



NIA  
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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

First, a note.

The Nian Republic is fictional. There is no evidence of its existence.

But then again, for all anybody knows, the Nias could exist, and they could still be living in secrecy on the distant planet of Neath.

Now, the story.

## PROLOGUE

Nia V did not look like a dying man. He did not act like a dying man, nor did he feel like a dying man. Yet he was a dying man, and ironically enough, the cause of this was the same as the cause of his extreme unlikeness to a dying man. Nia had just finished his book, titled "NIA". The authoring of this book was not widely regarded as his greatest achievement; indeed he had commanded an inferior army at age twelve and had fought to a bitter standstill with a far more superior force, eventually establishing a peace treaty between the two sides that lasted for millennia to come; he had witnessed the fall of a two-thousand-year utopia, survived it, and ridden it out to establish another utopia in his own lifetime, which he then defended with his life and soul against rebels, assassins, clones, sorcery, and finally, historians; but yet, the humble achievement of the writing of his book satisfied him.

Presently there were two buttons on his desk. One button would deliver a drug that would extend his life for many decades more. The other would stop Nia's current medication and kill him. To most people this would be an easy decision. To Nia it was also an easy decision, but not as you may think. Nia pushed the button that stopped his medication.

# NIA I

## I

One might find it ironic that the utopia called The Nian Republic started with a single man. And a man too, not remotely like a Nia in any way.

This man, James Bendan, was born in the 1980s to a middle-class family in suburban New York. Later in his life he moved to NYC. On his 16th birthday, James Bendan received a gift that sparked his brilliant brain to kickstart the utopia called The Nian Republic.

Nia Bendan was not, contrary to what his name suggests, a Nian lizard. He was born in captivity a gecko. Nian lizards are known to develop mature intelligence at around one year of maturity; Nia did not so until he was four years and older. James received Nia as a birthday gift.

James was very interested in mechanical engineering, often building gadgets and testing them out on Nia. Nia hated James for this, but this was a very important detail in the becoming of the Nian Republic. James had a journal in which he drew intricate technical diagrams of all sorts of things, from smartwatches to orbiting vessels.

Eventually, James went to MIT to study mechanical engineering. This was when Nia's intelligence developed enough for him to appreciate James. In a few years Nia had learned fluent english, which he could read and comprehend and speak by typing. Eventually he learned how to speak the language with his own tongue. Nia may not have been a Nian lizard, but he wasn't the normal gecko.

Throughout the years, James and Nia grew very close. James built Nia something called the "Jamesmobile", which he could use to travel around and avoid injury with glider wings and gyroscopes and all sorts of things.

In 2006, James died of terminal cancer. James' will had nothing about Nia, so his executors decided to deport Nia to the wilderness. This is where the fun begins

James spent the remainder of his days designing a rocket for Nia, packed with several of his ideas. He sent the design and all of his savings to a private manufacturer with the request to build such a rocket.

By James' request, the rocket was put in a box and locked inside Nia's house shortly after he died on Tuesday, Halloween 2006.

Nia was grieved by James' death. He searched frantically for any instruction from James after learning of James' executor's plans, but could not find any. On November 2, Nia empty-handedly returned to his "house" and was carried away to the animal shelter.

The animal shelter, fortunately, was under investigation by the government at the time, and Nia was able to search inside his "house", where it occurred to him that James might have hidden instructions or a gift.

On November 4, after 2 days of scouring the house, Nia found a switch next to the door that was wired to the door of what appeared to be a secret closet.

Nia had tested the aircraft's instruments and controls to find that, in theory, it was very easy to fly, not unlike the Jamesmobile's glider functionality.

Sunday morning, James' craft soared out of an open window into the blue Manhattan sky.

Nia marveled at the sights of Manhattan as he soared over the New York bay, leaving behind his first and only home.

The aircraft was pre-programmed on a path to a location in Henan, China, and Nia assumed that James had left this path as an instruction to him and so made no attempt to modify or interrupt it.

To Nia's surprise, the aircraft started accelerating to faster than 1000 knots. This was almost Mach 2, well faster than any regulation aircraft would usually travel.

In two hours, Nia was past the Atlantic and over Madrid in Spain.

After he was over the Atlantic, the flight computer warned him of a new danger: low fuel.

The fuel would not last until Nia reached his destination of Changge.

Nia considered the situation. He would have to land somewhere or else the plane would nosedive into the ground. He would then have to make the rest of his journey by foot, which could be very hard without a navigation system. He did still have the Jamesmobile, and that granted him some advantages, but even those admittedly did not include navigation, and Nia didn't think he could wing it without any help.

As the fuel ran lower and lower, Nia was forced to begin planning an emergency landing and make the rest of his journey from the ground or by other methods, navigation system or not.

Nia began a gradual descent. Out the window, the ground slid ever so slightly closer and closer. Roads and cars and houses soon came into focus. Then, trees. Nia was soon at 500 ft.

It was too soon to be this low, but Nia feared that ascending again would cost too much fuel.

He had made a mistake in descending. He was forced to look for a suitable landing site, but he found none.

The plane traveled on and continued its ever so gradual descent. Soon it was at 300 ft, and Nia had a crisis.

The land below him was criss-crossed with trees and houses and busy roads. There was nowhere to land!

Nia despaired. The plane was approaching 100 ft. Thank god he wasn't near any major city, or he likely would've collided somewhere. But that didn't change the fact that there wasn't anywhere to land.

And then the plane dropped so suddenly it almost clipped the rooftop of a house below, and Nia was just able to pull up in time when he heard the dreaded warning.

"Critical fuel. Critical fuel. Please land and refuel immediately. Critical fuel. Critical fuel."

Nia slammed the control panel desperately to no avail. He pulled up just as he almost collided again with a tangled mess of tomato plants.

Nia pulled up as hard as he could just as the engine faltered a bit, screaming for nonexistent fuel.

The engine coughed and made a last, dying attempt to save itself from fatal collision and the plane jerked up a few feet. Then the engine screamed and died down to nothing.

In that moment when the plane was elevated, that brief moment, Nia was able to get a vantage point from above, and that was when he saw it.

There was a small but long lake ahead to the left. If he could land there, maybe Nia would survive.

Suddenly, there was a loud crack, and what looked like one of the ailerons flew off behind Nia. The plane's right wing extended for what appeared to be no reason whatsoever, causing the plane to veer left.

The lake was now dead ahead. If only, Nia thought, I could get the plane to stop veering left...

Nia's problem was solved with another crack as the left aileron flew off. The wing extended, but this one appeared to be damaged. A large flap of metal that didn't look like it should be capable of coming off was at a 45 degree angle and was twisted almost all the way around with burn marks around its perimeter.



The plane rolled left slightly, but it did not seem to be too much of a problem. The plane was still aligned with the lake and collision was imminent.

The plane came lower than tree level, narrowly avoiding yet another would-be collision with a rooftop. The trees approaching the lake, thankfully, looked to be spaced wide enough so that the plane was not in immediate danger of crashing into any of them.

Nia's fingers discolored slightly as they grappled with the control column, fighting to keep the nose lined up as the plane shuddered unpredictably.

Nia was now above the shore and almost above the lake. Nearly touching the ground, but not quite. Not just quite yet.

Time seemed to slow down suddenly as the aircraft broke free of the treeline and Nia found himself above the water. An expanse of blue, all around, filling the glass of the cockpit windshield with the water of the lake.

And then the shock of the collision jolted Nia back into The Real World.

Pain shot through Nia's legs and body as the aircraft skidded across the water, losing parts right and left. Inside the cockpit, everything was chaotic. Alarms blared. The windshield was partly submerged now as the craft continued to shakily bounce up and down on the water, shredding the wings, pulling them down and under. The nose broke off and caught on fire before becoming submerged. The canopy shuddered above Nia. The mechanical lock became undone, but the thing held in place. Drops of cold lake water drizzled in from everywhere.

The windshield cleared for one second, and through the shroud of pain, Nia saw land, dead ahead, and on that land, there was a huge temple-like structure, filled with lizards. There were lights going off beside the temple as emergency teams rushed out.

The water proceeded to submerge the windshield. Through the water, Nia could see nothing more of the temple. *I must be hallucinating*, he thought.

Then what remained of the craft struck land hard.

A wave of pain overcame Nia. The corners of his vision turned black, and his eyes felt as if they were going to pop out. The canopy flew away. The sides of the cockpit fell out. The nose skidded on forward, fueled by momentum, dragging Nia with it.

Nia was in a feverish state of misprocessing as dull pain hammered into him everywhere. He thought he saw a team of lizards lift him on to a stretcher and carry him away.

His vision turned fully black.

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## II

Nia awoke to dull pain.

His vision was blurry, and he reached up to rub his eyes, only to find that he could not move his arms.

He tried his legs - they didn't work, either.

He blinked a few times and attempted to sit up.

There was a sudden pain in his back that felt like cracking, and Nia slammed his head back into the bed that held him.

He opened his mouth and attempted to cry for help. What came out was a dry, crinkly sound that filled his mouth with a foul taste.

*Enough wasting my time on this*, thought Nia. He blinked a few more times to clear his vision.

Soon, his vision was clear enough that he could pick out the crossbeams in the ceiling.

Above him were several wooden crossbeams that were polished, smoothened and painted so white that it looked like plastic. They supported what looked like a Chinese-temple-style triangular curved rooftop.

Where was he? Nia racked his memory. What resurfaced was that of a plane. And then he remembered. He had been on James' plane to Changge,

and he had crashed in God knows where. He had survived the crash. Or had he? He didn't know. There were the lizard medical team, but that might've been a hallucination...but then how did he get here? The lizards were probably real.

Nia decided to continue to observe his current residence.

He couldn't turn his head; there was some sort of brace on his neck. He closed his eyes and focused on sound instead.

Right then, there was a muffled voice, possibly heard through a wall. It was a young, feminine voice, appearing to be very energetic and excited about something. Nia could not pick out any words.

Then there was another one, in response to the first. This one was lower, as if the speaker were older. It was quieter, more serious. Nia could not even tell if it was feminine or masculine.

The first voice replied. Nia identified it as a murmur of agreement, an affirmative to what the other said. There were footsteps, and a loud knocking on a nearby door.

The knocking startled Nia slightly. The sound carried clearly through.

Indeed, the second voice sounded disapproval. They were close, and Nia could hear the words: "Mestanzy, don't be so loud. You'll startle him."

The owner of the first, feminine voice was named Mestanzy. That was useful information.

"Sorry," responded Mestanzy. "I'm just so excited. Nobody has ever come by the Bendan temple."

*Bendan?* thought Nia. *Is this James' family?* James', and so Nia's, surname was Bendan. If the temple was affiliated with the Bendans in any way, Then he might find something of James' here.

The door creaked and opened, and there were footsteps - presumably Mestanzy's - as she walked in.

Nia opened his eyes and made an attempt to look in the direction of the sound. He squirmed a bit to try to communicate to Mestanzy that he was

awake and the neck brace was annoying, though he didn't know what Mestanzky could do about it.

Evidently, Mestanzky saw, because she said, "Sorry about the neck thing, but you were in pretty bad shape after the crash, and - heck, you don't speak our language, do you?"

Nia tried to nod affirmative, that he did speak the language, but Mestanzky began trying other languages.

"Um...I don't know many languages. Of course I know the native lizard language, I learned English at school. Something about....oh, I don't know, some history reason. Anyways, do you speak French? *Français*?" She tried to mangle the word out in a French way, but it ended up sounding weird anyway.

Nia attempted to shake his head. The brace had some give, and he was able to shake it a little. However, he still couldn't see Mestanzky.

Mestanzky probably got the message. "No? Okay. Hmm. I wonder. You can talk, you know. You don't have to keep your mouth shut. It'd be much easier to guess your language if you actually gave me some of -"

Just then, the elder spoke. "Your time is up, Mestanzky. Let's go. You can visit again when he's better. He needs to rest."

"But no! I want to talk with him!" protested Mestanzky in a whiny voice.

"Let's go," said the elder with finality.

"Fine," Mestanzky said grumpily. There were footsteps. Mestanzky left.

Nia had a lot to ponder on after the short conversation. *Native lizard language? School? Some history reason?* Could that be James, or his ancestor, maybe? Well, at least he had confirmed they were lizards. Better yet, they spoke English, and they seemed to be nice enough, if a little too jumpy for Nia's taste. Still, Nia was a gecko, not a lizard, and he wasn't sure how well that would play out.

Suddenly he became very tired and fell asleep.

Nia woke up again under the same ceiling. It felt more familiar now that he had a clue that it might be related to James.

Mestanzky was already next to him.

"Hi," Mestanzky said. "Can you talk now?"

After he had reasonably woken up a bit more, he tried to obey Mestanzky's request.

He cleared his throat a little, then gagged, and choked out: "H-hi," The taste that filled his mouth this time was just bitter. Not throw-up bitter, but still bitter.

Mestanzky seemed to have trouble controlling her delight. "Great! You can talk! What language is that? It's English, right? So you can understand me? Yay! What's your name?"

Nia had to gasp for air a bit before continuing. He had unconsciously held his breath while Mestanzky was talking. Something had happened, and now he had to make a conscious effort just to breathe. Weird.

"I'm Nia," he managed to say.

Mestanzky was confused. "But isn't Nia a girl's name?"

Nia breathed again. "Not necessarily. James named me this."

"James?" questioned Mestanzky. Then she came up with her own answer. "Oh, your guardians?"

"Guardians?" Nia was confused by what the phrase *guardians* meant in this sentence.

"Yeah, the people or lizards or geckos or whatever who raised you. We try not to discriminate between lizards and geckos and those brought up by humans or other lizards or geckos or maybe something weird like a rat." Mestanzky shuddered visibly at the thought. "Ugh, rats. I hate those things. They're scary."

Nia had seen his fair share of rats in Manhattan, and he had to agree. He was beginning to like Mestanzky.

He was finding out more info by the minute. The society here was probably where James meant him to go. It was friendly, and hey -

“Where is this?” asked Nia.

“The Bendan Temple,” answered Mestanzzy, matter-of-factly.

“No, I mean the city.”

Mestanzzy seemed to get it then. “Oh. Um, it’s off of a highway in China. There’s a sign not far from here that says C-H-A-N-G-G-E and some Chinese, but nobody knows what it means. Changge is the name of a city or something. Or maybe they just misspelled Change. Although why would they have a highway sign that says Change? Weird.”

Changge. Nia had reached Changge.

Over the next few days, Nia was able to find out lots of information from Mestanzzy, who visited almost every time that he was awake. Nia told Mestanzzy about James and his old life back in Manhattan. Mestanzzy told Nia about the Bendan Temple, and Nia began to look forward to being able to not be braced to a bed and living life at the Bendan Temple. His plane had been scavenged, he heard, and awaited his orders to do whatever with them. Now that Nia had confirmed that he was at where James intended him to go, he was ready to take it all in.

Nia’s neck brace was removed. Medical lizards filled out a report and gave it to Nia. He had broken a huge list of bones, punctured his lung, injured neck, blah, blah, blah. Nia felt great for a guy who had a hole in his lung.

Mestanzzy was horrified by the list of Nia’s injuries. She squirmed as each item was read.

Soon, Nia was well enough for a wheelchair. He followed Mestanzzy around on a tour of the temple.

The temple was a 3-floored complex, with a central pentagonal structure and wings spiraling from each side but one. There were 3 courtyards in between each wing. The other 2 sides was the main entrance to the temple.

There were ramps and stairs in the central hall that led to each floor, though those were the only ramps in the building and even so Nia could not ascend or descend throughout floors without assistance.

Many of the shared family rooms - the dining hall, the living room, the study room - were on the second floor. The first floor was mostly either guest bedrooms, storage, or workshops. The third floor had most of the bedrooms and the hospital wing.

Nia was given a temporary bedroom on the second floor. He ended up using the second floor the most. He often found himself in the study rooms, reading up on the history of the temple and the settlement around it. Mestanzzy told him wonderful things about the lizard settlement other than the Bendan temple itself, though Nia had never actually been anywhere else in the settlement.

Nia met Miso (Isn't that like, a Japanese soup or something?, Nia thought), a big lizard with an appetite for tree nuts that seemed kind enough, the elder lizard who was talking to Mestanzzy the first day and whose name was Mrs. Bendan (really?), and a handful of little lizards that swarmed him with questions.

Nia noticed that Mestanzzy called everyone lizards, even though many were geckos and there were actually very few lizards, and called all the little lizards "geckos". He questioned her on this, to which Mestanzzy replied, "Another branch of our anti-discrimination attempts; geckos are little lizards and geckos, and all adults and sometimes younger (she snickered) adults we call lizards."

Nia had to adjust to the new naming system, and quite often he still found himself confused when somebody called him a lizard, but he understood and respected the reasons for it and did his best to change.

After two weeks of being confined to a wheelchair, quietly reading stacks and stacks of books and conferring with Mestanzky, the medical lizards informed Nia that he was ready to come out of the wheelchair.

Of course, Mestanzky immediately insisted that he go on a tour of the entire town. There were electric bikes, she told him, available for use.

Nia was amazed by the similarities between the bike and the Jamesmobile. He could probably upgrade the Jamesmobile so that it could also fold out into an electric bike. *That'd be awesome*, he thought.

One of the courtyards had a little garage leading out to a path, which was where Mestanzky led Nia out into the settlement.

Nia saw the lake again. It was just as he remembered - a glimmering expanse of water, filling up all of his vision - except now he didn't have to worry about dying and he proceeded to take everything in. A cobble road ran around the perimeter of the lake, ringing the blue with a nice light grey.

Mestanzky zoomed ahead on her bike, bouncing up and down precariously across the cobbles, yelling "Woo-hoo!" and wheeling around again, sending smaller specs flying and her own bike bumping around across the terrain. Nia rode slowly, taking in the forest around them. It was pretty dense, though maybe that was because he was now on the ground as opposed to 50 feet in the air.

Nia followed Mestanzky halfway around the lake to where there was a path that led away from the temple, into a dense forest of grasses and weeds. The path was covered by a long archway corridor of grasses and other plants. The cobbles in the path thinned out until they were just scattered bumps that served as minor annoyances, and the road turned to a much smoother but dirtier-looking dirt or some sort of clay or adobe.

They emerged from the archway corridor at a T road intersection along another dirt road. To both sides of this new road were hundreds of adobe houses, each with their own yard and little vegetable farm. Nia looked up and



down the road in awe at all the lizards that lived here. There must have been thousands and thousands and thousands of them!

Mestanzky again zoomed ahead, shouting back to Nia, "Come on! I'll introduce you to some of my friends!"

Nia stepped on the accelerator, but the tires suddenly lost traction and the bike did a sort of skid-drift onto the left road, after Mestanzky's trail of dust.

The adobe houses were all very similar, with a plaque on each that read what Nia would assume to be street numbers - they were in between 60 and 62 and opposite 61 at the intersection.

Mestanzky roared ahead, Nia keeping pace on the dirt road, kicking up dirt everywhere. Eventually Mestanzky slowed down and skidded into the yard of adobe house number 19. She jumped off her bike and sprinted over to the door. Nia followed suit.

By the time Nia had reached the door, a young lizard - a *gecko*? Nia still wasn't sure where the line was drawn - seemingly a little younger than Mestanzky burst through the door.

"*Salut*, Mestanzky!" she said cheerfully.

Mestanzky rolled her eyes. Nia recognized *Salut* as French, though for all he knew, it could just as easily be another language.

"Who's this?" she asked, gesturing at Nia.

"Okay," Mestanzky said, then breathed. "Introductions. Liza, this is Nia. Nia, this is Liza." she exhaled.

"*Bonjour*, Nia!" said Liza, just as cheerfully as Mestanzky.

"*Bonsoir*," Nia corrected, "Liza. *Enchante*."

"Yeah, whatever...I've only been in French for half a year, y'know. Anyways, c'mon in."

Liza's house was orderly through and through, although with the occasional board game or book lying about.

An older lizard - but not an adult - came down the stairs. "Bonsoir, Monsieur," he said. "I don't think I know you. What's your name?"

"I'm Nia," said Nia.

"Course, we gonna do intros anyways," said Liza. "Nia, this is my good bro Will. Will, this is my friend Mestanzy's friend Nia."

Will smiled. "Hi, Nia,"

"Nice to meet you, Will," said Nia.

"Are you new to this town? We haven't had any newcomers in years, y'know."

Mestanzy spoke up. "Nia came here from New York."

Liza's eyes lighted up. "New York? NEW YORK? AWESOMESAUCEY SAUCE! TELL ME ABOUT IT!"

Nia spent the rest of the afternoon attempting to explain the awesomesaucey sauceyness of Manhattan to Liza.

The next day, tours continued. Mestanzy showed Nia the school, the epic Noverc Academy that everyone wanted to get into and that Nia should probably visit sometime, the government hall, some other friends' houses, and they wound up back at the Bendan Temple, where Mestanzy insisted that now Nia tell her about the Jamesmobile and James and the plane.

Finally, touring was over and Nia set to work on recovering James' plane.

Word about Nia got around. Lizards came and went to visit Nia in his garage, busily attempting to revive James' components, but he lacked many of the right tools and materials for repairing.

Mrs. Bendan kept the visitors regulated and manageable. She recorded Nia's talking about Manhattan and set up an exhibit for that. In two days, the excitement had died down quite a bit, and Nia was able to focus. He still couldn't get the right tools, so he tried to build his own.

Three days in, Nia got a surprise visitor. Felipe Lexar from the Noverc Academy came seeking a study about Nia and the outside world from which he came from. In return he would get tools and a team to help him work on James' craft and maybe upgrade the Jamesmobile.

Nia readily accepted the deal. He spent hours and hours in study rooms, drafting up a full report with drawings. Meanwhile, Noverc Academy helped edit and compiled a team of mechanics and technicians for Nia.

Two days later, Nia submitted the first draft and the Noverc Academy's crew started working per Nia's instructions on James' craft.

One the first day of work, there were many runs as tools were shipped to the garage at the Bendan Temple. Eventually, they realized that some of their machines were way too big to even consider shipping, so they took the whole entire plane wreck and instead carted that to the Noverc Academy's garage.

Here, there were big machines - huge laser cutters, industrial metal 3D printers, new screens, computer hardware, recovery machines - that sped up the process considerably. The computer segments were stripped away for separate repair while the body of the craft was repaired according to some blueprints found in the recovered Black Box.

With the blueprints, repairing the body was easy; however, the left wing proved to be way too damaged to use, and so they had to rebuild it from scratch.

The computers were much harder to repair. James had stashed tons of data onto 8 1TB drives in a RAID 10 configuration to speed up response time, and so much of the data was vastly unrecoverable. Many of the other components were scorched beyond repair, but that wasn't a problem, as there were many supercomputer units in the academy and replacements were easily obtained.

What remained of James' data was thankfully much of the ingenious flight software and whatnot. Expert coders at the academy spent a full month trying to make sense of all the code and repair corrupted codes.

Mestanzky visited constantly, enthusiastically supervising every portion of the repair

The repaired or rebuilt body of the plane was outfitted with a modified Noverc flight computer to test.

As Nia took off in the temporary plane, he felt lonely without Mestanzky and was suddenly reminded of James. In the air, he was away from the only familiar person that he trusted other than James. He radioed Noverc and told them that he was incapable of performing the flight tests alone and so on the first flight only the takeoff and landing tests were carried out.

Nia had the blueprints modified to seat two lizards. Mestanzky was informed of this and assumed that Nia wanted a professional co-pilot to help him in case the plane malfunctioned, but when the modifications were complete and the flight was scheduled, Nia asked Mestanzky to come along with him.

Mestanzky was surprised that Nia would prefer someone that he met only a week ago over a pilot that he knew would be trained and could save him in an emergency, but enthusiastically agreed to come help him.

Five weeks into the repair process, James' aircraft took to the skies for the third time, with Nia as pilot and Mestanzky as copilot.

As the wind blew around above the canopy, creating a loud whooshing sound, Mestanzky gripped her chair. The front wheels lifted up off the ground, then the rear wheels, and the modified plane was airborne.

Nia noticed Mestanzky and asked, "First time flying?"

This came through as a static-ridden radio signal sound in Mestanzky's headset.

Mestanzky nodded, and then realized that Nia's eyes were glued to the flight computer's screen since there was no trained co-pilot to do that for him. "Yeah,"

The view from above was incredible - the lake, the huge temple, the orderly line of houses. However, if they flew too high or too low, everything became translucent-like. Nia made a note to ask the Noverc Academy people about it.

For Mestanzky, it was a breathtaking view. "Amaze," she gasped into the headset.

Nia laughed, then radioed ground control. "Ready for test 1?"

Mestanzky suddenly got scared. "Tests?"

Nia looked back a little. "Yeah, we're here to test, not just to admire the view, yeah? Don't worry, it'll be fine. This is James' little creation here, remember?"

"Hmm," Mestanzky replied nervously.

The first test was easy; they simply had to circle the lake. A path lit up on the navigation system. Nia found the Noverc systems harder to use than James' systems, though it was manageable.

The second test was an endurance flight from Changge to Xuechang to Zhengzhou and then back, following the highway and the navigation equipment. The projected flight plan would take about 2 hours at a slow speed at low altitudes. Humans, predicted the academy, would mistake the aircraft for a remote-controlled vehicle or drone.

The major cities were amazing from above. Nia flew so low that they were right beside the windows on tall buildings in Zhengzhou, and Mestanzky, who had never seen a city before, excitedly gasped at everything.

The whole flight was recorded and livestreamed to televisions and computers all around the settlement. Lizards had trouble peeling their eyes off their screens to do anything else, and geckos gathered around them, Oohing and Aahing at the sights just as Mestanzky had done.

Soon, the plane had circled around completely and was back above Bendan. Lizards and geckos rushed outside to get a glimpse of the plane. It shined, reflecting sunlight, and gleamed a metallic white.

Nia was informed that the next test was a speed test. Put quite simply, Nia was asked to fly from Zhengzhou to Beijing as fast as the engine allowed.

Again, geckos and lizards gathered and oohed and aahed at the speed of the landscape zooming by at almost Mach 2.

In less than half an hour, the plane was above Beijing. Nia flew around the city for Mestanzky and all the geckos gathered around the TV. There were anti-smog filters installed around the cockpit, so the sights were much more clearly visible.

The smog that remained provided a nearly magical curtain effect. One second it was covered by smog, the next it was a supertall tower.

Needless to say, the experience for the young geckos who had rarely been anywhere further than the safety of the streets of the settlements was magical.

Half an hour later, the plane landed at the Noverc Academy's (and the whole settlements') only runway for refueling.

Nia decided that the plane needed a name, but he couldn't decide on any. He handed down the decision to his Noverc Academy crew.

Nia's crew decided on the name *Megan*.

And so the *Megan* it was.

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### III

Nia settled into Bendan life. 4 days a week Mestanzky went to school from 7:30 to 2:30. The school day started early and ended early because everyone was so tight-knit and close to the building.

Nia had the task of taking care of Mestanzu. He accompanied Mestanzu to her school everyday, often went to the Academy to write, read, or take care of the *Megan*, and then picked Mestanzu up again and accompanied her back to the Bendan Temple.

One day, Mestanzu insisted on taking a shortcut through a different path into the forest. Nia reluctantly followed.

Mestanzu trotted ahead confidently, with Nia trailing behind. Soon, they came to a split in the path.

“Um. Oh well, let’s try right first,” said Mestanzu. “We can always backtrack.”

Nia rolled his eyes, but followed Mestanzu to the right.

Then they came to another split. They went right.

Then another path conjoined theirs. And another. And another, and both Nia and Mestanzu lost track of where they were. They attempted to backtrack, but could not find a way back.

Mestanzu started panicking. Nia called Mrs. Bendan and assured her that they were fine, just slightly lost. They would find their way out eventually.

Then, Mestanzu spotted some bricks. “There!” she yelled. She began sprinting for the building.

Mestanzu stopped in front of the main entrance.

Nia caught up to her, panting and shaking his head.

The building was a simple brick rectangle with a flat roof outfitted with satellite dishes, radar, and other unidentifiable things. The walls were covered in vines.

“What a cliché way to die,” said Nia.

“Relax!” said Mestanzu. “We’ll just ask that lizard inside to show us the way out. If he lives or works here he probably knows how to get out.”

“You were the one panicking,” retorted Nia. He knocked on the heavy glass doors.

Indeed, a lizard with a beige fedora hat came over. Lizards wearing human-style accessories were so uncommon and pointless that Nia had to resist laughing out loud.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m LFA. How may I help you today?”

“Umm, we’re kind of lost. Can you tell us how to get to the Bendan Temple?” Nia asked.

The lizard named LFA scratched his chin. “Bendan Temple?...I don’t recall knowing what that is, but I have some maps inside that might be of some help.”

“May we see them?” asked Mestanzky.

“Of course!” said LFA. “But can you come tour this building and tell the folks up at your Bendan Temple to come visit sometime? It’s been a long time since anyone came around here,”

“Sure!” said Nia.

“Okay! Come on in.”

LFA’s brick house was more modern inside.

The walls were a modern-looking white-grey. There were low couches and tables and potted plants that were recognizable from the forest. In the far corner was an L-shaped desk setup with three computer monitors. Awards were hanging from the walls advertising LFA’s awesomeness.

LFA reached up to his computer and brought up some maps, then projected them onto a wall. He invited Nia to sit down on a couch opposite the wall.

Nia, of course, did not recognize the map, but Mestanzky yelled, “There!” at the familiar roads of the Bendan Temple at the far bottom of the map.

However, this map was only a terrain map and did not include anything about the paths.



LFA searched around but could not find a map that both had the paths and the direction of the Bendan Temple.

Nia suggested that they try to infer the directions based off of the other maps, but everyone was quickly confused by the constant cross-referrals and nobody could accomplish anything.

By this time, there was an unpredicted drizzle coming in, and it looked like there might be hail, judging by the hue of the sky.

LFA regarded the heavens gravely, as seriously as one may be whilst deciding a man's fate. "You might have to spend the night here," he told Nia.

Nia and Mestanzky readily agreed.

Indeed, minutes later hail poured down in buckets, battering the roof. There was a constant *dink-dink* as marble-sized hailstones slammed down to the ground.

LFA showed Nia and Mestanzky two bedrooms that used to be used by guests when there were visitors.

Nia had just settled in for the night when Mestanzky came running into Nia's room. She shivered and told Nia that she was frightened by the hail.

Nia stayed in bed uncomfortably with Mestanzky for a bit, then decided that it was too awkward and weird and took a blanket and slept on the floor.

Nia stayed on the hard floor, staring up at the ceiling in the dark, listening to Mestanzky's even breathing. The hail continued to pound down, but Nia had gotten used to the constant plitter-plattering.

Soon, Nia's eyelids grew heavy and he fell asleep.

The next day, Nia and Mestanzky went back to trying to decode their way back. Eventually, they gave up and attempted to try and radio Noverc to take the *Megan* out to look for them.

Nia and Mestanzky crawled onto the roof with LFA and attempted to set a small signal fire.

Minutes later, two planes, one the *Megan*, circled the smoke of the fire and landed at a nearby clearing.

Nia grinned, thanked LFA, promised to lead other lizards to come visit and keep in touch, and stepped into the *Megan* with Mestanzu. The pilot that was previously in the *Megan* saluted to Nia and LFA before proceeding to get into the back of the other plane.

Nia spent a year at the Changge settlement, living a happy life. He kept his promise to LFA and he often spent weekends taking geckos to tour the LFA building deep in the forest. With the help of the *Megan*, a more complete map of the forest maze was completed. Compasses were distributed so that maps could be more easily used.

LFA informed Nia that the translucency of the settlement was because of a camouflaging shield that he had set up years ago, when he had first moved into the forest to assemble it and experiment with other dangerous things.

Nia wrote many books about human life during his time at Changge. He also took many of James' books that he had memorized and transcribed them into the "native" lizard language, which Nia had taken up. Nia's rank moved up, and he became almost famous in the little settlement. He started a "Nia club" where he taught geckos about stuff.

Meanwhile, he continued to study at the Noverc Academy. Startlingly, at request, the Noverc Academy was able to obtain a copy of James' technology notebook. Nia read about James' latest idea, an orbital spacecraft that would go into orbit by a high-altitude helium balloon and could sustain a large population of what were really geckos but what James called "Nian Lizards" like Nia. He presented the design to the academy, and they worked on formalizing blueprints as a fun project, or just in case they needed it. Meanwhile, the coders dug deeper into the code of the *Megan*, attempting to fix it or make sense of it, and found a set of calculations for control surfaces of

a spacecraft matching the description in James' notebook. The calculations were presented to the blueprint designers, who were delighted to find that they could just build up the craft based on the pre-determined calculations of the weight, the drag coefficients, and whatnot of the spacecraft. They soon found that James had been a genius in his own right, having compiled such an amazing ship that was so perfectly tailored for the lizards of the settlement that they wondered whether James could read the future.

As it was, in spring of 2007<sup>1</sup>, the tech team at the Noverc Academy reported that there was going to be construction on the highway near the settlement and that they were going to try and build a highway exit right on top of the settlement.

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## IV

As panic spread, Nia became involved with committees at the Noverc Academy as well as continuing to send out updates through the Nia Club and constantly collaborating with LFA and those at the Bendan Temple. As it was, he had mutually positive connections to almost everybody of importance in the settlement, as well as being physically attractive and having a way of charming people with words. He gradually rose to the top in command, right after the leaders of the Noverc Academy and experienced elders like Mrs. Bendan.

The Academy organized a daily meeting, and live, 24/7 (but toggleable) Skype was set up to everyone who attended, including Nia, Felipe Lexar (the guy who first contacted Nia and turned out to be the head director of the Noverc Academy), Mrs. Bendan, Miso, sometimes LFA (though he was always on Skype even before the announcements had been made), and more.

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<sup>1</sup> There was no officially recorded service on Highway G4 in spring of 2007 near Changge that would suggest that an extra exit or any type of interaction at all with the area surrounding the highway.

Mestanzky was able to come and view the meeting as a VIP inside the room, and there was a large viewing room that ringed the meeting room where the public could come and listen. Everything was also livestreamed to television with helpful summaries of what was going on in the corner for those who could not leave their homes.

