear and see him through the car’s console.

“Opening Thunder Eagle’s launch duct. Have a safe flight, Yuki.”

The Thunder Eagle was on tracks that ran through the garage reaching its east wall. There, next to one of the panoramic elevators’ shafts, was the launch duct of the Thunder Eagle: The vehicle would run through it vertically and fly out of the hatch on the top. A tunnel on floor E came out not too far from the rear of the skyscraper and was meant as a secret entrance and exit for the Fire Panther, inside of a thick, tree-lined area between Deverex Park and a car park.

The Thunder Eagle slipped into the duct. Once it was perpendicular to the ground, Yuki began speeding up more and more, to overcome gravity. The steering wheel could be rotated left or right by 360 degrees, pushed forward or pulled backwards, to change the vehicle’s direction.

“Very good...” the hologram encouraged her. Take-off was the most difficult phase for her. “Just a little bit more gas...”

The car ran along the wall for a while, pushed against it by its own speed. Then it finally whizzed out of the duct into the holographic night sky.

“Okay, brilliant!” Hex complimented her. “Now draw in the wheels and align the car to the ground.”

“Roger.” She pressed a button to retract the wheels back into the vehicle, then she pushed the steering wheel forward, moving the car parallel to the ground.

“Excellent,” the hologram said. “Usual route.”

The map on the main view showed both the destination and the current position of the vehicle, so all Yuki had to do was to pilot it until the two points on screen overlapped.

“Roger. I have set the destination point’s coordinates. Distance is about 29 kilometres as the crow flies. Current speed is about a hundred kilometres per hour. Arrival estimated in about twenty minutes.”

The Thunder Eagle’s maximum airspeed was Mach 2—i.e. about 2450 km/h—while its top speed on the ground was 400 km/h. The top speed of the Fire Panther was instead just about 200-250 km/h.

Yuki followed the route shown on the electronic map. Despite her initial reluctance and some minor accidents during her first attempts, she had to admit she was showing decent driving skills. The credit was mostly due to the Thunder Eagle, she was sure, having been designed to be very handy and easy to drive.

Despite being merely holographic, the Thunder Eagle Yuki was driving was whizzing through the sky with the same loud, resonant roar the real one would make. Now she had almost reached her destination and prepared for vertical landing. Once she was close to the mansion, Yuki began to slow down. Then she enabled the vertical landing sequence, switching the thrust direction of the lateral propulsors.

“Okay. Landing completed,” she declared at the end of the sequence, with a sigh of relief.

“Not a single mistake! Bravo!” the hologram replied. Yuki was the kind of person who, rather than just accept a compliment, tried to make up reasons why she didn’t really deserve it, so Hexagon’s constant praise was a real panacea for her self-esteem.

She had landed behind the holographic mansion, not too far from the back door. Just like its real counterpart, the holographic Deverex Mansion too was a three-storey building in the middle of a large garden. Yuki got off the vehicle to stretch her legs a bit, then something came to her mind.

“Hexagon...” she began.

“Yes?”

“I was thinking... Isn’t it possible somebody could see the Thunder Eagle entering and exiting the DT?”

“Unlikely. The real Thunder Eagle is equipped with a stealth device, and

can be made completely invisible.”

“Really? That’s cool! So I can get from the DT to the mansion without being seen at all?”

“Not quite. The stealth device is still a prototype and it eats up quite a bit of energy, so I’d rather you use it only while entering the DT or leaving it.”

“Too bad...” she replied. “Oh, and on that subject, what if somebody sees me at the mansion? I’ll be unrecognisable alright, but it’d still make the news.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. If they see you and they manage to take a picture of you, then maybe someone will believe them when they report seeing some kind of armoured, alien-looking thing. Otherwise, whoever sees you will be considered a crackpot, or someone who’s had a drop too much. These are only minor details. You shouldn’t worry too much about them. Just come back.”

“Roger...”

Yuki hopped on the Thunder Eagle and turned the engine on. She switched the propulsors to vertical take-off mode and, after reaching the right altitude, she left the garden, turning swiftly around the building. Once she was again near the holographic version of the Deverex Tower, she slipped into the duct next to the panoramic elevator’s shaft and slowly ran down through it, until she reached the garage on floor E.

“Okay,” the AI said when Yuki got off the vehicle. “It’s late. Let’s call it a night. If you’re okay with it, tomorrow I’ll let you try the Zephyrus Armour on, and then you’ll try the simulation while wearing it. After that, you’ll get into action for real! What do you say?”

“Already?”

“You’re really good. I’m sure you’ll do fine,” Hexagon smiled.

“Well... I don’t know... If you say so...”

Hexagon stopped the simulation as they walked out. The simulated environment vanished entirely, revealing the structure of the HYPNOS. It was a room not larger than a hundred square metres with a net of hundreds of tiny holographic projectors and cables welded on the walls. Yuki had thought more than once the HYPNOS would be the perfect place to throw awesome parties—too bad she couldn’t have invited anyone to them.

The first two or three training evenings hadn’t been enough for Yuki to get used to the effects the high-speed, over eight-hundred-metre long, vertical ascent had on her stomach. The result had been an annoying, discontinuous feeling of nausea that had lasted for a short time. Apparently,

the descent of the return phase hadn't caused her any troubles, though, and actually she had liked it since almost the beginning—the first couple of times had been kind of scary. Her very first simulation had been completely under Hex's control, just for the sake of checking what effect the flight would have on her. Later on, once he had persuaded her to try again and had given her some theoretical piloting lessons, she had tried to fly the vehicle on her own. After about five days, her nausea disappeared entirely, and driving the Thunder Eagle started to grow on her. She didn't yet know if she would really have dared trying to drive the real thing and run the risk of crashing into a building or something, but anyway she felt reassured by the fact Hexagon could drive the vehicle with remote control if necessary. When the hologram had told her about it, she had immediately asked, "What? Why are you making me go through these lessons if you can pilot it yourself?"

"To let you try something new," he had replied with a smile. "I thought it'd be good for you."

## CHAPTER 12

Ayleen's decision to join the team of experts had been made for quite some time. That evening, fifteen days before her trip to Arizona, she was flicking through some photographs of her with Judy, Floyd, and some other friends from the time when they still lived in Ottawa. Her relationship with Judy back then was different. Curiously, the bonding between them had become stronger some time after Judy was told—and had accepted—Ayleen's secret. Revealing it had been a difficult but necessary decision. Even more difficult had been dealing with Judy's initial reaction to it.

Now, Judy had just come back home after an evening spent out with her friends. Strangely enough, Ayleen said sarcastically to herself, she didn't seem to have broken any bones.

"Hi," the teenager said, closing the entrance door.

"Hi. How was your evening?"

"Hmm, not bad. We did some *flips*, some *grabs* and a couple of *eggplants*, then we went to eat something." The unusual terminology referred to the skateboard acrobatics they had performed.

"Uh-huh."

"Ayleen, I'd like to take a shower now," Judy continued, after putting away her skateboarding equipment. "Could you do me a favour?"

"Sure."

"I need to revise a few skateboard tricks in some of my older magazines. They're in the box on the bookshelves. Could you please take it down?"

"Sure thing," Ayleen answered, putting the photos aside. Judy thanked her and went to take her shower.

Ayleen stood up from the sofa and gave a look around, to make sure all the curtains were closed. She jumped toward the top of the bookshelves and stopped right in front of it, fluctuating at about 1.2 metres from the floor. She took the box, then landed gently back onto the floor and rested the box at the foot of the shelves. Then she went back to nonchalantly browsing through the photos.

Two years before, when Ayleen had finally resolved to tell her the truth about herself, Judy had brushed it off with a laugh. She thought Ayleen was joking, probably mocking her own almost maniacal precision and her often serious mood. Obviously, Ayleen didn't expect to be believed right away, even though Floyd was there to back her up. After hearing both of them insisting on the same nonsensical claim, Judy snapped at them annoyed, saying they'd taken the joke too far. When they gave her irrefutable proof of what they were saying, Judy panicked and had an impulse to run away. Floyd went after her, while Ayleen stayed behind. She figured Judy needed time and space to accept it.

Later, when Floyd reached her, he convinced her to come back with him to talk to her adoptive sister.

The subsequent conversation between her and Ayleen had unquestionably been a rather particular one. A few days later, Judy was still somewhat intimidated by Ayleen and was quite silent and reluctant to see her. It took some time for the ice to finally melt and for their relationship to return to how it used to be. It grew even deeper, in fact, albeit with the occasional misunderstanding, as one would expect.

\* \* \*

The Zephyrus Armour, as Hexagon had explained to Yuki, had a remarkable feature. Its helmet implemented an incredible new technology which allowed the user to interface her brain directly to the helmet itself. Since the helmet was connected to every single component of the armour, this feature essentially turned the Zephyrus Armour into an extension of the user's body. To use any of its functions, she just had to *wish it*. For example, to fire the blasters—the directed-energy weapons installed on the forearms—it was enough to just want it, just like one would do to move an arm or a leg. Similarly, adjusting fire power, switching through different view modes of the visor, changing the internal temperature, visualising the armour status, and so on, were all functions that could be used by mere thought. The visor even had adjustable zoom and focus, making Yuki's spectacles useless.

Of course, Yuki didn't need to master using such a technological jewel. She would need it just this one time and that would be it. The hologram had her try it while driving the Thunder Eagle a couple of times and taught her to control its functions, just to be on the safe side. Right now, Yuki was at the rear of the *real* Deverex Mansion, where she had arrived five minutes ago, at one thirty-seven in the morning on September 20.

Driving the real Thunder Eagle hadn't been any easier than driving the simulated one, and the twenty minutes it had taken to fly to the mansion had probably been the longest of Yuki's entire life. However, once she had landed, all of her tension was swept away by the enthusiasm of having successfully accomplished such an endeavour. She went around the house to reach the front door, which she opened with a rather homemade-looking master key built by Hexagon.

"Okay," she confirmed, closing the door behind her, "I'm in. Blast! It's pitch dark in here."

She thought to turn on the two torches installed on the lower side of the forearm parts, near the grapnel housings, and the two bright lights turned on instantly.

*This is so cool!*

She took a look around. She was in an ample and stylish entrance. One of the first things she saw was a tall mirror: She looked at her own image in it and thought the armour made her look like Batgirl's bigger sister.

"It looks good on me, doesn't it?" she asked the hologram. He could hear her through the helmet's built-in mike and see all she could see through the visor and the armour's sensors.

"Very—they say black is slimming..."

"Oh, shut it!" she chuckled. "What am I supposed to look for, exactly?"

"I don't know. Anything related to Ayleen Marker."

"If she lived here with Edwin, I'd expect she had her own room. Maybe she left something in there."

"Good idea. Probably the bedrooms are upstairs, but anyway give a look around everywhere."

"It looks like the entrance leads to a living room. I'm guessing these hallways on the sides lead to the kitchens, or maybe to the servants' rooms," she commented. "I suppose the Deverexes must have had servants."

"Could be. But there should be a cellar as well, and it might be worth a visit. Judging by where he put my brain, I'd say Edwin must've had a real passion for secret floors," the hologram joked.

The living room was finely furnished. It was hung with tapestries and paintings, and elegant carpets lay on the floor. The entire building was pervaded with a stale smell, and every now and again one could hear the same creaking sounds made by old houses settling. However, the Deverex Mansion seemed to be in perfect condition, except for the abundant dust covering most of the surfaces.

"Hex, I'd like to go upstairs and look for Ayleen's room."



“Fine. We can come back downstairs later.”

Yuki began to climb up the stairs, accompanied by the muffled, metallic noise made by the armour as she stepped. Even though there was no danger there, and despite the high level of protection provided by the Zephyrus Armour, the deserted old mansion was still more than enough to make Yuki’s imagination run wild. She had been the kind of child who wound up spending many a sleepless night because of the monsters and ghosts created by her own mind.

When she got to the top of the stairs, Yuki lit up the hallway on her right, which overlooked the living room below. There were a few doors, all closed, some more paintings, and fake indoor plants. Marble busts were between some of the doors.

She turned to her left and cried out.

“What the devil...?” she shouted. She pointed the blasters at what was standing before her: It was just a marble bust.

“Chill,” Hexagon suggested. “You’ve got an itchy trigger finger, eh? You were about to blow up an extremely dangerous and threatening... statue.”

“Hey, it isn’t my fault! This place is giving me the creeps. I really thought there was somebody there...”

“Aww! You biological creatures are so easily frightened...” the AI commented.

Yuki started to walk along the hallway, examining every room. Bathrooms, some storerooms, a large study, a library, a billiards room, another living room.

The first floor seemed rather uninteresting, so Yuki went on to the next one. There she found what she was looking for: Against her expectations, the servants’ rooms were on that very floor, together with the terrace, more facilities, and the former owners’ bedrooms.

One of the rooms had a double bed. It had to be Edwin’s parents’. It seemed the room had remained untouched after they had stopped using it, as though their son had done all he could to preserve it as it was. The next room, on the opposite side of the hallway, had to be that of the scientist. There was a single bed, a bookshelf full of scientific books of all kinds, a dusty computer on the desk by the window, and some photographs of him with Paul and Grace Deverex on the wall. A blackboard was hung on the wall—another sign of the mathematician in him, Yuki thought—with some partly erased differential calculations on it, and there were some newspaper cuttings pinned on the wall.

On Edwin’s dresser there were some more pictures. All were either of him with Ayleen or Ayleen alone.

"Maybe they *were* dating," Yuki commented.

"We can't say for sure. And I don't think it's very important anyway."

"What if it was a crime of passion?" Yuki said, with a pinch of sarcasm.

"We don't know if Edwin is dead or not, and even then, men are generally more likely than women to commit a crime of passion."

"Well, this Ayleen seems to be a rather forward woman..."

"Why don't you take a look at the desk?" Hexagon grumbled. "There's a suspicious-looking book there."

Yuki moved closer to the desk and picked the book up.

"It's a diary!" she exclaimed. She quickly opened it, but the first fifty-some pages had been ripped away.

"What about the other pages?" Hex asked. Yuki flipped through them to no avail. "They're all blank," she sighed. "Why would anyone rip them out?"

"I doubt they too were blank. I think they were removed because of what was on them."

"Edwin's kidnapper might have taken them?"

"Unlikely. Assuming something compromising was written on them, taking away the whole diary would've been safer and faster."

"So only Edwin or Ayleen could have ripped them out. It could have been either, depending on what was on those pages."

"Why would she rip pages off his diary?"

"You know, you gave me an idea," Yuki told him.

"I'm listening."

"If they *were* dating and then had an argument or broke up, the whole thing could make sense. Imagine they quarrelled shortly before her departure and broke up shortly thereafter. At that point, he was so bitter about it he destroyed the diary containing his memories of his life with her."

"Hmm. And then she... kidnapped him?" Hex mused.

"Actually, no. I was trying to prove Ayleen is innocent, backing up her claim she didn't hear from Edwin ever again after her departure..."

"She never said she quarrelled with him during the questioning."

"Maybe she thought it'd make her suspicious."

"Bah. If they were together, why would she go to live on her own in Canada? And why would Edwin only destroy the diary but not the pictures? Anyway, I'd like to see what's on that computer now."

"There's no power. I can't switch it on."

"I know. Open the case up and unplug the hard drive. I'll take a look once you're back," Hex told her.

"Fantastic..." Yuki commented, unscrewing the case's side panel.

“Adding burglary to housebreaking...”

The next room Yuki visited was presumably Ayleen’s. The only things worth mentioning in the almost empty room were some pictures in a drawer: a lagoon, an erupting volcano, and others. All drawings signed by Ayleen herself.

On the ground floor there were a ballroom and a dining room, a veranda overlooking the garden, the kitchens, the pantry, facilities, and a staircase leading to the large cellar; part of the latter had been turned into a laboratory by Edwin. There were computers down there as well, and thus hard drives to take.

There were also work tables, various tools, cables and circuitry, but nothing that could be linked to Ayleen.

At three twenty-two in the morning, the Thunder Eagle was whizzing through the sky of London on its way back to the Deverex Tower. Hex got the launch duct ready for the arrival of the vehicle, which slowly descended it and reached the garage on floor E shortly thereafter.

“Welcome back, *superhero*,” he mocked her, benevolently. “Did you have fun?”

The girl took off her helmet. “Seriously?”

Hex looked at her inquisitively.

“It was the coolest thing ever!” she exclaimed, bouncing cheerily on her toes as much as her boots permitted. “I was quite nervous during the first flight, but the second one was so much fun! The view from up there is awesome! Not even in the simulation did I have the courage to look down, but this time I did! And sneaking into the old mansion Batman-style was too cool!”

Hexagon thought the sight of her, so excitedly skipping around with the gear on, was the most cutely ridiculous thing he had ever seen.

*I can almost hear her asking ‘Daddy! Daddy! Can we do it again?’*

“Well, I’m glad you enjoyed yourself so much!” he said, as they left the garage. “It wasn’t so difficult after all, was it?”

“Nu-uh!” she answered, handing him the disks she had taken. “There you go! So, are we going to take a look at them?”

“I’m guessing you’ll be tired...” he replied, almost stuttering. He had never seen her so enthusiastic before. “Wouldn’t you rather go to bed? I can take care of the disks on my own...”

“To bed? You’ve gotta be kidding! I’m too excited to sleep!” she replied,

running toward the elevator. “Come on, let’s go!”

“But wait!” he shouted. “Wouldn’t you like to take the armour off first, at least?”

No point. She was clearly too excited to even listen.

## CHAPTER 13

Floyd and Judy had learnt of Ayleen's secret under different circumstances, but his reaction hadn't been all that different from Judy's. Judy had been told the truth intentionally, whereas Floyd had happened to learn it only by chance. Luckily, Floyd was anything but a chatterbox, and at any rate, at the time Ayleen Marker was already a very close friend of his, and he would never have disclosed a secret of a close friend.

One day few years earlier, Floyd had asked Ayleen to help him with a small repair on his car. She knew something about motors so she went to give him a hand. The car jack Floyd had been using to lift up the car was in rather bad shape, one of those tools whose replacement he postponed time and time again. Had she known, Ayleen had said, she would have brought her own, but he had replied it didn't matter: His jack was still an 'excellent jack'.

It was indeed so 'excellent' that it had collapsed while Floyd had his head underneath the car, nearly making him quadriplegic, if not killing him altogether. Thus, in that split second separating Floyd from his almost certain demise, Ayleen had had to make a choice. She could have let him die, or she could have grabbed the car and held it up as if it had no weight at all. The second option would have saved his life but would have also forced Ayleen to explain her incredible strength.

Ayleen had chosen the second option.

At first, Floyd had probably been too shocked by his near-death experience to understand what Ayleen had done, but then, after he had thanked her, he had suddenly stopped to marvel how she could have done it. As he himself had observed, not even the world's strongest fellow could have borne the weight of the car that way.

Wrong. The world's strongest fellow, Ayleen Marker, had had no problems bearing the weight of the car. What had really been difficult was making up credible excuses to explain what she had done. What could she have possibly said? She worked out a lot?

The damage had been done. The last thing Ayleen would have needed was a swarm of nosy parkers asking her to show them how easily she could

lift cars barehanded, so she had been forced to beg Floyd not to tell anyone what had happened. Trying to make stuff up to convince Floyd she had done nothing strange would just have been sheer straw clutching that would have led her nowhere.

And so it had come to be that Ayleen Marker had had to reveal her secret voluntarily for the first time. It was also the first time somebody other than Edwin Deverex learned about it.

Of course, Ayleen had tried to prepare Floyd as best as she could: She had had him sit down and waited for him to recover from the first scare before giving him another one. After the revelation, he had not run away like Judy had, but, initially, he had started to behave as if Ayleen were a stranger, as if the person he had known had never existed to begin with. At that point, Ayleen had addressed him: “Come on, Floyd! I’m still me and everything is just like it used to be! The only difference between now and before is that I scared the life out of you, whereas the car would’ve *taken* it out of you!”

Floyd had laughed heartily, which left Ayleen slightly surprised.

“You never laugh at my jokes,” she had said. “You always said they’re terrible.”

“They are,” he had replied. “I’m laughing because you’re right... You’re still you... And because, well, I’m still alive after all...”

\* \* \*

A few days after her visit to the Deverex Mansion, Yuki was studying in her apartment—or rather, she was *trying* to study, since Hexagon was there too, insisting on weighing the situation up. Her enthusiasm for their investigation hadn’t worn out, but her studies required her to know when it was time to put the rest aside and just focus on maths.

“Okay, okay,” she sighed, putting her book away. “I give up. Feel free to fill me in about any details you’ve discovered.” She took her spectacles off and rubbed her eyes.

“There isn’t much to tell,” Hex answered, pacing to and fro with his arms behind his back. “Or rather, there isn’t *yet*. On all the drives you brought back there are some encrypted files. Some *very* well encrypted files.”

“Can you decrypt them?”

“Probably, but it’ll take time. Anyway, the point is: If they’re encrypted, they must contain hot stuff. Not necessarily stuff about our friend Ayleen, of

course.”

“So what? You’re interested in finding out how and when Edwin disappeared, not in knowing all there is to know about Ayleen. Maybe those files will turn out to be interesting anyway.”

“Of course. But they might just be data about some of Edwin’s projects.”

“What are the files’ names?”

“Names are encrypted too, obviously. Mr Deverex loved data security.”

“You can’t tell their type, either? Text, pictures...?”

The hologram shook his head. “Nothing at all. At the moment, I’m attacking the problem using a two-fold approach. I’m looking for encryption keys and I’m also trying a ten-billion-password-per-second brute-force. But since I don’t know the password’s maximum length, or what type of characters it may contain, the number of possible passwords could easily be more than forty digits long. We’re talking about an order of magnitude of billion, billion, billion, billions if not more. Even at a speed of ten billion passwords per second, trying all the possible ones would take something along the lines of 31,709,791,983,764 years. I’m sure you understand that, if we get any result, it’s probably not gonna be thanks to the brute-force approach...”

“Yep, I see your point...” she commented. “But then... Why the hurry to ‘weigh the situation up’?”

“How would you feel,” Hexagon asked after a moment, “about another easy little job wearing the Zephyrus Armour over the weekend?”

She felt a wave of excitement rush through her, and her ability to focus on mathematics disappeared in a puff of smoke.

\* \* \*

That night, at around ten to eight, it was literally pouring in London. Ayleen’s departure was a week away, and now she was staring at the rain drops breaking against the window. Through the glass, she could see a neighbour hurrying out of his car heading home with his head covered with a newspaper, a family of kittens taking shelter under an old wooden crate, and a slushy creek of rainwater and leaves flowing through Hilldrop Lane.

Ayleen moved away from the window, letting the curtain fall back onto the glass. She sat at her piano in the living room and uncovered its keys. She gently put her fingers on the keyboard and began to play Beethoven’s *Für Elise*, one of her favourite pieces. Her hands began gliding on the keyboard, producing the delicate notes of the melody. It was an execution of merely

three minutes and twenty-four seconds, but to Ayleen Marker it was more than enough time for deep reflections. Her thoughts went to her dreams, as it often was the case. The first image coming to her mind was the old fisherman at the port. He made the boats, and every now and again somebody came along and took one away. *What's a port?* she asked herself. A place where people and goods arrive to and depart from. The word *goods* echoed in her mind. Just like in a shop, goods came from, and arrived to, ports. Just like the boats made by the fisherman. They came and went; he made them, and somebody would take them. Maybe the fisherman was a merchant?

The melody cheered up.

The small town of her dream. A tavern, a parliament, people working. The police—certainly a guild. Where had she seen them before? In the dream of the infinite castle, albeit indirectly. The sign on the door read '*Only the parents, the mums, and the police can go in.*' She had always wondered what was the point of the apparent repetition. Parents and mums. She had been let in, so what was her guild? Probably not the police: They wore a uniform in the dream of the lost town, while she didn't. And the parents? Who were they?

The melody became nostalgic again, like at the beginning.

The parents couldn't be anyone but the lords of the castle.

In the dream of the infinite castle, the lords of the castle had told Ayleen everybody was their child. Including her. Thus, all the servants of the lords had to be their children. She could not be one of the lords, not according to any of her dreams anyway, and apparently she wasn't in the police either; however, she was let in, so she had to be a mum. Evidently, despite the similarity between 'mum' and 'parent', those words had different meanings in her dreams. But whose mum was she, assuming the word had its usual meaning?

The music turned tense, anxious.

Her sister. According to the old fisherman, she and Ayleen were the only two members of their own guild, and thus the only two mums. Who knew why she could never get to talk to her. The only dream where she was able to see her clearly was *The Fall of the Gods*, but she never had a chance to ask her what she wanted. That was the only dream where she was merely a spectator, without any power to act in it as she pleased.

A swift stream of notes gave the melody its usual, nostalgic tone back.

In a few days, she would leave for Arizona, and would finally be able to examine the remains of the explosion that had marked the beginning of her new life and the end of her old one. Would she finally find some answers, or



just new questions? She was quite uncertain. The way she saw it, the clues she could find on Earth could engender only new questions. Her answers had to be elsewhere.

“A beautiful execution!” Judy said, clapping. “Just like always.”

“Thank you,” Ayleen replied, turning toward her at the entrance to the living room.

“So, *Beethoven*,” Judy continued. “Are you ready to embark on the journey of revelations?”

“Yes...” Ayleen nodded, getting up from the stool, “but...”

