

## **Episode 2:**

### **The Empress**

“Woman is as lazy as she is arrogant. Seated atop her throne, she imagines herself a queen. She does not plow the fields. She does not fix what is broken. She does not take up arms to defend her family. She merely sits in repose and allows that which she desires to be brought to her, praising herself all the while, as though she is somehow responsible for the riches which have been strewn about her.”

*- The Good Davride, Book of Nurturance, 4:11*

“It is a dangerous neurosis to compulsively fix that which appears broken. It is the fallacy of mortal beings, bound by time, to pathologize the present moment and attempt to coerce it into some kind of greater harmony. It is by this mechanism that disharmony is created.

But when we mortal beings step outside of time, and see the totality of the universe as it truly is, we no longer see the present moment as flawed. We see it as a perfect and beautiful step in a unfolding process. The fix we so desire is there, awaiting us in the future. It is coming to us. We need only wait.”

— *Jaivuzar Keen*

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"Maybe you really are immortal," Kresh wheezes. He's been lagging behind Bangles for a while now.

"I haven't died yet," Bangles confesses.

"We've been walking all day... and you ain' even tired."

"Nope," Bangles says. "Well, there was a time there, a long time, when I didn't do much of anythin' at all. So I guess I got all my restin' in then, and now I don't have to get tired anymore."

"Yezz... okay," Kresh says, too exhausted from their hike to try and decipher Bangles' cryptic ramblings.

The two of them have been walking south for several hours, picking their way through heaps of scrap metal growing ever higher and ever more dense the closer they get to the center of the ruined city they'd passed earlier this morning. The canyon walls looming over the road to Altama had sheltered them in shadows, but they've left that canyon behind now. To their left, a sheer vertical wall two thousand feet high. To their right, the glaring eye of the sun. But the afternoon heat has crested, and Bangles can feel the stiflingly hot atmosphere showing a little mercy and growing ever so slightly cooler.

"And you ain' thirsty either," Kresh mutters, with more than a hint of envy. "Whenzza last time you took a pizz?"

"Well... I can't remember the last time I took a piss," Bangles answers, after a moment's deliberation. "Years, probably."

"Thazz... not good," Kresh says.

"Naw, it's fine," Bangles says. "It's been this way for a while. If I was gonna keel over dead from not pissin' and not drinkin' water, it probably woulda happened by now."

"Becuzz you're immortal."

"That's right!" Bangles says, with perhaps a little more cheer than Kresh is comfortable negotiating in his current state of exhaustion.

The two men walk in silence for a few minutes before Kresh pipes up again. "This got somethin' to do with that whole 'you puttin' your body back together' thing? And that whole 'you catchin' bullets with your bare hand' thing?"

"Well, yes, I'd have to say it rightly does."

"We see," Kresh says pensively. "Say, would you mind... tellin' us how alla that works?"

"Hmm," Bangles hums thoughtfully. "Well... the main thing, is that I know I don't really wanna die..."

"Yeah, we'd say thazz true of most people."

"... but on the other hand, I know I don't really care if I live or I die. Sort of a paradox that balances itself out by bein' jus' the right type o' contrary. So, when somethin' of a violent nature is happenin' to my body, I can just step back, so to speak, and calmly examine it. Like: 'oh... oh gosh. I'm bleedin'. Well, how a-bout that.' I jus' ain't got no attachment to it, one way or the other. And because of that, I can give the present situation my full attention. No emotion, jus'... jus' a real profound

awareness. And the rest jus' takes care of itself."

"We've heard that song before. Itzza good song," Kresh says. "But itzza hard one to sing. So, did you learn it from, like, one of those hardcore Naraean magicians that used to stab themselves with those big-azz steel knitting needles?"

"Well, I don't think I know any Naraeans, whatever those are. And I'm pretty sure *I* ain't a Naraean..."

"No shit, spike, those ain' feathers," Kresh says, reaching up and tapping the point of Bangles' horn with his index finger.

"No, I mean..." Bangles says, starting up a sentence but trailing off immediately. He's been taken out of the present moment – the same present moment that he had only seconds ago claimed so much proximity to. He's been transported to the past by an image in his head of a statuesque woman with skin as red as clay, dark eyes that glimmered like a starry night sky, her long well-toned legs folded in front of her, her graceful hand taking a long black stick and stirring the embers of a dying fire back to life. The vision assembles itself into his mind, and a second later it dissolves away like smoke. "I mean, I didn't learn it from no Naraean or anythin' like that," Bangles clarifies.

"So, where did you learn it?"

Bangles reaches for the image that had slipped into and out of his mind only a moment ago, but he finds nothing. Unable to recall, he simply turns and makes a grand sweeping motion with his arms to indicate the great wide desert stretching out all around them.

"Out there, somewhere," Bangles says. "But also... in here?" He taps his index finger against his temple.

"Uh-huh. Very informative," Kresh replies.

"Look, friend, I'll tell ya everything I can as soon as I remember, but..."

"But what?"

"It's jus'..."

"Juzz *what*?" Kresh says, getting more than a little annoyed.

Bangles sighs. "I got a real strong intuition that maybe you ain't really wanna know how to live forever. Like, maybe there's parts of all this you don't want no part of, sacrifices you'd have to make, things you aren't considerin' right now that could very well cause you a great deal of regret in the future, should your desire come to pass."

"We can say with confidence that you are wrong about that."

Bangles shrugs his shoulders and kicks at a loose crank shaft sticking out of the dust. This subject of discussion is making him uncomfortable. He decides to change the subject. "So, I gotta know. Are all the trains 'round these parts as gosh darn amazin' as the Train we were on this mornin'?"

"Ah ha... no," Kresh replies, shaking his head. "That particular train is one of a kind, *ling*."

"Yeah, shucks, I mean, how could there be two of 'em? How would there ever be enough room for that much beauty in the universe?" Bangles says, getting a little moony as he rhapsodizes. "I mean, it's the most beautiful machine I ever saw. Shucks, it's the most beautiful train I ever heard!"

"Hmm," Kresh says, letting out a vibrant musical buzzing as he thoughtfully strokes his chin.

"You're one of us, aren' you?"

"I'm not sure I follow..." Bangles says, checking his neck and cranium for fins.

"A Commuter. You're a Commuter, like us."

"What's that word mean?" Bangles asks, scratching the top of his definitively finless bald head.

"Ain't that what them two angry lawmen with sticks up their trousers was callin' us?"

"Ah ha, yezz..." Kresh chuckles. "But you're a Commuter. You were making your pilgrimage to the Train."

"Oh yes. Definitely."

"And you know the teachings of Jaivuzar Keen," Kresh continues.

"Oh, ah, well... hmm. I mean, safe to say, friend Kresh, I don't know much of anythin'."

"Yezz. Right. That much is pretty clear," Kresh agrees. "Tell us, friend Bangles. What do you think of a job well done?"

"Well, it makes a heck of a lot more sense than doin' a job badly," Bangles says, matter-of-factly.

"Mhm, mhm," Kresh confirms, nodding profusely. "Tell us, friend Bangles. What do you think about taking care of your mind and body?"

"Well, heck, what kind of a life would I be livin' if I didn't?" Bangles says.

"Mhm, mhm," Kresh replies, with burgeoning enthusiasm. "Tell us, friend Bangles. What do you think about trying your hardest to make the world a better place? Even in the face... of certain doom?"

"Well, gosh, Kresh, I mean... ya gotta try, don'cha?" Bangles says. "You just got to! I mean, what other option is there?"

"Mhm, mhm," Kresh says, reaching out and giving Bangles a friendly pat on the back. "Bangles, friend... we think you might be a Commuter."

"Oh gosh!" Bangles says, excited by this sudden and unexpected acquisition of an identity.

"But therezz one more question we have to ask."

"And what question is that?" Bangles asks, hoping he gets the answer right.

"Ya holdin'?"

Bangles looks down at his empty hands. "Nope," he says.

"Yezz, yezz, stupid question. Where would you even be holdin' if you were holdin'?" Kresh asks. "Don' answer that," he adds. "I don' wanna know. Well, Bangles, you may not be holdin', but we are. We are always holdin'. Would ya like a little *kek*?" Kresh says, an enigmatic enthusiasm animating his face.

"*Kek*?" Bangles asks.

"Medizzzzzin," Kresh explains.

"But I'm not sick."

Kresh sighs. "Itzza End of the World, baby. Everybody's sick with something or other."

"Oh! Gosh! I had no idea!" Bangles says. "*The End of the World*?"

"The End of the World," Kresh confirms. "No more animals, not even bugs. No more plants, not even weeds. Not even water. Maybe you noticed?"

"Now, somethin' does seem a little bit outta place," Bangles says, though he feels certain that Kresh is exaggerating with this End of the World business.

"There, you see?" Kresh says. "Something izzoutta place. That means, you need medizzzzzzzin."

"Well, shucks. Maybe you're right."

"Oh, we're always right," Kresh says, reaching into one of the many pouches attached to his belt. He appears to be sorting through a rather large number of objects inside the pouch, though he takes none of them out into the light. "Now, you seem a little discombobulated...uh, no offense..."

"None taken," Bangles assures him.

"...so, we're not gonna razzle and dazzle your deal with big fat dose of the pineal feel. Lezz get you started on the zazz."

"Zazz?" Bangles asks.

"Zazzamatazz," Kresh explains, pulling a little plastic bag filled with beige powder out of his pouch.

"Like sassafrass?" Bangles asks.

"No, not at all," says Kresh, sticking a little spoon into the bag and offering it to Bangles. "Zazz izza dopaminergic transpersonally entactogenic color resaturating hybridized amphetamine. You know what we mean?"

Bangles does not. He takes the adorable little spoon and holds it up to his mouth, but Kresh arrests Bangles' forearm with a gentle tap of his gloved hand.

"You *could* eat it," Kresh says. "But we think you should take it in the nose."

"The nose?" Bangles asks.

Kresh taps his own bulging nasal bridge in reply, then pantomimes snorting something off of the tip of his index finger.

"Ah. Of course," Bangles says obligingly, closing one nostril with a finger and holding the little spoonful of powder up to his other nose-hole. He inhales sharply, sucking every last crystal in the spoon up, up, and all the way into his brain. "Hmm," he says. "No offense, but that was jus' the slightest bit uncomfortable."

"None taken," says Kresh, gleefully refilling the spoon. "But here, take a little more."

"Certainly," Bangles says, inhaling again, this time through the other nostril (for balance's sake).

"You can keep the spoon," says Kresh, pulling a little spoon for himself out of another pocket.

"Um...where?" says Bangles, looking down at his naked body.

"... right," says Kresh. "Bangles, *ling*, we're gonna have to get you some threzz."

"Threzz?" asks Bangles, tucking the spoon behind his ear.

"Threzz," Kresh replies, gesturing to his remarkable outfit with one hand while he empties a spoon up his nose with the other.

"Oh yeah. I certainly do need some threads," Bangles concedes. "But where are we gonna find those?" he asks, looking around the dust-covered ruins as though a tailor might have somehow survived whatever calamity had befallen this place, and remained here amongst this lonely wind-swept wreckage, keeping his empty shop open out of a deep and profound sense of sartorial honor.

"Spirena," Kresh mutters, a look of frustration spreading across his handsome features. "Damn. We're really going to Spirena. We're gonna need more of this," he says, dipping his spoon back into the baggie for another dose.

"Is it that bad?" Bangles asks.

"What it is, is complicated," Kresh grumbles. All of a sudden, he perks up. "Hey, do you hear that?"

Bangles listens, and yes, he does indeed hear something: a rumbling and a tumbling and a chugga-chugga thump-thumpening. "A train!" he says.

Kresh's eyes go wide. "We need to get to that train!" he says, off and running before he's even finished his sentence.

Bangles follows close behind, leaping over hunks of oxidizing scrap metal, perfectly rectangular hunks of stone jutting upwards at strange angles, and fallen lampposts half submerged in the dirt. Without the weight of mortality to slow him down, Bangles can run as fast as he wants, as long as he wants. And yet, somehow, he cannot keep pace with Kresh. Stirred from his exhaustion by the promise of salvation (and perhaps a little something more), Kresh seems almost weightless as he sprints through the abandoned city. When Kresh spreads his glider wings and lifts off the ground entirely, Bangles is hardly surprised. Flight seems to him a natural extension of Kresh's buoyancy. The airborne Zoan soars to the train, alighting on the roof of a passenger car while Bangles is still down in the dust running alongside. Impatiently, Kresh beckons him on, but the forward progress of the train is already taking him out of Bangles' line of sight. Bangles catches himself hesitating, hesitating because he is unsure of the mechanics of boarding a moving train from the ground. But his hesitation could very well cost him this train ride. The caboose is coming up alongside him, and Bangles turns and lunges for it. He grabs on to the railing that encloses the small platform at the back of the caboose, squeezing the skinny metal bars in his hands so tightly that he worries he might break them. Once he works his feet on the platform, he climbs the rest of the way up, onto the roof of the train, and sets about trying to find Kresh.

Kresh, at first glance, is nowhere to be found. Bangles fears he's been abandoned, but decides to investigate the situation thoroughly just to be sure. It does not take him long to find Kresh. The Zoan is lying on his back, his turquoise suit glimmering in the sun. He's using one of his many pouches as a

pillow, and he seems to be right at home, nestled in a comfortable groove between the various ridges, railings, and general topographical variations of the rooftop of the train.

"Hey," says Kresh, opening one big golden eye. "Ya made it."

"That flyin' maneuver's quite the trick," Bangles says. "How'd you take off from the ground?"

"Old Zoan secret," Kresh says, wagging his finger. "My ancestors had to do a lotta running, to get away from a lotta very persistent jerk-offs. We've turned making a quick getaway into an art form."

"I like that. If you gotta do somethin', do it so well that it turns into art," Bangles says.

"Yezz!" Kresh says, giving Bangles' bony shoulder a squeeze. "Exactly! Thazz what being a Commuter izzall about. Which reminds me... ya feeling it yet?"

"Feelin' what yet?"

"The zazz! The zazzamatazz!" Kresh says. "Little bitta powder that went up ya nose?"

"Oh! Right!" Bangles says, pondering for a minute. "I mean, what's it supposed to feel like?"

"Like colors are deeper than ever before. Like light is a liquid you spilled on the floor. Like your body izza gaseous cloud made of pleasure. Like itzza best day of your life, and it's lasting forever," Kresh sings.

"Well, okay!" Bangles says, enthused, though still thoroughly confused. "Hey, Kresh?"

"What?"

"I think that's how I feel most of the time anyway."

"We see. Aren' you a lucky one," Kresh says, closing his eyes and letting the sun wash over his mottled skin. "We shouldn't've taken so much. It's gonna dehydrate us."

Bangles, meanwhile, has rediscovered the spoon he'd tucked behind his ear, and he is now examining it. To his delight, he finds that it is rather beautiful. The handle of the spoon has a number of enticing little whirls and whorls carved into it, and a few brightly colored feathers running alongside it. "Hey, Kresh?" Bangles asks. "What kinda bird did these feathers come from?"

"Feathers?" Kresh says, sitting up and giving him a curious look. Once he sees the little object that has captured Bangles' attentions, he laughs. "Oh, those things? They're synthetic, they're not from a real bird, *ling*. All the real birds are gone," he says.

"*All* the real birds?" Bangles asks, more than a little disturbed by the notion of total avian extinction. He'd been quick to dismiss Kresh's earlier comment about the End of the World, but he finds himself unable to shrug it off again so quickly now.

"All the birds but the featherheads... and, ya know, the occasional flying frog," Kresh adds, with a twinkling smile. "There's some rich folks still gotta few birds tucked away somewhere, probably. But yezz. All the wild birds."

"All the wild birds..." Bangles mumbles to himself, gazing up at the evening sky above. It is a sky devoid of soaring eagles and circling buzzards. Bangles has not seen a single animal anywhere in the desert since his tumble from the cactus. Nor has he seen a single plant, save the cactus itself, which withered away to nothing shortly after his fall.

Now, perhaps some folks out there imagine the desert to be an empty wasteland devoid of life, but nothing could be further from the truth. Many a colorful lizard and bejeweled beetle carves out a life for itself beneath the stones and pebbles of the desert floor, only to find their way into the mouths of scampering roadrunners and clever foxes, who themselves fall prey to the cunning maneuvers of majestic hawks and ferocious coyotes – all this drama, of course, taking place under the watchful eye of every imaginable sort of succulent, from the tranquil aloe to the towering cactus, not to mention the drifting tumbleweeds and those elusive wildflowers who only show their faces when just the right conditions have been met. A desert without this elaborate ecosystem to color it is no desert at all. It's something else, something worse, something hollow, like an empty human skeleton with the face, the organs, and the brain all rotted away. It's horrible to contemplate, and yet, Bangles finds himself accepting this new paradigm of reality without a struggle.

"Kresh," he says. "I seem to be accepting this new paradigm of reality without a struggle."

"New paradigm of reality? You mean the apocalypse?" Kresh asks, and Bangles nods. "Ah. Yezz. That would be the zazz kicking in. We feel it, too."

"I mean, it's sad, for sure it is. But it's not so sad that..."

"That you'd what? Try to kill your own immortal azz about it?" Kresh says, smiling mischievously.

Bangles can't help but chuckle.

"Thazza interesting thing about sadnezz," Kresh continues. "Now, we Commuters? We get it. When we're sad, we feel sad. It's juzz part of the Serran experience. But the rest of the world? They think sadness must be fought. They think sadnezz izzan enemy. They try to kill it with happinezz, and when that doesn' work, they try to kill it with debauchery. Now, we're all for a little debauchery. But debauchery won't make anyone lezz sad, not in the long term. So when that doesn' work, and they keep finding sadnezz anywhere they go, anywhere in the world... they try to take over the world. And crush the sadnezz out of it," Kresh says, clenching a sunbeam in his fist. "Total control. A fist that never opens," he says, opening his own. "And, for a while there, it looked like they were actually gonna pull it off."

"...what happened?" Bangles asks.

"The End of the World," Kresh replies, wistfully. "We guezz thazz juzz what happens when everyone tries too hard to fight the ways of the universe. We suppose it'll happen to you too, soon enough. What with you fighting off death the way you are."

"I ain't fightin' death," Bangles says, softly. "And I ain't runnin' from no death neither."

"Everybody's running from something," Kresh mutters. "Hey, take a look," he says, turning his head to the front of the train.

Bangles obliges. There, appearing in the midst of the flat expansive plain on the western horizon, are boulders: boulders that gather and rise into hills, hills that gather and rise into mountains, two tall and mighty mountains reaching up to snare the setting sun between them. Nestled in the gap between these majestic twins of dirt and stone rests a broad city skyline. It's miles away, far enough that the buildings look as small as children's blocks. Like Altama, this city is covered by an enormous transparent dome, but Bangles can already see that the dome before him is far, far larger than the dome that contained the doomed city of Altama. As tall as the buildings are, they don't even begin to approach the colossal ceiling of this thing. Even the tallest of them – three towering spires with slender stems and broad blossoming tops – only reach a little over half the way up.

"Spirena...", Kresh says, pensively. "Oh. You're gonna need some threzz, stat."

"But I don't have any -"

"Here," Kresh says.

Without taking his eyes off the city on the horizon, he pulls a handful of something from one of his pouches and thrusts it in Bangles direction. It's a pair of little silk shorts: periwinkle blue and speckled with little green cacti. The cacti have a certain wobbly curvaciousness to them, as though they had been dancing bonelessly in the privacy of Kresh's pouch, only to freeze mid-undulation in Bangles' hands, hoping to feign inanimacy and escape detection.

"Have you had these the whole time?" Bangles asks.

"We haven' been back in months," Kresh says, ignoring Bangles' question. "We were hoping to make it years."

"You gotta tell me," Bangles says. "Why you don't wanna go back."

"We don' gotta tell you anything, *ling*," Kresh says. "But we will. Because we are feeling ourselves in a friendly and trusting mood, and because we have a suspicion that you might be able to help us. But we're going to have to let you in on a secret, and you must promise to help us keep that secret."

Bangles rises to his feet, placing one hand over his chest. "Kresh, my friend, I do hereby solemnly swear to help you keep your secret a secret."

"It's like this," Kresh begins. "We Zoans, we are an amphibious people. We live in the water: we breathe the water, we drink the water, we purify the water. We live closer to the water than any other conscious being. And what we know, by living in the water this way, izzat the water hazza memory. The water remembers everything it has ever passed through. Every ocean, and every riverbed. Every fish, and every octopus. Every mouth, and every urethra. The water remembers. It knows you better than you know yourself. And if we Zoans want to share in this knowledge, all we have to do is let the water permeate us."

"Amazin'!" Bangles says, mystified.

"What that means, izzat much of Zoan memory is collective memory. However, sometimes it is hard for us to accezz that collective memory. Thazz why our people train our priests and priestezzes to hear the memory of the water. Then they can share those memories with the rest of us, when the time is right. What that means, izzat Zoan secrets are very hard to keep. If one of us knows something, and that one enters the water we all share, then, sooner or later, each of us knows that something."

"Okay..."

"Bangles, we are trying to keep a secret from the rest of us. A secret none of them can know!"

"And what secret is that?"

Kresh leans in close, close enough that Bangles can see the little feathery black veins that weave their way through the perimeter of Kresh's big golden eyes. "We can't tell you. Because we forgot," he says, grinning proudly.

"I...see?" Bangles replies.

"We had to!" Kresh continues. "There was no other way! The second this one returns to the communal waters of Spirena, then alla this one's memories will be shared with the priestezs! We had to wring it all out of this one's brain, to make sure that that won't ever happen. Here, take a look..." he says, reaching into one of his many pouches, and pulling out a canteen of water. "Here it is. The memory of this one's secret. All we have to do is drink this water, and we will remember. So we can *not* drink the water!"

"I think I understand..." Bangles says, nodding profusely.

"Here's the catch," Kresh says, narrowing his eyes conspiratorially. "This one does not remember the secret, but this one does remember that he *has* a secret. So, as soon as this one joins in that communal water, then all of us will know that he's hiding something. And that's where you come in, Bangles the Immortal."

"Me?" Bangles asks, looking around the roof of the train as though there might, in fact, be another immortal named Bangles sneaking around behind him somewhere. When he finds no such doppelganger, he points a trepidatious finger to his own naked chest.

"You," Kresh confirms. "You are going to take this canteen and make sure that no one... *no one!* Drinks the water inside. Can you do that for us?"

"Why, yes, I certainly can!" Bangles says. He snatches the canteen out of Kresh's outstretched hand. With his free hand, Bangles digs out a little hollow in his abdomen. He tucks the canteen away in there, somewhere between his small intestine and his rib cage, and his flesh closes back over the wound as though nothing had ever happened.

"Fuck," says Kresh, blinking rapidly to wipe the horrified stare from his eyes. "Bangles, *ling*, you gotta warn us when you're about to do something grisly like that. Thazz traumatizing. Juzz plain traumatizing."

Bangles opens his mouth to reply, but promptly becomes distracted by the gentle tickling of the wind against his skin. The wind dances across his body, investigating his contours with the gentle longing and curious fingers of love's explorations. Bangles closes his eyes, but vision accompanies him into the darkness beyond his eyelids. No mere sunspots, these little beads of light coalesce in his mind's eye into a map of his body, with every sensitive area indicated by a dazzling nexus of electric pink starlight sparkling and crackling with feeling. "Kresh," he says, at last. "I think the wind is tryin' to



seduce me.”

“Don' drag the wind into your Serran paradigms,” Kresh advises. “It won't fit.”

“What's a paradigm?” Bangles asks.

“A word you used – accurately – only a couple of minutes ago,” Kresh replies.

“Did I?”

“You did.”

“Okay,” Bangles says. “So... what is it?”

“A paradigm is a box you build in your mind, so you can use it to organize your thoughts,”

Kresh answers. “A useful tool, until one gets so accustomed to the box that they forget that it's there.”

“Ah,” says Bangles.

“I don't think you have any.”

“Paradigms?”

“Thoughts,” Kresh says. After a pause, he gives Bangles a playful smile and an even more playful tickle, and adds: “We're juzz playing, *ling*, don' take us seriously.”

“Who could take anythin' seriously?” Bangles says, with hushed awe. The sun is disappearing behind the approaching Spirena skyline, casting rays of brilliant blue this way and that. He turns around, and that brilliant blue light is splashing over the pink of the massive canyon wall in the distance behind them, spilling across every available surface like shining liquid mercury. “How could anythin' this beautiful be serious?”

“Our thoughts exactly,” Kresh says, warmly.

At last the sun has sunk behind the city, but Bangles has observed another sun that alights upon his breastbone. “I forgot what it was like,” he says.

“What? *Kek*?”

“Bein' with people,” Bangles says. “Sharin' a moment with somebody. I'd completely forgotten how good it feels.”

“Yezz,” Kresh agrees. “It's the juice that makes everything else we do possible. We'd give you a hug to commemorate the moment, but we're a bit too *hext* for huggin' right now. And you... are a bit too naked.”

“Handshake?” Bangles suggests.

“We're into it,” Kresh replies, pulling off a glove and revealing the long webbed fingers beneath.

The two of them clasp hands, and to Bangles, it is as though two tiny spiraling galaxies have collided in an exchange of suns and stars. When he closes his eyes, he can find no clear delineation between the perimeter of his hand and the architecture of Kresh's: only an amorphous swirling of wayward cosmic dust. But is it truly wayward? What is the destiny of dust but to disassemble and reassemble over and over again on its endless journey across the universe?

“Kresh?” says Bangles, unwilling to let go of the Zoan's hand.

“Yezz?”

“I am beset on all sides by sensuality, spirituality, and serenity.”

“Don' forget poetry,” Kresh adds.

“Who could?” Bangles says, a tear welling up in the corner of his eye.

“Hey, so... good *kek*, right?” Kresh asks, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “We always get the good stuff.”

“Yes!” Bangles blurts out. “Yes, good God, yes! It's jus'... how could... all this...” he says, frantically gesticulating with a flurry of hands to indicate the aura of magick that has come to permeate his personal psychic bubble “...come from a little bit o' powder?”

“Magic medizzzzzin?” Kresh says, cocking an eyebrow. “Couldn' tell ya, *ling*, we're not a doctor. Juzz a distributor... and a connoiseur. Oh, hey would ya look at that. We're here.”

Bangles turns his head and cranes it back (giving Kresh an opportunity to finally reclaim his

hand). The train is nearing the foot of the massive transparent dome that encircles the city of Spirena. A wall of steel-reinforced concrete some four stories high looms over them, stretching all the way to their left and reaching all the way to the right. Beyond the wall and the bubble dome atop it, the bustle and grind of the city soundscape vibrates like a hive of perpetually irritated mechanical bees. In the fading light, the streetlights and electric signs have begun to flicker on, joined by an erratic selection of the windows in the towering buildings, all of them, light and dark and in between, all placed in perfect rows atop perfect rows atop perfect rows within perfectly rectangular buildings placed within perfect rows of their own.

"Is it jus' me, or do y'all folks really like squares?" Bangles muses.

"Hey, don' look at us, we didn' design this shithole," Kresh grumbles. "We juzz built it."

"You? Built this... *enormous* city?" Bangles asks, pinned between awe and disbelief.

"Well, no, not this one personally. But Zoans, our people, we did most of the labor."

"You must be very hard workers," Bangles says.

"Thazz one way of putting it," Kresh says, with a sigh of resignation tinged with a hint of irritation. "Oh, you might wanna duck," he adds, dropping into a crouch.

"Huh?" Bangles says, moments before the low ceiling of the archway the train is passing under separates his head and shoulders from his torso. But the separation is only momentary.

"Yeesh," says Kresh, shaking his head. "We don' know if we're ever gonna get used to that."

The train passes through the tunnel in the dust wall, and emerges into the hustle and bustle of the city of Spirena. The tallest buildings Bangles thinks he's ever seen – five stories, ten stories, fifteen stories high – loom on all sides, like the towering trees of a jungle canopy, giving him an exhilarating rush of claustrophobia. Unweathered, unworn, and free from the dust that permeates the world outside, each of these buildings has the sparkle of the new about them. Beneath them, streetlights shine like little pale moons on every street corner, and up above, billboards mounted on rooftops tantalize Bangles with cryptic messages scripted in sigils of vivid color, dancing seductively to and fro in an endless loop. It's a lot for him to absorb all at once. He takes a deep breath in, observing as he does so how clean and yet how stale the air beneath the dome is. As the train's mighty brakes squeal, Bangles studies the dark and crowded streets spreading outwards from the train tracks in every direction, and finds himself deeply unsure whether or not he's capable of actually navigating these paved roads branching endlessly throughout this city.

"Kresh," he says, clutching his new friend's shoulder. "Please don't let me get lost in here."

"Don' worry, *ling*. You're carrying this one's little secret, remember?" Kresh assures him. "But stay close to us. If you wander off with this one's secret, this one is willing to go to great lengths to hunt you down and take it back."

The train stops at the platform, the whistle blows, and the passengers disembark. From where Kresh and Bangles are standing, the passengers' departure is almost completely obscured by the overhanging roof of the train station. Kresh steps gingerly off the roof of the train and onto the roof of the station, and Bangles follows behind. The metal slats of the roof are not particularly comfortable on Bangles' bare feet, and yet somehow that discomfort transmutes into an almost masochistic pleasure. A side effect of the *kek* he's ingested, perhaps. They walk to the rear of the train station, walking until they run out of roof. To Bangles' great surprise, Kresh keeps on walking anyway, stepping right out into thin air and floating there as if he were standing on solid ground.

"Um, Kresh?"

"What?" Kresh replies nonchalantly.

"How are you doin' that?"

"Doing what?"

Bangles is about to clarify his question several different ways, but he elects to veto each of his potential responses. Instead, he follows Kresh over the edge of the building and promptly splatters

himself into a bloody heap on the sidewalk below. As he reconstitutes himself, Kresh slowly levitates down to stand on the sidewalk next to him.

"That's quite the trick," Bangles says.

"We know a thing or two about gravity," Kresh explains. "Do us a favor?"

"Sure."

"Please, please, please don't do that regenerating thing in front of people. We got lucky, nobody saw you juzz now. But we promise you, people *will* freak out if they see you do that."

"I'll, um... try my best."

They depart the alleyway, and Kresh leads Bangles directly into the humid warmth of the crowd that walks these chaotic city streets. He's only been within the city for a few minutes, but Bangles has already blown far past his usual threshold for novelty, and his nervous system is melting somewhat. His jaw hangs open, flopping around limply somewhere between his collarbones. His head keeps turning around and around, each revolution accompanied after a slight delay by the rest of his body. This city is a carousel, finite and yet somehow boundless, and Bangles is its prisoner. If there is a way off of this ride, he can't see it. Looking over the heads of the crowd, he sees doors and alleyways. Perhaps he could find refuge in there. Or perhaps not. Who knows what tenants those walls conceal. Anyway, it's irrelevant, because right now Bangles has one instruction, and he must keep to it: stay with Kresh.

Luckily for Bangles, Kresh seems to have anticipated his wandering ambulatory fugue state. He saunters gently through the crowd at a steady pace, never rushing nor hurrying, simply letting their journey unfold at its own natural tempo. This is fortunate for Bangles, because his own natural tempo has become somewhat erratic. Part of him wants to escape this crowd. It takes him a great deal of self control to keep this aspect of himself from staging a mutiny, and the effort is leaving him a little bit exhausted. And it is not the only part of Bangles that suddenly requires management. Another part of him wants to tell all the women passing by that they're pretty (and some of them are *really* pretty). A third part of him wants to ask Kresh approximately thirty-five questions a second.