Construction was started at double-time for James' spacecraft. Committees worked 24/7 to attempt to build, and build, and build. Teams searched for high-altitude balloons and pumps.

Sometimes, as Nia sat in the meeting room, monitoring progress and planning provisions, he felt James watching down on them, grinning mischievously as his dream came to life.

By late June of 2007, three ships had been built. A helium balloon had been found and a pump was ready to be deployed at the push of a button. The highway people had marked off the land and started clearing trees. Soon, they would be at the settlement, but in the meantime, LFA's genius camouflage seemed to keep them safe. However, more often than not now, heavy shadows felled the whole of the settlement and forest in a shroud of darkness in the day, and at night nearby lights blinded anyone who looked outside and the groaning, rusty generators hummed noisily in the background. Lizards were advised to sleep as much as they could in the day. School continued, though the schedule was shifted several hours back and current events classes were added.

The ships began to be outfitted with living necessities. Soon, families of lizards and geckos moved in to the onboard apartments and cabins. Much of the Bendan temple was unpacked and moved into the ship, into a space remarkably similar to the Bendan temple. What was more was that the room had already been sketched by James in his journal. By now, everyone treated James as a future-telling divine genius that just happened to be Nia's owner, which brought even more fame to Nia (everyone expected him to have some

trace of James' genius, and indeed he showed it in his excellent leadership) and now he assumed almost unprecedented dictatorship, which he was not sure that he liked, but everyone else certainly seemed to be happy with it and so Nia played along, doing his best as dictator (Nia would grimace at the word). Even Felipe obeyed his commands now.

Eventually, almost all the lizards lived onboard in apartments almost identical to the interior of their old adobe houses.

In the last days before departure, the adobe houses were either knocked down or transferred to the cargo bay. The whole of LFA's building and camouflage system was literally ripped out of the ground and thrown in the cargo bay, then hooked up to all the anti-shock coatings and shells and power supplies. The Bendan Temple was disassembled, compressed, and packed into the ship. Mestanzky melted down as the house that she had lived in for half a lifetime was taken apart, piece by piece.

The takeoff was scheduled for a month after everything was set up so that people could bid farewell to life as they knew it, but a week into this period construction was advanced and trees were felled almost right on top of the still-camouflaged ship. Checks were performed hastily and a helium balloon rose into the sky with its camouflaged cargo.

The takeoff was excitement for many young geckos but a morbid farewell to long-lived lizards who had spent nearly the whole of their lives on Earth.

Nia, Felipe, and others, though, were too focused on checks on everything from ascent speed and tilt of the spacecraft to security measures and how best to regulate all the passengers on all three ships to view the brilliant takeoff. All day long the first day, Nia and the others were gathered around the meeting room. Mestanzky was invited to run the radio station, whose voice was broadcast throughout the ship, reading out reports from Nia

and the crew, with Nia often leaning over her shoulder and clarifying certain items in a muttered voice.

Shift one drew to an end with the passing of a grizzly 8 hours, and the second shift people came on, some who had insisted on also working the all-important first shift and was running their second 8-hour shift in a row.

Nia wanted to stay online, but Felipe insisted that he sleep. He, Felipe reminded him, still had to run the next two shifts and staying awake for 32 hours straight would drive him crazy sooner rather than later (someone had been reading too many creepypastas).

As it was, Nia slept soundly for some 8 hours, even cutting 30 minutes into his next shift.

Nia dreamed that he was back in his house.

*If this is a dream, Nia thought in the dream, it certainly is very, very vivid, and I am not usually a lucid dreamer. Besides, I can easily think clearly and consciously.*

He opened the front door to find himself back in James' apartment.

James sat at his table, sketching a picture of the *Megan* in flight, with the word MEGAN written across the top.

James slowly wheeled around to face Nia, then his mouth spread into a grin.

"You have done brilliantly," he told Nia, leaning in towards him. "I could not have done a better job."

"Is this a dream?" Nia asked, then was surprised. That was the first time that he had communicated directly with James. Now that Nia knew that he was capable of it, it felt weird. "I mean, are you real?"

James' smile split even wider. "What a cliché question, Nia. And so I think I'll provide a clichéd answer, what do you say? Of course this is real, but only in your head." And then James bellowed out a deep laugh. "Nia, of course

this is real! I may be dead, but then again, what does that mean at all?" He laughed again.

Nia smiled and settled back into sleep, knowing that he had satisfied James and was on the right track.

Nia woke up.

He glanced at the clock on his bedside table and saw that he was 15 minutes past when 8 hours had been up.

He got up, dressed, and walked over to his desk, flicking on the desk lamp and his computer.

He typed up his dream. He didn't want to lose it, especially not the forty-two reference at the end.

Mestanzky read Nia's story on the radio.

She had started something called the "Joke of the hour", where every hour she would tell a joke. Of course, this was only when she was online, which was twelve hours a day, not counting meal and bathroom breaks. She tended, however, to spend her 90 minutes of meal breaks all in the radio room, keeping company with Nia. She also did her best not to use her 30 minutes of bathroom breaks.

A few days and 16-hour operating and 8-hour resting shifts later, the helium balloon had successfully taken James' three ships up to 100 km up in the sky, and the helium balloon seemed to be about ready to implode at any second.

The crew was all gathered in the meeting room, including those who were now in their 20th hour in a row.

Calculations were made at competition speeds as the crafts got ready to break away from the dying balloon and go into orbit.

Rockets were fired up in an upward direction to support it these last few meters until they passed the Karman line.

Suddenly there was a sickening crunch as the balloon imploded, dragging the lines, still rigged to James' spacecraft, in. The deflated balloon started falling down to Earth, slowly, in the reduced gravity.

The crew watched in terror as the balloon shrank out of view and began dragging the craft, complete with fired-up rockets, back down to earth.

Nia screamed inside his head, panic almost driving him immobile, but Mestanzky's announcement on the radio snapped him back to reality. Nia yelled, "Release the lines!"

Nobody responded.

Nia vaulted over the table and shoved the first officer aside, punching the release command in.

Nothing. The craft continued to sink.

Nia smacked his forehead.

"No, no."

Suddenly, James' voice spoke.

"Nia, release the lines."

Apparently, everyone else heard it too, because they looked around in awe.

"I can't!" yelled Nia.

"Release the hatches that the lines are attached to, then."

Nia felt like slapping himself.

"EVACUATE ROOMS 9A AND 9B!" yelled Nia. Hours of looking over the blueprints and planning strategically saw to it that Nia memorized the exact rooms under the hatches that the lines were attached to. Call it luck, call it James' genius, but it happened.

Mestanzky screamed the command into the radio. Soon, second officer confirmed that it was evacuated.

Security officer punched some commands in, and suddenly there was a tremendous groan.



From the officer's cameras, Nia could see that the walls of the room suddenly caved in, all the stuff pouring out into the vacuum of outer space. The doors showed signs of giving in, too.

"No!" screamed Nia. "Emergency airlock doors! Quick! A18BE and A19BE!"

A split second before the wooden doors caved in, metal airlock doors dropped into position. Splinters of wood came off of the doors, huge swarms of them, and flew off into space. Soon there was nothing but the metal airlocks where the doors used to be.

The walls were a crippled mess, the door and all the belongings of residents 9A and 9B gone, floating off into space, but the crisis had been avoided.

Suddenly, the crew broke into applause as primary rockets fired off and the craft officially entered orbit.

Nia could hear James clapping and laughing right along.

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## V

After the craft went into orbit, Nia's shift shortened to 12 hours. He now had 12 hours for resting. Then, after a week with no problems and 78 (!) orbits around the earth, Nia's shift shortened to 8 hours, then 6 hours, then the job of piloting was switched to the first and second officers and Nia didn't have a set shift anymore.

People were quick to settle into life on the spaceship in space. What was the most new, it seemed, was the view of glistening stars right outside of the window against the dark, infinite black space beyond.

Nia kept thinking of Owl City's Alligator Sky, a single line of lyrics in particular:

"I'm sittin' where I'm supposed to

Floatin' on the cloud, can't nobody come close to  
The concrete and the sky switch places  
So now my ceiling is painted with cosmic spaces.”

Weeks later, another part of Alligator Sky came to Nia's mind.

“Where was I when the rockets came to life  
And carried you away into the alligator sky  
Even though, I'll never know what's up ahead  
I'm never lettin' go, I'm never lettin' go...”

Nia missed life at the settlement back on Earth. In fact, he missed earth itself, now only being able to see it from 100 kilometers up in the sky. It was a good life, but a nostalgic one.

Life continued. Isolated life. Nia read digital books - the traditional book collection was far too small, and Nia had sucked the life out of the whole library very quickly. He decided to rewrite interesting books - The Hitchhiker's Galaxy, several encyclopedias...

Nia frowned as his smartwatch beeped. He was called to the control cabin.

When he got there, he snorted at the cliched situation.

The ship was being sucked into an undetectable object that warped everything into it and nothing back out.

In short, the ship was heading for a black hole.

The crew held tight. There was no escape from the black hole. They could try and capture as much data as possible and send it back to Earth, which was miraculously out of reach of the black hole. However, space

stations and craft like the ISS were doomed. Astronauts were evacuated on experimental Virgin Galactic SpaceshipThree's.

As the ship drifted in, everyone somber-faced, they prepared to be torn into particles.

The clocks onboard spun wildly.

Suddenly, there was a flash of black.

The black hole was nowhere in sight.

They were in orbit again, above a planet much like earth -

Except it wasn't Earth, and they weren't in orbit.

They were falling.

Nia had no time to worry about what had just happened, complete with black hole that turned out to be a wormhole of sorts and whatnot.

"Emergency landing," he concluded, watching the dials on the altitude meter fall.

Of course, James had not let them go unprepared. There was a set autopilot course for emergency landings, which Nia gladly activated.

"Mapping," breathed Nia, after a few minutes.

"Mapping?" replied Felipe, who was standing next to him.

Nia took control again. "Mapping. Fire up all the instruments - radar, sonar, whatever - and set the cameras rolling. Try to launch some satellites too, while we're up here."

"Roger," said first officer. He started typing a frenzy of commands.

"Mestanzky, radio. Tell everyone we're landing again, but not on Earth, and those who want a fuller explanation will get one if they come to the meeting room's viewing ring after we land."

"On it," said Mestanzky, then shut the door to the radio booth, punched the broadcast button, and started speaking frenziedly into the microphone.

Then the crew got an unexpected visitor.

"Nia! We're've four years in the future!"

Nia spun around. "What?"

"The clocks," It was Liza, Mestanzky's friend, and possibly the first non-Bendan lizard Nia had met in his life. "They's were spinning superfast, y'know, an' now there back to norm, but now our clocks er' readin' 2011, it's craze awesome!"

Nia rubbed his eyes tiredly. Time travel was a side effect of being sucked into a wormhole, what with a gap in space and time and whatnot. They were lucky not to have been spun to the end of the universe (or beyond).

"That's interesting," Nia replied. "We teleported to a new planet too." He pointed out the windows.

"Whoa! It looks a whole lot like Earth though, ain't it?" Liza started air-drawing the continents of Earth.

"It does, but it clearly isn't Earth. I think Mestanzky needs some help in the radio booth."

Mestanzky was struggling along, trying to broadcast the scripted info and answer anxious folks from three ships simultaneously. It was amazing that she could manage it.

"Will do!" said Liza, then tore the door open and crammed herself in with Mestanzky in the radio booth.

Nia grinned at the two little lizards screaming stuff at the microphones.

Meanwhile, a full map compiled from all the sensors was creating itself on a big screen above the windows. There were figures of satellites that launched away from a 3D model of the ship floating above the rest of the map, drawing closer at every passing second. The whole thing was very epic.

Camera footage from hundreds of other cameras rolled simultaneously, showing themselves on separate, smaller screens to the sides of the bigger screen displaying the supermap.

As the spaceships got lower, Nia wondered why he had made no attempt at all to try and stop the fall.

“Rockets! Full vertical at negative a hundred!” Nia commanded.

There was a roar as second officer followed Nia’s commands. The whole entire ship shuddered, then tilted to the left a sly bit. The ship eventually leveled out, but the roar and the shaking stayed.

“What’s going on?” asked Mestanzky, peeking her head out of the booth.

“Rockets,” growled Nia, clutching the railing of his command podium as the ship shook left and right.

Mestanzky disappeared back into the booth.

“Shock absorbers! Fire all the backup and emergency rockets!”

The ship groaned again and the descent slowed a bit, although they continued to fall.

LFA ran into the room. “Nia, the shield is down. Also, all the computers are going crazy downstairs!”

Nia groaned. “Of course they are, we just entered a new decade a few minutes ago. Or a year ago, from different standpoints.”

“I realized,” said LFA. “But the navigation stuff is down too. This isn’t Earth, and there aren’t any artificial satellites in orbit yet.

“We’re working on that,” Nia gestured at the map that was getting more detailed and bigger every second.

“Hmm,” said LFA.

A message appeared on Nia’s command screen. It said,

NIA, JAMES NAV SYSTEM IS DOWN. I GUESS IT COULDN’T COPE WITH EVERYTHING. WE HAVE TO LAND MANUALLY. -Second Class Navigator

Nia groaned again. “Manual landing, everyone. Hang on to your buttocks.”

The ship suddenly tilted left as what could only be identified as an air thermal sent it tumbling portside. James' autopilot apparently crashed, and their own local autopilot was outfitted for Earth and wouldn't help here.

Everyone in the crew who wasn't sitting down, including Nia and LFA, slid to the left wall, slamming into Mestanzky's radio booth.

The officers still seated quickly corrected this, and the cabin leveled out, though the rumbling was still there.

The map on the screen was now distorted and appeared to be caving in on itself in weird, geometric chunks. It slowly corrected itself, but the figure of the ship spun wildly as the computer tried to figure out how to pair itself with the data rolled in by the tilt.

Mestanzky assured everyone that it was okay, and that if they turned on their TVs they would get a view of the main control cabin.

There were several people in the viewing rooms already, anxiously waiting for touchdown.

Nia scrambled to one of the officers' empty desks. All the text was weird and unreadable. Only the map had been reliable, and that was still correcting itself, although now it was at least usable.

The manual override still worked, thankfully. Nia switched to the fixed camera's feed from the front of the ship, showing basically what everybody else saw through the front windshield, enhanced with other sensors' information and the flight computer's data in a green-accented UI. Beautiful. It was just like the middle screen of the *Megan*.

Nia made a mental note to reassemble the team and get them working on the code as soon as possible.

There was a large clearing below with only scattered trees. Nia thought that he could land there, with one problem.

They had almost no way of controlling the ship.

All of the thrusters were used to keep the ship from plummeting at terminal velocity, and without any working autopilot, nobody knew well enough what would happen if they adjusted the rockets even a tiny bit.

Then, Nia remembered. There was still a working flight autopilot onboard.

It was the primitive system aboard the *Megan* that had been recovered from James' code.

Twenty grueling minutes later, two out of three ships landed successfully on the surface of the new planet.

The third ship's cargo bay was crunched to oblivion, and some of the vacant cabins in the lower portion of the ship were also destroyed. There were no major injuries and twenty-seven minor injuries of people who were either injured in the pre-*Megan* crazy flying by Nia's crew or the post-*Megan* crazy landing that also saved their necks (although one neck was bruised by the zipper of a pillow that went flying when the ship tilted).

Fire mechanisms and crews rushed to the third ship from the first, second, and within the third ship. There were huge plumes of fire spreading throughout the ships at each second, endangering the hundreds of lizards and geckos onboard.

Lizards were advised by Mestanzky to stay in their cabins and keep their TV sets or computers tuned to channel 5, radios on to Mestanzky's broadcast.

Nia wasted no time, even amid the fire, sending scouting teams out with heavy equipment to measure things like atmospheric density, the composition of the air, the molecules of the soil.

By the time it was confirmed that it was safe to go out without heavy safety suits, the fire in Ship 3 had been contained and there were lizards pouring out of the smoke-infested cabins of the ship.

Lizards in ships 1 and 2, meanwhile, started drizzling into the main hall. Here, a giant 360 degree surround screen showed Mestanzky on one side and

Nia and the rest of the crew on the other, telling everyone about announcements. The same screens and audio started playing on all TVs and radios on the ship.

Screens folded down from the top of hallways, informing lizards caught in the mob of important information.

“We have confirmed that the planet is safe to go out on, and ship three’s lizards are already out,” Nia said. “However, you should stay aboard the ship until we can get procedures organized for how to make sure everyone gets off safely and retrieve their stuffs.”

Mestanzky spoke up. “Our suggestion is to go to your cabins and start packing your stuff. When you are done packing, go to one of the viewing rooms, the main hall, or the canopy. Keep tuned to your TVs and radios in the meantime.”

The tide of lizards reversed as they rushed to get back to their cabins to pack. The previously unlucky folks trapped in their cabins were now the lucky ones, and they started to pack everything up.

Then, Nia put on a new announcement. “However, while we get housing set up, you should use your ship cabins as shelter. Pack, however, all things that you won’t need in your day-to-day life, such as most furniture, books, materials that you won’t need, etcetera. You can also just pack everything up and use the ships’ public supplies, such as the cafeteria and onboard offices.”

The urgency eased gradually as the crowd in the main hall thinned. Lizards with carts of boxes and bags lined up in the corridors, viewing rooms, and main hall, all wanting to breathe fresh air, to see daylight again, even if it wasn’t their sun that they felt or their native air that they breathed.

A few hours later, the corridors and viewing rooms were full of almost single-file lizards, which was amazing considering the sheer amount of people aboard.



Nia pushed a button and both sides of the corridor turned to seats, which lizards gladly took after waiting these hours. The main hall's floorboards also rose up into benches, and the viewing room already had benches installed.

It was a long wait from then. There were still updates over the intercom, informing lizards of who was to go where, what color they were, and then changing these things. Every other monitor started to display the text summaries of what Nia was saying instead of broadcasting live Nia and Mestanzu.

Finally, the doors opened. There were already officials outside, and signs had been posted informing people of where they should go these first few hours.

Meanwhile, construction crews were already hard at work building shelters. Structures rose from the ground, a great many of them formed from the cabins onboard the ships that had been detached and brought out.

Lizards poured out of the ships, breathed the fresher-than-earth air, felt the better-than-sun sunlight, and were left agog.

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## VI

A month later, the area around their landing site had been thoroughly explored by the satellites Nia had launched. Around the site itself rose the settlement of Jamestown, which they named after James as well as the original English colony of Jamestown. Originally it was to be Niatown, but Nia disapproved and so Jamestown it was. They were on a peninsula at a fork in a great river that Nia decided to name the King River. Everything was documented on the Great Map, as it came to be known, that was still installed

in the airship. Work on the *Megan* had resumed. Lizards everywhere were living happily.

Some explorers had led a party to the edge of the land, to a sea that they assumed was water but wanted to make sure and test through and through. Liza and Mestanzky were among them, enthusiastically bounding along with the rest of the group.

After confirming that it was indeed H<sub>2</sub>O that they were dealing with, they started a new city there, which they decided to name Bendan in honor of Nia. Nia reluctantly approved of this, as it accredited James and all the rest of the Bendans that had helped them get here.

Lizards flocked to Bendan to see the sea, and soon there was a well-paved path between Bendan and Jamestown.

Soon, Bendan grew to dwarf Jamestown in population and size. The remains of the Noverc Academy started construction on a new, bigger campus. Skyscrapers towered over the sea. There were a delicious many small fish in the water that could be caught and eaten by the lizards.

Lizards started settlements far and wide across the island. Satellites monitored the resources available and the pollution of the atmosphere.

Everyone knew all too well what could happen if they overused the resources or polluted the planet too much. A huge breakthrough was made by LFA, yet again, who designed a magnesium-H<sub>2</sub>O generator that combusted the abundant Magnesium and equally abundant Water into Magnesium Oxide and Hydrogen gas, creating much heat in the process, generating electricity. Plants like this were existent in almost every settlement; LFA started manufacturing kits and distributing them. Tiny magnesium collectors were also set up, and they were able to capture all the magnesium necessary for electricity generation. Solar power was also a major generator of electricity. The solar panels that had previously been used to power the ships in space were stripped off and used in the initial settling days, and more panels were

manufactured and distributed. A hydroelectricity plant was set up in the King River and in several other places, and the people had all the electricity that they needed without expending too many resources.

Some settlements were significantly more successful than others, and it left people with a certain freedom of movement.

Bendan remained a huge megalopolis. Only a few miles away was the city of Novera, where the Noverc Academy was.

Down the King River was Portland, which became a major hub. At the very end of the King River, then, was King City, one of the biggest cities on the Island. There was a huge lake to the east of here, and cities sprung up around it. The biggest of these was Tagi.

Then there were all the *New* cities - New Manhattan, which was really New New York, but that was weird so Manhattan it was, New Paris, even New King - that were meant to be as grand as the original ones, which happened to be *Very Big*.

There were also uniquely lizardian cities, like Nue city, Samu city, and Yakuta city that was a recreation of the old Bendan settlement.

Nia governed the country for many years. He died in the year of 49 NT.

Before his death in the year of 49 NT (Nian Time, in years after landing on Neath), Nia met Crystal Young and they had a child together. Crystal saw his resemblance to Nia and insisted on naming him Nia the Second, and though Nia disagreed, Crystal won the argument and so Nia II it was.

Nia died just as clocks had to be recalibrated as the wormhole effects wore off. Though the date was not known, his death did not go unnoticed.

The Noverc Academy organized a huge public funeral where the ships first touched the planet. The body of Nia rested in the heart of the remains of James' genius craft.

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## VII

Nia left behind not only his accomplishments, but also a legend.

As with James, it was believed that Nia's spirit still lingered somewhere, and could be summoned in times of need. Mestanzky, perhaps the one who suffered most from the loss of Nia, later noticed that something had been carved into the gravestone of Nia:

Whosoever plays  
the Anthem of  
the Republic, of Nia  
should summon the spirit of the original.

It was signed, amazingly,

-James Bendan

Historians at the Noverc Academy termed this cryptic message the Legend of Nia. It remained unsolved for millennia to come, until the disastrous Second Nian Revolution.

The Noverc Academy was tasked by the citizens to name everything. In a new scale, a Nian system of measurement, so that they didn't have to use ridiculous tiny little fractions of human units.

In honor of Nia and James, arguably the reason why everyone was alive and prosperous, they established the Nian system.

The planet was named Neath, a nostalgic mirror of Earth. The island was named Pangaea after the supercontinent that once existed on Earth.

Since *lizardian* appealed to approximately nobody, the term *Nian* was established. To unify the lizards and geckos and contrast this race from other lizards, the species was named *Nian Lizards* or *Nias*. Interestingly, the same system was found centuries later written in invisible ink in James' notebook.

James' notebook became the pinnacle of technological advance again and again for millennia to come as his ideas were tested, formalized, perfected and introduced into the society.

As the old calendar system was very difficult to follow after the wormhole sent all clocks going loopy and a new length of day and year in the solar system, a new system of time was established.

Instead of changing the amount of hours in a day or the amount of minutes in an hour or the amount of seconds in a minute, a new system, the "Nian System", of time was established. This system used the same units and amounts of units as the old system, but shortened everything slightly so that everything matched up correctly. The old system was termed the "Ether" system.

Many of Nia's direct descendants made huge contributions to Nian society, but interestingly, those who were named Nia followed in the footsteps of the original the closest, and none more than Nia V. Nia the Fifth was a leader in both the First and Second Nian Rebellions, which are covered in volumes 4 and 5. We will have to end this volume here, at the death of Nia I and the establishment of the Nian System.

## NIA II

### I

After Nia's death, the world was thrown into chaos.

Nobody had as much influence as Nia did except perhaps the Noverc Academy, but the academy was divided against itself in terms of opinions, and was still working to establish a zoning system to admit new scholars.

Without a central leader, residents of huge cities took action themselves, forming their own voting systems and governments. However, there was not a large number of experienced politicians, and most of them presided in the Noverc Academy, trying to argue their way into their own choice of a centralized government system instead of taking action themselves.

Some academy politicians were in favor of localized governments, arguing that a local government meant that citizens would know their leaders better and vice versa, and they would be able to get more things done; however, arguments were made against local government about how localized government could make the country split up into different, independent regions limited to their own resources and unable to get anything done.

It was, as it turned out, already too late. Regions clustered around big cities as crews began to build walls, sometimes conferring in peace or through violence with neighboring regions about where each region's boundaries should be.

Communications were unclear across different regions that weren't adjacent, and the satellite updates were only available to the Noverc Academy now. Maps were different for different regions, and territory-caused arguments were constant and everlasting.

Small towns far from major cities often remained independent, letting soldiers from different regions build walls around them without paying much

attention at all to the government, and the governments usually ignored these towns. Independent villagers were encouraged to check in with the Noverc Academy for their latest info, not the major cities.

At first, while the almost a hundred different forces built up their power, there was only mostly peaceful conquerings of nearby cities and then only minor skirmishes between neighboring territories. The territories quickly all conquered large amounts of land that surrounded the city that was the territorial hub. Each territory quickly gained land, power, troops, and resources from taxing. Taxing was usually unofficial, and most citizens gave up the demanded resources willingly. Taxes demanded were mostly reasonable and was very light, as none of the kingdoms wanted to upset their citizens. As the supply of available troops, money, resources, and power grew, the demand for more of the aforementioned resources lessened a bit, but the demand for more land and power grew only larger.

As the territories began to become more powerful, they started to war against each other now not only to protect their own boundaries but also to conquer new lands and neighboring kingdoms. What used to be minor skirmishes now sparked competition and retaliation now that territories could afford to devote more resources to conquest. The tens of territories that existed began warring openly with each other, with complicated alliances forged and bloody rivalries declared. Bloody battles resulting in thousands of death was a sight seen all too often. In a battle, the outcome was almost always that one side or the other gained and the other lost land.

Although these hundreds of years of warring and conquest of land was later viewed by historians as a long, bloody era in the grand history of the Nian Republic, the kingdoms that were involved in the actual warring did not think so. Not all kingdoms were warring at one time. Sometimes the warring was concentrated mostly in one area, other times in another. Sometimes there was a large area that the war affected, and other times the area was confined just

between the boundary or a segment of a boundary between two kingdoms. The Kingdoms themselves considered the situation to be a war only when they or those around them were affected by it, but in truth the war was constantly raging across all of the face of Neath as the boundaries of the many kingdoms changed, new kingdoms were created, and old kingdoms were conquered and annihilated.

The first to recognize this was not a historian or politician, but a college student studying practical philosophy at the Noverc Academy, which was perhaps the only safe haven on all the face of Neath during the Kingdoms Era. The reason why the Academy was safe was because a) the Academy had technologies and weapons that were more than capable of targeting any person on Neath and automatically finding and killing them but b) the Academy remained independent in the war, refusing to lend military assistance to any country, although it accepted refugees. But enough about the Academy. The name of the aforementioned Practical Philosopher was Cedar Brown.

In 352, Cedar Brown submitted a paper about the aforementioned concept of the war being one big era of conquest and warfare between the nations. This was supposed to be his graduation assignment, and as it was, it was the last academic assignment that he would ever have to do for years, and so he did probably far better than he should've done.

The first result of this was that Brown graduated with flying colors. His paper was published online, and all of the Kingdoms wanted him for advisor, offering huge amounts in their own currencies for his service. Brown took none of them, but more on that later.

The second and more important outcome of his paper was that forces began to take the war more seriously. A new act was added to the medley of military and political actions: merging. Instead of conquering other kingdoms, oftentimes now kings agreed to join their kingdoms in deeper ways than just alliances: by combining the two kingdoms into one, unified kingdom ruled by



two kings or whatever governmental structure presided. Many alliances were already so deep and mutual that such kingdoms quickly merged and combined into one kingdom. The further effect of this was that the number of kingdoms was reduced from almost a hundred to less than twenty.

At this point in time, Neath was divided into two distinct regions: Old and New Neath. The boundary between the two regions roughly follow a straight 45 degree NE-SW line that falls on the city of Phyllamen at its midpoint and follows the Phyllamen Mountain Range in both directions out. The north-western section was the Old Section, where Nia and the lizards first landed on Neath. The south-eastern section was the New Section, explored later than the Old Section but with more experience and more advanced technologies.

The main distinction between the two sections, other than the minor characteristic of time settled, was actually a result of the aforementioned minor characteristic of time settled. This distinction is that, since the Old Section was the first settled and is also smaller in inhabitable land area, it is characteristic of the region for the population to be very dense and resources uncentralized and scarce, with less ability to organize military movements or control unorganized outbreaks. In the New Section, an abundance of resources but also very rich farmland meant that much of it was rural or suburban. This gave kingdoms in the New Section the advantage that organization was generally much easier.

Furthermore, a result of the aforementioned rural and suburban dominance in the New Section was that, since the kingdoms first sprung from urban areas, the lack of urban areas in the New Section compared to the Old Section meant that there were far less initial kingdoms in the New Section compared to the Old Section.

There exists a fact that contradicts the pre-existing trend, however. This is that, since the few kingdoms in the New Section all have abundance

resources and easier organization, the aforementioned kingdoms are all stronger and more competitive and more reluctant to form alliances with each other.

All of this was also realized by Cedar Brown and mentioned in his way-too-good research paper. This led to another self-contradicting effect: the kingdoms in the Old Section realized that they could potentially become stronger than those in the New Section by bonding together and unifying or forming alliances. This happened, and as a result, the two sections were just about balanced in power, causing the war to last hundreds of years longer than it should've, shedding much more blood and violence. Cedar Brown was also the first to realize this, though unlike last time, he kept his mouth shut and kept it to himself until his death, leaving it for historians to figure out for themselves.

A chain of events happened spontaneously: alliances were formed and broken, battles were fought and unfought, wars were started and ended, kingdoms created and merged or conquered. What resulted was six main superpower kingdoms that respectively controlled almost all of Neath mostly peacefully.

Skrimishes and battles were still fought, but they were chilvary-like battles, sporting events between the superpowers to prove themselves better than the others. Little land was gained or lost as a direct consequence of a battle. The boundaries of the kingdoms remained more or less static and constant.

In 356, the Academy decided to document the state of the civilization first-person for future peoples. The Academy was a neutral and well-respected-by-the-kingdoms organization on its own, but the Academy still feared that danger would come to researchers and therefore much of the first few years of research was conducted remotely. In 358, however, Cedar Brown

signed up for the research project and confidence was boosted in that on-location research would be safer.

With the reputation of Cedar Brown to help them, the research group traveled Neath to all the different kingdoms. Their report of the Kingdoms was submitted almost a decade later in full, although segments of it were submitted in advance as they were written. Summaries of the kingdoms were also included, which are as follows:

“It is 360, and the face of Neath has been separated into several different kingdoms as a result of chaos and warfare and conquest. These kingdoms are the kingdoms of Bendan, Phyllamen, Manhattan, New King, King, and Putnam.

“The Kingdom of Bendan is farther north than any other Kingdom. Its southwestern boundary follows the northeast bank of the King River and then goes around the northeast side of the King Mountains, following into the King River Delta into the sea. Its southeastern boundary follows the northwest of the Phyllamen Mountains of the Phyllamen region until it is directly north of the city of Phyllamen; here it goes straight north until it is 5 miles south of Samu City in Bendan, where it goes east all the way to the shore. The Noverc Academy is sometimes counted as part of the Kingdom, but the grounds of the Academy are small and they rely on the Kingdom of Bendan for their food. As it is, many historians and geographers, including some Noverc Academy scholars, agree that it is part of the Kingdom of Bendan. The Kingdom of Bendan had a Constitutional Monarchy, and throughout its four-century-long lifetime, it was ruled by the more peaceful Kunucuber family. While the Kingdom of Bendan was not considered one of the three active warring kingdoms, it ended up conquering all of Neath and establishing the Kingdom of Noverc.

“Southeast of the Kingdom of Bendan is the Phyllamen Republic region. The Phyllamen region’s Northwest border is all along the Kingdom of Bendan. Its southeastern and eastern borders start from the northernmost tip

of Notab lake on the northwestern bank, going due north to the Phyllamen Mountains, which it wraps around and then continues to head due north on its original trajectory until it reaches the sea. The southwest border of the Phyllamen region follows the southwest boundary of the Phyllamen mountains. The Phyllamen Republic is a representative democracy with representatives sent from each city that serve for life unless he is voted out of office for another candidate. The Phyllamen Republic remained a peaceful region throughout the Kingdoms era, peacefully surrendering to the Kunucubers in the final attack on the terms that they would not harm the citizens.