“Nervous? Worried?”

“Not really. In all honesty, I don’t expect much of out this trip. New unanswered questions at best, or nothing at all at worst.”

“That’s not the spirit! After all, new questions could mean more chances of adding new pieces to the puzzle, right?”

“Perhaps. But we already have plenty of missing pieces, and knowing there are even more of them wouldn’t make it any easier.”

“True, but it prevents you from jumping to conclusions.”

“I never jumped to conclusions. I’ve never had enough evidence to draw any...”

“C’mon, big sis!” Judy encouraged her, patting her back. “We’ll get to the bottom of it, you’ll see!”

Ayleen just smiled at her. She really appreciated her support.

\* \* \*

The other ‘easy little job’ Hexagon had proposed to Yuki was, in the hologram’s own words, ‘quite simple’: Sneaking into the police station where the files and evidence about the Deverex case were kept. What the AI was interested in were the hard drives the police had removed from the computers in Edwin’s apartment at the DT. Somehow, the hologram had managed to convince her to do it, and now she was almost in trouble.

She had managed to get in unnoticed, reach the archive in the basement, find the right shelf, open the crate containing the disks using some gadget Hex had given her, and scamper away from the basement. She really hadn’t had the time to close the crate and put it back to its place, especially since somebody had just come downstairs. He had probably heard some strange noises. Yuki took her booty, left the large hall in the basement headed to the next room, and hastily climbed out of the same window she had broken in through. The officer who had just arrived noticed the open crate, and after

pointing a torch to the bottom of the room, he saw a strange shadow moving—the shadow of Yuki wearing the Zephyrus Armour. He ordered her to stop to no avail, then he dashed off in pursuit of the intruder while alerting his colleagues via radio.

The Fire Panther was parked behind the police station, ready to leave. Yuki had turned it on remotely through her helmet. She put the hard drives away into the space under the motorbike seat and jumped on the vehicle right when the police came out of the building and ordered her to freeze. She had activated the Fire Panther's propulsor and ran away at full speed, under the astonished gaze of the officers.

Now Yuki was darting a hundred and thirty kilometres an hour along Upper Thames Street, trying not to run over anything or anyone in the process. She had shaken her chasers off shortly before, thanks to a smoke bomb that was part of the Fire Panther's equipment.

Once she was positive the squad cars weren't after her any more, she slowed down and headed to the Deverex Tower. She had probably already broken all possible traffic laws when she finally reached East Ferry Road, where she took a small side street leading to the very rear of Deverex Park where the Fire Panther's access tunnel was. 'Batgirl's bigger sister' had once again acted under cover of darkness, and she doubted there was anyone around who might notice anything unusual.

Her first successful 'mission' at the mansion had given her a new self-confidence she had never experienced before, which the hologram had played on to persuade her to attempt this last enterprise. However, being chased by the police had been more than enough to make every last bit of defiance she had vanish. At the moment, she didn't seem remotely as enthusiastic as the last time, but it was only partly true.

"Blast it, Hex!" she bawled, taking the helmet off. "I was a hair's breadth away from getting caught!"

"They didn't catch you, though..."

"Well, blast it, they could've! I told you it was far too risky! I must've been completely out of my mind to listen to you and go and steal evidence from the police!"

"Come on, do you really think they'd ever have managed to handcuff you?" the AI chuckled.

"That's not the point! I am a thief now, do you understand? Nicking stuff seized by the police is an *extremely serious* offence!"

"You do it for a good cause... And to be honest, you look like you've had a lot of fun motorbiking around in London..."

“Fun?” she asked, bewildered. “*Fun?* Have you lost it? They nearly got me. I escaped by the skin of my teeth. I ran like crazy through the city dressed up like some sort of masked avenger—and God knows if I didn’t risk running a few people over in the process! If that weren’t enough, I blinded the police with smoke and they could have crashed into a fire hydrant or something!”

“Who do you think you’re fooling?” the hologram commented, lifting up the bike’s seat to take the two disks. “You *did* have fun. It’s written all over your face...”

She noticed her own overjoyed smile and immediately banished it from her face.

“Up to a few days ago you hadn’t even ever been on a motorbike, and today you’ve already escaped your first chase. Are you telling me you aren’t even a little bit proud?”

“Proud of being a criminal?”

“No. Proud of your skills. Not everyone would be able to keep a cool head in that situation as you did, you know?”

“Don’t change the subject, I don’t—”

“Then why were you smiling for good five minutes?” the hologram asked point-blank, grinning.

“Well...”

“It *was* exciting, wasn’t it?”

Yuki hesitated to reply. She had never been the kind of child who had to climb up to tallest branch. No matter what she had been doing, she had always been told ‘*It’s dangerous!*’ or ‘*You’ll get hurt!*’ as a child, making her prefer to always choose safety over risk, even when the risk was non-existent or insignificant. She had come a long way in changing her thinking, but she hadn’t entirely banished it yet. For some reason, that made it difficult for her to admit having enjoyed running a risk like this one. “Yes,” she conceded after a while, “but my point is—”

“Aha! See?” he interrupted her, throwing the disks in the air and catching them on the fly. “I was right.”

The AI left, headed to the computer science laboratory on floor D.

Yuki blew out a fake sigh of exasperation. “What I meant is—”

“Thanks a lot for these...” Hex interrupted her, amusedly, showing the disks he had in his hands.

## CHAPTER 14

Thursday, October 2, 2008. Heathrow airport, 06:00. It was a damp, gloomy, and rather cold morning. There wasn't much movement on the airstrips, except for a 747 which had just landed and was now manoeuvring to get to the gate, and a British Airways 777 that had just taken off accompanied by the usual roar of the engine.

Ayleen's flight was scheduled to take off at 07:55.

"There it is. It's this one," Floyd said pointing at the screen. "AA 0099 Heathrow-Chicago O'Hare, boarding at Terminal 3 starting seven fifteen."

"Yes, that's it," Ayleen confirmed.

They queued up at the check-in point for a little over half an hour.

"When did you say your connection from Chicago to Phoenix was again?" Judy asked after Ayleen checked in.

"It leaves at 18:56 London time. That's 12:56 in Chicago."

"And... when will you be in Phoenix?"

"Twenty-two thirty-one London time, *mummy*," Ayleen said. Judy looked away with an amused smile, then replied: "Be a good daughter and call me as soon as you get there. Don't make me worry."

"Yes sir, sir. And you try not to drive Floyd and Lisa insane while I'm gone. Understand?"

Judy stood with folded arms and stared at Ayleen sarcastically, while Floyd answered, "Don't worry. I'll call you if she breaks more than three bones, as per agreement."

Ayleen laughed. "Well, I'd better get ready for boarding."

The three of them took a few minutes to reach the entrance to the gates, then stayed there for ten more minutes to say goodbye once more. The airport was quite crowded with people coming and going all around, sitting down waiting for their flight and reading a magazine, or maybe having something in a café.

Judy could feel the typical torpor one experiences after getting up very early. The grey sky of the morning certainly wasn't helping to wake her up.

Departures always made her slightly agitated, and her agitation would increase a little when she heard the roaring of a plane and turned to the large windows to watch it land or take off.

Ayleen had suggested her not to come to the airport and spare herself getting up at such an ungodly hour, but she wouldn't listen. She wanted to say goodbye right before Ayleen's departure.

"Well, have a safe trip, Ayleen," Floyd said, hugging her.

"Thanks Floyd. Take care." Then she hugged Judy and said: "I'll be back soon, okay? On October 31 I'll be here again."

"I'll miss you, Ayleen..."

"I'll miss you too."

"Okay, now you must go," Judy said, letting go of her. "Have a safe trip... And good luck."

"Good luck, Ayleen," Floyd added.

"Thanks guys. See you soon."

As Floyd and Judy watched her board, Ayleen remembered something similar happening before, when she had seen Edwin Deverex for the last time.

\* \* \*

The sight of the Deverex Tower standing out all lit up in the evening sky was by that point rather familiar to Yuki Kashizawa. She could enjoy the sight at least five times a week, every time she got back home from King's College after a hard day of study. Still, it wasn't a display one would easily get tired of seeing. London was covered in soft, reassuring lights, and the ever-so-tall, luminous building towered over it, shrouded in the distant, relaxing background noise of the city. The waters of the Thames were moved by a light, slightly cold breeze making the reflection of the building flicker.

Ten minutes earlier, she had received a call from Hexagon, who had asked her to reach him on floor D as soon as she could.

*He must have some news to tell, she thought. I only hope it's not about going and stealing the handcuffs from all the guests at a police party.*

She still couldn't believe all that had happened to her in just a month. It was already incredible enough her father had inherited such an astounding fortune, that she had got into King's College for a PhD, that she lived in an

extra-luxury suite in the tallest building in the world, and last but not least, that she had had the courage to leave Japan despite her mother repeatedly begging her to reconsider. She certainly had not expected she would also meet an artificial intelligence who would send her off to search for Edwin Deverex, equipped like a superhero with her very own Batmobile. More than one friend of hers would have been jealous of what was happening to her, but of course she could not tell anyone about it.

Speaking of the AI, Yuki had thought time and again about the conversation she had had with Hexagon after the ‘job’ at the police station. It was true: She had had fun during that chase, even more than while flying over London on the Thunder Eagle. She had also been really frightened and had thought more than once she was about to end up in jail and ruin her own life. Perhaps, she could still be busted and arrested. What if the police managed to track her down somehow? She imagined them coming to the DT to take her, handcuffing her while somebody was reading her her rights, and then taking her away with everyone watching. She could kiss her PhD, her friends, her life, and her freedom goodbye! She didn’t even want to think how her parents might react—they probably wouldn’t speak to her ever again. Not only had she been so unforgivably reckless—which would drive her mother insane—but she had also committed a theft, and against the police no less—which would make her father fly into a fury. She had always obeyed the rules. Maybe taking the disks from the Deverex Mansion was less serious an offence, since the house was the property of her father now, but the theft at the police station was a different matter altogether. She had tried to tell herself she had done it for a just cause, but the problem was she had had fun while doing it, and that was what made her feel guilty.

Who would ever have thought she would enjoy risking her life darting through London on a motorbike, anyway? She had always told herself she was not interested in risky or scary things, that they just weren’t for her, that trying the scariest rides at amusement parks wasn’t quite her idea of fun, but perhaps she had been wrong about it.

In addition, she couldn’t say her secret life at the Deverex Tower had affected her everyday life negatively. She attended college normally, went out with friends for a drink or a walk, and spent her weekend afternoons downtown. In fact, except for the guilty feelings, she thought those new experiences made her feel more alive than she had ever felt before.

“Oh, here you are!” Hexagon greeted her, pretending he hadn’t seen her arriving.

“Hello! So, what’s new?” Yuki asked.

“Well...” the AI began, getting up from his chair. “As you know, I found more encrypted files on the new disks you brought. I’m trying to open them too, but it’s a slow process.”

“I suppose that’s not all, right? What about Ayleen? Didn’t you want me to take a picture of her?”

“I wanted to talk about that too. I’ve been keeping an eye on her via satellite for a while, and yesterday she took off from Heathrow headed to Chicago.”

“Chicago? What for?”

“There she took another flight for Phoenix, Arizona. Shortly after her arrival, she hopped on a US military chopper. Some men were waiting for her. The helicopter disappeared during flight after a while. It probably landed on a military base where they’re not too keen on letting satellite onlookers poke their nose.”

“A military base? I repeat, what for?”

“Haven’t got a clue. According to her criminal record, she has never had any trouble with the US Army or any other army for that matter. She has no previous convictions or legal troubles in the States.”

“Even if she did, I don’t think she’d nonchalantly take a trip to Arizona, where a chopper is waiting to take her to jail...” Yuki mused.

“Indeed. I don’t think that’s why they were there. On top of that, she boarded the helicopter without resisting. They even shook hands, and she had a large case with her. Clearly, she’s going to stay for a while.”

“Hex... Have you thought... maybe...”

“Maybe?...”

“I mean... What if Edwin was kidnapped by the Americans for some reason? Perhaps they need his talent for something big, and—”

“Yeah, the thought hovered on the edge of my mind for 0.68 seconds, but since that wouldn’t seem to be connected to Ayleen’s presence there in any way, I discarded the idea.”

“Maybe she’s the one who told them where to find Edwin or who helped them get him...”

“I don’t think the Americans would need help from the acquaintances of the people they intend to kidnap, if any—and even so, why would Ayleen go there right now?”

“I don’t know...” Yuki answered, shrugging.

“At the moment, we can’t tell what she’s up to over there or why she went there. Nonetheless, we probably have another promising lead.”

“What lead?” she asked, intrigued.

There was no doubt Hexagon wasn’t big on modesty. He was very well

aware of being the best computer on the entire planet and certainly didn't put any effort into trying to conceal how proud he was of that. He enjoyed talking about other computers as if they were old coffee machines, and he always wore a smug grin when telling about his ideas and deductions. He might have come across as disagreeable to some, but Yuki knew it wasn't his intention.

"Do you remember I mentioned a wave of thefts at several research labs years ago?"

"Yes. The mother of the girl living with Ayleen was killed during one of those."

"Exactly. I did some research out of curiosity and found out that some of the Deverex Research and Development Laboratories were among the robbed labs."

"Did they actually manage to rob them?"

"They did. They stole some cutting-edge technology and vanished, as usual."

"What did they steal, exactly?"

"I'll answer you with a question," Hexagon said, putting on a worried face. "Have you ever wondered how Mr Deverex managed to create the Zephyrus Armour and all the other contraptions I showed you?"

\* \* \*

"There she is." Inspector Alan Parker indicated the figure on the screen, pausing the playback of the video recorded by the surveillance system. "The image is quite clear."

"What the hell is she wearing?" his colleague Inspector Jonathan Wilburn said, coming closer to the screen and squinting. "She looks like Mazinger Z's girlfriend."

"It's body armour. Can't you tell?" Parker replied, putting his cigarette out. "Her body is completely covered, except for the mouth area of her face. She's unrecognisable."

"Maybe we can find out something about her features from what is visible."

"Yes, perhaps. But I want to know who she is, what the devil she was doing here, and where she got the contraption she's wearing and that atomic bike of hers."

"She shook off the cars as easily as if they'd been bolted to the ground. And did you hear about the smoke bomb? She's got better toys than



Batman.”

“Yeah, I know,” Parker grumbled, lighting up another cigarette.

“At any rate, we do know what she was doing here. She was stealing evidence from our archive.”

“Right, but why? Was she looking for something in particular?”

“She’s stolen just some hard drives concerning the case of Edwin Deverex.”

“That case’s been long dropped. What would she do with them? Maybe she wanted to steal more, but she didn’t have the time to. Perhaps she acts on commission. Maybe somebody pays her to steal evidence.”

“Do you think they also paid for her equipment?”

“Let’s run a check on all producers of race vehicles. Let’s see if anyone makes motorbikes with a rocket on the butt. And let’s try to figure out if anybody’s seen where she went after she lost our men.”

“Okay, but don’t count on it. She ran like the devil. They might have seen no more than her trail.”

Parker didn’t reply. He stood up and walked toward the door.

“Hey, Alan, what do we do about that armour?”

“Ask Mazinger,” he grunted, leaving the room.

## CHAPTER 15

The six experts summoned by the US government had just set foot in a meeting room of the military base. They took seats together with other scientists who, unlike the newly arrived experts, were in the military and had already worked on that specific research. There were about a hundred seats, and the scientists occupied only a tiny fraction of them. In front of the audience, on a stage, was a long table and a few chairs, and also a projection canvas ready to use.

The person who was in charge of instructing them on their task, General Juma Moyokonde, arrived shortly thereafter. Ayleen had heard some of the other people in the room chatting about him shortly before he had come in. He was originally from Mozambique and had started his military career fighting for independence from Portugal with Frelimo—the Mozambique Liberation Front—when he was only a young boy. Like many other soldiers who had grown up in his same circumstances, Moyokonde was a real patriot, but his ambitions and his passion for a military career had brought him to America several years before. He was a robust but slender man of noble bearing, frowning almost all the time.

The general put a laptop on the table and pressed a button on a remote to switch on the projector hanging from the ceiling. He then proceeded to switch off all the lights in the room—which was underground and thus without windows—so the only light source was the projector itself.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he commenced, “welcome. I am General Moyokonde, your reference officer for the entire duration of your stay here. I presume you’ve already been told that everything you’ll become acquainted with here is classified. Once you get out of here, you’re supposed to forget about what you’ve seen, unless you’ll ever be back here to work on it again. The US government doesn’t like leaks, and if you cause one you’ll like the consequences even less. For your own good, I hope that’s all clear.”

Some of the summoned experts—none of whom had been in a military base before—looked at each other, perhaps starting to question their own choice to accept the job. Ayleen Marker was listening impassively, but she

was impatient to finally see the remains.

“I also presume,” the general went on, “you’ve been informed about the rules you’re supposed to follow throughout your stay, but let me refresh your memory about some of them I particularly care about. Your only means of communication with the outside world is a phone. You can use only landlines and only specific phones. You can only make calls and never receive any, of course. You are not allowed to use your cellphones. We won’t confiscate them, but you don’t want to get caught using them. Your calls will be monitored, so if you are afraid we could listen to your private business just don’t talk about it. At any rate, your job will keep you quite busy, so you won’t have too much time to make calls, and we’d like you not to waste too much time chattering anyway.”

The task at hand did require some secrecy, of course, but anyway Moyokonde had always been rather paranoid about leaks. According to the rumours Ayleen had heard, the reason was something that had happened to him during his career when he was still a long way from becoming a general. Somebody could not keep his mouth shut, and because of that, half of Moyokonde’s team had kicked the bucket during a mission. He himself had barely made it.

The general connected the computer he had left on the table to the projector and proceeded to show a series of slides.

“Now let’s get to the point,” he continued. “What your respective companies have probably told you is that the USA government needed you to examine some remains and you’d be lavishly paid to do it. What they could not tell you, because they themselves didn’t know, is what remains we’re talking about.”

He pushed a button on the remote he was holding in his hand and made the projector show the first slide. One could see a huge tangle of metal wreckage, like some sort of damaged bulkhead blackened by burns, with cables, tubes, and circuitry coming out of it. The first slide was followed by others, all more or less similar to the previous ones.

“In a way, you won’t know either. All you need to know is we’ve got a nice pile of junk like that, and we’ve been wondering for years where the hell it came from. According to our studies, they could be the remains of one or more vehicles of some sort, which apparently had no one at all on board since there wasn’t a soul to be seen at the crash site. The analysis of the data suggests the wreckage crashed onto the ground, so we must be dealing with flying vehicles. We can’t establish with certainty whether there was only one vehicle or if there were more. The wreckage and the amount of debris could account for two vehicles, but of course it depends on the size of a

single vehicle. Additionally, we need to know why they crashed. Was it a technical failure, or were they shot down? In the latter case, who did it, and why? How? Where do the vehicles come from? Who was flying them, if anyone?”

A shy mechanical engineer raised his hand to ask leave to speak.

“Please,” the general said.

“Do we know where the wreckage was found, or how long ago it was found...?”

“We do, but you won’t. That’s classified information.”

“But it could be important. Not knowing how long ago the impact happened, what the impact environment was like, or how long the wreckage stayed there, could lead to incorrect conclusions.”

An expert in metallurgy in the group confirmed what the engineer had said.

“They were in sandy soil. They stayed there for a couple of hours at least, and everything happened some ten years ago. Is that enough?” the general replied, sounding as if he was making a huge concession.

The engineer just barely smiled and nodded, probably to avoid an argument with Moyokonde.

“All you need to know and can know will be communicated to you by your colleagues working here once you start.”

“So, what have you found out already?” the engineer ventured to ask.

The glance the general cast on him revealed he had already answered that question with his previous sentence.

\* \* \*

Edwin Deverex would of course never have been able to create all he had created if he had not owned dozens of high-tech industries. The components he needed to create the Zephyrus Armour, the Thunder Eagle, the Fire Panther, and Hexagon’s brain itself, had all been created by Deverex Enterprises—but they obviously had no idea why such components had been requested in the first place.

Now, according to Hexagon, at least part of this highly sophisticated technology had fallen into the hands of people who, being thieves, were not very likely to be too well-meaning.

“The weapons installed on the Zephyrus Armour,” the hologram explained, “can easily be located from here. Their power generators were

created by Deverex Laboratories and can be tracked down by the very energy they emit. There are tools here in the Deverex Tower that can detect it anywhere on the globe. Which is very handy to locate the user of the Z-Armour, for example in case the radio signal was lost. One can trace the position of the weapons as soon as they're fired. The same goes for some components of the engine of the Thunder Eagle and the Fire Panther."

"Go on," Yuki exhorted him.

"As I found out, these generators were among the very things stolen from Deverex Laboratories, together with other components that are vital to build an engine like that of the Thunder Eagle. So, I thought, if the Zephyrus Armour can be tracked down, the stolen components can be too. I connected to satellites and waited, hoping the thieves would eventually use what they have stolen, which they did. This isn't good news."

"Definitely not good," Yuki said, shaking her head. "If I understand you, whoever has those components could be able to build weapons like the Zephyrus Armour's and a vehicle like the Thunder Eagle."

"You understand perfectly well, and since they didn't ask permission to take those things, you can bet there's something fishy going on here. Naturally, we can't be sure these guys know the potential of what they've stolen, but maybe the components have already been handed to someone who knows what to do with them. It's only logical to assume these thefts were commissioned."

"And if the robbery at the Deverex Labs were only some among many others at different laboratories... That means we're dealing with somebody who seems to be in dire need of technology. Somebody who probably has a very precise goal."

"Indeed, and having good weapons is certainly an advantage, whatever their goal may be."

"Hex," she said slowly, after a sudden, frightening realisation. "Lucy Penn. She died of third-degree burns, and there was nothing at the crime scene that could cause them. The murder weapon could be something like the blasters of the Zephyrus Armour, could it not?"

"Exactly. But the thefts at the Deverex Laboratories took place after that. They were the last ones in the series, shortly before Edwin disappeared but when I had already been deactivated. Which means—"

"It means," Yuki interrupted him, "the people who stole those generators are likely to already have weapons like that. They want to build more of them, and thus, they probably know very well the potential of what they stole. Maybe they also know how to turn it into a weapon."

"Precisely," the AI confirmed. "Or perhaps they don't."

“Spell it out.”

“When I found out the thefts at the Deverex Laboratories had happened before Edwin vanished, I thought that maybe his kidnappers needed him to know how to make weapons out of the stolen components, which is why I said it was a good lead. Maybe the people who have the generators and the other stolen components are the same people who kidnapped Edwin.”

“But how would they know Edwin knew how to turn that stuff into a weapon?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they were counting on his talent, or maybe, which would be far worse, they knew about the Zephyrus Armour.”

“How could they?”

“Suspect number one is again our friend Ayleen. If the armour was for her, maybe she knew about it since the very beginning. Maybe she thought she could make a tidy sum by selling it to an arms dealer. True, the armour’s still here, but she might have sold the information.”

“She and Edwin were too close. She could never—”

“Or maybe the very company she works for, Robotronics, might be interested in similar contrivances. Interestingly, Robotronics is *not* on the list of companies whose laboratories were plundered during the rash of robberies.”

“Surely the list of companies that weren’t robbed is longer than that!”

“Of course it is, but this evidence points toward Ayleen nonetheless.”

For some reason, Yuki and Hexagon were on opposite sides. She passionately defended Ayleen without much of a reason to do it. Hexagon seemed to find her guilty of everything, but at least he had clues to justify his position.

“Do you think Ayleen’s trip to Phoenix could be related to this?”

“Possibly. Maybe the United States is interested in a new weapon and Robotronics doesn’t have anything to do with it. At any rate, I’d rather not jump to conclusions. The trip might be unimportant. There’s no trace of the stolen components in the last known locations of Ayleen.”

“But they might be in the zone you can’t examine, where Ayleen probably is right now.”

“I can’t rule it out, but given the circumstances, I can’t confirm it either.”

“What do we do?” Yuki asked after a deep sigh. She feared she already knew what Hex was going to say.

“Simple. We need to take a look at the place where the stolen components are. I bet we’ll find a lot of interesting stuff over there, and perhaps some answers to our questions, too.”

“I don’t suppose you’d consider telling the police about it, right?” she

asked foolishly.

“I’d say not, unless you want to tell them that, thanks to the mighty technological wonders hidden in the Deverex Tower, your holographic friend has found out some criminals with directed-energy weapons have stolen components that will allow them to make even more directed-energy weapons, just like those *you* wore when you sneaked into the police station a few days ago.”

“So you’re saying it’s up to me.” Yuki sat down on one of the chairs nearby, rested her arms on the armrests, and sank into her seat.

All of a sudden, she felt as if a huge responsibility had been placed on her shoulders. A responsibility that could imply serious dangers for herself. This game was getting much more dangerous than she had imagined.

“If you don’t feel up to it, I can’t force you,” Hexagon continued after some moments of silence. “But do take into account that without your help I can’t do anything and we have no idea what those people are up to—nothing good for sure anyway.”

She began to feel cold, and she trembled while speaking.

“I... I... I can’t. I don’t feel up to it. This isn’t about sneaking into a police station, nor into a deserted mansion. We’re talking about criminals, people who have already killed and won’t hesitate to kill again in order to reach their goals. I’m just not up to it.”

