

The depths of St Absainthe were the closest thing to absolute freedom.

To get there, however, one had to find the courage to throw oneself in, aware that one might never return: the price to pay for an existence of sparks, forbidden desires, exotic nectars, and golden crowns or, perhaps, for yet another role as an extra, lay just behind a portal of controls, registers, travel formalities.

Agents scrutinised, noted, recorded, updated databases, and then fell towards the centre of the world.

An endless plummet from the faint rays of the surface sun turned into an interrupted sequence of slums hopelessly crushed to each other in a web of roads, bridges, and crude steel ties.

In the air was dust, smoke, the scent of street food and the dampness of rock walls, the rotten aroma of a concentric metropolis, underground and dark.

What would be in the dark?

Not darkness, that was for sure, for when the Sun was a memory, it was the turn of neon to illuminate the caverns and caves of the depths of St. Absainthe.

The Sun was for the unfortunate. It had always been so.

Centuries before, the regions above the city were wastelands battered by multiple diseases: from malaria to leprosy, the wild lands that made up the horizon of Vesper, their nation, were nothing but cradles of plagues and death.

To live outside, to be touched by the sun's rays, in those days meant being filthy and diseased, a danger to the rich heiresses and industrialists of the underworld.

It was not the fear of disease that condemned the Ascended (as the surface dwellers were called) forever, but rather their factual and undeniable poverty: those born outside were born workers, and to be born a worker, amidst the soot, the noise of machinery and communal houses to be shared with hundreds of families, was to be a parasite.

Avi had grown up as a parasite, in a room touched by the sun and tinged with grey.

His father worked in one of the surface component factories and his mother worked in the agricultural areas just outside the enclave; his parents had insisted he join the army, and had used all their credits to allow him to do so.

There were not enough credits to eliminate the smell of the outdoors that plagued him or the faint rosy hue that coloured his cheeks, an indelible sign that the sun had branded him.

That shame always managed to identify him as a Descendant, a former inhabitant of the outer circles who had managed to make a career for himself and gain access to the middle circles, the first subterranean circle of St. Absainthe.

The Median Circle was perhaps the most distressing to live in, for one only had to lower one's gaze to be dazzled by the concert of light and splendour that animated the depths. It seemed to constantly remind him how much he was still a creature in the middle, outer and underground, dirty and clean, a being stuck in a stagnant, motionless limbo.

Avi wanted to convince himself that it was momentary.

He was an agent now, and the possibilities of becoming something else (not just Avi, not just the Descent) were manifold.

One day he would have a penthouse with a stained-glass roof, and from the windows, he would be overwhelmed by neons, sparks, and fireworks. And he would have a nice tailored suit, and maybe someone waiting for him in bed every night, maybe someone as beautiful as the girls in the late-night cinemas he frequented.

Today, however, he was still Second Officer Avi, and he had to follow his boss, Commander Rosh, to a meeting with a secret informant in the depths of the metropolis.

The lift they were on was moving too slowly for Avi to concentrate on anything but that trip. A certain anxiety enveloped him, but he tried to keep it at bay, although he was aware that a Chimera like Rosh could sense it.

The commander's flat nose, whose nostrils flared upwards as if forming a hooked triangle, widened and narrowed at the slightest stimulus. Even his ears, elongated and covered with the same brown hair that filled his face (or perhaps a muzzle?), skin, and hands, seemed to pick up every vibration and noise.

Avi had always lived with the Chimerae, like most Softskins like himself, and Rosh certainly wasn't the most bizarre one he had ever seen, since he was only a Ferine.

He was physically built like a Soft Skin, spoke like a Soft Skin, dressed like a Soft Skin, but perhaps his senses were really those of a tiger or a wolf: perhaps his pale eyes with their thin, scarlet pupils, Avi thought, could go much deeper than his own; even the commander's hands, now wrapped in leather gloves, concealed hair, and claws, so sharp that they had to be hidden most of the time.

The lift interrupted its wearisome descent into the abyss and announced it with a melodic ding.

The golden walls glittered for a moment, reflecting the neon of the streets and distorting their reflections.

The doors opened, sliding open to reveal a colourful, busy street, where voices, singing, and laughter mingled indistinguishably with the sounds of engines and the echo of music coming out of clubs.

Rosh stepped out and Avi imitated him.

They were on one of the lowest floors in the city and for that reason one of the most unfamiliar to Avi. He certainly couldn't afford to drink or party in one of the many clubs that dotted the main street: he was too badly dressed, too poor, and too dishevelled for them to let him in. He struggled to hide his embarrassment, which only increased when a group of boys walked past him and laughed at his plainclothes outfit.