"Why does everybody seem... seem like somethin's missin' from 'em?" is the first question Bangles decides to ask.

"Do you remember that terrible horrible traumatizing thing that we witnezzed juzza few hours ago?" Kresh replies coolly.

"Oh good gosh. Yes, I do," Bangles replies, a cold chill huddling his shoulders.

"Thazz why," Kresh explains, in a tone of voice that pre-emptively silences the next hundred of Bangles' questions.

The nimble Zoan has adopted the stoic posture of the city's people – eyes ahead and mouth shut – and Bangles' instinct is to follow suit. Out of the periphery of his eyes, he watches the other pedestrians file past all around him. The streets of Spirena are crowded with people of every race. Bangles recognizes the Naraeans (and there are quite a lot of them here), but he had forgotten their diminutive size, with most of their feathers barely reaching his collarbones. Looking down at the tops of their heads, he spies little threads of silver and gold that the wealthiest have woven between their feathers. With the long flowing robes that hang limply from their shoulders and the multi-tiered petticoats floating buoyantly around them as they walk, this particular social class seem driven to take up as much space on the sidewalks as possible. A whole flock of these well-dressed Naraeans come down the street, all of them color-coded in white fabrics with green trim. All the other pedestrians step obediently to the side, halting their own forward progress and crowding against the walls in silence. Bangles looks to Kresh for an explanation, but none is forthcoming. The flock passes, and the rest of the pedestrian traffic on the road returns to normal.

The Zoans in the crowd may not be taking up as much space, but they seem to have a monopoly on color. Part of that is intrinsic, of course. The deep hues and bright stripes of the Zoans' skin are more beautiful all by themselves than most clothing could ever aspire to be. With that gift comes the challenge of pairing such brilliant skin to an article of clothing with colors vivid enough to complement

it. It is a challenge that each Zoan embraces in an entirely different way, some even going so far as to add luminescence, pearlescence, or iridescence to their ensemble. Each of them is an idiosyncratic work of art, and Bangles doesn't notice himself staring until Kresh puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Don' go off followin the wrong Zoan now," he says, with a smirk.

On the other end of the spectrum are the Xilas. They are not many in number, but they are here, walking in *tavs*, joking with each other in their native tongue, but keeping wary eyes to the crowd at all times. Their clothing is dark and worn and dusty, and they wear loose open vests if they wear shirts at all. With nothing to contain their axillary aromas (and no particular inclination towards bathing) the Xila's musk is a defining component of their presence. Passing a *tav* on the street corner, Bangles catches a whiff of dense odors: powerful and yet not entirely repulsive (even a little alluring, in the case of the females). Regardless of race or fashion choices, there is an uncomfortable common denominator running through each and every Serran face on these streets: nobody is happy, and everybody is bewildered. Bangles finds this bothersome on principle. This world is beautiful – terrifying, yes, overwhelming, yes, but undeniably beautiful. With all this terrifying beauty around, there is a certain spiritual obligation for anyone worth their weight in grey matter to open up their eyes and let the world back in. Bangles is just about to lay hands on a passerby's shoulder and inform them of this joyous obligation, when a car goes by – sleek and predatory, like the disembodied head of some gigantic viper – and Bangles jumps almost out of his skin.

"That was movin' real fast," Bangles explains.

"Juzz... stay out of their way," Kresh implores him.

"I didn't see where the horses were."

"Bangles... there are no horses. Anywhere," Kresh says, an unsettling reminder.

"Then how..."

"Modern engineering, for New Panarza's cultural elite," Kresh grumbles.

"There's a *New Panarza*?"

"Bangles, we are beginning to suspect that your personal mix of amnesia and immortality may be more comprehensive a phenomenon than we had first assumed."

"Well, now, you don't gotta suspect me o' nothin', cuz I'm a very above board sort of fella. Cards on the table," Bangles says, moments before colliding with a Naraean woman in a very short skirt and a very big hurry. "Sorry, ma'am! I weren't lookin' where I was goin'!" he shouts after her, affecting a little bow. But she pushes him aside like a curtain, hustling on past without acknowledging his courtesy.

"It's best to consider the people of this city as non-interactive, *ling*," Kresh advises him.

"Alla them?" Bangles asks, feeling let down, like a child being dragged passed the window of the candy store (coincidentally, the two of them are passing by a candy store. Kresh does not slow down).

"Alla them," Kresh confirms.

"Even them?" Bangles asks, indicating a friendly seeming Hegovarian man in a white vest, white shirt, white slacks, white cowboy boots, and white cowboy hat standing on the street corner. The man in white is flanked by a pair of cloaked figures that Bangles surmises are women, judging by their proportions. They're covered head to toe in white clothing that obscures every bit of skin and every lock of hair, and over their faces they wear blank and expressionless white masks. The man in white is shouting loudly about the teachings of the 'Good Davride', enjoining passersby to join him in prayer. He does not find any takers. Most of the Spirenans quick their pace to escape the man in white, and a few pedestrians brandish knives or guns as they pass by him.

"Yezz, especially them," Kresh says. "Those are Orthodox Davridians, pretty much the absolute worst that spirituality hazz to offer."

"Gosh, nobody seems to like them at all," Bangles says, feeling a tug of compassion on the old heartstrings.

"Yezz, well, therezza damn good reason for that," Kresh says.

Bangles, meanwhile, has allowed his attentions to drift and has now become absorbed in the cyclical movements of a pink digital heart pulsating on an LED billboard. Watching this strange electronic dance, Bangles leans against a kiosk covered in softly hissing vents. A picture of a pair of lungs (healthy lungs, despite their separation from whatever body once held them) dominates the top of the kiosk, and as Bangles pauses here for a breath, he notices that the atmosphere in the immediate vicinity tastes particularly nourishing.

"Filtered and processed oxygen," Kresh explains, as he snatches Bangles by the arm and drags him towards another bustling gauntlet of overstimulation.

Over here, it's a row of people hocking alcohol in colorful bottles, and selling all manner of intricately crafted glass smoking apparati. Around the corner, it's clothing in tantalizing hues and soft silky fabrics (and more than a few pairs of goggles, much like Kresh's, but without the thin layer of dust on the frames). Across the road, Bangles spies the strangest woman he's ever seen, walking up and down the rows of vendors. She's got the feathers of a Naraean, but she's too tall to be Naraean. Her skin appears pale and hard and smooth, reflecting on its surface the dancing lights of the ubiquitous electric signs and billboards. Her movements are stiff, and her joints are marked by deep dark creases. She scans the crowd, her face a mask of frozen severity. The crowd, in turn, gives her a wide berth. Bangles is simultaneously intrigued and repelled by this being.

"Kresh," Bangles says. "What's wrong with that person?"

"Which perso- ohhh. Thazz not a person," Kresh says.

"She's not?"

"No, and please, don't get that thing's attention. Izza Harpy. Automated law enforcement."

"Oh," Bangles says, averting his gaze. The word 'automated' is lost on him, but the words 'law enforcement' are not.

"We're good," says Kresh, addressing a bulky Zoan in a dusty grey jacket whispering to him from the street corner.

"Hey, you need *kek*?" the bulky Zoan whispers to Bangles. "We got it all, anything you need."

Kresh tugs Bangles by the arm, pulling him past the *kek* seller, and down another side street, past a scrawny young Naraean fellow in spectacles prying open a first story window with a crowbar, past an extremely angry Naraean woman shouting incoherently at people on the street, past a decrepit looking old Zoan swaddled in a furry coat who informs Kresh as they walk past that Jaivuzar Keen was a false prophet.

"All prophets are true prophets. But all priests are charlatans," Kresh replies, without breaking his stride. "Jaivuzar Keen said that," he adds, for Bangles' edification.

"Which one was he?" Bangles asks.

"Keen? Neither," Kresh says. "He was juzz a very unlucky dude trying to make the best of a *terrible* situation."

"So, a hero," Bangles says.

Kresh stops in his tracks. "Yezz. Exactly. A hero. And why should the rest of us be anything lezz?"

Bangles, at this point, has completely lost his bearings. He could not possibly find his way back to the train station if, for some reason, he wanted to. He has no idea which way is north, but if he did, he would know that Kresh is leading him northwest, deeper and deeper into the city. Rising above the skyline, the three great Spires – their broad circumferences blotting out the moon and stars – loom disapprovingly over Bangles no matter which direction Kresh leads him in. In fact, it seems to him that Kresh is leading him directly towards one of these towers, as every time Bangles tilts his head skyward, that particular Spire appears to be getting larger and larger, and closer and closer. Bangles is also noticing a shift in population demographic. While the streets closer to the train station were filled with people of every race, Naraeans appeared in the greatest numbers. But in this neighborhood, Bangles is seeing more and more Zoans and less and less of everyone else. Bangles also observes (but decides not

to comment) that the buildings in this neighborhood are much more dilapidated. Little piles of garbage accumulate in the gutters here, and many of the trash bins have been repurposed into vessels for bonfires. Around those flickering flames and dancing shadows, Spirena's less fortunate gather to warm their hands, as the cool of the desert night descends onto the city. But where there is no fire, the streets here are dark, as so many of the street lights have fallen into disrepair (and others have been shot out by parties unknown). And yet, the people seem friendlier. More than a few of the Zoans they pass greet Kresh with a smile and a wave, and several even give him a hug.

"Oh, *zag! Kai kai*, Kresh! Haven' seen you in a while," says a young Zoan with an explosive blossom of bouncing fins atop her head. Those fins, and the ones along her throat, pulse and flare with excitement as she wraps her arms around Kresh. Kresh's fins return the dance in kind. "Where'd you find the thickneck?" the friend with the fin blossom asks.

"Howdy friend, I'm Bangles!" Bangles says, surreptitiously checking his neck with one hand to see if it's gotten thicker without his noticing.

"Hezza fellow Commuter, met him up on Charlie. He saved our azz from a couple of bloodthirsty *vunkas*... and then he saved us a second time from whatever the hell happened at Altama..." Kresh explains.

"What happened at Altama?" Fin Blossom asks.

Kresh pauses a moment, his eyes distant, his voice muted. "This one is not ready to talk about it. Soon, this one will return to the water, and then Miri can fill you in on the rest..." Kresh says, trailing off and shaking his head. "Anyway, this Bangles izza good sort. We can tell. He's hadda little knock to the head though... or something along those lines," Kresh says, leaning in close and whispering in his friend's ear loudly enough for Bangles to hear without a problem. "Hezza little *kekt* in the *hex*."

"Did you give him more *kek*?" Fin Blossom replies.

"What kind of Commuters would we be if we didn'?" Kresh answers, indignant.

"Maybe Miri's got somethin' for him," Fin Blossom says. When Kresh winces, Fin Blossom persists. "Hey, she might. She's the bozz lady, but she's not a bad bozz lady."

"She's not our bozz," Kresh says. "Not anymore."

Fin Blossom widens one eye while narrowing the other. "Be that as it may, now that you're home, she'll be expecting a visit."

"Well, where do ya think we're headed right now?" Kresh replies.

"Your timing is impeccable," Fin Blossom says. "It juzzo happens we're having a *zubadi* tonight."

"A *zubadi*!" Kresh exclaims.

"A *zubadi*?" Bangles asks.

"It's like what you Hegos call a trial," Kresh says. "Except in a *zubadi*, nobody gets screwed."

"Now, that's justice I can get behind," Bangles says, and both of the Zoans wince.

"Bangles, please," Kresh says. "Don' use that word around here."

"Hey, we'll catch up with you," says Fin Blossom. "We need to head home, grab some *kek*, and put on some shinier threzz. But you know where you're going?"

"How could we forget?" Kresh replies, with a mischievous grin.

Bangles follows close behind as Kresh leads the way. Kresh heads left, then right, then left again, winding his way through the dark and narrow city streets with the confident forward motion of a man who could walk this path in his sleep. As they round another corner, he urges Bangles to pause at a railing separating the street upon which they stand from a lower level several feet beneath them. Bangles peeks over the railing, and gasps in astonishment at what he sees down below: water. Gallons and gallons of cool inviting water pour forth from great yawning pipes emerging here and there from various cul de sacs and alleyways. It's flooding the streets, lapping at the ankles of Zoan pedestrians when it's shallow and carrying their recumbent bodies when it's deep. Many a resting Zoan floats on his back in the gentle current that winds around lampposts, and statues, and terraces, and half-submerged

stone structures. The water runs right through the entryway of these structures, leaving no part of this neighborhood – exterior or interior – untouched by its caress. Bangles can feel the soft humidity rising from this water and misting over his dry dusty skin. At the touch of that mist, the pores of his skin open up and beg for more.

“Welcome,” Kresh says, with a sweeping gesture of his hand. “To the Reservoir.”

But Bangles is already halfway over the railing and about to dive in. He pauses there, crouched atop the skinny railing he's clutching with both hands, and looks back at Kresh. “Am I... am I allowed to get in?”

“Swim at your own risk,” Kresh says. “There's no lifeguard on duty. But Bangles...” he's about to add, but Bangles has already plunged over the edge and collapsed into a crumpled heap on the hard surface of the street below, where the water is only a few inches deep. “Deep end is over there,” Kresh says, pointing it out a little too late.

But Bangles could really care less. His injuries quickly fade, as all his injuries do, leaving him face down and gurgling in the calming embrace of the water. Eventually, his lungs grow weary of drowning, and he spits up the water he's swallowed. He may be immortal, but Bangles is no amphibian. Sitting cross legged in the water, he runs his fingers to and fro, feeling the almost gelatinous pressure of the current yield to his inquisitive hands. He makes a bowl with his palms and scoops it up, lifting it over his head and allowing it to trickle down over his crown, his occiput, and his shoulders. The way it catches the light astounds him. The water seizes the emanations from the lampposts and dances with them, refracting and fractalizing and refractalizing the light into an oscillating carnival of prisms and pinwheels. Over to the right, Kresh has submerged himself in the deep water with a splash. Now he rises to the top with a broad smile of sublime joy spreading across his face.

“For a second there,” he says to the water. “We thought we'd lost you.”

For a long moment, Kresh floats in a sort of bobbing meditation, occasionally nodding as if to agree with some unspoken declaration or smiling as if caught off guard by a subtle but clever joke. Finally, whatever internal process is taking place for him has run its course, and with a few languid thrusts of his muscular legs, he makes his way over to Bangles.

“Thank you,” they say to each other almost simultaneously.

“We owe you an apology,” says Kresh, and Bangles can tell by the look in his eye that this is not the tense and anxious Kresh from the desert but a new Kresh, a calmer Kresh, a flowing Kresh. “We have not been ourselves today. The drier we get... well... we're creatures of the water, *ling*.”

“I understand,” Bangles says. “You don't need to 'pologize.”

“We know. But we're doing it anyway,” Kresh says, smiling warmly and leaning in for a gentle hug that lasts for at well over a minute. “Well,” he says. “We do have a party to get to.”

“*Zubadi*?” Bangles asks.

“*Zubadi*,” Kresh confirms. “You're a Commuter, so you are, of course, invited. Follow me.”

Half slogging and half swimming, they make their way under bridges and over submerged terraces, and deeper into the world of the Zoans. Here, music is absolutely everywhere. Clusters of musicians huddled on rooftops and staircase waterfalls laugh and sway as they pluck at their guitars and pound on their hand drums and plunk on small portable pianos. Bangles can't help but shake his non-existent booty to the rhythm that permeates the atmosphere, much to the amusement of the townsfolk floating by. Men, women, and children alike sing to themselves and to each other as they swim down the street, their harmoniously buzzing voices filling the air with vibrating auditory honey. Every so often, a little raft floats by, invariably containing some smiling Hego or Naraean, keeping their pants dry as they make their way slowly down the canals. Bangles and Kresh pass over a particularly deep pool of water, and Bangles peers into the depths at a swarm of naked little tadpoles chasing each other around and around in endless lemniscates. They are close enough now that Bangles can see the details of the statues he'd spied from above, and the vast majority of them all depict the same woman: a towering amazon with an imposing collar of fins and long muscular legs, her head

thrown back in ecstasy, her wide mouth parted in song.

And now, the current leads them through the center of an enormous public garden built beneath the watchful gaze of colossal electric lamps that burn with the intensity of the sun. The lush greenery, and the fruits and flowers that arise from it in splashes of purple and red and orange and yellow, is drizzled with water from an elaborate grid of narrow pipes, dripping life down onto the leaves and blossoms. Beneath the plants, a network of little canals recycles the precious overflow back into the depths of the city. Astonished by this jungle in miniature, Bangles reaches out to gently touch the petals of an enormous pink chrysanthemum.

"Hey now," Kresh scolds. "Thazza delicate piece of work there. If you've absolutely got to touch it, touch it as carefully as you can."

"Yes, of course," Bangles says, his voice soft with awe.

Reverently, Bangles touches his fingers to the soft dewy petals of the flower, inhaling deeply of its aroma, and savoring this moment of communion with the first living plant he's seen all... day? Month? Year? Century? He has no idea how long it's been. All he knows is that this beckoning blossom is as important as anything that's ever been. At last, he withdraws his trembling fingers, and the two of them continue floating on their way. His eyes somehow opened by the beauty of that flower, Bangles sees the colors of the garden everywhere now, for the Zoans of the Reservoir have covered many of their walls and the sides of their buildings and bridges with vibrant murals. Some of them feature amusingly distorted caricatures of the four Serran races: big surly Hegovarrians with pouting lips and crossed arms, predatory little Naraeans with greedy grasping talons, feral Xilas filthy and crawling on all fours, and naïve Zoans wide-eyed and innocent, doing their best to stay out of the way of the other three. But some of the murals are less light-hearted: intricate abstract designs of deliberate yet indecipherable intent, crawling with lines and angles that zig and zag in every color of the rainbow. And a truly breathtaking few depict the horrors of an entire people's trauma.

Beneath one of the many bridges that criss-cross the Reservoir, Bangles looks up to find a chilling image painted on the underside of the overpass above: a column of crushed Zoan bodies piled high into the sky, with a single mad Naraean standing on top, his feathery head thrown back in a maniacal laugh, lightning bolts gathered in his hands. Kresh sees him looking, and presses a silent finger to his lips.

"If you promise not to talk about it," he says. "We'll show you another one."

In response, Bangles pantomimes an invisible needle and thread that stitch his lips together. Satisfied, Kresh beckons for him to follow, and then dives deep into the water beneath the bridge. With a gulp of oxygen that the immortal Bangles is not quite sure he needs, he dives in after the Zoan. Down in the depths, at the solid stone foundation of the bridge, there is an alcove illuminated by a ring of peaceful lights (LEDs, which Bangles has, of course, never seen before this day). And within this alcove, lies the mural.

It is the silhouette of another city of pools, bridges, and terraces much like the one in which he now swims. Yet it is larger, grander, more like a metropolitan fortress than this humble Reservoir. But the city in the mural is dark and crumbling, shattering, obliterated by a shockwave of brilliant flame. A pillar of fire rises from within the blackened shell of the city, and a cloud of smoke fills the sky above it. From this cloud, an ocean of suffering faces pour out into the night sky and along the periphery of the mural, their contorted screams wreathing the carnage in the center with their agony. Beneath the mural, atop little shelves carved into the stone, lay piles of offerings: colorful gemstones, artisan's tools, children's toys. Drawn in by the gravity of this solemn altar, Bangles breaststrokes in for a closer look. He sees hundreds upon hundreds of names etched by dozens of different hands into the stone across the top, bottom and sides of the mural. But now, as if by some tacit telepathic agreement, Kresh and Bangles simultaneously leave the mural behind and rise to the surface.

"Gosh," says Bangles. It's the only word he can find, and it's nowhere near enough of a word to convey how he feels. But truly, no one word could. There's so much he wants to say, a whole fountain



of empathy and heartbreak rising up from within him. But as soon as he opens his mouth, Kresh silences him with a gentle glove.

"Keep it a secret," Kresh says. "Now, come on, *ling*. We gotta party to catch."

Their destination is not far: a hulking, two-story warehouse sitting in the center of a broad deep pool. But as Kresh and Bangles draw nearer, the street below rises up to meet them, finding their feet as the water level dips lower and lower. And the closer they get to this warehouse, the louder the music. A mighty rumbling bass note booms from within the warehouse, accompanied by a clatter of percussion and the occasional ascending arpeggio, its last note hanging suspended in the air like the rising intonation of an ominous question. By the time they've reached the main entrance, the water has descended to knee level, and Bangles notices with a small degree of embarrassment the way his boxer shorts are clinging to the outline of his shrunken genitalia. At either side of the huge double doors of the warehouse, two tall and muscular Zoans stand guard. They are smartly dressed in forest green suitcoats with gold buttons at the cuffs. Beneath their coats, they wear black vests and silky lavender shirts. Their waterlogged trousers are neatly pressed with a long inseam to encourage ease of movement in their powerful lower bodies. One of them stands a little shorter and wears a pair of spectacles on a golden chain attached to his vest pocket. Both of them wait at the entrance with impeccable posture, their hands clasped behind their backs

"*Kai kai*, Kresh," says Spectacles.

"*Kai kai, kai kai*," Kresh says, nodding to each of them in turn.

"*Kai*," says Bangles, feebly, waving a nervous hand in greeting.

"What you got there?" says Spectacles, chuckling a little as he cocks his head in Bangles' direction. The other guard smiles at Bangles, but looks him up and down with careful scrutiny.

"Commuter who made the pilgrimage, but lost his way," Kresh says. "We don't suppose you've seen him around before?"

"We haven't" says Spectacles, narrowing his eyes. "You sure he's one of us?"

"He may not talk the talk, but he walks the walk," Kresh says. "More than we can say for some."

"Uh-huh. He packing heat?" Spectacles asks.

"Does he look like he is?" Kresh retorts.

Spectacles ignores the question. Both Zoan guards examine Bangles carefully, and Bangles notices with some consternation that he is levitating right up out of the water. Whatever force it is that lifts him spins him slowly around in three hundred and sixty degrees before placing him back on his feet.

"Uh-huh. You want a leash?" Spectacles teases. "We could put a leash on him."

"Ah ha, nah..." Kresh responds, casting a devilish eye in Bangles' direction. "Not yet, anyway. Hezza slow learner, but he *is* learning. We think."

"..." says Bangles, wisely.

"You do a cavity search?" Spectacles asks.

"Hell no, we didn't do a cavity search. You wanna do a cavity search?" Kresh says to Spectacles. "How about you?" he asks No-Specs. "Cavity search? Anybody for a cavity search?"

"Alright, but if he starts fucking around, it's on you," Spectacles warns with a wag of his finger, and nods to No-Specs, who spins a wheel attached to a chain that pulls the massive double doors open wide, letting out a deafening blast of music that almost knocks Bangles off his feet.

"Yeah, yeah, it's on us. You guys take it easy," Kresh says, stepping through the open gate with Bangles close behind, following his friend into the cacophonous shadows of the warehouse in a trance of awe and trepidation.

The room inside is enormous: the ceiling several stories high, the crowd even higher than that, their clothing soaked and clinging to their skin, the floor entirely submerged in water. Dazzling

columns of colored light – in molten yellow gold, in throbbing green moss, in clear sky blue, and in wine and wildflower purple – slide and spin into each other's orbits over Bangles' head. They dance together, they twirl together, they bleed together. Reflecting in the water's surface, the lights warp and wobble as they adopt the contours of the traveling peaks of the restless waves. Drawn into each other's gravities, they collide, shrinking together into a tiny point and then bursting expansively outwards across the walls and ceiling. Now they arrange themselves into intricate geometric patterns, polygonal archways of temporary temples that disintegrate a moment later into a sandstorm of particulate entropy, fading away only to return and repeat the entire dance anew. In the shadows beneath these mesmerizing tendrils of light, the room is packed with hundreds of people: some sitting, some standing, some drinking, some dancing, some floating, some splashing, and more than a few hanging from the ceiling. A second story balcony runs along the perimeter of the space, densely occupied with a bustling of shoulders and shirtsleeves and sending a constant precipitation down to the floor below due to a preponderance of overfull drinks, shedding feather boas, cigarette ashes, and dangling legs with dripping toes. The floor slants downwards as Kresh and Bangles leave the entrance and drift towards the center of this cavernous warehouse, the water level getting deeper and deeper along the way, until reaching almost collarbone height. There are a few artificial islands bulging up from the water, placed here and there for the comfort of those Commuters born mammalian. All of them are crowded well past maximum occupancy, save for one, the largest of them all. This lonely island is some two stories tall, rising almost to the ceiling of the warehouse and dominating the center of the room where the water is deepest. This island bears a number of podiums of different heights, jutting from the island's base like shards of crystal growing from a stone. Some of these podiums are very short, others very tall, but most somewhere in between. The island is almost empty, save for a couple speaker towers, a few musical instruments, and a handful of tough looking Zoan fellows whose job, no doubt, is to make sure it stays empty.

Between the music, the lights, the crowd, and the sweet-smelling little clouds of smoke that periodically drift by, Bangles finds himself once again utterly overwhelmed with stimulation. He's gawking a little at the costumes these good people have chosen to wear this evening. Over there, sitting at the edge of one of the smaller islands is a Hego in a tuxedo, his face hidden behind a smiling possum mask with glowing pink eyes. He takes an enormous drag off of a fat handrolled cigarette, and when he exhales, the teeth of the mask light up. His partner in conversation is a Naraean girl in a faux leather skirt with matching black jacket, black boots, and black forearm length gloves. She's dyed her feathers bright blue and yellow, and painted her eyelids white, and over her mouth she wears a black bandanna with a carnivorous smile painted on it. She pulls that bandanna down and places a black balloon to her black lips. She inhales the contents of the balloon and falls over, leaning limply against her Hegovarian companion's shoulder. Wading in the water beneath them is a tall Zoan fellow in a black bathrobe with polka dot lapels. He wears an enormous furry top hat askew upon his head, he's wedged an over-sized monocle into his eye socket, and he's twirling a cane bedecked with little colored lights that spin and spin until they become intricate patterns in the midst of their centrifuge. He brings the spinning cane closer to the water, creating a sort of mill wheel effect, much to the amusement of a nearby Zoan girl. The young lady has donned an enormous fish tail over her entire lower torso, and cavorts about the water like a mermaid. In the midst of all this costumery, Bangles frets about his outfit, or lack thereof. But he quickly realizes how irrelevant such concerns are to this particular crowd. His degree of nakedness is in no way unusual. In fact, he spies a beautiful young Hegovarian girl to his left bouncing around the water completely nude, but for a few streaks of iridescent paint to highlight her eyes, her sacrum, and her nipples. Pleasantly flushed, Bangles drifts buoyantly towards the sight of her, then catches himself and remembers his manners. Or, at least, most of him remembers. Embarrassed, he hopes that the dark water and the abundance of sensory stimulation in this room will adequately hide his semi-erection from the other party-goers.

“Hey!” Kresh says, grabbing Bangles by the shoulder. “We know those guys. Come on! Lezzay

hello!”

Luckily for Bangles and his modesty, Kresh's friends are in the deep water, and he is allowed to continue obscuring his turgidity until it is gone. As Kresh reconnects excitedly with his Zoan compatriots (and exploring an astonishing number of permutations on the concept of a group hug), Bangles' head continues its wobbly spin about the room. Clusters of Commuters all around him are laughing, telling stories, holding hands, and smiling ear to ear. Bangles spies more than a few of them putting little bits of candy into their mouths or snorting little bits of powder up their noses. Others are dancing suggestively and writhing in the water, and some are fondling and kissing each other, dissolving into intimacy as though they were the only two (or three, or four. Oh, or five) people in the world. The sight of it all makes Bangles long for touch, deep touch, the sort of touch that leaves long languid grooves in the butter of the soul.

“Hey, *ling*, take a hit of this,” Kresh says, clapping Bangles on the shoulder and popping the business end of an elaborate cigarette filter into his mouth. It seems like a lot of fancy apparatus just to hold a joint, but it does make sense, he supposes, as it enables them to get their hands wet as they play in the water without inadvertently extinguishing the cherry. The smoke from the cigarette tastes sweet and vaguely fruity, and Bangles inhales deeply enough to give himself a coughing fit. Kresh's Zoan friends laugh good-naturedly and pat him on the back. “This is Bangles,” Kresh says. “We met him out on Charlie, totally *kekt* in the *hex*. All he remembers about himself is his name, and the basics of Commuting. Everything else, he forgot.”

“Hey, if you remember how to Commute, what else do you need to know?” quips one of Kresh's friends.

Bangles isn't really sure if it's appropriate to say that he remembers Commuting, or really understands what it is at all (Kresh, his only source on the matter, has been somewhat vague). Perhaps it'd be more accurate to say that Commuting (or what little he knows of it so far) is as intrinsic to him as walking or swimming or just generally being sort of a decent person. But before he can attempt to make this nuanced point to a group of total strangers over the roar of the crowd and the music, both of those sources of sound suddenly go silent. The lights in the room go dark, and Bangles isn't sure what exactly is going on, but he has a hunch that *zubadi* is about to begin.

It starts with a booming bass drum kick – dum, da-dum, dum, da-dum – slamming into Bangles diaphragm and subsuming his heartbeat into the master rhythm of the sound system. In no time at all, Bangles is drawn into a lucid trance by the power of this beat. He doesn't notice the chant emerging from the crowd at first, and he doesn't notice himself joining it either. “*Kai!*” they shout on the beat. “*Kai kai! Kai! Kai kai!*” A squadron of dancers appears on the darkened stage, women illuminated by lines of color running the length of their leotards. They carry long luminescent scarves in their hands, swirling and twirling them in time with the beat, urging the audience to join in the dance with them. The audience complies. All around the warehouse, the Commuters are bobbing their heads and pumping their hands and swinging their hips to the rhythm, and Bangles is dimly aware that he's dancing right along with them, bobbing awkwardly through the water like a disoriented jellyfish.

On the island, a fiery orange spotlight kicks on, following a trio of Zoans in triangular formation as they escort a sullen looking Hego woman with fiery red hair onto the stage. This Prisoner does not walk: she is levitated by her escort, a Prisoner of their gravity-defying magick. They deposit her atop the lowest of the podiums on stage right, then stand off to the side, watching her carefully to ensure that she doesn't try any funny business. The red-headed Prisoner in her dirty torn-up clothes sneers and squints and holds up a hand to shield her face from the spotlight. She seems a bit bewildered, but more than that, she seems defiant.

“Don' get any ideas...” comes a Zoan's voice, a woman's. The voice is loud, cutting through the bass drum with the assistance of a microphone. The rolling cadence of her speech bounces in time with the pounding of the beat. “Any sudden movements, and we paralyze you again. Perhaps we make an armchair of you, before we make a friend,” she speak-sings in a sultry contralto, and the crowd of

Commuters laughs uproariously.

“Thazz Miri Vae,” Kresh says, leaning over to speak directly into Bangles' ear. “Shezzin charge of all the Commuters in town.”

“The high priestess?” Bangles asks.

“Yezz,” Kresh says. “The bozz lady.”