“Yuki, listen. I repeat, I can’t force you to and don’t want to. Still, I would like you to look at the situation from all angles. Forget for a moment about the ethics and social value of preventing criminals from getting their hands on such weaponry, or of setting a man free after four years of imprisonment, or even of bringing his killers to justice. Focus only on the feasibility of it. You’ll be armed to the teeth and extremely well protected by the Zephyrus Armour, and you’ll have a vehicle as fast and powerful as the Thunder Eagle. And don’t forget you’re a karate black belt. If you decide —”

“Look, if you think I am some sort of Karate Kid—”

“If you decide,” he went on, ignoring the interruption, “to go on this mission, I’ll do my very best to ensure you’ll be prepared for it. I’ll create simulations for you to practise combat situations with potential enemies, armed like their real counterparts are likely to be. Whatever they may have, I don’t think they have anything as good as the Zephyrus Armour for now—that’s not an easy thing to build.”

“I’d like to think it over a little,” she answered, after a few moments. She knew she was saying so out of politeness, and she would certainly refuse in the end. She had no wish to get herself killed.

“Of course, that’s understandable,” Hexagon replied. Even though he was a computer, Yuki thought, he really behaved like a human. She already felt so sorry she was going to disappoint him.

“Where did you trace the stolen components?” she asked, just to fill the silence.

“French Polynesia,” the hologram replied, looking almost scared to tell her.

“*Where?*”

“Almost fourteen thousand kilometres from here.”

After a moment, Yuki stood up from her chair, breathed in deeply, and said, “I need to think about it.” She then left the room, under the silent gaze of the AI.

\* \* \*

One evening, a few days after the study of the wreckage had begun, Ayleen was in the room she’d been assigned for the length of her stay at the military base. Another day of work on the remains was gone, and all the summoned specialists had left the laboratories and gone back to their respective quarters.

She had just talked with Judy on the phone for perhaps five minutes. She told her everything was fine and asked her how life was in London. There, too, everything was just like always. Judy had also asked her sister how the job was going, but Ayleen answered she could not say anything about it. And even if she could, there wasn’t much to say: They had started with the first metallurgic and chemical tests on some samples taken from the wreckage, in an attempt to find out their composition. The outermost part of the wreckage was an alloy of different metals—a rather light and resistant one, even though now it was semi-destroyed. Identification of its non-metallic components had not been possible, which seemed to support what previous scientists had suggested—namely, that such components couldn’t be found on Earth. The innermost part of the wreckage was crossed by cables here and there, and the experiments thus far had revealed they were conducting metals. That was no surprise, since those cables were connected to some sort of circuitry, or at least something that looked like it. For the time being, the focus of the research remained on the external structure of the wreckage. Tests on the circuitry were postponed—for example, tests to establish if it really was circuitry, if it worked, and if it contained information of some sort.



The discovery of wreckage of unknown, probably non-terrestrial origins, endorsed the fears of those who anticipated an alien invasion. Moyokonde seemed to be particularly afraid of that possibility. He probably thought he would have to fight again for the freedom of his people, just like as he had done previously in Mozambique with Frelimo. This time around, though, ‘his people’ would be all of the people of the world.

Ayleen thought such ideas were amusing. All they had found in ten years was a relatively small amount of wreckage, and thus far no alien had waged war on anyone at all. Thus, she thought, anyone could see it was extremely unlikely any invasion was going on. She was not at all convinced of the alien invasion hypothesis; however, it was certainly true the flying vehicles that had crashed onto the ground in Arizona were, in all likelihood, alien vehicles.

She wondered how aliens fitted into the picture, though. Even though Moyokonde could not know it—and it would be better if he never knew it—Ayleen was aboard one of those vehicles when they had fallen down. She didn’t know if anybody else was there with her, but if there was anyone, they had somehow managed to flee before the impact—they couldn’t have just vanished. Anyway, she had no idea if those hypothetical other occupants were humans or aliens. If she was an alien, she certainly didn’t look like one.

Ayleen chuckled. *I concede I am somewhat different, she told herself, but to call me an alien seems a bit extreme.*

Well, those ruminations weren’t much use for now. All that mattered was continuing the tests to find out more about the vehicles.

\* \* \*

Alan Parker was sitting at the desk in his office, reviewing some files. It had been another long and tiring day, and the inspector was trying to relax with the umpteenth cigarette. He was holding his head up with his right hand while trying hard to pay attention to what he was reading—boring paperwork, like reports, proceedings, notices, and other rubbish of the same type.

He had spent the last hours of the tedious day in his office, which was now impregnated with the smell of smoke. The little fresh air left was coming through the half-open window and was moved around by the fan Parker left on at all times, even in the winter.

However, something more interesting was now about to happen.

Somebody knocked on his door.

"Come," he said to the figure he could make out behind the door's glass.

"Alan, I've got somebody here you'd better listen to," Wilburn said, leaning out from behind the door.

"What is it, John? My shift's almost over and I'd like to call it a day."

"Mr Stunner, here," the other said turning around to the man he was talking about, "says he's seen an unidentified subject wandering about near a mansion in Sevenoaks, some twenty days ago."

"So what?"

"Let's just say this subject looked quite a lot like Zero."

"Like who?"

"Zero. You know, the armoured woman."

"Since when does she have a nickname?" he asked slightly annoyed, getting up from his desk.

"Well, you know what they say about the case, right? Evidence: zero. Results: zero... Not to mention the 'Z' marked on the cuirasse..."

"We're this close to making a mascot of her... Let this Stunner chap in."

"Like I told your colleague, Mr Inspector," said the old man with thin, white hair, "I was passing by the old mansion of the Deverexes at about a quarter to three in the morning, and I noticed something moving in the yard. I knew the mansion was deserted and that nobody goes there except Paul Deverex's only son every now and then, and since he's vanished I said to myself it couldn't be him, therefore—"

"Get to the point, Mr Stunner," Parker pressed him, interrupting his speech. The man spoke slowly and in a rather confused manner. He had to be more than seventy years old and came across a lot like somebody with a screw loose. However, a report of a sighting of 'Zero' was well worth listening to, even at the risk of it being complete humbug.

"I apologise, Mr Inspector," the old man smiled, revealing his missing teeth. "You're right. My wife always says I ramble a lot when talking. As I was saying, I came closer to the gate of the mansion to see who was there in the yard, and it was then I saw something unbelievable!" He put his hands high up to emphasise what he was telling. With his face rested on his left hand, Parker cast a bored glance at Wilburn, as to ask 'who the hell did you bring to me?'

"I saw somebody coming out of the building's door, but whatever it was, it was not human! It was completely black and it had long hair and some sort of horns on its head! Its arms and legs were much bigger than a man's, and its face was covered! I'm telling you, it was the devil himself!"

“Mr Stunner,” Parker said, not at all convinced, “the area where you say you’ve seen this... creature is very dark and lonely late at night. Are you sure you saw what you say you’ve seen? Couldn’t you be... mistaken?”

“Absolutely not, Mr Inspector! I could see everything clearly!”

“How?”

“The vehicle! The vehicle the weird individual got into!”

“What vehicle? A motorbike, perhaps?”

“No, sir. It was more like a car. At some point a dome opened up, and some lights turned on and lit the area up enough to let me see what was happening. The creature hopped in the car and then flew away a few moments later!”

“It *flew* away? You said it was a car.”

“I said it looked like one, but I’m telling you: It took off!”

Parker was perplexed. The description sounded at least in part like that of Zero’s appearance—the old man might have mistaken those pointy, ear-like things on the helmet for horns, and the armour did make the limbs of the user appear bigger than they actually were. The long hair and the covered face matched too, and given the motorbike she had, it would have been no surprise if Zero had a flying car as well. But perhaps they were just coincidences, and Stunner was nothing but a boozier.

“Tell me...Raymond,” Wilburn intervened, making a visible effort to remember the man’s name. “Could you make out if it was a man or a woman?”

“I-I don’t know, Mr Inspector! I think it was neither! Perhaps the long hair could make one think of a woman, but I didn’t see it well enough to tell for a fact...”

“Could you tell me what you were doing over there in the dead of night?” Parker continued.

“Well, you see...” Stunner replied, looking a little embarrassed. “I was getting back home after seeing a friend.”

“At three in the morning, in a place like that, and on foot?”

“I don’t live too far from there...”

“Mr Stunner,” Parker pressed him, “what were you doing at your friend’s place?”

The old man kept playing nervously around with a button of his coat. He glanced a couple of times back and forth from the button to the stern face of the inspector.

“Alright,” he admitted reluctantly after a bit. “We had a couple of pints. But I swear what I saw was real!”

*I knew it, Parker thought. A boozier. He was probably tottering his way*

*back home almost unconscious and mistook some tree around the mansion for a monster.*

“You don’t believe me, do you? I swear that’s exactly what happened!”

Parker stood up and was about to briskly dismiss him, but Wilburn took him to the side and said, “Listen. He was drunk alright, but what he’s saying is quite interesting.”

“Of course it is—why don’t you ask him if the flying car was pulled by white horses?”

“Come on, Alan. The subject he described sounds an awful lot like Zero, and don’t tell me a flying car would surprise you after she left us in the dust with that jet bike of hers! Besides, don’t you think it’d be quite a coincidence Zero stole stuff about the Deverex case and the place where Stunner saw ‘the devil himself’ was right outside the Deverex Mansion?”

“Okay!” Parker burst out, opening his arms. “Have it your way. Take him for an identikit of the subject he says he saw, and let’s see what comes out of it. Let’s also get an accurate description of the car and let’s try to find out what it was like. Anyway, I wouldn’t expect too much out of this tanked-up drunkard.”

## CHAPTER 16

Floors 125 through 127 of the Deverex Tower constituted the so-called *Diamond Village*. Its name came from the fact it was decorated with faceted crystals shaped into diamonds or other solid geometrical figures, either hanging from the ceiling or sticking out of the floor supported by metallic structures. Floors 126 and 127 had a large aperture in the middle and were supported by circular steel pillars. Other pillars were entirely made of crystal and shaped so they would act as prisms. They were merely ornamental and projected light rainbow shades on the walls. Besides the elevators, one could move between the Diamond Village's floors using the escalators passing through the central apertures in each of them.

The Diamond Village hosted several cinemas, snack bars, pubs, restaurants, shops, and a discotheque occupying half of the 127<sup>th</sup> floor. A vintage cinema of the Diamond Village was having a revival of the *Star Trek* saga, and that particular evening they put on *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*. Yuki went to the 8:30 PM show. At around eleven, already a while after the end of the film, she stopped by at a pub for a strawberry caipiroska.

Yuki had been thinking about Hexagon's proposal for the past several days—or rather, she had been thinking about how to tell him she was not going to help him, and about how she could be at peace with herself afterwards. Trying to always go beyond her own limits was one thing—which she had done a lot as of late—but going into a suicide mission on a secluded atoll in the middle of the Pacific Ocean was another. That was not an exaggeration. If the components stolen from the DRDL were indeed on the island, it was obvious the thieves had to be there too, and they were almost certainly the same people who had kidnapped or killed Edwin—not to mention Lucy Penn. The danger was real, and despite what Hex thought, she was just not up to the task. The Zephyrus Armour was most assuredly an impressive piece of technology and would certainly have been quite an edge on all fronts, *if* she had known how to use it—too bad she had always used it only as a disguise. The hologram had promised her intensive training to prepare her, but she doubted it would be enough. All the training

programmes in the world would not prevent her from getting killed. She could already picture the scene in her head: Stone dead—incinerated like Lucy Penn, perhaps—surrounded by criminals laughing at how ridiculous she looked in that armour. She thought there was something extremely humiliating in dying while wearing the equipment of a superhero. She felt like it would be the most concise and elegant proof of the fact she was grossly overestimating herself and she had once again failed to meet expectations—her own.

Yuki Kashizawa was never pleased with herself. Her way of thinking, perhaps caused by her constant insecurity, was the all-or-nothing way: Anything short of a complete success was a total failure. Being a mathematics PhD student was not enough. She had to know every definition and every detail. She had to be able to prove any theorem, any lemma asked of her point-blank, and she had to know how to solve any exercise, otherwise she could not say she was a real mathematician. It was actually worse. In a way, she had already *decided* any endeavour was pointless: When she was successful, it clearly meant the enterprise she was attempting was too easy, and when she failed, it was unquestionably because of her innate inadequacy and incapacity. She was well aware of how unreasonable that was, and she knew that way of thinking was the direct cause of most of her own problems. However, keeping up the hope her efforts would one day lead her to the long sought-after perfection and bring about the end of all her inner troubles was somewhat easier than taking a step back and learn how to be less intransigent with herself. Moreover, resigning herself to her own supposedly innate ineptitude after a defeat was simpler and more comforting than getting back up and keeping going.

Anyway, none of that mattered. It wasn't about her way of thinking, nor her self-image. The mission was very dangerous and full of unknowns, and her fears of not being up to the task were fully justified in her mind. Had he been there, her *sensei*—her karate master—would probably have said that playing down her own abilities would certainly not have helped her make an objective decision. He had spent years telling her that as long as she didn't trust in her own abilities, life would always appear to her as an unjust, never-ending fight in which everything seemed to be designed to put a spoke in her wheel. She had learnt the lesson, but was just not able to put it into practice. Yuki had become a second-dan black belt in a remarkably short time, and her sensei would often tell her she was one of his best pupils. However, she had not been *the* best of the pupils, and the very existence of pupils who were better than she was was enough to make her conclude she wasn't all that good after all.

On the bright side, the constant dissatisfaction had always pushed her to do better, and at times, even to be more daring. A key factor had been her mother's overprotecting behaviour. Yuki's teenage years had been a long time of conflict between her and Misako, who had been completely against Yuki's decision to study martial arts—unsurprisingly, she thought it would be too dangerous. Yuki had enrolled on the beginner's course mostly for the sake of contradicting her mother and was certainly not expecting she would make it past the first year. Dissatisfied as she was with her results, she had kept pushing until she had exceeded even her sensei's expectations—but of course not her own.

Edwin Deverex's disappearance was a real mystery, and it had turned out to be even more intricate after Yuki's and her new friend's recent findings. Still, not even the most fascinating mystery would have made her risk her life. There was a limit to everything. However, if anything could make her entertain the thought for even just a second, it was her morals. Hex was right. Whoever had stolen those components was dangerous, and in a situation like that, one couldn't just go and tell the authorities and hope to be believed. Refusing the mission would mean letting dangerous, murderous criminals—equipped with sci-fi weaponry, on top of it—carry on their unlawful business undisturbed. She wasn't sure she could just brush it off and still sleep soundly, and she didn't know how to tell Hexagon she cared for her own life too much to jeopardise it for the greater good.

One way or another, though, she had to tell him.

\* \* \*

That night, after a few more days of tests on and analyses of the wreckage had passed, Ayleen was on her way back to her quarters and passed once again in front of the chapel. She had passed by it numerous times, but it was the first time she actually entered it.

The chapel was perhaps a bit larger than one would expect in a military base. There were about fifty seats, an altar that was anything but bare, and a few paintings representing Christian myths. The central nave was about twenty metres long and was covered by a red carpet inlaid with golden embroidery. On top of the wall behind the altar, right under the rose window, there was a wooden crucifix. It was more of a tiny church rather than just a chapel, and at the moment it was deserted. There was even an organ immediately on the left of the altar. In front of both groups of seats there were some rather worn-out candles, not all of which were lit. There

was no book on the lectern, and the whole little church was immersed in silence.

Ayleen turned toward the entrance. There was no one around. It was a rather solitary area of the base, and it was late. She turned again to look at the rose window and saw a dim light coming through, certainly from another area of the base itself—the chapel was on an underground floor, and there was no chance the rose window overlooked outside the base.

She slowly moved closer to the organ and started to play it.

The melody was neither happy nor sad. It started off quietly and gradually became louder. The notes began to flow rapidly in the air, just like Ayleen's thoughts in her mind.

Whatever alloy the wreckage was made of, it was now clear beyond doubt that it was nothing but the remains of an aircraft of some kind, apparently a completely black one. The propulsion system it used was unknown, since there appeared to be no trace of it left. This bolstered the theory a technical fault had made the aircraft crash—the engine had probably blown up shortly before. Among the parts of the hull that were salvaged there was a rather peculiar one. Unlike the other ones, which had jugged and irregular outlines, one somehow had a round hole in it, as if somebody had sliced half a circle out of it. The border of that part was quite different from the others. It looked smelted. Something had to have melted the metal, and that was quite impressive. According to the tests, not even a blast furnace would be hot enough to melt the alloy. It was first conjectured that the apparent explosion of the engine could have raised the temperature enough to melt the metal, but in that case there should have been more melted parts than just that particular one. A few tests were also run on the circuit-looking parts found in the wreckage, but there had been no way of reactivating them or extracting data from them. Speaking of the wreckage, according to the calculations made on the possible size of one aircraft, it seemed unlikely all those pieces could belong to a single one. It wasn't very likely more than one aircraft would crash because of the same engine problem. Nor was it likely they would come to rest so close to each other that one couldn't tell which remains belonged to which aircraft. It seemed more reasonable to think the two vehicles collided with each other first, exploding and eventually crashing into the ground. Even assuming that theory was correct, one would wonder why they were on a collision course to begin with, and the only plausible explanation was that at least one of them was damaged and crashed into the other. Considering how close to the surface they both were before the impact, they were probably about to land, which could possibly explain the collision—they were landing close to



each other.

The melody was resounding and at times disquieting, and it made Ayleen's thoughts wander. She started to ask herself what would have happened if the accident had never taken place. The two shuttlecraft would have landed, she would have got off and... then what? Why had she gone to Arizona? What could possibly be so important in the Sonoran Desert that somebody would send two so technologically advanced shuttles there? Maybe the others who were with her—there *had* to have been someone else!—knew the answer, but now they were gone. Perhaps they had died. Maybe they weren't like her and had been literally vaporised on impact. And if they had managed to somehow escape instead, why didn't they take her with them? Another hypothesis, one that was just a joke thus far, came back to her mind. Maybe somebody had tried to get rid of her, and considering Ayleen's abilities, crashing two shuttles into each other to reach the goal didn't seem all that unlikely. Establishing where those shuttles came from seemed impossible, but that was no surprise for Ayleen. After all, *her own* place of origin was unknown as well; she and Edwin hadn't even known where to start looking. Perhaps those shuttles and Ayleen had come from the same place, or at least from two places that were similar to each other. At any rate, the chances either of the two places was Earth were getting smaller and smaller.

The music came to an end, and Ayleen heard a comment she wasn't expecting to hear.

"Congratulations," Juma Moyokonde said. "You play beautifully. What was the piece?"

Ayleen had been so intent on playing she hadn't noticed the general entering the chapel. When she heard his voice, she turned to look at him. Without answering his question, she said, "General. I hope I have not violated security protocol." She climbed down the few steps of the altar and found herself right in front of the general.

"No, not at all. The chapel isn't an off-limits zone, and this is your free time. So, what were you playing?"

"Johann Sebastian Bach's *Fugue in G Minor*."

"You must have attended music school, I presume."

"Autodidact."

"Remarkable," Moyokonde commented, as if he was trying to conceal his own amazement. "Did you come to pray?" he asked her after a moment of silence.

"I was passing by and glimpsed the organ. I felt like playing it. I'm not a believer."

“Agnostic?”

“Atheist.”

The general stared at her and nodded sympathetically. “I see,” he said.

“I presume you are a believer, instead.”

“I am indeed. Catholic. But I promise you, not the kind who must convince everyone else to believe too, or who frowns at you if you don’t believe. I think everyone should come to God in his or her own way with no interference from others, if ever.”

“Your faith seems very strong,” Ayleen commented. The general seemed to take it as a compliment, although she had meant it as merely an observation.

“Quite so.” The man sat on the closest pew, made the sign of the cross, and joined his hands in prayer. “Even though it’s been put to a hard test many times.”

“May I ask you in what way?”

“Well... Let’s just say that, as any good believer knows, one often feels the need to turn to God because of somebody we care for... Our family, our friends... Our comrades. But His answer to prayers is not always the one we’d like to obtain. When this happens, the let-down and our imperfect nature can undermine the strength of our faith. However, I have learned to strengthen my faith more when God’s answer is ‘no’ rather than when it is ‘yes’. I take it as a sign my faith isn’t strong enough and needs to be cultivated with more care.”

Ayleen could hardly believe the meek preacher before her was the same, harsh and brusque-mannered man who had received the experts’ team a few days earlier. She observed the man. He was kneeling, and his head was bowed down as a sign of respect for his god. She wondered how could two such radically opposite traits coexist in the same mind.

“What are you praying for?” she ventured asking.

“For my family.”

“Are they very far?”

“They died during the independence war of Mozambique from Portugal.”

“I’m sorry,” she answered after a very short pause. “I won’t disturb you further. Goodnight, general.”

“You are not disturbing me,” he replied quickly, without interrupting his prayer. “You can talk to me while I’m praying. Praying is an exquisitely spiritual act. Words do not matter. God hears the voice of our spirits much better than spoken words. All I do while I pray is think about what I need to turn to God for. Having a conversation while I do it doesn’t disturb me—quite the contrary, it delights me.”

Despite what he had said about one's own spiritual journey toward God, General Moyokonde gave Ayleen the feeling they could soon end up talking about religion, which she could gladly do without. She looked at the clock, said something about how late it was, and excused herself saying she was going to sleep. While continuing to pray for the souls of his dead, Moyokonde wished Ayleen goodnight, listening to her light steps moving away along the central nave of the little church.

\* \* \*

"Alan," Inspector Wilburn said, entering Parker's office, "I just wanted to tell you old Stunner's description of Zero has been sent to all London police stations together with the images captured by our cameras."

"Good. Even though, if the car can really fly as Stunner said, Zero could be anywhere, and just informing the London police won't be enough."

"Well, his identikit of Zero was a bit too fanciful. Maybe he exaggerated the features of the car, too."

"I doubt it very much, given how fast her motorbike was. And fanciful or not, the identikit he gave was quite close to the surveillance camera footage of Zero. According to Stunner, that was unquestionably her."

Wilburn hummed. "Even if she's not in London any more," he said, "there's a chance she will be back. There are other sensitive targets."

"Indeed. She stole evidence about Deverex's case and got caught doing something in his mansion. We should send someone over there to see what she's done, or what she was so interested in."

"I wonder why she stole evidence about a cold case. It's not like we could get anywhere with those disks."

"We couldn't, but maybe she, or those who pay her, could."

"Why would they care about those disks? I mean, if they're involved in Edwin Deverex's disappearance, it would've been smarter to make every piece of evidence disappear *before* we could find it, right? Why risk being jailed four years later?"

"Maybe they realised there was some very compromising data on those disks, and rather than running the risk of our decrypting the data, they decided to risk Zero being arrested. Not that she seemed to be risking very much, anyway."

"Yeah," Wilburn commented, perplexed.

"At any rate, Zero wasn't interested just in those disks in particular. Rather, I think she's interested in anything having to do with Deverex. That's

why we'll have to keep her every possible target under control. We'll pass her pictures to industries, labs, and anything with the name 'Deverex' on it. They must inform us immediately if Zero were to show up."

"Agreed."

"And most of all, we'll keep an eye on the Deverex Tower too. It could be her next target."

"Should we inform the staff there?"

"Yes. We can't guard it day and night unless we're sure she'll come. We'll bring the problem to the attention of the building's management. They must tell security to keep their eyes wide open."

## CHAPTER 17

The night of October 14 Lisa was out for dinner with some friends to celebrate a birthday. Floyd and Judy were at home alone, chatting in the veranda while having some lemonade, just like Floyd and his girlfriend would usually do.

“Phew!” Judy snorted. “Seventeen more days.”

“You miss Ayleen very much, don’t you?” Floyd asked, sipping some lemonade through his straw.

“I do.”

“I miss her too. She’s one of a kind, isn’t she?”

“I am a little worried, Floyd.”

“Worried? Why? She went to a military base, not to war. What could possibly happen?”

“It’s not about that. It’s just...”

“What?”

“It’s what she could discover. What she doesn’t know about herself.”

“You think if she finds out something about her past, she might not like it?”

“Yes, that too, but... I feel so selfish saying a thing like this, but I’m afraid what she could discover could take her away... Away from me.”

Floyd put his empty glass down on the small table and poured some more lemonade into it.

“I’m sure Ayleen would never abandon you, regardless of her past.”

Judy just breathed in deeply. She didn’t feel like answering with an insincere ‘I know’ just to suit the circumstance.

Of course Ayleen cared a lot for her and for Floyd as well. They both knew that. But it was possible that Ayleen’s place of origin was God knew how far from Earth itself. What if Ayleen found out where that place was? What if something made it necessary for her to go back to it? In that case, chances were she would have to leave Judy, who would be left alone once again. Luckily, she thought not without guilt, there wasn’t much of a chance Ayleen could rent a spaceship to reach her own home. However, somehow she *had* managed to reach Earth, so maybe somebody was looking for her

and would send more spacecraft like those she came on to take her away. But would she agree to leave? What if they forced her?

It was so strange. Wherever Ayleen came from, it wasn't Earth for sure, but still anyone looking at her would just have seen a human woman. It was certainly the hardest puzzle to crack.

\* \* \*

The next evening, once she was back at the DT, Yuki dropped by her suite to leave her coat and backpack, then she called Hexagon and told him to be ready to take her down to the laboratories.