Commander Rosh did not seem at ease either. He checked his wristwatch, from which emerged a small golden hologram and a set of coordinates.

"Not long now," he informed them, his voice low and cavernous.

The crowd engulfed them mercilessly.

From young revellers with wavy, colourful hair to businessmen in exquisite gold and silver pinstripe suits, it was impossible to spot two people with the same face or dress. In the air scents of spices, alcohol, synthetic flowers, sweat, and asphalt danced between neon and fireworks,

Chimerae and Soft Skin, incessant music, fur, fangs, claws, tattoos, flowers, and scales, it was impossible to tell how long the evening had started, let alone how long it might continue.

«Commander Rosh» a glance from his superior and then he continued. «May I ask you a question?»

The skyscrapers lit up with the glow of flats, clubs, and offices, while the streets and pavements swarmed with patrons and drunken, drug-addled youths, busy loving and hating each other mercilessly. Amidst a blaze of fire and disarray of electronic drums, a figure with elegant swan wings met Avi's gaze and blew him a kiss.

«I cannot tell you anything about this encounter» Rosh replied.

A hesitation, then a sigh. «I want to operate at my best, Commander. I did not mean to be indiscreet».

A traffic light interrupted them and soon three lanes of flying machines filled the airspace between the skyscrapers.

Rosh stopped, and with him the rest of the crowd.

For a moment, Avi saw only the commander's face in that ever-changing background. «I'm sure you won't start disappointing me just yet. Besides, it's a little late to turn back», he pointed to a bar across the street, a night bistro with dark blue curtains. «The person we're meeting is waiting for us in there».

«Any idea who they are?» asked Avi.

«A refined fellow, judging from the place», commented the commander.

Nectar of the Gods, the sign read, and from inside came pleasant jazz music. Upon entering, one found oneself in front of a small circular room, with black walls covered in silver geometric patterns and dark blue velvet sofas. The floor was lit and emanated a peculiar pale, almost lunar light, while from the ceiling hung an old chandelier made of diamonds, a vintage piece that was probably worth more than the whole place.

The tables were not many and were surrounded by no more than three chairs, themselves lined with soft velvet. On a raised stage, occupying the rest of the room, a band of masked musicians was performing. Even the bartender at the entrance wore a black balaclava, which almost allowed him to blend in with the rest of the decor, and similarly anonymous clothes.

All the tables were empty. Except one, occupied by a Soft Skin like Avi.

The woman drank a glass of wine and smoked a cigarette, placed in a long decorated wooden cigarette case. In the dark, silver room, her hair was in a messy red bun, held together by a brooch of emeralds and gold.

Rosh gave an awkward nod to the bartender, who did not react in any way, and then moved in the direction of the woman. Avi hurried after him, numbed by the intense, floral smell

hovering in the bar and by that masked band, capable of arranging such pleasant and, at the same time, distressing music.

The closer they got, the clearer and more defined their contact became.

She was a middle-aged woman, with thin glasses framing her brown gaze and large golden earrings. Her skin was so dull and pale as to appear translucent, a sign that she had probably never left the depths of St. Absainthe and was therefore a Decadent. The only hints of colour animating her face were the pitch black of a mole drawn on her left cheek and the purplish bruise of dark circles surrounding her eyes. She wore a grey turtleneck, a scarf of the same colour, and a watch on her wrist, a particularly old model that she must have inherited from a grandfather or even a great-grandfather.

Avi had seen many women like her in his brief sojourns in the depths of the city.

He was always struck by their well-groomed hands, their long fingers, and callus-free palms, but what really stunned him was the way they walked: indolent, elegant as if moved by invisible threads, they never exceeded.

Their contact moved in the same way when he saw them coming.

She placed the goblet on the table and pushed the cigarette case away from her white lips, barely veined with blue, in a graceful and measured dance, but one that was broken by the smile that crossed her face: ungainly, forced, and enormous, it revealed a mouth full of teeth freshly stained with red wine and sparkling like pearls.

They sat down at the table a moment later.

Rosh and the woman looked at each other and a golden glow crossed their irises for a moment.

Optical scanners, realised Avi, a technology that very few within St. Absainthe could afford.