Another spotlight turns on, a gentler one, illuminating the tallest podium and the chorus of buzzing Zoan women atop it with a soft lavender light. Each of them holds a clamshell in her hands, collectively concealing a mysterious someone at their center. Bangles' expectation is that the chorus will pull back their clamshells and reveal the woman behind the voice. But they do not pull their shells away. At the crash of a gong, Miri Vae materializes in front of the clamshells instead, rippling and refracting into being before the cheering crowd. She is a liquid trick of the light, an aqueous prism cast about on waves of molten atmosphere, a shimmering outline of a person that never quite stands still.

“Camouflage aura,” Kresh explains. “She's been standing up there, invisible, the whole time.”

The dancers dive from the podium and into the water, leaving Miri Vae alone beneath the spotlight. The priestess with the microphone is of small stature but regal bearing. Her shimmering and scaly turquoise body suit clings to the lithe musculature of her body as she poses and struts from one end of the podium to the other. Atop her shoulders, she has draped the sinewy body of an enormous serpent, wrapping it about herself like a mantle. In his altered state of consciousness (which had been fading until he'd inhaled all that sweet smoke, and which was now accelerating in intensity), Bangles cannot tell whether or not the serpent she wears is real or fake, alive or dead. Is it moving, or is that just a trick of his eye? (It seems to him that everything the spotlights touch is moving a little bit, rippling like the surface of the water in which he is standing, and expanding and contracting like the breathing of his rib cage.) The rigid fins of the serpent curl up and around Miri's smooth circular face, wreathing and accentuating the soft curves of her brow and the roundness of her cheekbones. Her eyes are large and dark, and her heavy eyelids have been painted with turquoise mascara. As she strides across the stage, her camouflage aura fluctuates with her movements, snatching away a chunk of her rib cage only to return it in exchange for the better part of her leg. Off-stage, a team of her Zoan assistants levitate a massive synthesizer keyboard onto the podium in front of her. Miri lets go of her microphone (which refuses to succumb to gravity, hanging in the air like a dandelion seed suspended on the breeze) and reaches down to press a few keys. The melody she plays is simple, but the timbre is rich and sizzling with unexpected oscillations. In her other hand, she holds a long cigarette filter tipped with a smoldering joint. It is much like the ones the other Zoans in the crowd have, but Miri's is far more intricate, sculpted into the sinuous sine wave of a dolphin at play. She lifts it to her lips, placing the dolphin's blowhole beneath her mouth as though she were about to blow into it like a flute player. But instead of blowing, she inhales deeply, drawing a steady stream of smoke into her lungs as she regards the Prisoner down below her through narrowed eyes.

One of the Zoans standing at the edge of the stage levitates a microphone in the Prisoner's direction. The Prisoner snatches it out of the air and shouts into it. “Hey! Can I get a hit of that?” she asks, curling her thumb and forefinger together and placing them at the corner of her mouth.

Miri slowly blinks her lavender eyelids, then blows a cloud of smoke in the Prisoner's direction. The cloud doesn't quite reach the Prisoner, but one of the Commuters at the foot of the stage offers her their cigarette holder. The Prisoner plucks the joint free of the filter and takes a long drag off it.

“Whazz your name, *lingalingaling*?” Miri gently buzzes.

“I'm Kalisa Ferris, so doncha get careless,” the Prisoner says, and while she doesn't bother trying to sing, she rhymes ferociously to the beat of the drum. “I'm a sick-ass bitch with a warrior sound, and I'll burn this whole fucking city right down to the ground.”

“Ooooh!” sings the crowd, a collective siren of amusement and skepticism.

“Zzzaaa,” Miri replies, unimpressed. “Such a pointlezz mission, such pathetic ambition. Girl, you are better than this endlezz demolition. Now, we are not doctors but we know sick when we see it.

You gotta heart on lock down, and girl, we're gonna free it," She laughs and the crowd laughs with her.

"Oh, what's that you're sayin', you think I'm pathetic? Like you know the truth but I'm stupid to get it?" Kalisa growls. "I'm sorry, have you not been readin' your billboards? You're a hypocrite, asshole, you people are whores," The crowd laughs at this as well, and Kalisa thrusts her fist into the air in a posture of victory. "Bought and paid for!" she adds.

"Yezz, we have seen the stupid little billboards, and no, we don't love our corporate overlords," Miri sings. "When we saw the damn things, we put up a fuzz, but these are the words that the Clans spoke to us: you can have the billboards, or you can have a graveyard."

At that last word, the buzzing crowd and the persistent beat suddenly go silent. Everyone in the room has their eyes trained on Kalisa Ferris, and for a moment, their strong-willed prisoner wilts beneath the hostility of their collective gaze. But this woman thrust into the spotlight against her will has a firm resolve, and, digging deep into her well of stubborn machismo, Kalisa retaliates.

"You need me!" Kalisa says. The bass slams back into action on her word 'need' bringing with it an upward key change and an aggressive clattering of synthetic cymbals. "And your whining only feeds me! You need a bitch to keep you honest, a cunt to keep you real. You need a bitch in your lives with a spine made of steel. You're livin' in a dream, and you're prayin' to a story. You're givin' up your power for somebody else's glory. Slavery ain't freedom, y'all are gettin' played. They're stealin' up your souls, but at least you're gettin' paid! So, you build yourselves a billboard. Well, your billboard ain't shit. I knocked your billboard over, y'all, I did it for the fuck of it! Everything that goes up, must come down. You dumb motherfuckers do not run this town." Satisfied with her comeback, Kalisa thumps her chest with her fist while the crowd, thrilled by the drama, sings another "oooooh."

But Miri comes back with a vengeance. "Nihilism's cheap, it's prepackaged defeat, ya giving up on the song while ya still got a heart beat. Worse than that, you wanna take us down with ya, 'cuz you juzz can't admit that you're a broken hearted stoner. Well, bitch we're gonna give you juzz one more chance, and if you don't take it, we will ram it up your azz. You are gonna do what we ask you to, and if you disagree, then you're gonna get screwed," Miri retorts.

"Fuck you!" the crowd of Commuters shouts in unison.

"Alright, alright, don't getcha fins in a knot. If it'll getcha off my case, fine, show me watchu got," Kalisa rhymes. "Just you keep in mind that I'm doin' you a favor, buzz it up all you want, y'all, I'll never be your neighbor."

"Dice Thermal!" Miri shouts, and the words sound like gibberish to Bangles until a third spotlight turns on, illuminating in blue an androgynous Hego with short brown hair and a pair of spectacles perched upon their nose. They stand on the pedestal just below and to the left of Miri's, with an electric guitar slung over their chest, an instrument exotic and yet strangely familiar to Bangles' eye. A powerful urge to pluck those strings and dance atop that fretboard stirs within the tendons of his fingers. Back on stage, Dice Thermal is the picture of cool and confidence, staring haughtily at Kalisa and arpeggiating an accusatory little chord.

"You again?" Kalisa shouts, exasperated.

The spotlight on the newcomer shifts from blue to red, and Dice responds by letting loose a shrieking flurry of notes in a harmonic minor scale that comes screaming down the fretboard at mach ten. They finish by striking a heavily distorted chord and grabbing the whammy bar of their guitar, wringing every last drop of tone from those ringing notes before plunging them all the way down into the abyss. "Me again," they say, stepping to their mic stand on the podium.

"Dice, you've got a need, a need unmet," Miri sings. "Tell us what it is that you came here to get."

"I come here in urgency, for a life-saving surgery," Dice replies, her singing voice decidedly female, her passionate alto wail a stark contrast to her bookish appearance. "I need a lotta money to get this operation done, but I spent my last paycheck on a submachine gun." Dice sings, adding a few palm muted triplets on the low string of the guitar (a sonic simulation of machine gun fire) before sweep

picking her way into a jagged minor key crescendo.

"Money?" Kalisa chortles in disbelief. "You think I got money? Well, I got some real bad news for ya, honey."

"Artine Lavell!" Miri shouts, and a fourth spotlight turns on, this time a green light featuring a middle-aged Narean woman on the podium above Kalisa's. Stout and scowling, Artine's belly is large and her thighs are thick. A faded red headband keeps her grey feathers out of her face, and a well worn green cloak covers her shoulders. Slung across her back is an assault rifle almost as long as Artine is tall. A Commuter standing off to the side of the stage tries to hand her a tambourine, but she swats it out of his hand and into the crowd.

"I don't have time for this foolishness," Artine barks into her mic. Unlike the other three, she refuses to speak in time with the music. "Someone I care about is in grave danger, and I must take action tonight! You want money to get yourself an operation? I've got your money. But you won't see a dime until the job is done."

"Two gunslingers, thazz the bezz we can offer," Miri lilts.

"So now I work for you?" Kalisa interjects. "Tell me, why should I bother?"

"Izza salve for your soul..." Miri sings.

"But my soul is a joke," Kalisa counters. "I'll worry about my soul when the rest of me croaks."

"How 'bout all the *cotcha* that you'd ever wanna smoke," Dice replies, arpeggiating a dreamy major chord with an augmented eleventh. "Come on back to my place, and I'll offer you a toke."

Kalisa cocks an eyebrow. "Hey now, baby, I think you're speaking my language."

"Call me baby again, and I'll smoke you with my twelve gauge," Dice snaps back, bending an angry b string up and down.

"And so, once again, a wrong becomes two rights. Thank you all for joining us in *zabadi* tonight!" Miri sings, as the colored spotlights that illuminate the stage shut off one by one until only Miri's lavender effulgence is left. She plucks a few notes on the keyboard, a lilting little melody she vamps atop a bold march of descending fourths. "Remember what transpired here tonight, my lovely dears, lest the moral of the story fall upon unhearing ears. We rise up every morning to honor the new day. The work we do sustains us, so that all night we play. They say the world is broken now, there's nothing left to mend, but we say we must keep dancing 'til the..." And here comes the forward motion of the subdominant chord... "very..." Now rising to the dominant... "The very..." And collapsing to the tonic: "The end."

And with the final chord bringing it all on home, the lights go out and the crowd goes wild.

Bangles (suddenly re-anchored to the proximity of his body) cheers and cheers, screaming his voice hoarse and clapping his hands raw. He demands an encore. He demands several encores. But after a few moments, the dance music returns and the party picks up right where it left off. Someone hands Bangles a snorkle, and while he's never seen one before in his life, he doesn't hesitate to put it on over his face. Kresh takes a long drag off another *cotcha* cigarette, then floats up and exhales the smoke down into the air tube of the snorkle, surprising Bangles with another blast of that sweet fruity herb. It's more than enough to provide the immortal cowboy with the sort of hazy psychological melt too intoxicating for conversation but perfectly liberating for interpretive dance. Bangles does not know for how long he bounds and splashes in that water, but one minute they're frolicking and the next minute, a group of stern looking Zoans are tapping Kresh on the shoulder.

"Zag," says Kresh.

# 10

Dice Thermal's home is a modest apartment above a gun store, with wrought iron bars over the doors and the windows. It sits at the southern edge of the Reservoir district, overlooking the flowing canals but untouched by their moisture. Kalisa has had about enough of moisture. Her knee-high combat boots are soaked. But short stocky Artine is waterlogged almost to the hip. The surly featherhead's shoes squish moistly on the plate steel stairs leading up to Dice's second story residence. Kalisa smirks, but Artine does not seem to notice or care. Her mind is clearly elsewhere.

The first thing that Kalisa notices about Dice's place is that, pound for pound, there are more books than furniture. In fact, outside of a couple overstuffed bookshelves and two steel gun lockers (one standing vertically against the wall, the other lying horizontally across the floor), there is no furniture. Kalisa is about to drop her ass down on top of one of the many stacks of thick hard-cover books piled about the room, when Dice presses the barrel of her handgun into Kalisa's cheek.

"Your sloppy ass can sit on the floor," Dice says, shoving Kalisa with surprising strength and redirecting her downward trajectory towards an empty patch of dusty carpet. "Hands to yourself," Dice adds, when Kalisa reaches for a heavily dog-eared copy of the Good Davride.

"Thought you was a Commuter," Kalisa says, braving Dice's trigger finger and clapping her hand on top of the Good Davride.

"I like to know how my enemy thinks," Dice replies.

"Davridians think?" Kalisa jokes.

"Occasionally," Dice answers. "But when they do, it's in knots."

"I coulda told ya that," Kalisa snorts. "And I didn't have to do no readin' to know it, neither."

Dice opens her mouth to reply, and immediately thinks better of it. She leans against the wall, propping one of her feet up against the heavy metal locker lying on the floor. "You wanted to hire a couple guns for a job," Dice says, addressing Artine.

Artine stands by the window looking out at the Reservoir, her arms folded tightly in front of her sagging chest. Grimly, she shakes her head. "Zephyrs be. You're the best the Commuters have to offer?" she asks, her disappointment palpable.

"Commuters aren't exactly known for special ops. Or warfare," Dice responds calmly. "I shouldn't have to tell you that. If you're looking for soldiers, there are plenty of other options. Xila marauders. Retired Penetrators. Disgraced *ashuras*."

"Disgrace," Artine says, packing the word with as much loathing as it will hold. "Yes. The Spire Clans are an utter disgrace. But they have permeated this continent. They have a stranglehold on all of us. There's hardly anything their talons don't touch."

Dice smirks. "You do know we work for them."

"Yes, I do," Artine says. "And I also know that you despise them."

"What about you?" Dice asks Kalisa.

"Huh?" Kalisa asks. She's opened up the Good Davride and is reading a passage that absolutely boggles her mind ("It is not the place of fools to learn, for they have been born with everything they need know and blessed with lords to lead them").

"The Spire Clans," Dice clarifies. "Are you for or against?"

"Look, I'm here for two reasons," Kalisa says, closing the book and throwing it aside as Dice winces. "The first reason is: you pointed a gun at me. The second reason is: you said I get a lifetime

supply of *cotcha* if I play along. So, here I am. Playing along.”

“No. I don't like this,” Artine says, fixing Kalisa with a frigid stare. Kalisa sticks her tongue out in response. “I don't like this at all,” Artine continues. “What if the Spire Clans catch her and make her a better offer? Or torture her? How can we trust her?”

“To be frank, Artine, I'm not sure I trust *you*,” Dice replies. “What exactly is this job you're recruiting us for?”

Artine looks at the two semi-mercenaries, then out the window at Spire Taiun looming over the Reservoir, then back again. “Do you know what they do up there?” she asks, jabbing her finger out the window at the Spire. “Do you know what the *ashuras* are?”

“Soldiers, right?” Dice replies. “Soldiers, assassins, bodyguards... all of the above?”

“The ones that survive, yes,” Artine says. “But before they become soldiers, they are girls. They are children. Children who have been taken from their families, brainwashed for years, and then pitted against each other in the arena for the Spire Clans' amusement!”

“Wait, what?” Kalisa interjects. This conversation is making her queasy. “They make little girls fight each other?”

“To the death!” Artine confirms.

“What?” Kalisa shouts. “Dude! That is fucked up!”

“Not such a nihilist after all,” Dice says softly.

“Did you know about this?” Kalisa asks Dice.

“I'd heard rumors,” Dice replies. “Hard to know what's true and what's mythology. They run a pretty tight ship up there,” she says, cocking a thumb out the window in the direction of Spire Taiun. “Which begs the question: how is it that you know what you claim you know?”

“They have my niece!” Artine snarls. “Clan Lashlei snatched her from her parents' arms when she was just a baby! And when her parents tried to get her back, the Lashleis had them killed! I'd given up hope! I thought I'd never see her again, never know the woman she would some day become. But then I saw her! She came to me in a dream, and she begged me to help her.”

“Wait... a dream?” Dice asks, skeptical.

“Yes! A dream!” Artine snaps. “*Huh!* You've got all these books piled up in here, girl, and you're telling me you've never read about a dream-strider before?”

“What's a dream-strider?” Kalisa asks.

“The Naraean word is '*ogilan*', correct?” Dice asks. When Artine confirms with a nod, Dice continues. “An *ogilan* can travel into a person's dreams and plant certain thoughts inside their minds. The Spire Clans have waged war on each other on many fronts, and that includes the dreamscape. An *ogilan* can make a person go crazy, or turn them into a sleeper agent, planting cues in their subconscious waiting to be triggered and awakened.”

“An *ogilan* can also be a healer,” Artine adds. “Helping a wounded soul face their buried trauma. They are prophets as well, able to predict the future.”

Kalisa ponders this new information a moment. “And... your daughter -”

“Niece,” Artine corrects her.

“Is one of these oagy-lawn,” Kalisa says.

“*Hai*,” Artine says. “And if the Spire Clans find out what she's capable of, they may well kill her. After all, that's what they did to all the others. That's why you can only read about them in books.”

“Alright. I'm in,” Kalisa says, rising to her feet and pulling out her handgun. She's halfway to the door before Dice calls after her.

“You haven't even heard the plan yet,” Dice says. “Assuming there is one,” she adds, regarding Artine with a little suspicion.

“There is,” Artine growls. “Do you know what last night was?”

“Tuesday?” Kalisa guesses.

“Wednesday,” Dice corrects her.



“The Battle of Liasha,” Artine says, her voice rising a little. “The yearly competition in which the three Spire Clans pit their 'children' against each other in a battle to the death. At the conclusion of the battle, those *ashuras* who survive face one of several fates. Either they remain in training, graduate to the Spire Clans' elite reserve of soldiers and assassins, or they are married off to breed more *ashuras*. Some, however, are discarded entirely, especially those with 'problematic' dispositions.”

“And you got all this from a dream?” Dice asks.

Artine scowls. “*Hai*. You said you wanted money for a life-saving operation. Do you want that money or not?”

“It's not about the money,” Dice says. “That operation won't matter if you send me on a suicide mission. I need you to put your cards on the table. You claim to know a lot about the inner workings of the Spire Clans, more than most of us could ever know. I need you to assure me that this isn't a set-up of some kind. What's my insurance? The last thing I want to do is be a pawn in some chess game the Spire Clans are playing with each other.”

“You mean, other than your day job,” Kalisa interjects.

Dice opens her mouth to argue, but before she can speak, Artine cuts her off.

“Insurance? What possible insurance could I give you? It's a leap of faith. Isn't that what you Commuters are all about? Leaps of faith? Believing in people? Isn't that what makes you better than them?” Artine asks, pointing her finger out the window at the Spire again. “I used to work for them,” she says quietly, her eyes downcast. “When I was young, before my niece was born, I worked for the Spire Clans, training those young girls. I stood at the front of a lecture hall, and I fed them propaganda by the spoonful, day after day after day. They swallowed every bite of it, and I swallowed it too. But when my niece was born, all of that changed. She was such a sweet little child. So smart, you could tell just by looking at her eyes. She was taking all of it in. I remember how she smiled at me. I remember how gently she'd grasp my finger with her delicate little hand. And they snatched her out of her parents' arms, and took her away to make a killer out of her.”

“And then you left. You just waltzed right out the front door, and the most powerful people in the world did nothing to stop you from spreading their secrets around town,” Dice says.

“I ran!” Artine counters. “I've spent the last seventeen years in hiding! Moving from place to place, hiding underground, making allies with the sorts of people I thought I'd never ever speak to, much less beg for help. And now I'm here, begging you for help. Are you going to help me?” Artine asks, taking her assault rifle into her hands. “Or not?”

Dice regards the angry old Naraean coolly. “What do you think?” she asks Kalisa.

Kalisa shrugs. “I dunno. I still don't know what the plan is.”

“I was going to tell you, but you interrupted me,” Artine snaps.

“But do you think she's lying?” Dice asks.

“Ehhh... everyone's a liar,” Kalisa says. “The real question is, will I get to shoot people who deserve it, and get away with it?”

“*Hai*,” Artine says, firmly affirmative.

“Holy shit,” says Dice, shaking her head. “What am I getting myself into?”

“The time is now. If we're going to do this, we're going to do it tonight,” Artine says. “Now. I need you to remember everything I'm about to say. I'll go over it as many times as necessary. Alright?” she asks, looking from Dice to Kalisa warily. They both nod. “Alright,” Artine says. “This is the plan.”

*At the train station in the center of town, a supply train will pull up at 2:30 AM. The third car from the rear contains, among other things, a crate full of spare parts for a musical instrument called the Vertiginous Harp. The Vertiginous Harp is a one of a kind object, an elaborate stringed instrument some sixty feet long, twenty-five feet tall, and twenty-five feet wide at its broadest point. The sound it makes is powerful enough to level buildings, but when played with grace and delicacy, the aural experience for the spectator is second to none. The Lashleis are planning a performance with the Harp*

*next Sunday to honor the one hundred and twentieth anniversary of the Spire Clans' first arrival in Panarza, and they're having the thing tuned up and restored for the occasion. Hence the crate full of spare parts coming in on the train. A truck driven by Zoan Commuters in the employ of Clan Lashlei will be receiving it at the train station and driving it to the Opala Lirei Museum of Musical Singularities, which happens to be on the ground floor of Spire Lashlei. At 2:45 AM, the two Zoans driving this truck will stop at a take-out restaurant to pick up a couple synthetic cricket burgers. The parked truck will be out of their line of sight for about three minutes. They will have forgotten to lock the back door.*

And there it is, ready and waiting at the promised address, parked in an empty alleyway around the corner from a twenty-four Commuter slop shop with a swampy green paint job. The streets are deserted but for Kalisa and Dice, hustling down the road with black ski masks to obscure their faces (and Kalisa's scraggly vermillion mop). The padlock on the rear door of the truck hangs loose and useless, and the door slides up without a problem. The crate with the Vertiginous Harp's components is the biggest in the truck's cargo space. Kalisa pries open the lid with her favorite crowbar, and clears a space for the two of them to huddle into. It's cramped in there, closer quarters than either of them would prefer. Kalisa does not care for the pungence of Dice's body odor, and she is glad that she can reciprocate with her own cultivated aroma of vinegar and rotting meat. They pull the lid back over them, immersing themselves in darkness. A moment or two passes, and then Kalisa detects the muffled croaks, peeps, and buzzes of the Zoans returning to the truck. The key turns in the ignition, and the van begins to move. It's happening.

Kalisa's chest is tight with anxiety, more anxiety than she is comfortable with. She takes some solace in the fact that Dice, her face illuminated by her little flashlight as she reaches into a little compartment in the tongue of her shoe and pulls out a little strip of paper in a little plastic bag. Kalisa examines the label on the bag by the beam of Dice's flashlight. It reads: "HAPPINESS GOOD TIME SUNSHINE POWER! THREE SUNSHINES WORTH! SUPER POWERFUL BE CAREFUL OUT THERE TAKE DEEP BREATHS AND STAY HYDRATED WE LOVE YOU!" Beneath the message is a picture of a turquoise cartoon turtle with a big purple heart painted on her chest giving a warm smile and a thumbs up.

"Holy fuck," Kalisa says, chuckling. "You can't be serious."

"You don't *kek*?" Dice asks, placing the flashlight in her mouth so she can use both hands to extract the delicate little piece of paper.

"I mean, yeah, I *kek*, but not when I'm, like, you know, riskin' my life," Kalisa lies. The truth is that she's scared to try *kek* again. Her first time was also her last time, because it was not a good time.

"Then I won't offer you any," Dice says, her articulation distorted by the flashlight between her teeth.

"We'll be there in, like, fifteen minutes. If that's *surge*, it won't come on soon enough."

Dice tears off a teensy strip of paper and puts it under her tongue, then replaces the baggie in her pocket and clicks the flashlight off. "It's *surge* alright, but it's a specially designed isomer of *surge*, calibrated for maximum buccal absorption."

"Uh huh," Kalisa says, unsure of what most of those words mean.

"It's also good for anxiety," Dice adds.

"Uh huh," Kalisa says, skeptical. "So, if you get *kekt* in the *hex*, and then get shot in the head, who's gonna get me my *cotcha*?"

"You'll get your *cotcha*," Dice assures her. "But I'm not getting shot. Not tonight."

They ride the rest of the way in darkness and silence, with Kalisa wondering restlessly whether or not Dice has started *keking* yet, and when that becomes boring, wondering which part of the city they're currently driving through. Past the textile mills and the manufacturing plants, past the regal veneers of the hastily constructed upper class homes clustered in the shadow of Spire Lashlei, there is a perimeter fence that separates the Spire from the rest of the city. The fence is fifteen feet high,

electrified, and the top is strung with barbed wire. But once a night, at 3 AM precisely, the gate of that fence opens for a supply truck carrying whatever it is that Clan Lashlei feel they cannot provide for themselves that day. Kalisa checks her watch. It's 3 AM. They must be passing through that gate right now. A few heartbeats later, the truck comes to a complete stop, and Kalisa can hear the sound of the rear door opening up. One by one, the Zoan laborers load the boxes and crates out of the back of the truck and onto what Artine has promised them is one of several trolleys that will take them inside to the Opala Lirei. Kalisa expects the Zoans to struggle with the added weight of the two women now inside the box, but there is no difficulty whatsoever in moving the crate from point A to point B. For a moment, Kalisa is baffled, but she realizes quickly that the Zoans are using that obnoxious levitating trick they're so good at. They've unloaded the truck, but they've never actually laid their own hands upon a single box. The trolley ride is short, and the crate is soon deposited at the proper address and left awaiting the restoration team's arrival at sun-up.

*Wait there until 3:30. Shortly before 3:30, the highest-ranking members of Clan Lashlei will depart the Spire for a parlay with Clan Vargas, taking most of their security team with them. The remaining guards will be shortstaffed, but don't get cocky. Hegovarians are forbidden from entering the Spires, and that policy is strictly enforced. If you get caught, a quick death is the absolute best case scenario. So, don't get caught. At 3:30 AM, I will set off a series of explosives around the perimeter gate. Hopefully, that's enough of a distraction to get you inside.*

"Do you hear voices?" Dice asks, around 3:28.

"No," Kalisa replies.

"Are you sure?"

She's not. "Yes," she says, but pricks up her ears in case she's wrong. Still, she hears nothing.

"Oh," Dice says, after a moment of silence. "It's the spirits of my ancestors," she explains nonchalantly. "They're breathing."

"Fuck me," says Kalisa, slapping her palm to her forehead.

"No, it's a good thing. A positive omen," Dice says. "I think."

But there's no time for Kalisa to puzzle out where exactly Dice's head is at. It's 3:30, and, somewhere in the distance, a bomb is going off.

Kalisa pulls out her crowbar again, and easily pries the lid off the crate from inside. Directly in front of her is an enormous wooden beam lying across the floor: the base of the Vertiginous Harp. Swirlings inlays of gold and platinum curl and wrap around the length of the beam. On the far side of it, a series of thick coiled metal strings are clasped to the beam by finely wrought hooks of iron. The taut strings slope up and up and up towards the throne of the one who strikes them: an ornate wooden chair atop a three-story wooden tower engraved with the snaking necks and ocular feathers of peacocks. A suitable totem, given the similarity between the shape of the body of the Harp and the fan of a peacock's tail. This pavillion of the Opala Lirei has an enormous domed ceiling to accommodate the size of the harp, creating a warped sense of scale that makes Kalisa feel like an insect.

*When you leave the crate, you will find yourselves at the base of the Harp. Run along the length of it, towards the seat at the top from which the harpist plays. Continue in that direction past the Harp, and you will find an exit. Through that door is a hallway branching in two directions. Head to the right, then enter the second door on your left. Inside, you will find a storage area full of crates of medical supplies. At the back of the room is a walk-in freezer. Next to the freezer door, there is a hatch leading to a supply elevator. The elevator platform will be on the ground level, your level. Climb into the hatch and wait in the elevator shaft, above the opening and out of sight. If you hurry, you will get there before the workers do.*

The hatch opening is only a few feet across, and Kalisa can barely get her broad shoulders through it. The little supply elevator is clearly not intended for Serran use, and Kalisa hopes its strong enough to lift both she and Dice to wherever it is they're headed to next. Above their heads, the elevator shaft goes up, and up, and up, so high that the beam from Dice's flashlight cannot find the top of it.

Kalisa and Dice brace themselves against the walls of the narrow elevator shaft, and wait. But not for long. The hatch beneath them opens, and a disembodied pair of hands places upon the elevator an assortment of gauze, bandages, surgical masks, anesthesia, tranquilizers, painkillers, and several jars of a mysterious translucent substance that Kalisa surmises could be semen. The hatch closes again, and before Kalisa and Dice can react, the elevator platform comes flying up to meet them. The elevator moves with incredible power and speed, lifting them some seventy-seven stories in a matter of seconds.

At the top of the shaft, the elevator comes to a halt in front of another hatch, which opens up to reveal the face of an extremely startled Naraean nurse with a surgical mask over her mouth and a net over her little black feathers. Dice shoves the barrel of her rifle into the nurse's face, and – apologizing profusely all the while – climbs out of the hatch and pushes her against the wall. Kalisa (who appears to have inadvertently crushed one of the little jars of semen – or semen-like fluid – with her foot and gotten the translucent slime inside smeared all over her boot) emerges behind Dice, finding herself in a sterile white room full of medical equipment. The walls are lined with metal sinks and metal cabinets, and Kalisa sees a tabletop covered with boxes of latex gloves and surgical masks.

“Hey, are we in a hospital?” Kalisa asks.

Dice's only response is a glare.

*Go through the door to the left of the hatch. She will be alone, waiting beyond the curtain. Take her.*

Barging through the door, Kalisa finds herself in another sterile white cube lined with metal storage lockers, with fluorescent lights flickering overhead and a curtain partitioning off one side of the room. She runs to the curtain and pulls it back, giving herself an eyeful of the prettiest little vulva she's ever seen. So much like a mouth, puckered and waiting for a kiss, the purplish cast of the girl's pussy lips segues perfectly into the soft grey skin of her mons. So taken is Kalisa with the sight of this delicate little orifice, that it takes her a beat to register the girl to whom it is attached, lying sedated on a hospital bed, wearing a hospital gown, her legs spread wide and her feet in stirrups. It takes Kalisa another beat to recognize that the girl is not alone, as promised, and is, in fact, flanked by a pair of nurses and a wrinkled old Naraean man in a black floor-length cloak with gold trim stitched through the sleeves and the hem. The lines in the dour old man's face tell the story of a thousand dreary frowns, and his disheveled crop of dark grey feathers points this way and that, like the twigs of a bird's nest. But his eyes are dark and sunken pits, openings into a loathsome void that fills Kalisa with an immediate sense of revulsion. She draws her handgun.

“Yer not supposed to be here!” Kalisa yells. “What the fuck are you people doin'?”

“My thoughts exactly,” the old man snarls, gesturing angrily with the tool he holds in his hand, a strange vibrating tube with a long sinister-looking needle affixed to the end of it. “Do you have any idea the importance of the procedure you are currently interrupting?”

“Pfft. No,” Kalisa says, frustrated that she should have to reply an answer so obvious to a question so stupid.

“Guar-” the old man shouts, but Kalisa pulls the trigger before his mouth can finish forming the word.

As the old man's head snaps back and an elegant plume of red dances across the septic white of the wrap-around curtain that encloses the girl on the bed, it occurs to Kalisa that the sound of the gunshot is probably much more dangerous than the sound of the old man shouting. But it's too late for that now. Dice materializes behind Kalisa, her eyes wide inside the eye-holes of the ski mask.