“The Kingdom of Manhattan is to the east of the Phyllamen region. It shares its western border with the Phyllamen region, and its southern border follows the southern bank of the Notab lake until it approaches the Phyllamen border north of the city of Mia. As much of the population is concentrated in the city of New Manhattan, the Phyllamen region is a monarchy with its capital in New Manhattan. Manhattan remains peaceful. [and surrendered to King in the final battle]

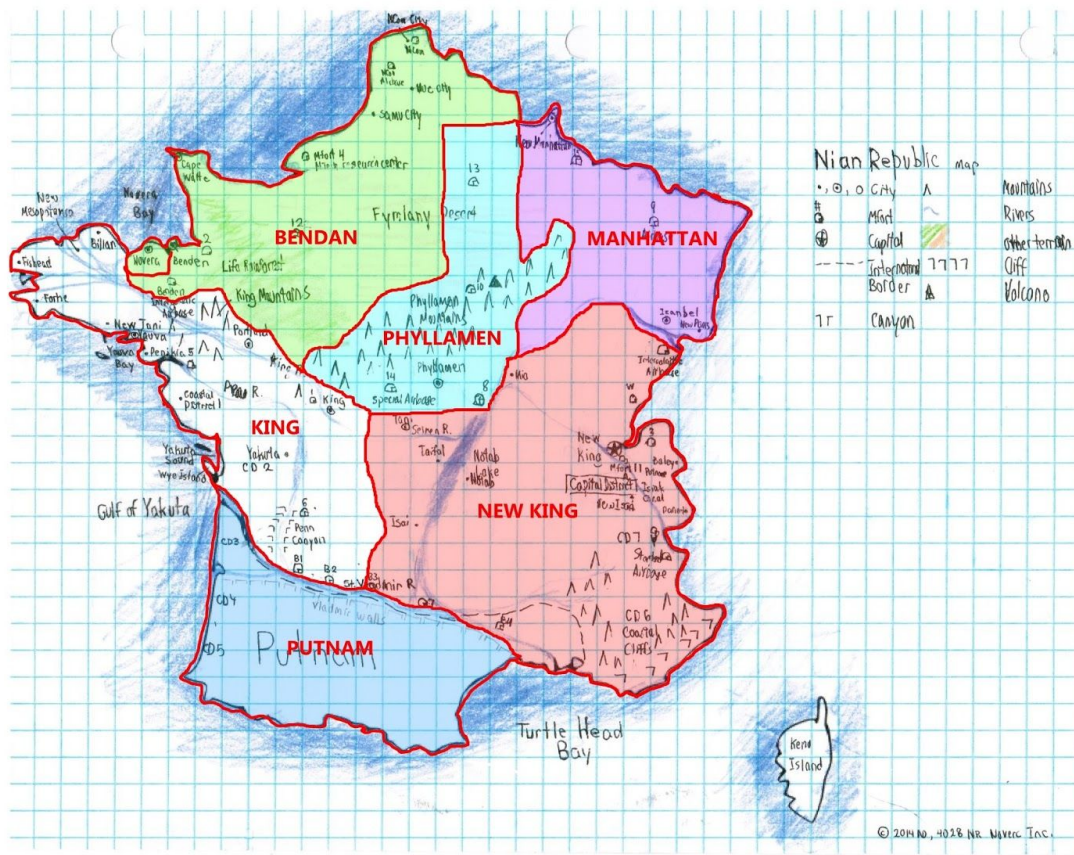
“South of the Kingdom of Manhattan is the Kingdom of New King. The kingdom is the biggest and the most powerful of the three warring kingdoms. It shares its northern borders with the southern borders of Phyllamen and Manhattan. Its western border is a roughly north-south line from the southwest corner of the Phyllamen region. Its southern border is along the Vladmir river. The Kingdom of New King was one of the three warring kingdoms, conquering much of King and all of sub-wall Putnam before being destroyed from within and then from outside by the Bendan.

“Putnam was a more mysterious and unknown region. The region’s northern border is on the northern bank of the Vladmir river. Putnam was derived from Putname, which came from the English words *Put Name*; Putnam was meant to be unbeknownst to all enemies to prevent being attacked. Putname was one of the fiercest and most strategic of the three warring kingdoms; in the first few years of the war, the Kingdom went from a tiny

kingdom centered around the minor village of Pametown to a huge kingdom expanding from the east to the west coast and south to the ocean - all through conquest, not surrender - and put up a strong fight against the other two warring kingdoms, though with its limited troops and budget, it didn't ever stand much of a chance. The Putnam troops built a huge wall after it became apparent that they were bound to lose the war, protecting their secrets as all personnel authorized to know everything were brainwashed before surrendering.

“The last kingdom is the Kingdom of King, a kingdom that had the ultimate naval superiority. It was sandwiched between the kingdoms of Bendan and Putnam, and it shared its northwestern border with Phyllamen and New King. The Kingdom of King was the last of the three warring kingdom and the second-largest. They were the first to fall to the Bendan, having already been weakened and battered by the Kingdom of New King as well as Putnam.”

“The map below shows the kingdoms in detail.



Such a map was included in the original report, and we have taken the liberty of including it in this volume of Terra Autem Lacertae as well. These kingdoms changed boundaries over time, but the overall structure remained as described by Brown until the First Nian Revolution. It was four hundred long years of peace before anything of the sort happened, but when it did, it was groundbreaking.

## II

The location of Putnam was possibly the worst that there is. On the extreme southern tip of Neath and surrounded by either the powerful kingdoms of King and New King or the frigid and harsh land of the Neath South Pole.

In 705, after hundreds of years of relative peace between the kingdoms, all the kingdoms had grown strong, and they were ready to war again. The three kingdoms that started warring first, in chronological order King, New King, and Putnam, were called the Three Warring Kingdoms. The other three kingdoms were called the Three Non-warring Kingdoms.

Putnam didn't stand a chance against the two other warring kingdoms, not with the little resources that they had, not with the horrible location, not with the non-existent escape route. Intense military action on the part of New King lead to the surrender of Putnam to New King in 715, and now there were only five kingdoms. In a chain of similar events following this, that was how the cookie crumbled.

Phyllamen was now the smallest, most resource-lacking, and most vulnerable kingdom. The king of New King, being a very bright person, saw it as a valuable opportunity to extend the reaches of his kingdom.

The one geographical feature of Phyllamen that had kept it from being conquered over the hundreds of years before was the Phyllamen Mountain Range. The extremely difficult-to-scale and difficult-to-cultivate mountains also contributed to Phyllamen's lack of resources and power, lessening the value of Phyllamen to its neighboring kingdoms.

The fatal flaw of the Kingdom that lead to its conquest by New King, however, was that its capital, the city of Phyllamen, was located on the side of the mountains closer to New King, meaning that while the value of Phyllamen was low and it would be hard to access the other side, the capital was easily within the grasp of the powerful nation of New King.

In 716, following the conquest of the kingdom of Putnam, the Kingdom of New King took over the city of Phyllamen. The cities and civilization around the capital quickly collapsed without leadership, and the people north of the mountains fled to the nearby kingdoms of Bendan and Manhattan for safety.

Another kingdom down, four more to go.

The New King conquest of Phyllamen troubled the Kingdom of King. The present capital, King City, was surrounded by New King land on all sides but the south and the high mountains that lay to the west that had protected it from the former kingdom of Portland before the two merged.

The king of New King saw this and grasped the opportunity. It was on a roll now, conquering kingdom after kingdom. In the same year as the previous conquest of Phyllamen, 716, the Kingdom of New King set out to conquer the Kingdom of King. The military of the kingdom moved in and easily conquered the piece of land that was the Kingdom of King from the boundary between New King and King westward all the way to the Penn River. Here, King opposition was the strongest, and the geographical challenges of the Penn Canyon and the Notab Lake meant that the Kingdom of King still had superiority in this area.

This did not matter, however, as the already conquered land meant that the capital city of King City was now surrounded. On Christmas Day 716, the King of the Kingdom of King surrendered to New King.

To the subjects of the kingdom of New King, this was an act of betrayal and cowardice. They felt that the Kingdom of King was more than capable of fighting back; after all, they still had the majority of their land, and unlike the New Section Kingdom of Phyllamen, the Kingdom of King still had the city of Portland, the capital of Portland before it was merged with King. Even though the official region of King was conquered by New King, the people of King resisted conquest and continued fighting against New King.

This weakened the country and eventually the resources ran so low that many of the people of King left and went to the peaceful Kingdom of Bendan.

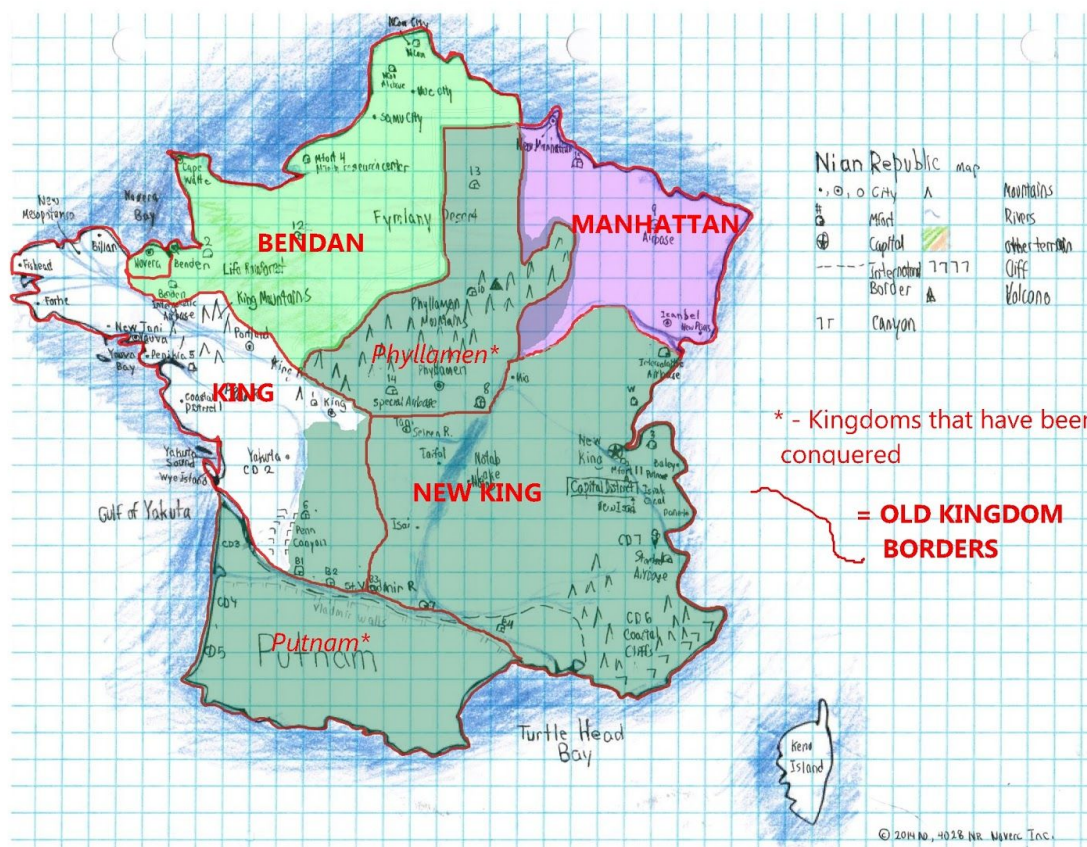
New King took the opportunity and invaded, quickly driving the remaining King resistance force back, but the tide of war changed when the Kingdom of Bendan offered military assistance to the Kingdom of King. The



increased military force was able to push the New King forces back to the Penn River.

The kingdom of King was never officially conquered except for by New King, but that was just a useless treaty that was signed by two useless kings between two useless countries. The thing that wasn't useless was the opinions and will of the citizens, and the citizens continued fighting. In 717, however, the remaining people of King, lacking organization, decided to merge with the Kingdom of Bendan.

At this point in time, the composition of the Nian Republic, in terms of kingdoms, looked something like this:



The Kingdom of Bendan was non-violent throughout much of the early portion of the era of Kingdoms. They did not actively war like many of the other

kingdoms, although they did defend their boundaries. They were friendly with most other kingdoms, accepting refugees and sometimes sending military assistance, for instance to the people of King to fight against those of New King.

This was the image that the other kingdoms saw: a friendly, powerful, non-violent kingdom that sat around in the north-eastern corner of Neath, quietly gaining land and resources. Perhaps a future threat, but what could be done about it? Conquest of the growing kingdom had been attempted before, but none of the attempts had succeeded.

If the other kingdoms had known the true nature of the Kingdom of Bendan, however, their point that the kingdom was quietly growing and could be a threat would only be more accurate. In the background, the Kingdom of Bendan was quietly forming alliances with others so that they could more easily conquer them later.

In the year 720, the Kingdom of Bendan sent out the signal to their troops to initiate the attack plans that had been laid out and updated for decades.

Many of King region's leaders were actually Bendan soldiers undercover, but they stayed as such: undercover. When the notification to initiate attack plans came, they suddenly announced that they were allied with Bendan. The shock and disorder caused within the kingdom was enough to jolt enough sense into the people to surrender to the powerful kingdom that used to be their friendly neighbor and was now their conqueror. As it was, Bendan received the naval and air combat forces of King region. The Bendan-controlled-from-within King army staged a massive sneak attack on the defenses along the King-New King border across the Penn River.

Hundreds of aircraft took off from the airfields of King and Bendan and bombs fell on top of many army camps and command centers of the Kingdom of New King. Directly following this, just as the kingdoms were waking up and

in anti-air mode, they would be stormed by waves of Bendan and King infantry squads. The attacks were collectively called *l'aviation et l'infanterie*, French for Aviation and Infantry.

The air raid-infantry attack system continued and attacked a series of key points as air and ground troops were also sent to the Bendan-Phyllamen and now the Bendan-New King border, successfully pushing the expanse of the New King conquest back even further.

A band of Bendan undercovers in the heart of the New King Kingdom staged epic attacks on the central military command center while the people within focused on trying to solve the problems around their kingdom and as Bendan, King, and Phyllamen Air Superiority and Bombing squads rained down with heavy bombardment. The command center was quickly and thoroughly destroyed, and New King military leader Peter Bishop was killed in the attacks. Military advisor Peter Williams, however, was critically injured but managed to escape the attack.

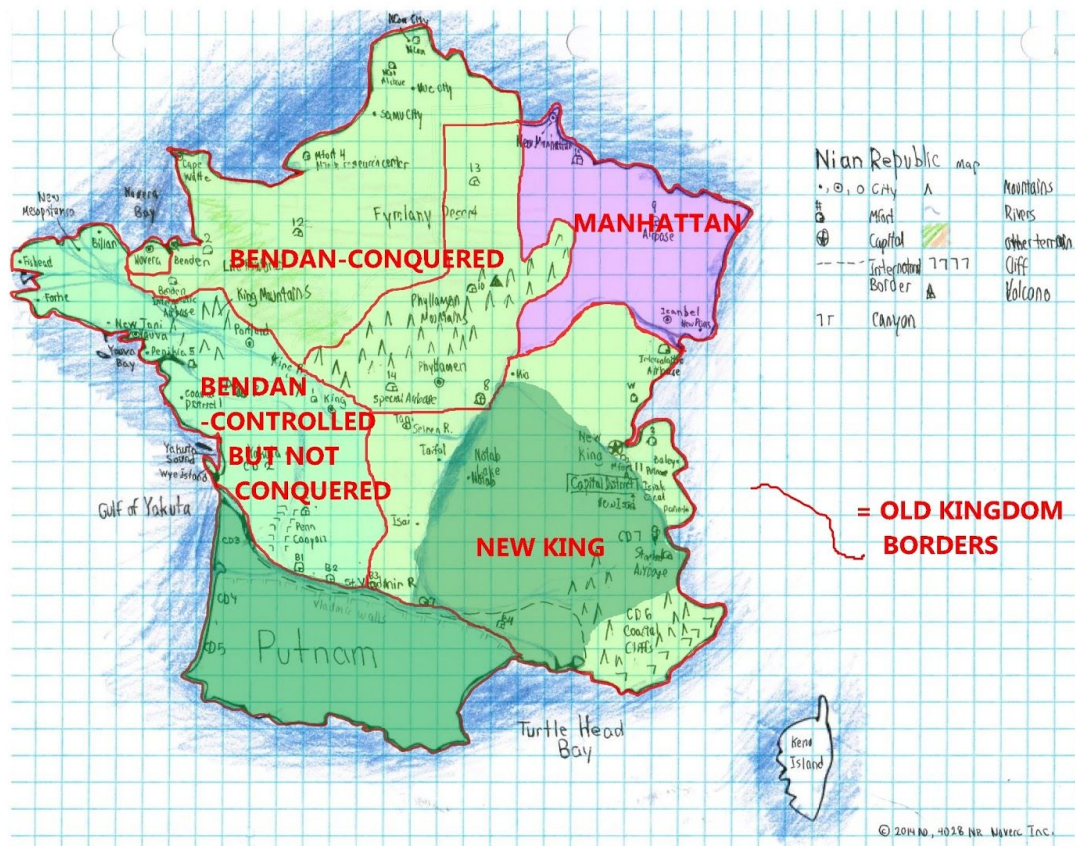
There were also huge, organized attacks like this in many other New King cities around the Kingdom. Phyllamen, Izanbel, New King, Baley, and other cities on the outside ring of the Kingdom were liberated, forming an attack ring surrounding the kingdom.

Air superiority-infantry raids continued, targeting cities with less anti-air or air superiority defense units. The staggering rapidity and intensity of the attacks was overwhelming for the previously strong Kingdom of New King.

Soon, New King territories were forced onto the island of Putnam.

The attacks left only three kingdoms: the now-dominant Bendan, strong-but-non-active Manhattan, and the forced-onto-Putnam New King.

At this point in time, the kingdoms looked something like this (except that New King was confined to only Putnam):



### III

The Kunucuber Treaty was one of the more interesting ones precisely because the treaty did not end the war.

The Bendans sought peace and unity and used their power to attempt and obtain such peace and unity. In 716, the final attacks and counterattacks were made and peace was mostly restored, and the King of Bendan, King Kunucuber XVII, presented the Kunucuber Treaty to the two other kings when they met at the Noverc Academy.

The treaty proposed a Kingdom of Kunucuber, which would be a democratic constitutional monarchy (oxymoronic, but not really; please do read

on) ruled by the Kunucubers, but other candidates could also attempt to oppose the current monarch every 10 years in a democratic voting system.

Each kingdom was to be a state of the whole kingdom; each state was to hold local elections to elect parliament leaders to serve in parliament, who would make laws and keep the monarch's powers in check.

The term of a king would last for his lifetime unless a challenger that receives more than 66% of local votes challenges the king and wins an election. The election would be a live election happening during a debate; throughout the debate voters can shift their vote from one side to the other if they feel like they want to.

The Kingdoms of Manhattan and other representatives from Bendan agreed to the treaty, but the Kingdom of New King stubbornly refused and walled themselves up on the island of Putnam.

To avoid holding back a unified government any longer, the Kunucubers added an amendment to the treaty so that a new kingdom, the Kingdom of Kunucuber, was formed with the states of North Bendan, Phyllamen, South Bendan, Manhattan, and King.

Although many people viewed the war as over, Kunucuber did not. He knew that the war would only be over when Neath was again united under a unified government, and New King was still a problem area. At this point in time, there were only two kingdoms in the Kingdoms Era: The Kingdom of Kunucuber and the Kingdom of New King.

After the treaty was agreed upon, it took a while for news to spread and all details about the system to get around. Old rivalries still existed, though they started to dissipate.

There were already candidates campaigning to take over the Kunucubers even when most of the citizens didn't know what was happening. Rumors spread like wildfires, and some civilians even tried to oppose

Kunucuber XVI directly, marching up to his palace and demanding to see the King on the grounds of opposition.

Kunucuber hosted a large event to try to ease some of the confusion. The Treaty of Kunucuber was read aloud in its full glory.

An amendment was added about opposition requirements. Opposers had to be at least twenty years old and have received at least 14 years of education in the Noverc Standard Education System established hundreds of years before with the Nian system and that still remained standard today, with the exception of the history program, which was largely rewritten as new wars were fought, new breakthroughs were made, new amendments added to different constitutions across the world.

The event clarified many misconceptions and whatnot. Soon, voting season rolled in.

Because of epic misunderstandings on the part of the citizens, voting season had been held back for more than a year from its mentioned time in the treaty of Kunucuber.

However, roll in it did.

First were the parliament elections.

Votings happened. 20 parliament members, 4 from each state, were elected in statewide elections.

The elections were held as single transferable vote elections. Kunucuber, while discussing the Treaty of Kunucuber, had a large argument with the people at the Noverc Academy; he argued that a STV voting system would reduce the number of unhappy citizens, vital for a new government such as the one they were trying to establish. Noverc Academy politicians argued that, when there were no official parties, having an STV system would not be to any sufficient advantage. Still, the treaty of Kunucuber was signed, if only for the generations of the future.

The parliament representatives reported to national parliament with Kunucuber XVI in what was officially parliament but was more widely known as “Nia court” or “Nia’s court” because of the resemblance of the meetings to Nia’s meetings back on earth during the first catastrophe, complete with viewing rooms and Nia-style name tags.

The meetings were casual, adding even more to the resemblance to Nia’s meetings, with formal votes happening only after laws or decisions had already been discussed and more or less agreed upon, so the results of the vote were more or less all positive.

Kunucuber XVI demonstrated strong leadership in parliament. In mere weeks, laws were made that sent out national police forces to replace weak local police units. Things like public schools and postal services were enforced, transforming many of the best schools around the kingdom into free public schools that received full funding from the government. Life was made much easier for the citizens of the Kingdom of Kunucuber.

When anti-Kunucuber elections rolled around, opposition against Kunucuber turned out to be weak. There were two Noverc Academy politicians running against Kunucuber, but they did not know what their citizens wanted anything near as well as Kunucuber did from years of ruling the Kingdom of Bendan.

The elections were tense nevertheless. The election was held as a fiery debate was happening between the candidates. Citizens could shift their votes between four positions: Kunucuber XIV, the former king; Andre Felipe, a mid-40’s figure with sparkling blond hair; Nia III, the descendant of Nia, still at a young 20 years old, having graduated every school ahead of time, and was now well into his political career; or any of three categories between Kunucuber and Andre, between Andre and Nia, or between Nia and Kunucuber. These votes were to be displayed on a huge backboard so that all

three candidates as well as the voters could see the votes live as they were happening.

Andre never stood a chance against the strong opposition. He had a minority of votes from the start of the debate, with a ridiculous British accent and weak argument.

The remaining votes were split about half-and-half between Nia and Kunucuber. Nia was strong, like his grandfather in the first migration, but he was still young and inexperienced. As the debate progressed, Kunucuber proceeded to destroy Nia's running chance at winning.

Eventually, instead of being slaughtered (figuratively), Nia surrendered to Kunucuber, saying to the camera: "You know what, Kunucuber's the better king of us two. Give me some time to learn, and then I'll come back and steal your throne then."

More than a quarter of the votes were still with Nia, but the remaining three-quarters minus whatever small band of voters Andre had gotten and managed to keep outnumbered Nia's.

Kunucuber stayed in power.

In 745, almost thirty years later, Kunucuber was still in power, now at a grizzly seventy-seven years old but still a genius.

Nia III had not attempted to oppose Kunucuber for 3 terms in a row. Instead he had held back, quietly observing his opposition, waiting to seize the golden opportunity when it came up.

Meanwhile, there was unrest in the Kingdom of New King, the one kingdom that Kunucuber had not been able to convince to sign the Treaty of Kunucuber; the last obstacle to a unified Kingdom of Kunucuber.

On the morning of July 4th, 745, the same date as the formation of the United States of America, the Putnam walls were torn down by the subjects of the Kingdom of New King as a mass rebellion started.



The peace and prosperity of Kunucuber was not unheard of in this kingdom. Free schools, no sales taxes, fair laws; these were all things that existed in the kingdom just across the river but not on the side that they stood on. Many people craved to see what they could do for themselves in the free country.

The problem, though, was that there was a wall in the way, and emigration was strictly prohibited.

For thirty years after the war ended, the government assumed that the citizens were too weak and the military still too strong to leave any room for rebellion. They taxed them heavily, trying to rebuild an epic kingdom and storm the Kingdom of Kunucuber.

But thirty years later, the destruction of the walls sent a clear message to the king and all the other officials. The citizens wanted out of the place. They would not tolerate the tyranny of the kingdom any longer, and they would sooner die than consent to the unfair laws of the kingdom.

New King's capital city of Vladmire, specifically its castle, was walled up just as the stolen weapons and cannons rained heavy fire down upon the king's hideout.

The citizens were not without support. Even if Kunucuber himself did not offer any support, there were parties and militias that were strongly for it.

One such group was Nia III's political party. Nia thought that liberating the citizens of New King would win him many supporters and take away many from the more conservative Kunucuber, giving him a better chance at winning the throne.

Air strikes were made. Artillery teams were sent in to destroy the defenses on the walls of Putnam. Citizens streamed out of various passageways and crossed bridges leading to Kunucuber. More of Nia's people welcomed them into the kingdom and helped them fill out paperwork and whatnot.

Five months later, with the help of Nia's troops, the king of the Kingdom of New King was overthrown. The citizens chose to join in with the awesomeness of Kunucuber.

All of Neath was now unified under the Kingdom of Kunucuber.

The Kingdom of Kunucuber now spanned from the north of Neath to the south, from the east coast to the west.

With this, Kunucuber's dream kingdom was complete. He was 80 and approaching his deathbed when he smiled upon his Kingdom and said, "I resign."

Kunucuber ended his career as the first king of Kunucuber on that day in 748. New elections were to be held in 750. In the meantime, Kuncuber's advisor took over.

It should be noted here that "I resign" was not the only thing that Kunucuber said on that day. What followed was, "and I wholeheartedly support Nia Bendan as my successor."

Nia won the 750 elections by almost 80 to 1 against the next most popular opponent. All members of the parliament pooled their votes in for him; most of the supporters of Kunucuber also voted for their leader's chosen successor. For Nia himself, his speeches didn't attract any voters; everybody who voted for him was already on board at the beginning.

The first thing Nia did as the new King was hold a huge ceremony to congratulate king Kunucuber XVI on his amazing military leadership and for establishing the Kingdom of Kunucuber.

The original Nia's original world had once again united itself under the rulership of Nia.

## IV

The kingdom of Kunucuber was designed to minimize the amount of unhappy citizens and to preserve peace over prosperity in the Kingdom. With careful examination, this is quite evident, from the Single Transferable Vote system to the light taxing and many public services.

The downside of this system is that it discourages quality, instead favoring making the kingdom last longer in peace.

The people of Kunucuber, however, were still able to exceed Kunucuber's goals and prosper after more than two centuries.

Nia III stayed in office until his death in 835. His vice president at the time, Jayman Peterson, took over office for the 5 years before the 840 elections. Jayman did not run in the 840 elections, letting Novercan politician William Govan take the throne.

Govan then proceeded to rule for another 20 years unopposed until the 860 elections, when non-Novercan politician Walter Vekman won the throne as the first king to have no affiliation whatsoever with the Noverc Academy, confirmed after an investigation by a team of Noverc Academy students found that there were no occurrences of "Walter Vekman" in the academy records at all, even coincidentally, amongst the 868 years of aforementioned records.

A theory was spread that Vekman purposely hacked into the system and deleted all values corresponding in any way with his name, though Vekman denied this, and it was probably not very likely that is was true.

Politicians like William Govan took advantage of the rumor of scandal, claiming that Vekman was "a fraud" and "forging evidence", "according to a 861 study". The "861 study" that Govan was referring to was likely the Noverc Academy's study, although Govan never officially gave out the source, even when questioned by another Noverc Academy investigation in 863.

Vekman avoided this kind of advertising, instead meeting people in person and answering to interviews, dismissing false claims.

870 rolled around. Vekman managed to ride the wave and survive the bombardment of Govan supporters to stay in power, at least for another 10 years.

Meanwhile, the country unified itself, established a fair system of laws and taxes, and built up courts and jails and public services like a military and public schools and hospitals.

Thousands of years passed in peace. The powerful Kunucuberean military was able to suppress any conflicts that came up, and most influential figures approved of the country's progress. The economy was stable and living conditions only grew.

Kiki Prodan was one of the most successful figures in Kunucuber history, right along with Kunucuber and the different kings themselves.

Kiki Prodan was born in 3350, about 2600 years after the Treaty of Kunucuber was signed. He was born to parents Kay and Phillip Bendan. He was born with genetic mutations that made his skin bumpy instead of smooth like most others. His eyes were also bigger than most lizards, causing him to be very nearsighted throughout his life.

Prodan attended primary and secondary school at public schools in the huge city of Bendan. The public schools of Bendan were known for being not very excellent. The school that Prodan attended was no different, and Prodan was often bored to death in his classes.

Kiki's parents bought him expensive textbooks from the nearby Noverc Academy that Prodan was able to read instead of the bland curriculum of Bendan.

The Bendan public school system had a promotion system that required a portfolio, so in 4th grade Prodan began creating such a portfolio. The portfolio took him a year to complete and was so comprehensive that the Noverc Academy offered to take it and reprint it as a textbook. Kiki himself was

against the reprinting of a portfolio, but his family was in a financial crisis and the reprinting of Kiki's portfolio might turn in some income and help give them some breathing space, so Kiki eventually yielded.

The textbook was so successful that it became the standard textbook throughout Bendan. The Noverc Academy wanted Prodan to write more textbooks, offering him millions of dollars. Prodan declined the offer, though he did start to work on new textbooks in private in case he should ever need the aforementioned millions of dollars.

Prodan was pulled out of school after that to take courses from the Noverc Academy, which Prodan gladly did. In 3363, by the time Kiki was 13, he had graduated from the Noverc Academy as an honors student. He continued to study physics and computer science until he was 21, when he set up a laboratory and began experimenting with instantaneous cloning.

Finding that he soon ran out of funds, Prodan remembered the Noverc Academy's offering of millions of dollars for his textbook. Upon calling the academy, he was informed that the offer still existed as such.

Prodan submitted 4 different manuscripts, earning him more than 2 million dollars toward research and then supplying him with a steady income as the books sold. He gathered a research team of the best biologists, physicists, and computer engineers around, and began his project, one that would last for over a decade before a solution was arrived at.

Meanwhile, Kiki started his own side projects. He struck up a deal with Noverc and they started designing and manufacturing technologies that would one day become the most widely used products in the Kingdom.

This company was called Noverc Electronics. Noverc Electronics was a company that focused on designing the simplest, most user-friendly but powerful software and hardware available. It helped that Noverc Academy funding made it possible for many Noverc Electronics projects to be open-source or very inexpensive. These were things that helped Noverc

Electronics quickly become the standard among professional and nonprofessional users. From this Prodan also profited greatly, generating millions of dollars for the company and himself.

In September of 3375, Prodan was satisfied with his contributions and stepped down from his position of CEO to become a technical advisor. His wealth was more than enough to support his humble needs for years to come, so Prodan returned to his original project.

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## V

In the first 5 years, Prodan's research team had compiled much data from experiments and previous study. For the next year and a half, Prodan poured over the data, often conferring with co-workers to discuss their next steps. Gradual, nature-aided cloning was already quite easy and polished; instantaneous cloning was what Prodan wanted.

In early 3377, experiments started. Prodan's team started with gradual cloning and tried things to speed along the process. The team cloned mice and other animals. They created vats that were substitutes for natural growing environments, and then sped up growth so that a clone could be grown that was dumb to start off, but could be educated thoroughly and instantly about everything that it needed or the operator wanted it to know. This was a success that enlightened many on Prodan's team, including Prodan himself. However, controversies started growing about manipulation of these clones. Prodan's project was put into jeopardy at the peak of its success. Kiki was forced to shut down the main project. However, the project was continued in secret elsewhere. The original machine worked, yes, but it was clunky and components were spread out over the entire complex of Kiki's lab.

Prodan built a new lab deep in the woods and named it the LFA center, after the brilliant scientist on Bendan.

The whole building reeked of isolation. It was constructed of bricks. On the outside, the building simply looked like a giant cube of bricks.

On the inside, however, were the latest cutting-edge technologies.

The doors opened up to a deserted, old, lobby with several doors, all locked. The walls were all modified so that any scan would tell the operator that all the rooms were empty. They were also heat-proof, so that infrared scanners would not be able to identify any people inside.

The central room was where the machine was. Two rooms to either side were computer rooms, storage rooms, and a secret passageway to outside.

Although the original prototype was left with the old building and shut down accordingly, the detailed design plans were still intact. For the next year, Prodan's team worked in secret, refining the design into one central machine that could start with an input of DNA and output a full clone according to the DNA sample.

As plans were finalized, construction began.

To order parts and to prevent purchases from landing on the head of any one person or persons, Kiki created and incorporated the company Kiki Prodan Inc, to which future supporters could donate funds to. Parts were ordered under the aforementioned company name of Kiki Prodan, Inc.

The second prototype of the cloning machine, which Prodan named "Instantaneous Artificial Automatic Cloning Machine version 2", often shortened to "IAACM2", pronounced I-comm-two, was a significantly improved model, now taking up only an 11x10x8ft space and was just as functional as the first model.

Prodan, however, was not satisfied and proceeded to make it smaller.

This became even more vital when a minor jam destroyed several tubes in the machine, contaminating much of the rest of the machine, with only the airtight growing vat still intact.

Half a year later, IAACM3 came out. The new model took up about 5x5x10ft. Only now was Prodan happy, though he still did not dare publicize his invention.

What he did do, however, was take pride in that he had created the universe's first automatic instantaneous artificial cloning system.

With Prodan's lifetime goal accomplished before he was even 30, Prodan turned to pioneering other technologies.

One such technology was time-stop technology. How useful, thought Prodan, if we could invent a time-stop chamber so that it would stop, or slow down time, inside the chamber. Then we could put stuff into it for long periods of time without worrying about it. We wouldn't need preservatives, or fancy packaging, or even freezing, to keep food and other things fresh. It could be used in other fields, too - medicine, science, and a whole lot of others.

Prodan declared that he would have it ready by 3380.

His team was shocked; that left a 2 year window of time to develop a revolutionary technology. What Prodan replied was simply that they'd "better get started."

And get started they did. Prodan quickly rearranged his research team, replacing biologists with more physicists and technicians, but still giving his original team a small salary.

Prodan's team received much funding for their new ambitious project. Investors from physicists to physicians supported the project, and the team had quite a fortune in their reach.

Prodan's first task was to figure out how to slow time, and then slow it until it stopped, or at least slowed until it was useful. It was the same approach



that he had used with the development of the IAACM, but this time with such a dangerous matter as time on his hands.

Time dilation could be accomplished by speeding things up relative to what is around it, but speeding things up to the point that it would make a useful difference took a massive amount of energy. There were other ways, though, such as gravitational fields, but these required large amounts of mass squeezed into tiny spaces, which might work if it didn't also affect everything in the vicinity.

Still, Prodan's team of genius physicists were able to find a way to dilate time without using massive amounts of energy or exerting massively unpleasant effects on the immediate vicinity of the chamber.

The functional prototype, however, had components (again) spread all over the research center. Prodan's job was now to centralize everything, and he only had a year left to do it.

He hired top designers and architects from all around the kingdom to try and compact such a machine into at most the size of a refrigerator.

Such a machine was made, with 3 months to spare, but 3 of the 5 models produced imploded on themselves because of a single misplaced component.

As progress advanced, rumors bled out into the consumer world. Prodan's declaration was remembered, and pressure was on. There were only just 93 days now, 2232 short hours.

Everything had to be taken apart and redesigned according to now even stricter specifications. Many faulty models were designed and made, and a fully functional, non-imploding, centralized model was only finalized with 1 week to spare.

1 week of blazing-fast production happened.

On Friday of that week, Prodan and his team answered to the newspapers.

