

PART ONE

NINEVEH UNDERGROUND

STORY I

Cat Feeder

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Alarms howled at Nineveh Military Police Headquarters; Colonel Misan Stacker prepared two sections of a dozen men each to descend to the lower levels of the underground city. A shootout between rival gangs was in progress, already reporting eleven civilian casualties. When they arrived at the scene, there were approximately thirty gang members shooting each other as if there was no tomorrow. They used high-calibre weapons, a constant noise of bullets smashing against concrete walls and whistle of lead flying through the air had taken an entire street. Stacker knew that it was pointless to engage with those fanatics with conventional police weaponry, and the shadow of an idea crossed his mind. But it was only a shadow, so he had no choice but to shoot those gangsters with his pitiful service gun. They didn't even notice police, most of them used homemade bullet proof vests and metallic helmets, so it was like throwing them rocks. A week before, several high-level gangsters had disappeared, initiating a war to death between Nineveh's two most powerful gangs, Qurons and Lash, each one blaming the other gang for the supposed kidnapping of their affiliated gangsters.

In that chaos, Stacker looked up and saw a figure on the top of a building, covered in dark rags and carrying a strange device in its hands; something between a large chainsaw and a cannon. Then the creature fired an almost invisible beam, faintly red, and killed two gangsters in one shot. An even larger confusion came, and a dense fog covered the street as the dark figure went down floating on the mist. In its way down, it looked at Colonel Stacker, and shot a beam that ripped his left arm at elbow height. The Colonel looked at his arm and fainted. That time, Karlo "Bitter" Keserü, the Qurons gang leader disappeared in the mist.

Stacker woke up in a hospital room, looked at his left forearm but there was nothing there. A slight silent sob was followed by stillness and finally, resignation. Stacker called for a nurse and asked for his encrypted texter, a device with a pair of small antennas that communicated lines of characters to mainframes and to other devices of the same kind. An electric arc leaked between the antennas as Stacker sent a message to General Vaurmann, then another one, and another one; texting with just one hand was as difficult as he had imagined. Vaurmann, at his desk in the higher levels, being a Crom himself, could not care less about what had happened to Stacker, or the gang war; gang violence was so common in Nineveh's lower levels that he considered it just a quantitative problem, nothing new or worth worrying about. Nevertheless, Stacker's idea was simple, marginally creative, it had real chances to deliver a good result and, in theory, almost nothing to lose for the department; legislation had become somewhat flexible in that last century. So, he texted back his authorization without really thinking much about it.

Hours later, Udo Karvállat appeared in Stacker's hospital room ready for a potentially difficult conversation, or perhaps, just a light chat. Udo had been discharged from Military Police and imprisoned some months before for killing a gangster with a metal rod, in obvious procedure violation; an action performed without knowledge or authorization of his direct superior: Misan Stacker. The Colonel had convinced General Vaurmann in Military Police Human Resources Management, to release Udo from prison as a private adviser for the Police Department in the ongoing gang war case.

Udo had not been a rule obedient officer in his almost fifteen years of service, his violent attitude and psychopathic indifference gave Stacker a lot of trouble while he was under his command. On the other hand, Udo was extremely effective, he had a lot of contacts in Nineveh's lower levels as he had grown up down there, he maintained close ties with the city's underworld creatures, preferably prostitutes and white witches; those women knew all the secrets, past and present. Also, his skills were perfect for private investigation and marginal intelligence collection; he could make a gangster talk or kill him in the process, with neither hesitation, nor remorse. Free from conventional police regulations, Udo would be dangerous for gangsters, but harmless for Military Police Department, that would have no responsibility for his actions thanks to a clause in his new contract, that released him from revealing any detail of his methods of "information acquisition" and therefore excluded the Department from any accountability related to those methods. Nevertheless, he could use any resource from Military Police that he would consider necessary for his work: vehicles, infrastructure, and tech; only excluding weapons of any kind, at least the ones officially provided by the Department.

Karvállat eyes were turquoise, his head was shaved, and he wore a short goatee that sometimes blended with the rest of his poorly maintained beard. He was wearing wrinkled clothes, stored since he had gone to prison, and had some new scars, certainly his time inside had not been peaceful. He sat on a chair next to Stacker's bed and without greetings or small talk, he began breaking down the case.

"There were some illegal exhumations in the Necropolis last week, the same day that Nilso Corv disappeared," started Udo.

"I don't see any relation, maybe witches, they are on the rise, but you know that better than me," replied Stacker.

"What about the shooter you saw in that roof? That was not a conventional weapon."

Udo felt betrayed by Stacker when he was discharged from the Department, so a part of his soul was happy for what had happened to his arm.

"The gangs may have contacts up there and managed to buy a forbidden weapon, maybe they kidnapped someone's family, that could be good lead," said Stacker.

"Up there? That kind of weapon haven't been manufactured in centuries, too unstable, too much radiation. You need to be crazy to carry something like that around. There is something else involved, maybe black magic, that's why I think the exhumations could be linked to it."

"Whatever you say, you don't need to explain your methods to me anymore. Is actually a relief."

Udo stood up and walked towards to the door.

Stacker said to him before he would go through it, "You never told me why you killed Salvatore. Not that it matters anymore, but if you use that skill you have, your complete sentence could be changed for private advisory. But results would be needed to make that happen."

"Killing is not a skill, is the opposite of that, what kind of results do you have in mind?"

"The gangs have killed over fifty civilians in a week of war, stop that and the deal is yours."

Udo turned to Stacker and said, "I guess that, if there are no soldiers left to fight, the war would be over," and left the room.

Udo passed by Military Police Headquarters and received a card, both for identification purposes and to use the Police Exclusive Elevator, the safest way to escape from the lower levels of the city; he also received some money assigned to his mission, a couple small electronic trackers, controlled by Military Police mainframes and a texter. With the money he purchased some guns, knives, and rented an apartment in the middle levels. The air was poorer than in prison, but still breathable.

Artificial illumination in the underground city marked the difference between night and day. It was, nevertheless, a small difference, as the Queen ordered to maintain barely a gloom during day hours and almost total darkness in the night, with the excuse of energy saving. When night came, Udo took the elevator and went down ten levels, to the Red Stratum, a place where the smell of booze and incense dumbed the senses until animal cravings started to rise.

He walked down a street he knew very well, and found Alessa, a blonde girl that dyed her hair black, using sunglasses and a blue bikini in the middle of the night. They had grown up together in those streets, where often the difference between life and death depended on the mercy of a white witch. As many night working girls in Nineveh, Alessa had implanted vampire fangs, a detail that many of her clients considered a delicacy. She approached Udo but said nothing, just made a sign with her mouth and passed by his side, then she disappeared inside a building. Udo waited a couple minutes and then went directly to her apartment. She opened the door in silence, and Udo entered looking behind his back, in case anyone had seen him contacting her. A year before, she was raped and sent a week to the hospital by Salvatore, a member of the Qurons; when Udo found out, he used an unrelated mission to impale him with a two inches thick metallic rod.

Alessa put on a light blue chemisette and blue hot pants. She sat on an old couch and took her texter without saying any word. The texter antennas glowed several times with an arc between them. Minutes later she looked at Udo and said in a whisper "five levels below, there will be a merchandise pick up". In that moment, Klaudia, a stunning blonde with short hair, wearing a red bikini and fake vampire fangs, entered the room; with her big blue eyes wide open she shouted "Udo! My love!"; then both Udo and Alessa made her signs to shut up. Klaudia clinched Udo and kissed him in the neck, slightly piercing him with her fangs. Udo gently walked away from her, with that pain that can only come from overcoming tentation. He left some money on a table and went out in silence, hiding his figure in the shadows that he found in his way.

This time, he could not use the elevator, it would have got too much attention, instead he crawled down stained structures that once were stairs connecting the levels. After a couple hours he got to an abandoned building that he knew sometimes was used by the Lash for secret meetings and goods storage, the place was full of debris and broken bricks. He hid behind a pile of rubble in a corner and waited. Half hour later two Lash members appeared in the building and started to take boxes out of a pantry. Udo approached them from behind, took out a knife and without a sound he stabbed it in the neck of one of the gangsters and stunned the other hitting his head with a brick.

When the beaten gangster woke up, he had a remarkable headache and city lights were up again. His arms and legs were chained to a shackle on the floor and Udo was standing in front of him. They looked at each other in silence and Udo's texter started to beep. When Udo looked at the message, his eyes widened for the impression, and he went out through the door so fast that the gangster had no time to think or say anything.

City lights started turning on in Nineveh's middle-high levels at six in the morning and kept getting brighter until they reached their usual twilight intensity at eight o'clock; by that time as usual there were a lot of people going to work or study in those levels, most of them were normal humans that worked with the Crom elite and struggled to keep up to them. At the beginning, Crows were a close community within the Empire, when they opened to the rest of humans, it became obvious how different they were, not only biologically, but also psychologically and spiritually. With time they placed themselves in the center of power and wealth. They were officially considered a different race of humans; nevertheless, there was sufficient scientific evidence to support the theory that they were actually a different species. That theory seemed extremely realistic to any normal human who had ever witnessed a Crom having a spiritual episode, an experience that could easily leave a human in awe and terror.

People in the middle-high levels were always busy, they walked on those streets looking at their texters, bumping on each other and apologizing without even raise their eyes, often getting electrocuted with their texter's electric arcs. That being the situation, nobody noticed a little boy in dirty clothes, walking slowly and barefoot, towards the main square; until a schoolgirl took the time to look at his face and shouted in horror, dropped her books, and pointed at the boy. Only then people noticed that the boy's face, hands, and feet looked rotten, with shreds of putrid meat hanging from his fingers, and his eyes were, somehow, like cat eyes.

When Udo arrived at the hospital, the cat eyed boy was already in intensive care, as doctors were struggling to understand how he was alive, and how to stop his organs from failing. Decomposition was so advanced, that death was almost certain and imminent. Udo asked for genetic tests to confirm the rotten boy's identity and compare it with those involved in exhumations perpetrated a week before. He waited at the hospital for results and hours later the boy died for multiple organ failure. Genetics tests and other medical procedures practiced on his corpse revealed various unexplainable facts.

Main genetic material from his body belonged to a boy that had died ten years before and was exhumated the same night that Nilso Corv disappeared. His eyes contained genetic material from two different sources, a cat, obviously, and Nilso Corv. Inside the boy's stomach, it was found almost a cup of blood from a woman disappeared twenty-five years before, a human scientist that worked in the upper levels. The boy's original cause of death, ten years before, was haemophilia, but doctors couldn't find any sign of the disease in his genetic material.

Udo went to visit Stacker in the same hospital, neither of both could hide the expression of disbelief in their faces.

Udo asked him, "What do you know about Rebekka Brühl?"

"She was a prominent bio engineer when I was a child, famous for being the higher ranked human scientist working with the Crom elite, it was said that she even had spiritual episodes, like a Crom. She was kind of a hero at that time, friend of the Queen, role model and things like that. But then, her daughter died of haemophilia and she just disappeared, after the funeral she evaporated, sold her house, her car, and left her job, nobody has heard a word about her since. She was working on a cure for haemophilia when her child died. Tragic story."

"I'll go to the Necropolis."

"Wait, how are you in the other matter?"

"I might have a lead, but I must do some shopping first."

The exhumation of Maria Brühl took hours, so it was almost night when Udo verified that her body was not in her grave, impossible to know when she was taken. So, he went shopping to a supermarket that was always open and then back to his apartment. The gangster chained to the floor looked at him with fright when he opened the door. The poor guy had to make his vital needs on the floor and the stench was unbearable. Udo looked at him and said, "It doesn't matter, I'll have to clean later anyway" and closed the door behind him. He sat on the floor near the gangster's feet and took out a plastic bottle from a shopping bag he was carrying; it was sulfuric acid.

Udo took off the gangster's shoes and socks, then started pouring acid drops in his toes. He made it for about ten minutes without saying a word, then made a pause when the guy stopped shouting, because he had fainted and had two toes less than before. Udo waited fifteen minutes

and woke the gangster up with a glass of water on his feet, that made a fetid vapor come out of them. Then he sat on the floor and started pouring acid drops again, this time on the ankles. At some moment, suddenly, the gangster stopped screaming and looked at him, then Udo knew that he was ready.

He just asked the gangster, “When are the Lash going to attack the Qurons, and which base are they going to hit?”

“Tomorrow morning, about five, on Zeppelin Street base at level 66.”

“Thanks, you don’t need to suffer anymore, and I need to clean.”