“Okay, okay,” Kalisa says. “You two nurses, come with me and, uh...” Kalisa pulls back the curtain and looks around the room for somewhere to stash them. She settles on a tall metal locker, yanking it open and pulling the scrubs within off their hangars and onto the tile floor. “Get in here. Both of you, climb in, right now.”

The two nurses oblige, both of them fitting comfortably into the locker, and Kalisa considers for a moment how convenient it is that Naraeans are such a diminutive people. Dice, meanwhile, is

studying the corpse on the floor and the ever expanding pool of blood in which it has fallen.

"So tenuous the threads that bind us to this world," Dice says. "How easily it could have been one of us."

"Keep fuckin' around, and it *will* be us," Kalisa snaps. Looming over the girl in the stirrups, Kalisa gently slaps the girl's cheek a few times. "Hey! Hey, little cutie! Hey, wake up, kid!"

"She's sedated," Dice says. "Just grab her, and let's go."

But Kalisa needs no urging. She has already lifted the girl out of the hospital bed and onto her shoulder. The girl is limp, her body heavy with anesthesia, and yet she lies atop Kalisa's powerful shoulder as lightly as a pillow.

*Do not leave by the door you came in. There will be one other door; leave by that one. You will find yourselves in a stone corridor full of unmarked doors. Head left, and run down this corridor, past every door until you find yourselves at a pair of big double doors that open onto the top of a spiral staircase. Take the staircase all the way down to the bottom and push through the door with the sign on the front saying: "NO ENTRY. NOT AN EXIT." From there, the only way out is down.*

"Yo, these carvings are really something," Dice says, pausing in the corridor. She's running her fingers over an elaborate vinelike patterning etched into the stone that runs along the wall at waist height. "Look at these little golden threads. They almost look like some kind of embedded circuitry."

"Dice, come on!" Kalisa whisper-shouts. The big double doors are right in front of them. They're almost home free.

"No, really, check this out, it's beautiful," says Dice. "I've never seen anything like this in my life."

A loud clang from the other end of the corridor sends a bolt of adrenaline into Kalisa's brain. "And it'll be the last thing you ever see in your life if you don't move your ass!" Kalisa says.

Kalisa pushes through the doors with her shoulder and enters the stairwell. Were it not so immaculately clean, this stairwell would look a little like a mausoleum. The low lighting leaves plenty of shadows on the walls, and the stairs are carved from ancient blocks of stone – chipped and dented, but sturdy. The spiral staircase is taller than expected. Much taller. Kalisa peers over the edge at a dizzying number of stairs and landings disappearing down below them in the darkness. Dice is right there peering with her.

"Haha, whoa," Dice says, with a grin. "Vertigo."

Kalisa hears the sound of footsteps and angry voices coming from the corridor behind them, and she moves without hesitation. She dashes down the hard stone stairs with the grace and ease of a natural athlete, moving as quickly as she can without dropping the drowsy and delicate cargo heaped upon her shoulder. Dice, meanwhile, moves with astonishing speed, skipping and prancing, gleefully taking the stairs three at a time. In a flash, she's some five stories beneath Kalisa. And it's on the landing precisely between the two of them that a squadron of *ashuras* appears through an open door, wailing the battle cry that activates their vibrating *tuogis*. But Dice is ready, whirling into a defensive crouch and blasting one of the *ashuras* through the shoulder with her rifle. The *ashuras* broaden their *tuogis* from blades into shields, and the bullets from Dice's rifle ricochet off of their sonic barriers and bounce erratically around the stone walls of the stairwell. But this sudden exponential increase in entropy has no impact on Dice's trigger finger. A bullet whooshes past Kalisa's face, grazing her cheekbone before caroming off the wall behind her, ricocheting off a bannister railing, and striking an unprepared *ashura* in the side of the head. But before Kalisa can call Dice a *hex-kekt* dyklone (dyke + cyclone, a homespun insult Kalisa is particularly proud of), a door slams open somewhere above Kalisa's head, accompanied by a clatter of way, way too many footsteps. An even larger squadron of *ashuras* pours into the stairwell from the landing above her, their eerie banshee wail vibrating from their gaping mouths. As long as Kalisa holds the girl, they can't risk getting too close. But that doesn't make Kalisa any less trapped. She backs slowly towards the ornately carved bannister railing at the edge of the stairs, stopping once she feels it press against the middle of her back. Kalisa gently

maneuvers her rescuee off of her shoulder, setting the girl's feet on the ground. Limply, the girl falls backward, her weightless little body slumping against Kalisa's ribs. Kalisa holds her close with the same arm that holds her gun, keeping it trained on the approaching *ashuras* all the while as they slowly descend the stairs. While Dice's friendly fire pings and ricochets around her, Kalisa uses her spare hand to pull out her belaying cable. Without taking her eyes off the bird-brained bitches in the stairwell, she affixes one end to the landing upon which she is standing, and attaches the other end to her belt.

"Don't fuck me this time," she warns the cable, as she grasps the sedated little Naraean teenager in a bear hug, and rolls backward over the balcony.

Kalisa and her rescuee plummet five stories in approximately one-and-a-half seconds, coming to a rest dangling in space directly in front of Dice. Clutching the girl to her chest with one arm, Kalisa reaches up to disengage the belaying cable, and tucks and rolls as she collides with the stone stairs, shielding the girl in her arms with her body. Kalisa's bruised and battered, but nothing's broken, and she lunges to her feet and sprints down the rest of the stairs with Dice running behind her and occasionally opening fire at the *ashuras* following them in hot pursuit. Kalisa sees a door labeled with boldface Naraean words she can't read, and plows through it without hesitation, only for her desperate dash to freedom to come to an abrupt halt. She is standing at the edge of an enormous chasm ringed with dozens and dozens of pipes great and small, dumping gallons and gallons of rushing water down into the void. The roar of the foaming white water is deafening. Somewhere down below, all of this water is certainly running back to the sewers of Spirena, the only functioning sewer system left anywhere on the entire continent of Panarza.

"The sacred source of all life, reduced to a mere vehicle for Serran excrement," says Dice.

"Holy fucking shit," says Kalisa.

"Halt! Not one more step!" shouts the leader of the *ashuras* who have just burst through the door.

But a direct order is all it takes for an anti-authoritarian iconoclast like Kalisa to overcome her hesitations. One more step is exactly what she takes, sucking in one last gulp of air, clutching the girl she carries to her chest, and hoping against hope that she is, in fact, rescuing the poor little thing and not just murdering her. Dice steps over the edge right alongside her, and the three of them plummet down into the rushing water and into the unknown.

# 11

Led from behind by a phalanx of stern faced Commuters, Kresh and Bangles are escorted from the dance hall and marched down a long wet corridor. Slogging through the waist-deep water that fills the hallway, they are taken to what appears to be a dead end.

"Get in," says one of the Commuter escort.

"Um," Bangles says, scratching his chin. He scrutinizes the blank wall in front of him, looking for some indication of a hidden door. "Where?"

"Uh..." Kresh says, pointing downward into the water with his finger.

Bangles peers into the dark water, and yes, there does appear to be some kind of a tunnel carved into the floor. Still, he's hesitant.

"Come on, dry boy, get in," says another of the escort. "It's not far, you'll be fine. Miri Vae wants to meet you. She's not looking to get you killed. Not yet, anyway."

Kresh shrugs, and dives into the water, and Bangles follows reluctantly behind. Yes, there is a tunnel. But it is an uncomfortably narrow and frighteningly dark tunnel, and Bangles finds that he must constantly remind himself as he swims into this claustrophobic grotto that he is, in fact, immortal, and cannot possibly be destroyed by this leg of his adventure. Unless, of course, he is somehow wrong about the completeness of his immortality, and there is some lingering caveat he has not anticipated, waiting to cut his exciting journey short. But after descending for a few moments, the tunnel begins to curve upward, and Bangles can clearly see a dim light at the end of it.

He emerges with a gasp to find himself in what is most certainly a temple of some kind. The ceiling here is high and domed, and water flows into this atrium from a series of spiralling ornate sluices that encircle its perimeter. Hanging from the architecture of these sluices, small purple tapestries with green stripes that curve like the ripples in a pond hang down almost to the waist-high water's surface without quite touching it. Beyond the sluices, the very walls of this place weep with water. A translucent trickle runs across the grid of interlocking triangles that line the wall, tinkling peacefully as it descends into the pool. The light in this room comes from a series of columns topped with strange jagged crystals that shine with a pale blue light that blankets the entire atrium. These columns are arranged in two rows, and the path between them leads to two enormous statues standing side by side. One of them, Bangles has seen before: it's an image of a tall and powerful Zoan woman, her head thrown back and her mouth open as though she were in the middle of belting out a war cry, or the final note of an aria. But the statue next to her, while diminutive, is otherworldly enough to be even more arresting. The figure and face of this mysterious creature is Serranoid, and yet distinctly alien, with long narrow cheekbones, a flat little nose, and a slender jawline. An array of fern-like gills flare out from the creature's neck beneath two long beautiful ears so much more like the blossoms of calla lillies than like any kind of Serran feature. This being's eyes are concealed by an unusual pair of goggles, but Bangles feels certain that were those goggles to be somehow removed, the eyes beneath would be the strangest he'd ever seen. The figure grins enigmatically, an expression not quite malicious but most certainly dangerous, dripping with a palpable intensity evident in his many dimples and the tonus of his facial muscles. The proportions of his body are such that he appears childlike, yet there is something about the straightness of his backbone, and the proud posture of his hands upon his hips, that indicates that this is no child, that this is, in fact, a great leader. But a leader of what?

"Lettuzz guez," comes Kresh's voice from over Bangles' shoulder. "You don't recognize him

either.”

“Not even a little,” Bangles says, awestruck and slowly shaking his head from side to side.

“What... what is he? Who is he?”

“That there is Jaivuar Keen, *ling*,” Kresh replies, with an air of reverence in his voice. “That there is the man who fell from the sky. That there... is the first Commuter. Now, he did not invent our way of life. The way of Commuters was lingering inside of us, a natural set of tendencies confused, confounded, and suppressed by the evils of Serran society. For centuries, none of us on Serra could find words to put to those tendencies, those innate desires welling up from within and trying to guide us. It took a man from another world to reveal to us what had always been there: the will to care. The will to trust. The will to create. The will to live... to really and fully live, knowing full well that someday... we must die.”

Bangles opens his mouth to contradict that last statement, but quickly thinks better of it.

“Scientists told us that mind and body are separate,” Kresh continues. “But Jaivuzar taught us that they are one and the same. The authorities told us that it was wrong for us to alter our consciousnesses with *kek*, but Jaivuzar taught us that altered states of consciousness are our birthright, and our medizzin. The priests taught us that God was judging us, and that we could never feel God's love without the priests' intercession. But Jaivuzar taught us that God is love, and God is always with us, with or without the interference of priests. Before Jaivuzar came to us, so many of us had given up. We were numb. We were cold. We moved from place to place like machines carrying out a program. We lived without purpose. He brought us purpose, and more than that, he brought us connection. And more than connection, he brought us the Train.”

“The Train?” Bangles asks, excitement welling up within him. “You mean, the one I met you on the roof of?”

“The very same,” Kresh says. “He designed the Train, the Chariot, and he offered it as a gift to his followers. So, of course, the Panarzik Alliance conspired to steal it from us.”

“Those bastards...” Bangles says, clenching his fist despite having never heard those two words together before.

“Hey,” Kresh says, placing a firm hand on Bangles' bony shoulder. “We'll get it back. One way or another, we will have that Train.”

“Where is he now?” Bangles asks, but not too loudly. The sanctity of this sacred space is becoming more and more clear to him with each passing moment. “This Jaivuzar Keen.”

“Dead. Gone,” Kresh says. “You think the powers that be would let a guy like that run wild?”

Bangles assumes (rightly) that the question is rhetorical.

“Hang on,” Kresh says, changing the subject. “We're about to see a Priestezzz. We're going to have to get high.”

Bangles opens his mouth to respond, but the joint is already lit. Kresh delicately places the fat smoldering cone in the corner of Bangles' gaping orifice, thereby silencing whatever question or commentary the immortal cowboy was about to expectorate into this sacred space. Puffing and passing, the two of them continue their walk through the water, and as they near the two statues, Bangles can see that beyond them is a marble pavillion shrouded by gauzy and translucent lavender curtains. In front of this pavillion, three Zoan girls float in the water, holding a large and intricate wooden object in their hands. This object is constructed of a number of intersecting wooden bars, arranged in a manner both mysteriously arcane and entrancingly geometric. At first glance, it appears to be a fusion of a five-pointed star and an equilateral triangle, but as the trio of girls turns it around and around, the three dimensional nature of this structure becomes apparent. Before Bangles' eyes, it transforms from triangle to pyramid, and from star to dodecahedron.

“And now you want to know what that is,” Kresh says, with a sigh.

“Yes, please,” Bangles insists.

“In the Zoan tongue, we call that *voria darzunazz*, the key with no lock,” Kresh explains. “The



sages say that to contemplate its shape is to understand the secret of our reality.”

“Which is?”

“The secret?” Kresh asks, rolling his eyes. “We cannot tell you. For it izza secret.”

“Ohhh.”

“A secret we don't have time to pursue,” Kresh says. “To truly understand, you'd have to devote the rest of your life to following the sage's path. But last we checked, we have a Train to catch. Though first, it looks like we have some explaining to do.”

The two of them ascend the stairs that have been carved into the side of the pavillion, and Kresh (with the joint resting precariously atop his lower lip) pulls back the curtain so that the two of them may enter. Inside, Miri Vae awaits them, reclining atop a great slab of jade half submerged in a pool of water that occupies the center of the pavillion. Another sluice enters the pavillion from above, allowing a gentle stream of water to sprinkle continuously downwards onto this slab. The enormous hunk of jade has been carved into the shape of a massive coiled serpent – much like the mantle Miri wears about her shoulders, but larger, with a hungry mouth and angry nostrils. The silent creature scrutinizes the two interlopers with its frozen eyes. Miri straddles the skull of the jade beast, her legs dissolving into and out of the surface of the green stone in a mesmerizing display of her camouflage abilities. She still holds her dolphin-shaped cigarette filter from her earlier performance, dragging idly on the cotcha joint affixed to its tip, and exhaling aromatic clouds of smoke in Bangles' and Kresh's direction.

“You're late for work,” she says, her elocution refined and immaculate. She studies Kresh through heavily lidded eyes. “Five months late.”

“Yezz, there was a problem with our alarm clock, you see...” Kresh says, grinning brazenly.

“You abandoned us, darling Kresh,” Miri continues, sitting up. “But the world outside these walls was too much for you. And now you've come slinking back to us.”

“There were some extenuating circumstances,” Kresh admits. “Not that we should have to make excuses for ourselves. This one izza free one, is he not?”

“Yezz, you are free, darling Kresh,” Miri replies. “And with freedom, comes responsibility. Responsibility that you have shirked.”

“You are wrong,” Kresh declares, firm in his resolve.

“Are we?” Miri chuckles, her amusement but a thin veneer over her burgeoning hostility.

“Kresh, you have shared your water with us. We know what you know. And we know that you have switched teams.”

“Yezz, thazz right,” Kresh says, nodding. “This one hazza new bozz.”

“Not juzz any bozz,” Miri growls. “Spanner Boz. The pretender.”

“He's got more than you got,” Kresh counters, holding his ground.

“Kresh, you fool. He's one of *them*! Not one of us!” Miri says, leaping to her feet and standing atop the head of the jade serpent. She glowers down at Kresh from her perch, tilting her cigarette holder down to extinguish her joint against the eye of the bestial statue.

“Spanner hazz forsaken the family to which he was born. He hazza new family now,” Kresh calmly explains. “And Miri... you are in no place to judge him.”

“Tell me, darling Kresh,” Miri inquires, clasping her hands together. “Does Spanner Boz have water to offer you?”

“Not yet,” Kresh confesses. “But we're working on it. We have a plan, a plan to save all the Commuters from the Spire Clan's oppression. A plan that Jaivuzar himself would have been proud of.”

“A plan?” Miri says, confused. “Kresh, you have shared your water with us, but we have seen no trace of a plan.” Perplexed, she holds her hand up to the stream of water trickling down onto her from above. She stands there, her eyes closed, with a look of deep concentration on her face, as though studying the secrets of each and every little droplet that tickles her palm. “Oh. Oh poor darling Kresh. Tell me it isn't so.”

“Yezz,” Kresh confirms. “This one hazza erased a part of his memory.”

"You mistrust us so deeply?" Miri asks, placing a hand over her wounded heart.

"Perhaps," Kresh shrugs. "Perhaps it is not you we mistrust. Perhaps it is the sheer number of us coming into and out of this water we share. Perhaps we juzz cannot know that this precious secret of ours could be kept safe here."

Miri sits down atop the head of the jade serpent, allowing her legs to dangle before its rigid gaping maw. She ponders Kresh a moment, gently stroking the slope of her jaw with one webbed index finger. "So your plan is to save every Commuter?" she asks, at last.

"Yezz. All Commuters. Everyone who knows the truth of Jaivuzar Keen in their hearts," Kresh says. "And that includes you," he adds. "Provided you are willing to be saved."

Miri chuckles at this. "Oh, darling Kresh," she says, shaking her head. "Our sweet darling Kresh. Fine. Leave us on this fool's errand. We have more than enough workers to satisfy the inane demands of the Spire Clans, and who knows? Perhaps you will succeed. Perhaps you will be the one who saves us all."

"No," Kresh says. "There is no one who will save us. It is we who will save us. All of us. Together. But for right now, in these early stages of the plan, when secrecy is of the utmost importance, the fewer parties involved, the better."

At this, Miri smiles warmly. "You are not as foolish as you seem, Kresh Balta. And tell me, is this one here you've brought with you part of this plan of yours?"

"My name is Bangles, ma'am," Bangles says, stepping forward to introduce himself. He bows, reaching up to doff his hat. But finding no hat upon his naked head, he simply pantomimes the doffing. "I must say, this here is most certainly a beautiful establishment, and you folks are both a kind and a fascinating people. Thank you ever so much for allowin' me into your strange and wonderful world."

"We found him on the roof of the Chariot," Kresh says. "Hezza strange one, isn't he? Helpful fellow, though."

"Quite," says Miri. "Welcome to our temple, friend Bangles. You were assisting our Kresh atop the Chariot, may we assume you are one of us?"

"A Commuter, you mean?" Bangles asks. "Well, I can't remember, but gosh, it sure seems like I am!"

"Another amnesiac?" Miri asks, her eyes darkening with suspicion. "Strange how such coincidences arise, the paths of two such people weaving together in this way. But izzit coincidence... or izzit calculation?"

"Hezza good person. He saved this one's life, *twice*," Kresh insists. "This one owes him a bit of a debt on that front."

"To some, the saving and spending of Serran lives is no different from the saving and spending of money, or food, or any other resource," Miri declares. "You are a loving creature, Kresh Balta. So many of us Zoans are. How easily we forget that such love is lost upon the worst of our world. We share a common tongue with the people of Panarza, but are we really speaking the same language?"

Kresh looks at Bangles, then back at Miri. "A leap of faith. Thazz what it is we Commuters are to take when faced with the unknown. We trust. And we jump. Thazz what Jaivuzar taught us, izzit not?"

"Yezz..." Miri says, absently. "With certain caveats." She focuses her awareness intensely upon Bangles, who shifts his feet nervously beneath her piercing glare. "Step forward, Bangles. Allow us to see you more clearly."

Bangles complies, stepping forward to the edge of Miri's pool. From atop the jade serpent's head, Miri extends one of her dangling feet towards him, delicately placing her big toe upon Bangles' forehead. The cool moisture of her toe seeps into Bangles' brow, spreading through the nooks and crannies of his cranium like a fine mist.

"Very interesting," Miri says. "He does indeed have amnesia, and it is not accidental. Somebody – somebody very powerful – has decided that they most certainly do not want you to remember

something.”

“Izzit... the Well?” Kresh asks.

“Perhaps,” Miri says. With her toe, she firmly taps Bangles' forehead in three places, starting from a spot above the bridge of his nose and ending with a spot where Bangles' hairline would be, if he had even a lick of hair on his smooth shining scalp. “But the vestiges and impressions of the magick that has been worked over this man are everywhere. These are not the slapdash enchantments of the Well's cut rate wizards. It izza strong magick, an old magick, something the likes of which we have never seen before,” she says, stroking her jawline thoughtfully. “Kresh, thizzizz very dangerous. We must recommend, as strongly as possible, that you take this man to an expert before proceeding any further.”

“An expert?” Kresh and Bangles ask in unison.

“An expert,” Miri confirms. “This one izza priestezz, this you know. It is this one's duty to handle the mystical and ceremonial duties of our people. This one wazza priestezz-in-training when Jaivuzar Keen came to Serra, and under Jaivuzar's tutelage, this one became the priestezz you see before you now. But this one has been unable to dedicate herself to the practice of the mystical arts. Without anyone else to take the lead, this one has no alternative but to organize and guide the Zoans and Commuters of this city by herself. It is demanding work, and it leaves time for little else. By all rights, this one should be able to diagnose this man's malady, but unfortunately, that is simply not to be. We must send you instead to one of the only freelance sorcerors left alive in Panarza. His name is Trigsy Basel, and last we heard, he was dwelling in the city of Zulae.”

“We suppose we could add it to our to-do list,” Kresh says. Reaching into one of his many pouches and pockets, he pulls out a folded up piece of paper and unfolds it. Looking over his shoulder, Bangles sees that there is only one item written on the to-do list. “Go to Zulae and find Trigsy Basel,” Kresh reads aloud. “Well, how about that!” he says, grinning as he carefully folds the paper back up and returns it to his pockets. “We'll fill up our tanks, and be on our way tonight!”

“Would it be possible for me to get some clothin' first?” Bangles asks.

Kresh feigns exasperation. “Oh fine. We'll get you threzz if you *really* think you need threzz.”

They're already turning to leave, when Miri calls after them. “One more thing,” she says. “You will do us a favor.”

“Of course, Miri, anything for the Commuter's Guild,” Kresh says, bowing with a flourish.

“A friend of ours is making some powerful enemies tonight,” Miri explains. “She needs to be escorted out of the city immediately, lest she bring the consequences of her actions down upon all of our heads. We will arrange a meeting aboard the next train that leaves for Zulae. Go now... and Kresh?”

“Yezz?” Kresh says, once again caught halfway in the act of turning to leave.

“This one hopes with all her heart that you succeed. Be careful. Be wise. And love the people of this world. Even when they are consumed by their own vulgar ferocity and their own damned foolishness, love them anyway. They know not the gift that lies inside them. And if we callously thrust them aside, then we have guaranteed that they never will. Go with grace, darling Kresh. Go with grace.”

## 12

When they (whoever they are) drag Kalisa from the water, still clutching the little Naraean teenager to her chest, she's soaking wet and half drowned, retching and coughing and trying to force every last drop of the sewer water she's ingested out of her lungs. Her rescued Naraean girl is in even worse shape. Mysterious hands in the darkness of the sewer pry the girl's limp little body from Kalisa's grip, and someone Kalisa can't see applies CPR until the girl begins to breathe again under her own power. Somewhere nearby, someone else is coughing. The coughing irritates her, so Kalisa assumes it must be Dice. It seems all three of them have survived. For now.

"I think I just drank hepatitis," gurgles Kalisa.

"Come," says an unfamiliar voice, a woman's. "We have dry clothes for you."

"Well, maybe I like being wet," Kalisa retorts, but she staggers to her feet all the same, and allows some stranger's gentle hand to guide her through the darkness. "Hey Dice," she says, wondering if they're all being taken to the same place. "You dead?"

"No," comes Dice's answer from somewhere behind Kalisa. "Are you?"

"I'm dead inside," Kalisa explains. "But I was dead inside before you met me. When do I get my *cotcha*?"

"I don't know," Dice replies, wearily.

"I don't like bein' sober," Kalisa says. "And I can't remember the last time I had a toke. Y'all are gonna like me a lot more stoned than sober."

"Hang on," says another unfamiliar female voice coming from Dice's vicinity. Kalisa hears the flick of a lighter, and her nerves tingle with excitement. "Here," says the voice again, coming from over her shoulder this time, handing her a lit joint. Kalisa takes it from her, and inhales deeply of the gentle smoke. Her relief is immediate. The bitter tension she carries in her chest and shoulders slides off her body and melts into the ground somewhere. Kalisa chuckles a little bit.

"Hey Dice," Kalisa calls again. "Holy shit, you weird bitch. We did it."

"Yes, we did," Dice replies. "I'm still shaking from the adrenaline."

"And the *surge*," Kalisa reminds her. "Crazy *kek-hext* dyklone." She's glad she remembered to use that one.

"Maybe not the smartest thing I've ever done," Dice admits. "But you only live once. And now I can say I got *kekt* in a Spire..."

"I strongly recommend you not brag about that," comes the voice of one of their unseen escort. "In fact, I recommend that you never speak of this mission again, after this day."

They round a corner in the darkness, then another, and Kalisa hears the sound of a door's hinges squeaking open before her. Her unseen guide leads her to some kind of cot and urges her to sit on top of it. "We're going to take off our infrared goggles," says the guide. "And then we're going to turn on the light."

Even with the warning, Kalisa is momentarily blinded by the shift in brightness. It's a warm light, not at all overpowering, but still a marked change from total darkness. Dice is sitting across from her on another cot, her hair dark and slick from the water. They're in a wide room with a low ceiling, a space lined with empty cots. Kalisa watches as a burly Hegovarian fellow deposits their semi-conscious Naraean rescuee onto one of these cots. The girl's hospital gown is completely soaked through and clinging tightly to her slender frame. Kalisa stares at the girl's dark nipples poking through the wet

fabric of the gown for a full fifteen seconds before she catches herself and looks away, embarrassed, as the Hegovarian fellow gently places a warm blanket on top of the water-logged girl. He offers towels to Dice and Kalisa as well, and Kalisa uses one to give herself a hasty once-over, while taking stock of her new environment. To Kalisa's left, there's a desk supporting the lamp that illuminates the room, and beyond that, a trio of vertical lockers that look a lot like the one she stuffed those two nurses into back in the operating room. Leaning against the desk is a middle-aged Naraean woman in rumpled clothing, nondescript but for the rectangular shape of her face. Next to him stands another Naraean in her early twenties, a girl possessing a certain wide-eyed innocence that makes Kalisa certain the youth is a virgin, or at the very least sheltered. The two of them look so similar that Kalisa assumes they must be related in some way, if not, in fact, mother and daughter. Both of them wear green circular badges attached to their left shoulders, and while Kalisa cannot recall having ever seen that badge before, she imagines it must mean something for the both of them to be wearing it. Behind them, sitting on a stool with his back against the wall, is a middle-aged Xila with grey streaks in his long dark ponytail. His teeth are long and sharp, but his dark claws are even longer. He meets Kalisa's gaze with his pale yellow eyes. The predatory contraction of his pupils unnerves her.

"I thought I smelled something horrible," Kalisa sneers. "What the fuck is that doing down here?"

The Naraeans and the Xila exchange a glance. The Naraeans seem apologetic, but the Xila only shrugs.

"You came of age in the farmlands?" the Xila asks.

"Coxex," Kalisa replies, but it's more of an accusation than an answer.

The Xila nods, as if that was the exact answer he expected. "Yes. That was Khotal's territory. He fed thousands upon thousands into the mouth of the great unknown. And here you are, alive. The winds have smiled upon you. They have let you keep your breath."

"They didn't let me keep shit," Kalisa retorts. "I'm the one who wouldn't let go," she adds, and now she turns to her two Naraean hosts. "What the fuck is he doin' down here? What the fuck is all this?"

"Your joint's going out," the younger Naraean says.

"Yeah, yeah," Kalisa says, relighting it with her index finger. The others gasp. "What?" she says. "It's notta big deal. Fire and I go way back. We have an understanding."

The Xila opens his mouth to speak, and then thinks better of it, but Kalisa knows damn well that she doesn't like the way he's looking at her. She glowers back into those tiger eyes, taking a long deep drag of the cotcha.

"To answer your question," the older Naraean says. "I am Sasadara. This is my daughter, Ell. The Hegovarian is Jordan. The Xila is Zakhaje. And these are the sewers of Spirena..."

"No shit," Kalisa interrupts, taking another drag.

"...built by the Zoans fifteen years ago," Sasadara continues. "They worked day and night to meet the outrageous timeline the Spire Clans demanded of them, often ingesting large amounts of *kek* to keep awake and stay strong. To appease the Spire Clans, the Zoans worked until they dropped, and then they'd be carried back here. Here they would rest, maybe eat a little food, until they could stand up and work again. The Spire Clans have forgotten this place. They could care less about the footnotes of their bloody march through history. But the Commuters remember, and we remember too. Occasionally, this place becomes useful to us."

"Commuters everywhere. Is he a Commuter too?" Kalisa asks, indicating the Xila Zakhaje with the quickly vanishing roach in her hand.

"He's a... a contractor," Sasadara replies.

"You're here for me, aren't you?" Dice asks.

"If you are the one who requested the surgery, then yes, I am here for you," Zakhaje says.

"Have you been taking your medicine?"

"Yes," Dice replies. "Yes, I have. Every day." Dice struggles a moment to maintain the decorum of neutrality before the others in the room, but she can't fight the smile that arises, nor can she stop the sparkling in her eyes or the way her breath is quickening. "It's really happening," she says, shaking her head in wonderment and elation. "I've been waiting for this day for years, and now, it's finally happening."

"You're going to let that dirty mudbelly stick its claws into you?" Kalisa asks.

"Xilas are the finest surgeons in the world," Sasadara informs her.

"They sleep in the dirt," Kalisa counters.

"Yes. Xilas sleep on the ground, beneath the stars," Sasadara replies. "*And* they are the world's finest surgeons. Their fine motor control surpasses that of any other Serran. They have been practicing surgical interventions on the battlefield for centuries. For the Xilas, repairing the wounds of combat is an art form, and an honor."

"Thank you, old friend," says Zakhaje.

"Are you goin' to use your claws?" Kalisa asks in disbelief.

"Of course," replies Zakhaje.

"Are you goin' to *sterilize* your claws?" Kalisa asks.

"Of course," replies Zakhaje, chuckling a little bit.

Wide-eyed and skeptical, Kalisa turns to Dice. "Well, dude, it was nice knowin' ya. Jus', like, before you go off to die on your great malpractice adventure, could you make sure to hook me up with that *cotcha*?"

Sasadara nods to her daughter, and the young woman opens up one of the lockers. Inside is a collection of books, clothing, guns, and several large sealed bags stuffed to the brim with *cotcha* buds. Ell takes one of the bags, and tosses it to Kalisa, who snatches it hungrily out of the air.

"Hey, wait a second," Dice says. "Is that my stuff?"

"Yes," says Sasadara.

"You were in my house?" Dice asks, confused and more than a little upset.

"It is not your house," Sasadara patiently explains. "The apartment belongs to the Commuter's Guild, and you are renting it. But do not worry. We did not come into your home out of judgement or avarice. We came into your home as an act of service."

Seeing the look of utter confusion on Dice's face, Kalisa breaks out into uncontrollable laughter. "Oh, damn. Oh oh oh, damn! Dice, you fuckin' tool. Now do you get it? Now do you see why I don't wanna join your worker bee drug cult?"

"It's fine!" Dice insists, a little angrily. "It's fine. I'm just... caught off guard. I wish I'd had a heads up."

