

Jonas Is Flying

1

Across the lands below autumn is on parade. A myriad warm colors spill from hill to hill, right up to the feet of the nearby mountains. There aren't many farms out here, but the few fields he does see have already been harvested. Winter is not far at all. It is already turning mountain peaks into white fangs that pierce the darkening sky. Strong currents of cold air coming from there often force him to check his compass and adjust course.

Any delay would mean certain doom. There is a battle to be fought and Jonas intends to turn the tide of what has so far been a disastrous campaign. It's not often that an air strike is affordable, but they've been losing ground for months. This is their last chance to secure important land before winter will slow the war down to a grueling crawl.

He adjusts his flight goggles, trying to get the worn visor to better shield his eyes from the frigid air through which he and his companions are rushing. His thick, blonde hair is covered in protective oils. A simple dark brown leather flight suit wraps his battle-honed body. Despite the mounting pressure brought by the importance of their mission, Jonas is ecstatic. Every now and then, he uses a silver tube to take a deep breath from a pouch sewn on his back. The wind snaps the smoke from his nostrils as he looks up, grinning towards the skies.

He can sometimes hear his brethren's war chants from further back. They have trained hard for this day. Now, in the few hours they have until they reach the battleground, the warriors are allowed to pass the time in the most joyful way they can, for these may be their last hours alive. They're sitting back-to-back, strapped in their places and to each other by thick ropes. Some are armed with crossbows while others hold strings of glass baubles.

They're the last faction to survive the prolonged civil war that followed the collapse of the land's monarchical dynasty. A despotic Regency had claimed power since then. The new rulers then proceeded to bribe rich families with lands and influential positions. That is until the rightful owners of those lands rebelled.

The smell of dry leaves makes its way to them as they soar over the rusty forest covering a tall hilltop. Among the trees, a sinuous brown line can sometimes be seen. They're flying close enough for Jonas' sharp eyes to spot several loaded carriages making their way along the road. He's surprised to see people out in the forest this late. They must be desperate. The carriages are pulled by oxen and escorted by several riders, so he assumes these must be some rich farmers trying to move some of their crops behind the walls of the nearest castle. The villages in these border areas have been warned that the enemy has crossed the great river in the west. A difficult winter may be heading their way. But Jonas means to change all that. He finds himself wondering how history will remember this day.

2

The tiny elevator's doors seal shut with a soft thump leaving its occupants in complete darkness. There's barely enough space for the two inside to huddle together, crouching and kneeling, with the back of their necks pressed firmly against the metal ceiling. It wasn't meant to transport humans or any living thing for that matter. They wait for the elevator to start moving. Nothing happens.

This has not been a good night. They almost got caught when they broke into the building. A proximity sensor didn't figure on their map. After tripping the alarm they went hiding behind the first door they could open. It was a mix of luck and incompetence that saved them. The soldiers patrolling the ground floor didn't bother to check their own locker room.

In this country, the punishment for meddling in the military's affairs is worse than death. A mysterious employer and the guarantee of a fat payday had made the risk seem worth it. But now, the unbearable delay makes the two partners in crime reconsider their choices. Within seconds, the metal box turns into an inspiration for their worst nightmares. The silence is suffocating. Cold sweat. Racing hearts. Frozen thought.

With a subtle jolt, their prison starts its descent. The man lets out a sigh of relief. He struggles, trying to shift his weight from his aching knees. His accomplice is tense like a bow's string and unmoving like a rock. The smell of sewage they felt when entering the building is getting worse. It doesn't help to think that the elevator's destination is about thirty meters below street level.

“I sure hope we don’t splash into anything”, grumbles the man.

“Shut up, grandpa,” answers a raspy feminine voice. They don’t know each other’s real name, having met less than an hour ago on poorly lit nearby street.

It didn’t take long for her to realize they’ll get along like water and oil. An aura of rigid discipline emanated from the old man. His black, featureless trench coat was in perfect tune with his sharp moves and stiff demeanor. His machine-trimmed white hair reminded her of an abusive alcoholic uncle. But what she now realizes she hates most is people who talk too much during an op. Every word can be transformed into evidence these days.

“Relax, Red”, speaks a voice in both their ears. “Nobody bothers eavesdrop this grave”. It’s Glitch, the man or woman who supervises this heist. They use “he”, but it’s hard to know because the voice is passed through a cheap filter that makes it sound like an action movie robot from the early twenties.

It’s getting hot. Greedy silence swallows their words and breaths. Red realizes that keeping her mouth shut isn’t that easy after all. Why is it so quiet? Is the elevator still moving? What if they’ve been discovered? Bothered by doubt her mind calls upon imagination to discourage the current course of action. Imagination obliges. She sees herself facing sentencing after a summary trial. Her daughter is there, crying. No, wait, that’s ridiculous. She sees herself in a holding cell, no trial at all. Her daughter has been shoved in some military school as payback for her mother’s actions against “national security”.

“Why couldn’t you fix us a normal elevator, Glitch? You’re supposed to own this entire building by now, aren’t you?” asks Red. Her imagination pouts. It doesn’t like interruptions.

“Because working a building is not as easy as hacking a delivery truck and making it drive me around the neighborhood. And because there aren’t any normal elevators here.” Then, after a short pause Glitch treats them to one of his sadistic jokes: “These guys don’t travel much”. Cue the annoying robotic laughter.

“How large is the unit?” asks the old man.

“Large enough for one of you to stay behind and contemplate betrayal by the others while looking at the elevator’s doors.” That laughter again, same intonation, same length. He’s probably using a sample.

“This’ll be one case when age won’t come before beauty”, sneers Red. The old man ignores her. It’s the worst possible answer. The truth is she doesn’t feel all that beautiful. The tight uniform strangles her large body and itches all over while her sweat is beginning to make friends with the foul smell of this place.