That said, Udo sliced the gangster’s throat with a curved knife and let him bleed out. He cut the body in three parts, packed the parts in plastic bags and threw them out his bedroom window. There was a reason why Udo had chosen that apartment, and it was that the bedroom window was located directly over a gap in the structure near one of the main pillars of the city, if something fell into it, it would go directly to the lowest levels of Nineveh, at least twenty miles down.

Zeppelin Street was full of Qurons trying to define an interim leader as Karlo “Bitter” Keserü was kidnapped and possibly murdered by the Lash, or so that they thought. It was not possible for Udo to approach enough to make a move, so he waited in an alley nearby, between trash cans and street cats.

Cats in Nineveh were descendants of a race bred in Kish, Nineveh’s sister underground city back on Earth, a couple centuries after the Annihilation War. As radioactivity and nuclear ice ages killed about half of wildlife in the planet and humans retreated to specially designed subterranean cities; rats thrived in underground structures eating carrion from former wild animals, garbage from former cities and practicing sporadic cannibalism, they made their own kingdoms in abandoned subway stations and tunnels, and augmented their size considerably; the same way, cats had a growing population of rats to feed on, and grew bigger for generations until they reached the size of former large dogs. Dogs on the contrary, having their hunting skills numbed after millennia of domestication and selective breeding, failed to adapt to the new scenario and became smaller with each generation, to finally being hunted, and extinguished by cats, rats, and vultures.

It was about that time that Crows started to adopt those wild cats and mix them with the few normal cats that followed humans to the underground city of Kish. As for Crows it was funny and even desirable to be occasionally bitten by a hundred pounds cat, for humans it was really a problem, and even a worse one for the dogs that lived in Kish; but that was then, by the time Nineveh was built, there were no dogs left in Kish, and they have never existed in the glooming Nineveh.

A one-eyed cat, limping because he lacked a front leg, approached Udo’s hideout, with serious intentions of eating some of his flesh. Udo stabbed its neck with a curved knife before the feline could make any noise and reveal his position. Most of those street cats were scarred, dirty and generally scary to look at, but then, a magnificent white cat with shiny fur and big blue eyes appeared in the ally, stared at Udo for a moment but then did not give him more importance.

“Someone is really feeding that cat” thought Udo and saw the feline jump to a building top without making any sound.

In that same building top, a dark rag covered figure appeared with something between a chainsaw and a machine gun in its hands. The Lashes attacked the Quron’s meeting with a small rocket launcher, trying desperately to use the advantage that Bitter’s disappearance had given them. Some minor Lash members thought that they had actually kidnapped and killed Karlo Keserü, and that their leaders were hiding the operation from them to protect it from possible information leaking. But Dario “Necro” Origz, leader of the Lash, knew better, and was seriously worried about the fact that, even if they would have tried to kidnap Keserü they would have never succeeded, and somebody not only had managed to make it right in front of them, but fast and without leaving any

trace. So, as any manager of a large and lucrative organization would have done, Origz focused first on what was within his reach and guided his gang to pursue a possible hegemony over Nineveh's organized crime.

With three rocket impacts an entire building in Zeppelin street collapsed, killing a dozen of Qurons inside, but they quickly counter attacked with grenades and explosive bullets. The Lashes put on gas masks and took out four cylindrical tanks with valves from a truck, getting ready to throw them to the Qurons, when a dense mist covered Zeppelin street. Udo's texter indicated that it had completely lost signal. A couple barely visible beams killed and thorn apart some of the Lash members closer to Origz. He took off his mask and looked in all directions, but the mist was so thick that he couldn't distinguish anything, then a hit on the back of his head knocked him out. From the alley, Udo saw the obscure figure floating up in the mist and reach the top of a building, carrying the body of Necro as it weighted nothing, and jump to the next building top. Udo started running through the allies to follow the kidnapper, but then the white cat appeared in his way.

As the cat ran towards him, Udo's first reaction was to grab his gun, but then a second impulse made him desist. The white cat pounced on Udo's neck, but Udo grabbed one of its front legs and pulled it to a side, so the cat bit him in the shoulder instead, then both fell to the ground and the cat lifted Udo by his shoulder and threw him over some trash cans. Udo realized that his evaluation on the feline's strength was very wrong. The cat jumped and pounced on Udo's head, but he hit its jaw with the lid of a garbage can, knocking it out. He put a tracker in the cat's throat and pushed it, so the cat swallowed it. Udo stood up as he could, slowly walked and disappeared in the gloom leaving the cat unconscious on the alley. He went to the Police Elevator, grabbing his shoulder to stop the bleeding from his wound. Pushed some buttons and went back to the middle levels.

In his apartment, where the smell of sulphur was still fresh, Udo collapsed and fell asleep in the floor of the living room, unable to reach his bed. Before his mind got lost in the black void, he remembered her mother's eyes for the first time in years, big and green, tender, infinite. Her face had dissipated from his memory long before, he was only five the last time he saw her.

Dario “Necro” Origz woke up tied to a pole and sitting on the floor of a room where the only lighting was a small window, through which entered the occasional light from vehicles passing by the street, and there weren’t many vehicles passing by. The Lash leader had implanted obsidian fangs in his upper jaw, his blonde hair was long to his shoulders, except for the sides of his head and his nape, where it was shaved. The sound of moaning and crying, by a voice he recognized, shocked him, because it was someone whom he had never heard, or even imagined that could cry.

“Bitter? Bitter, is that you?”

The crying stopped and the sound of throat clearing replaced it for some seconds.

“Necro, of course, you hired that old witch, you bastard, you didn’t have to do this, we could have negotiated, we...”

And Karlo “Bitter” Keserü continued to cry, desolated by something unknown by Necro. The Quron leader had an obsidian septum piercing in the middle of his nose. His hair was a little longer than Necro’s and black. He commonly used black make up around his eyes, which he generally maintained impeccable and neat; but after hours of crying, it had scattered over a good part of his cheeks and looked like poorly built spiderwebs.

“I have been kidnapped too, stupid... and stop crying, you sound like a little girl...”

Then a car passed by the street and some light came into the room, Necro realized that Bitter, tied to a pole just like him, about ten feet away, had no arms or legs anymore. The deep lament from Bitter’s mouth became a drill in Necro’s psyche, who remained silent for about an hour, listening to the cry of one of the toughest guys he ever met, trembling of fear while thinking about its meaning.

Then he said, “I have a tracker in my boots, in the rubber sole, my soldiers will be here in no time, just wait.”

“There is electronic jamming of some kind in this place, I had a tracker implanted in my left tibia, nobody ever came, and then the witch just cut me with a saw! She made me watch while she fed her cats with my flesh!”

Bitter continued crying, until a white-haired old woman came into the room. Bitter started shouting and moving his stumps frantically as she untied and took him in the air like a baby; then Rebekka carried him out of the room and closed the door behind her. Necro was too terrified to say anything, so he just stared at that small window, looking at that occasional light, from vehicles passing by the street.

Hours later, Rebekka Brühl was staring at the ashes accumulated in her fireplace. Then she collected the ashes in plastic bags and took them outside her house as giant cats played around her legs, and almost made her trip a couple times; she was happy, so the cats were happy. The white

cat, her favourite, had just arrived from its night adventure and she petted its head with her venous, soft hands. She realized that city lights were starting to turn on, so she said to her cats "Is time to sleep", she went to her room and cuddled in her bed with three cats the size of a German shepherd, one black, other yellow-black and the white one. Before she fell asleep, the yellow-black cat started to lick her face; she didn't notice but, the blood of Karlo "Bitter" Keserü that remained in the cat's mouth, got scattered all over her face.

There was a cathedral and a church in Nineveh. The cathedral was in the upper levels and was used almost exclusively by Crows. Christianity there had become a mix of black magic iconography and saint's adoration beyond anything medieval churches or Visigothic heresy ever accomplished. Images of angels and demons mixed with pentacrosses, Baphomets and Heidruns had replaced traditional Christian ornaments. In the centre of it all, there was an image of the Virgin of Halych, Grand Duchess of Krestkrovi with a crown made from a rosary. Crows did their praying in whispers after cleaning their sacred eyes with holly water; nobody spoke out loud in the cathedral, it was a sin, even less the human nuns that cleaned statues, blessed the water, and received confessions in dark cubicles. Except for them, humans considered the cathedral a nightmarish place, and avoided it at all cost.

The church was in the middle levels, most humans and some Crows assisted to its more traditional services. It was open every day of the year and every hour of the day for those in need for spiritual solace. That morning, a nun was walking the passage between the rows of seats and greeting the few attendants when a little girl entered through the church doors without crossing herself. The nun approached the girl with the intention of lecturing her, but then she realized that the girl's face looked putrid, and her eyes were the ones of a cat. "Where is my mom?" asked the girl, as the nun fell to her knees and said a prayer looking at the church's roof.

Udo's texter started to beep and he woke up, he looked at the message from Stacker: "NEW RESURRECTED CHILD, MEET ME AT THE HOSPITAL". He washed his face and went out, with his clothes still covered in dry blood.

Stacker had recently been provided with an electro-mechanical prosthetic forearm in replacement for the one that he had lost.

Udo looked at it with scorn and Stacker said, "It is the same model used by the Empress in Kish."

"She has had it for three hundred years, Stacker."

"Exactly, and it is still functional."

"Not my point... anyway, what do you know about this new resurrection?"

"Genetic analysis shows that her eyes are part feline and part from Bitter Keserü, the body is from a girl dead by haemophilia twenty years ago, and she has a good amount of Rebekka Brühl's blood in her stomach."

"I must talk to her before she dies."

"Interestingly, she is not dying Udo. Her organs are functional despite necrosis, and they are purifying themselves. Doctors say that, with appropriate care she may be entirely healthy in a couple months, and of course, she shows no signs of haemophilia."

"I'll go check on her."

"You should threat those wounds first..."

When Udo arrived outside the girl's room, her father had just entered it and was by the side of her bed, in tears, telling her that her mother had died a couple years ago. Then the father hugged his girl and assured her that she would be fine, that he would take care of her. She reminded her repeatedly, how happy he was that she was back.

Udo listened in silence, connected some dots in his head and went back to Stacker's room.

Once there he hastily said to the Colonel, "Rebekka Brühl is rehearsing to resurrect her daughter and cure her from haemophilia. She has perfected a procedure involving human sacrifice, gang members, black magic, and cat eyes."

Stacker's first reaction was perplexity, then he tried to laugh, but then he actually thought about it. In a world where Queens lived forever and had vulture wings, it wasn't something so crazy.

He just moved his head in approval and added, "Am worried about your wounds Udo, at least treat them before you continue your mission."

"I will, but not here."

Udo went to Military Police Headquarters to check the position of the tracker that he put on the white cat. At the military mainframes' datacentre, a large room full of sparking machines with a constant buzz of electronic processing and fans, a technician explained him that the signal was intermittent and was not reachable at that moment. Udo gave him his texter address and requested that any new position indicated by the tracker be sent to him. Then he passed by Military Police Vehicle Storage, where he borrowed a motorcycle and a helmet.

Udo went to the Exclusive Elevator riding the motorcycle; when he was close, he pressed a button in his card and the Elevator doors opened for him and his vehicle. From there he went to the lower levels and visited the Romanov house.

The Romanov were once nobles and ruled a vast Empire on Earth before the Annihilation War, but Udo knew nothing about that story. Before the rise of the Crom Empress, and centuries after the Annihilation War, they were accused of using witchcraft for political gain. Udo didn't know anything about that either. For Udo, Ksenia Romanova, almost eighty years old, was the white witch that had saved him from death so many times, that he could not pay her back in just one life. If Udo could change just one thing in his life, it would be to save Ksenia's son and his wife from being murdered by the Lashes two years before. The gang took retaliation after they cured a dying boy connected to the Qurons. He was unable to see the signs before that crime and could only make the Lash pay in blood, after it had happened. The couple left a one-year-old baby girl, Kato, short for Katina, and Vanessza, a ten-year-old girl, both now under the care of Ksenia.

By the time the gang war started, Kato and Vanessza, three and twelve respectively, were already taking part in Ksenia's curative sessions and being helpful for the marginalized community of Nineveh's lower levels.

Udo parked his vehicle outside the Romanov house and knocked on the door. Ksenia made him enter and their blue-eyed black cat, Sekhmet, received Udo with purrs and soft scratches. Udo showed her his shoulder; she washed it bluish water and covered the wound with bandages. Then she guided him to an interior room with a bed specially implemented for curative purposes. Udo laid on the bed and Ksenia placed a series of crystals, of different colours and sizes around his body.