"Hex," she said once on floor E, "I—"

"I decrypted some files on the hard drives you took from the police archive," he interrupted her.

"*What?*"

"You heard right. I found the encryption key, but unfortunately it isn't the same as that of the other files on those same drives or those taken in the mansion."

"So... What did you find out? What do the files say?"

"Some of them are notes about physics, maths, and so on. Really neat ideas which evidently Edwin didn't have the time to complete and wanted to keep safe from prying eyes. *Other* files contained the email messages Edwin exchanged between January 5 and March 23, 2004, with *Ayleen Marker*."

"So Ayleen did lie to the police," Yuki slowly said, looking down. "It's not true she hadn't heard from Edwin since the day she went back to Canada."

"Indeed it isn't, but whether she was innocent or guilty, she had a good reason to lie."

"What reason?"

"Protecting the secrets of the Deverex Tower."

\* \* \*

"I have been recently informed by the management," concierge Louis Petrier said to the chief of security of the DT, "that a malicious person might try to trespass into the building. More precisely, a malicious *woman*."

Petrier showed him the pictures of Zero they had sent him and went on:

“The police have reason to think this woman is particularly interested in anything related to *Monsieur* Edwin Deverex. Therefore, the DT is potentially one of her targets.”

The tall, dark man wearing a black suit examined the pictures he was handed and commented, “Never seen anything like it. It looks like some sort of armour.”

“That’s not all. It appears she has rather fast vehicles, allowing her to flee with ease. Brace yourself—It looks like she has a... flying car.”

“A *flying* car?” the security chief replied, stifling a chuckle. “You can’t be serious!”

“I’m *extremely* serious. The woman has already escaped the police once on a jet bike, and a witness says he has seen her leaving the Deverex Mansion in a flying car.”

“Is she armed?”

“Nobody knows. The police say Zero has never opened fire thus far, but they can’t rule out she has weapons.”

“Zero?”

“*Oui*. It’s the name the police gave to the woman.”

“Rather silly, don’t you think?”

“What I think is that there’s a concrete risk this criminal could jeopardise the safety of the Deverex Tower and its occupants, which is not at all silly. The management wants security to keep their eyes wide open and to inform the police of any suspicious-looking person wandering about the neighbourhood and anything out of the ordinary. If Zero were to show up, we would have to call the police immediately, and you would have to prevent her escape until they get here.”

“Understood. I’ll make copies of the pictures to give to my guys.”

“*Très bien*,” Petrier replied gravely.

\* \* \*

“The first email contained in the files I’ve decrypted,” Hexagon explained, “is from Edwin to Ayleen. He asks her if her trip was okay and stuff like that, then he says my debug was almost over and I’d soon be reactivated—which did indeed happen on January 8, 2004.”

“So Ayleen knows about your existence. And about the underground floors.”

“She does.”

“What about the Zephyrus Armour and the rest?”

“The emails don’t talk about them. Maybe she knows, maybe she doesn’t.”

“What else do the emails say?”

“Ayleen replied to his email saying everything went fine and that she wanted him to keep her up to date about my reactivation. In the subsequent two weeks, they exchanged very few emails. They’re chronicles of the reactivation and education of yours truly and Ayleen’s replies to them.”

“Hex, if she knows you, why don’t you know her?”

“Apparently I did. The other emails, those from the times after my second deactivation, talk a little about my very first days. As you know, I was already active during the second half of 2003, and in one email specifically, Edwin goes on about the ‘good old times’ when he, Ayleen, and I, still lived together. I’d say if we consider Edwin as my father, then we ought to consider Ayleen as my *mother*.”

“So I was right. They were dating, weren’t they?”

“No. Ayleen created my programme together with Edwin, as he himself says in the aforementioned email. He makes it clear that without her help I probably wouldn’t have a holographic interface.”

“Hey! I thought Edwin was the genius!”

“Apparently there were two geniuses. Going back to the reason why I didn’t know Ayleen, that’s because of my first accident, the one I already told you about. In that accident both my holographic interface systems and my memory were damaged, and the latter was completely lost. When Edwin started to instruct me again, he had only two weeks before the second accident and did not have the time to talk about Ayleen. This second snag went on for longer than expected, and during that time Edwin disappeared. I was reactivated automatically four years later after the diagnostics. You know the rest.”

“Some things don’t add up, Hex. The first person to report Edwin had gone missing was my father, just because he happened to go to visit him on April 15, 2004. How could Ayleen not notice the disappearance before then?”

“When he went missing, she was in Canada already. I can tell from their emails they rarely heard from each other. He often apologises about writing so seldom because he’s busy with me and his research. Maybe they talked on the phone, but I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“If Ayleen was actually involved in Edwin’s disappearance, then her best bet would have been to look like she couldn’t possibly know anything about it. If she was not involved, admitting she had in fact kept in touch with



Edwin would've been a bad move. Sooner or later, she might have had to tell about the secret floors and about me. Either way, making up stuff about her contacts with him would've been risky. Thus, her only choice must have been lying and maintaining she hadn't heard from him since her return to Canada. However, if Edwin and Ayleen had kept in touch by phone, her story would've crumbled. The police have most certainly checked the phone records, and if it had turned out they had in fact kept in touch, Ayleen would've been in trouble. That didn't happen. Eventually, they decided she had nothing to do with the disappearance and did not have any useful information."

"The police could have checked Ayleen's computer, to make sure they didn't keep in touch via the Internet, right?"

"Possibly. But if Edwin encrypted their emails on his computer, obviously Ayleen must have done so as well. If they had something to hide—which they did—they needed to encrypt anything they were saying about their secrets. Thus, if the police had checked her computer, they'd have found encrypted files similar to those they eventually found on Edwin's computer—if nothing else, their cryptography experts should have noticed the two encryption systems were the same. It'd have been enough to make them suspicious and think Ayleen wasn't telling the whole story. Therefore, either the police didn't check her computer, or she wiped those files."

"They could have found copies of their emails on the server."

"I don't think so. Edwin used an email client he wrote himself, the only one capable of opening those encrypted emails. Certainly Ayleen was using it too. That programme is smart enough to make sure no trace is left of the emails downloaded from the server. Mr Deverex always left his computer on, even on those rare occasions when he went out, and the email client took care of periodically checking the mail and downloading it."

Yuki sat on a chair and stared at the screen in front of her for a while. Then, slowly rocking left and right, she asked: "Are there any clues about his disappearance?"

"Nothing at all. The last email from Edwin sounds completely normal and doesn't talk about anything special. The only extra piece of information we have and the police don't, is that Edwin almost certainly disappeared between March 24 and April 15 2004, since his last email has the date March 23, 2004, 23:54."

"Are you going to try to open the other files too?"

"Of course. Even though according to our findings there is no evidence to suspect Ayleen, there isn't any proving her innocence, either. We have reason to believe Mr Deverex fully trusted her, but we can't be sure his trust

was not misplaced. And anyway, there are still many questions whose answers might be in those files.”

“Right.”

“Now that I think about it, weren’t you saying something when you came in?”

*I’m so going to regret this*, Yuki thought, breathing in deeply.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I was about to say it’s time for me to get ready for Polynesia.”

## CHAPTER 18

The night of October 18, Yuki was about to go downstairs to floor D to try the first training programme Hexagon had prepared for her. It was a simulated flight on the HYPNOS, from London to the atoll where the components stolen from Deverex Laboratories were. It was necessary to perform some tests because the distance between the places was huge and the trip would take about ten hours—just a little below six at a constant speed of Mach 2, but keeping it up for so long was neither feasible nor advisable.

Hexagon had been ecstatic she had decided to go. When she had informed him, he had replied he was sure she would accept, although in her opinion, he had looked very much convinced of the contrary. Yuki was much less enthusiastic than him about the whole thing, and the only reason she had finally given in was that, had she refused, her conscience would have bothered her.

Nonetheless, the situation still felt incredibly unreal to her, and she kept wondering *how* she would react the day of the actual departure.

Yuki had slept the whole day in order to be able to go through the simulated trip without worrying about fatigue, and she would have to do the same for the real trip as well. She was almost done changing into the armour, and just before she put on the helmet, her mobile phone rang.

“Hi Dad!” she answered.

“Hi. Are you busy?”

“No, not all...”

*After all I was only about to take on a ten-hour flight simulation. No worries.*

“...What’s the matter?”

“It’s something I should not tell anyone, in fact, but I’d rather let you know.”

“Let me know what?”

*I smell trouble in the air.*

“Well... You’ll never believe this, but it looks like there’s a woman who

goes around wearing armour, and for some reason, she might pay a visit to the Deverex Tower.”

She felt her blood running cold. *How the hell...?*

“The police,” Yutaka Kashizawa continued, “have footage from their security cameras showing this person rummaging in their archives. They chased her, but she managed to escape. A witness says he saw her by the Deverexes’ mansion.”

*Caught by the cameras! Damn it! And they saw me at the mansion, too! I knew it!*

*Please, tell me they didn’t recognise me...*

“Nobody knows who she is...”

*Phew.*

“...but considering how interested in Deverex this woman seems to be, the police think she could show up in other places that used to belong to Edwin or his family, and therefore the Deverex Tower is the first on the list of her possible targets.”

“Of course, I understand...” she said, stumbling over her words.

“Are you alright? You sound strange.”

“No, I’m just a little tired, that’s all... I... I need more sleep...”

*I’m screwed... Completely, absolutely screwed.*

“I see. Anyway, building security have already been informed. They have orders to stop her by any means if she were to come, or at least to block her until the police arrive.”

*It’s not so bad after all... They’ll throw me in jail and spare me a kamikaze trip to Polynesia...*

“It didn’t feel right not to tell you... Be careful, we don’t know if Zero is dangerous or not.”

“Zero?”

“That’s what the police call her. I don’t know why.”

*What a ridiculous nickname!... Great. Just great. A few floors above my head there’s a dozen watchdogs who have orders to stop me on sight. I’m officially wanted.*

“Should you see anything suspicious, please inform security immediately, okay?”

“Of course, Dad...”

“Wanted!” she repeated to Hex for the umpteenth time after the call. “Do you get that?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t expect it! They caught you red-handed at the police station. I think it’s understandable they’d at least like to ask you a

few questions... Anyway they aren't looking for you, they're looking for 'Zero'. So long as they don't find out who she is..." the hologram replied, shrugging.

"Indeed! If they ever found out—"

"They won't. Calm down, okay? There's no reason to panic."

"No reason? They filmed me, somebody saw me at the mansion, and my pictures are hanging from the walls of all police stations in London! I wonder how long it'll take before they make it to the papers! Even DT security are looking for me! Do you understand?"

"Excellent—as long as Zero doesn't show up at the DT, they won't find her."

"It's easy for you to say! I *live* at the Deverex Tower! And drop the stupid nickname, will you!"

"Stupid? Why? I like it. It's very superhero-ish, don't you think?"

"Oh, give me a break," she grumbled. She sat on the floor and snorted again.

"So you want to just drop everything?" the AI asked after a long pause.

"I didn't say that..."

*...but I should have.*

"Good."

"Okay. Let's forget this story and start the simulation. We can't do anything about it anyway."

"That's the spirit!" Hex exclaimed. Yuki turned slowly to look at him, annoyed. The hologram looked away in embarrassment, and after clearing his throat went on: "So... Shall we?"

\* \* \*

Ayleen Marker had just finished her lunch, but she still had half an hour before the end of her lunch break. Then she would return to the laboratory where they were running a few more tests on the electronic components of the wreckage. She left the mess hall and reached a tiny inner yard—a strictly guarded one—where she would spend the rest of her break in the shadow of a tall tree. The company in here wasn't exactly great, so she didn't mind being all by herself for a while.

The tests would take only five more days, and the research team would then spend four more days at the base to compile the final reports on all the analyses that had been carried out. All the experts would leave the base on October 29 in the afternoon and would all go back home on that very day.

All, except for Ayleen, who would depart on the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup>. On the afternoon of the 29<sup>th</sup>, she intended to visit the Sonoran Desert and go to the very spot where Edwin had found her in a pitiful state inside one of the two exploded shuttles.

Edwin indeed. She pulled out from under her shirt the pendant Edwin had given her, the one shaped in a capital Y barred under the bifurcation, and observed it, thinking back to the time he disappeared.

Ayleen had been one of the first to be interrogated by the police about the scientist's disappearance. When they asked her if she knew what had happened to him—or even just if she had heard anything at all from him—between early January 2004 and the alleged date of his disappearance, she had no option other than lying. She maintained she had tried to get in touch with Edwin again after he was already missing, which was a complete lie. The police would never find that out, though. She knew they could find only a few unanswered international phone calls to Edwin's number, made with her phone around the end of April 2004. However, she also knew that, despite the evidence, the police had never really seem convinced she wasn't somehow involved in the disappearance. How could they possibly be convinced? She and Edwin were so close, and yet, for some reason, they hadn't kept in touch at all *exactly* during the few months prior to his disappearance. If that weren't strange enough, Ayleen had decided to get back in touch only almost immediately *after* Edwin had already gone missing. Impeccable timing on her part! Luckily for her, the police had not investigated her any further. She certainly could not tell them the whole truth and run the risk of jeopardising her secret along with many others. Had she not got rid of the encrypted emails, though, lying to the police just wouldn't have been possible.

Ayleen hadn't been sure of it, but given the bond between her and Edwin, she had thought she would likely be his heir after his disappearance. It would have been helpful in more than one way, but eventually Ayleen's hopes had vanished when the news Kashizawa was Edwin's only heir had been disclosed.

The lunch break was over. Ayleen put the pendant back and left the yard, headed to the laboratory.

\* \* \*

Two days later, Wilburn was chatting with another officer about the inspection the police had carried out at the Deverex Mansion. Somebody

had been there, and it was certainly Zero. The large footprints in the dust could only have been made by her armour's boots. Additionally, the computer in Deverex's room was missing the hard drive. The thief seemed to be really obsessed with stealing disks. There was also a diary with pages ripped out. The police thought the pages had probably been removed by Zero herself.

Even though the case appeared to be difficult and with few clues, the portly Inspector Wilburn was nonetheless able to maintain his usual jolly and affable demeanour. It was about eight thirty in the morning when the conversation was abruptly interrupted by Parker storming in in a towering rage.

"Alan, what's the matter with you?" Wilburn asked, perplexed, while Parker slammed the door shut and kept swearing.

" 'What's the matter'?" Parker shouted. "Obviously you haven't read the Times this morning!"

Parker slammed the paper violently on the desk Wilburn was leaning on. The stout inspector took the daily and began reading the front page: "*Armoured woman on the trail of Deverex—'Zero' robs the police and vanishes into the heart of London.*"

The article came with most of the pictures of Zero the police had and a sketch of the Thunder Eagle, and it explained almost blow-by-blow the hard drive theft at the police station, Zero's daring escape on Upper Thames Street, and her sighting in Sevenoaks. Of course, the press also speculated about who Zero could be and why she had done all she had done.

"I want to know," Parker bawled, while Wilburn kept reading incredulously, "who's the bloody idiot who couldn't keep their fat mouth shut! If I get my hands on them, I'll tear them to shreds first, and then toss them into the clink for centuries to come!"

"Crap! They reported everything, including that we're keeping an eye on anything Deverex."

"They did, and if we ever had a chance to surprise her, now it's gone! She knows the whole city has seen her pictures, so she'll certainly be more careful. If she ever had half a mind to strike at the DT or any of Deverex's former properties, she won't now because thanks to the blasted reporters, she knows those places are being watched!"

"Maybe it was old Stunner..." Wilburn told the officer he was chatting with before. "Maybe he thought he could sell the news for a good price..."

"Quite likely," the officer commented, "he talked about it with others before us. It's possible he bragged about how the police took him seriously. The news must've spread like wildfire in Sevenoaks."

“But he didn’t know we wanted to watch the Deverex Tower... Nor did he have the pictures... Jesus, they made us look like such suckers! The whole of London knows she made monkeys of us all!”

“Okay, for now I don’t give a damn who it was,” Parker continued. “First we need to throw the bloody thief behind bars, retrieve what she stole from us, and save face. Then,” he went on, pointing at the newspaper article, “we will find the blabbermouth responsible for this and give them a really hard time. I know it won’t amount to anything, but let’s call the Times and let them know how pissed off at them we are.”

Parker went to his office, violently slamming the door again.



## CHAPTER 19

It was the afternoon of October 28. With her PhD supervisor away, the week would have been somewhat less busy. Thus, the day before, Yuki had called in sick, saying she would be back in a few days. It was of course just an excuse to go to Polynesia—too bad it wasn't a leisure trip.

It was the last day before her departure, and the last of the training sessions created by Hexagon had taken place this morning. They had been combat simulations against different types of holographic opponents. Some were equipped with normal firearms, others with directed-energy weapons similar to those of the Z-Armour, and yet others were unarmed but skilled hand-to-hand fighters.

Every simulation had followed the same pattern: What Yuki had had to do was a thorough inspection of the area in order to find and destroy the stolen components, and then she would have to reach the Thunder Eagle, at which point the simulation would terminate. In some simulations, Hex had left her completely alone and with no map available, so she would be prepared for the unlikely event the satellite signal would be lost and she would be entirely on her own.

The training week had quite exhausted her. After the last training session, Yuki had rested for a few hours and had tried to meditate a little. She had asked Hex for some privacy and had sat down in her room, on the floor, in the lotus position. Some twenty minutes later, she still hadn't managed to calm the tumult of her thoughts. She resolved she needed to get out and stay away from the DT for an hour or two.

Before leaving, she had done some research on the Internet to find a good place for meditation. Kensington Gardens, the Gagosian Gallery, Hilly Fields, the Peace Pagoda—where she would maybe find a Buddhist monk with whom she could have a stereotypical conversation about finding oneself—Sydenham Hill Wood. Nothing. There was nothing that appealed to her in that moment. She gave up and decided she would leave and stroll aimlessly for as long as she felt like it.

*Life is strange*, she thought to herself. When she was little, Yuki used to spend most of her time alone. She had not been an asocial kid: In fact, she

had a rather exuberant personality, but she would show it only as long as she felt she was in a 'safe' environment where no one would have put her to the test, doubted her, or would have been hostile toward her. During her childhood, she had never felt quite at ease with other children her age and had made only a few friends. Rather than playing with other kids, she preferred to play alone and live imaginary adventures in her own room, where the furniture turned into the landscape of strange worlds far away and all kinds of stuffed toys were her inseparable companions.

Every now and again, some of her few friends would come to her house to play. Other times she would go to their houses.

She had started to exercise regularly only during her teenage years, after having picked up karate. Before then, she had never so much as entertained the thought of playing sports. In fact, she didn't even like leaving her house. At home she felt safe. There was where all the imaginary dangers foisted on her by her mother ceased to exist, as well as the dangers coming from unfamiliar people and situations, which she had begun to fear as a consequence of the brainwashing her mother had unintentionally been doing to her.

She would leave the house only if necessary. Sometimes her parents would have to drag her out, since she would rather stay inside alone than go with them, no matter where they were going.

Luckily, time had changed her a little. Going out was no longer a problem for her. In fact, she quite liked it. The same social situations which she used to shy away from were now an essential part of her everyday life, and she would go insane without friends to have fun and share interests with.

During her school years, she had got the impression other people would always try to use her, scam her, make fun of her, and she had resolved she should always be wary of them. She had begun to change her mind during her college years. The people she met then were so unusually friendly that she hadn't even known how to react to such cordiality at first. It was then she had rediscovered herself as a sociable and extroverted person.

Once, she wouldn't even poke her nose out of her room and was afraid of her own shadow; now, she was thousands of kilometres away from home and was about to leave for a secluded isle, where she would get herself into God knows what kind of trouble for the sake of what she thought was the right thing to do.

Life was strange indeed.

Yuki's phone beeped. She had received a text from Paul, a friend of hers.

*"You coming to Marianne's Halloween party? :)"*

*Who knows?* she thought. *If I don't give up the ghost on the other side of the world.*

*"Maybe :) I'll let you know later"*

It looked like Paul might have a thing for her. Even so, at the moment she had other things to worry about.

She thought of how she had never really had a relationship. She had never been interested in one until now, for some reason. If she ever had a relationship, what would she tell her partner about the Deverex Tower, she wondered? And what about being a wanted criminal? Well, perhaps, with some luck, 'Zero' would disappear immediately after the mission in Polynesia. Possibly without dragging Yuki down with her.

She wondered what would happen if she were to die in Polynesia. She would disappear and nobody would know how or why. Her parents would certainly have the DT turned inside out for the sake of finding even the faintest clue about her disappearance, and perhaps Hex would be discovered. Or maybe, Hexagon would throw secrecy out of the window and would get in touch with her parents to tell them the truth. Yutaka would be devastated, but perhaps also proud of his daughter's sense of duty. Her mother, though, would just wallow in despair and wonder why Yuki had done such a foolish thing—and try to strangle Hexagon with her bare hands.

What about Hex? What would he do? Were she to die, she thought, he would feel terribly guilty. Would he continue with the investigation, though? Would he ask somebody else for help? Or maybe, given the turn taken by events, would he turn to the police and reveal his own existence?

She tried to think positive.

What if she succeeded? What if she had freed Edwin? That would be her life's greatest accomplishment, something to be proud of forever. Too bad she wouldn't be able to put that on her resume.

The rain interrupted her thoughts. The weather had changed abruptly, and she didn't have an umbrella with her. She was on Keeton's Road and ran ahead to Bermondsay Station to take the Tube to Canary Wharf, where she would then take the DLR to Island Gardens, right in front of Deverex Park.

\* \* \*

Ayleen Marker got out of the off-road she had rented for the afternoon after having left the military base. She was walking slowly on the reddish sand of the Sonoran Desert, coming closer to the spot where Edwin Deverex had found her.

She climbed down along a small, grassy hill, one of the mountainous relieves in the area. At about four hundred metres from the foot of the hill was the point where the two shuttles had crashed. Time had by then deleted most of the traces of the impact, except for a slight difference in the amount of brushwood, which was more sparse where the crash had taken place.

Ayleen knelt down and observed the ground. After all, she thought, Moyokonde hadn't found out all he had hoped for. They had been able to confirm there were two vehicles, and they weren't of terrestrial origin, but they hadn't found out anything about any occupants of the shuttles, nor had they managed to deduce any information out of the circuit-looking things in the wreckage. It was good there was nothing that could lead them to Ayleen. No one could ever suspect one of the occupants of the shuttles was there with the other scientists, studying those very remains. Had there been any trace of her presence on the shuttles, she would have had to dispose of it. Where the shuttles came from, why they were in Arizona, and what would have happened if they hadn't been destroyed, were all questions still without answers.

Being there again was a strange feeling. In truth, it was like she had never been there in the first place, since when Edwin had found her she was unconscious and had stayed such for several days. She had regained consciousness only later on, when she was already at the Deverex Mansion with him. However, since Ayleen had no memories of her life prior to the crash, the desert was a bit like her birthplace.

She stayed to look at the zone for a little bit longer, trying to estimate the point where the two shuttlecraft had collided. Eventually, she resolved there wasn't much else to do there and her mysterious past was probably destined to remain so.

She got in the off-road and headed to Phoenix, where she had reserved a hotel room to spend her last night in Arizona.

\* \* \*

It was eleven PM in London. Hex was waiting for Yuki to reach him, double-checking every single piece of equipment she would bring along. Sensors, weapons, brain interface, component interconnection, satellite link with the DT: Everything checked out with the Z-Armour. Engine, fuel, propulsor status, sensors, satellite link, weapons, stealth: Everything was okay with the Thunder Eagle as well. Hex was thinking about boosting the stealth at some point, so it could be used more often with less energy

consumption, but for the time being it would have served only as a protection against the prying eyes of those who might have wanted to find out where Zero's 'secret base' was. However, Hexagon was hoping there would be no reason to improve the stealth device or anything else. He hoped everything could come to an end with a successful last mission. All Zero had to do was dispose of anything dangerous those criminals had, and set Mr Deverex free if he was still alive. Then she could come back safe to disappear forever, returning Yuki to her normal, everyday life again.

Yuki's destination was Kiritimati, the largest atoll in French Polynesia and in the world. It was a coral island with a very jagged coastline, a surface of 642 square kilometres with innumerable bays and closed basins in the inland, and a small, sparse population.

Hexagon thought it was a really good place to hide something. It was solitary, out-of-reach, and with very poor connections with the rest of the world. Quite possibly, its geological conformation also offered several natural cavities—thus excellent hiding places—particularly in the southern zone, precisely where the components stolen from the DRDL had been localised.

The one really big question was, who would Yuki find there?

\* \* \*

That was not good. It was seriously not good. Why the hell was it happening right now, after all this time...?

*Calm down! Calm down!*

*There's no reason to think anybody is going to find out anything. Nobody knows what Zero wants, so calm down!*

He was pacing back and forth, smoking nervously, looking at the pictures of the armoured woman over and over again, wondering what the hell she would care about Deverex. He kept telling himself there was no reason to worry for the moment. Okay, they had seen her at the Deverex Mansion. Okay, she had stolen evidence about the disappearance of Edwin goddamn Deverex from the police. None of that meant she was after him or she even knew about him. He had done his job and he had done it well. Nobody could possibly have anything to say about that and nobody could have found out anything. Nothing at all. He had taken his money and he had split it with those who helped him, so nobody could even have a score to settle with him!