The following week, headlines all over Neath read “Prodan Inc invents Time Stopping Device”, or “Prof. Kiki Prodan invents Time Dilation Field”, or even in some extreme cases “Mad Scientist Invents Time Travel”.

The refridgerator-sized time stop machines were mass-produced and sold in small quantities for testing in the first month. They were not recommended for widespread use or for consumer use yet, as they were the first prototypes and everyone was warned that they could be unstable; plus, locking living, organic matter inside still had effects that had not been fully tested.

Still, the success made Prodan a celebrity in the scientific community. “Prodan,” read magazines and newspapers, “the genius textbook writer, inventor of instantaneous cloning, now inventor of time dilation.”

Of course, these were both wrong. Prodan was not the inventor of instantaneous cloning; such processes had existed in nature since even before Nian lizards came to be. Prodan simply perfected the artificial mechanical form of this, and he recognized it. He was also not the inventor of time dilation; gravity and relative speed existed since physics came into effect (a.k.a. since the beginning of time till the end) and these concepts were identified by brilliant minds as Sir Isaac Newton and then were associated with time dilation with more brilliant minds as Albert Einstein in the 1900’s.

The investments made by others paid off as they were instantly made rich. Experimenters and adventurous peoples and companies bought thousands of models.

Prodan spent the next few years perfecting the prototype as he had done with the IAAMCM, except now he had a huge budget to exhaust as well as third-party experimenters bursting with critique and news.

He also had to work with marketing to try and get his finished product out. Prototype designs were sketched and rendered and very basic prototypes were made. With some fancy editing, commercials were soon ready to air

about portable transparent boxes that slowed down time to preserve whatever was inside the box.

The major thing missing, though, was the name of the product, as both his marketing team and critics pointed out to Prodan.

Prodan let the marketing team decide it.

In 3381, Noverc Electronics offered to buy Prodan's company of Kiki Prodan Inc.

Noverc Electronics was falling behind without Prodan's genius to keep them going. Other manufacturers were catching up quickly, and the company was running out of tricks. The offer was a last attempt to save the company.

Prodan provided a counter-offer: to merge the two companies for free if and only if he was again made CEO.

Presented with what was an even better deal to the folks at Noverc Electronics, they hastily accepted, only to find that Prodan had not even started at paperwork except for the letter he had sent through email.

This caused quite a laugh in the consumer and marketing communities. Prodan's deal held, though, and the two companies merged together into the new Noverc Electronics.

The time-stop chambers were named "Hourglasses" and branded with the company name Noverc Electronics. Noverc Electronics Hourglasses hit the market in 3383, and they gradually began to be applied in different areas all around.

Noverc Electronics patented this technology for two years of protection under Prodan's name so that only after two years could other companies adopt the technology for their own products.

And adopt they did. The time-stop chambers were scary as "time-stop chambers", so many companies adopted the name of hourglasses as well, even if that name was protected intellectual property.

In 3383, when Prodan was 33, he had accomplished his second technological revolution in as many decades. His name was practically legend in the tech community.

The years that followed the success of Prodan were years of massive advance.

Prodan continued to revolutionize education, transportation, agriculture, and a variety of other technologies. Kiki also met Alisha Ecryis, and they had a child, Blade Kiki Prodan. In 3385, Prodan's skin mutations hospitalized him. His suffering, however, did not minimize his ability to do anything, and he had much time for goodbyes and everything else.

Kiki simply closed his eyes and died a peaceful death on the thirteenth of October, 3385, at the young age of 35.

The planet mourned for his lost. Prodan never breathed another breath, never spoke another word, never revolutionized a single more thing.

Prodan's legacy, however, lived on. Advancements happened. Technology got more awesome. Life in the Kingdom of Kunucuber steadily got better. But then, the violent empowering of Kai Ecryis, the brother of Alisha, killed the long-lived kingdom.

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## VI

In 3390, elections were held.

Kai Ecryis ran against the ever-popular Fille de Maes. Ecryis lost the elections by 90% of the votes, but that didn't matter to him.

Later that day, Maes was found shot through the head in his apartment building as a laser precision rifle had penetrated a bullet-proof window. By protocol, advisor Ais Fjel took over, but he was killed in a brutal car crash that killed both the driver and all passengers of three other vehicles as well as ten

guards and the vice president. It was believed to be a suicide attack and not just a normal traffic accident, as all drivers in the attack were in otherwise normal mental and physical health.

Kai, the next most popular candidate, therefore was sworn into office.

Kai spent the next year passing unpassable laws with clever and deceitful wording and presentation and as laws built up on each other Kai's power was almost unlimited.

By this time the parliament, having been fooled by Kai, was powerless. Kai was able to overrule all of their decisions.

In 3392, parliament was destroyed, both politically and literally, by Kai. Citizens watched in horror as bombs rained down on the building, killing all 100 representatives trapped inside.

Kai also controlled all of the military. The citizens were left powerless and at the mercy of the now dictator-like Kai.

It should be noted that the year 3392 was also the year of Alisha Ecryis' death. Alisha died in a brutal car accident at a major intersection in King City. Whether this had anything to do with Kai was never confirmed, but it was widely suspected, as King City was the capital at the time.

Kai used his dictatorship to do horrible things. His first step, after taking control of the government, was to take control of the citizens.

The next year was spent brutally kidnapping, torturing, interrogating, and murdering anybody of power that he suspected was against him in any way.

By 3394, 6 million people had been executed, 9 million tortured, and 12 million captured. This summed up to 27 million people, almost a fifth of the kingdom's citizens. Nia V, at present only 13 years old, was one of the people captured. Fortunately, he proved to have no intentions of rebellion under interrogation; he had been adopted by a family in the city of Phyllamen and grew up educated about a wide field of topics from politics to military strategy to calculus. He used Prodan's genius curriculum, which, because it was only

written in 3360, was very modern and contained much recent history. However, he did this all oblivious to the tyranny around him. In interrogation, however, Nia kept a keen mind and was able to learn much about what was happening.

3395 saw heavy taxing on everything. People that were previously wealthy were taxed so heavily that they entered the lower class; everyone else was stricken into unbearable poverty.

By 3396, about 52 million people had died from poverty caused by the taxing, with no hope of recovery. Living conditions nosedived, undoing all that Kunucuber and Prodan and all of the other entrepreneurs had spent thousands of years building up.

The Noverc Academy had its own private defenses that were unknown to the rest of the world in case of a dictatorship like the one that happened with Kai. This was something that Kunucuber and Nia saw to while they were in power.

Such defenses were immediately set up. New dormitories were built, and the Noverc Academy began harboring citizens of all sorts. They transported citizens from all over the country to the Academy through portal technology, dropping portals all over the kingdom.

Kai hated this. The advanced technology made the Noverc Academy unstoppable.

The academy had weaknesses, however. Their resources were limited now that they were separated by their defenses from Bendan, which had previously supplied them with much of their resources. Their numbers were also limited; most of their refugees were weak and unable to fight at all.

The portal technology also had its downsides. Armed enemies could easily disguise themselves and walk in, taking over the whole academy.

Kai was a very clever, if evil, person. He saw this loophole and sent in thousands of armed troops in disguise through a portal in the large farming community of Yakuta.

In 3396, the academy saw havoc as Kai's troops opened fire on the camps. The Academy's small army and automated defenses, however, were able to contain all 1000 of them with just one death. The attackers, meanwhile, were only able to injure 2 refugees in the camps. Kai's attack was a massive failure, but it did open massive security holes in the portal system.

The refugees inside were concerned, and they demanded the closing of the portals. The academy was forced to do as suggested.

Meanwhile, supplies were getting low. Kai sat in King City and planned the Academy's demise, waiting for the right moment to obliterate his only opponent remaining.

But 3397 saw a surprise. The small army of the Academy, armed with the best weapons and armor, marched covered in suits that made them invisible to eye, radar, and sonar alike, to Bendan and destroyed Kai's units there. There were no casualties on either side. Bendan was now quietly the property of Kai's worse opposition.

By Christmas day of 3397, Kai's troops had learned its lesson well enough. Their defenses were fortified heavily. Regardless of their weaker technology, they still had the advantage in numbers.

However, the academy's troops attacked with a ferocity and will that was not seen in Kai's troops. They all knew what they were fighting for. Many of Kai's troops willingly surrendered in battle to be taken to the academy. Noverc's troops also did not cause harm; they simply disarmed enemies instead of killing them brutally, as Kai's troops did.

From their local attacks, the academy had also gained resources and manpower. Their army was still smaller than that of Kai's, but they had the superior technology and will.

On Christmas day of 3397, the academy launched their largest attack yet. Portals suddenly opened up in King City into Kai's prisons as thousands of academy troops poured in. It was by far the most epic and dangerous attack so far.

Fire rained down upon both sides, thousands versus millions of troops and billions of dollars in defenses.

It was one of the first battles with heavy casualties. Both sides lost hundreds. Three-quarters of the attacking Novercans and indeed almost three-quarters of the whole Novercan army were killed brutally by either deadly defenses or heavy crossfire by the enemy. Meanwhile, thousands of enemies were killed by collapsing buildings as well as their own heavy crossfire, and on multiple but not most occasions by Novercan fire as the armies attempted to get in.

Millions more of Kai's troops were captured, disarmed, or injured by the Novercans. By the end of the battle, only ten of Kai's troops were still able to fight in any way. Nine surrendered to the hundreds of Novercan troops that now outnumbered them. The other opened fire and was quickly disarmed.

Thousands of Kai's prisoners in the building, however, died due to structural failure or by crossfire. Another 9000 or so were injured, 5000 of them critically. 3000 of these died in medical treatment.

Nia V was one of those injured. He was forced to the wall of his cell by other prisoners and hit in the arm and legs by 3 bullets fired by Kai's troops. Nia almost died due to blood loss during treatment, but he survived after several blood transfusions.

After the capital was taken, it was an easy matter to take over the rest of Kai's control.

Kai's dictatorship was powerful, cruel, and short-lived, shattered by surprise attacks by Noverc's extremely superior military technology and strategy. This skirmish that costed millions of lives pointlessly on both sides



also ended the long-living and prosperous Kingdom of Kunucuber. The original Treaty of Kunucuber was found, half-burnt, in a prison.

Kai was imprisoned for the rest of his life.

Nia V, at 17, played a major military and political role in the defeat of Kai, but his story is detailed in Volume III.

## NIA III

### I

Nia the Fifth was the direct ancestor of the original Nia Bendan after an arbitrary amount of generations. He was born to Nia IV Bendan and a mother who was never identified in 3381, two years before Kiki Prodan's son Blade was born.

Nia IV and his wife were very unhappy and they were on their path to divorce when Nia V was born. Neither parent wanted their child to grow up in such a violent and exposed environment, so they left behind a letter to Nia V and tearfully gave him up for adoption with instructions to give him the letter when he was thirteen years old.

Nia V was adopted by step-parents Lucas and Ellie Smith.

The two Smiths who raised Nia V did so in a very perfect way. The family was very wealthy and owned a large suburban estate outside the city of Portland. Nia V grew up in a mansion of sorts, with luxurious interiors, luxurious exteriors, butlers, servants, and a lot of other fancy items.

The Smiths also hired the best private tutors for Nia. Not just standard teachers either, nope; the standard courses, mathematics, language, science, and history Nia taught himself using Prodan's textbooks. His tutors taught him such things as business management and advanced literature and government and technology. In his less than eight years of private tutoring and self teaching Nia V had learned more than most Noverc Academy graduates.

Nia was also a frequent visitor to the Noverc Academy. From Portland, it was a short thirty-minute commute from his grand estate to the collection of geniuses that was Novera. Nia often participated in competitions, debates, and discussions, often listened to lectures, and learned a lot from those at Noverc.

Of course, what made much of this very easy for Nia was money. If he had been adopted by poor parents, would he have become the figure that he did? Many historians doubt it. As it was, Nia's upbringing was one where he was surrounded by lots of luxuries and intellectual works and minds. Another major factor in the perfection of his upbringing was that he had no siblings or biological parents, so he wasn't as intimately close with anybody as one raised by biological parents with siblings might. This had the effect of Nia being quite a bit less biased, but also less experienced. The one close relationship that Nia was recorded as ever having with anybody was that he became very good friends with the daughter of the owners of the neighboring estate, who often came over to the Smiths' estate to study with Nia. Later, reflecting on his life, Nia recalled that he had had "a perfect childhood", one that many others were jealous and envious of, and for good reason.

Nia was very interested in Kiki Prodan's works and life. Prodan had written the textbooks when he was not even a decade old, and Nia, fast approaching the same age, was still studying content written by a person his age. Nia looked up to Prodan and his amazing accomplishments; a genius who grew up in a massively imperfect environment with gangs, horrifically unsatisfactory public education, and family that loved him but was unable to provide enough money even sometimes for food, and yet Kiki was still able to become the one of the most successful figures in history. And here Nia was, with a perfect, flawless, rich, spoiled life that anyone and everyone who knew of would envy and he was not yet even nearly as good as Prodan had been.

Nia spent much his isolated childhood pondering many philosophical ideas, such as the one about childhood upbringings, in particular his upbringing compared to his ancestor, Nia I's, and Prodan's, which he had read about in books. When he was eleven, he wrote up a two-hundred page long manuscript on his thoughts and sent it to the Noverc Academy for review.

He received an email reply a day later that he thought was probably written by a robot. "Sorry, your submission was not accepted due to your age."

He sent another email to another person in the Academy, telling him about how the robot had rejected his draft due to age restraints, and if he could submit it through him to get past the age requirements. The person just replied, "Sorry, the age restraints still apply."

Nia V considered, then sent an email summarizing his work and asking if it could be published in some other way if age restraints did not let it be considered for a book.

The Academy officer replied, "Sorry, kid, but you ain't no Prodan."

Nia V smiled as he read the message, containing everything from double negatives to informal language, and sent from a publishing press, no less. He carefully documented everything, then posted it on major social media websites online, all over the place, anonymously and through several other's accounts so that it would be traceable to all but him.

The posts went viral. If the publishing press recalled that it was to him that they sent the embarrassing messages, they were too busy to try and blame it on an eleven-year-old and risk damaging their publicity even more.

Meanwhile, he sent the works to other major publishers. They were accepted by two different presses and began to be printed and distributed across the kingdom. Nia's work was read by many people, ordinary people and scholars alike, and he achieved a fairly famous status in the authoring community. Over the years, he published many more thoughtful essays and books, some which were universally agreed upon and others which sparked debate all across the kingdom.

Although Nia did not know, Kai Ecryis, dictator of the kingdom, was one of the biggest fans of Nia's work. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why he spared Nia's life and from harmful torture that he put millions of others through.

Two years after the publication of his first book, in 3392, Nia was shocked to see thousands of troops pouring into his mansion, about to drag his step-parents away.

He sprinted down the staircase and stepped in front of the army. Many soldiers, including, thankfully, the leader of the squad, recognized Nia as the famous author and did not open fire, only capturing him. Nia pleaded that they did not harm his parents. The commander replied that that was up to Kai, and that now could be the last time that he sees them. The commander then gave them five minutes to take what they needed and leave.

Lucas and Ellie spent the last five minutes of their life telling Nia about the letter from his parents.

Five minutes later, both were shot dead and Nia was captured and forced into a helicopter and rushed to Kai's castle with no physical injuries, but physical injuries weren't everything.

Nia was logical, very much so. Perhaps too much so; where the pain would've ripped anyone else in half, Nia was able to burn it up into his brain to fill his heart with nothingness.

Nia was not stupid, though. At thirteen, he knew he would go paranoid if he didn't let his sadness, fear, and anger spill out. For now, though, an empty heart and some mental damage seemed much better than having a bullet pass through his head.

There were two guards to either side of him, in basic mobility armor. The attackers did not expect him to be armed. They were the same guards who had taken him to the helicopter.

*Learn as much as you can about your enemy and what lies ahead so you can prepare for it. You are your own most valuable asset. What is separate from you, even if linked with you, is still separate from you.*

Nia tried to keep his voice straight, but it was still a little wavery. "Why did you kill my parents?"

It came out sounding childish. Innocent, idiotic. He had not meant it, but now he realized his age was a valuable advantage.

The two guards did not respond for a while. Then, one said in a grainy voice through the microphone, "We followed Kai's orders."

It was obviously measured as not to show any intention of being against this "Kai"'s orders. The conversation was probably recorded and being shown to Kai. Kai must be a powerful figure for someone to show so much fear.

The other spoke up. "Hey, little man, you're very brave to be not in tears right now," he said stupidly.

Nia wanted to laugh at his stupidity and burst into tears like he said at the same time. The guard still thought that he was just a child. But Nia tried not to waste his time on such meaningless thoughts.

He could not think, though.

*Useless*, he thought. *Useless, useless, useless.*

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## II

Contrary to Nia's initial thoughts, the chopper stopped in another city before heading to their final destination.

Nia was thrown roughly into a darker but still lit room into the back of another plane. The doors slammed shut. Nia was trapped inside. He didn't spend any time trying to open the door; inside a plane, such a short-lived escape would be useless.

Minutes later, however, somebody else was thrown in. A young boy. Nia thought he recognized hi-

"PRODAN!" he screamed. A guard jumped back in surprise. Another few raised their weapons. Still others glanced around nervously and put their fingers on the triggers of their guns.

Blade Prodan, the son of Kiki Prodan, both of whom Nia had read about and idolized from books, was already bound up and on the floor, rolling around. His mouth was still uncovered. His eyes were red and puffy. But still, Nia had seen enough to recognize him. He just moaned and rolled so that he was face up. "Bendan," he croaked weakly.

Nia almost laughed if not for the guns aimed at the two nervously and the microphones that were now easily seen in the bright light streaming through the open door.

Then a voice rang out from somewhere.

"Come on, you imbeciles. Why did I ever hire you as soldiers again? The plane's about to leave. Do you want to be sucked into the vacuum of space, or what?"

The soldiers quickly left, slamming the door and locking the two in darkness.

Nia leaned back against the wall in the darkness.

"Prodan," Nia repeated breathlessly. "Prodan."

Blade grunted on the floor. "Yes, Bendan the great, it's me. I'm sure you know about my dad. So, how are we going to get out of this?" his voice sounded almost distorted, and he had to pause several times mid-sentence to sniff air.

Nia took a shaky, rattly breath that he was, for a second, embarrassed of making. Then he remembered that he was locked in a dark chamber, his only guardians and friends were dead, and he was being taken to who knew where for who knew what. It effectively erased all thoughts from his mind, and he spilled into a crazy, insane simultaneous laugh and sob.

"Crazy what - " Nia hiccupped. "what - what life..." he hiccupped again. "what this life bri - "

"I know, I know," gasped Prodan. "Stop wasting the air, please."

Nia shook his head maniacally, dizzying himself. “You really think - “ hic - “they would lock us up - “ hic - “two important people - “ hic - “with limited?” -hic.

Blade sighed heavily, pushing out a rattling breath of air. “Don’t overestimate your worth. They just killed everyone else - “

“And spared you and you alone.” Nia had recovered somewhat now. “Don’t underestimate yourself, Mister Prodan. You’re a superstar everywhere. The son of Kiki Prodan, the genius.”

“The son of,” growled Blade. “The son of Kiki Prodan, the son of the genius, never recognized as the genius himself, unlike *you*, the brilliant author, brilliant person. *You’re* the one worth being the son of Prodan. Am I worth the title *Mister Prodan*, or even the surname *Prodan*?”

Nia inhaled shakily. He didn’t want any enemies, but he didn’t have the presence of mind to think consciously. “I’m lucky. I’ve had a perfect childhood up to now. I’ve never been exposed to this stuff. It’s probably even a good thing that I’ve never met any *Nias* other than myself.”

They were quiet for a moment.

Blade’s voice was softer when he spoke again. “Yeah. Sorry.”

Nia didn’t know how to reply. Perhaps it was one of the disadvantages of isolation that he didn’t know how to communicate properly in times like this.

The two sat in silence for a while. Nia mulled over his thoughts, trying to sort them into something that he could follow logically. It occurred to him that he was not worried about his future. He associated this with the fact that he was too focused on the events that had just happened.

He let out a groan that he didn’t mean to and was instantly embarrassed. To his relief, Blade was already asleep on the rounded floor of the cell.

Nia leaned back and closed his eyes himself.

“Rise and shine, prisoners,” said a voice.



Nia woke up with back aches. *What...* Nia wondered for a second as bright light blinded him. He felt for his smartwatch and alarm clock, but could not find it.

He opened his eyes and for a second was confused to find himself in a room with concrete walls and a few crystalline and definitely not glass windows. There was also another child next to him that looked like the Prodan that he had seen in the books and on the plane, and a person with a gun in front of him, shaking his shoulders.

Then he remembered that his parents were dead, and for a second the emptiness returned. He pushed it out and got up and stretched.

“Good morning,” said Nia.

“Good morning,” replied the armed guard. He was a large lizard, but he wore no protective armor, or any armor at all, just a military jumpsuit. He had a pistol strapped to his belt and a small semi-machine gun across his back.

Nia recalled his capture and meeting Blade Prodan. Somebody must have taken them while they were still asleep to this cell, where he had woke up.

The guard interrupted his thoughts as the burly lizard proceeded to wake up Blade. “Wake up,” he said.

Nia thought back to history textbooks. Blade had been born in 3383. Kiki died in 3385. Alisha, Blade’s mother, died in 3392. That was earlier this year. Or maybe it wasn’t. Maybe it was five years ago, in 3387. Was it 3392, or 3387? In history, it didn’t matter, but in life, he realized that it made the difference between remembrance and forgotten in a person’s memory.

“What are you going to do with us?” Nia asked the guard, who was shaking Blade’s shoulders in an attempt to wake him up.

The guard looked up for a moment, then back down at Blade, then said, in a low voice: “It depends. If Kai’s in a good mood, he’ll just have someone ask some questions. If he’s unhappy, he’ll torture you or do whatever

he wants to you to make him happy. Which may or may not include brutal, brutal executions.”

Blade was up now. Nia had a suspicion that he was just pretending to sleep for the last moments so he could listen to his surroundings before he woke up. *Smart guy*, he thought.

“Where to now, though?” asked Nia. “Surely Kai can’t tend to all of us immediately.” Of course, Nia didn’t know how big *all of us* was. Maybe it was just famous people, and he did tend to *all of us* immediately. Or maybe Kai was the codename for a collection of evil people who had enough in numbers to tend to all of them immediately.

“No,” the guard agreed. “We’ll see how long you get to stay happy.”

Blade was still on the ground, struggling to push himself up. Nia could tell that a night on the stiff bed was worse on Blade than it was on him.

“Stay happy, my foot,” he muttered.

“I’m Mikhael, by the way,” said the guard named Mikhael. “Let’s go to breakfast.”

Nia risked a snort. “They even care enough to serve us breakfast.”

Mikhael did not reply, but opened the door and gestured for him and Blade to come with him.

They headed down a corridor full of similar doors to theirs, with heavy locks on them. Daylight streamed in from windows every once in a while. There were also stairs every few doors leading pretty far upwards, to what Nia estimated were at least five floors.

“Oh, there’s eighty-seven or so floors to this building. This is only the basement. It’s the largest floor, too. Everything is portal-connected; you just step in a door and it teleports you to the right floor. It’s great. Imagine climbing eighty-seven flights of stairs just to get to bed.”

Nia was very surprised. Eighty-seven floors was very high. Regulations required all buildings to be lower than fifty stories high without special permit. As it turned out, most all buildings were exactly fifty stories high to get the

most out of the least allotted space, but these buildings were thirty-seven floors higher than regulation. Surely they couldn't have constructed such a building in such a quick time. It must've been here before. How such a rough sandstone building got approved was beyond him.

At the end of the hall was a set of metal double doors with two fortified crystalline windows. They weren't sealed tight, but Nia had a feeling they were locked.

Indeed, when they got to the door, Mikhael had to unlock a bolt that Nia had not previously realized was a mechanical lock.

*We, Nia thought, are still using locks invented 10 millennia ago.*

Blade was quite surprised as well. "Why not electromagnetic locks?"

"Too expensive," said Mikhael.

Nia was not convinced.

The mess hall was strict and orderly. Of course, Nia knew none other than those like it, but Blade's impressions of it was that it was what the principal yelled at him and his class about all day as ideal school lunchroom would be like.

There were a few rows of tables that formed a single, long shape all the way down to the ends of the room, with some breaks in-between for people to pass through.

Many people were muttering to each other. Some were crying, walking around with red and puffy eyes. In the far corner, a group of larger lizards were playing cards. Those around them scooted around nervously.

There was a short line at the front of the room that lead to a row of robotic arms handing out food on people's trays.

Nia was reminded of an exhibit he had once seen about automation at the Noverc Academy. Of course, automation had happened a while back. It had replaced pretty much all manual labor, physical or mental.

He was still nostalgic, however. As he got in line and it moved up slowly the feeling did not go. It felt like each part of him was getting pushed and prodded and pulled in every way possible, but gently, until all of it burned off, but pleasantly so; the downside was that it left a whole big pit of darkness, regretfulness, and everything else at the bottom of his stomach.

On his tray was a bowl of something that was whitish-brown, looked a bit flaky, and smelled like flour, a plate of something else that looked like bread but had the colors and smell of bacon, and a glass of something that looked like the same stuff as the stuff in the bowl.

To his surprise, Mikhael also got the same meal. He left them with a cheerful “See ya’!” that for some reason didn’t seem to belong in such a lunchroom and then went to sit with the big guys in the corner. Were they also guards like him? The others didn’t have guns.

Blade followed Nia as he weaved between the tables, trying to find an empty seat. The first one that he came across that was big enough for him and Blade both was in the third row from the line, near the middle of the room.

Nia sat down next to a young girl who was rubbing her eyes.

“Hi,” she mumbled. “Nia?”

Nia surprised that so many other people knew him. He had rarely been outside of the mansion estate, and everyone on the estate knew him and he knew them. Out here, however, although it seemed that everyone knew him, he knew nobody.

“Yeah,” he said. “You?”

“I’m Josie.” she looked down and twirled a piece of bread-whatever in the glass of stuff, then bit a chunk off. “Hmm,” she looked up and regarded the rest of the bread curiously.

Nia tried dipping the bread in the glass, and Blade followed suit. The bread, to his dismay, did not taste like bacon. It tasted like some sort of deep-fried, buttered toast that was still super-soft on the inside. The stuff in the

glass tasted like some sort of milk-like product. A little like almond milk, but not quite. Maybe soy milk?

“They sell this in Chinatown,” said Josie. “*Yo-tiao* and soy milk. Literally “greasy stick”. Sort of a disgusting name, but still, it tastes delicious.”

Josie leaned back and pulled her hair into a ponytail, then remembered that she didn’t have a hair tie, and slumped forwards onto the table again, hands around her eyes.

Nia glanced at Blade. He was busily drinking the last of the soymilk in the glass.

“What?” he gasped. “This stuff is delicious.”

“It’s good,” Nia agreed.

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### III

Mikhael locked Nia, Blade, Josie, and everyone else in a huge common room for the rest of the day after breakfast was finished.

The common room was really a hallway leading to several meeting rooms; however, all but one of the meeting rooms had no intact walls, so there was a nice array of tables and desks with a walled room in the corner.

Mikhael and the rest of the people that were in the corner left, presumably to go to their own room.

Nia picked a table and sat down. Blade and Josie followed, on either side of him. *Company is weird*, thought Nia. *But then, so is life*.

Josie leaned back again and let her hair fall. “How’d you get from being a rich boy to a prisoner?”

Blade snorted. “How’d you get from a mumbling girl talking about Chinatown to such a nosy, annoying person in such a short time?”

Nia made an attempt to break the rapidly developing rivalry. “The usual. Soldiers come, kill everyone, take one hostage away. I guess it’s a good

strategy if someone wants to get information - break the hostage down, build him up again, but thinly, and then crack him. Whoever Kai is, he's a genius."

Josie seemed surprised. "*Whoever Kai is?* How do you know so little about Kai?"

Nia shrugged. "I was kept in my step parents' house after Kai was elected. They kept me away from current events. It was dangerous to know, I guess, and they wanted to protect me."

Blade seemed like he knew exactly what Nia was saying, but Josie was still making a *how-the-heck-do-you-not-know-about-Kai* face.

"What's your last name?" Nia asked Josie.

Blade and Josie both answered at the same time. The result was that Nia heard neither name, Blade followed up with, "Wait...oh," and Nia burst out laughing hysterically. Josie joined in, and when Blade finally figured out what had just happened, he did too.

When they finally stopped laughing, Josie said, "My last name's Amadeus."

"Josie Amadeus," said Blade, scratching his chin.

"Josephine Jules Amadeus," Josie amended.

"Josephine Jules Amadeus," Blade repeated. "Hmm."

In the few hours that the three had together, Nia learned that Josie had been captured a day ago from Chinatown in King City. Her parents were safe as scholars in the Noverc Academy, which Nia learned was one of the only places on Neath that wasn't under control of the dictator Kai.

Josie was an advanced student that had already mastered all core elementary classes in math, english, history, and science, as well as elementary creative classes of general music and fine arts. She had got to level four in French and some other classes, and had been taking Music Theory among some others when she was captured.

Later, the guards returned.

They herded everyone into the hallway and they started walking down toward their rooms.

Nia noticed that everyone tried to walk around the guards. Why? Mikhael didn't seem to mean them any harm, just following the orders of Kai, escorting them here and there.

Josie whispered, "Got to go," and then sprinted away from them and Mikhael toward her own room.

To her misfortune, her route took her past the group of guards. She accidentally bumped into one of them.

Before she could say sorry, the guard scooped her up, slapped her, and shoved her into another room, following in behind her. Several of the others followed him in. Her screaming rang down the hallway, but everybody tried to ignore it and kept moving.

Blade was shocked. He tugged on Mikhael's sleeve, frantically saying, "Aren't you going to do anything?"

Mikhael answered, "I wouldn't stand a chance against so many of them."

Nia responded, "You have a pistol and a sub-machine gun."

"I can't use them. That would get me taken by Kai for endangering his prisoners."

*That made no sense*, Nia thought.

"Mikhael, Josie is being beat up by a gang of guards, and you're talking about not endangering prisoners!" Blade yelled.

"Sorry," said Mikhael.

"GODDAMNIT!" screamed Blade.

Josie was more introverted from then on. She barely talked at all, and she shied away from everyone.

It was only days later that Kai ordered Mikhael to escort Nia and Blade to the castle. "Together. And no harm is to come to them."

Blade was scared out of his mind as to what would happen to them.

"Don't underestimate your worth, Prodan," Nia repeated. "Plus, whatever happens, we won't be able to change it at the moment. Worry about it later, when it will actually matter."

The flight was short and uninteresting. This time, they were not locked in a chamber, but given economy-like seats. They were locked in by safety belts, except this time they were electromagnetic locks that could not be picked as easily.

The other seats were also filled up with prisoners. Nia noticed that many were bruised and cut and injured. He wondered how many had been subject to the same thing that Josie had.

The plane landed on an in-air runway, floating above a city that Nia instantly identified as King City from the fifty-plus floor buildings all around.

Everybody on the plane was forced into a single-file line, with Mikhael and the two pilots in front. They marched out of the one, narrow doorway into an even narrower but taller hallway.

After a considerable amount of walking, they reached the end of the hallway. The walls and floor were smooth and solid-looking all the way down until the other end, where it opened up to the plane. Nia began to feel claustrophobic.

Presently, there was a loud groan, and the corridor darkened. The entryway to the plane outside slid shut.

Nia's feeling of claustrophobia was magnified by a few times.

Beside him, Blade squirmed uncomfortably. Nobody said a word.

They stood there for several minutes. Nia was getting tired, and he wanted to lean against a wall, but he didn't dare. It was eerily silent.



The group waited until Nia's legs started to hurt. Then his ankles started to hurt. Eventually, others started leaning against the walls, including the pilot and Mikhael. After a considerable amount of time in which more nothingness happened, Nia also leaned back and let himself rest a little.

Suddenly, the silence was disrupted as if a wound had been slashed in it. There was a huge groan as the wall in front of Nia suddenly became transparent and blasted them all in the face with bright light. Several of the captured people yelped, shielded their eyes, and stumbled backwards into the wall.

Nia closed his eyes, seeing the bright blue aftershock of the light, and heard several people gasp. He opened his eyes slowly, and when they had adjusted to the light, he gasped, too.

Below was a huge, expansive chamber room. There were orderly clumps of tables with lizards seated in front of monitors. Each was designed differently, each with a distinctive leader. Each had lizards doing different things on different programs.

Signs came from holographic projectors on the ceiling way above. Beautiful staircases were all over the place.

What was the most surprising, however, was the network on the ceiling itself. There were white metal pods that appeared to be suspended several feet below the ceiling with no physical attachments. In them sat supervisors with laptops and headsets. The pods moved around, going back and forth.

It was all very orderly and functional but simultaneously beautiful in a way that was shockingly awe-inspiring.

A larger pod pulled up in front of the hallway. The lizard inside had a crooked grin across his face. He was sitting on a magnificent, throne-like seat, surrounded by many opaque holographic screens. He touched one of them, and the screens all disappeared.

"Welcome, my friends," he said. His voice sounded crisp and clear, like Nia was right next to Kai and not separated by several inches of metal and

glass and a few yards of air. It was a strange experience. "Welcome to King City's government hall, the hidden gem of the new, Kai-style Kingdom of Kunucuber." He laughed. "Come on, I'll let you look around."

The hallway they were in suddenly groaned and swung a little. One of the lizards looked like he might throw up.

Kai's sharp eye noticed. "Don't worry, it'll stop shaking soon."

Indeed, the hallway stabilized after a moment and started moving seamlessly. The cabin, however, was so stable that if not for the window nobody would've realized that it was moving at all. Nia wondered if the whole time that the window was closed the hallway had been moving to where they were now. After all, it seemed like they were in the middle of a huge control room, and the plane had landed on a runway that was in mid-air, floating above an indelible place over King City. It would make sense for Kai to have them be transported without them realizing it. There would be no way for them to tell in any way where they were or the physical route to be taken to get here. Kai was not only evil, but also clever, or so it seemed.

Kai's pod followed along with them. Every so often, he would point something out in his weirdly transported voice. Nia wondered if there was a microphone hidden somewhere in Kai's pod, and a speaker in Nia's.