"There wasn't time," Sasadara explains. "You had to move to save the girl, and once you did, you would have to go into hiding."

"Hiding? Nobody said anything about hiding," Dice says.

The old woman shrugs. "I would've thought it was too obvious to require explaining. Charging into the inner sanctums of the Spire Clans like that and kidnapping one of their *ashuras*... they're not going to take that lightly. If they find you, they will torture you before they kill you. They might even eat your soul."

"Pfft. What?" Kalisa squawks, laughing incredulously. "Oh my god. You can't be serious."

"I am deadly serious," Sasadara insists. "The magi of the Spire Clans use the unmoored souls of the dying as fuel for their darkest magicks. At full power, a Naraean magus has the ability to levitate entire buildings, or summon a tempest out of the aether, or tear a man to shreds with a flick of the wrist. Their works are the stuff of legends. They are not to be trifled with."

"Welp. I'll smoke to that," Kalisa says, still giggling. "Any of y'all got rollies?" The girl Ell offers a pack to Kalisa, and she snatches it out of his hand. She opens the bag of *cotcha* in her lap, and holding it up to her nose, she inhales deeply. "Ohhh," she moans, orgasming ever so slightly. "Good

lord, y'all. It smells like pineapple. And it looks like heaven," she says, fingering the sticky buds with her damp fingers.

"So what happens now?" Dice asks, visibly unnerved.

"That depends," Sasadara replies. "How many did you kill?"

"I shot an *ashura*," Dice says.

"I got one," Kalisa says, making a gun with her thumb and index finger. "Pyew pyew," she says, making the sound tiny adorable bullets would make if they were fired from a tiny adorable gun, before returning to the task of rolling her joint. "Old dude in a black robe. Creepiest motherfucker I ever saw. And I've seen some creepy motherfuckers. Pretty sure the world's a better place without him in it," she says, sealing the paper around the herb with her tongue.

"I see..." says Sasadara, furrowing his pensive brow. "I suppose I can't be too surprised. There is much I can see, but clairvoyance is never one hundred percent certain."

"You're one of them too, aren't you," Dice says. "An *ogilan*. A seer. A dream-strider."

"Yes, I am," Sasadara says. "So is my daughter. So is she," he says, indicating the Naraean girl on the cot, who appears to be waking from her sedation. "And so was the man you killed."

"Oh," Dice says quietly.

"We will have to get you out of the city immediately," Sasadara says.

"I ain't afraid o' no Spire Clans," Kalisa says, lighting the fresh joint with her fingertip.

"You should be," Zakhaje interjects.

"I ain't afraid of you either, Dr. Dirtcat," Kalisa retorts.

"It's not about you!" Sasadara growls. "It's about her!" he says, pointing to the drowsy Naraean girl on the cot.

Kalisa feels a twinge of shame. It's a rare phenomenon in her life, confusing and unsettling, the unwanted feeling worming its way through her chest and refusing to be smoked away. Detaching herself from the Sasadara's glare, she wanders to her rescuee's side, taking a knee by the girl's cot.

"Hey kid," Kalisa says. "How ya doin'?"

The girl flutters her thick eyelashes and sighs. "*Hoh*. You came for me," she says, her soft little voice still heavy with the anesthesia. "Thank you. Thank you for rescuing me."

"My pleasure," Kalisa says, enamored. For the first time, now, she can really study the girl's face: the smooth slate grey of her skin, the glimpse of supple pink hiding inside of her moist little mouth, the heart shape implied by the swell of her cheekbones above the delicate point of her chin. The girl's hand lies limply on the cot next to her head, and Kalisa places her own callused hand on top of it. "My name's Kalisa Ferris, and I'm here for you. Whatever I can do to help you feel safe, you jus' let me know, alright?"

"Okay," the girl says, yawning a little.

Dice, meanwhile, has been making her way towards the exit alongside the Xila surgeon.

"Ell will assist you," Sasadara says, gently pushing her daughter to follow them.

"I do not require assistance," Zakhaje says. "And I especially do not require interference. But if the girl can sit in silence, like the watchful hunter, she could learn much by observing my art."

"If ya die, I'm takin' yer stuff," Kalisa calls out to Dice. "She has guns. And *cotcha*," she explains to the girl on the cot.

"Oh," says the girl.

Sasadara sits down on the cot behind Kalisa, facing the girl. "Hello, Ioni. I am so grateful that you're safe. My name is Sasadara. I am a friend of your aunt's, your *real* aunt. The Lashleis took you, just as they've taken so many other little girls. They told you that you belonged to them. *Their* dynasty. *Their* lineage. All a lie. You are not Ioni Lashlei. Your name is Ioni Desei. You were taken from your family because you are an *ogilan*, a being with the power to enter the minds of others and predict the future."

Ioni nods a little, lying there on the cot with her eyes closed, inhaling and exhaling slowly and

deeply.

"I understand," says Sasadara. "This is a lot for you to take in right now."

"I knew," Ioni says. "I couldn't explain it. I couldn't put it into words. But deep down, I knew. They would come to me in my dreams. Angels. They'd come and they'd tell me secrets."

"You are very brave, my child," says Sasadara. "Reaching out the way you did. We heard you in our dreams, asking for our help, and we came to your aid. But this is only the beginning of your journey. As soon as you are strong enough, we must smuggle you out of this city."

"Yes," says Ioni. "To Astralo."

"Astralo?" Kalisa and Sasadara ask in unison.

"Why the hell would you wanna go to Astralo?" Kalisa asks, perplexed.

"What about Zulae?" Sasadara demands.

"The shadow is coming to Zulae. It is not safe there," Ioni explains.

The big mute Hegovarian youth in the corner makes a series of strange gestures that Kalisa cannot understand. But Sasadara does, nodding along with the boy's communication.

"No, Jordan," the Naraean says. "Egi is not safe either. Too many comings and goings. Too many Commuters with confused alliances. We need secrecy."

"We will go to Astralo. It is the perfect place to hide. But more importantly, we have work to do there," Ioni says, her eyes locking onto Kalisa's. "You and I have a job to do."

A shiver runs down Kalisa's spine, but she cannot, will not, look away. "If you say so," she says, suddenly noticing how dry her throat has become. "Hey, old woman. What do I gotta do to get a glass of water in this place?"

Sasadara's Hegovarian assistant (whose name Kalisa has already forgotten) dredges up some dry clothing for Kalisa and Ioni: a matching set of faded linen garments too small for the former and too large for the latter. The teenage Naraean girl looks adorable in the over-sized shirt, her little hands lost in the depths of the long sleeves. Now, Ioni sits atop the cot with Sasadara, listening intently as he explains to her what an *ogilan* is and what her capabilities are. Kalisa lounges nearby, propping up her head with one hand and smoking gratuitous amounts of *cotcha*. Every time Kalisa's thoughts start to wander, her eyes meander back to Ioni. *That's the kinda dog I am*, Kalisa thinks. *When no one's holdin' the leash, I go for the sweetest treat in the room.*

Despite her youth, the Naraean girl seems remarkably intelligent. But Kalisa can't quite put her finger on why this is. It isn't what Ioni's saying, since the girl listens more than she speaks (though that's an indicator of intelligence all by itself). Perhaps it's what twinkles in those dark sad eyes of hers, the light of her soul rising up from within and coming to rest wetly against her corneas. Perhaps it's the choreography of her facial expressions: the subtle synchronization of her lips and her eyebrows and the wrinkling of her nose as they dance together in tandem. Perhaps it's the calmness of her demeanor, so unlike the numbness that most young Serrans have stumbled into in the wake of the Great Evaporation. Kalisa can read the resignation that's written on Ioni's face, and see the determination in the girl's elegant backbone.

Or perhaps Kalisa is choosing to imagine that Ioni is wise beyond her years so that she feels like less of a creep for ogling a girl some ten years younger than she is. She feels guilty, but then again, Naraeans always look so much younger than they actually are: the large eyes, the tiny nose, the diminutive stature. Kalisa tells herself that Ioni must be eighteen, at least.

Meanwhile Sasadara – utterly oblivious to the turmoil of Kalisa's internal monologue – prattles on at length about the world of dreams, and the fragility of the Serran ego when pilloried by the storms of the subconscious. Kalisa keeps losing the thread of the lecture, distracted by the way the little black feathers atop Ioni's head bob when she nods. And Ioni is nodding a lot, indicating subtly that, wise little creature that she is, she already understands most of what she is being told. But Sasadara rambles on anyway, describing nested layers of consciousness inhabiting each other and threads between worlds



that can affect the past and the two-way transdimensional intersection of all possible destinies converging on a single point. It's a phantasmagorical sermon of far-fetched Commuter-flavored dreams and fantasies that should, by all rights, be fascinating, but which, when droning out of Sasadara's mouth, metastasizes from mystical intrigue into a congealing blob of asides, tangents, and wholly unnecessary wordplay that amuses no one but Sasadara herself. After a seemingly endless period of time that Kalisa can neither escape nor fast forward through, Sasadara's droning cadence begins to lose momentum, as though maybe, just maybe, she's getting ready to stop talking.

"And it is we *ogilan* who have rescued you," Sasadara explains. "We have formed a network, a resistance network, and we are building a railroad to freedom."

"Freedom?" Ioni asks.

"Freedom for all conscious beings," Sasadara replies. "The Spire Clans and the Buffs Survival Corporation think that as long as they hide behind their walls, they will be immortal. So they keep building more walls. More and more and more walls. But these walls are suffocating us. It is not walls that give life. It is freedom that gives life. But without strength, we will have no freedom. The more *ogilan* we gather into our ranks, the stronger we are. If only there were more *ogilan* to gather... Unfortunately, the Spire Clans and the Well are attempting the same thing, even as we speak. They are trying to hoard Serra's destiny, as though it belongs only to them. That is why they took you. We thought we'd lost you. But here you are. And now, you say you want to go to Astralo?" Sasadara asks Ioni.

"*Hoh*. It's not about what I want," Ioni replies. "I do not choose my destiny. I am the instrument of something greater than myself."

Neither of her companions know what to make of this enigmatic statement, though both of them find it distinctly off-putting. Kalisa averts her eyes, rolling another joint but not lighting it, squeezing the tip between her thumb and forefinger and slapping it against the palm of her other hand. Sasadara strokes her chin pensively, taking some time to choose her words.

"I have heard that same logic expressed by the Spire Clans," she says, at last. "When they use their proximity to the Raelia – whatever that is – to justify their endless greed and cruelty. I do not feel comfortable hearing those words from your mouth, young friend."

"The Raelia is neither good nor evil," Ioni says. "It simply exists, just like the rest of us."

"And is the Raelia what has chosen your destiny for you?" Sasadara asks.

"No," Ioni replies.

"Then what has?" the pedantic Naraean sage inquires.

Ioni thinks for a moment, biting her lower lip ever so slightly. "Jez Paz," she says, at last.

"Jez Paz," Sasadara repeats. "I do not know those words. Is that a name?"

"Don't you know?" Ioni asks, incredulously.

"I know a great many things," Sasadara says. "I know nothing of this Jez Paz."

Ioni struggles to find an appropriate explanation. "They are so unlike us. So distant from our world, and yet everything they think and feel touches us in ways we cannot escape. Yes, I am *ogilan*. But I am more than that. I am a bridge between us... and them."

"But what are they?" Kalisa asks. She's intrigued enough to break through the herbal fog with which she has saturated herself, entering the conversation for the first time in two hours.

"Four, plus one, becomes five," Ioni says, elucidating the math with her fingers and thumb.

"And there is nothing the arms of that star do not touch," she adds, grabbing onto Kalisa's forearm for emphasis. "They are the elements, and the space between the elements. The gifts they exchange with each other, that is the alchemy from which our world arises."

"Are they God?" Kalisa asks.

"They are not far off," Ioni explains.

Perplexed, Sasadara changes the subject. "And what if we say no? What if we deny you this sojourn to Astralo?" Sasadara asks.

"*Hai!* Why would you do that?" Ioni wails, the pitch of her voice rising in alarm.

"For your safety, of course," Sasadara says.

"My safety is irrelevant," Ioni says. "I am to be put to use, not stashed away somewhere."

"Oh, come on!" Kalisa interjects. "After all I went through gittin' you out that tower, and this is what you gotta say 'bout it?"

"*Hoh!* Oh, no!" Ioni says, horrified that she has offended her rescuer. "You did *exactly* as you were supposed to! You were amazing, Kalisa."

Hearing her name spoken by that tender voice, Kalisa softens immediately. "Hey, I mean, it was nothin'. Jus', like, a day in the life, ya know? This is who I am. It's what I do."

"Really," says Sasadara.

"I'm here to help you," Kalisa continues. "Like I said before. Whatever I can do for you, jus' name it. You want me to take you to Astralo, fine. I'll do it. God only knows what those fascist scumbags'll do to us if they catch us. But if you gotta plan, or your... chess-paws... got one, then yeah. Like, jus' lead the way. Ya know?" Kalisa says, blushing a little bit. She's babbling, she knows she is. She's melted her brain with too much *cotcha*. Embarrassed, she lights the joint she's been playing with, hoping that maybe having something in her mouth will keep her from saying anything else stupid.

"Let's say you do go to Astralo," Sasadara says. "Once you get there, what will you do?"

"Azter Te. That's the name of the sleeping volcano they built that city around. That is where we must go," Ioni declares.

"I grew up not too far from there," Kalisa says. "Never could understand why they built a city on a volcano."

Sasadara seizes the opportunity for a history lesson. "The Xilas indigenous to the Panarzan coast worshipped that volcano. 'Violent Mother.' That's what Azter Te means in their tongue. To those tribes, it was the most sacred place in all of Panarza. And that's why the Hegovarian settlers built their capital around it. To show the Xilas once and for all who was in charge. And now, the only Xilas left in Astralo are slaves."

"I know. I can hear them," Ioni says, staring at the blank wall at the opposite end of the room as though she could see them as well. "I can hear their sorrows, their fears, their desperation. Those few that escape, they have nowhere else to run but the tunnels beneath Azter Te. And there they hide."

"*Ho, ho,*" says Sasadara, a sad little sound.

A thought occurs to Kalisa, a vicious thought about Xilas and what they do and don't deserve. She is about to give that thought a voice, but then she looks at Ioni's ear – a little butterfly's wing, soft and pink – and realizes that she does not wish to disturb that delicate ear with her angry vengeful bullshit. "Is that why you wanna go to Astralo?" Kalisa asks instead. "To help them mudbelly slaves?"

"No," Ioni says. "It is so I can help everyone, everyone I can. Many lives are about to converge: countless threads of destiny weaving together into a single strand, a strand that will pierce the eye of a needle and save the world. We have a great responsibility to those who will carry out this task."

"And what of your aunt?" Sasadara asks. "What of the woman who went to such lengths to save you?"

"She shall join me in Astralo, when the time is right," Ioni declares. "Tell me, wise friend. Your plan is to smuggle us out of this city. How were you going to accomplish this feat?"

"Of all the people who come and go from Spirena, there is one group who routinely mask their faces, who are forbidden not to," Sasadara explains. "It's the perfect disguise."

"Oh, come on," Kalisa moans. "You can't be serious. Not the Ghosts!"

Sasadara nods. "Yes," he says. "The Orthodox Davridians. One of their little family units ran afoul of... the usual vigilantes."

"Justice served," Kalisa scoffs.

"We have their uniforms," Sasadara continues. "The white gowns, the white hoods, the white masks. We have their identification cards as well."

“*Hai*,” Ioni says, smiling. “It is the perfect disguise. And what better place to wear that disguise than the Davridian city of Astralo?”

“Is it serendipity?” Sasadara asks, tilting his head towards the ceiling. “Or providence?”

“Is there a difference?” Ioni asks, coyly.

“I don't wanna play dress up,” Kalisa says. “And I especially don't wanna dress up as one of them fuckin' ghosts. But for you, I'm willin' to make an exception. Problem is, we're gonna need a Hegovarian guy to be our 'Erector' or whatever. Can we borrow that boy over there?” she asks Sasadara.

“Jordan?” Sasadara asks. “You could, but he may be a poor choice. The boy is a mute, and you'll need someone who can speak for you, since the both of you will be forbidden to speak for yourselves. And it's going to have to be someone who knows the *Good Davride* forwards and backwards.”

“Well, I guess that's that,” Kalisa says, lying down. “Guess we'll just stay here for a while”

Sasadara checks her watch. “Zakhaje will be finished with the operation in another couple hours, and then... you'll have your man. It seems serendipity – or providence – is not done with you yet. Anyway, you'd best use this time to get some sleep. You have quite the journey ahead of you.”

After their nap, Sasadara invites Kalisa and Ioni to pay Dice Thermal a visit. Dice rests supine atop a cot and beneath a blanket. But it's not her head resting on that flat pillow anymore: it's his. To Kalisa, Dice looks the same. Still androgynous, still homely. Still kind of a nerd. Though it appears that the Xila surgeon gave Dice a haircut to go with the sex change operation. Somehow, there's already stubble appearing on Dice's face, a fact Kalisa struggles to wrap her head around.

“What's with the scruff?” Kalisa asks, the first words anyone has spoken since they entered the room.

“What?” Dice asks, still groggy from the anesthesia. “Oh. That. The Commuter's Guild have been sneaking me hormone shots for weeks. I've been shaving to keep it a secret, but...” he trails off, too weary to explain the obvious.

“*Hoo, hoo*. How do you feel, dear?” Ioni asks, leaning over Dice's recumbent body and smiling benevolently.

“Mm.. groggy. I'll be better after I get some sleep,” Dice says, smiling absently.

“Ya better be. We're on a pretty tight schedule now, apparently,” Kalisa says, lighting up a joint and placing it between her lips. Struck with a sudden puckish curiosity, she lifts up the bedsheets to examine the work that's been done. The end product of the phalloplasty is still wrapped in bandages, but there's no denying what's between Dice's legs.

“Kalisa!” Ioni gasps with horror and embarrassment.

“Well. Dr. Dirtcat didn't skimp, that's for sure,” Kalisa says, lowering the blankets and taking a long drag off her joint. “Does it work?”

“After a fashion,” Zakhaje says. “I have implanted a pump that can fill the dangling branch with saline solution.”

“Just add water,” says Dice.

“What 'bout the scar tissue?” Kalisa asks. “What if they, like... examine his junk, when we reach Astralo?”

“Why on Serra would they do that?” Ioni says, exasperated.

“I dunno,” Kalisa shrugs. “I dunno what ghosts do when no one else is around. I dunno what the security is like in Astralo. I dunno!”

“You sure don't,” Dice mutters, smirking.

“We'll be fine!” Ioni insists, and Kalisa knows she's probably right. Even before the hormones and the surgery, Dice Thermal had been flat-chested and unusually tall for a woman. Kalisa wonders if Dice was, in fact, meant to be a man all along and had simply been temporarily waylaid by some kind

of hormonal fuck-up in the womb. It wouldn't be the first time the universe had destroyed the happiness of some innocent mortal with a casual oversight.

"Hey, Dice," Kalisa says, patently unable to resist an opportunity to be an asshole. "I thought you said this was a 'life-saving operation.'"

"It is," Dice says, annoyed.

"If you say so," Kalisa says, then turns to Zakhaje sitting quietly in the corner of the room.

"And you're comfortable with all this?" she asks him. "This don't seem weird to you?"

"Of course not," Zakhaje replies. "My people do not believe gender is absolute. There is light, and there is dark, and in between, there are many kinds of shadow."

"You do a lotta these, then?" Kalisa asks.

"I've done a few, yes," Zakhaje answers.

"And the cock you gave him, that's gonna work?" Kalisa asks.

"Yes, of course, though he'll have to wait until the stitches come out before he allows himself to have the, ah, strength of the tree," Zakhaje explains.

Kalisa laughs so hard, she falls over. "The strength of the tree," Kalisa repeats, when she can finally breathe again. But saying the words out loud again only makes her laugh harder. "A-mazing. A-mazing. Ya hear that, Dice? No erections today. Not even one. Think you can make it?"

"Sure. Every time I start getting turned on, I'll just look at you," Dice says. "That'll kill the mood. Guaranteed."

"Hey!" Kalisa says, slapping Dice on the thigh. "He's better already! That's good, dude, real good. Cuz by this time tomorrow, we'll be needin' you to convince a bunch of Astralan knuckle-draggers that you're man enough to be tellin' me what to do. Think you're up to the challenge?"

Dice smirks, and gives a weary thumbs-up. But his smirk quickly transforms into a puzzled expression. "Wait, what? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, right, you weren't there for that whole conversation," Kalisa says. "Basically, magick and prophecy and... some other things? And then providence, I guess, whatever that word means. All that is to say, you, me, and the little one here's goin' to Astralo."

"What? Why the fuck would we do that?" Dice asks. He tries sitting up, but Sasadara guides him back down onto the cot, making sure to glare at Kalisa all the while.

"*Hoh. Ho ho.* Dice. That's your name, right?" Ioni says, her voice soft and soothing. "My name is Ioni. Ioni..."

"Desei," Sasadara finishes for her.

"Yes, Ioni Desei," she says, letting out a musical little giggle. "That's going to take some getting used to. Anyway, Dice, they tell me you're something of a religious scholar."

"I'm a scholar of life," Dice insists. "But yeah, I know a thing or two about religion."

"Tell me, my dear. What do you believe in?" Ioni asks, taking Dice's hand in hers and tightening Kalisa's diaphragm with jealousy.

"I'm a Commuter," Dice says. "I believe in the teachings of Jaivuzar Keen."

"The Spire Clans provided me with many lies on the subject of Commuters," Ioni says.

"Perhaps you could clarify for me what Commuting means to you. Especially regarding the mystical... and the ineffable."

Dice hesitates a long while, long enough that Kalisa wonders if he's fallen into some kind of chemical narcolepsy. "I believe that the universe is deeper, richer, and more alive than I could ever possibly know in this lifetime," Dice says at last. "I believe that the veil between the world we know and the world we can't is strong, but thin. And I believe that it is our birthright, all of our birthrights, to pierce that veil and experience the thing we cannot know."

"Yes," Ioni says. "All of this is true, at least, insofar as I have confirmed these things through my own travels across the veil. Perhaps my vessel is too small and too corrupted to hold the truth that lies beyond. But still, what I have experienced moves me like the current of a river. I can either fight

against that current... or I can allow it to take me to where I belong.”

“And that's Astralo,” Dice says.

“Here's the part where we'd ask ya to join us,” Kalisa says. “But I don't see how you have much choice, seein' as how them Spire Clans are gonna come looking for us unless we get the fuck out of town ASAP.”

Dice grimaces. “What are our other options? Zulae? Altama?”

“I'm sorry to tell you this, but Altama's been destroyed,” Sasadara explains. “You could hide in Zulae, or some other Commuter occupied territory like Eqi, but you would be far from safe. The truth is, after what you've done, there may not be any safe places left for you in Panarza.”

“Well, alright...” Dice says. “So... we're going straight into the belly of the beast.”

“Thank you,” Ioni says, giving Dice's shoulder a squeeze. “Soon, all of this will make perfect sense. For now, you just have to trust the current.”

“Trust the current,” Dice repeats, closing his eyes.

“Alright, that's settled,” Kalisa says. “But I still have one very important question. How are we gonna sneak all my *cotcha* onto the train with us?”

## 13

Kresh and Bangles have boarded the train to Zulae, but they did not buy a ticket. Instead, they crawled up into the latticework of an archway dangling over the train tracks and waited for the right train to pass beneath them, jumping down onto the roof of the slow-moving train when it finally did. Bangles felt a brief pang of guilt regarding this tiny act of theft. But on the other hand, he has no money and nothing to trade and is therefore exempt from the usual economy of Serra for the time being. Kresh had to front him the money for the clothes that Bangles is currently wearing, and although Bangles was a touch embarrassed to be receiving this generous gift, he was more than a touch embarrassed to be walking around in cactus print underwear and nothing else. Now he's looking dapper and mildly rugged in matching black denim pants and vest, along with tall black boots and a black cowboy hat with a wide brim to keep the sun out of his eyes. A pair of goggles rests atop his forehead, and he's wrapped a blue kerchief around his neck (because the color of it reminds him of the pale metallic blue of the setting sun). The centerpiece of this outfit is a black leather belt that sports an oversized metal buckle engraved with a picturesque tableau of the desert that once was: cacti, eagle, scorpions, and wildflowers all find a niche in this wistful ecosystem. Kresh had made some taunting comments about the whole ensemble looking 'retro' and 'a little mudbelly', but Bangles feels a certain nostalgic comfort in the aesthetic he has chosen, sort of like the feeling one has when returning home after a long journey and sleeping in the warmth of one's own familiar bed.

But now they are aboard the train, settling in for a long ride. Kresh came prepared with a hammock. It is an iridescent galactic purple, constructed out of some entrancing fibrous mesh that Bangles can't help but run his fingers over. It's smooth and yielding, yet it seems incredibly strong for something so thin. Even more miraculously, Kresh had the whole thing folded up into a square the size of his palm and tucked away in one of his many pockets. Now that he's convinced Bangles to stop investigating its tactile qualities, Kresh reclines in the hammock, suspended between a stack of crates marked "MACHINE PARTS. TOILETRIES. SYNTHETIC VEAL" in the center of the car and a sturdy support beam against the wall. Bangles sits cross legged on the floor, feeling the buck and sway of the train beneath his pelvis.

"So, now..." Bangles begins. "I'm just plum 'mbarassed to admit this, but I'm a little lost. Where are we goin', again? And what are we doin'?"

"We-e-ell," Kresh says. "We're on our way to the free city of Zulae, to solicit the assistance of a crazy character named Trigsy Basel."

"He's crazy? How did he lose his mind?"

"Ah ha! No. He's not crazy in the sense of misfiring neural wires or one too many *kex* to the *hex*. He's crazy in the sense of being a most unusual being. His fearlezz capacity for exploration is combined in him with a deep and compassionate understanding of the Serran condition. Real alchemy, *ling*. He izza wandering saint of sorts, a being outside of time. He walks among us, yezz, and yet he stands apart from us, somehow immune to the insistent forward motion of regular Serran life: an unmovable boulder amidst the rushing current."

"So... he's a wise man," Bangles concludes, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Yezz, indeed. They say he is one of the wisest men left on Panarza, old or new. Hezza friend to the Commuters, and a historian, of sorts. Though he prefers to call himself an anthropologist."

"An...thropologist? What's that? A kinda wizard?" Bangles asks.

Kresh chuckles. "When most people call themselves anthropologists, no, they are not wizards. But when Trigsy Basel calls himself a wizard... well... perhaps he is."

"Gosh. He sounds like an important sorta fella. I hope he's willin' to make time for us."

"We think he'll be most willing. For you and I, friend Bangles," Kresh says, grinning broadly and making a deeply unsettling sort of eye contact with the wayward cowboy. "You and I are heroes."

"*Huh. Huh huh huh.* Is that what you are?" squawks a voice from the other side of the train car. Bangles is on his feet immediately, and Kresh has somehow latched onto the ceiling. But their shadowy visitor fires no shots, and bares no handcuffs. She merely laughs. "Relax, 'heroes,' I'm not the law," she jeers, stepping into the light. She's a Naraean woman, middle-aged with greying feathers and a rotund belly bulging under her loose green fatigues. There's an assault rifle slung across her back, a circular green badge stuck to her shoulder, and a scowl smeared across her face. Her eyes are cold and blue, and her lips are pale and almost non-existent. "Artine Lavell," she says. "And you are?"

"This one is Kresh Balta," Kresh says, levitating down from the ceiling and bowing gracefully. "And this here is our sidekick, Bangles."

"Howdy, ma'am," Bangles says, tipping his lawman's hat. "Yer lookin' well today."

"You must be our new travelling companion, the one Miri asked us to help. We are at your service," Kresh says, placing his hands on his hips and thrusting out his chest.

"*Huh. Huh. You're helping me?*" the woman says, levelly. "Perhaps you've been misinformed. Or perhaps you're just gullible and stupid. Miri Vae told me that my job was to keep an eye on the two of you."

"We feel that izza particularly lopsided way of looking at things," Kresh replies, tilting his head as far to the left as his neck will allow.

"*Huh.* You feel, do you? Well, I'm not much for feelings," Artine says. "I'm into cold, hard facts," and she raps her knuckles on one of the big crates, right on top of the word "SYNTHETIC" to prove her point. "And the cold hard fact is that I am both a soldier, and a leader, and not some *kekt* up Commuter, so I am, without question, the one in charge here."

"Oh, speaking of *kek*," Kresh says. "You holding, Artine?"

"No," Artine says, rolling her eyes. "And you will refer to me as Lady Lavell."

"Well, that's quite alright, Lady Lavell. For *we* are holding," Kresh declares, flashing his glider wings.

"Keep your brain melting slime the hell away from me," Artine snaps.

"Fine, fine, *kek* is never mandatory," Kresh says, pulling a *cotcha* cigarette from one of his pouches. "*Cotcha*, blunderbush, wise willow, white cherry rose, pink rose cherry, and a few dollops of hydroxy-chlorophyll megamethane sulfate. Itzza seasonal blend," Kresh announces, shaking the joint and smiling that mile wide smile of his.

"There are no seasons anymore," Artine says. She sits down, and begins disassembling and cleaning her gun.

"There are seasons in our hearts," Kresh retorts, lighting the joint, taking a puff, and passing it to Bangles. "Go easy on that. Blunderbush izza harsh hit, and there's no need to rush. We have almost a day's worth of train ride ahead of us."

Bangles inhales, and promptly coughs up a lung. "Well... *urk*... Kresh... *hugh hugh*... if we got a few hours, there's somethin' I've jus' been dyin' to know," Bangles says, passing the joint back. "What... how... how is it exactly that the world is endin'?"

Artine stops cleaning her rifle, and gives a suspicious eye to the lanky cowboy. But Kresh and Bangles pay her no mind.

"Forgive my ignorance -" Bangles continues.

"Forgiven," Kresh interjects.

"But I thought the world was s'posed to just go on and on forever," Bangles says.

"That does make some kinda sense, we suppose," Kresh sighs. "Well! We're sure you'll

remember everything once this whole amnesia thing pazzes – and *ling*, for your sake, we do hope it pazzes. Although, hmm, for our sake, we gotta say, we really don' mind you like this. Most Serrans don' know nothing about anything, but they act like they're experts on everything. You, Bangles, you're much more honest than all of that.”

“Of course I'm honest! What else could I be?” Bangles says.

“The story goes something like this,” Kresh begins. “Once upon a time – *zag*, it was only fifteen years ago – this one was hardly more than a tadpole. But boy, did our future look bright! There was grazz on the ground, birds in the trees, fish in the sea, and millions more people in Panarza. Now today, we ain' got birds, and we ain' got fish, and we ain' even got trees or seas. But back then? We had a surplus of *everything*! And, there were a lot more cities then. Cities as far as the eye can see. There was even a city that we Zoans had all to ourselves! Ragni, we called it,” Kresh says, and Bangles detects a wistful longing in Kresh's chipper cadence. “Things didn' run smoothly all the time, thazz for damn sure, but by and large, we had ourselves an interconnected society. All over Panarza, Hegos worked with Zoans, and Zoans worked with Xilas, and Xilas worked with Hegos... and Naraeans didn' work with anybody, but Naraeans are a little crazy. No offense, Lady Lavell.”