Without any warning, the doors open. Red almost lets out a scream. She manages to hold it in, but her companion chuckles. He must’ve felt her tense up, the sly bastard. Thoughts of treachery worm their way into her mind. She wants to ask him how long it has been since they stopped but pride defeats curiosity.

The old man turns on the flashlight on his shoulder. A bleak gray corridor extends for as far as they can see. The air is musty and thick so the light doesn’t make it very far before it gets asphyxiated into a blurry brown blotch. The corridor is wider but not much taller than the elevator. They crawl out on all fours. Claustrophobia is here to stay.

The tunnel is lined with round metal hatches on both sides. Less than two meters separate each hatch. This place is very crowded. Red turns on her own light and illuminates the inscription on the round doorway to her right. “Asset 81A-F” it says. She looks at the screen on her wrist. According to Glitch, the target is more than a kilometer away. There must be hundreds if not thousands of vaults on this level alone.

It’s even warmer here than in the elevator. Annoyed, she removes her bandana before her head can pop like corn in the microwave. Her companion scoffs at the sight of her tousled curly hair.

“What are you trying to do with that hairdo? Catch some spiders?”

“Shut up, geezer.”

She notices that the builders haven’t even bothered to install light sources in this place. These walls have never seen the light of day, she realizes. A chill tiptoes down her spine, beckoning her imagination to come out and play. Imagination obliges. They’re going to get caught. No, that’s too easy. They’re going to live here for a couple of days. Long after they run out of

electricity and water, they're going to beg to be taken into custody. If they're lucky, they might even see the sky on one last day before being sent to wherever the military stashes traitors these days. Even better, continues her imagination unabated, she's going to go through the ordeal all alone. The old man will probably make it out with the loot. Together with Glitch, he's going to laugh all the way to the Corporation or to whatever dubious institution will be willing to pay top credit for the tech they're about to steal.

3

It's dark now. A farmer and his two helpers have just finished repairing their carriage. They're trudging along a forest road, eager to get back to the safety of the village. Grunting as they pull the overloaded thing, none heeds the trees stirring behind them, closer and closer. A single torch is fighting a losing battle against the darkness. Swarms of shadows squirm all around the path. At last they realize something is coming from behind them. They hear a sound. It's almost like a breath, the breath of something very large.

"What was that?" asks one of the helpers.

The farmer turns to answer but before he can open his mouth, he's slapped by a gust of unnatural wind. Above and all around them, the trees protest showering them with dead leaves and broken twigs. Their torch is extinguished in an instant, leaving a trail of glowing red tears swirling away towards the sky. They look there, almost expecting something to happen. Nothing does. In that darkness, the stars retake their primordial importance. The forest seems to quiet down, but they know better.

Without warning another blast of wind lashes the forest. They cover their faces but keep on looking up. Through the hail of leaves and twigs they can see a huge, black shape cross the starry landscape. And then another two, followed by another three. The forest boils. A half-dead tree collapses just in front of them. Trapped inside their own bodies, locked in place by an overriding survival instinct, the farmers wait for the creatures to pass, praying that none of them stops for an easy snack.

But Jonas and his squad have more pressing matters to attend to. He had noticed the peasants' torch from miles away. On a different occasion he might have avoided flying over them, but tonight he cannot afford even the slightest change in course. They must fly low and they must fly fast. In his

hands, the metal scepter that he's using to steer the dragon buzzes with magic. Tiny balanced stones of fire and water glimmer in spirals all across its length.

They are getting closer now. Up ahead, not that far away, the battle is in full swing. Sometimes, green lighting flashes behind the smoke that billows from the battleground. The enemy wizards had entered the fray as soon as the sun set. No purple lightning so far, which means that their own warlocks are probably bidding their time until the air support arrives. He just hopes the infantry doesn't get wiped out until then.

He takes another puff from his fire-bag. The wave of focus and relaxation is just about perfect, but not quite there. He should have put a bit less tobacco in the mix. Eyes closed, he holds the navigator's scepter with one firm, powerful arm, anticipating another river of cold mountain air in front of them. Jonas is one with the wind now. In his mind, he sees the great mountains shape the air across the land. He feels the dragon's mighty push through his every vertebra as the creature's huge wings propel them towards their destiny.

Then, against all his strength, the scepter tilts to the right, followed by the dragon changing course. He can hear his men's cries of surprise from behind him. There is somebody else's hand on the scepter. He grabs it with his other hand even before opening his eyes in anger and surprise. There's only room for a single pilot underneath the dragon's scaled throat. But the one that has taken over his creature is not sitting next to Jonas, but rather floating in the air just ahead of him.

Surrounded by a shimmering blue sphere is the last person he expected to see today. She looks straight into his soul, expressing wrathful patience. Her eyes beg him to keep hold of her hand, but the diamond crown on her head punishes his transgression. Jonas immediately lets go. He throws his hands to his sides, in unconditioned surrender. They've been discovered. The mission is over.

"Majesty..." he manages to whisper, knowing that his word has been smothered by the torrents of air as soon as it left his lips.

With a gracious wave of her hand, she extends her magical shield around him. Inside the holy silence, his own heartbeat terrifies him. She's going to crash them into the ground. Or worse, she's going to turn him against his own people.

“Hello, Jonas”, she says. Her voice is an avatar of innocence but it makes his hair stand as if a venomous spider were creeping into his ear. There is power beyond human understanding in her every syllable.

Jonas cannot dare look behind, but he hopes that the rest of the squad has not been tricked into following the new direction. Dragons are immune to most spells, but not their pilots. What if she’s not alone? There are certain measures that can be taken against spell-casters. Jonas is well trained in them. But in front of him is no usual caster. Covered in a simple white and silver robe is the Ivory Princess herself. Her milky skin makes her appear defenseless against his seared, battle-scarred body, yet he knows she can turn him to dust in the blink of an eye.