"All the units are grouped in six tables. Sometimes there are clumps of multiple of these six-table formations, but rarely. Oh yeah, there are also larger units of multiple clumps called divisions, and several divisions make up departments. There's a few departments - defense, economics, law, just to name a few - and they're pretty much the top level, under the whole government, of course."

Nia was confused, then, as to what division Kai belonged, and how he had so much power. Maybe he belonged to some sort of welfare department, or the defense apartment? He must of had a good reason to kill Lucas and Ellie and imprison him. The troops said they were doing it on his own orders...

It turned out that Kai had a sharper eye than Nia's own realizations permitted. "Questions, Nia? Ask away. Don't worry, I won't drop you from the pod," he laughed at his own joke.

Nia wondered if Kai could hear Nia from across. Was there also a microphone in his pod?

"What's your role in government, sir? You seem to be a very powerful figure," Nia considered saying more to please him, just in case he would drop him from the pod, but he shut his mouth.

Kai simply laughed at the question. Nia had made the assertion to himself that Kai laughed too much. "I, my friend, am the leader, the director, the president, the dictator, the king...call it whatever you want." He grinned. "I am in charge of running everything and keeping it in order. Of course, I have help..."

He looked out of the pod and gestured at a floating block, with red accents that stood out from the rest of the building and its components. There were darkened windows. Inside, lizards stood or sat, touching the screens. There was obviously something on the screens, but Nia couldn't see anything from the outside.

"This is my council building," said Kai. "Inside is my council and their own small teams. They help me make decisions. Of course, they can also control my power. If they disagree with me, we have a problem that must be resolved before I can carry out my decisions,"

Nia tried to keep his face straight this time as he thought, *a problem that must be resolved. Hmm, very reassuring.*

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## IV

The hallway pod slid to a halt beside the council building. The window opened to a seemingly solid wall.

The deceleration was the only blip of imperfect stabilization throughout the whole journey, and so several people stumbled and fell. Not Nia, though, and as Blade collapsed into him, Nia could not help but laugh. He heard Kai laughing along with them.

He wasn't sure how Kai could see them. Or at least, not until the thing that was previously a window vanished, the thing that was previously a solid wall folded back in hexagonal pieces, and Kai was revealed behind it, sitting in a lounge chair by a real fireplace. There were several other lounge chairs around him.

Kai gestured for them to sit down. "Come on," he said, "sit."

They came out and sat. The hallway was now revealed to be a rectangular pod. It slid away to reveal the view that was behind it, and it was a view beyond all views. Several people gasped and opened their mouths in awe for the second time.

Before them stretched all the tables, all the clumps, all the divisions, and everything else receding into the distance with HUD lights overlaying boundaries and labels for each clump, division, and everything else. Only now did Nia realize the true grandness of the place and the engineering that must've gone into such a huge, continuous chamber. Kai didn't say anything and just let them marvel at it.

It took Nia a while to get past the grandness and reading all the information on the glass and notice that the room was slowly revolving and revealing new clusters and divisions and departments outside the window. Blade must've realized it too, because he leaned his head back and made a "Whao!" sound.

Kai had butlers show Nia, Blade, and their fellow prisoners to their rooms. The conditions were significantly improved over the previous prison conditions.

Each room had a large, super-soft bed. Nia first laid down on it to try it and found that when he got up again it was already morning, and this was coming from someone who had lived in luxury for almost a decade.

He groggily got up. He had slept in his clothes. Well, he hadn't as much slept as sat down, dropped like a stone, and passed out. There were toiletries already in the bathroom, but he didn't feel like doing any of that and so he fixed himself up a bit and rang the bell on the door to call for his servant.

The servant arrived with a tray of breakfast - bacon and the like - but also with Blade trailing behind him.

"Is this room bugged?" he asked.

"Yes," said Nia. "Look around, will you?" He reached under the carpet and pulled out a rectangular sound absorption wafer. It was great because it didn't need any electricity to run; it simply absorbed sound naturally and, if decoded right, could actually be translated into a string of usable audio.

Blade shook his head. "Kai and his bugs."

"He's a genius," replied Nia.

Blade was sickened. "A genius? He killed - "

"I didn't say that he was a good person, I said that he's a genius."

Blade snorted and shook his head again.

Some more days of touring and whatnot followed. Nia became more and more fond of Kai. He had almost forgotten his step parents. Probably Kai's manipulation, but Nia found himself more interested in Kai and less in everything else. It was manipulation, but he didn't care.

He could tell that it had the same effect on Blade. He brought up the negatives of Kai less and less and agreed more with Nia about his brilliance.

But one day, Nia was sitting in the lounge, the only room he thought where there were no visual bugging, he suddenly realized something.

Kai had ordered the death of his step-parents.

It was a stupid realization, one that should have come to him before.

Instantly, his mind filled up with a burning hate towards Kai, an immense sadness, insane, frantic worry that Kai would find out about him, and a great sense that he should get revenge.

It seemed like all his intelligence, coupled even with some of Kai's, suddenly doubled over, spewed out all impurities, and left Nia with a cold sense of what he needed to do. It was scarily awesome. He hadn't felt like this since that social media humiliation of the Noverc press.

He felt powerful, and he wanted to do something with his power.

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## V

That night, Kai called Nia down to his pod for a meeting.

Kai had made it pretty apparent that he favored Nia over others. He constantly conferred with Nia. He and Blade were both invited to a council meeting, but Blade was still in Kai's manipulated stupor of intelligence. It was crazy what some genius could do to some other genius. They were both asked to actually participate and vote, but Blade's vote was simply this: "What Kai votes for."

Nia had to constantly resist the urge to tackle everyone to the ground and beat up Blade until some sense returned to him. He was surrounded in a world where everyone was attached to Kai's opinions, including the council members. In the meeting that Nia went to, where Nia could've and did raise several counter-points, the council simply stood dumb and did not even try to agree or disagree with them. He quickly realized that it was a dictatorship to the core even though there was a council and hundreds of different subdivisions.

When Kai called for Nia and only Nia, Nia was only mildly surprised.

Nia walked down the corridor to the lounge they had stood in on the day of their arrival. It seemed so amazing, the door, the disappearing wall, the

adjustable opacity windows. It was all part of Kai's manipulation, he knew, but it was still amazing technology.

Kai was already in his pod. It was several feet from the door.

Nia approached the threshold. "What?" he called out.

"Jump," said Kai, grinning.

Nia did so without hesitation, charging at a full sprint and leaping off of the bottom edge of the window, with arms outstretched to balance his landing, if necessary. As soon as he jumped, though, Kai scrambled his pod backwards as fast as it would go.

Nia was not fooled. *A cheap trick*, he thought. *If I don't make it, he'll say he killed me by accident. If I do make it, he'll say it was just a test of my devotion.*

*Then let's make it work for me*, he told himself. He made a motion to carry him even further, and ended up overshooting the backing pod. He landed between the ceiling and the pod and was impressed not to see any of the metal on him float upwards towards what he had previously assumed was a magnetic ceiling or pod.

The hatch opened up. Kai was smiling widely. "Nice jump," he congratulated Nia, helping him into the pod.

"Cheap tricks," replied Nia, who was willing to take a little risk.

"Ah, so you were not fooled." Kai's smile only grew wider.

Nia coughed up a laugh. "Of course. You kill me, it was an accident. I survive, it was a test. Am I right, or am I right?"

"You, of course, are right. It's nice to see someone who doesn't have to be hypnotized to like me." Kai laughed. "Do tell me, am I that wretched?"

Nia's quick thinking was the only thing that kept him afloat and alive in this dangerously sharp and icy game of cat and mouse. He choked up another laugh. "Wretched? Why would anyone ever think that?" He included a hint of sarcasm at the last moment.

Still, Kai's talk made Nia think, and he didn't have time to spare for such thinking. It was obviously some sort of test. Kai was a genius. From Nia's answers, he could probably tell if Nia was in a stupor, not in a stupor but supportive of him, or not in a stupor and not supportive of him, in which case he would probably be thrown out of the pod to certain death.

It scared him that he found himself agreeing with some of Kai's philosophies after he regained his consciousness. He was becoming a supporter of Kai.

Meanwhile, Kai had reeled out the next question of the fast-paced test. "So, do you know of anything about the war?"

Nia was really confused over this one, and did not try to hide it. "War? I'm sorry, I don't recall ever hearing about a war in recent history..."

Kai leaned back, and a frown spread across his face. He opened his mouth up to speak, but then shut it suddenly. His face brightened again. "No, of course not! Oh, I should've kept a better account. Shame on me. We shall spend this fine evening talking to you about this war, then," he said. He pressed a mechanical button on the armrest of his chair. A holographic screen faded into view. There was a "ding".

"Ordinateur, take us outside please," he told his screen.

Nia wondered why Kai was using French, and older vocabulary at that. "Why not use more modern terminology?" asked Nia.

Kai grinned. "I see you're familiar with the beautiful language of French."

"Je avais l'habitude de parler français," said Nia.

"Oh?" Kai chuckled. "Used to? Since when did you stop?"

"Never," admitted Nia.

"Of course not,"

The screen that Kai had referred to as the ordinateur beeped. A message appeared on the screen. A handprint scanner popped out from either side of the chair.



Kai placed his hands on the scanners. There was a beep of confirmation, and the previously unibody ceiling above them whirled hexagonally, collapsing into different panels, and then revealed the sky.

It was another thing that Nia had not realized that he missed when he was in his stupor. It was a beautiful night. The moon was bright, at just before half. Clouds gave the sky a slightly green-blue look. Bright, shining stars were dotted among them.

Nia saw that they were just above ground level. They were on the roof of a small, cubic, white metal building that extended for about a story out of the ground. Around them was woods - trees, grass, plants, and all sorts of wildlife - without a city in sight.

It was amazing that a floating platform over King City had lead them so far away from any city, or, as it seemed, any civilization.

The two of them just sat there for a while, taking in the wild. Eventually, Kai whispered, "You know, I haven't been out here for a while." Nia murmured a half-hearted response.

"So, the war," Kai said.

It was 3392. People were accusing Kai of things. Manipulation. Dictatorship. He was dangerous. Disastrous. Tension was growing.

There was word of a rebellion. Kai's private police intercepted emails about it, with concrete evidence of specific people planning uprisings. Warrants were secured. Arrests were made. Many people accused of planning to lead rebellions were arrested.

This just lead to more tension. Kai feared that he had gone too far, but now there was no turning back. One side had already resorted to violence. Kai was forced to respond with it.

Kai started arresting people. People fled to the Noverc Academy. The Noverc Academy, a poorly funded academy, dependant on everyone else and not themselves. Nia was familiar with the academy, of course. He agreed that

they would not be ideal leaders of the country, what with hundreds of brilliant minds disagreeing over everything; however, he was not convinced by Kai's plans just yet, either.

The Noverc Academy had all kinds of technologies never seen before by anyone else. They also had a monopoly in technology designs, and they could easily deny everything available to everyone else. Of course, there were still fakes that did the same exact thing just as well, if not better, but still, new plans meant new plants and more money needed.

Kai didn't know what to do. He couldn't let the academy have too much power, but he didn't want to go on a killing spree either.

Kai's meeting with Nia turned out to not be only a test, but also an invitation to help Kai make decisions. Just the two of them, no council, no departments in the way, just Kai and Nia, two brilliant minds put together.

Who was Nia to turn down such an offer? He accepted it enthusiastically, the next day pouring over plans and drawings and the such.

Was he in another stupor? One for glory, craving for honor, for fame, for success? He recognized that a similar thing had happened before, and now, coincidentally, he was against the same enemy: the Noverc Academy.

The first action was easy. The Noverc Academy got almost all of its resources, from energy to food, from the nearby city of Bendan. Just take over Bendan and cut off the links, and Noverc is now deprived of food. Of course, Noverc was full of geniuses, and they would find a solution. A war wasn't won that easily, only a battle. In the meantime, however, it was a nice little disadvantage for the Noverc Academy.

Bendan, the city named after Nia's ancestors, was taken over, once more in the possession of an actual Bendan. It was Kai's first strike against the Noverc Academy and the start of the Second Nian Revolution. Less known was that it was all the doing of a thirteen-year-old. The invasion of the city of

Bendan became known as The First Attack, as it was the first open battle in the war.

With Kai's opener into warfare, the Noverc Academy didn't hold back, either. A month later, Kai had taken over almost everywhere but the academy, and they had troops shored up around it. Much of the progress was thanks to Nia's military genius. The Noverc Academy, however, had technological genius. Their weapons were able to instantly knock out a person without causing any major damage in one shot, and it didn't even have to be region specific. A shot to the foot could cause the same damage as a headshot, the way the guns were designed, and that damage was absolutely zero, but the targets would then drop, unconscious but with no health deterioration.

Kai suffered heavy losses. Nia was concerned by the huge amount of Kai's troops being captured by the Noverc, but Kai insisted that they outnumbered the Noverc Academy hundreds to one, and that he needn't worry.

Five years passed by. Kai kept Nia in the battle commanding position for all five years. In this five year period, Nia's genius was able to keep Kai's kingdom alive, no major progress was made against the Noverc Academy. Actually, the Academy wasn't even touched by the massive attacks.

By now, Nia was well known. For five years before he was even an adult, Nia was able to sustain a whole entire kingdom against enemies with uber-advanced technologies and genius military veterans several decades older than himself. The supporters of Kai loved him, and the opponents of Kai resented him more than anyone else on Neath.

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## VI

Nia's alliance with Kai ended just before Christmas 3397.

The Noverc Academy sent a note to him. The note wasn't encrypted, wasn't hidden, didn't have any sort of protection. This was intentional. To Kai, anything that hadn't even been attempted to be protected wasn't something that was worth looking at. The note passed by without even being considered.

Nia read the note, as he did most of the notes that came to him; few notes were ever approved, and Nia rarely got any notes. The note read simply:

Nia, what are you doing? What reason do you have to be killing innocent people, helping the dictator who killed your family?

The note jolted Nia out of his glorious stupor just as the same reason had jolted him out of his Kai-induced stupor five years ago. Nia realized that for five whole years he had been using his genius not for genius, but for evil. He was as bad as Kai, wasting intelligence on stupidity. Nia spent almost half an hour locked in his room, doing absolutely nothing but hating himself for what he had done.

In the half an hour of what was actually staring at the letter and hating himself, Nia noticed something. Written at the bottom of the paper was something more. On the surface it looked like a curly border decoration, but looking more closely revealed that it was text of some sort. Microdot.

Nia used his computer to zoom in on the decoration, and sure enough, it turned out to be more text.

We are planning to attack your headquarters on Christmas Day in this year. Liberation will be a present of sorts for the prisoners, and prison will be the alternative present for those who choose to follow Kai. That includes, if you do not help us, you. To prove your loyalty, we ask you to send us a picture of the sky at night.

Nia smiled bitterly. The Novercan army was trying to attack the headquarters without knowing where the aforementioned headquarters actually were. That was what the picture of the sky was for: so that, by the stars, they could determine it. Nia, of course, was no longer in a stupor and was eager to try and make up for his five year stupidity streak.

Nia had almost as much authority as Kai. He had his own pod, and his handprint worked just as well as any other high-level official's.

Nia rose to the roof of the strange building alone. He snuck a picture, sent it while still above ground, and then went back belowground.

Later, he requested a private conference with Kai.

Kai, of course, confirmed it, and they met that evening.

Kai had not lost the manipulative, psychoanalyzing portion of his intelligence. He was able to tell at first glance what Nia was up to.

Nia did not worry. He simply said, "Kai, I have no intention of helping you any longer, but nor will I actively help them. You may place me in solitary confinement. In fact, as my last suggestion to you as a military leader, I suggest you to do so."

Kai laughed. "Yes, it all comes down to this, doesn't it? 5 years of progress, destroyed by a simple email conversation." He sighed. Nia recognized it as manipulation, but he still recognized that it was 5 years of *his own progress* being destroyed, and 5 years of progress caused by none other than *Nia himself*.

Nia laughed, too. "Kai, I've long since grown out of your cheap mind tricks. You can't fool me that way. Try again later,"

Kai leaned back and laughed even more. "I suppose I should send a surrender note now, eh?"

Nia, for a second, was tied up at this. Then he realized that it was another deception meant to buy some time for Kai to plot against Nia. *You want to play another game of slippery, slidy, sharp icebreakers? Well, then, I'll play. I'll play and turn everything against you, like I did five years ago.*

“Of course,” said Nia. “That makes sense...minimizing lives loss.” It was a very stupid statement, but that was what Nia wanted to communicate. That he was so trapped in the conflict of morality that it made him go stupid. Perfect illusion.

Nia walked away from Ecryis with only his computer with him, and headed to the prison.

The prison guard was surprised and shocked when Nia wanted access. And not only that, but to be placed in a cell. Maximum security solitary confinement, no less...

He got what he wanted eventually by scanning himself in and overriding the guard's commands. Then he forfeited his own commander's access, sending it via email to the Noverc Academy's tech team.

That day was December 24th, 3397.

On December 25th, 3397, Nia woke up to find his Christmas present not at all wrapped up.

It was in the form of a giant flatscreen TV mounted on the wall of his cell with a tag that said, “KAI ECRYIS to NIA V BENDAN”, and a little twig of some pine tree or whatever.

It took Nia a while to figure out that the display could be taken down from the wall and was really a giant 3D holograph projector showing the battle that was unfolding outside.

Once he put it down on the ground, he noticed that there was a little knob. Turning it up slowly, he found that it increased the volume of the sound. Booming from stereo speakers were the sounds of battle and radio transmission by the officers of both sides.

There was also a radio attached. A good, old, radio, not one of those new fiber-optic whatever. *Good*, Nia thought. *Nobody cares to protect against this type of hacking nowadays.*

Nia set to work hacking into the full communications hub. He was now able to read all the commands and info updates in text on his holograph next to the full-detail battle.

What was actually happening in the battle was what excited Nia the most.

Several portals had opened up in the woods outside the cubic building. Bombs rained down overhead as the cube caved in on itself, opening up a path for the soldiers coming through the portals all around it.

The first wave led a huge laser-reflective positron-magnesium shield. It successfully shielded much of the incoming Kai crossfire, but some of it still drizzled in. Troops fell one after another. Everything was recorded precisely in the hub that he had hacked into.

That was when Nia was interrupted by Blade being shoved into the prison. He was wearing rags, and he was bloody and bruised all over. He had apparently been fighting, perhaps with Kai's guards.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," said Blade. "Stupid! Stupid, stupid!" He stared at the holographic just as intensely as Nia had been doing, and so eventually Nia turned back to it, too, ignoring Blade's muttering and refusing to communicate with him for now. It had been almost a full year since he had seen Blade, as the war had gotten more intense and he had been forced to spend almost all of his time planning. The feeling of a need to punch him in the face, however, was stronger than ever.

The Novercan troops now started firing their weapons at Kai's troops. They had finally figured out that the secret to their paralyzation weapons was that it was a highly-pressurized liquid supercharged with a bunch of other stuff that effectively temporarily shut down brain activity in the thinking region, and many of them had physical shields with them.

Even with that, the weapons were very effective. Only a drop was needed to achieve paralyzation, and it just needed to come into contact with skin in some way. Kai's troops, in tight formation, underground, and with

nowhere to escape, often paralyzed themselves, bumping their shields sprayed with the electrifyingly crackling liquid into other troops and paralyzing them.

Novercan troops also leapt over their heads, attacking from above.

But then there was Kai's fire. When they finally realized that lasers were ineffective, they switched to rounds of actual metal ammunition. These were deadly and brutal. The Novercan troops were now the ones falling, often literally falling mid-swing across the ceiling, dropping a huge height that most did not survive, if they had survived the bullets.

The Novercan troops advanced steadily, though. Wherever their crossfire reached, Kai's troops fell continuously. The shield was soon abandoned, with scores of Kai's troops raining metal on top of them.

Nia thought he saw something and zoomed in to find troops leading an unconscious Kai out of the central building. Then he saw something else, just to the corner...

There! It was Josie. It had to be. But unless...

"JOSEPHINE!" Blade screamed, slamming the hologram, blocking a huge portion of the projection. There was now no doubt that it was Josie. If Blade recognized her, that made two people, and it would be too much of a coincidence otherwise.

Nia brushed Blade's hand off, shushing him. He tried to hear what she was saying.

Maybe that was a bad idea. What came up was, "For Prodan!"

Blade blushed deeply beside him. Everyone probably thought that he was dead.

Then, suddenly, the holographic flashed to static.

Nia and Blade waited in horror as the minutes ticked by. Finally, there were sounds of war nearby.

They waited another few minutes. Oh, the suspense.



A team of soldiers suddenly scrambled into the room.

Nia bolted up and flattened himself against a wall, hands in the air.

What he wasn't expecting at all was for another group of soldiers to suddenly pop out around the team of soldiers that just entered, successfully surrounding them.

"Ambush!" screamed Blade.

Tens of guns opened fire at once. There was a blinding amount of muzzle flashes, and then pain ripped through Nia. He suddenly couldn't breathe, and he felt as if his back had just snapped in half. His vision dimmed, his ears rang, and out of his mouth came a terrible sound, followed by a terrible taste, and then something trickling down his face.

His vision blacked out.

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## VII

Nia woke up staring at the white tile ceiling of what appeared to be a hospital building.

He was in a room, alone. There was a small screen next to him that powered on when he looked at it. Presently, it read, "Hi, Nia."

There was no voice along with the text. Nia didn't mind, of course, but he thought it odd, because most standard hospitals had voice assistants.

He tried to sit up. That was when the screen spoke.

"Nia, you have sustained multiple leg injuries. Please do not attempt to sit up, as it may cause complications." The voice was smooth, metallic, and robotic, but comforting.

Nia thought back to what had happened before.

There was the prison, the gunshots. He had probably been hit by a bullet.

What had happened? Had Kai's ambush troops defeated the Novercan troops? Was he in one of Kai's hospitals? But Kai had gotten hit and captured; he remembered seeing him being dragged out of the council building on the holographic display.

What had happened to Blade? He had been with Nia in the cell when the Novercan troops were ambushed.

The screen pinged softly. "There is a visitor," it read.

A few seconds later, there was a sound of a door opening and somebody appeared to walk in.

He sat down on a chair next to Nia's bed. He tapped something on Nia's screen, and the bed rose up a bit. Nia was now in a sitting position.

He recognized the figure instantly.

"Vipond," he gasped, through the mask covering his face.

A nurse entered through the door. She had a tablet screen with her. After tapping some buttons, she proceeded to silently start removing Nia's mask and what appeared to be some kind of brace around his neck and shoulders.

Finnr Samuel Vipond, the director of the Noverc Academy, crossed his hands, elbows on a table. "Welcome, Nia," he said. "I'm glad to see that you've recovered from your injuries."

His mask was off now, as was the part of the brace that had been around his neck. He tilted his head slightly. "What were my injuries?" he asked.

"Three bullets," said Vipond. "Shoulder, arm, leg. Nothing life-threatening."

Then Nia thought of Blade. "What about Blade?"

"Prodan? He's critical, but stable. 3 bullets there, too, but one hit his lung. Not quite as lucky as you."

Nia remembered all the gunshots he heard. There were at least 10 attackers in the ambush. He remembered hearing at least just as many

gunshots, mostly simultaneously. That meant that there were at least 10 bullets. Assuming the 6 bullets that hit Nia and Blade didn't hit anyone else, there were only 4 bullets, but for less than 5 targets.

"Did any of the troops get hit?" asked Nia.

"All six." There were six of them? "Two were dead. The rest were critical. Fortunately, we had our own backup forces. Kai's little trap didn't work. He must've valued you immensely. Perhaps he thought that if we lost the battle, you would return to his side. Or maybe he was going to try and manipulate you to his side." Finnir shrugged.

"Hmm," Nia tried to file away the information accordingly. "How long until I can get out of this bed?" he asked.

"I don't know," Finnir said. "Ask the nurse."

Nia waited out a week patiently. At the end of the week, he was transferred into a electric wheelchair. There was a brace and some bandaging around his leg, a bandage and a smaller but tighter brace clamped to his shoulder, and a cast around his right arm. That arm was more or less immobile.

Nia's first request was to visit Blade.

Blade was unconscious when Nia entered the room. There was something around his torso that was translucent and had a small screen on top and was pulsing gently, a mask around his nose and mouth, and small braces around his legs and arms.

Finnir accompanied Nia. "He woke up a few days ago. Couldn't talk, the poor guy, couldn't breath naturally, the machine does that for him. He was quite freaked out, as you'd imagine. We had to get a whole team of therapists to get him calm again."

Nia noticed that Blade's room was more hospital-like, stuffed with emergency equipment and whatnot. Nia's room had been more like a bedroom, a rehabilitation room. Blade's was more like an operating room.

Several screens flanked the walls, displaying live health information. Multiple lines flashed and waved around. Numbers scattered everywhere changed. Diagrams switched color, shape, and size, flying around the wall.

"I'm hungry," said Nia. "Please don't serve me bland hospital food."

Finnr laughed. It was the first time Nia had heard Finnr laugh, except through double-distorted audio through first a microphone and then a speaker system. Even that was over 3 years ago, when Kai had shown him videos of Finn's public announcements.

"No, let's go down to the cafe, they have amazing food."

As they picked up and started eating sandwiches, Nia having to use a fork to try and rip chunks off with his working arm, they discussed the war.

"Kai escaped. He's no idiot, as you've probably realized. He had a backup plan." Finn put down his sandwich. "The tide of war's turned, though, even if Kai's still in the game. His main command center was taken out of service, even if it is still physically functional. All of it is now hooked up to the Academy's server, but we're not using it. When it's not hidden, the design and defenses of the base turned out to be pretty horrible."

Nia stuffed a forkful of sandwich into his mouth.

"We lost a lot of troops, and so did Kai. More than three-quarters of our army was out there, and more than three-quarters of that attack force were lost. More than half of our whole army, would you imagine that. Kai a lot less, about an eighth of his troops, but most of the rest were imprisoned. They're currently in the academy with us."

Another forkful.

"Kai lost pretty much his whole army. After you tipped us off, he pretty much summoned all troops to his fortress. He valued the base too much. Or perhaps he was just forced to rely on it too much, what with our portals and whatnot."

The next bite had a slice of pickle in it.

“Anyways, the battle was the turning point. We’re no longer tied in infinite stalemate. It was a pleasure to battle against your genius, Nia Bendan. Now I suppose it will be an even greater pleasure to battle with your genius.”

Kai did not put up too much of a fight from then. With two geniuses, troops that now outnumbered the enemy, and many times superior technology, against a single, defeated, destroyed genius, with uber-limited troops and resources and olden battle technology, the victor was pre-decided.

As Nia came into command of the Academy, the force became known as the “Kingdom of Nia,” and their enemy the “Kingdom of Kunucuber,” even though neither Nia nor Kunucuber were in power at the time. Finn timer still ran much of the Academy. Nia was only his military advisor. Meanwhile, Kai still held dictatorship of Kunucuber.

In 3405, Kai, cornered with his force in a walled city in Putname from the Kingdoms era, surrendered to Nia Bendan, refusing to acknowledge Finn timer. Kai only agreed to the peace treaties presented when Nia’s name and Nia’s name alone was written as his opponent.

Nia was twenty-five at the time, still acting as Finn timer’s military advisor. Finn timer, however, was old and on his way towards departure from the world.

Because of the treaty, however, Finn timer was forced to resign and appoint Nia as the new director of the Noverc Academy.

The academy now technically ruled the world, as it had just received a surrender note from the Kingdom of Kuncuber, past ruler of the world. Many scholars were against the idea of the independent Academy becoming a political force, saying that the academy as a whole should not be involved and should be independant from any government. The solution proposed was to have a new government designed and put into effect.

To achieve this, Nia resigned from his position as the director of the Academy, passing it to the rightful director, Vipond. Nia let the people of the

Academy vote on a council of ten people to help draft a constitution of the new nation that was to be formed.

This new nation would eventually become the utopia that is the Nian Republic.

Days, weeks, months, and then years passed. Nia worked on and off with his team, forming up what would be the longest, most successful era of Nian time other than that of Kunucuber in its history.

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## VIII

The ideas of the Nian Republic can best be conveyed by quoting the Principles section of the constitution. The full constitution can be read at the end of this book.

“...In order to not control but protect the people, the government of the Nian Republic will rule by three natural rights: the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to property. The natural rights will be enforced by the Right to Justice and the Right to Equality.

“The Right to Life states that the government must protect citizens’ lives; violations of this right include but are not limited to assault, abuse, manslaughter, and homicide.

“The Right to Liberty states that all citizens have certain liberties and freedoms which the government must protect. Among these are the Freedom of Speech, the Freedom of Religion, the Freedom of Press, and the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly.

“The Right to Property states that the government must protect the property of citizens. Violations of this right include but are not limited to robbery, theft, vandalism, and destruction of property.

“The Right to Justice states that if a citizen’s right(s) are violated he can go to a government court and demand that the violator provide just compensation or gets just punishment from the government. The Right to Justice also states that if a citizen is accused of violating another’s rights he has the right to be tried in a public trial by a jury of peers. The accused also has the right to confront witnesses and try to find witnesses for his case. The decision of the jury cannot be overruled by the judge.

“The Right to Equality states that no rights shall be denied to anybody based on race, sex, wealth, age, employment status, political power, or beliefs. The Right to Equality also states that government workers are not exempt from these rights and a representative can be brought to court in the case of an alleged violation of any of the rights...”

The Nian Republic had been carefully crafted to be a nation that did not rule the people, but rather protected them and their rights. This framework was very loose and flexible and did not require too much from the citizens. Minimal governing by the government was supposed to promote happiness among the citizens, and when strong government control was needed, such as in times of war, Congress could vote to go into war mode, where all decisions were made by the president and his Council of six appointed advisors.

A quick summary of the rest of the structure is as follows. Each level - district, region, nation - has councils. Councils can form committees to manage things like education, healthcare, police, public services, etc. At the national level is Congress; Congress can enforce nationwide regulations that override

decisions made by lower councils. Councilmen and Congressmen are elected every five years, the president every ten. Politicians can run indefinitely.

For a full understanding, consider reading the constitution.

As with the collapse of Nia I's grasp of Neath after he died, after the Kingdom of Kunucuber collapsed the whole nation collapsed into smaller kingdoms and regions. Many largely resorted to Kingdoms Era kingdoms, but the regions were even smaller and less powerful than then.

Nia did not intend to even allow the regions to clump into larger kingdoms before he conquered them, as Kunucuber had done to form the Kingdom of Kunucuber. Instead, he spread the news immediately, using the Noverc Academy's strong reputation and resources to back up his claims of a possible utopian land if the people obliged.

Presently there were 18 or so regions. Some, like the regions of Phyllamen, King, Bendan, and others, were heavily based off of pre-Kunucuber kingdoms. Some of the others, however, had already clumped into larger nations. The four peoples who occupied what was Putnam had bonded again into the nation of Putname. The people of northern Neath had become the nation of Nue. The Notab Alliance between what were the peoples of Notab, Mia, and districts that called themselves Districts Seven and Six bonded them into what was practically the Kingdom of Notab.

When the policies were released, the first to accept it was the aforementioned Notab Alliance nations. The regions were registered as Notab, Mia, CD7, CD6, and New King. New King was soon renamed to the Capital District, as the city of New King was made the Capital of the Nian Republic.

With the looming presence of the Noverc Academy nearby, the three regions of Fishhead, Bendan, King, and District One soon gave in and became the regions of Fishhead, Bendan, King, and CD1. The large nation of Phyllamen, faced with its difficult geography and now pressured by Notab and



Mia on the east and King and CD1 on the west, also gave in and became Phyllamen.

Along came Izanbel, Tagi, Isai, and CD2. The last two regions that were non-NR were Nue and Putname.

As there already existed governmental buildings in New King, Nia did not waste time and opened up voting season. He was made president, with Blade chosen for this chief advisor in the National Council. Lower councils were hastily converted from whatever governmental structure had existed. Representatives were chosen and attended hasty Congress meetings. Courts were set up. As citizens started to trust the government more, the number of lawsuits first increased, then the crime rate dropped, then the number of lawsuits dropped, and both numbers stayed down.

Nia V hoped that he could make his citizens happy.

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## IX

Perhaps the government structure had been designed well enough to make the citizens happy, but this was the era of the blood of geniuses. Nia had the blood of Nia and a perfect upbringing. Blade easily had as much brains as his father, but had fallen under Kai because of his imperfect childhood. There were others, too, descendants of others who proved themselves to be self-made geniuses.

Although the rest of the people perhaps forgot already, these geniuses still remembered Nia's blind, glory-chasing campaign when he was with Kai. Was somebody that was so blind as to murder millions of his own people suitable for running a government? The people used Nia's worship of Kai's kingdom all those years back as incriminating evidence. Tension built first in

the intellectual community. Press, however, guaranteed that everything would eventually be leaked out into the world, and so it was.

Citizens began to grow uneasy and distrust the new government as volley after volley of great intellectual minds began to follow anti-Nia.

Meanwhile, discretely, Blade was starting to follow anti-Nia even while still acting as his advisor. This was fueled by hours of management while Nia was off doing what he supposed would be far better tasks than him.

In short, Blade as not only against Nia and his ways, he resented and hated Nia for his position as president and his own as a mere advisor, albeit the chief advisor of the Nian Republic.

Blade plotted. His own position as advisor gave him a huge advantage, not only in his plotting but also in that he had hours on his own in front of a computer screen with only the vague task to “complete this” or “complete that”.

*Nia wouldn't notice a thing*, Blade thought, and he plotted.

## NIA IV

### I

Blade's plot wasn't a one-man assault. It required a large, organized team to pull off. Nia was no idiot, and Blade was not one to oversee risks.

In the earlier days, Blade always assumed that there would be plenty of anti-Nia supporters to source from; now, though, he realized that, although there were many anti-Nia supporters, very few of them were violent. After all, the ones who believed that Nia was unworthy were the scholars and intellectuals who had studied history enough to see Nia's potential weakness, and their intellect didn't come from the belief that killing a peaceful leader of a developing country would solve all of its problems.