Udo closed his eyes and fell asleep immediately. Vanessza and Kato entered the room. Both the girls and their grandmother were wearing white dresses and white pearl chokers. The girls had long reddish blonde hair and blue eyes, Ksenia had dyed her white hair in a dark-blonde tone and looked forty at most. In their wrists, bracelets made of crystals reflected the glooming light. The three of them knelt next to the bed, put their hands together and closed their eyes. Sekhmet joined them, sat by the side of Kato, and closed his eyes too. They said prayers of light, love, and crystals for ten minutes, as their bracelets shone with a violet light. After that, Udo woke up and felt no pain from his shoulder. He thanked them, lit a candle on a modest shrine at the entrance and left the house. As usual, the Romanov did not accept any money for their curative services. They survived with donations made by the community, but not when their services were provided.

Rebekka entered the room where she was keeping Necro Origz prisoner with an axe in her hands.

"The saw is too slow," she said and proceeded to cut Necro's legs with it. The white cat came into the room and started eating the flesh from Necro's legs as he looked in horror and fainted. Then the cat went out, to his final walkaround in this life, breathing Nineveh's rarefied air one last time.

Udo's texter beeped when he was leaving the Romanov house and the message showed the current position of the tracker, two levels beneath him, so he rode on the motorcycle through rusty stairs and emerged like a dragonfly two levels below. Minutes later he spotted the white cat on the top of a building. The cat recognized his smell and started jumping over the rooftops as Udo pursued him from the streets riding his vehicle. Udo turned left on a narrow street, then a four-pound stone impacted his helmet at eighty miles per hour from his left side and threw him unconscious to the pavement; the motorcycle continued running and crashed against a building. Fog covered the street and Rebekka appeared floating by his side; she picked him up and took him to her house.

Nearby, a garbage truck was collecting trash bags from a couple blocks around, accumulated for more than two weeks, and transported them to a dump at the level immediately below. Garbage incineration was programmed for the day after.

In the Qurons main base and headquarters, a signal indicated that the tracker on Bitter's tibia was active again. Half hour later, sixty Qurons, all that remained of them, arrived at the dump, followed by fifty Lash that were keeping an eye on their every movement. For a couple minutes they menaced each other at the edge of a massive shoot out, in front of the confused and terrified gaze of the garbage collectors.

Some Quron said, "Maybe Bitter's remains are in one of those bags."

They looked at each other, unable to immediately digest those words, and then slowly lowered their weapons, all at the same time.

A modified texter indicated distance and direction from the tracking device, so they dug up in the pile of trash until they identified the bag from where the tracking signal was emitted.

Inside the bag, a pile of carbonized bones, blood and ashes made them cross themselves and whisper unintelligible little prayers.

"Are all those bags from the same place?" asked a Quron to a garbage collector.

"Yes... all of them came from the same level this afternoon."

They opened other bags from the same lot and found some debt bills. All of them were addressed to the same street, Halych Avenue, in level 132.

Udo woke up to the sound of an inconsolable cry, he was tied to a pole, sitting on the floor and it was night again. A car passed by the street and a tenuous light allowed Udo to see his surroundings. Necro Origz was tied to a pole with his hands behind his back ten feet from Udo, his legs were no longer attached to his body, they were half eaten and tied with a rope, hanging from the roof, next to the pole that he was tied to. There was a jar under Necro's legs, and another under his body, collecting his blood from both sources, and they were almost full.

"I know you..."

Necro said that without any forces left, just looking at the window, then continued crying and praying to a god he never believed in. Udo tried to reach a small knife he had hidden in the sole of his right boot, especially for those occasions, then Rebekka entered the room with a long thin knife in her hand. She looked at Udo expressionless, almost ignoring him, and squatted in front of Necro. She grabbed Necro's head and carefully took his eyes out its basins. A dense fog entered the room as Necro howled in desperation and fear from the shadows that had already taken his mind.

"Hathor!" said Rebekka and the white cat came through the door already relishing. Hathor made a sharp noise and twitched when he saw Udo, but nothing else. Then approached Rebekka and purred like a kitten.

Rebekka took the jar under Necro's body and filled a small bowl with his blood. Then sprinkled some white powder into the bowl and dipped Necro's eyes in the mix. She gave the eyes to Hathor, who ate them with delight and Necro suddenly stopped crying. Deprived of his soul, Necro's body just ceased functioning and became an empty vessel. Rebekka kissed Hathor's forehead and gave him to drink the rest of the blood in the bowl. Then said "I'm sorry" to the cat. She untied Necro that collapsed like a garbage bag to the floor. Hathor finished the bowl and then ate Necro's face. She untied Necro's legs from the roof and dragged all his remains to another room that was not visible for Udo. There she gave those remains to her black and yellow-black cats.

Hathor had stayed in the dark room with Udo, strangely still, in some sort of trance. As a car passed by the street, Udo saw how the cat collapsed to the ground and his eyes shone blue in that darkness. Rebekka grabbed Hathor's body and dragged it outside the room. Through a corridor she took it to a large room where a transparent capless casket, seven feet long, three feet wide and two feet high, contained the remains of her daughter, Maria Brühl. Only darkened bones and traces of blonde hair lingered from her body, and they were disposed the closer way possible to its original configuration.

That was the most painful part of the process for Rebekka. She took Hathor by the back of his neck and positioned his throat directly over Maria's empty eye basins. She cut the cat's throat and warm blood came out of it, staining the white fur and filling Maria's eye sockets for a moment, then it drained down inside her skull. Rebekka took Hathor's eyes out from its basins and put them in

Maria's eye sockets, then she cut her own left wrist and poured a cup of her blood into her daughter's mouth. She placed Hathor's corpse inside the casquet, over the dark bones.

Then Rebekka went back to the dark room, where Udo had already grabbed the knife from his boot and was cutting the rope around his hands. He stood still when she came into the room, but the old lady didn't pay him any attention. She grabbed the jars with the remaining blood of Necro and took them to the large room. She poured all the remaining blood, almost ten pints into the casket. Blood covered all the casket bottom, touching Maria's bones and some parts of Hathor's corpse. Then Rebekka unfolded four gross copper wires connected to her main electric supply and tied them to four electrodes placed around Maria's body on the bottom of the casket; the electrodes were soaked in blood. Then she pulled a lever in an electric board on the wall and the casket was fed with a thousand Watts.

Electric power passed from wires to electrodes, and from them to Necro's blood, that was in contact with Maria's and Hathor's corpses. Rebekka stood in front of the casket and recited verses in a language created for creatures that glow in the chasms. She raised her hands and green flames elevated from the casket, crossed by shadows of eyes and stars. Hathor's body disintegrated and flowed like liquid mixing itself with Necro's blood and then irrigating Maria's bones. Hathor's eyes in Maria's skull grew to fill her sockets, as putrid eyelids were created around them from Necro's blood and Hathor's flesh. Her bones got connected with each other again and organs grew inside her, feeding on their own putrefaction and purifying the rest of her new flesh. Her blonde hair grew to reach her shoulders, although some locks had a darker tone due to residual decomposition. After a couple minutes, Maria's body took the general appearance that it had at the moment of her death, twenty-five years before, at the tender age of eight.

Green flames over the casket slowly turned blue, then Rebekka pushed the lever on the electric panel and flames disappeared. She grabbed a blanket to warm her daughter's body and approached the casket. Took out the electrodes and caressed Maria's forehead. Her skin had green stains and dark veins were visible all over her body. Maria opened her beautiful blue cat eyes and looked at her mother.

Udo had cut the ropes that imprisoned him and started untying the intricate knots in his left boot laces. His boots were high, stiff, and complicatedly tied, because he had a small twenty-two calibre gun hidden in each of them. Stiffness made the guns harder to detect, and complicated knots provided an extra layer of difficulty for those willing to inspect him. He took the gun out and tied his left boot again. He left the dark room and silently advanced through the corridor with the gun in his hand. There was a green door at one side of the corridor, but he didn't open it and kept advancing towards an illuminated large room ahead of him.

Then Udo felt something that humans were not supposed to feel.

A spiritual episode was a mental state achieved by Crows in which one, or several of them shared their thoughts with another group of individuals, also normally and almost exclusively Crows, reaching a temporary hive mind. It was a modified form of telepathy, in which thoughts and feelings were translated to its approximate equivalent in prose poetry. Prayers in the Cathedral were commonly performed in that state and it was the main reason why talking out loud in there was prohibited, to avoid disturbances or interruptions during the trance, that was described as pleasurable and deeply satisfying by Crows. It could be triggered by emotional states of extreme sadness or happiness.

There were only two known humans capable of performing a spiritual episode and broadcasts their thoughts in poetic form to anyone in their near surroundings: The Virgin of Halych, and Rebekka Brühl.

Udo was advancing through the corridor when his mind was invaded by a female voice. He put a hand on the wall to avoid falling to the ground.

The voice said, "Spikes have torn my flesh since the day you left, my child. Since blood invaded your eyes and took you away from me. I fell from the top of the highest mountain and my skin was peeled with pincers and fire. I sought solace in feline demons we loved so much but their souls are like bottomless wells, in which I find myself drowning too often.

"How could I not imagine your tender soul being tormented by demons in the afterlife. How could I forget the soft touch and tinkling voice that once was a gift from the gods, directly for me, no matter how sour the pains we shared in your sickbed were, they were precious in my heart beyond my understanding.

"I want to say I'm sorry I could not cure you, I want to pour my own blood into your veins and make you live again, I want to give you the most beautiful eyes in the universe and watch you fly from your grave like an angel, bright or dark it doesn't matter to me, because you are my child, and every breath you take is covered in diamond dust and the tips of your fingers make jungles grow in the arid Moon.

"Everything else is just a shadow now that you are with me again."

Udo advanced towards the entrance of the large room, breathing heavily and barely walking. He entered the room pointing his gun forwards and found Rebekka hugging Maria, that was covered with a blanket.

The girl saw Udo and asked her mom, "Mom, who is that man?"

Rebekka turned her head and looked at Udo with tears in her eyes. Until that moment, Udo had only seen Rebekka's face in the gloom of the dark room, so, only in that moment he noticed that her eyes were green, tender, and infinite; just like he remembered his mother's eyes.

Still looking at Udo, Rebekka said, "He is only... looking for what I have behind the green door, baby."

Udo slowly walked backwards until he left the room, always pointing his gun at Rebekka. Once in the corridor he looked in both directions until he identified the front door of the house. The green door was in his way, but he had no intentions of checking what was behind it. He knew what Rebekka was capable of and didn't want his act of mercy to lead him to death; he had to get out of there as soon as possible. He opened the front door and a dozen high-calibre bullets smashed against it. One of them passed through his hand. A hundred gangsters, Qurons and Lashes were waiting on the street, ready to enter the house and annihilate everything inside it.

Udo closed the front door and went back to the large room, but it was empty, Rebekka had already escaped with her child. The gangsters kept firing against the front door, and it was almost destroyed. Then he thought that maybe Rebekka was right about the green door, and he needed whatever was behind it. He opened it and turned on a light switch by its side. It was a storeroom, it had tools of different types and a laser cannon that looked like a chainsaw.

A group of gangsters approached what was left of the front door and a red beam came from behind it, tearing apart the bodies of ten of them and scattering their limbs on Rebekka's front yard. They started firing on the entire facade of the house. Udo went to a room by the side of the front door and took cover under a window. He put the cannon on the window and casted rays that killed two dozen gangsters more. The gangsters set a rocket launcher on a tripod in front of the house, Udo receded to the inner rooms, then a rocket destroyed a big part of the facade, and the gangsters entered the house. Udo went to the kitchen and moved an old refrigerator to the main corridor. Hiding behind the refrigerator, he managed to kill two more dozen gangsters before they threw a grenade to his position. He jumped to the kitchen by his side, but the explosion affected him anyway. Still dazed, he stood up and kept casting rays against the gangsters that gathered outside the kitchen. He received two high-calibre bullet impacts in his left arm but kept firing the cannon, fuelled by an adrenaline rush. The laser cannon started to glow red and burned his hands on contact. He threw it to the ground and hid behind a cabinet. Then his wounds started to affect him; he sat on the floor, almost fainting.

By that moment, almost all remaining gangsters were inside Rebekka's house. A dense mist invaded the street and entered the house. The kitchen window burst and Rebekka came through it, floating in that fog. Udo, barely conscious looked up and saw her green eyes shining in the strange mist. She grabbed him by the armpits and lifted him like a child. Both went out through the kitchen window and flew over the rooftops. The laser cannon exploded like a small thermonuclear bomb, erasing four blocks around Rebekka's house. Udo saw the fire from the distance, as Rebekka was already half mile away, carrying him while flying near the upper limit of that level. He tried to hug her, as a reflex to avoid falling from her grip, but his failing strength did not allow it.