He’s too scared to think what to do next so he just sits there with his hands still at his sides, having relinquished complete control of his dragon. The woman smiles at him. He sinks inside her oceanic eyes.

“Don’t be afraid. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The dragon continues its flight unabated. Below, the ground moves at dizzying speed and above, not a single lock of her dark hair moves. His pilot instincts scream against the violation of the rules of nature. They’re sitting in a bubble of calmness where even a stray green firefly has found refuge.

With slow movements, the Princess draws a rectangle in the space between them. He watches her index finger scar the air with its sharp whiteness. She’s drawing a map. On it her hands flow leaving colored marks and ghostly lines.

“That’s where the wizards are”, she says while placing more marks on the map. “And that’s where the griffons are. They’ll be expecting you to attack the wizards from the north. But they’re in for a surprise now, aren’t they?”

“Wh...” he stammers. “Why are you showing me this? We... we’re fighting against you.”

She smiles again. He wants to forget about the battle.

“You’re not. You’re fighting my family, a family that has disrespected this land and its people.”

Her words only deepen his expression of disbelief. She tilts her head a little, in an almost playful way.

“It’s not only because of my family’s arrogance that the dragons have sided with you. I’ve been following you for a long time Jonas. You are a special man. No usual soldier would have stood up to the Regency. No usual soldier could have trained a squad of Dragon Knights as adept as yours.”

He finds that his fear has been replaced with something entirely different, but just as incapacitating for the mind. The Princess is perhaps the most dangerous of all the ruling family, the only one that had bothered to undergo military training. And yet here she is, talking to a traitor, a man who her own parents would love nothing more than to burn at the stake. It doesn’t make sense. It must be a trick.

“It’s no trick”, she replies to his thoughts. “It’s your chance to make a difference.”

The blue sphere around them starts to shimmer.

“I’d like you to come back alive from this mission, Jonas. I’d like to meet you in person one day.”

Before he can realize what’s going on, she leans over and kisses him on the lips, imparting a jolt of dizzying energy. For a second, it’s light that flows through his veins. He feels like he might faint, but then the cold night air blasts him to wakefulness. The blue sphere and the white shape within are blown away. He looks behind and sees tiny whirlwinds of sparkling dust dance into nothingness underneath his dragon’s wings. He notices the other dragons following close behind. They continue on the new course. In just half an hour, history will indeed be written.

4

From the distance, a stray beam of light reveals the rusty scars on the hatch marked with “Asset 84D-P”. Two figures are approaching, crawling through the dark and moldy corridor, inhaling fetid sewage odors. But for these hounds the smell of money overrides any other inconveniences, even though in this day and age money doesn’t smell anymore. They stop at regular intervals and use their flashlights to check the inscriptions on the hatches on both sides of the narrow corridor.

“What a sewer. I’m going to enjoy burning this uniform after we’re done here”, says the woman.

The old man ignores her. He can sense his partner’s fear. He doesn’t like it, not one bit. Fear is what can turn a successful heist into a one way ticket to the military’s detention centers. Thinking of this makes him realize that it would be wise to support his unstable partner.

“I think you deserve a flavored keepsake from the day you became rich, Red.”

“You’re a funny guy, Old, you know that?”

But “Old” is not funny. “Old” is calculated, cautious and experienced.

“Old” wants to get out of here alive, together with a very expensive piece of hardware if possible. And “Old” has been doing runs like this for decades, but never anything so risky. The massive payday they’re about to score had made the gamble seem almost rational. Now, he’s not so sure.

They stop to examine another set of opposing hatches. “Asset 84C-N. Getting close now,” says Red.

The man lowers his chin so he can talk into the microphone on his uniform. “Glitch, get that hatch opened.”

“Roger that”, speaks the robotic voice in their earphones. Glitch’s assumed humanity is melting away sentence after sentence. Old finds comfort in that. Their hacker better be paranoid, because if he gets caught then there’s only one way out of this grave. He feels his back pocket just to make sure he still has the neurotoxin pill with him.

Meager flashlights are no match for the greedy darkness. They’ve been crawling for about half an hour. Even so, they still sometimes brush the ceiling with their heads when the reflex to see what lies ahead kicks in. In front and behind, the corridor seems to stretch forever. This lack of boundary adds agoraphobia to the oppressive cocktail of fears simmering between their ears. Examining the coarse, unpolished floor, Old realizes that hauling the loot to the elevator will be exhausting. No way will they be able to push or drag the sensitive equipment on this sort of surface.

They stop in front of yet another pair of hatches. “This is it”, proclaims Red. “84D-P. Let’s get us some asset!”

Old chuckles.

“What’s so funny, grandpa?”

“You haven’t been around these places too much haven’t you?”

“How would **you** know?”

The man turns to his partner not caring to twist the flashlight away from her squinting face. “We’re not here for the ‘asset’. We’re here for something the ‘asset’... uses” answers Old as pedantic as he can. Enjoying the expression of worry on the woman’s face, Old adds: “but don’t worry, it’s not relevant for our contract.” Then, into the microphone: “Glitch, we haven’t got all night, open this hatch already.”

“I opened it when you told me to!”

For the first time since they met, Old and Red look at each other without hostility. Then, as if their primal instincts aligned from that one single glance, they speak with one voice: “It’s closed!”

Silence from the other end.

“You better open this vault right now or I swear I’ll...” growls Red.

“Give me a minute.”

Despite the voice filter, Old can sense frustration in the hacker’s voice. For the first time this night, he’s worried.

Red hits the metal hatch with her heavy boot. A gloomy thud resonates across the corridor. “That’s one minute too long! If you think I’m going to just sit here stuck in front of this door you’re wrong. I haven’t risked my neck to...” she stops mid-sentence. An absence of background noise in their ears indicates that their hacker muted his microphone. “He hung up!” she yells.