Slowly he held out his hand to the commander and met his gaze directly. «Argus Rosh. I am surprised. I didn't think I'd have to deal with the commander of the Third Division: it's rare for you to go so low»

«I've never heard of you, though» Rosh's scanner reactivated for a moment. «Doctor Zelda Ashford»

«We'll have time to get to know each other» she replied, dryly, and then turned in Avi's direction. She observed him without warmth. «This is your assistant?»

Rosh replied for him. «This is Avi Marcet. My sub-officer»

That creepy smile still furrowed her face. «Incredible. So young and so promising. You're a Descendant, aren't you?»

«Yes, ma'am. I was born in the Agricultural District»

«Call me Zelda» she murmured, encouraging him to sit down. Avi sought confirmation in the commander's gaze and then obeyed, albeit awkwardly. «It will be useful to have an ex-Ascended. Tell me, Avi, how many epidemics have you survived?»

«How many epidemics?»

Zelda brought the cigarette case to her mouth again. «The Agricultural District is among the most susceptible to contagion, as it is the largest, most populous, and most difficult to isolate. You breed like rabbits up there. But perhaps you are too young to remember the last few years of quarantine»

«I am twenty-six years old. The last quarantine happened...»

She interrupted him, and a quick stream of smoke escaped her cadaverous lips. «Thirty years ago. You cannot remember. That's when the vaccination campaigns began, the genetic selection campaigns, and the forced removals of nuclei at risk of contagion. An immense amount of work: my laboratory was clogged, and so were the containment areas», she allowed himself a pause and another shot and then resumed speaking. «You have me and another brilliant mind you will meet tonight to thank for your survival, Avi. Your genetic strain had to be unimpeachable to get you down here»

Zelda's words should have provoked him. A more honest man, a true Ascended man, would have raised his voice and made his point, but Avi was too desperate and too tired to do so. Besides, a true Ascended man would never have joined the Third Division and voluntarily found himself at that table.

Faced with that list of abuse and violence suffered by his community in the name of St. Absainthe's safety, Avi stood still and let indifference consume him.

«Are you a geneticist?» he asked.

«Epidemiologist» she looked at him a moment longer, unreadable, and then turned to Rosh. «Your Ascended knows we're going to talk to Gossamer, doesn't he?»

The band stopped playing and everything seemed to stop.

Avi felt himself freeze and, for the first time, regretted not being honest or brave.

He hated Rosh, for not telling him about it, and he could hardly suppress the anger he was feeling towards the doctor, because she had decided to humiliate him just for the fun of it.

He forced himself to breathe and to remember that, Gossamer or not, this was just another important assignment, one of many that would await him if he continued his career within the Third Division.

The name Gossamer was synonymous with ruin. Anyone who saw or, worse still, spoke to Gossamer came back changed from the experience: it was rumours, of course, urban legends that told of agents unable to sleep because of nightmares and driven to madness, of industrialists who committed suicide only hours after meeting him, and of repentant criminals who rushed to confess even the smallest wrongdoing after seeing him.

None of his colleagues had met Gossamer. Rosh had never spoken of him. Who that creature was (Soft Skin or Chimera, urban monster or unscrupulous informer) it was impossible to determine and, perhaps, irrelevant to do so.

What Avi did know was that Gossamer's lair must lie somewhere in the depths of Saint Absainthe, perhaps in the most ancient abyss, and that this being had the reputation of being omniscient, a seer who offered absolute truths in exchange for immense sacrifices.

«If our goal is to meet Gossamer, we have kept him waiting long enough» Avi managed to say.

Rosh sighed, ears flattened and backward, but remained silent.

Dr Ashford put out her cigarette on the tablecloth and stood up. «The band has finished playing. We can go. Let me lead the way.»

She stood up, revealing a slim, petite build, and then advanced towards the back of the club, without adding anything else. With her, the bartender also moved: he mechanically passed them and opened a back door, which led to one of the many side streets facing the main road.

Avi felt an enormous relief when the chaos of the city welcomed him back.

The lights and the incessant noise dampened his fear, turning it into a silent panic that he was sure he could handle. He and Rosh exchanged a glance of understanding, the prelude to a conversation, but Ashford's brisk pace left unanswered the many questions Avi wanted to ask his commander.

Why Gossamer? What was the reason for the meeting with Ashford? Who else awaited them in the presence of that creature of terrible reputation?

They headed for a more suburban district, first taking a taxi (called and paid for by Zelda) and continuing on foot after about ten minutes of travel.