Udo looked at a building top and saw a creature that can be described as a big octopus, but it had arthropod legs between its arms. There was a person, without legs or arms tied to the beast, and their heads were connected by wires. The fog was coming from the cephalopod's tentacles. Rebekka stretched out her hand, covered Udo's eyes and turned his head to the other side.

"Don't look at that, it'll just give you nightmares."

Rebekka flew down and carefully left Udo laying at the doors of Military Police Exclusive Elevator. She looked at him and smiled, unable to dissimulate her happiness, then flew away and got lost in the misty darkness. Udo pressed a button in his card and the elevator came down to that level. Once there, the doors opened, and Udo crawled inside the machine. The elevator closed its doors and moved up. Laying on the metallic floor, Udo saw Nineveh's lower levels passing down by

his side. He texted Stacker to inform the situation and ask for medical help. Before fainting, Udo asked himself if he or Rebekka were worthy of the mercy that they had offered each other. He realized that he was in no position to pass judgment on anybody.

STORY II

Vilacon

1

A young redhead woman wearing an almost transparent dress and fake fairy wings was chained to a rock higher than her. In front of her, and on their knees, there were three figures dressed in black lace robes that covered their bodies from head to feet. They were reciting verses in a language that she did not understand. Behind them, fifty gang members wearing black but ununiform clothes were kneeling in silence. The verses ended and one of the figures in robes stood up and opened a box by the side of the altar. From the box came a creature. It was reminiscent of a phasmid, but much thinner and longer. The creature was seven feet long, without counting the antennas, that were at least five feet long. It was light green and had eight thin legs, three to four feet long each. The average diameter of its body was two inches. It advanced towards the chained girl as the robed figure returned to its place in front of her. The way the creature moved and looked at her with black, cold, slanted eyes made the woman feel panic beyond her control and she started squealing in horror to that vision.

The creature climbed on her body and got to her face. Then it punctured the girl's left eye with one of its spidery legs and entered her skull through her left eye basin. The girl suffered spasms for some seconds and then she started pouring black liquid from her mouth. Her arms fell to the ground and from her shoulders came out two pairs of thin black arthropod legs. From her back came out a pair of real wings like those of a moth but transparent and full of black veins. Her right eye became black, and a new black eye grew in her left basin. The son of an Angel had possessed her body and she herself had become an Angel.

She started working immediately, clouding the vision of the oracles in Kish, hundreds of millions of miles away.

It was Tuesday morning, gears were rolling on the middle-upper levels of Nineveh, especially in the banking section, where three finance corporations pulled the market and got their share of the pie. It was a place to find Crooms and humans united by the same religion, language, and purpose: money. They all dressed in the same modern elegance and walked with the same arrogance, regardless of race. In the middle of it all, the Central Bank of the Empire, the bigger of the three banks operating in the area, a corporation spread among worlds and older than most of them.

From its inception, data science that allowed the oracles in Kish to see future events was closely intertwined both technologically and conceptually with the art of accounting. As a result, among the relevant events that oracles were able to predict, the easiest for them to visualize were those involving financial crisis, currency devaluation and of course, large bank robberies. For that reason, it was believed that committing burglary against a bank, something bigger than smuggling a couple marks from its desk, was impossible; it would be foreseen for the oracles and prevented by police, as it had happened several times. In fact, there had been no large bank robbery in the Empire for four centuries.

If for some reason, a criminal or terrorist organization would be planning on perpetrate an attack on a scale big enough to destabilize the Empire, like destroying a major city, they would have to cloud the vision of the oracles before starting any operation, otherwise their intentions would be foreseen, and their efforts would be stopped. If they would had acquired or manufactured a device or entity capable of jamming the oracles' perception, the simpler way to test it would be to rob an important bank. Of course, the money acquired would help their cause.

People were coming in and out of the neo-gothic building of the Central Bank, when they noticed an unknown vehicle floating in the air in front of the Bank's facade. Guards came from inside the bank and pointed their guns to the object. It was a metallic disc, twelve feet of diameter and five of thickness, floating horizontally twenty feet above the ground. In its lower face it had a series of circular devices, probably for propulsion. In its upper face it had two thick and mobile cannons, one to each side. On its top it had a hatch, probably to access its interior. The flying saucer opened fire against the Central Bank facade and destroyed its front doors. The guards shot against the disc, but bullets rebounded on its surface. The saucer advanced without a sound and entered the bank as people ran from it in panic.

A gangster squad dressed in black, armed with automatic rifles appeared and killed the guards while they were distracted by the saucer. Then they captured the remaining functionaries at the building and gathered them in front of the saucer, that was floating over the marble floor of the bank's reception. A deep, almost guttural voice, came from the saucer and demanded the higher ranked officer in the bank to identify itself, otherwise, they would start killing people. In fact, the gangsters killed two functionaries immediately after the declaration. A bald middle-aged man came forward and said that he was the Chief Financial Officer of that branch. The hatch on top of the saucer opened and from its interior came a figure dressed in a black lace robe, covering its entire

body. The figure stood over the flying disc and jumped down to the floor, then walked towards the bald officer. The dark figure was unexpectedly short, four feet and eight inches at most.

It stood in front of the officer and said with an infantile feminine voice, "I need the password for the vault."

The Chief Financial Officer laughed, both from nervousness and shock caused by the unexpected voice tone from the dark figure in front of him.

After some seconds he recomposed and answered, "I'll never give it to you, and you can't force the vault, its walls are five feet thick and made of steel. Military Police will be here at any moment."

"I know..."

Then the dark figure folded out her hands, that were covered in black leather gloves. She took off the glove from her right hand and stretched her arm to touch the forehead of the officer with her palm. Her hand was pale, and her nails were sharp, painted red. In seconds, the vital force of the officer abandoned his body and passed through his forehead to the white hand touching it. His body became ash and collapsed inside his clothes leaving a mound on the marble floor. The dark figure headed towards the armoured vault and entered the password that she had acquired from the officer's brain, in a keyboard on the wall.

The vault opened and the gangsters took out six thousand million marks which they loaded on the flying saucer. Then the gangsters scattered in various directions, the dark lace covered figure re-entered the saucer and it silently flew away from the bank. Military Police arrived at the scene led by a fully recovered Colonel Misan Stacker, proudly showing his left mechanical forearm. They followed the saucer, but it had a lot of advantage and was faster than their vehicles.

The flying disc entered through a wide gate on a building with the name "Vilacon" written in a neon sign on its facade. The gate closed behind it. There were two individuals inside the saucer, both dressed in black lace robes, one the size of a grown man and the other the size of a little girl. The controls in front of them allowed either of them to govern both the vehicle and its weapons. Normally one pilot took control of navigation and the other one controlled the cannons; but it could be done by just one person. The little one, the same that had opened the bank vault, took off her robe and leather gloves. She looked like a twelve-year-old human girl, but she was fifty-two as her growth had been stopped at an early age for occult purposes. She had blonde curly hair long to her waist, green eyes, and a black spider tattoo, looking upwards in the middle front of her neck. Under the robe she was dressed in a red silk dress, full of creases, like those used by French courtesans before the revolution. Her name was Mactra and was a known witch, but she was secretly one of the darkest ones in of Nineveh.

"Take control, am coming out," she said to her co-pilot.

She opened the hatch and jumped from the saucer. She combed her hair with her pale hands and walked to the main hall of her establishment. There was loud music and flashing lights. An army of women dressed in tiny or semi-transparent apparel, complemented with fake wings were dancing, serving clients with mysterious beverages, or leading them to private rooms. The Vilacon was a thematic cabaret inaugurated two years before. The name came from the contraction of

“Vila”, a Slavic breed of fairy or nymph, and “Complex”, alluding to its thematic concept: beautiful women pretending to be fairies. In a world where magic had lost part of the veil that separated it from science, it was an alluring theme. Mactra ran the place, providing it with the fragrance of real magic. It was open at all hours, like a church.

The saucer crossed corridors of the Vilacon until it reached a large room with surrealist paintings on its walls. One of those walls opened inwards showing a wide descending passage, the saucer entered the passage, and the wall came back to its original position. Outside the eastern armour of the known structure of the city, the saucer descended eighty levels on a pit carved directly on the rock, to reach a secret facility where it was unloaded and stored. The facility worked as a military unit with a bunkhouse, kitchen, and arsenal. It also had an altar and a series of dungeons. It belonged to the local Nineveh branch of a feverish cult known as “The Society of Truth”, born in Krestkrovi, an underground city in Proxima Centauri.

Stacker and his squad, pursuing the saucer, arrived on a street with fancy restaurants and the Vilacon at the end, attached to the city’s outer armour. They asked in the restaurants, but as the saucer had a silent flight, and it was always dark in Nineveh, the few people that noticed it could not say in which direction it had gone. They got to the end of the street and the only place left to check was the Vilacon. The guards at the entrance were wearing suits and opened the door for the police almost with a reverence.

Mactra received Stacker with a kiss in each cheek; the Colonel took off his hat, bent down to kiss her and immediately felt that the inspection was a complete waste of time. The Vilacon had escaped the bad reputation associated with lower levels’ brothels. Even when prostitution was practiced at the Vilacon, it was considered to be significantly safer there than in other establishments, for both parts involved. Most of its clients were there to enjoy the stunning shows and socialize with the financial community that famously spent every Friday night there. Some Saturdays only couples were allowed, and some serious members of the upper community took their wives there to have a slightly erotic date with high quality music and dancing. Stacker himself had invited his wife there a couple times and she had loved the place. Of course, Mrs. Stacker didn’t know how wild of an animal Misan was before they met.

“What can I do for you Monsieur Stacker?” said Mactra with a fake French accent.

“I am looking for a flying... disc, Mademoiselle Mactra” replied Stacker, following her game.

Mactra laughed out loud, moved her right hand drawing a circle in the air, the light around her hand seemed to be absorbed into it, casting curved shadows for a moment, and the girl by her right side, dressed in a transparent camisole and black moth wings floated in the air, moving her wings, and smiling to Stacker.

“I can only offer you a flying Vila, Monsieur.”

Stacker laughed too, a little ashamed and ordered his squad to leave the cabaret. Mactra carefully put the girl down and retired to her office. Inside a large cabinet in her office there was an elevator that led directly to the secret facility, eighty levels below.

Udo Karvallat was in his new house in the middle-upper levels of Nineveh. The place was assigned to him by Military Police Department for the duration of his “advisory” job for them. He had installed armoured doors and iron bars in all windows. He had also implemented a crematory for “garbage” disposal. Hidden in the front yard, he had placed two machine guns connected to motion sensors, that could be activated from inside the house.

His head was shaved, he had grown a full and messy beard in which grey hairs had started to appear. Someone knocked weakly on his door. He opened and a blonde woman, with hair long to her shoulders and black eye makeup scattered all over her cheeks looked at him. It was Klaudia, a prostitute friend from the lower levels. She was so skinny that he did not recognize her at first. She hugged him and started crying. He made her enter and ask her to calm down.

They sat on a sofa and she said to him in a sob, “They had kidnapped Alessa.”

“They who? When?”

“That new gang, like a cult, yesterday.”

She was talking about the Society of Truth, that had an operation in the lower levels. When the Qurons and Lashes disappeared, they filled the power vacuum and took the lower levels by force. Their methods were brutal, their members were fanatics that believed in a utopia with every bit of their souls, and nevertheless, they never discussed its details outside the cult, except to proselytize. They only talked about it with those that shared their same twisted fanaticism or were prone to it. Disappearances became usual down there, Udo heard one of them say “the beast needs to be fed” and rumours of ritual cannibalism had spread since they appeared. Another rumour said that, to be accepted in the cult, applicants must kidnap a person and offer it as “sacrifice”, but its real meaning was unclear. In this new scenario, Udo had only a limited access to information, rules had changed and were diffuse, unintelligible for him.

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“Two days ago, in Mercedes Street, level 66. A new handler took her a week ago, but I heard him say that he was entering the cult and would be rich in no time. He mentioned that he had to pay the price for initiation but preferred to pay it with new ‘merchandise’.”

“Why did she go to Mercedes? That is a dangerous place... Anyway, what’s the name of the guy?”

“Volodia, he wanders all day in Mercedes Street, he uses a red jacket with the number “666” on its back, he has no hair or beard.”

“Stay here, there’s food in the refrigerator, make yourself at home.”

Udo went out and his texter beeped, Stacker needed him at Police Headquarters. Udo took his new motorcycle and rode there. Stacker received him with a handshake and a hug. Taking down the

most important gangs in the lower levels was a remarkable achievement, and all the glory fell on Stacker for coming up with the idea of contracting Udo's "advisory". Udo was still seen as a dangerous outcast, but as he had Stacker's approval, he was provided with almost anything that he asked for.