“Relax. He’s working on it.” But Old is not relaxed anymore. If Glitch doesn’t get the hatch open, they might as well leave. This is the second mistake for tonight. His trust in their hacker’s competence is plummeting.

What if the entire building has been put on lockdown because he tripped some failsafe?

Red opens and closes her mouth like a fish on the pavement. She punches the floor. “Relax?! Are you insane? He hacks a state of the art military complex and then he can’t open a stupid hatch? And get your damn flashlight out of my face!”

Again, they wait. Red is right. This isn’t the sort of flop they could expect or afford.

“He’s definitely been made. We should get out of here. He got made. He...”

A crackling sound in their ears shuts Red up: “We’ve got a good news bad news situation here so listen up,” starts Glitch. “The good news is that I can open it. The bad news is that I’ll be using a fire emergency subroutine so I won’t be able to close it.”

“And what’s so bad about that?” asks Old.

“There are medical drones going through this corridor every three hours or so. If one of them spots an open hatch, we’re in serious trouble. I’d say you have one hour left, to be on the safe side,” informs Glitch. “We can call the whole thing off if you want,” he adds as an afterthought.

“Medical drones? What’s the use of medical drones in a place like this?” asks Red.

“Just open this damn vault,” demands the old man.

“Hey, why the medical drones?”

A metallic clank can be heard from within the round rusty hatch, startling the both of them. Stale, putrid air blows out from within the vault. The hatch swings inside with a sad but ominous squeak. Red forgets her question.

It’s ironical, Old thinks, that inside this dilapidated building lie some of the military’s most prized assets. The space ahead is just as black as everything else here. He crawls inside through a short access corridor. After years of constant leakage the coarse concrete floor is now covered in slippery goo. It is most likely the source of the disgusting smell. It’s good

they've been down here a while, because if they were to enter this place straight from the fresh air outside, they'd vomit.

Now they're in the one and only room behind the hatch. Red's eyes glimmer with greed as she sees the first light source since they entered that cursed elevator. Against the left wall lies their prize, a metallic cylinder about the size and shape of a car tire. On it, there's a small rectangular panel whose LED indicators bask the room in a faint, sick green. A bunch of thick wires extend from it towards the other side of the room.

Old watches as Red traces the destination of the wires. He suspects what will happen next so he gives her some space. The flashlight's beam follows the wires as they snake across the room, a round white circle that pulls dirty reflections from the wet floor. The cone of light reaches a spot where the wires ascend towards something. With a slow, uncertain move, Red moves the light up half a meter revealing... the something. For a moment, she doesn't react. Perhaps she did know what the 'asset' is.

"What the..." she manages to say before adrenaline kicks in. Her palms slip and she lands with her cheek flat on the gooey floor. She gasps, takes a breath of fetid air that serves her nostrils with an overdose of the rancid bouquet. "Aaaaaaah!" she yells. Her legs kick left and right as she's backing against the wall, struggling to keep the spot of light on the 'asset', almost expecting it to leap at her.

But the 'asset' doesn't move. It just hangs in the air, which makes it appear even more terrifying. A couple of hoses from the ceiling connect to the thing. The wires are ascending to various areas of its black body, most of them towards what seems to be its head. It's humanoid, very thin, almost like a skeleton. There's nothing supporting its arms and legs, so it appears to be floating. Old points the flashlight to Red so that he can enjoy the spectacle of her twisted face. Flared nostrils, mad, green eyes just about to pop out and barred irregular teeth. Not bad, he decides.

"Wh..." Red sobs. She's shivering. "What... what... the... the military... they're hiding... they're hiding aliens!"

There's nothing but shocked silence for a few seconds as Old considers the verdict. Then, a loud guttural laughter fills the room. Even if they get

busted, it was all worth it just to see that cocky punk lose her screws over this. It's better than he expected, much better. Even though he's sorry for his partner, he can't stop laughing.

"You! You knew! How can you laugh at this? Don't you realize what this means?"

"Oh, 'course I realize what it means" he manages before he erupts in another burst of laughter. "It means you're an idiot, Red. He's human. But as Glitch said, they don't travel much... muscle degeneration and all that."

He gives Red a few more seconds to stare at the suspended skeleton. Her breathing slows down a bit. She wipes her cheek with her shoulder, all the while keeping the spot of light on the vestige of a human body.

"Oh, don't worry kiddo he's in no shape to bite."

"Why's it floating like that?" The sting is gone from Red's voice. She's back to being an inexperienced burglar.

"Aerogel matrix," answers Glitch. "Now move it, fun's over. We don't have much time. I've no way of knowing when the building's governor decides to resupply its precious soldiers here."

The old man proceeds to the cylindrical object. He examines the panel for a few moments then he turns his attention to the wiring.

"Soldiers? What do you mean soldiers?" asks Red, turning her gaze from the asset for the first time, looking upwards as if she wanted to pierce the concrete and look Glitch in the eye.

"Boot the user, Glitch. I'm going to disconnect his unit."

Red looks at the skeleton, then at the old man. "Hey! What do you mean soldiers?" It dawns on her at last that the semblance of a human being wouldn't even be able to crawl out of here not to mention carry a rifle.

"Damn it", says Glitch.

"Not again..." moans Old.

"I can't boot him."

"Don't tell me. There's a glitch." Dripping sarcasm corrodes the airwaves.

“This isn’t funny. If I can’t boot him we can’t unplug him from his unit. It’s against the rules of engagement.”

“I wipe my ass with your rules of engagement, hacker.” Old’s voice is stern and menacing.

Red is still staring at the skeleton. Soldiers, rules of engagement, what did she get herself into?

“I just need ten minutes.” Glitch is almost begging now. “There has to be a way to take somebody offline. See if you find anything inside the room. I’ll keep searching from here.”