“*Huh*,” Artine responds, without looking up.

“Anyway,” Kresh continues. “Back then, men and women gave each other respect, nobody took the Davridians all that seriously, people had hope for the future, and everybody more or lezz got along. More or lezz.”

“Davridians...” Bangles says, trying to remember. “Those fellas in white you said nobody likes. What's their deal?”

“Do you believe in God?” Kresh asks him.

“Well, yes, of course,” Bangles says. “We've met.”

That last comment earns him a snicker from Artine's corner of the room.

“Sure, sure, we're Commuters, meeting God is part of the job,” Kresh says, taking Bangles' eccentricity in stride. “Well, thing about Davridians is, they think that only *they* get to meet God. They think that everyone else who talks about God is lying.”

Bangles frowns, and wrinkles his brow. “I can't say I like that. Not even a little bit.”

“Yeah, anybody with their head and their heart in the proper alignment would have to agree with you. No offense, Lady Lavell.”

Artine sighs. “Please stop dragging me into your idiotic conversation.”

“Cities as far as the eye can see,” Bangles murmurs, taking another drag of Kresh's seasonal blend. He leans back, resting his head against the rumbling wall of the train and looking out the skinny window by his head at the desert rolling by. He imagines that empty expanse filling in with cities, the buildings and the bridges and the bustling crowds breaking through the ground and emerging onto the landscape like flowers from buried seeds. Between these cities, he imagines little copses of lush forest, and fields of golden grain swaying in the breeze. He imagines roads alongside the rivers, and train tracks alongside the roads, and trees alongside the train tracks.

“There were a lot more people going to work, at a lot more of these big businezzes all over the place,” Kresh continues. “So, there were a lot more trains. Trains connected everything, all over the place. The whole continent ran on trains, and the trains always ran on time, thanks to the Panarzic Alliance – a.k.a. the unholy marriage of the Spire Clans and the Buffs Survival Corporation. Back then, just like now, it was their partnership that coordinated everything. The Spire Clans looked after the Naraeans, and the Buffs Survival Corp looked after the Hegovarians. The rest of us didn't get looked after so much, but hey, at least we weren' slaves. Or target practice. Things were a little crazy sometimes, there's no denying that, but the citizens of Panarza were flourishing all the same. But then it happened,” Kresh leans forward, and slaps his gloved palms onto the floor with a sharp thwack.

“Wham! Pow! Ba-boom! The Vaysie starship crash landed on Serra.”

“Vaysie?” Bangles asks, his imagination derailed by this unfamiliar term. “Star... ship?” he asks.



“Like... a boat?”

“*Hai!* A boat that travels from star to star!” Artine snaps. “Up there! In the sky! Zephyrs be, where did you find this idiot?”

“Don' mind the Lady.” Kresh says. “This here's pretty sensitive emotional territory. Most of us don' like to talk about it at all if we can help it.”

“Kresh... That strange statue in Miri's house...” Bangles says. “The one of Jaivuzar Keen, your – I mean, *our* – wise man. Is that a Vaysie?”

Kresh narrows his eyes. “Yezz. Jaivuzar Keen wuzza Vaysie. But we're getting ahead of ourselves here. As we were saying, the Vaysie ship crashed into the ground not too far from Ragni... not too far from the town this one used to call home. And it wuzza disaster. The Xilas – the less-than-civilized kind of Xilas – they sleep under the stars, they watch the sky all the time. While the rest of us were blinded by the city lights, these Xilas saw the starship coming, and they were ready.”

“Ready to help?” Bangles asks.

Kresh just looks at him a moment. “You're thinking of the wrong kinda Xila. Back then, sure, there were a lot of Xilas who were doing their best to integrate into the society the rest of us were sharing. But there were some Xilas who refused to change their ways, refused to give up the hunt. As luck would have it, Khotal, the deadliest Xila chieftain in all of Panarza, made it to the crash site with his *tav* before anyone else could. The Vaysies barely had time to get their bearings. Now, they did have some serious tek: weapons the likes of which none of us had ever seen before. But Khotal and his *tav* had the advantage of surprise. And, of course, the advantage of not having just survived a crash landing. It only took a few minutes for the Xilas to kill all but five of the Vaysies. And that's when Mona Zonora arrived,” Kresh says, and his eyes glisten at the mention of the name. “She was the high priestezz of Ragni, and she had the greatest singing voice in the history of song. Her voice was so powerful that she could bowl you over backwards with it. Literally! She could knock you right over! And thazz exactly what she did. Her song stunned Khotal and his warriors, and her royal guard rescued the surviving Vaysies and carried them to safety.”

“Quite the mythology,” Artine mutters. “Why don't you tell us a story with a magical dragon in it next?”

“It's not mythology if it's true,” Kresh says, pointing his index finger at a spot between Bangles' eyes. “Now, we expect you to think for yourself, *ling*. We're not the thought police. But by all that is holy in the sea or the sky, believe us when we tell you that this is no lie. We Zoans know what happened that day better than anyone. Because we were there.”

“Thought you were only a tadpole at the time,” Artine snaps.

“Thought you didn' want to get dragged into this conversation,” Kresh snaps back. “Anyway, only five of the Vaysies survived,” he says, demonstrating the number with the fingers of his hand. “Jaivuzar Keen, he was the son of the captain of the ship. Breezy Mandraic was the name of the little girl that made it, and she only made it because of their chief of security, who also made it. There were two others who survived, both of them brilliant engineers. Mona Zonora took them back to Ragni, and they were so, so grateful for the help that we gave them. '*Kai*', they said to us, with tears in their eyes. '*Kai, kai, kai*' over and over again. It izza holy word to them. And now, it izza holy word for us too. But it wasn' long before word of our otherworldly guests had gotten around... and the Spire Clans came to Ragni, to pay their respects. Well, to be exact, the Well had come to Ragni, at the behest of the Spire Clans. Before you ask, the Well are a secret network of secret spies.”

“If they're all a secret, then how do ya know about 'em?” Bangles inquires.

“They want us to know,” Kresh says, narrowing his eyes conspiratorially. “It gives them pleasure to know that they are making us paranoid. But we are too good for that. We are Zoan, we have strong intuitions,” Kresh says, pointing to his belly. “Here. Thizzizz where the intuitions are. We know you're not a spy, Bangles. You're too convenient to be a spy. And you, Lady Lavell. We know you're not a spy. You're too *inconvenient*.”

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Artine counters.

"So when the Well came to Ragni, we Zoans knew they were spies. But we also knew who sent them, and we knew they had the upper hand. It killed us to do it, but we didn't have much choice. We let them take our Vaysie guests," Kresh says, a twinge of regret in his voice. "Breezy, the little girl, they hid her somewhere. Wanted her for leverage, probably. Jaivuzar and the others, they were taken in for questioning. Nobody knows what information got squeezed out of them. All we know is that it wasn't enough. Or maybe, the Spire Clans juzz couldn't understand what they were hearing. The comforts of rule do not make for an enlightened mind. They introduced the Vaysies to Dosla Dae, Serra's greatest engineer, and then set them up in a workshop together. The Spire Clans wanted Vaysie tek, and they wanted it to work for them. But in the end, they weren't happy with what they got. Which izza true shame, because what they got was Champagne Charlie: the Southwest Chariot, the finest train in the history of trains. It was not the job the Spire Clans had asked them to do. But it wuzza damn fine job all the same. Dosla Dae died under mysterious circumstances not long after unveiling the Chariot, and Jaivuzar and the other Vaysies were cut loose. The Vaysies made their way back to Ragni, back to the hospitality of the Zoan people. They were amphibians, the Vaysies. Amphibians, just like us. They felt a kinship. They felt safe with us. They felt they could... They felt they could trust us..." Kresh pauses again, becoming visibly choked up. "We're going to finish this story with tears in our eyes. And thazza good thing. This story is incomplete without tears."

Bangles, awaiting the conclusion of the story with bated breath, only nods.

"The Well work for the Spire Clans," Kresh continues. "But they also work for Duke Buffs and the Buffs Survival Corporation, the biggest and most powerful Hegovarian conglomerate in the history of the world. The Well let the Buffs Survival people know what the Spire Clans were up to, and the Buffs people got real pized off. Pized off, cuz they got cut out of whatever intergalactic tek was exchanged between the Spire Clans and the Vaysies. Duke Buffs couldn't lash out at the Spire Clans, because the Spire Clans were too powerful. The Vaysies, on the other hand, were fucking powerlezz. And so were the Zoans of Ragni."

"Oh no..." Bangles mutters, because he remembers the mural beneath the water in the Reservoir, and he knows exactly how this story ends.

"Oh yes," Artine assures him. "The city of Ragni was obliterated. That part of the story is real, though no one really knows who did it and why."

"What happened next?" Bangles asks. "Was there..."

"Was there justice? Is that what you're trying to ask?" Artine demands.

"I jus'... I mean... I don't rightly know how justice even gets a say, when it comes to somethin' like this," Bangles replies.

"*Huh*. Good. A little healthy cynicism. I was starting to get worried too much *kek* had made you all starry-eyed," Artine clucks.

"There's no such thing," Kresh says, wiping away a tear.

"As what? Too much *kek*?" Artine sneers.

"No such thing as 'healthy cynicism'," Kresh replies. "There's always such a thing as too much *kek*. The right amount of *kek* izza moving target. Every dose is dependent on the situation. All Commuters know that."

"Does he?" Artine says, cocking her head in Bangles' direction.

But Kresh ignores her. "You want to know what happened next. The Spire Clans decided to try out some of their brand new tek, torn right out of the hands of the Vaysies. And, of course, they didn't have a god damn clue what they were doing."

"What happened?" Bangles asks.

"They destroyed the water," Kresh says. "All. The water."

"...Really?" Bangles asks, hoping against hope that Kresh is just pulling his leg.

"Really," Kresh confirms. "Take a look outside," he says, gesturing to the window. "You won't

find any water in a natural environment, anywhere on this planet. Whatever Vaysie tek the Spire Clans were testing out, it misfired – or maybe it worked exactly as it was supposed to – and it sucked all the water right out of the air. It ate away at the lakes and the rivers and even the oceans, until all of them were gone. All the animals that lived in the water died immediately. The rest of the animals died soon after. The plants withered away, leavin' these dried up husks everywhere. And billions of people died. Literally! Billions!”

“Billions? I didn't even know there was a billion people,” Bangles says, his face pale with shock.

“Well, there aren't now,” Artine says flatly. “In the year following the Great Evaporation, about five billion people died. The rest, well... he'll get to that.”

“These dried up plants hanging around everywhere, they were just inviting disaster,” Kresh continues. “And soon enough, disaster came calling. Some farmer's field out by Coxex caught fire during a Xila raid – Khotal and his *tav*, at it again. The fire spread over the entire continent, burning up all the plants and filling the air with ash. After a few years of cold and darknezz, the ash in the air settled into that dust out there, covering everything.”

“So, all that, out there, is the ghosts of the plants?” Bangles asks, pointing out the window.

“Yezz... that is one particularly metaphorical way of putting it,” Kresh says.

“Shucks. Just.... shucks. I'm really overwhelmed right now, Kresh! This story is... it's just... shucks!” Bangles sputters. “I mean... how do I know you ain't pullin' my leg?”

“He is and he isn't, you idiot,” Artine groans. “Aliens? There are no aliens. It's a story the Commuters tell to rally people to their cause. Don't listen to the god damn Commuters. Look around! The truth is out there, it's just in pieces. Pick up the pieces, and put it together yourself. Don't just listen to *his* story. Some of what he's saying is true, and some of it's just a bunch of Zoan mythology. Buzzers love a good story. They love any story where they're the underdog and someone else is the villain.”

“Such strong words from such soft feathers,” Kresh counters, an undertone of menace in his voice.

“Can it, egg-layer!” Artine snaps, jumping to her feet and pointing her accusatory finger at Kresh. “You could've beaten them, you know. You could've beaten the Spire Clans. You had a fighting chance, but you squishy spineless slugs chose surrender.”

“Yes, we could have been brave... and dead. We chose to survive, even if our only option was to survive as slaves,” Kresh says, his genial warmth cooling rapidly. “Tell us, Lady Lavell. Are *you* fighting the Spire Clans?”

“Yes!” Artine shouts, puffing herself up. “I am fighting those bastards every day of my life. I will fight them until I die. I will never surrender to the Spire Clans! They are monsters! And there is nothing monsters like more than willing enablers.”

“Willing... enablers...,” Kresh says, turning the words over in his mouth. “We forgive you, Lady Lavell. We forgive you for misunderstanding the ways of the world. Anger izza locked door. You want to get through that door, and get on with your life, but you can not. The only key to that locked door... is sadnezz. The sadnezz we know you feel.”

For a moment, Artine appears to deflate before their very eyes. “You don't know what I feel,” she says at last, sitting back down and returning to the cleaning and maintenance of her firearm.

In the tense silence that follows their exchange, Bangles turns his attentions inward, towards the shiftings and loosening of his own interior world. He notices a certain rumbling in his intestines, and follows it as it crawls up his spine and swoons gently over his head and extremities. When he closes his eyes, he feels as though the hard perimeter of his body is evaporating into a fine mist: still roughly approximating the shape that is Bangles, but without the usual conviction. He searches for words, something to break the awkward silence hanging in the air of that claustrophobic little train car, but he can think of nothing to say. His mind is peacefully blank. The river of his thoughts has found its ocean. And the stiff metal floor beneath him is beginning to feel more inviting than it has any right to be.

"Kresh," he says. "I may have mentioned that I'm not one for sleep..."

"You have," Kresh says, his ebullient grin returning.

"But I'm feelin' *somethin'* comin' on. Maybe not sleep itself, but a cousin. Or a neighbor. Would it be alright if I were to lie down and shut my eyes a spell?" Bangles asks, but he has already assumed the position. It feels good to be horizontal, after so many eons of being vertical.

"Stage two of our seasonal blend," Kresh informs the drowsy cowboy. Reaching into one of his many pockets, Kresh pulls out a flattened little purple tube, and unrolls it into a flattened little purple square. He unscrews a cap on the corner of the square, and with a hiss, the square fills itself with air. Kresh screws that cap back on, and tosses the air pillow to a grateful Bangles, before levitating himself up and snuggling himself down into his own hammock. "A shame we could not end our little tale on a high note," Kresh says from inside his swaying cocoon. "Though we're not entirely sure how one goes about pulling a happy ending from a story about the End of the World. Lady Lavell, while we heroes get our hero sleep, would you mind taking the first watch? And the second? And the third?"

"*Huh*," Artine clucks. "Sleep all you want. I'm looking forward to the absence of the sound of your voice."

Down on the floor, Bangles is already somewhere else, absent and at rest and yet somehow still conscious. He is aware of his breathing, and of the rise and fall of his chest, and of the bucking and the bouncing of the boxcar he's riding in. He is aware of the soft little sound at the point of friction between the rag in Artine's hand and the barrel of the gun she is cleaning. He is aware of the calming susurrations of Kresh's gentle snores. And he is also aware of the tether that binds his mind to his body, a tether that seems a bit more slack than usual at the moment.

"It seems my mind has a body all its own," Bangles says aloud. But Kresh and Artine do not hear him, because the mouth with which Bangles is speaking is not a mouth of tooth and tongue, but a mouth of steam that speaks with something more subtle than sound. "If my body has a body," he continues. "And my mind has a body... well then how many bodies do I really have?"

However many there are, his bodies appear to be diverging at the moment. At least one of those bodies stays down on the floor. And at least one of those bodies floats up to the ceiling. Bangles passes through that ceiling, rising up and out of the boxcar and into the sky above the rolling train. From this vantage point, he casts his ethereal eyes across the desert landscape. Beneath him, shadows are rising from the dark and barren soil, springing from the ground like weeds and growing rapidly. They grow tall, like trees, but they lack any of the familiar architecture of a tree. They do not have a firm trunk at their center, nor do they possess expansive arms of fractal branches. Instead, they flail and flop about amorphously, their inky black tentacles clutching at the air like the arms of an octopus. They are a forest of grasping, a forest of need, and Bangles is glad that they cannot grasp him. To the northeast, the land before the train begins to slope upwards, rising up to what had once been the coast of Old Panarza. A warm and friendly glow emanates from a place many miles ahead of them, and in this spot arises a fortress of dark knotted wood, bedecked with inviting lanterns of red and orange and yellow. But to the west... the sky darkens, turning from pink to blood red and becoming thick with smoke, a smoke that storms and billows until finally taking on the shape of a tall statuesque woman. The woman's body is jet black and full of stars, and she appears almost two-dimensional, as though someone has taken a pair of scissors and cut her shape out of the very fabric of reality. The apparition sees him and laughs: a chilling sound, a rustling choir of clicking mandibles like the feasting of a million voracious insects.

"What are you?" Bangles demands.

"What am I?" the apparition responds. "What do you see?"

"I don't know," Bangles confesses. "I look at you and I feel... hunger. Great, great hunger. I see a space that cries out to be filled, a space that swallows everythin' that tries to fill it." And it's true. The shadow this woman casts consumes miles and miles of land: the desert, the mountains, the train tracks, the train. She takes everything into her void and leaves nothing behind.

The apparition laughs again, and parts the darkness before them. As she peels back the

obscuring shadow, Bangles sees Xilas and Hegovarians, hundreds of them, thousands of them, meeting in battle on an open plain. They slash each other with their claws, they gore each other with their horns. He seems women and children slaughtered without mercy, and dead bodies strewn across the blood red desert beneath a burning orange sky. Dust covers all of them, and cold concrete blocks are piled on top of that dust. Higher they pile, blocks upon blocks upon blocks until they have become buildings in the shape of blocks: prisons. Now he sees Serrans of all races shackled with chains and marched into these buildings, where they are thrust into jail cells. The doors slam shut, hundreds and hundreds of them, and the jail becomes a fractal fortress, expanding outwards for miles and miles like some ruthless concrete mycellium.

“Safe,” the apparition declares, and again it laughs. “Safe from war. Safe from pain. Safe from loss. Because there is nothing left to lose.”

And then she is gone, her shadow withdrawn. And Bangles is alone in the desert again, far from the rumbling of the train and far from any living beings, save the cactus to which he has been chained. “Shucks,” he says. “Here again...” Because really, it was all a dream. The cactus had never fallen. He'd never seen the Train, never gone on a magical journey, never tasted that water, never met his new friends. He's been here the whole time, hanging upside down, sustaining himself endlessly on and on and on and on and on and on and on. The empty desert remains unchanging above him, and the sky below him changes so quickly and so meaninglessly that it seems almost like the rippling of water. His heart is gripped with sadness and longing. He misses them already, the strange new friends he had made, but he cannot remember them, cannot remember the architecture of their faces, or the syllables of their names. He longs, and the longing reaches from him like an arm, grasping at the air but unable to hold on to anything or anyone. Because there is nothing and no one there but him.

And so he gives up. He releases his empty grasp, and he lets the sadness wash over him like rain. But there is no rain either. His eyes are dry. And there is nothing.

Except her. She is the Void, calling the world into existence around her and then cloaking herself in it, wearing it like a gown and defining her contours within it. She approaches him, though her legs – if legs they be – do not move. It is the world that moves around her, and in this way, she and Bangles approach each other.

“Who do you think you are? Walkin' 'round like you own this place,” Bangles says. “You ain't the Queen of the Desert.”

She speaks, and the sound is the sizzling of worms beneath an oppressive sun, dying atop the cracked and hardened clay. “The Desert has no Queen,” she says.

“Who are you? And what are you doin' here?” he asks.

“Brave of you to ask,” she says, laughing. And her laughter is the gurgling of a slit throat, convulsive and thick. “Brave... and presumptuous.”

“Well? Are ya gonna answer my question?” he asks, eons ago exhausted by the vanity of deities.

“I am the beginning and the end. I entered this universe long before you ever did, and soon I will tear it all away from you,” she says.

“Why?” he asks. “What did I do to deserve that sorta treatment?”

“Nothing, fool,” the Void retorts. “This is not about you.”

“If it's not about me, then why are you here, talkin' to me? This is my place, ain't it? This is my cactus,” he says, tugging his hands a little against the nails that hold him in place.

“All places are my place. For wherever I am not, there I am,” she says, drawing his world closer to her so that she may stroke his face with her long vacant hand. Her touch is colder than ice, so cold it burns. She massages away the muscles of his cheek with the fingers of her nothingness, peeling back his flesh and exposing his cheekbone, and even that hard and calcified structure wastes away at her touch. It is all Bangles can do to regenerate himself beneath the horrible destructive power of her fingertips. “Surrender to me,” she says. “Surrender.”

With a start, Bangles' body – his most material of bodies – awakens. He is back in the traincar,

sitting up on the floor. Artine is giving him a funny look. And Kresh is snoring softly in his hammock.

“Boy, it sure is good to be back here,” Bangles says, heartfelt.

“*Hoo?*” Artine says, confused. “Must've been some dream, to be worse than this.”

Bangles wants to protest, but he is too weary to protest, and so he just lies back down. “How can you not see?” he asks, but he asks with the mouth of his mind, so that she cannot hear. “How can you not see how beautiful this world is?”

Mr. Seth Carraba examines his dapper doppelganger in the mirror. Maintaining an impeccable appearance is a vital part of his role as the Buffs Survival Corporation's Secretary of Public Relations. So it is only fitting that the mirror in which he examines his attire and countenance is large and sparkingly immaculate. If Seth were to allow his attentions to wander from his own appearance for a moment, perhaps he might notice the way this mirror reflects the floor-to-ceiling window at his back. And then, perhaps, he might notice the view beyond the glass. From up here in the green room, on the fifteenth story of Buffs Pyramid, the window overlooks the massive sprawl of Astralo, the Last Great City in the World. And Buffs Pyramid is the center of it. The Pyramid is a radical structure like no other: a luxurious golden fortress three hundred stories tall and a mile and a half wide. The Pyramid was built around the broad slopes of a comatose volcano, annexing the sleeping giant and enveloping it beneath layers upon layers of offices, typing pools, food courts, department stores, firing ranges, athletic facilities, manufacturing plants, and hundreds of stairwells, thousands of elevators, five million square feet of soft luxurious carpet, and seven million square feet of indoor parking. It is the largest – and without question, the best – structure in all the world. From this central point of the Pyramid, the rest of the city radiates outward like the five arms of a starfish. Two of those arms reach eastward to pinch the inland mountain ranges. These districts consist largely of manufacturing plants and synthetic agriculture laboratories. The three arms spreading westward sprawl to the deep sands of the former coastline. Within these arms are peaceful suburban grids, quaint and orderly and stratified by income, just as the Good Davride intended. The centermost of those three arms contains Steer's Neck, the neighborhood in which Seth lives, perhaps the wealthiest residential neighborhood in all of Astralo. But Seth is not thinking of his home and his family right now, nor is he thinking of the vast city about him. Seth is not looking out the window at all. In fact, long ago, he'd hung an enormous Astralan flag across the window, just to prevent such a distraction. The flag is red, like blood or a woman's lipstick, and in the center of it rests a white star atop the brow of a proud golden bull.

The view obscured by the flag is spectacular, but at the moment, Seth is much more concerned with the part of his thinning blond hair and the knot of his slender golden necktie and the equilibrium of the lapels of his maroon sport coat. His personal assistant Misky (a surly brunette with suspicious green eyes and a matron's thick and columnar torso) applies another dusting of foundation on top of the dusting of foundation already on his face, then dabs a bit of rouge on his cheeks and begins to polish his horns. Seth loathes make-up. He's a military man: retired now but formerly of the Penetrators, the Buffs Survival Corporation's private army. Make-up is much too feminine for a veteran like Seth, but it enables him to appear the picture of health without actually having to subject himself to some kind of daily exercise routine. One must also account for the mysterious intricacies of translation between real life and screen, mediated by the video camera. Public relations is a serious business, and there is no margin for error. So, Seth tolerates the application of these cosmetics, but invariably, he demands that Misky thoroughly scrub all trace of the foundation from his face before he goes home for dinner each night. Seth cannot afford to present a chink in his paternal armor to either his wife or his son. His domestic situation is tenuous enough as it is.

At last appropriately presentable, Seth wheels his chair off to the side and opens the top drawer in the cabinet beneath the mirror and the cosmetic table. The belly of the drawer is full to the brim with pre-packaged hypodermic needles, each of them inscribed with the word "Glory" in golden leaf. Seth

removes one from the drawer, and peels away the packaging. It's a customized cocktail of B vitamins and short-acting amphetamines, perfectly calibrated to launch him into a state of radiant enthusiasm for precisely the duration of the filming. This medicine is distributed throughout the city of Astralo by the Buffs Survival Corporation, for the purpose of ensuring maximum performance from all Buffs Survival employees, particularly in moments of great importance. It comes in a single-use syringe for intramuscular administration. Once used, the syringe is placed in a bin and returned to the factory, where it is cleaned, repaired, and recycled for redistribution. After all, every healthy male in Astralo is expected to take his vitamins on a regular basis.

Seth unrolls his sleeve, and pushes the little needle into a muscle belly on the back of his forearm. It's nothing more than a pinprick. The red light above the green room door flashes on with a buzzing sound, and Mr. Seth Carraba – smiling the pharmaceutically jovial smile of a man wholeheartedly committed to his role – bounds out of his chair, through the door, down the hallway, and onto the stage.

A spotlight clanks on, and Seth bursts through the heavy black curtains that ring the stage and into the solar embrace of that spotlight's beam. In the bustling shadows beyond the spotlight, the studio audience goes wild with applause, and Seth urges them on, prancing around the stage and waving his hands in the air.

“He-e-ello, A-a-a-astralo!” he bellows. “How are *you* doing? And how are *you* doing? And *you*? What about *you*? Don't hide that smile!” he shouts in a rich baritone, dropping to one knee and personally addressing certain members of the studio audience. “Heavens high and Johnny above, it sure is mighty fine to be here today. Here in Astralo, the Greatest City... in All the World,” Seth says, pausing for applause. “The Greatest City in All the World!” he repeats. “And it's our city. We are the sons and daughters of Johnny Davride. We are the chosen ones. We are Astralo. Can you feel him? Can you feel his love, pouring down from the heavens? I know I can. Now, feel that love!” Seth demands, shaking his fist vigorously over the crowd. “Feel it! Feel the love of our Johnny!” he shouts, slamming his fist against his chest over and over again. And feel it, they do. They feel it in the stomping of their boots. They feel it in the gnashing of their teeth. They feel it in the cracking of their horns. They are delirious with love, free of the past and the future. Seth bounces to the sigil painted in the center of the blood red stage: a sparkling white star on a golden steer's brow. Seth throws his head back, and lets out a resounding exultation. “Aaaa-aaaaah! It really is beautiful to be here. Gentlemen, ladies, my name is Seth Carraba. And this is *your*... Daily Brief.”

A light turns on at stage left, illuminating a Buffs Survival mahogany desk with a glistening finish. Seth bounds over the desk and lands with practiced grace in the seat of his state-of-the-art Buffs Survival hydraulic office chair. He whirls to face the camera, grins broadly, and winks.

“Tell me, tell me.... do you feel safe in Astralo? Well, I sure do!” Seth declares without waiting for an answer, slapping his palms loudly against the hard wood of the desk. “The impenetrable wall that protects our perfect civilization continues to hold strong. Every day! We improve this wall! Every day! We make it stronger! Because we Hegovarians are the finest engineers in all the world! And we Astralans are the finest Hegovarians in all the world! The best... of the best! What we build, stays built! We built that wall out there! And that wall isn't going anywhere! We? Are safe! It's just too bad I can't say the same for our neighbors in the city of Altama. Or should I say... the former city of Altama!” He slaps his hands onto his cheeks, as the crowd taunts and jeers for the departed. “Now, you're smart people. I don't need to tell you what happened. Because you already know what happened. But I'm just gonna go right ahead and say it anyway. It was those dirty... oh, Johnny forgive me, it was those dirty God *damn* mudbellies!”

At the mention of the Xilas, the crowd boos furiously.

“I know, I know! Gentlemen! Ladies! This is not a surprise! This is not a surprise! Now, I know everybody here in this divine city is a true believer of the Hierarchy. None of you need proof of the



Natural Order. But if anyone ever wanted proof that the word of the Duke was the word of Johnny, if anyone ever wanted proof that the word of Johnny is the word of God, well... just take a good look at what comes to those who don't believe! Those folks in Altama thought they were too good for Astralo. They thought they were too good for Duke Buffs. They thought they were too good for Johnny Davride. And look what happened," Seth says, shaking his head in disgust one minute, and mugging for the camera the next. "May Johnny take mercy on their stubborn little souls. But they're gone now, so why should we bother praying for them? No, do not think of the dead. Think of the living! Think of all those stupid, stupid people who stumble their way through life without even a drop of Johnny's love! Pray for *them*! Send your prayers to God, send your prayers to Johnny, and ask: "Please, your Hugeness! Give these wretches another chance to do the right thing! Help the foolish to learn! Their! Place!" Seth roars.

The crowd takes up the chant. "Learn their place! Learn their place!" they scream, repeating the message in harsh staccato over and over and over.

Bringing the first of his right hand into the palm of his left with an audible *smack*, Seth piously bows his head for a moment of silent prayer. He waits a beat, that perks his head up and stares directly into the camera. "Well, you know what, friends? I've got some good news for you. The people are waking up. The people are stepping into the light. Right this very minute, a whole trainload of chosen ones is headed right to our door! They're coming from Spirena! They're coming from Zulae! They're giving up on sin, and they are choosing the Natural Order. They are choosing Astralo. Now, I know some of you out there might be worried. Yes, worried! New neighbors? Gosh, anything can happen when new neighbors move in! Well, don't you worry. Astralo accepts only the best. Each and every one of your new neighbors possesses the ideal Hegovarian genetics essential for civilized behavior, and each and every one of them has accepted Johnny his Hugeness into their hearts, their minds, and their souls!" The crowd cheers, and Seth nods vigorously. "I know! I know! They're getting a second chance! They're getting a second chance! So, please! On behalf of the Duke himself, I'm telling you: give them that chance! Oh, I know, I know. They're backwards people from border towns. They've been living without law and order. They've been living without Johnny. And they are going to make mistakes. But hey... at least they're not mudbellies," he jokes, and the crowd snickers and guffaws. "Still, they will have to learn what it takes to be an Astralan. Be patient with them! They don't know any better. But they *will* learn! And I've got the proof. Send her in, fellas!"

The spotlight swings to stage right, and a nervous Hegovarian housewife with bouncy hair and an immaculate white apron steps hesitantly through the curtain and onto the stage. She's pretty, but not too pretty, a little heavysset, but not too heavy. The crowd goes wild, and the housewife blushes, hiding her embarrassed smile with both hands.

"Gentlemen... Ladies... this... is Hesha. Come on, Hesha! Come on down!" Seth instructs her, gesturing magnanimously to the chair in front of his desk. Timidly, Hesha sits down across from him, her hands folded in her lap. "Hesha, my dear, tell me: where are you from?"

"I'm from Eqi. Or, I was," she says in a soft little voice.

"Anyone here from Eqi?" Seth asks the crowd, and a couple of audience members shout in affirmation. "How long have you been here, Hesha?"

"Five years..."