Stacker informed him about the bank robbery, and how it had become a delicate issue, not only for the money involved but also because of what it meant in terms of security, and how it compromised the reach of the oracles in Kish.

"The new gang may be involved," said Udo to Stacker.

"The 'Crazy Cannibals of Truth'?"

"Those same. I've seen them, they wear black clothes, and use automatic weapons, just like the ones that robbed the bank."

"And the disc? How does it fit with them?"

"That I don't know, but crazy people and crazy machines, can easily fit together."

Stacker approved Udo's mission and he received a good amount of money assigned to it. Udo visited a gun shop, and then went down to level 66, to perform a hunt on Mercedes Street.

Mactra went down to the secret facilities of the Society of Truth using the elevator in her office. When she got there, the other pilot of the saucer was taking off his black robe. His skin was covered in black scales, like a reptile; he had four curved horns on his head and his eyes were black, with a red vertical line as pupil in each. His clothes were mere black rags, decoloured and crossed by grey stains. His name was Sakánor and was Mactra's mentor as well as a demonic entity. She smiled at him, but he didn't pay her any attention, he was upset about something.

The third robed figure in the possession ceremony advanced towards Mactra and took off her lace robe too. A beautiful woman in her thirties, wavy dark blonde hair long to her feet, soft white skin; and the deeper blue eyes in the Empire. Her name was Cora Orsic and was the founder of the Society of Truth. She had inherited a powerful industrial corporation in Krestkrovi, after her father died in strange circumstances five years before. Since then, she had developed ground-breaking technology for mining and transport, in her own words "inspired by supernatural creatures". Some of her secret prototypes included flying saucers and a new form of extradimensional travel. She was wearing an exquisite yet sober black silk dress. She hated Crows and all that they represented, nevertheless, she never hesitated to use them for her own purposes.

Cora was upset too. She didn't even look at Mactra, passed by her side, took a large bag and filled it with half of the money robbed from the Central Bank.

"I'll take this to Krestkrovi in the morning," said Cora, "at least not everything was a fiasco."

"What happened?" asked Mactra, increasingly worried.

Cora closed the bag and looked at Mactra, furious.

"Allátik, son of the Angel Vadállat is dying inside the harlot that you gave him to possess."

Mactra opened her eyes wide for the impression.

Cora continued, "The girl has rot, Allátik can't come out of her, the power has faded. I was stupid enough to trust you to find a suitable vessel for him."

"We've been feeding him with that kind of girls the entire last year, it was never a problem," replied Mactra.

"It's not the same for possession, the host soul must be strong and pure enough to endure the constant transmutation. I must have said something when I saw her dressed like that, but I never thought that you would use a girl from your brothel for this."

That last comment deeply offended Mactra; having her respectable, artistic, and snobbish cabaret compared with a brothel was something that she was not going to tolerate. She floated in the air and flew to the altar, as Cora and Sakánor followed her. Her demonic mentor only allowed her to keep the cabaret going because it was an easy way to get human flesh to feed on, but he had

never set foot there. He had lied to and used her all her life, but her tantrums were never easy to handle for him.

Mactra floated in front of the rotten body of the girl, still with semi-transparent moth wings but they had acquired a nearly black tone. Mactra's hands got surrounded by shadows and she ripped the chains that imprisoned the girl to the rock. She laid her on the floor and took out a curved knife from her dress. She opened the girl's chest and opened her ribs wide. Allátik was there, his skin had turned opaque as well as his eyes. Mactra made a deep longitudinal cut in her left wrist and feed the vermin with her blood. Cora and Sakánor appeared by her side. Allátik regained his colours and crawled outside the rotting body of the girl, he had shrunk to only three feet long.

Cora took him in her arms, caressed his antennas and said, "He needs to be fed, immediately."

"He will be fed; I'll give him one of my "harlots". But first you'll show some respect. Do you even know the difference between a brothel and a cabaret? Of course not, the world you've seen is too limited."

"Sakánor, can't we give Allátik flesh from sacrifices, and forget about the 'Cabaret'?"

"We ran out, they were all consumed by the other beast" answered the demon.

"It seems that you owe me an apology, Cora."

"What do you have in mind, witch?"

"Send your money to Krestkrovi, but stay here, tomorrow night you are invited to witness the biggest show on the Empire, at the Vilacon."

"I can't be seen in a brothel."

"It's a Cabaret!!... and later I'll give Allátik a suitable vessel, to create an Angel that will live forever."

"In that case I'll stay and see your show," Cora thought for a second and added, "a nun would do, but a young white witch would produce a remarkable Angel."

"Then I'll bring you the whitest witch, so white that she glows in tones of violet."

"Good, now feed him with one of your 'artists'."

Mactra went up to the Vilacon and called one of the girls to her office. She knew which ones had family or friends and the ones nobody would miss. The girl she called was in that last group. She drugged her with a cup of wine and took her to the secret elevator inside the big cabinet. Half hour later, the girl was devoured by Allátik, son of an Angel. As every time she did that, Mactra felt a part of her soul died with the girl, but she never told anyone.

Alessa was chained to a bed by her right wrist. She had been there for two days, in a filthy apartment on Mercedes Street, at level 66. The left side of her face had several bruises. Her captor, Volodia, was shaving his head and face while eating a sandwich made of rat meat. When he finished, he sent her a kiss and went out of the apartment wearing a red jacket with “666” printed on the back.

Volodia went down to the street and gathered with other delinquents on a corner. He handed some money to one of them and received a small plastic bag with three pills inside. Then he went back to his building, up the stairs and headed to his apartment; he heard some noise in his way up but paid no attention. Udo’s motorcycle had been parked two blocks away since an hour before Volodia came down to buy. Volodia stood in front of his apartment door and heard a noise to his left, in the direction of the building stairs. He thought he saw a shadow move but he couldn’t distinguish anything strange in that direction. He took out a keychain from his pocket and put a key in the door lock, with his right hand. In that moment, a machine gun discharge disintegrated his right forearm and he fell to the ground in pain. Udo approached Volodia and put the barrel of his machine gun under Volodia’s chin. Udo pushed, the barrel got buried in Volodia’s jaw and dragged him three feet on the ground until blood soaked his neck.

“Is she in there?” asked Udo.

Volodia emitted a sound vaguely similar to a “yes” and Udo pulled the trigger, scattering Volodia’s brain on the floor. The key was still in the door lock, so Udo turned it, entered the apartment, and kept the keychain. Alessa burst into tears at the sight of Udo, as she had remained strong to that moment. In the keychain, Udo found the key to open the chain’s padlock and liberated Alessa. They went out of the building and found some delinquents dead in a corner, killed by Udo before rescuing Alessa. They ran towards Udo’s vehicle. Udo hid the machine gun in his jacket and mounted his motorcycle, Alessa mounted behind him and hugged his waist.

They rode to the Exclusive Military Police Elevator. Udo pushed a button in his identification card and the Elevator door opened for him. He took her to his house in the middle-upper levels. Once inside he prepared her a cup of coffee and something to eat. Klaudia was sleeping on the couch and they didn’t want to wake her up, so they went to the kitchen.

They sat on metallic chairs and Udo asked her, “What were you doing in Mercedes Street?”

“I was rejected at the Vilacon, so was Klaudia, ‘too many friends, too many contacts’ Mactra said, and gave me that direction to be handled by Volodia. Klaudia refused to go there, and she had starved since. The lower levels had become nightmarish, even for us.”

Udo hated Mactra, something about her did not fit in his head, he thought it was the spider tattoo, but maybe it was his instinct functioning properly. He had visited the Vilacon on several occasions but had always avoided talking to her.

“Why would Mactra send you to an applicant for the Society of Truth?”

“That’s the funny part, a week ago he wasn’t, then a little girl appeared looking for food in the trash cans and gave him a direction to contact the cult, in exchange for food. Then she approached me and said that she lived at level 121 and that her mother was dying. She told me the street and apartment where she lives, and that what she really wanted was... your blood, Udo.”

“You mean that she wants to kill me?”

“No, she wants to drink your blood.” Alessa hesitated before continuing. “Her teeth were dark blue, like rotten, and she was a Crom.”

“A Crom girl in the lower levels?”

“Exactly.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I don’t want you to get your blood sucked, at least not by those rotten teeth, she was the creepiest looking creature I’ve ever seen.”

Klaudia had woken up, and was listening to their conversation from the kitchen door, unnoticed, then she interrupted it:

“She used to work at the Vilacon.”

Klaudia and Udo looked at her with surprise, both because they didn’t know that she was listening and for what she had just said.

“Not that way, she is too young. Her name is Tigris, and she used to do Tarot readings there, until a year ago, then she disappeared. Creepy girl, and I am not afraid of Crows.”

Udo prepared himself a coffee as Klaudia hugged Alessa and put ice in her bruises.

Alessa asked him, “Will you go to her?”

“I don’t know, is certainly not a tempting invitation.”

Ksenia Romanova lived in level 106, she was eighty years old and had two granddaughters whose parents had died three years before: Vanessza and Katina “Kato” Romanova, thirteen and four years old, respectively. They assisted her in her service as white witch for the impoverished community of the lower levels of Nineveh.

That Tuesday evening, Mactra travelled alone in the flying saucer, accompanied on the ground by a small squad of cult members. She arrived at the Romanov house, made the saucer descend on the street, and came out of it through its hatch. She was wearing the full body black lace robe and leather gloves, to protect herself from the luminous power of the white witches.

Ksenia sensed her dark presence, then she and the girls receded to the inner rooms of the house and knelt side by side to pray. Their black cat, Sekhmet, that was the size of a Rottweiler, joined them and sat on the floor by the side of Kato. Ksenia and the girls had bracelets made of crystals, and they shone violet, filling the room with light as they started praying. Mactra ordered her soldiers to open fire and they destroyed the house facade and a little shrine at the entrance with a rain of lead. Two of them entered the house carrying machine guns, searching for the Romanovs, until they found the room where they were praying.

When the violet light reached their naked eyes, they released their weapons and fell to the ground on their knees. They looked up and repented for sins of thought and action, feeling a warmth they’ve never felt in their lives. They put their hands together and cried bitter tears of joy and pain simultaneously. Mactra arrived at the room entrance and the violet light burned in her eyes and skin, even through the thick lace veil. She endured it and grabbed one of the machine guns on the floor, then receded to the other room to avoid the light. After some seconds she entered again and killed the two cult members that were praying on their knees, for their weakness. Then she receded again.

As she could, Mactra pointed the gun to Ksenia from behind the room entrance, with only the barrel of the weapon inside the room and pulled the trigger. The bullet impacted in Ksenia’s shoulder and the three Romanov stopped praying. The light vanished and Mactra entered the room with the machine gun in her hands as Vanessza, Kato and Sekhmet dragged Ksenia to a wall behind them and rested her back on it. To their left side, there was a door that led to a room especially implemented for curative sessions, it was full of crystals and semi-precious stones.

Without saying a word, Mactra grabbed Vanessza by an arm and tried to drag her away from the wall. Sitting on the floor, Ksenia bent a little forward and grabbed Mactra’s leg with her naked hand from under the lace robe and silk dress, touching her naked skin. Mactra’s eyes closed, and she collapsed backwards.

“Hide in there,” said Ksenia pointing to the healing room with her head.

“No, babushka,” replied Vanessza, unwilling to leave her grandmother alone with Mactra.

“She wants you, not me.”

Vanessza, Kato and Sekhmet entered the healing room and closed the door. They put a pile of crystals on the floor and knelt behind them forming a line; first Vanessza, behind her Kato and finally Sekhmet. That way the dark witch could not shoot on anyone except for Vanessza, and she needed her alive. They started praying and the light from their bracelets was reflected by the crystals on the floor, producing a blinding violet glow.

Mactra opened her eyes and kicked Ksenia on the chest, making her impact her back on the wall and let go her leg. The dark witch stood up, took the machine gun from the floor, and opened the door of the healing room. The blinding light made her close the door immediately. Besides, she couldn't shoot Kato or Sekhmet without risking killing Vanessza. Ksenia looked at her from the floor and said:

“Poor child, you've been deceived your whole life.”

“Shut up witch, Vanessza! Surrender yourself!”

“You crave for light in the dark cave they force you to live, so you turn any spark into a firefly to warm your eyes in the cold vacuum. You cherish them and secretly cry when you have to kill one, to keep the rest.”

Mactra looked at Ksenia with a mix of fear and shame.

Ksenia continued, “You should know that your mother did not give you away, Mactra, Sakánor killed her and took you from her side, you remember it, but is buried under the scar of a wound so painful, that you don't want to open it.”

Mactra felt horror, and remained still for a couple seconds, then she hit Ksenia's head with the bottom of the machine gun.