The city centre gave way to a district of low, squat buildings, quite different from the large skyscrapers of just before. Avi recognised it as one of the many business districts of St. Absainthe, which among colleagues they called 'The Late-hour': precisely in the waning hours of the night, hundreds of nightclubs, squatted former barracks and nondescript dive bars came alive to satisfy the desires of the most partying, extreme and unscrupulous patrons.

Above their heads, lifts kept moving, frantically. From top to bottom, they reconstructed the skeleton of the city in an eternal motion of ascent and descent towards the abyss.

It was a magnetic and disorienting vision, which was even more confusing with the background of techno music, screams, and chants that animated the streets.

That was why Avi hardly noticed Commander Rosh.

The Ferine spoke to him firmly, without losing sight of Ashford. «I know you have many questions, Marcet. I would have liked to share more about this assignment, but I think you are realising how delicate it is»

«Yes, commander. I realise that»

«I knew about Gossamer, but I confess that I do not know the reason for our meeting» Rosh continued. «And I'm not reassured that someone like Zelda Ashford is involved. She collaborates with the Lower Echelons, and is on the scientific committee».

«Security and Health» recited Avi. «I'm familiar with what they do»

The commander looked bitter for a moment. «You'll know better than me, then, that if the Third Division and the scientific committee are involved, it's something to do with the outside and perhaps what's *beyond* the outside. We may be dealing with war, my boy»

Avi rarely thought about the rest of the world.

He lived defining himself to St Absainthe and Vesper, his homeland. What did not belong there was not relevant to his survival.

He knew enough of Riftless to define himself as cultured as a citizen of the underworld: he knew, for example, that in Kerys, the land of the chimerae Lynfa and Nemglan, a wine with a floral aroma so intoxicating that it was comparable to a drug was produced, and that in the cold nation of K'inad, some shamans swam with the fearsome blackfish, the orcas, and listened to their song.

He knew, then, what was indispensable for a member of the Third Division, namely how to fight the Irrlicht's Revenants, bioterrorists enemies of the state, and how to hinder their expansion along the borders with Vesper.

«Perhaps another epidemic is on the way» he reflected aloud. «Perhaps Gossamer knows a possible cure».

Rosh did not reply, and Avi realised that the conversation was over.

The district soon twisted into a tangle of suffocating bottlenecks and blinding illuminations, which for a few metres they shared with other completely bewildered passers-by, still living beings but already an integral part of the worn, grey, and forgotten scenery of the city.

They passed young men with tattoos identical to the graffiti and murals on the shutters of buildings, their eyes goggled and injected with neon, their skins lashed by scars and cancer, their bodies on the edge and torn apart by drugs, which Avi was now all too used to seeing. They paused in front of an alley and there he met gaze with a man: he was hunched over, a broken creature in the gap between two buildings, his face distorted by a swollen, fleshy deformity that was also spreading to his shoulders and arms.

Incomprehensible sounds escaped his mouth, but he didn't seem intent on approaching.

«I doubt he can really see us» commented Dr. Ashford. «He'll be dead by tomorrow».

A right turn, another in the same direction, increasingly narrow streets and buildings so tall and thin they seemed like pins, and then they reached a door: it was the entrance to a workshop, closed off by a shutter with a hastily spray-painted fluorescent sign.

Till death do us part, Holy Abyss.

Avi looked around. They were alone, in what seemed to be a deserted neighbourhood. He and Rosh were unarmed and in plain clothes, and that “brilliant mind” Dr. Ashford had mentioned was still missing. Moreover, they were about to meet the most mysterious and dangerous personality in all of St. Absainthe, and the reason for their visit was so dangerous that even the commander didn't know it.

It was too late to be afraid, but the more time passed, the more Avi felt trapped.

All his attention was now focused on Zelda.

The woman seemed completely at ease and smiled when she noticed his attentive and insistent gaze. «Look here, Descendant» she murmured, as she rolled up one of her turtleneck sleeves.

She exposed her forearm and revealed a series of discreet mechanical protrusions, slightly raised against her diaphanous skin. She barely touched them for a curved interface, similar to a hologram, to appear around her wrist, like a bracelet of light.

The golden glow of the interface looked like a halo and illuminated the dust in the air, which now danced around Zelda in that dark corner of the city. The doctor skimmed through what could have been images, notes, emails, or news from the net, but eventually, she stopped on a message that Avi could barely make out in the darkness and clicked a prominent button.

A dull, mechanical noise passed through the shutter. It rose from the ground and ascended inside the building, accompanied by a barely audible hum: soon, they were left in front of an old concrete garage and a metal hatch, so opaque it blended perfectly with the floor.