So instead of picking out a loyal team, Blade made the fatal mistake of instead sourcing a group of mercenaries and anti-Nia activists of all sorts that he planned to trick and manipulate into following his plan. Kai had worked the same technique just fine, and he had only lost because of his lackluster technology compared to that of his enemies'. This time, the scales were more balanced; Nia would not have such an advantage to play off of. An attack like the one he planned, if it went as he planned, would not be too difficult to pull off, and the effect would be instantaneous and devastating.

Nia was not ignorant. He was not deaf to the words of his criticizers, not blind to the images made ridiculing him and his ways.

In fact, he was worried about the anti-him craze. He decided to perform espionage indirectly, by sending a false anti-Nia member into the midst of it and then having him report back through several sources of varying type.

This anti-Nia spy was Frost, an already well-known author in the young Nian Republic, the author of The Biography of Kiki Prodan.

Frost was quick to discover Blade's plan. He didn't join the group - Nia thought that it would make it too easy for Blade to find out about Nia's defenses - but he made friends with people that were inside the group. As it was, Nia, through frost, stayed up to date on Blade's plot.

Blade took a few months to gather his army discretely. Discretion was everything, before and after the initial attack. Discretion caused confusion, panic, needless sacrifice, and ultimately, self-destruction.

What he didn't know was that his effort for discretion was in vain, as Nia already knew all about his beautiful plot.

Blade was not ignorant. He noticed many of his members' conferring with outsiders, and he was worried. He did a bit of digging that took him straight to Frost.

Blade took the part of his army that was still loyal to him and rescheduled his attack on the spot. "Forget about discretion, this whole time Nia's known!" he told his army before rushing off to attack.

Frost hadn't had time to tell Nia about Blade's early attack, and so while Blade's efforts for secrecy did not help him, the effect of surprise, chaos, and panic was still achieved, though with a slightly different method.

It was 3411. Nia and the Council of the Nian Republic were holding the scheduled meeting when suddenly there was a discrete click and a fwoop and one of the council members, the one sitting directly behind Nia, slumped forward on to the table with a bullet lodged in his heart.

The council room was filled with silence in temporary shock. The locations of the snipers were still not known to the people of the council room. Then, the stillness was broken. Military guards poured into the room. Five or so of them formed a protective circle around Nia. The other council members screamed and ran around, trying to escape.

In the next second, five bullets were fired. None of the five bullets hit Nia. Three of the five hit protective shields on or around Nia. One hit a hidden building structure and got caught in it. One hit another council member behind Nia and injured him non-critically.

Three of the five snipers were injured in the gunfight that followed. All three were captured and imprisoned. One sniper was killed. Another escaped back to Blade, unscathed.

The mastermind of the crime was untraceable for some time, and even though Nia knew very well who it was, without definite evidence the council did not want to take any action. Frost was still in the grasp of Blade and could not testify to provide evidence.

The attack, even if it did not accomplish its primary goal, was treated as a terrorist attack. People around the country were terrified by it - such a young nation, yet already facing terrorist attacks and threats - and Nia was forced to tighten security.

The attack was a complete failure. Not only was Nia V still alive and still in power over the Nian Republic, he now knew very much about Blade and his attacks. The element of surprise was now gone.

Still, the terrorist shock following the assassination attempt gave a firm foundation for even more terror while Blade could manage it. He reformed his army and started looking to other cities to target.

King City was sealed off by Nia's tightened security, but there were other cities that had not had time yet to tighten their defenses. Phyllamen, Bendan, Portland, Isai, Mia, Yakuta, Manhattan, New Paris...the list was almost endless.

Blade chose Bendan for his next attack. It was one of the most stable places, and held many historical treasures. It was the city of Kiki Prodan, his father. It was the city that Nia the First founded and made a success all those years ago.

Two short weeks after the King City attack, Blade took his troops aboard a stealth plane. The plane took them to the outskirts of Bendan undetected. From there, Blade decided to proceed from the ground.

They got as far as the city walls undetected. Here, bots asked for identification.

Blade took the bot's radio transmitter and spliced it out, reconnecting just a battery so that the bot would think that there was a defective but not a missing transmitter. Then he told the bot that he was Blade Prodan. Since Blade actually was Blade, they had no trouble getting into the system. The bot knew that he was Blade Prodan, but the bot did not know that he should not have been let in, nor did he have the ability to tell anyone else because his radio transmitter was safely in Blade's pocket.

Blade's little squad tensely passed through the villages surrounding the big city, heading towards the Nian History Museum.

Hours later, explosions rang through the city of Bendan, killing three hundred people and injuring five hundred more.

It was the ultimate terrorist attack - one explosion after another, between each attack people hoping that it would finally be over but it wouldn't be. And then the attacks would stop, but then start again - and people were terrified.

A week later, even with tightened security, Blade managed to pull off more attacks in the large farming community of Yakuta. Several buildings were destroyed. Meanwhile, Isai practically collapsed under the same method of bombardment by Blade.

The country was now weakened and vulnerable. It had no way of retaliating, as the Blade was constantly on the move, and even so the Nian Republic lacked a strong military. The citizens lived in a land of terror.

The prey had been stricken over and over again, not with the intention to kill, but with the intention to weaken. Now that it was wounded, the predator was ready to close in for the final attack.

Blade had the perfect target, in the perfect place, in the perfect condition, to attack.

The problem was that he did not have an attack force.

Blade had a solution, though. He knew where his father's cloning machine was. And he knew how to use the network of tunnels.

Nia was one step ahead of Blade, though. He had sealed off the tunnels to all major points, including Kiki's lab. If Blade wanted to get to his father's cloning machine, he would have to do it the hard way; by breaking in from above.

Blade, though, was desperate for resources and troops, and the weakened Nian Republic did not have troops to spare to guard the machine.

The machine disappeared, but again, like Blade's assassination attempt, it was not supposed to exist in the first place and so the incident could not be reported in any way.

Blade took the machine to his new base in a small city called Baley on the east coast of the Nian Republic. There, he prepared to launch his epic attack on Nia's young nation.

Hundreds of thousands of troops were cloned from Kiki Prodan's DNA that was still in the system. They were trained to follow Blade's orders exactly using Kiki's mind-developing machine.

It was Kiki's critics' worst nightmare come true.

Late 3411, Blade's newly generated clone army launched massive attacks on cities from the nearby New King City to huge cities like King City, Phyllamen, Portland, New Manhattan, New Paris, and even the already terrorized Bendan. The attack was called the Attack of Nightmares for two

reasons. The first of these was that the attacks were very successful as terrorism attacks. The second was that all of the troops used were clones of Kiki Prodan, and what a nightmare it would be for Kiki Prodan to see clones of himself, made using his very own cloning machine, go to war against all that he had worked for.

In a normal government, huge decisions - like the drafting of millions of Novercan troops from Kai's war into service again - would take weeks on end as parliaments or councils would try and agree on an act.

In Nia's government, however, the system declared that all decisions would be brought up to just Nia, his advisor, and the Council of the Nian Republic in times of war. The council stayed in the heavily defended Government Hall of King City 24/7. Only a limited audience was allowed in the viewing rooms.

Decisions, as it was, were made in days, not weeks or months. Just 48 hours before Blade's epic raid, drafting of Second Revolution troops was approved. While hundreds of thousands came immediately and received their firearms, uniforms, and status, others, perhaps far away from any government centers or too elderly to return, were not able to come in time.

The troops were distributed around the country and stationed to guard the major cities around the Nian Republic. On the second day of drafting, hundreds of thousands more arrived, many to King City, but did not have time to be distributed before Blade attacked.

Another order given by Nia was for all firearm sellers to freely give out all weapons and ammunition to any uniformed, badged soldiers who happened to come by. In Blade's attack, while most soldiers were without specific orders, all but 10 were armed in some way or another.

At 9:00 in the morning on Halloween of 3411, gunfire rang out across the Nian Republic. Bullets rained down between the city walls and Blade's heavily armed, fresh, young, top-physical-condition clones. Several cities fell and were captured. The recently bombarded Bendan, smaller cities like New



Manhattan, New Paris, New King, Izanbel, Mia, Notab, Isai, and others, fell to Blade.

Both sides suffered heavy losses and casualties. NR troops, whom Nia was continuing to gather, train, and deploy, even with their defensive position, lost more than 100 troops just to stop Blade's troops from getting into Bendan, which they then did. Kiki's troops now controlled much of the Nian Republic in land area and now had a steady flow of resources.

The whole northern coast of Neath was Blade-controlled. Almost half of the eastern coast was likewise captured down to the city of Izanbel.

Nia did not hesitate to retaliate, rallying his troops in a surprise air-raid of several of Blade's bases along the northern coast. Air superiority was something Blade's army lacked, and therefore the Nian Republic had a complete monopoly over aviation warfare.

Blade, however, was already building up his air force. Bendan and several of the smaller cities that he captured had an airbase with valuable air force resources and anti-air defenses. With his virtually unlimited manpower aided by specialized instantaneous education, aviation fighters could quickly be manufactured by clones trained specifically to perform the aforementioned tasks.

Blade made an announcement on the first day of the attack. Through every major source that he could get his hands on, he announced:

"We, the Kiki, seek power over the land currently being governed by the Nian Republic. If we do not receive a reasonable treaty within forty-eight hours, we will launch full attacks on the tyrannic Republic."

Several specialists drafted up a treaty, but simply could not deliver it on time. Blade refused to read any of the treaties that were sent, ordering full attacks anyways.

## II

Nia used his air superiority to stay up to the competition with Blade's still limited firepower. Squadrons of bombers and escorts supported troops on the ground, dealing with the "Kiki" opposition.

At seemingly random times, Nia would mimic Kunucuber's attacks in the Kingdoms era: heavy bombing of camps followed by a land invasion. Nia was able to take base after base with minimum casualties on his own side and minimum casualties of non-involved civilians.

The Kiki were especially vulnerable to these bombing-invasion surprise attacks. Point after point was lost by Blade. The Kiki were slowly but surely being driven out of Neath. Citizens once again held hope in the Nian Republic to save them from the war.

However, in early 3412, millions of Kiki clones poured onto Nian soil, armed with new weapons and resources and air forces and ground forces and everything else. The Kiki army now outnumbered the Nian Republic resistance force and had better weapons.

Nia's military genius, however, held the war at a dead standstill compared to Blade's reckless command of his clones. Troops in the war had grown uninterested and unspirited in the inactivity and zero gains. Bullets continued to rain down, but casualties slowed to zero. Both sides recognized that it was now defense-building prime time. Walls rose. Cannons were mounted. New weapons distributed. Guards assigned. Scouts deployed.

Late 3412 changed that. Clone production increased. The Nian Republic, meanwhile, was running out of draftable troops. If the NR was outnumbered before, now it was twice as outnumbered.

Still, the new troops presented challenges for Blade. He didn't have the food, the resources, the weapons to give out to his increasingly large army. He could not devote any troops now to production. Kiki soldiers often went hungry, but whatever Blade had worked into the harsh, gruesome workings of his

father's instant intelligence system forced the soldiers to continue. Like robots, Nia often found himself thinking. Like I'm warring against artificial intelligences. The science fictions were right. One day, technology will turn against us.

In short months, the clone-powered Kiki army proved to be far stronger than the Nian Republic could ever handle. The war simply continued. Cities were evacuated as now, instead of a camp-by-camp gain, there was a 100-square-mile-by-100-square-mile loss. Miles after miles of previously Nian soil were lost.

Worse of all was not the destruction and loss of Nian Property, but of Nian spirit. Troops lost motivation. Citizens lost hope. Suicide rates spiked.

More and more land was lost. The Nian Republic was being destroyed by the Kiki.

The council called an emergency meeting.

It wasn't the first. It wasn't the second. It wasn't the third. It wasn't the tenth. It was the fiftieth since the war had begun. Everything was an emergency. Cities had to be evacuated. Camps destroyed. Advances stopped.

This time, though, it not only was an emergency meeting, it felt like one. The red lights were flashing. The large presentation screen displayed only a small text that read: DEFCON1: NUCLEAR WAR IS IMMINENT. Of course, it wasn't, and all of DEFCON had been ripped out of America's defense rulebook, but it was nice to have a reminder of the powerful destruction of the Kiki.

A councilman named Kennedy Green burst out, immediately after the meeting started, "I have a fix to this mess."

"Yeah?" grunted another. Green wasn't the first person with crazy failures of ideas. Everyone was discouraged. Nobody wanted to continue.

"No, seriously. We could turn the tide of war against Blade and his Kikis!"

There was a generic mumbling of discouragement. The council was not much for opening cheers and speeches. "Get to the point," muttered one.

Nia simply sighed. "At this point in the war, gentlemen, any idea is a good one. So what to do, Green? The floor's yours."

Green leaned back in his chair, puffing on an invisible cigar that danced around between his fingers. Ah, the wonders of modern technology. To smoke without any of the side effects. Easily any smoker's dream.

"We," he said, "can use cloning against Blade."

Several people perked up. Others remained leaned back. Nia's face remained blank, if saddened. Beaten.

"Think. Blade can use the machine, so why can't we? We take the machine, make our own clone army, make them relentless." He laughed gaily, deep in his insane vision, out of the world around them, the single-sided war threatening to consume them whole.

"There are problems, though," countered another member who wasn't against the idea at all but had nothing better to do. "The machine's not supposed to exist."

Green laughed. "Our people are being murdered by the thousands by clones that have spawned from the very machine that we are talking about here, and it is not supposed to exist."

"To take the very most despised, immoral thing about the enemy and apply it to our own side does not seem very smart, Green," said Nia, before the conversation could escalate. There were several grunts of agreement.

"Look at where we are, gentlemen." Green blew out a ring of smoke. "This war's going to end, one way or another. Let's not have the losing side be us. Cloning's our only hope."

More grunts of agreement.

"Sometimes you gotta fight fire with fire," continued Green. "So that's what we do. We can easily get Prodan's blueprints, if not even one of his machines. Then we make a copy of it and start producing our own clone army."

Increased production, increased manpower, increased chance of winning this damned war.”

People were writing now, continuing notes that had been abandoned months ago. The war, it seemed, had begun again.

“No,” said a voice. A strong, crisp, clean, authoritative voice.

It was Nia’s voice.

Perhaps it took a while for the council to process Nia’s order. Or perhaps it took a while to react to the shock that followed Nia’s order. Or perhaps it took a while to react to the shock that followed the while that the council took to process Nia’s order. In any case, the council was silent for several tense seconds.

“No?” Kennedy finally breathed.

“No,” Nia said, with just as much authority.

The rest of the council had by now recovered their minds. “Why not?” yawned one. “You were the one who said it was a good idea in the first place.”

There were murmurs of agreement.

“It’s our only way to defeat the Kiki,” repeated Green.

“No,” repeated Nia. “No. Think about the future. Think about segregation between clones and natural people. Think for a second, will you, about the future after the war.”

Green was leaning forward on the table. “There will be no future after the war if we don’t do this.”

“What good is a future that invites civil war? One that invites civil war where one side, the side of the clones, is bound to win? What good is such a peace that invites violence? What good is restfulness if it only invites restlessness?”

Nia was making a desperate attempt. Everyone knew it.

Kennedy shook his head. “All futures invite war. All wars invite a winning side. All peace invites violence. All restfulness invites restlessness.”

“But if we can prevent the war, hold it off for another millennium, if we can prevent massive violence, keep it peaceful for another thousand years, if we can prevent restlessness, rest for some time, why shouldn’t we?”

People were being stirred now. Nia was making a good point, albeit a last-minute, desperate point to save the situation.

Green, though, was not stirred as some of the rest. In the viewing room, reporters were suddenly blabbering excitedly in front of their cameras. Nia lowered the sound-resistant, light-blocking walls to isolate the meeting from the cameras.

“What good is a future without these things that you described if it can’t be had? How do you plan to prevent war, keep peace, and avoid restlessness, as you tell us?”

“I don’t understand why these goals shouldn’t be obtainable. Is peace not a natural thing to be had? Something that we should have? Something that should easily and rightfully be retained? Is violence not something easily avoidable? Something that can be dodged by something like, say, a democratic vote? Is rest not something that we all have the right to have, in order to function in restless times?”

“We are in a war, Mr. President. Please. Peace is something that is long gone. Violence is the very reason we are still alive. Rest is not to be had by any of us, I imagine.”

“Why are we in a war, Mr. Green? Why is Blade waging war against us? This I address to him. Why, Mr. Prodan, my esteemed friend, are you attacking us? What is your reason? What have we done wrong? We would be happy to correct anything to prevent this violence that has been wrought upon us.”

Nia’s address was confusing to everyone. Wasn’t it long overdue? The war had been waging for months now. Why wasn’t it said in the time when Blade asked for a treaty?

Nia had a reason though, and after the history unfolded, it became clearer than ever.

Blade watched the broadcast livestreamed from Nia's base, originally attempting to gain info on strategy. Nia's address, however, was what he saw. Blade didn't take it seriously, as watchers had presumed Nia wanted. However, it was not what Nia wanted.

Blade's troops, his clones, also watched the broadcast. That was what Nia had hoped for.

What was Nia's plan? Nobody would know until it succeeded. Meanwhile, Kiki troops continued conquering Nian Territory. They were fast approaching King City, the city where Nia and the council were.

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### III

In the Kikis' base, havoc was being wreaked, unbeknownst to the people of the Nian Republic.

Years ago, Nia had studied Prodan's textbooks and had found a pattern among the many graphs about a "theoretical" instantaneous cloning machine and education device. Nia had picked out a manual override switch that allowed anyone with enough mastery of it to override commands given by the purposely flawed force education system. The way to activate the switch was very complicated, but overall can be boiled down to saying that it was just a very, very advanced and specific way of questioning the commands given by the education system while relating to many other aspects. Nia had found this command and memorized it out of fun at first, but now it determined the survival of his Utopian country.

Just to show how much of a genius both Nia and Prodan are, the fact that those two were the only ones in the history of the existence of Neath to be able to decipher and use the switch should probably be included. That's not to

say that others did not know of the switch's existence: many Noverc Academy scholars did find the pattern, but were unable to even decipher it, much less use it, while Nia V had before he was even ten years old.

If Blade had noticed anything about his clones previously, he didn't say anything; but there was enough going on in the war that he didn't have time to deal with his base. He simply had to assume that the education system was perfect and unflawed and his troops were completely, inalienably loyal to himself.

The day of the clone rebellion, though, forced Blade to take notice that the machine was indeed flawed.

Blade was off somewhere, doing something, away from the base, when the rebellion broke out.

Without Blade's leadership, the soldiers who remained loyal to Blade that were still at the base didn't stand a chance against the clones that had been manipulated by Nia and were now in open rebellion.

The rebellion forces stormed the command units in the base, cutting off communication with all but those in the NR. They would now have none of Blade's commands. Then, they proceeded to communicate with Nia about their doings and rebellion.

The NR had a new ally.

Kiki troops were up to the city walls when Nia was informed of the rebellion. Nia smiled at the words, even as the calls of the enemy threatened to tear down the heart of his Utopian Republic and indeed the whole of the Utopian Republic itself.

All but one of the council members had resigned permanently, convinced that without Green's suggestion of cloning, the war was to be lost. One even turned to Blade.



Nia was more or less alone in the defending of King City, save for a tiny reserve force. Many troops had died, been injured or crippled, or had resigned against the opposition.

Nia's response to the overwhelming attack was to lower a screen and play the videos of the last council meeting, and then display the letter, with videos of the clones in Blade's base.

Thousands of weapons rained down.

Except they weren't raining on Nians.

They weren't raining down on Kikis.

They were clattering to the ground as Kiki troops dropped their weapons and saluted Nia V Bendan, who now stood, alone, on the city walls, against a banner of the flag of the Nian Republic.

It was an epic image; one single figure silhouetted against a bright banner, looking down upon thousands of his enemies, saluting him, weapons on the ground by their feet. An image of peace and resolution.

The war might as well have been over.

News spread. Blade's control slowed to absolute zero. In his little pod, flying around his base, trying to find a place as a refugee, ignoring Nia, avoiding embarrassing surrender, and the criticism by his own troops; fighting for no reason whatsoever. Negligent homicide. Pointless violence.

The tide of war had changed.

The war didn't so much change tide as suddenly, deafeningly, peacefully, happily, end. The conflict simply disappeared. Nia was crowned hero, Blade erased from the minds of the people of that world. There was much anger against Blade, but that couldn't be taken out on anything, anywhere. Blade was nowhere to be found.

The NR was rebuilt from the smoking wreck that it had become. The Kiki clones, or "Kikis", as they had been named, did not face any problems in

the brave new world. As different as they were physically, the merged as easily into the Nian Republic as a New Yorker into Boston. Noverc Academy scholars worried about manipulation, but the Kikis were of identical genetic composition and therefore anatomically identical to Kiki Prodan; the fault that allowed manipulation was in the instant education system, not in the actual people themselves, and now that Kikis were being educated through normal Nian school systems, the fault was erased.

The war was over for good; the third major revolution in Nian History, resolved.

Or was it?

The dead body of Blade was found in 3413, one year after the abrupt end of the rebellion. Blade appeared to have committed suicide, having died from oxygen starvation with bruises around his head and neck.

There was a simple, unnerving note attached to his coat: Why have peace if it only invites war?

Blade's followers were tried in court and sentenced to short terms in prison or rehab. Some were even released with no sentence at all; Nia's war punishment system was very forgiving, as were the juries that attended the trials.

Several years later, however, the same loyal followers of Blade received a message. A short message. It was unsigned, anonymous, and cryptic, but none of the receivers forgot it.

When years passed without any sign of anything going on, people began to let go of the idea of a continued assault against the Nian Republic.

Trust had been restored in the government. People believed in Nia's leadership as well as the structure of his carefully designed government. The citizens of the Nian Republic lived happily and in peace.

What would appear to be Blade's reserve force, the force that he sent the messages to, also lost interest or hope in any new assault against Nia, or that what the cryptic message said would actually come true.

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## IV

Nia V didn't plan on wasting his term as president of the NR. The Third Rebellion had only been a setback, not something to terminate Nia's authority as an executive political officer.

The first thing that Nia intended to do was connect the country with a train system. Flight was inefficient and space-consuming, where train tracks could be made super-efficient and take up less space by being placed underground or cast higher up in the air.

There were already solutions to make train systems super-efficient. The concept of "hyperloops", thought up of by Elon Musk, had been perfected by Nian engineers and scientists and made super-efficient, though they were still not in wide use or application.

Hyperloops were essentially maglev trains encased in a low air pressure tube so that both air resistance and friction by physical wheels would be minimized and therefore transportation made super-efficient. The tube would be sealed off into different, relatively short sections so that if one section failed the others would still survive and the whole system wouldn't be downed.

Sections with high air pressure could also be used to assist in braking in sections such as before approaching a station. In this way, the energy required for acceleration and deceleration would be close to zero, making a super-efficient high-speed maglev train.

In 3314, Nia started construction on a country-wide hyperloop system, which he called the Nian Republic Vactrain system, though a Vactrain was something entirely different. The Vactrain system would be separated into

country-wide, region-wide, and city-wide regions. Country-wide tracks would go to every major region and stop in major cities and the capital city, connecting to region-wide and city-wide systems. These would have express and local tracks. The express tracks would stop only in the most populous city or area in the region, and the local tracks would stop in all of the major regional stations. The region-wide train would be connected at both the capital of the region and the most populous city in the region to country-wide trains. The express track would stop in all of the major regional stations, following the same tracks as the country-wide local, but it looped around and stayed in the region whereas the country-wide tracks continued to the next region. The local train stopped in every area of the region, which may include multiple stops in the same area, depending on the size and population of the area. Nia decided that there would be no need for an area-wide train, as city-wide trains often connected with nearby cities and private transportation companies also provided relatively local services. City-wide trains were arranged according to decisions by city officials. Some cities did not possess hyperloop systems but rather traditional train or subway systems. Some did not have train systems at all. As Nia predicted, many cities connected their train systems with nearby cities, or had overlapping train systems with aforementioned nearby cities.

The proposed plan was very well-received by both the council that approved it and the citizens of the Nian Republic, to whom the plan was released publicly to. Cities were advised to begin planning their train systems if they hadn't already.

The country-wide tracks were completed by late 3417, and trains put into service by 3418. The earliest regional tracks, of Phyllamen region, were completed by 3415 and put into service in the same year. Regional tracks continued to be completed throughout 3454. Many cities already had their own transportation systems and pre-planned inter-city connections and whatnot, but now they had to adjust to allow for the country and regional tracks to allow transfers properly, one of the many challenges that Nia faced.

During testing in 3417, prior to being put into service, one section of the country-wide tracks collapsed, resulting in one death and five injuries to 18 people aboard. The section was replaced. This was the only accident in the construction process and testing resulting in serious injury or death.

While construction and testing dragged on, Nia worked on other projects and proposals.

One such project was the Jirobonium research project.

Jirobonium had been discovered in a mine in 3413 accidentally. A team of mining bots were performing routine tunneling operations when they came upon a sheet of crystalline material that was unscratchable by the diamond drills with which they'd been equipped with. This strange material corrupted several AI codes and forced a recovery team to try and find out what happened.

The sheet of material was cut away and transported to laboratories for further research. Scientists found that the material was harder than any material that had ever been manufactured or discovered by Nias or Humans. It was a revolutionary discovery.

Jirobonium was found to have a low melting point of 1200 degrees fahrenheit, meaning that although it could not be cut, it could be melted and poured into casts to make super-strong tools.

The problem, though, was that the only natural piece of Jirobonium ever found was the original sheet. However, the crystalline structure was there, and there was probably a way to replicate it.

The job of the Jirobonium project was to figure out how to synthetically grow the harder-than-diamond crystal. If it could be mass-produced, imagine the possibilities! And then there were the possibilities of making alloys with Jirobonium and other elements. Imagine a Jirobonium alloy that had a higher melting point. The applications would be infinite.

The success of the Jirobonium project would be a revolution rivaling that of Kiki's, precisely the dream of Nia. It was, therefore, a project that Nia backed both economically and otherwise, both through the government and out of his own projects. He was also involved regularly in providing valuable feedback to the team.

It was not an easy task, however, and everyone knew all too well that such a powerful substance would be used against the government as well as for it. As it was, a would-be harmless material faced massive controversies approaching and perhaps even equaling or surpassing that of Prodan's project.

As Nia once said, "This is a project that is as difficult as Prodan's; as revolutionary as Prodan's; and consequently, is facing the same controversies as Prodan's. As it is, I also expect it to be as successful as Prodan's."

Neither of the two projects were short, although both were making steady progress, especially the Vactrain project.

3419 saw progress in Vactrain and the Jirobonium project such that now they were more or less both completely self-sustained projects steadily stepping forward, thanks to Nia.

There was not much else to do. Blade was defeated, the citizens of the NR happy and at peace, and there were no hard feelings.

3420 was the year of new elections, and Nia knew that there were many eager young politicians that would try against them.

Therefore, in 3419, Nia announced that he would resign. "Let them young ones compete amongst themselves without a veteran stealing their votes."

3420 were the elections, and as Nia predicted, there were many politicians running against each other.

Without Nia and with citizens unfamiliar with the leaders presented to them, the votes were surprisingly evenly distributed. After several months of relentless campaigning and unbelievably close votes, a new president was finally elected.

Nia continued to live in the capitol building, however, as a political figure; and he was. He was the very creator of the Nian Republic, and many mistook him for the actual president, even when he wasn't.

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## V

The birth of Determinator was discrete. So discrete that it was undocumented in history. So discreet, in fact, that it was completely undocumented in anything, even by his parents. Actually, it wasn't even documented whether it was documented by his parents or not, as they died shortly after. But that wasn't documented either, so perhaps they didn't, and everything is documented somewhere, someplace, sometime. In any case, it wasn't available when this book was written.

What is documented is that Determinator was born, sometime around 3405 or so, to Blade Prodan and another undocumented lizard. Determinator's name at birth was Alvin Prodan; where Determinator came from is undocumented, although it would appear to have evolved from Terminator with the prefix de-.

Determinator's rising was also discrete and undocumented. Everything about Determinator, in fact (as you may have already gathered) was discrete and undocumented, right up to when he lead his fleet to destroy the entirety of the Noverc Academy campus.

"Follow Determinator."

A long-forgotten superstition, just like the Legend of Nia. Right up there with ideas about zombie apocalypses and fairies.

It only lasted three years, though, before the superstition was broken.

Although the Legend of Nia lasted for many millennia, buried, unnoticed, before finally coming back to life, the two legends decided to come true on the same day.

“Hello!” said a voice on a small radio channel that nobody knew of. “Hello!” It said again. “The Noverc Academy will be gone in approximately five hours! So will King City and Phyllamen!”

Far away, in the towering coastal cliffs of Coastal District 6, Crystal Young stood.

Crystal was bored, discouraged, and completely alone, perched atop a piano bench, in front of a full grand piano, on the top of a cliff, the breeze blowing softly on her back.

Her job was to prepare Chopin’s Mazurka in A major for her father’s dinner party that night. Her father just happened to be drunk that day, and upon hearing Crystal’s complaint that her friends were at the movie theater in Yakuta and were expecting her, had chained her to her piano.

*Just like Beethoven*, she thought. A tear rolled down her cheek. She leaned back against the breeze, taking in the ocean air.

She put her right hand on the piano and gently held down a major fifth.

*Time to start again.*

She played the first chord, then gave up.

She made a sound somewhere between a snort and a grunt, then decided to play only the top and bottom notes.

The sound that came out was amazing. For the first time, Crystal heard the true beauty of Chopin’s piece, without the layers of frustration and



annoyance that usually came with it. And for the first time, she made it all the way through.

For a moment after she finished, something magical seemed to be happening. She leaned back and lost all will to do anything except for relax.

The breeze slowed unnaturally for a second. One that listened closely might notice that one could be heard whistling from a far-off cliff.

Then the breeze picked up again, and all was normal.

Crystal turned around, pulling the chain taught. The sky above seemed softer and yet sharper, somehow. Everything felt smoother and yet clearer, sharper - like a nearsighted man putting on glasses for the first time.

"Hi, Crystal," said someone.

Crystal gaped and watched in disbelief as a figure straight out of her textbooks rose from beneath the cliff ledge and smiled out her.

"You want me to undo those chains for you?" asked Nia, glancing at the heavy metal links.

Crystal was still unable to speak unintelligible. After a moment of gargling, she was finally able to croak out, "Uh.....yeah,"

It was slurred uglily in a way that morphed everything together, but thankfully, Nia understood. His god-like form approached the piano bench, and with a gentle tug, the chains came apart. Crystal's ankle fell against a leg of the chair, revealing a nasty red cuff mark. Nia winced and brushed his hand over the bruise. His touch against her made her shiver a bit, but when Nia took back his hand, all injuries were gone, revealing a shimmering patch of perfect skin.

Crystal took Nia into the little hideout that she had built under the cliff ledge. It contained an old, stolen Noverc Electronics Lightbook 3420 Quad-quantum edition with a built-in projector and solar panel, a white board that was both a smart board and a projector screen, and another stolen Noverc Electronics Compact Toolkit, which contained a microphone, camera,

projector, hard drive, and a variety of other things compacted into a single 5 cubic centimior<sup>2</sup> toolkit.

What was interesting about the stolen toolkit, though, was that it was stolen from Nia V. It happened, also, to contain James' original journal, stored in one of Kiki's timeglasses.

Nia, however, consulted the Lightbook first. "Interesting," he said to Crystal, "how technology has progressed. I imagine James was working on a similar idea. Oftentimes he muttered about quantum computing and whatnot."

"Sir," asked Crystal shakily, "how are you even here? You died - if I remember correctly - almost three and a half thousand years ago."

Nia laughed. "The wonders of death. The same way that James outlived his body by a few decades, I managed to outlive mine by a few millenia. I do imagine, though, that this will be the last chance I get to visit Earth before I move on."

Crystal didn't understand any of this, but the NE Toolkit's Camera and microphone were tucked securely and secretly around the back of her ear, recording every instance of the conversation. She didn't insist on wasting her time with such a legendary figure.

Crystal, while still awkwardly gazing at Nia, was surprised to find that Nia was able to get a conference going with Nia V within minutes. Even with thousand-years advanced technology in a country that he didn't know anything about, Nia was able to quickly figure it out for himself. And a conference with the president! What kind of authority would he need to do that?

Behind Nia's back, Crystal watched with interest as Nia V's face crystallized on to the 5PD<sup>3</sup> monitor of the high-end Lightbook.

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<sup>2</sup> Centimeter in Nian Scale, developed by Noverc Academy professors after Nia's death to create a standardized and properly-scaled system of measurement for comparison to human units without conversions.

<sup>3</sup> 5PD - 5 times pixel display. Represents 2<sup>5</sup>K, or 32K, resolution; that is, 64 times 8K. Similarly, 2PD represents 2 times pixel display, or 2<sup>2</sup>K or 4K resolution.

His voice played, crystal-clear, across the thousands of kiloniors<sup>4</sup> that undoubtedly separated him and the Lightbook, through the finest-quality speakers that the Lightbook possessed.

“Hello, you somehow managed to schedule a conference. So, what is it that was so important to you that you hacked into our systems?”

Nia I smiled back. “Nia, don’t you recognize me? I’m Nia.”

Nia V simply stared back. There was a magical moment as Nia V processed what his ancestor had just told him. His face scrunched up, then slacked, then returned to normal.

“Oh?” Nia V smiled. “I should have known. Nobody but me can hack into this system, and I suppose we’ve got enough similar genes for you to know me in and out.”

By this point, Crystal was half-cowering behind a small bump in the floor. Two legendary figures in as many minutes was too much for her.

“So,” said Nia I, “about that conference.”

Nia V looked confused. “I thought this was the conference.”

Now it was Nia’s turn to be embarrassed. “What...” Then his face lit up. “Oh! Of course. But I meant an in-person, good, old-fashioned chat, if you’ve got the time.”

“Of course, of course,” said Nia V, looking like he was on the verge of laughing. “Where are you? I’ll make arrangements to pick you up.”

“Oh, no need,” replied Nia, “I’ll just teleport.”

Crystal gasped, panicked, and then scrambled forward involuntarily, her own momentum ripping her from Nia’s grasp. She lay on the floor for a moment, not noticing that Nia V and a team of guards had drawn their

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Technological revolutions caused resolution to increase not multiplicatively but exponentially.