The old Romanov lady fainted and Mactra shouted at the door of the healing room, “Vanessza, surrender yourself or I'll kill your grandmother!”

Then the dark witch pointed the barrel of her weapon to Ksenia's head.

Vanessza said, “Keep praying,” to Kato, came out of the healing room and stood in front of Mactra.

The dark witch closed the door behind Vanessza, to hide the light coming from Kato, then took a part of her black veil and tried to cover Vanessza's bracelets with it, to prevent her from using them.

Vanessza said, “First, let Sekhmet carry my grandmother to the other room.”

“How do I know that you won't escape after?”

“Because I promise that I'll go with you, I don't break my promises.”

“Fine.”

“Sekhmet!”

The black cat came out, carefully took Ksenia by an arm with his jaws and dragged her to the healing room. Then Vanessza offered her wrists to Mactra and she covered the bracelets with black lace, as she could not touch them, even with gloves on.

They boarded the flying saucer and Mactra took Vanessza to the secret facilities of the Society of Truth, through a heavily guarded entry, down there in the lower levels.

Kato and Sekhmet prayed for about fifteen minutes before Ksenia could recover her consciousness. Mactra did not tell anyone and stayed in denial for a while, but she actually remembered the day that Sakánor killed her mother.

Night came in the city of gloom; lights went down to almost total obscurity. Udo was preparing a room for Klaudia and Alessa, as it wasn't safe for them to return to the lower levels, when someone knocked on his door. He found a bittersweet surprise when he opened it. Ksenia Romanova, her granddaughter Kato and her cat Sekhmet had come to his house for refuge. He made them enter and his first question was "where is Vanessza?". Ksenia told him what had happened and how Mactra was deeply involved with the Society of Truth. Then Udo told her his dilemma about the enigmatic Crom girl called Tigris.

"I feel that, if I go to see that girl, I'll be putting myself in a danger that I can't understand; but at the same time, I feel that I have no choice but to go there. I have no intel on the cult, or the Vilacon, or Mactra, and I need it before making any move," said Udo.

"Your instincts are right," replied Ksenia, "the moment that you enter that girl's apartment, you'll be in a danger beyond your knowledge or experience. There is no way you can protect yourself against Tigris. At the same time, she is your best chance to interfere with the plans of the cult, and I feel those plans go way beyond bank robbery. It makes sense that Tigris wants your blood, in exchange for information. She had been neglected by the cult. The Society of Truth is like any other organized religion, there is a superior spiritual entity, in this case many of them, there are followers mesmerized by those entities and in the middle, there is a church, that channelize that devotion to make profit, pursue causes, provide hierarchy, and organize spiritual exchanges between the gods and the believers. From time to time, an alien prophet comes into play, capable to communicate directly with the gods and make the whole hierarchy tremble. That prophet is Tigris's mother, Euphrat, now dying in her sickbed as her daughter starves."

"How do you know all this?"

"I peeked into Mactra's mind this evening. I saw how Tigris and her brother were stars performing in someone else's show. Cora Orsic, dark priestess of Krestkrovi, hates Crows, she actually started the cult as an excuse to spit her hate on Crows' faces. She did not appreciate Euphrat making pacts and elevating her children to levels Cora herself would never reach, and the fact that they are Crows made it much worse. So, when things went wrong for Euphrat, her son ran away and a delicate, extremely relevant ritual was left unfinished, Cora, Mactra and other high members of the cult, just turned their backs on her. They didn't need to do anything to bring her down anymore, they just let the demons consume her as she rots in her bed. And they just forgot about Tigris. That is an entirely different story, they literally can't do anything to her, she will not die until her brother comes back and the ritual is complete; no matter how much she starves, she can't die. It's been a year already."

"Why me? Why my blood?"

"That I don't know, Tigris will have to explain that herself."

That said, Ksenia handed Udo a white crystal, about two inches long.

“Will this protect me from Tigris?”

“Nothing would, Udo; that may help you bring my Vanessa back, it can absorb darkness if you pray for it. I don’t have much time left in this life; my heart has been failing since I was a child, it had refused to heal completely and now my time is running out. I hope you can perform this miracle and let me see her again before I die.”

“What about Mactra, how dangerous she really is?”

“She is trapped in a dilemma, accept a painful truth, or wrap herself in a comfortable lie. She doesn’t only look like a child, she thinks like a child and worries about childish things, like status, appearances and opinions. Why else would she have a cabaret if she hasn’t even grown a woman herself?”

“What do I do about her then?”

“Tell her the truth when she needs to hear it. She will listen.”

Udo prepared a room for the Romanovs and slept in the couch that night. Nightmares of witches and cats tormented and prepared him for the next morning.

Down in the secret facilities of the Society of Truth, Mactra presented Vanessa Romanova to Sakánor and Cora Orsic. They took her to a dungeon and chained her neck to a wall, through a twenty feet long chain; that would give her enough mobility to sleep on the stone floor.

Cora looked at Vanessa for minutes with her deep blue eyes, mesmerized by her power. Then she said to Mactra, “Her glow is too powerful, it may damage Allátik, I will prepare a potion to attenuate it. Tomorrow night, after your show, we will create an Angel that will live forever, indeed.”

Wednesday morning. Udo went down to level 121 in his motorcycle; following instructions from Alessa, he parked it on a lonely street and entered a building. He went upstairs to the third floor and knocked on a specific apartment. The door opened and a girl in a white gnawed dress appeared in front of him. She looked twelve, her hair was blonde, straight, and long to her knees; her skin was extremely white, her fingernails were two inches long and she was barefoot. She was obviously a Crom, as the sclera in her eyes was dark gray and composed by thousands of ommatidia. Instead of iris and pupil, her eyes had each a black eight-pointed star, which rays reached the edges of the eye, and superimposed over the star, a red vertical line from the tip of its upper ray to the tip of the lower one, passing through the center of the star and therefore the center of the eye. A putrid smell came from the apartment, Tigris Báthor looked at Udo from head to toe and said: "come in" with indifference. Udo entered; she closed the door behind him and pointed to an old sofa. Udo sat on the sofa and she approached a door that led to her mother's bedroom, a whispering wail came from there as Tigris closed that door. Then the girl went to a window and opened it wide. The air in the room cleared a bit and Tigris sat on a couch in front of Udo. There was a coffee table between them. On the table, closer to Udo, there was an empty cup and a curved knife. On the couch, next to Tigris, there was a notebook and a pencil. A skinny black cat, with only one red eye and the size of a German Shepherd, jumped to the couch and sat next to Tigris.

The feline bit her left hand, she allowed him to suck some of her blood and then said, "Not now Azag, I'm busy."

The black cat released her hand and jumped out through the window without a sound.

Then she showed her dark-blue, black stained teeth to Udo and said, "You'll die in seconds if I bite you, the only one capable of withstanding my venom is my brother, Nimrod, but he is away, out of reach. I crave for the blood of those who can face death and show mercy at the same time, like my brother, like you. If you fill that cup with your blood and give it to me, I'll tell you everything and anything within my knowledge. If you refuse, I'll have to drink half rotten blood from the remains of your body."

Udo took the knife and made an incision in his left wrist, longitudinally. He poured blood into the cup until it was full, then carefully pushed it closer to Tigris. The girl took the cup and swallowed its content in seconds, relishing.

Then she put the cup on the table, wiped her lips with her tongue and asked Udo, "Are you a religious man Mr. Karvállat?"

"No."

"But you believe in the white witches and their prayers, don't you?"

"I've seen their power with my own eyes, applied to my own body. There's no faith involved."

"Exactly. Imagine gods and demons were real and you could see them with your own eyes, you'll need no faith to realize how insignificant we are compared to them."

"I suppose, but... listen to me, I need to find a kidnaped girl, precisely a white witch, and stop the Society of Truth, your... 'revelation' is not helping me."

"First you must know what you are dealing with, you think that they are a gang, that they rob banks, that they kidnap girls. Those are just preparations. Have you noticed what is just two levels directly over the Vilacon?"

"Mmmh... the upper nuclear reactor?"

"Exactly, you can blow half of Nineveh just by placing a pound of dynamite inside the reactor. The Vilacon is attached to the eastern outer armour of the city, they had already drilled a structure in the rock outside the armour, but they've been forced to dig downwards, because the moment they start digging towards the reactor, the oracles in Kish would perceive their plans and they would be exposed. That why they need Vanessa."

Udo was sure that he hadn't mentioned the name of the kidnapped Romanov girl. He assumed that they had planned the kidnapping in advance and that Tigris knew about it.

"But why? Why would Mactra want to do something like that?"

"She doesn't, she is in a permanent state of denial since she was six and Sakánor initiated her."

"Who is Sakánor?"

"From our point of view? A demon, from hers, something like a father."

"My god..."

"I thought you were not a religious man."

"So, is he behind all this?"

"Yes, and Cora Orsic, an industrial leader from Krestkrovi."

"But why would they want to destroy Nineveh?"

"I already told you, we are insignificant in front of the gods, Angels, and demons; that is the truth behind the Society of Truth. The problem is that Cora thinks it is something political, that somehow our insignificance makes us all uniformed minions, that we all owe them servitude, and she use that to justify her hate against the Crom race and how we have dominated the power spheres. She sees Nineveh as the ultimate symbol of Crom greed. She hasn't realized yet, that from the first forbidden ritual she performed, she is in the wild, and there's no politics in the wild, only survivance."

"How do I stop them?"

"You can't. No matter what you do, Nineveh will be destroyed. But if you listen to me, you may delay their plans and maybe even save a part of the city."

Then she took the notebook and made a sketch on it with the pencil.

She handed it to Udo and continued, "On level 116, there is an abandoned alley at the eastern extreme. At the end of the alley there is a big ceramic gate, attached to the outer armour. Behind that gate there is a secret base carved directly in the rock of Titan. In the base there is a small army of cult members and by their side, the nest of a cephalopod beast. You can't attack from there, is impossible. Deeper in the rock, there are dungeons, that's where Vanessza is; an altar, and the pit where they store the fighter disc."

"Wait, a cephalopod beast?"

"Imagine a thirty feet tall octopus, with arthropod legs and moth wings."

"I think I've seen one of those or dreamt about it."

"It was not a dream, Rebekka Brühl's work is ground-breaking."

"Where is she now?"

"She moved to Kish; she knew Nineveh would not last long."

"Well, what about the fighter disc, is that what they used to rob the bank?"

"Exactly, if you look in the drawing, you'll find the exact location of the disc and how to access it from the ventilation system of the base, you'll notice that you can enter the air ducts from that elevator pit. And you can access that elevator from Mactra's office at the Vilacon, eighty levels above. Those stripes mean that it goes all the way up to the Vilacon."

It wasn't so clear at first, but with that explanation, Udo managed to make sense of her drawing.

"So, I get to the disc and what then?"

"You use it, is easier to ride than your motorcycle."

Udo looked at the draw, then to the crazy eyes of Tigris, and hesitated.

"How could you know all that? You haven't been at the Vilacon for a year."

"They've been drilling the rock outside the armour since before the Vilacon was inaugurated, and the fighter disc was transported piece by piece from Krestkrovi over a period of two years, then assembled a month ago in the same pit where is resting now. But that is not how I know all that."

"Then how?"

"I know this entire cycle of past and future."

Udo made a grimace of disappointment, thinking that she was just another crazy clairvoyant down there and he was wasting his time.

Tigris added, "If you don't believe me, I can recite you a little poem that only you know, it goes, 'I want to say I'm sorry I could not cure you, I want to pour my own blood into your veins and make you live again, I want to give you the most beautiful eyes in the universe and watch you fly from your grave like an angel, bright or dark it doesn't matters to me, because you are my child, and every

breath you take is covered in diamond dust and the tips of your fingers make jungles grow in the arid Moon'..."

Udo looked at her with disbelief for a moment, then replied, "Fine, you know all that. But why are you even helping me? I don't think a cup of blood is incentive enough for the kind of help that you are providing me."

"Simple, I don't want to be expelled into space, merge with one of Saturn's rings and agonize for millennia in the cold. If you destroy the base and rescue Vanessza, their plans will be delayed time enough for my brother to return, then I will die in peace and fulfil my purpose."

"Well, that is somehow, good enough for me. I'm sorry about your mother, I hope that she..."

"No, she will not get better, maybe I should just let her die."

That said, Tigris stood up, walked to the main door, and opened it. Udo went out without saying goodbye, then he went down to his motorcycle and came back to his house in the middle-upper levels. Even hours later, he could not shake the feelings of disgust and sadness that Tigris had induced in him.