Seriously now, not even the damned coppers had managed to find out

anything. Just because the chick wore an armour didn't mean she was smarter than them, did it now?

But what if somebody was trying to avenge Deverex? Christ, he didn't even know what had happened to him. Somebody just wanted the scientist and was ready to pay good money to get him. He had just handed him over to them. He did not know what they had done with him and he didn't give a damn about it, either. So why would Zero be after him? Rather, she should be after those who had paid him to kidnap Deverex! He didn't even know the man. What could there possibly be about him on those disks or any other goddamn thing Zero had taken at the mansion? Sure, the police only knew about the visit she had paid to the mansion and the police station itself, but if this woman was as smart as they said she was... maybe she had dug deeper. The papers said she was on the trail of Deverex. Bah! The papers made all sort of crap up for the sake of selling more. Come on now, a *woman*! Okay, maybe she had fooled the coppers, but...

*Damn, if anybody rats me out they'll kill me!*

*Calm down! Calm down!*

He lit up another cigarette. He sat down and passed a hand over his shiny, shaved skull.

He thought he could call the person he had met years before, the one who had lured Deverex in and had wanted half of his three hundred thousand pounds for that. No, no. Better not. Maybe the armoured arsehole was tapping his phone. It was best to just keep calm and pretend nothing ever happened. Never draw any attention. Never.

\* \* \*

The black dome of the Thunder Eagle rose up. Yuki hopped into the vehicle.

"Ready to rock, hero?" the AI asked.

"Kinda," she replied, slightly agitated.

"I am counting on you making the news again, okay?"

"I hope not. It might be bad news..."

"C'mon! How do you feel?"

"A little nervous," she answered, hesitantly. "But in good shape. I slept twelve hours."

"If you need more rest during the flight..."

"You can take over. I know, I know. Don't worry."

She cast a glance at the digital clock on the dashboard of the Thunder

Eagle. Midnight. She had better rush, or she might give in to temptation and change her mind.

“It’s time for me to go, Hex.”

“Alright. You’ll be in Kiritimati around eleven PM local time. Ten in the morning here in London. We’ll keep in touch all the time, so you’ll have some company during your flight, too...” he joked.

“Roger.”

“Yuki...”

“Yes?”

“The Zephyrus Armour can be a deadly weapon. Try to come back without any blood on your hands, but... If your life is at stake, if there is a choice between your life and a criminal’s... Well, I want you back here in one piece, understood?”

“Understood,” she smiled.

“One more thing...”

“What is it?”

“...Thank you.”

The dome lowered down. The hologram opened the Thunder Eagle’s launch duct. Shortly thereafter, the roaring of the engine resonated in the whole garage, and the vehicle began to run along the tracks at increasing speed. It slipped up into the duct and when it was perpendicular to the ground the main propulsor turned on with a bright red blaze, pushing the Thunder Eagle up faster and faster. The blue light of the small ‘ED’ logos on the walls of the duct whizzed away like shooting stars, while the noise of the propulsor ricocheted off the duct’s walls, growing louder.

When she was about halfway through, Yuki enabled the stealth mode, so the vehicle was completely invisible.

She set course for Kiritimati and began to speed up to Mach 2. Once she was a few kilometres from the Deverex Tower, she disengaged the stealth mode, and the Thunder Eagle could be seen darting across the skies of London again.

## CHAPTER 20

Ayleen had wondered how long that dream would take to turn up again. It was one of the longest, most complex and enigmatic dreams she had ever had. It was the only one in which she wasn't able to make decisions of her own, forced to be a mere spectator, even though she was at all times conscious she was dreaming. That night, the dream presented itself again.

*The Fall of the Gods.*

*...I'm in a temple, like those in ancient Greece. A dark hall, full of pillars and a few torches giving off a dim light. I'm sitting on an imposing throne of veined marble, coloured with different shades of blue, like the rest of the temple. There's Judy next to me, standing up, with her long, loose blonde hair and blue eyes, just like every time she's in my dreams. We both wear long capes, a black one for me, a cyan one for her. Before us is a man who comes to speak with us. We impart truth and wisdom. He needs to know an important truth about himself.*

*He arrived just a moment ago, but we have no time to speak to him: A rumble echoes far away. Judy and I look at each other, scared, and run out of the temple, giving up on hearing the man.*

\* \* \*

It was late night on Kiritimati when the Thunder Eagle landed gently on a secluded green spot in the South of the island. Once she was out of the car, Yuki commanded the reinforced locks of the dome, the wheels, and the propulsors, then she switched to night vision and waited a few instants for a map of the area to be computed. After about two minutes, a tiny picture of that part of the island appeared on the upper-right corner of her visual field, with a pointer indicating the direction to follow to reach the area where the stolen components were.

"I'm about five kilometres away," she said. She felt a little dazed, and as she looked around, she anxiously asked herself what the devil she had been



thinking, agreeing to come here.

“I know. It’s about eleven. There’s no need to rush. Get closer quickly, but don’t run. I don’t want you to waste any energy. Keep your eyes open: There could be armed guards.”

Yuki set out along the way shown on the map, keeping out of the bay area in the inland. Moving along that way would lead her next to a group of tiny lakes in the southernmost part of the atoll, where her destination was.

The path seemed completely quiet, except for some mildly disturbing background noises partly due to animals and partly to Yuki’s own imagination. In any case, she decided to set the blasters to the highest stun level and be ready to pounce.

Since Yuki had set foot on the island, the mission had begun to look even more desperate and doomed to fail. More than once she had been tempted to tell Hexagon she was very sorry, but she didn’t feel like she could go on; still, she had resisted the temptation and concluded that if she *really* wanted to get back to London in one piece, she had to set all her uncertainties aside and keep focused.

She moved farther and farther away from the Thunder Eagle, vanishing in the darkness of the night.

\* \* \*

*We have just left the temple. In front of the entrance, our two guards are quarrelling: She’s accusing him of trying to kill us while he rejects the accusation. They’re duelling with spears. Judy and I try to pull them apart and understand what’s going on. I’m quite surprised at how they don’t seem to care about the rumble we heard a moment ago. The woman guard pushes us back, and while fighting with the other guard, she inadvertently knocks against a lit torch which falls on him. This is incredible: First he catches fire, and then, as Judy violently pushes me away, he blows up, obliterating himself, the other guard, and the whole temple.*

.....

*“Because you’d never have made it.”*

*“I could have!”*

.....

*The temple was in the middle of a desert with two suns. Rationally*

*speaking, it strikes me as odd, but my dream alter-ego doesn't seem to mind at all. I'm looking at the sky and tell Judy we'd better get going—something's wrong.*

*Suddenly, the scene changes: We're in the basement of the temple of the gods, our home. I don't know if it's the same temple as before. I suppose not. Somebody has just tried to ambush us, but they failed; a guard, intimidated by our presence, confesses some rebellious mortals have attacked the temple, helped by some treacherous demigods, himself included.*

*Judy is furious at him. I notice my hands are chained up, for some strange reason. Judy kills the guard, and my hands are inexplicably free again. Once more, my alter ego seems to find everything perfectly normal.*

*Judy and I have a definite plan: I will protect the temple from the rebel incursion, while she will prevent the Library of Alexandria from being destroyed. In the dream, the Library is a part of the temple.*

*Before we go, Judy tells me the night before she had trouble falling asleep.*

\* \* \*

The terrain had at times proved to be a bit more rough than expected, and the fear somebody might be near had preyed on Yuki's mind more than once, slowing her down a little. After almost an hour on foot, she was about seven hundred metres from her target.

Thus far, she hadn't bumped into anyone. Probably, those on the island who had something to hide thought no meddler would venture so far from the villages, let alone in the dead of the night.

One could never be too careful, though.

She had been watching the guards for some minutes already. She had zoomed her visor on them when she was about four hundred metres away. There was no building, no structure, nothing at all. What were they guarding?

She took a closer look. There were some twenty men. Some of them were armed and waving their torches around, while others were moving some crates into strange vehicles. There were so many crates to load, Yuki guessed it was more than the vehicles could carry.

The thought of being no longer alone in the neighbourhood caused her a tremendous anxiety, which she endeavoured to drive away.

“Hex, is there anything of interest inside those crates?”

“Not as far as I can see. If there’s any of the stolen components in there, it’s turned off.”

“Why would they keep gear like that switched on inside a crate? Maybe they are off and they’re inside the crates.”

“True, but there are many crates, a lot more than you’d need to carry the components stolen from the DRDL. You should try to get closer and eavesdrop on their conversation.”

“Okay, I will.”

The vehicles they were loading the crates on were at about two kilometres from the coast. Yuki stole closer, hiding behind shrubs, bushes, and rocks.

“The components are on board those vehicles,” Hex said all of a sudden. “They’re parts of their engine. They’re *shuttlecraft*.”

“Can they fly?”

“I suppose so.”

“I’d better keep quiet now. I’m moving closer.”

“Okay. Set the mike volume to the maximum. You’ll hear them through the speakers in the helmet and you won’t need to get too close.”

Squatting, completely still behind a big boulder, Yuki waited patiently for somebody to speak.

“I can’t hear a word of what they’re saying, Hex,” she said after a bit. “It’s like staring at a fish tank. I can see their lips moving but there’s no sound. I’m still too far away from them.”

“No big deal. I can see their lip movement clearly enough to read it.”

“Cool! You can do that?”

“Yes. One of them is saying to get a move on loading those crates. They’re not going to take them all, though. Not enough room. They’re going to make more than one trip.”

“Where are they going?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t say. However, I’m starting to think our target isn’t this island after all.”

“*What?* Then which one is it?”

“I don’t know for sure! But I think our new target might be the destination of those crates.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“Well, tough luck! It doesn’t look like there’s much else to do here. The only components I can see are on those shuttles, and they’re about to make off.”

“Blast. I think they’re almost done loading. We might lose them. I can’t get any closer. Some of them are probably staying to guard the rest of the cargo.”

“Indeed. Wherever they’re going, you’ll need to get there as well.”

“We don’t know where they’re going!”

“You’ll have to follow them from the distance. You can fly in stealth if needed, at least until I can figure out where they intend to land.”

“It took me almost one hour to get here. Going back would take too long. You’ll have to drive the car here, Hex.”

“Indeed. Move quietly away, in the direction of the Thunder Eagle. I can’t land it too close to their position. I’ll keep an eye on them via satellite. You’ll chase them once they take off.”

“Agreed.”

Yuki headed back again while the Thunder Eagle turned back on and flew in her direction.

\* \* \*

*Things are getting more and more confused. This is much closer to an actual dream than all others I have ever had. It’s so much more vague and muddled. At times, the temple turns into the infinite castle and it’s surrounded by a vast, deep moat, as if it were located on an island in the middle of the sea. Rebels are trying to break in. They climb up the walls with ropes, or they come from the sea on small boats with only one occupant each. The battle goes on on the sea as well: The demigods who still are on our side are also fighting against the invaders on boats. Cannons keep thundering all around while I hit all the opponents within range shooting luminous arrows from the bow I’m holding—I wonder where I got it. The enemy boats seem very sturdy, it takes me quite a few arrows to sink one.*

*Far off in the middle of the sea there’s a large, dark ship, silently watching the scene. It’s a warship. Seeing it disturbs me, and I feel compelled to turn toward the castle: Suddenly, I’m on its top—it’s again a very high temple—and the horrific sight of its structure, torn apart halfway through, stands before my eyes. I can see dead bodies.*

*I dive back down to where I was to fight. Judy reaches me: She asks me if I intend to leave our home on Hilldrop Lane to others, and I reply it was a question for our parents, not us, to ponder. Then she says the rebels are about to reach the desert with the two suns.*

*If necessary, I'll have to chase them. She'll stay and protect the Library of Alexandria.*

\* \* \*

Several minutes after the shuttlecraft left Kiritimati, the cloaked Thunder Eagle began to follow them. In principle, their engine should have been as fast as their pursuer's, but nonetheless, they weren't particularly swift. Hex guessed they were still just prototypes.

"They're such slowcoaches," Yuki complained.

"Be patient... We need to figure out where they're headed. I'm trying to find the radio frequency they use to talk... If there is one. They might let their destination slip while they talk with their base or something," the hologram replied.

"Do you have any thoughts as to where they might be going? I'd like to get there before they do. What's the closest place along this course?"

"Actually, yes, I kind of do... The closest place is Mataou Island."

"Mataou?"

"That's how you say 'fish hook' in Gilbertese, the local language. It's a deserted little isle of fifty square kilometres that looks like a fish hook. It has more luxuriant vegetation than the neighbouring islands. It's about 530 kilometres from here, on this exact course."

"Sounds like the perfect place to hide something. Do you read anything of interest?"

"No, but it doesn't necessarily mean there *isn't* anything of interest."

"I agree," she nodded. "Listen," she went on after a moment or two, "I'm going there."

"It's best to wait for—"

"Think!" she interrupted him. "You said it's a deserted island—it's the perfect place. A secluded atoll in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, not on any transport route and of no interest at all. All those crates could contain food supplies, for example! They can't get them on the spot, so they send their henchmen to the closest island to get them!"

"That's one hell of a lot of supplies..." he replied, obviously alluding to the amount of crates they had seen. "Anyway, there are inhabited islands closer to Mataou than Kiritimati. But still, you could be right. They probably take on supplies only every once in a while, to avoid having to fly those jalopies too often and reduce the risk of being caught. It mustn't be too hard to pass themselves off as wholesalers who would then resell all the

stuff to people in the rest of the world.”

“My point exactly.”

“Okay. Go. Go up a few hundred metres, then switch the cloaking off and speed up. If you are sufficiently high up they’ll take you for a plane—assuming they see you—and won’t get too suspicious. If you can keep up even just a little less than Mach 2, you’ll be there in about twenty minutes.”

“Great!”

The Thunder Eagle began to rapidly gain height, and once its height was optimal, it became visible again. It then started to speed up, breaking the sound barrier shortly thereafter.

\* \* \*

*There. The scene is changing. It always does.*

*There’s Judy and me, we’re kids. This must be our bedroom. We’re arguing: She says everybody dislikes me. All I care about, though, is playing one of the many pianos in the room, paying no attention to her.*

.....

*“I generally don’t care about the gossip...”*

*“That’s right, sorry... Well, if you did care, though, maybe you’d be a little more up-to-date about what happens around you, wouldn’t you?”*

.....

*We’re in the living room now... Judy’s parents are there, as if they were parents of both of us, but anyway we’re not their only children. There are many, many others. We’re the eldest ones, though.*

*Our parents want us to set an example for the other children. They want us to show them how to behave in society.*

.....

*“...I’m here for your initial instruction session. Follow me.”*

.....

*“Nice colours, don’t you think?”*

.....

*Mum and Dad have a business. They have a family company. We all work there: me, Judy, and all of our numerous brothers and sisters. We’ve been working there ever since we were babies. Our parents taught us to*

*carry out a specific job each. Eventually, they put Judy and I in charge of instructing others. Our job is building houses. Large houses. And we make sure their occupants have a good life there.*

*Come to think of it, Mum and Dad are so different from us. Usually we don't mention the topic to them, but theirs is quite a sad story. Their house was destroyed. They told us once it's the reason they are into the construction business. They want to prevent this from happening to others, so they build good, sturdy houses. Anyway, they don't seem sad one tiny bit. They always work wholeheartedly.*

*We children work really well, but it looks like my alter ego thinks the others are not as good as her. That's why others don't like me, Judy says.*

*Anyway, since we do our job so well, Judy is going to ask Mum and Dad for new toys for us.*

.....

*"...What's all that stuff supposed to be?"*

*"...I don't want to spoil the surprise for you..."*

.....

*They said they must think about it, but we will probably get the new toys anyway. I'm not sure I like the idea.*

\* \* \*

"Okay, here we go," Yuki announced. "Slowing down to subsonic speed and switching stealth on for landing."

"Roger. From what I can see, there is somebody on the north-west end of the isle. I'm showing it on the map," Hex replied, modifying the image on the screen of the Thunder Eagle to highlight the area he was talking about. "With some luck, they're waiting for our friends from Kiritimati, therefore their 'lair' must be here somewhere. The place where the crates are going, that is."

"I hope so. I'm landing on that green area on the hump of the hook, hopefully nobody's there."

"We'll make sure of that. The problem is... What do we do once you're there?"

"One thing at a time."

The vehicle landed. Yuki made sure nobody was around and disabled the

cloaking. She then got out of the Thunder Eagle and closed the reinforced locks. The darkness of the night and the thick vegetation would help to make the car invisible from a distance.

“Okay. I suppose you’re not picking up anything worth mentioning?”

“Actually, I am... There are other men in another part of the island, about a kilometre from here. Five blokes are on the beach in the concave part of the island, where Mataou Bay is. They’re talking on the radio with those who are on the tip of the hook. They want to know when the shuttlecraft are coming.”

“Bingo!”

“That’s not all. I think there’s some place dug into the rocks underneath the isle.”

“...*Underneath* the isle?”

“Unlike all the other *Line Islands*, Mataou isn’t a coral island. It has a sandy surface and a rocky, underground structure. Basically, the whole island rests on a rocky heap going deep down. According to data from one of the low-Earth-orbit Deverex satellites, there’s nothing at all on the surface of the island. I don’t think our friends would leave their crates and shuttlecraft out in the open, nor would they sleep under the stars, so there must be some kind of structure somewhere. And if it isn’t on the surface, it must be underneath it. The rest of the stolen components must be in there, which means there’s no way I could see them.”

“Are you sure? I don’t see how they could have dug into the rocks and built a structure *under* a deserted island!”

“I don’t think they did that themselves. It could be a leftover bunker from the war. Of course I’m not completely sure, but there is only one way to find out.”

“They say two more hours,” announced the rather bored man with dark skin.

“Who cares?” replied the man with a ponytail. “Two hours or two days is all the same to me, as long as I get my money.”

“Say...” the slim one commenced. “Do you have any idea where they got all this stuff? I mean, the shuttles, the weapons...”

“I know they robbed several large high-tech companies. They make stuff out of what they stole and are probably going to resell it. They need money. And, Jesus Christ, who doesn’t? What’s under our feet must have been quite expensive after all.”

“Yeah. Particularly, the gear to keep the cod cold!” the slim one laughed.



"I wonder why they did that..."

"They give me the creeps, with that dead skin tone of theirs... Not to mention their hands..."

"Maybe," the man with the ponytail sneered, "but I bet you'd still bang the woman, wouldn't you? You're not really the kind of guy who can afford to choose..."

"Knock it off! The thought alone makes me sick."

"Oh, picky, are we? But tell you what, you're right. Those four are anything but normal. Anyway, I don't care. They don't pay me to poke my \_\_\_"

"Shh! Shut it!" the black man urged them, pricking his ears up.

"What is it?"

"Didn't you hear that? There was a noise coming from the bushes."

The others moved closer to listen better.

"I can't hear anything."

"I'm telling you I've heard something moving through the leaves."

"I say alcohol is playing tricks on you," sniggered the one with the ponytail. "You've imagined it. Or maybe it was an animal."

All of a sudden, a flash of light at their feet blinded them, followed by a thick smoke cloud. The men started to cough, trying to cover their faces and move away from the smoke, but they didn't have the time. A dark, vague figure closed in through the artificial fog and began to hit them violently one by one, leaving them unconscious on the ground.

Some instants later, once the smoke had cleared away, Yuki was already searching the unconscious guards, looking for anything useful. Her heart was still pounding wildly in her chest out of fear her ambush might fail and they would knock her out immediately.

She threw their guns and radios into the ocean, so it wouldn't be so easy to ask for help or dash off in her pursuit once they recovered. All those men had a magnetic key card in their pockets. The black man also had a small remote with a red button and a green button.

"I think you should give the remote a shot," Hexagon said.

"If you say so... Red or green?"

"Green. It's my favourite colour..." he answered, as she pressed the button. "Not to mention the colour that is traditionally used to give the go-ahead."

As the hologram finished his sentence, the ground started shaking, and something rose above the water level from the deep, rocky bottom of the bay.

*What the hell is happening?*

That ‘something’ was *an elevator* large enough to fit two of the shuttlecraft Yuki had seen shortly before.

“See? I told you there was something down there. I’d guess the red button makes the elevator go down again,” the hologram continued, while Yuki kept staring at the elevator open-mouthed.

“*Holy crap!*” she finally cried, flabbergasted.

“Such expressions are not what I would expect from a well-behaved lady... Come on, don’t waste time and get in.”

Still astonished, Yuki quickly entered the elevator and pressed the red button on the remote. She then proceeded to put the remote and the key cards in a small slot in the left vambrace of the Z-Armour.

The doors shut. The elevator went back into the rocky hollow.

\* \* \*

*We grew up.*

*The passing of time shows for Mum and Dad, but not for us. That notwithstanding we grew up. I have changed too. I followed Mum’s advice that I should take my lead from Judy, and I’ve learned not to be so introverted any more.*

.....

*“...happiness isn’t just a simple matter of definition. To say you’re happy you must feel happy.”*

.....

*The work goes well. We built a lot of houses. Mum and Dad gave us the toys Judy asked for, and we got a bigger house ourselves, too.*

*We also have new brothers and sisters.*

*I made many friends, and to my surprise, I like the toys quite a lot. Now that we’re grown-ups, we can go out with friends in the evening, too. Some of us have even got a boyfriend or girlfriend.*

*Mum and Dad are very proud of our most recent achievement: We managed to build a house identical to the one they had before having children, the one that was destroyed! They’re really very pleased.*

*Some of us thought Mum and Dad wanted to go and live in the new house now, but it doesn’t seem they will. They’ll stay here. Other people already live there anyway.*

*Speaking of their old house, Judy is very interested in it. Our parents lived there with their own family and with many others. When they had to leave it, they brought many things along: books, games, music instruments... They taught us what their lifestyle used to be, the things they used to do, and how they spent their time when they still lived in their old house. Now we do those same things. Judy loves reading their old books and studying how they lived.*

*I think Judy is very proud of being their daughter.*

.....

*"...I'm not just the most prominent authority on the civilisation of..."*

\* \* \*

The elevator doors opened again. Instinctively, Yuki flattened against a wall to prevent being seen by any guard inside.

She hadn't yet managed to get a proper look at the entry hangar, but it had to be quite large and at the moment wasn't too full. Yuki could hear few steps echoing and moving closer. She heard two voices, those of two guards who had probably grown suspicious because the elevator had apparently come down empty, and were now about to inspect it.

"Hey! What th—"

The man wasn't able to finish his sentence, because Yuki sprang out of the elevator, and while in mid-air, unleashed a left kick first and then a right one, hitting both men in the face—*nidan-geri*, a double flying kick. They were knocked out on the spot.

She proceeded to check for security cameras: If there were any, her aggression was certainly already on tape, but she could still destroy them and cover her next moves. Anyway, the place seemed clean.

She looked around. There were five or six shuttlecraft. She moved closer to one of them and looked at the main hatch on the side: There was a slit, probably meant for one of the stolen key cards, but there was a numeric keypad as well. Too complicated.

On the right, on the same wall as the elevator, was a large cabinet with tools and small closed cases. Yuki put the two guards inside the cabinet, closed it, and reached a closed door on the wall opposite to the elevator.

"I wonder how many floors there are?" Yuki said.

"No more than a couple, I'd say," the hologram replied. "Regardless of

who built this structure, it mustn't have been too easy, nor cheap."

"I hope so. I'm afraid I could lose contact with the DT on lower floors."

"Don't worry. I'm using an ultra-low-frequency signal and the Thunder Eagle is acting as a booster. We should be able to communicate with no problems up to a depth of a few tens of metres."

"Okay."

Yuki went down to the second floor and looked around. There was no one around. She found a corridor with some thirty doors, all locked and numbered, immediately on her left.

Keeping her guard on all the time, she moved toward the bottom of the corridor, where the toilets were.

"These rooms on the side must be living quarters. It seems there are a lot of people working here."

"There's no point in staying here. Check the rest of the floor."

"Alright."

Yuki reached the opposite side of the corridor. There were only four doors. Probably the rooms behind these doors were larger than the others.

One of the doors opened. A man with a rather strange, greenish complexion came out and turned in Yuki's direction.

He then turned in the opposite direction, reached the door at the bottom of the corridor, and entered it shortly thereafter.

Yuki came out of the corner where she was hiding and reached the door from which the man came. It was open.

She stepped in and glanced around. There was a bed on the left and a desk with a chair and a computer on the right. At the bottom of the room was a small wooden altar, decorated with intricate carvings and symbols, probably connected to some kind of religion.

"Hex, do these symbols tell you anything?"

"No," he answered, looking at the pictures on his screens, transmitted from the Zephyrus Armour's helmet. "There's something mystical about them, but they don't seem to be referable to any religion I know of. Anyway, we're not here for a theological debate. Rather, go to the computer and see if it's connected to the Internet, then check its IP and give it to me. If I can sneak into their computers, we're gonna have some fun!"

"Okay... I'm checking... Yes, it is connected. We're in luck. There's a network cable, too. That probably means you can get anywhere in their network from here!"

"It must be your name bringing us good luck... It does mean 'lucky' after all, doesn't it?" Hex replied. "Come on, what's the IP address?"

“Okay...” She gave him the number, then went on: “Do you think—”  
She suddenly stopped.

*Damn.*

“Move away from there,” the man ordered, “and keep your hands where I can see them.”

“What the hell happened here? Who did this to you?” the blond man with short hair asked the five men attacked at the bay. He had grown suspicious when the guards didn’t reply on the radio, so he took another guy with him to check it out.