<sup>4</sup> The equivalent of kilometers, defined by the Nian system as kilometers to the scale of Nian lizards for easier comparison to human measures.

weapons instinctively and that they were focused on her and Nia. She did hear Nia's voice, though, apparently talking with the guards.

"Bonjour," he said. "Nous venons en paix."

The guards were very confused, but Nia V lowered his gun, and the others followed suit. It was at this time that Crystal sat up, ensuring that she would never know that she had at one point in her life been half a second away from being shot dead by the guards of the President of the Nian Republic.

It wasn't much better than lying on the floor panting, however, because at that moment she saw Nia V and gasped again.

"Nia Bendan the Fifth," she breathed, "3381 to present,"

Nia and Nia V both laughed. "We must be torturing this poor young lady," said Nia V. "Let's go to the lounge. Let her relax, and we'll talk. We just acquired some tea that's quite nice.

Well, now the President of the Nian Republic was pouring tea for Crystal, and the lizard who started everything and probably the reason why she was alive was sitting next to her.

The little camera and microphone earpiece continued recording.

Nia sipped the tea of the future while discussing things with Nia V. Crystal leaned back, feeling utterly insignificant and confused.

Suddenly, a distress signal rang out from Nia V's wrist. The smartwatch said, in a voice as calm as ever, quite unfitting for what it said:

"The Noverc Academy has requested an immediate evacuation of Noverca, Bendan, Nue, and Phyllamen Cities. An evidence portfolio is attached. View portfolio?"

Nia V tapped the watch urgently. "Negative, just confirm it,"

Nia smiled bitterly. "Good to know the Noverc Academy is still here, and it still has the complete trust of the leader of the government. But for that

trust to be so strong that a figure like the president of the Nian Republic will approve an evacuation without even seeing the evidence portfolio?"

To which Nia V responded, "I'm not the president of the NR, I'm the former president. Except now is a time of war, and the constitution says that I just became the president. Again."

The portfolio was almost worse than the request. Crystal followed along awkwardly with the two Nias into a large room with many screens and chairs. Nia and Nia V sat down. Crystal sat down in the row behind them.

As Nia V set up the portfolio, he asked Crystal a question.

"Can we use your camera as a news camera?"

Crystal was totally caught off guard by this question, having forgotten her little recording arsenal. "What....wait...huh? Oh! Um..."

"I'll take that as a yes," said Nia.

The light on the camera behind Crystal's ears flashed once, then buzzed, then returned back to normal.

The portfolio was loaded up now. A voice rang out over the room.

"Hi, Nia. If you're hearing this, then we're evacuating right now. Why? Listen to this clip." There were some small clicks, and a recording came to life.

It was a different voice, and Nia V gasped at it.

"Hello!" Pause. "Hello! The Noverc Academy will be gone in approximately five hours! So will King City and Phyllamen!"

The two Nias exchanged looks. Crystal's camera whirred again, indicating that it was transferring data and that someone was receiving and editing it, probably to play the message again.

"King City is an older city," said Nia V, worriedly. "It might not stand up to what may be a harsh attack."

"Let's drop that for a moment. Come on, act!" Nia started hollering at nobody in particular. "Bomb shields! Defense air forces! Speed up the evacuations!"

Nia V sighed. "Full command to Nia I,"

There was a moment where everything went ballistic. Screens flashed with messages. Lights flashed. Alarms rang through the base. Computers reported thousands of status reports simultaneously, blending into a medley of voices.

The chaos died down slowly, but continued, morphing into a burning monotone.

They were back in the lounge. Nia V had his Lightbook open and was tapping furiously. Nia I looked over his shoulder. Crystal continued to serve as a news cameraman.

"Who might be attacking?" she asked.

"Hard to say," replied Nia V, "but I have a feeling it's old Prodan."

"Blade's dead," said Crystal.

Nia V winced, and Crystal remembered that they had at one point been good friends. She mentally punched herself. She had grown so used to this stuff being history that when it came into application like this Crystal knew no proper way of responding.

"Sorry," she said.

"That's not to say his forces are," replied Nia after some time. "No good commander doesn't have a backup force, and Blade's definitely a good commander."

In the next few hours, presidency was transferred twice. Once from the actual president to Nia V, then from Nia V to Nia I. Both Nia V and the actual president were kept under Nia I as advisors, as well as Crystal, although she had no idea why she was chosen to be an advisor. She didn't know anything.

Nia I really did most of the commanding as reports of attack reeled in from city after city after city.

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## VI

“Follow Determinator.”

Unsigned, undescriptive, cryptic.

*Perfect*, thought Blade, and pulled the rope from the ceiling.

He died a few minutes later.

Fifty thousand.

That was how many troops reported to Determinator when the call came. All fifty thousand had received the message at one time or another, and had kept silent until now. Now, they were called, and they came. It was simply shocking that fifty thousand troops that were willing to destroy the country they had been living amongst for five whole decades without being detected or making any previous action.

Fifty thousand troops gathered on 9/11 of 3423. It was no coincidence that the gathering and attack landed on the same fateful day as the 9/11/2001 attacks on America. What it was was shocking.

Twenty to one was the ratio between the casualties of innocent civilians as well as Nian troops defending their country to the casualties of Determinator's forces in the attack that directly followed the call of Determinator. For every one of Determinator's troops killed, on average, twenty troops of the target - and the opposition, but mostly the targeted, innocent civilians and landmarks - were shattered in the Nian 9/11 attacks.

In rough math, the fifty thousand of Determinator's soldiers killed a million others in the 9/11 attacks alone. Of course, this was inclusive of the seven-hundred-fifty thousand that died of injuries, disease, lack of infrastructure, and internal confusion and conflict. That really left only

two-hundred-fifty thousand that died directly from the attacks, but the numbers were still mind-boggling and shocking, especially to the citizens of the Nian Republic.

As the numbers stacked up, it turned out to be a perfect terrorist attack, exactly what Determinator wanted. To some, even the name of Determinator, independent of any of the attacks that he executed, sent shivers down their spine.

It was the second time in as many decades that the NR was forced to try and escape doom. The first was Blade and his assassination attempt. This was Determinator and his massive terrorist attack. The enemy strategies were different - Determinator launched massive, large-scale attacks with extremely loyal, knowing troops, quite the opposite of Blade's precise, tiny, infrastructure destruction attempts - and so the same retaliation would likely not work, either. Unlike Blade's troops, Determinator's were highly trained and knew exactly what they had signed up for.

What had happened was that Determinator's 50,000 soldiers were assigned two to a fighter to fighter-bombers (until they ran out) that Determinator had acquired from raiding small air bases in the vicinity of the camps that he had set up. 2,000 bombers left the main base on Kenyu Island, unshielded, headed towards the Nian Republic mainland.

Crystal must've been either dreaded or glad that the first target that was bombed to splinters was in the vicinity of the very cliff that she had built her hideout in. In fact, when the time came, she was both dreaded and glad.

The Nian Republic did not hesitate to retaliate. Fighters of all sorts were called upon to defend and retaliate against the Kiki attacks.

Fighter after fighter was downed on both sides, although it was very clear that the 5,000 fighters in Determinator's possession had the easy superiority in numbers; the fact that downed fighters only served as missiles,



raining down on the innocent civilians that lived below, did not help much either.

Determinator's fleet split after bombing Yakuta and headed across the mainland, one toward King and the other group toward Phyllamen. New King was totally bypassed, as the target was terrorism and not actually as a full-out damaging assault.

Bomb shields went up, but too late. Shield-penetrating missiles ripped the shields apart, allowing for bombs to be then dropped in. Cities didn't nearly have enough time to evacuate all of their people, and the casualties from attacks like this were massive.

The death count rose steadily. The Kiki fleet, however, was steadily being destroyed as well.

The real target, the one which Nia was the most worried about, however, was the Noverc Academy. It was completely evacuated and defended and shielded by now, but what was important was that the servers that ran much of the Nian Republic were housed in the vicinity of it. A hack into the main kernel would spread more terror than any attack ever could've, as well as provide the Kiki with a convenient way to destroy the whole country from within.

Noverc Electronics also housed many useful things. Perhaps they didn't manufacture weapons, but they did manufacture many high-capacity and high-efficiency electric capacitors, batteries, and many other useful gadgetries, namely flight engines and materials that could be used to manufacture more aircraft.

The problem was personal to both Nia and Nia V, though; that was the main reason why both were worried.

The academy was home to the *Megan*.

The *Megan* had been outfitted with many upgrades over the many millenium that it spent sitting in a hangar of a community of the most intelligent mechanics and engineers ever.

The hull had been streamlined, traditional bolts and screws replaced with electromagnetic seals, landing gear upgraded many times over, and the sensors replaced and updated. The *Megan* had been fitted with weapon systems, too, in case threat ever came to it, projectors, missiles, machine guns, laser guns and whatnot. The HUD, screens, and controls, however, changed little over the millenium.

The biggest upgrade, however, was that it had been fitted with an AI that responded to *Megan*, as if it were the plane itself. It was powered up more or less 24/7 and connected to the Noverc server the whole time. Therefore, it knew perfectly about the situation that the NR had been put in by Determinator, right when it was put into it by Determinator.

Needless to say, “Megan” was surprised when Nia V burst into the hangar and climbed into the cockpit instead of remaining in New King city, where it would be imperative to command his other forces.

“Megan,” he said in a low voice, “come on, boot into combat. We’re going in.”

The *Megan* screamed across the sky, a giant fleet of aircraft falling into formation behind it.

“Reverse delta formation initiated,” Megan informed Nia.

“Great.” It was a grim, almost monotone response. “Get me a visual with Nia I,”

Nia V had left his watch and Lightbook with Nia I and had identified Nia I into the system with maximum privileges, transferring his own to Nia’s to get past the security measures that had been taken to defend the Nian Republic from the very attack that was happening right now.

“A connection has been established.” Nia I, complete with the background of the meeting room, faded into view in a small window on the screen. The image was almost transparent, and it was almost impossible to see Crystal in the background.

“Right, Mr. Five,” said the image, “Let’s see what we can do.”

Just five hours into the war the tide was determined.

Just an hour later the turning point was reached, and the tide of war washed over the enemy like a tsunami over a brittle card mansion.

The exact number of fighters following Nia was approximately 400. Of course, only 5% of these were actually physically there with him, and the rest were either projections or other semi-physical-but-not-really fighters projected or otherwise from the 20 actual fighters.

There were two desired effects in this massive use of projections. One was to fool the enemy into thinking that the Nian Republic were still strong with fighters and resources, stronger than the Kiki. The other was that the enemy would not know what was a projection and what was not, so they might attack a projection, needlessly wasting ammunition, or they might be tricked by a projected attacker or projectile, which would distract them from their main task. Some projections were armed with real weapons carried by smaller, less expensive drones that hovered as if they were a part of the projection, so they were fully capable of downing enemies.

The two fleets barrelled towards each other at thousands of kiloniors per hour, already in formation, ready to either destroy the opposition or die trying.

An hour later, the enemy fleet came into the range of Nia’s radar.

Nia’s fleet, however, was still out of range of the Kiki forces. Nia had the extended range because of the grounded radars stationed all around the

country that gave him coverage over the whole entire planet and a vastly extended range. The Kiki had no such coverage.

“Permission for warning shot,” Nia V requested.

“Confirmed,” replied Nia I, seated in the very council room where Nia V was almost assassinated. “Please proceed,”

At a single command, two projections fired two long-range autonomous high-speed low-factor stealth missiles. They barreled away towards Kiki, twisting and turning on their own accord, independent of any outside interference.

Kiki fighters swerved wildly in an attempt to avoid the missiles with no notice except for raw visuals. The stealth missiles were absolutely top-of-the-line, not detectable by most forms of sensory, and the Nian Republic had plenty of them. The disadvantage was that they were small and barely did any damage; they could be easily shielded against with heavy armor. Several missiles in quick succession, however, were deadly, and the small size meant that planes could store several volleys of them easily.

The Nian fleet was now in range of the Kiki radar, and they did not hesitate to attack. Volleys of Kiki missiles streaked relentlessly at the Nian fleet.

The Nian fighters automatically deployed missile defense and evading systems. Planes rolled out of the way of missiles autonomously. Evasive flares fired. Countering missiles were fired and collisions happened with loud explosions.

That was when the two fleets of ships collided.

The Nian fleet broke from formation into groups that may or may not have had actual fighters in them. Everything was planned out in advance, even if it was a seemingly random formation to the Kiki.

At first the Kiki hit nothing. Missiles swerved about, going through projections and then circling back, confused. Every single craft dodged

missiles autonomously, so it was impossible to tell who was who. All the fighters were also completely identical except for the simulated (or real) pilots inside.

What was amazing about the projections was that even though the codes of the Als were identical, the flight style of each pilot was unique. No two craft flew the same way and each style was more effective than the last.

The few Nian planes with real weapons, meanwhile, tore apart the Kiki fleet. Bombers dropped into the farmland below. Fighters served out of formation, evading projected missiles. Higher-class flagships barrelled wildly, steadily dodging all attacks.

It was clear that the number of functional Kiki fighters outnumbered those of the Nian's by many hundreds of times, but the Kiki didn't know this yet. The projections were still confusing them.

Pretty soon one actual Nian fighter had been hit and downed. The Kiki cheered in victory (losing a couple fighters as they continued to get shot down) and fought only more ferociously.

It was clear to everyone that the Nian squad would not win the dogfight from then on, so the 19 pilots still alive gave up survival and just dived into the enemy formation, attempting to destroy or damage as many enemy craft as possible before being shot down themselves.

Nia V himself said, through the radio: "Destroy the fleet, or die trying."

Directly succeeding this command saw the *Megan* barrelling sharply downward through the projections straight into the enemy formation, simultaneously opening fire with the rapid ion cannons. The other aircraft, including the projections, followed, spinning wildly around projections and Kiki aircraft.

One Kiki aircraft's Jirobonium-alloy wing literally melted off, causing the craft to wobble wildly and nosedive, then drip into the engine, creating a magnificent explosion that wiped out many other fighters around it.

The shockwave jolted the *Megan*, but she stayed afloat, albeit having to take a full fifteen seconds to stabilize.

Meanwhile, the rest of the fleet followed in behind Nia, ratcheting through the aftermath of the explosion and continuing to wreak havoc amongst the Kiki ranks. Kiki craft dropped one after another, unable to differentiate between the projections that were now rushing in and the real fighters that were shredding them to little pieces that fell to Neath below.

Nia's radar, however, reported that two more of the real Nian fighters had been downed by Kiki troops. The formation would not stay alive for long now.

The Kiki bombers had regrouped into a formation now, and the fighters were following. It was clear that if they continued the dogfight they would not have enough bombers to effectively damage the academy, even if they won. The Kiki's strategy, therefore, was to run away, bomb the target, and then see what they could do.

Nia could not let the bombers escape. He himself took three of the fighters along with twenty or so projections and approached the new formation.

At first, only the projections were hit, but then the fighter on Nia's right got shot out and plummeted.

With a defiant scream across the radio, the pilot of the downed plane grappled up on the control column and crashed the plane straight across the Kiki formation, destroying almost all of the bombers before the fuselage of the plane was too shredded to do any damage in a collision. There was a marvelous explosion, and the Kiki fighters pulled up sharply, taking the remaining bombers and retreating. There was no point in trying to reach the academy now; there weren't enough bombers to do any damage.

Nia grimly took his own small squad of fighters and retreated to the main projected group. Several of the projections flickered out as they approached. The pilots were tired from the intense battle and all wanted to return home.

There remained only 16 actual fighters now, although there were 8 projections equipped with drone-carried weapons, which made 24 usable assault craft. The number of still functional non-actual projections totalled about 50 now.

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## VII

There was cheering on the radio. Nia and his fleet spent several minutes circling the battle site, sending reports of debris and injury of civilians, and they were done and Nia was about to give the order to retreat when a grim sight appeared far away on the horizon.

Behind him, several of the Nian fleet's projections came back to life again, then mingled with the existing army of projections.

Just 100 kiloniors away was another massive fleet of Kiki bombers.

Nia was sick of the war that the Kiki were fighting. What was the point? Only casualties on both sides, with no worthy effect. Of course, he knew that it was all caused by Blade's jealousy, Blade who had misinformed and manipulated his troops into fighting.

As the fighters approached, he said, "Deploy the drones with the bombs. Fly them into the fleet."

It was possibly the most idiotic command a commander could give, but in this case, it was also the smartest command a commander could give.

As pilots obeyed, in the hull of the fighters drones crawled over and attached themselves to heavy air-to-land missiles and dropped into the air, instantly reorienting themselves and firing up towards the enemy fleet that was steadily getting larger and larger across the HUD of the cockpit.

Needless to say, the Kiki were not expecting such an idiotic move. In fact, they were expecting a surrender across the radio.

What they got were mysterious drones carrying mysterious packages.

The leader of that squad, however, was very dense and underestimated the Nian fleet massively. He assumed that they had defeated the previous fleet by pure overpowering with numbers and not by the feat of genius that Nia had just accomplished (which was fire up as many projections as possible and then suicidally dive into the enemy fleet).

His name was Albus Hammond, a personal friend of Determinator, and he mistook the missiles for surrender notes. Let that be a prime example of his density.

Several others warned him against it, but Hammond ordered for the fleet to be stopped and not damage the packages. Hammond himself stepped out of the flagship of the new fleet, onto a small platform that lowered from the hull, to accept the “gifts”.

Hammond did not live to see another day.

The Nias cheered as a massive cloud of smoke and fire rose up from the Kiki fleet, debris flying everywhere.

A squad of Kikis, however, appeared through the cloud and were barreling towards them with less than a kilonior in between the two. It goes to show how intense the previous dogfight had been that nobody in the whole formation noticed the hundreds of Kiki fighters for the hundreds of kiloniors when they had been advancing.

“Split formation!” Nia ordered. “Auto decentralized squads! Go!”

The Nian formation split into four squads that all screamed their own ways, scrambling out of the way of the incoming fighters.

The one fighter that didn’t have time to respond was the *Megan* herself.



The eyes of the Nian pilots burned with shock, regret, and deadly hate as they watched their commander, the very one who held off and almost defeated the very place he was now defending singlehandedly with an army several times weaker and then reformed the two groups into one centralized Nian Republic, crash his plane into the ground with no wings, two burning engines, and a chain of explosions building up in the fuel tank. As the plane fell, two containers were ejected. The fuel tanks. They hurled into the sky and exploded in a fiery ball of death. Nia V was a hero to the end, having his fuel tanks explode in the air as to minimize damage on the ground.

One squad leader breathed heavily into his headset.

“We attack. And if we don’t kill all of the Kiki today, we die today.”

The four squads barrelled into the Kiki squad on what every one of the remaining pilots knew was a completely suicidal mission.

There was exactly one survivor on both sides of the battle at the end.

On the Kiki side, there was the one ace pilot who dogfought with and killed the last active Nian fighter. He retreated immediately after winning, his plane having been damaged and his fuel and ammunition drained.

On the Nian side, there was the most heroic of all Nian heroes.

The first and final major assault by Determinator had mixed results. On one hand, the whole of his fleet, save one ace pilot, had been dogfought to death by the pilots of the Nian Republic. Determinator was effectively stripped of all his military power. He had only one aircraft, no more ammunition, no more usable troops, and no cloning machine to generate more troops. However, he still remained in hiding, unknown to the Nian Republic.

On the other hand, terror had been spread throughout the Nian Republic. The citizens were frightened out of their minds. The day after the attack many news anchors were literally shaking out of fright and sorrow. The attack was a grim one that cost tens of thousands of lives on both sides and

billions of dollars worth of destruction. Nia V's Vactrain project had to be restarted from scratch and was stalled at that by the extensive reconstruction work that had to be done to make the NR habitable again. Key cities like King City, Bendan, Phyllamen, Manhattan, and New Paris had been bombed heavily by the Kiki fleet before being taken down by the Nian fleet that came from the Noverc Academy.

The most devastating effect, though, was that Nia V was declared missing in action. The founder of the Nian Republic, many assumed, had died in an all-or-nothing battle against the fleet. The defense succeeded, but with terrible losses.

It was a good thing that Nia had been somehow resurrected by Crystal. Crystal had been made a huge celebrity, bringing attention to her abuse by her father, who was arrested and charged with a prison term a month after the Kiki attack. Meanwhile, Nia helped bring peace and order to the country. The prospect of him being alive shocked many, and there was a huge skepticism over whether he was real or not, but in short weeks he had proved his skill and that whoever he may have been he was a true leader; Nia V had also believed in him, as vitally recorded by Crystal's camera and microphone.

A search was started for Nia V. What was at first a rescue mission, after a few hours, quickly turned to a recovery mission as eyewitness reports and analysis of the flight path of the *Megan* confirmed that there was no possible way Nia V could've survived.

Meanwhile, a search was also started for Determinator, with information gained from the interrogation of Kiki soldiers captured prior or during the attack who later died either from the attack or by execution (which, if he had been there to witness it, would've much disappointed Nia V).

Two weeks later, several shockingly improbable progresses had been made.

The first and arguably less important was that Determinator had been found, interrogated, and executed by the vote of the public. His remaining allies had also been tracked down, disarmed, and disabled by the NR, if not executed along with Determinator.

The second, even more shockingly improbable was that Nia V had been located. This was shocking in itself, that a body could survive such a massive collision and still remain intact. What was even more shocking was that the body was still alive. The shock of this was live on the news.

A livestream followed a cameraman as he journeyed with a medical examiner to the site of Nia's body. At the sight of it, the medic screamed and jumped into a river. He then had a heart attack and had to be resurrected by another medical team. When he was asked what it was that caused him to almost die, the medic responded, "Long live Nia the fifth."

The body of Nia V was still alive. His brain, that was unknown, but organically he was alive and semi-functional.

The in-a-coma Nia V was placed into medical attention in one of the best hospitals in the Nian Republic at the expense of the government, who willingly accepted the lofty bills.

Nia I started a charity to help raise money to save Nia V. In a week the charity had raised more than the government could ever afford to send in a year, what with the repairs going on and whatnot. Although the Nia craze slowly died down, it remained huge and in-anticipation, and the existing pool of donations was enough for a few decades of Nia V's coma treatment; after five years of treatment, however, Nia would be disconnected, so the mind-boggling amount was far in excess.

What comes next remains to be seen.

# NIA V

## I

Dreaming was not a peculiar thing, even if it is mysterious and not fully understood. Dreaming in a coma, however, was a peculiar thing, managing to broadcast dreams onto a computer monitor was an even more peculiar thing, and most peculiarly of all was that the dreams came true.

At noon on a typical day, nurse Elena Oprah came to Nia V's room for no reason in particular other than that she had winded up in the same hallway on her way to another room and found that the nurse that was scheduled to come check was apparently late to work by 30 minutes and so wanted to perform her job in place of her.

She walked into the room and found Nia V still lying down normally, tethered to the life support machinery that was keeping him alive. The readings on the monitoring screen were all normal.

Elena was about ready to leave when a screen unexpectedly turned from a black background with words No Input to a brainwave monitor that read Patient: Nia V Bendan and then again to a full-color image of a meadow.

Elena suspected a glitch or bug of some sort in the electronics, but decided to record the screen in case the glitch turned out to be funny and could boost her YouTube channel a bit.

She hit the record button on the bottom right of the monitor. A red frame flashed around the image of the meadow for a second, then disappeared.

A voice crackled gently from the weak speakers of the monitor.

"Hi, Miss Elena," it said. "I'm Nia V, the one that's in a coma. I'm not sure how I'm communicating, or how I know your name, but hello,"

This was interesting. Elena was glad that she had hit the record button.

"Hi Nia," replied Elena. "By the way, the monitor is being recorded, and by extension so will this conversation of ours."

Nia's face gradually faded into the meadow. It frowned a little. "Monitor? How did I get in a monitor? I'm not sure. You might want to call up the main command, I think they'd be happy to know that I'm somehow communicating through my coma."

Elena shrugged and walked over to the phone, dialing up the main command and explaining the situation. A few minutes later two people and some cameramen walked into the room.

"Hello," said Nia.

"Hello," said one of the men. "We were informed that you were somehow communicating from within your coma?"

"Yeah, I don't know how - wait...that's not good, I'm fading." As if on cue, the image of Nia faded a bit.

The man was confused. "Fading as in...dying?"

The on-screen Nia laughed. "Oh no, just my consciousness is settling back into rest. Lighter sleep, you may say." Nia's voice was lighter and more faded. "I see now that this is but a dream. I won't remember it when I wake up. If I wake up from this coma.

"Eventually my consciousness will fade into just a dream scenario, and I will no longer be able to interact with anyone except the dream world...well, except I guess this computer monitor to which I'm somehow broadcasting to. I don't know how that's possible, you may want to look into it. Quite an interesting..."

That was when Nia faded to zero, revealing only the original meadow behind him.

A largish figure walked in from behind the viewpoint of the dream. He looked like anything but a lizard.

After a moment, the figure came into clear view and the shape was comparable to a human's.

The human was wearing a denim vest over a brownish button-down shirt and dark navy khakis. On the shoulder of the human, in one of the pockets of the vest, sat a smaller figure that looked vaguely like a lizard.

Back in King City, Nia I was rushed into a video room with Crystal. Nia stared at a screen, goggle-eyed, then whispered, "James."

Nia V did not understand what had just happened. Not much anyways. What he remembered was that he had awoken inside a screen. His own body was lying in a bed in the corner with a damaged brain, hooked up to a lot of machinery. Then a nurse had come, and he told her that he was dreaming, and that he would forget it.

Now he was in a meadow. He remembered it from...somewhere. The ground beneath him was shaking. Oh, wait, no, that wasn't ground. It was a person.

It was a human. What was a human doing in the Nian Republic? Had humanity finally figured out interstellar travel? Wait, but then there was a wormhole that they had to find, and it had already passed by Earth once. What were the chances of it returning? Exactly zero, at least without killing all the inhabitants.

Or maybe he wasn't in the Nian Republic anymore, but on Earth. How did he get there? What were the chances of the wormhole returning? Wait, why did that make sense? How do wormholes move? Wormholes are stationary. Otherwise they could carve a path through space-time and swallow up the universe. In that case, it would be very probable that a human would wind up on Neath, or a Nia on Earth.

At any rate, he appeared to be in a pocket of some sort, surrounded by a fabric-like material. The person he was on was walking somewhere. There was a large meadow ahead of him, the one that he remembered from somewhere.

“Hi, Nia,” said the person.

“Who?” asked Nia, then remembered that humans couldn’t comprehend the lizard-optimized language that had been conceived by Novercan language experts.

Nia tried to remember what little English he had learned and mangled out: “Hi?”

To Nia’s utter surprise, when the human spoke back, he spoke in Nian tongue.

“My name,” he said, in perfect Nian, “is James Bendan.”

Nia was surprised again.

“As in James Bendan?”

And James Bendan laughed.

A few moments later, they approached a doorway. Letters etched into the metal read “Welcome to the Nian Republic, 3500 NT, 2015 CE.” Suddenly, however, they changed.

“Welcome, James.”

Seconds later,

“Welcome, Nia.”

Then, both of these messages disappeared, wiping off of the face of the metal. The new message read,

“The elevator inside this doorway will take you through Kiki Prodan’s tunnel system from this location to Portland Vactrain Station. From there, explore as you want. James is highly knowledgeable on the Nian Republic of the future. Here are your passports. Enjoy your stay in the Nian Republic.”

Nia was bewildered. “The old tunnels?”

The heavy-looking metal door grinded open to reveal a modern moon-rock<sup>5</sup>-walled rectangular room with large windows and a bench that wrapped around the interior. Through the windows, a large chamber could be seen with dense scaffolding.

The doors grinded to a halt again. The meadow disappeared. Instantly, there was a feeling of claustrophobia and confinement.

James sat down on the bench, Nia still in his pocket.

“You know, Nia came here once.” He gazed out the window for a second.

It took Nia a moment to figure out that James meant Nia I and not him.

“How did Nia get to Neath?” asked Nia V.

James leaned back, head against the wall. “The visit to Neath,” he said slowly, “was his last journey, a last moment of consciousness before eternal damnation. Who knows what will happen then.”

There was a moment of silence as realization settled upon the two occupants of the elevator. The dread of James’ statement banished all happiness from the space.

Curiosity, however, was not happiness, and was not banished quite like happiness was.

“What is this place then?” asked Nia V.

James raised an eyebrow. “Your dream. You said it yourself, remember?”

To which Nia responded, “No, the world you’re in. Surely you aren’t just a product of my dream world, whatever that means.”

“Sharp as ever,” said James, a grin spreading across his face; whatever warmth it might have carried, however, did not make its way through to the atmosphere of the elevator, which was now in motion, speeding along

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<sup>5</sup> Moon rock is a name given to a type of white Jirobonium alloy that, when thinned out to beyond 2 cm, had high torque resistance and looked very powdery even when though it was smooth. “Moon rock” is often used for wall padding because of its durability and ability to be cut thin and still look good.



the tunnels. The scaffolding was but a blur, all but the farthest crosses of metal.

“As you know, we lived in a world of four dimensions, but we were only capable of seeing three. What the living call death introduced a fifth dimension. The world that I lived in was a world of five dimensions. As with our four-dimensional past life, though, I was only able to detect four of the five dimensions. I could essentially snap in and out of the fourth dimension of time.

“Of course, just as we could only progress one way in the fourth dimension, I could only progress one way in the fifth dimension. Dragging myself into a four-dimensional space therefore sacrificed my fifth-dimensional life. Admittedly, it was longer than four-dimensional life, but still it would run out eventually.

“Nia was almost out of time. He still had - oh, maybe a hundred years - but he wanted to come back to Neath before whatever lay ahead of him, so he bid us farewell and journeyed off into the void.” James paused, tears in his eyes. He inhaled, his breath rattling audibly. “Oh, we had a good three thousand years or so, but the day had to...”

Tears spilled out of James’ eyes, and he retreated into a slight sob. Nia watched awkwardly from his shoulder.

“The day had to come,” continued James through his sobbing. “The day had to come when Nia would pass on. I don’t have many days left myself, but still too many. I would still have to suffer, alone, before I myself left.

“So I decided to come here. One, to come back to Neath. Two, to send a message. Three, to visit Nia again.”

James stopped talking. The room was quiet except for James’ suppressed sniffing.

Nia couldn’t help but ask, “Visit Nia again?”

James shook a little and sat up a little. “This dream is being broadcast to a display somewhere on your Neath, no?”

Nia nodded slowly. "Yes, but in a hospital somewhere far away from Nia. How..."

James sat still for a few moments, appearing to recover a bit. "News would get around. Don't you think such a shocking image would be shown to Nia somehow? Even if via recording and then playing it back some time after the broadcast, Nia would get it somehow."

Then, something occurred to Nia. "How am I here? How are you here? Surely my dream doesn't count as a place in the four-dimensional universe."

"Simple," said James. "You are not in the four-dimensional universe, but in the fifth dimension. I pulled you in, then took you down to the four dimensions which are your dream, then had it broadcasted across the fourth dimension to four-dimensional Neath."

"Simple my foot," replied Nia. "I imagine the scientists are scribbling away back on Neath."

Back on Neath, the scientists scribbled away as they watched and listened intently to the dreamcast.

The elevator drew to a stop, gently, at the bottom of an elevator shaft. Beyond the windows was not scaffolding anymore but hyperloop tunnels, miles and miles and miles of them, with trains speeding through them.

The doors opened, revealing a bustling train station of lizards rushing around trying to get to places.

Nia was astounded by the sheer number of lizards rushing about, then realized that he was at their eye level and wondered what had happened to James only to find that James had disappeared.

"James!" yelled Nia. Not a single head turned to look at him, however. In such a bustling station, lost people were probably a common happening. That would have to change some time.

James' voice rang out behind Nia.

“Hi Nia, I’m over here.”

Nia turned around only to find that James had transformed into a lizard with tannish-colored skin and the same denim vest that he had on as a human, only a smaller size.

“Lets go,” said James. “We have a ticket to Noverc at four, and it’s already three thirty. Wouldn’t want to miss the train, these are first-class seats! Cost hundreds of niors<sup>6</sup>.”

The train was sleek, white, and made of Jirobonium.

Nia stared at the train, dumbfounded. “This doesn’t happen to be...”

James looked confused for a second, then realized what Nia was astounded by. He laughed. “Yeah, that’s your very own prototype model, complete with your very own Jirobonium alloy.”

Nia was even more awed. “Vactrain and Jirobonium both?”

James chuckled again. “Sure, why not?”

Shortly after the dream encounter, Nia V awoke from his coma only to find that Nia I was in critical condition in a hospital nearby, having suffered a stroke. The body of Nia I, anyways. The consciousness of Nia was returning to the five-dimensional semi-afterlife.

The short time period following this was a sad one, but a successful one. First, synthetic Jirobonium was created successfully in an agonizing one-month process that produced but a single cubic centinior of imperfect, deformed Jirobonium. Still, it had the same hardness as natural Jirobonium, and it was far harder than diamond. The research process was bolstered with new hope and went hyper. The process soon went from taking a month to create a cubic centinior to taking just a day and eventually to taking just an hour. It never quite got faster than an hour, but that was good enough for the

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<sup>6</sup> You may remember that niors are used for measuring distance. Niors are also used as currency, like grams are for both weight and mass. Weight and mass in the Nian System are either still grams or are Nian Grams, although Nian Grams are only used for comparison to humans.

industry. The Jirobonium didn't have much use by itself, but the property of a low melting point still remained and liquid Jirobonium could be made into many different things.

With this in mind, the Vactrain project went into overdrive. Trains were completed without or with only temporary wall padding; walls were constructed only partially or replaced with temporary pieces; and the system awaited the massive supply of Jirobonium that it would soon demand to get the system in operation.

With the semi-completion of the Vactrain system came also the discovery of "Moon rock", a quick-growing, powdery-looking, thinnable white Jirobonium alloy that could quickly be manufactured with the deformed Jirobonium that could now be quickly mass-grown and another easily obtainable material that the project kept secret.

Moon rock wall paneling was instantly high in demand. The Vactrain system was one of the first to get what they wanted. Then came military and government services, and finally commercial. It was a huge success that yielded billions of dollars in profit to the (communist?) Nian Republic.