Wednesday evening. Colonel Misan Stacker had just arrived home at the middle-upper levels. His wife had prepared him a low-calorie meal; he left his hat and coat on a clothes hanger, then sat at the table and started eating. His texter beeped, he had a message from Udo Karvállat: "I NEED YOU FOR A FULL NIGHT SURVEILLANCE OPERATION, CAN'T TRUST ANYONE ELSE IN THE DEPARTMENT". He showed the message to his wife, finished his meal, and put his coat on again. His wife combed his dark hair backwards and put the hat on his head.

Then she pinched his left cheek and said with an infantilized voice, "You look so handsome in uniform, like a soldier."

Stacker smiled with a dumb expression and thought to himself that technically he was a soldier, as Military Police was a branch of the Imperial Army, not only that, but he was also a decorated Colonel with a limb lost in combat. But love endures everything.

He kissed his wife and said, "I'll miss you."

"Be careful, remember there will be street washing tonight."

"Right, I love you."

"Love you too."

Street washing was programmed every two weeks. Water fell from the roof of every level, cleaning streets and buildings from dust and small garbage particles for a couple hours, starting at midnight. The water was collected and recycled in the lower levels, then taken back to the system. Some people just called it "artificial rain".

Stacker went out and drove his car to Udo's house. Udo received him and made him enter. Once inside he presented him to Alessa, Ksenia, Kato, Sekhmet and most importantly, Klaudia. Udo guided Stacker to the living room, they sat in front of each other and Klaudia sat next to Stacker, smiling to him and showing her gorgeous fake vampire fangs. The Colonel felt something was wrong but said nothing.

Udo started the conversation, "Misan, I'm sorry, there is no surveillance operation."

"What is happening then?"

"The Vilacon is involved with the Society of Truth, and I need to access Mactra's office."

"Mactra is involved?"

"Actually, she is one of the leaders, and I need to distract her security to a degree that only you can achieve."

"You need a squad there, a full operative?"

"No, that would alert them, I need them distracted, surprised, shocked if possible."

"I don't understand."

"Do you remember how we were ten years ago, before you got married and domesticated?"

"We used to party a little, yes."

"Party a little? You destroyed entire brothels my friend." Klaudia laughed at the mere idea, Udo continued, "You remember that place, 'Aquarius'?"

"Some."

"You almost set the place on fire, literally speaking."

"Well, but what are you suggesting?"

"I need you to mix mezcal and absinthe tonight, Misan, and go to the Vilacon. I need an old school brothel scandal there tonight. I'll take your car and you can go in my motorcycle, with our friend Klaudia here, she will stay by your side and keep you safe. Also, she knows how to make a good scandal herself, the effect will be amplified."

"No, my wife would kill me."

"That's why I sent you that message, I knew you would show it to her."

"Right, I showed her the message, it said 'full night surveillance'."

"Your part of the operation will be over short after midnight, you'll have the whole night to rest, and you'll be using one of my suits, not your clothes, she'll never find out."

"She will find out, trust me, maybe I'll just tell her when I get home."

"Misan, listen to me, they may destroy the city if we don't do this. A kind girl has been kidnapped and may have a fate worse than dead in we don't save her. Just be yourself, do your magic, and I'll risk my life for both of us."

"Trust me, I'm risking my life with this."

"So, you're in?"

Misan Stacker looked at his wedding ring for a moment and answered, "Fine, give me the mezcal, I can drink absinthe at the Vilacon."

Klaudia hugged the Colonel and gently pierced his neck with her fangs, then together they drank three bottles of pure mezcal in the next two hours.

Lights went down in Nineveh, and the Vilacon was prepared to deliver the best show ever seen in the Empire. In the front row, closer to the central stage and next to the dancefloor, were the guests of honour: Cora Orsic and some of her collaboratives from Krestkrovi. Mactra had instructed her girls to avoid taking clients to private rooms, unless necessary to prevent a scandal. She was determined to show Cora how respectable and glamorous her Cabaret was.

Flashing red lights illuminated the central stage, the band started playing ragtime and jazz in a frantic explosion. A dozen stunning girls appeared on stage wearing short black lace skirts and black

moth wings, also made of lace. In their heads they wore exquisite crowns made of black silk flowers. They danced to the enticing music and Mactra used magic means to remotely induce short flights and wings movement on the girls, in a carefully prepared choreography. It was so mesmerizing that in minutes, Cora was moving her head and feet to the rhythm of the band without even notice. The show lasted half an hour, and the girls took a recess. The band started playing a calmer music. Mactra looked at Cora, the industrialist looked back at her and smiled.

Mactra enjoyed her triumph while it lasted, because in that moment, an unremarkable car parked nearby and then Udo Karvállat, wearing a fine suit, entered the Vilacon. He sat on an empty table near the narrow stairs that led to Mactra's office. The table was far from the central stage, across the dancefloor. The narrow stairs were custodied by one of Mactra's guards, as expected. Udo's reputation was not unknown to Mactra, who immediately perceived the danger that his presence there posed to her operation. She approached his table and sat in front of him.

"Monsieur Karvállat, may I join you?"

"Of course, Hölgy Mactra – that made her immediately angry, it was the first man not to follow her French game at the Vilacon."

"It's Mademoiselle Mactra," replied her, visibly upset, but trying to dissimulate it.

"We are all gypsies here, what game are you playing?"

Twenty blocks west from there, outside Udo's place, an alcoholised Misan Stacker mounted Udo's motorcycle, wearing a borrowed suit and trying to remember how to ride a motorcycle, as an equally alcoholised Klaudia, wearing a noticeably short green minidress, mounted behind him and hugged his waist. Neither of them wore a helmet or remembered what a helmet was.

Stacker turned the engine on, and they ride in the darkness a hundred miles per hour. Misan Stacker was one of those people who felt more in control the more drunk they got. Adrenaline accompanied alcohol side by side in his veins. They arrived at the Vilacon, parked the motorcycle next to the front door and entered the nymphs' cabaret. They approached the table next to the narrow stairs, where Udo and Mactra looked at each other as if they were fighting a duel. In the way, Klaudia took a hortensia from a jar and brought it with her. Stacker saluted Mactra with a kiss on the mouth and sat next to Udo. Klaudia also kissed the little witch on the lips and sat next to Stacker, then she started eating the hortensia.

"As you see, Mademoiselle Mactra, I brought my own green fairy," said Stacker alluding to Klaudia's dress, "but now I want a bottle of absinthe."

Mactra, still annoyed by Udo and the unexpected kisses, raised a hand and a girl wearing swan wings approached the table.

"A bottle of absinthe for Colonel Stacker, please."

The next fifteen minutes were a torture for the little dark witch, Stacker and Klaudia drank the entire bottle of absinthe as it was apple juice, laughing and screaming like feral cats. Klaudia ate two more hortensias and started dancing on the table. Every time Mactra looked at Cora, she seemed more indignant, and her prior triumph vanished like absinthe in Stacker's cup. She ordered the band

to play a more energetic melody, so the couples on the dancefloor would hide the unrefined behaviour in that table. As the girls took their clients to dance, Stacker stood up and approached the dancefloor too. He pushed a guy in smoking, took his girl, and led her dancing closer to the band. The guy in smoking followed them and pushed Stacker back. Then the Colonel punched the guy in the face and took a chair from the nearest table. He broke the chair on the guy's ribs, throwing him to the ground, then kicked him on the floor until the band stopped playing and one of the musicians tried to stop him. Then Stacker started molesting the band, grabbing instruments, and smashing them on the floor. Udo smiled and stared at Mactra, who looked like she was about to cry. Klaudia jumped down from the table and sat next to Mactra, then she started playing with the golden curls in the little witch's hair.

Cora Orsic stood up and left the Vilacon, totally shocked. She returned to Krestkrovi that same night. She had already handed her attenuating potion to Sakánor, and she didn't worry about the result of the possession until much later.

The guards of the Vilacon, all members of the cult, started chasing Stacker, including the one in the narrow stairs, so Mactra couldn't abandon the table and left Udo unsupervised. Then Klaudia stood up, opened her legs, and sat in Mactra's lap, closely facing her.

"You worry too much," said Klaudia and deeply kissed Mactra in the mouth.

Mactra opened her eyes wide and shouted scandalized, then her hands casted a shadow in the air around Klaudia, lifting her up and letting her fall on the table, breaking glasses, and empty bottles on it. Klaudia laughed laying on the table, and Mactra realized that Udo had disappeared.

Mactra stood up and ran to get the stairs, but Klaudia grabbed her hand from the table, and said, "Where are you going? Stay with me, spider girl."

Infuriated, Mactra raised her other hand and a dense black mist accumulated on it. She was about to cast a dark energy beam on Klaudia, a practice notoriously related with demonic witches which normally resulted in the death of any normal human who received it. Then she noticed that most girls at the Vilacon and some of the clients were looking at her. Everybody knew she was a witch, but not that kind of witch. Then she calmed down and the mist disappeared from her hand. Klaudia smiled at her, showing her fangs.

Mactra said to her guards, "Take them out, right now!"

The guards finally grabbed Stacker and took Klaudia from the table, then they threw them out to the street. By that time, Udo was already going down in Mactra's elevator, halfway to level 116.

It was already midnight, Stacker stood up in the cobblestone street, so did Klaudia. Artificial rain started to fall over them, soaking their clothes; Klaudia laughed and kissed Stacker in the mouth, then he mounted Udo's motorcycle and Klaudia mounted behind him.

Mactra was going up the narrow stairs when the entrance door of the Vilacon burst open and the feral couple entered riding the motorcycle, destroying her fancy jars full of hortensias and ramming against chairs and tables. Mactra had no choice but to come back from the stairs and try to stop them.

Stacker drove the motorcycle to the main stage, and the vehicle climbed on it carrying the alcoholised couple. The fairy girls ran away and Mactra casted a shadow on the vehicle, that stopped moving. Unable to continue his epic race, Stacker descended from the motorcycle, leaving Klaudia still mounted on it and stood in the middle of the stage. He grabbed his stomach with both hands, bent forwards and vomited a fair amount of green bubbling liquid, soaking the stage with it.

As Mactra screamed in horror at the Vilacon, Udo had reached the top of the elevator through a square hatch in its roof. The machine was getting to level 116. Udo jumped from the elevator to a thick air duct next to the elevator shaft, then removed a squared lid on the duct, exposing a gap and entered through it. Inside the duct, he crawled a hundred feet straight, sixty feet to the right, and a hundred more to the left.

Cult members at the secret base, armed with automatic rifles, saw Mactra's elevator reach their level and approached it. When they saw that it was empty, they prepared for a possible attack and informed Sakánor of the situation. They gathered around the elevator pit and the ceramic gate in the outer armour. Sakánor went to the dungeons, to guard Vanessza.

Udo reached the ventilation duct over the fighter disc pit. He removed a lid on the duct and descended to the saucer in silence. He opened the hatch and entered the combat vehicle. The instructions on the panel were in German and Hungarian, so he had no problem to turn it on and make it fly out of the pit. It was indeed easier to ride than a motorcycle.

Mactra was on her knees, crying and cursing at Stacker from the floor. The Colonel mounted the motorcycle again, Klaudia hugged him from behind and they rode out through the front door.

"Kill them!" shouted Mactra to her guards, then went upstairs to her office, and called back her elevator.

Mactra's soldiers grabbed machine guns from a little armoury at the Vilacon and took out a couple of Mactra's fancy cars from her garage. They followed Stacker to Udo's house, as artificial rain still soaked the streets. Stacker and Klaudia descended from the motorcycle and entered the house while fancy cars arrived at the place. Cult members descended from the cars and approached the house. Stacker closed the front door and pushed a switch on a wall panel at the living room. Two machine guns hidden between the garden shrubs activated, sensing the movements of Mactra's soldiers. In seconds, eight cult members were killed, and a ninth was severely injured; he crawled to the car but died minutes later, unable to reach it.

Udo drove the fighter disk to the arsenal of the secret base. Firing the disc's cannons, he destroyed the arsenal walls and reached some of the explosives stored inside. The consequent explosion destroyed not only the arsenal, but also the kitchen and the bunkhouse, killing all soldiers inside. Then he flew to the elevator shaft and shot half dozen explosive charges, killing the soldiers gathered there. He drove the disk to the ceramic gate and opened fire, killing all cult members there and destroying the gate, leaving a clear path to the eastern side of level 116.

Then Udo headed to the dungeons, to get Vanessza, but suddenly an external force stopped the advance of the disc and destabilized it, throwing it to the ground tilted to one side. A thirty feet high cephalopod, with spider legs, tentacles, and a pair of black wings on the sides of its head had taken the disc and pulled it to the ground. The beast had five eyes that glowed in fury as it grabbed the

disc again and threw it against a rocky wall. Udo tried to aim a cannon at the beast, but that last impact had damaged the control systems of the vehicle. The cephalopod flew over the machine and emitted a sound reminiscent of the roar of a bear mixed with the cry of a whale, then grabbed the disc again and smashed it against the ground several times until the vehicle started to tear apart. Inside the machine, Udo hit his head repeatedly and lost consciousness.