“I don’t know,” the black man answered, exploring the bruises on his face with his fingers and rubbing his back. “It all happened too fast. Somebody fired a smoke bomb and beat the hell out of us.”

“Christ. You’re bleeding.”

“Yes, I know... I’m not even sure what it was...” He searched his own pockets. “Damn! My card and my remote are gone!”

“Our cards are gone too, together with our weapons and radios!” the slim one said.

“The intruder must be inside. C’mon, let’s get a move on.”

The blond man took his own remote and called the elevator back up.

“Come out. Slowly,” ordered the man with the curious skin tone, keeping his weapon on Yuki. By the look of it, it was no ordinary pistol.

“Okay. Keep calm,” she answered while listening to what Hex was suggesting to her.

“I said hands up,” the worried man repeated once more. He almost looked like he had seen a ghost.

She started the movement slowly, and once her forearms were parallel to the ground, she fired the arm blasters at the man, surprising him. He fell down unconscious, uttering a stifled groan. Yuki moved immediately closer to drag him into the room.

“Excellent! Bravo!” Hex said with a sigh of relief.

She searched the man and took his card and weapon. The greenish skin tone was not just a trick of the lighting, as she had initially thought. There was something disturbingly strange in his appearance, but there wasn’t time to stop to think about it. She put the weapon inside a slot in the right boot, where it barely fitted. She used the card to lock the door behind her and proceeded to destroy both the card and the card reader next to the entrance. She ran to the door in front of the elevator and bumped into a guard who had

rushed out of his room, probably alerted by the shots. Taking advantage of her momentum, she jumped up and hit him in the middle of the chest with her right sole—a *tobi-geri* kick. The man was pushed backwards and hit his head against the wall, collapsing half-unconscious two or three metres away from the elevator.

The reason no one was around was probably that it was late night, and she had already been lucky enough nobody else had been alerted by the noises. Yuki checked the room in the middle of the floor. It was a mess room. There was another door on the opposite side of the room. Even though it was unlikely anything of interest lay beyond it, she decided to leave no stone unturned.

She ran toward the door and attempted to open it.

“Yuki, watch out! Behind you!”

A man jumped out from behind a line of metal cabinets and wrapped an arm around her neck, putting a really strong grip on it. He growled something she couldn’t understand as she instinctively grabbed his wrist trying to break free. She saw he had a knife in his other hand that was dangerously close to her face.

Yuki made a sudden 360-degree turn and jumped backwards, crushing the man between herself and the wall. After the second time, the man was temporarily stunned and let go of her.

She moved away from the man still short of breath, looking at him, scared. She assumed the guard position again and quickly turned toward the door she had entered from. It was locked.

“There’s somebody else inside the room,” Hex said. “I could just barely see him entering on the rear view.”

Yuki felt a lump forming in her throat.

He was probably hiding behind one of the lines of metal cabinets, and they were too thick to see him with a thermal scan. Yuki was moving forward slowly and cautiously, trying to keep a cool head and anticipate the next move of her opponent. She had learnt how to stealth-walk during her *shinobi-aruki* exercises, but in that very moment doing it felt anything but easy. She feared the little noise she was making would give away her position to the enemy. She could hear moans of pain coming from the bottom of the room. The other man was probably recovering already. Time was running out.

“Listen carefully,” Hexagon said. “There’s only one thing you can do.”

Several shots were fired. Then darkness came.

“There’s nobody here. There should be two guards,” said one of the men who had just entered the hangar on the first floor.

“Let’s look for them. They might...”

A stifled cry for help came from one of the tool closets. Inside it were the two guards, with their hands and feet very well tied with electric cables.

“Who did this to you?” the blond man asked.

“I’m not sure...” the other answered, feeling his wrists. “It took just a moment. We moved closer to the lift to see who was there and we were hit at once. I think the intruder wears something black... I saw a black trail hitting us. What hit me was cold. I guess it was something metallic... Darn, my face hurts like hell.”

“Okay. Stay here, and if you see anyone you don’t know, shoot them. Take these.” He handed them two guns from a cabinet nearby.

The blond man and his guard squad went down to the second floor to pull everyone out of bed and start searching all the floors.

The man who had just stepped into the kitchen to check for intruders had been surprised by darkness. There *was* an intruder, and they had just killed all the lights in the room. He had nothing he could use to call for help, nor a torch, so he rushed to the exit. There was an emergency light there he could unplug from a power outlet by the door. He quickly went there, stumbling into some chairs left around and some partly open drawers. He touched the wall, searching for the light. He found it and turned it on, then he swiftly turned around toward the inside of the room and briefly lit up the figure who had somehow managed to follow him in the dark. Instinctively, he shot it.

Three hits. Some metallic clangs. A thud. Then silence.

The man shone the emergency light across the floor, looking for the body of the person he had shot.

Two blue flashes hit the man directly without even giving him the time to wonder what was happening. While he was still faltering, Yuki moved all her weight to her right foot and hit him with her left heel close to his teeth—a side-thrust *yoko-geri-kekomi* kick, then followed by a few *choku-zuki* straight punches to his chest.

Yuki had fallen down immediately after being hit by the three bullets fired by the man. Terrified and not at all sure she hadn’t been hurt, she had got up immediately to prevent the situation from getting worse and had returned fire, knocking him out.

The kick and the punches had been just an emotional outburst.

She did not have time to catch her breath. Hexagon warned her that the man who had attacked her at the bottom of the kitchen was now right behind her, brandishing his kitchen knife blindly. She suddenly turned around and could see him through the thermal scan about to stab again. She blocked his arm using her own right arm and then hit him violently in the stomach with a *yama-zuki* punch—a left uppercut. She then quickly repositioned herself and started spinning, hitting him violently in the face with a *tsasumaki-senpuu-kyaku* round kick shortly thereafter. The man fell on the ground unconscious.

Now she could finally check whether or not she was dying.

She picked up the emergency light from the floor and feverishly checked the cuirass, terrified she might see her gloves covered in her blood. She saw two small dents by the ‘Z’ and then a hole on her abs padding.

She had been hit, and considering how much she had moved around after being shot, she figured she must have lost a lot of blood.

She felt faint.

“Don’t worry,” Hexagon said. “Everything is alright. The Z-Armour’s integrity test says the bullet didn’t go through the bulletproof layers. Look closer.”

He was right. There was no hole. The deformed bullet stuck out of the protective layers for almost half its length. Still short of breath and with her heart pounding wildly in her chest, Yuki felt a modicum of relief.

“I must get out of here...” she fumbled in a whisper. “I must get out... I must’ve been crazy to come here... I must leave...”

“Listen,” Hexagon said to her after a brief silence. “You’re right. It’s too dangerous. I never should have asked you to run such a risk. I beg you, go back to the elevator and get out. I’ll drive the Thunder Eagle closer and you’ll be able to leave.”

Yuki didn’t say anything. Hex had probably regretted sending her over there. The mission required a cool head and nerves of steel, and she was trembling like a leaf. She had managed to disappoint him as well.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, I did,” she answered, absent-mindedly. She was thinking about how she had whimpered about leaving a moment earlier. Suddenly, she felt ashamed of herself like never before.

“Then hurry up and don’t worry,” the hologram went on. “It’ll be over soon.”

Yuki was about to open the door, but she stopped where she was upon hearing the voices of the guards who had just arrived and were waking everyone else up. She pushed the door slightly to open a tiny crack and glanced outside the room. Behind the door, on the left, there were all the



men coming out of their quarters, and on the right there was another small group of people talking about the intruder. She tried to keep calm and eavesdrop on the conversation.

“What’s happening?” a woman with a light green complexion asked one of the guards. Curiously enough, it didn’t sound like a question.

“Intruder. Knocked out some guards and now is in the base.”

“An intruder? How is that possible?” She pondered for a second. “What do they look like? Is it a man or a woman?”

“We don’t know. They were too fast. We’re forming search teams to find them.”

“Warn the personnel on the fifth floor,” added one of the other two men with the strange skin tone. “I’d rather avoid any nasty surprises.”

“Hey!” a guard intervened. “This door is out of order. Somebody destroyed the card reader. Where’s your friend?” he concluded, turning to the three greenish ones.

“Damn it!” a blond-haired man said. At least someone seemed to have a normal skin tone. “He must have surprised the intruder and then was locked in. You and you, get him outta there. The others join the patrols.”

The kitchen door slammed open, and two clouds of smoke burst forth not far from the elevator door. Yuki had resolved that staying where she was would have meant her death, while taking the back door bore the unacceptable risk of ending up in a dead end. Without any other options left, she had taken two tear gas pellets from her belt and had thrown them to her left and right, clouding the view of her opponents on both sides.

“It’s tear gas!” somebody cried. “Cover your face, fast!”

The smoke had spread quickly, preventing everyone around from breathing and forcing them to cough constantly. Yuki ran toward the elevator covering her mouth and nose. She was headed to the third floor, fully aware she would soon have some twenty furious men after her, all looking forward to ripping her apart.

\* \* \*

*Mum and Dad are very strange as of late. Their behaviour is weird. They look like they’re not good, like something’s worrying them, but they insist they’re perfectly well, everything is fine, and we have no reason to worry.*

*If nothing else, the work goes just as well as usual, so I don’t think that’s what they’re worried about. We children are quite concerned about*

*them, and not just because something's wrong, but also because they won't tell us what it is.*

*Some of us are quite upset with them for their stubborn denial, but nobody talks about it with them anyway. We've given up on asking them what's wrong for a while already, but we're all still looking for an answer. Somebody thinks it's old age making them more tired and less enthusiastic than during the early days, but I don't think so.*

.....

*"...Then what would your theory be?"*

*"I don't have any. Unlike you two, I don't jump to conclusions..."*

.....

*I couldn't put my finger on it, but I think they might be sick. Somebody wonders what will happen when, eventually, they won't be with us any more. Who will keep the business going? That's what our parents care about the most, and I think it's our duty to keep it going. I've heard somebody thinks we should close the business down, but neither Judy nor I approve of that.*

*Judy is taking all of this rather badly. She can't bear the thought Mum and Dad could be lying to us. She wishes it weren't true. She even had an argument with one of our brothers who accused them of being liars. I told him he was blowing it out of proportion, but in truth I do think they lied about many things. They say they spend all their time with us, but then again everything is fine here, so what would they be worried about? Still, they are clearly worried about something.*

.....

*"Important... for us too?"*

*"...Either way, the answer is 'yes'. It must be important for us too."*

.....

*I suspect Mum and Dad have some trouble away from home. But where? As far as we know, they never go anywhere.*

## CHAPTER 21

“Yuki, where are you going?” Hex asked astounded as he noticed the elevator going down. “It was the perfect opportunity to escape! I told you to leave!”

“I can’t go...” she answered, agitatedly. “Edwin could be here, or maybe just a floor below... We can’t abandon him...”

“Yuki, it’s too dangerous! I beg you, go back!”

“I said I can’t!” she screamed.

He realised there was no point in crossing her. She wasn’t in her right mind and it didn’t look like she would listen to reason. All Hex could do was help her get out of that place alive.

“Alright,” he gave up. “But please be quick. You’re going to have them on you in a matter of moments.”

Once she reached the third floor, Yuki got out of the elevator and entered the first room in front of her. It was full of crates, dozens and dozens of them piled up, with little room to move around them. She headed for the centre of the room, where she found a trolley and a crowbar leaning on a crate. Time was a luxury she could decidedly not afford, but she told herself that wandering around those floors without fully inspecting them would have made no sense.

“I want to have a look at these crates.”

“Surely Edwin hasn’t been inside a crate for the past four years, don’t you think? Don’t waste time!”

“We must find the stolen components!” she insisted, forcing the crate open.

“There’s no—”

“Forget it! Did you manage to get into their computers?”

“I did,” the hologram gave in, drawing a deep sigh. “I’m downloading all there is to download, and trust me, there’s plenty of hot stuff in there.”

“In here too,” she said upon seeing what was in the crate she had just opened. “Weapons. Firearms of all sorts. Not to mention ammo and explosives.”

"I thought so. Among the hot stuff I was talking about there's information about their trafficking. Arms smuggling. They probably make a whole lot of money by selling weapons to, say, countries afflicted by civil war, or to criminal organisations. And this is only the beginning, I'm afraid."

"Damn! They're coming!"

The same blond man she had seen before and another ten thugs walked slowly into the weapon storage area, their eyes still reddened. They split up, some to the right, some to the left, and the rest to the middle of the room. Yuki hid behind some crates at a right angle to the bottom of the room, to the left. Fear was making her heart drum wildly in her chest, to such an extent she almost couldn't think.

"You here, my little uninvited guest?" the blond man shouted. "The tear gas was really a neat trick, but it's my turn to make you cry now! Show yourself!"

*What am I going to do? This is it... I'm so dead...*

She had an idea, but it was too crazy to seriously consider.

"Keep calm," Hexagon said. "Keep out of sight and try to reach the opposite side. There's a pile of crates there you could easily climb on. If you manage to get high up, you'll be able to run off without being noticed."

She would have replied, but she was too afraid any sound she made would get her busted. Three men were walking along the narrow corridor between a line of crates and the left wall, maybe ten metres away from her. There was no use now trying to slip away to the opposite side as Hex had suggested. Others were arriving from the centre of the well-lit room; had she moved, they would have seen her immediately.

After realising death was probably getting closer with every step of those men, her idea didn't seem so crazy any more. The first lesson her karate master imparted to each of his pupils echoed in her terrified mind.

*You must always try to avoid a fight...*

The charger of somebody's weapon clicked.

*...but if you can't, you must hit first and hard.*

"No panic," Hex went on, "all you need to..."

Yuki jumped out of her hideout and opened fire on the crates behind her chasers without giving them the time to react. She fired at the highest setting.

The forty-some crates, stacked up behind the small group of men, blew up with a terrifying rumble, triggering a chain reaction that broke through the storage area's wall, creating a black cloud of smoke and pieces of wood, of the wall, of ammunition, and of weapons. The fire system activated instantly, raining down on the storage area.

"Bloody hell!" the blond man screamed. "What the hell was that?"

“The intruder fired on the crates! We need to get outta here, fast!” answered one his men.

The patrols were forced to leave the storage area, while Yuki had already vanished from the third floor, having exploited the stampede to slip through the corridor where her pursuers were before, between the right wall and the crates.

“Are you out of your mind?” Hex reproached her, while she climbed the fire escape ladder down. “You nearly got yourself killed! You blew half the third floor up!”

“Did you have a better idea?” she gasped. “There was no way of reaching the other side unnoticed!”

“Well then, let me remind you you’re more than ten metres below the water level, and if your clever trick has by any chance undermined the stability of the rocks, you’ll be swimming any minute now!”

“Never mind that! Rather, go on with what you were saying about the weapons.”

“Sure... ‘Never mind!’...” the AI burst out. “The one you just blew up isn’t their only weapon storage room. I found out from their database they also smuggle *directed-energy* weapons.”

“Great. They are already able to make them.”

“I would think so, given the tiny directed-energy weapon factory on the fourth floor.”

The explosion had ripped up both the ceiling and the ground on the third floor—thus punching a large hole into the floor above and the ceiling below. The rumble had alerted everyone in the facility, and all the limited personnel on the fourth and fifth floor were now trying to get up to see what had happened. Some of them had managed to get in touch with the blond man’s group. Told what was going on, they were ordered to find and stop the damned intruder dressed in black.

They had blocked the elevator to make the life of the intruder harder. Fire escape ladders were the only way the bastard could move now.

“Come. There’s no one left on the fifth floor. Everybody is fleeing. They’re afraid the entire structure is going to collapse,” said Hual’Medor. He knew it was no use threatening their mercenaries to not pay them if they fled, and there was no argument they could use to persuade them to stay. Those infidels were only worried about their puny lives. What was the

word a local would have used again?... Yes, right. *Spineless*.

“Do you think that’s where the intruder’s going?” Ta’Mek asked.

“I’m not sure, but where else would they want to go? At any rate, I’d rather not be caught unprepared. Not after all this time.”

They reached one of the fire escape ladders other men had just climbed up, then proceeded to the fifth floor.

Yuki had slipped into the tiny factory and was chased to the adjacent laboratory. It was a room full of interconnected computers and strange machinery, from which Hexagon had downloaded all he could before messing them all up.

Now the chasers were armed only with tools and other blunt objects they had probably found in the factory. They were no more than five or six—others had likely preferred fleeing, and they had made the right choice: The new rumble that came suddenly from the third floor could only mean the fire had spread to the rest of the crates and blown them up. If the first explosion hadn’t damaged the rocky structure overlooking the ocean, the second one had done it for sure.

The laboratory had turned out to be almost a dead end, with just one ladder leading only back up to the third floor. Before she could turn around and react, three of her chasers reached her. One of them hit her on her left shoulder with a crowbar, making her let out a scream that was more of fear than actual pain. Yuki swiftly turned around, but she didn’t have the time to open fire. Two of the three men had grabbed her arms and blocked her. She managed to kick the third one in the stomach before he could hit her, making him recoil momentarily. Yuki was furiously trying to break free drawing on all of her strength, and managed to resist her attackers at least until two more thugs arrived to help them. They pounced on her, and the impact made her lose her balance. The attackers took advantage of the occasion to pin her to the ground.

“Keep her still!” shouted the one she had hit in the stomach, closing in. “You’re dead, you bloody bastard.”

The situation was too hectic for Yuki to listen to Hex’s alarmed voice as he tried to be supportive and suggest how to break free from their hold. The man who had threatened her bent over her to try to remove her helmet, but he was careless enough to get too close and all he got was an angry headbutt to his right eye.

The man swore in pain, feeling his bleeding eyebrow. “This will help you calm down, you’ll see,” he said grabbing a crowbar. “If you survive it,

we'll all have a little fun with you later on."

There were too many of them on her. There was no way she could break free.

She saw the man as he prepared to hit her on the head with his crowbar. Her rage started to fade and give way to fear and discouragement. For a very brief moment, she felt relieved at the thought of offering no resistance and let him hit her, as that would put an end to a strenuous, hopeless fight.

She heard a voice. It was Hexagon's.

"Yuki, don't give up! *I know you can do it!*"

She decided she didn't want to let him down.

The grapnel whizzed out of her right vambrace and clung around a conduit on the wall. As soon as she began rewinding the cable, Yuki was strongly pulled away from beneath her aggressors, who rolled abruptly in the opposite direction.

The impact against the conduit could have been worse, and Yuki stood up immediately, albeit faltering. The men too were standing up again, all fiercer than ever.

"To hell with fair combat!" Hexagon exclaimed. "Shoot them!"

She would have shot them without delay, but she did not have the time. After the second explosion, the ocean water had started to come through the rocky wall of the third floor and was now pouring into the fourth. It didn't take long for Yuki's chasers to drop everything and flee.

"I wonder if all that junk can float, bitch!" one of them shouted, climbing the fire escape ladder up.

"Yuki, are you alright?" the hologram asked with a sigh of relief.

"I think so." Her right shoulder was a bit painful, but she said nothing.

"Awesome! Now listen: This is definitely not the moment to test how well you can swim with the Zephyrus Armour on. You've got to make it to the surface right away!"

"Not yet," she answered, moving away from the ladder.

"Are you out of your mind? Where are you going? This place is going to turn into the biggest aquarium on the planet!"

"Then I need to check the last floor and get back up real fast."

"*What?* Yuki, drop everything and skedaddle! Or would you rather drown?"

"I must find Edwin before leaving!"

"We don't know if he's here! Do you want to risk your life on a guess? Run, I told you!"

"Wait!"

She ran to the room on the opposite side, crossing through the factory

again. There was just a shuttlecraft workroom, no trace of Edwin or anyone else.

She got to another fire escape ladder and reached the fifth floor, even though she knew the water would soon reach that floor too, and there it would start accumulating and burying everything.

\* \* \*

*So it did happen, in the end. Mum and Dad are leaving us.*

*They said they needed to talk to us, so we all gathered up and listened to what they had to say.*

.....

*“...You snooper! What were they saying?”*

*“...They were saying it’s time to ‘tell us the news’...”*

.....

*They said they can’t take care of us any more, nor of the houses. Something is preventing them from doing so, and they must leave home. On the subject... I wonder what ‘home’ means. The house we live in is ours. Mine, Judy’s, and our brothers’ and sisters’.*

*But not Mum’s and Dad’s.*

*I was right. They lied about many things. They apologised for it. They said it was necessary. They repeated they love us very much and they fully trust our ability to make the business go on without them.*

*They didn’t say where they actually live or why they are leaving, though.*

.....

*“...Basically you’re slinking off without much of an explanation! That’s unacceptable!”*

.....

*“...I have a feeling you take us for slave drivers.”*

*“...Indeed I have entertained the thought!”*

.....

*There was no keeping them here. They left. Now Judy and I are in charge of the company and we make all the decisions. I made it clear from the very beginning: Our work will continue, otherwise all the houses might crumble, as Mum and Dad said.*



*The thing is, we all want to know where our parents went and what made them leave. Some don't care, though. They would just want to leave as well. I can't believe they're so thoughtless.*

*I too am disappointed and confused, but I cannot endorse the way some of my brothers and sisters behave.*

*Anyhow, Judy says Dad told her something.*

.....

*"...Do we have to drag it out of you?"*

\* \* \*

The man with the greenish skin had just set foot on the fifth floor, when Yuki jumped on him from behind, tightening her right arm under his chin to block him. He instinctively grabbed her arm, while she moved away from the ladder, dragging him along and waiting for the others to come down.

"Tell me where Edwin Deverex is," she ordered, putting her left blaster against the temple of her hostage, "or I'll blow his brains out."

"So that's why you're here," the woman of the group answered in somewhat poor English.

"That's right. Now tell me where Edwin is, or he's going to be pushing up daisies."

"Why are you so interested in him?"

"That's none of your business! Where is he? My patience is wearing thin!"

"Know my comrades," said the hostage, whose fake calmness was quite apparent, "will not give in just because you're threatening to kill me. My life isn't more important than our goals."

"Is that so?" Yuki growled, pushing her weapon even closer to his temple. She was convinced he was just trying to buy himself time.

"Very well. If you really want to know where the Son of Kuren is," the woman continued, "so be it. There's nothing you can do anyway."

Yuki stared at her confused, wondering who the hell Kuren was anyway.

"Follow me," the woman went on, entering the room on her left. Yuki made a sign to the others to go in first, holding firmly onto her hostage.

The room they entered wasn't too large, but it contained some sort of big equipment, with a hatch low in the middle.

"Yuki, whatever it is you're planning to do," Hexagon's voice said through the helmet, "do it fast."

The woman pushed a few buttons on a panel on the equipment. A long carriage came out with a hissing sound, pushing the hatch open. A cloud of cold air accompanied the movement and spread rapidly into the room, disappearing.

Edwin was there before Yuki's very eyes, lying under the glass dome.

It was a *cryogenic capsule*.

"What...?" she began. The astonishment made her loosen the grip on his hostage, who took advantage of it to break free.

"As you can see," he said to her, "there isn't much you can do. You can't take him with you, and even if you could, he'd die outside the machine."

Yuki felt the urge to ask why they had done this to him, followed by the urge to shoot those strange, eight-fingered creatures.

"Of course," another of them went on, seeing one of the blasters pointing at him, "as you can imagine, we're very interested in this man. We can prevent him from dying buried by the waters. If you don't shoot us, that is."

"You really expect me to buy that?"

"Yuki, they're right," Hexagon interrupted. "If they wanted him dead, they could have killed him right away instead of freezing him. Obviously they need him alive, even though I don't know why they froze him. We can't do anything. There's no way to carry him with you. Maybe they might really have a way to take him out of here. You must let them go, otherwise Edwin will likely die."

"But—"

"Well?" pressed the man with the blaster pointed at him.

"Yuki, run away! The water will soon get to the fifth floor too!"

Reluctantly, Yuki had no option but to leave. She left quickly, holding her weapons on those four, until she reached the ladder.

"Quick," Hual'Medor said, once the intruder was gone. "Kal'Hyvak and I will take him out. J'Lok, reactivate the elevator and get the emergency shuttlecraft ready. Ta'Mek, you go back to the quarters and take as many weapons and as much money as you can."

Yuki was climbing up the metal ladder feverishly, resisting the flow of the tiny waterfall coming down from the fourth floor. The small waterfall was strong enough to loosen Yuki's grip on the ladder, and she would have fallen down if she hadn't fired a grapnel that clasped on something at the entrance of the third floor. She pulled herself up by reeling the steel cable up into its housing in the vambrace. Then, once she was past the waterfall,

she continued to climb up the ladder as fast as she could.

She reached the hangar on the first floor, entered the elevator and activated it pushing the green button on the remote she had stolen.

Hexagon had already warned her that all those who had fled the underground structure were waiting for her outside.