Zelda turned to Rosh. «After you, Commander»

«The last time we met Gossamer elsewhere» commented the Ferine, once they were all inside the garage. The shutter closed under Avi's watchful eye.

Dr. Ashford adjusted her sleeve. «We requested an alternative entrance. You can never be too careful; you know that better than I do» she stopped in front of the hatch and looked at Rosh with an out-of-place complicity that came off as mocking. «I hope it wasn't a bother to follow me»

«You are clearly the guest of honor» replied Rosh. «The Third Division plays a marginal role in this story»

«Oh, no. I assure you not. I can't tell you anything in advance, though» and with that, she vaguely pointed to the ceiling of the garage.

In the four corners of the room, a series of cameras were watching them.

Perhaps, Avi thought, whoever was waiting for them had been watching them the whole way: he recalled the masked men at the jazz club, the taxi driver called by the doctor, and that long wandering through anonymous and disconnected alleys from the rest of the city.

Zelda, standing by the hatch, called him and asked him to come closer. «Can you handle this?»

Avi easily lifted the metal cover: the hatch concealed a long flight of stairs leading down.

They were already deep, and Avi could only acknowledge that they were about to access one of the oldest layers of St. Absainthe: below must extend the complex network of tunnels, catacombs, and bunkers that dated back to the old world, to Riftless before the Zenith, the beginning of everything.

Everyone in Vesper knew about the bunkers, but they were considered mere ruins, relics of a distant past that no one could fully reconstruct: publicly, they had been repurposed into city warehouses or control rooms, inaccessible from the outside. Down there, however, was where Gossamer was hiding.

He let the commander and Zelda go ahead, and then he closed the hatch. Under the LED lights, they began descending the stairs, accompanied by the creaking of aged metal and the humidity that tainted the dusty air of the underground.

Commander Rosh led the way, followed by Dr. Ashford, while Avi trailed behind both of them without making a sound: his heart was racing, and never before had he felt so crushed by the depth of St. Absainthe.

For a moment, he thought he was in the basement of his childhood home and felt like a child again, scared and vulnerable in that dimly lit darkness. The deeper he went, the more that feeling became undeniable and overwhelming, and the more Ashford and Rosh seemed distant, unreachable.

He would never truly walk alongside them, he thought, and an immense weariness washed over him.

After an indeterminable amount of time, the stairs ended, depositing them in what appeared to be a hotel corridor. The red carpet, decorated with gold spirals, stretched out to a large steel-reinforced door, marked with the numbers zero and six. The walls, panelled in wood, were lined with very old photographs, antique paintings—some too worn by time to make out their subjects—and clocks, dozens and dozens of clocks: their incessant ticking filled the air with constant and unbearable noise.

In the middle of the corridor stood two more people.

The taller one was a Soft-Skin just a little older than Dr. Ashford, wearing a dark blue tailored suit of exquisite quality (which Avi couldn't help but notice and envy) and perfectly polished black shoes. Next to him was a young man, likely the same age as Avi, dressed just as elegantly. Both perfectly embodied the stereotype of the Decadent, a prestigious and wealthy inhabitant of the depths, sharing the same slicked-back brown hair and a dark pink birthmark on the bridge of their noses.

They had to be father and son, Avi thought, although their rigid postures (the man's indifferent and assured, the boy's still awkward) and the distance between their bodies suggested a professional or even a power-subordinate relationship.

Zelda approached the man and shook his hand, holding it for a second too long for it to be a casual or inadvertent gesture. She whispered something in his ear but seemed to get no response.

When she turned to the young man, however, the courtesies were more expansive, with Dr. Ashford calling him by name (Edmund), asking how he was (Nervous, but understandably so), and inquiring about his studies (Graduation was nearing, the neuroscience professor was particularly impressed with his research and was considering an internship abroad, outside St. Absainthe).

Rosh, beside him, had tensed up. They exchanged a single glance, but it was enough for Avi to understand they were thinking the same thing: Dr. Ashford and this man, whom she had described as one of the "brilliant minds" of the scientific committee, were regular guests of Gossamer; for them, descending into the depths of the city was no different than meeting at a jazz club or a bistro for a quick lunch.

Perhaps after such a meeting, Ashford and her colleague had decided how to act regarding the infected in the Agricultural District and how to control the population, which was increasingly reluctant to follow the committee's directives.