"And how has it been for you, getting used to the Greatest! City! In All the World!" Seth shouts, throwing his hands up in the air for the roaring crowd. "But, seriously. Share your world with us, Hesha."

"My world... my world's good. It's been good. I've never felt so... safe!"

"Did you hear that everybody? She feels... S-a-a-a-afe!" Seth bellows, throwing his head back and waving his horns in the air. The crowd goes wild. "Hesha, darling, if there's one thing you could tell these newcomers in our beautiful city, what would that one thing be?"

"Accept the love of Johnny Davride into your hearts," she says, placing her hand over her

bosom. As the crowd applauds, she continues: "Johnny Davride is the one true Lord of all beings, because he is the hugest of all beings. That is the Natural Order. That is the Hierarchy. Johnn Davride has shown me the error of my ways. I was lost, and now I am found. I used to be alone, and my heart was full of fear every day and every night. But now, I have such good neighbors. And I have rules to follow, and I always know where to go or what to do, and now I'm not afraid any more! I've never been happier!"

"You heard her, folks! She knows what to do! She knows what to do!" Seth declares, tapping his index finger against his temple. The crowd screams in agreement. They also know what to do. "Alright, Hesha, you've been great. Take a little Johnny with you!" Seth insists, leaning across the desk to shake her hand and give her a fistful of Buffs Survival coupons and gift certificates. Then the camera turns away from her, and she vanishes from Seth's universe.

"Now when I think Xilas, do you know what I think?" Seth asks, moving seamlessly into his next segment. "I think... trouble!"

A storm of grumbles and boos sweeps across the audience.

"I know! I know!" Seth says, throwing his hands up in the air. "Wouldn't it be great if we could just... kill all the mudbellies?"

The crowd erupts in a frenzy of agreement.

"I know," Seth says. "But here's the thing... The mudbellies... can be useful. They can be very useful. But *only*... when they know! Their! Place!"

Again, the crowd takes up the chant. "Know your place! Know your place! Know your place!"

"And a Xila's place... is in service," Seth declares. "A Xila's place is on his knees! This is why we de-claw them! If you let those mudbellies get up onto their hind legs, they will forget their place! And if you let them grow their claws out, well... don't you come crying to me when they cut out your baby boy's eyes! Don't you come crying to me! Know your place! Know your place! Am I right?"

And the crowd lets him know just how right he is.

"Well, I've got some news for you, friends. A terrorist plot... a Xila terrorist plot..." Seth glowers, furrowing his brow and hanging his horns down low for dramatic effect. "... has been foiled!"

And the crowd, hanging onto his every word, cheers wildly for the news of this victory.

"They tried!" Seth declares. "Oh believe me, those heathen fools tried. But they have failed! Guess what those arrogant little monsters tried to do. Just guess! They tried to get their dirty claws on a Buffs Survival firearms manufacturing plant! Can you imagine what those *animals* could've done with all those guns? Can you? Well... you don't have to! Because Johnny Davride is looking out for you! Duke Buffs, *our* Duke Buffs, the only man in the world who can truly serve the will of Johnny, our Duke has foiled this Xila terrorist plot! So don't you worry, friends. Don't you *ever* worry. Not while you live in the Greatest City in All the World. Thanks to the guiding hand of Duke Buffs, no mudbelly will *ever* harm this city. Never forget this, my friends: left to its own devices, the Xila mind stumbles helplessly into jealousy and laziness. Violence is their nature. Fury is their default setting. Without the discipline that only we can give them, the mudbellies will not hesitate to wreak havoc upon their betters! They will not hesitate to force themselves on *our* young women! They steal for the sake of stealing! They conquer for the sake of conquering! They kill for the sake of killing! They have no shame!"

The crowd screams and boos as the faces of two Xila men appear on a screen behind Seth. The Xilas appear disheveled and badly beaten, and their monstrous countenances are terrifying. They are scowling, their entire faces contorted into predatory feline snarls.

"Look at them!" Seth demands. "Look at those heartless eyes! Look at that filthy hair! They are the very definition of savage! Well, I promise you this, my friends. Those bastards are going to get exactly what they deserve. Death... by the Horn!"

The crowd explodes. Many of the audience members jump from their seats, shaking their fists in the air and screaming. A few of the men lock horns, punching each other in the chest and shoulders

in a display of testosterone comraderie. "Death by horn!" they chant. "Death by horn!"

"Death! By! Horn!" Seth repeats. "Death by horn. The execution will be carried out in public this Sunday, following your neighborhood church service. I'll see you there!" Seth assures them, waving and smiling broadly. "Now, some of you have Xilas in your home. I certainly do."

Some of the crowd boo, but Seth waves them down with his hands.

"Remember! Remember, my friends! Our role as the superior race is to be merciful! His Hugeness placed these wretched beings in our care for a reason! The closest thing to salvation a Xila soul can ever experience is the life of service only we can offer them. It is a gift! It is the greatest gift we can give them. But it is a sacrifice, too. And our Johnny rewards those who sacrifice themselves to share his divine love with the less fortunate. So, for those of you with mudbellies at home, here is the gift you can give them. When you go to the Horn this Sunday, bring your Xilas with you! Make them watch! Show them what happens to those who stray from the path! Show them what happens to those who forget their place in this world! Give them the gift... of knowledge!" Seth commands, smiling with every single one of his teeth. "And please! Do not hesitate to show your support for the Buffs Survival Corporation by buying yourself a brand new KS-21 Universal Assault Rifle, now with laser sight and adjustable stock! This is the only – I repeat, the only – weapon you will need to survive the Invasion when it comes."

The image of the beaten Xila faces on the screen goes dim, replaced by an picture of the dark and glistening KS-21 in all its martial glory. The crowd oohs and aahs.

"Brought to you by the same people who brought you Buffs brand fleece jackets! Keeping you warm on cold days!" Seth declares, and the image of the KS-21 shrinks down to make room for the image of the jacket (sleek yet soft). "And Buffs brand down comforters! Keeping you warm on cold nights!" Seth adds, as an image of an immaculately made bed filling the center of a well-appointed bedroom joins the other two advertisements on the screen.

And now, it is time for the last segment. Seth springs from behind his desk to pace around the front of the stage.

"Spirena," he says, enunciating the word slowly and letting each syllable float over the audience. "What does that word make you think of?"

"Heathens!" somebody shouts.

"Yes, heathens, lots of those in Spirena," Seth agrees.

"Decadence!" someone else yells.

"Decadence! Ooh! Big word! Big Spirena kinda word, am I right?" Seth teases, and the crowd laughs with him.

"Weakness!" somebody screeches.

Seth nods vigorously. "Yes! Yes! All of these things, but weakness especially. Well. This is not going to come as much of a surprise to you righteous Astralans, but Spirena... has been having a little problem!" he says, mockingly.

The crowd laughs and boos.

"I know. I know. Surprise, surprise, am I right? So... they've been having a little problem... with a Commuter infestation!"

The crowd groans.

"That's right my virtuous friends! A Commuter infestation! Thousands and thousands of lazy, useless, no-good Commuters! Stuffing their faces with *kek* and melting their brains to that noise they call music. And what do the Spire Clans do? They don't chase them away. They don't lock them up. They hand those good-for-nothing Commuters a paycheck. That's right, the Spire Clans are *employing* them! Typical Spirena," he groans, as the crowd rumbles and boos. "And now, there are more Commuters than ever! I mean, what did they think was going to happen? The crazy little bastards are spreading like a plague! And it's not just those egg-laying buzzers anymore! Now it's everybody! Even Hegovarians! Can you imagine anything more pathetic than a Hegovarian who believes in Jaivuzar

Keen?”

A ripple of sneering laughter cuts through the crowd.

“How stupid do you have to be?” Seth snorts. “How stupid do you have to be? What kind of moron turns away from the loving Hugeness of Johnny Davride? What kind of moron trades everlasting paradise for sex, drugs, and dance music? And those downy-headed Spire Clans! To hand something as valuable as money to a mob of *kek*-addled heathens who don't know their rears from a hole in the ground? Unbelievable. No wonder the economy of Spirena is falling to pieces.”

On the screen behind the desk, a nighttime view of Spirena appears, trash fires and all. More images follow, each of them zooming in closer and closer on the trash fires, the shiftless refugees, and the dilapidated warehouses in which they are squatting.

And the crowd are on their feet again, yelling, screaming, jumping up and down.

“I know! I know!” Seth yells. “Look at all that poverty! You can practically smell the diseases! Who the heck do you think you are, Spirena?” Seth asks, cocking an ear in anticipation of an answer that never comes. “Well, I promise you! I promise you! Terrible things will happen to Spirena! These slums will spread, and they will eat that city alive! Those *kekt*-up Commuters will be running wild in no time, foaming at the mouth and committing all kinds of heinous crimes! Rape! Burglary! Cannibalism! There is no limit! There is just no limit! One depravity begets another, and that's a fact. This is why we have laws in our society. This is why we follow the sacred word of Johnny Davride. We must never entertain that kind of filth in Astralo. Never! We must never tolerate the low and vile act of Commuting! Never! We must hold ourselves to the highest moral standard. Respect authority. Know! Your! Place! And remember! If you see suspicious clothing! If you hear suspicious music! Report it immediately to the Bureau of Moral Security. Do your part for Astralo. Our beautiful city exists *for* you... and *because* of you. But more importantly, Astralo exists... because of His Hugeness, Duke Buffs!”

One of the curtains behind Seth lifts up to reveal a portrait of the mighty Duke Buffs: his massive horns glistening with gold, his beefy fist clenched over his heart, a look of regal piety on his broad and handsome face. The crowd falls silent, and everyone strikes their right fist to their left palm, as Seth leads them in prayer.

“May His Hugeness Johnny Davride smile on you for your good works done in his name. May he reward you for your obedience. May he alleviate your suffering, and if he does not, may you endure his tests. For we are the chosen few. We have the biggest brains, the biggest hearts, the biggest horns. We are the biggest city in all the world, and so we are the best. We are the biggest people in all the world, and so we are the best. Ye-haw.”

“Ye-haw,” echoes the crowd.

The lights go dark. The amphetamine high fades away. And Seth's stomach lurches, bringing the taste of bile to the back of his throat.

## 15

The fresh scar on Rozz's back begins above the crest of her left hip and runs diagonally to the bottom of her scapula. It was not a deep enough cut to require stitches, only gauze, bandages and time. Her body is sore all over, and bruised in places she never expected to find bruises. When she rolls out of her hospital bed to trudge to the bathroom, the stiffness of her body surprises her. Her shoulders and hips do not want to move separately from each other, denying Rozz her usual grace and forcing her to hobble like an old woman on her journey to the toilet. Her doctor says this is temporary, and that she'll be back to her old self in a matter of weeks. But his words means nothing to her. The trauma to Rozz's body is superficial. The trauma to her heart is not.

Back from the bathroom, she lowers herself carefully into the hospital bed. The doctors have prescribed her *cotcha* extract for the pain, and the tinctures she's taking keep her floating at the border between waking and sleep. She's drowsy enough – and still enough in shock – that she's not entirely aware of the delivery of the flowers. Footsteps come and footsteps go, but they are of no consequence to her until she opens her eyes. They sit in a transparent vase on the table by her bed: white, yellow, pink, and red. The red rose at the center of the bouquet looms towards her, the crimson mouth of the blossom yawning wider and wider. She screams, and when the nurse comes in to check on her, she finds Rozz wrapped into a ball with the blankets pulled over her head. Rozz's body is attempting to both sob and hyperventilate simultaneously, and the end result looks a little bit like a seizure. Once the nurse ascertains that Rozz is not in any immediate medical danger, she tries to find out what's wrong. But with Rozz's consciousness drifting back and forth between a world of numbness and a world of pain, the struggle of attempting to string words together into a coherent sentence is more than the poor girl can manage.

“*Hai?*” is the only sound Rozz can squeeze out of her throat, and she cannot clarify that emotion in any meaningful way. She desperately wants the nurse to take the flowers away, but translating this desire into speech proves impossible. Eventually, the nurse gives up and leaves (but not before writing a brief note on Rozz's chart wondering if a stronger dose of *cotcha* might be necessary), and the flowers remain on the table.

About a day later, Rozz awakes to find Melosa sitting on a chair in the corner of the room. Melosa has a sketchbook with her, and she is engrossed enough in the act of putting lines to paper that she does not notice right away that Rozz has awoken.

“It's you,” Melosa says, holding up the picture for Rozz's approval. “Wrapped in your little bundle.” Rozz stares uncomprehendingly at Melosa's artwork. Her overloaded mind is unable to translate that collection of lines and cross-hatching into anything resembling objective reality, much less an image of herself. “Oh come on, it's not that bad,” Melosa teases.

“*Hoh,*” Rozz says, gently rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her fingertips. “*Hoh.* I don't know, I'm sorry,” she adds, unsure of what she is apologizing for but certain that there is much for her to be ashamed of.

“You're high as a kite, aren't you?” Melosa asks.

“*Hoo...*” Rozz replies.

“I'll take that as a 'yes',” Melosa declares, laughing softly.

Rozz recoils from Melosa's face. Her friend's eyes are brighter than the fluorescent lights in the hallway. It's not a real brightness. The light is implied, but it is tangibly felt, and Rozz can't help but

look away. But in looking away, her eyes come to rest upon the flowers. Her stomach lurches at the sight of the rose, and involuntarily, her hand rises to protect her throat. She winces and wimpers, gazing imploringly at Melosa. But not for long, as the light radiating from within her friend is too strong for her to withstand.

Melosa studies the flowers for a moment, and quickly isolates the problem. Rising from her chair, she plucks the rose from the bouquet and throws it like a dart, right through an open window. "Better?" Melosa asks.

Rozz nods, her eyes welling up with tears of gratitude. She tries to thank Melosa, but she cannot find the words, her nervous hands wringing the hem of her blanket to and fro as she tries, and fails, to jumpstart her sedated brain. "*Hoo*," she says, a sad little sound.

"It's okay. You don't have to talk," Melosa says, taking a peek at the doctor's chart at the foot of Rozz's bed. "Looks like they've got you on enough *cotcha* to knock out a horse. I'm jealous. You know, every time I end up in the hospital, I always try to make it seem like I'm in more pain than I really am, to make sure they up the dose. Not that I'm accusing you of that. Just that, you know, it's hard to turn down free *kek*. Especially since normally they won't let us *ashuras* take *kek* at all. Not that they can stop me..." Melosa says, flashing a conspiratorial grin. She waits for Rozz to laugh, but Rozz is too bewildered to process the joke. "*Ho, ho*," Melosa consoles her. "*Ho, ho*. Well, dear, I'm here for two reasons. The first, and most important reason, is to assess your state of being. And girl, you're a mess," she says, dragging her chair to Rozz's bedside and reaching out to take Rozz's hand. This time, Rozz does smile a little. "The second reason is to fill you in on what comes next. Are you up for that conversation?"

It takes Rozz almost thirty seconds to process the fact that she is being asked a question and must now formulate a response. "*Hai*," she says.

"Yeah, you seem pretty shellshocked," Melosa says, sighing a little. "It's okay. It's not your fault, Rozz. You did your best. I mean it. Objectively speaking, you really kicked some ass out there. It's not your fault the rest of the team was scattered all over the place. It's not your fault that Clan Vargas brought in a team of killer robots. I swear, Liasha gets stupider every year. Anyway dear, our soulless *keira* is not going to allow me very many visits, so I'm just going to go ahead with my elevator speech and hope that, even if you can't process it now, you'll remember it well enough to process it later. Sound good? Just nod, honey, don't try to talk."

Rozz nods, sitting up in her bed with the blankets wrapped around her shoulders.

"Okay," Melosa says. "Here's the deal. We lost this year's Liasha, and the burden of that loss has fallen on your shoulders. Like I said, that doesn't mean it's your fault... and don't be surprised if Avatylic tries to make you feel like it is. But it's the trauma. You're a gentle soul, Rozz. You're not a cold-hearted bitch like me, or like most of the other girls. You watched... I mean, what happened..." Melosa sighs, fumbling for the right euphemism and not finding it. She decides to spare Rozz her usual bluntness, and leaves the sentence unfinished. "They've been doing this Liasha thing a good long time. This has happened before. It's happened to lots of *ashuras*. I suppose it's part of our life cycle. So the good news, is that they'll never ask you to fight in Liasha again."

And it is good news. Rozz feels a wave of relief wash over her wounded body.

"Your training is over. No more waking up at the ass crack of dawn. No more sparring with mean bitches and running obstacle courses until you think you're going to pass out. No more uncomfortable dormitory beds. That stage of your life is over. But the next stage... is something of a mixed bag. Look around you, Rozz. This probably hasn't occurred to you, but you're in the good wing of the hospital. You have your own room, with a door. Gargan and Avatylic even sent you flowers. Real flowers, not plastic ones. How's that bed? Is it a soft one? Real mattress?"

"*Hoh...*"

"Yeah, I know. You don't know what it means. But I do. I've been doing this *ashura* thing for six years. And I've been watching the other girls come and go. Some of the girls, they just disappear, and I

don't know why, or for what. But when they start giving you the good treatment, even though you lost? That always means one thing. You're about to get initiated. They're going to take you into Clan Lashlei proper, and the next time Liasha rolls around, you're going to be one of the jerks sitting in the stands with a monocle and a wine glass, not one of the jerks getting sliced to ribbons on the killing floor. But there's a catch, so brace yourself. You're going to have to get married."

"*Hai*?" says Rozz, suddenly a teensy bit more sober. "Fuck."

"I know," says Melosa.

"No. I can't get married," says Rozz. "Where's... where's Ioni?"

Melosa looks like she's about to speak, but instead, she just exhales.

"Where is she? Melosa! Where is she?"

Melosa is silent for a while, thinking. At last, she rises from her chair, and bends over to give Rozz a little hug and a gentle kiss for her forehead. Melosa heads for the exit, but pauses in the doorway. "I have to get back," she says. "They're introducing the new *dovei* tonight. The wheel just keeps turning on, *hai*? But Rozz, dear, I'll be back to see you as soon as I can."

But they've discharged Rozz from the hospital before Melosa could return. An entourage of middle-aged women – servants, who wear clean clothing in drab unobtrusive colors and avoid any eye contact – find Rozz in her hospital room and escort her through the exhaustingly vast hallways of the Spire. They leave behind the fluorescent lights and spartan corridors of the hospital and the *ashuras'* dormitories, passing through a pair of ornately carved double doors that Rozz has never seen the other side of. Across this threshold, the walls and the floors are no longer barren: richly colored tapestries (illustrating the history of Clan Lashlei and their relationship with the Raelia) hang from the walls, and a plush black carpet absorbs the sound of Rozz' footsteps. Vases of pure gold as tall as Rozz present her with distorted reflections of her own face as she passes by, and plants – real living plants, with real live fronds and leaves and flowers – emerge from the tops of those vases and brush at Rozz's head and shoulders as she walks by. The noblemen in their robes and the noblewomen in their petticoats and long flowing dresses ignore her as she passes them in the hall. Everyone is wearing black. Everything else shines like gold.

Rozz's entourage leave her in the room that's been set aside for her, advising her to make herself comfortable as they depart. Rozz sits on the golden down comforter atop the king-size bed that dominates the room, but she is numb to its yielding softness. The room is deathly quiet, but for the sound of her own shallow and irregular breathing. Everything smells vaguely of lavender and roses. There are plants here too, many of them, their golden pots arranged on the windowsill and hanging from a vaulted ceiling so high that Rozz couldn't touch it even if she jumped from the bed. To her right, past the foot of the bed, two suitcases rest against an immense mahogany armoire. Vaguely, she remembers that the suitcases had been in the hands of the servants who brought her here. Likely, they contain what few possessions she had been keeping in her room in the dormitories. To her left, at the head of the bed, is a colossal mirror in a golden frame, and in its surface Rozz can see her own miserable face, wan and faded. The typically healthy grey of her skin has taken on the pallor of snow, and there are dark rings and bags beneath her eyes.

Rozz does not know how long she sits motionless on that bed. Eventually, she finds her feet and sleepwalks out the door and back the way she came. She keeps her head low, so as to avoid the possibility of eye contact with any of her Clan she might pass in the hall, walking quickly with a determination that verges on panic. She passes again over the threshold of those double doors, but she does not return to her dormitory, nor does she return to her hospital bed. Instead, she works her way down to the ledges and open terraces at the base of the Spire's blossom, the realm of Vaieu and the *kori*. But she is not seeking their company.

Unseen, she descends to her favorite terrace, from which she can see her favorite view of the city beneath her. In the light of day, there is no constellation of trash fires to look upon. The city bustles

beneath her, swarms of Serrans moving around in great homogenous masses. From this height, no one person can be singled out and identified. They are a seamless whole, an integrated collective like a body of water flowing to and fro throughout the city streets. Rozz steps from the ledge to join them. And for a moment, she is weightless.

Time stops. The city does not rise to meet her. There is no sensation of falling. There is no pain, no fear. There is no sudden separation of soul and body. There is no experience. There is no escape. Only Rozz, static and floating free of gravity. At last, the city begins to move, but not in the direction she had anticipated. She is not moving downwards towards it. In fact, she is not moving in a vertical axis at all, but in a horizontal one. Invisible hands are dragging her backwards, back towards the safety of the ledge she had attempted to depart. As she returns to the Spire, she rotates her body and there she sees them: Avatylic, her whip in hand and her practiced look of disapproval more pronounced than ever, and Vaieu, smiling cruelly as she reaches for Rosalim, the *kori*'s long graceful arms twisting and swaying in the sensual dance of the enigmatic sorceress. Before Vaieu can bring Rozz fully back onto the terrace, Avatylic lets loose her whip, snatching Rosalim by the leg and jerking her forcefully back onto solid ground.

"Suicide," Avatylic mutters, looming over her wayward daughter. The toes of her black boots are inches from Rozz's face. "Do you even comprehend what you were about to throw away?"

Rozz does not.

"Stand," her *keira* commands.

Numbly, Rozz complies.

"Ungrateful wretch," Avatylic declares, and Rozz flinches, but her mother does not hit her. Avatylic just stands there, staring coldly at Rozz as though the girl before her were not a living breathing Serran but a poorly manufactured product purchased at an uncomfortably high cost. "You persist in disappointing us. No matter what privileges or second chances we offer you, you persist in your failures. You are a lucky child, Rosalim. You do not know how lucky you are."

Rozz mumbles a reply, too softly for anyone to hear.

"What?" Avatylic snaps, grabbing Rozz by the collar of her shirt and yanking on it hard enough to ruin the fabric. "What did you say to me? Speak up, girl!"

"Then let me go," Rozz repeats. "Please. Let me go."

"You think I don't want to?" Avatylic shouts, narrowing her eyes as the nooks and crannies of her face fill in with shadow. "If it were up to me, I would happily let you go, right now, right over that ledge. But it is *not* up to me. And it is *not* up to you. Come along now, girl. You are still your father's daughter. And today, you shall receive your birthright."

Rozz follows Avatylic through the corridors of their Spire, hustling to keep up with her *keira*'s brisk strides. Avatylic, her boots clacking loudly against the stone floors, is leading her daughter back to the hospital, chastising her all the while.

"Suicide," Avatylic sneers. "Unbelievable. What a grotesque lapse of reason. There is only one excuse for this behavior, and it is this: you do not yet understand what you are. What is your name, daughter?"

"Rozz Lashlei," Rozz replies.

"Rosalim!" her mother snaps. Her hand moves as quick as lightning, striking Rozz across the face before she can react. "Your name is Rosalim! Do not sully my ears with that buzzing. You did not hatch from an egg like one of those disgusting salamanders, and you will not imitate their graceless noises. It is tasteless. But what can I expect? We have kept you ignorant, and now? We have an ignorant daughter."

Avatylic pauses at an imposing pair of double doors. Carved to look like the roots and branches of mighty trees, the elaborate woodwork etched into these doors is inlaid with thin strands of gold. Avatylic pushes them open, and ushers Rozz inside. The room within is an observation deck: almost



empty, save for a slender podium in the center and a large ornate window carved in the side of the wall. This window is massive and circular, some nine feet in diameter. The circumference of the window is a beautiful and intricate stone work, a fringe of labyrinthine geometry encircling a breathtaking view of the city below. From here, Rozz can see the entire western half of Spirena, reaching right up to the edge of the chasm to the north. Farther southwest, beyond Spire Taiun and Spire Vargas, is the sheer rock face of one of the two Govalyr – the massive twin mountains that enclose the city. And beyond them, nothing but desolation.

“Don’t fall out,” Avatylic snarls, locking the doors behind them. “Tell me, foolish daughter. What do you think, when you look out that window?”

“It’s pretty,” Rozz says. “It’s lonely, and it’s desolate. But it’s pretty too.”

“Pretty?” her *keira* mocks her. “She calls it pretty. Perhaps it is, in a perverse sort of way. But tell me, dear daughter. Would you settle for pretty... when you could have beautiful?” Avatylic approaches the podium in the center of the room and touches a golden sphere mounted in the center. The view out the window disappears, replaced by a stunning panorama of a verdant mountain range: snowy peaks and tall coniferous trees, and a wet mist rising from the foothills below, slowly condensing into a rain cloud. “Do you know what this is?” she asks.

But Rozz is speechless. Her mouth trembles, but she cannot form sound. She reaches out, but there is nothing to touch. This wild beautiful place is only a video on a screen. One tear, and then another, slides from her eye and runs down her cheek.

“It is Narae,” Avatylic explains. “Would you like to go there?”

“What?” Rozz almost shrieks the word, spinning around and staring at her mother in disbelief. “The world is ending! Everything is gone! Even Narae.”

Avatylic replies with a haughty smirk. “Narae is not gone,” she says. “Narae is alive and well. I’ll ask you again. Would you like to go there?”

“Yes!” Rozz says, whirling back to face the video again. There are flowers on the screen, real live flowers growing wild in a lush valley meadow. “Please, yes!”

“And what will you do to earn that right?” Avatylic asks.

“Anything,” Rozz says, and she means it. She never wants to see Spirena again. “I’ll do anything.”

“Good,” says Avatylic. “Perhaps you are not such a fool after all. Come along, now.”

Avatylic takes Rozz from the observation deck back into the corridors of the hospital, escorting her through a generic unmarked door in a hallway of generic unmarked doors. The room inside appears to be an operating theater of sorts, with a blockade of curtains in the center that Avatylic swipes aside to reveal a hospital bed, equipped with stirrups at one end.

“Sit,” Avatylic commands, before pivoting on her heel and striding back out into the hallway, where she calls loudly for servants.

The first servants to arrive are, of course, the wrong servants. Avatylic scolds them for not knowing better and demands that they go fetch the servants she actually wants to see. It takes some time, but finally Avatylic has gathered together the team she desires: a pair of nurses in scrubs and a middle-aged man with dark eyes and a black robe with gold trim that hangs down to his ankles. One of the nurses presents Rozz with a hospital gown that’s been folded into a square and closes the curtains around the table so that Rozz may change clothes with some semblance of privacy.

“*Hoh, hoh, hoh.* I do apologize, Lady Lashlei,” says the man in the robe. “I did not realize you had made an appointment.”

“*Hai?*” Avatylic shrieks, and through the curtain Rozz can hear the sound of the back of her mother’s hand colliding with the man’s jaw. “What is this idiot saying to me?” she demands of the nurses, who do not reply. “Do not spread your filth upon me, you wretch. ‘Appointments’ are the burden of bottom-feeders. Do I look like a bottom-feeder to you?”

“No, Lady Lashlei,” the man in the robe says, cowering. “You are my master.”

"I am your master," Avatylic confirms. "I am your superior. I am Clan Lashlei. I fly beyond the clouds, and I roost atop the world. I am the darling of the moon, and the shadow that blots out the sun. Everything I see is my domain. And I see everything. I see you. And you are mine. Your fate is my whim. I could tear your throat away if I wanted. I could bury you in an avalanche of gold. I could carve up your children and eat them while you watch. I could make you live forever. I can do whatever I want to you. Because this is my world you are living in, and you belong to me."

"Yes, Lady Lashlei," says the man in the robe. "I belong to you."

"Pathetic," Avatylic snarls. "What is your name?"

"I am Nuro Selyr," he says. "Assistant to Mr. Veigis Cleiv."

"And where is Veigis?" Avatylic demands.

"I regret to inform you that Mr. Veigis Cleiv was killed, my Lady," says Nuro. "During the incident -"

"Yes, I remember!" Avatylic cuts him off. "Disgusting, absolutely disgusting. A travesty of that scale must never be allowed to happen again."

"The kidnapped girl -" says Nuro.

"Is replaceable," Avatylic snaps. "But your predecessor was not. How many years was he your mentor?"

"Ten years, my Lady," he replies.

"Ten years is not enough. We need a minimum of fifteen. Is there no one else who can perform the rite?" Avatylic demands.

"There is not. Old Mr. Sodamo died of a heart attack several months ago. And Mr. Rusan is visiting family in Zulae. Lady Lashlei, I am more than capable of performing the rite of Umallae," Nuro asserts.

Rozz can hear her *keira's* heavy rage-breathing through the curtain. There is an uncomfortably long pause, punctuated by a startled scream from Mr. Nuro Selyr.

"Clean this up, immediately," Avatylic orders the nurses. "On your feet, wretch. The cut is superficial, despite your theatrics. On your feet. Now. You are weak and you are disrespectful and you are thoroughly lacking in common sense, but you will have to do. My fool of a daughter is wallowing in the shallow emotions of her adolescence, and we cannot allow that to continue. You will make a woman out of her today."

That last sentence, and the scornful manner in which her *keira* speaks the word 'woman', sends a chill up Rozz's spine. Beneath the drafty hospital gown, her muscles clench and her throat becomes so tight that it's hard for her to breathe. A nurse peeks through the curtain and asks Rozz if she is ready. Rozz does not reply. She just stares straight ahead, her face a frozen approximation of the halfway point between resignation and horror. Numb to Rozz's emotional state, the nurse draws back the curtain. Beyond the curtain and beneath Avatylic's cruel glare, the other nurse is taping a bandage to Nuro's cheek. He waits patiently for her to finish, all the while holding what appears to be some kind of strange rifle in his hands, the barrel of the thing tipped with a long and ominous needle. Rozz gasps at the sight of his weapon, but the nurse is already plunging a smaller syringe into the nook of Rozz's elbow. The anesthesia takes hold rapidly, and Rozz dimly observes herself collapsing backwards onto the bed in a crumpled heap. The two nurses lift her delicate body, placing it into the desired configuration as though she were nothing more than a limp doll. They place her feet in the stirrups, and draw the hospital gown back to expose Rozz's vulva, and Rozz, at this point, is too exhausted and overwhelmed to be frightened any more. Through heavily lidded eyes, she looks to her *keira*, the only semblance of familiarity and safety in the room. But Avatylic, her arms crossed in front of her chest, has only a scowl to offer her daughter. There will be no explanation. There will be no escape. Rozz closes her eyes and surrenders.

The process is over surprisingly quickly. She only vaguely registers the intrusion when that sinister needle enters her, and there is no pain: only the undeniable sensation of penetration happening

to her and yet somewhere happening far away from her. The needle enters her once, slanting to the right, and once more, slanting to the left. And then it is withdrawn, and the procedure is over.