That beast needed to eat at least six people a day, it was the destiny of most human sacrifices offered to the cult in Nineveh.

Sakánor entered the dungeon where he kept Vanessza. The girl was sitting on the floor with her back resting against a wall. She looked at the demon and noticed that he was carrying a small transparent cup in his hands with a black liquid inside; it was the attenuating potion prepared by Cora Orsic.

Vanessza said to him from the floor, "That is a sad mix of fear and death."

"It is not poison," replied Sakánor with a guttural voice.

He grabbed her chin and forced her to swallow the black potion. She trembled for a second and the sclera of her blue eyes turned black. After that, she remained motionless like a rag doll sitting on the stone floor, barely blinking. Then Sakánor went to the altar to get Allátik's box, to feed him with Udo's flesh and prepare him to possess Vanessza.

Udo woke up with hands and feet chained to a wall in a contiguous dungeon, still dressed in his suit. By his right side and closer to the entrance there was a wooden table. On the table there were several iron pincers of different sizes and shapes, most likely for torture purposes. Mactra was in front of him, with wrath and indignation in her eyes.

She grabbed a rusty pincer from the table, approached Udo and said, "I should skin you for what you've done, Allátik would eat you anyway."

"Who is Allátik?"

"Something beyond you understanding."

"Try me."

"Shut up! You infuriate me! You had no right to embarrass me in front of my allies. That cabaret is my life. The art I create there is my life... was my life before you screwed it and lowered it to the level of the cheapest brothel in front of all Nineveh and Kreskrovi."

"Right, Cora Orsic. She may be your ally, but right now she doesn't want to be seen a mile away from you."

"Because of you! I was showing her the value of my art and you spoiled everything!"

"So, what was your plan? Having a cabaret in Kreskrovi once they had destroyed Nineveh? That place is ruled by a living religious icon, a puritan one, doesn't seem like a good place for a brothel, no matter how refined."

"Things are about to change there, and Cora was my way in. But I don't expect you to understand it or have any sympathy for me."

"You are right, I don't have any sympathy for you, I don't like you, never did. I didn't know why but now I do; you are shallow and fearful, prone to believe your own lies and careless about the

damage you inflict on others. You may have the pincers in your hand, but I'm not the one afraid of sincerity here."

"So what? I owe nothing to this city of harlots and thieves; the stench of their corruption makes me sick."

"I don't see you doing any better."

"And who does, you, maybe? A hired assassin for the Crom elites who don't even bother to salute you or shake your hand because they see you as an animal?"

"The girl that you keep prisoner does, she has done more good in her short years than you in all your decades."

"Of course, the white witches, pure love and light. What do they know about being abandoned? What do they know about being unloved and given away by your own prostitute mother, to a demon? Nothing! They know no pain like mine! All I know is this life, I would be dead without Sakánor."

"What do you mean? Was your mother a prostitute?"

"Yes."

"And she gave you away, to Sakánor, a demon?"

"Right."

"Who told you that?"

"Sakánor, of course."

"And you believed it?"

"Why wouldn't I believe him, he has taken care of me all my life."

"To what price, Mactra?"

Mactra remained silent, thoughtful, and Udo continued, "Look, you may have dealt with dancers and nymphs for a couple years, but I have dealt with prostitutes my whole life, in and out of their brothels and streets, I've known them as friends, mothers and lovers. I know all their colours; they achieve the wisdom of an old lady as soon as they become adults. There is something out of place in your story."

"What do you mean?"

"I know nothing about your mother, but if she was a prostitute and she wouldn't have loved you with all her heart, you wouldn't be here right now, she wouldn't have had you in the first place."

"You mean..."

"Yes, you would have ceased to exist the moment she would find out that you were inside her. It would have been the easiest thing for her. If you were born, it means that she loved you despite all her problems, possibly more than her own life. It means that she chose a terrifying path in front

of her, with the bravery that can only come from love. I can assure you, that the only way her baby would have ended up being raised by a demon, would have been after she was killed by that demon.”

Mactra’s face winced, she turned around, threw the pincer on the table, and abandoned the dungeon in silence. She advanced a few steps further, fell to her knees leaning a hand on the stone wall, and cried in silence. Her tears ran down her cheeks and reached her mouth, she felt the salty taste of the liquid and stood up, wiped her face, and entered the dungeon where they kept Vanessza.

The Romanov girl was sitting on the floor like a doll, her wrists were still wrapped in black lace to cover her crystal bracelets. Mactra knelt in front of her, looked at her darkened eyes and removed the lace from around her wrists. Mactra touched the crystals with her both bare hands, felt the warmth coming from them and closed her eyes.

Mactra then remembered in detail, the day her mother died. She saw the filthy alley where they were passing the night, the shadow that grew with red shiny lines as eyes and how she hid between the trash cans while her mother faced the demon armed with a piece of rotten wood. She remembered the fear and pain that she felt when Sakánor smashed her mother’s head against a wall, how the blood covered her tender amber eyes when she looked at her, being dragged away by the demon. Years of potions and rituals had erased that memory from her mind until she became someone else, and her captor became some sort of twisted father in her eyes.

Sakánor entered the dungeon where he kept Udo, carrying a black metallic box. He left it on the floor in front of Udo and opened it. Allátik came from inside the box; the son of Angels had regained some of its length and was four feet long.

“There is no need for a ritual, now that we have no congregation, thanks to you,” said Sakánor with his harsh voice.

Udo could not help but notice, that the red lines in his eyes were reminiscent of those in Tigris eyes. In fact, the demon provoked in him the same angst that Tigris presence did.

Allátik climbed on Udo’s body and approached his face; Sakánor was standing in front of Udo, a couple feet away, looking at the scene with sadistic interest. In that moment, a shadow covered the wooden table by Udo’s right side. The table flew towards Sakánor and Allátik, violently pushing them away from Udo and smashing them against the rocky wall to his left. Some of the pincers fell to the ground and others got pierced in Sakánor’s body. The impact broke some of Allátik’s thin legs and left both demon and phasmid unconscious on the floor.

Mactra entered the dungeon and took out a rusty key from her dress.

She liberated Udo from his chains and handed him the key, then said, “Take her away from him.”

Udo ran to the contiguous dungeon, Sakánor regained consciousness and projected the table against Mactra from the floor. The little witch stopped the table in the air and smashed it against the ground, splitting it in half.

The demon stood up and advanced a couple steps, kicked the black metallic box backwards, to a corner of the dungeon and said to Allátik, “Hide in your box.”

Allátik limped to his box and hid inside, as Sakánor casted a black beam against Mactra and the witch stopped it with her left hand. Her fingernails started to rot for the contact with the dark energy, so she moved her right hand and a pincer from the floor flew to stab Sakánor in the ribs. The demon stopped casting the black ray and let go a grump of pain. Mactra moved both hands drawing a circle on the air, casting a shadow on one half of the wooden table and projected it against the right leg of the demon, severing it at knee height. The demon fell to the ground and squealed in pain.

Udo tried to wake Vanessza up, but she was unresponsive. He unlocked the chain in her neck with the rusty key, took off his suit jacket and took her in his arms. He ran from the dungeons carrying her and even in that state, she managed to hug him back. They were reaching the exit to level 116, when the cephalopod beast appeared from the darkness and grabbed Udo by his legs with a tentacle. Before the beast lifted him, he released Vanessza to prevent her from falling from higher. The beast took his left forearm with another tentacle and ripped it off his body, then threw Udo to the ground, unconscious. With Udo out of combat, the beast perceived as priority to help Sakánor against Mactra and protect Allátik.

Mactra took a foot long pincer from the ground and approached Sakánor, who was laying on the floor, wounded and in pain.

Then she said to him, "You killed my mother, you bastard!"

"I raised you, ungrateful witch. You would have grown to be a whore just like your mother."

"I loved my mother! And she loved me! Now I'm going to kill you and your angel."

The rocky walls of the dungeon trembled, and the noise of an earthquake was followed by the cephalopod roar. Mactra closed her eyes and moved a hand, but the shadows she was casting were not in that room.

Udo felt that something lifted him from the ground and put him back on his feet as he regained consciousness. Then he reacted and noticed that he was bleeding profusely from the remains of his left arm. He took off the tie in his neck, and aided by his mouth, he tightly tied it around his left arm making a tourniquet. He looked around and spotted Vanessza laid on the floor a dozen yards from him. He took her and carried her on his right shoulder. Then, as he could, he ran for the exit to level 116.

They reached the alley that once had a ceramic gate at its end and streets were still wet after the artificial rain. Udo looked around to determine the shortest way to the Military Police Exclusive Elevator. Ten blocks west and five north, then they could go up and she would be saved. He ran the first five blocks but then he had to slow down and walk the rest of the way.

Mactra opened her eyes, and the cephalopod destroyed the dungeon wall in front of her. She flew, covered in shadows, pounced on the eyes of the beast, with the pincer still in her hand and she stabbed it in one of the cephalopod's eyes, blowing it up. But the pincer was too short to reach the brain of the beast, that grabbed her with a tentacle and threw her to the ground. Then the cephalopod stabbed her in the chest with one of its spider legs.

Mactra died immediately and Sakánor said to the beast, "Go get the girl, we still have Allátik."

The cephalopod opened his enormous wings and flew to the ruins of the ceramic gate. He entered the glooming city and sniffed the air to track his prey.

Udo had to stop and put Vanessza down a block away from the Exclusive Elevator. He had lost too much blood and was about to faint. Vanessza's white dress was soaked in Udo's blood. He took a deep breath, carried the Romanov girl again and continued advancing towards the elevator. When he was fifteen feet away from it, he collapsed to the wet ground with Vanessza, and could not stand up again. He took out his identification card and pressed a button on it, the elevator started to come down to that level.

Then he remembered the white crystal that Ksenia had given him, it was in his pocket. He put the crystal on Vanessza's forehead and tried to say a prayer, "In this night of need, Oh Lord, I pray for your aid. Not for me, but for this creature of light, that heals in your name and eases the pain of the humblest among your children. Do not look at the many sins I carry, as I'm only a supplicant messenger, but look at the kind heart of the one I need to save."

The crystal shone violet, and Udo passed out from the effort. The crystal absorbed the darkness from Vanessa's eyes, and they became normal again; the white stone became black and turned into ash, flying away on the artificial wind. The girl woke up and looked around. The elevator had arrived, and its doors opened. Five blocks away the cephalopod beast roared and looked at them. Vanessa stood up and grabbed Udo by the armpits, dragging him towards the elevator. Is not easy for a ninety pounds girl to drag a man twice her weight, but Vanessa Romanova was not a normal girl. The crystals in her bracelets shone and she was able to move him into the elevator with a reasonable effort, while the beast approached flying three blocks away from them.

Once inside the machine, Vanessa pushed a button and the doors closed. Then she selected the middle-upper levels in a panel and the elevator started moving upwards.

The cephalopod beast pounced on the Exclusive Elevator, managed to open its doors with his arachnid legs and entered the shaft. The elevator had already gone up fifty feet, but the beast stretched his tentacles and grabbed it by its sides, stopping its ascent and dragging it down five feet. Then with his beak, the beast started to bite the floor of the machine.

Inside the elevator, Vanessa knelt next to Udo, that was unconscious on the floor, and grabbed his head with both hands. She prayed like she had countless times and her bracelets shone again. Seconds later Udo woke up and realized that the beast had almost made a hole in the elevator floor. He sat and asked Vanessa to help him untie the laces of his right boot. They did it and Udo pulled out a small but powerful grenade from inside the boot. As the beast opened a gap in the metallic floor, Udo removed the safety of the grenade and threw it through the gap, into the cephalopod's mouth. Udo hugged Vanessa by his side, to protect her from the explosion, and the grenade burst inside the beast shattering its insides. The cephalopod fell to the bottom of the elevator shaft staining its walls with black blood and letting the machine free to ascend.

On their way up, Vanessa noticed how the middle levels were slightly more illuminated than the lower ones, even at night, and that made her sad, "Maybe some change is necessary," she thought. She laid down on the elevator floor, letting the wind coming from the gap in its center play with her reddish-blond hair.

Udo sent a text to Military Police Headquarters asking for help, as Stacker was probably sleeping, and he didn't want to wake him up. Before they arrived at their destiny on the middle-upper levels, Udo thought about one of many things Tigris had said to him: "No matter what you do, Nineveh will be destroyed", and felt a chill run down his spine, because everything she had said, turned out to be true.