The man didn't introduce himself until Avi and the commander approached. Then, he smiled courteously and shook hands with both of them. He had a firm grip, what Avi's father would have called a good worker's handshake, but his eyes were lifeless: they were two expressionless purple shards, so cold and devoid of light they seemed like colored glass.

«Doctor Virgil Fairchild» he said, lingering on his name as a patient teacher might. He was shaken by a tremor and turned towards the end of the corridor. «Gossamer is becoming impatient. We must reach him.».

Avi stood paralyzed as Fairchild, Ashford, and Rosh lined up in front of the reinforced door, and the same happened to Edmund. The boy's attention was entirely focused on the door sliding open, the metallic creak now filling the entire corridor. His whole body was tense towards that threshold and whatever lay in the depths of the city, but he dared not approach it.

Watching him, Avi found the same bewilderment that had accompanied him for years: an uncertainty that forced him to hold his shoulders ever straighter, to seem larger than he was, and to speak with a voice always confident, as if he knew he was unstoppable.

The boy noticed he was being observed and shot him a glare. It was a disgusted and arrogant expression, which made him seem younger and, at the same time, reminded Avi how different they were. Yet, it also confirmed what he had noticed until then.

Perhaps he and Edmund Fairchild had something in common. Perhaps he was so frightened that he wanted to believe that, in that abyss, there was at least one of his kind.

However, when the door fully disappeared into the walls and revealed the room it contained, even that meagre hope seemed to vanish, and Avi's fear, which had kept him alive until then, chose to transform into terror.

In that concrete room, with an unexpectedly high ceiling, hung a creature. It looked like a large, pulsating heart, connected by webs of flesh to the ceiling and floor of that secret refuge, but it was covered in faces, deformed and sometimes rendered anonymous by the thick layer of skin that hid their features and threaded with cables that hung from its bulbous body like artificial tentacles.

It seemed to be breathing, and with difficulty, so that its mouths filled the room with gasps, exhalations, and hisses, an orchestra of pain that nonetheless confirmed how alive and real that thing was. The webs of flesh anchoring it to the concrete prevented it from falling into the dark hole over which it was suspended, and they alternated between thin threads, immense trunks, and long roots.

A mellifluous and crystalline voice insinuated itself into the minds of all present.

Welcome. Let me look at you.

Hundreds of eyes opened along the raw flesh, announced by a moist sound of lids parting.

Avi wanted to run. He wanted to dash towards the door, start pounding on it, give in to desperate sobbing, and let shame consume him. At the same time, he wanted to throw himself at that monstrosity and tear it apart with his bare hands, even if it meant hurting himself or dying.

Immobilised, he could only be pushed forward by Rosh. The commander whispered something to him, but Avi understood nothing: he only saw his mouth moving, as if in slow motion, and felt the gazes of those around him.

Then, again, that voice.

You seem tired. Is the city not treating you well?

«On the contrary, Gossamer» replied Dr. Fairchild. «Our city shines ever bright»

«And it will continue to do so» added Zelda, smiling. «Thanks to you»

Thanks to our collaboration, you mean. The monster seemed pleased. Thanks to the trust that binds us. Helping you would be an act of charity, unjustified alms. Ours is a commercial relationship, my dear.

Dr. Fairchild tried to speak, but a deep breath shook the creature, and for a moment, everything seemed to tremble.

Just a moment, Virgil. A large blue eye with a round black pupil focused on Rosh. Argus, it has been decades since you last came down here: your fur has turned grey, your fangs are no longer as sharp as they once were... Do you still dream of me? Despite your life moving forward.

«I haven't dreamt of you for a long time» the commander replied.

I wish you were lying. I miss dreams, and living yours is all that remains of sleep for me. It seemed to sigh. Your dreams have always been unusual. Who dreams of the sea without ever having seen it?

«Echoes of another life, perhaps» murmured Rosh.

A life where you didn't meet me. The eye moved to Fairchild's son. And here is another Virgil, young and healthy, smelling clean: I envy your legs, other Virgil, I would use them to go far.

The boy's voice came out broken and hoarse. «My name is Edmund»

As if I didn't know? No, you are nothing but Virgil. No matter how much you try to escape it, that is the face you meet every time you look in the mirror. Even when you think you don't recognise yourself, you will always be Virgil. The tone became conspiratorial and caressing again. I wonder who you are in your dreams.

Edmund said nothing more, visibly disturbed, and none of the others commented on what they had heard.

Avi kept his gaze down when the eye rested on him. He tried to focus on his boots, memorising every detail, but something confused him: a slight discoloration on the tip of the shoe was enough to break him.