“Weren’t you the one saying we don’t have much time? I’m giving this five minutes before I pull the plug. Red, move your jelly carcass over here and see if you find some sort of boot command on this panel.”

It takes less than three minutes for all of them to realize that there’s nothing to be done. In the end, it’s Glitch who delivers the unavoidable conclusion. “Ok. Pull it.”

5

With his fire-bag now empty, Jonas is ready for battle. His mind is storming through tactical calculations as he anticipates every possible trajectory of the first dozen enemy griffons. He pulls the citrus spray from his belt and squeezes it hard towards his companions sitting behind, upon the dragon’s spine. They have been waiting all day for this signal. On cue, they prepare their bows and incendiary bombs.

To their delight, half of the griffons aren’t even manned. Their riders are nearby, but nearby is thirty seconds closer to death. Jonas grins. Even the wind is on their side today. The enemy hears the huge creatures approaching, but it is too late.

Upon a thin wooden arch extending from the dragon’s throat down to the pilot’s right, a prism starts glowing in a dark, voracious red. Jonas touches it and prepares his bow executing a flawless ritual. The dragon’s head moves backwards. After one final, mighty push, they’re in range of the first griffons. With a blood-curdling growl, the dragon showers the ground with its acid venom. A single, well placed fire arrow from Jonas ignites the first

two griffons. Incendiary bombs start falling. Jonas erupts in laughter. He is one with his dragon, invincible, unleashed. They've won.

As his dragon comes back for another run, a large, triangular portion of the sky starts flickering blue and red. It's like the side of a huge pyramid. The forest blinks out of existence, replaced by green rectangles.

"What is..." he manages before a mountain shows up in front of them. They fly through it, ending up in a twisted field made up of patches of leather, bricks, starry sky, feathers, clouds and turbulent ocean. Yellow and blue stripes dance across the jumbled pattern below. They look just like the colored stripes on the visor he's wearing. It's like it was stretched to hundreds of miles away.

His dragon gets stuck in mid-air, everything freezes. A scream from one of the enemy riders gets stuck in time becoming a horrible, screeching wail that drills into his brain. Strange runes start floating on the ground. There is no ground anymore, just a dark blue emptiness. Jonas threshes in his seat. Then, there is no seat. Everything disappears and along with it, so does his strength. He can't move.

Jonas tries to scream but there's something stuck in his throat. Muscles cramp, his skin starts burning. Then he's falling, or at least it feels like that. The sensation doesn't last long. A blast of sharp and unbearable pain all over his body informs him that he hit the ground. So this how dying in a dragon crash feels like. But against all logic, it doesn't end.

Something rakes his face off. His eyes are pulled out of his head. His throat is ripped from his chest. In spite of all this, he's still somehow in one piece. The sensations contradict themselves like in a nightmare. He can hear himself scream and sees a light so bright he wishes blindness could save him. But his eyes are fine because as the light changes direction, it illuminates the very real face of an old man dressed in a strange, black uniform. This can only mean one thing. The Princess betrayed him. He's in enemy hands.

"Whhhhh..." gargles Jonas. He feels a liquid spilling over his lips, warming his chin and neck.

"Good morning, sunshine", speaks the old man. His olive skin is as alien to Jonas as the uniform he's wearing. On the left shoulder the man has a

magical torch that showers him and the cave in which they seem to be in a cold, white light.

“Whiizzzrddd...” he manages before a liquid cough smothers his voice. Against the merciless white light, Jonas sees droplets of bloodied saliva erupting from his own mouth. Now he wishes he really were in a dragon crash instead of being captured by a wizard. He fears the black eyes staring back at him. He fears their power and their wisdom.

“What’s he saying?” asks a younger voice from somewhere behind the old man.

“How should I know?” answers the wizard.

6

Old is crouching next to the ruined human being checking the readings from a device he placed on the man’s forehead, even though he doesn’t need a scanner to tell him the guy’s a mess. His jaw is clenched and trembling, breathing is irregular and his pulse is all over the place. It’s too bad they had to sever his connection with the unit in such a crude way, but the stakes were too high. Still, even in their line of business there is a place for human rights.

“How long is this going to take?” asks Red, speaking fast and with more than a trace of annoyance in her voice.

“Until he calms down a bit and remembers,” answers Old. “Now unless you want to do this yourself, I suggest you get busy and prepare the unit for transport.”

He turns to the skeleton now lying in a pool of foul liquid. His suit had to be cut open in several places so that the man doesn’t risk drowning in his own fluids due to the combination of reality shock and partial shutdown of his life support system. For the same reason was Old also forced to tear off the skeleton’s mask, which is now discarded on the floor, still partially connected to its owner’s body. It left a seeping wound, an ugly purple ring that circles the man’s face.

Bloodied, terrified eyes stare back at him from sunken pits surrounded by an emaciated face. Whatever hair the man used to have looks frail and decayed, spread into gray patches of irregular length. There are gashes on

his skin wherever the mask's insides got a bit too friendly with his face. This isn't the first time Old pulled somebody out of a suit, but this guy's condition is so deplorable it might very well be the last. And besides, once they sell his hardware, Old plans for early retirement.

"Whhhhh... whhhhiiii... whhhhiiiiiiiizz..." the man gargles. He grunts, convulses, lifts his hand half a centimeter before the effort becomes too much. He starts trembling and coughing.

"I know sunshine, I know. You're having a bit of reality come-back shock," says Old with a compassionate voice. "Don't worry we're not here to hurt you. If it were up to us you'd be in your comfy imaginary lobby now, taking a nap until your employers got here." He takes one final, worried look at the brainwave scanner then returns it to a pocket of his uniform. "My apologies for dropping you. We didn't know that fancy transmitter unit of yours controls the aerogel matrix too. When we started going through the cabling you fell like a sack of bones." He pauses. "That was mean, I apologize."