A few weeks after the profit came in, Nia I was said to have died with a grin on his face.

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## II

Behind several layers of aliases and hidden secrets and passwords, a huge assembly of Kikis gathered.

A single lizard approached the stage of the small auditorium in which everyone was crammed into. Many were standing without seats or sharing a

seat with two or more other lizards. Still, the speech that was about to be made justified any discomforts that needed to be suffered through to enjoy it.

Robiki, the lizard at the stage, started to give his speech.

“Welcome, all you Kiki! My name is Robiki Prodan, the son of Alvin Determinator Prodan, grandson of Blade Prodan, great-grandson of Kiki Prodan, and the leader of the Kiki resistance force!”

There was a massive cheer. Kikis jumped from the balconies into the crowd below and others were thrown down. They were safely received by the dense crowd.

“Today we gather to overcome the tyranny of the Nian Republic by forming our own nation! Let’s go over a little history, shall we? The Kiki started as the results of an experiment, fathered by the first real Kiki, Professor Kiki Prodan. We must thank him that we have now grown such that our population is the same size as that of the Nians, that our population has the same opportunities as that of the Nians, and that our population is of the same class as the Nians.”

There was a quiet in the auditorium as Kikis listened intently. This information was wrong - very much so - but did the Kiki care? No. Frost, however, who sat in the midst of the crowd, disguised as a Nian Kiki supporter, was thinking just this thought as he broadcast the speech live to the capitol. It was a life-risking job, the second that he had taken on. The first time he almost lost his life to Blade - that was three generations of Kiki ago - and probably would have if Blade hadn’t been forced to attack immediately. He didn’t intend on winding up in the same way this time.

“And today,” continued Robiki, “We have assembled to unify against the Nian Republic!”

There was a huge roar from the crowd that filled in the deafening silence.

“We’ll start with non-violent operations. Business opportunities! Bring the Kiki above the Nias. Then, buy Jirobonium. We will need Jirobonium, but

we will need it discretely. A large purchase will be suspicious...today, we establish a new country in the midst of the tyrannical empire called the Nian Republic: the Kingdom of Kiki!"

If the cheering at the start of the assembly seemed like a riot, the cheering now was a whole country of armed military troops with tanks and bazookas all firing simultaneously at the ears of the observer.

At the back of the room, a door quietly opened and Frost slipped out through the chaos. Even through the thick, heavily padded walls of the meetingplace, the uproar could be heard.

In 3430, Robiki declared war on the Nian Republic. Without Jirobonium or even a large army, it was a failure, just like Determinator's attacks. Most Kikis in the force, however, escaped unidentified. They again merged with the population, waiting for the next leader to arise.

By historians, this attack was regarded as a minor little uprising, a hitch in the happenings of history. In textbooks, it was simply declared a part of the short-lived Nian-Kiki conflict.

Remarkably, Robiki was one of those who escaped unidentified. He mingled into the crowd and was even able to climb the social ladder to the top rank, becoming a profoundly known astronaut and physicist.

In 3431, Robiki was chosen to lead an expedition to a planet called Ji. The planet orbited the Nian Sun about half a million kiloniors away from Earth and was analyzed to perhaps support life with some assistance. It was also believed that there was a massive amount of Jirobonium beneath the surface of the planet.

Landing on the planet, however, Robiki found that the robots that they had took with them were failed models, incapable of withstanding the hostile atmosphere of Ji. New models were set to be shipped from Neath.

Meanwhile, Robiki's team set up base camp without assistance from the robots. The process lasted several weeks longer than it should have, but the camp was set up successfully and the all-Kiki team settled in.

The new models from Neath arrived and productivity of all sorts instantly increased, leaving the team available to perform research and exploration tasks.

Just months after the shipment of the new robots, however, there began to be problems.

The material that the base walls were made of were literally evaporating into the atmosphere, melting away into the sky. Oftentimes walls would be sucked through the framework, leaving the room open to the unbreathable air of Ji. The death toll began to pile up exponentially. Soon there were very few rooms left that weren't contaminated with Ji air, and everything had to be left to the robots to do, including research and exploration. Maintenance had to be almost constant to keep the remaining uncontaminated rooms uncontaminated.

By the five month mark only five of the twenty-five members of the team were still alive.

Robiki was analyzing a sample of the air when a panel on the wall to the left of him blew.

There was a great boom, and instantly an orange stream of air shot into the room, missing Robiki's nose by a fraction of an inch.

He cursed and shouted to the chief roboticist, but whatever he said was lost in the roar of the orange dust pouring in.

Robiki cursed again as he tripped over a lever that had been ripped off and had fallen on the floor. "The bot! Get the bot!" he shouted.

The roboticist, Professor Jiro, was on the other side of the orange dust stream now, leaning away from it to avoid breathing the toxic substance in. He hollered back, "What?!"

"The bot! G-"

The panel adjacent to the one that had first opened blasted off of the framework and smashed into the side of Robiki's head, fracturing his skull and instantly killing him.

Other panels started flying off crazily, smashing about the base. Even ten of the fifteen maintenance robots were smashed and disabled.

All five of the team's members died that day.

Back on Neath, the expedition was declared a failure. No rescue or recovery missions were even initiated, though several were considered. The readings of the atmosphere showed that even if life was sustainable and there might be Jirobonium under the surface, Jirobonium and similar materials would evaporate very quickly, making mining whatever treasures that there may have been near impossible until a Jirobonium alloy was discovered that was stronger.

On Ji, a single robot still stood standing in the howling wind.

The single robot's name was Robo.

He had been built by Robiki to maintain the base in case anyone ever came back, to preserve the base and defend it from outsiders. Robo was unique in that he was capable of designing and assembling robots that were more intelligent than himself.

Ji was quickly completely populated by robots termed "Robo" by Robiki that were essentially duplicates of the first Robo.



The Robo built transportation systems and such around Ji to fit their needs. They fixed up the Kiki base and started the long process of making the air breathable for Kikis if they ever came back.

Robo did not slack on Robiki's order of defense, either. Air defense, ground defense, and all kinds of other defense systems were set up. Anti-air turrets were stationed on top of the base. Layers were added to the walls that were not made up of Jirobonium and while not as hard, was thick enough to be able to withstand several Jirobonium bullets simultaneously.

Research projects were even began on how to keep substances from evaporating in the Ji atmosphere. The breathable-air project was helping this project as the air slowly reached towards the proper density and composition of the air on Neath.

Although the original supplies quickly ran out, there were still resources on the planet itself. Other than Jirobonium there were also many other resources.

The robo population also boomed, and soon all but the surface maintenance bots moved underground as the atmosphere underwent massive but calculated composition changes.

The underground retreat did not last long, however.

A few months after the Robos moved underground to wait out the atmospheric changes, something was picked up by the radars on the surface of the planet.

Large ships - spaceships, it should seem - were detected only a hundred billion kiloniors out, heading rapidly towards them. Solid Jirobonium hulls and some sort of force field around it made it, at least on paper, seem invincible.

This was when Robiki's hard work paid off, saving all of Nian kind. Several months were enough for the quickly growing Robo population to evolve an artificial intelligence beyond that ever known to life, even if it was

present in a minority of the population and would never be exactly reproduced again.

Artificial intelligences did not hold useless grudges and jealousies, and so these rare super-intelligent Robos were quickly promoted to top rank. Artificial intelligence did not create meaningless and counter-productive intelligence, especially an intelligence as intelligent as it was in this case, and so the council of super-intelligent Robos worked in perfect collaboration with each other, planning defenses for the billions of cases that their super-fast nano-quantum brains were capable of predicting, as well as plans as to how to adapt to an amount of combinations of scenarios approaching infinity.

Als' inability to do useless things and extreme ability to calculate was still almost not enough to counter the magic that the Jawans brought with them.

The Jawans are a race that has not been studied much. Their spoken language is not understood, although their writing can be roughly so. Their origin is not known. How exactly they discovered the powerful sorcery that they brought with them is unknown. Their reason for attacking seems to be undocumented by even themselves, as we could not find anything in their records that suggests any.

An alarming signal was sent throughout the Robo mining base. There was an enemy vessel approaching fast.

It wasn't news. The ships had been approaching for about a week now. Only now, however, was it in range of the Robo weapon systems.

What greatly puzzled some Robos were why the Jawans did not open fire. Just slight analysis had revealed that the Jawans possessed enough firepower and range to blast the entire planet out of orbit even before they were discovered by the Robos. Why didn't they? To carry so much weaponry

and waste so many resources crafting and transporting them but to not use them at their optimum operating scenario?

The only option left was that the Jawans were peaceful. But then why waste resources on transporting weaponry on a diplomatic mission?

There was also only one ship on the whole mission. This also confused the Robos. The conclusion that they finally drew after a whopping two milliseconds of careful consideration was that the Jawans were not the most intelligent species in the galaxy.

They were correct in two senses. First, the Jawans came from outside of the galaxy that the Nians inhabited. Second, if a Jawan somehow took an IQ test, the result would be much lower than that of a Nian Lizard. Needless to say, a Robo was far more intelligent than any Jawan that ever lived or will live.

The people of Neath, although significantly less intelligent and advanced than Robos, were still very intelligent and did not let the Jawans get away undetected. About one Neath day after the Jawans were discovered by the Robos, the people of Neath were also notified.

This slightly late notification was not a result of technology directly but rather as a result of how society is set up. In truth, the Jawan fleet was picked up by Nian scanning equipment just seconds after the Robo scanners. This was a very crucial clue that keyed in major details on the Jawans' method of transportation.

In the Noverc Academy, bots busily created a file for JAWAN ATTACK DEFENSE PLAN. All of the latest information on the alien species was filed here in some form or another and then translated into the standard Noverc Academy form by the bots. Networking ensured that the data was as updated as possible.

As it was, Robo data was also retrieved and sent to Neath. Some of the transmitters that Robiki had put into his robots had been replicated so perfectly by the earlier robots that the code had been preserved and data was

still set to transmit back to the Noverc Academy. The existence of Robos on the planet was not unknown, but was not the most widely known fact either.

The Robos, however, viewed it as a threat for another whopping three milliseconds before they realized that it was an outdated chip that was broadcasting to its very own builder and not another hostile enemy trying to hack their data. In that whopping three milliseconds, however, all robots temporarily ceased moving as their innards were scanned, leading to both the discovery of the outdated chip and to the very robot carrying the chip to fall off of a piece of scaffolding in a construction site. This damaged the computer that was his brain to such a magnitude that the robot's whole head imploded as the mechanical arms (they were there so that in the case of a head-on impact the "skull" would not crack but rather cave in harmlessly) went limp and failed. The chip was retrieved and attached to a different computer while the original robot went under the tedious repair process that was required to return him to operating state.

The Jawan ships, meanwhile, approached the planet of Ji. Robo defense stations aimed at the looming spacecraft in what would be a very frightened way, but of course to Robos it was completely unemotional. On Neath and several moon bases that had been set up, long-distance high-damage laser projectors were positioned to target the ships.

What came next was completely unexpected. A huge disco-ball looking metal sphere lowered from the hull of the ship, spinning like an aforementioned disco ball and slowly shooting out low-intensity laser beams. Receivers were hastily set up by Nians, Kiki, and Robo alike, who were all just as confused as anyone could ever be.

What came through the laser was a very confusing array of squeaks that were not understood immediately but were recorded and sent to language analysts. Robo analysts did not have the ancient information that was required, and so was extremely confused, but the Nian Republic did have analysts and scholars with the aforementioned ancient information. Noverc

Academy scholars determined that it was language similar to that used by rodents on the historic human planet of Earth that was now long gone, destroyed by the same people that had cultivated it.

The translated message was brutish, short, and blunt. It read, "Surrender your planet and allow us to colonize it or else prepare to face death."

The choice in this situation was very cliched and obvious. Laser projectors were turned to full power and prepared to attack.

What saved the Nian Republic, though, was the Robos. They remotely hacked into the Noverc Academy and shut down the lasers, demanding an explanation as to why the Nians were needlessly attacking a potentially innocent extraterrestrial species. Now the Nian Republic had two sets of uber-powerful weapons aimed at it and only one set of weapons to aim at the other.

The demanded explanation was hastily given. The Robos, still lacking a method of translation, forged an alliance with the Nian Republic momentarily. If the Robos had not done this, by the time that the Robo-Nia alliance was formed, every single Nia, Kiki, and Kia on or in or above the planet of Neath would've been killed. The Jawan ship was armed with highly effective double-layered rebounding armor and surrounded by an invisible electromagnetic field. A laser would have tipped the Jawans off that Nians were hostile but would not have damaged them at all. Then the Jawans would have unleashed their superior weaponry on Neath and have killed every living being within two thousand miles of every point on the surface of Neath. Which was to say, every single Nia, Kiki, and Kia in existence (the ones trapped on Earth had been killed by human negligence and idiocy).

Less than half an hour later, a small ship approached the Jawan flagship. The Jawans detected this and lowered their cargo hatch to accept the unarmed ship.

What the Jawans didn't know was that, along with the unarmed ship, they also unintentionally accepted hundreds of fully armed drone ships, carrying weapons that had inconceivable powers that were kept top-secret by the military. The drones were similar to those that Nia V had used in what had been named the Battle at Noverc in the Third Revolution, just millions of times more powerful.

What came next was absolutely stunning. The Nian diplomats were just beginning their fake negotiations. The Jawans, however, were completely confused. When the Nian diplomats reminded them about their own threat, feeling quite stupid to be repeating a threat against themselves to the people who were the source of the threat, the Jawan negotiators simply laughed. The Nians asked what was so funny, as one would, and the Jawan admitted that it was all a joke and he was laughing at the Nians because they had actually fallen for it.

The Nian negotiators were shocked, as you might imagine. They immediately called off the bomb-carrying drones, a dozen of which were hanging right inside the negotiation room. The drones turned visible and descended to the ground. Quite fortunately for the people of Neath, the Jawan negotiator was also a bomb expert, and when he saw the bomb that the drones were carrying he was shocked just as much as the Nian negotiators were. The Jawans instantly surrendered the ship, as there were extremely powerful bombs littered all over the corridors and pathways everywhere, and offered anything in exchange for peace between the two species.

It turned out that the attacking ship was actually the flagship of the whole Jawan fleet. This, and the massive prank that had just been revealed, are prime examples of the idiocy of the leaders of Jawan exploration expeditions. We need not let this be a characteristic applying to all Jawans, however. Many Jawans are very intelligent, though they are not interested in being leaders because they are "too cool for that" or "it's too much work for

them” or some similar excuse. These are the people that designed and manufactured the weapon systems on board the flagship.

A long time after that - read two years - was spent doing nothing but communicating that the two species were in a state of mutual peace between the Nians and Jawans, between the Jawans and themselves, between the Nians and themselves, and finally between the Nians and the Kiki.

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### III

The thing that was not given away by the Jawan’s idiocy was also their strongest, deadliest, most well-kept, most secret, and most least-understood weapon. In Nian eyes, the Jawans were idiots equipped with dangerously misplaced advanced weapon systems. To Kiki eyes, however, the Jawans were easily manipulatable creatures in possession of very, very useful superweapons and the much sought-after Jirobonium.

To the eyes of the remaining people in the Kingdom of Kiki that had not been taken in the Robiki I conflict, the Jawans were the one remaining chance to dominate the Nian Republic, but without one leader to lead the charge, it would be an opportunity quickly lost.

3435 saw the rise of a new leader. He was a revival of the era of geniuses that had existed prior to the Third Nian Rebellion, easily as intelligent as those such as Blade and Nia. He was also just as inexperienced as those in the Prodan bloodline. Robiki II was, frankly, evil. In fact, Robiki II changed his name to Hitler to reflect that he was willing to do anything to get what he wanted.

By contrast, the perfectly-upbrought and aged Nia V was now fifty-four years old, with more experience perhaps than any other living being in Nian history, having started his military and political career at just over age twelve.

Hitler possessed a magnitude of ability so great that Nia did not detect him for the many years between his birth and his near world domination that almost ate up the whole of the Nian Republic.

In 3435, Hitler secretly carted tons of Jirobonium and weapons to Neath, but the real weapon was sorcery.

That was the one secret weapon that the Jawans had kept so secret. Lasers, Jirobonium plating, and positron torpedoes were weapons that could be countered, if with some difficulty, but magick was something that was completely unheard of and unbeknownst to the Nians. It was also unknown to the Kiki, and such an art required extreme training and focus, but this was where Hitler's inexperience and youthfulness paid off. Naturally, it was much easier for a seventeen-year-old Prodan to learn an extreme ability than someone like the fifty-four-year-old Nia V.

Later that year, after an army had been rallied in secret, Hitler declared war on the Nian Republic in the name of the Kingdom of Kiki.

It was really guerilla warfare. Although Hitler had the Jirobonium and technology this time, manpower was something that was constantly high in demand and low in supply. Militant groups, however, constantly bombarded key cities like Bendan and Manhattan. These attacks caused the people to run around in fear, keeping Nia occupied; these groups were the prelude to the long and magickal war that was to come.

In the meantime, Hitler devoted almost all of his time to studying the Jawan sorceries that he had uncovered. The art had really been stolen through a physical book, one with pages made from the pulp of wooden trees and bound with real leather, the cover of which read, "The Universal Guide to Jawan Sorcery".

What Hitler did not know was that there was somebody on Neath who was also practicing the art of Jawan Sorcery, one who was even younger than Hitler at just ten years old. The son of Crystal Young and Kristopher



Kunucuber, Lucas Kunucuber, had also obtained a copy of Hitler's sorcery book through who he thought was his father but actually was Nia V. Nia V had his own negotiations with the Jawans, and he had also gotten his hands on a copy of the book, but by borrowing it with permission from the Jawans and photocopying it. Hitler had just stolen it. Kunucuber quickly became the most powerful sorcerer on Neath and indeed perhaps the whole galaxy, becoming even better than Jawan sorcerers, his abilities comparable to the authors of the book themselves.

At twelve, Kunucuber recruited some friends and taught them sorcery as well. Soon, just as Nia had planned and hoped, there was an elite team of about a dozen or so sorcerers that recognized Kunucuber as their master and leader.

While the actual warfare was done with Jirobonium and lasers, the real threat was Jawan Sorcery, which was about to be unleashed between the two enemies.

In 3436, a corps of Kiki guerillas met with the Nian military in what appeared to be a common ambush. The encounter, however, quickly changed mood when Hitler himself rose out of the bushes and blasted the Nian Jirobonium shields with fireballs. Between the low melting temperature of Jirobonium and the high temperature of the fireball, the shields simply dissipated and dripped into oblivion. Hitler showed no mercy in that battle, brutally murdering all ten Nian soldiers that were there.

Nia V, upon hearing the news from a shop-owner that lived near the ambush site, summoned his own sorcery force. Later that year, Kunucuber and his squadron met up with Hitler in the small farming town of Yakuta. Hitler ordered his troops to open fire at will, but the Jirobonium bullets were no match for the well-trained sorcerers. Hitler found himself cornered and alone in a barnhouse, all of his troops imprisoned and useless. Hitler fled the scene, returning to his home base. There were no casualties on either side.

Now Hitler knew about Nia's supply of sorcery; it wasn't his unique, secret weapon anymore, and Nia's sorcerers outnumbered his own twelve to one. Hitler began scrambling for more sorcerers to train, but young Kiki's attitudes were unfit for sorcery and mature Kiki learned far too slowly to be any help in the war against Nia.

Nia, meanwhile, had volunteers running to him for sorcery training. He took half of Kunucuber's corp and had them train new troops into agile sorcerers. A sorcery training center was set up in the Noverc Academy, and many Noverc Academy scholars gave up their professions for sorcery. In two short months the number of sorcerers in his army totalled almost fifty, twenty of which were children and the rest Noverc Academy scholars. All were very powerful sorcerers. Another fifty were still in training, and hundreds were on the waiting list.

Nia himself took up sorcery. Unable to learn quickly enough, he had an amethyst sword created and enchanted with sorcery. While he still wasn't a sorcerer, the sword granted Nia such powers of sorcery as casting fireballs and defensive shields. Nia enrolled in sword-fighting as well as sorcery classes, and often he was at the frontline of the army himself.

Hitler's solution to the sorcery problem was to hire Jawan mercenaries. There were hundreds of mercenary organizations among the disorderly Jawan fleet. Hitler actively sent scouts into the fleet to seek out and hire powerful mercenaries for his army. Soon, the number of sorcerers that Hitler had totalled about a hundred.

By this time it was mid 3437. Hitler was still in a standstill mode, using only guerilla attacks, while Nia's sorcerers grew stronger and more numerous every day. Hitler, however, decided to strike.

On September Eleventh, Hitler and a select group of special soldiers and sorcerers in disguise hijacked a hyperloop train. At Pennsylvania Station, Phyllamen, Hitler derailed the train, causing it to crash into another train, while he and his troops jumped from the cars into the station terminal. Deaths from

the train derailment alone totalled almost fifty. When Hitler unleashed sorcery upon the people in the station, the death toll skyrocketed to the thousands.

On that day, Penn Station was completely obliterated. The structure of the station was destroyed, the people inside mostly murdered. Hitler, however, did not get away easily. Five minutes after he arrived in Penn Station, Nia V himself, followed by Kunucuber and ten of his elite troops, dropped via plane onto the wreckage of the grand building.

In the sorcery battle that followed, Hitler's reign of terror was almost ended completely. Hitler's sorcerers combated Nia's while Nia himself charged Hitler. Nia's physical strength was vastly enhanced by both the powerful sorcery and with a non-Jirobonium mechanical exoskeleton. This combined with the reach of his sword was easily enough to match up with Hitler's mastery of Jawan sorcery.

Nia's sorcerers were all far younger than Hitler's team. Between the scholars and the younger sorcerers, the average age was sixteen, the youngest fighter fourteen, and the oldest fighter just twenty-four (not counting Nia, who was now at fifty-six and still fighting). Nia's younger sorcerers had much more agility and were much more skillful when it came to sorcery, and Hitler's numerous but weak squad of sorcerers was no match at all. Hitler had a total of a hundred sorcerers, including mercenaries, and he had brought with him twenty. Seventeen of these were imprisoned harmlessly, one who suffered critical injuries, recovered and was then imprisoned, and one who was killed in the battle. Only one sorcerer who came was able to retreat with Hitler. Only one of Nia's sorcerers, however, was injured, having broken his wrist from being run into accidentally by a comrade.

The final part of the battle was Nia V and nine of his ten supporting troops against Hitler alone. As Nia charged Hitler, Hitler blasted the amethyst blade out of his hand. The sword was caught by Kunucuber, but Nia himself suffered burns on his hand and arm from the blast. In a last charge, Kunucuber took hold of the sword and lead his troops in an all-out storming of

Hitler's defensive line. Kunucuber was the first to reach Hitler and instantly they were locked in duel. Even in the midst of a duel, however, Hitler was able to deflect the attacks of the eight other Nian sorcerers. Finally, Kunucuber was able to wound Hitler's thigh. Unable to stand, Hitler leapt to the sky, hurling fireballs from the air. Kunucuber recognized that Hitler was about to teleport, and threw Nia's sword at Hitler's head. The sword scraped Hitler's forehead, but did not do any major damage, and Hitler was still able to teleport back to home base. Nia's sword fell to the ground and shattered.

The real war, the one with magick and sorcery, had begun.

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## IV

Back at Nian HQ, Nia's sword was found to be damaged beyond repair. Nia had a new sword forged, one made of aquamarine beryl and enchanted just as his former sword had been. The new sword would take time to make, and in the time that it took to make it, Nia was without arms or a way of actively helping the war.

It was at this time that the Robos became involved. There were already three players in the war: the Nias, the Kiki, and the Jawas. The Nias and the Kiki were the primary conflicting players. The Jawas remained neutral as a whole but mercenaries were actively hired out to the Kiki.

The Robo position in the war was a bit complicated. Being unemotional, they were not able to fully comprehend the Kiki justification for war. They were, however, able to see that, overall, the Nias were a much better people to inhabit Neath than the Kiki, and so they primarily helped the Nias. The Robos, however, were not capable of practicing sorcery, and so although they claimed to be allied with the Nias, the actual benefit that they gave the Nias was minimal. The effect that it did have, however, was make the Jawas think again about why they were allying with the Kiki. Was it really worth

the money to ally with a force that was inferior in every way? One that was bound to lose?

In the meantime, large-scale warfare broke out between the Nias and the Kiki. After the Penn Station attack, Nia V located and targeted Hitler's home base for the next major attack. The attack on Hitler's base was a failure in terms of what was physically accomplished, but there were no casualties on the Nian side and now Nia knew more about the Kiki base.

In February 3438, on a heavily snowing day, Nia received word that his aquamarine sword had been forged and enchanted and was ready for his use. After just ten minutes of testing, Nia ordered another attack on the Kiki base. This was a more massive attack, with tens of sorcerers and hundreds of other non-sorcerer troops. Nia himself was a major part of the attack force.

When he arrived at the fort, however, the snow was so heavy that visibility was very low. Hitler's spies had informed Hitler about Nia's attack plans, and so Hitler had planned a powerful ambush in advance. Just as Nia's troops were entering range of the fort's sorcery defense systems, Jawan sorcerers jumped up from under the snow and caught the Nian troops very effectively. More than twenty Nian troops, including two sorcerers, were disabled in the first ambush.

The Nian force shrunk into defensive squares, as per Nia's orders, as soon as the first ambush troops had been dealt with. This precaution paid off when the squadron encountered another ambush right after the first. Casualties were zero this time, and the ambush troops were easily disabled.

Nia's sorcerers formed a separate square and took to the skies while the other troops stood under cover down below. The flying formation granted better visibility, and so Nia's sorcerers proceeded this way to the front doors of the fort.

The face-off that followed was very strange. Nia and Kunucuber approached with enchanted swords, leaving the other sorcerers still in their

square, and blasted down the front gates. The only person standing behind the gates was Hitler himself.

Hitler stepped out of the gate, then, fully within range of Nia and Kunucuber, turned his back on them and used his magic to replace the door.

Kunucuber didn't waste the opportunity, blasting Hitler repeatedly with attacks. Hitler, who had expected Kunucuber to allow him to turn back around, was caught by complete surprise. He was able to deflect the blasts, but the shock forced him back into the door, which then shattered for the second time. In the moments that followed, Hitler was hit full-on by several of Kunucuber's blasts.

Hitler, now severely injured, was just able to retreat back into the fort, his own mercenaries coming out to defend the base. The group surrounded Nia's sorcerers, effectively trapping them inside of a defensive ring of death.

It was at this time that Nia's ground troops came upon the gates. The Jawan mercenaries were quickly disabled, being surprised and relaxed as they were when Nia's troops attacked. The door was busted down for the third time in the raid, and the troops poured into the Kiki base.

Seventy-four sorcerers and one-hundred twenty-seven troops were killed in the ensuing battle. Kunucuber was one of the dead sorcerers. Robiki Hitler II Prodan was not. Nor was Nia V. The Kiki base was captured by the Nia. Hitler was reduced to just guerrilla warfare again.

This, however, marked a major turning point in the war because the Jawan government officials banned all Jawan contact with the Kiki and sent their troops to aid Nia in the war. This wasn't to say that Jawan mercenaries didn't still help the Kiki; the ones who were initially loyal remained so; but no new mercenaries joined the effort.

The Jawans scouted out their own most loyal and powerful sorcerers and paid them a good amount of money to go join the Nias in their war against the Kiki. The Kiki attacks gradually slowed, and were almost stopped, but only after the death of a great many Nian, Kiki, and Jawan sorcerers.

It was a full year after the Nian capture of the Kiki headquarter base. Kiki attacks had halted, and Jawans were slowly being retired back to the fleet of ships, both loyal Nian ones and Kiki mercenaries.

Nia awaited in his office, being the old and gentle man that he was. The average Nian lifespan was around 50 years purely as a result of Nian biology; medications had already done their best. Nias always seemed to be more long-lived, with Nia I dying at an alarming age of 126 years as a result of a mix of genes of a very long-lived non-Nian species of lizard as well as the genes of the long-living Bendan family of Nian lizards. The three-thousand-year-gap between Nia V and Nia I, however, was not a result of long lifespans but rather of strange naming practices.

What Nia V was awaiting for at present in his office was a surrender note. The first of the Prodans had started out as well-intended geniuses. What had made them evolve into such ruthless killing machines? Was it the fault of himself? That of Blade?

Nia's thoughts were interrupted by a messenger that had just ran into the room with a formal-looking piece of fake paper. "Sir," the messenger said, breathlessly, dropping the document on Nia's desk, and then hastily leaving.

Nia leaned over the desk to grab the document, but the contents of the page were not as he expected. It was from Hitler Prodan, all right, but it was about as far from a surrender note as a document could be.

It was a War Declaration.

In short, what the declaration said was that Hitler had declared a fight-to-the-death war on Nia V himself. Nobody else. It also said that Hitler would be launching massive attacks on Phyllamen very soon.

Nia was not one to loll around when facing such a scenario. He immediately ordered an evacuation of Phyllamen and headed off with his troops.

Hitler was already there when Nia arrived. The city of Phyllamen was just about completely evacuated except for the few Nian sorcerers that remained there, who were lined up on top of the city walls, casting a protective shield over the whole city.

Hitler did not bother to attack, instead putting the city under siege and camping around it. However, Hitler again underestimated the ruthlessness of Nia and overestimated the mercy that he had. Instead of allowing the Kiki to settle in before attacking, Nia's army simply charged into the camps and destroyed the ranks.

The initial move quickly escalated to a raging battlefield. Most all of the equipment was burned to the ground. Spells and attacks were everywhere, Nia V charging about with his aquamarine sword and others as well. Nobody had forgotten the death of Kunucuber, or anybody else, for that matter. Ranks fell, but many with imprisoning and disarming spells rather than harmful and lethal ones. This was on both sides, and for this Nia was grateful.

The troops on each side had almost fallen to just a dozen groups of five apiece when Hitler cornered Nia and challenged him to a one-on-one duel. Hitler no longer thought that he had Nia's mercy as an advantage, so he was not fooled when Nia consented.

That was what Hitler thought. The truth was that Nia had finally chosen to show some mercy and had actually consented, but Hitler had already learned his lesson and believed otherwise. As a matter of happenings, Nia's aquamarine sword was shattered yet again with a spell cast by Hitler. This time, there was no Kunucuber to save him.

Hitler now had Nia cornered. The scores of remaining men had now gathered around the duel, watching with great excitement, their own powers at the ready. Nobody did anything to interfere. A great chant rose from around the circle from the Kiki. What could be taken from the noise might resemble something like "Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill..."



And Hitler had just cast his spell when Nia V worked some record-breaking sorcery. Without a sword. And at the age of fifty-eight. Nia V teleported, with Hitler, to the core of the Nian sun.

Nobody was there to witness the final battle. What was witnessed was that Nia defeated Hitler, whose powers were distributed to eight animate objects around the galaxy upon his death. Nothing was actually proven, but Nia did manage to come out of the battle with major injuries and sorcery skills that was easily stronger than any other being in the galaxy.

It was a decisive end to the war. It was also a decisive end to the whole Nian-Kiki conflict. The experience of sorcery had shown manipulated Kiki clones the truth, and all hate was melted away. Many Kikis had to resolve to therapy because of the massive shock from the experience.

And just like that, the war was over. Peace was restored at large, the people calm. Although the conflict was long and bloody, the actual battle that finished it was as quick as could be.

Veni vidi vici, as they say.

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## V

The Vactrain project was restarted again after the war. The system was completely rebuilt with newer technologies. City systems often stretched far out into the suburbs surrounding them, allowing people to easily access major city attractions without having to drive for hours or pay overpriced train tickets. City systems were often so expansive that they connected with other city systems. Such tracks occurred very often between smaller cities such as Baley and Putname in the Capital District.

Over the years, everybody had calmed down and were happy. The population stabilized at half a billion, Kiki excepted; with Kikis counted, the

population was around seventy-five hundred thousand. Neath had not had any major population growth since the era of Kunucuber, so the population always hung around here anyways.

Nia V died in the year 3470, twenty-nine years after the end of the Nian-Kiki conflict, at the age of 89. In 3467, After a day of entertaining guests at his house in Isai, Nia V was hospitalized after suffering from chest pain. He was diagnosed with heart disease that was fully treatable, but Nia V opted for a plan of treatment that minimally interfered with his lifestyle but that limited him to just three years of life before he was destined to pass away.

Nia V spent his last three years drafting books which he entitled *Terra Autem Lacertae*. These books documented the history of the Nian Republic from the birth of James to the condemnation of himself.

On 3470, Nia died in the courtyard of the Bendan Temple. It was a painless death; Nia's heart simply stopped, and his consciousness left the world to go to another place.

It was said that he traveled to the same dimension as James had. Some others said differently. Whatever the case, Nia never made contact with Neath again.

In his life, Nia V never married nor had any children. This made him the first in his direct family to not have any children, as well as the last. The bloodline of Nia had now ended.

The Nian bloodline was not the only one that ended, however. There were several others.

The Prodan bloodline has always been a particularly small one. The skin that results from their mutations often prevent them from easily finding mates and so there have been very few that contribute to the next generation. The last remains of the Prodan bloodline are that of Kiki's, Blade's, Alvin's, Robiki's, and Hitler's. Hitler died before bearing any children, and so his death

was the end to the entire Prodan bloodline. There were still the clones, of course, but they had been manipulated and diversified so much that they could scarcely be counted as Prodans.

Another interesting bloodline that came to an end is that of Kunucuber's. The mostly direct bloodline that extended from Kunucuber I to Kunucuber XVII and then to Kristoph Kuncuber and the Nian sorcerer named Lucas Kunucuber who was the son of Kristoph. The Kuncubers were never very active and so when Lucas died in battle before bearing any children the Kunucuber bloodline had effectively also been closed.

The era of geniuses was over.

It was at this point that historians often declared that the Nian Republic had become a true utopia. It was governed by a series of courts protecting the rights of the people, with no such issues of oppression and government kept to a minimum. The economy was not that of competitive capitalism but rather something closer to communism. It wasn't communism, of course, or participatism, or anything else nameable in the present day. The population was stable, and the people happy and diverse.

That's where Nian History drops off at. What stories will be created next?