Out of nowhere, he found himself thinking about his childhood bed, the factory smoke, the smell of wheat fields, and the girl he had kissed on his seventeenth birthday. He also thought about the agent from the Third Division who had crippled his father and his first drunken night, the rain on his cheeks, and the first Revived he had killed after a violent trench battle.

He realised too late what was happening, and by then he had already looked up. He was face-to-face with the blue eye.

*Marcet sounds like rotten*¹. Gossamer declared. *What is rotten was once alive. What is alive is in its place. You are rotten because you are out of place, Avi. What are you doing here? Why are you in the presence of a monster from the depths?*

He did not answer. His tongue felt paralysed. His mind desperately sought an answer, and the creature's voice, always affable, became almost an echo of his thoughts.

Success. Fame. Wealth. No matter how deep I have to sink, how much I have to forget. A pause. But you haven't forgotten: that's what's destroying you. Serving the same army that made your father a cripple, that massacred the very roots of your community... Rotten, rotten, rotten.

Avi let out a groan.

But never as disgusting as me, that's what you're thinking. How can I blame you? I certainly don't look like the film stars you pay to see every Saturday night. The voice rippled into a laugh. I want to taste your dreams, Ascended. The ones that taste of sunshine and regrets are my favourite. I hope to stay with you for a long time.

Gossamer left as silently as it had arrived, without its presence being felt. However, it left behind a sense of calm and well-being that restored Avi's clarity.

Everything around him became clear and bearable again. The creature was still horrifying, but now it provoked a sense of compassion and sympathy, so sincere and genuine that it made him feel at ease. Avi took a deep breath, free from the terror with which he had entered, and looked at Rosh.

He was surprised to find anguish on the commander's face.

A moment of silence passed, and then Dr Fairchild spoke. «With your permission, I'd like to introduce the reason for our visit. Zelda, the floor is yours».

That phrase was enough to change the doctor's demeanour, which until then had been light and nonchalant. With her hands behind her back and her face slightly raised, she turned into a solemn and precise speaker: her voice, once playful and irreverent, took on a severe and professional tone.

«Gossamer, we have discovered that the Revived are infecting reconnaissance troops at the borders between Vesper and the Mora Marshes. And we know how they're doing it» Dr Ashford glanced at Avi for a moment. «We believe it involves the Beast».

The Third Division knew the Beast well. None of the agents Avi knew had ever encountered it, but numerous testimonies and videos confirmed the existence of a super-soldier serving the Revived, causing such chaos and destruction every time it acted that it earned the nickname "Beast."

¹ Rotten, in italian, can be translated with the adjective "marcio": a word quite similar to Avi's surname.

Avi recalled security footage from one of the military bases on the border between Irrlicht and Vesper, clearly showing a figure of gigantic proportions, its face covered by a mask of thorns, moving through the corridors of the facility accompanied by other masked bioterrorists.

While the others wielded bows or rifles and protected themselves with shields, bulletproof jackets, and armour, the Beast operated barehanded and feared no bullets, as evidenced by the numerous wounds that marked its bare, muscular torso.

His entire squad had been astounded to see it grab a reconnaissance soldier and strangle him through his armour. It had flung him against a wall without effort and then moved on to his comrades until they found what they were looking for: supplies, implants, weapons, and drones.

«Some soldiers who survived an encounter with the Beast died within forty-eight hours. Not from the injuries sustained in the clash, sometimes quite superficial, but from a decay of their cells» explained the doctor. «In all recorded cases, we observed similar stages: abdominal pain and vomiting, followed by dehydration and hypovolemia, then insomnia, hallucinations, and finally the collapse of the liver, kidneys, and all muscles in the body».

«The Beast touched them all?» asked Rosh.

«Yes, exactly. We confirmed it from footage on their optical scanners. Additionally, the same biological agent was present in all the bodies: we're trying to identify it, but it's difficult to isolate and preserve. It seems not to survive in a dead body» the doctor paused. «That's why we decided to capture the Beast and bring it to St. Absainthe for further study».

Rosh did not hide his surprise. «Bring it here? When everything it touches is destined to die in less than three days?»

Fairchild responded. «We believe that in a controlled environment, far from Irrlicht and the outside world, this power of theirs (if we can call it that) would be much weaker, if not completely nullified. The Revived's weapons depend on the energies that infest their lands: if this biological agent works the same way, the Beast will be just another terrorist»

«Energies?» interrupted Edmund. «You mean the Echoes?»