In the other corner of the room, Red toils and swears whoever welded the unit to the wall. She takes out two tubes of pyro-paste and begins applying the mixture onto a pair of hooks.

Glitch, after having stayed silent for a while, startles them: "Bastards!"

"Love you back," replies Red as she lights up the pyro-paste.

"They never planned to take him offline I think. These monsters didn't set up any way of disconnecting their soldiers from the system! That's why we couldn't boot him."

Old reevaluates his hate for the military while taking out a syringe and a black vial from one of the many chest pockets of his uniform. "I'm going to give you a nice shot to relax you and jog your memory a bit." Then, in his microphone: "What's his name, Glitch?"

The room lights up for a brief moment as the pyro-paste activates. The man lying on the floor tries a scream. Instead, he succumbs into a fit of fluid cough.

“File says Jonas. According to this, he’s been in here for twenty three years.” Glitch allows for the number to sink in. “And probably never getting out either. Disgusting!”

“Judging by the hardware they equipped him with, I reckon he’s high ranking too,” says Old. “There’s nothing better than making a good buck while throwing some spanners in the military’s cyberwarfare program.”

“Thank you for telling me all this before we went in here, by the way,” grumbles Red.

“I thought he did,” says Glitch.

“I thought she knows what she’s getting into,” replies Old in a bored voice.

He fills up the syringe and shows it to Jonas. There is no sign of understanding on his patient’s face. He uses his knife to cut another opening into the skeleton’s suit, exposing a bit of his right arm. Thin, purple veins crisscross in an unhealthy jumble upon the man’s deteriorated skin.

“Red, give him your earphone,” demands Glitch.

The woman gapes. She turns to where Jonas is lying on the ground.

“What? And then put it back in my ear? No way!”

“Show a trace of compassion woman. Do you think this is an easy wakeup for him?” asks Old while he struggles to find a good place for the needle. Flesh is in short supply. He turns his attention back to Jonas whose eyes dart from left to right. “Don’t mind Red, sunshine.”

“Do you smell this place? Who knows what sort of diseases that thing’s carrying?”

“Fine, then throw it away afterwards if you want,” says Glitch. “Now give him your damn earphone, time’s ticking.”

“Yeah, come down here and make me, hacker,” she scoffs, turning back to the unit with defiant determination.

A cone of light moves fast across the wall. Before she can realize what’s going on she’s slammed against the wall with Old’s face millimeters away

from hers, a savage glimmer in his black eyes. Never before had Red seen somebody move that fast.

“I politely suggest you reconsider that request.” His voice is calm but only because the fury it carries is so sharp that it becomes invisible. She looks at the syringe in his right hand as if it were a revolver.

“All right, all right, no need to go crazy now man.” She relaxes and tries to look as harmless as possible. The old man lets go of her arm but doesn’t step back. His breath smells of tobacco. She avoids his burning gaze. Then, she sees it. A thin, irregular scar is circling his face, sometimes hiding underneath patches of regrown skin, sometimes getting lost through his beard and hair. Her jaw drops. She looks to the skeleton lying on the floor then back at the man in front of her.

“Yeah, that’s right, kiddo. I was one of them once. One of those you call ‘things’. And I can tell you it ain’t pretty to wake up in one of these rooms after spending a couple of years doing jobs for God-knows who.”

His expression softens but he doesn’t blink and doesn’t move. They stare at each other for a few seconds until she has had enough truth. She looks away. The old man nods and steps back.

Red pulls her earphone out without a single grumble and hands it to him. He returns to Jonas and inserts the object in the man’s ear. Jonas whimpers in fear. While he’s still concerned with the new object in his ear, Old administers the shot with accurate, expert moves.

“Jonas, do you remember Sarah or Patrik?” asks Glitch. Jonas groans. He’s trying to shake off the voice in his ear but he doesn’t have the muscles to move his head more than a few millimeters.

“Sarah and Patrik are your parents Jonas. Do you remember? Remember, Jonas.”

The old man lifts an eyebrow. Glitch is either a woman or has just switched to a very convincing voice filter impersonating a young lady. “Try to remember those names, Jonas. Sarah and Patrik. Sarah and Patrik.”

The quick acting drug manages to settle the man’s twitching and shivering. Glitch continues to repeat the names in a calm but firm voice. There isn’t any hint of understanding upon the skeleton’s face. Perhaps he’s trying to

remember. Or perhaps his brain is fried. Old crawls over to help Red. They're almost done. With a bit of luck they'll be out of here in less than thirty minutes.

"What's Glitch telling him?" asks the woman while the repetition of "Sarah and Patrik" keeps going in Old's ear.

"Oh, so you care now?"

The lack of answer is satisfactory. The bravado is fading away again. He waits a bit more, just for good measure.

"He's trying to make him remember who he is. He seemed pretty far gone to me so I'm not sure Glitch's going to make it, even with the elephant dose I gave him."

It takes longer than expected to make sense of the jumble of wires on the floor and un-power the unit. Behind them, the "soldier" moans and whimpers.

"What's the military doing with these people?"

"They're controllers. They operate machinery, sometimes even trucks or airplanes. I figure this one right here is a pretty important one, since he has this state of the art quantum transmitter."

"Sarah and Patrik" goes on and on. Jonas quiets down a bit. He whines every now and then. This is a good sign most of the time, explains Old. At other times, people would just die when were disconnected without first returning them to a lobby. The brain often can't handle the sudden shift in reality. Given that Jonas had been in there for almost a quarter of a century, he's pretty damn brave.

They finish disconnecting the transmitter from the wall. It's heavier than Old expected. Or perhaps it's the exhausting night that's sapping his strength. They're just about to start carrying it towards the hatch when Glitch abruptly stops his "Sarah and Patrik" routine.