\* \* \*

*Here it changes again.*

*The battle is still raging outside the castle.*

*Things aren't looking good for us. The rebels have sunk many of our boats, and many of us have fallen.*

*I don't know what has happened to Judy, or what is happening inside the castle.*

*Here, though, the situation escalates.*

*Two of the rebels' boats are moving away from the castle. They're headed to the Pillars of Hercules, beyond which they'll be in the desert with the two suns.*

*I have no choice. I must follow them and stop them.*

*I'm swimming, trying to dodge the enemies' cannonades. We're already in the desert when I finally reach the two boats. The Pillars of Hercules move farther and farther away, until they disappear. Meanwhile, I managed to get on one of the two boats. The rebels shoot me. They try to stop me. I'm left with no other options.*

*I must destroy both boats.*

*The explosion is very strong and it sweeps me away. The boats blow up into a thousand pieces, and I fall back unconscious. I have no idea what happened to the rebels who were with me on the boat, but I do know what happened to me.*

*I'm dead.*

\* \* \*

"Freeze!" the blond man shouted. Instinctively, all his armed men aimed at Yuki, without giving her the time to poke her nose out of the elevator.

Fighting against all those men wasn't an option. The armed ones alone were probably some thirty men. Even assuming she had opened fire on them

and somehow managed to hit half of them, the remaining half had all the time in the world to empty their firearms and directed-energy weapons on her until they sent her to her Maker. Not that surrendering and peacefully coming out with her hands up would improve her chances to make out of it alive.

“Congratulations,” said the black man from whom Yuki had stolen the remote. “You’ve managed to make quite a mess. C’mon, get out the lift.”

She came out without arguing.

“I’m not quite sure why you’re here or who sent you, but sure as hell you’re never going back.”

The doors shut behind Yuki, and the elevator went back down.

“Awesome bodywork, though,” the man went on, pointing at the armour. “Really impressive. I wonder how many hits it can take.”

*Get a move on...* Yuki thought, anxiously.

“Hey...” one of the men said. “Don’t you hear...?”

Somebody turned around to look.

Accompanied by a deafening roar, the Thunder Eagle came out of the thick of the vegetation riding a burning red flash, and hurling down on those men like a fury.

“Get ready to jump in!” Hex said while the guards threw themselves on the ground or ran away to avoid being hit. The vehicle, remotely piloted by the hologram, slowed down as much as it could as it closed in on Yuki. The glass dome rose up and Yuki jumped in, banging against the backrest and making her shoulder hurt even more.

She was in, though.

The dome closed again, and the roaring engine of the Thunder Eagle pushed it as far as possible from Mataou Island.

Her heart still furiously pounding in her chest, Yuki sat down properly on the seat and was pleased to note that she was still alive.

“Congrats, boss,” Hex said to her. “You made it! Chillax, I’ll drive.”

She drew a deep sigh and removed her helmet, which by then felt like it had been glued on her face.

“Made it? I suppose you mean made it to get out of there alive, because the whole mission was a fiasco.”

“You kidding? I mean, you found Edwin, you blew up the bad guys’ secret base, their weapon storage facility, and jeopardised their evil plans... at least for a while, I should think, right? For a first mission that’s not bad at all! Well, you did give me a few grey hairs, but nothing a new interface cannot fix...”

“I found Edwin... but I left him there.”

“There was nothing you could do, and if nothing else, now we know

better who we're dealing with and where Edwin is."

"We sure do know where he is—thirty metres underwater!"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"You really think those four guys could get him out of there? They probably drowned too. I thought I was supposed not to kill anyone..."

"I don't think so. Right now I can see a larger shuttlecraft in Mataou Bay. It came up with the elevator, and those four are likely to be on board. I don't think anyone else was down there when you came back up. Now, why do you think they'd take a larger one?"

"Do you think Deverex may be in there?"

"It could be. Maybe they have a way to power the cryocapsule from the shuttle temporarily. They might have another place to go to. They look like rather well organised people."

"Then why don't we go back and check?"

"It's out of the question. You're exhausted and there's too many of them. And anyway there is no way you could take Edwin with you—nor, to my knowledge, awaken anyone from a cryosleep. As absurd as it may sound, Edwin is better off with them for the time being."

Yuki exhaled deeply.

"I'm sorry I involved you in this mess," Hexagon said after a while. "I shouldn't have. You risked dying a dozen times, and—"

"It's not your fault," she replied. "You begged me to go back. I didn't listen."

"On that subject... Don't get me wrong, but... What got into you after leaving the kitchen? I thought you were about to cut and run, and yet you went downstairs."

"I don't know how to explain it..." she began. "I felt profoundly ashamed at the thought of fleeing just to save myself. I had the opportunity to stop people who already have caused harm and wouldn't hesitate to cause more. If I had given it up just to save my own skin, I'd have felt like a selfish coward. I would never have forgiven myself if I had run away."

"You were really brave," Hexagon said with a smile.

"Thank you."

"Not to mention completely crazy, but let's not go there..."

They both laughed. There were a few moments of silence.

"Did you see how weird those four people looked?" she asked. "They had only four fingers on each hand! Who the devil were they?"

"I don't know. Still, I found many interesting things in their databases..."

"What things?"

"You're never gonna guess," Hex giggled, "*who* I found on their

‘payroll’ ...”

\* \* \*

*I’m dead.*

*I was defeated in the end. I didn’t think it was really possible, and yet it happened.*

*If it happened to me, it can happen to Judy too. And to all the others.*

*I can see them. The rebels have taken over the castle, the temple of the gods... We’ve been defeated. Many of us perished, and the rest have been taken captive. Betrayed from the inside, we could not withstand their attack. Maybe it was our own arrogance of self-proclaimed deities that defeated us, our taking up such a responsibility...*

*No, it isn’t our fault. We didn’t take this upon ourselves on our own accord.*

*What will become of the houses now? We can’t build any any more, nor can we take care of the existing ones. The rebels have taken everything away from us, everything Mum and Dad had worked for. Why did they? What do they want? What are they going to do to the people in the houses?*

*What happened to Judy? I bet they had to kill her too. She would have never let them take the houses.*

*And of all days, why did this have to happen today? Today we could finally have done what Dad had told Judy to do. She wanted it so very much. They stopped us. They won. My sacrifice will be in vain. If Judy and the others are dead as well, the rebels can send others to the desert.*

*Finally, the gods have fallen.*

*...This scene is new.*

*Arizona. I’m in the Sonoran Desert.*

*The Sun hits real hard, and I’m in the middle of the desert. No one’s around.*

*Suddenly, an explosion: High up in the sky, two shuttlecraft collided.*

*That’s when I arrived on Earth. This dream isn’t part of The Fall of the Gods. I’ve never had it before. I can act freely again.*

*The remains of the shuttles are plummeting to the ground. I can see a jeep closing in on them from the distance. That’s Edwin. It’s when he found me.*

*He's getting closer to the wreckage. He's seen me. Or rather, he has seen my alter ego lying unconscious in the wreckage and the sand.*

*I'm moving closer to him.*

*"Can I be of assistance?" I ask.*

*"There must've been an accident!" he replies. "Look what I found!"*

*Looking at yourself in such a state is quite disturbing.*

*"I must take her with me," Edwin continues. "Maybe I can do something for her."*

*The power of dreams. He pays no attention to the fact I'm lying down in the shuttle and standing up outside the shuttle at the same time.*

*"Do you know her?" I ask.*

*"Oh, I do."*

*I didn't see that one coming at all.*

*"I know a great deal about her. And about her sister, and many others. About her dad and mum."*

*"How?"*

*"I've always known those things. Someone had to. Someone had to let them know."*

*Nonsense. Edwin didn't know about me more than I do.*

*"Can you give me a hand to lift her onto the jeep?" he asks. "I'm taking her with me to London."*

*"Of course," I reply, helping him to put... myself into his car. "Can I come with you? There's something I'd like to ask you."*

*You can't. You must stay here in Arizona. You've got a plane to catch at 09:34, remember? Hold on a second, my mobile's ringing."*

*The alarm buzzed. It was 06:30.*

*Ayleen sat up on the bed, reflecting for a moment. She switched the light on, then she looked around. It was the room she had rented, in a cosy guest house in Phoenix.*

*It was time to get a move on and go back home.*

*Flight AA 1246 departed from Phoenix Sky Harbor International at 09:34, perfectly on time, headed to Chicago O'Hare.*

## CHAPTER 22

Hexagon was very proud of Yuki. She had been really brave. She had always thought of herself as fearful and insecure, and yet she had risked her life in that endeavour. That wasn't all. She had gambled with her own life when she had decided to go down and check the last floor instead of fleeing at once. If the water flow had been faster, the ocean would have invaded the floor and she would have drowned.

During the two months he had known her, Hex had got a clear picture of what kind of a person she was. She was stubborn and tenacious, but also easily discouraged. As a rule, the first difficulty she would bump into was enough for her to conclude the task was beyond her abilities. The standards she had set for herself were so high she could never reach them; thus, disappointment was always around the corner. Not only did she have to succeed, she had to succeed with ease, otherwise it would have been a sign she just wasn't good enough. For somebody with her profile, that adventure was a huge leap forward. Her problem wasn't a lack of skill or abilities, but rather her impossible, unreachable ideal of what she should be able to accomplish; if her endeavours on Mataou Island didn't convince her of it, probably nothing could.

The girl had been sleeping for the past four hours. It was now 09:15 PM in London, and the Thunder Eagle would be back at the base around 11:30 PM.

There was some other important news waiting for Yuki, but there was no rush to tell her. It was best to let her rest. She had done a lot more than Hex expected, so, once she was back, she could just make herself comfortable and enjoy the last, unexpected act of the mission.

\* \* \*

At 9:15 PM Ayleen had been in Hilddrop Lane for half an hour already. Judy and Floyd had collected her from Heathrow airport, and now they were all about to go back to his place, where Lisa had prepared a delicious



dinner to celebrate Ayleen's return home. Somebody else would have been too tired to have dinner after a trip like that, Judy thought, but not her sister. She was always as fresh as a daisy.

"Come on, Ayleen! You really can't tell us anything?" Lisa said at the table.

"If I even just told you what colour the floor was, General Moyokonde would strangle me," Ayleen joked. "In fact, you never heard me name him, are we clear?"

"Hmm. Are they really so serious about secrecy over there?" Floyd wondered.

"I'm telling you, that man goes completely paranoid over confidentiality. If you ask him the time, he's probably going to answer in code language."

Lisa chuckled, then she got up to bring the dessert to the table.

"You hate me, don't you Lisa? You know I'm nuts about your tiramisu. You prepare it every time I'm over for dinner so I'll get fatter than a whale!" Ayleen said.

*Oh, give me a break, Judy thought. She wouldn't put on an ounce if she ate a cow. I wish I was like that!*

She had missed Ayleen so much.

"Anyway, I can assure you the place was quite oppressive. Apart from the general atmosphere in the military, everything was bad there, even the colour of the walls. I wouldn't wish anyone to spend a month in a place like that, and I doubt I'll ever go back there again."

Sitting on Floyd's veranda, Ayleen and Judy were left alone for a few moments.

"So, Ayleen," Judy began. "How did it go? I mean, did you find what you were looking for?"

*Tell me you are not going to go away somewhere...*

"Yes and no. I'll tell you more at home."

"Uh-huh, okay."

"I had the dream of *The Fall of the Gods* again," Ayleen continued after a short pause. "It was last night. And there was a small addition to it."

"Really? Good! What was it?"

"It's really short. I was in the desert in Arizona, witnessing my own arrival on Earth and Edwin finding me. He told me he knows a lot about me, which I find rather surprising."

"Nothing surprises me any more when it comes to you," Judy smiled.

Ayleen smiled back. Floyd came back after a few instants, followed by

Lisa bringing the usual lemonade jug and glasses.

\* \* \*

Another peaceful day had gone by at the Deverex Tower. It was a pleasure to see the police seemed to have been wrong about the armoured woman, at least for now. She hadn't shown up at all thus far.

Everything was normal, and the most serious problems security had had to deal with were the occasional metal detector going off for no reason, and the usual misplaced handbags or wallets. For some reason, the young lad with the 'Genius at work' shirt came to his mind... Such an annoying fellow he was! But why think about him? Thankfully, he hadn't seen him in two months.

He was flicking through some leaflets he had there at the reception desk, just to kill time until the end of his shift. Late at night, the hall was always very quiet and there was almost nothing to do. He looked up from time to time, just to make sure no one was looking for him or needed assistance, but there were only very few people around, either leaving the building or going to the upper floors to enjoy a little night life in some club. A cleaner walked by pushing a cart full of detergents and other cleaning tools and greeted him with a nod. He nodded back.

He kept browsing his leaflets for a few more minutes. By now, he almost knew them by heart.

A shadow stopped in front of him. It was probably the chief of security with some utterly unimportant thing to tell him, or some other staff member of the hotel.

Well, not quite.

He lifted his eyes up from the leaflet to see who it was, and his heart skipped a beat when he saw Zero standing right there, staring at him with her arms crossed and a smile that would make his broadest one pale by comparison.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he stuttered. He searched for the intercom switch with his hand and called: "Hurst! Hurry up!" talking to the chief of security. "Security, rush to the *conciergerie*! The armoured woman is here!"

How had she managed to get in?

"I don't think security got your message..." the woman said.

The concierge pressed the call button on the intercom again and tried to call Hurst a second time. There was no sound at all. The device seemed to be completely mute. Had she sabotaged it? But how? Luckily, there were

two other guards who had heard him screaming and were now dashing in.

“Get her!” Petrier ordered.

The guards jumped on her, but she inexplicably managed to move away, avoiding both of them and eventually grabbing their heads and knocking them against each other. They now lay dazed on the floor.

The concierge observed the scene astounded. Then, hoping to intimidate her, he said: “I’m calling the police.”

“Don’t bother...” Zero said, shaking her head. “I’ve already seen to it. They’ll be here in no time.”

\* \* \*

“Are you messing with me, Wilburn?” Alan Parker asked.

“See for yourself!” the fat inspector replied, handing him the printed piece of paper.

Parker read it.

“ ‘Be at the Deverex Tower’s reception around midnight. Zero.’ ”

Was that some sort of joke? By midnight! Or what? Her car would turn back into a pumpkin?

“Alan,” Wilburn continued rather agitated, “I think we’d better hurry.”

“Will you calm down and explain to me how you got this paper?”

“The question is, how come *you* didn’t get it? *The whole station* got this paper! Every single printer in the building began churning them out one after the other, and everyone’s computer is frozen and displaying the same text!”

“What?” the incredulous inspector said. He shook the mouse on his desk to turn his computer monitor back on. It was showing a black screen with the ‘Z’ logo on the background and the same message on the foreground. The only reason he hadn’t got the printed paper himself, Parker thought, had to be that his printer was unplugged.

“How the—”

“See? This must be Zero’s doing!”

“It could be just the prank of some blasted wannabe hacker who thinks he’s so bloody funny, but we can’t just ignore this. Call the boys, and let’s go.”

He quickly got up from the chair and left the office, Wilburn following right behind.

Shortly thereafter, a flock of police cars left the station, rushing off sirens wailing to the world’s tallest building.

## CHAPTER 23

The police did indeed dash into the building no later than ten seconds after Zero had completed her sentence. The two inspectors and the officers ran to the reception desk and aimed their guns at Zero, and Petrier was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief.

He was so relieved he didn't even seem to wonder *why* Zero had called the police in the first place.

"Stay where you are!" Parker ordered her. "Put your hands up and keep them where I can see them, at once!"

"You're very punctual," Zero merely commented.

"I told you to put your hands up! Now!"

"So, Petrier," she went on. "Now we're all here, isn't there anything you'd like to say to these gents?"

The concierge stared at her baffled.

"I'm not going to repeat myself. Hands up," Parker insisted.

"As you wish," Zero shrugged. She lifted both arms, aiming her blasters at Petrier. "So, are you going to spill the beans?"

"What...?" the concierge stuttered. "What do you want from me?"

"I'm warning you, Zero: Either you put those hands down or I put a bullet in you."

"While the inspector makes up his mind on whether I should keep my hands up or down, let me refresh your memory, Petrier... *Edwin Deverex*. Does that name ring any bells?"

"I don't know what you are talking about! What does Monsieur Deverex have to do with anything?"

"Why don't you tell us about how *Monsieur Deverex* was kidnapped?"

Parker stared at Zero first, and then at the concierge, who had become pale as a ghost.

"She's crazy! I know nothing! How could I?"

"Let's put it like this. Either you tell them, or I will. After I toast you."

She moved the blasters closer.

"What the hell is going on here?" bellowed Wilburn, who had been silent thus far and seemed no longer able to make any sense of what was

happening.

“So, Petrier. I’m going to count to five, and then I’ll shoot you.”

“Put the damn guns down!” Parker ordered again.

“One...”

*Mon Dieu! It can’t be... How can it...?*

“Two...”

*Stupid bitch, do you really want me to shoot you? I’m not even sure I’d hit you...*

“Three...”

*Come on, mustacho! Get a move on! I can’t shoot you for real, you know?*

“Four...”

“Put the weapons down I said!”

“Fi—”

“*Alright! I confess!*” Petrier exclaimed. “*Oui!* I lured Deverex into a trap to kidnap him, I admit it! But I don’t know where he is or what happened to him, I swear!”

Parker stared at him wide-eyed, probably not quite sure whom he should be pointing the gun at any more.

A few minutes later, after Petrier had finished telling his version of the story, the baffled police arrested him with charges of complicity in kidnap and aiding and abetting.

“Take him away. Jesus Christ. Unbelievable,” Parker said, shaking his head.

The police handcuffed the concierge and took him away, under the astounded gaze of the security personnel and the other people in reception, who were certainly expecting Zero to end up wearing the bracelets.

“*Au revoir, Poirot!*” Zero said as they were taking the concierge away. He immediately turned back to look at her wide-eyed as she was waving him goodbye.

“Don’t think the game with you is over,” Inspector Parker said facing Zero. “Burglary, theft of classified information, housebreaking, obstruction of an officer of the law, countless violations of traffic laws, unlawful possession of unconventional weapons and vehicles, hacking, actual bodily

harm, attempted murder. You're under arrest."

"Murder? You mean the concierge? Oh, I wouldn't have actually fired! I was pretending, just to make him speak up."

"I don't give a flying monkey. You're under arrest."

"Hey, did I or did I not help you to get Petrier?"

"She's got a point, Alan," Wilburn intervened.

"What? Wilburn, are you out of your mind? She's got enough charges to spend the next twenty years behind bars!"

"Everything I did was necessary to charge Petrier," Zero defended herself. Well, actually, who would have thought he was at all involved?

"Listen carefully, 'superhero'. Taking care of criminals is up to the police, and there's no need for any masked weirdo to do our job, particularly not for one who couldn't care less about the law. Is that in any way unclear?"

"You'd never have known about Petrier without my help."

"Let's call it a day, shall we. Take that damn helmet off and give me your wrists." He took the handcuffs he had hanging from his belt.

*How ungrateful! Zero thought. I bet this is just sexism.*

Wrapped in the cloud of smoke that had accompanied the sudden white flash of light, the police were too busy covering their faces and coughing to try to stop Zero as she took off. The cloud dispersed quickly, but at that point Zero was already gone.

"She can't be far!" Parker said. "Search everywhere! Somebody run out and look for her car or her motorbike and guard it!"

The police spread all over the place, and their search lasted no less than a few hours. Eventually, Parker had to give in to the fact that, however inexplicable it might have been, Zero had vanished into thin air.

Literally so.

## CHAPTER 24

Ayleen was free on Friday, so she decided to go for her usual jog in the morning rather than in the evening. She hadn't had the chance to jog while in Arizona.

Life was going back to normal: Judy was in school and Ayleen would be back to work on Monday. Everything was just like it used to be.

Well, sort of.

Passing by a newspaper kiosk, she noticed the Times' headline was *'London City like Gotham City: is Zero a criminal or a hero?—The armoured woman gets man involved in Deverex's case handcuffed'*, while the front page of the Guardian said *'The butler did it: Zero uncovers evidence against the concierge of Deverex Hotel'*.

Other papers all had similar headlines, and all came with the same pictures of Zero that were already issued in previous articles about her.

*Who the hell is Zero? And more importantly, how come she wears the Zephyrus Armour?*

Ayleen bought a copy of the Times and began to read the front page article, thinking that spending a whole month without being able to keep up to date was a really bad thing.

\* \* \*

It was twelve thirty PM on October 31. Hexagon was examining the data he had downloaded the night before—well, actually he was more intent on thinking about the holographic costume he would use that very night at the Halloween party at the Diamond Village. Dressing up had started growing on him after he had posed as Zero the previous night. Yuki had found his performance rather convincing, although she thought his bluff had been a bit too risky. The holographic Z-Armour wasn't a very accurate simulation, and he couldn't have actually fired even if he had wanted to.

The night before, the journalists had arrived at the Deverex Tower shortly after the police, but only after 'Zero' had already disappeared. They

overwhelmed Parker with questions, especially since a man had been arrested. Initially, some fools had thought Petrier was Zero, but then it turned out the brand-new superhero had in fact built a case against him, even though the details hadn't been divulged yet.

Thus, neither the papers nor the people knew that Louis Petrier—as Hexagon had learned thanks to one of his usual visits to police and government databases—had had some troubles with the law a few years before. He was the concierge for another hotel, but he was a gambler. He had lost large sums of money he could not pay back. To avoid really bad publicity, the hotel he worked for had fired him on the spot, worsening his already precarious financial situation.

He had lost his job, but not his gambling habit. Now, though, he was forced to play in gambling dens rather than the exclusive casinos of the hotels he had worked for. As the concierge himself had told the police and the fake Zero, in one of the dens he had met a man with a shaved head who knew somebody wanted Deverex and would pay a very generous amount of money to get him.

Edwin Deverex. Of course Petrier knew the name, and not only because it was the name of the owner of the world's tallest building: It was also the name of a patient of his father, Charles Petrier, a professional psychoanalyst who was now long dead.

No one, not even Hexagon, knew Edwin Deverex had been in treatment for a long time. Apparently, he suffered from paranoia. The AI knew that the most brilliant minds often were prone to that type of pathology, and yet, he was quite struck by the news.

Perusing some notes his father had taken about Deverex's case, Petrier had found out Edwin had been haunted by complex and elaborate deliria since his teenage years. He said he possessed memories and knowledge that were somehow unrelated to him and that he had not experienced personally. Yet, he said, they were of the utmost importance, and he had somehow been chosen to possess them. It looked like all the requirements for delusion of grandeur were there, but Edwin was never completely convinced about the diagnosis.

Louis Petrier had learnt from those notes that Deverex would have done anything to discover the meaning and the origin of those tormenting memories. Thus, he had struck a deal with the man he had met at the den. He would give him a way to draw Deverex into a trap, and then they would split the three hundred thousand pounds they had been promised. The money would be enough to pay his debts and start his life anew.

They sent an anonymous note to Deverex, a note the police never found.



The message said somebody could explain to him all he wanted to know and quoted relevant parts of what the scientist used to tell to Charles Petrier. It was enough to convince Edwin whoever had sent the message must *really* have known something. He could finally prove he was not crazy after all.

Once Edwin got to the meeting place the message talked about, he was assaulted and taken away.

Eventually, Petrier paid his debt and finally overcame the temptation of gambling, but the irony of fate wanted him to find a new job right at the Île de Chiens Hotel, which would later become the Deverex Hotel. And he would now not even dream of setting foot in his new workplace's casino.

When Hexagon—disguised as Zero—had told Petrier he would tell it all to the police if he hadn't, he was lying. All Hex could find out was Petrier's bad debt history, the charges of insolvency against him, and his name and picture obtained from the databases he had downloaded from Mataou Island, together with some information about him and what he knew. Clearly, the four greenish 'people' liked to keep track of their helping hands.

*Funny*, Hex thought, observing the people coming and going in the hall. *I was right again.*

Yuki was still sleeping and would probably do so for quite a while—she had deserved it. The annoying concierge was finally no longer in his way, so he was free to stop by the hall to welcome a very special visitor without arousing anyone's suspicions and without anyone bothering him.

He got out of the west service elevator and made for the hall.

Ayleen Marker was there arms crossed, looking at him.

"I had predicted your visit," he said to her, "with 98.7% probability."

"And I had no doubt," she answered, "you were active again. It's nice to see you again, Hex."

"Nice to make your acquaintance again, Ayleen. I suppose we both have information to share, although I probably have more to tell than you do."

"I guess you're right. Shall we go?"

"Be my guest," he answered, showing her the elevator whose doors opened instantly. They headed to floor E.

"So, what about your superhero friend?"

"You mean the *other one*?" Hex joked. "She's sleeping. But given the circumstances, I think I'll wake her up."

"Good morning, Zero," Hexagon greeted her around two ten in the afternoon.

Yuki barely opened her eyes, bothered by the light coming through the blinds controlled by the AI, which were slowly opening up. She recognised the figure of her holographic friend, then she yawned passing her hand through her hair, and finally answered, “Hex... What’s the matter?”

“Come on, sleepyhead, you’ve been sleeping for almost fourteen hours now, not to mention five more hours on the Thunder Eagle... The early—well, early-ish—bird catches the worm! There’s news I’m betting you’ll love to hear.”

“No...” she moaned. “Let me sleep a little longer...”

“You kidding? This stuff can’t wait! Oh, by the way, how’s your shoulder?”

“Better than yesterday... And it’d be even better if I could stay in bed...”

“Come on!” he insisted, pulling her blankets away. “I have important news!”

“Alright...” she grumbled, looking for her spectacles on the night stand next to the bed. “You can tell me while I get some breakfast, okay?”

“Come on, come on, let’s just grab something on the fly from a café and run to floor E.”

“Wait, let me get dressed at least!”

“Okay, okay... I’ll be waiting outside. Make it fast!”