Fairchild nodded but said nothing more, and Avi could not hide his confusion.

He had no idea what the Echoes were and found it absurd that a scientist was talking about powers and energies, things that sounded like pure fantasy to his ears. He recalled the legends told by the elders of the Agricultural District, those stories of rebellion and magic whispered on summer evenings and wondered if the doctor was referring to something similar.

The Echoes are what the Zenith left behind. Gossamer invaded his mind without warning, making him start. It must have been speaking only to him because no one else seemed to hear it. Anomalous energies, manipulate and can be manipulated: not much different from the magic you've heard about, Ascended. But they are, oh, so unpredictable... I'd like to show you what they can do.

Avi struggled to ignore it, but that sentence seemed to burrow into his head with unnatural effectiveness as if Gossamer had rooted itself in his brain. The thought that this might have happened made him nauseous and terrified, but for some reason, he did not feel the fear he was sure he should be feeling: the longer he stayed in that place, the more he understood he was detaching and distancing himself from his surroundings.

He managed to refocus on the conversation, inexplicably clearer.

«That's why you need the Third Division», said the commander. «You want us to capture it and bring it here»

«Correct», replied Dr Ashford. «But we need to figure out how to isolate the Beast. As I said, the Third Division will play an essential role in this mission: we will rely on you to devise an action plan and carry it out. You already deal with the Revived, so there are no better agents we could turn to»

Rosh shook his head. «Isolating and capturing the Beast will result in the death of dozens of my men. Not to mention the immense risk we would all take in bringing it to St. Absainthe: we kill the Revived outside to leave them outside. Why not just neutralise it?»

«We need to understand its power. Besides, Commander, you have no option to refuse» Fairchild cut in. «You know that if we're talking to you about it, it's because the Lower Echelons have already decided it is a necessary and mandatory mission»

Avi spoke without realising it. «And what will you do with the biological agent? If you succeed?»

Fairchild's gaze grew even colder. «That is none of your concern, Marcet. What you are asking goes far beyond your authority».

He was about to retort, but the commander grabbed his shoulder and looked at him sternly. That was enough for Avi to understand he had crossed a line. He lowered his head and, although he should have formally apologised to Fairchild, he merely returned the doctor's gaze as he whispered something into Edmund's ear. There was a strange intimacy in the contempt the two Decadents didn't hesitate to show towards him, but if such behaviour would normally have brought him down, now it only stirred anger within him.

Doctor Ashford cleared her throat and addressed Gossamer directly. «The commander's concerns are understandable. That's why we need your advice. How can we tame the Beast? Approach it without it wanting to hurt us? It must have a weak point: it is still a Soft-Skin»

The inhabitants of Irrlicht call themselves Grothon. That's how we should refer to them. And indeed, despite being different from you, they remain Soft Skins: fragile and tenacious, murderers and victims. There was something petulant and amused in the creature's voice. *I know what the Beast desires and what could make it lower its guard, but I want something particular in exchange for this information.*

A shiver ran down Avi's spine when he saw Dr Fairchild's expression grow confused. «You've never asked for more than was already agreed upon. Strange, coming from you»

Your request is strange in itself. It deserves a strange reward.

«We will make sure to satisfy you», replied Dr Ashford before her colleague could respond.
«We are at your disposal, as always»

Gossamer did not speak immediately. That was enough to envelop the room in an oppressive silence.

Avi did not know how that monster was paid and was afraid to find out. Even more, the thought that he and Edmund might be the reward for its services terrified him: it was irrational and stupid, but judging by the expression of the young Decadent (still calm, but increasingly pale) he could not have been the only one who thought so. Perhaps, all those human protrusions under Gossamer's flesh were nothing more than young and unsuspecting sacrifices, who, like them, had been led to the slaughter.

Rosh would never do that, Avi thought, but he could not fully convince himself, and for that, he felt deeply guilty.

I don't need your rotten body, Ascended. Gossamer's voice intruded once again in his mind, forcing another intimate and personal conversation. *I already have everything I want from you.*

Suddenly, the monster's body seemed to tremble. Something inside it was agitating and writhing, testing the entire system of webs and flesh that anchored it to the ground. The dozens of eyes that traversed it opened impossibly wide, the pupils reduced to enormous spheres of darkness, and a single phrase insinuated itself into the minds of all present, halfway between a scream of rage and a moan of pain.

I want the Beast's spine. And I want the Ascended to bring it to me.