"What's wrong?" asks Old.

"What do you mean?" answers Red. The man makes a grimace and points to his earphone. They put the unit down.

“They’ve started with the early morning checkups,” answers Glitch.

Unable to hear their hacker, Red throws her partner impatient glances.

“The western elevator has been taking drones up and down for the past ten minutes. Now it’s heading for this floor. I’m going to jam it between floors but you really need to hurry now.”

Red studies the shifting expressions on her partner’s face. She checks her clock and looks towards the corridor. She gesticulates asking to know what Old is hearing. The other man puts up his palm. He looks at the floor, frowning. This does no good to Red, who wastes no time in getting more and more agitated with every passing second. Her eyes dart from wall to wall, as if expecting the room to collapse.

“Why haven’t you warned us earlier, hacker? Can we get out using the other elevator?”

As soon as she hears this, Red makes a move towards the room’s exit. An iron hand on her shoulder keeps her in place.

“Yes and that’s exactly why I didn’t warn you. You need to keep your calm and focus on the mission.”

“Let me go! We’re being made!” wails Red, struggling to free herself from her partner’s viselike grip.

“Calm down, kiddo. Only guy ‘being made’ today is that poor sob on the floor. We just need to hurry a bit.”

“Old, give him another shot, take the earphone and go,” says Glitch. “His off-duty time is almost done. When they realize he’s gone they’re locking down this complex tighter than Guantanamo.”

“Do you think he’s going to remember?” asks Old while he pulls out the black vial from his chest pocket. Red gesticulates in desperation, pointing to the unit and the door. Old ignores her.

“It’s worth a shot.” The sadistic robotic laughter is back. Behind them, Jonas moans, startled by the unnatural voice in his ear.

The old man fills another syringe from the vial and empties it in the skeleton's arm. He pats Jonas on the shoulder in a supportive manner. "Sorry again sunshine, it's just business." He takes the earphone away.

7

Hot waves caress his body from the inside. Gravity took a vacation, he's floating, all pain is gone. They're underneath the clear sky being showered with light and warmth from four suns. A soft hand goes through his hair. The Princess is holding his head in her lap. Her diamond crown cuts light into sparkling colors. There are trees nearby. He can hear the wind singing them. She speaks in his mother's voice. He's not ready for the real world she says. She's sorry it turned out this way. What does she mean by the real world? Time is running out, she says and begs him to come with her.

He wants to, but another reality hits like a hammer. The mind poison they gave him works in waves. He's back in the hellish grotto. His eyes have adjusted a bit. He realizes this is not a cave, but a room with a very low ceiling. Beams of white light play on the coarse gray walls. The wizard and his apprentice are grunting as they drag something out. But is the old man a wizard? He remembers a voice in his left ear. "Sarah and Patrik" it kept saying before the old man took it away. A flash from his earlier life flickers by. Yes, his parents! He doesn't remember much yet, but he feels like the memory is about to barge in.

"Moooooom..." he cries.

The old man returns to him, crawling on all fours. "We're running out of time, sunshine, so I'll have to show you something." His hand picks up the something lying on the floor close to Jonas' head. With a slow move, he brings it in front of his eyes.

It's a sort of mask out of which two white tubes smudged with blood are hanging, still dripping a yellowish liquid. There is some light flickering in the place where the wearer's eyes should be. A few pieces of flesh are stuck on the inside. It's grotesque but somehow familiar. With the corner of his eye, Jonas sees that a sliver of black material connects the terrible object with his own body. The old man holds the mask by some wires and a thick, black hose. Jonas can't stand the look of it.

"No... nooo..."

“Old, hurry up. We need to go damn it!” says a female voice from somewhere behind his captor. It’s not Her voice. This voice is mean and scary. It mocks him, mocks his reality, his importance.

Another wave comes just in time to soften the blow. They’re on the beach now. He sits between his parents, just like he did when he was a little child. There are only three suns on the sky now. The red horizon tells him that the Great One has just set. The Princess is walking towards the water, beckoning him to join her. A thin veil covers her body. The breeze steals it when the first wave touches her feet. A pair of dragons pierces through a black cloud above. He notices an aircraft carrier in the blue sea. Father gets up and walks away. Mother leans to him and whispers that he shouldn’t have joined the military. Somebody is shaking him. What do they want now? He’s done with today’s mission. This is his own time now.

“Remember when you first put one of these on?” asks the old man still holding Jonas’ mask.

Yes, the mask, the haptic suit, the enrollment form, his debts, a promise to serve the country, disappointed parents, a hate for some enemy, airstrikes, guided missiles. But then come the dragons, the elven maidens, the four suns, the Princess, the warlocks, the glory. All his for a day’s work. Memories are scattered in a whirlwind of lives he might have lived. But is any of it real? He’s back now, confronted with a reality he wishes was fake - that of the old man that ripped his mask off.

“You... you’re not a... whiz... wizard.”

The old man chuckles. “I’d wish, sunshine, I’d wish. I’d just clap my palms and whisk us all out of here in a jiffy.” Then, in a stern voice: “Rank and name!”

A well-formed reflex kicks in. “Colonel, 84D-P at... at your service,” he speaks in a broken voice. The part of him that is in complete denial revolts against this nightmare. What is a “colonel”? He’s a Dragon Knight! The wizard is playing games with his mind. They’re torturing him, hoping to make him give up information about the dragons’ nesting grounds.

“You hear that, Glitch? He’s back. Well, as back as he can be given the way he’s tripping.”

As the wizard utters the last syllable, Jonas is off again. This time it's the deck of an aircraft carrier. A man is barking orders at him. He seems angry. Jonas doesn't care. Their war toys are just money wasted for futile posturing. He will meet the Princess after this pointless training mission is done. She'll forgive his sins. The Blue Twins are up on the sky. But didn't Earth have only one sun? Wait. Earth!