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, Ayleen was walking up and down on floor E. It had been quite a while since last time she had been there, and she had seriously doubted she would ever be able to go there again. Edwin was really nuts, that was for sure. He had turned the place into some sort of a superhero hideout. It wasn’t quite like the last time she had been there. Back then, it was more like a kind of large storage space. When he had shown her the Zephyrus Armour, it was still incomplete and was in the electronics lab on floor D. Evidently, Edwin had begun to modify floor E without telling her anything and had said nothing about the car or the motorbike, either! Judy would go nuts about that motorbike...

Hexagon had briefed her about his reactivation, meeting Yuki, Zero, and the ‘trip’ to Mataou Island.

*The Son of Kuren*, she thought. *Intriguing.*

\* \* \*

“Go ahead, I’m all ears,” Yuki said. They were heading toward the service elevator, and she was carrying a tiny cardboard box containing her breakfast. “What is there so important to tell?”

“Last night, while you were sleeping, I managed to open the remaining files on the hard drives you brought to me.”

“Really? Awesome! What do they say?”

“Hot stuff, as per usual. I found the mail exchanged by Ayleen and Edwin from when she moved to Canada until their December meeting, not to mention a diary by Edwin telling the whole story of their first meeting and their life together. The diary was on the disk taken from the Deverex Mansion, while the emails were on those taken from the police. According to the diary itself, there used to be a paper version of it which Edwin eventually preferred to get rid of, after making a digital version. It explains the diary with the ripped pages you found in the mansion.”

“Great! What do those files say?”

“Oh, I’ll let Ayleen herself tell you. She’s waiting for us on floor E.”

“She’s *what*?”

“You heard me. Come on, let’s go.” They got on the elevator. “Still, let *me* give you the *really* exciting news myself!”

“Go ahead. What are you waiting for?”

“Brace yourself: *Ayleen Marker is an android.*”

“*What*? She is...? Preposterous!”

“You bet she is, honey. I mean, she’s not preposterous. She’s an android. Genuine 100%.”

“But... what... That’s impossible... I mean...”

“Yes?”

“Did... Did Edwin build her?”

“No.”

“Then who did?”

“Have you taken me for an oracle? She herself doesn’t know, so why would I?”

“Alright...”

“Cheer up, hero. In a moment you’ll be able to ask her all the questions you want.”

“I feel a bit nervous at the thought of meeting an android...”

“What? Look, just because I’ve got a holographic body and she’s got a cybernetic one we aren’t all that different! I mean, that’s discrimination! You know that, right?”

They found Ayleen on floor E, with her back turned, looking at the

Zephyrus Armour. She turned around and walked over to join them.

“Hello, Yuki,” the android said, shaking her hand. “Ayleen Marker. Nice to meet you.”

“My pleasure...” Yuki mumbled, hesitantly. *Quite a strong handshake*, she thought. Ayleen was slightly taller than her, even though for some reason Yuki had imagined her shorter.

“Hexagon told me what you’ve done. Nice job. Congratulations.”

“Well, I... Thanks,” she replied, hinting a smile. By just looking at her, Yuki thought, nobody in their right mind could ever think Ayleen was an android.

## CHAPTER 25

“Edwin was in the Sonoran Desert when I crashed there on board the shuttlecraft,” Ayleen recounted. “He thought it might have been a helicopter, or a small passenger plane, fallen because of a technical problem, and he came to look for survivors. There was only me, half destroyed.”

“The trip to Arizona you’ve just taken...” Yuki began. Hexagon was listening without saying anything.

“Exactly. It was about those shuttlecraft,” the android completed. “The US government has kept those remains for ten years, and even after all the research done on them, still no one knows where they came from, and neither do I. All we could do was confirm their non-terrestrial origin and the fact there were indeed two of them. Presumably, they collided and eventually crashed onto the ground.”

“What happened after Edwin found you?”

“As he saw I was an android, he decided to take me with him to try to fix me up and to keep me away from prying eyes. I was severely damaged, and he probably couldn’t have done anything about it without my self-regeneration system.”

“Your *what*?” Yuki asked in surprise.

“Edwin noticed I was self-repairing. While I was unconscious, pieces of my body were moving back into place of their own accord, and the missing ones just popped back into existence. Within a few days, I was up and running again in his mansion.”

“That’s absurd! It goes against all known physical laws!”

“From what I’ve read, she’s got a thing for breaking the laws of science...” the hologram commented drily.

“When I regained consciousness,” Ayleen went on, “my mind was empty. I didn’t remember anything at all. Who I was, who made me, why I was on Earth. And I still don’t know. Edwin taught me everything, from speaking to living among humans. We lived together in Sevenoaks for a few years. During that time, I studied all I could on the human race, and I have wondered about myself but found no answers. Edwin modified my body to some extent, so I could come across as human as possible.”

“You did not look human prior to that?”

“I always did, actually. But I could not eat or drink, etc. On the assumption I would have to spend a long time among humans, Edwin thought it would be best nobody ever knew about my true nature, so he designed implants to allow me to carry out normal human bodily functions, like eating, drinking, breathing, and other special implants that would prevent me from triggering metal detectors.”

“Why did you move to Canada?”

“Shortly after the Deverex Tower was built and Hex was created, after I had completed my studies, I decided it was time to have a life of my own. Edwin was quite the asocial and lonely type, while I wanted a different life. Most of all, I wanted to know about my origins. At the time, I still thought I might be a human creation, so perhaps I could find out more by entering the cybernetics field. I applied for a job in Robotronics in Ottawa and was hired.”

“You no longer think a human made you?”

“No.”

“Then why do you look like a human woman?”

“I’ve been wondering about that for years and still don’t know.”

“Please, continue your story.”

“During my time in Ottawa I made some friends, and in December that same year, I took my first vacation and came back to London to see Edwin. It was then he showed me the two ‘surprises’ Hexagon has read about in our emails.”

“Surprises?” Yuki asked.

“Indeed,” Hexagon said, “although it’s not said anywhere what surprises they were. I’d guess they were the Z-Armour and the vehicles.”

“Yes and no,” Ayleen replied, moving closer to the armour.

“The Zephyrus Armour was meant for you, wasn’t it?” Yuki asked.

“Yes, it was,” the android replied. “When I was found, I was wearing a suit of black armour, but it was destroyed and was not rebuilt by the self-repair process. When Edwin showed the Zephyrus Armour to me, I was quite sceptical about it. He told me he had built it because, together with my abilities, it could make a superhero of me.”

The android chuckled.

“I replied it was nonsense,” she went on, “and then he said it was perhaps my destiny to wear armour, since I had one prior to arriving on Earth. At any rate, I refused to use it, and the Zephyrus Armour remained here. I remember I called him a paranoid while we were arguing about it, because he seemed to be worrying about imaginary dangers. He was quite

upset at that, which probably backs Petrier's story up. I didn't know anything about the Thunder Eagle or the bike. He never showed them to me."

"I suppose that, speaking of superhero abilities, Edwin meant your superior physical strength and your self-regeneration system," Yuki said.

"Yes, and he probably also referred to the fact I can fly."

"You can *fly*?"

"I can. I gradually discovered I can fly, apparently across any distance and for any length of time."

"Whoever made you was certainly quite smart..."

"I think so too."

"What was Edwin's other surprise, Ayleen?" Hexagon inquired.

"My oneiric programme. In the early days of our cohabitation, Edwin suggested to me to try to 'sleep'. Technically, I could not and still cannot do so, and I found it useless since I don't need any rest. However, he persuaded me saying that, for the sake of my integration among humans, it was best if I picked up their most common habits. He also said he would design a programme to allow me to dream. He gave it to me the same night he showed me the armour, and since then, the bloody thing torments me with rather cryptic dreams."

"Tell me," the hologram further asked. "Did you know Edwin had been in treatment?"

"No, he never told me. I suppose the topic was too sensitive for him. Anyway, December 2003 was the last time I saw him in person. We kept in touch for months after I was back in Canada, but he was a strange fellow, and it wasn't unusual not to hear from him even for weeks. For that reason, I suspected nothing even when—starting from mid March—he stopped replying to my emails. After some time, I thought I should report him as missing, but then I found out Yutaka Kashizawa had already done it. The police themselves told me about it when they traced me to question me. In our correspondence of the few previous months, Edwin and I had talked about Hexagon basically every time, so I was left with no other option than deleting those files and lying to the police. They never seemed to be persuaded by my version of the facts, though.

"I would have wanted to look for Edwin myself, but it wasn't possible. In order to do it, I'd have needed to examine the last places where Edwin had been and talk to the last people to see him, and I just couldn't do that without getting in the way of the police's investigation and casting further suspicion on myself. As if that weren't enough, then Judy arrived. She had just lost her mother, and I just couldn't leave her in Canada to come to London and play detective, never mind take her with me and risk involving

her—directly or indirectly.

“I wasn’t able to investigate even later on, after I had already told Judy I am an android and after moving to London. By that point, the Deverex Tower was an extremely popular and crowded place, and inspecting it wouldn’t have been as easy as when the building was still deserted, especially without Hexagon’s help. Had they caught me acting suspiciously in any Deverex property, I would have been in trouble up to my neck—something that, as a legal guardian of a minor, I just could not afford. I had hoped that, sooner or later, a document would turn up to at least allow me to legally set foot again in Edwin’s flat here at the Deverex Tower. In truth, I thought I’d probably inherit the whole building, which would have at least made it easier for me to find out what had happened to Hexagon, but eventually I found out Yuki’s father was the only heir of all of Edwin’s wealth, and at that point I thought it was really over.”

“Given the circumstances,” Yuki intervened, “I wonder why Edwin chose my father and not you, in fact.”

“I believe he would have wanted to choose me. For some reason, Edwin must have drafted a will before meeting me, and he disappeared before he could change his will. Probably he didn’t think there was any urgency to change it—I suppose he had no idea something was about to happen to him.”

Yuki nodded. “Hex was right about your pictures,” she said after a while, with a slight change of topic. “He thought it was strange you looked practically the same age in pictures taken even several years from each other.”

“Actually,” he added, “by then I had already thought you might be an artificial life form, but since it was the only clue pointing in that direction, I kept such a bold deduction to myself. I didn’t want to run the risk of cutting a really poor figure...”

“Now that we have cleared everything up,” Ayleen went on all of a sudden, after a short pause, “I’d say we have other matters to take care of.”

“Edwin,” Hex said.

“Exactly. The questions are, why those creatures kidnapped him, why they froze him, and most of all, who they are and what they want.”

“Not to mention,” Hexagon suggested, “are they *perchance* the same ones who were on the shuttlecraft with you when you arrived on Earth?”

“Indeed.”

The conversation went on for a while longer. Eventually, when Ayleen was taking her leave, the Zephyrus Armour became the main topic again.

“Ayleen, I wanted to tell you something...” Yuki began.



“Yes?”

“About the Zephyrus Armour and the rest... The way I see it, that’s all your stuff.”

“Thanks, but I do not intend to claim any of it. I don’t want to, and I don’t see why I should.”

“Well, they could be useful to you to save Edwin, if nothing else.”

“True. But, you see, I made a promise.”

Yuki looked at her inquisitively.

“I promised Judy,” Ayleen explained, “I would stay out of trouble. She’s already lost the two people most dear to her, and she doesn’t want it to happen again. And neither do I.”

“I see, but... Don’t get me wrong, but what could happen to you, given your self-regeneration system?”

“Despite our efforts, Edwin and I have never been able to understand how the system works, or even where in my body it is. As a matter of fact, its very existence is merely theoretical. However, should it ever stop working, there wouldn’t be any way to fix it. I suppose I could have had it worse in the desert, and the system wasn’t damaged—or not too badly, anyway. Next time, though, I might not be so lucky.”

Yuki barely nodded, pensively.

“I wish you had not been involved in this mess, but should you want to be Zero again in the future, I would not object. You’re a person of many skills, and after all, someone must save Edwin, assuming he wasn’t left at the bottom of the ocean and can be awoken. You and Hex can always count on my silence and my help.”

“Thank you. Your secret too is safe with us.”

“I know.”

Ayleen Marker left the Deverex Tower around five PM. She reached Billson Street, where she had left her Grand Cherokee. She got in it and headed to Hilldrop Lane.

*Home.*

## CHAPTER 26

A few weeks later, the newspapers reported Petrier had confessed all he knew, including the name of the man with whom he had worked to lure Deverex into the trap set by his kidnappers. For security reasons, the name was of course not divulged.

The police could easily check whether the whole story of the Deverex Hotel's former concierge was true. He really turned out to be son of Charles Petrier, who was indeed a therapist. They found the notes Louis had used to persuade Deverex to go where his kidnappers were waiting for him, and they also found out his debts were actually paid back in cash, so most likely thanks to the reward he had got in exchange for his help in the kidnapping.

The police had one last, definitive confirmation of Petrier's story when they traced the man he had said was his accomplice. They found him dead, shot in the back of his neck.

Ayleen was at the piano once again, this time playing *The Heart Asks Pleasure First*. As always, she found herself absorbed in her own dreams. More precisely, she was thinking about *The Fall of the Gods*.

The entire dream had to be nothing but a distorted interpretation of her life prior to the incident in Arizona made unrecognisable by oneiric censorship. Edwin had created her oneiric programme based on the Freudian model of the mind, thus it would work by means of *displacement*, *representation by the opposite*, *condensation*, and all the others means by which, according to Freud's theories and descriptions, the human mind worked to keep people from knowing their own thoughts.

She thought about the first scene: the temple. She and Judy were about to grant an audience to a man who was looking for the truth about himself. What did that bring to her mind?

The last scene. Edwin said he knew a great deal about Ayleen. She was probably the last person in the world who could be chosen to reveal important truths—she didn't even know the truth about herself.

*Could the man at the temple have been Edwin?*

Possibly. That would be *representation by the opposite*: Maybe Edwin

had something important to tell her and her sister, not the other way around. That seemed to agree with the final part of the dream, when Edwin said he knew a lot about Ayleen, her sister, and the others.

What others? The other children of Judy's parents—or rather, of the castle lords, obviously. The castle lords, who were many men and women in the dream of the infinite castle, had been *condensed* into two single elements, a man and a woman representing all of the men and all of the women among the lords of the castle.

But Ayleen and her sister had never met Deverex together. Ever. Ayleen herself didn't even know who her sister was! Then maybe the dream was acting according to another of the Freudian conditions necessary to the formation of a dream: the *wish fulfilment*. Their meeting Edwin was probably meant to happen. It was an expected event. In the dream, Judy *cared very much* about doing something her father had told her to do, and it had not been possible. Maybe that something was talking to Edwin? Was it what the dream was doing? Emphasising the wish to talk to him, representing what should have happened and yet had not?

She thought about the kidnapping. Why had they taken him? Assuming the kidnappers were the same people with her on the shuttlecraft, was this somehow related to what Edwin had to tell Ayleen? And if Edwin did, in fact, have information for her, why hadn't he told her anything in all those years? And how could he know her already before the incident in the desert?

*He was in treatment because of... delirium?*

*Perhaps he himself did not know who the information was meant for? Could it be our meeting in Arizona did not happen by chance?*

If she and those who had kidnapped Edwin were on the same shuttle... Were they androids as well? Were they comrades? Or maybe they were Ayleen's creators... But then, why hadn't they come back for her?

*What's my relation to those creatures? Were we here for Edwin?*

She thought about the end of the dream, when she had died. She clearly had not died for real, so that element could only represent a hypothetical situation. Had she died, and if her sister had been defeated too, then maybe all of the gods—as the dream showed—could fall as well.

*But who are the gods? And the rebels?*

The two boats moving past the Pillars of Hercules... She had to destroy them because they were going to the desert with two suns, the same one where the temple stood before the guards' argument had destroyed it.

*I don't know why there were two suns, but... what if the desert were the Sonoran Desert, instead?*

*Displacement.* Two elements were connected by a common aspect—the desert—and the dream emphasised the secondary one over the main one—Edwin in the Sonoran Desert.

Thus the rebels did not care for the desert with the two suns, but rather about the Sonoran Desert. They wanted Edwin, and she had tried to stop them—she had to blow up the boats, the shuttlecraft.

*Did I do that? How?*

*The ‘rebels’ who got Edwin referred to him as the ‘Son of Kuren’. What does that mean?*

Whoever the rebels were, Ayleen thought, they had proved they were dangerous.

*Maybe I should look for them.*

But what about Judy?

At some point, the part of the dream about the battle had made room for the part about the family. She, Judy, their parents, and the other children. But who could the... *parents of the gods* be? And what had happened? Why had they left? And what connection did that have with the rebels?

All of it had elements in common with the other dreams—the castle, the temple, and the houses, were perhaps all similar symbols, just like the family and the organised society in the dream of the lost town. Still, there were many, many elements, whose position in the puzzle kept escaping Ayleen.

\* \* \*

Yuki was sitting in the observation lounge of the Deverex Hotel, on floor 145. There were several people there, enjoying the view just like her. Some were having a coffee, sitting on the comfortable armchairs in the lounge, and others were chatting in front of the windows, against which some enthusiastic kids were standing with their noses glued.

She was just sitting there, leaning forward, with her arms on her knees and her hands joined.

A waiter passed by and asked her if she wanted something to drink. She barely hinted a smile and shook her head.

Leaving Japan and setting off for England had been a more important step in her young life than she would have ever imagined. Throughout her entire life, she had made modest progress in trying to rid herself of her own insecurity, but the events of that autumn had changed her irrevocably and forced her to take an honest look at herself. So, Yuki Kashizawa was a risk-

taker now? No, probably not. She didn't think she would enjoy actively looking for trouble, but she was forced to admit she had liked the *thrill* of Zero's endeavours—except perhaps the 'thrill' she had experienced on Mataou. That had definitely been too much for her.

At any rate, she had been brave.

Yes, she had to admit it. Bravery did not mean having no fears. It meant facing the adversities of life *despite* your fears. It was certainly no new lesson, but it was one she had clearly not learnt before.

Maybe, she thought, she ought to be a little less demanding with herself. And maybe, not demanding perfection would contribute to making her less insecure. Who wouldn't hesitate before such a tall order, after all?

Bravery, not wanting to disappoint Hexagon, and noble ideals weren't the only reasons that had pushed her to run such a risk. After having broken free from those men's hold on Mataou Island, she had thought it would have been a shame to flee without making sure if Deverex was really there or not. Had she fled, all her efforts would have gone to waste—not only the physical ones, but also those she had made to overcome her fears.

Would she make more such efforts in the future? She didn't know. Not for quite a while for sure. However, Edwin was still a captive, and judging by the intentions of the four greenish creatures, more trouble could soon appear on the horizon.

Not far from her, somebody was commenting on a recent newspaper article about the Deverex case. The commenter was wondering who 'Zero' could be, and how come there hadn't been any talk about her for almost a month now.

"I know who she is," Hexagon said, suddenly springing out behind Yuki.

"How many times did I tell you not to sneak up behind me like that?" she scolded him, jolting. "Who is who?"

"Zero," he went on, sitting next to her. "I know her personally."

"You don't say?"

"True story. I can introduce you to her, if you want. I'm sure you'd like her."

"Knock it off," she joked, pushing him with her elbow.

"As of late, though, it seems she's a bit busy with her studies and stuff. That's why she hasn't been around."

"Uh-huh."

"It's a shame. I would have asked her to dinner."

Yuki didn't manage to stifle a chuckle. "Really?" she asked.

"Sure thing. You jealous?"

“Actually, I was wondering what you would order for yourself.”

“Holographic grilled chicken. My favourite.”

“Ah, I see,” she nodded. “And you’re paying?”

“Hey, I came up with the idea,” he replied, showing her the way as they left the lounge. “I thought you could put up the money!”

“What happened to chivalry?”

“I didn’t know you were so old-fashioned! Damsels can pay too, these days, don’t you know? And I thought you were seeing this Paul guy lately? I would never want to give him the wrong impression...”

“No, of course not...”

“...and anyway, you know I haven’t got a penny! What am I supposed to do, hack a bank’s server?”

“Excuses, excuses...”

\* \* \*

“Zero,” said Hual’Medor. “That’s what they call her.”

“What can she possibly want from the Son of Kuren?” Ta’Mek asked.

“I have no idea. But I think she might try to come back to rescue him.”

“This incident will slow us down a great deal. We must find a way to leave soon!”

“It’s still not possible. Not before we find a way to send a distress signal. Most of our possessions have been lost or destroyed. We’ll need to start over, and we need the means and money to do so.”

Hual’Medor stood up—he had been kneeling in prayer.

“Do you think Zero is the Mother Unit?” Kal’Hyvak asked him.

“No. The armour makes Zero look like her to an extent, but she’s not the Mother Unit. Zero is not as powerful as she was and clearly does not know us.”

“Maybe she has changed.”

“No, she’s not her. I think the Mother Unit has been destroyed.”

“I hope so.”

Hual’Medor stayed silent for a moment, moving a few steps. Then he continued:

“We must be prepared for any possible future interference by Zero. She may not be the Mother Unit, but we’ve all seen what she’s capable of. I do not want any further complications.”

“That’s something we all agree on.”

“I look forward to the day when we will finally be able to leave this...”

what was the word again? Oh, right, "...*cesspit* infested with infidel dogs."

## Acknowledgements

The second edition of *The Fall of the Gods*, and especially the Italian version, isn't all that different from the first in terms of its contents. I have thus no new people to thank, but I do wish to thank the old ones once more. I also really want to break with the style and the feeling of the first edition, so I decided I should rewrite the acknowledgements entirely and make them more to my liking.

Once more, my girlfriend Ania deserves to be thanked first. Cliché as it may be, she supports me and bears with me every day. Not only did she read this book time and time again; she listened to all my ramblings about how the plot of the entire series was too messy to eventually work out—and also all my ramblings about how it could work out anyway. The entire series, and *The Fall of the Gods* in particular, have enormously benefited from her invaluable suggestions. Her help with designing and creating the cover of this book was equally indispensable.

The next people I've got to thank are my two editors—that's right, just one editor wouldn't cut it. Simona Bagalà, my sister, took care of the Italian version of FOG. Laura Kingsley worked on the English version, and she taught me a thing or two about narrative styles and the importance of deciding once and for all *who* is the narrator of any given sequence.

A lot of other great folks—such as Caterina 'Your Eminence' Vitale, Sergio Rossi, Janne Andsten, Brittany Rose, and Richard Cohen, just to name a few—have helped out in a number of ways. They read several drafts, gave useful criticism on the cover (especially on the damn stairs, which failed at 'stairing' every time, if you know what I mean), corrected my English, and so on. A very special thanks goes to Sue McNeil, the most hardcore fan of *The Elynx Saga* (and of Hex in particular) I know. Despite all the work Laura and I had done to root out all my mistakes, some more or less atrocious ones had nonetheless managed to survive and make their way to the e-readers of people. Very kindly, Sue offered to read the book a second time and go on a seek-and-destroy mission to find them all. They should all be gone now (or so I hope). On the subject, I care to emphasise that any error that might still have survived is attributable only to me, be it in the English or Italian version. A special plea to my English readers: Bear with me. English isn't my native language. You know, you do what you can.



## What do you think?

The opinion of readers can be very useful, both to myself for future books and to other readers who need to decide if this book is worth their time. That's why it'd be really nice of you to write a review of this book, even a line or two, wherever you like—for example on *Goodreads*, or your social media, or whatever. If you feel like it, you can send your review to me as well. Mail it to [nicola@elynxsaga.com](mailto:nicola@elynxsaga.com)—I will publish the reviews which I find to be the most useful or interesting (not necessarily praising) on the series' website.

Although the plot and the backstory of *The Elynx Saga* are largely established already, this series is a work in progress. I'd love to hear your ideas and suggestions on how you think the story should progress or what you think will happen in the next book. Should I use any of your suggestions, I'll make sure to credit you in the acknowledgements of my next books.

**Coming soon**

*The Pillars of Hercules*

The disappearance of Edwin Deverex and Ayleen's mysterious past turned out to be two different aspects of the same problem, and the key to solving it may be held by the four strange creatures Yuki met on Mataou Island. It will be up to Yuki and Hex to deal with them, while Ayleen will continue exploring her own oneiric world, looking for new clues. Will she finally meet her real sister? What are the 'Pillars of Hercules' that appeared in *The Fall of the Gods*? Will she be able to keep her promise and remain with Judy, or will she be forced to leave her to return to her own home world?

*The Pillars of Hercules* is the second instalment of *The Elynx Saga*, and it will (hopefully) soon be available as an e-book. The release date and more information will be made available on the series' website at <http://www.elynxsaga.com>, on its Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/elynxsaga>, as well as on my blog and my social media. (See next page.)

## The author

I'm a bit of this and a bit of that. I got a master's degree in mathematics from Helsinki University, where I studied physics and computer science as well. I have been living in Finland for several years now, and I am very passionate about science, technology, and science fiction. I'm also a strong advocate for rejuvenation biotechnologies against ageing, which I discuss at length on my blog *Rejuvenaction*. Writing is just a hobby of mine, though not the only one: I enjoy playing piano, drawing portraits, and acting. *The Elynx Saga* is a science fiction series which I've been working on almost since the turn of the millennium. After too long a break, I'm now hoping to complete the series soon. (Having published the first book should provide enough pressure to continue, right?) After a short (mis)adventure with Amazon and other online publishing platforms, in 2017 I decided to give out my books for free on my own website, under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International licence.

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