But not quite. The nurses, with the help of Mr. Nuro Seler (whom Rozz cannot bring herself to think of as a doctor) transfer her from the hospital bed to a guernsey and cover her with a blanket. They wheel her guernsey through the hallways, and Rozz does not bother opening her eyes to find out where they are going. Somewhere ahead of them, she hears the clack of her *keira's* boots leading the way. They wheel her into an elevator, and the elevator takes them all up a few floors. They proceed down another hallway, and out of the light that presses on Rozz's closed eyelids and into a darkened room.

"Gargan!" Avatylic shouts, surprise dismantling her usual authoritarian decorum.

"Yes," replies Gargan, and Rozz realizes that this is the first time in years she has heard the sound of her *keir's* gravelly voice. It is the sound of the scraping of a heavy stone door against the cold floor of a mausoleum. "She is my daughter, my progeny. I shall witness her take flight."

"Yes, my Lord," Avatylic replies, her frosty decorum returning. "Awaken her," she demands of the nurses.

A firm hand in a surgical glove takes Rozz's jaw between thumb and forefinger and gently pulls open her mouth. The cold glass of a medicine dropper brushes past Rozz's lip, depositing a little splash of a tasteless fluid onto Rozz's tongue.

"Don't. Swallow," the nurse warns her.

But the drug is already taking effect. Rozz's drowsy delirium is pushed from her body by an upswell of energy rising from the base of her pelvis, arching her back as it travels up her spine and collides with the base of her skull. The tremors of this collision ripple outwards through her body, jerking spastically towards her extremities. Rozz hears herself grunting, as this mysterious power awakened inside of her pushes her chin down towards her sternum.

"She's seizing. Hold her down," Nuro instructs the nurses. He leans in close to Rozz and whispers in her ear. "Surrender to the serpent inside," he says. "You will be fine in a moment."

But it is the longest moment of Rozz's entire life. She is convinced that she is dying. The fear she feels is unlike any fear she has ever felt before: greater than her fear of her *keira's* whip, greater than her fear of a rival *ashura's* blade. It is fear without reason, without source, without purpose. Her eyes open now, she sees the face of the man in the robe wreathed in a strange pink light. His face glows, then bursts into a luminescent static, as though he were a star detonating into a supernova. But is it this strange man that is detonating? Or is it Rozz herself? Her skull is melting away, her mind is free, and gravity no longer holds any sway over her. She perceives her vertebrae rising over her head, reaching up away from Serra and grasping for the cosmos beyond. And she is ready. Rozz is ready to follow her spinal cord up and away from this world. She is ready to die.

But she is not dead. She is standing atop a stone altar flanked by four marble pillars, but how she came to be standing here she does not know. Beneath her feet, a triangle has been carved into the stone and Rozz is standing at one of the points. Opposite her, standing between the other two points of the triangle, is Gargan Lashlei. His face is obscured by shadow, but Rozz is certain it is her father. There is no mistaking that hair, reaching and grasping and twisting and turning, spiralling around and around itself like a corkscrew and spilling onto the stone like ink. A translucent dragon coils around Gargan's legs and hips, its scales a brilliant blue, its belly and whiskers a glistening gold, its eyes a smoldering red. In the center of the triangle between Rozz and Gargan, a fire has been lit, and atop that fire, a cauldron boils, the water inside dissolving into steam. Gargan lifts a hand, and although he is too far away from Rozz to touch her, he tears the hospital gown from her body with a sudden gust of wind. Her lithe little body is exposed but Rozz makes no move to cover herself. She is filled with lust: not lust for her elderly father, but raw unbridled lust for pure sensation. The chill that runs up her backside exhilarates her. The steam that rises from the cauldron and buffets her face arouses her. Somewhere deep inside of her, the person she usually is watches this strange tableau with confusion and fear. But that familiar identity has been pushed aside by something powerful and hungry, something that fills her

almost entirely with its presence, straightening her spine and widening her eyes and peeling back her lips to expose her ravenous teeth. Her vision floods with a brilliant pink light, and through the veil of that light she can see the flames that rise from her naked skin, emanating from her but not burning her.

Gargan raises his hand again, and the resulting sensation in Rozz's pelvis is so powerful that it almost doubles her over. She staggers in her struggle to stay upright, breathing hard and fast, her respiratory diaphragm pumping like a bellows as her pelvic floor shudders with power. It is the most powerful orgasm she has ever felt in her young life, filling every space in her body and pushing at every barrier, until she feels that she is about to burst. Some frightened part of her tries to move away from this power, escape it somehow, but no matter how she squirms, it remains inside of her, throbbing and growing. The power climbs from her pelvis to her abdomen, rising to her heart. As it reaches her throat, her jaw clamps shut involuntarily, missing the tip of her tongue by a hair. The power keeps rising, crawling over her face and into her brain, and Rozz can take no more. She explodes.

The explosion rockets her into the stratosphere. Beneath her, barren Serra looks empty, lonely, inhospitable. There in the canyons lies Spirena, nestled between two mountains and perched atop a great yawning crack in the ground. The city plunges its drills into that crack, digging and digging and digging for water. How long have they been there, clinging tenaciously to survival as the dust piles up around them? The city is twelve years old, younger than Rozz herself, and yet, when she looks at it from this vantage point, it seems eternal. They have been there forever, their lives hanging by a thread forever, relentlessly digging and digging and digging until every last drop of blood is squeezed from the stone. This is the true nature of Spirena. This the true nature of the material realm, the realm of gravity, the realm of density, the realm of matter. And Rozz is leaving it behind. Beneath her, the city shrinks to a dark little smear, and then it is nothing.

All around her, the yawning vastness of the cosmos awaits, mocking her with the insurmountable distances between its points of light and threatening to consume her fire in its frozen void. But Gargan is here with her, though he is younger now, young and strong the way he has always been. He has left most of himself behind, carrying only an outline of dazzling filaments of light to mark the periphery of his being. As Rozz watches, the recognizable schematic of her eternally youthful father condenses and transforms into a serpent of pure light, coiling and uncoiling around itself. And Rozz, of course, must transform in the very same way. The two serpents, male and female, wrap around each other in an irresistible dance of orgiastic pleasure, and in the sensual writhing of their interwoven bodies, Rozz becomes dimly aware of a spectator, watching from the darkness. The spectator takes form, a dim pink light becoming harder and darker, harder and darker, and more and more real. The light coalesces into a face with empty eye sockets, their hollows filled with the distant twinkling of the stars behind them. There is lust in those eyes, and hunger. From the top of the spectator's head, its light continues to spread outwards, like the antlers of a deer or the branches of a tree, reaching and reaching until wrapping entirely around the tiny planet beneath them. Serra is completely contained within the grasp of this firmament. There is no escape. One last orgasm ripples through Rozz's disembodied soul, booming and rumbling like a peal of thunder, obliterating the threads of light that bind her together and scattering her like stardust across the desolate planet below.

Rozz does not expect to ever open her eyes again. But when she does, she's lying on her back, in a large soft bed, alone in a strange room. As her eyes dart frantically around, she begins to recognize her environment. This is the room she had been led to this morning, the opulent room with the nice plants and the nice furniture and the high ceiling. This is 'her' room. Those are her suitcases leaning against the armoire. Those are her clothes folded in a neat little pile at the foot of the bed. They aren't much, but those little fragments of familiarity are grounding enough for Rozz to sink back onto the pillows and rest. Though she feels awake, wide awake, more awake than she has felt since the battle of Liasha. Perhaps the sedatives and painkillers have finally worked their way through her system. And that terrifying dream with her *keir* was only that: a dream, a fever dream brought about by the synergy

of the pain, the trauma, and the *kek*. Gradually, her breathing slows, and she relaxes.

Rozz feels something squirming around at the base of her skull, and she leaps out of bed with a start. She examines the pillowcases but finds nothing, pulls back the sheets and throws the pillows off the bed, but exposes nothing there either. With great trepidation, she slides one hand along the nape of her neck. Yes. There it is, slithering around her occiput. With both hands, she tries to remove it – whatever it is – swatting at it, batting at it, scraping at it, all to no avail. She grabs the slippery thing with all its smooth tentacles, and tries to pull it loose from her head, but the pain is overwhelming. And then she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the bed. Her feathers are gone, and in their place, there is hair. Her hair is thick and dark, drifting weightlessly in the air as though buoyed by some imperceptible current. It grasps inquisitively at the edges of furniture, at the corners of blankets, at nothing at all. It is an organism whose only sense is touch, and it desires to sense everything it can. As she watches, its tendrils grow longer and longer, running along the contours of her cheeks, her collarbones, and her rib cage. They fondle her breasts. They wrap around her throat. And all Rozz can do is scream.

## 16

Seth Carraba pulls into the driveway of his home in Steer's Neck (the most expensive and therefore the most secure gated community in Astralo), and eases his pristine white Buffs Survival SUV into the garage. He hops out of his vehicle, clutching his briefcase in one hand, and slapping the hood of his car affectionately with the other. It's new as of this week, replacing the white Buffs Survival SUV he's had for the past three years. It's written into his contract that he gets a new car every three years. Perk of the job. This big two-story house in one of Astralo's most affluent neighborhoods, this is a perk of the job as well. He walks into the house, placing his briefcase on the dining room table and loosening his tie. His feet are tired. He's eager to kick off his tight black dress shoes and relax on the big white Buffs Survival couch (with loveseat attachment) that dominates his living room. Yet another perk of the job.

"Commander!" his eight-year-old daughter Heather greets him. She's holding a child's assault rifle – model HG-14 – and is dressed in Buffs Living children's home defense fatigues. With her short curly blonde hair tucked under her beret, it's hard to tell whether she's a little boy or a little girl.

"Princess!" Seth says, reaching down to remove the beret and tousle her blonde hair. She slings the rifle over her shoulder as he bends down to give her a hug. "It's good to see you!" he says, aglow with fatherly pride. With a theatrical grunt, he carries her over to the couch and collapses into it with her in his arms.

"Commander! Today I learned to make cupcakes!"

"You did? Can I have one?"

"No..." Heather says, looking dejected. "I followed the instructions in the video. But then I took them upstairs to give to Mommy, and Mommy said they were a disaster and she made me throw them away."

Seth winces. He knows he should probably let his wife Fara out of her pen upstairs, but he'd rather take a moment to relax with Heather. "Well," he says. "Mommy can't bake cupcakes either. So, she's in no place to judge. Okay? I'm sure you tried your best. The first time you do something, you're going to do it wrong. That's just the way it is. But you'll keep on learning, and maybe the next batch will be better. And then you'll learn a little more, and the next one will be even better than that."

"Why doesn't Mommy learn?" she asks. "She doesn't cook anything. She doesn't even try. Yukhala cooks everything, and it cleans too. Mommy doesn't even go into the kitchen. She just stands in the doorway and yells."

"Heather," Seth says with a sigh. He hopes his middle-aged Xila maid is not within earshot. "Yukhala's not an it. She's a she. Or a her. You know what I mean."

"Oh," Heather replies, looking thoughtful. "Is Yukhala a Mommy?"

"Yes. Vun is her son. That's why they live together."

"Oh," Heather replies. "I thought they were married."

"Nope," Seth says, trying to think of a way to segue out of this conversation, but too tired to come up with anything. "Mother and son."

"Where's the Commander?"

"I'm the Commander, precious. I'm right here," Seth says.

"No, I mean..." Heather struggles for a minute, trying to find the right words. "Where's Vun's Daddy?"

The memory passes through Seth's mind in a flash: an agonizing scream, a splatter of blood. And then it is gone again, submerged in the tightly sealed vault in which Seth keeps all his problematic memories. "He went away a long time ago," Seth replies.

"Where did he go?" Heather asks.

Seth sighs again. This was not the relaxing father-daughter moment he was hoping for. "Heather, baby, I want you to listen to me right now, okay?"

"Okay..."

"These are questions you do not need to be asking. Now, you know I love it when you ask me questions. But *these* questions are a different kind of question. They're not good questions. They're bad questions, and they make people very very uncomfortable. From now on, I don't want you asking questions about Vun, or Yukhala, or any of the other Xilas you might see around town or in other people's homes. Don't ask me those questions, and especially don't ask other people those questions. Not even Mommy. Do you understand?"

"Okay... but why?"

"I'll tell you when you're older."

"But I want to know now!" she says, pouting.

"Heather, sweetheart... I promise you that you don't. You're not ready yet to know about that. Little girls are soft and sweet and that's what makes them special. I want you to be soft, and sweet, and special, for as long as possible. Sooner or later, you're going to be a woman, and when that happens, we can talk about the Xilas, and where Vun's Daddy went, and all sorts of other things. But right now, I need you to shush," says Seth, putting a finger to his lips. "Shhhuuuushhhh!"

"Shhhuuuushhhh!" Heather says back to him, putting her finger to her lips as well.

"Commander?" she whispers in his ear. "Want me to get my cupcakes out of the trash for you?"

"No," he says, laughing. "I have a better idea. Why don't we let your Mommy and your brother out of their pens?"

"Do we have to?" Heather protests.

"Yes," Seth answers firmly. "It's the right thing to do. You unlock Mommy's pen, and I'll go unlock Adam's."

"Okay..." Heather says, her face downcast, her reluctance obvious.

"None of that!" Seth scolds her gently. "Try it again."

"Yes, Commander!" she says, leaping to attention, her back straight as a post. "Right away, sir!"

"That's my girl!" Seth says, smiling warmly.

As Heather trots up the stairs that lead from the living room to the second story bedrooms, Seth battles his own reluctance on his way through the kitchen and down the basement stairs. On his way to Adam's room, he passes the entrance to the family's emergency bunker and the larger of the family's two gun lockers. He thinks, and not for the first time, that he is uncomfortable with the proximity of this gun locker to Adam's bedroom. Adam does not know the combination to open the lock. If he did, he certainly would have done something reckless and violent by now. But Seth has discovered time and again that Adam is clever in all the wrong ways. It is only a matter of time before he figures out a way into the family arsenal, and Johnny only knows what would happen then.

Adam's bedroom door is closed, and a series of horizontal metal bars blockade the doorway. Seth taps out a combination – the digits of Adam's birthday, with each digit increased by five to keep him from guessing it – and the horizontal bars slide away, disappearing into the recesses of the doorway. Seth raps his knuckles on the wooden door: no answer. He knocks again, louder this time: still no answer. Taking a deep breath, he tilts his head back, then slams his horns forcefully into the door, splintering the thick wood ever so slightly.

"What!" comes a muffled voice from within.

"It's your Commander," Seth replies. "I'm coming in. Are you decent?"

"You mean, am I jerking off? No, I'm not jerking off," Adam says, the scorn in his voice

tangible even though muffled by the door.

Adam's room is some sixteen by sixteen feet, with a bed taking up one side and a large desk supporting two CPU towers and five computer monitors occupying the other half. There is a walk-in closet, but judging by the dirty clothing covering literally every available stretch of floor space, it does not appear that Adam is using it. The room smells vaguely like rancid milk. Seth would love to have the servants in here to clean things up a little, but inviting the Xilas into Adam's room would guarantee some kind of violent retribution on Adam's part. Seth picks his way through the heaps of dirty laundry on the floor and sits down on the bed. Adam, his pale skin bathed in the unnatural blue light of the monitors, continues to dick around on his computers for a couple minutes, perhaps hoping that Seth will give up on trying to connect with him and just leave. When Seth fails to depart, Adam plucks his Buffs Survival Stereo Blaster headphones out of his ears (and the Buffs Survival Gut Blaster diaphragmatic attachment – to give the bass that extra kick – off of his rib cage), and throws them onto the desk. From across the room, the hiss that comes from those speakers sounds to Seth like pure noise, some kind of weird rhythmically pulsating static that drones on and on. Adam whirls around in his chair to face his father.

“What do you want?” Adam demands, crossing his plump, doughy arms in front of his chest. A clump of brown stringy hair hangs in front of his face. He looks and smells like he hasn't showered in over a year.

“I want to check in with you. To see how you're doing.”

“Terrible. Thanks for asking,” he says, spinning his chair around to face the computer screens again.

“Adam, you're being punished for a reason,” Seth says.

“Because I broke a chair over that uppity mudbelly's head?”

“Because you violently attacked *my* servant with absolutely no provocation whatsoever. That kind of behavior is deeply disturbing. And, to be clear, you did not break the chair. You do not have the upper body strength required to break a piece of furniture, Adam.”

“So, you came down here to make fun of me for being fat,” Adam sulks.

“I came down here to try to find out why it is that you don't take care of yourself. You don't exercise. You don't wash yourself. You sit in front of the computer all day listening to that terrible... 'music.' And then you lash out violently for no reason. I have every reason to be worried about you, Adam.”

“Well, I have an idea that might help.”

“And what's that?”

“Stop being such a shitty Dad!” Adam yells.

Seth waits a beat before responding, attempting to take a deep breath without making it obvious that he's taking a deep breath. “First of all, you will refer to me as Commander. I served in the Penetrators for over a decade, and don't you forget it. Second of all, what have I *ever* done to hurt you?”

Adam whirls his chair around again, staring into his father's face with a theatrical expression of well-rehearsed disbelief. “Are you *serious*?” he says.

“What?”

Adam gapes at him, his brow wrinkled up in frustration. “You lock me down here, and you give my stupid little sister a *gun* and the right to patrol the house? That's completely backwards! I'm your son! *I'm* supposed to have the gun. *I'm* supposed to protect the house! Me! Not her! Me! This is blasphemy, 'Commander'. It goes against everything in the Good Davride, and everything we learn in church, and everything our great society is supposed to stand for.”

Seth sighs. “What am I supposed to do, Adam? I can't trust you with a gun.”

“Why not?” Adam yells, or tries to. His voice cracks, transforming his yell into a whimper.

*Because you'd shoot our servants. Maybe shoot your sister. Perhaps even shoot me as well,* Seth



thinks. "Because you've never given me a reason to trust you," Seth says. "You need to learn discipline before you can be trusted to arm yourself and protect this home."

"How can I, if you never give me a chance?" Adam pleads, having apparently forgotten the sixteen years of chances he's blown thus far.

Seth waves his hand dismissively. "This conversation is going nowhere. Dinner's in an hour," he says, getting up to leave. He pauses in the doorway, turning to make one last plea to his son. "And for Johnny's sake, Adam. Take a shower. You smell like a chemical waste dump."

At dinner, Fara is sitting at the head of the table in the dining room beneath the gaudy Buffs Survival chandelier she picked out of a Buffs Survival catalog three years back. She's wearing a long dressing gown (the golden fibers of which seem like an extension of her own flowing blonde hair) and swirling a glass of red wine in her hand. It's a lab-derived artificial wine, of course, since there are no vineyards left anymore. They save the real stuff for holidays and special occasions. Seth sees his wife impatiently sipping from the glass, and wonders to himself *is it glass number three today? Or glass number five?* He wanders into the kitchen to surreptitiously examine the garbage bin. Yes, it's as he feared. There's already an empty bottle sitting atop Heather's molten cupcakes and the rest of the day's refuse. Yukhala, tending to their evening meal of lab-sirloin and lab-potatoes and lab-asparagus to go with their lab-wine and lab-napkins, keeps sending worried little glances his way. The family's Xila servants are perpetually worried of being punished, and Fara's drunken whims do nothing to discourage that notion. Yukhala (the eldest member of their household, with her stooped posture and her dowager's hump) takes a kitchen knife and begins slicing the asparagus. Seth can recall a time, years ago, when she had first been de-clawed and kept attempting to cut the food with claws that were no longer there, swiping ineffectually out of force of habit until remembering what had been taken from her. But she has learned to use cutlery. She has adapted herself to the civilized Davridian way of life. If only Seth's son could follow suit.

"That smells delicious, Yukhala," Seth says, sniffing the air. "Thank you very much for cooking tonight."

Yukhala does not respond verbally. Instead, she merely bows her head, which is as close to an act of communication as the Xilas are allowed within the city of Astralo. Seth wanders back into the dining room, and prepares to negotiate his wife's jagged edges. He'd like to warn Yukhala to give Fara a wide berth tonight, but there's no point. Yukhala is the one delegated to refilling the wine glass over and over. She already knows. Seth takes a beer from the fridge, and pulls a mug out of the freezer. He pours the beer into the mug – carefully, to keep it from foaming up – and enters the dining room. Seth seats himself at the head of the table opposite his wife, wondering (and not for the first time) how nice it would be if the table were long enough and she were far enough away that he couldn't make out the sneer on her cold pretty face. An embroidered white tablecloth covers the table, an heirloom from Fara's side of the family. In the center of it, a pale golden cactus has been stitched.

"Did you pour yourself that beer?" Fara asks, suspiciously. "The trashcats are supposed to pour the beer."

"It's my house, I'll pour myself whatever I want, whenever I want," Seth says firmly.

Fara rolls her eyes, and shouts for the children. "Heather! Adam! Dinner time!"

Heather appears almost immediately, skipping down the stairs and taking the seat to her father's right. "Mm-mmm!" she says. "I'm hungry!"

"Adam! Come on!" Fara shouts again, her voice sharp.

"Give him a couple minutes. Dinner isn't even on the table yet," Seth replies.

"Why don't you just go down there?" Fara demands.

"I talked to him. His pen is unlocked. He knows dinner is soon," Seth assures her.

A moment later, Adam slouches into the room behind Yukhala, who bears a serving tray of blanched asparagus. Hearing the boy approach, she quickly steps out of his path. Seth holds his breath,

hoping the boy has more sense than to slap the tray of food out of Yukhala's hands. He doesn't. Adam bumps the Xila servant with his shoulder as he walks by. It has the appearance of an accident, but Seth knows it isn't one, and he reaches out to steady the tray in his servant's hands to keep the asparagus from tumbling onto the carpet.

"Sorry," Adam mutters, though it's more of an accusation than an apology. His dark hair has been combed dramatically to the right, looming over his right eye and shaking comically when he moves his head. He glares at Yukhala as she gently places a few stalks of asparagus on his plate before moving on to Fara's, and then to Heather's.

An awkward silence hangs over the table, while Adam seethes in his chair. Fara sips her wine. Heather kicks her feet. And Yukhala scurries off to the kitchen for the potatoes.

"I'm taking them," Adam says.

"Taking what?" Seth asks, knowing full well he doesn't really want to know.

"The mudbellies. To the mudbelly execution," his son replies, jabbing his fork toward the servant who has just returned from the kitchen. Yukhala pretends not to notice, depositing a generous spoonful of mashed potatoes onto Seth's plate.

"No. You're not," Seth replies, taking a sip of his beer. "I don't want the servants leaving the house. Ever. For any reason. And you're grounded, so I don't want you leaving the house either."

"You said I'd only be grounded til Saturday," Adam complains. "The execution is Sunday. After church."

"The servants stay here," Seth says.

"They need to go. It'll be good for them. They have to learn their place," Adam continues, speaking through a mouthful of potatoes.

"And what about your place?" Seth asks wearily.

"Don't eat until everyone is served!" Fara snaps, leaning over to smack Adam on the shoulder with the back of her hand. "No one eats until we thank Johnny."

Adam responds by opening his mouth and depositing his half chewed food back onto the plate.

"Eww!" shrieks Heather gleefully, squeezing her eyes shut in mock revulsion.

"Disgusting," Fara groans. "You're a civilized Hegovarian, Adam. Act like one."

"I don't have to take orders from a woman!" Adam whines loudly. "I'm a natural born Hegovarian man, and that means I am chosen!"

"It's not enough to be born male and Hegovarian, Adam. If you want a good job, you have to learn to comport yourself. You have to learn self-control," Seth declares, exhibiting an astonishing amount of self-control himself. Yukhala has made the rounds with the potatoes and has now returned with the steaks, placing the largest of them upon Seth's plate before moving on to Adam's.

"Oh, what, so I can be in the government and wear a tie and sit behind a desk all day? I don't think so," growls Adam.

"And what *do* you plan to do with yourself when you graduate from school?" Seth asks.

"Law enforcement," Adam says, thrusting his chin out proudly. "I'm going to be a Penetrator."

"Respecting the chain of command is even more important in the Penetrators," Seth lectures. "Insubordination could cost you your paycheck. Or your life. If you're really serious about serving, you need to start cleaning up your act right now."

"And you'd better start doing some push-ups," Fara mutters into her wine glass.

"And when I'm a Penetrator," Adam continues. "I'll spend all day every day putting *you* in *your* place!"

Yukhala deposits a piece of meat on Adam's plate, and he picks it up with his fingers and hurls it at her. It hits her in the face with a wet smack, then falls to the ground. Yukhala stiffens for a moment, then bends down to pick it up.

"No!" Seth interrupts, and the servant woman freezes. "If he wants to eat it, he can pick it up himself."

Yukhala nods and quickly finishes serving the two Carraba women. She's about to hustle back into the kitchen, when Fara lifts her empty glass.

"Hey, you!" she says, waving the wine glass back and forth like a tiny flag. "Yeah, you know what to do!"

"Well?" Seth asks his son. "Are you going to pick your dinner up off the floor? Or are you going to go hungry tonight?"

"He could stand to lose a little weight," Fara says.

"I'm not eating that. You saw what it touched! I might as well be licking that thing's face," Adam says.

"*You* threw the steak. *You* made a choice. Choices have consequences!" Seth insists. He's beginning to lose his appetite.

"Whuh- ugh-," Adam stutters and whines. "Heather burned a bunch of stupid cupcakes, nobody made her eat those!"

"My cupcakes aren't stupid!" Heather shouts.

"I could smell them burning all the way down in the basement! Where are her consequences?" Adam yells, standing up from the table.

"Sit down, and shut up, all of you!" Seth roars. "We have been served, and we are going to thank Davride, and then we are going to eat a quiet peaceful meal as a family! Is that clear?"

The table is silent, and Adam takes his seat.

"Alright! Heather, dear, would you lead us in our prayer?" Seth continues.

"Okay," the little girl says hesitantly. All four of the family members extend their right hands over the center of the table, over the pale embroidered cactus icon. As patriarch, Seth's hand goes on top. As the youngest female, Heather's hand goes on the bottom. Fara begrudgingly pries her hand from her wine glass and places it between Adam's and Heather's. The family close their eyes and nod their heads, and Heather haltingly recites the Davridian dinner prayer from memory. "Our thanks to you, your Hugeness, Good Johnny Davride, for the lessons you have given us; for the laws you have commanded us; for the hiker-arky -"

"Hierarchy," Seth interjects, softly.

"... for the higher archy in which you shelter us. Because you protect us, we are safe. Because you chose us, we reign supreme. Because we are the best, you have blessed us with the best this world has to offer. Your food is in our bellies, as your love is in our hearts. We are the biggest. We are the best. Ye'haw."

"Ye'haw," echoes the rest of the Carraba family.

"Let's eat!" says Heather, and the family pull their hands back from the center of the table. With a stray elbow, Fara accidentally brushes the full glass of wine that Yukhala has placed on the table for her. Seth groans quietly as the wine glass totters, sloshing dark red droplets onto the immaculate white tablecloth before toppling over entirely and emptying its contents onto the table and the carpet beneath.

"Good Davride!" Fara shouts. "Hey! Hey! I know you're in there!" she drunkenly shrieks at the darkened portal to the kitchen, where Yukhala is most likely washing the dishes and utensils used to prepare the family's meal. "I know what you did! You think you can... trick me? Make me look stupid? Huh? Get out here!"

Head lowered, Yukhala re-enters the dining room: gloves, rag and cleaning solution in hand.

"No!" Fara bellows. "Not while we eat! Never while we eat! You clean this up when we're done, and so help me Johnny, if any part of this tablecloth or this carpet is stained, *you* will be eating it for *your* dinner. I just want you to feel shame for what you've done, and to *know*... to know that *I* know... what you are!"

Yukhala stands mutely, frozen in place.

"Are you done spoiling my appetite?" Seth asks, glaring at his wife.

"Oh, so it's me? This is my fault now?" Fara retorts, seething at him from across the table.

"It's not important whose fault it is. What's important is that I had a long day at work, and now I want to eat a quiet meal with my family, but I can't eat if my family are yelling and fighting over every little thing that happens. I am in charge here, and I say what we are going to do. Now, all of you, for the last fricking time, shut up and eat!" Seth says, punctuating the word "eat" by forcefully jabbing his fork into his steak. "And you," he says to Yukhala. "Back in the kitchen." As Seth dislodges his fork from his meat, he can't help but notice that Adam has stealthily returned his own steak from the carpet to his plate in the midst of the commotion. *Well*, he thinks, *at least the boy isn't wasting food*.

Seth wakes up in a cold sweat. His heart is racing, his breathing labored. He looks over at Fara, who is curled up as far away from Seth as their king size bed will allow. She has not noticed his nocturnal turmoil. She has gone right on sleeping the imperturbable leaden sleep of the consummate alcoholic. Seth looks over at his alarm clock. It's 4:29 AM. He might as well get up. Downstairs, the house is silent. He goes into the kitchen, rummaging around the fridge for something to eat. On the wall to his right, by the door to the basement, are two cubbies, each about four feet by four feet, covered with a metal grating and a wooden door. These are the servants' quarters. Xilas do not sleep lying down. All they need is the space to sit. It's actually a very economical arrangement. He hears a little rustling in one of the cubbies: Yukhala, probably, woken up by Seth's early morning search for breakfast.

"It's okay," he says, speaking softly to her through the grating and the door. "It's just me. Up early again. Heather will let you out in a couple hours. Get some rest."

Seth eats, showers, and dresses himself, all in the peaceful silence of the early morning. The ease and spaciousness of this time of day is soothing to him. It's enough to make him almost grateful for the nightmare that roused him. Almost. He gathers his coat and briefcase and leaves the house without rousing any of his family members. But Seth does not drive to work. He makes a detour to his place of worship, the First Church of Natural Law, a spectacular cathedral some three stories high. The front door is open. Elderly Erector (shortened from Erector of the Structure) Crow is an early riser. Seth walks down the aisle between the pews, his footsteps reverberating through this great empty space and announcing his presence. In the center of the cathedral is a towering wooden sculpture of a cactus, and from this cactus hangs another colossal wooden carving: a man, but more than a man, the savior Johnny Davride dangling upside down from the nails that bind him to the pillar of the cactus. The first rays of the morning sun brighten the sky, peeking through the circular windows that ring the cathedral ceiling, and looking upon the noble savior of the Hegovarian people. Seth walks around the statue of Johnny and the cactus, knocking on and then entering a nondescript door to the side of the altar.

Inside, Erector Crow rises to greet him. The Erector's horns are long and heavy, and when he walks, his head hangs forward in a limp bobbing nod reminiscent of a vulture. A small pair of spectacles rests delicately on the bridge of his broad flat nose, although the Erector's perpetual snorts and snuffles threaten to knock them loose at any moment. Even in his old age, the Erector is a tall and broad-shouldered man, his sturdy frame frocked in the white flowing garments of holy light, of pure perfection, of Erectorhood.

"Ye'haw," says Seth, placing his right fist to his left palm.

"Ye'haw," replies the Erector, returning Seth's salute. "Please, my son. Relax. Take a load off."

Seth lies down on the couch in the Erector's office and closes his eyes. Erector Crow drags his chair to a place behind Seth's head. The chair creaks a little as the Erector lowers himself into the seat with a sigh.

"Tell me, my son," says the Erector. "What is bothering you?" But he knows exactly why Seth has come.

"It happened again," says Seth, grimacing a little from the pain of the recollection. "I had the dream again."