A woman shows herself from behind the old man. She's young, large and has weird, orange hair. "Let's move it Old. Time to get rich." She's the owner of the other voice Jonas has been hearing.

"How... how long... long was..." starts Jonas. He can't muster much strength. The drug is coming at him again.

"Ah, the most common question. According to our hacker, about twenty three years," answers the one called Old.

It can't be. It just can't be! He runs away to a mountain cabin. Outside, the gray sky sieves sparse snowflakes. He looks for the Princess but can't see her. Behind thin clouds he can sometimes see a small red dot. It's the Tiny One. Judging by the dark twilight outside, the Tiny One is the only sun on the sky so it must be early morning or late at night. Somebody knocks at the door. He opens it without a second thought. The old man smiles at him. Then, he rakes his face off, showing him his virtual reality helmet. Jonas throws up in both realities.

The one called Old regards him with compassion. He uses a piece of Jonas' own suit to wipe the barf off his cheeks. Behind him, he can see the old man's belligerent companion. Even she looks back at him with a mix of curiosity and mercy. It burns to be looked at in that way. But those few seconds of empathy have an effect stronger than that of the drug.

A metallic screeching from the corridor makes them freeze in place. "What was that?" asks the young woman. But before she can get any answer, an even louder screeching fills the room. The two strangers scramble away from Jonas on all fours like scared sheep. They don't make it very far. A loud bang resonates through the room.

"Glitch! What the hell! The hatch closed!" yells Old.

His companion wails. She curls head down clasped by hands. Her orange hair spreads in an ugly bunch on the tacky floor. "I knew it, I knew it! We

should have gotten out when we had the chance! You didn't let me go, bastard!" screams the nasty woman.

In spite of the commotion, Jonas succumbs back into another world. It's a better world, a world where he wins wars, conquers the hearts of royalty and is adored by his people. This is the real world. This must be the real world. His mind claws its way back to the safety of illusion where it can lick its emotional wounds.

He's on a large balcony, overlooking the countless spires of a sprawling white city. The whole kingdom celebrates his victory over the Regency. He waves from his place of honor high in the Royal Citadel. A glimmer of light from above gets his attention. Through cracks in the white fluffy clouds he can see a diamond crown, as large as the entire world. It's Her crown. "I want you to stay here with me," his goddess says from up in the sky. Why is she not here with him? The crown begins to move away, fade out. Where is she going? For all its might, imagination cannot last long. There's perpetual screaming coming from the other reality, shattering the dreamy cocoon.

Two people struggle to escape the room where they've ended up locked together with Jonas. They're banging against a metallic something. They're not able to open it from the inside. Of course not, this is a prison. Jonas almost finds it amusing. But then he remembers his own situation. The illusion loses substance and now his mind is spiraling back to the infernal room.

"Glitch, answer damn you!"

"He's gone! I knew..." the woman starts before the old man silences her with a brusque gesture. There is a strange sound coming from the walls. It's a sort of creepy metallic gurgling. Old rotates his torch around the room as if looking for something. The circle of light freezes on a small metallic flower coming out of the ceiling just above Jonas.

"Quick! Get the unit back in its place!" orders the man. "No arguing or we're losing it!"

They rush to the object they had been carrying and lift it off the floor. They're halfway back to the corner of the room when water erupts from the ceiling. The cold shower interrupts Jonas' constant reverie. There's

yelling and panting as the two strangers transport their load out of the way of the water whipping the center of the room.

As soon as they get the unit back to relative safety, the large woman hurries to gag the sprinkler with her bare hands. Water gushes around her arms, drenching her. There's a terrible ruckus made up of swearing, desperate cries and futile attempts to escape.

Then there's that metallic screeching again and in the same time the torrent stops. Only the water dripping off their clothes punctuates the eerie silence. The three people in the room exchange stunned glances. It's as if they just landed there. For a moment, they're all scared animals, trapped in a machine not of their making. They share the same reality, the same pain, but tainted with different shades of madness.

The old man cocks his head to one side, as if listening to something. He looks relieved.

"Yeah well next time be careful when triggering fire drill routines you idiot!" he says. They get moving. Together with his partner, he picks up their prize and they start for the room's exit.

"Don't leave me here." Jonas hears himself beg.

The old man crawls over to and gives him a painful pat on the shoulder. "Your employers are coming, sunshine. Time for us to make our exit."

Jonas panics. He can feel the drug preparing to snatch him back into himself, except that he doesn't want to go there. Not now!

"No... don't want to do this anymore. Don't... don't leave me here!"

"Not sure you have an option, sunshine. You're in pretty bad shape. But at least you're stable now. They'll patch you up and then it's up to you. Maybe you'll be back playing with wizards or maybe... who knows?"

With surprising agility he crawls over to his companion. Together, they move the communications unit outside Jonas' room. The young woman comes back for one final look. She does a military salute, manages a thin, crooked smile and then disappears. From the shadows, a dragon's claw tries to catch her but ends up a few centimeters short. Reality is slipping away again.

“... but...” he manages before the drug is back with a vengeance.

He’s buried. Somewhere underneath the cracked, old asphalt there is a maze of cells made for the willing or less willing slaves of digital warfare. They’re fed cheap goo through pipes and hoses, just enough to keep them alive until their reflexes become too poor to be worth feeding. He looks towards the sky through twenty eight floors of stinking, oozing tunnels built in the cheapest possible way. A black, sick sun as large as a dead Universe laughs back at him. “Welcome home”, the black sun sneers. He searches for the Princess. Shiny beautiful memories turn into rotted skin and melted plastic. Now she’s just a ghoul, a prop, the cheap bait they used to devour his life. With the sound of a crushed diamond crown, he accepts reality. Jonas is not flying anymore.

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